



China's Maritime Militia and Fishing Fleets

A Primer for Operational Staffs and Tactical Leaders

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Articles about gray-zone operations—states' use of nontraditional forces and methods to pursue security objectives without triggering armed conflict—are unavoidable in military professional literature.¹ This is particularly true for commentary about Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC).² These states' embrace of gray-zone operations is unsurprising since such operations are an attractive means for relatively disadvantaged powers to challenge a stronger rival like the United States. Among the most important of China's gray-zone forces and actors is its maritime militia. In addition, China's overtly civilian distant-water fishing (DWF) fleets, which are affiliated to varying degrees with Chinese government agencies, have been subject to growing international scrutiny.

Vessels in both groups help China rewrite the rules of freedom of navigation, buttress its maritime claims, secure vital resources, and extend its economic reach across the globe. In the coming years, U.S. Department of Defense civilians and military personnel throughout the joint force will encounter these nontraditional maritime forces engaged in a variety of operations across several geographic combatant commands. Failure

to recognize the purpose, capabilities, or limitations of these vessels will impede U.S. forces' ability to accomplish assigned missions, defend themselves, and avoid unintentional escalation.

China's maritime actors have drawn growing attention from both scholars and defense professionals. However, the political context provided by academic research may not reach practitioners who rely on shorter, descriptive articles about Chinese capabilities.³ Bridging this gap can support more informed assessments of Chinese vessels' possible intentions, assisting military staffs and leaders in developing rules of engagement, tactical procedures, and reporting criteria.

The article proceeds in three parts. It begins by analyzing the domestic sources of Chinese grand strategy that influence the PRC's maritime policies and activities. The next section describes China's maritime militia and fishing fleets, their strategic purposes, and their strengths and limitations. The final section addresses the challenges these actors pose to U.S. forces, with particular emphasis on the links between force protection and unintended escalation.

China's Grand Strategy: Misperceptions and Reality

"Grand strategy" is the highest rung of a state's foreign policy; it is a unifying theme linking a state's various

Chinese fishing boats head out to sea from Zhoushan in Zhejiang Province, China. (Photo courtesy of China Foto Press)

efforts to secure its own survival and welfare in the international system. As defined by political scientist Richard Betts, it is “a practical plan to use military, economic, and diplomatic means to achieve national interests (or political ends) over time, with the least feasible cost in blood and treasure.”⁴ The key phrase is “over time,” because what distinguishes “grand strategy” from “strategy” is some consistent thread between a state’s individual policies.

However, as Betts observes, the concept of grand strategy is too often applied retroactively to decisions that were merely ad hoc responses to a problem. Moreover, “[t]he term ‘grand’ conjures up unrealistic images of sweeping and far-seeing purpose, ingenuity, direction, and adroitness.”⁵ These critiques neatly capture many recurring tropes about China’s grand strategy, including “hide and bide,” “a game of Go,” and invocations of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* (especially “defeating the enemy without fighting”).⁶ The first refers to China’s late paramount leader (from 1978 until 1989) Deng Xiaoping’s philosophy that China should “hide its strength and bide its time”; the second holds that Western strategists see the world as a chess game (seeking decisive battle), but Chinese strategists see it like the board game “Wei Qi” (encircling the enemy over the long term); and the third suggests that Chinese strategists rely on deception and delay more than their Western counterparts (who, ostensibly, are avid readers of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*).⁷

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These maxims sensationalize Chinese strategic thought as permanent, infinitely patient, devious, and opaque to the Western mind. To be sure, they contain some truth, but the pop version of Chinese grand strategy perpetuates two false assumptions (see the table, page 9). The first is that China is a unitary actor rather than a state with many domestic audiences (interest groups with varying degrees of power). The second is that Chinese policy priorities are fixed over time, despite the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) shifting legitimating narratives for its internal audiences. The implication is serious: If China is incapable of change, what is the point of any U.S. policy but containment or confrontation?⁸

The PRC’s long-term plans are more nuanced. China has a grand strategy, but one that is rooted in its governance structure and the CCP’s narratives of legitimacy. U.S. defense professionals dealing with gray-zone forces should understand how China’s maritime disputes affect the CCP’s internal calculus about the stability of its governance. Knowing what domestic audiences and CCP narratives are impacted by, say, an at-sea encounter between U.S. warships and Chinese fishing boats, can inform analyses of the risks and benefits of such interactions.

While it remains subject to debate whether Beijing pursues a full-fledged revisionist goal of displacing the United States in the Indo-Pacific region and challenging U.S. dominance internationally, a broader and consistent theme has emerged in China’s official documents and leadership speeches: that of Chinese national “rejuvenation,” or a restoration of its past position of prestige in world affairs.⁹ In a recent article, political scientist Avery Goldstein argues that rejuvenation has been a consistent grand strategy of the PRC alongside a second strategy: survival of the state with the CCP as its sole ruler. During the Cold War, as the PRC faced existential threats from outside, survival dominated rejuvenation. It remains the regime’s “topmost vital, or ‘core’ interest” today, but China’s greater safety leaves room for it to pursue rejuvenation.¹⁰ Since 1992, Goldstein argues, rejuvenation has undergone three phases: “hide and bide” under Deng; “peaceful rise” (reassuring other countries of China’s benign intentions) in the 1990s; and the “China dream” (increased assertiveness) under Xi Jinping. Upon taking power in 2012, Xi considered “hide and bide” and “peaceful rise” anachronistic, preferring an “activist approach” in which the PRC would utilize its power to “more resolutely resist challenges to core interests.”¹¹

