

Center for International Maritime Security



CURRENT OPERATIONS, INDO-ASIA-PACIFIC

ANDREW S. ERICKSON AND RYAN D. MARTINSON DISCUSS CHINA'S MARITIME GRAY ZONE OPERATIONS

MARCH 11, 2019 | DMITRY FILIPOFF | LEAVE A COMMENT

By Dmitry Filipoff

On March 15th, the [Naval Institute Press](#) will publish [China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations](#), a volume edited by professors [Andrew S. Erickson](#) and [Ryan D. Martinson](#) from the Naval War College's [China Maritime Studies Institute](#). CIMSEC recently reached out to Erickson and Martinson about their latest work.

Q: What was the genesis of your book?

Erickson: In the last decade or so, China has dramatically expanded its control and influence over strategically important parts of maritime East Asia. It has done so despite opposition from regional states, including the United States, and without firing a shot. Others have examined this topic, but we found that much of the public analysis and discussion was not grounded in solid mastery of the available Chinese sources—even though China tends to be much more transparent in Chinese. We also recognized a general lack of understanding about the two organizations on the front lines of Beijing's seaward expansion: the [China Coast Guard \(CCG\)](#) and the [People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia \(PAFMM\)](#). This volume grew out of a conference we held in Newport in May 2017 to address some of these issues. It contains contributions from world-leading subject matter experts, with a wide range of commercial, technical, government, and scholarly experience and expertise. We're honored to receive endorsements from top leaders in sea power, strategy, and policy: former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead, former Secretary of the Navy J. William Middendorf, Harvard Professor Stephen Rosen, former Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Fleet Commander-in-Chief Vice Admiral Yoji Koda, Dr. James Carafano of the Heritage Foundation, and former Pentagon Director of Net Assessment Andrew Marshall.

Q: The title of your book is *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*. How does the term "gray zone" apply here?

Martinson: We usually prefer to use Chinese concepts when talking about Chinese behavior, and Chinese strategists do not generally use the term "gray zone." But we think that the concept nicely captures the essence of the Chinese approach. We were inspired by the [important work](#) done by RAND analyst Michael Mazarr, who contributed a chapter to the volume. In his view, gray zone strategies have three primary characteristics. They seek to alter the status quo. They do so gradually. And they employ "unconventional" elements of state power. Today, a large proportion of Chinese-claimed maritime space is controlled or contested by other countries. This is the status quo that Beijing seeks to alter. Its campaign to assert control over these areas has progressed over a number of years. Clearly, then, Chinese leaders are in no rush to achieve their objectives. And while [China's Navy plays a very important role in this strategy](#), it is not the chief protagonist.

