

Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "[Meet the Chinese Maritime Militia Waging a 'People's War at Sea'](#)," China Real Time Report (中国实时报), *Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 2015.

Meet the Chinese Maritime Militia Waging a 'People's War at Sea'

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By Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy



Chinese fishing boats set off to fish near the Japan-controlled Senkaku islands.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

When the Philippines announced last week that it was restarting construction in disputed areas of the South China Sea in response to China's own construction binge, it entered a contest it has virtually no hope of winning.

Satellite images released in February reveal that China has undertaken an [unprecedented series of construction and land reclamation projects](#) designed to help it control much of the South

<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/03/31/meet-the-chinese-maritime-militia-waging-a-peoples-war-at-sea/>

China Sea, including a 75,000-square yard artificial island with a cement plant and a helipad just over 200 miles from the Philippines.

China's territorial ambitions in the East and South China seas are by now well-documented. Much less understood is one of the key factors in the country's ability to realize those ambitions: an increasingly well-funded and capable maritime militia.

Along with Vietnam, China is one of very few countries to have a maritime militia. Such forces are typically comprised of civilian fishing vessels and fill a variety of roles, from using emergency response units to rescue stranded vessels to more assertive operations including conducting [island landings](#) to declare sovereignty. Mariners retaining civilian jobs in large companies or fishing collectives are recruited into military organizations and undergo military training, political education, and mobilization in defense of China's maritime interests. China's force, which was formed in the early years of the People's Republic, is drawn from the world's largest fishing fleet. In recent years, it has grown in sophistication and importance, performing a range of tasks from supplying building materials to collecting intelligence. The most advanced units are even training to confront foreign ships, if necessary, in a guerrilla-style "[People's War at Sea](#)" with [sea mines](#) and [anti-air missiles](#). It now essentially functions as Beijing's first line of surveillance, support and pressure in promoting the country's claims and interests in East and South China seas.



A photo published in a report on Chinese mine warfare by the U.S. Naval War College shows Chinese civilian fishing vessels practicing deploying sea mines at a naval base in Sanya in 2004.

COURTESY OF U.S. GOVERNMENT

Little is known about the militia outside China, but it's possible to glean valuable insight into the force through publicly available Chinese sources.

Of all the questions surrounding China's maritime militia, the most complex is who controls them. The maritime militia's daily building and training is conducted by the numerous People's Armed Forces Departments established in China's coastal cities and counties, supervised by their associated Military Sub-District Commands. From there it gets more complicated, since the militias play a variety of roles that puts them under the direct command of various agencies.

Recently, efforts have been taken to transform individual militias by reducing their size and increasing their specialization. Some units provide support for the military and Coast Guard. One such unit is the long-standing Maritime Militia Battalion of Yuhuan County in Zhejiang Province, which supplies naval ship units with fuel, ammunition, and other supplies.

Other units play supporting roles through reconnaissance, safeguarding of important facilities and areas, [deception](#), jamming of enemy equipment, augmenting sea transport capacity, [repair](#)

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[and medical rescue](#). For example, Taizhou’s maritime militia emergency response company in the past year alone has conducted over 136 search and rescue missions, [successfully rescuing 18 vessels and 286 people](#). A military, coast guard and militia joint-exercise [in the Gulf of Tonkin](#) in August 2014 employed fishing vessels in reconnaissance and interception roles to protect a drilling platform.

Maritime militias also help to maintain a Chinese presence in disputed areas or landing on claimed islands, coordinating with the nation’s political and diplomatic efforts. The key push is to achieve the best combination of units’ everyday fishing or work activities with national “struggles” on the sea, while maintaining the ability to respond swiftly to a call of duty from military commanders.



A Chinese fishing boat seized by Japan Coast Guard officials near a disputed island in 2010 after an incident at sea in which it collided with two Japanese patrol vessels.

JAPAN COAST GUARD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Thousands of militia boats are equipped with China’s *Beidou* navigation satellite system, which allows them to track other units, transmit short messages, and even features a tablet screen for crews to [hand-write Chinese characters](#). Such systems are instrumental in launching the maritime

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militia into “informatized” (Information Age) warfighting. According to an article with contributions from multiple military authorities in *National Defense*, the Chinese Navy Headquarters Military Affairs Department in 2007 even called for the construction of a “maritime reconnaissance network” based on the use of civilian vessels and militias. The same article cited a census report of two anonymous provinces possessing almost 20,000 fishing and commercial vessels as well as “hundreds of thousands” of militia, all available to provide a vast pool of manpower for monitoring of the seas off China.

Daily development costs are assumed by a unit’s home city or county, while costs associated with specific missions and larger projects are subsidized by the provincial government. Owners of the boats and other militia members are compensated for damage or costs incurred in the course of their operations as per [vessel mobilization rules](#) written by the provinces.

An array of government departments are [involved](#) in building the maritime militia, including the Fishery Law Enforcement Command, Maritime Safety Administration, Defense Transportation Administration and the People’s Armed Forces departments. Each assumes specific portions of this effort, from providing armaments to equipping vessels with proper electronics for communications or navigation.

Militia members are trained in a variety of skills from ship identification to light weapons and military organization. To ensure their loyalty, they are also inundated with political and national defense education, with some undergoing political training administered by temporary Communist Party branches [even while at sea](#).

For all the benefits they provide, maritime militias also present China with challenges. A particular problem is increasing fishing industry privatization, which has caused large fluctuations in vessels and personnel. When catches stagnate, many fishing companies sell off assets or lay off workers to stay above water, forcing military commanders and the People’s Armed Forces Department to scramble to [replace and retrain personnel](#). One such serious occurrence saw a county in Ningbo over the course of a year experience a [selloff of 40 fishing vessels](#) from the previous recruited total of 140.

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These challenges vary across the range of companies and fishing collectives that constitute much of the maritime militia. As a result, local military commands are now experimenting with different ways of addressing them, including by holding training during times of the season [when fishermen are relatively idle](#).

Regardless of those difficulties, China's employment of maritime militias has widespread implications for its regional neighbors as well as external powers such as the U.S. Should a conflict erupt in the East or South China seas involving a U.S. ally [or the U.S. itself](#), rules of engagement would be required to deal with numerous overtly-civilian vessels serving military purposes. A [low-intensity conflagration](#) in the South China Sea could see China's weaker neighbors face to face with a guerilla-style melee meant to keep navies out of the fight. Most descriptions by those involved in building the Maritime Militia call for the recruiting of "steel-hulled" vessels, [pushing to replace the numerous wooden hulls](#) that still make up much of the fishing fleet. This focus on hull-quality is likely in consideration of both distant water fishing as well as potential [ramming actions](#) as witnessed during the [standoff](#) surrounding China's 981-Drilling Platform within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in 2014.

Navies such as the U.S.'s find themselves with their hands bound due to political sensitivity in confronting civilian actors, especially when those civilian actors are backed up by naval warships. In the meantime, the militias will continue to help build, and guard, China's ever-expanding facilities in disputed waters.

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