



China Coast Guard vessels shoot water cannons at fishermen on 10 December 2023 in Bajo de Masinloc (also known as Scarborough Shoal), disputed territory claimed by the Philippines and China. (Photo courtesy of the Philippine Coast Guard)

Confronting Irregular Warfare in the South China Sea

Lessons Learned from Vietnam

R. Kim Cragin, PhD

On 5 March 2024, the Philippine government released a video of Chinese maritime militia shooting water cannons at a coast guard vessel near the Spratly Islands. Water crashed through the windshield and injured several sailors on board.¹ It was just one of many ongoing confrontations in the South China Sea between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the nations of Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The hostilities exemplify how state actors aggressively pursue their political objectives and yet remain below the level of armed conflict in modern irregular warfare.

This article explores irregular warfare in the South China Sea, focusing on the activities of the Chinese maritime militia and Vietnam's response. It then derives lessons from Vietnam's experiences for the U.S. military.

Most studies on the Chinese maritime militia examine the Philippines. This makes sense—the Philippines remains an important U.S. ally, and it has come under pressure from the militia. Further, in May 2009, the Philippines asked the United Nations to recognize its claim to the outer edge of the continental shelf, two hundred nautical miles from its baselines. This claim elevated what had been perceived as a regional security challenge. Vietnam and Malaysia followed.² The PRC refuted these countries' claims. In its response, the PRC released publicly a map of what is now referred to as the “Nine-Dash Line,” asserting jurisdiction over approximately 90 percent of the disputed territory (see map).³

Since then, the disputes among the PRC, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, and the Philippines have escalated.⁴ Each country has historical claims to the South China Sea. Each also has political, economic, and security interests in controlling at least parts of it. The seabed has yet to be fully explored, but it is assumed to hold significant oil deposits. In March 2024, for example, the state-run Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) announced the discovery of a one-hundred-million-ton oil field near the coast of Guangdong Province.⁵ Approximately 12 percent of global fishing occurs in the South China Sea. Further, the People Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) ballistic missile submarine fleet is stationed at the Yulin Naval Base on Hainan Island.⁶

Regional experts for the most part judge the PRC as having been the most successful in asserting its claims to this territory. It has seized control of the

Scarborough Shoal, creating 3,200 acres of new land by dredging and building artificial islands, as well as establishing twenty outposts in the Paracel Islands and seven in the Spratlys.⁷ However, Vietnam has been surprisingly effective at managing tension with the PRC even as it defends its claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The U.S. military would, therefore, benefit from a closer examination of Vietnam's approach.

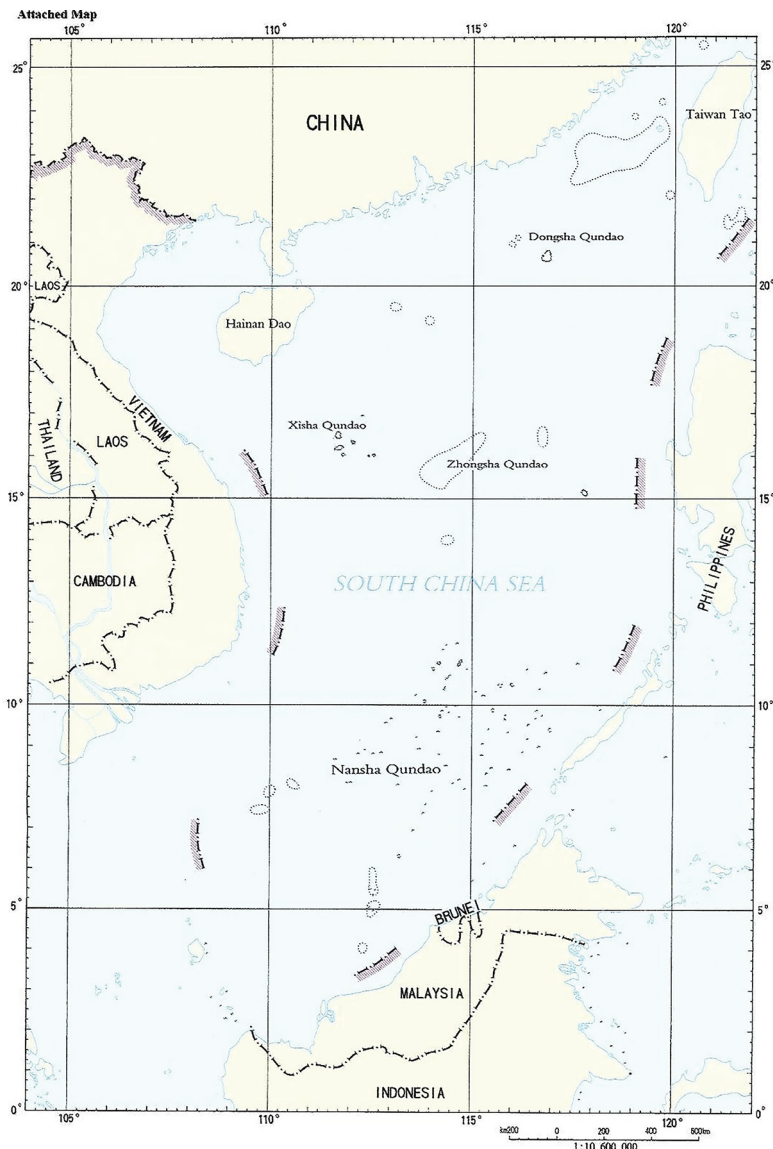
Prior studies, journal articles, news reports, and social media posts related to irregular warfare in the South China Sea support this argument. The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, for example, publishes maps of disputed reefs, islets and, importantly, outposts.⁸ These sources highlight the PRC's expanding presence. That said, the most significant findings in this article draw from the author's field research in Vietnam and Singapore conducted in April 2023.