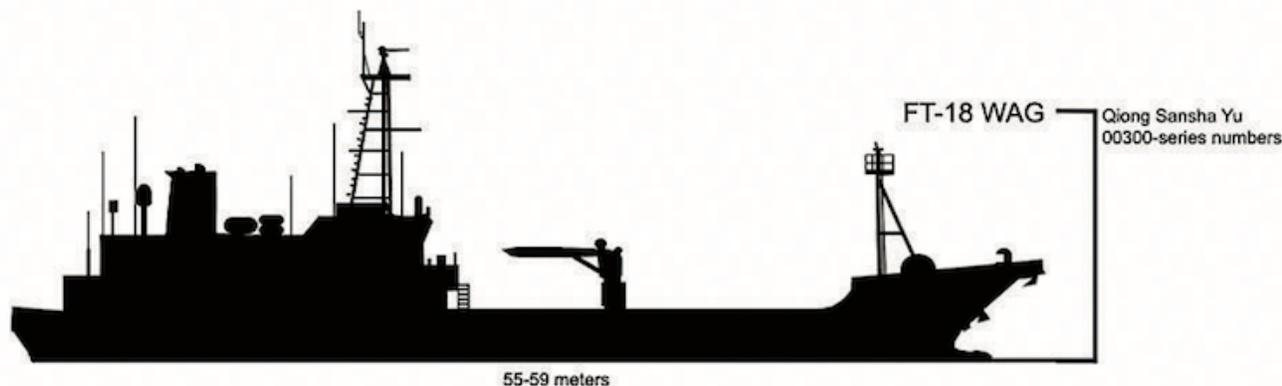
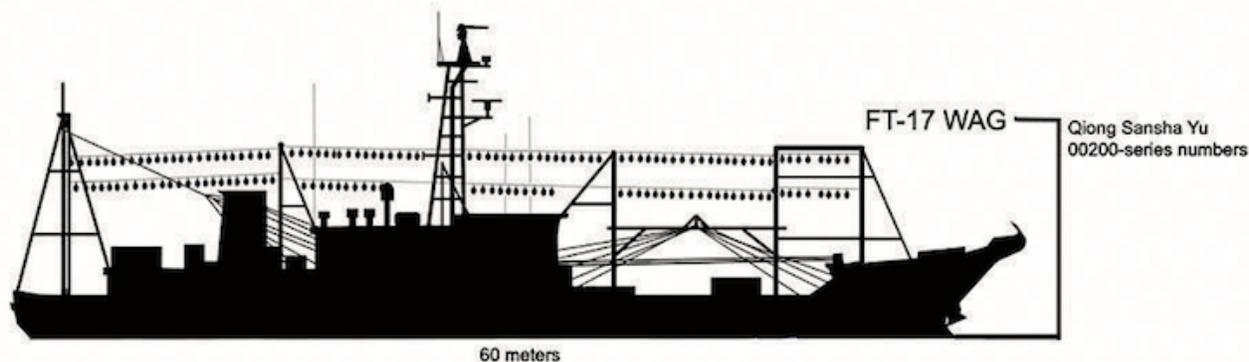
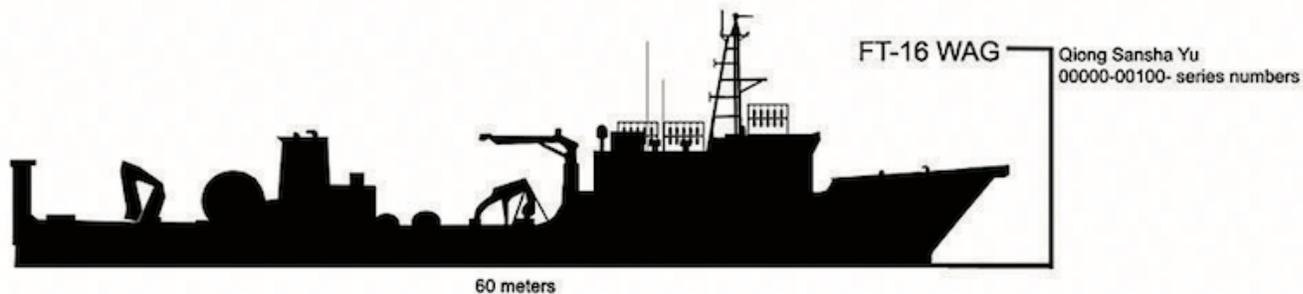
Q: Who, then, are the chief actors?

Martinson: The CCG and the PAFMM perform the vast majority of Chinese maritime gray zone operations. Chinese strategists and spokespeople frame their actions as righteous efforts to protect China's "maritime rights and interests." The CCG uses law enforcement as a pretext for activities to assert Beijing's prerogatives in disputed maritime space. PAFMM personnel are often disguised as civilian mariners, especially fishermen. Most do fish, at least some of the time. But they can be [activated to conduct rights protection operations](#). And a new elite subcomponent is paid handsomely to [engage in sovereignty promotion missions fulltime](#) without fishing at all. Meanwhile, the PLA Navy also plays a role in disputed waters, serving what Chinese strategists call a "backstop" function. It discourages foreign countries from pushing back too forcefully and [stands ready over the horizon](#) to come to the aid of China's gray zone forces should the situation escalate.

