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CHINA'S MARITIME MILITIA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA *Myths and Realities*

*How might we view the role of China's maritime militia objectively? Reviewing the historical background and reasons for this militia's important role in the past, **HU BO** argues that because the background and reasons have more lately been subject to fundamental change, the strategic significance of China's maritime militia is declining rapidly, which is contrary to external popular perception.*



After the glory days of the Chinese maritime militia. A fishing boat skipper looks out from his vessel's pilot house. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

The militia is one of three parts of China's armed forces and China has never denied its existence. The [Law of the People's Republic of China on National Defense](#) states, "The armed forces of the People's Republic of China [PRC] consist of the Chinese People's Liberation Army [PLA], the Chinese People's Armed Police Force, and the militia." However, the official documents from China's central government and Central

Military Commission have rarely mentioned the maritime militia; instead, the maritime militia tends to be mentioned in the documents of local governments and related departments.

Towards a Definition of “Maritime Militia”

It is no secret that China has the maritime militia; however, the number, role and influence of China’s maritime militia have been too far exaggerated. There are two groups of actors responsible for this: one group comprises some Chinese local governments and media wanting to highlight their accomplishments; the second includes [certain US scholars with a tendency to exaggerate the “China Threat”](#), who have cited a great deal of the less than authoritative literature produced by the first group, while [never having made the necessary field studies](#).

These two kinds of literature on China’s maritime militia share a common problem of methodology, and the failure to provide a precise definition of what exactly constitutes a maritime militia. This being the case, all fishermen could be considered as maritime militia if observed through these coloured glasses.

A more objective way to judge the nature of a fishing boat would be by its behaviour rather than its national affiliation. It need not surprise that Chinese fishing boats appear in disputed waters or others’ traditional fishing grounds, nor are these new phenomena. In fact, they are commercial issues best debated within the World Trade Organization. As long as fishing boats do not interfere with the freedom of navigation of other vessels, and conduct no military activities, they should not be viewed as constituting maritime militia. Moreover, it is a common practice around the world for governments to provide subsidies for their countries’ fishing industries, which in itself should not be taken as evidence of maritime militia.

A Brief History of China’s Maritime Militia

Before the 1990s, China’s maritime militia had played important roles during times of both war and peace, for three reasons.

First, for a long time after the PRC’s founding, China’s navy and maritime law enforcers were too weak, even compared with most of its neighbouring countries. As such, China’s maritime security agencies could not properly perform their essential duties without being dependent on the support of civilian forces such as fishing vessels operating in the South China Sea. For instance, the Chinese maritime militia would play important roles in reconnaissance and logistics in the 1974 campaign against South Vietnam. Generally, Chinese maritime militia provided for general coastal defence against any hostile incursions.

Second, China’s tradition of People’s War had blurred the line between the regular armed forces and the people. This tradition had been reinforced by military doctrine deriving from China’s history: the people’s support, cherished by Chinese leadership, especially Mao Zedong, was one of the essential factors in the PLA’s defeat of the Kuomintang regime. Thus, People’s War had long been a major principle and feature of China’s national defence. For the Chinese, it was very popular and natural to

mobilise all available forces to defend their country, which certainly included China's fleet of fishing boats.

Third, in the era when central planning was the main economic basis, all assets, including fishing companies and fishing boats, had to conform exactly to government dictates. Before economic reform and China's opening-up to the world, national and collective interests reigned above all else, including individual interests.

The Declining Strategic Significance of the Maritime Militia

Today, all of these conditions have changed fundamentally. With the Chinese navy and coastguard being sufficiently powerful, there is not much need to use maritime militia. China's navy is catching up qualitatively with the United States Navy (USN); it already deploys more vessels in the western Pacific than other military forces including the USN. Thus, based on rational inference, the role and influence of the maritime militia should decline. As China modernises its military, it increasingly emphasises the professionalism of its forces at the military, police and civilian levels. In addition, the principles of market economics have made the fishing industry more and more unattractive to China's younger generations, resulting in an overall shrinking of China's fishing fleets in the South China Sea.

Against this background, the maritime militia's moment of glory has passed, at least in peacetime, with its role becoming progressively limited. Unlike Vietnam, China no longer has armed maritime militia in peacetime, and is relying decreasingly on its maritime militia for use against other countries. Despite frequent US accusations that China uses maritime militia, even the US Navy has found no definitive evidence of encounters with Chinese maritime militia for at least the recent decade, which is also confirmed in my private exchanges with some US officials and scholars familiar with the situation.

There are also some signals of change in Chinese military statements. [*China's National Defense in the New Era*](#) (2019) declared, "China is streamlining the number of primary militia nationwide, driving deeper reform of militia and reserve forces in their size, structure and composition." Professionalisation, after all, is the only way for a great power to come of age.

In the future, China's maritime militia will not disappear. To a certain degree, China's militia is a historical phenomenon and a manifestation of the "people's army", relating to China's defence traditions and a particular period of China's military history. The historical experience cannot fully apply to the realities of today and the future. Nonetheless, China's historical reliance on its militia is not unique; even America's independence was achieved by its militia.

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