Both grand strategies—rejuvenation and regime survival—depend on safeguarding China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and maintaining economic development.¹² First, the CCP’s domestic legitimacy since its founding has rested heavily on the party’s demonstrative capabilities in defending the country from foreign interference. Its main competitor in the 1930s and 1940s, the Kuomintang, received both U.S. and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics support in World War II. During the

and the Great Leap Forward, the CCP in the late 1970s began to downplay communism and Maoism. Under the reform-minded Deng Xiaoping and his allies, the CCP emphasized economic growth as the source of the party’s legitimacy and initiated radical economic, but not political, liberalization. But this economic opening, though conceived as a source of legitimacy, also threatened the regime’s support by introducing socioeconomic inequality, changing values, and corruption.¹⁶ The 1989 Tian’anmen

prodemocracy protests and the demise of the socialist bloc in the early 1990s compounded the problem.

Against this backdrop, the CCP launched a propaganda campaign to shore up the party’s legitimacy and discredit Western-style liberalization, reinforcing the memory of the “century of humiliation” (1839–1949) when foreign powers invaded China, imposed extraterritoriality in treaty ports, restricted indigenous economic

regulation, and extracted war indemnities.¹⁷ The years of backwardness and suffering at the hands of foreign powers engendered a persistent Chinese yearning for the country’s restoration as a strong, prosperous, and respected power.¹⁸ At the same time, new parochial interests and actors emerged outside the traditional Chinese foreign policy establishment during the reform era, forcing the CCP to cope with competition among bureaucrats, business elites, and local governments alongside an explosion in news outlets and internet users.¹⁹ Many of these new actors constrain state action on foreign policy issues, including those on territorial integrity and sovereignty that resonate deeply with the Chinese nationalist sentiments.²⁰

In this way, economic growth has reinforced the CCP’s original claims to its right to rule: the “protection” of Chinese territorial independence and sovereignty. The pursuit of marine resources in the three million square kilometers of “maritime national territory” that incorporates the Chinese exclusive economic zone and continental shelf is thus framed in both economic and sovereign

Table. Misperceptions about China’s Grand Strategy

Misperception	Reality	Implications for the U.S.
China as an “unitary actor”	Multiple domestic social, political, and economic audiences	Missed opportunities to influence Chinese domestic audiences
Chinese policy priorities as fixed	Policy priorities change over time in response to domestic politics and the external environment	Perception that diplomacy is futile, or that U.S. actions cannot affect China’s priorities

(Table by Jonathan G. Panter)

ensuing Chinese Civil War, therefore, the CCP sought domestic support by claiming that it was the only side unsullied by foreign influence.¹³

After the CCP triumphed over the Kuomintang in 1949, its claim to be the sole party that could defend China from the machinations of foreign powers remained an enduring part of its foreign policy and domestic legitimacy. This precipitated an intervention in the Korean War in 1950 and a war with India in 1962. Concerns about territorial integrity and sovereignty at times even outweighed ideological alignment. In the 1960s, the PRC supported North Vietnam to counteract both U.S. and Soviet presence in Southeast Asia and used force to contest Soviet encroachments along the PRC’s disputed border.¹⁴ In 1974 and 1988, China fought Vietnam to seize land features in the contested Paracels and Spratlys, and to secure a stronger position in the South China Sea.¹⁵

A second major component of the CCP’s legitimacy was its economic program of collectivization and central planning. But after the humanitarian disasters and internal turmoil resulting from the Cultural Revolution

terms.²¹ First, the marine resources in these areas contribute both to China's domestic food needs and its export economy. China is by far the world's largest producer of "captured" (nonfarmed) fish, comprising 15 percent of world total, and the largest exporter of captured product. Of the 3.1 million fishing vessels in Asia, China operates 864,000 of them.²² Second, China's growing reliance on sea lines of communication for trade in energy and other goods has increased Beijing's resolve to protect strategic waterways within and beyond China's maritime boundary.²³

The growing need to safeguard maritime territories and jurisdictional waters in China's near seas has incentivized the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—which has, since the 1990s, focused on preparing for a Taiwan scenario—to share the burden of new missions with nonmilitary state actors. In its defense white paper from the year 2000, China for the first time described its frontier defense as a "joint military-civilian land and sea border management system, headed by the military and with a sharing of responsibilities between the military and the civilian authorities."²⁴ Since then, China has incrementally moved away from a relatively navy-centric approach toward a multiagent, division-of-labor method for safeguarding its maritime sovereignty and interests. Since 2005, China has preferred to employ the PLA Navy (PLAN) in background roles, relying instead

on maritime law enforcement agencies and the maritime militia as its frontline responses to maritime disputes and contingencies.²⁵

