

summary of Yung's chapter from p. 22 of the volume's Introduction: "Chinese strategic planners place a high priority on an accurate pre-conflict strategic assessment; indeed a singular criticism of Argentina in the Falklands/Malvinas was that Buenos Aires failed to conduct a comprehensive strategic assessment in the run-up to its own actions that precipitated the conflict."

- 42 Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China's Daring Vanguard: Introducing Sanya City's Maritime Militia," *Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC)*, November 5, 2015, <https://cimsec.org/chinas-daring-vanguard-introducing-sanya-citys-maritime-militia/>.
- 43 Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, "From Frontier to Frontline: Tanmen Maritime Militia's Leading Role—Part 2," *Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC)*, May 17, 2016, <https://cimsec.org/frontier-frontline-tanmen-maritime-militias-leading-role-pt-2/>.

4 China's Maritime Militia in the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea

Conor M. Kennedy

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has long relied on a deep reserve of militia forces to support government and military objectives in both war and peace time. At sea, from shortly after the founding of the PRC in 1949 until even after the Cold War's end four decades later, Beijing relied on militia forces (typically drawing on fishing fleets or other civilian mariners) to compensate for its lack of maritime power, especially naval and constabulary forces. However, after decades of investment and rapid development, the PRC now has the world's largest Navy and Coast Guard.¹ It has also retained and continues to develop the world's largest Maritime Militia force constructed out of its vast fishing and merchant fleets. The exact size of the Maritime Militia is still unknown to foreigners and will almost certainly remain that way to preserve a key advantage, deception.

Maritime Militia development in China assumed new significance after the national strategy to become a maritime power was declared after the 18th Party Congress in November 2012. This objective is comprehensive and includes development of all elements of Chinese maritime power.² Recent People's Liberation Army (PLA) reforms also shifted the focus of reserve militia force construction toward the sea and high-tech sectors. General land-based militia forces and the overall number of personnel are undergoing significant reductions, whereas the construction of Maritime Militia and more sophisticated types of militia units better suited to supporting modern PLA operations are currently promoted.³ The result has been the growth of Maritime Militia forces nationwide.

Maritime Militia force development also included greater roles in the protection of PRC maritime rights and interests. Maritime rights protection is now a key focus in militia development to assert PRC presence and control in its maritime disputes. This focus was further invigorated by the highest levels of national leadership in 2013 with Xi Jinping's visit to the little-known fishing village of Tanmen in Hainan Province shortly after

coming to power.⁴ Xi's visit on the first anniversary of China's capture of Scarborough Reef from the Philippines in 2012, with the help of the village's Maritime Militia, made it clear that the Maritime Militia will continue to be a key component in protecting maritime rights and interests. Xi is reported to have issued multiple directives on maritime rights protection and Maritime Militia construction since he assumed power.⁵ This demonstrates strong recognition of the success these forces had in protecting and advancing PRC claims without sparking a regional conflict.

The militia has a prominent role in protecting maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea due to sovereignty and territorial disputes between China and other regional claimants. Numerous operations and achievements by Maritime Militia forces in the South China Sea have been well-documented and acknowledged by international observers.⁶ Maritime Militia forces in the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea receive significantly less attention. However, Maritime Militia force development in this region appears to be equally as robust as in the rest of China's coastal provinces. As a key responsibility of PLA provincial military districts, militia construction in northern coastal provinces has also shifted focus toward the sea.

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of Maritime Militia forces that could be mobilized in the Yellow Sea, how they are organized, and how the PLA envisions their use. The decentralized nature of militia development nationwide provides abundant authoritative open sources that elucidate this still insufficiently studied force. Surveying sources from various local governments, media news services, and PLA writings reveals the scale, organization, and development of Maritime Militia forces in Chinese provinces along the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea. Details on specific units, training, and other factors also demonstrate what capabilities may be available when mobilized, and can establish a baseline of Maritime Militia forces that commanders may draw upon in a gray zone scenario. This will be crucial to gauge potential responses by China in gray zone disputes in the region.

