

## The World Today with Eleanor Hall

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# Tensions between China and US intensify over South China Sea

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ELEANOR HALL: Well let's go now to one of the world's most critical and contested trade routes, the South China Sea.

The standoff there between China, its neighbours and the US has been intensifying in recent months, with the Chinese taking an increasingly acquisitive stance in the area.

And a specialist on China's strategy is adamant that one of the keys to China's success is a secretive militia based on China's fishing fleet.

Dr Andrew Erickson is a professor of strategy and a founding member of the China Maritime Studies Institute at the US Naval War College.

He joined me earlier from Rhode Island to discuss his latest research.

ANDREW ERICKSON: The maritime militia appears to be an important part of China's maritime security approach, nothing less than a third sea force for China.

China's maritime militia is mostly effective for China and most corrosive to regional security and international norms when it's able to lurk in the shadows below the level awareness for the vast majority of outside observers and policy makers.

ELEANOR HALL: And how effective are these apparent fishermen against the huge United States naval vessels that are conducting their freedom of navigation trips through this area.

ANDREW ERICKSON: The capabilities of China's maritime militia are not just theoretical. This is a force that has played a significant role in a variety of Chinese international sea battles, skirmishes, and incidents.

In some ways, most importantly in recent years the 2012 direct participation of maritime militia forces in China's seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, and finally in 2014, maritime militia participation in repelling Vietnamese forces that were trying to challenge the stationing of the Chinese

HYSY981 oil rig in waters disputed with Vietnam.

And according to an article in Defence News, late last October when the USS Lassen was involved in a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea, it's reported that a number of civilian-like vessels anticipated its transit and approached it and that has all the hallmarks of maritime militia activity that in the future I worry could be dialled up.

ELEANOR HALL: And is there a particular power in this militia because it is not a naval uniform?

ANDREW ERICKSON: At this point China's trying to have it both ways. The maritime militia are in fact organised forces subordinate to a PLA, People's Liberation Army, Chinese military, chain of command.

It appears Chinese officials are going to deny some of these things in a very implausible way. We are getting some very implausible stories here and I think it's really high time that we got to the bottom of this and got down to the facts, so that's what we're trying to do now with our research.

ELEANOR HALL: You've been urging the US government to at least acknowledge the existence of this militia, why is the US reluctant to do this?

ANDREW ERICKSON: I don't know why it hasn't come up in a significant number of US official public statements. I'm optimistic that that will change in the near future. I think the fact that some of these Chinese official denials are as implausible as they are is testimony to the cost of the US not making a more conclusive official statement.

ELEANOR HALL: What do you think would happen were the US government to acknowledge the existence of this fishing militia? Do you think it would make it harder for the Chinese to then use them to build the islands and block the US vessels?

ANDREW ERICKSON: The more that this irregular force is called out and documented for what it is, I think the more power and the more effectiveness it will lose. It will lose plausible deniability, it will lose an element of surprise, and well Chinese officials may be extremely reluctant acknowledge or admit how it's been developed in some ways.

I think the fact that as other countries take it seriously and their officials make statements about it, those very facts will make Chinese officials much more careful about how they think about developing and employing this third sea force of theirs.

ELEANOR HALL: Do you think that the US Navy should change its rules of engagement so that it can take action against what appear to be civilian vessels?

ANDREW ERICKSON: I am not a lawyer so I am not qualified to comment on the specific details of rules of engagement. My person strong recommendation, and I think this should be communicated to China, is that any Chinese maritime militia-type elements that ignore repeated warnings by US Navy or other US government vessels to desist from disruptive activities, should be treated as militarily controlled and should be dealt with accordingly to ensure self defence and unobstructed mission accomplishment.

It seems clear to me that there should be ways to make it clear that US government vessels will act in a positive way and they're not looking for some sort of unsafe encounter but nor will they allow

themselves to be stymied or thwarted or diverted by any kind of Chinese military-sponsored harassment even if it comes from ostensibly humble appearing maritime militia forces.

ELEANOR HALL: Could doing what you suggest, though, actually spark a military conflict in the area?

ANDREW ERICKSON: I think that both the US and China have very strong incentives and strong shared interests to not let tensions get out of hand. I think we're in a period right now, at least in some security aspects, that I term 'competitive coexistence'.

So, on the one hand our two countries have deep, shared economic interests, we have strong interests in counter terrorism. These are strong bulwarks that I think can keep things from spinning out of control. The fact is China has equally strong interests not to allow any sort of unexpected encounter or incident to escalate out of control.

ELEANOR HALL: That's Dr Andrew Erickson, a professor of strategy and a founding member of the US Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute.

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