

Winning without Fighting in the Indo-Pacific

The Role of Irregular Forces in China's Maritime Strategy

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in scholarly and media attention to the strategic developments surrounding China's maritime domain. Within this trend, most analysts and scholars focus on China's rapidly expanding conventional forces, especially in relation to the rapid modernization and expansion of the grey-hulled People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which transformed from a minor coastal defence force in the 1990s into the largest naval fleet in the world by 2020. However, while this growth has admittedly been extraordinary, the current focus on China's navy overlooks the development of China's considerable unconventional or irregular maritime forces. In reality, most of the observable maritime actions 'on the ground' in relation to the implementation of China's maritime strategy occur in the so-called 'grey-zone,' and can be attributed to the vessels of the recently-centralized China Coast Guard (CCG) and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). Accordingly, this paper analyzes the role of China's irregular forces in the implementation of China's broader maritime strategy and Indo-Pacific outlook. It finds that China is effectively developing a three-sea-force with an evolving division of labor, in which the irregular forces gradually assume China's near-seas objectives in order to allow the PLAN to increasingly focus on its blue-seas missions and capabilities.

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'To fight and conquer in all our battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting' – Sun Tzu

Introduction

In March 2021, the Philippines complained to China about a large fleet of around 220 Chinese vessels moored near Whitsun Reef in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, as their 'swarming and threatening presence' created an atmosphere of instability. After requesting the Chinese government to direct the vessels to leave the disputed waters, which the Philippines considers part of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), China protested by arguing that they were merely fishing boats sheltering from sea conditions.¹ This incident is one example of several similar maritime incidents in the South and East China Seas, where the Chinese leadership has increasingly employed irregular forces to further its geostrategic objectives. Indeed, following Sun Tzu's opening quote, this pattern reflects a longer strategic tradition in China that emphasizes the pursuit of strategic goals without resorting to conventional forces. Nevertheless, when analyzing Chinese maritime developments and strategy, most scholarly and media attention focuses on China's grey-hulled conventional forces, specifically in relation to the rapid modernization and expansion of the People's

Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Yet, while the PLAN's growth has admittedly been impressive, this approach overlooks China's considerable unconventional or irregular forces. In reality, most of the observable maritime developments 'on the ground' – or at sea, as it were – in relation to the implementation of China's maritime strategy take place in the so-called 'grey-zone,' and can be attributed to China's rapidly expanding white-hulled Coast Guard (CCG) and blue-hulled maritime militia – the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).

Considering the possibility of a potential future confrontation in the regional waters that China views as its near seas, following the increasing geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, it is worthwhile to consider the level of integration of China's irregular forces in its maritime strategy. Accordingly, this paper analyzes the role of these irregular forces in implementing China's increasingly global maritime strategy, specifically in relation to China's progressively assertive stance in its regional waters, including the South and East China Seas. In doing so, the paper utilizes the 'Four-Way Typology of Assertiveness in Maritime and Territorial Disputes,' developed by Andrew Chubb, in a qualitative methodological analysis.² After first considering China's maritime strategy in the context of the broader Asia/Indo-Pacific region and China's grand strategic goals, the paper will zoom in on the role played by China's coast guard and maritime militia to achieve its geostrategic goals in the near seas.

China's Maritime Interests and Strategy: Offshore Defence & Open Seas Protection

Since the arrival of Xi Jinping as China's paramount leader in 2012, the grand strategic goal of the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' has frequently been mentioned in official documents and public statements.³ Accordingly, China's grand strategy constitutes a pursuit of political, economic, social, and military modernity to expand China's national

1 Reuters Staff, 'Philippines Protests 'threatening Presence' of Chinese Vessels in Disputed Waters, *Reuters*, March 23, 2021, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china-southchinasea-prote-idUSKBN2BF01A>.

2 Andrew Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015,' *International Security* 45, No. 3 (January 1, 2021): 79–121, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00400.

3 National People's Congress, Xi Jinping: The Governance of China, May 17, 2020, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/xjptgoc/xjptgoc.shtml>.

power, improve its governance, and amend the international order in support of Beijing's national interests.⁴ Within this grand strategy, a strong emphasis is placed on the modernization of China's military, as an essential element of the country's rejuvenation. The 20th Party Congress report,⁵ therefore, focused on intensifying and accelerating the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernization goals, including improving its 'system of strategic deterrence.'⁶ Within this military modernization project, the PLAN has attracted considerable attention and resources over the other service branches, as it expanded from a minor coastal defense force in the mid-1990s to the world's largest navy in the number of battleships by 2020, with a battlefleet of approximately 340 platforms.⁷ Hence, in order to explain China's rapid naval expansion, it is essential to consider China's maritime interests.

