



MAKING WAVES

A maritime news brief covering:

- **MARITIME SECURITY**
- **MARITIME FORCES**
- **SHIPPING, PORTS AND OCEAN ECONOMY**
- **MARINE ENVIRONMENT**
- **GEOPOLITICS**

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CONTENTS

MARITIME SECURITY	3
PIRATES BOARD CRUDE TANKER NEAR WORLD'S MOST CRITICAL OIL PASSAGE.....	3
FIRST GLOBAL VDES SATELLITE NETWORK TO LAUNCH IN 2022	4
US MILITARY RESEARCHERS CALL FOR USE OF PRIVATEERS AGAINST CHINA.....	5
CAMEROON: CARGO OF FAKE CHLOROQUINE TABLETS INTERCEPTED IN SW REGION	6
WHAT THE CORONAVIRUS HASN'T STOPPED: BEIJING'S BUILDUP IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA.....	7
MARITIME FORCES.....	11
RUSSIAN NAVY TO SPEED UP TEST LAUNCHES OF TSIRKON HYPERSONIC MISSILE.....	11
WHY ARMY HELICOPTERS ARE LAUNCHING FROM A NAVY SHIP	12
NEW CHINESE ASSAULT CARRIER CATCHES FIRE.....	13
RUSSIA TO SPEND \$1.3 BLN TO CONSTRUCT TWO HELICOPTER CARRIERS ...	14
THE NAVY CAPTAIN FIRED FOR SOUNDING CORONAVIRUS ALARMS BROKE NO LAW—JUST PROTOCOL.....	15
SHIPPING, PORTS AND OCEAN ECONOMY.....	17
INACTIVE BOXSHIP FLEET TO SURPASS 3M TEU FOR THE FIRST TIME	17
TANKERS A SILVER LINING FOR SHIP OWNERS	18
ATHOS I AND SAFE BERTH CLAUSES.....	19
WITH SAILORS STRANDED, SHIPPING FACES A HARD CHOICE	20
CRUISE LINES ARE GETTING DESPERATE.....	22
MARINE ENVIRONMENT	24
UNUSUAL OZONE HOLE OPENS OVER THE ARCTIC.....	24
TROPICAL OCEANS HEADED FOR COLLAPSE WITHIN THE NEXT 10 YEARS, MAJOR STUDY REVEALS	25
OTHERWORLDLY, STRING-LIKE ORGANISM SPOTTED IN DEEP SEA IS MADE UP OF 'MILLIONS OF INTERCONNECTED CLONES'	27
COASTAL POLLUTION REDUCES GENETIC DIVERSITY OF CORALS, REEF RESILIENCE.....	28

JUDGE: NOAA VIOLATED ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT BY ALLOWING LOBSTER TRAPS THAT THREATEN RIGHT WHALES	30
GEOPOLITICS	31
US THREATENS TO BLOCK CHINA TELECOM FROM AMERICAN MARKET	31
THE UNEXPECTED HOLDOUT TO A GLOBAL OIL PRODUCTION DEAL	32
US READY TO BLOCK IRAN'S REQUESTS FOR CORONAVIRUS AID FROM THE IMF, OFFICIALS SAY.....	35
Is U.S. ENERGY DOMINANCE COMING TO AN END?	36
POLICE FORCE ESTABLISHED TO REPEL INVADERS OF OUTLYING ISLANDS ..	38
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	40

MARITIME SECURITY

PIRATES BOARD CRUDE TANKER NEAR WORLD'S MOST CRITICAL OIL PASSAGE

Unidentified armed men have boarded a Hong Kong-flagged oil tanker off the coast of Iran near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a British monitoring organization and a private intelligence firm reported.

The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Organization said the vessel was boarded on April 14 while anchored just off the Iranian coast in the Sea of Oman, but added that the ship was later released.

The organization urged vessels in the area to "stay vigilant."

Dryad Global, a private maritime intelligence firm, said it was unclear whether the vessel had been in distress or was being assisted by Iran.

The company identified the tanker as the Hong Kong-flagged SC Taipei on its way to Al-Jubail in Saudi Arabia. It said the 22 crew members aboard were all Chinese.

The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain has not immediately commented on the reported incident, which comes amid heightened tensions between the United States and Iran in the region.

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has harassed or seized a number of vessels over the last year in a move viewed by analysts as a way to exert pressure on the United States and its allies over crushing U.S. economic sanctions.

Iran is also suspected of planting limpet mines on six ships in the Gulf of Oman in May and June of 2019.

Dryad Global said "it cannot nor should not be ruled out" that Iran attempted an operation on April 14 against the Hong Kong-flagged ship "in haste," and aborted the mission out of political concerns.

"While Beijing is not responsible for Hong Kong vessels, there is a realistic possibility that China would view the detention of a Hong Kong vessel as a proxy assault on its own sovereignty," the company said. "At a time when China still buys Iranian oil, and Iran has few international friends, such a move would be highly irregular, and would not further Iran's interests."

Source: oilprice.com; 15 April 2020

FIRST GLOBAL VDES SATELLITE NETWORK TO LAUNCH IN 2022

A newly established consortium is going to develop a network for low Earth orbit (LEO) satellites delivering ice chart data to ships at sea to improve navigation for ships in rough seas and raise security for the crew on board. The network will also allow the satellite operator Sternula to launch its first out of a total of fifty small satellites.

A new research project called MARIOT (Maritime IoT) is going to develop a low Earth orbit satellite network based on the new VDES (VHF Data Exchange System) technology.

GateHouse, Space Inventor, and Satlab will develop the hardware and software components for the project while Aalborg University—based on its extensive experience with launching smallsats—will contribute with technology and expert knowledge.

The Danish Meteorological Institute will participate with its ice chart service, which is in development and will be tailored to the VDES network. The MARIOT project will be managed by Sternula and is sponsored by the Danish Innovation Fund.

The consortium behind the project is headed by the Danish satellite operator Sternula. The project will initially focus on the need for improved communication and navigation services in the Arctic Ocean.

Commenting on the project, Business Development Manager at GateHouse, Per Koch, said: “Today, the satellite communication networks used by ships in high-latitude seas are often expensive, inept for small amounts of data, and, in some cases, do not even cover seas in remote regions. This is an issue—especially in the Arctic Ocean—where optimised navigation services can significantly reduce the length of shipping routes, e.g. by placing routes closer to the Arctic.

“VDES offers a faster and more efficient data connection compared to other Satcom services on the market, and after the VDES standard was assigned global radio frequencies last year, we now have the opportunity to launch the first global VDES network improving navigation services and security for ships sailing through treacherous passages.”

VDES technology is the second generation of the Automatic Identification System (AIS) which is used to monitor marine traffic by more than 200,000 ships.

However, AIS has a limited reach of only 30 nautical miles and is also limited to transfer on only certain types of data. VDES will enable global connectivity through satellite networks as well as the efficient transfer of more data types.

Besides shipping companies operating in the Arctic Ocean, the VDES network is also relevant for maritime security and navigation services, e.g. for sailing directions and coastal monitoring, and can also be used by the maritime industry to monitor marine engines and critical equipment on board.

The contribution of GateHouse is mainly related to data communication. More specifically by ensuring that data can be communicated to and from the individual satellites to the ground station. This includes inter-satellite capabilities and advanced algorithms for data routing in satellite constellation.

Source: satteliteprome.com; 05 April 2020

US MILITARY RESEARCHERS CALL FOR USE OF PRIVATEERS AGAINST CHINA

The United States should encourage the use of privateers to fight Chinese aggression at sea, according to a pair of articles in magazine produced by the US Naval Institute.

The reports – titled “Unleash the Privateers!” and “US Privateering Is Legal”, and published in the April issue of Proceedings – suggest the US government issue letters of marque – a commission authorising privately owned ships (privateers) to capture enemy merchant ships.

The authors – Mark Cancian, a retired US Marine Corps colonel and senior adviser at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and Brandon Schwartz, a former CSIS media relations manager – said that China’s larger merchant fleet represented an asymmetric vulnerability with the US, and an attack on China’s global trade would undermine its entire economy and threaten its stability.

Such a campaign would be a legal and low-cost way to contain China’s power rise on the sea, they said, adding that it could prevent, rather than provoke, a war.

Collin Koh, a research fellow from the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University, said the idea was “politically unsound”.

“That would be regarded as an outright provocation which would invite retaliation from China,” he said.

“And going by the UN Charter, it might even be construed as a use of force, and would invite international condemnation too.”

Privateering with a letter of marque dates back to a period from the mid-16th to the 18th century known as the Age of Sail, but was outlawed with the introduction of various treaties in the 19th and 20th centuries.

However, the authors of the Proceedings reports said that the US government never formally signed any agreements, and argued that the US Constitution gave Congress the power to “grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal”.

Although no such letters had been issued since 1907, that was due to “strategic and policy considerations rather than legal ones”, they said.

The authors did not say if China's trillions of dollars worth of trade with the US should be exempted from attacks by pirates, but that probably was because it would no longer exist in a hypothetical scenario of the two nations already having decoupled.

Hong Kong-based military commentator Song Zhongping said that such decoupling, as advocated by American conservatives and far-rights, was a dangerous sign that it would place two nuclear powers in confrontation and even conflict.

"When the Americans decide to act tough against a so-called adversary or enemy, they will spare no effort and limit no means," he said.

"Privateering on Chinese merchant ships may also be possible."