Organizational Methods and Total Force Estimate

Militia force construction occurs in the provincial military districts (省军区), which are roughly equivalent. The provincial military district system is overseen by the Central Military Commission's National Defense Mobilization Department. The guidelines set forth by this department are then implemented in each of the provincial military districts through subordinate military subdistricts (军分区), including PLA garrison commands, established at the municipal level. Each subdistrict oversees the work of People's Armed Force Departments (人民武装部) at the county, village/township, and enterprise levels, which directly command and oversee militia forces in their respective jurisdictions or posts.⁷

Maritime Militia units are generally concentrated in coastal districts that contain ports and marine industries. Many of these are formed out of fishing

enterprises or fishing collectives and can be found in large and small fishing harbors dotting the coastline. In more rural areas, several townships may each contribute small units, often squad- or platoon-sized, to form a larger Maritime Militia detachment or "fendui" (分队) at the county level.⁸ Maritime Militia units are generically referred to as "fendui," a term encompassing battalion, company, platoon, or even squad-sized units. Municipalities with major port and development areas see higher concentrations and varieties of Maritime Militia units, many formed in the merchant marine and shipyards, as well as among commercial fishing enterprises. Additionally, areas near naval forces will often form service support militia units dedicated to providing support functions for the PLA Navy.

Maritime Militia units are formed upon a balanced compromise of military district requirements and what mobilizable resources are available locally. Fishing communities will often form reconnaissance units to exploit their ability to cover large areas, loiter, and operate under the guise of fishing. They also often form search-and-rescue units and emergency response units. Merchant shipping organizations will logically form transport and supply units to support the PLA, whereas those in specialized industrial enterprises will fulfill other specific roles, such as salvage, dredging, obstacle clearance, etc. Not all Maritime Militia members are equipped with their own vessels, however. Medical rescue units are often drawn from local hospitals and are trained to operate on rented or requisitioned vessels. There are also a few cases in which some land-based militia units receive "Maritime Militia training" in response to new requirements for general militia training.⁹

A number of new-type Maritime Militia units are also appearing under new guidance from the National Defense Mobilization Department regarding the overall national militia force. Large swaths of traditional militia units are disbanding, whereas new units reflecting heightened emphasis on specialization, technical sophistication, and emerging technologies are being established. Some localities note the effort to spend more time training fewer units, rather than providing less training to large numbers of less-effective units.¹⁰ Numerous units are being created to provide communications, surveying, mapping, navigation, electromagnetic spectrum-related, meteorological, and hydrological support out of various institutions and companies. For example, Jiangsu Province recently disbanded 1,571 traditional militia units and formed over 1,000 new "marine environmental monitoring" and "electromagnetic spectrum management" units.¹¹ Other Maritime Militia units are trained to operate unmanned aerial vehicles for reconnaissance, enhancing the search radius of individual vessels and providing the capabilities for a range of additional measures for harassment and coercion of foreign vessels. Some areas are reporting new "deep-sea" Maritime Militia units, supporting missions in underwater detection.¹² Such examples indicate major efforts to reduce wasteful and outdated

practices and modernize the militia force to better support current and emerging PLA maritime operations. Several of these new-type units were identified in the Maritime Militia forces discussed below.

Modernization and large-scale changes to the militia do not appear to be coming at the cost of the general Maritime Militia forces, but rather to their benefit. Many localities report increases in Maritime Militia forces and the creation of new types of militia forces.¹³

The following section breaks down Maritime Militia forces by the Liaoning, Hebei (and the Tianjin Garrison), Shandong, and Jiangsu provincial military districts. Some noteworthy features and new-type militia units are described for each district, with identified units for each district located in Figures 4.1–4.4, respectively. Only known units from sources within the last 10 years are represented. Additionally, only those units that receive Maritime Militia training and can operate at sea are shown.¹⁴ Unit sizes are used in place of the term “fendui” when such information is available. Unit locations are marked approximately, and in many cases, based on the author’s best determination using the sources.