Q: Most readers will have heard about the China Coast Guard, but fewer may be familiar with the PAFMM. How is the PAFMM organized?

Erickson: The PAFMM is a [state-organized, developed, and controlled force operating under a direct military chain of command](#). This component of China's armed forces is locally supported, but answers to China's centralized military bureaucracy, headed by Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping himself. While most retain day jobs, militiamen are organized into military units and receive military training, sometimes from China's Navy. In recent years, there has been a push to professionalize the PAFMM. The [Sansha City Maritime Militia](#), headquartered on Woody Island in the Paracels, is the model for a professional militia force. It is outfitted with [seven dozen large new ships](#) that resemble fishing trawlers but are actually [purpose-built for gray zone operations](#). Lacking fishing responsibilities, personnel train for manifold peacetime and wartime contingencies, [including with light arms](#), and deploy regularly to disputed South China Sea areas, even during fishing moratoriums.

Sansha City China Maritime Militia (CMM)



Three types of maritime militia vessels depicted in the Office of Naval Intelligence's China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), Coast Guard, and Government Maritime Forces 2018 Recognition and Identification Guide. (Office of Naval Intelligence)

There are no solid numbers publicly available on the size of China's maritime militia, but it is [clearly the world's largest](#). In fact, it is virtually the only one charged with involvement in sovereignty disputes: only Vietnam, one of the very last countries politically and bureaucratically similar to China, is known to have a similar force with a similar mission. China's maritime militia draws on the [world's largest fishing fleet](#), incorporating through formal registration a portion of its thousands of fishing vessels,

and the thousands of people who work aboard them as well as in other marine industries. The PAFMM thus recruits from the world's largest fishing industry. According to China's 2016 *Fisheries Yearbook*, China's fishing industry employs 20,169,600 workers, mostly in traditional fishing practices, industry processing, and coastal aquaculture. Those who actually fish "on the water" number 1,753,618. They operate 187,200 "marine fishing vessels." An unknown portion of these are militia boats. To give a sense of the size and distribution of PAFMM forces, our volume includes [figures showing the location of leading militia units](#) in two major maritime provinces: Hainan and Zhejiang.

Q: How is the CCG organized for gray zone operations?

Martinson: When we held the conference in 2017, the CCG was in the midst of a major organizational reform. It was only set up in 2013, the result of a decision to combine four different maritime law enforcement agencies. Before 2013, most rights protection operations were conducted by two civilian agencies: China Marine Surveillance and Fisheries Law Enforcement. They did not cooperate well with each other. Moreover, neither had any real policing powers. After the CCG was created, it became clear that Beijing intended to transform it into a military organization. In early 2018, Beijing announced a decision to transfer the CCG from the State Oceanic Administration to the People's Armed Police. At about the same time, the People's Armed Police was placed under the control of the Central Military Commission. So, [like the PAFMM, it is now a component of China's armed forces](#). Moreover, CCG officers now have the authority to detain and charge foreign mariners for criminal offenses simply for being present in disputed areas of the East China Sea and South China Sea (although they have yet to use this authority in practice).

Q: How is the CCG equipped to assert China's maritime claims?

Martinson: When Beijing's gray zone campaign began in earnest in 2006, China's maritime law enforcement forces were fairly weak. They owned few oceangoing cutters, and many of those that they did own were elderly vessels handed down from the PLA Navy or the country's [oceanographic research fleet](#). They were not purpose-built for "rights protection" missions. In recent years, however, Beijing has invested heavily in new platforms for the CCG. Today, China has by far the world's largest coast guard, operating more maritime law enforcement vessels than the coast guards of all its

