

Good News For Spratly Reef Health: Ships No Longer Anchored In Large Group As 70 Move Out Of Union Banks

Analysis By Similarity
August 23, 2021



Executive Summary

This report is a follow up to our July 12, 2021 report “Sewage From Anchored Ships...”

First, we illustrate the practice of anchoring many ships together inside the Union Banks, including the Whitsun (Julian Felipe) reef occupation earlier this year, and going back to 2016. This is to establish the practice of this behavior prior to our July 12 sewage report.

Then, we count the number of ships in Spratly locations before and after our July 12 sewage report. There are 71 fewer ships in Union Banks, 35 fewer ships in Thitu Reefs, and 88 fewer ships in the Philippine EEZ overall since our report.

Key Results Following Our July 12, 2021 sewage report:

- ✓ **71 Ships have left** Union Banks Atoll, reducing the amount of human activity and waste that the reefs in Union Banks are subjected to
- ✓ Ships are **no longer anchored together in large numbers**. Reducing the amount of waste being dumped in any one place
- ✓ The [South China Morning Post](#) reported on July 24:
“A meeting held on July 15 by the **municipal government of Sansha** – a body established by China to administer a group of 260 islands, reefs and beaches located in the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands and Macclesfield Bank – demanded that “**the fragility and irreversibility of islands and reefs should be fully recognised**”. All related departments were asked to “**fight together the battle of pollution prevention and control and safeguard the clear sea and blue sky of Sansha**”.

The behavior changes identified in this report help achieve those goals.

Anchoring Together

Since 2019, we have seen the practice of anchoring multiple ships together in the disputed Spratly Islands. These ships are presumed to belong to the Chinese Maritime Militia, based on photos taken by the Philippine Coastguard in March 2021, at the time of the Whitsun Reef occupation. When ships that are anchored together dump waste, it is more concentrated in one place. Spreading out the ships helps dilute the “excess nutrients”, which helps the coral.



