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## Gray Forces in Blue Territory

### *The Grammar of Chinese Maritime Militia Gray Zone Operations*

AS CHINA'S THIRD SEA FORCE, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) is a key instrument Chinese leaders use to defend and advance the country's maritime claims. Evolving from a tool of necessity when the Chinese navy was weak to a tool of choice for China's more recent assertive posture, the maritime militia has been involved in multiple incidents at sea. However, to date there has been no systematic effort to define the range of dispute-related operations it performs.

This chapter attempts to fill that gap. Part one of the chapter outlines the considerations guiding Beijing's use of militia in its dispute strategy. China could simply rely on its powerful navy and coast guard to pursue its claims. For political and operational reasons, however, the militia has important roles to play. Part two examines the specific types of gray zone operations the militia conducts. These include presence; harassment and sabotage; escort; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. It discusses the functions and tactics that characterize each type of operation and highlights known cases in which these operations have been performed.

## Gray Zone Advantages

In peacetime, the maritime militia serves Chinese dispute strategy. China is a party to three broad categories of disputes: over territorial features, over the shape and extent of zones of jurisdiction, and over coastal state authorities to regulate foreign activities—above all, military activities—in its jurisdictional waters. The first two categories involve China's neighbors: Japan and Taiwan in the East China Sea, and the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Indonesia in the South China Sea. The third category primarily involves the United States.<sup>1</sup> The PAFMM plays important roles in defending and advancing China's position in all three types of disputes. Their actions are often framed as efforts to "safeguard China's maritime rights and interests."

The vast majority of China's maritime militiamen are part-time personnel: commercial mariners, often fishermen, who can be mobilized as paramilitary personnel to serve the state functions for which they train and are compensated. Despite serving under the command authority of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and sometimes also the China Coast Guard (CCG), the PAFMM is generally unarmed when conducting peacetime rights protection operations, and its members frequently operate in civilian guise. This dual identity—as civilians in day jobs and as soldiers when activated for national tasking—makes them uniquely suited to serve key functions in China's dispute strategy. Beginning in Sansha City in 2015, an even more professional, militarized full-time maritime militia contingent has emerged with easily identified vessels optimized for nonlethal coercion.

Use of militia forces is guided both by political and operational considerations. Politically, militia forces can vigorously pursue China's claims without opening the country to criticism for gunboat diplomacy or justifying foreign escalation (or intervention). When not in uniform, their activities can be framed as private actions. This perceived deniability, however implausible, makes them ideal instruments for pursuing national aims in the gray zone between war and peace.<sup>2</sup> Senior Colonel Chen Qingsong, the head of the Zhanjiang City Xiashan District's People's Armed Forces department (PAFD), describes the role of the PAFMM as a means of preventing war: "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. [They are] an effective means for ensuring implementation of the national strategy of strategically managing the ocean."<sup>3</sup>

While in many ways inferior to China's other two sea services (the navy and coast guard), the maritime militia also offers unique operational capabilities. Militia forces tend to operate smaller and more maneuverable vessels, which are better equipped for plying shallow waters and engaging small foreign vessels. Moreover, with their blue hulls far more numerous than China's gray- and white-hulled assets, militia forces can cover much broader swaths of ocean, enhancing presence and bolstering maritime domain awareness.

## Operations

The PAFMM conducts several distinct types of operations to defend and advance China's maritime claims. These operations vary depending on the type of claim involved. However, most generally fall into four broad categories: presence; harassment and sabotage; escort; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).

## Presence

The presence mission sits at the heart of the maritime militia's rights protection function. It involves sending militia forces to disputed waters in the guise of civilian mariners, generally fishermen, to show the flag and uphold a narrative of Chinese ownership. Their presence in disputed waters also justifies the presence of other elements of Chinese sea power, especially the CCG, ostensibly sent to manage their activities and ensure their security. Together, they present foreign leaders with the threat of action, thereby supporting Beijing's coercive diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

For members of China's maritime militia, the presence mission, often described as "declaring sovereignty" (宣示主权), dovetails with their regular employment in the fishing industry. The industry as a whole, especially those segments operating in disputed areas, receives fuel subsidies and vessel construction and upgrade incentives. Maritime militiamen also enjoy access to increasingly robust government and military support that can mitigate market and catch performance volatility.<sup>5</sup> This mix of economic and social supports for the maritime militia enables China to insert large numbers of PAFMM vessels into disputed waters.

Geography and the circumstances of China's disputes make presence missions in the East China Sea and South China Sea differ greatly. In the South China Sea, maritime militia forces routinely sail to most, if not all, Chinese-claimed areas to assert fishing rights. In 2013 the head of Guangzhou military

region's mobilization department, Senior Colonel He Zhixiang, outlined the goal of having maritime militia deployed to "all areas within the nine-dash line."<sup>6</sup> Hainan military district (MD) commander Zhang Jian echoed this goal in his writings, stating that the PAFMM ensures that China continuously maintains fishing vessels in its waters, "achieving regular presence and regular demonstration of rights."<sup>7</sup>

Militia forces also play an important role in manifesting China's claims to disputed land features, especially during crises. Working in conjunction with the CCG, militiamen maintained presence at Scarborough Reef throughout the 2012 standoff, helping to pressure the Philippines to accede to Beijing's demands.<sup>8</sup>

They played a similar role at the Second Thomas Shoal in early 2014. Beijing decided to pressure Manila by harassing supply shipments to the *Sierra Madre*. Most foreign press focused on the role played by the CCG. However, elements of Fugang Fisheries Company's maritime militia were also present as part of this campaign of intimidation. On February 27, 2014, seven fishing vessels and a supply ship departed Sanya, arriving off the Second Thomas Shoal on March 3. Receiving approval from the CCG, elements of this unit approached to within one nautical mile of the Philippine outpost.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, militia forces were used in an apparent effort to pressure the Philippines not to build civilian facilities on a sand bar near Thitu Island in the Spratlys. Starting on August 13, 2017, a combined force of Chinese navy, coast guard, and Sansha maritime militia ships moved close to Sandy Cay, just west of the Philippine-occupied feature. Satellite imagery shows that maritime militia vessels maintained their presence well into October. One Philippine official claimed the PAFMM also prevented a ship from the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources from accessing the area on August 15.<sup>10</sup>