Republican congressman Ron Paul raised the issue of using letters of marque against Osama bin Laden and Somalian pirates in 2007 and 2009, but did not succeed.

Julia Xue, chair professor of International Law at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, said the researchers argument was not valid.

"It has been customary international law, and the US is also bonded by it," she said. "It was an incorrect interpretation of international law."

Koh said the current policy elites were unlikely to seriously consider such a recommendation, but such articles represented the think tankers who advocated a much harder policy stance against China.

"If anything, it does reflect the growing schism between China and the US, as both countries see their ties sliding downhill under the cloud of strategic lack of trust," Koh said.

Source: scmp.com; 10 April 2020

CAMEROON: CARGO OF FAKE CHLOROQUINE TABLETS INTERCEPTED IN SW REGION

A cargo of fake chloroquine tablets reportedly manufactured in neighbouring Nigeria has been intercepted in a boat around Limbe, Fako Division of the South West region of Cameroon, reports have confirmed.

Sources say the cargo containing a huge consignment of fake chloroquine tablets and other drugs was intercepted by the Cameroonian army in one of its routine patrols to secure Cameroon's maritime borders.

It is thanks to Dr Thompson Kingue, Director of the Limbe Regional Hospital who got to the scene after the cargo was intercepted that maritime security officials were able to determine that the chloroquine tablets were fake ones.

“Reading on the packages, I see that these are fake chloroquine tablets manufactured in Nigeria” the medic said.

According to sources, these fake chloroquine tablets alongside the other drugs seized were meant to be sold in Cameroon.

After it was announced that chloroquine could be used in the treatment against the dreaded Coronavirus pandemic that has killed many worldwide, some malicious people engaged themselves in the illegal traffic of this drug so as to put it on the market.

Reports say most at times, the tablets sold are fake.

Source: journalducameroun.com; 03 April 2020

WHAT THE CORONAVIRUS HASN'T STOPPED: BEIJING'S BUILDUP IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

- Shashank Bengali

SINGAPORE — Even as China's President Xi Jinping mobilized a “people's war” against the coronavirus, Chinese warships were busy on another front: maintaining their pressure campaign in the South China Sea, where a buildup of military activity foreshadows a new U.S.-China cold war.

Across the resource-rich waterway, China Coast Guard and paramilitary vessels have continued to harass fishing boats, military ships and oil and gas rigs belonging to smaller Southeast Asian states that reject Beijing's sweeping claims over nearly the entire sea.

Last month, the Chinese navy carried out combat drills with a fleet of submarines, fighter jets and fast-moving missile boats. The exercises occurred as a U.S. aircraft carrier in the region was sidelined thousands of miles away in Guam, its crew members and former commander sickened with COVID-19.

The tussle in the South China Sea is driving a deeper wedge between China and the U.S. The Trump administration accuses Beijing of capitalizing on the pandemic by helping countries fight the coronavirus while the People's Liberation Army tightens its grip on disputed islands and reefs, defying international rulings and territorial claims by neighboring countries.

“There's no apparent pause or reduction at all” in Chinese activity in the South China Sea, said Collin Koh, a maritime security expert at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. “It appears to be business as usual for the PLA, and for that matter, the China Coast Guard as well.”

But the coronavirus crisis has also highlighted the United States' diminishing global leadership.

As the isolationist, "America first" Trump administration is preoccupied at home with containing the world's severest outbreak — with half a million infected and more than 18,000 dead — allies in Asia and around the world are accepting Chinese aid even as they bristle at Chinese violations of international norms.

The pandemic "confirms their worst fears about us both — that the U.S. is withdrawing while China is going to put its own interests above those of its neighbors," said Gregory B. Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

On one day last month, Chinese state media trumpeted more than a dozen reports of Beijing donating aid to battle the coronavirus: gloves to Italy, testing kits to Ethiopia, protective medical suits to South Korea.

The same day, March 20, the official New China News Agency carried a report headlined, "New research stations come into operation on Nansha Islands," describing the opening of two civilian labs to study the marine environment in the South China Sea.

The announcement, using China's name for what are more commonly known as the Spratly Islands, elided the bitter dispute surrounding the archipelago, where the Chinese military has created a series of artificial islands to house military outposts.

The two research stations are located on Fiery Cross Reef and Subi Reef — each claimed by the Philippines and Vietnam — where China has dredged land to build runways, missile emplacements, radar towers and barracks that could house thousands of troops.

Although the labs are described as civilian in nature, security analysts say China could use the research to step up exploration of deep-sea oil and gas, rare metals and other resources.

Last month, a Chinese transport plane landed on Fiery Cross Reef, the sort of routine supply mission that often goes unnoticed in what Poling called "China's low-level, day-to-day consolidation of the South China Sea."

The waterway, through which more than \$3 trillion in goods transits every year, is one of the most contested regions of the world. Sitting atop large oil and gas reserves, it is the main sticking point in China's relations with Southeast Asian countries, including half a dozen that hold competing island claims.

Beijing's aggressive actions there are at odds with the softer image it has tried to project since the coronavirus outbreak, which emerged in central China late last year and raced around the world. China was criticized for initially underreporting the severity of the outbreak, but has since held itself up as an indispensable power in helping contain the virus' global spread.

As China reports that COVID-19 cases are on the wane domestically, it has donated protective equipment to more than 120 countries, fired up factories to meet the global demand for ventilators and deployed medical experts to assist other nations. The

Chinese leadership has rejected criticism that its assistance is politically motivated, saying that “it is never on its agenda to make aid a ploy to pursue influence.”

The U.S. has increased aid as well, contributing an additional \$274 million in emergency health and humanitarian assistance to countries worldwide, including \$18 million in Southeast Asia.

In this region, which is battling to get a new wave of infections under control, China’s humanitarian aid is welcome, Koh said. But governments also recognize that China’s maritime maneuvers have continued while rival claimants “have their hands full grappling with the coronavirus crisis,” he added.

“There’ll be inevitably an impact on trust and how these governments view Beijing’s intentions,” Koh said. “China will have to tread water very carefully if it doesn’t wish to see its diplomatic gains from this coronavirus outreach offset by what it’s doing in the South China Sea.”

The tensions spilled into view last week after a Chinese military vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat off the disputed Paracel Islands, the second such incident in less than a year. Vietnam lodged a formal protest, and the Trump administration accused China of “exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states to expand its unlawful claims in the South China Sea.”

Beijing blamed the Vietnamese ship for fishing illegally in Chinese waters.

Individually, the claimants can do little to counter China’s military might. The U.S. has been unable to alter the status quo in the South China Sea even after a much touted “pivot to Asia” under the Obama administration and Trump’s trade war against Beijing.

The most important U.S. ally in the region, the Philippines, has failed to demand China adhere to a 2016 international ruling that denied Beijing’s sweeping claims over the South China Sea. Although the Philippines sided with Vietnam in the fishing boat incident, President Rodrigo Duterte has generally sought rapprochement with China and announced plans to cancel a major security pact with the U.S. that could unravel the decades-old alliance.

The U.S. military’s ability to project force in the South China Sea — usually by conducting port calls and sailing warships on “freedom of navigation” missions — has also been weakened by the pandemic.

The aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt had just concluded a visit to the Vietnamese port of Da Nang last month when sailors aboard were found to be infected with the virus. The ensuing fiasco — which culminated in the acting secretary of the Navy resigning after he criticized the ship’s commander, who was fired after speaking out about the risks to his crew — has grounded one of the key U.S. carriers in the region the Pentagon calls the Indo-Pacific.

Countries are beginning to worry about Washington’s capacity to fulfill its security commitments as it grapples with the health and economic costs of the pandemic, according to a commentary published this week by the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank.

“Stricken warships, stalled deployments and Washington’s acute preoccupation with its own poorly handled humanitarian crisis will not reassure Indo-Pacific allies,” wrote the authors, Ashley Townshend and Jim Golby.

For now, the pandemic appears likely to widen the U.S.-China divide while convincing other Asian countries that both powers are unreliable.

Malaysia, for example, has been stuck in a months-long confrontation with Chinese military vessels near two offshore blocks where Malaysia’s state-owned Petronas is drilling for oil and gas. A China Coast Guard ship drew to within 0.3 of a nautical mile of the Petronas rig in January before pulling away, highlighting what the Center for Strategic and International Studies said is China’s determination to bully any country that attempts to develop new energy sources in the area.

Last month, however, when China delivered a shipment of N95 masks, other protective gear and 200 ventilators to the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur to help fight the coronavirus, New China News Agency reported that Malaysia’s foreign minister thanked Beijing by saying, “We really, truly know our friends in times of crisis.”

“Southeast Asian countries are getting used to dealing with China in this way — having some local skirmishes on territorial issues, but having the larger trade and diplomatic relationship going on at the same time,” said Zack Cooper, a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

“These countries don’t have a lot of options on how to contest these claims,” he said. “The Chinese are confident that the status quo is stable in the South China Sea, and trending in their favor in the long term.”

Source: [latimes.com](https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fz-china-south-china-sea-20200410-story.html); 10 April 2020

MARITIME FORCES

RUSSIAN NAVY TO SPEED UP TEST LAUNCHES OF TSIRKON HYPERSONIC MISSILE

- Franz-Stefan Gady

The Russian Navy is reportedly expediting test launches of the hypersonic 3M-22 Tsirkon or Zircon anti-ship missile (ASM) from submarines and surface combatants, according to two Russian defense industry sources.

