

Assessing China's Crop Success in the South China Sea

China recently announced that it had successfully cultivated vegetables on Woody Island to meet food demand. But this crop serves more than a nutritional purpose.

According to the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), more than 1,650lbs of vegetables were **recently harvested** on Woody Island, a feature in the disputed Paracel Islands claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The success resulted from an experiment to grow crops on sandy surfaces: cellulose solution was mixed with sand to turn it into arable soil.

China said the practice can help its troops stationed on Woody address their need for fresh food. This is not unreasonable. According to China's most recent publicly disclosed figures, the island houses about 1,000 people. Military personnel comprise **three-fourths** of that population and the rest are their families and some fisher folk. Since fresh food and water are usually transported to the island from the mainland, the new crop growing method could provide this population with an alternate source of fresh vegetables. And it may be more cost effective than China's previous efforts to transport soil or build greenhouses on the island.

Limited legal implications

An international tribunal in **ruled** in 2016 that no feature in the disputed Spratly Islands can generate a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone since they cannot sustain human habitation nor have independent economic life. Instead, they are classified as rocks. Applying similar criteria to the Paracels, some experts have **concluded** that Woody Island and nearby features should be considered rocks as well.

But Chinese scholars have **argued** that China's crop success can challenge "international theories, including those in 2016 arbitration" by showing that Woody Island is habitable and that its occupiers can be self-sufficient and develop an independent economic life. China could resort to this argument in future arbitrations and recent **reports** suggest it is preparing to do so.

But such legal implications might be limited. Taiwan has similarly been farming on Itu Aba in the Spratlys to show that the feature fits the definition of an island. In 2013, the Chinese (Taiwan) Society of International Law submitted an **amicus curiae** brief to the then-ongoing arbitration with detailed evidence of Taiwan's various "livestock breeding, farming and agricultural activities" since 1947, including a "Happy Farm" that produces not just vegetables but also "a wide variety" of fruits. This was accompanied by figures showing that such production meets the nutritional demands of "hundreds of people." The document also illustrated that Itu Aba's soil is not just sand-based, but is able to sustain microorganisms and indigenous vegetation. The 2016 ruling labeled Itu Aba a rock anyway.

If Itu Aba cannot be qualified as an island with longer-term farming, it is unlikely that

Woody can, even when the PLAN expands its crop growing efforts.

New move, old tactic

Despite its limited legal effects, China's crop success should still receive attention for one reason: the move is yet another effort to "civilianize" the South China Sea disputes. This is a tactic China has increasingly employed in the last decade.

China established Sansha City on Woody Island in 2012. In 2013, China began to [allow](#) tourists to visit the Paracels. In June 2014, China announced the construction of a kindergarten and a primary school on Woody. Three months after, China opened an [official cruise route](#) from Hainan to the Paracels, with around 200 passengers on board—mostly [public officials](#). The tourism plan later was put under the [direct control](#) of the United Front Work Department of China's Communist Party, indicating that the development was not purely for economic purposes.

In 2015, construction for a [filling station](#) and water pipelines started on Woody. China introduced the island's first desalination plant in 2016, [first movie theater](#) (with free screenings) in 2017, first remote intelligent [micro-grid](#) to generate electricity in 2018, first logistics base in 2019, and now the first sand-to-soil farming success, not to mention several other facilities for recreation and utility. These "civilianizing" efforts are more extensive in the Paracels than in the Spratlys, possibly because the dispute over the Paracels involves fewer parties and the islands are wholly occupied by China, and therefore receive less international attention.

This "civilianizing" may offer several advantages to China. First, China can strengthen its presence without directly resorting to military means and being seen as aggressive, which fits with its "peaceful rise" narrative and "good neighbor" policy. Chinese state-run outlets [confirmed](#) this intention in 2018, saying that focusing on civilian rather than military efforts in the South China Sea can "soothe regional fears" about China's purposes.

Second, some facilities such as the filling station or the logistics base on Woody Island, despite their obvious civilian utility, could also later be utilized to support military purposes. This dual-use [concern](#) applies to civilian construction across Chinese-occupied features.

Third, this is generally [less costly](#) than a purely military approach to demonstrate China's control of the island. Additionally, for the domestic audience, increasing civilian presence is a way to [sustain](#) the party's legitimacy, showing that China is not backing down and still strengthening its position, even in the face of international pushback.

Fourth, the civilianizing tactic serves China's propaganda purposes, contributing to a type of [information warfare](#) about which the U.S. Department of Defense has raised alarms. China can criticize the United States for militarizing the South China Sea with its naval presence without being accused of doing the same thing. The general public, especially those not familiar with the South China Sea disputes or maritime law, may

look at China's thriving civilian presence on Woody and find Beijing's argument that it has historical rights and effective control convincing.

Diplomatic cost

China's new farming practice and the civilianizing tactic in general may cause damage in China's ties with Vietnam. Immediately after the PLAN's online announcement of the new crop, Vietnam [responded](#) with a public statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, criticizing the farming as violating Vietnam's sovereignty and international law. Even if the civilianizing tactic is not new, the more extensive it becomes, the more it diminishes Vietnam's trust in China. It undermines belief in China's ["16 golden words"](#) principle (which can be translated into "friendly neighbors, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, future orientations") and its [willingness to peacefully resolve](#) the disputes with Vietnam.

Vietnam usually balances itself within the U.S.-China dynamic, not publicly leaning toward either side. But recent unprecedented moves in its security policy have shown that Vietnam is making adjustments: in 2019, Vietnam declared that it ["respects"](#) U.S. freedom of navigation operations near the Paracels, [joined](#) the first-ever ASEAN-U.S. maritime exercise, and [expanded](#) its "three-Nos" security principle to leave open the possibility of greater military cooperation with third parties under "specific conditions." In June, as ASEAN chair, Vietnam pushed for a stronger position on the South China Sea with a draft leader statement stressing growing concerns for ["serious incidents"](#) for the first time. If trust in China continues to decay, Vietnam may move further in this direction.

China's crop success in Woody Island introduces an alternative to provide for the island's occupiers. While its legal implications are not as remarkable as Chinese experts argue, it is still worth watching because it represents another move in China's series of "civilianizing" efforts in the Paracels. And this trend may lead Vietnam to further distance itself from China.

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