

September  
2021

# UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S MARITIME POWER



## NAVAL ASSOCIATION OF CANADA



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In an announcement that made headlines around the world this month, the governments of Australia, the United States, and Great Britain announced the signing of a trilateral defence pact. Dubbed AUKUS, the agreement promises to support the construction of an Australian fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) through technology transfers and engineering support. The target of this new fleet (while always unstated) is clearly China.

The significance of Australia's decision cannot be understated and may represent a decisive break in the broader Western world's perception of China. Until only recently, Australia's relationship with China was based on a thriving commercial partnership centred around natural resources and agriculture exports. Yet, this dynamic soured with remarkable speed as Beijing chafed at critiques coming out of Australia. The response was a trade war that reduced Australian export by over \$5 billion AUS. Canadian farmers might recognize this approach to economics and diplomacy after seeing the country's canola and pork exports blocked as punishment for Ottawa's arrest of Meng Wanzhou in 2018.

Concerns over China's efforts to leverage trade to shape political decisions in other countries are made all the more acute by that country's growing defence spending and rapidly expanding navy. Of concern to many in the West, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has tripled in size since 2001. Through aggressive maritime action in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the waters around Taiwan, China has clearly demonstrated its willingness to disregard international law when it serves its purpose – relying on threats, coercion, and intimidation to advance its interests at the expense of its neighbours' sovereignty. Taken together, Chinese actions paint a disturbing picture of a rising superpower that has now completely abandoned former leader Hu Jintao's platform of “peaceful rise,” a policy and promise that assured the world that China's economic and military power would never pose a threat to international peace and security.

Australia's decision to procure a fleet of SSNs is a reaction to this shift in approach from China. Faced instead with the new ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy of coercion and intimidation, Canberra is settling in for a long confrontation. In so doing, it may represent a canary in the coal mine for much of the world. The United States and Great Britain have clearly shifted their own approaches to China. So too have other regional powers; India is working more closely with its QUAD partners (United States, Japan and Australia) following deadly border skirmishes. Japan, meanwhile, has been expanding its own maritime capabilities: working on hypersonic anti-ship weapons while even discussing publicly the importance of Taiwanese security.<sup>1</sup>

Canada's response to growing Chinese aggression has been less evident. Protected by vast oceans and a superpower neighbour, it lacks some of the urgency of the Australian situation. As Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> Japan, Ministry of Defence, “Defence of Japan” (2021), [www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w\\_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021\\_Digest\\_EN.pdf](http://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_Digest_EN.pdf)

diplomat Raoul Dandurand said in 1925: Canada is “a fireproof house, far from inflammable materials.” Or at least that is how many Canadians feel. Indeed, China is mentioned only three times in the country’s defence policy, and never as a competitor. While more frank and forthright conversations are certainly taking place behind the closed doors of NDHQ, the conversation of Canada’s requirements and international obligations must expand.

To this end, the Naval Association of Canada is pleased to publish research by two of its members on China’s growing naval capabilities, and its unique application of maritime power in its near seas. In a concise history, Jim Boutilier outlines the rise of Chinese naval power and the development of complementary capabilities, from its enormous coast guard and military fleets to its advanced anti-access/area denial systems centred on shore-based antishipping cruise and ballistic missiles. These developments have been hugely impactful. From deploying carrier groups to the Strait of Taiwan with impunity in the 1990s, the United States now finds itself in a situation where power projection inside the first island chain may now come with prohibitive costs.<sup>2</sup> As Boutilier notes, some of this shift in the balance of power can be ascribed to a failure on the part of the US to adapt more rapidly to the changing security dynamics in the region. Canada certainly shares in this tunnel blindness; though, while the United States is adapting, Canada continues to operate a fleet of aging warships with replacements many years out. As China develops its own forces, Canada’s slow pace and lethargic procurement may leave it unable to manage the challenges of the new naval dynamic and contribute meaningfully to allied defence.

