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China's Maritime Militia

What It Is and How to Deal With It

Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy

ANDREW S. ERICKSON is Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute. Follow him on Twitter [@AndrewSErickson](#) ^[1]. CONOR M. KENNEDY is a research assistant at the Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute. The views expressed here are the authors' own and do not represent those of the U.S. government.

Last October, when the American destroyer USS *Lassen* sailed by Subi Reef, an [artificial island](#) ^[2] built by China in the South China Sea, a number of Chinese merchant ships and fishing boats maneuvered around it, apparently having anticipated its approach. The *Lassen* was on a [freedom of navigation operation](#) ^[3], meant to demonstrate the United States' commitment to maintaining open access to the area, much of which China claims as its own. China was using an unusual resource to broadcast its opposition to the trip: ships that appeared to be crewed by civilians, but in all likelihood were actually controlled by state-sponsored forces taking orders from China's military.

To promote its disputed claims in the South China Sea, China is increasingly relying on irregular forces such as these, which together form what China calls its maritime militia. In recent years, maritime militia units have played important roles in a number of encounters and skirmishes in international waters: in 2012, for example, they participated in China's seizure of the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, and in 2014, they helped China repel Vietnamese ships from an oil rig that China had stationed near the contested Paracel Islands.

The militia represents a useful tool in China's plan to bloodlessly press its maritime claims, since its frequently civilian appearance allows Beijing to deny its involvement in encounters such as last October's and exploit the U.S. Navy's rules of engagement, which limit the actions U.S. ships can take against civilian vessels. Despite its potency, the maritime militia is the least understood of China's sea forces, and so far, the U.S. government has not acknowledged its existence in public reports or major official statements. That should change. By showing Chinese leaders that it is wise to their game, Washington could discourage Beijing from using the militia even more assertively than it has so far—a crucial step in preventing China from [asserting control over a vital waterway](#) ^[4] that should remain open to international traffic.

A MILITARY IN DISGUISE

A number of countries have maritime militias that contribute to law enforcement, disaster recovery, local security, and other such tasks. The United States, for example, has modest naval militias ^[5] that help deal with emergencies in undisputed coastal waters and provide reservists to the country's other military services. But Beijing's maritime militia is different: with thousands of members, it is the world's largest, and it is one of only two, along with Vietnam's, known to send elite irregular forces to harass legally operating foreign vessels.

The maritime militia units are managed by local PLA military commands and are funded ^[6] by local and provincial governments. To encourage locals to join up, municipalities often promise to pay militia personnel a pension equal to several thousand dollars per year if they are disabled in the line of duty—a sum comparable to other Chinese government pensions and an attractive draw in a rural fishing village. Hainan, the Chinese island province that claims administration over most of the South China Sea, is home to many of the most advanced units, some of which Chinese officials, including Chinese President Xi Jinping ^[7], have visited.

Maritime militia units are designed to look like civilian groups in most contexts, and they have considerable leeway to decide when to use the military uniforms in which their members usually train. A January 2014 article ^[8] in China's official military newspaper, *PLA Daily*, neatly captures the intended effect: "Putting on camouflage, they qualify as soldiers; taking off the camouflage, they become law-abiding fishermen." Of course, these are no ordinary fishermen. Members of the militia report to the People's Liberation Army and other government elements, and their missions are mandated and sponsored by the Chinese state. What is more, according to authoritative Chinese government and military-affiliated publications, some of China's most advanced maritime militia units—the same ones that would likely be entrusted with missions requiring contact with U.S. and other foreign forces—are trained by PLA Navy officers.

Indeed, in a number of international encounters over the past few decades, members of the maritime militia have closely coordinated their actions with China's navy ^[9] and coast guard. Perhaps the most infamous episode came in 2009, when a crewmember on a fishing trawler—piloted by a militia member and registered to a militia organization—attempted to use a grappling hook to snag the sonar array of a U.S. surveillance ship, the USNS *Impeccable*, after the trawler, two Chinese coast guard vessels, and another apparently civilian boat forced the *Impeccable* to a halt by cutting across its bow—all as a PLA Navy warship watched nearby.

Despite the fact that the *Impeccable* incident and other such encounters have been widely publicized, the militias are strikingly deceptive about their activities. Earlier this month, an Al Jazeera reporter ^[10] visited the township of Tanmen on Hainan, where she saw a contingent of fatigue-clad militiamen drilling by the village's harbor. Asked what they were doing by the reporter, a local official said that the men were members of a film crew. A man who said he was a local fisherman but was later identified as the Tanmen militia's deputy commander went further: he knew nothing about the men drilling by the harbor, he claimed, apart from the fact that they were fishermen wearing military uniforms for the innocuous purpose of protecting themselves from the sun.

The measure of deniability afforded by its civilian camouflage is not the maritime militia's only advantage. The militia units also provide China with an asymmetrical advantage and help it take the initiative in encounters with foreign forces: as foreign ships grapple with how to respond, the militia units can interfere with their operations while reporting their location and activities to other Chinese forces. And then there is the propaganda value: in the event of an encounter between the militia and foreign ships, Chinese outlets might flood the Internet with a selectively edited footage of apparently civilian fishermen being unjustly victimized. Of course, members of the maritime militia are not mere civilians, and their direct connections to China's military chain of command, from which they receive mobilization and operational orders, should disqualify them from being treated as such.

GETTING IN FRONT OF THE PROBLEM

Observers should not expect the maritime militia to ease off its activities anytime soon. China's drive to coerce its neighbors in the South China Sea is growing, and its ongoing development and fortification of artificial islands in the region will provide the militia with plenty of support. At the same time, Beijing's efforts to streamline the People's Liberation Army by cutting 300,000 troops ^[11] will provide plenty of fresh equipment and manpower for the militia: veterans are highly attractive recruits. Responding to signals from Beijing, local officials along China's coastline are expanding existing militia units and establishing new ones. Consider Beihai, a city in China's southern Guangxi Province. In 2013, that city was home to two maritime militia detachments, with around 200 personnel. In 2015, it boasted at least ten detachments and more than 2,000 personnel ^[12].

Before another incident involving China's maritime militia and U.S. forces occurs, Washington needs to get in front of the problem. It should start by publicizing its awareness of the dangers posed by the militia by, for example, ensuring that the Department of Defense's annual report on China's military covers the group extensively in 2017. U.S. officials should openly discuss the militia's attributes, its uses, and the consequences that it and other Chinese government actors would face in a variety of scenarios involving U.S. forces, making clear that the maritime militia won't stop the United States from pursuing legal access to the South China Sea. Doing so would bolster transparency ^[13] in a crisis-prone region and help to establish clear off-ramps ^[14] to avoid escalation in the event of a dangerous encounter. Even if Chinese officials decline to discuss the issue with their American counterparts, Washington's message would still resonate in Beijing.

The PLA Navy, for its part, should not be allowed to present itself as China's good cop by cooperating with U.S. forces in the region at the same time that China's coast guard and maritime militia (some of which the PLA Navy trains) do the dirty work. Instead, Washington should call on China's coast guard and maritime militia to adhere to the same code of conduct as the PLA Navy. And so that the proper rules govern all irregular forces in the region, the United States should also ask Vietnam to make its own maritime militia adhere to similar standards.

If China does not cooperate, the United States should consider revoking some of the privileges that the PLA Navy currently enjoys with U.S. support, such as its participation in the U.S.-hosted Rim of the Pacific naval exercise. By calling out the maritime militia's

activities, imposing costs for its employment, and preparing for the various contingencies it might provoke, Washington can get ahead of the serious challenge posed by Beijing's irregular sea forces in one of the world's most volatile regions.

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