

Use of Starlink in Chinese Waters

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Question:

We have been informed by various websites that Chinese Authorities have issued a penalty to a foreign vessel for illegally using Starlink satellite-based internet service – within Chinese waters and specifically in Ningbo port. According to the best of our knowledge this case is the first case of its kind and we would like to confirm that our actions below are sufficient to avoid such implications while calling Chinese ports.

Managers requests vessels to the STARLINK proprietary power cable connected to the STARLINK router is disconnected prior to entering Chinese territorial waters and also make relevant entry in Bridge Log Book with the time and position taking this actions.

We are looking forward for your response and thank you in advance for your assistance.

Answer:

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your inquiry.

We did participate in the handling of the mentioned case involving the use of Starlink in Ningbo Port. Based on the details of the case we

assisted with, the following outlines the regulatory requirements, consequences of violations, and recommended compliance measures regarding the Starlink direct-to-terminal services in Chinese Waters for your reference.

Pursuant to relevant Chinese laws and regulations governing satellite communication services in China, any direct-to-terminal satellite services utilized within the Chinese jurisdiction must be provided by licensed entities, with all data routed through domestic satellite gateways. As Starlink has neither obtained operational approval from the Chinese government nor established regulated gateway or ground stations within Chinese territory, the use of Starlink's direct satellite communication service by vessels within Chinese waters is not permitted. Violations of these rules are subject to investigation and penalties, as exemplified by the aforementioned Ningbo Port case. Specifically, in accordance with the Maritime Traffic Safety Law of the People's Republic of China, offenders may face administrative fines of up to RMB 30,000, or as high as RMB 100,000 for serious violations.

Based on this regulatory context and insights from the Ningbo Port incident, we offer the following supplementary recommendations for your consideration:

1. In addition to disconnecting the power cable, it is also suggested that the onboard Starlink equipment be fully powered off. Case observations indicate that even without active data transmission, leaving the device in a "connectable state" may also be regarded as "potential use" and trigger regulatory inspections.
2. Prior to and while navigating within Chinese waters, utilize approved communication solutions such as local cellular networks, IMO-recognized GMDSS equipment (e.g., INMARSAT, Iridium), or China-authorized satellite services.

3. Beyond documenting the time and position of power disconnection, retain all accessible satellite communication records (e.g., communication timestamps, parties involved, content exchanged) to facilitate potential inspections by authorities.

4. As a prudent precaution, we suggest notifying all crew members of the prohibition on Starlink usage within Chinese waters to ensure full adherence to regulatory requirements.

5. Ships are advised to proactively communicate with port authorities through the shipping agent for policy and regulatory updates before entering Chinese waters.

6. In the event of a boarding inspection, truthfully declare the ship's Starlink equipment configuration and usage details, and fully cooperate with law enforcement personnel to ensure a smooth process.

Although no similar penalty cases have been announced by other maritime authorities, this particular case serves as a clear warning that China is strengthening oversight of Starlink equipment on vessels. This emerging regulatory trend demands Members' close attention.

We hope the above information will be of assistance. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require additional support or further clarification.

Best regards,



CUI Jiyu

Head of Marine Team