In November 2012, China's former President Hu Jintao publicly stated that China should become a 'great maritime power.' This announcement cemented a long-awaited strategic shift within Chinese military-strategic circles that had gradually developed over the previous two decades, since China had traditionally been considered a continental or land-based power.⁸ This maritime shift can largely be attributed to China's growing maritime interests combined with its broader Indo-Pacific outlook, which is intertwined with the grand strategic goal of national rejuvenation. During the past two decades, China's geostrategic situation has changed dramatically. China's globally expanding economic and security interests, combined with unresolved sovereignty issues regarding Taiwanese reunification and the control of land features in the South and East China Seas, have demanded a focus on the maritime domain. Some of China's economic interests and motivations include exploiting marine resources, safeguarding shipping routes essential to China's economic growth and energy security, and protecting Chinese overseas communities.⁹ In line with these interests, China's Academy of Military Sciences states: 'Our country's national interests are expanding mainly in the sea, national security is threatened

mainly from the sea, the focal point of military struggle is mainly in the sea...'¹⁰ As a result, in his rhetoric, Xi Jinping has integrated the maritime domain within his vision of the 'Chinese Dream.' Public statements and official documents therefore increasingly characterize the goal of becoming a maritime power as a fundamental part of China's national strategy, to the people's well-being, to the protection of national sovereignty, and to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.¹¹

China's current maritime strategy focuses on 'Offshore Defence' and 'Open Seas Protection,' and aims to expand the geographic and mission scope of its operations.¹² In 2015, China published its 10th Defence White Paper, which announced a shift in China's maritime strategy as it stated that China's navy would 'gradually shift its focus from Offshore Defence to a combination of Offshore Defence and Open Seas Protection to develop a modern maritime force

- 4 U.S. Department of Defense, 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022' (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Defense, November 2022), III, <https://www.defense.gov/CMPR/>.
- 5 Jinping Xi, 'Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,' Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, October 16, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html.
- 6 CGTN, 'Xi Jinping Says Modernized Army Key to National Rejuvenation,' October 23, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-23/Xi-Jinping-modernized-army-key-to-national-rejuvenation--UOHd54iBQ4/index.html>; U.S. Department of Defense, 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022,' III.
- 7 Congressional Research Service, 'China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress,' CRS Report (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/265>.
- 8 Michael McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream' (Arlington: CNA: Analysis & Solutions, June 2016), iii, <https://www.cna.org/news/events/china-and-maritime-power>.
- 9 McDevitt, 10-14.
- 10 PLA Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Dept., *Science of Military Strategy*, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute, In Their Own Words (Montgomery, Alabama: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021), 209, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2485204/plas-science-of-military-strategy-2013/> <https%3A%2F%2Fwww.airuniversity.af.edu%2FCASI%2FArticles%2FArticle-Display%2FArticle%2F2485204%2Fplas-science-of-military-strategy-2013%2F>.
- 11 McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,' 10.
- 12 Jennifer Rice and Erik Robb, 'China Maritime Report No. 13: The Origins of 'Near Seas Defense and Fa' by Jennifer Rice and Erik Robb,' China Maritime Report (Newport, Rhode Island: China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, February 2021), 1, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/13/>.

capable of defending national security and global interests.¹³ Open Seas Protection corresponds with China's outward vision for the Indo-Pacific region, for which it uses the term 'two-oceans region.'¹⁴ According to this strategic concept, over the long term, the PLAN should be able to 'protect the security of strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and overseas interests and participate in international maritime cooperation.'¹⁵ This shift was primarily underpinned by China's expanding global interests beyond China's 'offshore waters' or 'near seas,' the bodies of water between China's coast and the first island-chain.¹⁶ In contrast, the 'open' or 'far seas' refer to the bodies of water between the first and second island-chains in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region beyond the Malacca Strait.¹⁷ These far seas are essential to China's national security, as they include important SLOCs that sustain the Chinese economy.

To effectively protect the security of China's SLOCs, the PLAN needs to invest in blue-water capabilities with vessels that are both multi-

mission capable and large enough to sustain far-seas operations. Currently, however, the PLAN's primary focus remains fixed on the near seas, where China faces multiple sovereignty issues regarding the various contested islands and associated maritime rights.¹⁸ As a result, it is essential for China's long-term maritime strategy to consolidate control over its regional waters because its far-seas ambitions first require a solid geostrategic position in China's near seas, i.e. the three East Asian littorals of the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. Securing China's regional waters can therefore be considered a vital first step in the pursuit of China's broader maritime strategy, which is confirmed by Chinese statements regarding the three objectives necessary to become a maritime power: 1) the first objective is to control the waters where China's 'maritime rights and interests' are involved; 2) the second objective is being able to enforce these maritime rights and interests; and 3) the third objective revolves around the ability to deter or defeat attempts at maritime containment, which is related to Open Seas Protection.¹⁹ By maritime rights and interests, Chinese commentators primarily refer to the sovereign rights that China claims over its regional waters.²⁰ Thus, the emphasis on controlling China's near seas can be considered a vital precondition to China's global maritime strategy, illustrated by the intensification of Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas in recent decades.

Chinese Near-Seas Assertiveness: Measuring Change and Continuity

Following the end of the Second World War, the Chinese Kuomintang-led government first demarcated its territorial claims in the South China Sea with an eleven-dash line on a map. The claim included most of the area, including the various islands and reefs such as the Paracel, Spratly, and Pratas islands, as well as the Macclesfield Bank, which China regained from Japan. In 1953, the Chinese Communist Party-led government removed the portion encompassing the Gulf of Tonkin, creating the nine-dash line

13 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'White Paper: China's Military Strategy,' Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, May 2015, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>.