“The schedule of the hypersonic missile’s test launches from naval ships will be tightened,” the sources were quoted as saying by TASS news agency on March 25. “The Yasen submarines will begin firing drills this year, alongside the continuing series of launches from the Admiral Gorshkov.”

The Project 855 Yasen-class multipurpose nuclear-powered attack/cruise missile submarine (SSN/SSGN) K-329 Severodvinsk will reportedly be the service’s first boat to test fire the Tsirkon ASM.

The Navy reportedly intended to launch the Tsirkon not from the Severodvinsk, but from the service’s first-of-class Project 885-M SSN/SSGN Kazan initially. However, the boat is now not expected to enter service until 2021. In December 2018, I wrote about the technical characteristics and armament of the two Yasen-class variants:

“The improved Yasen M-class SSN is reportedly quieter than the lead Yasen-class boat. It is built with low magnetic steel to reduce its magnetic signature. The Yasen M-class SSN is purportedly not equal to the United States Navy’s new Virginia-class attack subs. Rather it is technically on par with older U.S. Seawolf-class SSNs, built by the U.S. Navy from 1989 to 2005, although the underwater top speed of the Russian subs is reportedly much lower than that of U.S. boats.

The Kazan is fitted with eight vertical CM-346 complex (3P-14B) silos for submarine-launched cruise missiles as well as 10 torpedo tubes for firing (...) [missiles and torpedoes]. The Severodvinsk can carry up to 40 Kalibr cruise missiles while (...) the Kazan, can carry 32. (The Kazan is approximately 10-12 meters shorter than the first boat.)”

The Tsirkon hypersonic missile was reportedly already test fired from the Project 22350 frigate Admiral Gorshkov in January of this year. The missile was launched from the Barents Sea against a ground target at a distance of 500 kilometers in the Northern Urals. As I explained last month:

“The Tsirkon hypersonic ASM is thought to be a variant of the P-800 Onyx ASM. The P-800 has a reported maximum speed of Mach 2.9 and a maximum range of up to

500 kilometers, while the Tsirkon, powered by a solid-propellant boost engine and supersonic combustion ramjet (scramjet), is thought to be capable of hitting targets at a distance of up to 1,000 kilometers. The longer range is reportedly partially due to a new fuel, Detsilin-M, specially designed for hypersonic cruise missiles.”

The Russian defense minister, Army General Sergei Shoigu, also told Russian lawmakers last month that “flight development tests of the Tsirkon sea-launched hypersonic missile are under way” without revealing specific launch dates.

Source: thediplomat.com; 01 April 2020

WHY ARMY HELICOPTERS ARE LAUNCHING FROM A NAVY SHIP

-Kyle Mizokami

The U.S. Army and Navy are working together to send a not too subtle message to Iran. Army Apache Guardian helicopters are practicing flying off the USS Lewis Puller, an expeditionary landing base ship stationed in the Persian Gulf.

The Lewis Puller can refuel and rearm attack helicopters, setting the services up for the same kind of joint military operation last performed in the mid 1980s under Operation Prime Chance. The Apaches, part of the Army’s Task Force Saber, spent the month of March operating from the unique warship.

The combination of the Apaches and Lewis Puller creates an improvised attack helicopter carrier, capable of launching attacks against targets on shore or at sea. The Lewis Puller is based on the Alaska-class double hulled oil tankers, which have a 1.3 million barrel capacity in their unmodified configuration. The expeditionary sea base (ESB) ships add a flight deck—the third largest after aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships—that can handle four helicopters at once.

The AH-64E Apache Guardian is a dedicated attack helicopter armed with a M320 30-millimeter chain gun and up to 16 Hellfire anti-tank missiles. Alternatively, the Apache can be armed with a mixture of 8 Hellfire missiles and two rocket pods, each loaded with 19 Advanced Precision Kill Weapon Systems (APKWS) laser-guided rockets. The Hellfire missile can destroy tanks at ranges of up to 4.3 miles, while APKWS can damage or destroy lightly armored targets at up to 3.1 miles.

The Puller-Apache platform is capable of engaging small boat swarms, oil rigs, land-based anti-ship missiles, and other threats. This places the ship squarely in the path of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), a paramilitary organization controlled by Tehran. The IRGC Navy operates swarms of armed speedboats, armed with machine guns, rocket launchers, and shoulder-fired anti-ship missiles, and trains to operate them in groups of a hundred or more to “swarm” bigger warships. The IRGC also operates anti-ship missiles and short-range ballistic missiles stationed on Iran’s coastline.

If Iran wanted to close the Persian Gulf to commercial traffic, the U.S. military would likely open it again, neutralizing threatening Iranian forces with a combination of air and sea strikes. If Iran or Iranian-backed militias struck again, as they did in January with the ballistic missile strike on U.S. forces at Ain Al-Asad Airbase, the Apaches could conduct retaliatory strikes against IRGC naval and coastal forces in the area.

Something like this has actually happened before. Between 1987 and 1989 the U.S. Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, also known as "The Night Stalkers," flew Little Bird helicopters from barges and Navy frigates in the Persian Gulf. Operation Prime Chance paired the U.S. Army helicopters with Navy SEALs, Marines, and Special Boat Units in an undeclared war against Iranian Revolutionary Guards units harassing civilian shipping. Six Little Birds, both MH-6 utility and AH-6 attack versions equipped with SEAL snipers, rockets, and machine guns, flew patrols as low as thirty feet.

The Army/Navy team worked together to monitor Iranian forces in the Gulf, particularly at night when IRGC Navy forces were suspected of planting sea mines. On September 21, 1987, two AH-6 attack helicopters and one MH-6 Little Bird launched from the frigate USS Jarrett and attacked the Iran Ajr, an Iranian ship, after it was observed laying mines. The Little Birds fired on the ship, which was subsequently abandoned by its crew. A team of SEALs boarded the ship, secured the mines on board as well as proof the vessel had been mining international waters.

Now, more than 30 years later, there's the possibility that the Army/Navy helicopter/ship team could be activated again, and against exactly the same enemy. But Prime Chance 2.0 would be even more lopsided. Iranian forces have changed little, the Apache Guardian is much more advanced than its Little Bird predecessors—both in firepower and the range of its sensors.

Source: [popularmechanics.com](https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/a29400137/iran-ah-6-little-birds/); 07 April 2020

NEW CHINESE ASSAULT CARRIER CATCHES FIRE

- H I Sutton

Black smoke has been seen billowing from China's first assault carrier in Shanghai. The new Type-075 carrier, which is similar to the U.S. Navy's America Class assault carriers, is designed to carry helicopters and hovercraft to support amphibious landings.

The smoke was reported on Chinese social media platforms earlier today. Images suggest that the fire took hold within the hull of the ship, possibly in the expansive aircraft hanger. Smoke came out of the open aircraft lift near the front of the island superstructure. Smoke also came out of the rear hangar opening. For a time a massive cloud of smoke rose high into the air, and would have been visible for miles around.

The fire was put out, but not before causing significant smoke damage to the hull. The extent of damage inside is not yet known. Black stains can now be seen from the ship's large well deck in the stern, contrasting with the clean gray paint. The vessel was only launched on September 25 and is being fitted out before sea trials.

The incident is clearly bad news for China's navy, known as the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy). Yet although it will clearly set back the fitting out process for the ship, outward signs are that it was dealt with quickly. It is unlikely to prevent the completion of the ship.

And this is only the first of several Type-075 assault carriers. The second is being built just yards away at the Hudong-Zhonghua shipyard. Yesterday we reported that it is likely to be floated into the river imminently. That may now be pushed back a few days while the first carrier is cleaned up, but overall I do not expect a major delay.

Satellite imagery shows that hull sections of the next ship to be constructed in the dry dock are already queued up. So the shipyard will want to get the carrier into the water as soon as possible, despite the incident with her sister-ship. The next vessel to use the dry dock appears to frigate, but more assault carriers are expected.

These assault carriers will be the backbone of China's amphibious warfare capability. They will add to the already greatly expanded and modernized amphibious fleet. Currently the main ships are Type-071 landing platform docks (LPD). Those are equivalent to the U.S. Navy's San Antonio class amphibious transport dock, whereas the new carriers will be more like the Wasp and America classes.

Source: [forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenwolfe/2020/04/11/chinas-new-assault-carrier-is-on-fire-again/); 11 April 2020

RUSSIA TO SPEND \$1.3 BLN TO CONSTRUCT TWO HELICOPTER CARRIERS

Construction of the first two universal landing ships at Crimea's Zaliv shipyard will cost about 100 billion rubles (\$1.3 bln), the contract is slated for signing in late April, a source in the military-industrial complex told TASS.

"Construction contract is slated for signing in late April. The helicopter carriers' cost will be slightly less than 100 billion rubles," the source said.

According to the source, the ships should be laid down in early May.

"The lead ship should be commissioned in 2026, and the second one should be commissioned in 2027," the source said.

Earlier, military-industrial complex sources told TASS that a technical project for both ships has already been prepared and it complies with the Navy's requirements. The ships' full displacement will be 25,000 tons, while their full length will be about 220 meters. Each ship will carry up to 20 heavy helicopters, 900 marines and will be equipped with a docking camera for landing boats.

Universal landing ships, also known as helicopter carriers, have never been built in Russia and the USSR before.