Although the United States takes no position on the ownership of the contested maritime territories, PRC maritime sovereignty and jurisdiction claims challenge U.S. interests in the region in several ways. First, China seeks the right to regulate and restrict the activities of foreign military vessels and aircraft operating within its exclusive economic zone, which is at odds with norms



(Graphic courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

South China Sea Claims



Soldiers attend a flag conferral ceremony 21 July 2013 during the official launch of Sansha City's maritime militia. (Photo by Zhou Xiaogang, Xinhua News Agency)

on freedom of navigation and has been the central source of friction between U.S. and Chinese ships and aircraft in the South China Sea.²⁶ Second, it attempts to erode U.S. alliance relationships, especially those with Japan and the Philippines, with whom China has unsettled maritime territorial and boundary disputes.²⁷ Finally, the PRC continues to expand power projection and anti-access/area denial capabilities to cover a growing portion of the western Pacific.²⁸

While employing maritime law enforcement and fishing ships in lieu of naval assets may enable China to avoid crossing the threshold of military conflict outright when asserting its maritime claims, it can still complicate crisis management for both the United States and China in the event of a maritime incident. Past major crises between two countries in the contemporary era illustrate the potential dangers. One of the most serious incidents occurred in 1999 when the U.S. Air Force accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists. Despite a lack of evidence that the bombing was intentional, the incident triggered violent anti-American mass protests in China.²⁹ The affair highlights the sensitivity of any incident, mistaken or otherwise, resulting in Chinese civilian casualties.

The Hainan Island incident in 2001, in which a Chinese fighter jet collided with a U.S. reconnaissance plane during an attempted interception, highlights a different potential source of crisis escalation: distortion of information within the Chinese political system between local and central authorities. According to former senior U.S. civilian and military officials, the local naval aviation authorities in Hainan may have falsely reported to high-level Chinese leadership that the U.S. plane intentionally crashed into the Chinese fighter (which was technically impossible).³⁰ Crisis management in an incident involving Chinese fishing boats, whether or not registered as maritime militia, entails both types of danger.

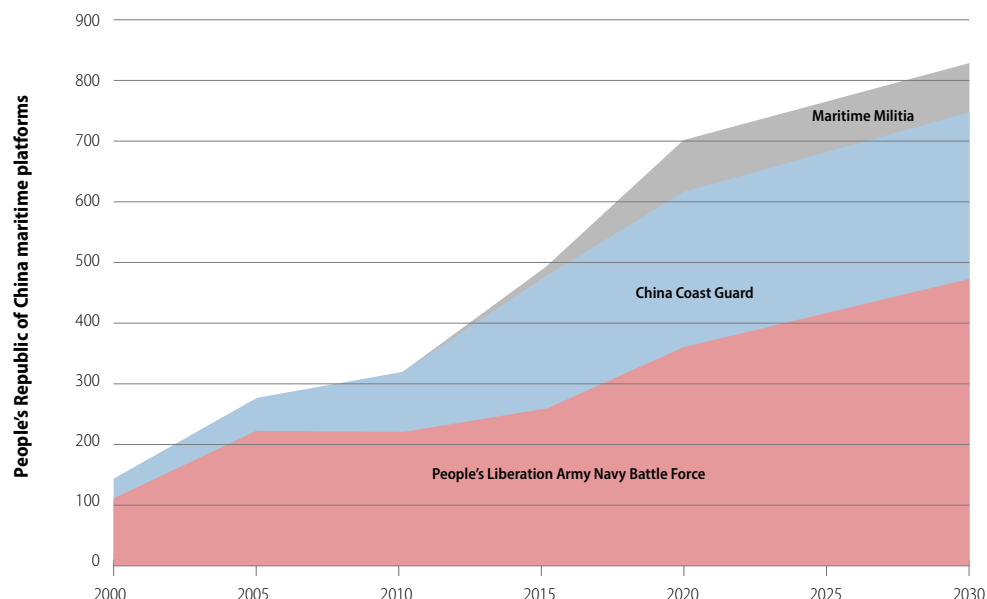
China's Maritime Militia and Fishing Fleets

The PRC defines its militia as “an armed mass organization composed of civilians retaining their regular jobs,” a component of China's armed forces, and an “auxiliary

and reserve force” of the PLA.³¹ Once conceived as a major component in the concept of “People’s War,” the militia in contemporary Chinese military planning is now tasked with assisting the PLA “by performing security and logistics functions in war.”³² The maritime militia, a separate organization from both the PLAN and China Coast Guard (CCG), consists of citizens working in the marine economy who receive training from the PLA and CCG to perform tasks including but not limited to

border patrol, surveillance and reconnaissance, maritime transportation, search and rescue, and auxiliary tasks in support of naval operations in wartime (see figure 1).³³

The National Defense Mobilization Commission (NDMC) system, comprised of a national-level NDMC overseen jointly by the Chinese State Council and the PLA’s Central Military Commission and local NDMCs at provincial, municipal, and county levels with a similar dual civilian-military command structure at each level, has traditionally been tasked to manage administration and mobilization of the militia. Following the PLA’s 2016 reorganization, a National Defense Mobilization Department (NDMD) has been established under the Central Military Commission to oversee the provincial-level military districts and take charge of the PLA’s territorial administrative responsibilities including mobilization work. The head of the NDMD is appointed as the secretary general of the national NDMC, in which China’s premier and defense minister serve as the director and deputy director, respectively.³⁴ In addition to the NDMC line, the State Commission of Border and Coastal Defense system—also subject to a dual civilian-military leadership—has its own command structures running from the national to local levels, and it shares responsibility for militia administration,



