

Fishing industry

China's fishing fleet embroiled in rising tensions with US

Washington has cracked down on Beijing's vessels over illegal fishing and 'grey-zone operations' in South China Sea



South Korean coastguards apprehending Chinese vessels suspected of illegal fishing in 2011. China's fleet has long faced accusations of environmental and labour rights abuses © Dong-A Ilbo/AFP/Getty Images

Edward White in Seoul YESTERDAY

From the waters of the Pacific Ocean to the coasts of Antarctica and Africa, China's fishing fleet is emerging as a new geopolitical flashpoint between Washington and Beijing.

The Chinese distant water industry is by far the world's biggest in terms of catch volume and fleet size, and is estimated to have about 10,000 vessels worldwide. It has long drawn criticism from conservationists for its pillage of endangered species and from human rights experts for abuse of workers on the high seas.

Over the past year, however, a crackdown on the industry has become a pillar of Joe Biden's broader Indo-Pacific policy designed to push back against China. With US-China relations at their lowest point in decades, [fishing](#) has become an increasingly acute point of tension between the military superpowers, experts have warned.

Elizabeth Freund Larus, a [China](#) expert at the Pacific Forum, a US foreign policy research institute, said Washington had determined that illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing by Chinese boats was a "national security concern".

The fleet was depleting fish stocks worldwide and depriving coastal communities of critical food sources, she said. But even more troubling to Washington, Larus added,

was the dual use of China's fishing vessels for both commercial operations and as a maritime militia that allegedly supports China's navy, coastguard and maritime police.

Beijing, which backs the industry with [generous subsidies](#), has mostly rejected such claims. The Chinese foreign ministry told the Financial Times that China was a "responsible country in distant-water fisheries" and had a "zero-tolerance" attitude towards illegal fishing. It said claims of environmental and labour abuses were "not factual", and added that descriptions of the militia came from "ulterior motives" on the part of the US.

The foreign ministry also alleged in March that US fishing vessels often practised illegal fishing on the high seas and in waters under the jurisdiction of other countries. "We call on the US side to do its own part on the issue of distant-water fisheries first, rather than act as judge or police to criticise other countries' normal fishing activities and politicise . . . issues that are about fisheries in the name of environmental protection and human rights," said ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin.

China ranks as the world's worst offender for illegal fishing

| Rank | Country |
|------|-------------|
| 1 | China |
| 2 | Russia |
| 3 | South Korea |
| 4 | Somalia |
| 5 | Yemen |
| 6 | Taiwan |
| 7 | Ukraine |
| 8 | Eritrea |
| 9 | Egypt |
| 10 | Libya |

Source: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

Those comments came after Biden instructed US government agencies to step up efforts to combat China's illegal fishing and labour abuses.

The US, Japan, Australia and India [last year announced](#) a satellite-based initiative to help countries in the Pacific region track illegal fishing and China's alleged maritime militias. The US imposed financial sanctions on two big Chinese fishing companies in December. The US Coast Guard is also working with Pacific Island nations to police the industry.

China's use of a maritime militia alongside its fishing vessels and coastguard, coupled with its occupation and militarisation of the disputed islands, reefs and atolls in the South China Sea, were viewed by analysts as "grey-zone operations" that increased the risk that other countries would respond more forcefully, said Evan Laksmana, an expert on military modernisation in Asia with the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Laksmana warned that the expansive Chinese fleet raised the chances of a "nightmare scenario" in which nations' navies and coastguards clashed at sea. "Does that mean it is armed conflict between two states?"

China's fishing fleet also faces a series of fresh allegations of labour and environmental abuses from NGOs. Key areas of concern include the Pacific Ocean, [the 5,500km coastline of west Africa](#) and the waters around the Antarctic peninsula.

While Taiwan and South Korea, among others, have faced similar allegations of environmental and labour abuses, the sheer size of the Chinese fleet means it presents as a more systemic problem.

In one example, the UK-based Environmental Justice Foundation has raised concerns over the operations aboard the *Run Da 5*, a privately owned Chinese vessel, which was at sea for 565 consecutive days after leaving Busan, South Korea, in August 2021.

Among numerous allegations of physical abuse reviewed by the FT, at least three workers suffered from severe frostbite and lost fingers to amputation after being forced to work in freezers for more than five hours at a time. Immigration officials in Port of Suva in Fiji rescued eight abused workers in March, the EJF said. Neither the Fijian police nor the fishing vessel's owner responded to requests for comment.

Illegal fishing is among the biggest contributors to transnational crime

| Transnational crime | Estimated annual value |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Counterfeiting | \$923bn to \$1.13tn |
| Drug trafficking | \$426bn to \$652bn |
| Illegal logging | \$52bn to \$157bn |
| Illegal wildlife trade | \$5bn to \$23bn |
| Human trafficking | \$150.2bn |
| Illegal mining | \$12bn to \$48bn |
| IUU fishing | \$15.5bn to \$36.4bn |
| Crude oil theft | \$5.2bn to \$11.9bn |
| Small arms and light weapons trafficking | \$1.7bn to \$3.5bn |
| Organ trafficking | \$840mn to \$1.7bn |
| Trafficking in cultural property | \$1.2bn to \$1.6bn |
| Total | \$1.6tn to \$2.2tn |

Source: Global Financial Integrity, a US think-tank

According to an IUU fishing index published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, China was the worst-performing of the 152 countries surveyed, followed by Russia and South Korea. The US was ranked 27th worst-performing.

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, an international oceans watchdog, said a monitoring trip earlier this year found that in waters near the South Orkney Islands, about 600-km from Antarctica, Chinese krill-fishing boats harmed endangered species – including whales, seals and penguins. Krill is a feedstock for China’s booming aquaculture industry.

Sea Shepherd also said it had helped eight countries in west Africa stop 86 illegal fishing vessels since 2016, including 18 since the start of last year. More than 70 per cent of these vessels were either flagged to China, or were joint ventures with Chinese beneficial ownership but flagged to another country. Sea Shepherd’s vessels act as transport and crew for fisheries officials and law enforcement in countries that lack

transport and crew for fisheries officials and law enforcement in countries that lack their own resources.

Peter Hammarstedt, Sea Shepherd's director of campaigns, who has personally monitored the Chinese fleet in Antarctica and Africa, said it was common for Chinese vessels to tamper with the mandatory automatic identification systems used for tracking purposes. He also warned that environmental campaigns were becoming increasingly enmeshed with broader geopolitical concerns.

"Conservation issues become problematic because of the new cold war that we find ourselves in," he said.

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