14 PLA Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Dept., *Science of Military Strategy*, 245-46.

15 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China's Military Strategy'; Rice and Robb, 'China Maritime Report No. 13: The Origins of 'Near Seas Defense and Fa' by Jennifer Rice and Erik Robb,' 4.

16 The first island-chain refers to the first chain of major archipelagos from China's coast, extending from the Kuril Islands in the North, through the Japanese Archipelago, Taiwan, the Northern Philippines and Borneo, to eventually the Malay Peninsula – essentially encompassing the Yellow, East, and South China Seas.

17 Zhengyu Wu, 'Towards Naval Normalcy: 'open Seas Protection' and Sino-US Maritime Relations,' *The Pacific Review* 32, No. 4 (July 4, 2019): 668, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2018.1553890>.

18 ONI, 'The PLAN Navy: New Capabilities and Missions in the 21st Century' (Washington, D.C.: Office of Naval Intelligence, 2015) 8, <https://www.oni.navy.mil/ONI-Reports/Foreign-Naval-Capabilities/China/>.

19 McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,' 130-32.

20 Alan Burns, 'Laying a Foundation for Ambition at Sea: The Role of the PLA (N) in China's Goal of Becoming a Maritime Power' (China as a Maritime Power Conference, Arlington: Center for Naval Analyses, 2015), 6, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/laying-foundation.pdf.

21 'Timeline: China's Maritime Disputes,' Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/chinas-maritime-disputes>.

China still invokes for its conflicting territorial claims today.²¹ In the East China Sea, similar maritime disputes exist over the extent of the respective EEZs of the littoral states, as well as a dispute over the ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands between China and Japan.²²

The Maritime Assertiveness Time Series (MATS) dataset, designed by Andrew Chubb at the National Bureau of Asian Research, provides the most extensive collection of empirical data available on assertiveness in the region, despite some important limitations regarding its inevitable incompleteness as states have incentives to keep incidents in disputed areas secret. The dataset illustrates that Chinese assertiveness constitutes a basic continuity in the South China Sea.²³ In contrast to the assumption that China became more assertive since Xi Jinping took power, Chinese assertiveness in its regional waters dates back to at least 1970. Thus, following its public statements, China's intent to consolidate its claims and control over the South China Sea's maritime spaces has been long-standing and relatively continuous over nearly five decades, preceding China's economic and military rise. Nevertheless, a pivotal change in China's behavior occurred in 2007, which marked the beginning of a significant intensification of Chinese assertiveness through a sustained buildup of demonstrative and coercive actions, including increased patrolling and land-reclamation efforts.²⁴ However, due to this intensification, significant tensions emerged between consolidating China's maritime claims, on the one hand, and avoiding military escalation, on the other, which would be detrimental to Chinese interests. China's leadership, therefore, recognized this tension by consistently referring to the 'unity of rights defence and stability maintenance' in its maritime policy. For example, in 2013, during a Politburo study session on maritime disputes, Xi Jinping vowed never to compromise and called for 'coordinated planning of the two overall situations of rights defense and stability maintenance.'²⁵ In other words, this policy requires that Chinese actions in its regional waters remain below the threshold of warfare or military conflict – in the so-called grey-zone.

When analyzing the intensification of Chinese assertiveness in its regional waters, it becomes evident how Chinese irregular forces come to play a dominant role in implementing the first two objectives of China's maritime strategy, regarding its proclaimed maritime rights and interests. In this context, 'assertiveness' can be interpreted as statements and behaviors that strengthen a state's position in a dispute. This breaks assertiveness down into observable events – statements and behaviors – that can be identified without needing subjective judgments about an actor's state of mind.²⁶ However, assertive behavior can vary widely in its implications for international stability. Chubb has therefore developed a typology that identifies four types of assertive actions in maritime and territorial disputes based on their consequences for the positions of rival claimants. These types of actions can be characterized as follows: 1) *Declarative* actions, verbal assertions via non-coercive statements, diplomatic notes, domestic legislation and administrative measures, international legal cases; 2) *Demonstrative* actions, unilateral administration of disputed possessions that does not involve confrontation with rival claimants: patrols, surveys, resource development, construction of infrastructure, state-sanctioned tourism or activism, domestic judicial procedures, and cooperative agreements with third parties; 3) *Coercive* actions, threat or imposition of punishment: may be verbal, diplomatic or administrative, economic punishment, warning shots, physical interference with foreign activities in disputed

22 Alessio Patalano, 'What Is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?', War on the Rocks, September 10, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/what-is-chinas-strategy-in-the-senkaku-islands/>.

23 The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), 'Maritime Assertiveness Visualization Dashboard (MAVD) v1.2,' MATS Dataset, 2022, <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/679733cea527406bb0aa1b936aa37b90/>.

24 Andrew Chubb, 'Dynamics of Assertiveness in the South China Sea: China, the Philippines, and Vietnam, 1970-2015,' NBR Special Report (Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2022) 12, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/dynamics-of-assertiveness-in-the-south-china-sea-china-the-philippines-and-vietnam-1970-2015/>.