Source: ednews.net; 10 April 2020

THE NAVY CAPTAIN FIRED FOR SOUNDING CORONAVIRUS ALARMS BROKE NO LAW— JUST PROTOCOL

- Ephrat Livni

In a world that seems to have gone to hell in a handbasket very rapidly, with the regular rules of society quickly jettisoned due to the coronavirus crisis, some authorities are responding to pandemic management critiques by firing subordinates who sound alarm bells.

Most recently, acting secretary of the US Navy, Thomas Modly, announced that captain Brett Crozier was relieved of his command of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, stationed in the Pacific, for showing “extremely poor judgment” by widely disseminating a memo about the coronavirus infection spreading quickly on the vessel with 4,800 crew members. Modly accused Crozier of “misrepresenting the facts” and took him to task for disobeying the chain of command.

The acting Navy secretary told reporters, “While I do take issue with the validity of some of the points in captain Crozier’s letter, he was absolutely correct in raising them. It was the way in which he did it...that was unacceptable to me.”

This response doesn’t sit well with civilians. After all, extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures, and the vessel was essentially a petri dish of disease, with 100 crew members testing positive for Covid-19 already. At the Washington Post, columnist Max Boot wrote a piece entitled, “The only official fired over the virus? A captain who tried to protect his crew.”

Seventeen Democratic senators have called for the Defense Department inspector general to conduct a formal investigation into the firing. Joe Biden, Democratic presidential candidate and former vice president, also criticized the move, tweeting, “Navy leadership sent a chilling message about speaking truth to power.” And an online petition for Crozier’s reinstatement already has nearly 115,000 signatures as of the time of this writing.

Meanwhile, crew members aboard the sidelined vessel say everyone turned out to cheer the captain that the Navy reprimanded.

So how did this happen?

Military law expert Gary Solis—also a Marine Corps veteran and West Point adjunct professor of law—tells Quartz that Crozier broke no law in the code of military justice and won’t face legal consequences, but adds that he’s likely destroyed his career. “Right or wrong, he wasn’t relieved for trying to save lives. It’s that he exercised poor

judgment in a public way. That's it for him. He's never going to see a good duty station again—he's just screwed."

Even if Crozier's superiors were unresponsive to his initial requests for help, the captain's obligation was to inform his boss and lay a record in writing that would force action while still following procedure, Solis explains. But Crozier's letter was widely disseminated.

Solis says he has "great sympathy" for Crozier but from the perspective of superior officers in the military, "there's no room for failing to follow accepted and long-respected chain-of-command obligations."

In any case, Crozier is not alone in paying a high price for his Covid-19 whistleblowing.

On March 27, an emergency room doctor in Washington state who posted complaints on Facebook about his hospital's coronavirus protections and pleaded for more protective gear was also fired. "I got a message that said, 'Your shift has been covered,'" Ming Lin told the Seattle Times. Lin phoned his supervisor and learned that despite the public health crisis and 17 years of service, he would not be returning.

The punishment of whistleblowers right now is particularly frightening given that this pandemic might not have become quite the global nightmare it has if authorities in China hadn't tried to silence Li Wenliang, a doctor who initially warned about a cluster of severe pneumonia cases in December, was reprimanded by Wuhan authorities, and died of the new coronavirus in February.

Suzanne Nossel, CEO of PEN America, a New York-based nonprofit that fights censorship and promotes free speech, acknowledges that officials have an interest in minimizing public panic. But she rejects the contention that suppressing facts can do that.

In response to news of Lin's termination last week, she told Quartz in an email on March 29, "The free flow of information is essential to effective pandemic response. If officials cannot help foster it, they should at least get out of the way." Managing public sentiment "has to be done with fealty to the truth, since there's nothing that stokes anxiety more than the feeling that we are being lied to and cannot trust those in power to level with the people."

Source: [qz.com](https://qz.com/1013137/whistleblowers-covid-19-coronavirus/); 04 April 2020

SHIPPING, PORTS AND OCEAN ECONOMY

INACTIVE BOXSHIP FLEET TO SURPASS 3M TEU FOR THE FIRST TIME

- Sam Chambers

The sudden massive volume of blanked sailings announced in recent days is set to create new records in terms of the inactive containership fleet, which analysts at Alphaliner are now saying will breach the 3m teu mark for the first time meaning some 13% of the entire global box fleet will be out of work.

The inactive containership fleet had actually been dropping for most of the last month having hit a record of 2.46m teu at the start of March.

The fall was largely due to the resumption of sailings that were blanked during the extended Chinese holidays in February.

This is all changing fast however with liners nixing sailings across the world as coronavirus lockdowns keep consumers at home.

Alphaliner reported in its latest weekly report that more than 250 scheduled sailings will be withdrawn in the second quarter alone.

Up to 30% of total capacity is being removed from some of the most badly affected routes.

“No market segment will be spared, with capacity cuts announced across almost all key routes,” Alphaliner warned, adding: “While the larger ships will be cascaded to replace smaller units on the remaining strings, carriers will be forced to idle a large part of their operated tonnage. This will affect all size segments in the coming weeks.”

In an ongoing poll carried on this site, a majority Splash readers believe shipping will suffer a record number of layups in the coming 18 months and readers have singled out the container shipping sector as the shipping segment likely to be most hard hit from the fallout brought about by the coronavirus contagion.

Earlier this week, Rodolphe Saadé, the CEO of CMA CGM, the world’s fourth largest containerline, told *Le Figaro* newspaper in France that he was anticipating May will be the slowest month for box movements across the globe thanks to the coronavirus.

Container vessel utilisation rates are beginning to slide however freight rates are stable, on a par with this time last year.

“High air rates have some shippers looking to switch to ocean shipping. This shift, along with carriers continuing to blank large numbers of sailings for the coming weeks as demand slumps, have kept ocean rates stable this week, with China-US West Coast rates even climbing by 5% to \$1,604,” container booking platform Freightos noted in an update yesterday.

According to a report issued on Sunday from Copenhagen-based Sea-Intelligence, the volume loss alone from the record number of pandemic-linked blanked sailings will cost the top 15 carriers more than \$6bn in 2020, rendering the industry loss-making in 2020, reversing the \$5.9bn profit the top 15 carriers managed combined last year.

Sea-Intelligence warned that a failure to prevent a simultaneous rate collapse could lead to the liner industry losing a “staggering” \$23.4bn in 2020.

Source: splash247.com; 08 April 2020

TANKERS A SILVER LINING FOR SHIP OWNERS

- Nikos Roussanoglou

The tanker market has offered reason for respite for tanker owners amid the pandemic. In its latest weekly report, shipbroker Allied Shipbroking said that “with the first quarter of 2020 now firmly written in the books, it is worth examining what we have witnessed so far in the tanker market. Undoubtedly it was a very interesting quarter with a significant freight boom taking place earlier in the year, tensions among oil producers creating volatile market conditions and the COVID-19 pandemic reshaping the global economic environment. The truth is that the recent developments as part of the pandemic have affected the whole global economy, diminishing demand for several oil products which in turn has started to show a slight trend in crude oil itself”.

According to Mr. Yiannis Vamvakas, Research Analyst with Allied, “looking just at the BDTI index, we can see on absolute terms that the quarterly loss was 12.7%. This is a disappointing figure, but not devastating especially when it is compared to the dry bulk market, proving that the oil market was able to resist the effects of the global economic downhill that is being witnessed. Adding to this, we noted that both the VLCC and Suezmax TCA have gained 164.4% and 37.7% respectively on a quarterly basis. It seems as though that had it not been for the catastrophic February, things may have been even better for the crude oil tanker segments”

Vamvakas said that ‘the price war between oil producers has pushed Brent and WTI to record lows, helping demand remain healthy even under the current circumstances, while several tankers have been “taken out” of the global fleet in order to be used as storage. In contrary to all of this, we should note that the Aframax TCA moved in the opposite direction this past quarter, losing about 30.8%. Given that oil price is not expected to move significantly upwards in the coming months (obviously not considering any major shift in production plans of the main oil producers), we are anticipating interest from the charterers’ side to remain intense during the start of the 2nd quarter. Adding to this the glimpse of optimism reflected in the rebound noted in

European stock markets on the back of the stabilization seen in the COVID-19 spread, and you could have the basis for a gradual improvement to take place. On the supply side, we have seen the global tanker fleet increase by 53 units during 1Q20, with 23 of them being crude oil carriers”.

Allied’s analyst also noted that “this quarterly rise is around 1%, an encouraging figure when compared to the respective fleet expansion of 2.63% noted in 1Q19. On the supply side things remain positive for now, with interest for newbuilding orders having eased back as of late. However, it is likely that this trend will shift in the near future, as ship recycling activity will now be minimal due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures taken in the Indian Sub-Continent, while at the same time this pause noted in newbuilding activity is expected to be temporary. On the positive side though the orderbook to vintage fleet ratio (a figure that depicts the potential additions compared to potential demolition candidates) holds at fairly good levels”.

Vamvakas concluded that “the ratio now holds for the VLCC segment at a mere 13.33%, for the Suezmax 24.00% and for the Aframax 7.89%, the lowest points noted the last 5 years. Taking into consideration the resilience that crude oil tanker market has shown so far, we anticipate the market to remain on a positive track in the coming quarter, even if there are some signs of volatility emerging. The low-price of oil, the potential that the worst is now behind us and the healthy status of the supply side, all leave space for optimism. However, as we are deliberating on a market that is largely exposed to geopolitical events and highly linked to the global economy, it is essential to remember that there could always be another “blank swan” hiding around next turn”.

