

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA'S THIRD FORCE: UNDERSTANDING AND COUNTERING CHINA'S MARITIME MILITIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Critical to understanding and responding to Beijing's actions in the South China Sea is the fact that it is employing *not one but three major sea forces* there.¹ As a *China Daily* article reveals, "a less noticed force, China's maritime militia, is also improving its operational capability."²

Bottom line up front—I want to tell you why:

- ***So much is at risk if more is not done to address China's Maritime Militia.***
- ***So much is knowable about it, even through open sources alone.***
- ***So much is say-able, if only U.S. government officials would do so.***
- ***So much is preventable, but only if U.S. officials act soon.***

China's Maritime Militia is its Third Sea Force of "blue hulls," after its Navy of "gray hulls" and its Coast Guard of "white hulls."³ Increasingly, these forces operate in concert, with blue hulls operating forward and white and gray hulls backstopping them.⁴ The Chinese operational concept entails a "first line of Militia, a second line of Administrative Law Enforcement, supported by a third line of the Military."⁵ Collectively, these are "gray zone" operations:⁶ conducted to alter the *status quo*, and employing coercion as necessary, but without resorting to war.⁷ Chinese sources term such efforts "War without Gun Smoke."⁸ Beijing works constantly in peacetime (and possibly in crises short of major combat operations with the United States) to "win without fighting [killing]," and thereby to further its unresolved land feature and maritime sovereignty claims. This is part of Beijing's broader South China Sea strategy:

consolidate disputed claims where it can, delay resolution of issues it cannot yet settle in its favor, and coerce (deter and/or compel)⁹ potential opponents while limiting escalation.¹⁰

In the most probable scenarios concerning Chinese interference in U.S. Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPs), punishing the Philippines for pursuing international arbitration, or deterring Vietnam and others from following suit, China’s irregular but military-controlled Maritime Militia would likely play a frontline role. It has already done so in a range of international sea incidents, including China’s 2009 harassment of USNS *Impeccable* and 2012 seizure of Scarborough Shoal. By its very design, this approach is particularly challenging for potential opponents to understand clearly, let alone address effectively.¹¹

I therefore offer a summation of my extensive, published research findings with my Naval War College colleague Conor Kennedy¹² concerning:

- **what China’s Maritime Militia is,**
- **why it matters,**
- **and what to do about it.**

China’s irregular sea force is one of the most important—yet most under-considered—factors affecting U.S. security interests in the South China Sea. Many in Washington understand that China has the world’s second-largest blue water Navy, some that China has the world’s largest blue water Coast Guard. But *almost no one* knows that China—drawing on the world’s largest fishing fleet—has deployed the world’s largest Maritime Militia; and virtually the only one *charged with advancing disputed maritime claims*. These Chinese “Little Blue Men” are roughly equivalent at sea to Putin’s “Little Green Men” on land.

There is an important reason for this lack of light on China’s Third Sea Force: despite a deluge of Chinese-language evidence of its development and activities, to the best of my knowledge no U.S. government report or Washington-based executive branch official has publicly mentioned China’s Maritime Militia, at all!

As a result, I submit to you, U.S. policy is under-informed, U.S. regional allies and partners are confused, and Beijing is emboldened. In recent years, it has used its Maritime Militia against military and civilian ships and crews of its immediate neighbors and the United States—with *no direct* public response from *any* of them.

ADVANCING CHINA’S SOUTH SEA CLAIMS

Thousands of personnel and vessels are registered in China’s Maritime Militia. What should concern Washington and its regional allies and partners is an *elite subset*, primarily from four locations: Danzhou,¹³ Tanmen,¹⁴ and Sanya on Hainan Island; as well as Sansha, the new municipality in the Paracel Islands charged with administering all Chinese claims in the South China Sea. *These* are the forces entrusted with, and trained

for, *participation in international sea incidents*. From a research perspective, that means that the problem is manageable and the main points are knowable: analysts can drill down deeply in a few key areas.