While the PLAN’s qualitative and quantitative growth has caught the headlines, the Chinese state’s maritime power encompasses more than traditional hard-power assets. Grey-zone warfare has become a central pillar in China’s approach to its near-abroad and Dr. Ann Griffiths offers a detailed look at the philosophy underlying these tactics and the tools that Beijing is employing to achieve its objectives. For Canada and other Western states, the years ahead will require new strategies and tactics for dealing, not only with the Chinese navy, but a wide array of maritime militia and quasi-state actors. Working in that grey zone has been a challenge for Western powers, and – as Griffiths highlights – presents a host of ever evolving political and tactical challenges which threaten regional peace, while threatening undesired and uncontrolled escalation under the wrong circumstances.

As Canada refines its defence policies and procurement plans with an eye on the next several decades, China’s growing power and belligerence will likely feature prominently. Canada has yet to make its own ‘pivot’ to Asia, as the Americans have over the past decade, but that move now seems inevitable. How the Royal Canadian Navy responds to China – and how Canada chooses to work with its regional allies politically, economically, and militarily – are choices that must soon be made and will define national defence policy for years to come.

The NAC would like to thank our two authors for their important contributions to this increasingly pressing subject. We hope that their work, along with other important research now emerging, illustrates China’s intention and demonstrates the need for Canada to build and maintain capable, efficient and globally deployable warships that can go in harm’s way if need be.

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<sup>2</sup> On the results of recent wargames see: Valerie Insinna, “A US Air Force war game shows what the service needs to hold off — or win against — China in 2030,” *Defence News* (April 12, 2021).

# The New Indo Pacific Naval Dynamic

**Jim Boutilier**

The rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by two unprecedented and mutually reinforcing phenomena: China's discovery of seapower and the global expansion of China's influence. The dramatic growth of the Chinese economy during that period placed a premium on port development and the evolution of commercial shipping to ensure the timely export of products and the importation of energy and raw materials. Thus, by 2010, seven of the world's top ten ports were located in the PRC, and China had become not only the world's biggest shipbuilder, but the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was well on its way to supplanting the United States Navy (USN) as the world's largest navy.

China had a fairly large navy at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, but it consisted primarily of small, obsolete riverine and coastal craft. In keeping with Soviet doctrine, the navy was seen as an adjunct to the army, providing maritime support where necessary. The idea of an autonomous, blue water navy was alien to the PRC, although a number of incidents over the years slowly disabused the Chinese leadership of that outlook. To begin with, Beijing found itself in an untenable position in 1950, when, unable to compete with the USN at sea during the Korean War, it was obliged to abandon the idea of invading Taiwan. A decade later, the Chinese leader, Mao Zedong, realized that the Soviet Union's room for maneuver was severely curtailed during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) because of the inadequacy of the Soviet Navy in the western Atlantic. What the Soviets did have, however, was a growing fleet of submarines, including ballistic missile boats, and Mao sought to emulate their achievement, although with only limited success.

The real breakthrough occurred when Admiral Liu Huaqing became the commander-in-chief of the PLAN in 1982. Like his near contemporary, Admiral of the Fleet, Sergei Gorshkov in the USSR, Huaqing had an expansive, Mahanian vision of sea power. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) had just been worsted in a sanguine border war with the Vietnamese (1979) and Chinese analysts began to realize that rapid changes in battlefield technology were beginning to render the Maoist "people's war" construct bankrupt. Still further, the profound changes effecting commercial shipping argued persuasively in favour of a new approach to national sea power. If China wished to become a great regional, or even global, power it would have to do what other global powers like Spain, Britain, and the United States had done; develop a world-class navy.

Fortunately, for General Secretary Deng Xiaoping and his successors, all of the parts of the puzzle began to fall into place. China's shipbuilding industry was thriving, ports were developing, the commercial shipping industry was booming, and the Chinese leadership was beginning to embrace Huaqing's vision, slowly but surely. At first, naval construction was modest, and, frankly, old fashioned. But the Chinese were quick to identify their own shortcomings. They continued to be chastened, if not stunned, by America's technical prowess in the Gulf Wars and by the impressive mobility of the USN. The latter reality was brought home to Beijing in 1996 when the appearance

of American aircraft carriers off the Taiwan Strait underscored the relative impotence of the PLAN when it came to China's efforts to intimidate the Taiwanese.