Source: hellenicshippingnews.com; 10 April 2020

ATHOS I AND SAFE BERTH CLAUSES

- Barry Parker

On rare occasions, maritime cases will reach the highest court in the land - the US Supreme Court. Shipping veterans will remember back to late 2004, when the Tsakos managed tanker Athos I spilled crude oil on the Delaware River inbound to the Citgo dock at Paulsboro.

A US Coast Guard report, at the time, found that the vessel had been holed by an anchor, not found on nautical charts, at the bottom of the river- in a channel maintained by the US government, on the approach to the berth. The cleanup cost was extensive (circa \$130m), an amount exceeded by payouts on third party damage claims, with funding coming from the P & I Clubs- the vessel had been enrolled in the UK Club - with the shipowning interests reimbursed, partly, from the US Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund- created from OPA 90. All told, total payouts exceeded \$300m.

In the ensuing legal cases, in District Court and then in the Appeals Court, which culminated in the end March 2020 Supreme Court decision, the P & I and Liability funds tried to collect reimbursement from companies related to Citgo. The Citgo companies sought to block these efforts (based, in part, on a claim that the channel had not been properly maintained). At a high level, and avoiding the legal jargon, the

questions came down to the responsibilities of a charterer when it agreed to provide a “safe berth”, and in maintaining the approach to the wharf.

At the end of March, US Supreme Court ruled 7 -2 in favour of the shipowner, with the charterer, in this case of division of the Citgo, was financially liable. Lawyers Christopher Nolan and Robert Denig, from the Maritime group at Holland & Knight, wrote that: “the US Supreme Court has provided a roadmap for interpreting safe berth/safe port clauses, ruling that the form clause commonly used in the industry must be construed as an express warranty of safety and imposes on the charterer an absolute duty to select and provide safe berth.”

Lawyers at Blank Rome, on a team spearheaded by Jeffrey Moller, a partner handling maritime and energy cases), explained that the ruling said “that a plain reading of the language found in the ASBATANKVOY charter form creates a warranty of safety rather than merely a duty of due diligence.” The implications of the “Safe Berth” language were that “safe-berth” clause in the charterparty should be viewed as a safety warranty, implying that it was the responsibility of Citgo (and the related companies) to make sure the tanker docked safely.

The ruling is in line with the viewpoint of industry associations. Holland and Knight explains that it had filed a “Friend of the Court” brief on behalf of Bimco, Intertanko, and Intercargo supporting the absolute warranty of safety. But owners and charterers are free to negotiate terms in charter parties- which may deal with warranties, and this decision is very specific.

Judge Clarence Thomas, one of the two dissenters, wrote in his dissent: “The plain meaning of the contract’s text, however, does not support the majority’s interpretation. Fortunately, the majority’s opinion applies only to this specific contract.”

Source: seatrade-maritime.com; 09 April 2020

WITH SAILORS STRANDED, SHIPPING FACES A HARD CHOICE

- Adam Minter

Before the pandemic, 100,000 seafarers traveled in and out of the world’s ports every month. Some had spent weeks or months aboard the cargo ships, tankers and other merchant vessels that are essential to moving products and commodities across the globe. In a ritual little noticed outside the industry, new crews would regularly arrive to relieve them, ensuring that the world’s vast merchant fleet wasn’t endangered by fatigued sailors.

Now, thanks to the coronavirus, this critical process is breaking down, threatening the safety of the world’s waterways and the functioning of a business that carries 80% of global trade.

Worldwide, more than 1.6 million seafarers are serving on merchant vessels. Filipinos make up about 25% of them, while most of the rest come from other developing

nations. Pay is good, especially when compared to wages back home, but the work is invariably hard and dangerous. Storms, piracy and accidents are among the most obvious hazards. More treacherous still is the fatigue that can build up due to lack of sleep and long voyages.

Even before the coronavirus, seafarer fatigue was causing alarm in the industry. Globalization has encouraged shipping companies to set highly competitive schedules with fewer and fewer crew members. Although some rules and regulations have been established to limit work hours, a recent study showed that sleeplessness is a problem at all stages of a ship's journey, and that fatigue and stress increase as a voyage nears its end, irrespective of length. Among other problems, this can lead to significant health issues for seafarers, including depression.

Inevitably, all that stress will harm workers' performance and thus the safety of their ships. In recent decades, research has repeatedly pointed to human error — usually precipitated by fatigue — as the primary cause of maritime accidents. In one study, such errors amounted to 75% of the value of marine-related insurance claims between 2011 and 2016.

Crew switches are a crucial means of mitigating those problems, and seafarers' contracts generally include transport to and from their ships as part of their compensation. But virus-related travel bans, combined with the cessation of many international flights, have made that process difficult, stranding tens of thousands of sailors on board ships.

Precise numbers aren't available, but there are some hints. India reports 40,000 stranded sailors; China expects more than 20,000 by the end of May. A.P. Moller-Maersk A/S, the world's biggest shipping line, has suspended all crew switches until May 12 to reduce the risk that seafarers might be stranded or exposed to the virus.

Though there's only been one confirmed outbreak of Covid-19 on a merchant ship, seafarers are certainly aware of the stigma attached to crews and passengers of cruise ships, and the difficulties they've been having getting repatriated. Likewise, the stress of being at sea for an indefinite period (and away from family and friends) weighs heavily in the best of times; during the pandemic, it's surely even heavier. iCALL, a free helpline for seafarers, saw a 40% spike in messages and calls in February.

How that human struggle will play out for the industry is unclear. No responsible shipping company should want to operate its vessels with a stranded, stressed and sleepless crew. But unless something changes drastically, a hard choice is coming soon: Either the shipping industry will have to accept more risks, or the world will have to accept less shipping.

So long as most international air routes are suspended, it won't be easy to switch out and repatriate seafarers. Nonetheless, governments could ease the pressure and ensure the continued flow of goods by recognizing that seafarers are "essential" or "key" personnel, akin to medical professionals or truckers, and allow them to transit through their territories to reach airports, ferry launches and other transport nodes. Meanwhile, countries with large numbers of seafarers should coordinate with shipping companies to arrange for designated ports where crew changes could be overseen, quarantines can be established and charters arranged.

It's true that this will inevitably increase costs. But shippers — and governments — should be willing to pay up. Without seafarers and their cargoes, the world economy is sunk.

Source: gcccaptain.com; 09 April 2020

CRUISE LINES ARE GETTING DESPERATE

- Erik Shilling

Cruises were a dubious proposition before coronavirus, but now they're in far worse shape. That's understandable, given the worldwide pandemic that has had some passengers trapped on ships for weeks. Almost everywhere cruise lines look these days, the news isn't good.

About a third of cruise passengers are over the age of 59, according to The New York Times, which is not the stat you want in the coronavirus era. Cruise lines also weren't included in the \$2 trillion federal stimulus bill, despite President Donald Trump's urging, which is a bad thing for cruise lines that might need access to liquidity. Cruise lines are also mostly not currently running any cruises, which doesn't bring in any revenue.

And, now, banks and investors are smelling blood in the water, as cruise companies grow increasingly desperate for cash:

And last week, Carnival, which has already drawn on bank credit lines, began an effort to raise \$6 billion by selling stock, bonds and other securities. It was selling some of those bonds with a suggested 12.5 percent interest payment to investors, a strikingly high figure.

Twelve and a half percent! Surely it can't get worse.

Before the equity offering, Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America had been working to put together a debt deal for Carnival that would offer some investors a potential return in the high teens, according to two people familiar with the discussions. Bankers pitched the deal to hedge funds and private equity investors, some of whom passed on it because of concerns about the company's long-term viability.

You don't have to be a financial genius to recognize that the high teens are bad, or that Goldman, Chase, and Bank of America had come to that number after determining that the stakes for Carnival are existential.

Carnival's stock price did somewhat recover this week after a nosedive began in February, but that was only after Saudi Arabia's state fund injected in some cash after revealing it owned 8.2 percent of the company. Saudi Arabia has deep enough pockets to weather this particular storm probably no matter what happens, but Carnival, which operates about half the cruise business in the world, might not.

“Carnival Cruise Line said last week that it is further canceling some of its sailings through the end of the year, making it the first major cruise line to do so because of the global health crisis.

The company said last week that it expects most of its ships to be idled for a prolonged period. If 80% of its fleet were to be put in a prolonged layup, the company could reduce its monthly cash burn by about \$100 million to \$150 million, allowing it to survive as long as 15 months without revenue, UBS Securities LLC analyst Robin Farley said in a note to clients.”

Fifteen months from now would be sometime around July 2021, so if you think the world will be back to normal before then, well, Carnival has some stock and probably wouldn’t mind if you bought in.

Source: jalopnik.com; 07 April 2020

MARINE ENVIRONMENT

UNUSUAL OZONE HOLE OPENS OVER THE ARCTIC

The ozone layer is a natural, protective layer of gas in the stratosphere that shields life from the Sun's harmful ultraviolet radiation – which is associated with skin cancer and cataracts, as well as other environmental issues.

The 'ozone hole' most commonly referenced is the hole over Antarctica, forming each year during autumn.

In the past weeks, scientists from the German Aerospace Center (DLR) have noticed the unusually strong depletion of ozone over the northern polar regions. Using data from the Tropomi instrument on the Copernicus Sentinel-5P satellite, they were able to monitor this Arctic ozone hole form in the atmosphere.

In the past, mini ozone holes have occasionally been spotted over the North Pole, but the depletion over the Arctic this year is much larger compared to previous years.

