

Vietnam expands maritime militia off southern coast

New squadron of ships, platoons and light weapons debuts in sovereignty assertion

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HANOI -- Vietnam has taken a new step to bolster its maritime presence as territorial tensions rise in the South China Sea.

Vietnam launched a new squadron -- the Permanent Maritime Militia Unit -- on Wednesday in Kien Giang, the country's southwesternmost province. It consists of nine ships and platoons equipped with light weapons trained to carry out paramilitary work with support from the country's Naval Academy and Naval Technical College.

Establishing a new maritime militia in Kien Giang Province, which faces into the Gulf of Thailand, shows the importance Hanoi attaches to the strategic location as it expands oil and gas exploration and transportation in the area. The unit will protect fishing activities and conduct patrols, among other tasks.

Major Gen. Truong Minh Khai, deputy commander of the 9th Military Region, called on the local military command to quickly provide staffing, facilities and training for the unit.

The squadron is organized as a maritime force "to jointly protect the sovereignty of the sea and islands," the Defense Ministry said in a statement. The squadron will conduct patrols and collect and process information from both air and sea.

The new unit is the second since April, when another squadron consisting of 131 crew was established in Ba Ria Vung Tau Province, an oil and gas industrial center in southern Vietnam.

The expansion of maritime forces comes amid growing tensions in the South China Sea and before Association of Southeast Asia Nations defense ministers meet on Wednesday in a video conference. Also expected to take part in the conference are ASEAN's eight dialogue partners, which consist of China, the U.S., India, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Russia.

China's maritime activity in the region has led to territorial disputes with several ASEAN nations. In March, the Philippines accused some 200 Chinese armed vessels of anchoring at Whitsun Reef in the waters of Sinh Ton Commune in the disputed Spratly Islands.

Manila again in May accused China of sending 100 more ships to the area.

China's coast guard announced in April that it would enforce a summer fishing ban from May 1 to September 16, covering the Bohai, Yellow and East China seas, along with "waters north of 12 degrees north latitude" in the South China Sea, including part of the Gulf of Tonkin and the disputed Parcel Islands.

Malaysia's air force this month said 16 Chinese military transport planes came close to violating Malaysian airspace, after they were detected conducting "suspicious" activity over the South China Sea.

China's "nine-dash line" territorial claim covers 90% of the 3.5-million-sq. km South China Sea, despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruling against the claim in 2016.

On Tuesday, Vietnam Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son called for "a basic and long-term solution" to the South China Sea issue during talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, suggesting the two sides comply with international laws and hold talks to seek a solution.

For years, Vietnamese experts have said China has been developing a "maritime militia," illegally operating in Vietnamese and Philippine waters, and clashing with fishing boats -- incidents that have resulted in deaths. Vietnam's oil and gas exploration activities have been hindered by Chinese aggression at sea. The experts have urged Hanoi to protect people and resources in the country's exclusive economic zones.

Speaking to local media on Tuesday, Nguyen Chi Vinh, a former deputy defense minister, said, "No Vietnamese leader has any intention of making concessions to China on sovereignty. All [the country's] military soldiers and leaders will have wronged the people if Vietnam loses sovereignty in the East Sea." The South China Sea is known as the East Sea in Vietnam.

"Vietnamese authorities have always kept a close watch on all activities in Hoang Sa and Truong Sa archipelagoes, as well as Vietnam's waters in the East Sea," Vietnam Foreign Ministry spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang, told a news conference Thursday, responding to reports that Chinese vessels appeared near Tri Ton Island in the Paracel Islands.

Since 2018, Hanoi has been planning to enhance its "maritime militia force." Vietnam first acknowledged the force in a 2019 defense white paper, noting the presence of a domestic "militia" and "changes in its organization and equipment."

Vessels for the force are being built at a factory in the port city of Hai Phong, near Hanoi. Local media said the new generation of large-capacity ships would be equipped with propulsion systems, and up-to-date information communication and exploration equipment. The ships will carry out search and rescue missions, logistics, as well as providing support to fishermen.

Vietnam's decision to build up its maritime militias now comes in response to Beijing passing a law that turned its coast guard into a quasi-military force that can fire on foreign ships, said Ha Hoang Hop, a visiting senior fellow with ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singapore-based think tank.

"Vietnam's Permanent Maritime Militia will be used to respond to potentially illegal action by Chinese maritime militia and coast guards in Vietnam's waters," he said. "The units are designed to help defend Vietnamese sovereignty and other legal interests, by fighting crime and conducting civil defense tasks."

"Vietnam wants to augment its capability in the gray zone, as it knows that most, if not all, of the conflict in the South China Sea takes place in the gray area between war and peace," Alexander L. Vuving, professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii, told Nikkei Asia. "The militia is an important force in [this uncertain space] and Vietnam's militia is far behind that of China."

Vuving also pointed out that Kien Giang Province was Vietnam's farthest coastal province from China, and faces west into the Gulf of Thailand, which is not part of the South China Sea theater of conflict. The new militia's missions would be focused on the Gulf of Thailand, rather than the South China Sea, he said.

Hanoi's move to set up the militia was designed to test the response of China and other regional countries, he said. ASEAN's defense ministers meeting next week will also give Vietnam a sense of how its neighbors view this action, he added.

Additional reporting by Kim Dung Tong in Ho Chi Minh City