This setback led the Chinese to redouble their efforts and to focus on the interplay between regional geography and naval operations. They realized that the Americans were functioning at a distinct disadvantage in Asian waters, because, with the exception of US bases in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Guam, the USN was operating thousands of miles away from its traditional sources of supply and support in the Hawaiian Islands and the Californian coast. How then, the Chinese queried, could they make America's geostrategic problem even more challenging?

Leading south from Japan is what the Chinese call the First Island Chain; the long tail of the Ryukyu Islands, running southwest from the Japanese home islands, the rocky outcrop known as the Senkakus, the island of Taiwan, and the Philippines archipelago. The first priority was to gain effective control of as many of these geographic features as possible in order to extend China's maritime perimeter. This was the classic approach of a weaker navy: sea denial rather than sea control. The Chinese pursued a three-pronged strategy: detachment, seizure, and erosion. Fortunately for Beijing, the installation of the Duterte government in the Philippines in 2016 confirmed a growing anti-American trend in Philippines politics that had seen the US lose access to Subic Bay, (its vitally important naval facility on the west coast of the island of Luzon in 1991), and the persistent questioning of the security relationship between Manila and Washington. Duterte was, for a time, openly hostile towards the Americans, at least rhetorically, and this gave Beijing an opportunity to begin detaching the Philippines from the US defense orbit.

*Chinese Navy Type 032 Submarine (Image: Wikimedia Commons)*



At the same time, the Chinese began consolidating their control over the South China Sea by seizing disputed geographic features and building them up to the point where they were able to accommodate military installations, missile batteries, and runways long enough to handle any aircraft in the Chinese inventory. These actions made impeccable sense from a strategic point of view but flew in the face of international maritime law. In fact, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in Den Haag deliberated for a number of years before bringing down a ruling in July 2016 which stated that Chinese claims in the South China Sea were completely baseless. The Chinese chose to ignore the court ruling and embark on a campaign of intimidation to prevent other claimant states in the region, like Vietnam and Malaysia, from exercising their legitimate rights to energy exploration.

Further to the north, there were two more disputed territories; Taiwan, which Beijing maintained was an integral but unincorporated part of the PRC, and the Senkakus or Diaoyutai, as the Chinese call them. Taiwan, of course, is a major point of uncertainty and instability in Asian politics. The Chinese have stepped up their erosion policies, trying to wear down Taiwanese defenses with overflights and naval manoeuvres near the island. The same is true, on an even larger scale, with the Senkakus. They are a part of Japan, but the Chinese strategy is to repeat, ad nauseam, that they are a part of China in the hope that the lie, repeated frequently enough, will be transformed into reality. Thus, the First Island Chain is subject to constant pressure from Beijing. The Chinese have been moderately successful in their aim of converting the waters inside the chain to a sort of maritime glacis designed to provide the Chinese coastline with additional protection.

While these geostrategic activities were taking place, the Chinese were working resolutely to build up the number of vessels in the PLAN. They have been very successful in this regard. The PLAN is now, numerically, far larger than the USN (360 vs 297 ships), although it is important to note that this does not apply to overall tonnage nor to one critical class of warship: the aircraft carrier. Additionally, the USN also holds a decisive advantage in the nuclear-powered attack submarines, another capability gap that the PLAN is unlikely to close any time soon.

Nevertheless, this is an astonishing achievement by almost any metric and most of the world failed to notice what the Chinese were up to until it was a fait accompli. Indeed, in the first eight months of 2019, the PLAN commissioned roughly as many ships (19) as there are in the Royal Canadian Navy. What makes the Chinese accomplishment even more worrisome is the steady decline in the old frontline navies. The Royal Navy, for example, had 152 frigates and destroyers in the 1960s. It has 19 now. Similarly, the Americans announced their intention in the 1980s to build a 600-ship navy. They now have less than half that number and existing plans call for the decommissioning of even more vessels. For a long time, they prided themselves that their technology was superior and that this fact would allow them to function with fewer fighting units, but with every passing year the Chinese are closing the gap. Of course, one could argue that for two decades the Pentagon was deeply distracted by the War on Terror, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they were really asleep at the switch when it came to the rise of Chinese naval power. And if that were not bad enough, current naval planning in Washington appears to be characterized by confusion and uncertainty.