Presence near disputed land features also occurs routinely. The Tanmen militiamen that played such a critical role in the 2012 seizure of Scarborough Reef have been replaced by a full-time professional militia force. Established in 2015 under the guise of Sansha Fisheries Development Company, Sansha's maritime militia is systematically employed to maintain continuous presence near many Chinese-claimed land features in the South China Sea, including Scarborough Reef and the Spratlys. Operating large, steel-hulled vessels, they conduct rotational deployments, making them more akin to naval forces than fishermen. Members of this force deploy from multiple ports around Hainan at the same time, with other forces returning at regular forty-five-day intervals.<sup>11</sup>

When conducting routine presence missions, China's maritime militia forces seek to buttress the illusion of normal Chinese fishermen operating in

Chinese waters. There is evidence that they are succeeding, even in the case of the Sansha maritime militia—by far the most professional of China's militia units. In an April 2017 report, for example, Reuters highlighted Chinese allowance of small-scale foreign fishing at Scarborough Reef. The report described a “cordial coexistence” between the Philippine and Chinese fishermen but contained images of what were in fact Sansha maritime militia vessels, dwarfing the Philippine fishermen's bamboo outriggers. It stated that China enhanced its coast guard and fishing fleet presence but made no mention of China's maritime militia.<sup>12</sup>

The presence mission of the PAFMM is far less prominent in the East China Sea. A key function of the maritime militia in China's gray zone campaign is to assert Chinese fishing rights in disputed areas, but China and Japan maintain a fisheries agreement that covers a large swath of disputed waters.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the East China Sea lacks the plethora of territorial disputes that characterize the gray zone arena of the South China Sea.

Still, the maritime militia has played a role in China's strategy for asserting its sovereignty claims to the Senkakus. The first instance can be traced to 1978, during a period when China and Japan were negotiating a treaty of friendship. That April, approximately 108 fishing vessels from Shanghai approached the Senkakus, 16 of which entered the 12-nautical-mile territorial sea. The conventional explanation for this incident is that China was using the fleet to pressure Japan. However, some Chinese writings on this episode suggest that domestic politics were to blame. Indeed, the national conference on militia work in July of that year was held to rectify issues brought on by the Gang of Four's use of the militia and to reassert party control.<sup>14</sup>

More recently, in August 2016 hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels appeared near the Senkaku Islands under the escort of CCG cutters, raising questions about militia involvement. A small portion of the fishing fleet entered the territorial sea of the Senkakus beginning on August 5, and on August 9 the Japanese told a total of twenty-five fishing vessels to leave.<sup>15</sup> To the extent that all Chinese fishing vessels operating near the Senkakus are heavily subsidized and must first obtain Chinese government approval, their move into the territorial sea was a state-directed action.<sup>16</sup> But what evidence is there of militia participation?

As Adam Liff points out in his chapter in this volume, much evidence is circumstantial. In the days after China's annual fishing ban was lifted on August 1, 2016, minister of defense General Chang Wanquan made public visits to PAFMM units in two cities in China's Zhejiang province (Ningbo and Wenzhou). During a speech, he called for China to “earnestly research and

explore” the topic of fighting and winning a maritime people's war. He emphasized that they “must energetically adapt to the characteristics of the maritime rights protection struggle; understand the patterns of modern war; and innovate and develop the strategies and tactics of Maritime People's War.”<sup>17</sup> Shortly thereafter, hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels left their harbors and steamed for the Senkakus, escorted by a host of CCG ships.

Moreover, a number of PAFMM units were simultaneously engaged in major training activities, including joint training with the Chinese navy. Just as China's fishing fleets left their harbors, elements of the navy's North, South, and East Sea fleets were conducting red-versus-blue exercises in the East China Sea under the direct command of then-commander Admiral Wu Shengli. After having just hosted General Chang, the Ningbo military subdistrict was extremely busy coordinating its maritime militia to support these naval exercises.<sup>18</sup> Other maritime militia units were actively training and preparing in the days leading up to these events.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, periods such as this—just when the annual moratorium is being lifted—are the prescribed time for conducting PAFMM training activities, since fishing fleets tend to be concentrated in one area.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, it is unclear what this heightened training activity implies for the events that unfolded near the Senkakus.

The most convincing evidence of militia involvement comes from a statement by an individual in Fujian province's fishing industry, claiming there were more than one hundred maritime militia among the fishing fleet near the Senkakus. Speaking to a reporter from Japan's *Sankei Shimbun*, this anonymous source said that the militia's task was to command the nonmilitia fishing vessels and coordinate with maritime law enforcement, ensuring an organic control structure within the fishing fleet.<sup>21</sup> This description is consistent with known militia functions in rights protection operations. Moreover, as explained in the introduction, the Pentagon's 2018 China report officially confirmed maritime militia involvement in the August 2016 Senkaku operations.

### Harassment and Sabotage

Chinese militia forces also conduct missions to obstruct the activities of foreign vessels operating in Chinese-claimed waters. The purpose is to physically assert China's maritime claims through nonlethal methods such as engaging in dangerous maneuvering near other vessels and firing high-powered water cannon. Common targets include foreign survey and surveillance ships and fishing vessels.

In the case of foreign survey and surveillance ships, militia forces may block their regular course headings or attempt to damage the cables towed

Exhibit 10-1. Major Harassment and Sabotage Incidents with Confirmed or Presumed People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia Involvement

Date	Incident
September 2002	The towed array cable of the oceanographic survey ship USNS <i>Bowditch</i> is struck and damaged by a Chinese fishing vessel 100 kilometers off China's coast in the Yellow Sea. Presumed militia involvement.
March 8, 2009	The ocean surveillance vessel USNS <i>Impeccable</i> is harassed and impeded by two Chinese fishing vessels from a Sanya-based fishing company seventy-five miles south of Hainan Province. Confirmed militia involvement.
April 7–8, 2009	Chinese fishing vessels reportedly approach the ocean surveillance vessels USNS <i>Victorious</i> and <i>Loyal</i> as they operated in waters between 140 and 200 miles off China's coast. Presumed militia involvement.
May 1, 2009	Two Chinese fishing vessels force USNS <i>Victorious</i> to stop 170 miles off China's coast in the Yellow Sea. Presumed militia involvement.
June 9, 2011	A Chinese fishing vessel attempting sabotage becomes ensnared in the towed cables of Vietnam's <i>Viking II</i> seismic survey ship near Vanguard Bank in the Spratlys. Presumed militia involvement.
December 2, 2012	Two Chinese fishing vessels cut the towed cables of PetroVietnam's <i>Binh Minh 02</i> seismic survey ship forty-three nautical miles southeast of Con Co Island, just outside the Gulf of Tonkin. Presumed militia involvement.
July 2014	Maritime militia vessels from Jiangsu province "surround" the USNS <i>Howard O. Lorenzen</i> , taking video footage and reporting its location to the People's Liberation Army. Confirmed militia involvement.

