



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*The China Coast Guard:
Interpreting Its Evolving
Structures*

REPORT

Speaker :

Vikash Kumar Thakur

6 March 2024

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Speaker: Dr. Vikash Kumar Thakur, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Dr. Atul Bhardwaj, Fellow, Pradhan Mantri Museum and Library; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 6 March 2024

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The seminar examined the major changes and current situation of the China Coast Guard (CCG). The chair highlighted the relevance of the topic in light of increasing security tensions in the East and South China Seas and China's growing maritime power. Dr. Vikash Kumar Thakur provided a comprehensive overview of the CCG's history, the structural changes it has undergone and their underlying factors and their impact on the region. He also explored how the CCG works in coordination with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and drew parallels with India and other neighbouring countries.

The speaker began by explaining how fragmented maritime law enforcement in China was prior to 2013. Coastal security responsibilities were divided among five different agencies, namely, the Maritime Police of China (reporting both to the Ministry of Public Security and the People's Armed Police), the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command under the Ministry of Agriculture, China Marine Surveillance under the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), the Customs Police under the General Administration of Customs, and the Maritime Safety Administration under the Ministry of Transport. While each agency had its own designated area of focus, their functions often overlapped.

In 2013, a major reform initiated by the State Council merged four of the five maritime agencies — excluding the Maritime Safety Administration — into one under the SOA, thereby leading to the creation of the unified China Coast Guard. This move aimed to address issues such as wasted resources, unclear command, and enforcement gaps caused by overlapping roles. The speaker pointed out that this reform marked the onset of a more centralised approach to maritime law enforcement, driven by China's growing maritime interests and ongoing disputes with neighbouring countries.

The next major change occurred in 2018, when the CCG was transferred from the SOA to the People's Armed Police, which is directly under the Central Military Commission. This was a significant shift as the CCG, which was once under civilian control, was placed under military leadership. This change not only brought clearer command but also aligned the CCG more closely with China's national defence goals. The reform reflected China's growing awareness of the need for better coordination between military and civilian maritime forces to effectively manage both land and maritime borders.

The speaker argued that these reforms were driven by both practical and political considerations. On the practical side, there was a pressing need to stop wastage of resources and address enforcement gaps. Politically, rising tensions and clashes with neighbouring countries underscored the need for the government to strengthen the power and legitimacy of its maritime forces. Furthermore, the speaker also noted that maintaining domestic credibility is crucial for the Communist Party, which seeks to project strength and determination in the face of maritime disputes and threats to national sovereignty.

He highlighted how other countries in the region have undertaken similar reforms. Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and South Korea have all expanded or restructured their coast guards in response to the growing maritime disputes. Japan has given its Coast Guard more powers, including the authority to carry firearms and has established new training academies. The Philippines separated its Coast Guard from the Navy for better independence. Vietnam also lets its coast guard carry firearms under specific conditions. The speaker pointed out that around two-thirds of regional conflicts involve the use of Coast Guards, underscoring their growing strategic importance.

Besides the coast guard, the speaker also discussed China's maritime militia — state-supported civilians trained by the navy. These militias blur the line between military and civilian roles and can be rapidly mobilised in disputed areas. Although they lack advanced weapons or a clear chain of command, their ambiguous status enables China to push its claims and challenge rival states without starting full-scale military conflicts. This strategy adds a layer of complexity to the regional security issues..

In conclusion, the seminar underscored the growing strategic importance of the China Coast Guard in shaping regional maritime dynamics. The chair emphasised that the CCG, along with China's maritime militia, plays a central role in advancing Beijing's interests through "grey zone" tactics—assertive actions that fall short of open conflict. With ongoing tensions

in the South and East China Seas, and increased attention from India and Quad partners, the seminar highlighted the need for deeper academic engagement with these evolving developments and their implications for regional security.

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