It is also vitally important to note that the maritime calculus is not simply a matter of grey hulls. In addition to developing a huge navy, complete with aircraft carriers (one could engage in a theological debate about the PLAN's relative lack of experience when it comes to carrier operations), the PRC has built the world's largest coast guard as well as a marine militia consisting of thousands of para-military fishing vessels under PLAN control. While coast guards and militias are, stereotypically, considered to be non-combatant forces, experience has revealed that the PLAN is prepared to utilize these services as integral parts of the navy, harassing, ramming, and preventing foreign craft from undertaking their lawful missions.

At the same time, the Chinese have been building up a menacing missile arsenal, including hypersonic weapons designed to make it even more challenging for the USN to operate close to the Asian shore. Most well-known is the so-called carrier killer, the DF21D, an intermediate range missile that the Chinese allege can take out American carriers. Other members of the Dong Feng family are designed to neutralize American military assets on Guam, Okinawa, and elsewhere in East Asia. Already faced with operating at the end of extraordinarily attenuated supply lines, the USN must wrestle with the likelihood of having its regional facilities severely compromised in the opening stages of hostilities.

Of course, the United States has the inestimable advantage of having an array of friends and allies in the Indo Pacific region. The Chinese, by way of comparison, have hardly any (Russia, quite possibly, being the notable exception) and those are, arguably, more liabilities than assets. In 2013, in speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, Chinese President Xi Jinping outlined a bold and remarkable vision, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since coming to power in 2012, Xi has dedicated China to the so-called China Dream, a millenarian revitalization of China that will see the PRC emerge as a truly great power. The BRI is part of that dream; the first time in the nation's history that China has embarked on a program of extending its power and influence around the globe. The BRI has two components: a terrestrial, trans-Eurasian network of road, rail, and pipelines linking China with Europe and a maritime component involving sea lanes across the Indian Ocean to East Africa and the Mediterranean.

It is important to note that the PLAN has deployed to the Indian Ocean more than thirty times since 2008 in exercises designed to hone the navy's blue water capabilities and to enhance China's regional influence. Despite these deployments, however, China has almost no friends to whom it can turn. On the one hand, there is penniless and unpredictable North Korea, which serves as a buffer zone for China as well as a persistent distraction when it comes to the United States. On the other hand, there is Pakistan, a dead man walking. The Chinese have poured billions of BRI-related dollars into Pakistan in order to build a pipeline from Gwadar on the Makran Coast to Kashgar in western China (thereby obviating the necessity of relying on the highly vulnerable Strait of Malacca when it comes to crucial energy shipments), but despite these massive infusions of cash, Islamabad is teetering on the brink of insolvency. Of course, so long as Pakistan exists, it complicates India's military calculus, which works to China's advantage, but, otherwise, Pakistan seems to be well on its way to becoming a bankrupt Chinese client state.



The United States is much more favorably positioned despite the international anxieties generated by the Trump administration. In many ways Washington has been assisted materially by the Chinese themselves. The hectoring, arrogant and aggressive nature of Chinese foreign policy over the past half decade (despite Chinese triumphalism, China is a profoundly insecure and paranoid state) has had the effect of counterbalancing these anxieties and helping to forge an anti-Chinese grouping known as the QUAD. The QUAD consists of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. India has been a rather reluctant player over the years, but the ham-fisted Chinese campaign in the Himalayas, designed to detach still more territory from India, has had the effect of hardening New Delhi's resolve and, while the participants in the QUAD would publicly decry the idea that the formation had taken shape to check Chinese ambitions, that is its primary purpose.