(Figure from *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*, December 2020, by the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Marines, and the U.S. Navy)

Figure 1. Growth of China’s Maritime Forces since 2000

mobilization, and border defense. There is a significant crossover between the lines of authority.³⁵

The militia has played a major role in asserting Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea. This includes high-profile coercive incidents such as the 2009 harassment of USNS *Impeccable*, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, and the 2014 HD-981 clash.³⁶ Xi’s 2013 trip to Hainan—the island province with administrative authority over the South China Sea that has organized local fishing fleets into active maritime militia units—unleashed a nationwide push (see figure 2, page 13) to build the militia into a genuine third arm of China’s “PLA-law enforcement-militia joint defense” maritime sovereignty defense strategy.³⁷ Since it is comprised of both civilians and soldiers, according to the Chinese rationale, the militia can be deployed to strengthen control of China’s “maritime territory” while avoiding the political and diplomatic ramifications that might otherwise be associated with military involvement.³⁸

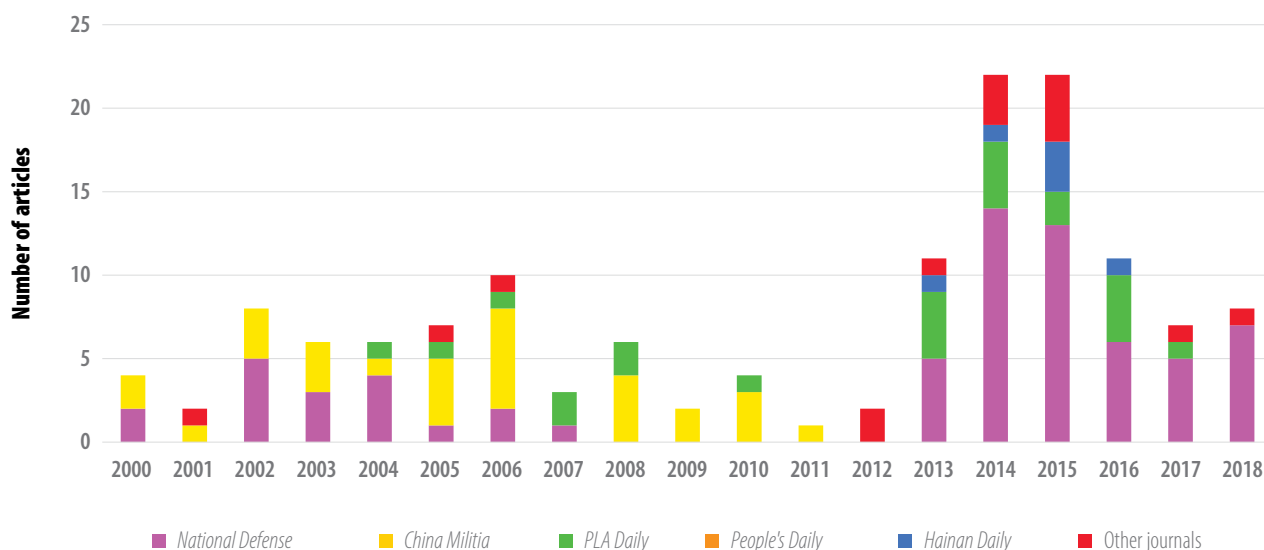
The surge of propaganda notwithstanding, several issues confront Beijing before the maritime militia can effectively function as the third arm in collaboration with the PLAN and CCG. First, the wide dispersion of the maritime militia at sea makes it harder to control than land-based forces.³⁹ Second, it is unclear through what

institutionalized cross-system integrator(s) maritime militia forces coordinate with the CCG or with the PLA's theater command system that operates active-duty forces.⁴⁰ PLA commanders and officers have openly discussed the problems of who commands the militia forces, under what circumstances, and with what authorization; who is authorized to review and approve the maritime militia's participation in what types of maritime rights protection operations; and who is responsible for militia expenditures. Due to these uncertainties, some PLA commanders have urged further standardizing the maritime militia's command, control, and collaboration structure.⁴¹

Budgetary shortfalls complicate the training, administration, deployment, and control of the maritime

renminbi (RMB, or Chinese yuan) for the maritime militia, a minuscule quantity given the huge costs of recruitment, administration, training, and deployment (1 RMB is equal to about 0.15 USD).⁴³ According to a 2014 estimate, one week of training for a fifty-ton fishing boat costs over 100,000 RMB for crew lodging and compensation for lost income.⁴⁴ To spread out the financial burden, common practice now holds that "whoever uses the militia pays the bill."⁴⁵

Even so, funding remains a key hurdle. In 2017, the commander of the Ningbo Military Subdistrict (MSD) under the Zhejiang Province Military Subdistrict complained in the PLA's professional magazine *National Defense* about a lack of formal channels to guarantee



(Figure by Shuxian Luo)