Furthermore, for grassroots forces to function effectively and economically, constant information release is virtually inevitable. Despite incomplete efforts at cover-up and denial¹⁵—some of which are truly farcical¹⁶—much can be learned from authoritative Chinese-language open sources,¹⁷ which offer considerable confirmable, conclusive data. Pedigreed, assembled, and compared, they offer deep understanding of many aspects of China’s Maritime Militia. Chinese local government websites in particular offer a rich source of specific time-stamped data.¹⁸ Hull numbers contain important information: searching the Chinese Internet for them can generate useful leads. This is not a faceless force; substantial information is available on key leaders’ backgrounds, contributions, and current roles.

Leading elements of China’s Third Sea Force have already played *frontline roles in manifold Chinese incidents and skirmishes with foreign maritime forces throughout the South China Sea. These include China’s:*

- 1. 1974 seizure of the western Paracels from Vietnam¹⁹**
- 2. 2009 harassment of a U.S. Navy (USN) survey ship²⁰**
- 3. 2011 sabotage of two Vietnamese hydrographic vessels²¹**
- 4. 2012 seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines²²**
- 5. and 2014 repulsion of Vietnamese vessels from disputed waters surrounding its oil rig, *including by ramming and sinking them*²³**

Make no mistake: these are state-organized, -developed, and -controlled forces operating under a direct military chain of command.²⁴

OPEN SOURCES SHOW *IMPECCABLE* LINK

Case in point: In March 2009, USN survey vessel *Impeccable* was surrounded, halted, and harassed by a coterie of five Chinese vessels: one Navy, two Coast Guard, and *two Maritime Militia trawlers*. One trawler approached dangerously close, and a man on deck attempted to snag *Impeccable*’s towed array sonar with a *grappling hook*.²⁵

No random patriotic fishermen, these! As one might expect, Beijing would not allow mere civilians to confront a USN vessel. Indeed, running a “VIN number check” in Chinese sources for the hull number produced conclusive documentation that the vessel was registered to a Maritime Militia company in Sanya City, and piloted by a cadre leader from that Militia, Lin Wei.²⁶ This is an important example of leading Militia units being entrusted with, and capable of, sophisticated frontline involvement in international sea incidents at Beijing’s behest. Disturbingly, however, the U.S. government *never said any of this publicly* (if it even *fully* knew), thereby reassuring Beijing that it could continue such malfeasance safely in the shadows.

Tracing Lin's subsequent whereabouts reveals that he has recently acquired a much larger, more capable Militia "mother-ship" that commands and supplies several dozen Militia trawlers on long journeys to the Spratly Islands. This is part of a Militia-wide wave of "mother-ship" buildup. Each 3,000-ton vessel allows several dozen Militia trawlers to operate better, longer, further—*together*.

Additionally, between 27 February and 28 March 2014, Sanya Maritime Militia forces were present near Second Thomas Shoal during China's temporary blockade of it, and the Philippines' consequent inability to resupply its forces stationed on the warship hulk *Sierra Madre* grounded there. Only the day after the Militia was reportedly recalled were Philippine forces able to successfully resume resupply of their outpost.²⁷ Such activities are likely to recur in the future, perhaps far more serious in their nature and execution.

SCARBOROUGH SHOAL – INSPIRING A NEW OPERATIONAL MODEL

Indeed, in 2012, China's Third Sea Force played a leading role in another international sea incident involving the United States. Twelve Maritime Militia trawlers were netting tons of endangered species at Scarborough Shoal.²⁸ When a Philippine vessel boarded two of the trawlers, Militiamen onboard radioed for help. China's Coast Guard rode to the rescue.