*Malabar exercises (Image: Wikimedia Commons)*

Anti-Chinese sentiment has also taken hold in Europe, expressing itself in the naval realm. The United Kingdom, for example, has dispatched its new, 65,000-ton aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, to the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean and Far East in an effort to telegraph the Royal Navy's renewed vitality and post-Brexit London's commitment to Asian markets. Needless to say, Beijing is well aware of the message underlying this deployment with its references to the South China Sea. As one of America's oldest allies, the United Kingdom is expressing its solidarity over and against the

rising maritime power of China. The same could be said for France. Under President Macron, the French have been prepared to challenge Chinese pretensions in the South China Sea and to work with regional navies to highlight the illegitimate nature of Chinese claims and activities in that sea.

The real question, axiomatically is: will the center hold? Will these maritime associations survive the outbreak of hostilities with China? Taken together, the navies of states like Japan, Australia, India, and the United Kingdom would make an enormously powerful supplement to a numerically reduced USN. However, peacetime rhetoric and wartime resolve are two very different things.

This brings us to Canada. Where might the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) fit in all of this? Like many other countries, Canada has adopted a much more jaundiced and wary attitude toward the PRC, but Ottawa has been painfully slow in articulating a foreign policy that encompasses the Indo-Pacific. For its part, the RCN has been forward leaning over the past two decades in terms of regularizing its deployments to Asian waters; deployments, incidentally, that have included transits



of the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, there is still a good deal of uncertainty in Asian capitals as to whether Canada is really committed to the region or not.

Not so long ago, security analysts took comfort in the fact that time seemed to be on their side. This is no longer the case. The maritime outlook has been transformed beyond belief. The Chinese leadership appears determined to reincorporate Taiwan, quite possibly within the next decade, and there are numerous flash points in Asian waters that could easily result in armed conflict. Canberra, at least, has come to terms with these new realities, but there appears to be a curious and disturbing lack of urgency in Ottawa about the new security environment. While Global Affairs Canada has begun preliminary discussions about Canadian interests in the Indo-Pacific, we are still a long way from a fully articulated foreign policy with respect to Asia. Similarly, our fleet of major warships is already a quarter of a century old and their replacements are upwards of a decade away. Thus, as the security environment at sea deteriorates, Canada is inadequately positioned to deal with the challenges of the new naval dynamic.

To change this dynamic Canada requires a defence structure that is based on the ability to control our ocean approaches and airspace, and the means to deploy expeditionary capability by naval and air forces. These forces must be able to conduct combat operations independently over the land, over and under the sea and from the sea. These defence forces, in particular the maritime forces, are needed to counter the rise of Chinese sea power in the Pacific and to face what may well be the next threat to global stability in this century.



*PLAN sailors from a Type 052 destroyer (Image: US National Archives)*

# Deniability versus Utility: China's Maritime Militia

**Dr. Ann Griffiths**

In mid-2021, hundreds of Chinese fishing boats anchored at Whitsun Reef, near Scarborough Shoal, a disputed area which both China and the Philippines claim. Since it claims this region is part of its Exclusive Economic Zone, Manila increased its patrols, photographed the hull numbers of Chinese vessels, publicly released the images, and filed diplomatic protests with Beijing to no avail. Were the Chinese fishermen there just trying to make a living, or were they agents of the Chinese state sending a message to the Philippines? Or both? Because the Philippines cannot match the power of China by itself, this represented a challenge: rely on US assistance or buckle under to Chinese pressure.

There is no doubt that Chinese foreign policy under President Xi Jinping has changed from the 'hide and bide' of Deng Xiaoping and the 'peaceful rise' of the 1990s. From aggressive economic policies to pursuing huge maritime claims in the South China Sea (SCS) and the East China Sea (ECS), China is taking a more assertive stand internationally.