regional neighbors combined. As the [chapter by Joshua Hickey, Andrew Erickson, and Henry Holst](#) points out, the CCG owns more than 220 ships over 500 tons, far surpassing Japan (with around 80 coast guard hulls over 500 tons), the United States (with around 50), and South Korea (with around 45). At over 10,000 tons full load, the CCG's two *Zhaotou*-class patrol ships are the world's largest coast guard vessels. The authors project that in 2020 China's coast guard could have 260 ships capable of operating offshore (i.e., larger than 500 tons). Drawing from lessons learned while operating in disputed areas in the East and South China Seas, recent classes of Chinese coast guard vessels have seen major qualitative improvements. They are larger, faster, more maneuverable, and have enhanced firepower. Many CCG vessels are now armed with 30 mm and 76 mm cannons.

Q: It appears that these gray zone forces and operations are heavily focused on sovereignty disputes such as in the East and South China Seas. Are they also pursuing [other goals and lines of effort](#)?

Erickson: That is correct. The vast majority of maritime gray zone activities involve efforts to assert Chinese control and influence over disputed maritime space in what Chinese strategists term the "Near Seas." When conducting rights protection operations, these forces help Beijing enforce its policies regarding which kinds of activities can and cannot take place in Chinese-claimed areas. The CCG and PAFMM intimidate and harass foreign civilians attempting to use the ocean for economic purposes, such as fishing and oil/gas development. Since at least 2011, for instance, China's coast guard and militia forces have been charged with preventing Vietnam from developing offshore hydrocarbon reserves in its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), part of which overlaps with China's sweeping nine-dash line claim. China's gray zone forces also protect Chinese civilians operating "legally" in Chinese-claimed maritime space. The [2014 defense of Chinese drilling rig HYSY-981](#), discussed in detail in our volume, is a classic case of this type of gray zone operation. By controlling maritime space, China's gray zone forces can also determine who can and cannot access disputed features. Since 2012, for instance, Chinese coast guard and militia forces have upheld [Chinese control over Scarborough Reef](#). Today, Filipino fishermen can only operate there with China's permission.

Q: What are some of the tactics employed by China's gray zone forces?

Erickson: Most CCG cutters are unarmed, and PAFMM vessels are [minimally armed](#) at most. They assert Chinese prerogatives through employment of a range of nonlethal tactics. In many cases, Chinese gray zone ships are themselves the weapon: they bump, ram, and physically obstruct the moments of other vessels. They also employ [powerful water cannons](#) to damage sensitive equipment aboard foreign ships and flood their power plants. Foreign states are often helpless to respond because China has the region's most powerful navy, which gives it escalation dominance.

Q: How have regional states reacted to Chinese maritime gray zone operations? Have some had more effective responses than others?

Martinson: Regional states have not presented China with a united front. They have each handled Chinese encroachments differently. China's strongest neighboring sea power, [Japan has taken the most vigorous actions](#). As Adam Liff outlines in his chapter, it has bolstered its naval and coast guard forces along its southern islands. It has also taken bold steps to publicize China's gray zone actions. Vietnam has been a model of pushback against Beijing's maritime expansion, as Bernard Moreland recounts in his chapter. But even its resistance has limits. In July 2017, Beijing likely used [gray zone forces](#) to compel Hanoi to cancel plans to develop oil and gas in its own EEZ, in cooperation with a Spanish company. Other states have taken a much more conciliatory approach to China's incursions in the South China Sea. The Philippines, for example, is apparently acquiescing to Beijing's desire to [jointly develop](#) disputed parts of the South China Sea—areas that a 2016 arbitration ruling clearly place under Philippine jurisdiction. Meanwhile, China continues to push Manila in other ways. Philippine supply shipments to Second Thomas Shoal are still subject to [harassment](#). China has recently concentrated a fleet of gray zone forces just off the coast of Philippine-occupied Thitu Island, in an apparent effort to [pressure Manila](#) to discontinue long-planned repairs and updates to its facilities there.