behind them. Deployed cables are vulnerable to sabotage due to the slow speed these vessels must maintain during data collection to prevent acoustic noise resulting from resistance as the streamers pass through sea water.<sup>22</sup> Exhibit 10-1 is a partial list of recent incidents in which foreign survey and surveillance ships were harassed by Chinese fishing vessels known or presumed to be crewed by PAFMM personnel.<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes militiamen target foreign fishing vessels. With relatively minor investments in large, steel-hulled fishing vessels, Chinese authorities can cheaply employ the PAFMM to assert control over foreign fishing activities in Chinese-claimed waters. Tactics include intimidation, verbal warnings, and aggressive shouldering or even ramming.<sup>24</sup> As Hainan MD commander Zhang

Jian outlined, one of the key roles of the maritime militia is to "pit civilians against civilians" (以民对民), thereby minimizing the risk of escalation.<sup>25</sup>

The Chinese media frequently reports on the PAFMM's front-line efforts at defending Chinese waters from so-called rights infringement (侵权) by foreign fishing vessels. For example, one maritime militia member recalled his service in the Crescent Group of the Paracels in 2015, when he and other militia personnel assisted the coast guard in boarding a foreign fishing vessel that refused to turn away. When a fight erupted, he was injured while attempting to subdue the foreign—presumably Vietnamese—captain.<sup>26</sup>

Obstructing foreign fishermen is an important mission of the Sansha maritime militia, especially those stationed at militia outposts in the Paracels. Because of the sensitivity of these operations, Sansha militiamen must check in with and receive approval from their garrison command on Woody Island before they can engage and repulse foreign fishermen. In this function, militia personnel may wear their military uniforms. For example, the Sansha maritime militia reportedly thwarted attempts by foreign fishermen to land on one of the Paracel Islands in 2014. Chinese reports attributed some of their success to the intimidation factor of camouflage uniforms.<sup>27</sup>

#### Escort

Chinese militia forces are sometimes charged with protecting the operations of Chinese civilian vessels operating in disputed areas. These escort operations have led to numerous sea incidents, especially in the South China Sea. The biggest beneficiaries of these operations are Chinese civilian survey vessels. Militia forces serve as a screening force, protecting these ships from foreign obstruction and guarding their towed cables from potential damage.

The Guangzhou Marine Geologic Survey has employed fishing vessels from the Zhanjiang Yueshui Fisheries Company Ltd. to escort the survey vessels *Tanbao* and *Fendou-4*. It sends personnel to inspect these vessels before departing to ensure they have the requisite safety equipment and that communications gear is functioning properly. In May 2005 the *Fendou-4*, escorted by two fishing vessels from Guangzhou, was confronted by multiple ships of the Republic of China navy during its operations in Taiwan's southwestern exclusive economic zone. Taiwan claimed the *Fendou-4* was mapping the ocean floor for the benefit of the navy's submarine operations. After three days of confrontation, the PRC ships left the area.<sup>28</sup>

The available information does not confirm militia involvement in this incident. However, PAFMM organizations are ideal choices for this escort role as they are held to higher standards than other mariners.<sup>29</sup> For instance,

they must operate capable oceangoing vessels, possess comprehensive communications gear, and employ comparatively more disciplined crews. These advantages are augmented by a mixture of incentives and support by local governments. Party organizations prevalent in militia organizations may also serve as additional channels to connect marine departments and companies with militia organizations.

China's oil and gas industry also employs the PAFMM to escort its growing fleet of seismic survey ships and drilling rigs. Navigational notices issued by the Hainan Maritime Safety Administration show that these escorts occur fairly regularly.<sup>30</sup> In general, regular escort missions for survey ships involve at least two maritime militia vessels. For example, four PAFMM vessels protected twelve cables towed by the seismic survey ship *Hai Yang Shi You* (HYSY) 721 from July 26 to November 10, 2016, during its survey of undisputed waters to the southeast of Sanya. However, the number of PAFMM escort vessels increases greatly when survey or drilling activities occur in disputed waters. During the 2014 HYSY 981 incident, dozens of maritime militia vessels were deployed for the duration of the oil rig's work. Sanya City's Fugang Fisheries Company alone dispatched twenty-nine PAFMM vessels.<sup>31</sup> Exhibit 10-2 details significant escort operations conducted in the South China Sea.

Because of its scale and intensity, the May-July 2014 escort operation to protect the HYSY 981 drilling platform merits special attention. Overseen by the PLA's Guangzhou military region (now the southern theater command), this operation involved PAFMM organizations in the Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan MDs. Militia forces received mobilization orders to sustain a defensive perimeter around the drilling platform as Vietnamese maritime law enforcement and civilian vessels attempted to challenge the Chinese presence.<sup>32</sup> China's maritime militia—working in concert with CCG forces—successfully expelled numerous Vietnamese fishing vessels and ultimately helped to prevent the Vietnamese from reaching the rig.<sup>33</sup>

The PAFMM's actions to defend the HYSY 981 drilling platform directly correspond with the CCG's description of the role of fishing vessels in escort missions. Writing in September 2015, a lecturer at the maritime police academy in Ningbo included tugboats and fishing vessels among the forces that can augment the coast guard's escort capabilities. Specifically, fishing vessels are "responsible for reconnaissance and security in the seas surrounding escort operations" as well as additional logistics functions to sustain escorting forces.<sup>34</sup>

Exhibit 10-2. Major Maritime Militia Escort Operations in the South China Sea

Date	Operation	Escort Vessels
May 22, 2005	Escort of China Geologic Survey Vessel <i>Fendou-4</i> in waters 110 nautical miles southwest of Gaoxiang, Taiwan	Two fishing vessels from Guangzhou ( <i>Suiyu</i> 140 and <i>Suiyu</i> 220); presumed militia involvement
Mid-April 2013 (30 days)	Escort of China National Offshore Oil Company survey vessel in the Zhongjiannan Basin, near Triton Island in the Paracels	Unknown number of maritime militia vessels from Sanya Fugang Fisheries Co., Ltd.
May 4–July 15, 2014	Escort of HYSY 981 oil rig in the Zhongjiannan Basin near Triton Island	Dozens of maritime militia vessels from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan provinces
March 14, 2017	Escort of <i>Tanbao</i> surveying ship in the Paracels	Two maritime militia vessels from Guangdong ( <i>Yuezhanyang</i> 03022 and <i>Yuexiayu</i> 90081)*

\*See <https://twitter.com/rdmartinson88/status/841661528701050880/photo/1>. *Tanbao* was previously obstructed by Vietnamese forces because of its operations in the Western Paracels. Ryan D. Martinson, "Shepherds of the South Seas," *Survival* 58, no. 3 (2016): 199–200, 211. See also "Nation Protests after Violation by Chinese Ship," *Vietnam News*, August 9, 2011, <http://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/214173/nation-protests-after-violation-by-chinese-ship.html#wVm6FUKRk0483rYA.97>.

### Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

A major function of China's maritime militia is to track the movements of foreign vessels operating "illegally" in Chinese-claimed waters. This ISR mission supports China's dispute strategy by providing leaders with information needed for effective tactical- and strategic-level decisionmaking. Militia forces are particularly useful because they are extremely numerous and can collect intelligence more discreetly than military and coast guard assets.

The militia has a long history performing ISR missions. These operations seem to have been common during the Cold War. For instance, Li Beishu, a Chinese fisherman and maritime militia member from Sanya City, recalled his experience tracking a U.S. "spy ship" in 1973. Armed with rifles and operating on PLA orders, Li's platoon monitored the vessel's activities for several days. According to Li, the PLA sent the maritime militia to avoid unnecessary trouble, stating "a conflict would easily erupt if the military were sent directly to approach this vessel."<sup>35</sup> Other examples are cited in exhibit 10-3.<sup>36</sup>

Exhibit 10-3. Known Cases of Maritime Militia Intelligence Collection Operations during the Cold War

Date	Militia Enterprise	Intelligence Yield
1962-84	Shanghai Marine Fisheries Company	2,292 sea and air intelligence reports provided 1,985 instances of recovering foreign military materials and aircraft wreckage, totaling 4,461 pieces  1965: maritime militia from this company tracked and followed an unnamed foreign navy's electronic surveillance ship operating in the East China Sea
1964-77	Guangxi Beihai City Waisha Fisheries Group	More than 370 reports on foreign military sea and air activities in the Gulf of Tonkin  Recovered more than three thousand "objects" from the water
1970-77	Liaoning Dalian Ocean Fisheries Group Corporation	More than 220 reports, including sightings of foreign naval vessels
1973-84	Zhejiang Province Zhoushan Fisheries Corporation	263 reports  For several days beginning on November 24, 1976, maritime militia from this company surveilled and harassed a foreign destroyer, salvage vessel, and supply ship east of China's Zhoushan Archipelago. Militia reports generate formal diplomatic requests by the foreign ministry.

In the contemporary context, information channels have been established between vessels at sea and the PLA MD system ashore. In many cases, the duty rooms of PAFDs or PLA garrisons receive PAFMM reports directly from individual vessels or dispatches from their parent enterprises.<sup>37</sup> The captains of maritime militia vessels concurrently serve as PAFMM information personnel (海上民兵信息员) who receive advanced training in the use of the Beidou system and reporting protocol.<sup>38</sup> Maritime militia vessels provide these reports using commercially available equipment, such as the Beidou satellite navigation system, marine radios, and satellite and mobile phones. Reports are then evaluated and shared with other relevant actors in the PLA and CCG. These flows of information rely on already existing communications

equipment and channels used and managed by oceanic and marine fisheries departments (海洋渔业部门), unless mission conditions specify otherwise. Instead of expending resources to design new communications channels specifically for maritime militia, the PLA uses already established and efficient fisheries management communications structures to transmit orders to the PAFMM and monitor the positions of militia vessels.<sup>39</sup>

Little is known about the form or content of militia reporting. In 2016 Lianyungang City mobilized more than two thousand PAFMM vessels to conduct "reconnaissance exercises" for the Jiangsu MD. These yielded thirty-six reports of "effective maritime intelligence," twenty-three of which were submitted to the eastern theater command and ten reports to the Jiangsu MD.<sup>40</sup> Passing information through the entire regional chain of command before sharing it with the navy is extremely inefficient. Therefore, more direct reporting channels between the militia and China's other maritime forces are probably established during higher intensity missions that require more rapid information sharing.

One recent example of maritime militia providing valuable intelligence involved the Hai'an militia regiment in Jiangsu province. During a July 2014 training exercise, vessel *Suhai'anyu* 00101 reportedly "discovered" the USNS *Howard O. Lorenzen* missile range instrumentation ship. Unit forces then proceeded to close in, surveilling and filming as they circled the ship. Then-PRC defense minister Chang Wanquan visited this county in May 2017 while on a tour to inspect national defense education work. While there, he met and praised the captain of *Suhai'anyu* 00101 for his actions during this operation.<sup>41</sup> The Hai'an unit has since enlarged its maritime militia force, recruiting 119 fishing vessels into the regiment, "all equipped with advanced radar and the Beidou Satellite Navigation System."<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

The PAFMM allows China to energetically pursue its maritime claims while avoiding many of the escalation, reputational, and other risks that would accompany use of traditionally conspicuous instruments of national power, such as China's navy. This chapter has attempted to classify four types of operations that the PAFMM conducts to support China's position in its maritime disputes. In exploring each type of operation, specific examples of events at sea were identified. Exhibit 10-4 lists these operation types, their primary purposes, and the tactics used to perform them.



Exhibit 10-4. Maritime Militia Operations, Purposes, and Tactics

Operation Type	Primary Purposes	Tactics
Presence	Uphold a narrative of Chinese sovereignty; justify the presence of other sea services (coast guard and navy); support Chinese coercive diplomacy	Sail to and linger in disputed waters; engage in economic activities
Harassment and sabotage	Prevent foreign vessels from using Chinese waters for economic or military purposes	Maneuver dangerously near a foreign vessel; bump and ram; cut towed cables
Escort	Protect Chinese civilian vessels operating in disputed areas	Physically block foreign access to Chinese civilian vessels; bump and ram foreign vessels, as needed
Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance	Provide military and civilian decisionmakers with information about foreign activities in Chinese-claimed waters	Track foreign vessels; sail close to and monitor foreign-occupied features; report observations to People's Liberation Army chain of command

One key conclusion from this study is that all these PAFMM operations have roots in earlier eras. While the disputes have intensified in recent years and material and organizational improvements in the PAFMM continue in step with China's other sea services, the basic operations themselves are not new. Increasing operational frequency and capabilities of the maritime militia, and greater coordination with the navy and coast guard, appear to be recent innovations made to better serve China's more assertive behavior in its maritime disputes.

