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Much Ado About The Sansha Garrison

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In June, Beijing raised the “administrative status of the Xisha, Zhongsha and Nansha islands” from a county-level administrative office to prefectural-level city named Sansha based on Woody (Yongxing) Island in the Paracels (Xisha) archipelago in the South China Sea. In July, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) [established a division-level](#) garrison in the newly created city also based on Woody Island.

Analysts and pundits have viewed the announcement of the new garrison with alarm. [One analyst](#) viewed the decision as “a sign of [China’s] growing reliance on hard power” in the South China Sea. [Another commentator](#) equated the announcement with a decision to create “a permanent forward-deployed military force within striking distance of such contested waters,” a view echoed by the [New York Times](#). Still [others suggested that](#) a division of at least 6,000 soldiers would be deployed to the region and that the garrison might command units from the PLA Air Force and Navy.

Such conclusions, however, are misplaced. In particular, they misunderstand the role of garrisons (*jingbeiqu*, also called garrison commands or garrison headquarters) in the PLA and how China has organized the defense of the islands and reefs it controls in the South China Sea. From a military perspective, the significance of Sansha garrison should not be overstated. Alone, it will not lead to an increase in combat units in the region nor does it portend a new effort by China to militarize the disputes in the South China Sea.

In the PLA, division-level military garrisons do not command main force combat units such as infantry or armored divisions or brigades. They also do not command PLA Navy or PLA Air Force units. Instead, as described in China’s [2006 white paper on defense](#), garrisons and other division-level military sub-districts (*junfenqu*, also called prefectural military commands) are administrative headquarters established in major cities responsible for supporting the military work conducted by the municipality, such as conscription and national defense mobilization tasks. Garrisons and military sub-districts fall under provincial-level military districts (*shengjunqu*) and are jointly commanded by the municipality’s party committee and government. As with division-level units, they are headed by Army senior colonels, who are assisted by a handful of staff officers. Depending on their location, garrisons and military sub-districts may command PLA border defense units (up to regimental size) that share responsibility with civilian public security forces (*gong’an budui*) for guarding China’s borders and providing early warning of an attack.

By our count, the PLA now has about 39 division-level garrisons and nearly another 300 military sub-district headquarters throughout China. In addition, there are four corps-level garrisons in the centrally administered cities of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing, and the Hong Kong and Macau Garrisons, which report directly to Central Military Commission. Comparatively speaking, at the same organizational level, the PLA Army currently has only about 31 infantry and armored combat divisions (though the number of combat brigades one step below a division has increased to roughly 50). The PLA has far more division-level organizations than combat-ready divisions. Thus, by itself, the establishment of division-level garrison such as the one for Sansha does not suggest the deployment of large numbers of forces.

In short, create a city or other prefectural-level administrative unit in China and a garrison or military sub-district will often be established as well. The Sansha garrison is merely the newest among hundreds of division-level organizations in the entire PLA. [One report](#) noted that the new garrison had been upgraded from People's Armed Forces Department (*wuzhuangbu*) that was part of the previous county-level administrative office. Moreover, consistent with the 2006 white paper, the Ministry of Defense spokesman stated that the [responsibilities of the new Sansha garrison](#) were "defense mobilization... city guard, support for the city's disaster rescue and relief work, and [direction of] militia and reserve troops."

So far, no border defense units have been assigned to the Sansha garrison. Instead, the existing Xisha (Paracels) maritime garrison under the PLAN's South Sea Fleet is responsible for the actual defense of the islands in the South China Sea under China's control. The Paracels maritime garrison is one of six division-level maritime garrisons (*shuijingqu*) that fall under the command of one of the three regional fleets in the PLA Navy. Maritime garrisons are responsible for conducting defensive operations (*fangwei zuozhan*) in their designated area and may command PLAN combat units.

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Although it is not clear when the Paracels maritime garrison was established, reports of the unit first appeared in the Chinese press in 1985. Nevertheless, China's deployment of troops to the South China Sea began almost three decades earlier, in the 1950s when the PLA occupied Woody Island in the Amphitrite Group of the Paracels. Following several confrontations with South Vietnamese forces in the Crescent Group of the Paracels in the mid-1950s, Premier Zhou Enlai in 1959 instructed the PLA to establish a base on Woody Island and in 1960 regular patrols around the Paracels were initiated. In 1971, the PLAN began to upgrade and expand the infrastructure in the Paracels, which has continued steadily until to the present day and includes a military-capable airfield built over 20 years ago. To date, there has been little to no evidence that the airfield has been used to accommodate "a permanent forward-deployed military force within striking distance of such contested waters."

The Xisha maritime garrison is commanded by a senior captain (equivalent to an Army senior colonel), the former head of the PLAN's 1st Marine Brigade, a main force combat unit in the South Sea Fleet. The number of troops in the maritime garrison is unknown, but a 2002 report from Taiwan stated that China has deployed around 590 troops on the features in controls in the Spratlys (while Vietnam had around 2020). The Ministry of Defense spokesman [acknowledged the difference between the two garrisons](#) stating, "the Sansha military garrison and Xisha maritime garrison are separate military organs executing duties according to their respective responsibilities... the Xisha maritime garrison... is responsible for maritime defense and military combat."

What, then, is the significance of the establishment of the Sansha garrison? First, from a military perspective, it is a minor development. It likely will not command any combat units nor will it result in a substantial increase in the Chinese forces in the South China Sea. Rather, it is designed to enhance coordination with the local government. Its importance is political, part of what [the China Daily](#) unabashedly described as China's effort, "to display its sovereignty over the South China Sea."

Second, because the PLA has maintained a military presence on the features it holds in the South China Sea for decades, the creation of the garrison [does not support claims](#) about [the growing role](#) of the PLA in Chinese foreign policy or policy in the South China Sea. Instead, the establishment of the garrison reflects the bureaucratic upgrade of an existing department following a change in the administrative status of the associated locality.

Third, militarily, any forces on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea are vulnerable and hard to defend. As retired U.S. [Rear Admiral Mike McDevitt has said](#), "Putting garrisons on Woody Island or elsewhere in the Paracels would effectively maroon these guys, so the only advantage would be just showing the flag — to say, 'We are serious.'"

Finally, the general reaction to the creation of the Sansha garrison reflects the limited understanding among analysts and observers of the PLA's organization despite Beijing's efforts to describe the structure of the Chinese armed forces in biannual white papers and media reports. For example, none of the Pentagon's annual reports to Congress on Chinese military power [have ever mentioned](#) this level of organization. In the case of Sansha, the Chinese government could have better explained its decision, while commentators might have examined what garrisons actually do before jumping to ill-founded conclusions.