Defining Irregular Warfare

What is irregular warfare? Several official documents address the topic of irregular warfare. The current U.S. *National Defense Strategy*, released in 2022, discusses irregular warfare in the context of integrated deterrence. It presents irregular warfare as a means of imposing direct costs on U.S. adversaries so that they reconsider aggression toward the United States.⁹

Interestingly, this characterization differs from the *Irregular Warfare Annex* to the *National Defense Strategy*. The *Irregular Warfare Annex* identifies the tools of irregular warfare—“unconventional warfare, stabilization, foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, and

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(Map from Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, Notes Verbales CML/17/2009 [7 May 2009])

China's Dashed-Line Map from Notes Verbales of 2009

counterinsurgency”—and defines irregular warfare as follows:

Irregular warfare [IW] is a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.¹⁰

This definition seems to treat “irregular warfare” as synonymous with “population-centric warfare.” It limits

irregular warfare to a struggle for legitimacy as perceived by local populations. It assumes that diminishing an adversary's legitimacy will, in turn, erode the state or nonstate actor's power. As such, it is remarkably different from the 2022 *National Defense Strategy*.

Of course, national defense strategies are by definition political documents. They are rewritten with each new administration. Thus, it is important to interpret the *Irregular Warfare Annex* in its political context. It was written in the wake of U.S. security forces' withdrawal from Syria and in the midst of negotiations with the Taliban. The *Irregular Warfare Annex* stood as a reminder that population-centric warfare should not be rejected. But, in doing so, it arguably placed too many constraints on irregular warfare and its role in U.S. defense strategy and policy.

By comparison, Joint Publication (JP) 1, Volume 1, *Joint Warfighting*, represents foundational doctrine for the use of military force. It describes how the joint force should be prepared to prevent armed conflict and, if that is not possible, to win. Joint publications tend to be somewhat less political than national defense strategies. Released in August 2023, JP 1 deemphasizes efforts to influence populations and affect nation-states' legitimacy. It instead focuses on indirect efforts to achieve

competitive advantage over adversaries as well as manage strategic risk. It states,

IW is a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare. The term “irregular” highlights the character of this form of warfare, which seeks to create dilemmas and increase risk and

costs to adversaries to achieve a position of advantage.¹¹

JP 1 provides a much broader definition of irregular warfare. It also notes that irregular warfare might be pursued as an alternative to conventional war or in concert with it. Most importantly, it emphasizes that irregular warfare seeks to “create dilemmas and increase risk and costs” for adversaries as means of achieving advantage. This definition has application beyond population-centric warfare. It also addresses the complexity of the current strategic and operational environments better than the others; therefore, it is the definition used in this article.

