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China Maritime Report No. 46: China's Fishermen Spies: Intelligence Specialists in the Maritime Militia

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Main Findings

- Collecting and reporting maritime intelligence is a core mission of China's maritime militia. Militia forces help fill in "blind spots" (补盲) for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and enhance its situational awareness. They are widely dispersed in the waters of greatest strategic and operational importance to Beijing, available in large numbers, extremely familiar with the operating environment, and, the PLA believes, less provocative than other military instruments.
- Militia forces that specialize in intelligence collection are organized into "maritime reconnaissance" (海上侦察) units. Located in China's coastal provinces, autonomous regions, and provincial-level cities, these units likely number in the hundreds. Militia vessels dedicated to intelligence collection are often called "information boats" (信息船).
- China's maritime militia has developed a cadre of intelligence specialists who serve the function of collecting intelligence and reporting it to the PLA. These militia members, called "information personnel" (信息员), generally deploy with militia vessels tasked with reconnaissance missions, but may also embark on boats from other types of militia units.
- While at sea, maritime militia intelligence personnel maintain close contact with the PLA units that oversee militia operations, called People's Armed Forces Departments (PAFDs). PAFDs direct militia reconnaissance operations and receive incoming intelligence reports, which they then share with operational PLA forces.
- As part-time soldiers, often with comparatively low education levels, maritime militia intelligence personnel cannot meet the same performance standards as intelligence specialists in the PLA. However, the existence of a large cadre of maritime militia intelligence specialists ensures a basic level of competence across the force and guarantees that capable personnel are available for important intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions.
- Given China's aspirations to become a global naval power, it makes sense that the PLA leverage the latent ISR capacity of China's distant-water fishing fleet and Chinese owned/operated merchant vessels. PLA experts have argued for embarking intelligence personnel on Chinese vessels operating abroad, and it is likely that this is already happening.

Introduction

In recent years, China's maritime militia (海上民兵) has become synonymous with "gray zone" coercion.¹ This association is almost daily reinforced by striking videos released by the Philippines Coast Guard, showing large, steel-hulled fishing boats anchored en masse at reefs that do not belong to China or aggressively confronting Filipino mariners for refusing to submit to China's unlawful territorial claims.²

However, perhaps the most fundamental—and certainly the most common—mission of China's maritime militia is not sovereignty enforcement, but rather serving as the "eyes" of the fleet, spying on the movements of foreign ships. This role is much less dramatic than bumping,

¹ Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis, Maryland: USNI Press, 2019).

² Much of this content is released by the Philippine Coast Guard X [Twitter] account@coastguardph and the account of the Philippine Coast Guard Spokesperson on West Philippine Concerns, Commodore Jay Tarriela (@jaytaryela).

ramming, and blocking foreign vessels, and it rarely makes the news. Nevertheless, the ISR function of China's maritime militia deserves careful study, as it provides the PLA with a clearer, more complete picture of the maritime arena, potentially translating into advantage in war and in peace.

The effectiveness of maritime militia ISR operations depends on many factors, but perhaps none more important than the competence of the intelligence collectors. To date, however, very little has been written about the individual militia members who perform this role.³ Just like modern navies, the maritime militia has developed a cadre of specialists tasked with collecting information on rival forces and conveying it in a form that is useful to the fleet. This report seeks to shed light on them: who they are, where they operate, what they do, and how well they do it.

It comprises two main parts. Part one examines in detail the ISR mission of China's maritime militia. Part two introduces the individuals who carry out this mission, with a focus on their organization, functions, equipment, and training. The report concludes with a summary of main findings. Figure 1 depicts the People's Republic of China (PRC) locations cited in this report.



Figure 1. PRC Locations Cited in this Report.⁴

³ For a short but valuable overview of maritime militia intelligence specialists, see Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China's Maritime Militia: An Important Force Multiplier," in Michael A. McDevitt, *China as a Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications* (Annapolis, Maryland: USNI Press, 2020), pp. 223-224.

⁴ The base map comes from www.marinetraffic.com.

The Militia's ISR Mission

Maritime militia intelligence operations are regarded as an “important supplement” (重要补充) to the ISR activities carried out by the PLA's three coastal theater commands (North, East, and South).⁵ Specifically, they help “fill in blind spots” (补盲) in the PLA's picture of the maritime battlespace, which, despite huge technological advances in ISR sensors and systems, still exist.⁶

Maritime militia forces can contribute to the PLA's maritime domain awareness because of several unique advantages.⁷ First, they are widely dispersed throughout the areas of greatest strategic and operational importance to Beijing. On most days, hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels operate in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea, some significant proportion of which are piloted by skippers who belong to the maritime militia and can be activated for duty. Second, maritime militia members have deep familiarity with the operational environment. Spending much of the year at sea, they are attuned to the normal patterns of human activity in their fishing grounds, making them sensitive to deviations from these patterns. Third, deploying fishing vessels manned by militiamen in civilian garb may be less provocative than sending PLA assets. In the words of one PLA expert, their presence is considered “low sensitivity” (敏感度低).⁸ Indeed, according to the then-Commander of the Zhejiang Military District, Major General Feng Wenping (冯文平), employing maritime militia vessels in ISR roles may enable China to “avoid unnecessary frictions and conflicts” (避免不必要的摩擦和冲突).⁹

While the waters within the First Island Chain are the core geographic focus of its ISR activities, the maritime militia could, in theory, also be tasked with intelligence collection beyond East Asia. China's distant-water fishing fleet operates around the world, as do Chinese owned/operated merchant vessels. With the PLA Navy aspiring to operate globally, it seems obvious that it would seek to leverage this tremendous latent ISR capacity for the benefit of the fleet. As will be discussed later in this report, a number of PLA experts have recommended it. However, to date there are very few (if any) publicly reported instances of maritime militia intelligence collection outside East Asia.

⁵ 姚淮南 [Yao Huaining], 着眼形势任务 遵循特点规律 积极探索海上民兵侦察情报建设新模式 [“Focus on the Situation and Task, Follow the Characteristics and Patterns, Actively Explore a New Model for Maritime Militia Reconnaissance and Intelligence Construction”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 46.

According to the then-deputy commander of the Zhejiang Province military region, Major General Yao Huaining (姚淮南), it is “irreplaceable” (不可替代).

⁶ One PLA expert described the role as “filling in blind spots, filling in what is missing, and remedying weaknesses (补盲、补缺、补弱). 唐社教 [Tang Shejiao], 紧贴实战需求 坚持任务牵引 深化推进海上民兵侦察力量建设 [“Closely Adhering to the Needs of Actual Combat, Persist in Being Task-Oriented, Deepen Promotion of Maritime Militia Reconnaissance Force Construction”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 49. See also 冯文平 [Feng Wenping], 以新时代党的强军思想为引领 构建主要战略方向海上民兵侦察情报体系 [“Led by the Party's Thinking on Building a Strong Military in the New Era, Construct a Maritime Militia Reconnaissance and Intelligence System for the Main Strategic Direction”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 44.

⁷ “Picture building” is the term favored by Geoffrey Till. See, for instance, *Geoffrey Till, Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), second edition, p. 264.

⁸ One PLA expert pithily summarized these advantages as “their numbers are great, they are widely dispersed, they are familiar with the situation, and the sensitivity is low” (数量多、分布广、情况熟、敏感度低). See Tang, “Closely Adhering to the Needs of Actual Combat,” p. 49.

⁹ Feng, “Led by the Party's Thinking on Building a Strong Military in the New Era,” p. 44.

Maritime Militia Reconnaissance Units

The militia's ISR function is so fundamental that China has created "reconnaissance" units that specialize in this mission set. Perhaps the country's most famous reconnaissance unit is based in Tanmen town (潭门镇), located on the east coast of Hainan.¹⁰ Its members have operated in waters adjacent to the Spratly Islands since 1985 and were pivotal in the seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012.¹¹ Altogether, China likely possesses hundreds of maritime militia reconnaissance units distributed along the coast of its 11 coastal provinces and provincial-level cities. Indeed, just one small city—Fuding (福鼎市), in the northern part of Fujian province—is home to at least eight and perhaps as many as two dozen maritime militia reconnaissance units.¹²

Like other maritime militia units, reconnaissance units are "tethered" to the PLA through the provincial military system. Separate from the operational PLA, the provincial military system is responsible for handling PLA recruiting/conscription, the PLA reserves (预备役), military mobilization, and militia construction and employment. At the top of the system is the provincial military district (省军区), commanded by a PLA general officer. Beneath the provincial military district are any number of military subdistricts (军分区) or garrison districts (警备区), located in major cities (i.e., prefecture-level cities, 地级市). Subordinate to subdistricts and garrison districts are organizations called People's Armed Forces Departments (PAFDs), which exist at both the county and town level. County- and town-level PAFDs are responsible for organizing, training, and, in many cases, commanding maritime militia units.¹³

Like other militia units, reconnaissance units use PLA organizational nomenclature. Most are constituted as "elements" (分队, sometimes translated as "detachments") or "companies" (连). Each element or company comprises two or more "platoons" (排), beneath which are "squads"

¹⁰ The unit's full name is the "Tanmen Town Maritime Militia Reconnaissance Company" (潭门镇海上民兵侦察连). See 光荣榜 ["Honor Roll"], 解放军年报 [PLA Daily], 20 June 2002, page number unknown. See also 金敏 [Jin Min] and 夏冠男 [Xia Guannan], 南海深处党旗红 ["Red Party Flag Deep in the South China Sea"], 科技日报 [Science Daily], 19 September 2012, p. 5, https://digitalpaper.stdaily.com/http_www.kjrb.com/kjrb/html/2012-09/19/content_171875.htm?div=-1.

