

THE SANYA CHINESE NAVAL BASE: A TOOL FOR REGIONAL CONTROL?

Sino-Japanese disputes about the Diaoyu / Senkaku islands spotlight the numerous ongoing sovereignty challenges in the islands of the Far East, from the Kuril to the Spratlys. In the South China Sea, the extension of the naval base at Sanya (or Yulin), on the island of Hainan, is an illustration of Beijing's ambitions in this region where the rise of China's power is exacerbating tensions.

A BREATHTAKINGLY RAPID MODERNIZATION

Built in great secrecy in the early 2000s, the Sanya base has become a symbol of the rapid modernisation of the Chinese navy. This base is the modern extension of a military settlement dating back to the first half of the twentieth century.

The site, with underground facilities, seems destined to house the bulk of the ballistic missile nuclear submarines (SSBN) of the Chinese navy, as well as surface ships and eventual aircraft carriers.

Two *Jin*-class SSBN (Type 094) and several *Shang*-class SSNs, three *Luyang* type destroyers and a modern *Jiangwei* type frigate have been sent there. This accumulation of sophisticated equipment on the island of Hainan is a result of both the strengthening of China's military shipbuilding policy and the strategy of transferring submarines from the Gulf of Bohai in the extreme north of the country down to Sanya.

The growing concentration of submarine forces in the south confirms the priority given to this region by the Chinese defence policy.



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Sanya
naval
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A STRATEGIC LOCATION

Located about twenty kilometres south of the Chinese mainland, off the Gulf of Tonkin, Hainan Island is located in the northern part of the South China Sea. This location allows rapid deployment of ships in highly contested maritime space, especially around the Spratly and Paracel islands – an area rich in fishery resources, mineral sites as well as possibly oil and gas. China has become a major energy consumer, now heavily dependent on oil imports to power its economy. A significant share of global economic trade travels through the South China Sea. Located near the strategic straits, the Sanya base offers another advantage to China as it allows the country to protect its economic interests in securing major sea lanes of communication in the region. Finally, the waters around the Sanya base are deeper than those of the Gulf of Bohai, making the movements of the submersibles more difficult to detect by neighbouring countries or anyone else present in the zone.

A MEANS OF PRESSURE IN SOUTH CHINA SEA

In this context, the Sanya base could be an instrument of pressure against China's rivals in the region. The gradual sending of military equipment to the site already generates strong concern in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

As a force multiplier, the submarines at the Sanya base could serve China's strategy of denial of access, in particular can be used to prevent any U.S. presence in the South China Sea in the case of conflict. This prospect worries Washington enough that they regularly send vessels in the vicinity of the base, at the risk sometimes of causing clashes similar to that between USNS Impeccable and Chinese vessels in March 2009.

The strategic location of the base of Sanya is not only an expression of China's political and economic ambitions in this region. Indeed, following the Soviet theory of the "strongholds" in the Okhotsk Sea during the Cold War, China's objective is to transform the islands into a Chinese sanctuary as they believe a large part of the South China Sea belongs to them historically.