Chinese Maritime Militia

The PRC’s use of its maritime militia fits the above definition of irregular warfare. The militia creates strategic and operational dilemmas for the United States, its allies, and partners. It imposes costs. It increases risk. The militia itself can be traced back to the late 1940s. A newly victorious Chinese Communist Party initially trained and funded the maritime militia, comprised primarily of fishermen, to assist with coastal defense.¹² But over time the maritime militia has expanded and, increasingly, augmented the PLAN and Coast Guard.

In January 1974, the PLAN fought the South Vietnamese navy for control of the Paracel Islands.¹³ The PLAN used a combination of conventional and irregular forces to defeat the Republic of Vietnam’s armed forces. The United States, moreover, did not intervene or push back against the PLAN’s combined forces’ control over the Paracel Islands. According to some experts, this reinforced the value of indirect, non-attributable, and asymmetric maritime tactics in the minds of Chinese strategists.¹⁴

The Chinese maritime militia has become larger and more advanced since the 1970s. Estimates vary on the exact number of vessels in the militia, as well as people employed. Some analysts assert that the militia has as many as 439,000 vessels, while others put the number closer to 23,000.¹⁵ Recent studies also have observed divergent patterns in the militia’s behavior. The so-called “Spratly backbone fishing fleet” reportedly does not engage in active hostilities. The individuals on these vessels receive a salary and some limited training.¹⁶ But the fishing fleet seems to be used to overwhelm other

nations’ vessels by sheer numbers and presence. The fishing fleet sometimes inadvertently provokes an attack, but multiple experts confirm that it has been directed by the PLAN to avoid initiating a confrontation.¹⁷

In contrast, the “maritime militia fishing vessels” receive more training, are better equipped, and seem to have closer ties to the PLAN.¹⁸ This maritime militia partners with China’s Coast Guard vessels to enforce the so-called fishing moratorium declared each year between May and August by the PRC.¹⁹ It rams other countries’ fishing and coast guard vessels, deploys water cannons, boards other vessels and arrests their occupants. It also cuts the cables of oil exploration and surveillance ships.²⁰ It has disrupted efforts by the Philippines to resupply its South China Sea outposts. In sum, the maritime militia fishing vessels pursue PRC interests more aggressively than the fishing fleet, but still hover just below the level of armed conflict.

In May 2013, PLA Maj. Gen. Zhang Zhaozhong put a name to this basic approach. He used the analogy of a “cabbage.”²¹ As Zhang described it, the PLAN layers fishing vessels, surveillance vessels, maritime enforcement ships, and warships just like the layers of a cabbage. The intent is to expand PRC control over the islets and reefs incrementally but not provoke a military response. In essence, the PLAN utilizes the “cabbage” approach to balance two somewhat competing priorities in the South China Sea: maintain regional stability versus exert sovereignty.

Vietnam’s Response

Vietnam has a similar “three-layer” maritime presence in the South China Sea: navy, coast guard, and fishing vessels. It also has approximately fifty outposts on islets and submerged reefs.²² But, practically speaking, there is not much of a comparison. Vietnam has a smaller navy and coast guard. Its commercial fishing vessels for the most part are not armed, although some reports suggest that Vietnam has plans to provide them with reinforced steel hulls, infrared technology, and more advanced communication equipment.²³ Vietnam’s economy also is deeply intertwined with that of the PRC. Thus, officials must balance multiple competing interests in their response to Chinese militia activities in the South China Sea.²⁴

That said, Vietnam has been the most assertive of its neighbors in responding to the PLAN and its

militias' presence within and around the Paracel Islands. Three key incidents exemplify Vietnam's approach. The following paragraphs describe each incident according to the behavior of the Chinese maritime militia, dilemmas posed by this behavior, and Vietnam's response.

First, in May 2011, the Chinese maritime militia approached the Vietnamese research vessel *Binh Minh 02* and cut its seismic survey cables. The *Binh Minh 02* belonged to the oil and gas company PetroVietnam and was operating approximately eighty miles off the coast of Vietnam in its exclusive economic zone.²⁵ The Chinese militia had grown more aggressive in its harassment of Vietnamese fishing vessels between 2005 and 2010. But the May 2011 incident marked a shift toward larger-scale and physical disruption of oil exploration. A month later, Chinese militia again cut the cables of a different vessel named *Viking II*. Like the *Binh Minh 02*, the *Viking II* was chartered by PetroVietnam for oil exploration in the South China Sea. PRC diplomats simultaneously demanded that Vietnam (and the Philippines) end all oil exploration in the area.²⁶