¹¹ Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, "Model Maritime Militia: Tanmen's Leading Role in the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal Incident," *CIMSEC*, 21 April 2016, <https://cimsec.org/model-maritime-militia-tanmens-leading-role-april-2012-scarborough-shoal-incident/>.

¹² In 2024 and 2025, members from eight separate Fuding maritime militia reconnaissance companies were recognized for outstanding performance: the 7th, 8th, 9th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 24th and 25th. If the unit numbering scheme begins with 1 and ends with 25, that would be over two dozen units. 2023 年度福鼎市国防动员先进单位和个人、先进基层武装部、优秀民兵名单 ["List of Advanced Units and Individuals of National Defense Mobilization, Advanced Grassroots Armed Departments, and Outstanding Militia in Fuding City for the Year 2023"], 幸福福鼎 ["Happy Fuding"], Wechat, 23 February 2024; 2024 年度福鼎市国防动员先进单位和个人、先进基层武装部、优秀民兵名单 ["List of Advanced Units and Individuals of National Defense Mobilization, Advanced Grassroots Armed Departments, and Outstanding Militia in Fuding City for the Year 2024"], 幸福福鼎 ["Happy Fuding"], Wechat, 13 February 2025.

¹³ Town level PAFDs are staffed by civilian cadres (专武干部), while county-level PAFDs are staffed by active-duty PLA soldiers. County-level PAFDs are called 人武部, while town-level PAFDs are called 武装部. Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Third Sea Force, The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA," *China Maritime Report No. 1*, China Maritime Studies Institute, March 2017, pp. 3 and 18, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/1/>; 中国人民解放军军语 [Dictionary of Military Terms] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, September 2011), pp. 330-331.

(班). Each company, platoon, and squad has a senior militia leader (连长, 排长, and 班长, respectively), with ordinary militia members sometimes designated “warriors” (战士).¹⁴ While this figure may vary significantly, each element or company generally comprises 50-100 militia members.¹⁵



Figure 2. The 64 members of the Huanzhong County (Huludao, Liaoning) Maritime Intelligence and Reconnaissance Element on the Unit's Founding in May 2016.¹⁶

The town of Nanpu (南埔), located within Fujian province's Quanzhou city, is home to a maritime militia reconnaissance element that may be representative of other reconnaissance units across the county. According to a 2016 document, the town has organized its maritime militia reconnaissance

¹⁴ Ibid. Some reconnaissance companies may only have squads and no platoons. The Nanpu town (see below) is a case in point. As are the reconnaissance companies located in Wendeng district (文登区) in Weihai city (Shandong). 威海市文登区人民政府 威海市文登区人民武装部关于表彰 2022 年度武装工作先进单位和先进个人的通报 [“People's Government of Wendeng District, People's Armed Forces Department of Weihai City Wendeng District Circular on Recognizing Advanced Units and Advanced Individuals in Armed Forces Work in 2022”], 威海市文登区人民政府 [People's Government of Wendeng District], 3 January 2023, www.wendeng.gov.cn/art/2023/4/19/art_130596_14321.html.

¹⁵ This is the case for Nanpu town, highlighted below. It is also the case for a maritime militia reconnaissance and intelligence element located in Suizhong county, under Huludao city, in the far northern province of Liaoning. It had 64 members at its founding in May 2016. 绥中县海上民兵情报侦察分队组建 [“Suizhong County Maritime Militia Intelligence and Reconnaissance Element Established”] 绥中宣传 [Suihong Propaganda], Wechat, 23 May 2016, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/WNt36xxv7EFBGdWMECVfOw?poc_token=HCAY72ejkzH1r7DPmKdk0SITnZ5PnZFGlpEDRBm-.

¹⁶ Ibid.

element into a force of 80 members and 10 boats, with personnel and boats distributed across four villages (村).¹⁷ Table 1 below provides the details of this distribution.¹⁸

Table 1. The Composition of the Nanpu Town Maritime Militia Reconnaissance Element

Village	Squads (班)	Personnel	Militia Boats
Xiaocuo (肖厝), also the unit headquarters (队部)	2	24	4
Shage (沙格)	2	20	2
Kecuo (柯厝)	2	20	2
Huiyu (惠屿)	2	16	2
Total	8	80	10

Most maritime militia reconnaissance units comprise Chinese fishermen. However, some specialized units contain members from other relevant organizations. For example, a Hangzhou (Zhejiang) based maritime militia reconnaissance element is embedded in a local research institute. According to one report, twenty of its members were activated to participate in a search and rescue exercise, employing their civilian sector skills to capture underwater imagery for the PLA.¹⁹ Similarly, there exists a maritime militia reconnaissance unit embedded within Qingdao city's Jimo District Maritime Development Department. Photographic evidence suggests that their members are largely made up of fisheries law enforcement officers (Figure 3), a phenomenon that will be discussed below.²⁰

¹⁷ 泉港区南埔镇人民政府人民武装部关于印发南埔镇 2016 年民兵整组实施方案的通知 [“Quangang District Nanpu Town People's Government People's Armed Forces Department Notice Regarding the Issuance of the Implementation Plan for the 2016 Militia Reorganization in Nanpu Town”], 南埔镇人民政府 [People's Government of Nanpu], 5 April 2016, www.qg.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxgkzl/zjdxgk/npz/zfxgkml/yzdgdqdtzfx_41678/201604/t20160405_1780938.htm.

As of 2011, Nanpu had a maritime militia reconnaissance element of 64 people. They were distributed across the same four towns as those listed in the table. See 南埔镇人民政府关于做好 2011 年度民兵预备役工作的通知 [“Nanpu Town People's Government on Militia Reserves Work for 2011”], 南埔镇人民政府 [People's Government of Nanpu], 14 March 2011.

¹⁸ The names of fishing boats belonging to this unit will begin with *Minquanyu* (闽泉渔).

¹⁹ 宋艳华 [Song Yanhua], 蔡俊 [Cai Jun], and 罗正然 [Luo Zhengran], 未来信息化战争民兵使不使得上劲? 杭州新质新锐民兵奋发有为 [“In the Future Informatized War Can Militia Give It Their All? Hangzhou New Type Militia Are Working Hard”], 中国国防报 [China National Defense News], 25 March 2018, Wechat, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LF5iG-m5UNzbRtzuPQ6ZHA>.

²⁰ 2022 年即墨区海上侦察一连民兵点验大会在区海洋发展局成功举行 [“2022 Jimo District Maritime Reconnaissance Company Militia Conference Successfully Held in the Maritime Development Department”], 山东省青岛市即墨区人民政府官方网站 [Website of Shandong's Qingdao City Jimo District People's Government], 10 June 2022, http://www.jimo.gov.cn/zwgk/bmxxgk/hyfzj/zdgg/gzdt/202206/t20220610_6112985.shtml.



Figure 3. Members of the Jimo District Maritime Militia Reconnaissance Company Attend a Training Event (June 2022).²¹

Information Vessels

Maritime militia vessels that specialize in conducting ISR missions are often referred to as “information vessels” (信息船).²² These vessels are divided into at least two categories, based on assumed professional competence. The best collectors are designated “backbone” information boats (骨干信息船), and others are simply called “ordinary information boats” (普通信息船).²³ One PLA expert cited a third category—“maneuver information vessels” (机动信息船)—with capabilities superior to the backbone boats.²⁴

Information vessels are not the only maritime militia forces that collect intelligence. Other militia boats do as well. The PLA believes that the more intelligence collectors it has the better, with the stated goal of “translating numbers into quantity” (以量换量), i.e., the more boats at sea the more intelligence that can be collected.²⁵ As an example, Ningbo city’s Fenghua district is home to two

²¹ Ibid.

²² They are sometimes called “maritime intelligence and information vessels” (海上情报信息船). 老港镇组织开展 2024 年度基干民兵点验暨入队仪式 [“Laogang Town Organizes the 2024 Primary Militia Inspection and Joining Ceremony”], 上海浦东 老港镇 [Shanghai Pudong Laogang Town], 12 May 2024, <https://www.pudong.gov.cn/016030006/20240513/779625.html>.