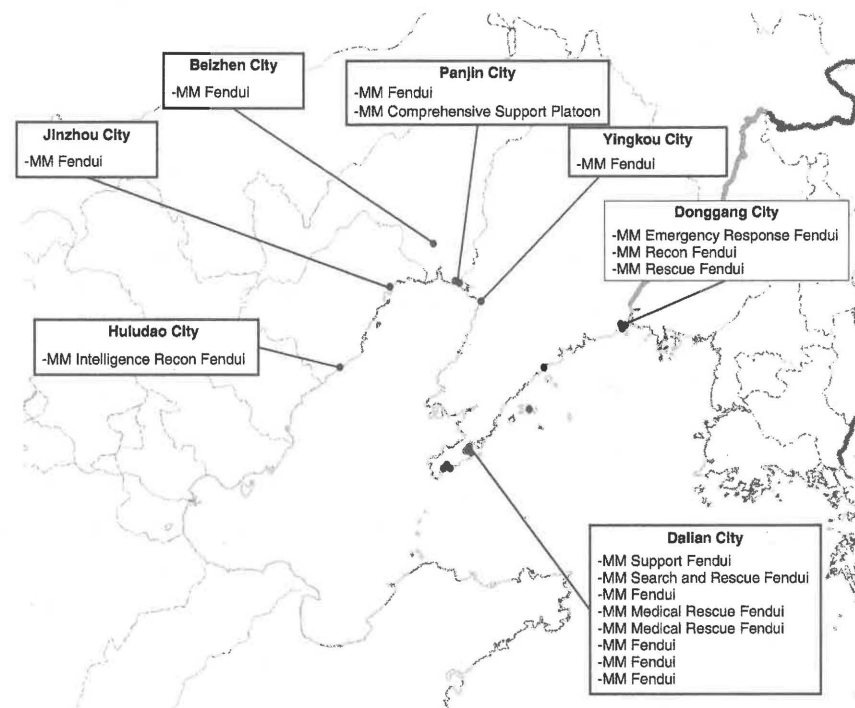


Figure 4.1 Map of Liaoning Province Maritime Militia Units.

Source: Conor M. Kennedy.¹⁵

Liaoning Provincial Military District

The number of units identified in open sources from Liaoning province were surprisingly few. The author found at least 17 Maritime Militia units, excluding seven additional professional naval support militia units in Dalian not depicted above as it is unclear whether they are seaborne militia forces.¹⁶ With Dalian’s large maritime industrial capacity—naval shipbuilding in particular—it is likely there are numerous units unreported in open sources, especially naval service support militia. For instance, the Dalian military subdistrict mobilization department head explained in a 2019 interview that the district’s units traditionally focused on mechanized combat were reduced by over half, cutting nearly two-thirds of its militia personnel. However, the number of Maritime Militia *fendui* have greatly increased to meet future mission requirements.¹⁷ Liaoning also reports the establishment of new militia units in over 20 focus areas, including maritime replenishment, helicopter reconnaissance and rescue, meteorological and hydrological specialties, salvage, environmental monitoring, and electronic confrontation and reconnaissance.¹⁸ These new units could not be located and identified for inclusion in the above map (Figure 4.1).

Maritime Militia units based out of the cities of Dalian and Dandong have a particularly important mission in assisting with management of the border with North Korea. These are heavily focused on monitoring efforts and emergency response to potential situations along the maritime border.¹⁹ Maritime Militia emergency response units in areas like Donggang City conduct coordinated patrol activities with military or fisheries law enforcement forces.²⁰ The Dandong military subdistrict has strengthened coordination among military, law enforcement, and militia forces in recent years, including responses to emergencies at sea.²¹

The Dalian Naval Academy provides significant support for Maritime Militia medical rescue unit development. It is home to the National Maritime Health Mobilization Center (国家海上卫生动员中心), which was first established in 2007 and contains two Maritime Militia medical rescue *fendui* aboard the PLAN training ship *Shichang*.²² This center is dedicated to the training and development of casualty evacuation and medical treatment at sea in Maritime Militia medical units. Since its inception, the center has developed over 1,600 maritime medical reservists from numerous provinces and municipalities.²³

Hebei Provincial Military District and Tianjin Garrison

Along the western end of the Bohai Gulf, there are approximately 71 identified individual Maritime Militia units in Hebei province and Tianjin municipality. (Figure 4.2, below, shows their locations.) Cangzhou City demonstrates the potential scale of Maritime Militia force construction. The city’s 51 Maritime Militia *fendui* are established in a mix of fishing and