Subi Reef, 2019
Credit: Maxar and Google Earth

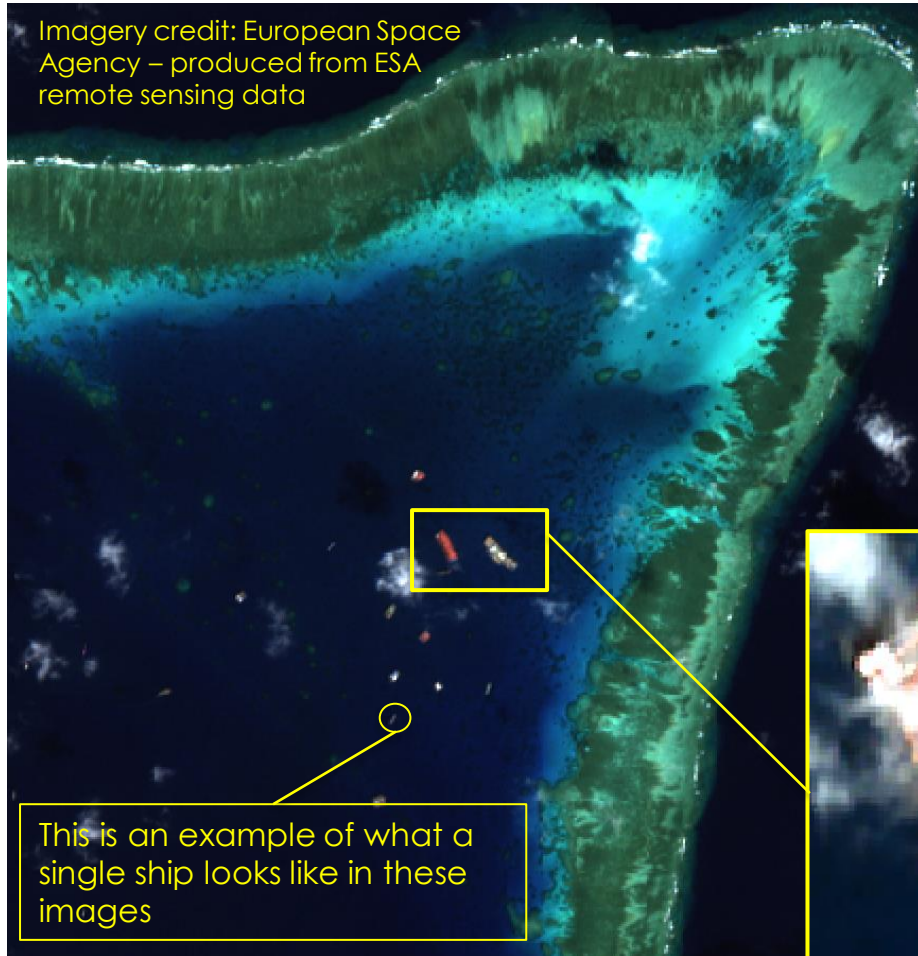


Chinese vessels in the Whitsun Reef located in the disputed South China Sea. Credit: AP



Chinese vessels remained in place on Julian Felipe (Whitsun) Reef in the West Philippine Sea, despite a diplomatic protest and a demand by Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana for them to leave the area, which is inside the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone. AFP

