

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/19/manilas-images-are-revealing-the-secrets-of-chinas-maritime-militia/>

ARGUMENT

Manila's Images Are Revealing the Secrets of China's Maritime Militia

Details of the ships haunting disputed rocks show China's plans.

BY RYAN D. MARTINSON, ANDREW S. ERICKSON

| APRIL 19, 2021, 7:15 PM



Six Chinese fishing vessels believed to be part of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, including the Yuexinhuiyu 60138 and 60139, are moored together at Whitsun Reef on March 27. PHOTO PROVIDED BY PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT

The Philippines is regaining the initiative in the South China Sea. In an apparent policy shift, it has begun sharing unprecedented amounts of information about Chinese actions in the Spratly Islands, the archipelago of disputed rocks and reefs off the western coast of the Philippines. While Manila's precise motives are unclear, its newfound transparency is creating fascinating new opportunities for understanding Beijing's maritime strategy. This is especially true when it comes to China's fleet of Spratly fishing vessels, some portion of which operates under the command of the Chinese military—units of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). Conceivably numbering thousands of vessels and with tens of thousands of personnel, this subcomponent of China's armed forces is trained and equipped to support the People's Liberation Army in advancing sovereignty claims to disputed features and sea areas.

Last week, the Philippine Coast Guard released images of Chinese fishing vessels moored at the Spratlys' Whitsun Reef, taken by the crew of the BRP *Cabra*, a Coast Guard ship that approached close to the Chinese vessels. Gone are the hundreds of boats seen in March. What remains is a small number of Chinese fishing vessels, six of which are tied together in the lagoon.

One key point: The new photos and an accompanying video show that the vessels seen last week were the same six boats observed by the *Cabra* on its last patrol over two weeks ago. Real fishing vessels cannot afford to linger for weeks in a single spot like this, especially when the weather is perfect for fishing elsewhere. As the captains of these boats are plainly indifferent to the economic costs of inactivity, their protracted presence at Whitsun can only mean one thing: They are tasked with being there. Yes, China does sometimes pay ordinary fishers to linger in disputed space, but given the intense spotlight on Whitsun Reef it seems far more likely it has turned to the professionals. They are undoubtedly members of the PAFMM.

This is an interesting but not unexpected finding. Despite implausible denials from the official spokespeople at the Chinese foreign ministry and embassy in Manila, we have previously uncovered evidence of militia presence at the reef, and the Philippines has referred to them as militia all along. Yet having this confirmation allows for a host of new insights into militia organization and the patterns of militia activities in the Spratly waters. What might be learned?

First, all six vessels are registered in Guangdong province. We know this from their hull markings, which begin with the character *yue* (粤), the usual abbreviation in Chinese for Guangdong, China's prosperous southern province. This is noteworthy because Guangdong militia members are not normally recognized, unlike those from Hainan or even Guangxi, as major actors in the South China Sea. That assumption needs to change.

In retrospect, the indicators were clear enough. The President Xi Jinping era has been a boon for the PAFMM. In November 2013, just seven months after Xi's famous visit to Hainan's Tanmen Maritime Militia to pay homage to the unit for its role in China's seizure of Scarborough Shoal, the commander of the Guangdong Military District, Maj. Gen. Gai Longyun, visited the province's city of Taishan to relay the new emphasis from the center. Gai declared, "the maritime struggle is growing more urgent." Thus, he continued, "the state is exploring ways to strengthen construction of maritime militia detachments."

Within a few months, the Guangdong Military District began implementing national decisions about using "mobilization forces" (like militia) in the "struggle" at sea. According to the 2015 Guangdong yearbook, Chinese doctrine now called for placing PAFMM forces on the "front line" in China's campaign to exert influence and control in disputed space. Behind them, on the "second" and "third" lines, would operate China's other two maritime forces, the coast guard and navy. This layered approach, which achieved its greatest success at Scarborough Shoal in 2012, is sometimes called China's "cabbage" strategy, thanks to its multiple layered leaves. As Whitsun Reef shows, this approach is alive and well.

The hull markings are even more illuminating. Take just two of the six, *Yuexinhuiyu* 60138 and *Yuexinhuiyu* 60139 (as seen in the photo accompanying this article). The second and third characters (*xin hui*, 新会) indicate that they are registered at Xinhui District of Guangdong's Jiangmen city. (The last character *yu*, 渔, *fish*, classifies them as fishing vessels.)

