

also thought to be rich in natural resources including oil and natural gas. China says it has historical claims to almost the entire area and that it has the right to defend those claims.

China staged its biggest military show of force in the South China Sea last month when it deployed dozens of navy vessels, including an aircraft carrier and nuclear-missile submarines, off its southern Hainan island.

The White House said this month that it has raised concerns with Beijing about the militarization of the South China Sea and warned there would be consequences. The new commander of U.S. Pacific naval forces, Adm. Philip Davidson, told a Senate committee in April that China had nearly completed military bases on its reclaimed South China Sea islands. "China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States," he said.

The Pacific Command and China's Defense Ministry didn't respond to requests for comment.

The international community has repeatedly called on China to refrain from militarization of the South China Sea. The U.S. Navy regularly challenges Chinese claims by sailing close to the disputed islands or flying over them. In 2016, the Philippines won an international arbitration that effectively invalidated Chinese claims to the sea, a ruling that China rejected.

The H-6K long-range strategic bomber deployed to Woody Island has a range that covers almost the entire South China Sea and many countries surrounding it, according to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, a unit of the Washington-based think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The bomber's deployment is an indication of China's progress in outfitting the islands it has built up, said Zhu Feng, executive director of Nanjing University's China Center for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea.

"It's a test of how capable the facility is," he said.

Security analysts say the deployments on Woody Island are a blueprint for the Spratly Islands, where China's claims are disputed by Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and the Philippines, and which it occupied and developed more recently than the Paracels. China already has built large aircraft hangars there but hasn't deployed military fighters or bombers.

The antiship missile deployments, reported early this month by CNBC, were the first in the Spratlys. When asked about the move, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said "the relevant deployment targets no one," adding that "the deployment of necessary national defense facilities are meant to safeguard China's sovereignty and security."

Some claimants that depend on the South China Sea for trade and fishing have raised concerns about the unrelenting militarization. Vietnam this month called on China to withdraw military equipment and requested that Beijing "shows its responsibility in maintaining peace and stability."

Other countries including the Philippines haven't pressed their claims, arguing that they are unable to stand up to China's military might. Foreign ministry officials in the Philippines and Vietnam didn't respond to requests for comment.

"If the international community cannot get its act together, sooner or later we are going to see China get de facto control of a very important maritime highway," said William Choong, senior fellow for Asia-Pacific Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore.

—Kersten Zhang contributed to this article.

Write to Jake Maxwell Watts at [jake.watts@wsj.com](mailto:jake.watts@wsj.com) and Eva Dou at [eva.dou@wsj.com](mailto:eva.dou@wsj.com)

Appeared in the May 21, 2018, print edition as 'China Flexes More Muscle on Sea Claims.'