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## Bombers in the South China Sea: Beijing Grows Its Military Presence on Disputed Islands

China landed a heavy bomber in the Paracels, its latest military buildup as the world focuses on North Korea



A Chinese H-6K, like the one that landed on Woody Island last week. PHOTO: LIU RUI/XINHUA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By *Jake Maxwell Watts and Eva Dou*

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China's first-ever landing of a heavy bomber on a disputed island in the South China Sea punctuates a steady buildup of military assets that has solidified Beijing's claims to one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

On Friday, China's air force disclosed it had landed an H-6K bomber on an island in the area, which would "help improve actual combat capabilities in responding to various security threats at sea."

Experts who track China's military moves said the landing was on Woody Island in the Paracels, an island chain where claims by Vietnam, China and Taiwan intersect.

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The landing was the latest in a series of military moves that China has carried out while global attention has been focused on the standoff with North Korea. Earlier this month, China

deployed antiship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missiles on the disputed Spratly Islands off the coast of the Philippines for the first time.

Satellite imagery also shows Beijing has installed radars and communication-jamming equipment on the Paracels and Spratlys in recent months, and that Chinese navy ships and military aircraft have made frequent visits.

Together, the deployments give China an interconnected array of radar, missile batteries and airfields that will allow it to project power over hundreds of miles of ocean where the U.S. Navy's dominance previously faced few serious challenges. "They crossed a big threshold," said Euan Graham, director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute.

The militarization of the South China Sea is part of a broader push by President Xi Jinping to assert control over long-claimed territory and extend China's defensive perimeter further into the Pacific, moves that are popular at home. As much as a third of global trade passes annually through the 1.35 million square miles of ocean, which is