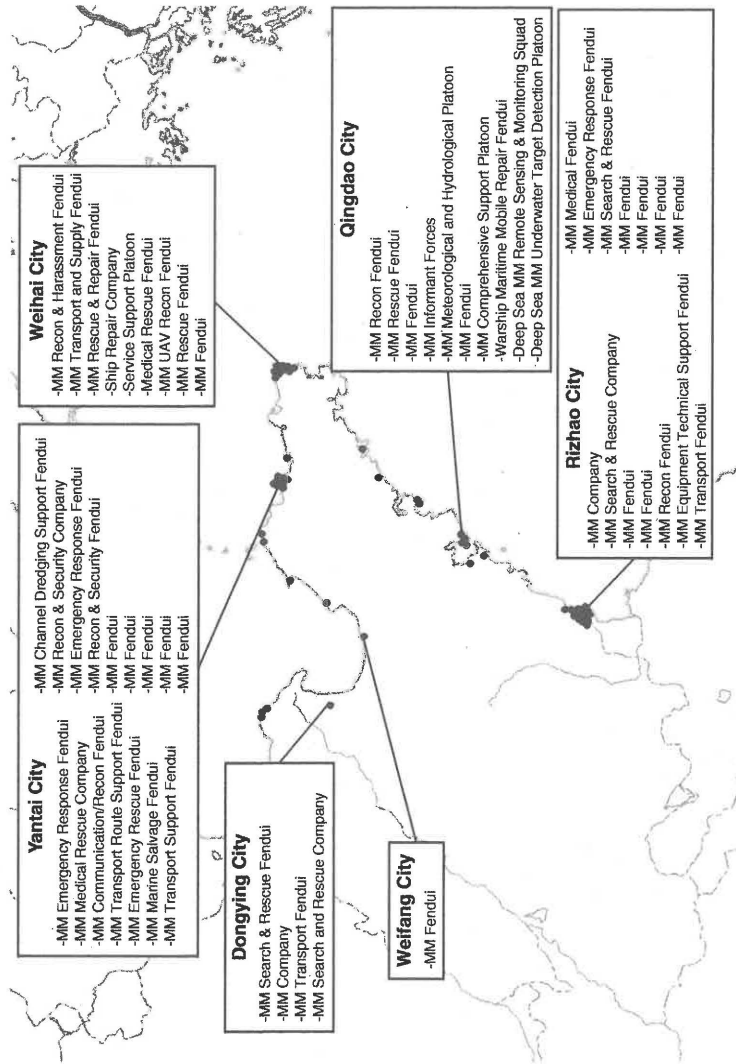


Figure 4.3 Map of Shandong Province Maritime Militia units.
Source: Conor M. Kennedy.³⁰

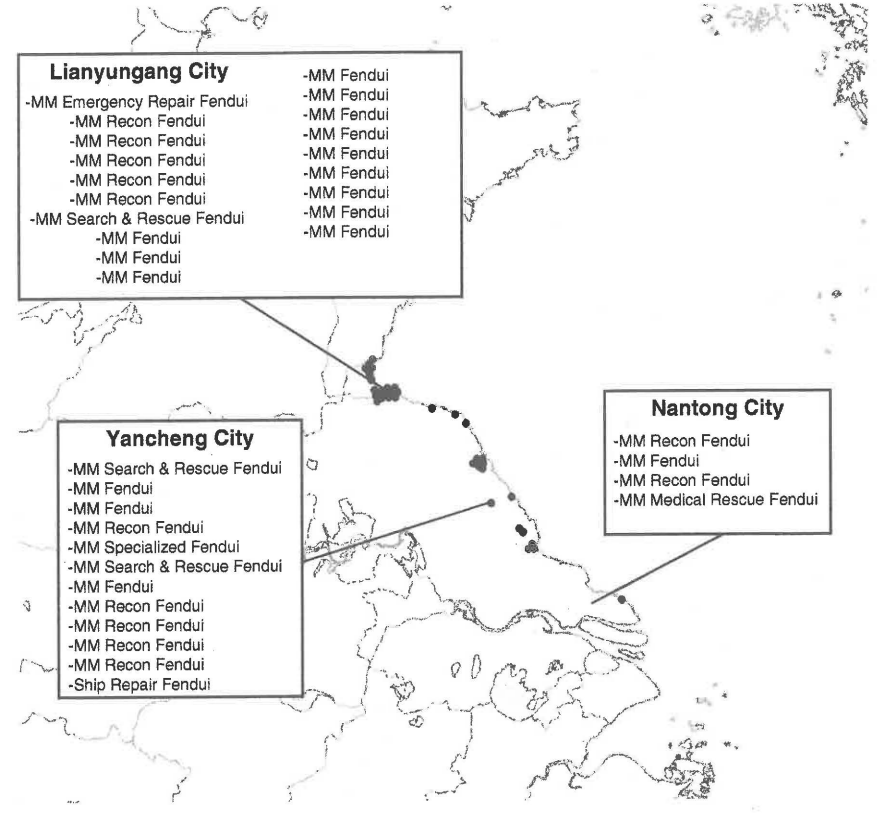


Figure 4.4 Map of Jiangsu Province Maritime Militia units (selected).
Source: Conor M. Kennedy.³⁵