25 Andrew Chubb, 'Xi Jinping and China's Maritime Policy,' *Brookings* (blog), January 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/xi-jinping-and-chinas-maritime-policy/>.

26 Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea,' 84.

area; and 4) *Use of Force* actions, application of military force or seizure and occupation of disputed possession.²⁷

When applying this typology to the MATS dataset – which details assertive actions in the South China Sea between 1970 and 2015 – Chubb clearly illustrates that Chinese assertiveness predominantly consists of declarative, demonstrative, and coercive actions, short of military force.²⁸ Within these actions, the PLAN has been relatively absent. This corresponds with China’s long-term maritime strategy, in which the navy should ideally be focused on increasingly far-seas operations. In contrast, the increasingly frequent coercive actions since 2007 – involving the threat or use of punishment – can largely be attributed to China’s irregular forces, demanding a closer analysis of China’s unconventional approach.

Strategy Implementation: Grey-Zone Operations and Irregular Forces

Considering China’s proclaimed strategic maritime objectives, the assertion and defence of China’s maritime claims and interests in its regional waters have been integrated as important grand strategic goals. To achieve these objectives, while also balancing the ‘unity of rights defense and stability maintenance,’ China has implemented a so-called ‘salami-slicing’ strategy. This strategy focuses on a series of incremental actions, none of which by itself would be considered a *casus belli*, to gradually shift the status quo in China’s favor.²⁹ In doing so, China pursues repetitive but limited *fait accomplis* – unilateral gains at an adversary’s expense on the calculated risk that the adversary chooses to relent rather than escalate in retaliation – to incrementally expand its foothold within a local context.³⁰ This basic notion (gaining ground slice-by-slice instead of all at once) characterizes the implementation of China’s maritime strategy in the near seas.³¹ China’s prominent land-reclamation activities at contested sites near the Paracel and Spratly Islands are prime examples of this approach, as such projects have unilaterally changed the day-to-day realities in the South China Sea in China’s favor.³²

This unconventional Chinese approach can be characterized by the concept of grey-zone operations – i.e. operations that reside in the grey zone between peace/diplomacy and war – which reflect both China’s current strategic directives and its traditional strategic legacy.³³ The concept of grey-zone operations corresponds with Xi Jinping’s emphasis on ‘holistic national security,’ which China’s 2015 Defence White Paper described as follows: ‘A holistic approach will be taken to balance war preparation and war prevention, rights protection and stability maintenance, deterrence and warfighting, and operations in wartime and employment of military forces in peacetime. They will lay stress of farsighted planning and management to create a favorable posture.’³⁴ Moreover, in contrast to the Western strategic tradition, China’s strategic legacy has a long tradition of

27 Chubb, ‘Dynamics of Assertiveness in the South China Sea: China, the Philippines, and Vietnam, 1970-2015,’ 6.

28 Chubb, 11.

29 Ronald O’Rourke, ‘U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,’ Background and Issues for Congress (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, February 2023) 10, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R42784>.

30 Dan Altman, ‘By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries,’ *International Studies Quarterly* 61, No. 4 (December 1, 2017): 881–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049>.

31 Richard W. Maass, ‘Salami Tactics: Faits Accomplis and International Expansion in the Shadow of Major War,’ *Texas National Security Review* 5, No. 1 (2022): 34, <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/21615>.

32 Maass, 36.

33 O’Rourke, ‘U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,’ 10.

34 The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s Military Strategy,’ Katja Drinhausen and Helena Legarda, ‘Confident Paranoia: Xi’s Comprehensive National Security Framework Shapes China’s Behavior at Home and Abroad,’ *China Monitor* (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies, September 15, 2022), <https://www.merics.org/en/report/comprehensive-national-security-unleashed-how-xis-approach-shapes-chinas-policies-home-and>; Research Institute of Party History and Documentation of the CPC Central Committee, *Xi Jinping on the Holistic Approach to National Security* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2018).

blurring the lines between peace and war, dating back to the writings of Sun Tzu and Mao Zedong.³⁵ Accordingly, in the maritime domain, Chinese strategic circles emphasize how maritime power encompasses more than merely naval power. It includes factors such as a world-class merchant marine, fishing fleet, shipbuilding capacity, ability to harvest or extract economically significant maritime resources, and a large and effective coast guard.³⁶ This final factor correlates with one of the most commonly used tactics in grey-zone operations, namely the use of ambiguous or irregular forces.³⁷ These irregular forces include China's considerable coast guard and maritime militia, allowing it to keep the PLAN in the background in order to limit the escalation potential of maritime confrontations.³⁸

The China Coast Guard (CCG)