Chinese fishing vessels massed off Philippine-occupied Thitu Island in January 2019. (CSIS/AMTI, DigitalGlobe)

At the same time, China itself continues to develop reclaimed land at Mischief Reef, a mostly submerged feature which because of its location clearly belongs to the Philippines. For its part, Malaysia has not publicly opposed Chinese incursions in its jurisdictional waters. But it is apparently proceeding with plans to develop seabed resources near the Chinese-claimed Luconia Shoals. Chinese coast guard vessels patrol the area, but have not forced a cessation of exploratory drilling operations—including those conducted by the Japanese-owned drilling rig [Hakuryu 5](#) in February 2018. This story will be worth following, as Malaysia makes decisions about next steps. In 2016, Indonesia took [robust actions](#) to crack down on Chinese fishing activities near the southern part of the nine-dash line, northeast of its Natuna Islands. Things have been fairly quiet in the years since, perhaps because CCG vessels are [escorting the fishing fleet](#) to the area.

Q: It seems like China's gray zone strategy is more often directed at other countries. Why is this topic important for U.S. national security?

Erickson: The U.S. Navy has also been targeted by China's gray zone forces. U.S. Navy special mission ships such as the USNS *Bowditch*, [USNS Impeccable](#), USNS *Effective*, USNS *Victorious*, and [USNS Howard O. Lorenzen](#) have been shadowed and harassed, victims of China's erratically-enforced opposition to foreign naval activities within its claimed EEZ. To be sure, China's gray zone campaign is largely targeted at other

territorial claimants, but two of these countries—Japan and the Philippines—are U.S. allies. Washington's [robust alliance with Tokyo](#), in particular, is critical to American presence and peace preservation in a vital but vulnerable region. Chinese bullying behavior threatens to undermine these alliances and could trigger direct American military intervention if China's gray zone operations were to escalate into armed attack. Moreover, as Jonathan Odom points out in his chapter, China's activities violate important international conventions and norms. This means they are weakening key pillars of the international maritime order, and with it the global system on which peace and prosperity depend. In many cases China's gray zone forces are used to assert maritime claims that have no basis in international law.

Q: And how can the U.S. Navy, as a more high-end force, better handle these sorts of Chinese paramilitary forces without risking escalation?

Martinson: If the United States wants to be effectual, it [must do more to expose China's gray zone activities](#), and it [must accept a degree of risk in opposing them more strongly](#). China's gray zone activities cannot be easily deterred, because each individual act is calculated to fall below American red lines. If Washington wants to get serious about countering China's gray zone expansion, [it must do more than conduct "presence" and "freedom of navigation" operations](#)—which appear to sit at the heart of the current approach. The former cannot deter Beijing from taking tactical actions in the gray zone. The latter does little to defend the interests of allies and partners. In our concluding chapter, we suggest ways that the U.S. Navy can do more to help them protect their legitimate interests and defend the legal norms and conventions that China's behavior threatens to erode. In short, the United States should be out there with them, [operating on the front lines](#) of China's seaward expansion. To that end, it must develop a range of nonlethal tactics that it can use to achieve local effects without resorting to use of force.

[Dr. Andrew S. Erickson](#) is a Professor of Strategy in the China Maritime Studies Institute and the recipient of the [inaugural Civilian Faculty Research Excellence Award](#) at the Naval War College. He is an Associate in Research at Harvard University's John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. In 2013, while deployed in the Pacific as a Regional Security Education Program scholar aboard USS Nimitz, he delivered twenty-five hours of presentations. Erickson is the author of Chinese Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile

Development (*Jamestown Foundation/Brookings Institution Press, 2013*). He received his Ph.D. from Princeton University. Erickson blogs at www.andrewerickson.com.

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Featured Image: A China Coast Guard ship uses a water cannon to harass a Vietnamese law enforcement vessel near the disputed Paracel Islands on May 27, 2014. (Photo by The Asahi Shimbun)

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