This incident presented the Vietnamese government with a dilemma. For the most part, Vietnam had been able to manage tension with the PRC in the South China Sea informally, especially the fishing moratorium. But threats against Vietnam's claim to oil resources were more serious. The political and economic costs were higher. According to one interviewee, Vietnam's leaders had worked to create (and demonstrate) a stable environment for Western oil companies. The cut cables undermined these efforts. This necessitated a more assertive response.²⁷

Vietnam's response included both formal and informal approaches, as described by experts in the region. Formally, it announced and conducted live-fire drills in the disputed territory off its coast.²⁸ Vietnam also sent its vice foreign minister, Ho Xuan Son, to Beijing to meet with PRC State Councilor Dai Bingguo. These discussions eventually led to a diplomatic agreement between the two countries titled "Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Maritime Issues," announced four months later on 12 October 2011.²⁹ Informally, Vietnamese officials reached out to build international diplomatic support through multilateral channels such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It also permitted popular protests

against China; the summer of 2011 witnessed the most expansive anti-China protests in Vietnam since the early 1990s. Collectively, these efforts appear to have influenced (at least temporary) the withdraw of Chinese maritime militia from Vietnam's exclusive economic zone.³⁰

Second, in May 2014, the state-run CNOOC deployed an oil rig near the Paracel Islands and within the territory claimed by Vietnam. The oil rig was accompanied by the Chinese maritime militia. This deployment came in the midst of the annual PRC-declared fishing moratorium. It also occurred in a wider geopolitical context. Namely, Southeast Asian countries had become increasingly alarmed at PRC efforts to establish new outposts in the South China Sea. In January 2013, for example, the PRC issued a new map with claims to 130 islets and reefs.³¹ The Philippines issued a formal protest to the United Nations about the PRC's construction activities soon thereafter. The presence of the CNOOC oil rig, therefore, was only one of many smaller incidents that had been escalating over a period of eighteen months. These, collectively, prompted a more assertive response from Vietnam.

Vietnam's response followed a somewhat similar pattern to the summer of 2011. It pursued deescalation through formal diplomatic channels. Vietnam also allowed anti-China protests in the streets of Hanoi and elsewhere. Rather than live-fire drills, Vietnam sent approximately thirty of its own fishing and coast guard vessels to confront the CNOOC oil rig and accompanying militia.³² According to interviewees, Vietnam wanted to respond more assertively than in May 2011 but still keep its response below the level of armed conflict. Vietnam's fishing and coast guard vessels were relatively small in comparison to the Chinese militia. They reportedly had been given to Vietnam by South Korea.³³ The fishing militia and coast guard, in this sense, were sent simply to prevent the oil rig from establishing a permanent presence. But they were overpowered. The Chinese militia rammed the Vietnamese vessels, causing extensive damage and injuring several sailors.³⁴

Unlike in the summer of 2011, Vietnam's collective efforts in the summer of 2014 did not yield a publicly announced resolution. CNOOC did, however, withdraw its oil rig one month earlier than scheduled (July versus August 2014). Some analysts have attributed

this early withdrawal to Vietnam's response.³⁵ Yet it was not fully successful, as tension simmered below the level of armed conflict throughout the summer and fall. Soon thereafter, the Vietnamese government echoed the Philippines complaint to the United Nations about

costs for Vietnam and its neighbors. The Chinese maritime militias also have managed to forestall a direct U.S. military response. Experts in the region perceive Vietnam as losing ground against the PLA and its militia forces. That said, Vietnam has inarguably faced

“ This video was the first evidence of PLA bombers landing in the South China Sea; it demonstrated that the bombers could span the entire area, including Guam and northern Australia. ”

PRC construction in the South China Sea. The U.S. military also began regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) near the Spratly and Paracel Islands.