China boasts the largest white-hulled maritime law-enforcement (MLE) fleet in the world, with an estimated force of at least 140 regional and oceangoing vessels (more than 1.000 tons displacement), 120 regional patrol combatants (500 to 999 tons), and an additional 450 coastal patrol craft (100 to 499 tons).³⁹ This results from a massive expansion and modernization program aimed at strengthening China's various MLE agencies that started with a national-level decision taken by China's leadership in 1999. In contrast (and similar to the PLAN) before the turn of the century, China's MLE fleet consisted of a limited number of outdated dual-use patrol and research ships, most of which were relatively small and confined to China's coastal areas.⁴⁰ By 2013, China consolidated four of its previously independent MLE agencies into a newly-established agency called the China Coast Guard or CCG.⁴¹ Before the merger, each agency had its own command structure and control system, leading to poor coordination with services often working at cross purposes. The reform, therefore, significantly improved the command structure and coordination of China's MLE forces, with a central CCG Command Center set-up sometime in early 2014.⁴² The consolidation within the CCG allows China to deploy its MLE forces more flexibly in response

to sovereignty challenges and more easily maintain its presence in regional hotspots.⁴³

While the CCG is responsible for various maritime security missions, including fisheries enforcement, combating smuggling, terrorism, international cooperation, and environmental crimes, Chinese authoritative texts emphasize the CCG's role as the 'primary instrument of rights protection in peacetime.'⁴⁴ Thus, the CCG's primary mission is to 'safeguard maritime rights and interests.'⁴⁵ This echoes China's maritime strategy and stated objectives, as the head of the State Oceanic Administration's (SOA) East China Sea Bureau, Liu Kefu, argued that rights protection is a vital 'precondition' for becoming a maritime power. In other words, China cannot pursue its global maritime ambitions until it has first consolidated control within its regional waters, illustrating the vital role of the CCG in implementing China's broader

- 35 Fumio Ota, 'Sun Tzu in Contemporary Chinese Strategy,' *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (April 1, 2014), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/577507/sun-tzu-in-contemporary-chinese-strategy/https%3A%2F%2Fndupress.ndu.edu%2FMedia%2FNews%2FNews-Article-View%2FArticle%2F577507%2Fsun-tzu-in-contemporary-chinese-strategy%2F>; Mao Zedong, *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965).
- 36 Kai Cao, 'Building China into Maritime Power Essential for Future Development,' *People's Daily Online*, November 14, 2012, <http://en.people.cn/90785/8018709.html>; McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,' iii.
- 37 John Schaus, 'Zone Defense: Countering Competition in the Space between War and Peace,' Report of the 2018 Global Security Forum Experts Workshop (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, November 27, 2018) <https://www.csis.org/analysis/zone-defense>.
- 38 ONI, 'The PLAN Navy: New Capabilities and Missions in the 21st Century,' 46.
- 39 U.S. Department of Defense, 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022,' 78.
- 40 Andrew Erickson, Joshua Hickey, and Henry Holst, 'Surging Second Sea Force: China's Maritime Law-nforcement Forces, Capabilities, and Future in the Gray Zone and Beyond,' *Naval War College Review* 72, No. 2 (March 28, 2019): 14, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol72/iss2/4>.
- 41 These agencies were the State Oceanic Administration's China Marine Surveillance (CMS); the Department of Agriculture's China Fisheries Law Enforcement (FLEC); the Ministry of Public Security's Border Defense Coast Guard; and the Maritime Anti-Smuggling Police of the General Administration of Customs. See McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,' 53-54.
- 42 McDevitt, 55-56.
- 43 ONI, 'The PLAN Navy: New Capabilities and Missions in the 21st Century,' 45.
- 44 PLA Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Dept., *Science of Military Strategy*, 426.
- 45 Ryan D. Martinson, 'From Words to Actions: The Creation of the China Coast Guard' (China as a 'Maritime Power' Conference, Arlington: Center for Naval Analyses, 2015) 4, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/creation-china-coast-guard.pdf.

maritime strategy.⁴⁶ Correspondingly, in recent years, international observers have noted reduced participation of the PLAN in regional patrols, EEZ enforcement, and territorial claim issues, as the CCG has increasingly assumed these operations.⁴⁷

Official and semi-official Chinese documents identify ‘administrative control’ as the desired goal of these so-called ‘rights protection operations.’ This could be interpreted as a wish to impose a Chinese legal order over the regional waters of the South and East China Seas.⁴⁸ To achieve this, China has since 2013 commissioned various new oceangoing ‘rights protection’ cutters,⁴⁹ displacing at least 500 metric tons. In addition, the CCG has acquired various larger vessels to boost the average displacement across the fleet. Larger ships are more capable of handling rough seas and allow for better endurance. This enables CCG forces to remain on station much longer, while simultaneously carrying the ability to intimidate vessels of other disputants.⁵⁰ Some of these newer and larger vessels are equipped with helicopter facilities, high-capacity water cannons, sirens, interceptor boats, and guns ranging from 20 to 76 millimeters, providing China with not only the

largest but also one of the most advanced MLE fleets in the world.⁵¹ The considerable and well-equipped white-hulled fleet, therefore, provides a tangible reflection of China’s intention to pursue its maritime ambitions, including the ability to enforce China’s rights in its claimed sovereign waters. In doing so, the CCG allows the PLAN to focus on its envisioned naval roles beyond the first island-chain, which is in line with China’s broader maritime strategy.⁵²