Figure 2. Maritime Militia in the Core Newspapers and People's Liberation Army Journals since 2000 (CNKI Search by Theme)

militia. As of 2010, only about 2 to 3 percent of China's national defense budget was used to fund militia training and equipment, with additional funding coming from local governments.⁴² Local funding has proven inadequate to compensate for gaps in central government outlays. A guideline issued by Hainan in 2014 stated that the provincial and county/city/prefecture governments each would be responsible for 50 percent of the province's maritime militia expenditure. For that year, the provincial government earmarked 28 million

funds. When the maritime militia was assigned to a task, he pointed out, funding took the form of "the county paying a bit, the city compensating a bit, and the province subsidizing a bit." This meant that "the more tasks you perform, the more you pay."⁴⁶ Given the fiscal strains, local authorities have forcefully lobbied Beijing for more money. The localities also see the outpouring of central government resources as an opportunity to benefit their local fishing economies. Hainan, for example, used Beijing's subsidies to upgrade local fishing boats



and increase modernized steel-hulled trawlers under the banner of “sovereignty rights via fishing.”⁴⁷ In fiscal year 2017, the province received 18.01 billion RMB in transfer payments from Beijing to account for “the province’s expenditure on maritime administration.”⁴⁸

The marketization of China’s fishery sector in the reform era has compounded the organizational problems arising from this unstandardized funding model. Since Chinese fishermen are now profit driven rather than de facto employees of the state, the government has both less formal authority and less economic leverage over them.⁴⁹ In the 2000s, coastal provincial military districts widely reported problems in tracking and controlling registered militia fishing ships.⁵⁰ According to a 2015 article by the director of the political department of the Sansha MSD under the Hainan Provincial Military District, surveys conducted in Hainan localities showed that 42 percent of fishermen prioritized material benefits over their participation in the maritime militia. Some fishermen admitted that they would quit militia activity without adequate compensation or justified their absence from maritime rights protection operations because fishing was more important.⁵¹

U.S. Navy sailors and U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Law Enforcement Detachment Team personnel approach a Chinese fishing vessel on a rigid-hull inflatable boat 29 November 2016 during an Oceania Maritime Security Initiative mission with Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS *Sampson* (DDG 102) in the Pacific Ocean. (Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Bryan Jackson, U.S. Navy)

In a 2018 interview with one of this article’s authors, sources with firsthand knowledge of Hainan’s fishing community noted that each fishing ship participating in maritime rights protection activity received a daily compensation of 500 RMB, a sum “too petty compared to the profits that could be made from a day just fishing at sea, and even more so when compared to the huge profits from giant clam poaching.”⁵² These financial pressures reportedly created substantial difficulty for China in mobilizing the militia during the 2014 HD-981 clash.⁵³ Some fishermen even manipulated maritime militia policies to evade regulations and conceal illegal attempts to fish for endangered or protected marine species in contested waters.⁵⁴ Notably, such activities were completely at odds with Chinese government strategy; Beijing had explicitly prohibited illegal

fishing to avoid “causing trouble for China’s diplomacy and damaging China’s international image.”⁵⁵

Given the unclear command and coordination arrangements, funding problems, and weak control exerted on Chinese fishermen, it is difficult to assess the extent to which Chinese authorities control fishermen operating in the South China Sea. Some fishermen have collaborated with the CCG and/or the PLA in gray-zone operations, indicating that the maritime militia does exploit the plausible deniability afforded by their dual identity as military personnel and civilian mariners. However, given the evidence in authoritative Chinese-language sources, it is unrealistic to portray the maritime militia as a coherent body with adequate professional training or as one that has systemically conducted deceptive missions in close collaboration with the PLAN and CCG. Rather, the coordination seems to be, as various sources in China, the United States, Japan, and Singapore similarly characterize it, “loose and diffuse” at best. Achieving high levels of coordination and interoperability will likely “take a long time.”⁵⁶

PLA officers and strategists worry that the maritime militia’s status as “both civilians and soldiers” could carry more risks than advantages during encounters with foreign vessels. A scholar at the PLA’s National Defense University asks, “If the militia uses force in maritime rights protection operation, should this be considered as law enforcement behavior or military behavior, or behavior other than war?”⁵⁷ The director of the political department of the Sansha MSD cautions that the militia’s inadequate “political awareness” and professionalism make its members “unfit for the complex situation surrounding the South China Sea rights and interests struggle.”⁵⁸ This makes it imperative, he argues, to “make the militia consciously comply with political and organizational disciplines, regulate their rights protection behavior, and avoid causing conflict, escalation, or diplomatic spats.”⁵⁹

Beyond the South China Sea, the U.S. Department of Defense believes that the maritime militia played a role in a large intrusion in 2016 in waters near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, a group of uninhabited islets in the East China Sea whose sovereignty is contested among China, Japan, and Taiwan.⁶⁰ However, some members of the Japanese defense and foreign policy community, while voicing the concern that China might use fishing vessels in a future Senkaku contingency, noted that the maritime militia has been far less visible in the East China Sea than in the South China Sea.⁶¹ For instance, in one prominent

international crisis between Beijing and Tokyo—a 2010 collision between a Chinese fishing trawler and two Japan Coast Guard vessels—the evidence later showed that a drunk Chinese fishing captain bore responsibility for the accident, rather than China’s maritime militia.⁶²