²³ 洞头年鉴 2017 [Dongtou Yearbook 2017] (Beijing: Fangzhi Publishing, December 2017), p. 116.

²⁴ Yao, “Focus on the Situation and Task,” p. 47.

²⁵ 堆沟港镇：举办海上民兵报情培训会 [“Duigougang Town: Holds a Maritime Militia Intelligence Reporting Training Conference”], 灌南县人民政府 [Guannan County People’s Government], 30 August 2022, www.guannan.gov.cn/gnzx/xzdt/content/99a1e98b-aac8-4c78-a86a-3967a53cbb44.htm; 刘忠诚 [Liu Zhongcheng], 努力打造新时代海上民兵侦察“尖兵” [“Strive to Build a New Era of Maritime Militia Reconnaissance ‘Elite Forces’”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 51.

maritime militia “emergency response companies” (应急连). This name suggests that their primary responsibility is handling maritime contingencies. Yet, according to an official source, these units “are able to leverage the unique advantages that come from the familiarity of local fishermen with the maritime situation and foreign activities, as well as the advanced electronic equipment aboard their fishing boats,” so that “when they encounter a military situation, they immediately report it” (在海上遇到军事情况时，立即上报).²⁶

Since most information boats are components of the fishing fleet, the maritime militia’s contribution to the PLA’s ISR picture shrinks markedly during the summer months when China imposes its annual fishing moratorium and most of the fleet is in port. This may explain, at least in part, the decision to create a unit from among the Jimo District fisheries law enforcement officers (described above), since they would be able to fill in some of the gaps created by the departure of the fishing fleet.²⁷ Figure 4 below shows the current dates of the annual fishing moratorium by ocean area. Of note, the moratorium does not apply to Chinese-claimed waters south of 12 degrees latitude, which includes the highly contested Spratly Islands.



Figure 4. Dates and Locations of China’s Annual Fishing Moratorium.²⁸

²⁶ 海上风景线的守卫者——记莼湖镇海上民兵 [“Guardians of the Ocean Scenery—Chronicling the Maritime Militia of Chunhu Town”], 宁波市奉化区人民政府 [Ningbo City Fenghua District People’s Government], 1 August 2018, www.fh.gov.cn/art/2018/8/1/art_1229045202_44921595.html.

²⁷ PLA sources have discussed incorporating maritime law enforcement forces into the maritime militia for this reason. See, for example, Yao, “Focus on the Situation and Task,” p. 46.

²⁸ 农业农村部关于调整海洋伏季休渔制度的通告 [“Circular of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs on the Adjustment of the Marine Seasonal Fishing Restriction System”], 农业农村部 [PRC Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs], 13 March 2023, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2023-03/15/content_5746783.htm.

While the bulk of the PRC fishing fleet returns to port during the period of the moratorium, these waters are not necessarily empty of Chinese fishing vessels. Some fishing boats are hired to help PRC maritime law enforcement implement the ban. Moreover, Chinese regulations allow special exemptions for four types of fishing vessels operating in zone 2: shrimp trawlers, cage pots, gillnets, and lighted purse seine vessels. Owners of these types of boats can apply for special licenses (专项捕捞许可) to fish during the moratorium. Nevertheless, those Chinese fishing boats observed operating during the moratorium probably have a higher likelihood of being information vessels, since the PLA would need to rely on them to fill in the ISR gaps left by the rest of the fleet.²⁹

Collecting Information, Collecting Things

Militia vessels serve their ISR function in two main ways. First, they report any unusual activity observed while conducting their normal fishing (or other) operations, sometimes called “reporting intelligence as it arises” (随遇报情).³⁰ In 2019, for example, two maritime militia vessels from Zhejiang province’s Zhoushan city—*Zhedaiyu* 06888 and *Zhedaiyu* 03240—were the first to report the movements of the French frigate *Vendémiaire* as it operated in the East China Sea. Their reporting helped “fill in the information gaps on the operations of that ship” (填补了该舰过航信息空白).³¹

Second, maritime militia vessels can be tasked, either directly by the fleet or the PAFD, to conduct an ISR operation. Such an operation might, for instance, involve conducting “close-in reconnaissance” (抵近侦察) of a foreign vessel to “verify and confirm” (核查印证) the identity of the target ship and/or film its activities.³² The July 2014 incident involving the U.S. Navy missile range instrumentation ship USNS *Howard Lorenzen* is an example of this type of operation. A militia unit from Jiangsu province’s Hai’an city (海安市) sent five fishing vessels and 50 militia members to participate in a PLA drill called “Maritime Reconnaissance Operation 134” (134 海上侦察行动). The Hai’an militiamen purportedly discovered the presence of *Howard Lorenzen*. One of the Hai’an boats, *Suhaiyu* 00101 (苏海渔), piloted by the 55-year-old militia member Dong Xianghong (董相宏), approached to within 50 meters of the *Lorenzen* to take video footage of her activities, “providing precious intelligence for their superiors” (为上级提供了珍贵情报). Then-Central Military Commission (CMC) member and Defense Minister Chang Wanquan (常万全) learned of Dong’s exploit during his visit to Hai’an in May 2017 and reportedly praised

²⁹ Yao, “Focus on the Situation and Task,” p. 46; 方寿祥 [Fang Shouxiang], 探索构建陆海统筹、军民融合的民兵情报“双+”模式 [“Exploring the Creation of a ‘Double-Plus’ Model That Integrates Land and Sea and Civil-Military Fusion”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2019), pp. 60-61; Liu, “Strive to Build a New Era of Maritime Militia Reconnaissance ‘Elite Forces,’” p. 51.

³⁰ Feng, “Led by the Party’s Thinking on Building a Strong Military in the New Era,” p. 44.

³¹ 岱山年鉴 2020 [Daishan County Yearbook 2020] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang Publishing, 2020), p. 198.

³² Tang, “Closely Adhering to the Needs of Actual Combat,” p. 49; 周厚江 [Zhou Houjiang], 坚持实战牵引 问题倒逼落实 推进海上民兵情报信息工作深入发展 [“Persist in Being Led By Actual Combat, With Problems Pushing Implementation, Promote the In-Depth Development of Maritime Militia Intelligence and Information Work”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 51.

him and his comrades for “filling in blind spots in maritime reconnaissance” (弥补了海上侦查的盲区).³³



Figure 5. Dong Xianghong, the Hai'an Maritime Militia Member Who Led the Intelligence Collection Operation against the USNS *Lorenzen* in July 2014.³⁴

Most of the targets of maritime militia intelligence collection are foreign surface vessels. However, some PLA experts have highlighted the need to equip militia vessels with instruments to detect foreign submarines.³⁵ In a 2018 article, the then-commander of the Ningbo Military Sub-District, Senior Colonel Liu Zhongcheng (刘忠诚), even suggested that a Chinese firm had already developed an “integrated maritime information collection and processing system” that used sonar and navigation radar installed on fishing vessels to detect underwater targets.³⁶ Anti-submarine warfare (ASW) is extremely difficult for even the best trained and equipped naval

³³ 孙家坤 [Sun Jiakun], 角斜“红旗”永远飘扬 [“Jiaoxie’s ‘Red Flag’ Will Forever Flutter”], 大众学堂 [Public Academy], no. 3 (June 2023), p. 55; 董相宏 [Dong Xianghong], 夏鹏飞 [Xia Pengfei], and 张志荣 [Zhang Zhirong], 江苏省海安市角斜“红旗民兵团”海上遂行任务能力大幅提升 [“Jiangsu Province’s Hai’an City Jiaoxie ‘Red Flag Militia Regiment’ Capabilities to Perform Maritime Task Has Greatly Improved”], 中国国防报 [China National Defense News], 3 December 2018, http://www.mod.gov.cn/mobilization/2018-12/03/content_4831016.htm.

Dong spotted the *Lorenzen* on radar. They immediately reported this intelligence to their superiors. He then piloted his boat close to the *Lorenzen*. They conducted video evidence collection. For his leadership, Dong received commendations from the provincial National Defense Mobilization Committee and the provincial military district. The forces involved in this come from the fabled Jiaoxie Town (角斜) “Red Flag Militia Regiment” (红旗民兵团). 徐亚华 [Xu Yahua], 常万全在苏调研全国防教育 专程察看角斜红旗民兵团 [“Chang Wannian Investigates National Defense Education in Jiangsu and Makes Special Visit to Jiaoxie’s Red Flag Militia Regiment”], 中国江苏网 [China Jiangsu Online], 16 May 2017, https://jsnews.jschina.com.cn/nt/a/201705/t20170516_509602.shtml, cited in Erickson and Kennedy, “China’s Maritime Militia,” p. 224.