## Notes

- Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 43–55.
- 杨胜利, 耿跃亭 [Yang Shengli and Geng Yueting], "对加强低强度海上维权国防动员的战略思考" ["The Strategic Thinking of Strengthening National Defense Mobilization for Low-Intensity Maritime Rights Protection"], *国防 [National Defense]* 1 (2017): 29–32.
- 陈青松 [Chen Qingsong], "加强和改进海上民兵应急分队建设之我见" ["My Opinions on Strengthening and Advancing the Construction of Maritime Militia Emergency Response Units"], *国防 [National Defense]* 12 (2014): 35.
- Some Chinese sources describe the maritime militia as operating on the front line in a three-tiered rights protection posture, with coast guard forces on the second line, and the navy on the third line. "三沙市推动军警民联防机制构建三线海上维权格局" ["Sansha City Promotes Military–Law Enforcement Militia Joint Defense Mechanism: Constructs Three-Line Maritime Rights Protection Structure"], *中国新闻网 [China News Net]*, November 21, 2014, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/11-21/6803776.shtml>.
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- Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "Model Maritime Militia: Tanmen's Leading Role in the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal Incident," Center for International Maritime Security, April 21, 2016, <http://cimsec.org/model-maritime-militia-tanmens-leading-role-april-2012-scarborough-shoal-incident/24573>.
- A series of photojournal posts were published June 13–26, 2017, by a reporter recounting his journey with the Fugang Maritime Militia to Second Thomas Shoal. 徐新建 [Xu Xinjian], "跟我一起闯南海" ["Come Break Into the South China Sea with Me"], June 2017, [http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/5Gy6C3Zi\\_Da91zV2N4Lc-g](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/5Gy6C3Zi_Da91zV2N4Lc-g).
- On April 21, 2017, Philippine defense secretary Delfin Lorenzana and forty reporters flew to Thitu Island, where he announced that Philippine construction on the island would begin "within the next few weeks." He later told reporters in November that the Chinese reacted to the Philippine attempt to build fishermen's huts on nearby sandbars. Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte reportedly called off the construction when learning of the Chinese response. "Philippine Defense Chief Delfin Lorenzana Visits Disputed Spratly Island of Thitu," *South China Morning Post*, April 21, 2017, [www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2089563/chinese-coastguard-accused-firing-philippine-fishing](http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2089563/chinese-coastguard-accused-firing-philippine-fishing); "Duterte Stops Building of PH Shelters in South China Sea—Defense Chief," *CNN Philippines*, November 9, 2017, <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/11/08/duterte-disputed-waters.html>.
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# China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations

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*Edited by Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson*



**NAVAL INSTITUTE PRESS**  
*Annapolis, Maryland*

Naval Institute Press  
291 Wood Road  
Annapolis, MD 21402

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
978-1-59114-693-3 (hardcover)  
978-1-59114-695-7 (eBook)

Print editions meet the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).  
Printed in the United States of America.

27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
First printing

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## Foreword

I JUMPED AT THE OPPORTUNITY to provide the foreword for this critically important book. My relationship with the Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) goes back many years to when I was the U.S. Pacific Command director of operations. I appreciated CMSI scholars' critical thinking and rigorous analytical assessment process. During my tour as the Seventh Fleet commander, I fully leveraged their expertise in expanding my thinking and that of my staff and subordinate commanders. This brought immense value to the various initiatives we undertook to better understand the forces at play in the Seventh Fleet area of responsibility among our allies, partners, and friends, as well as our competitors. It should come as no surprise that my relationship with CMSI deepened further when I was assigned as the Pacific Fleet commander.

This volume is a classic CMSI product. Editors Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson have recruited an outstanding team of leading scholars and analysts to examine one of the biggest problems vexing U.S.-China relations: Beijing's destabilizing efforts to reshape the maritime order in East Asia. To achieve its objectives, China has adopted a novel approach. Instead of relying on its increasingly powerful navy, it leverages the asymmetric capabilities of the China Coast Guard and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia to pursue its aims. Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army Navy often lingers nearby, conveying an implied threat to those who would defend their legitimate interests. By effectively leveraging these diverse elements of sea power, China is able to vigorously pursue its objectives while largely avoiding many of the risks and roadblocks hindering revisionist states of the past.

China's general modus operandi is widely recognized and is the subject of frequent commentary in the international press. This volume is unique because it uses original Chinese sources to grapple with deeper questions. How do Chinese leaders, both civilian and military, think about the country's gray zone strategy? How are China's paranaul forces structured to serve Chinese strategy? What are their strengths and weaknesses? With its focus on China's gray zone tactical actions, this volume provides readers with the opportunity to better understand the operational framework within which China's tactical actions are derived and, from that operational understanding, to discern the strategic vision and goals of China's leadership.

A key implication of the authors' analysis is the reality that more can be done to counter China's paranaul challenge. Certainly the United States has the power and the opportunity to respond more effectively. Contributors to this volume have offered some ideas for regaining the initiative in the East and South China seas. I leave you, the reader, to further explore their recommendations. I also commend you to critique them, to argue their merits and deficiencies. Take a position and debate it. This volume should open the door to a more fact-based—and less judgmental—discussion of the challenges China poses in the maritime domain.

As Washington debates the proper response to Beijing's gray zone expansion, there are several things to keep in mind. First, we must not lose sight of the big picture. China's actions are reprehensible not simply because they threaten the maritime rights and freedoms of the United States and its allies and partners. Something far more important is at stake: the health of the entire rules-based order. The current international rules-based order was established in a series of conventions at the close of World War II. The conventions sought to develop a system of rules to govern the inherent frictions that occur among nations large and small. The current maritime legal order grew out of this process. While China has signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), its policies and actions continue to undermine its authority. Beijing's refusal to accept an arbitral tribunal's ruling on important South China Sea issues within the framework of UNCLOS is a case in point. Rather than accept existing international rules and norms in vital parts of the global maritime commons, China is attempting to impose its parochial domestic laws there. Imagine what could happen if other great powers followed suit.

This underscores a critical challenge of our time: we risk taking the current international rules-based system for granted. This system has served us well since the end of World War II, as manifested in the collective growth the world has enjoyed in the ensuing years. Now that order is being challenged by Beijing

as it annexes maritime areas on a grand scale and strives to establish a leading position on the global stage, in part as a revisionist power. We should all recognize the foundational truth: that obstructive actions by a single nation ultimately impede all nations' freedom to use the sea in all their rightful domains.

