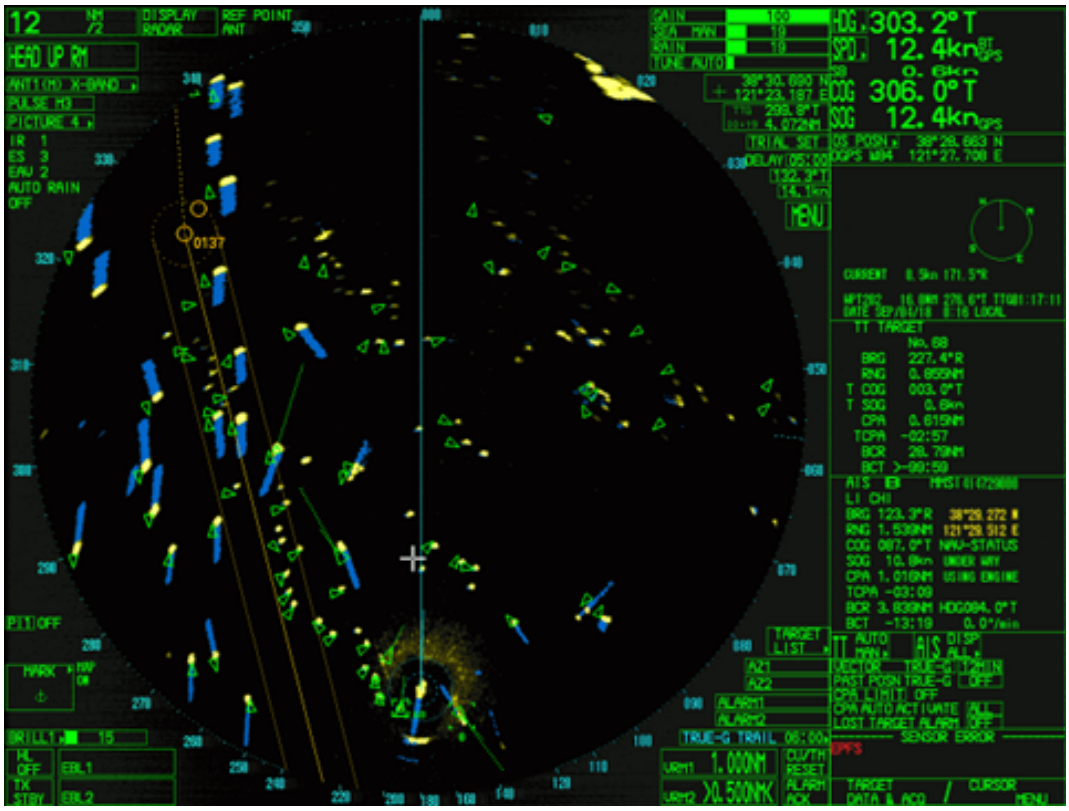

Increased collision risk in Chinese waters

With China's seasonal fishing ban coming to an end, ship operators and Masters are advised to take extra precautions due to the increased number of fishing vessels in Chinese waters.

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Every year we handle claims of collisions between merchant and fishing vessels in Chinese waters. Given the significant size and momentum differences between merchant vessels and fishing boats, such incidents can lead to extensive damage and loss of life. Data from China MSA reveals that from 2019 to 2021, collisions between merchant and fishing vessels resulted in the deaths of 248 fishermen.

In many cases, watchkeepers aboard merchant vessels may not even realize that they have collided with fishing boats, as illustrated in the case study referred to in this article .

More vessels, more risk

According to the 2023 notice of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of China, the fishing ban in the East and South China Sea between latitudes 26° 30' N and 12° N was lifted on 16 August 2024. The ban for the Bohai Sea and Yellow Sea North of latitude 35 ° will end on 1 September 2024, while the ban for the Yellow Sea and East China Sea between latitudes 35° N and 26° 30' N, will end on 16 September 2024. This will lead to higher numbers of fishing vessels in the region, increasing the risk of collisions.

Typical collision causes

• **High speed in high traffic areas:**
Often, vessels proceed at high speed, and their engines are not ready for immediate maneuvering. This can result in reduced time for decision making and greater damage if collision happens.

• **Lack of attention or resources:**
Watchkeepers on merchant vessels may be occupied with other tasks and the manning may be inadequate. Moreover, the crew on fishing vessels may not have the appropriate certificates and may be engaged in fishing activities instead of in navigation.

• **High reliance on AIS:**
Fishing vessels in China are often equipped with AIS, however it may be inoperative or transmitting incorrect information. Onboard merchant vessels, with AIS overlay on RADARs or ECDIS, the Officer of the Watch (OOW) will often rely more on AIS instead of using radar plotting. AIS can complement but not replace target tracking on ARPA / RADAR for collision avoidance.

• **Communication challenges:**
Attempts to communicate with fishing vessels via VHF radio, ALDIS lamp or sound signals may fail due to language barriers or insufficient watchkeeping level of fishing vessels.

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• **Last-minute actions:**
Merchant vessels sometimes leave it to the last minute before taking avoiding action. This can result in a collision, for example if the helm order given is not enough to achieve a large rate of turn.

Merchant vessels may also face claims for damaging fishing nets. Fishing nets are difficult to detect as they may be poorly marked. Nighttime detection of the nets may be easier if they display lights. Day time visual sighting, on the other hand, can be a real challenge. Nets with radar reflectors can be useful, but this is not a common practice. We understand the use of AIS markers is increasing. This may also clutter the RADAR and the AIS display.

Recommendations

• **Voyage planning:**
Attentions shall be given to the designated fishing zones and the high risk areas (HRAs), as recognized by China MSA (
Chinese circular
;
English translation
) and various provincial MSAs, such as the 39 HRAs within the coastal waters of Shandong Province identified by Shandong MSA (
Chinese circular
) in 2023.

• **Bridge team composition:**
We recommend increasing bridge watchkeeping level in advance to ensure that the OOW has sufficient assistance at night as well as during day. Other onboard activities should be planned to ensure that the bridge team are well rested for navigation-related duties.

• **Safe speed:**
In areas with high fishing activity, vessels should proceed at a safe speed with engines ready for maneuvering. The OOW should be empowered to adjust the speed as necessary.

• **Use of RADAR/ARPA:**
Make full use of radar and sound fog signal when navigating in fog, even when no fishing boats are sighted on the radar. The use of radar can be vital when navigating in these waters. General practice of long ranges scanning using the S-band radar to identify clusters of fishing fleet and using the X-band on small range for collision avoidance can be effective.

• **Keeping clear of clusters**
: Where OOW is able to detect a cluster of fishing boats, it is advisable to alter course well in advance to avoid navigating through it.

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· **Attracting attention of fishing boats**
: To gain the attention of fishing boats, use of light and sound signals may be more effective as establishing contact via VHF might be challenging.

Related reading

• Preventing collisions with fishing vessels in China

• Collision avoidance – safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of fishermen

• Incident hot spots - a global overview of navigation incidents

• Safety guidelines for the prevention of collisions between merchant vessels and fishing vessels in Chinese Coastal Waters

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