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## THE VIETNAMESE MARITIME MILITIA

### *Myths and Realities*

*To legitimise its own grey zone tactics, China has increasingly framed the Vietnamese maritime militia as the South China Sea's main source of instability. However, **NGUYEN KHAC GIANG** shows that Vietnam's maritime militia has neither the ambition, nor the power, to engage in the kinds of maritime confrontation its Chinese counterpart has undertaken. As a tactical self-defence force, Vietnam's maritime militia is also unlikely to be the country's long-term answer to China's aggressive behaviour at sea.*



At Mũi Né on the southern Vietnamese coast, maritime fishing vessels both small and large.  
*Image by Thomas G. from Pixabay.*

Early this year, the *China Daily* published an [op-ed](#) accusing Vietnam of building up its armed maritime militia as well as subsidising fishermen in the acquisition of “large militia ships” for the purpose of “confrontation”. The piece follows an increasing number of reports from China in recent years that have attempted to shift the blame for provocations at sea onto the Vietnamese side. The op-ed prompted a swift response from the Vietnamese foreign ministry rejecting the information as “[untrue](#)”. However, the ministry’s failure to elaborate leaves observers wondering what about the allegations is untrue, as Vietnamese media sources have indeed reported the establishment of standing maritime militia units in several coastal provinces since June 2021.

Hanoi does not hide the fact that it has its own version of maritime militia. But whether the militia’s strength and operations are at an aggressive level, as suggested in such allegations, is another matter. This paper first looks at Beijing’s recent accusations, and then examines the intent and capability of Vietnam’s maritime militia.

### **The Myth Purveyed by Beijing**

The myth about the “aggressiveness” of the Vietnamese maritime militia has been propagated solely by China. Other stakeholders in the South China Sea, most notably countries such as Indonesia that have been unhappy with Vietnamese illegal fishing, have never expressed concerns about encountering “aggressive” Vietnamese militia vessels.

A [report](#) by Peking University’s South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI), for example, alleges that more than 300 Vietnamese boats intruded into the waters off the Chinese mainland in February 2020. The green dots in the report depicting the alleged positions of Vietnamese vessels suggest that Vietnam was about to invade China at the time. Yet, the information looks suspect, according to a [tweet](#) on 3 May 2020 by Gregory Poling, a senior fellow and director of the Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the United States-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

It is difficult to believe that these Vietnamese fishing boats could elude the highly securitised web of Chinese law enforcement bodies to intrude into Chinese waters. We are not talking about one or two odd cases, but more than 300 — and in just a month. Some dots even show Vietnamese vessels docked along the Chinese coast. If the [allegation](#) were true, this episode would probably represent one of the greatest security breaches in China in recent times.

In an apparent attempt to give greater credence to its narrative that the Vietnamese maritime militia was being aggressive, the China-based think tank would also [report](#) that more than 100 Vietnamese boats had intruded into Cambodian waters in July 2020. Cambodia, however, [debunked the allegation](#) outright. Given Phnom Penh’s historical disputes with Hanoi and its cosy relationship with Beijing, why would it issue a refutation if there were indeed such intrusions?

Demonising the Vietnamese maritime militia seems to be just another effort on China’s part to deflect the increasing scrutiny of its own aggressive actions in the South China Sea. Vietnam and the Philippines, two of the most vocal claimants to islands, reefs,

and other geological formations in the area, are understandably the obvious targets when China plays to its audience.

### **Vietnam's Maritime Militia: Defensive in Intent**

The Vietnamese maritime militia, in fact, is intended for self-defence and serves as a part of Hanoi's counter to China's grey zone tactics — the competitive acts performed against opposing states short of all-out warfare. This role is evident if we look at the timeline of the militia's development.

Although Vietnam has had for some time a loosely organised system of self-defence militia (*dân quân tự vệ*), comprising civilians who had completed basic military training and could be called upon for specific missions, this was never institutionalised before 2009. Hanoi started thinking about developing a maritime militia only since a series of Chinese escalations from the [late 2000s](#), particularly after China had established an administrative region in the South China Sea in 2007. That year, the Vietnamese defence ministry issued Directive 04/CT-BQP on the need to “build the Militia and Self-Defense Force operating in the maritime areas”. In 2009, the existence of the maritime self-defence militia was acknowledged for the first time, with the promulgation of the Law on Militia and Self-Defense Forces. The law laid the legal foundation for Project 1902, which piloted the establishment of the militia.

[Government Decree 67](#), which provides incentives and loans to build bigger and steel-hulled boats for fishermen, was issued in 2014 after the *Haiyang Shiyou 981* incident, when Beijing moved a giant oil rig into Vietnamese waters. During the incident, Vietnamese fishing vessels were outmatched by much bigger and more powerful Chinese ones. Vietnamese policymakers had already been alerted to the danger of China's “[cabbage strategy](#)” (seeking control of a strategic area by wrapping it with successive layers of shipping) two years earlier when the Chinese occupied Scarborough Shoal, which had been previously held by the Philippines.

The defensive nature of the Vietnamese maritime militia is also reflected in the fact that there is no record of its confrontation with other claimant states. The force largely works within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This is very different from the Chinese equivalent, which [has been operating](#) throughout the South China Sea, harassing or attacking vessels belonging to other claimant states operating within their own respective EEZs and impeding their rightful activities. In addition to various reports of the [ramming and sinking](#) of Vietnamese and Philippine fishing boats, the [recent standoff](#) on Whitsun Reef with the Philippines shows how the Chinese maritime militia is at the forefront of China's aggressive South China Sea policy.