Chinese Coast Guard ships sealed off the shoal's lagoon, and Maritime Militia vessels screened off the approaches from Filipino fishermen—some of many Chinese actions recently condemned by the Arbitral Tribunal.²⁹ All told, China *renege*d on a U.S.-brokered deal to return to the *status quo ante*.³⁰ The incident showcased the use of professional fishermen in China's Maritime Militia who double as support to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) when called upon to do so.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government neither "called out" Maritime Militia involvement, nor imposed any costs for China's seizing the disputed feature. Beijing appears to have taken a lesson, and been emboldened accordingly. Serious Chinese sources have subsequently discussed a "Huangyan [Scarborough Shoal] Model"³¹ and concurrent transformation of China's maritime strategy. In an article framed around this very theme, researcher Zhang Jie of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences writes, "This model... sees non-military conflict as the bottom line to attain effective control over the disputed shoal and its surrounding waters by means of... civilian maritime force, etc. This model suggests that China's maritime policy has shifted fundamentally from keeping a low profile to becoming more proactive." As "the first official use of" the phrase "Huangyan [Scarborough Shoal] Model," Dr. Zhang cites an article in the overseas edition of *People's Daily*, implying that this term has the endorsement of China's government for communication with external audiences, including perhaps for signaling and coercion.³² "As China's strength increases," she projects, "China will be able to effectively wield more types of non-military instruments to resolve South China Sea disputes." Disturbingly, Zhang emphasizes that the "Huangyan [Scarborough Shoal] Model" has

also been “explored by China” vis-à-vis the “Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands dispute”³³—with the subsequently augmented presence of China Coast Guard ships³⁴ (together with many “fishing boats”³⁵) in the islands’ vicinity already a tangible result.

TANMEN MILITIA – BECOMING A MODEL UNIT

Helping China seize Scarborough Shoal was the Tanmen Militia, its personnel subsequently lionized and compensated for their contribution. The big prize came a year later, when Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping visited them. They were declared a “Model Unit” for all to emulate. Community development funds flowed apace. Among the many beneficiaries is a national museum complex to augment the Tanmen Militia’s own museum,³⁶ which Xi had toured. These facilities, and Tanmen’s Militiamen, play a special role in underwriting Beijing’s powerful but deceptively one-sided historical narrative concerning its South China Sea claims: “Our forefathers fished there.”³⁷

Now each of the Militia’s 29 Party members has his own new 500-ton steel-hulled trawler, or will soon. Neighboring countries’ *Coast Guards* would be lucky to have so many well-equipped vessels.³⁸ This fleet upgrading—part of a major ramp-up of large, new *steel-hulled* Chinese Militia trawlers—appears designed to increase *ramming* capabilities.

Subsequently, officials from other localities have flocked to Tanmen to study its Militia, in order to better develop their own. Local officials elsewhere examine Tanmen to inform their Militias’ development, so we too must scrutinize it for clues to larger development trends.

FRONTIER FORCES: MILITIA EXPANSION IN SANSHA... AND BEYOND

Today, two powerful factors are propelling Maritime Militia development:

- it is prioritized in China’s latest Five-Year Plan,³⁹
- and—as part of Xi’s downsizing China’s military to make it *leaner and meaner*—experienced veterans are becoming available. Attracted by growing incentives, some are already joining identified Maritime Militia units.⁴⁰

A major beneficiary of resource flows is the Sansha Maritime Militia, responsible for supporting all of Beijing’s South China Sea claims. New units are being developed to continue the struggle, both throughout the Paracels and increasingly in dedicated bases in the Spratlys as well. In the 1990s, China’s Maritime Militia was a key force in building the first-generation structures on Spratly features that allowed China to occupy them until its recent bout of “island” building.⁴¹ Now, this leading element of China’s Third Sea Force is being deployed to new facilities on the tremendously expanded, developed, and fortified reefs. Additionally, to enhance sophistication and technical management, a new specialized elite is now being added atop the old fishermen rank-and-file.