³⁴ 海安市滨海新区董相宏家庭：漂在“蓝色国土”上的“移动哨所” [“The Family of Dong Xianghong from Hai’an Coastal New District: ‘A Mobile Outpost’ Floating on the ‘Blue National Territory’”], 南通女性网 [Nantong Women], 5 May 2023, <http://www.ntwomen.org/ntnxw/hax/content/0de824e9-9f8f-400a-af6d-ac2a1dfd3063.html>.

³⁵ Tang, “Closely Adhering to the Needs of Actual Combat,” p. 49; Feng, “Led by the Party’s Thinking on Building a Strong Military in the New Era,” p. 45.

³⁶ Liu, “Strive to Build a New Era of Maritime Militia Reconnaissance ‘Elite Forces,’” p. 52.

forces, so the challenges of such operations could be great. Still, at least one militia unit has been commended for detecting an unidentified foreign submarine, suggesting that the effort is not entirely futile.³⁷ This may speak to the value that comes with having so many collectors operating in a confined, predictable space.

In peacetime, the primary purpose of maritime militia ISR forces is to sharpen the PLA's situational awareness of foreign maritime activities. In the event of a conflict, they could support maritime strike operations through the provision of targeting information to the PLA.³⁸ This function may seem unnecessary, given all the sensors (land-, sea-, air-, and space-based) that the PLA has at its disposal. Still, if China were fighting another great power, some of these sensors would no doubt be destroyed or degraded, in which case redundant capabilities like those offered by the maritime militia could be useful.³⁹

PLA sources suggest that the militia is indeed preparing to serve this function. In a November 2018 article, Senior Colonel Liu Zili (刘自力), a professor at the PLA Ground Forces Command Academy, and Colonel Chen Qingsong (陈青松), director of the PAFD in a district in Zhanjiang, Guangdong, explored the wartime reconnaissance roles of the militia. In a section entitled “maritime guerilla warfare” (海上游击作战), the authors cite reconnaissance and early warning as being key militia functions in the event of a conflict. They argue that militia forces should conduct operations “such as maritime reconnaissance to fill in blind spots, provide video reporting, and guide precision strikes against the enemy” (引导我方对敌实施精确打击).⁴⁰ Some PLA reporting indicates that maritime militia units are training for this purpose.⁴¹

Maritime militia vessels do more than just collect information—they also acquire foreign objects with intelligence value. On 7 June 2001, for example, a maritime militia reconnaissance boat (侦察船) from Zhejiang's Yuhuan city, named *Zheyuyu* (浙玉渔) 1012, was operating in the waters of the East China Sea when it retrieved two U.S.-made pieces of equipment, a MK61 MOD O SUS (signal underwater sound) and an AN/SSQ-57B sonobuoy, both used in anti-submarine warfare. The MK61 reportedly had “extremely high research value” (具有极高的研究价值) and, according to one account, shortened China's own effort to develop such a capability by 10 years, with the operation resulting in a commendation from the then-CMC Deputy Chair, Zhang

³⁷ 岱山年鉴, 2016 [*Daishan County Yearbook 2016*] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang Publishing, 2016), p. 208. The unit is located in Qushan town (衢山镇), Daishan county (Zhoushan city). Two militia members purportedly “detected an unknown submarine” in 2016.

³⁸ Mark A. Stokes, “China's Maritime Militia and Reconnaissance-Strike Operations,” in Erickson and Martinson, eds., *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, pp. 155-167.

³⁹ For a discussion of PLA sensors available to detect targets within the First Island Chain, see William Fox and Roderick Lee, “Assessing the PLA's Confidence in Its Ability to Achieve Air and Sea Control around Taiwan,” in Andrew S. Erickson, Conor M. Kennedy, and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *Chinese Amphibious Warfare: Prospects for a Cross-Strait Invasion* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2024), pp. 259-262.

⁴⁰ 刘自力, 陈青松 [Liu Zili and Chen Qingsong] 海上民兵参加海战的任务与行动 [“Tasks and Operations of the Maritime Militia When Participating in Maritime Combat”] 国防 [National Defense] (No. 11, 2018), p. 50.

⁴¹ See, for instance, 李根 [Li Gen] and 翟沁烨 [Zhai Qinye], 民兵出海, 渔船成为流动岗哨 [“When Militia Go to Sea, Fishing Vessels Become Mobile Sentries”], 中国国防报 [*China National Defense News*], 8 December 2015, http://www.81.cn/mb/2015-12/08/content_6805470.htm.

Wannian (张万年).⁴² More recently, in 2016, militia boats from Daishan county, under Zhejiang's Zhoushan city, salvaged an intact foreign sonobuoy from waters in the East China Sea, a feat for which they were commended by the Eastern Theater Navy.⁴³

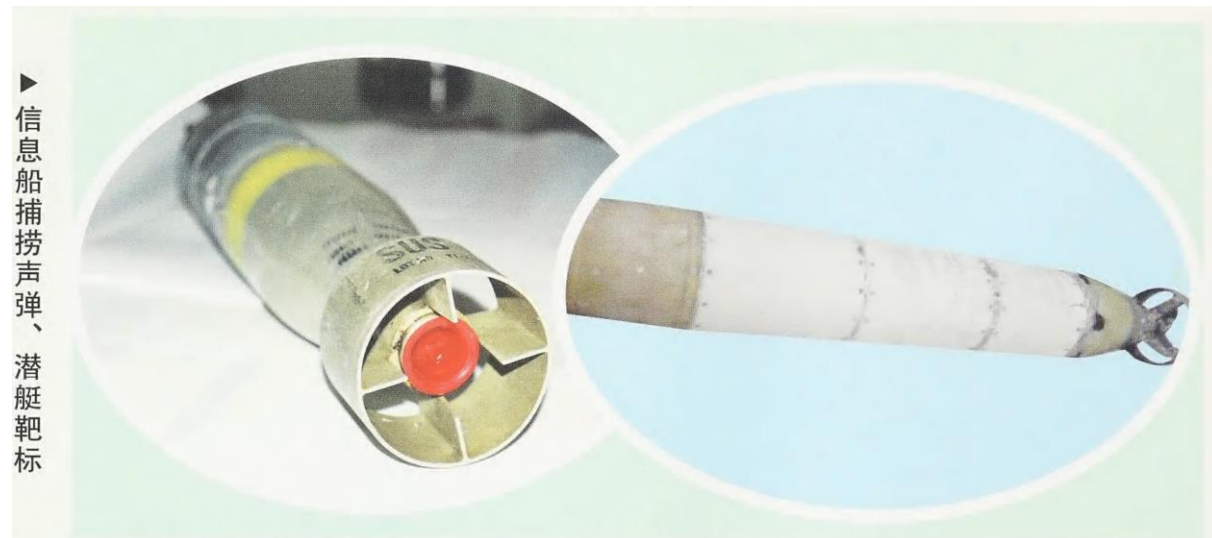


Figure 6. U.S.-Made Naval Equipment Collected by Information Vessels Based in Yuhuan City, Zhejiang.⁴⁴

“Information Personnel”: The Maritime Militia’s Intelligence Specialists

The maritime militia specialists charged with intelligence collection and reporting are called “information personnel” (信息员). According to one authoritative source, they are responsible for “providing firsthand intelligence information needed for responding to maritime security threats and completing diversified military tasks” (为应对海上安全威胁、完成多样化军事任务提供第一手情报信息).⁴⁵

Information personnel may not be members of specific maritime militia units. Instead, they are often organized into their own “force contingent” (队伍) separate from other units.⁴⁶ There are

⁴² 刘东生 [Liu Dongsheng], 不忘初心跟党走 高擎战旗谋新篇——坎门英雄基干民兵营加强全面建设纪事 [“Do Not Forget the Initial Inspiration and Go With the Party, Raise High the Flag of War and Seek a New Chapter—A Chronicle of Efforts by the Kanmen Heroic Primary Militia Battalion to Bolster Comprehensive Development”], 台州史志网 [Taizhou Historical Records Website], 9 June 2019, http://tzsz.zjtz.gov.cn/art/2019/1/9/art_1229142719_54204776.html; 玉环县人民武装部 [Yuhuan PAFD], eds, 英雄的足迹 [The Footsteps of Heroes], (Taizhou, Zhejiang: Taizhou City Headquarters Publishing Company, date unknown), p. 52.

⁴³ Daishan County Yearbook 2016, p. 208.

⁴⁴ Yuhuan PAFD, *The Footsteps of Heroes*, p. 52.

⁴⁵ 县海上民兵信息员集训在三沙开训 [“County Maritime Militia Information Personnel Start Intensive Training in Sansha”], 光影三沙 [Sansha in Light and Shadow], Wechat, 17 July 2017.