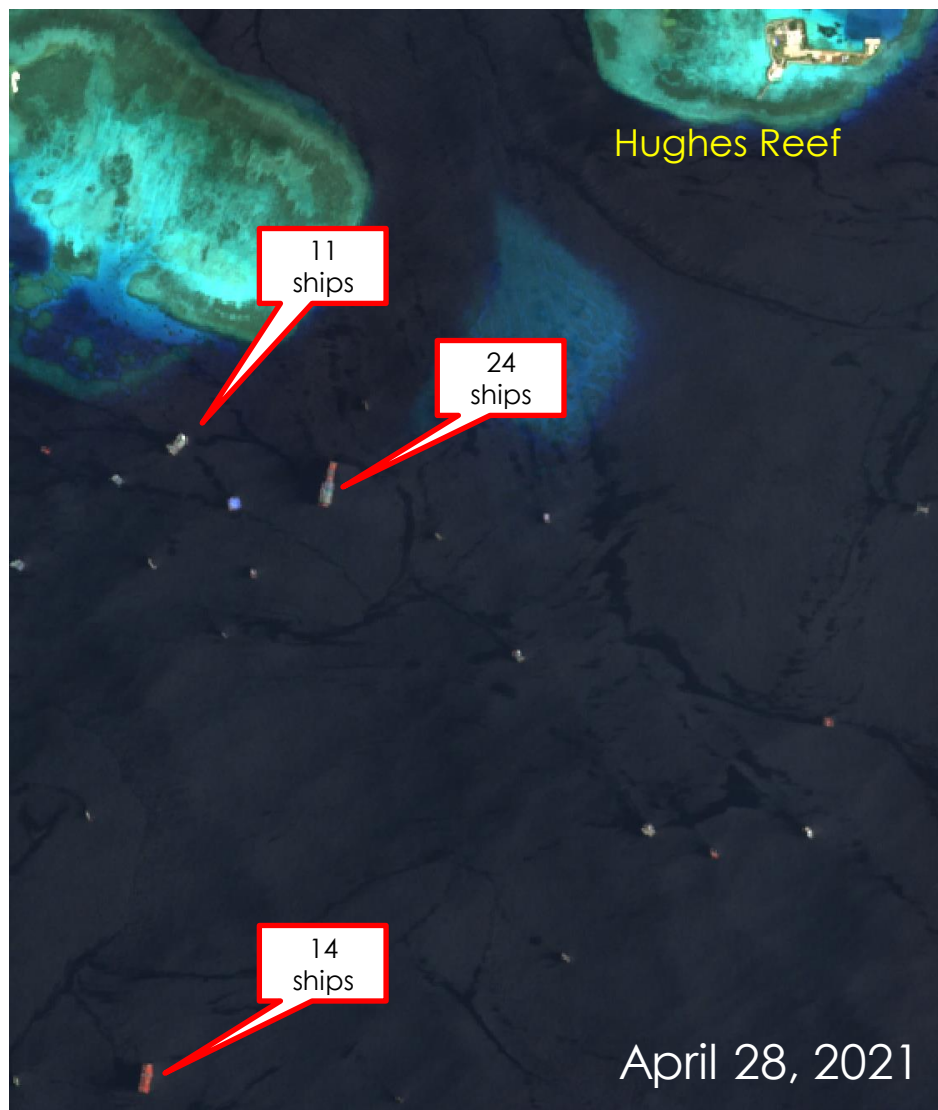
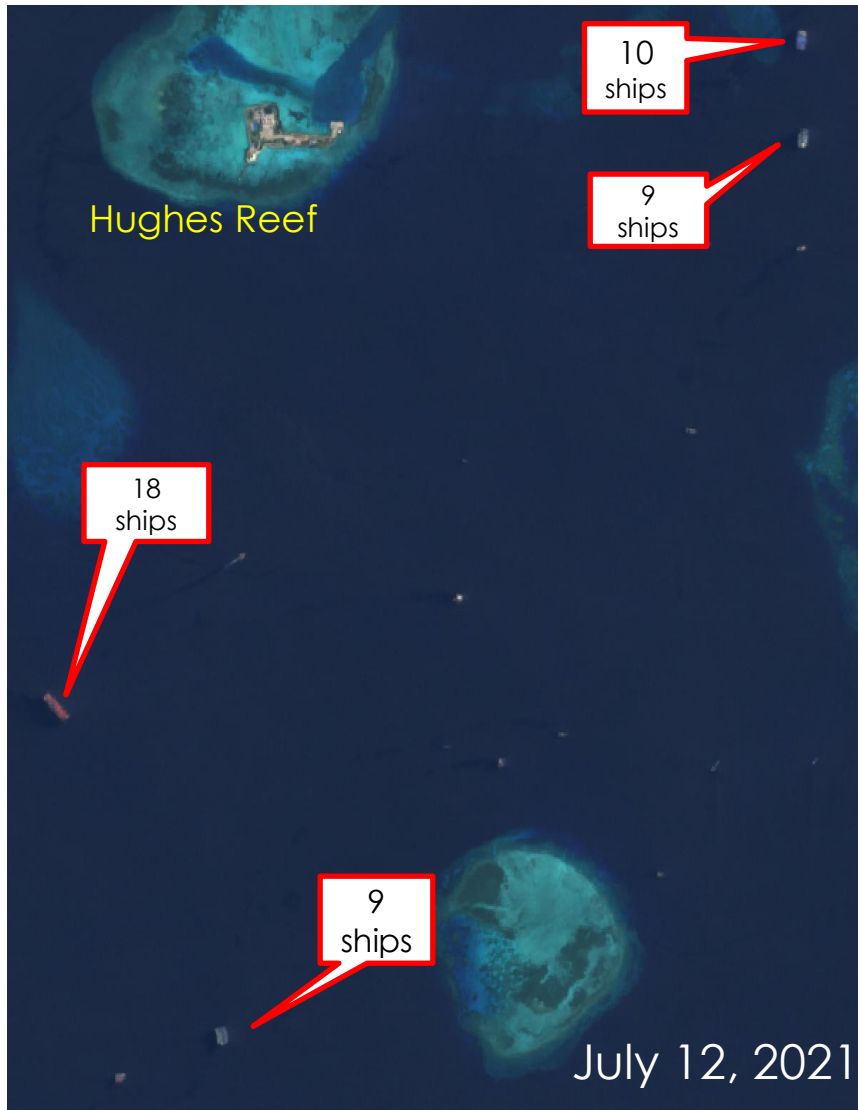
Ships Anchored Together: Whitsun Reef, December 13-14, 2020



In these images from December 2020, we see two sets of multiple fishing ships anchored together with at least 20 ships, and multiple smaller groups of ships anchored together. Through the past year, it has not been unusual to see groups of more than 20 ships anchored together, primarily in the Union Banks Atoll (where Whitsun Reef is located).