Amid all this, Sansha is taking Maritime Militia development to a dangerous new level of professionalization and militarization. Seven dozen large new vessels constructed and under construction at multiple shipyards boast *reinforced hulls, external rails to mitigate collision damage* to the ships themselves, *and water cannons*—features not common to normal fishing trawlers. An official publication of the PLA’s Academy of Military Science contains a photograph of Sansha Maritime Militia members loading 32-kg crates of “light weapons” onto one of the newly-delivered vessels during a widely-reported military exercise. Some vessels reportedly have a “weapons and equipment room” and an “ammunition store.”⁴²

Military veterans are sought for all positions. Militiamen receive hefty salaries atop an array of generous benefits: a crewman can earn over \$13,000 annually, a captain over \$25,000 annually. These are princely sums by Chinese standards, and go far in a coastal fishing village. The monies apparently come without actual fishing responsibilities attached: trawling for territorial claims would seem to be the purpose for their payment. Recently-enhanced training includes reconnaissance, “assisting in [maritime] rights protection,” and “shooting at sea.”⁴³ While other blue hull units have coordinated effectively with China’s white and gray hulls during premeditated international sea incidents, Sansha’s Maritime Militia is taking the blue hull role in the aforementioned three-tier Navy-Coast Guard-Maritime Militia “joint defense” to a new level of frontline capability, centered on a \$6 million command center.⁴⁴

All told, China is generating a worrying new wave of the future in leading-edge Maritime Militia development. The Sansha Militia was established to be a professional paramilitary force first and foremost, with fishing a secondary mission at best.⁴⁵ These are the frontline irregular forces that the U.S. and its allies and partners will most likely encounter in the South China Sea.

There is much more to come. Admiral Wu Shengli, Commander of China’s Navy, recently suggested that Spratlys construction is only “halfway” completed.⁴⁶ Follow-on moves in the Spratlys will likely at least partially echo development in the Paracels to date. Long a widely-distributed, versatile component of China’s reconnaissance-strike complex, China’s Maritime Militia will have even more persistent maritime domain awareness when operating from its new bases.⁴⁷ Rapid, diverse frontier growth combined with a lack of normal civilian entities in the Paracels and Spratlys makes it even easier for foreign analysts to detect Militia-specific assets and activity.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND COUNTERMEASURES

Now, as Beijing seeks

- to punish the Philippines for petitioning the Arbitral Tribunal,
 - to dissuade Vietnam and others from following suit,
 - and to demonstrate its long-standing opposition to U.S. FONOPS,
- its Third Sea Force likely appears a tempting tool.

Here’s how this could play out in a particularly dangerous way for regional stability and U.S. interests. Even if the current Administration is able to complete its time in office without a major incident, the next President may well face a fast-breaking Maritime Militia-related challenge just as s/he is getting started. The reason: Chinese leaders, fixated on perceived and potential differences in relative power, personalities, and policies, have a history of testing their American counterparts shortly after they assume office. The Chinese-instigated *Impeccable* incident, beginning just forty-four days after President Obama’s inauguration, was clearly designed to test his mettle and see if he could be pushed to reduce lawful U.S. surveillance and reconnaissance operations in international waters and airspace. Fortunately, President Obama passed that test.

On 27 October 2015, however, when the USS *Lassen* sailed near the artificially augmented Subi Reef, small commercial craft with the hallmarks of Maritime Militia vessels approached it “provocative[ly], crossing the *Lassen*’s bow and maneuvering around the destroyer,” having apparently anticipated its approach.⁴⁸ Who knows what contingencies they might have been practicing for, or what footage they might have been capturing for later (mis)use?

President Obama’s successor will assume office in a more challenging time for U.S.-China relations, wherein the South China Sea has become a growing arena of contention, and regarding which Beijing expresses growing determination to oppose U.S. FONOPS and related words and deeds. We must immediately support the next U.S. President and his or her freedom of action to defend U.S. interests by airing the facts on China’s Maritime Militia officially—long before a disruptive incident occurs and Beijing feeds a misleading pre-gamed narrative to media sources at home and abroad. In doing so, we would do well to take a Chinese saying to heart: “repair the house before it rains,” meaning “take precautions before it’s too late.”⁴⁹ And we will make it clear that the American commitment to preserving peace, law, and access in maritime Asia spans two administrations and more; so that Beijing cannot simply denounce the new U.S. President as an inexperienced “China hawk” who will soon revert to a more modest mean.