⁴⁶ For example, Donggang District in Shandong’s Rizhao City possesses six maritime militia contingents (6 支队伍): one maritime ambulance company (海上医疗救护连), one maritime rights protection company (海上维权连), one maritime reconnaissance and security company (海上侦察警戒连), one maritime search and rescue company (海上搜救连), one maritime logistics support platoon (海上综合保障排), and one maritime militia information personnel

exceptions to this general rule. Some maritime militia units are incorporated as battalions (i.e., a level higher than company or element), and the battalion may include intelligence specialists within its ranks. For example, the village of Chi'ao (赤澳), located along the Taiwan Strait, within the city of Fuzhou (Fujian), is home to a highly regarded maritime militia battalion. It comprises over 100 “backbone maritime militia members” (海上民兵骨干), 30 maritime militia vessels, and 30 maritime intelligence information personnel (海上情报信息员).⁴⁷

Most information personnel are likely assigned to support maritime militia reconnaissance units, but some may embark aboard militia vessels belonging to units with other specializations. For example, the town of Houlong (后龙), under Fujian's Quanzhou City, only possesses a maritime militia transport element (海上运输分队), comprising 20 boats and 175 personnel. Thus, the town's five maritime militia information personnel—organized into a “special contingent” (特殊队伍)—must be providing intelligence support to them.⁴⁸

Most, but not all, intelligence specialists are fishermen. Some contingents are created within civilian enterprises involved in other marine industries. For example, the PAFD of Qingdao's Shinan district (市南区) manages a contingent of maritime militia information personnel embedded in an unnamed marine transport firm (青岛某运输公司). Its members specialize in “collecting materials” (搜集资料) useful to the PLA.⁴⁹

Because of the sensitive nature of their work, the process of becoming a maritime militia intelligence specialist is lengthy and complex. While it may differ slightly from region to region, the process adopted by Yunxiao county (云霄) in Zhangzhou (Fujian) may be representative. Prospective intelligence specialists are recommended by their local village or town government and/or the civilian work unit to which they belong. The county PAFD then conducts a background check on each candidate, the results of which are reviewed/approved by the Zhangzhou military

contingent (海上民兵信息员). See 山东日照东港区: 打造“碧海红帆”海上应急志愿服务轻骑兵 [“Dongang District of Shandong's Rizhao City: Build a ‘Blue Sea Red Sail’ Maritime Emergency Response Volunteer Service Cavalry”], 中华人民共和国退役军人事务部 [PRC Ministry of Veterans Affairs], 28 February 2024, https://www.mva.gov.cn/xinwen/dfdt/202402/t20240227_401037.html.

⁴⁷ 郑瑞洋 [Zheng Ruixiang], 胡国福: 71 岁的讲师团成员 [“Hu Guofu: The 71 Year Older Lecturer”], 福州晚报 [Fuzhou Evening News], 12 November 2023, <https://news.fznews.com.cn/fzxw/20231112/M68564VGn3.shtml>.

⁴⁸ The town also has an emergency response platoon (综合应急排) comprising 30 people and two land-based information personnel (陆上民兵信息员). It is unclear if the latter support maritime operations. 后龙镇人民政府关于印发后龙镇 2018 年度民兵整组工作方案的通知 [“People's Government of Houlong Town Circular on the Release of Houlong Town's 2018 Militia Reorganization Work Plan”], 后龙镇人民政府 [Government of Houlong Town], 25 January 2018, http://www.qg.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxxgkzl/zjdxgk/hlz/zfxxgkml/jgzn_41694/201801/t20180125_1774873.htm. Other PAFDs oversee contingents of both shore-based and sea-based militia intelligence specialists. 平湖年鉴 2021 [Pinghu Yearbook 2021] (Pinghu City: Zhonghua Publishing, December 2021), p. 147.

⁴⁹ 焦淑军 [Jiao Shujun], 刘云峰 [Liu Yunfeng], and 张宁 [Zhang Ning], 倾心国防勇担当 [“Dedicated to National Defense”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 13 October 2014, p. 9.

subdistrict. After an individual is selected, a dossier on that person is created by the provincial military district.⁵⁰

Reporting Processes

While operating at sea, information personnel maintain two-way channels of communication with the PAFDs that oversee their respective units: the PAFDs send out orders and guidance, while the intelligence specialists send back information. In peacetime, PAFDs are the link connecting the militia forces charged with collecting intelligence with the active-duty PLA forces that use it.⁵¹ Local fisheries bureaus, which work closely with the PAFDs to train and manage maritime militia forces, may also be involved in the intelligence reporting process.⁵²

Some towns may have maritime militia watch floors to command militia forces and receive intelligence reports in real time. Taoluo town (涛雒镇), located in Donggang district (东港区) in Shandong's Rizhao city, is a case in point. The town administers 25 fishing villages, comprising 635 fishing boats and 3,600 fishing boat crew members (船员), 457 of whom are primary militia members (海上基干民兵). These militiamen are divided into six contingents, including one Maritime Medical Rescue company (海上医疗救护连), one Maritime Rights Protection company (海上维权连), one Maritime Reconnaissance and Security company (海上侦察警戒连), and a Maritime Search and Rescue company (海上搜救连). The town set up a Maritime Militia Information and Command Center (海上民兵信息指挥中心) in one of its villages that can track and communicate in real-time with all fishing boats from the town.⁵³ See figure 7 below.

⁵⁰ 云霄年鉴 2015 [*Yunxiao Yearbook 2015*], (Yuxiao: China Publishing Corporation Modern Publishing Company, January 2016), p. 64.

⁵¹ 翟兆方 [Zhai Zhaofang], 熊永岭 [Xiong Yongling], and 何名享 [He Mingxiang], 精武强能建功海防 [“Strengthening Military Skills and Making Contributions to Ocean Defense”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 23 October 2014, p. 9; 徐海峰 [Xu Haifeng], 适应新形势 全面规范海上民兵建设 [“Adapting to the Situation and Comprehensively Standardizing the Construction of Maritime Militia”], 国防 [*National Defense*], no. 2 (February 2014), pp. 65-66; 龙港年鉴 2021 [*Longgang Yearbook 2021*] (Beijing: Tuanjie Publishing, August 2022), p. 175.

⁵² For example, Dongtou district (洞头区), under Wenzhou city, “created a maritime intelligence and information network relying on the Marine Fisheries Bureau’s duty room” (依托区海洋渔业局值班室建立海上情报信息网). *Dongtou Yearbook 2017*, p. 116.

⁵³ 厉害了，日照这支“海上民兵连”！中央军委国防动员部表彰！全省唯一！ [“Rizhao’s ‘Maritime Militia Company’! Commended by the CMC’s National Defense Mobilization Department! The Only One in the Province!”, 日照文明网 [*Rizhao Civilization Network*], 3 August 2021, http://rz.wenming.cn/wmbb/202108/t20210803_7246680.html; 史树梅 [Shi Shumei] and 姚彩虹 [Yao Caihong], 迷彩绿，与人民同在 [“Camouflage Green, Together With the People”], 日照日报 [*Rizhao Daily*], 20 March 2024, p. A2, <https://rbrk.rznews.cn/index.php?s=/wap/article/detail/id/369098.html>.



Figure 7. The Taobao Town Maritime Militia Information and Command Center.⁵⁴

Information personnel report back to their PAFDs both regularly and situationally. Some PAFDs may require information personnel to check-in on a daily basis. For example, the Ningbo city military subdistrict duty room requires operating militia vessels to report back every day at 1500. A typical report might state the identity of the boat, its current location, the status of crew members, and whether or not they have encountered any “unusual circumstances” (异常情况).⁵⁵ However, if something noteworthy occurs, information personnel can immediately transmit the intelligence directly back to the staff in the duty room, who can provide further instructions and, if needed, request clarification.⁵⁶

How much foreign intelligence do Chinese information personnel collect, and how much actually gets used? While the PRC does not publicly share such numbers, the case of Wenzhou’s Dongtou district offers some insights. By the end of 2015, the Dongtou PAFD oversaw multiple militia units, including 12 “key” militia information boats, 38 “ordinary” militia information boats, and 74 information personnel.⁵⁷ In 2016, these forces reported 13 pieces of intelligence, of which just two pieces were actually used by the PLA Navy.⁵⁸ The following year saw better results, with 55

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ 冉应国 [Ran Yingguo], 陈启先 [Chen Qixian], and 赵继承 [Zhao Jicheng], 浙江省宁波军分区加强战备执勤下好“先手棋”耕海犁波, 海上民兵到点到位 [“Zhejiang’s Ningbo Military Subdistrict Strengthens Combat Readiness and ‘Lays the Ground’ for Ploughing the Sea and Waves”] 解放军报 [PLA Daily] 4 February 2016, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Xu, “Adapting to the Situation and Comprehensively Standardizing the Construction of Maritime Militia,” p. 65; Zhai and Xiong, “Strengthening Military Skills and Making Contributions to Ocean Defense,” p. 9.