The West seems to agree that China is of increasing concern and a possible threat to the existing world order. Both the 2021 G7 and NATO summits flagged concerns about China – although in veiled terms at times. The G7 final communiqué mentions China directly only once (para. 49) and calls on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly in relation to Xinjiang and Hong Kong. But indirect references are multiple.<sup>1</sup>

A NATO summit followed the G7 summit and its final communiqué pays more explicit attention to China, although the strongest language was reserved for Russia. The communiqué states that NATO will engage with actors beyond the North Atlantic area, including in Asia (paras 6e, 73). It vows that NATO members will work together to respond to disinformation campaigns and assist any member that is experiencing a cyber or hybrid campaign against it, up to and including

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<sup>1</sup> Indirect references include, for example: support for a rules-based international order, human rights, rule of law (para 4); concern about state-sponsored forced labour (para 29); opposition to internet censorship (para 32); call for secure supply chains and infrastructure relating to telecommunication technologies (para 34); call for democracies to work together to counter threats to democracy including disinformation; strengthen media freedom, protect journalists and support freedom of religion/belief (para 48). G7 statement June 2021, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/13/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communique/>.

invocation of Article 5 in the event of a serious attack (para. 31 re hybrid; para. 32 re cyber).

Despite stating that NATO hopes to maintain dialogue with China on areas of common interests, the language in the communiqué made it clear that it sees China as a challenge, if not a challenger. The communiqué declares:

55. China's stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security. We are concerned by those coercive policies which stand in contrast to the fundamental values enshrined in the Washington Treaty.... We remain concerned with China's frequent lack of transparency and use of disinformation. We call on China to uphold its international commitments and to act responsibly in the international system, including in the space, cyber, and maritime domains, in keeping with its role as a major power.<sup>2</sup>

Canada agrees with this concern about China. While perhaps more circumspect than the Americans, Canadians are clearly seeing the threat posed by an assertive – some would say aggressive – China. Until recently Ottawa was reluctant to criticize China because of fear of jeopardising economic relations,<sup>3</sup> however, as China ups its aggressive actions and language, Canada has taken a firmer stand.<sup>4</sup>

For most of Canada's existence, the focus was across the Atlantic to Europe. But that has changed. Federal governments of both political stripes have been refocusing attention across the Pacific Ocean toward Asia. Canada is a trading state, and given its geography, any trade that does not come from the Americas must come by sea. And in the past 50 years, increasing proportions of Canada's trade have been with Asia, supplanting traditional economic relations with Europe. China is Canada's second largest trading partner after the United States, and Canadian economic well-being and security are thus now linked to Asia.

Increased attention westward across the Pacific is reflected in defence policy. Canada's current defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE), released in 2017, refers to Canada as a Pacific state, stresses the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to the economy and security, and calls for Canada to engage more in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Multilateral defence relations are an important component of Canadian engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, and Canada participates in a number of high-level defence meetings and regional exercises that enhance interoperability, cooperation and foster relationships between the Royal

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<sup>2</sup> NATO final communiqué June 2021, Brussels Summit Communiqué, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en).

<sup>3</sup> The federal government also became circumspect in its criticism after Beijing arrested two Canadians in response to the Canadian detention of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States.

<sup>4</sup> An example that illustrates both sides stepping up the aggressive language was an incident in early 2021 when Canada joined Western calls to allow independent observers in Xinjiang. China said Canada should not speak about human rights abuses because of its treatment of Indigenous peoples. In response Prime Minister Justin Trudeau noted that at least Canada has acknowledged and apologised for past deeds, unlike China.

<sup>5</sup> Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, Ottawa, 2017, pp. 90-91.



Canadian Navy (RCN) and navies in the region. For example, the RCN has participated in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), the world's largest combined and joint maritime exercise, since its inception in 1971.

Ongoing RCN engagements in Asia are *Operation Projection - Asia-Pacific* and *Operation Neon*. *Operation Projection* was formed with a mandate for the RCN to have a steady presence in Asia, strengthen Canada's relations with partners in the area by conducting training and engagements, and in this way contribute to regional security. *Operation Neon* is the Canadian contribution to a multinational effort in support of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions imposed against North Korea. Canada also participates in bilateral defence relations with individual Asia-Pacific states. In addition to work with the US Navy, the RCN/Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) also undertake bilateral (and multilateral) naval work with Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Canada also has bilateral defence relations with the Republic of Korea (South Korea), India and Pakistan.

