



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 54/2022

01 August 2022

China's Maritime Armada - Primary Cause for Marine Disaster

Manan Bhatt

Keywords: South China Sea, Littorals, Sewage, Pollutants, Environment.



Image Source: chinadialogueocean.net



Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

The disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) have been adequately highlighted over the last few years, wherein the hegemony that China is trying to exert amongst the littorals has been a cause of concern. However, a lesser-discussed fact is that China is also the largest contributor to marine pollution¹ in the region. In fact, as per studies, plastic marine pollution by China accounts for one-third of the total global marine pollution.² In 2021 alone, China dumped more than 54 million tons of hazardous plastic into the oceans.³ In the past decade, China has been the largest decimator of ocean resources thanks to PLA (Navy) and its surrogated maritime militia as well as a dark fishing fleet.

At any given time, there are as many as 300 vessels operating in the South China Sea as part of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), also dubbed the 'Little Blue Men'. Add to this thousands of fishing vessels, many of which are involved in rampant overfishing and territory grabbing in the contested regions. All of these point towards an impending environmental disaster ahead. These vessels, anchored in big groups in the shallow waters of the South China Sea, have been reportedly dumping raw sewage, human waste, and wastewater into the sea.⁴ These actions are adversely affecting the coral reefs and also threatening fish stock and other marine species in the waters. The reports of satellite imagery, over the last half a decade, show that wastewater, sewage, and human faeces on the reefs in the SCS. This has resulted in unwarranted algae formation over the cluster of reefs and dis-balanced the marine ecosystem.

The untreated sewage from these vessels leads to the growth of 'phytoplanktons'. Whilst, phytoplankton within limits is necessary for maintaining a healthy marine ecology, a large concentration of these is a cause of concern. Many environmental monitoring groups have termed this phenomenon as 'Harmful Algal Blooms' (HABs). The HABs can produce toxins which are harmful not only to the copepods, fish, and other marine species, but may also be harmful to humans. The harmful effect of the bloom of phytoplankton are further multiplied when these die off. These dead phytoplankton then sink to the bottom and decompose. The bacteria that decompose these dead phytoplankton use oxygen in plenty, thereby creating large pockets of water bodies that are low on oxygen, adversely affecting marine life.

On July 13, 2021, Philippine Senator Poe strongly condemned the actions of Chinese vessels, highlighting how they are polluting the waters in the littorals and stating that China is "treating us as its toilets."⁵ Despite this, there are no evident efforts from the Chinese side to curb the spread of marine pollution through raw sewage and human waste. The number of Distant Water-Fishing (DWF) fleets has only grown over the years, and these, along with maritime militia are found disturbing the ecosystem in the region.

More recently, in early June this year, a PLA (Navy) oiler deployed as part of the Anti-Piracy Task Force in the Gulf of Aden was reportedly observed to have spilt a massive amount of oil at its overseas base at Djibouti. While the news has not been substantiated, Chinese vessels are known to have perpetuated many such maritime violations in the past. The Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) addresses environmental issues under International Maritime Organization's (IMO) charter. This committee lays down guidelines for Sewage Treatment Plants and effluent standards. All seagoing vessels are mandated to comply with these guidelines. However, the PLA Navy and the Chinese vessels are seldom found complying with these regulations. The Chinese Maritime Militia and DWF fleet, estimated to be more than 17000 vessels,⁶ are the primary sources of this violation and pollution in the South China Sea.

One might wonder why the existing guidelines of MEPC are not adhered to by the Chinese vessels in the SCS. The explanation is simple. Unlike regulations ashore, MARPOL Annex IV has no compliance monitoring and no conventions for strict implementation. Further, for a country such as China, which does not believe in rule-based order and had openly disregarded⁷ the International Tribunal's judgement (favouring the Philippines) over Scarborough shoals in 2016,⁸ it is hard to expect any adherence to guidelines promulgated by MEPC.

The issue is complex as, unlike on land, the marine environment is a unique entity. The adverse effects on marine life in one part of the globe directly or indirectly influence the marine ecosystem in other parts. The migratory species, the extent of coral reefs, and the dependence on the biome of one region on that of the other are some of the reasons for such interdependence.

The ever-increasing number of ships and vessels and the disregard for rules-based order by China need to be viewed with concern. There is a need to work out enforcement protocols in the future, with specific emphasis on the need for sewage treatment plants on board DWF and Maritime Militia. Heavy penalties for non-adherence to MEPC guidelines may also be imposed.

NOTES:

- ¹ “Closing the 'plastic loop' on marine waste across Asia”, *International Union for Conservation of Nature*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.iucn.org/news/asia/201806/closing-plastic-loop-marine-waste-across-asia>. Accessed on June 20, 2022.
- ² Niall McCarthy, “The Countries Polluting The Oceans The Most,” *Statista*, February 12, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/chart/12211/the-countries-polluting-the-oceans-the-most/>. Accessed on July 10, 2022
- ³ “Hazardous waste disposal volume in China from 2016 to 2021,” *Statista*, August 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1025504/china-hazardous-waste-disposal-volume/>. Accessed on June 20, 2022.
- ⁴ Steven Lee Myers and Jason Gutierrez, “With Swarms of Ships, Beijing Tightens Its Grip on South China Sea”, *New York Times*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/03/world/asia/swarms-ships-south-china-sea.html>. Accessed on June 25, 2022.
- ⁵ “Philippines to probe report of Chinese sewage-dumping at sea,” *CNN*, July 14, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/14/asia/philippines-south-china-sea-sewage-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.
- ⁶ Gabriel Pabico Lalu, “It’s the ‘Australian reef’: Photo of Chinese ships dumping poop in WPS disputed,” *Inquirer*, July 13, 2022, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1459217/dnd-verifying-claims-of-china-dumping-waste-on-wps-says-photo-is-from-australian-reef>. Accessed on Jul 25, 2022.
- ⁷ “Beijing calls tribunal ruling on South China Sea ‘a farce’ – video,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2016/jul/12/beijing-calls-tribunal-ruling-on-south-china-sea-a-farce-video>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.
- ⁸ Euan Graham, “The Hague Tribunal’s South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence?,” *Council of Councils*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/hague-tribunals-south-china-sea-ruling-empty-provocation-or-slow-burning-influence>. Accessed on June 20, 2022.
- 