Diego Loyola, from the German Aerospace Center, comments, "The ozone hole we observe over the Arctic this year has a maximum extension of less than 1 million sq km. This is small compared to the Antarctic hole, which can reach a size of around 20 to 25 million sq km with a normal duration of around 3 to 4 months."

Even though both poles endure ozone losses during winter, the Arctic's ozone depletion tends to be significantly less than Antarctica. The ozone hole is driven by extremely cold temperatures (below -80°C), sunlight, wind fields and substances such as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs).

Arctic temperatures do not usually plummet as low as in Antarctica. However, this year, powerful winds flowing around the North Pole trapped cold air within what is known as the 'polar vortex' – a circling whirlpool of stratospheric winds.

By the end of the polar winter, the first sunlight over the North Pole initiated this unusually strong ozone depletion – causing the hole to form. However, its size is still small compared to what can usually be observed in the southern hemisphere.

Diego says, "Since 14 March, the ozone columns over the Arctic have decreased to what is normally considered 'ozone hole levels,' which are less than 220 Dobson Units. We expect the hole to close again during mid-April 2020."

Claus Zehner, ESA's Copernicus Sentinel-5P mission manager, adds, "The Tropomi total ozone measurements are extending Europe's capability of the continuous global ozone monitoring from space since 1995. In this time, we have not witnessed an ozone hole formation of this size over the Arctic."

In the 2018 Scientific Assessment of Ozone Depletion, data shows that the ozone layer in parts of the stratosphere has recovered at a rate of 1-3% per decade since 2000. At these projected rates, the Northern Hemisphere and mid-latitude ozone is predicted to recover by around 2030, followed by the Southern Hemisphere around 2050, and polar regions by 2060.

The Tropomi instrument on the Copernicus Sentinel-5P satellite measures a number of trace gases, including aerosol and cloud properties with a global coverage on a daily basis. Given the importance of monitoring air quality and global ozone distribution, the upcoming Copernicus Sentinel-4 and Sentinel-5 missions will monitor key air quality trace gases, stratospheric ozone, and aerosols. As part of the EU's Copernicus programme, the missions will provide information on air quality, solar radiation and climate monitoring.

Source: esa.int; 06 April 2020

TROPICAL OCEANS HEADED FOR COLLAPSE WITHIN THE NEXT 10 YEARS, MAJOR STUDY REVEALS

- Patrick Galey

Global warming will cause “catastrophic” biodiversity loss across the world if greenhouse gas emissions aren’t curbed, with some ecosystems liable to collapse as soon as 2030, according to new research into where and when die-offs may occur.

Earth has never in human history warmed so quickly or uniformly as it is currently, but a variety of factors affect temperatures in individual regions, with significant seasonal and geographic variation.

Scientists predict that at the current level of human-made carbon emissions, Earth is on course to heat up to four degrees Celsius by 2100.

Instead of looking at global trends, researchers in Britain, the United States and South Africa looked at more than 150 years of climate data and cross-referenced that with the spread of more than 30,000 species of birds, mammals, reptiles and fish.

They then divided the globe into 100 square kilometre (39 square mile) segments, and modelled the temperature trends and effects this would have on wildlife in a given area.

Writing in the journal Nature, they concluded that under emissions as usual – known as the RCP8.5 scenario – up to 73 percent of species will experience unprecedented warming with potentially disastrous effects for populations.

Alex Pigot, from University College London's Centre for Biodiversity and Environment, said that the models showed that animal populations were liable to collapse once they cross a temperature "horizon" – being exposed to heat they're not evolved to handle.

"As we pass this threshold we expect the risk of local extinction to increase substantially," Pigot told AFP.

"It's not a slippery slope, but a series of cliff edges, hitting different areas at different times," he said.

The models change dramatically according to each emissions pathway.

For example, at 4C of warming 15 percent of all animals could see extreme heat that could cause "irreversible damage" to regional ecosystems.

But at 2C of warming – the cap aimed for in the Paris climate agreement – that figure dropped to two percent, according to the models.

The researchers predicted that such unprecedented temperature events will begin before 2030 in tropical oceans.

Recent phenomena such as the mass bleaching of the Great Barrier reef suggest this is already occurring in places, the team said, adding that higher latitudes would see similar events by 2050.

Coral reefs occupy a tiny percentage of the oceans but support as much as a quarter of all marine life.

Earth has already heated more than 1C since the Industrial Revolution and planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of fossil fuels are climbing annually.

The United Nations says humanity needs to slash emissions 7.6 percent annually by 2030 in order to limit warming to 1.5C – the more ambitious aim of the Paris accord.

"As we approach 2C of global warming, there is an alarming escalation in the risks of these abrupt biodiversity losses, providing strong evidence for the need to hold warming below 2C," said Pigot.

Source: saltyardonic.com; 10 April 2020

OTHERWORLDLY, STRING-LIKE ORGANISM SPOTTED IN DEEP SEA IS MADE UP OF 'MILLIONS OF INTERCONNECTED CLONES'

- Aristos Georgiou

Researchers have captured fascinating video footage of an otherworldly organism in the waters off the coast of Western Australia.

A team aboard the RV Falkor—the flagship research vessel of the Schmidt Ocean Institute (SOI)—spotted the organism, a type of siphonophore known as Apolemia, using a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) in a deep-sea environment known as the Ningaloo Canyons.

"Check out this beautiful *giant* siphonophore Apolemia recorded on #NingalooCanyons expedition. It seems likely that this specimen is the largest ever recorded, and in strange UFO-like feeding posture," SOI wrote in a Twitter post.

Resembling a long piece of string, siphonophores—a group of creatures related to jellyfish and corals—may look like one organism, but they are actually made up of many thousands of individual, specialized clones that come together to form a single entity.

With the help of lasers mounted onto their ROV—known as SuBastian—the Falkor scientists estimated that this siphonophore's outer ring measured 49 feet in diameter, suggesting that this section alone is 154 foot in length, or about as tall as an 11-story building.

"The entire creature is much, much longer. The crew is estimating it to be more than 120 meters in total length—possibly over 390 feet long," Logan Mock-Bunting, a spokesperson for the Schmidt Ocean Institute, told Newsweek. "We are in the process of outside confirmation of these measurements."

Siphonophores like this one are deep-sea predators that lie in wait for unfortunate animals to come into contact with the stinging cells found on some of the specialized clones.

"This animal is a kind of jelly, called a siphonophore. It's made of millions of interconnected clones, like if the Borg and the Clone Wars had a baby together. There are about a dozen different jobs a clone can do in the colony, and each clone is specialized to a particular task," Rebecca Helm, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina Asheville who saw the SOI video, wrote in a Twitter thread.

"I've gone on numerous expeditions and have never, EVER, seen anything like this. Let me tell you what this is and why it is blowing my mind," she said. "Most of the siphonophore colonies I've seen are maybe 20 centimeters long, maybe a meter. But THIS animal is massive. AND not just massive, the colony is exhibiting a stunning behavior: it's hunting."

According to Helm, some of the clones that make up the siphonophore specialize in catching prey with the help of the aforementioned stinging cells.

"Their slender bodies hang with a single long tentacle dangling like a hook-studded fishing line," Helm said. "A siphonophore colony in a line creates a curtain of deadly tentacles in the open ocean, but in THIS case, the animal is hunting in a galaxy-like spiral, the long wisp-like tentacles draped below. And the colony does not need to move to feed."

"Once a clone captures its prey—a fish or crustacean—it will reel it to the colony & other clones that work as mouths will surround it. Often many swallowing it at once. Once their prey is digested, they'll send the nutrients through a long digestive tract that travels down the whole colony, so that every other clone can use the nutrients. In this way, this siphonophore may remain still and feed for a long time, and I mean LONG," she said.

While it is difficult to determine how old a siphonophore colony is, Helm suggests that the animal in the video could be tens or possibly hundreds of years old.

"Everything in the deep sea grows incredibly slowly. It's only a few degrees above freezing, life takes time to grow," she said.

"This is one of the largest and most stunning and pristine siphonophores that I've ever seen. And to think, there are millions, probably billions of underwater siphonophore galaxies out there just like this one. Siphonophores are not rare, just fragile and remote. As we explore the ocean's more, who knows what other creatures we will see."

The deep-sea environment of the Ningaloo Canyons remains almost unexplored, although the wider region of the Ningaloo Coast—located on the north-west coast of Western Australia—is known for its incredible biodiversity.

"This expedition will be a wonderful opportunity to shed some light on some of this region's unseen biodiversity," Nerida Wilson, leader of the Falkor team from the Western Australian Museum, said in a statement.

This article has been updated to include comments from Logan Mock-Bunting.

Correction 4/8/20, 11:16 a.m.: The headline and article has been corrected to make it clear that the outer ring of the siphonophore is estimated to measure 154 feet in length, while the entire organism is thought to be larger—potentially around 390 feet in length.

Source: newsweek.com; 07 April 2020

COASTAL POLLUTION REDUCES GENETIC DIVERSITY OF CORALS, REEF RESILIENCE

A new study published in the journal PeerJ by researchers at the University of Hawaii found that human-induced environmental stressors have a large effect on the genetic composition of coral reef populations in Hawaii.

The National Science Foundation-funded scientists confirmed that there is an ongoing loss of sensitive genotypes in nearshore coral populations due to stressors from poor land-use practices and coastal pollution. This reduced genetic diversity compromises reef resilience.

