



NEW HORIZONS FOR CHINESE COASTGUARD

The Chinese navy has become an indisputable military power. However, Beijing is increasingly using its coastguard on long distance missions to assert its power... far from the usual role for this type of force which is to enforce the laws near the territory with a reduced armament.

AN INCREASINGLY POWERFUL COASTGUARD...

12,000 tons: the tonnage of the two main ships of the Chinese coastguard is impressive. The GCC 2901 and 3901, launched respectively in 2014 and 2016, hold the world record for tonnage of cutters¹ to date. This is even more than the displacement of the mighty Ticonderoga cruisers of the *US Navy* (10,000 t). While their weapons are certainly not comparable to those of the latter, the CCGs 2901 and 3901 are specifically designed to intimidate and to prevail in the increasingly frequent occurrences of sea dueling in the South China Sea.

In addition to these colossi of the seas, the Chinese coastguard currently has about 230 ships, of which a hundred have been in service since 2012 only. The result is a fleet today able to compete with the *US Coast Guard*, the largest in the world. Administratively, the Chinese resources are grouped together in a single body, created in 2013 by the merger of four government agencies.

... FOR AN EVER-EXTENDING ROLE

While the official vocation of this organisation is the action of the State at sea (police, assistance, anti-pollution ...), it sometimes uses its resources in a more aggressive way. The increase in the number and armament of the coastguard units coincides with the ever-greater influence that China intends to exert, to the point that there is now an onshore coastguard with "traditional" missions and an offshore one, responsible for protecting Chinese interests on the high seas: the *Wei qan zhifa* ("fleet responsible for enforcing maritime laws").

The role of the latter is ambiguous. Its units regularly conduct patrols in highly contested areas such as the *Paracel* (or *Spratley*) Islands... which are far from China's exclusive economic zone. Beijing does not intend to show any weakness when facing its rivals: out of 45 incidents reported in the *South China Sea*, 30 are related to the Chinese coastguards who harass, intimidate, or even strike foreign cutters or fishermen.

This doctrine of "soft" expansion of the zone of Chinese maritime influence recalls the classic diplomacy of the gunboat: a policy of assertion of power and sovereignty by sending a ship in a disputed area ... A strong symbol, but not an aggression. The effect is even more convincing in the case of cutters, simple vectors of public service painted in white, very different therefore from the gray battle ships.

¹ Light ships typically used by the Coastguard.

With its numerous imposing and increasingly invasive cutters, China has put "active" naval diplomacy up to date, with true "cutter diplomacy".

THE US PRECEDENT

China is not alone in doing so. The United States have already sent their cutters off the coast of Africa, with the stated goal of training local navies for state action missions at sea and up to the *Black Sea*. In addition, the Congress is currently debating whether or not to deploy the *US Coast Guard* in the *South China Sea* to carry out *Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP)*.

By doing so, US coastguards are likely to perform the same "soft" affirmation missions as their Chinese counterparts. It would be a first in the area for this somewhat aged force now in full renewal. This reorientation would be entirely consistent with the new priorities of the Pentagon, which relegates the fight against terrorism to second place in favor of maintaining strategic superiority vis-à-vis China and Russia.

This is a clear signal that the coastguards of States with a strong navy will play a more prominent role in future power struggles. The new Chinese and American cutters, more armed and imposing than ever, are strong messages sent from one state to another: despite their "peaceful" appearance, they provide a continuity to their military counterparts, the avant-garde of the power of their respective nations.



In the foreground: the 12,000-ton CCG 2901 cutter, backed by GCC 2502. © All rights reserved.