As an implementation instrument, the developments and actions involving the CCG can largely be characterized as *demonstrative* in the context of the Typology of Assertiveness. Demonstrative moves are unilateral administrative behaviors, i.e. actions that manifest a state’s presence or jurisdiction in a disputed area, but without directly confronting adversaries.⁵³ Examples of Chinese demonstrative moves include verbal and legislative actions. For instance, the Director of the SOA, Liu Cigui, stated in 2012 that the goal of maritime power is explicitly linked to the authority of Chinese law enforcement systems, leading to the establishment of the CCG.⁵⁴ In March 2018, China went a step further by publicly transferring control of the CCG from the civilian SOA to the Central Military Commission, the highest national defense organization in the country.⁵⁵ A further demonstrative action took place in January 2021, when China passed the new Coast Guard Law – which regulates the duties of the CCG. The new law explicitly allows the use of force against foreign vessels while applying those duties to the seas under China’s claimed jurisdiction.⁵⁶ This demonstrative action therefore sparked severe concerns among regional states. Most of the demonstrative actions performed by the CCG are the so-called ‘rights protection missions,’ which range from a mere presence in disputed waters to actual efforts to impose Chinese law on foreign vessels.⁵⁷ An analysis of ship transponder data from commercial provider MarineTraffic illustrates that CCG vessels maintained near-daily patrols at critical features across the South China Sea in 2022, including the Second Thomas

46 McDevitt, ‘Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,’ 54.

47 ONI, ‘The PLAN Navy: New Capabilities and Missions in the 21st Century,’ 45-46.

48 Martinson, ‘From Words to Actions: The Creation of the China Coast Guard,’ 8.

49 The term ‘cutter’ refers to a coast guard vessel more than 20 meters long (65 feet) with accommodations for a crew to live aboard and not classified as an auxiliary vessel.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS), ‘Cutters,’ United States Coast Guard, June 12, 2018, <https://www.uscg.mil/datasheet/display/Article/1547943/cutters/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.uscg.mil%2Fdev%2FgovD-test%2FArticle%2F1547943%2Fcutters%2F>.

50 McDevitt, ‘Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,’ 56-57.

51 O’Rourke, ‘U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,’ 97.

52 McDevitt, ‘Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,’ 58; Erickson, Hickey, and Holst, ‘Surging Second Sea Force,’ 19-20.

53 Chubb, ‘PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea,’ 89.

54 McDevitt, ‘Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,’ 53.

55 O’Rourke, ‘U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,’ 98.

56 U.S. Department of Defense, ‘Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022,’ 78.

57 McDevitt, ‘Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,’ 59.

Shoal, Luconia Shoals, Scarborough Shoal, Vanguard Bank, and Thitu Island.⁵⁸ Similar actions occurred in the East China Sea after tensions rose over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012, resulting in a regular CCG presence near the contested islands.⁵⁹ These moves are intended to demonstrate China's effective administration of the claimed area, compromising the position of other states in the dispute. As a result, such demonstrative actions can constitute stepping-stones to further acquisitions by *fait accompli*, as was frequently the case in China's island-building campaign. Nevertheless, these demonstrative actions do not involve discernable threats or punishment of other parties. Such actions would be characterized as *coercion*.⁶⁰

The CCG has been involved in some actions that could be considered *coercive* according to the Typology of Assertiveness – such as confrontations between CCG vessels and the Philippine Navy. But these have been less frequent due to the official character of the CCG in combination with China's wish to limit the escalation potential of maritime confrontations.⁶¹ As a result, the more coercive actions are performed by even more ambiguous forces that allow for greater plausible deniability, which are addressed in the following section.

The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM)

China's blue-hulled maritime militia – officially labeled the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) by the U.S. Department of Defense – forms a unique third component within China's maritime forces, augmenting the PLAN and the CCG. China operates the world's largest fleet of civilian fishing vessels and trawlers. A portion of these vessels, and the thousands of people who work on them and in related marine industries, are registered in the maritime militia.⁶² However, no official Chinese definition of the maritime militia exists. In late 2012, the Zhoushan regional garrison commander, Zeng Pengxiang, described it as follows: 'The Maritime Militia is an irreplaceable mass armed organization not released from production and a component of China's ocean

defence armed forces [that enjoys] low sensitivity and great leeway in maritime rights protection actions.'⁶³ Hence, the PAFMM is essentially a subset of China's national militia, an armed reserve force of civilians that acts as an auxiliary to China's uniformed maritime services, while being ultimately subordinate to the Central Military Commission as well through the National Defence Mobilization Department.⁶⁴ The maritime militia originated following the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 when China's leadership sought to defend the PRC's coastline from Nationalist forces that had retreated to Taiwan. Establishing an organized maritime militia to address this threat provided a simple solution to this legitimate problem.⁶⁵

Currently, the militia's roles have expanded significantly to support China's strategic objectives in various functions. Maritime militia vessels train with and support the PLAN and the CCG in surveillance and reconnaissance, fisheries protection, search and rescue, logistics support, and ultimately safeguarding China's maritime claims and interests.⁶⁶ Following China's increasing efforts to achieve its strategic goal of becoming a maritime power, the maritime militia's role has received top-level leadership attention, including from Xi Jinping, who personally visited a maritime militia force