This research provides valuable information to coral reef managers in Hawaii and around the world who are developing approaches and implementation plans to enhance coral reef resilience and recovery through reef restoration and stressor reduction.

The study identified that genetic relationships between nearshore corals in Maunalua Bay, Oahu, and those from sites on West Mau were closer than relationships to corals from the same islands, but farther offshore.

This pattern can be described as isolation by environment in contrast to isolation by distance. This is an adaptive response by the corals to watershed discharges that contain sediment and pollutants from land.

"While the results were not surprising, they demonstrate the need to control local sources of stress while addressing the root causes of global climate change," said Robert Richmond, director of the Kewalo Marine Laboratory and co-author of the study. "The findings show the need to track biodiversity at multiple levels."

While the loss of coral colonies and species is easy to see with the naked eye, molecular tools are needed to uncover the effects of stressors on the genetic diversity within coral reef populations.

"This study shows the value of applying molecular tools to ecological studies supporting coral reef management," stated Kaho Tisthammer, lead researcher on the paper.

The work was a collaborative effort among researchers at the university's Kewalo Marine Laboratory, Pacific Biosciences Research Center, and the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology.

"This work highlights the importance of limiting pollution, sediment, and agricultural runoff to nearshore coral reefs," says Dan Thornhill, a program director in NSF's Division of Ocean Sciences. "Protecting biodiversity is essential, as that diversity is needed in helping corals and other marine life adapt to changing oceans. Selecting for resilience to pollution may eliminate coral genotypes that resist disease, tolerate higher temperatures, and continue to grow in more acidic and oxygen-depleted waters."

Source: [nsf.gov](https://www.nsf.gov); 08 April 2020

JUDGE: NOAA VIOLATED ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT BY ALLOWING LOBSTER TRAPS THAT THREATEN RIGHT WHALES

- Fred Bever

A federal judge ruled Thursday that federal fisheries regulators are illegally allowing lobster traps that pose a threat to the endangered North Atlantic right whale.

U.S. District Judge James Boasburg says the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration violated the Endangered Species Act by authorizing the lobster fishery without appropriate attention to its impact on the whales.

Specifically, he faults the feds for failing to produce an assessment of the potential that whales will be entangled in lobster trap rope and face injury and death.

Boasburg said that failure — after NOAA had found that the American lobster fishery had the potential to harm the North Atlantic right whale at more than three times the sustainable rate — is "about as straightforward a violation of the ESA as they come," he wrote. The court then declared NOAA's so-called "biological opinion" in 2014 to be invalid under the Endangered Species Act.

The suit was brought by the Conservation Law Foundation and other conservation groups. It was defended by the feds and the Maine Lobstermen's Association.

Maine's Department of Marine Resources had no immediate comment. But in a statement, Gov. Janet Mills called the decision "deeply disturbing" and says she is instructing Marine Resources Commissioner Pat Keliher to investigate and respond "in the coming days."

Source: mainepublic.org; 09 April 2020

GEOPOLITICS

US THREATENS TO BLOCK CHINA TELECOM FROM AMERICAN MARKET

- Elena Pavlovska

The United States threatened to cut off China Telecom from serving the US market because of legal and security risks.

The government's top departments, including Defense, State and Homeland Security, issued a recommendation saying that the Federal Communications Commission should revoke and terminate all authorizations for the China Telecom's US subsidiary to provide international telecommunications services to and from the US.

The recommendation has to be decided upon by the FCC. The agencies explained that China Telecom is vulnerable to "exploitation, influence and control" by the Chinese government.

"The Executive Branch agencies identified substantial and unacceptable national security and law enforcement risks associated with China Telecom's operations, which render the FCC authorizations inconsistent with the public interest", the Justice Department said on Thursday.

The agencies said that "the nature of China Telecom's US operations" allows the Chinese government actors "to engage in malicious cyber activity enabling economic espionage and disruption and misrouting of US communications".

The US has also banned Huawei from supplying US government systems over security concerns.

In February, the US Justice Department indicted four members of China's military on charges of hacking into the US credit-reporting agency Equifax, which resulted in the stealing of sensitive personal information of some 145 million Americans.

Source: neweurope.eu; 10 April 2020

THE UNEXPECTED HOLDOUT TO A GLOBAL OIL PRODUCTION DEAL

- Amy Stillman, Nacha Cattan, and Eric Martin

One of the most dramatic global oil production agreements in history has been left hanging on the approval of an unlikely character: Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

For weeks Russia and Saudi Arabia, two energy powerhouses, have been sparring over oil, with their dispute sending crude prices tumbling. That drew in U.S. President Donald Trump, with a strong interest in seeing prices stabilize and in supporting America's shale industry as he campaigns for re-election in November.

And yet when Moscow and Riyadh finally seemed to have found common ground on production cuts, at a meeting on Thursday of OPEC+ nations that followed a flurry of diplomatic activity and high-level calls, it was Mexico that called time.

Lopez Obrador refused to sign off on the deal, even after the other 22 nations inked the pact to withdraw 10 million barrels a day from the market in a bid to tame a price plunge. From his office at the National Palace in Mexico City, the president known as AMLO was worried about only one thing: Pemex.

Mexico's national oil producer, with debt of more than \$100 billion, is the centerpiece of his administration's efforts to become self-sufficient in energy generation and stem a 15-year decline in production. Slashing 400,000 barrels a day to comply with the OPEC+ deal would put on hold his ambitious plan to return Pemex to its past glory. It was also a response reflective of a leader who has stubbornly gone his own way, including an initial refusal to enact stringent lockdown measures in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

AMLO, a populist who spent his political career decrying the rich and powerful, has relied frequently on his reputation as a president who advocates for his people, especially poorer workers, and who eschews the trappings of high office including a private jet. He's yet to travel overseas or attend multilateral meetings since coming to power in December 2018.

Long Call

With Saudi Arabia making the whole deal dependent on the participation of the Latin American country and amid growing irritation by energy officials taking part in a call that dragged well into the night in many parts of the world, AMLO was only willing to offer a cut of 100,000 barrels, or about 5.6% of Pemex's production.

As the likelihood of a deal faded, Lopez Obrador received a call from someone with much at stake: His friend Donald Trump, with whom he has struck up an unexpected rapport.

Even so, when the U.S. president tried to convince AMLO to accept the OPEC terms, the Mexican leader insisted Pemex wasn't able to reduce its output that much, said

presidential spokesman Jesus Ramirez. In the end, the U.S. seemingly agreed to shoulder an additional 250,000 barrels to cover for Mexico's position and in theory unlock the general agreement.

"Andres Manuel made the proposal to Trump and Trump accepted it. It was completely cordial," Ramirez said.

The OPEC+ alliance and Mexico made some progress in their discussions on oil-production cuts on Saturday, the third straight day of negotiations, but cautioned it was unclear whether the group would reach a final deal, delegates said. Saudi Arabia has insisted Mexico cut its production as much as everyone else in the group.

Trump had no choice but to absorb the production cut for Mexico because Lopez Obrador wasn't willing to budge, said a person familiar with the call who is not authorized to speak publicly. The U.S. president didn't ask AMLO specifically for anything in return, the person added.

"The United States will help Mexico along and they'll reimburse us sometime at a later date when they're prepared to do so," Trump said on Friday at a White House briefing. The president suggested that compensation from Mexico could be "in the distant future" while arguing there was "no real cost" of limiting U.S. production.

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Additional Cuts?

On top of Pemex, AMLO’s stance was probably influenced by his conviction that additional cuts will be needed in the future to halt an oversupply that saw oil prices tumble by half this year, said another person familiar with his thinking who asked not to be named. The president wanted to start the bargain from the highest possible base, the person said.

AMLO’s position was also strengthened by its sovereign oil hedge, the largest of its kind, which protects the government’s budget against crude prices falling below \$49 a barrel this year.

“We resisted until the end because it took us a lot of effort to boost production,” AMLO explained Friday during his morning press conference, when he made the deal with Trump public. “We already complied with this matter.”

Still, the president called the production cuts “temporary” and said Pemex will continue extracting oil.

Bigger Plans

The episode highlights AMLO’s willingness to defy conventional wisdom and put his domestic goals above all else, even if it damages his reputation in the club of oil producers. It comes as he rejects the need for massive stimulus measures to buffer an economy hit by the coronavirus, to the concern of some in Mexico’s business elite.

“This administration has proven that everything that is market standard, internationally accepted, common sense, is not within their playbook if not in line with the president’s will,” said Oscar Lopez Velarde, a law professor at Universidad Iberoamericana who specializes in energy and tax issues.

AMLO has sought to reverse a move by the previous administration to open the energy industry to private investors. Mexico is building the \$8 billion Dos Bocas refinery even as international gasoline prices collapse. Nahle took part in the OPEC+ call from AMLO’s home state of Tabasco, where the Dos Bocas refinery is being built, while Pemex’s six loss-making plants are running at less than 30% of capacity.

AMLO’s legendary obstinacy is likely to play well with voters who like his “Mexican people first” message. The hashtag [#RocioNahleMeRepresenta](#), or Rocio Nahle represents me, was trending on Twitter on Friday.

Still, “the nonsense is that this is a favor we didn’t need, as Pemex will not even meet its production goals because of its critical financial situation and shouldn’t be increasing production to avoid higher losses,” Iberoamericana’s Velarde said.