Second, while this is a peacetime contest, the United States must not neglect the importance of command of the sea. That potential adversaries recognize U.S. resolve and ability to control the sea is essential for effective deterrence. If Washington decides to do more to counter Beijing's gray zone expansion, Chinese leaders must be convinced that the United States is prepared to respond if Chinese actions go too far. As Naval War College professor Alfred Thayer Mahan himself emphasized, the ability to control the sea is a deciding, if not the decisive, factor in the outcome of war. He further advocated that the true target of a naval war was the opposing fleet. As I have expressed in other settings, I believe that this would be a core reality in any conflict in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. China clearly believes this to be the case. We should too.

Lastly, while sea power is an important tool, it is not enough to achieve the outcomes that we desire. Freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) cannot be the foundation of U.S. policy for responding to China's gray zone challenge. While useful for handling cases where national rules are not in compliance with UNCLOS and customary international law, FONOPs tend to give a false sense of meaningful action. They do not represent the whole-of-government approach necessary to blunt the progress China has achieved in changing the current rules-based order.

China itself does not just rely on sea power to achieve its objectives. It is using all elements of national power. China's tactical actions are shaped by an operational framework; informed by a robust, integrated government mosaic of policy; and derived from a well-thought-out, active, assessment-informed national strategy. Their strength comes from the collective sum of all these parts. If it is to be successful, the U.S. government must do the same.

In sum, military actions alone are far from sufficient to counter China's comprehensive approach to developing a new international rules-based order with Chinese characteristics. With Beijing's implied national strategy to strengthen its position on the international stage, only a whole-of-government, whole-of-region response will be effective. That response must grapple directly with China's maritime gray zone operations. Charting a successful course requires fresh thinking, and this innovative volume helps to point the way.

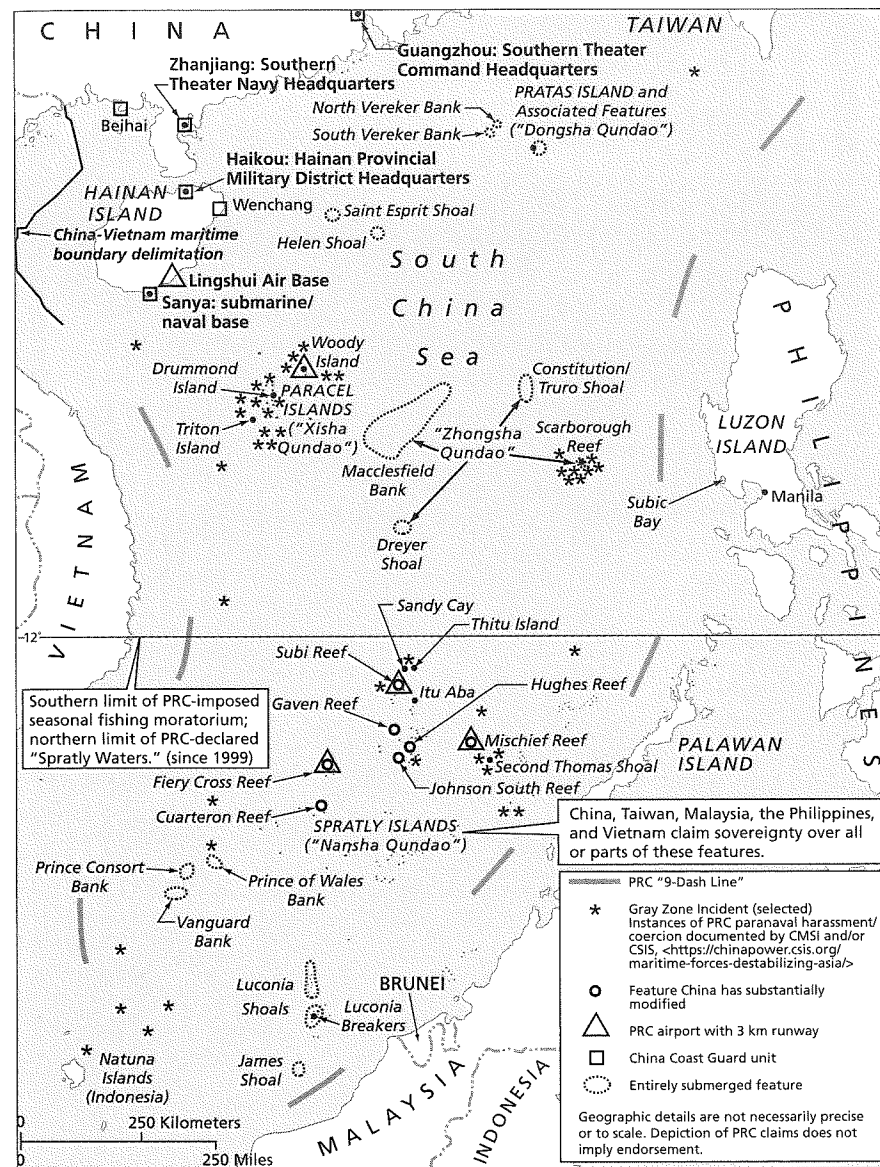
ADM. SCOTT H. SWIFT, U.S. NAVY (RET.)



Exhibit 0-1. China's Coastline and the Near Seas



Exhibit 0-2. China's Claims and Selected Gray Zone Incidents in the South China Sea