In some locations, information personnel may report intelligence directly to their PAFD. But in other locations, such as Ningbo (mentioned above) and Jiangsu’s Lianyungang city (连云港), information personnel may report intelligence directly to the provincial military sub-district (or garrison district) operations duty room (警备区作战值班室), i.e., two levels above the local PAFD. Li and Zhai, “When Milita Go to Sea, Fishing Vessels Become Mobile Sentries.”

⁵⁷ 洞头年鉴 2016 [Dongtou Yearbook 2016] (Beijing: Fangzhi Publishing, December 2016), p. 140.

⁵⁸ Dongtou Yearbook 2017, p. 116.

pieces of intelligence, 13 of which were used.⁵⁹ While these figures alone seem unimpressive, when multiplied by the hundreds of units actively collecting intelligence, the maritime militia ISR effort likely amounts to a continuous stream of operationally useful information reaching the PLA over the course of the year.



Figure 8. Then CMC Member and Defense Minister Chang Wannian Inspects a Dongtou Maritime Militia Vessel (28 July 2016).⁶⁰

Intelligence Training

Like all intelligence professionals, maritime militia information personnel require specialized training. The amount and type of training vary by region. Some comes in the form of “intensive training” (集中训练, often shortened to 集训) courses held over several days, usually during the fishing offseason. Training course participants may include all the information personnel from contingents in a given city or county. The training will be organized and conducted by the city or county PAFD. However, PAFD members will often invite outside experts to teach more specialized modules.

One focus of intensive training is on the technologies intelligence specialists need to do their job—above all, the equipment used for communicating with the PLA. Much of this communications equipment appears to be off-the-shelf kit. Information specialists, for example, are equipped with satellite phones.⁶¹ Some use the commercially available Yuxintong (渔信通) system, which includes a terminal installed on boats that enables crew members to send and

⁵⁹ 洞头年鉴 2018 [*Dongtou Yearbook* 2018], (Beijing: Fangzhi Publishing, December 2018), p. 170.

⁶⁰ *Dongtou Yearbook* 2017, p. 28.

⁶¹ For example, in 2016 Dongtou, a district within Zhejiang’s Wenzhou city, “adjusted and strengthened” its maritime militia information personnel contingent, applying for and receiving 90,000 RMB to purchase 21 “work phones” (probably satellite phones) for its members. *Dongtou Yearbook* 2017, p. 116.

receive text messages, photographs, and voice messages with their cell phones.⁶² Dong Xianghong used this system to communicate with the PLA during the reconnaissance operation against the USNS *Lorenzen* in July 2014.⁶³ However, the bulk of reporting likely involves use of the Beidou positioning/communications system installed on most Chinese fishing vessels.⁶⁴ This system was the subject of an intensive training course held by the PAFD of Fujian's Xiapu county from 12-15 July 2017 for 60 information personnel. According to PRC reporting on the event, the Beidou system is not only useful for ensuring safety at sea; it is also valuable for "identifying foreign warships and detecting and reporting on the enemy situation" (海上外军舰船的识别、海上敌社情的侦观报知). The event included briefings by a Beidou technical expert, an instructor from an unnamed PLA Navy department, and an official from Fisheries Law Enforcement.⁶⁵

Instead of relying on commercial (and presumably insecure) technologies like Yuxintong and Beidou, some information personnel may embark with dedicated intelligence reporting equipment. This appears to be the case for information vessels based in Pingyang county (平阳), which administratively falls under Zhejiang's Wenzhou city. The county leadership made major efforts in 2020 to improve the intelligence reporting capabilities of its maritime militia forces. It formed a contingent of information personnel, expanded the size of its fleet of information vessels by 300 percent, and "comprehensively pushed for the installation of intelligence reporting systems" on its information vessels (全面推开报情系统安装).⁶⁶ Such systems would likely require significant initial and ongoing training time for maritime militia intelligence specialists.

Aside from specialized intelligence training, maritime militia information personnel must develop more general skills required by their profession. As a case in point, in October 2019, Fujian province's Fuding city PAFD conducted a five-day training course for 80 militia members from the city's various towns and villages. Trainees included 70 elite (i.e., "backbone") militia members and ten information personnel. They trained on small arms, outboard motor repair, the use of tear gas, and counter-frogman tactics, while also developing skills more specific to intelligence specialists, i.e., "intelligence collection" (情报收集) and "maritime reconnaissance" (海上侦察). The course organizers enlisted training support from a non-governmental search and

⁶² Feng, "Led by the Party's Thinking on Building a Strong Military in the New Era," p. 45.

Installing a Yuxintong end-user set on a fishing vessel and the associated software on their cell phones allows militia members to send and receive text messages, photographs, and voice messages, and to make satellite phone calls. It is economical. The system covers all important fishing zones (渔区) within the First Island Chain (Bohai, Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea, and the Sea of Japan. Yuxintong is sold by China TranComm Technologies (北京中交通信科技有限公司). Yuxintong's promotional materials are available here:

https://www.trancomm.com.cn/file/research_yuxt.pdf.

⁶³ "The Family of Dong Xianghong from Hai'an Coastal New District: 'A Mobile Outpost' Floating on the 'Blue National Territory.'"

⁶⁴ Erickson and Kennedy, "China's Maritime Militia," p. 222.

⁶⁵ "County Maritime Militia Information Personnel Start Intensive Training in Sansha."

⁶⁶ 平阳年鉴 2021 [*Pingyang Yearbook 2021*] (Beijing: Chinese Literature and History Press, October 2021), p. 157. Other maritime militia units have also installed specialized intelligence reporting systems on their vessels. See 洞头年鉴 2015 [*Dongtou Yearbook 2015*] (Beijing: Fangzhi Publishing, November 2015), p. 138.

rescue organization named Blue Sky Rescue (蓝天救援队) and possibly PLA Navy personnel.⁶⁷ See figure 9 below.



Figure 9. Information Personnel and Other Maritime Militia Members from Fuding Conduct Intensive Training.⁶⁸

Maritime militia information personnel must also be trained to accurately identify the ships and equipment they encounter at sea. This includes distinguishing foreign equipment from China's own. On the afternoon of 21 August 2019, for example, a maritime militia intelligence specialist named Wu Huafang (吴华芳) from Xiaguan town (霞关), located in Wenzhou city (Zhejiang), was at sea fishing when he discovered "a floating instrument" (一漂流的仪器设备). Thanks to his maritime militia training, Wu was able to assess that it was Chinese state property (国家公共财产). To keep the equipment from being damaged or lost, he took it aboard and brought it back to shore and immediately reported the situation to the town PAFD. That PAFD then consulted with superiors in the Cangnan county (苍南) PAFD, where the equipment was moved for safekeeping. Ultimately, the PLA determined that the equipment was an oceanographic

⁶⁷ Video footage of the training event shows a PLA Navy officer present. 我市首次组织民兵跨区域进行连队化封闭集训 ["For the First Time the City Organizes Militia to Cross Regions to Conduct Unit Intensive Training"], 福鼎电视台 [Fuding TV], 9 November 2019, <http://www.fdxww.com/shipin/fudingxinwen/baixingshenghuo/2019-11-09/72882.html>.

⁶⁸ 福建国动 59|各地积极抓好主题教育活动及民兵训练 ["Fujian National Defense Mobilization 59, All Localities Actively Carry Out Thematic Education Activities and Militia Training"], 东南前哨 [Southeast Outpost], Wechat, 9 December 2019, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/GqngmPb-jlLRqJx4yX8_0g?poc_token=HOAa8Gej_pYMcPKBhLTrBtL0HoS-a5IKx5V5fLG0.

monitoring buoy (波浪浮标) belonging to China's Second Institute of Oceanography that had parted from its mooring.⁶⁹

Intelligence personnel must have the knowledge to decide what information to collect and how best to report it to their superiors. This requires a solid understanding of the strategic and operational context of their operations. In the view of Qingdao's Huangdao District PAFD, training for information personnel must strive to ensure that “when they encounter a sudden incident, they can rapidly master information and make decisions, giving full play to their intelligence function” (确保海上遇到突发事件能迅速掌握信息, 做出决策, 真正把情报部的功能发挥出来).⁷⁰ To that end, some training courses involve discussions of how to handle difficult reporting challenges that arise while on deployment.⁷¹

Maritime militia intelligence specialists may be summoned to attend shorter training sessions. For example, on 28 August 2022, 40 maritime militia information personnel participated in an “intelligence training conference” (情报培训会) organized by the PAFD of Duigougang (堆沟港镇), a town under the administration of Jiangsu's Lianyungang city. Participants came from 31 different villages. A town party committee member and the head of the town's PAFD chaired the meeting, with the core of the training provided by an officer from the county PAFD, Wei Guanyu (韦冠宇). Wei gave a presentation entitled “Maritime Reconnaissance and Intelligence Organization and Implementation” (《海上侦察报情组织与实施》). A key theme of his brief was the need to enlist unaffiliated fishing vessels into intelligence collection activities in order to expand overall ISR capacity.⁷²

Maritime militia intelligence specialists sometimes participate in fleet exercises, in which case they take orders from operational PLA Navy units. Due to the sensitive nature of these activities, open-source reporting is rare. One known case occurred in March and April 2016, when Xiangshan, a county administered by Zhejiang's Ningbo city, mobilized two information vessels—presumably including their assigned intelligence specialists—to participate in an East Sea Fleet exercise called “152C.” Their main task was to provide intelligence reporting for the fleet (参加情报报知活动). The two information vessels conducted “fixed point observation” (定点观察), while the PLA Navy command organization used the Beidou system's group messaging function (北斗群发功能) and satellite phones to direct all fishing vessels in the exercise area to assist with reconnaissance activities.⁷³

⁶⁹ 霞关渔民发现漂流仪器 连夜上交保存 [“Xiaguan Fishermen Discover a Drifting Instrument and Handed it over for Preservation”], 和美霞关 [Beautiful Xiaguan], Wechat, 26 August 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/SaCHC2pTbRY0tMMHm5ilQ>.