Source: [bloomberg.com](https://www.bloomberg.com); 11 April 2020

US READY TO BLOCK IRAN'S REQUESTS FOR CORONAVIRUS AID FROM THE IMF, OFFICIALS SAY

- Kylie Atwood

The Trump administration is seeking to block the International Monetary Fund from providing a \$5 billion emergency loan to Iran for assistance in combating the coronavirus pandemic, according to three administration officials.

US officials believe the money would not actually go towards the country's public health crisis.

"The world's leading state sponsor of terrorism is seeking cash to fund its adventurism abroad, not to buy medicine for Iranians," a State Department spokesperson told CNN. "The regime's corrupt officials have a long history of diverting funds allocated for humanitarian goods into their own pockets and to their terrorist proxies."

Almost 4,000 Iranians have died as a result of Covid-19, and the country has reported 64,586 cases of the virus since it swept the country in February, according to Johns Hopkins statistics. Many experts believe the real statistics could be much higher.

The devastation in Iran is particularly intense because the country is already plagued by a weak economy, in part because of US sanctions, and a shortage of medical resources. The US decision to block the aid could create further friction with the European Union, which announced on March 23 that it will give Tehran 20 million Euros to combat coronavirus and will support its appeal for IMF aid.

'We remain opposed'

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif asked for an emergency loan from the IMF almost a month ago.

"Our Central Bank requested access to this facility immediately," Zarif tweeted of the IMF offer to dole out emergency loans to help countries battling the pandemic. "IMF/IMF Board should adhere to the Fund's mandate, stand on right side of history & act responsibly."

A US Treasury official pointed out that the Iranian central bank is under US sanctions and is known for financing Iran's destabilizing activity.

"The United States is aware of Iran's request for financing from the IMF and, as in the past, we remain opposed to funding going to Iran that could be used to foster the regime's malign and destabilizing activities," the Treasury official said. "Unfortunately, the Iranian central bank, which is currently under sanction, has been a key actor in financing terrorism across the region and we have no confidence that funds would be used to fight the coronavirus."

The US will use its veto power if necessary to block the IMF assistance, officials said. Vetoing the move would require a special majority of 70% of the total voting power so

the US -- which accounts for about 17% of the voting power alone -- would have to find a handful of member states to help them block any such vote if it does take place.

However, the IMF is generally known to avoid calling for a vote unless they know it will pass, meaning the US statements against aid for Iran send a powerful message that might be all that's required to stop any attempt to help Tehran.

"When the US cares a lot about a particular lending program, it can stop it by blocking it politically," David Dollar, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, told CNN. "The US can go to its key allies, and those countries together do have veto power."

United Nations Secretary General António Guterres has advocated for sanctions relief during the pandemic to ensure access to essential supplies and medical support, saying that sanctions risk the health of millions.

Last week Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that sanctions policies are always being evaluated when asked about lifting any sanctions on countries like Iran due to the pandemic. But he has also claimed that for Iran specifically the push to lift US sanctions is "about cash for regime leaders," not fighting the pandemic.

Iran is currently under the toughest US sanctions in history -- and Zarif has called those sanctions "economic terrorism" -- but Pompeo emphasized that there are no limits on humanitarian efforts going into the country.

"When it comes to humanitarian assistance, medical devices, equipment, pharmaceuticals, things that people need in these difficult times, those are not sanctioned anywhere at any time that I'm aware of," Pompeo said.

Source: [cnn.com](https://www.cnn.com); 09 April 2020

Is U.S. ENERGY DOMINANCE COMING TO AN END?

- Nick Cunningham

America's era of "energy dominance" was brief.

The slogan was always silly. Leaving aside the extensive environmental fallout, the notion that a debt-fueled drilling boom allowed the U.S. to "dominate" energy markets in some way never really made sense. And despite a substantial increase in production over the past decade, activity is and always was connected with the global market – aggressive drilling never insulated the American economy from these global forces, at least not in the way that industry-friendly politicians seemed to think.

But the metric that proponents of the "dominance" mantra often cited was export levels. Indeed, U.S. petroleum import dependence decreased over the past decade and volumes of exports rose. Notably, the U.S. became a net exporter of petroleum products on a monthly basis last September for the first time since 1973, punctuating claims to energy dominance.

But the American shale bonanza was built on a decade of debt, aided by near-zero interest rates and a tidal wave of cash (several waves, actually). The drilling boom was already expected to slow dramatically this year, even before the pandemic.

Now, it is definitively over, at least for a while, and with it goes America's claim to energy dominance. In its latest Short Term Energy Outlook, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) predicted that the U.S. "will return to being a net importer of crude oil and petroleum products in the third quarter of 2020 and remain a net importer in most months through the end of the forecast period," which runs through 2021.

It was only a few months ago that the U.S. became a net exporter. America's energy dominance didn't last very long.

The EIA says U.S. oil production could fall by 0.5 mb/d this year, and decline by another 0.7 mb/d in 2021. That's an annual average figure, masking a 1.75 mb/d drop between March and October. The

Department of Energy cited this data as a justification for why the U.S. doesn't need to mandate cuts in order to "participate" in the potential OPEC+ agreement. "With regards to media reports that OPEC+ will require the United States to make cuts in order to come to an agreement: The EIA report today demonstrates that there are already projected cuts of 2 (million bpd), without any intervention from the federal government," the U.S. Energy Department said.

Even that might be on the optimistic end. U.S. E&Ps may cut spending by \$25 billion between 2019 and 2020, according to a new estimate from IHS Markit. That could translate into production declines of 2.9 mb/d by the end of the year compared to the first quarter. "The Big Cut is here. The U.S. government can't order cutbacks like other countries. But economics and the market are mandating dramatic budget cuts that will bring down U.S. production this year," Daniel Yergin, vice chairman, IHS Markit, said in a statement.

The U.S. oil industry has scrapped 102 oil rigs in just the past two weeks, including 54 from the Permian. Even ExxonMobil, which hopes to consolidate its position in the Permian, is retrenching, slashing spending by 30 percent.

Rystad Energy forecasts a decline in the rig count by 65 percent from mid-March levels. "The speed of this decline exceeds the initial post-oil-price-crash expectations. This is for sure a much faster industry reaction than during the previous US land rig down cycles, and we will likely see continuous downward adjustments of similar magnitude throughout the next couple of months," says Rystad Energy's Head of Shale Research Artem Abramov.

Oil prices could yet rebound in the months ahead, not least because so much supply is uneconomical. OPEC+ may or may not come to a global arrangement with the U.S. and other non-OPEC producers later this week, and the U.S. could claim to "contribute" to production declines, but either way supply is heading down.

If WTI were to average \$30 per barrel, roughly 40 percent of oil and gas companies would be insolvent in the next 12 months, according to a survey from the Kansas City

Fed. Standard Chartered estimates a decline in U.S. oil production by as much as 4 mb/d by the end of 2021 if WTI were to average \$30.

Source: oilprice.com; 08 April 2020

POLICE FORCE ESTABLISHED TO REPEL INVADERS OF OUTLYING ISLANDS

NAHA—Japan's first island-patrolling police force kicked off here on April 1 to protect the nation's far-flung territories against invasions and illegal occupation by armed groups.

The establishment of the 151-member Border Islands Security Force reflects Japan's growing concerns about the increase in incursions by Chinese government vessels in waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, a group of islets in the East China Sea.

The force, set up at the headquarters of the Okinawa prefectural police, is led by an assistant commissioner assigned by the National Police Agency. About 40 members are on loan from Tokyo's Metropolitan Police Department and other prefectural police departments.

According to sources, several dozen team members can be quickly mobilized in one dispatch to the site of an illegal landing or occupation.

Team members will be armed with automatic weapons and submachineguns. The NPA expects the force to receive a large helicopter that can carry more than 20 people by the end of next March.

Another large helicopter will be provided to the Fukuoka prefectural police to assist the Border Islands Security Force when the need arises.

The agency allocated about 7.1 billion yen (\$66.2 million) for the task force in the initial budget for fiscal 2020, which began this month.

The security force has been trained to operate in unfriendly terrain, such as precipitous coastlines and rugged hills.

The team also includes personnel who can provide emergency medical treatment to injured members, a first for any police force in the country.

Okinawa Prefecture is home to the Senkaku Islands, which are also claimed by and known as the Diaoyu Islands in China.

In 2012, Japanese authorities arrested seven Chinese, including activists, after they illegally landed on Uotsurishima, one of the Senkaku Islands.

Police and the Japan Coast Guard are primarily responsible for responding to illegal landings. Currently, police officers patrol waters around the Senkaku Islands aboard Coast Guard vessels.

To get to the Senkaku Islands from Okinawa Prefecture's main island, a helicopter operated by prefectural police usually must stop at Ishigakijima island for refueling.

The planned large helicopter for the security force will be able to make a round trip between the main Okinawa island and the Senkaku Islands without refueling, the sources said.

After the government bought some of the islands from private ownership in September 2012, the number of incursions by Chinese government vessels surged in Japan's territorial waters and the Contiguous Zone around the isles.

A record-high 1,097 Chinese government vessels entered the Contiguous Zone over 282 days in 2019.

The same year, 126 Chinese government vessels entered Japanese territorial waters around the islands over 32 days, the second highest total since 2013.

In addition, the Coast Guard warned 137 Chinese fishing boats to leave the area last year.

The Coast Guard has deployed 12 vessels in Okinawa Prefecture, including some stationed on Ishigakijima, as a force dedicated to patrols around the Senkaku Islands.

Source: asahi.com; 02 April 2020

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