Examples of Union Banks Ships Anchored Together **Before** Similarity's July 12 Sewage Report



Union Banks Ships **After** Similarity's July 12 Sewage Report



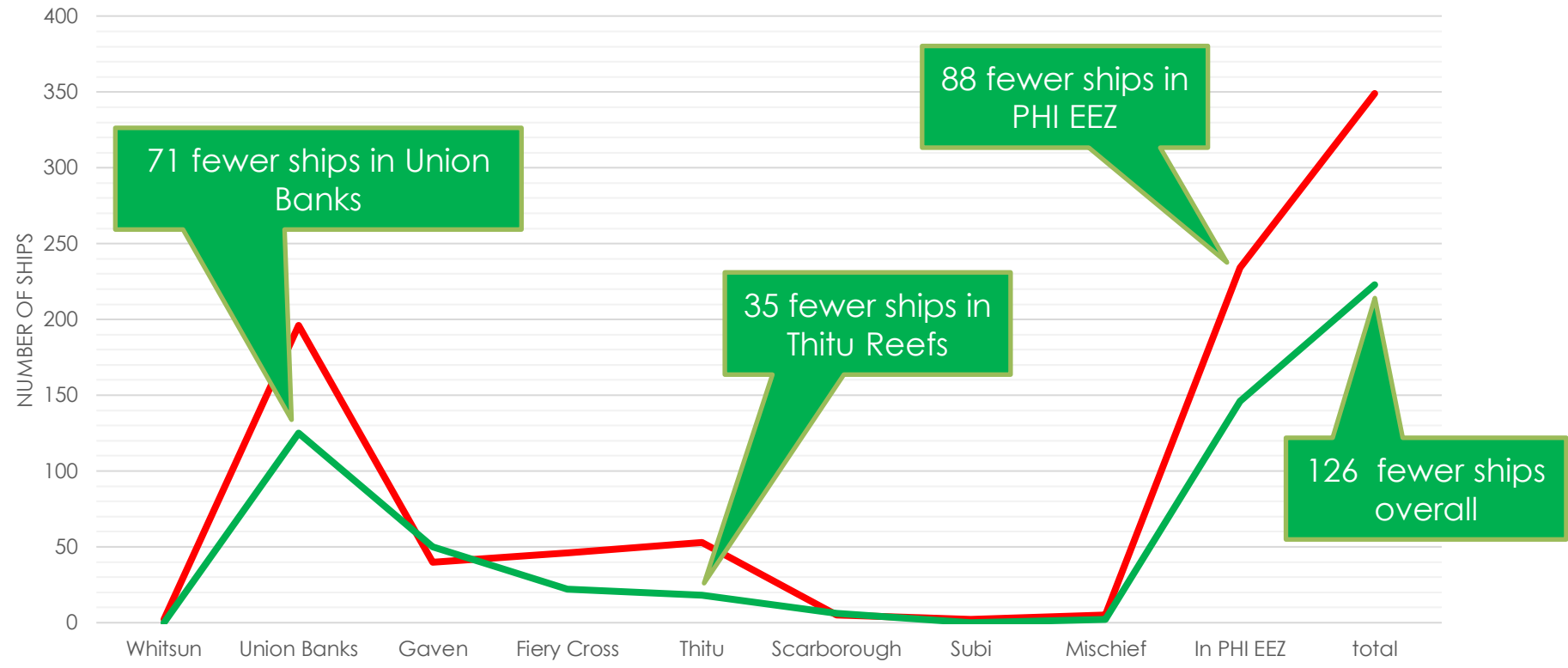
The maximum number of ships seen anchored together is 6.