As for worst-case scenarios for which the U.S. armed forces are duty-bound to prepare, there is further cause for concern. While Beijing seeks to “win without fighting,” Maritime Militia use in conflict is not just theoretical. Two vessels from what is now the Danzhou Militia played a central role in China’s seizure of the Western Paracels from Vietnam in 1974. In recent years, leading Maritime Militia units have trained with China’s Navy and Coast Guard, and have operated in close coordination with them in international sea incidents. They also train for specific wartime roles, including logistics support, reconnaissance, deception and concealment, assertion of presence near and surrounding of disputed claims, as well as interdiction, harassment, and obstruction of foreign ships, including with sea mines.⁵⁰

So, before China is able to put the United States, or one of its regional allies or partners, in a misleading but precarious position of appearing to confront “innocent civilian” fishermen, American officials must *publicly reveal* the Third Sea Force’s *true nature and deeds*.⁵¹

At the end of the day, China’s Maritime Militia can only be as deceptive and plausibly deniable as we allow it to be—through our own silence and inaction.

HERE’S WHAT I BELIEVE AMERICAN POLICY-MAKERS NEED TO DO NOW:

Emphasize 3 Principles:

- 1. China’s Maritime Militia is a *military force—often in disguise.***
- 2. China’s Maritime Militia forces *do not deserve civilian protections in the event of conflict.***
- 3. *Uncovering the truth about China’s Maritime Militia is the best way to deter it.*⁵²**

Engage in 3 Actions:

1. “Call out” China’s Maritime Militia officially in public.

a. Failure of the Pentagon’s 2016 report to mention China’s Maritime Militia *at all* was a *major missed opportunity*. Congress should require detailed coverage in next year’s report.⁵³

b. Meanwhile, Congress should *publicly* address this critical subject, and ask senior Administration officials to do so as well.

2. Share information with countries at risk, and provide strategic reassurance.

a. Inform our allies and partners on the front lines of keeping the South China Sea peaceful and open to all.⁵⁴ If the U.S. government (with all its resources and capabilities) has not yet begun to address this challenge openly and proactively, how can we expect less-advantaged friends to do so?

b. The next U.S. Administration—with Congressional encouragement and support as necessary—should issue a public, whole-of-government Asia-Pacific Strategy to coordinate policy, reassure allies and partners, and deter destabilizing behavior.⁵⁵

3. Communicate clearly with Chinese interlocutors.

a. *Make it plain* that any elements that *ignore repeated warnings* by U.S. vessels to desist from disruptive activities will be *treated as military-controlled* and *dealt with accordingly*, to ensure self-defense and unobstructed mission accomplishment.

b. Impose clear consequences for any use of Maritime Militia against U.S. vessels.

The U.S. faces growing challenges in the South China Sea. In many ways China’s Maritime Militia is one of the simplest to begin to address: its plausible deniability is one of its greatest strengths, and it has many vulnerabilities. We can quickly unmask it by putting a clear U.S. government stamp of authority on already-available information. It is high time that we did so, before things take a turn for the worse, in a time and a way that is not of our choosing.

Thank you! I'm happy to take your questions.

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- ⁹ Patrick C. Bratton, “When is Coercion Successful? And Why Can’t We Agree on It?” *Naval War College Review* 58.3 (Summer 2005): 99-120, <https://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/4e9e93e3-50b9-4fe9-b6e8-c7aca4218a9b/When-Is-Coercion-Successful--And-Why-Can-t-We-Agre.aspx>.
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²¹ *Ibid.*, 144-47.

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