Jiangsu Provincial Military District

The rest of the Yellow Sea's western shore lies along Jiangsu province. For the purposes of this study, Maritime Militia units along the Yangtze River have been omitted in order to focus on those adjacent to the Yellow Sea. The municipalities of Lianyungang, Yancheng, and Nantong in total have 36 identified Maritime Militia units, as shown in Figure 4.4 (above). Many of these are reconnaissance units formed in marine fisheries operations, with many more likely unreported. For example, the Ganyu District People's Armed Forces Department held a 12-day collective training event for 100 "core personnel" (骨干) in the Maritime Militia reconnaissance units from multiple townships.³⁶ The term "core," or "backbone," refers to key personnel in each respective militia unit, typically squad, platoon, and even company leaders or distinguished members of those units. The training of such personnel is designed to trickle down to the personnel of their

respective units.³⁷ Ganyu District's 100 core personnel would therefore represent a sizable reconnaissance force. In another area of Jiangsu province, Jiaoxie Township alone has 119 fishing vessels in its Maritime Militia reconnaissance forces.³⁸

Dafeng district of Yancheng city offers an example of how even small Maritime Militia units can be quite versatile and self-sufficient by organizational design. The single *fendui* located there has the following components: a maritime transport company, a ship equipment repair platoon, a maritime materials and fuel platoon, the maritime search-and-rescue 1st company, and the maritime search-and-rescue 2nd company.³⁹ As a whole, the district uses the generic "Maritime Militia *fendui*" term. This suggests that many of the generic units listed in the above sections likely have a number of sub-components designed to sustain and support the unit's operations at sea.

In total, the author has identified 177 individual Maritime Militia units established within the last 10 years along the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea. The bulk of these forces operate on fishing vessels. Fishing fleets from the above provinces largely operate in the Yellow Sea and the Bohai Gulf. Official PRC figures show the majority of marine products caught by fisheries in Shandong, Liaoning, Jiangsu, and Tianjin are from the Yellow Sea, with the exception of Hebei province, which catches most of its fish from the Bohai Gulf. The fleets in Shandong Province account for the largest catch of fish in the Yellow Sea at over 1.3 million tons in 2019, followed distantly by Jiangsu province.⁴⁰ People's Armed Forces Departments take a number of measures, such as increased communications, the building of Party organizations within units, and training programs to ensure that militia units remain ready to report what they see and respond if necessary at sea.⁴¹ Thus, there is significant potential for the PRC to rapidly conduct large-scale gray zone operations in the Yellow Sea by deploying numerous militia assets to a target area.

Some specialized units not reflected in the above survey may still be present in the Maritime Militia forces. For example, specialized Maritime Militia units from the Qinhuangdao Military Sub-District (MSD) in Hebei province were highlighted during the National Militia Military Training and Evaluation Outline Pilot Training Work Conference in August 2006. Warship technical support, torpedo testing, marine obstacle clearance, maritime reconnaissance, and transport units were formed primarily from technological posts and retired PLAN personnel, focusing on support for PLAN combat operations during wartime.⁴² It is unclear if these specialized units still exist; however, there would be little reason for the provincial military district to discontinue them under the current development guidelines for Maritime Militia.

There are also a number of under-recognized capabilities in China's merchant marine. Not noted in the above maps, there are multiple Maritime Militia units established in marine enterprises operating tugboats. These were found in Rizhao and Cangzhou City and are likely present in each of the major ports examined.⁴³ These are typically referred to generically as

"Maritime Militia *fendui*." Tugboats and their crews are generally more experienced due to the specialized skills involved in harbor operations and marine towing. The busy traffic of China's ports and regular coordination with pilots and maritime law enforcement makes them well-suited to the types of coordination required by diverse sea forces in gray zone operations. Other unique units include salvage, dredging, and even Maritime Militia search-and-rescue units comprising Maritime Safety Administration volunteers.⁴⁴

Scenarios for Major Maritime Militia Operations

The above section demonstrates the continued development of Maritime Militia forces in provinces along the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea. However, the absence of major contentious maritime disputes in the Yellow Sea begs the question: what purposes might they serve beyond combat operational support?