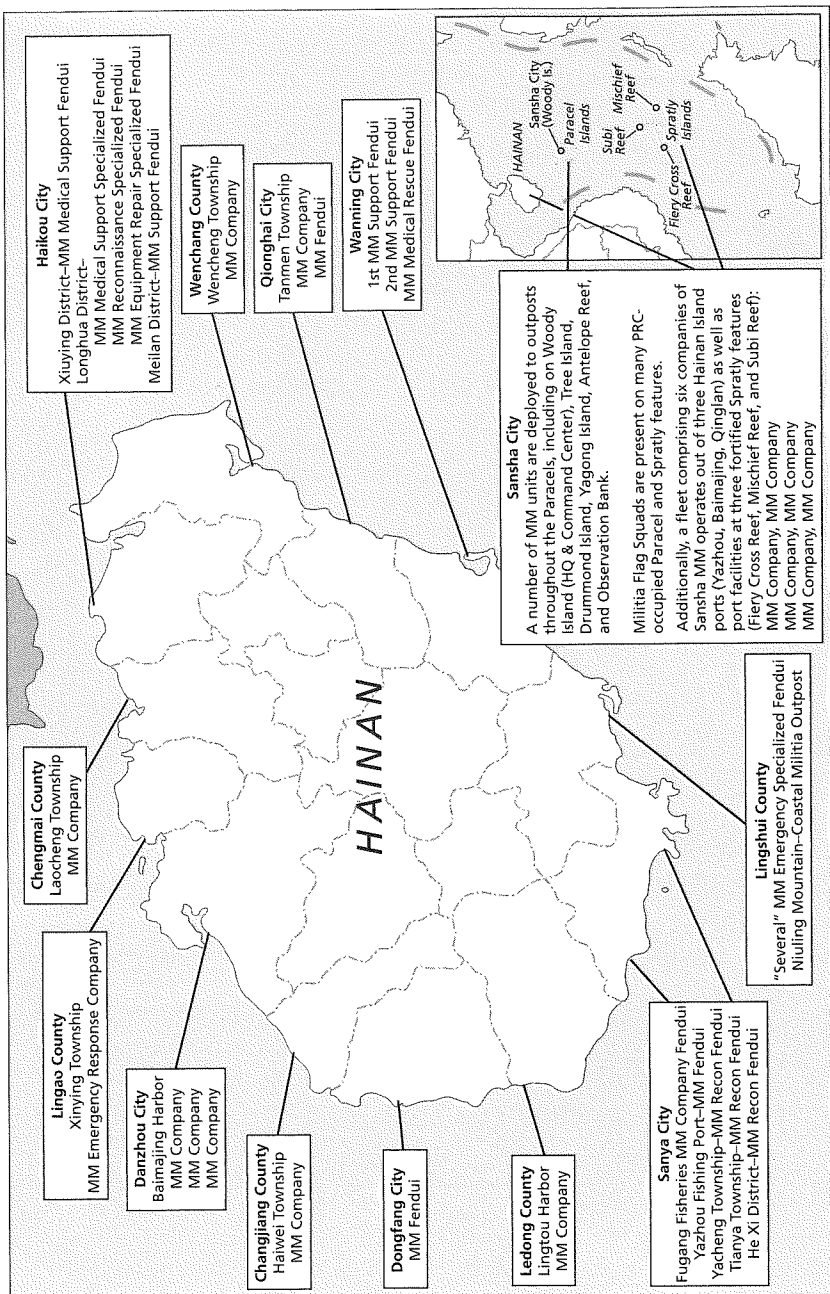


Exhibit 0-4. China's Claims and Selected Gray Zone Incidents in the Yellow and East China Seas

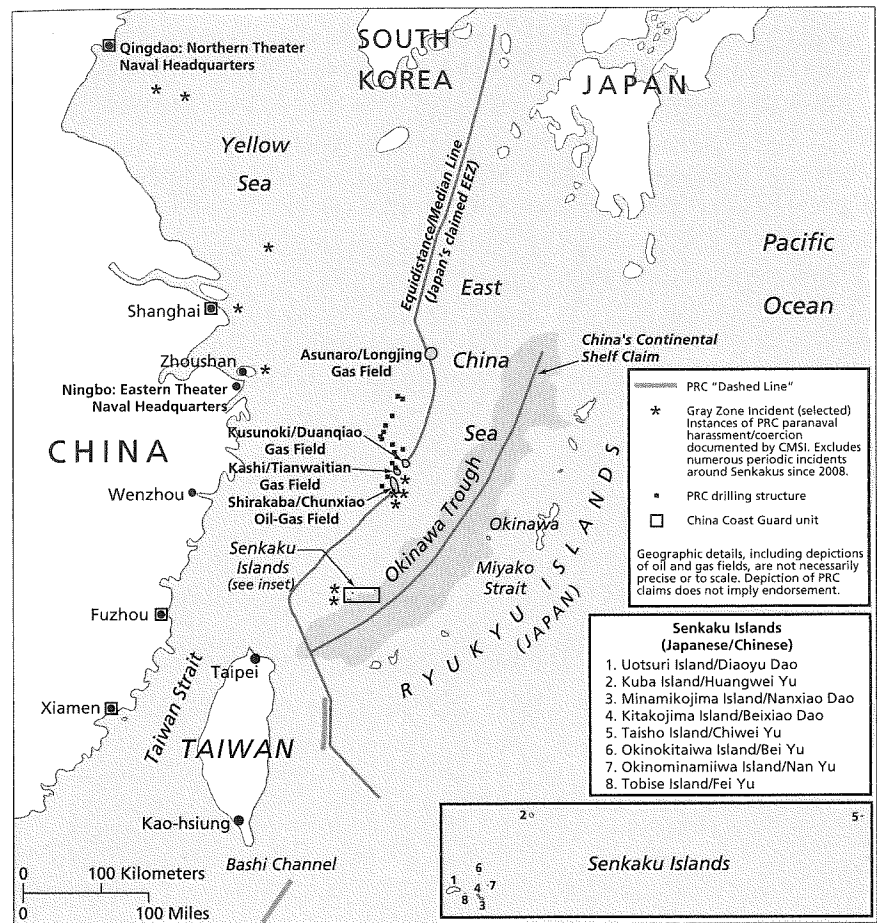


Exhibit 0-5. People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia Units Based in Zhejiang Province