- 58 CSIS, 'Flooding the Zone: China Coast Guard Patrols in 2022,' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, January 20, 2023, <https://amti.csis.org/flooding-the-zone-china-coast-guard-patrols-in-2022/>; 'Global Ship Tracking Intelligence | AIS Marine Traffic,' MarineTraffic, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/home/centerx:-12.0/centery:25.0/zoom:4>.
- 59 ONI, 'The PLAN Navy: New Capabilities and Missions in the 21st Century,' 46.
- 60 Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea,' 89.
- 61 'Philippine President Summons China Envoy over Sea Confrontation,' *Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/15/philippine-president-summons-china-envoy-over-sea-confrontation>.
- 62 Conor Kennedy and Andrew Erickson, 'China's Third Sea Force, The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA,' *China Maritime Report* (Newport, Rhode Island: China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, March 1, 2017), 2, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/1>.
- 63 McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,' 62.
- 64 O'Rourke, 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,' 101; Kennedy and Erickson, 'China Maritime Report' No. 1, 2.
- 65 Derek Grossman and Logan Ma, 'A Short History of China's Fishing Militia and What It May Tell Us,' *The RAND Corporation*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/04/a-short-history-of-chinas-fishing-militia-and-what.html>.
- 66 O'Rourke, 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,' 101.

in Hainan Province in 2013.⁶⁷ Accordingly, China's fishing industry, along with the militia units built within, have increasingly been mobilized as political and geostrategic tools to consolidate China's maritime claims. According to He Zhixiang, Director of the Guangdong Military Region, the maritime militia comprises an important force for normalizing China's administrative control over the near seas, since it already finds itself on the frontlines of the rights protection efforts.⁶⁸ As a result, rights protection missions have become one of the primary responsibilities of the PAFMM. These missions are aimed at displaying presence, manifesting sovereignty, and coordinating with the needs of national political and diplomatic objectives, often in coordination with the PLAN and the CCG. In doing so, the maritime militia is being assigned a special role within the so-called 'Maritime Rights Protection Force System,' in which the CCG also plays a central role.⁶⁹ Following this increased responsibility, the maritime militia is explicitly integrated into China's strategic management of the near seas and the country's overall maritime strategy. Accordingly, this somewhat unique Chinese practice of civil-military integration – often rhetorically framed as the 'People's War at Sea' – is considered central in China's pursuit of maritime power.⁷⁰ Additionally, mobilizing China's mariner population into the militia also allows the PLAN to increasingly focus on its assigned naval roles in the far seas.

The PAFMM thus plays a crucial auxiliary role to both the PLAN and the CCG in the claimed regional waters. It has the advantage of recruiting its members and vessels from the world's largest fishing fleet that also regularly operates in the contested waters of the South and East China Seas. Through the National Defense Mobilization Department, China subsidizes various provincial and local marine-industry organizations to operate militia vessels to perform 'official' missions on an *ad hoc* basis besides their regular commercial activities.⁷¹ Accordingly, it is difficult to estimate the exact size of the PAFMM. The only available estimate dates from 1978, which put the number of personnel at 750,000 on approximately 140,000 vessels. In 2010, China's FY2010 white paper on national defence stated that its primary militia consisted of 8 million members, of which the maritime militia forms a subset. Thus, considering that there are reportedly around 9.5 million people active in China's fishing industry, it is safe to say that China possesses a substantial fleet of potential auxiliary forces.⁷² Additionally, since 2015, the Sansha City Maritime Militia in the Paracel Islands has developed into a full-time salaried militia force equipped with 84 purpose-built fishing vessels armed with water cannons and reinforced steel hulls designed for ramming, along with a command center in the Paracel Islands, illustrating the militia's evolving capabilities and China's dual-use agenda concerning its fishing fleets.⁷³

The 'special role' assigned to the PAFMM translates into both *demonstrative* and the more *coercive* activities – following Chubb's typology – concerning China's rights protection operations. Coercive behaviors are characterized as those involving the threat or use of punishment against an adversary, including physical interference with foreign activities in a disputed area. Such actions pose more severe risks to stability than demonstrative moves because they present a relatively narrow set of choices to other parties: either alter their behavior, or continue and risk punishment.⁷⁴ Indeed, in contrast to the PLAN and the CCG, the maritime militia allows China to pursue progressively assertive actions in its claimed regional waters without obviously

67 McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,' 66; Yamaguchi Shinji, Yatsuzuka Masaaki, and Momma Rira, 'China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations,' China Security Report (Tokyo: The National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, 2023) 55, <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/chinareport/>.

68 McDevitt, 'Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream,' 66.

69 McDevitt, 68.

70 Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, 'China's Island Builders,' *Foreign Affairs*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2015-04-09/chinas-island-builders>.