Maritime Militia operating in this region are tasked with defending China's maritime borders. One interesting source from a senior colonel at the Dalian military subdistrict examines the role of the Maritime Militia in border blockade and control operations at sea.⁴⁵ This scenario involves responding to a neighboring coastal state under enemy invasion and experiencing instability with a coordinated operation of naval, border defense, People's Armed Police, and Maritime Militia forces to handle large numbers of refugees, armed personnel, and military and political leaders entering PRC-claimed waters. Without stating it outright, the senior colonel is quite clearly discussing a potential collapse of order in North Korea due to military conflict.⁴⁶

Maritime Militia would fulfill the following missions in this scenario. Maritime Militia reconnaissance *fendui* and island outpost militia would conduct joint early warning reconnaissance, positioning themselves at sea and in patrolling areas under the guise of fishing. These forces and coastal defense militia would also coordinate with PLA and Coast Guard forces to control the entry of personnel and vessels to maintain order at sea. They would stop and process incoming refugees, military and political leaders, and disarmed military forces to be brought to refugee camps and military monitored areas. Maritime Militia would also help keep navigational channels clear for the Navy in the area of blockade, guide incoming vessels toward processing areas, and pursue and stop vessels ignoring directions. They would facilitate the movement of troops and materials to support these efforts. And finally they would assist the Navy in ensuring this hypothetical nation's military does not attempt to force its way across the blockade zone. This operation would feature a range of military and government forces from Maritime Militia to PLA Air Force air support working jointly to strictly control China's maritime border with North Korea. It is also noted that should a third party force attempt to pursue vessels fleeing into PRC

waters, the Maritime Militia would assist the PLA in driving those third-party forces away.⁴⁷

This is the classic “joint military, law enforcement, militia defense” model that is practiced along China’s maritime border with Vietnam. The PLA, CCG, and militia regularly conduct large-scale joint defense exercises in the Gulf of Tonkin and South China Sea.⁴⁸ Instability across the border with North Korea is a major concern, and the PRC aims to ensure it can maintain its maritime border security should any major crises arise. If the PRC had to carry out a maritime blockade and control operation along the maritime border, it might also signify intent to keep China out of participation in the events that caused instability.

In the South China Sea, the author has documented four types of gray zone operations actively performed by Maritime Militia forces in recent years. These include presence; harassment and sabotage; escort; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.⁴⁹ Activities by Maritime Militia in these mission areas are often broadly framed as maritime rights protection missions. Numerous sources on units operating in the Yellow Sea describe maritime rights protection as part of their responsibilities, suggesting that similar tactics could be employed in maritime disputes there. For example, reconnaissance and presence missions are prominent in Jiangsu province’s Maritime Militia. In 2015, the province held collective training and at-sea exercises for all its Maritime Militia core personnel, focusing on reconnaissance and security, regular demonstration of sovereignty, and maritime rescue.⁵⁰ Such “Maritime Militia recon and security *fendui*” (侦察警戒分队) are a common form of organization typically using fishing vessels to exploit their large numbers, innocuous appearance, and ability to loiter and follow foreign targets under the guise of fishing.⁵¹ These types of units are also used to harass foreign ships, examples of which will be examined in Devin Thorne’s subsequent chapter in this volume. These reconnaissance units are ideal for maintaining more regular presence at sea and covering broad areas.

For major events at sea, a diverse array of Maritime Militia units will likely be deployed. In escort and protection missions, Maritime Militia personnel coordinate with the Coast Guard and other maritime law enforcement to ensure the security of Chinese operations in disputed areas. In particularly sensitive or tense situations, Maritime Militia forces can be surged into the surrounding areas to form security zones by intercepting any approaching vessels. The best example of this was the escort mission of the HYSY-981 drilling rig into Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. PLA Military Region authorities mobilized dozens of Maritime Militia units from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan provinces to sustain a security zone around the rig. A mix of Maritime Militia units on fishing vessels, tugboats, and merchant ships were sent to maintain the security zone for over two months.⁵² Should events require a similar response within the Yellow Sea, the Northern Theater Command would have numerous Maritime Militia units from multiple provinces at its disposal to assert control and provide security for important objectives without having to rely on the PLA Navy. The diverse

mix of units present in commercial maritime enterprises and the numerous units formed from the fishing fleets, as documented above, could easily sustain a large volume of vessels in a disputed zone. The number of vessels and capabilities available could also permit more aggressive tactics and acceptance of casualty risks. Marine casualties from ramming actions could be towed back to port by tugboats and salvage crews, and medical units could quickly treat wounded personnel at sea. If needed, supply and refueling units could help sustain the fleets over weeks.