6 ships

Ship Locations Before and After Similarity's July 12 Sewage Report

Ship Locations

— Before — After



Before: Number of ships in the **Philippine EEZ: 234**

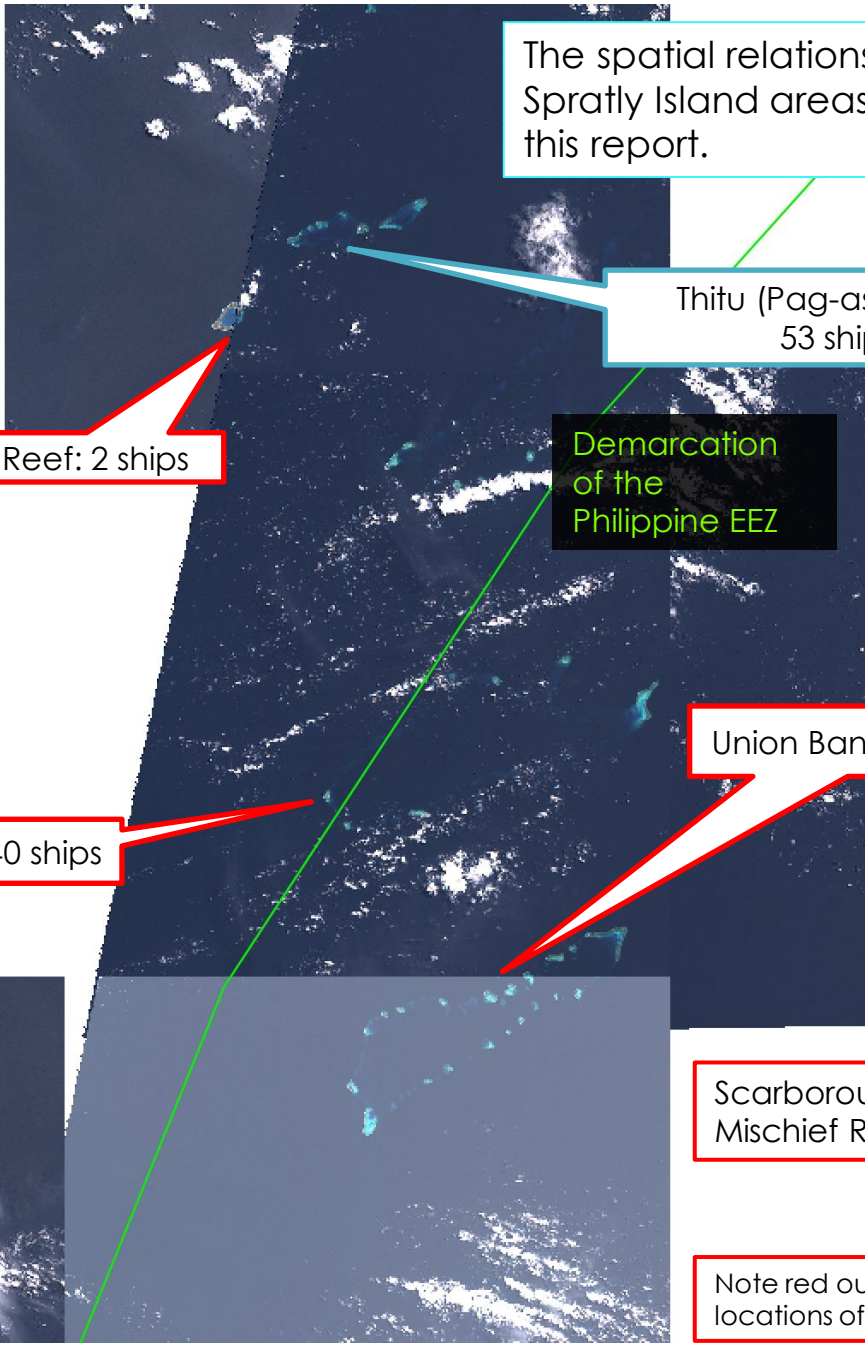
After: Number of ships in the **Philippine EEZ: 146**

Ship Summary

June 20 - July 12, 2021

Before Similarity's July 12 sewage report

Number of ships in the **Philippine EEZ: 234**



The spatial relationship among the Spratly Island areas mentioned in this report.

Thitu (Pag-asa) Reef: 53 ships

Subi Reef: 2 ships

Demarcation of the Philippine EEZ

Union Banks: 198 ships

Gaven Reef: 40 ships

Fiery Cross Reef: 46 ships

Scarborough Shoal: 5
Mischief Reef: 5

Note red outlines indicate locations of PRC military bases

Ship Summary

August 1-18, 2021

After Similarity's July 12 sewage report

Number of ships in the **Philippine EEZ: 146**

The spatial relationship among the Spratly Island areas mentioned in this report.

Thitu (Pag-asa) Reef: 18 ships

Demarcation of the Philippine EEZ

Subi Reef: 0 ships

Union Banks: 125 ships

Gaven Reef: 50 ships

Fiery Cross Reef: 22 ships

Scarborough Shoal: 6
Mischief Reef: 2

Note red outlines indicate locations of PRC military bases

Sources and References

Sources:

Quote from Slide 2: [Do South China Sea waste claims pass the smell test?](#) July 24, 2021, by Ziyu Zhang and Eduardo Baptista

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