

# China's coast guard is looking even more like its '2nd navy,' with 'Monster' ships, a destroyer-level vessel, and a rumored drone carrier



China has the world's largest coast guard fleet, and new acquisitions mean its strength has been significantly boosted.

Noel Mallia/Getty, alekseystemmer/Getty, Tyler Le/BI

- China has the world's largest coast guard fleet, and it's still building up on an ambitious scale.
- It's been taking ships from its navy and could be getting its own vessel modeled after a destroyer.

- **Experts say the acquisitions mean it's moving closer to being a naval reserve or auxiliary force.**

In May, military experts spied a peculiar, half-built vessel sitting among warships at a Shanghai dockyard.

Satellite images showed it had the shape and size of a Type-052D, an advanced guided-missile destroyer in China's navy.

But this ship was missing key features, such as a vertical launch system for missiles and its "Dragon's Eye" radar, a standard system for Chinese warships. Its main gun was also smaller than usual.

One detail stood out above all: the paint job. Chinese navy ships are gray, and this apparent Type-052D came in white — the mark of a coast guard vessel.

The discovery led to speculation, which has since been backed up by local reports, that China's coast guard, a law enforcement agency, was obtaining a ship modeled after a 6,500-ton naval destroyer.

The vessel is just one of several big-ticket acquisitions believed to be destined for the maritime force, which is now at a stage where its capabilities likely carry serious implications if Beijing goes to war with another naval power.

The policing body, moved in 2018 to fall under military command, is undergoing one of the world's most aggressive expansions at a time when the Chinese coast guard is increasingly becoming the center of tensions with its neighbors.

The sheer size and strength of its fleet, estimated at 250 vessels of at least 500 tons each, has led to Western experts often calling it a "second navy."

And it's continued to break ground with bigger and bolder ships. Earlier this month, a state-run shipbuilding institute announced it was preparing an unspecified "mothership" for the high seas, leading to rumors that the coast guard was due to receive a seafaring drone carrier.

In July, China anchored one of its two "Monster" ships — the world's largest-ever coast guard vessels displacing 12,000 tons each — in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. It was an incredible show of power, which Manila accused of being an intimidation tactic.



**The Philippines published photos of China anchoring the world's biggest coast guard vessel in its waters.** Philippine Coast Guard

Experts think Beijing's ambitions for the agency are global. China has made it no secret that it intends to expand its maritime strength for distant operations, establishing a "far-seas protection" doctrine in 2015.

Its coast guard looks poised to play a significant role, John Michael Dahm, a former US Navy intelligence officer and a senior fellow at the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, told Business Insider.

"That the Chinese coast guard would use these new, larger ships and capabilities to establish a security presence farther from China probably has the largest security implications for the US and its allies," Dahm said. "Not just in Asia, but around the world."

## **Why a destroyer?**

China's coast guard expansion isn't happening in isolation. It's locked in a pseudo-arms race with its neighbors in the resource-rich East and South China Seas, chiefly Japan and the Philippines. Both are US allies.

Beijing has, for decades, already been beefing up its coast guard with dozens of former People's Liberation Army Navy ships, including corvettes that were decommissioned and modified to remove heavy weaponry.

But its rivals have recently started working more closely as tensions mount over regional disputes, most of which China has been accused of initiating.

Manila is upgrading its coast guard with five Japan-made ships worth a total of \$400 million, while Tokyo is planning a giant 30,000-ton vessel for its respectable 150-ship policing fleet.

"Size does matter," Dahm said. "A vessel's size and displacement often translate directly into capabilities. A bigger ship means more people, more weapons, more fuel, more endurance, more range."

Western experts think the destroyer-esque ship being assembled in Shanghai is part of China's effort to stay ahead.

"China is upping the ante again by bringing in the most kind of modern, advanced form of a coast guard ship," said Vina Nadjibulla, vice president of research and strategy at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. "We should see it more as a naval ship than a coast guard ship."