China’s deep suspicion of U.S. involvement in its home waters and China’s use of a wide set of coercive instruments to assert its claims there stand in contrast to its activities in distant waters. China’s policy agenda in Latin America and Africa, which fall within what Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell call “the Fourth Ring” of Chinese security, entails six strategic goals: energy; commodities, markets, and investments; arms sales; China’s economic access abroad; diplomatic support for China’s position on Taiwan and Tibet; and support for China on multilateral diplomatic issues such as human rights. Regions subsumed under this ring are “too large, too far away, too politically complex, and still too much dominated by the traditional colonial and neocolonial powers to come easily under the sway of a remote Asian power.”⁶³

In these far-flung regions, China has emerged as a major distant-water fishing nation. Its fishing fleet is the world’s largest, operating a total of over 4,600 DWF vessels, according to a recent CSIS account.⁶⁴ China’s tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) introduced DWF as a component of the “going out” strategy, which encourages Chinese enterprises to search for new markets, resource accesses, and investments around the world.⁶⁵ After China articulated in 2012 its aspiration to become a “maritime great power” and introduced the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the DWF industry became a vital component of this strategy. The Chinese government sees DWF as a means to enhance China’s food security at home and connections abroad with key economies along the Belt and Road Initiative corridors.⁶⁶

Most recently, the Chinese fleet’s engagement in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing activities in regions such as West Africa and Latin America has posed a challenge to global and regional fisheries governance.⁶⁷ The fleet’s unsustainable fishing practices have caused tensions with Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, interpreting Chinese DWF activities and associated conflicts through a military lens risks securitizing what is largely a conflict of economic interests.⁶⁹ As China increasingly pays attention to international reactions to the illegal fishing activities of its DWF fleet and has recently acknowledged this problem, tackling

illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing activities in these distant waters represents a potential area that China sees as cooperation rather than confrontation, with coastal states and the United States better serving its global interests and repairing its international image as a “responsible fishing country.”⁷⁰

Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Operations and Tactics

The strength of the maritime militia is its deniability, which allows its vessels to harass and intimidate foreign civilian craft and warships while leaving the PRC room to deescalate by denying its affiliation with these activities.⁷¹ Meanwhile, when Chinese fishing vessels—even operating solely as civilian economic actors—operate unchallenged, their presence in contested areas helps solidify PRC maritime claims. Challenging these vessels is dangerous. Weaker states, aware of Chinese fishing vessels’ possible government affiliation, might hesitate to engage with them in a way that could provoke a PRC response. Even stronger states, like the United States or Japan, might hesitate before confronting fishing boats because of the challenge of positively identifying these vessels as government affiliated.

By “defending” China’s maritime claims from foreign interference, the PRC leverages its maritime militia in support of policies that form the core of a grand strategy of “rejuvenation” and also comprise the basis for the CCP’s domestic legitimacy. At the same time, as previously suggested, the maritime militia is among the least-funded, least-organized, and often least-professional of the forces that could be employed for these purposes. The same factors that make the maritime militia a deniable force (its civilian crews and dual-use technology) also raise the risk of accidents and escalations. This is a toxic mix: due to the maritime militia’s deniability and the core interests at stake, the PRC has a high incentive to employ it, but the more frequent its operations, the greater the likelihood of interactions with U.S. vessels that could spin out of control.

The remainder of this section draws on the aforementioned findings of this article to offer the authors’ own assessments of the maritime militia’s current strengths and limitations as a military instrument, as well as future projections.

Funding. Funding is inconsistent across units and vessels, and across provinces, which rely on different budgetary channels and have different incentives to

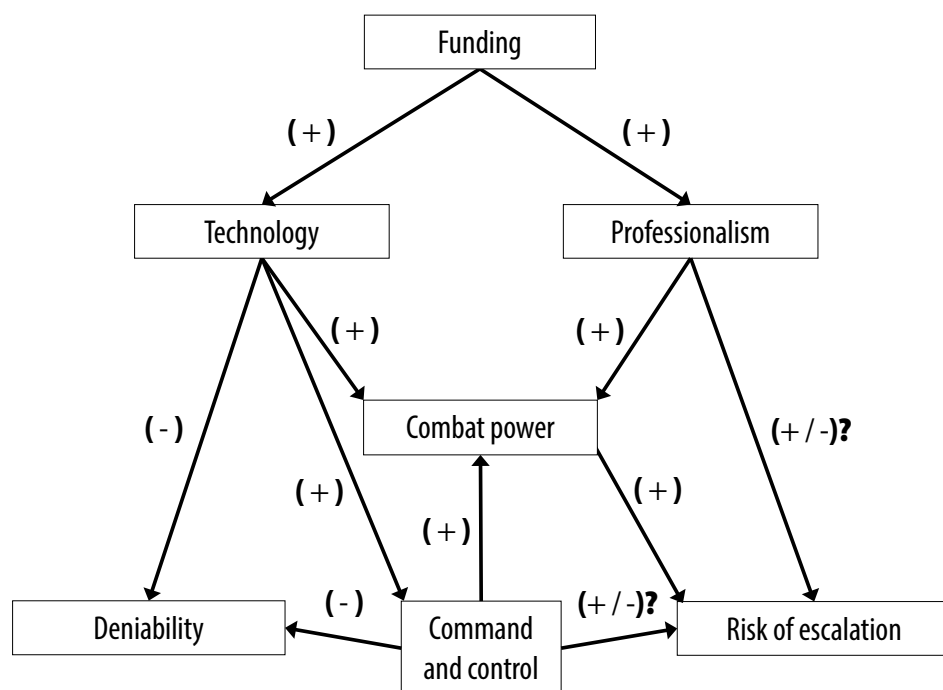
secure subsidies. Even where funding has been secured in some localities, budget constraints in others suggest that equipment standardization is a long way off. Strained budgets also restrict training opportunities, leading to inconsistency in professionalism across the force. This raises the risk of accidents and escalations.

