
Collision avoidance - Chinese Waters

1. Purpose

- 1.1. This Safety Alert issued by the Bahamas Maritime Authority to share Recommendations recently issued by the Maritime Safety Administration of the People's Republic of China on the prevention of collisions between merchant ships and fishing vessels in Chinese coastal waters.
- 1.2. Seasonal restrictions on fishing in the South China Sea, Yellow Sea and Bohai Sea have ended, the East China Sea will be opened on 16 September 2026. The complete opening of fishing season in Chinese Coastal waters means merchant and fishing vessels will have increased encounters, which can increase the likelihood of collisions.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. Collisions between merchant ships, fishing vessels and fishing fleet support vessels in Chinese coastal waters continue to result in a significant number of fatalities. September 2026 has seen one collision involving a Bahamian ship and a fishing vessel in Chinese coastal waters, there have been two others in 2025-2026. Fortunately none resulted in a death or loss of a vessel¹.
- 2.2. The attached guidelines should also be read by the operators and bridge teams of any Bahamian ship planning a passage through Chinese coastal waters.

3. Lessons to be learned from previous casualties

- 3.1. Marine safety investigations completed by The BMA have shared the following lessons to be learned:
 - Passage planning - probable traffic conditions should be risk assessed and critical areas identified as part of the appraisal. Effective control measures could include adjusting the passage to avoid high traffic areas, planning work to make senior watchkeepers available on the bridge for the transit of high risk areas or strategic use of the time available to reduce speed on high risk legs.
 - Bridge Resources – Senior watchkeepers should be available during high risk stages of the voyage. All watchkeepers should understand the available equipment and resources, and their limitations, to assess the risk of collision and support their decision making.

¹ Two collisions involving Bahamian ships and fishing vessels in Chinese coastal waters in 2018/19 resulted in 20 fatalities.

- Normalisation of deviance – Master and senior watchkeepers should ensure that the documented standards are maintained, noting that junior officers can model their behaviour or indifference to written requirements for closest point of approach or triggers for reducing speed.
- Collision Avoidance – Action should be taken in compliance with COLREGs and at an early stage. It should be substantial enough to be readily apparent to another vessel observing visually or by radar. Appropriate sound signals should be used to further communicate intentions.
- Near miss or collision? – If there is any indication that a collision has occurred, it is essential to find out conclusively and render assistance as required.

3.2. The China Maritime Safety Administration's Recommendations should be read by the operators and bridge teams of any Bahamian ship planning a passage through Chinese coastal waters.

4. Further reading

4.1. China Maritime Safety Administration² have shared resources which aim to prevent collisions between merchant ships and fishing vessels:

- Guidelines for coastal shipping routes:
<https://www.msa.gov.cn/html/cnmsa/xxgk/article/2026/4785980dd96a46baaf88a65ac212fb22.html?hav=1JnAAIjJxPAZWICEAC>
- Designation of 38 high-risk warning areas:
<https://www.msa.gov.cn/html/cnmsa/xxgk/article/2023/7b686fb50b5f4e82bcaea2e0f0420152.html?hav=1hRWZhVIPZiSWEI>
- Database of typical collision cases:
<https://www.msa.gov.cn/html/cnmsa/hxaq/sgjx/index.html?hcv=1U3u12EMIgwyexW5F>
- Guidelines for Preventing Collisions between Merchant Ships and Fishing Vessels in China's Coastal Waters (2023 Edition):
<https://www.msa.gov.cn/html/cnmsa/xxgk/article/2023/ad6e0cdc35284593be646712e47dc07f.html?hav=1pxEgPo4BYxUjdn>
- Guidelines for shipping companies on fulfilling primary safety responsibilities (version 1.0):
<https://www.msa.gov.cn/html/cnmsa/xxgk/article/2025/93e3ea21cda6435283ea7f9f7131e779.html?hav=6RxdqRhQP4egFPy>

5. Validity

5.1. This Safety Alert is valid until further notice.

² Some publications do not have official translations available. It is recommended to use available resources to translate as required. Please note in the event of any discrepancies, the original Chinese text prevails.

Safety Recommendations for Vessels Navigating in China's Coastal Waters

1. Strengthen Shore-based Monitoring and Guidance

1.1 Implement 24-hour shore-based watchkeeping, strengthen dynamic monitoring of your ships, and promptly receive early warning information issued by competent authorities on waters with dense fishing vessels, high-risk waters, and concentrated entry or exit of fishing vessels. Guide your ships to conduct thorough pre-voyage risk assessments, focusing on verifying voyage plans, collision prevention measures and watchkeeping arrangements in fishing areas.