**The Type-052D guided missile destroyer is one of China's most advanced warships.** MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AFP via Getty Images

From China's perspective, a destroyer-sized ship would fill a gap in its fleet, said Collin Koh, a senior fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

The coast guard's regular fleet goes up to 4,000 tons, before a dramatic leap to its 12,000-ton "Monster" ships.

Koh said China's "Monster" ship may have been staring down the Philippines in the South China Sea, but it's impractical to station such vessels so far away for extended periods.

"It's expensive to operate and deploy this sort of ship, because it's too big and it's not suited for this purpose," Koh said. "It's meant more as a command ship and a disaster relief platform than to go out there and show force."

A ship modeled after the Type-052D destroyer, at 6,500 tons, could fill that power-projecting purpose, especially if produced in greater numbers, Koh added.

Questions also remain as to what sort of vessel China is planning for its teased coast guard "mothership." Local pundits have guessed it may be a drone carrier or even an aircraft carrier, though the latter is unlikely.

The build-up seems a world away from what's traditionally been understood as the coast guard's role: to police fishermen and deter smugglers.



Japan's coast guard already has five 6,500-ton patrol ships, and if China expands its own agency with vessels of that class, the region is set to be filled by warship-sized boats jockeying for dominance.

For comparison, the US Coast Guard's largest cutters are the size of frigates, at about 4,500 tons.

"Anything the China coast guard does might be considered unprecedented at this point," said Dahm of the Mitchell Institute.

### **A coast guard that can go to war**

One of the most significant developments of a burgeoning Chinese coast guard is that its ships might make a difference in a war.

The US Navy far outstrips Beijing's in raw tonnage and firepower, but it is losing out in the numbers game, with roughly 300 vessels to the Chinese navy's 370. Add a sizable coast guard force, and China stands to far exceed Washington's count.

"They're using quite common baseline hulls as existing PLAN vessels," said Koh. "And that gives us the impression that they're maintaining some level of platform commonality."

That's important, because a common platform leaves open the possibility of adding naval weapons to coast guard ships.

"A coast guard Type-052D might have no vertical launch system on board, but it still has enough deck space to mount weapons," said Koh.

The navy corvettes obtained by the coast guard, for example, might possibly be refitted with their old weapons.

"If they can remove some systems, it means they can be reinstalled in times of conflict," Koh said.



**More than 20 Chinese Type-056 navy corvettes have been repurposed without their anti-ship missiles to become coast guard vessels.** TANG KE/Feature China/Future Publishing via Getty Images

Benjamin Blandin, a researcher and network coordinator at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies, told BI that he's noticed the Chinese coast guard also recently acquired landing craft.

"That's quite bizarre to me. I don't know why a coast guard would ever need landing capacities," he said.

Legally, little stands in the way of China using its coast guard in open conflict. The agency falls under the People's Armed Police, which reports to central military leadership.

Coast guard laws were also changed in 2021 to allow the use of force when China's "sovereign rights and jurisdiction are infringed upon."

"Clearly, they are being treated by the Chinese authorities as a navy reserve or a navy auxiliary," Blandin said.

China's foreign ministry press center did not respond to a request for comment sent by BI.

## **Ambitions for a global policing force**

A key element in China's announcement for its coast guard "mothership" was the phrase "far seas."

Almost nothing has been revealed about the new ship, but Chinese shipbuilders said it's designed to provide "comprehensive support" on long-range missions.

That's a clue that China might intend to send its coast guard on missions far beyond the East and South China Seas, Dahm said.

"For example, in the not-too-distant future, will the Chinese coast guard be patrolling the coast of West Africa to secure Chinese off-shore oil projects?" Dahm said. "What about the CCG offering police services to small island nations in the South Pacific?"

The US Coast Guard has been deploying more frequently to distant regions like Africa, providing training for host countries and security for their waters. Dahm said China could seek to do the same to boost its own influence.

Blandin of YCAPS said sailing under the coast guard also gives China's ships a softer touch in international relations, even if they might be formidable vessels.

"It's not a gray navy hull, it's a white hull. White-hull ships are nice people, right?" he said. "It's just that they use water cannons. It's just that they ram other boats. If they behave in the South Pacific like they behave in the South China Sea, I predict a lot of trouble."