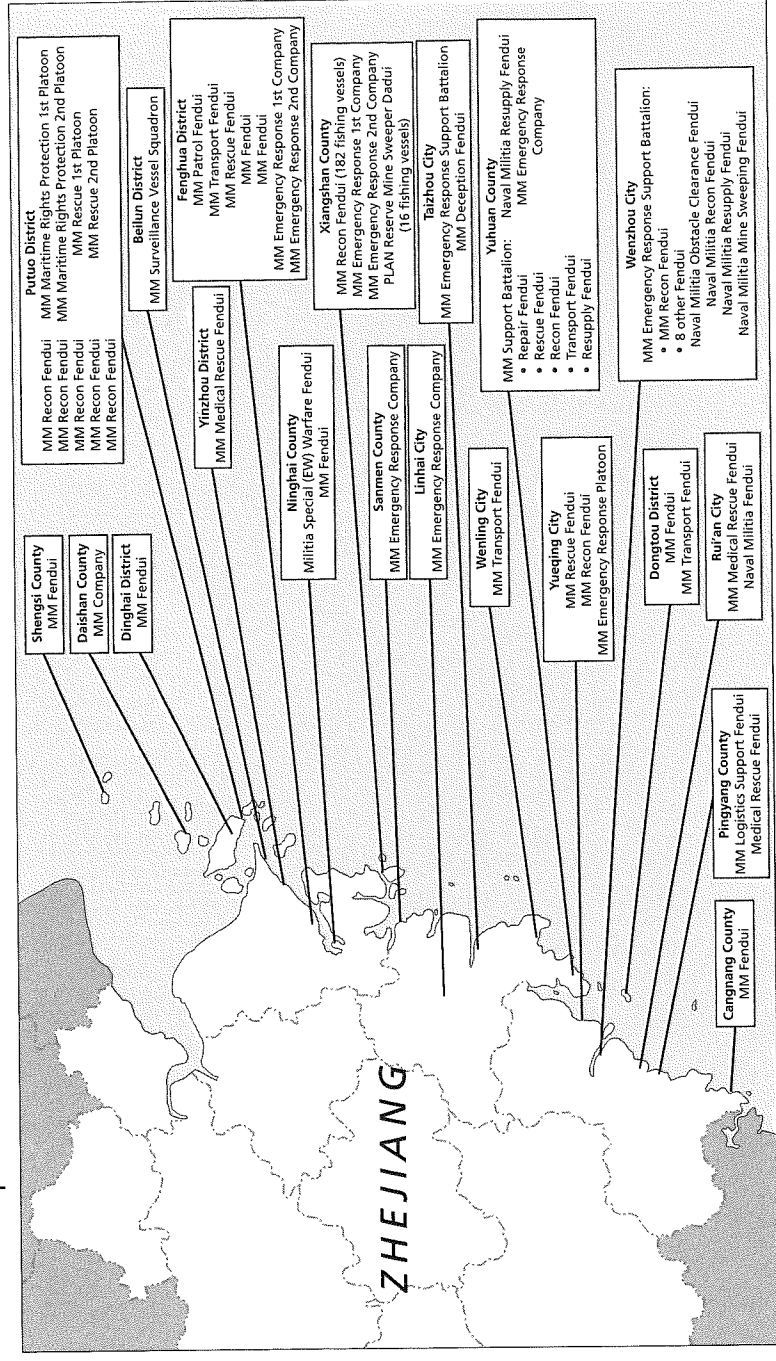
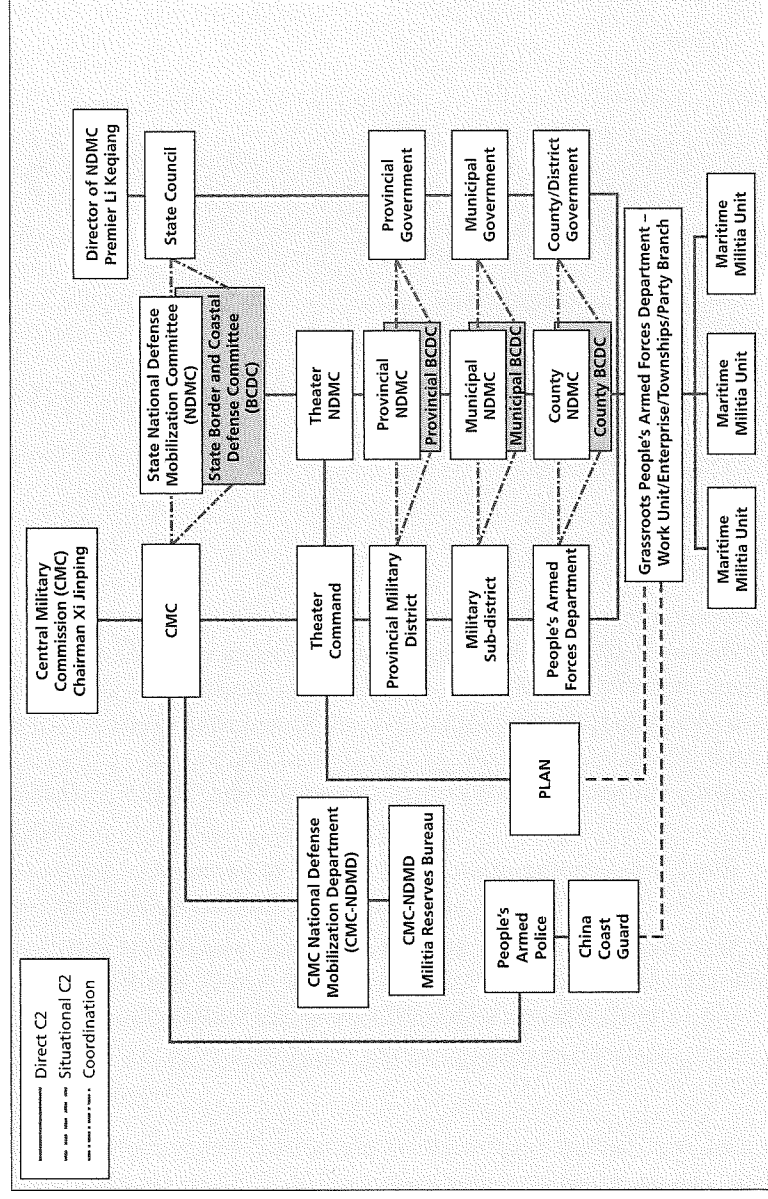


Exhibit 0-6. Command and Control of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia



## Titles in the Series

*China's Future Nuclear Submarine Force*

*China's Energy Strategy: The Impact on Beijing's Maritime Policies*

*China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*

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## Studies in Chinese Maritime Development

*Andrew S. Erickson, editor*

POWERED BY THE WORLD'S second-largest economy and defense budget, China is going to sea with a scale and sophistication that no continental power ever before sustained in the modern era. Its three sea forces are all leaders in their own right: the world's largest navy, coast guard, and maritime militia by number of ships. They are supplied by the world's largest shipyard infrastructure, which has achieved the largest, fastest production-capacity expansion in history. On the civilian side, Chinese sea power is augmented by the world's largest fishing fleet, one of the world's largest merchant marines, wide-ranging port infrastructure networks, and a large nationally flagged tanker fleet.

While paramount leader Xi Jinping is working to transform his nation further into a "great maritime power," at a minimum today's Middle Kingdom is already a hybrid land-sea power. Amid European decline and American fiscal and strategic challenges, this historic transformation has the potential to end six centuries of largely Western dominance of the world's oceans. The U.S. Navy and nation must understand this momentous sea change to properly inform strategy and policy.

Since the Chinese Maritime Studies Institute was established in 2006, it has been conducting research and holding conferences covering the broad waterfront of Chinese oceanic efforts in order to advise U.S. Navy leadership and support the Naval War College in its core mission area of helping to define the future Navy. The Studies in Chinese Maritime Development series assembles the resulting proceedings into edited volumes focusing on specific topics of importance to further understand Beijing's progress and challenges at sea.