⁷⁰ 黄岛区人武部 [Huangdao District PAFD], 完善队伍为新区建设保驾护航 [“Improve the Team To Support the Construction of the New District”], 新黄岛 [Xinhuangdao Paper], 10 March 2014, p. 3, <https://epaper.xihaiannnews.com/shtml/jnsx/20140310/18798.shtml>.

⁷¹ 宁波年鉴 2018 [Ningbo Yearbook 2018], (Ningbo: Ningbo Press, September 2018), p. 432.

⁷² “Duigougang Town: Holds a Maritime Militia Intelligence Reporting Training Conference.”

⁷³ 象山年鉴 2017 [Xiangshan Yearbook 2017] (Beijing: Fangzhi Publishing, December 2017), p. 85.

Professional Limitations

Given that the vast majority of maritime militia members are only part-time soldiers, it is inevitable that militia intelligence professionals fail to meet the same standards as counterparts in the active-duty PLA. Indeed, PLA assessments of their capabilities highlight a number of shortcomings. According to the then-deputy commander of the Zhoushan Garrison District, Senior Colonel Wang Hui (王辉), the educational levels of Chinese fishermen are fairly low, so they cannot easily grasp the intelligence reporting requirements. Thus, their ability to complete tasking is “not strong.”⁷⁴ One Senior Colonel from the Taizhou Military Subdistrict (Zhejiang) declared that information personnel are not good at identifying targets and their reporting practices leave much to be desired. They report too much information and receive too little feedback. Moreover, the quality of the intelligence is not great, and it is rarely useful for decisionmakers.⁷⁵ This criticism seems to be confirmed by the low utility rates of intelligence reported by Dongtou maritime militia forces (discussed above). The then-commander of the Zhejiang Military District has offered perhaps the most damning critique of maritime militia intelligence reporting, describing it as “not far (sighted), not complete, not clear, not accurate, and not fast” (不远、不全、不精、不准、不快).⁷⁶

Aside from the obvious challenges associated with being a part-time military force, there may be systemic reasons for their subpar performance. While some militia members no doubt find the work fulfilling, most probably regard it as an annoying obligation that comes with their profession. In some towns and villages, enlistment in the militia may verge on compulsory. Local officials have strong leverage with which to compel enlistment, stemming from their authority to issue, deny, and revoke fishing licenses.⁷⁷ If enthusiasm for militia work is generally low, at least some portion of the force probably just does the bare minimum during training and operations.

Moreover, the rewards of militia work likely do not offset the hardships it imposes. Multiple PLA experts have called for improving compensation, suggesting that a problem exists.⁷⁸ Others have noted that there exist no regulations governing the types, standards, and methods for subsidizing fishing boat owners that “participate in maritime reconnaissance operations” (参与海上侦察行动).⁷⁹ Senior Colonel Wang Hui from the Zhoushan Garrison District has recommended that PAFDs take steps to “improve the system for rewards and punishment” (完善激励奖惩机制) for militia members. For example, those who do a good job reporting intelligence should be publicly recognized for their work.⁸⁰ Some locations have adopted the practice of recognizing high-

⁷⁴ 王辉 [Wang Hui], 抓好海上群众报情工作的几点思考 [“Several Thoughts on to Grasp Maritime Mass Intelligence Work”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 48.

⁷⁵ Zhou, “Persist in Being Led By Actual Combat,” p. 51.

⁷⁶ Feng, “Led by the Party’s Thinking on Building a Strong Military in the New Era,” p. 44.

⁷⁷ Xu, “Adapting to the Situation and Comprehensively Standardizing the Construction of Maritime Militia,” p. 65.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Fang, “Exploring the Creation of a ‘Double-Plus’ Model That Integrates Land and Sea and Civil-Military Fusion,” p. 61.

⁷⁹ 徐国安 [Xu Guoan], 加强国防动员建设几点思考 [“A Few Thoughts on Strengthening National Defense Mobilization Construction”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 12 (2018), p. 57.

⁸⁰ Wang also recommends a punitive approach to handling militia members who “go through the motions” (消极应对) or “flee from the battlefield” (临阵脱逃). In his view, they should be forced to end their voyage or production (给予强制性停航停产) and/or have their fishing licenses revoked (吊销捕捞许可证). Wang, “Several Thoughts on to Grasp Maritime Mass Intelligence Work,” p. 48.

performing maritime militia intelligence specialists. For example, in February 2024, the city of Fuding, in northern Fujian province, recognized 27 “outstanding militia personnel” (优秀民兵) for their service in 2023. Two of the individuals were maritime militia intelligence collectors embarked on information vessels.⁸¹

In the final analysis, however, the fact that the maritime militia has members who specialize in intelligence work suggests that there exists some basic level of competence in the core ISR mission. That PLA experts highlight weaknesses in the profession should not suggest that information boats and their crews serve no useful purpose for the fleet. Perhaps more importantly, when preparing for key missions, the PLA is certain to choose the “best of the best,” and the sheer number of reconnaissance forces available guarantees that it will find highly competent maritime militia intelligence collectors where and when it needs them.

Intelligence Personnel in the “Far Seas”

Maritime militia intelligence specialists naturally go where the mission dictates, and today that remains largely, and perhaps entirely, in PRC claimed waters within the First Island Chain, which the PLA defines as the “near seas” (近海). There exists scant evidence of information personnel embarking on Chinese vessels sailing to waters beyond East Asia, i.e., the “far seas” (远海), and the evidence that does exist is often ambiguous. For example, in recent years, Guanyun county, under Jiangsu province’s Lianyungang city, has constructed a “maritime reconnaissance and intelligence network” (海上侦察情报网建设). It has fielded a maritime militia reconnaissance force comprising 17 boats and 34 information personnel operating in the “near seas” and 7 vessels and 14 personnel for “far seas” operations. At first glance, this seems to suggest that its network extends beyond East Asia.⁸² Yet, the term “far seas” is not always used with the precision prescribed by PLA doctrine; in some contexts, it may simply mean more remote locations within the First Island Chain.⁸³

Some PRC sources, however, do seem to be more categorical about militia forces operating out of area. One April 2016 report, for instance, highlighted challenges faced by Zhejiang’s Taizhou military subdistrict when trying to communicate with maritime militia forces operating at remote distances from the PRC. As fisheries resources were “drying up” (枯竭) near China, the report explained, Taizhou fishermen were continuously expanding their areas of operation from the “near seas to the ocean deeps.” As a result, while fishing vessels were operating in the “distant oceans” (远洋), information—and orders—were not able to consistently reach them.⁸⁴ In industry parlance, “distant oceans” refers to waters outside East Asia.⁸⁵

⁸¹ “List of Advanced Units and Individuals of National Defense Mobilization, Advanced Grassroots Armed Departments, and Outstanding Militia in Fuding City for the Year 2023.”

⁸² 灌云年鉴 2017 [*Guanyun Yearbook* 2017] (Beijing: Fangzhi Publishing, January 2018) p. 214.

⁸³ 何志祥 [He Zhixiang] 适应海防安全形势 建强海上民兵组织 [“Adapt to the Ocean Defense Security Situation, Build a Powerful Maritime Militia Organization”], 国防 [*National Defense*], no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 48-50.

⁸⁴ 台州军分区千里海防—“网”收 [“Taizhou Military Subdistrict Thousands of Miles of Ocean Defense Captured with a ‘Net’”], 湖州市人民政府 [*People’s Government of Huzhou*], 26 April 2016, www.huzhou.gov.cn/art/2016/4/26/art_1229213742_54845600.html.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, 中国的远洋渔业发展 [“Development of China’s Distant Water Fisheries”], *Government of the People’s Republic of China*, October 2023, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202310/content_6911268.htm.