The role of the Vietnamese maritime militia is not just that of countering Beijing's actions. One of the biggest headaches for Hanoi is the need to control the practice of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreigners in Vietnamese waters. IUU not only causes the loss of [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) in earnings for the country's fish export industry (which is the world's third largest) but also hampers Vietnam's relations with its maritime neighbours, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. The maritime militia, which is geographically diffuse, would be a much more effective force to deal with IUU than Vietnam's regular law enforcement agencies could be.

Furthermore, given that Vietnam is overwhelmed by more than 12 tropical typhoons annually, the maritime militia plays an important role in search and rescue missions. In 2019, a vessel from the maritime militia saved 22 Filipino fishermen whose ship had been [rammed and sunk](#) by a Chinese vessel.

### **Does Capability Match Intent?**

Even if the Vietnamese maritime militia were to have malicious intentions, as Beijing claims, could it really be a formidable force in the South China Sea? Despite China's exaggerated claims, the Vietnamese maritime militia has limited capability and simply cannot match its Chinese counterpart.

In 2021, Chinese media [alleged](#) that Vietnam's maritime militia comprised 76,000 members. This is a gross exaggeration of the militia's size. While Hanoi does not provide exact statistics, we can estimate the numbers through official reports. In 2016, a defence ministry journal reported that the country's maritime self-defence force accounted for [1.22 per cent](#) of its total maritime labour force. As the maritime labour force was [reported](#) to have a strength of 552,000 in 2021, one may deduce that just about 6,700 fishermen could be considered to be members of the maritime militia.

Even this number is misleading. These "militia" fishermen receive only basic training, are not provided with arms, and, more importantly, are active only when mobilised in an emergency, i.e., in the event of conflict or search and rescue missions. For most of the time, they are simply engaged in fishing activities.

The same can be said of militia vessels. Having on board a crew member who has received military training does not mean that a vessel is automatically considered to be part of the militia. That logic would be similar to saying that every family with a military trainee is an active military unit. Most Vietnamese civilian fishing vessels are hardly capable of being considered part of the militia. Only [2,660](#), or 2 per cent of Vietnam's total number of fishing vessels, are longer than 24 metres; the majority are small boats. Not many of these are steel-hulled, the majority being made of wood. Besides, most of these boats are poorly equipped. In comparison, the most well-known Chinese militia vessels, the [Spratly Backbone Fishing Vessels \(SBFVs\)](#), are required to be at least 35 metres (most are much longer) and steel-hulled.

In addition, the Vietnamese government's effort to increase the capability of civilian fishing vessels since 2014 has been a failure. By 2020, there were only 354 newly built steel-hulled fishing vessels, a tiny fraction of Vietnam's total fishing fleet. Moreover, fishermen involved in the project have been struggling with the vessels' poor quality, huge debt issues ([33 per cent](#) of the US\$400 million provided as loans under the programme is non-performing), and inefficient returns on their capital investments. Even if Hanoi had intended to strengthen its fishing fleet to undertake its own version of grey zone tactics, this policy has obviously not been successful.

A number of maritime-related state-owned enterprises, such as Vitranschart, Seaprodex, and Saigon Newport Corporation, also organise their own militias for maritime self-defence ([tự vệ biển](#)). Each of them has several hundred members and five to seven ships with dual missions, i.e., carrying out their regular business in normal times and undertaking [specific tasks](#) when requested (e.g., logistics, search and

rescue, and supporting law enforcement in cases such as the *Haiyang Shiyou 981* incident). Altogether, these forces have at best a few more than 1,000 members and several dozen ships.

With China's increasing use of grey zone tactics, particularly in the series of incidents centring around [Vanguard Bank](#) from 2017 to 2019, Hanoi decided to take a further countering step, borrowed from Beijing's own playbook. In 2019, Vietnam's National Assembly passed the amended Law on Militia and Self-Defense Forces, which paved the way for establishing "standing maritime militia units". Specifically, the law instructs coastal provinces to build "standing maritime squadrons" to support other law enforcement agencies such as the Vietnam Coast Guard and Vietnam Fisheries Resources Surveillance. In the first phase, from 2019 to 2022, Hanoi will have established six such squadrons, which shall be expanded to 14 in later stages. Applying the [indicator-based methodology](#) that CSIS uses to identify China's professional maritime militia fishing vessels (MMFVs), these units can be formally considered to be part of the Vietnamese maritime militia as they are under the management of the provincial military commands.

The capacity of this force, however, is nowhere near China's number of MMFVs. These squadrons, in total, have about 30 vessels; in contrast, according to the [CSIS report](#), China's Hainan province alone has at least 186 MMFVs.

Looking at both intent and capability, the Vietnamese maritime militia should be seen primarily as a self-defence response to China's increasing grey zone tactics. Unlike its Chinese counterpart, it has neither the power, nor the ambition, to provoke maritime confrontations. In the most likely scenarios, the maritime militia can only be a tactical solution rather than a long-term answer to China's maritime aggression. Vietnam knows this well; without a more unified regional response, China's maritime militia cannot be deterred. This is why Vietnam has accelerated negotiations with [Malaysia](#), [Indonesia](#), and the [Philippines](#) with a view to resolving its maritime disputes with each of these countries.

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