Many of the new type militia units discussed in this chapter present additional questions. It is still unclear exactly how they would fit in a gray zone scenario in the Yellow Sea. Many sources indicate they are first and foremost designed to support PLA operations. These same supporting functions could also easily be leveraged to support coercive actions at sea by other sea forces. Growing use of UAVs by militia forces, for instance, could enhance their ability to surveil and harass foreign ships from a distance.

Conclusion

Maritime Militia forces have made important contributions to PRC objectives through gray zone operations in areas such as the South China Sea. PLA decision-makers clearly judge that they fill a unique role and help advance PRC objectives without triggering an outright war. As one senior colonel in charge of building Maritime Militia forces notes, “in peace [the Maritime Militia] not only play a role in declaring sovereignty, fighting harassment by foreign enemies, and rights protection security; they also serve as a buffer for war (战争缓冲器) to create a peaceful, ordered, and stable maritime security environment.”⁵³ With the heavy requirement for maritime rights protection missions in the South China Sea, it is likely the PRC desires a preservation of the *status quo* in areas such as the Yellow Sea. Nonetheless, the Yellow Sea remains a strategically critical area for China to assert maritime power due to historical tensions; attention to North Korean issues; and the American, Japanese, and South Korean alliances in Northeast Asia. Those in the PLA recognize the importance of the Yellow Sea to China’s overall security despite the comparative lack of disputes there.⁵⁴ Thus, Maritime Militia forces in the region continue to develop and grow to remain capable of guarding against challenges to China’s claimed maritime rights and interests as well as supporting PLA combat operations if called upon to do so.

Notes

- 1 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020* (Department of Defense, 2020), 44, 71, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

- 2 For a more in-depth examination of the PRC's strategy to become a maritime power, see "China's Maritime Power Ambition," chapter 1 in: Michael A. McDevitt, *China as a Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 1-18.
- 3 "盛斌: 加快构建具有中国特色的新型国防动员体系" ["Sheng Bin: Accelerate Construction of a New-Type National Defense Mobilization System with Chinese Characteristics"], 新华社 [Xinhua], March 10, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-03/10/c_128787473.htm.
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- 5 刘新 [Liu Xin], "面向复杂多变海洋安全环境着力抓好海上民兵维权准备" ["Focus on Grasping Maritime Militia Rights Protection Preparation in a Complex Dynamic Maritime Security Environment"], 国防 [National Defense], 5 (2015): 17.
- 6 For a comprehensive review of various public writings on China's Maritime Militia, see Andrew S. Erickson, "The China Maritime Militia Bookshelf: YouTube Presentation, SECNAV Guidance, Music Video—& More!!" AndrewErickson.com, May 25, 2022, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2022/05/the-china-maritime-militia-bookshelf-youtube-presentation-secnav-guidance-music-video-more/>.
- 7 民兵工作条例 [Militia Work Regulations], 1991, Articles 4-8.
- 8 One example can be found at the county-level Zhuanghe City, whose Maritime Militia *fendui* comprises six smaller *fendui* from multiple districts of the city. "庄河市举行海上民兵分队军事训练总结表彰大会" ["Zhuanghe City Holds Meeting on Completion and Commendations for Maritime Militia Fendui Militia Training"], 庄河发布 [Zhuanghe Release], October 19, 2019, <https://kuai.bao.qq.com/s/20191019A0LOH400?refer=spider>
- 9 "河东海上民兵训练" ["Hedong Maritime Militia Training"], 美篇 [Meipian], November 23, 2018, <https://www.meipian.cn/1r98i7v0>; "十一农场武装部扎实组织骨干民兵训练, 增强骨干民兵素质, 强化民兵队伍建设" ["The People's Armed Forces Department of the 11th Farm Organizes Primary Militia Training, Strengthening Primary Militia Qualities and Enhancing Militia Force Construction"], 十一农场 [11th Farm], June 22, 2020, <http://www.caofeidian.gov.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=397&id=22745>.
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