71 O'Rourke, 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,' 102.

72 Shinji, Masaaki, and Rira, 'China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations,' 56.

73 O'Rourke, 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,' 102.

74 Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea,' 89-90.

implicating the Chinese state due to its highly ambiguous nature. As a result, the PAFMM could be considered one of the leading components of China's maritime forces regarding the implementation of the salami-slicing strategy and assertion of maritime claims.⁷⁵ As tensions with other littoral states escalate over China's overlapping maritime claims, the maritime militia provides a powerful non-forcible method of coercion to dominate the seascape while avoiding the risk of open conflict.⁷⁶

In practice, China deploys militia vessels to advance its disputed sovereignty claims, often by amassing them in contested areas throughout the South and East China Seas. In doing so, the militia plays a central role in China's coercive activities in pursuing its strategic goals without fighting, echoing China's strategic legacy that considers confrontational operations short of war as the preferred means of achieving strategic objectives.⁷⁷ Examples include Chinese harassments of foreign vessels and swarming incidents, which PLA General Zhang Zhaozong described as China's 'cabbage strategy,' in which a contested area is surrounded by so many ships that Chinese forces essentially wrap the disputed feature like layers of cabbage.⁷⁸ Such incidents include the mooring of hundreds of militia vessels in Whitsun Reef in the Spratly Islands (2021), standoffs with the Malaysian drill ship West Capella (2020), defence of China's HYSY-981 oil rig in disputed waters with Vietnam (2014), occupation of the Scarborough Shoal (2012), and the harassment of the USNS Impeccable and Howard O. Lorenzen (2009 and 2014).⁷⁹ The latter examples illustrate that China dares to take significant risks and seems sufficiently confident that PAFMM harassment of U.S. naval ships remains below the threshold of a forceful and escalatory response.⁸⁰ Thus, the maritime militia seems to be primarily deployed concerning coercive actions that could escalate a crisis if undertaken by the CCG or the PLAN. In doing so, Chinese leadership might believe that using militia forces allows for control over the escalation potential of a crisis and avoids military confrontations, while still reigning in the adversary and expanding China's effective control.⁸¹

Conclusion

While most international attention regarding China's maritime developments remains focused on its rapidly expanding grey-hulled navy, it seems that China's irregular forces, particularly the white-hulled CCG and the blue-hulled PAFMM, perform the most central roles in enabling China's near-seas ambitions and broader maritime strategy. China's publicly stated maritime strategic objectives consider the consolidation of Chinese control over its maritime rights and interests within the first island-chain as an essential precondition to its global maritime ambitions, which are inherently integrated with the grand strategic goal of national rejuvenation. Accordingly, the recently-centralized coast guard is specifically designed to pursue the implementation of China's near-seas objectives, by openly *demonstrating* Chinese resolve in disputed sovereignty claims in the grey-zone between peace and war. At the same time, however, while these maritime law-enforcement vessels afford China increased influence over the regional maritime situation, they are ultimately restrained in their level of assertiveness due to their official status. The more ambiguous nature of China's maritime militia, therefore, provides greater leeway in the implementation of so-called rights protection operations, allowing China to be progressively more *coercive* towards foreign disputants and vessels in the contested waters without risking military escalation.

75 O'Rourke, 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,' 100.

76 James Kraska and Michael Monti, 'The Law of Naval Warfare and China's Maritime Militia,' *International Law Studies* 91, No. 1 (July 20, 2015): 454, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol91/iss1/13>.

77 O'Rourke, 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,' 101.

78 Harry Kazianis, 'China's Expanding Cabbage Strategy,' *The Diplomat*, October 29, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/10/chinas-expanding-cabbage-strategy/>; Jeff Himmelman and Ashley Gilbertson, 'A Game of Shark and Minnow,' *The New York Times*, October 24, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/27/south-china-sea/index.html>.

79 O'Rourke, 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas,' 101.

80 Grossman and Ma, 'A Short History of China's Fishing Militia and What It May Tell Us.'

81 Shinji, Masaaki, and Rira, 'China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations,' 61.

As a result, China has developed an effective three-sea-force with an evolving division of labor, in which the irregular forces gradually assume China's near-seas objectives, allowing the PLAN to eventually focus on its far-seas ambitions. In the regional waters, to avoid military escalation and create a favorable geostrategic posture, China's grey-hulled navy primarily serves as a deterrent force, whilst the CCG and PAFMM simultaneously manage the intensity of the maritime disputes to avoid armed conflict while still exerting constant pressure on the adversaries to gradually advance China's rights and interests, slice-by-slice. Indeed, the decreasing prominence of oil and gas standoffs in the South China Sea in 2022, a frequently recurring feature of the years prior, already suggests some likely successes of China's grey-zone operations. Nevertheless, a lot of work remains to be done in the successful bureaucratic integration of the newly centralized coast guard, as well as in the integration of the three maritime services in an operational and increasingly escalatory context. The recent collisions between Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels off Second Thomas Shoal in October 2023 highlight the heightened risk of accidents potentially turning into further escalation as the US reiterated its alliance and warning to defend the Philippines in case of an armed attack.⁸² Still, there is enough reason to believe that these limitations will not be enough to halt China's activities in the regional waters, as it has bound the goal of becoming a maritime power to the dream of national rejuvenation. Thus, it seems like the ball is currently in the court of those states balancing against China's maritime claims to develop a response that effectively prevents China from realizing the 'supreme excellence of winning, without fighting.' ■

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82 Jim Gomez and Simina Mistreanu, 'US Renews Warning It Will Defend Philippines after Incidents with Chinese Vessels in South China Sea,' *AP News*, October 23, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/south-china-sea-philippines-collision-67aa7e2ca5df4f4e3a7c3bceff46c26f>.

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