Command and control. Strategic, operational, and tactical command and control is inconsistent across provinces and individual vessels. The command problem is structural, arising from bureaucratic competition and multiple lines of authority. The control problem is financial, as marketization has eroded individual units’ incentives to participate in militia activities that draw away from their fishing opportunities. Command and control shortcomings inhibit combat power but contribute to the militia’s core strength: its deniability.

Combat power. Fishing boats are inherently weak forces for traditional military operations. Due to their size, they are limited by sea state and lack the propulsion plants required for high-speed maneuver. Topsides gear and nets, when deployed, also limit their maneuverability. Finally, fishing vessels are soft targets for naval firepower. Fishing vessels’ “weaknesses,” however, do provide some asymmetric advantages.

First, because they are cheap, fishing vessels will always outnumber warships. Deployed in high numbers using swarm tactics, small craft can pose an asymmetric threat to warships, as U.S. Navy experience with Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) forces has shown.⁷² But the Chinese maritime militia consists of fishing boats, not high-speed assault and pleasure craft like the IRGCN employs. Slow speeds reduce the ability to maneuver and increase the duration of exposure to layered defense (although the vessels’ deniability could reduce the risk that they will be fired upon). Instead of a kinetic threat, Chinese fishing vessels present more of a disruptive one. Deployed in even limited numbers, fishing boats can inhibit, if not prohibit altogether, a warship’s ability to conduct towed array and flight operations (both essential for antisubmarine warfare, a critical capability given China’s growing anti-access/area denial forces in the South China Sea).

Second, fishing vessels pose a huge identification problem. As small craft, they generate minimal radar return even in clear weather and mild sea states. In addition, Chinese fishing vessels frequently do not broadcast their position in Automatic Identification



(Figure by Jonathan G. Panter)

Figure 3. Force Capabilities, Deniability, and Risk of Escalation

System and use only commercial radar and communications technology, making them hard to identify by their electronic emissions. The identification problem is compounded in congested environments like the South China Sea, which is cluttered with commercial traffic.

For these reasons, in combat operations, the maritime militia's primary role would likely be reconnaissance support, although some vessels have also received training in minelaying.⁷³ One of the PLA's major force modernization objectives has been development of an "informatized reconnaissance-strike capability" modeled on the U.S. military, although command and control problems continue to impede joint force operations.⁷⁴ When providing support to the PLAN in this way, it is important to note that maritime militia vessels would qualify as combatants under international law, despite their lack of military technology.⁷⁵

The basic capabilities required for militia vessels to provide reconnaissance support have been widely fielded. Before joining the militia, fishing vessels are required to install equipment permitting communication with the People's Armed Forces Department, whose

purpose is to assist with the reconnaissance function.⁷⁶ This includes satellite communication terminals and shortwave radio, which enable beyond line-of-sight communications.⁷⁷ But without advanced sensors and the training required to use them, militia vessels will be restricted to visually identifying opposing forces. The addition of electronic-intelligence equipment would be a game changer. In that case, the appropriate gray-zone analog for China's maritime militia vessels might be IRGCN intelligence dhows, not swarming assault craft.

Projections. Given the PRC's continued economic growth (and increasing government revenue) and the

priority placed on military modernization, a successful resolution of militia funding problems would contribute most to recurring costs like training rather than one-time costs such as equipment, much of which has already been subsidized and acquired (see figure 3). However, new technology purchases beyond civilian dual-use equipment would also be possible. Additional training would foster professionalism in ship handling, equipment use, and coordination. Technology and professionalism would enhance the combat power of individual units and those operating jointly, but at the cost of deniability, the militia's core capability as a gray-zone force. Sophisticated maneuvers, visible advanced gear, or electromagnetic emissions can help U.S. and partner forces identify a "fishing vessel" as Chinese government sponsored.

Enhancing combat power would also raise the risk of escalatory incidents. For U.S. commanders making force protection decisions, the chances of misperception could increase when weapons or sophisticated technology are present on units of unknown intentions. On the other hand, these units' increased professionalism could dampen the risk of escalation, as they might be less prone to

ship-handling errors or suspicious maneuvering. Finally, while improved command and control would reduce vessels' deniability, its effect on escalation risks is indeterminate. Individual Chinese captains might be more restricted in their decision-making, leaving less room for error. However, they might also have less latitude to deescalate depending on the priorities of higher command.