Third, in March 2018, PetroVietnam informed the Spanish oil company, Repsol, that it could no longer develop the Ca Rong Do oil field. Ca Rong Do, also referred to as the “Red Emperor,” is located 273 miles off the coast of Vietnam's southern coast and close to the Nine-Dash Line.³⁶ According to unnamed Repsol executives, PetroVietnam's action resulted from PRC threats to Vietnamese outposts in the Spratly Islands.³⁷

Importantly, Vietnam had attempted to increase its capabilities after the May 2014 incident. It had invested in submarines, reinforced its outposts, and expanded its own fishing militia to as many as eight thousand vessels.³⁸ Vietnam also invited a U.S. aircraft carrier, the *USS Carl Vinson*, to Vietnam in March 2018; it was the first visit since the war between the two countries.³⁹ But these efforts were not enough to deter Chinese threats against oil exploration by Vietnam. Instead, they arguably added to tensions. In an obvious response to the *Carl Vinson*, for example, the PLA-Air Force posted a video on its social media account of a long-range bomber taking off from a base in the Paracel Islands. This video was the first evidence of PLA bombers landing in the South China Sea; it demonstrated that the bombers could span the entire area, including Guam and northern Australia.⁴⁰

In sum, the PRC has utilized its maritime militias in classic irregular warfare fashion against regional competitors in the South China Sea. The militia have created security dilemmas, presented risks, and increased

a much stronger force in the PLA and its maritime militias. It should be given credit for preventing even greater territorial and economic losses over the past decade. As such, Vietnam's experiences can provide the United States with some important lessons.

Implications for the U.S. Military

First, Vietnam uses a combination of official and backchannel responses to PRC aggression in the South China Sea as enacted by its maritime militia. Official bilateral engagements tend to be somewhat conciliatory, as evidenced by the October 2011 “Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Maritime Issues.” By comparison, Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy reflects an effort to increase risk and costs for the PRC and its use of the maritime militia. Vietnamese diplomats are better positioned to manage these official and backchannel responses, given longstanding ties between the Chinese Communist Party and the Communist Party of Vietnam. Nevertheless, they provide an example for how the United States could support countries in the region as they attempt to manage threats posed by the Chinese maritime militia.

Second, Vietnam partners its diplomatic engagements with irregular warfare activities. These activities include expanding Vietnamese outposts in the South China Sea, strengthening those outposts, and arming Vietnamese fishing and law enforcement vessels so that they can better monitor and confront the Chinese maritime militia. But Vietnam does not have the resources to support its fishing or law enforcement vessels on-scale with the PRC. This provides an opportunity for

the United States, its allies, and its partners to support Vietnam or other ASEAN countries. To be sure, the United States, Japan, India, and others have expanded their support to ASEAN countries in recent years, particularly efforts to increase maritime domain awareness. But more could be done.

Third, like with its diplomatic engagements, Vietnam reaches for multilateral support if its official or unofficial bilateral efforts are not sufficient. This support tends to be in the form of FONOPs. But FONOPs alone are not sufficient to counter an irregular warfare threat. While the U.S. military brings a larger and more capable force than Vietnam alone, the PLAN's use of a maritime militia complicates a U.S. military response. The perceived asymmetry between the fishing militia and U.S. Navy is difficult to overcome. Any such response appears overly aggressive. Additionally, FONOPs are temporary in nature.

Although often welcomed, the ships soon depart, and tensions rise all over again. U.S. Coast Guard vessels could provide an important complement, if not alternative, to U.S. Navy ships. Some of this has already begun. The U.S. Coast Guard has rotated ships through the Western Pacific since 2018. Nevertheless, this presence, as well as relationships with regional coast guards, could be expanded.

Finally, this study demonstrates that even "great powers" can benefit significantly from irregular warfare tactics. The PRC has used a combination of its military, law enforcement, and militia to expand its presence and control over the South China Sea. While this article only focuses on the maritime militia, it is easy to see how the militia has contributed to the PRC's overall success. Given its successes, the U.S. military should anticipate this trend to continue and work to refine its responses. ■

Notes

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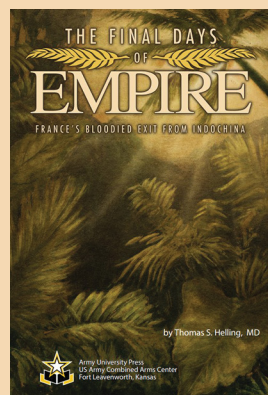
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In *The Final Days of Empire: France's Bloodied Exit from Indochina*, author Thomas S. Helling, MD, explores the dying vestiges of France's bid for colonial greatness in Indochina through the lens of the doctors and nurses as they attempted to save the wounded and maimed. The hills of northern Indochina were the backdrop to the death throes of France's imperial designs of domination. In an ugly war filled with contempt, treachery, and sabotage, the medical lesson learned on both sides was the vital importance of early care by virtue of proximity and quick evacuation to medical facilities.