The two Xinhui boats are equipped with automatic identification system transceivers, which means their movements can be tracked, at least some of the time. Commercially available tracking platforms tie them to Xinhui District's Yamen Fishing Harbor. It is located on the Yamen Channel, just down the coast from Macao. Satellite photos show two large wharfs along the west bank of the channel. This is their home. Just up the channel, on the east bank, is a Chinese naval base with docks hosting frigates and missile boats.

Chinese fishing records confirm what the photos show, that *Yuexinhuiyu* 60138 and 60139 are both trawlers. They are designed to drag nets at slow speed (under 5 knots), catching everything in their path, hoping that some of it is commercially valuable. At around 130 feet long, they are large vessels—the product of Beijing's call for Chinese fishers to "build big boats," an aspiration first expressed by Xi in April 2013 and later made policy.

The Xinhui fishing fleet comprises over 500 boats. Most are small vessels, operating near the Chinese coast, very far from the trouble spots of the South China Sea. In 2019, only six Xinhui boats operated in the "specially designated waters" of the South China Sea, a euphemistic term for the Spratlys.

The tracking information shows that when the two vessels left Yamen Harbor for the Spratlys on Feb. 24, they went in the company of another of Xinhui's six Spratly boats: *Yuexinhuiyu* 60136. Information we received from the Philippine Coast Guard indicates that this vessel is also present at Whitsun Reef. It is a large purse seiner, which operates by deploying its nets around a school of fish and then slowly drawing them in.

If 2021 is like 2019, *Yuexinhuiyu* 60138 and 60139 will take three or four trips to the Spratlys this year. Each will spend a total of about 280 days in these waters. Their owner—Deng Fengjuan—will receive millions of yuan to offset fuel costs, some half a million dollars. This shows that like supposedly ordinary Spratly fishers, those associated with the maritime militia benefit from very generous government subsidies to encourage Chinese fishing activities in these waters.

Xinhui district has supported PAFMM forces for at least two decades. The Chinese media periodically checks in on their activities. For example, in June 2002 the local military office in charge of militia-building, known as the People's Armed Forces Department, led a Xinhui militia detachment down to Guanghai in Taishan prefecture for a month of at-sea training. By 2004, Xinhui had established a maritime militia company specializing in “barrier breaching,” presumably a wartime function.

The year 2014 brought the Xinhui detachment into the national spotlight. In December of that year, the military media outlet *PLA Daily* published images showing Xinhui's PAFMM detachment receiving “tactical training” (i.e., with firearms) while aboard a fishing vessel. That year, the Xinhui District People's Armed Forces Department organized three such on-the-water drills. Their training focused on using reconnaissance and communications equipment and gaining familiarity with contingency plans.

By 2016, Xinhui district had established a “far seas” PAFMM detachment—a crucial milestone in its development as an agent in sovereignty enforcement. In the jargon of South China Sea militia work, the “far seas” refers to the Spratly waters. Since Xinhui only has six Spratly boats, most if not all belong to the far seas militia detachment. This, of course, includes *Yuexinhuiyu* 60138 and 60139.

From these two vessels alone, we gain valuable new information about PAFMM activities in the South China Sea: its operational patterns (including the frequency and duration of deployments), government support for Spratly operations (large fuel subsidies), and the key PAFMM units operating in contested space (Jiangmen's Xinhui district). The other four Guangdong vessels tied together at Whitsun Reef will also have their histories, offering even more insights into PAFMM organization and operations. In fact, the story of every member of China's Spratly fishing fleet, militia or otherwise, tells us something about Beijing's South China Sea strategy—and thanks to the Philippine government, outsiders can begin to read those stories.

In sum, we have now conclusively identified some of the most readily visible ships that have been lashed up at Whitsun Reef. Together with our previous exposure of seven PAFMM vessels visiting the disputed South China Sea feature last month, this shows

that Beijing's public messaging regarding Whitsun can be disproven with open sources alone. Yet these vessels and their activities are but a small subset of China's maritime gray zone operations, which the United States and its allies must follow and publicize more effectively in real time to get ahead of Beijing's unrelenting effort to achieve below-radar gains. Continued analysis of Xinhui and other localities is essential, and information disclosure by the U.S., Philippine, and other governments is badly needed. Having persuasively advocated greater U.S. government release of South China Sea information as a scholar, Pentagon advisor Ely Ratner is now particularly well placed to apply these sensible recommendations in the Biden administration.

Ryan D. Martinson is a researcher at the U.S. Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute.

Andrew S. Erickson is a professor of strategy in the U.S. Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute and a visiting scholar in full-time residence at Harvard University's John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies.

TAGS: CHINA, MILITARY, PHILIPPINES