Conclusion

In the past decade, American perspectives on China have shifted. Optimism has given way to suspicion, the desire for cooperation to rivalry. This shift appears in political science articles, partisan politics, and public opinion polls.⁷⁸ Hardly an issue of a military professional journal can avoid the phrase "the return of great power competition." In a related shift, these publications now dedicate substantial attention to China's instruments of national power that fall on the periphery of traditional military capabilities.

This is a welcome turn. As E. H. Carr pointed out, the security realm has never been neatly separable from other state activities.⁷⁹ But this new, broadened focus can also fuel alarmism and facilitate escalation. Defense and military professionals must walk a fine line between prudent skepticism of China and uninformed suspicions. This article has sought to assist those efforts with a primer on one PRC policy instrument that bridges the divide between the economic, informational, and military realms. Based on our findings, we close with two broad implications for U.S. policy.

First, in the South China Sea, pending resolution of the maritime militia's funding and organizational problems, the greatest threat to U.S. forces remains that of accidents and escalations.⁸⁰ Accurately identifying maritime militia

vessels, ideally beyond line-of-sight, is an important way to reduce this risk by providing commanders and staffs with increased decision-space. The sheer number of militia-affiliated vessels, their minimal electronic emissions and radar cross-sections, and the congestion of the South China Sea means that identification efforts to undermine the maritime militia's deniability at scale require a bold approach. Solving the problem will be nearly impossible without the assistance of regional allies and partners.

Second, in regions outside of East Asia, U.S. policy makers must resist interpreting China's DWF fleet as a traditional security instrument. These vessels are legally noncombatants, and in practical terms, their military utility is nonexistent. The more important question is whether DWF vessels, even those engaged in civilian activities, represent an effort to acclimate U.S. and partner forces to the presence of Chinese vessels (government-affiliated or not) in the Americas. The goal might be to make Chinese overfishing an accepted (if bothersome) part of the pattern of life, an activity that resource-constrained coastal nations in Latin America ignore. Ultimately, the damage wrought to local economies by illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing activities can undermine regional prosperity. Without a wholesale effort to build local nations' maritime law enforcement capacity, this trend will pose a far greater threat to nontraditional security realms—primarily ecological and economic—in the region, and to U.S. interests there, than any military role the Chinese DWF vessels could fill. ■

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Notes

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no. 1 (Winter 2020): 13–48. Stoker and Whiteside provide a critical perspective on the term "gray zone" that argues it is poorly defined, distorts history, and raises the risk of conflict escalation.

2. In 2020, the term "gray zone" appeared in nearly every issue of the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings* and in every issue of *Military Review*. See, for example, Charles M. Kelly, "Information on the Twenty-First Century Battlefield: Proposing the Army's Seventh Warfighting Function," *Military Review* 100, no. 1 (January-February 2020): 62–68.

3. For a concise description of the maritime militia, see Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, *China Maritime Report No. 1: China's Third Sea Force, The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, China Maritime Studies Institute, 2017), accessed 16 November 2020, <https://digital-commons>.

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4. Richard K. Betts, "The Grandiosity of Grand Strategy," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

6. On "Go," see Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 2–3, 22–32; Keith Johnson, "What Kind of Game is China Playing," *Wall Street Journal* (website), 11 June 2011, accessed 16 November 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304259304576374013537436924>. On "hide and bide" and Sun Tzu's counsel about winning without fighting, see articles in the September-October 2020 issue of *Military Review*.

7. These two authors are not as opposed to one another on this point as a simplistic reading would suggest. Sun Tzu maintains that strategic defense can win wars. Carl von Clausewitz argues that a purely defensive war is impossible, but tactical defense has advantages over attack. But both agree on the source of defensive advantage: the waiting defender can strengthen their position, and the maneuvering attacker expends energy and resources.

8. For an example of how this sort of theorizing can influence policy decisions at the highest levels, see Alan Rappeport, "A China Hawk Gains Prominence as Trump Confronts Xi on Trade," *New York Times* (website), 3 November 2018, accessed 16 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/30/us/politics/trump-china-trade-xi-michael-pillsbury.html>.

9. Oriana Skylar Mastro, "The Stealth Superpower: How China Hid Its Global Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January-February 2019): 31–39; Michael D. Swaine, "Creating an Unstable Asia: the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 March 2018, accessed 16 November 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/02/creating-unstable-asia-u.s.-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy-pub-75720>. Mastro argues that China seeks to take the United States' place as the regional political, economic, and military hegemon in East Asia and to challenge the United States internationally without replacing it as the "leader of a global order." By contrast, Swaine questions the depiction of China as an "implacable adversary" that seeks to challenge the United States regionally and internationally and argues that treating China this way is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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11. *Ibid.*, 172–79.

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15. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 267–99.

16. Jinghan Zeng, *The Chinese Communist Party's Capacity to Rule: Ideology, Legitimacy and Party Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

2016), 47; see also Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 624–46, 692–96.

17. Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9; for a deeper description of the "Century of Humiliation," see Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, chaps. 7–11.

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20. Suisheng Zhao, "Nationalism's Double Edge," *Wilson Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 76–82.

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