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Background Briefing:

South China Sea: Vietnam's Land Reclamation 1.9%

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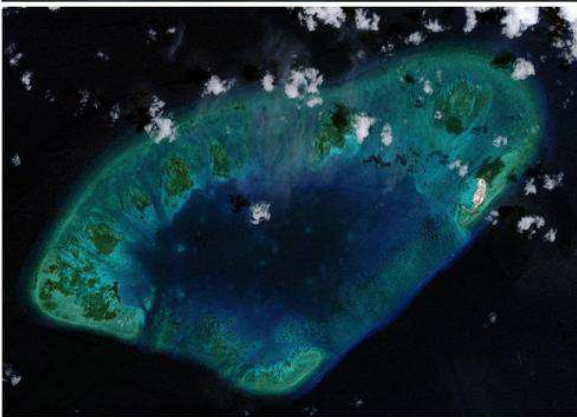
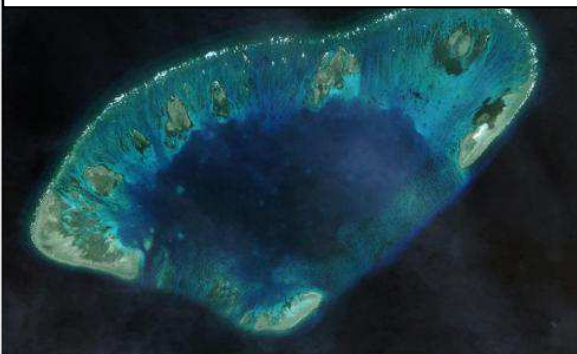
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We request your assessment of the report on Vietnam's Land Reclamation just released by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) at the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS), Washington, D.C.
<http://amti.csis.org/vietnam-island-building/>

What do you make of it? Has Vietnam been reclaiming land in the South China Sea for a while

West London Reef 2010 and 2015



ANSWER: The CSIS AMTI Report will be music to China's ears because China and its supporters are claiming that China is merely catching up with regional states. China has already alleged that regional states have reclaimed land, built military installations and even installed missiles.

The CSIS report provides new information to the extent that it depicts construction on Sand Cay and West London Reef from 2010. These are the latest photos Sand Cay and West London Reef in the public domain. The CSIS report may be misleading in using the description "significant" and giving stress to military facilities. These features have been occupied by Vietnam since 1956, first the Republic of Vietnam and then the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The

lighthouses were erected in the 1990s (if not earlier). All Vietnam's occupied islands and features have military personnel. They also have "fortifications" for defensive purposes. These are flimsy positions of concrete that are not very thick.

There are several points to be made. First, do these activities indicate a lack of self-restraint that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability in there South China Sea? These are the injunctions of the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). The evidence presented by CSIS AMTI regarding Vietnam land reclamation depicts normal activities that are of a defensive nature and do not threatened regional peace and stability.

Second, given the figures released by CSIS, Vietnam's land reclamation amounts to 1.9% of the land reclaimed by China (0.03 square miles of Vietnamese reclaimed land divided by 1.55 square miles of Chinese reclaimed land). Or, the total land reclaimed by Vietnam amounts to 9.5% of land reclaimed by China on Fiery Cross Reef alone.

Third, China has a track record of using armed force to secure islands and features in the South China Sea (January 1974 western Paracels, and March 1988 Johnson South Reef and adjacent features). China suddenly and without warning occupied Mischief Reef and has continually built on it since 1995 up to the present. China has also virtually



annexed Scarborough Shoal and invested (in a military sense) Second Thomas Shoal in the Philippines. China's actions have aroused security concerns in the Philippines because Chinese officials insist they have the right to declare an Air Defence Identification Zone over their features. In the past six months Chinese officials have requested that Philippine military aircraft leave air space that the Philippines claims is international air space.

Fourth, all the so-called military "fortifications" and buildings on Vietnam's tiny features are defensive in nature and are not large enough to support any offensive action. CSIS photos show "gun emplacements" but no guns.

China needs to specify what kinds of missiles are allegedly stationed on Vietnamese islands and features. The first charges of this nature were made by Taiwan and related to hand held anti-aircraft missiles. Taiwan later retracted its allegations.

Fifth, because of the way CSIS has reported on this new imagery, they have muddied the waters by using terms such as "significant" and "military" without putting it in proper context with respect to the DOC.

CSIS does report, however, that China's land reclamation activities are much greater than Vietnam's land reclamation. Vietnam's land reclamation may be "significant" if CSIS means that Vietnam expanded a tiny speck by 66% of the total land area, for example.

Sixth, all this release of satellite imagery cries out for transparency by all parties concerned. Why are China and Vietnam reclaiming land? What do they ultimately intend to do as a result of land reclamation?

Vietnam's airstrip on Truong Sa island pre-dates the 2002 DOC by many years. But China's track record, coupled with its construction of two new airstrips, one large

enough to take military aircraft of any size, raise concerns about its intentions in the long run. They may provoke regional states to take counter-measures. And it is in this sense that Chinese activities complicate the present situation and could result in an escalation of disputes and affect peace and stability in there South China Sea.

ASEAN and Chinese diplomatic interlocutors on the Joint Working Group to Implement the Guidelines on the DOC should determine if Chinese and Vietnamese land reclamation activities breach the clause on "self-restraint" and whether they affect peace and stability in the region. They are unlikely to do so, however.

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