The Ningbo city military subdistrict may command information vessels that are active outside East Asia. According to an authoritative account, one of its deployed boats reported back to the duty room that it was operating in “high seas areas” (公海海域). Since Beijing asserts that all the waters of the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea fall under some form of coastal state jurisdiction, the vessel could only have been operating further afield.⁸⁶

There is ample evidence dating back over a decade indicating that at least some PLA experts believe that maritime militia forces should be operating out of area. In a 2014 article, Xu Haifeng (徐海峰), a PLA officer assigned to the headquarters of the Zhejiang Military District, called for the province to seize on opportunities presented by existing policy initiatives, including the creation of “marine economy demonstration zones” (海洋经济示范区), to expand maritime militia force construction away from the fishing industry to other marine industries. In doing so, the province could form a force disposition that included the near seas, far seas, and distant oceans. In his vision, large-scale fishing enterprises, presumably including the distant-water fishing fleet; distant-ocean shipping companies; shipbuilding and ship repair enterprises; and marine resource exploration entities would all set up maritime militia elements. While the author does not specify that they should specialize in intelligence collection, as this report has shown, all maritime militia units, regardless of focus, are expected to serve this function. Moreover, the author highlights maritime reconnaissance forces as being “key contingents” (建强重点队伍) that should be prioritized.⁸⁷

More recent studies have been explicit about the need to embark information personnel on PRC vessels operating overseas. This was a key theme in a special January 2018 issue of *National Defense* dedicated to maritime militia reconnaissance forces. One article, written by the then-Deputy Commander of the Zhejiang Military District, Major General Yao Huai’ning (姚淮宁), called for building a “distant-ocean information contingent” (远洋信息队伍), which would include information personnel constituted from marine transport companies, marine exploration departments, and overseas trading organizations. They would “monitor international sea lanes and important maritime thoroughfares” (随船过航时担任监视国际航线、海上要道任务) from aboard Chinese ships. In his words, they should “extend the ‘antennae’ of maritime reconnaissance to the maximum extent possible” (最大程度延伸海上侦察“触角”).⁸⁸

Writing in the same issue, Colonel Zhang Li (张莉) from the Shanghai Garrison District, called for “creating militia far seas reconnaissance and early warning elements largely comprising civilian vessels and militia that work in distant oceans” (以远洋作业的民船民兵为主组建民兵远海侦察预警分队). Colonel Zhang recommended that the elements “use their distant-ocean work as cover to monitor maritime military developments” (以远洋作业为掩护，监视海上军事动态).⁸⁹ Also in the same issue, the then-Commander of the Ningbo Military Subdistrict, Liu Zhongcheng, called for integrating distant-ocean fishing vessels into the country’s “intelligence reporting reconnaissance network” (全部纳入情报侦察网) and “expanding near-seas intelligence

⁸⁶ Ran, Chen, and Zhao, “Zhejiang’s Ningbo Military Subdistrict Strengthens Combat Readiness,” p. 9.

⁸⁷ Xu, “Adapting to the Situation and Comprehensively Standardizing the Construction of Maritime Militia,” p. 65.

⁸⁸ Yao, “Focus on the Situation and Task,” p. 47.

⁸⁹ 张莉 [Zhang Li], 加强海上侦察分队建设初探 [“A Preliminary Discussion on Strengthening Maritime Militia Reconnaissance Elements”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 57.

reporting to the far seas” (近海报情向远海拓展).⁹⁰ In yet another article, the then-Commander of the Zhejiang Provincial Military District, Major General Feng Wenping (冯文平), recommended that China “accelerate the shift of maritime militia [reconnaissance] forces from the near seas to the far seas” (加快推进海上民兵...由近海部署向远海前推).⁹¹

More recently, in a 2019 article, Fang Shouxian (方寿祥), from the Zhejiang Military District, Readiness Construction Department, called for expanding intelligence work into the “distant oceans” (拓远洋). The author recommended that China exploit “opportunities such as distant ocean transport, cross-border trade, finance and logistics, international cooperation, and cultural exchanges by choosing people to engage in far seas and overseas intelligence collection work.”⁹²

Given the evidence presented above, it is more likely than not that PRC vessels operating overseas have already begun embarking information personnel to serve intelligence collection and reporting functions. In the case of China’s fishing fleet, serving this foreign intelligence collection function could be as simple as adding a new duty to the “information personnel” that already embark aboard some distant-water fishing vessels. Aside from their primary responsibilities of tallying and reporting production numbers, serving as experts on international and national fisheries regulations that affect their work, and handling interactions with foreign officials while at sea and in port, they might also be tasked with collecting and reporting military and political intelligence while operating overseas.⁹³ Similar processes may already be in place in the commercial shipping industry. For instance, Guangxi province’s Beihai city has built up its ranks of maritime intelligence specialists by recruiting from among marine shipping personnel (海上交通运输从业人员).⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Liu, “Strive to Build a New Era of Maritime Militia Reconnaissance ‘Elite Forces,’” p. 51.

⁹¹ Feng, “Led by the Party’s Thinking on Building a Strong Military in the New Era,” p. 44.

⁹² Fang, “Exploring the Creation of a ‘Double-Plus’ Model That Integrates Land and Sea and Civil-Military Fusion,” p. 61.

⁹³ For a description of the responsibilities of information personnel embarked aboard distant-water fishing vessels, see 比北京时间先过上元宵节，这位赛艇队队长出海已超三百天，金枪鱼渔船上搓圆子 [“Celebrating the Lantern Festival Before Beijing Time, This Rowing Team Captain Has Been at Sea for More Than 300 Days, Making Rice Balls on a Tuna Fishing Boat”], 上观新闻 [Shanghai Observer], 24 February 2024, <https://www.jfdaily.com/wx/detail.do?id=719145>; 你要“草本元素”，他给“量子科学”，产教融合何以告别“平行线” [“You Want ‘Herbal Elements’ But He Gives ‘Quantum Science,’ How Industry and Education Can Say Goodbye to ‘Parallel Lines’”], 上观新闻 [Shanghai Observer], 24 March 2025, <https://web.shobserver.com/statics/res/html/web/newsDetail.html?id=880804&v=1.7&sid=67>.

⁹⁴ 北海年鉴 2022 [Beihai Yearbook 2022] (Guangxi: Guangxi People’s Press, November 2022), p. 101.



Figure 10. Cabin of an Information Specialist Aboard a Chinese Distant-Water Fishing Vessel.⁹⁵

Conclusion

The maritime militia is a component of China's armed forces separate from the PLA that can be mobilized to support military operations in both war and peace. While militia operations are often associated with coercive actions to impose Beijing's will on its weaker neighbors, the most fundamental and enduring role of the maritime militia is to collect and report foreign intelligence. China likely operates hundreds of maritime militia reconnaissance units that specialize in intelligence collection. It also encourages other militia forces to serve this reporting function, on the principle that more is better.

Undergirding these operations is a cadre of maritime militia intelligence specialists called "information personnel." Information personnel are organized into force contingents that support operational militia forces. Most have day jobs in the fishing industry, but many hail from other sectors, including marine shipping and even maritime law enforcement units.

While embarked on militia vessels, information personnel are tasked with collecting information on the foreign vessels they encounter while at sea, deciding which information (if any) has intelligence value for the PLA, and transmitting that information to the PLA in a form that is useful. Their work is overseen by PAFDs, which also serve as the conduit between the militia forces collecting intelligence and the operational PLA forces that use it.

As part-time soldiers, militia intelligence specialists do not perform their jobs with the same competence and proficiency as active-duty PLA intelligence personnel. They are not as fast or efficient, and their intelligence may not always be useful. However, militia information personnel

⁹⁵ "Celebrating the Lantern Festival Before Beijing Time."

have played key roles in the tracking of foreign vessels operating along China's periphery, and they have captured foreign equipment with intelligence value for the PLA. The sheer numbers of maritime militia intelligence specialists ensures that the PLA will be able to select the best-trained, best-motivated, and most competent individuals for important missions. Moreover, while militia units from a given town or county may only report a few pieces of actionable intelligence each year, when multiplied across the entire force, the contributions to the PLA's situational awareness truly are, as one PLA expert described, "irreplaceable" (不可替代).⁹⁶

To date, the vast majority of militia intelligence specialists are assigned to Chinese vessels operating within the First Island Chain, in waters of greatest strategic and operational importance to China. However, as a country with ambitions to transform itself into a "maritime great power" and build a "world-class navy," the PRC would naturally look to leverage civilian mariners operating overseas to collect maritime intelligence, and indeed a number of PLA experts—many of whom are in charge of formulating and implementing militia policy—have publicly recommended that it do so. Other sources suggest that it is already happening. Thus, it seems likely that maritime militia information personnel embark on at least some distant-water fishing vessels and merchant ships engaged in international trade.

⁹⁶ Yao, "Focus on the Situation and Task," p. 46.

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