1.2 When developing voyage plans, full reference should be made to documents including the Guidelines for Coastal Public Shipping Routes, the Notice of the Maritime Safety Administration of the People's Republic of China on Promulgating High-risk Warning Zones for Collisions between Merchant Ships and Fishing Vessels in Coastal Waters of China, and the Guidelines for the Prevention of Collisions between Merchant Ships and Fishing Vessels in Coastal Waters of China, to plan reasonable routes and specify collision prevention measures.

2. Enhance Navigation Safety

2.1 Vessels navigating along China's coast shall formulate voyage plans in a scientific manner. The planned routes shall keep clear of concentrated fishing areas as far as practicable, and vessels shall navigate along recommended routes whenever possible. During navigation watch handover, full information regarding the movements of surrounding merchant ships and fishing vessels as well as all navigation safety hazards shall be handed over. Watch handover shall only be conducted after collision avoidance manoeuvres have been completed and the vessels have passed and cleared each other.

2.2 Before entering areas with dense fishing vessels in coastal waters of China, a navigation safety meeting should be convened to clarify navigation requirements. When navigating in waters with dense fishing vessels, ships should strengthen bridge watchkeeping manpower, with at least two watchkeeping officers on the bridge. The master should take command when necessary. When navigating in fishing areas at night, the master should issue night orders specifying safe navigation requirements.

2.3 Before entering fishing areas, inspect and test radar, electronic chart display and information system (ECDIS), automatic identification system (AIS), voyage data recorder (VDR), very high frequency (VHF) radio, emergency power supply, navigation lights, daylight signaling lights and other sound signaling equipment. Inspect the "four engines and one boiler" to ensure their good working conditions and stand by the main engine for immediate use. Test manual steering (follow-up, non-follow-up), automatic steering and emergency steering to ensure the steering system functions properly for emergency collision avoidance manoeuvre.

2.4 When taking measures to avoid collision with fishing vessels, on the premise of ensuring the ship's own navigation safety, exercise good seamanship to take early and positive action to keep clear of fishing vessels, so as to avoid the close-quarters situation. The minimum distance at closest point of approach (CPA) should be kept at no less than 1 nautical mile (0.5 nautical mile as far as possible in dense fishing areas). Use VHF Channel 16, ship's whistle and lights to carry out early communication and warning with fishing vessels.

2.5 When giving way to fishing vessels engaged in fishing operations, maintain a sufficient safe distance from both the vessels and their fishing nets. When passing a trawler, keep a distance of no less than 1 nautical mile from its stern. Crossing between pair trawlers is prohibited. When passing fishing vessels engaged in seining operation, keep a safe distance to windward and upstream of the vessel.

3. Emergency Response and Rescue

3.1 In a close-quarters situation, take decisive evasive actions such as slowing down, stopping, reversing, and altering course to avoid bow-on collision with the side of fishing vessels, to minimize collision consequences.

3.2 In the event of a collision, prioritize the rescue of human life and adopt all possible measures to rescue persons in distress. Immediately report to the nearest maritime administration through all effective means, including the location of the incident, name of the vessel in distress, casualties, ship damage, weather and sea conditions, and rescue needs. Meanwhile, notify surrounding vessels and request their assistance in rescue operations.

4. Other Important Notices

4.1 Fishing vessels engaged in drift netting, stow netting and cage fishing usually use fishing net position AIS locator to indicate fishing nets, which appear as triangular symbols on ECDIS. Fishing net position MS locator may affect watchkeepers' judgment of shipborne AIS, ECDIS and radar information, requiring special attention and identification.

4.2 Fishing vessels engaged in fishing operations may fail to exhibit appropriate lights and shapes in accordance with regulations. Keep clear of low-speed fishing vessels, which may be operating, anchored or adrift, possibly with improper watchkeeping or switched-off VHF/AIS equipment. Some wooden fishing vessels may be difficult to be detected by radar due to their material and structure.

4.3 Fishing vessels may suddenly alter course or increase speed to protect their fishing nets. Enhanced lookout is required.

4.4 Foreign ships communicating with fishing vessels via VHF in coastal waters of China should fully consider language barriers.