It is clear, therefore, that along with its G7 and NATO allies, Canada is interested in the events in the Asia-Pacific region, and perceives that China represents a challenge, if not a threat, to the international order.

While China has disputed land borders and tense relations with several of its land neighbours, because the current hotspots in the Asia-Pacific region are maritime – i.e., disputes in the South and East China Seas and Taiwan – it is likely that any conflict with China in which Canada is involved would have a maritime focus, and thus would involve the RCN and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), rather than armies.

Historically China spent little attention, and little money, on its navy. But that is no longer the case and the People's Liberation Army (Navy) (PLAN) is now larger in terms of numbers, although not in capability, than the US Navy. The PLAN, however, is not the only element of China's maritime forces. It also has a robust and growing Coast Guard (CCG) – by far biggest in world, bigger than the USCG, Japanese and South Korean CGs combined – and an extensive maritime militia. And some would include the huge far-sea fishing fleet as a possible agent of Chinese foreign policy.

The maritime challenges posed by China exist on several levels. The PLAN is becoming larger and increasingly sophisticated in its technology and capability but China is also making use of lower level assets to get what it wants, and on that level the West is falling short. This paper will focus on the Chinese maritime militia. What is it? How has it been used by China? What advantages (and disadvantages) does it provide to China? The paper will argue that the Chinese maritime militia has been and could be very useful in furthering Chinese foreign policy goals in the SCS and the ECS. It provides Beijing with a large contingent of maritime forces, a certain amount of deniability and could allow China to take possession of islands while making it difficult for external military forces to respond. However, this paper will also argue that the maritime militia could be a mixed blessing for Beijing. The ambiguity that makes it useful for government purposes also makes it less controllable, and it could become a wild card in tense situations, and indeed could create tense situations that Beijing does not want.

After briefly outlining characteristics the theories of gray zone/hybrid warfare and the Chinese maritime militia, this paper will outline both the advantages and the disadvantages of the militia for China. The paper will conclude with a discussion about how the Chinese maritime militia affects (and could affect in future) Chinese foreign policy goals, and Western goals in the Asia-Pacific region.

## Hybrid Warfare, Gray Zone Warfare and Maritime Militias

As China has become more powerful, it has become more assertive, particularly in its own region. (We must remember that the perspective *within* China is that it is acting defensively, not offensively.) Beijing uses many levers to get its way – diplomacy, dis/misinformation, propaganda, economic incentives or pressure, selective interpretation of international law, and increased activity in international organizations. These levers can be considered elements of *coercion*, but China has been careful about using *military* force at sea. It is far more likely to use hybrid/gray zone activities to get its way.

It is interesting that, with a few notable exceptions, the theories of great power conflict have focused on land despite the fact that many classic arms races have involved naval assets. And in the post-WWII era, security analysts have placed emphasis on nuclear deterrence – indeed the fundamental underpinning of the Cold War was deterrence between the superpowers.<sup>6</sup> But do these studies and theories apply at sea, and to China? As noted, the most probable interactions, and therefore points of friction, with China will be maritime.<sup>7</sup>

While the United States builds high-end naval capabilities to deter China, China focuses on lower-end/asymmetric assets in addition to its high-end naval capabilities. The PLAN is much bigger and better armed and trained than it was, but Beijing recognizes that it probably still cannot prevail in a direct conflict with the USN (and US allies), and most assuredly does not want to be in a situation where it has to fight a war. This adds an element to China's strategy – i.e., avoid direct military-to-military conflict. But that does not mean that China cannot achieve its long-term goals in the region. *Naval* forces are not the only way to achieve strategic goals. There are other maritime forces that can help achieve China's foreign policy goals.

Before we discuss the specifics of China's maritime militia, we must first discuss hybrid and gray zone warfare in order place the militia into this framework. While the terms hybrid/gray zone warfare may be recent, the concepts are not. There have been many terms over the years such as irregular warfare, low-intensity warfare, asymmetric warfare, and military operations other than war, etc. There are multiple definitions for both hybrid and gray zone warfare. Some analysts seem to find little difference between the terms, while others clearly differentiate them. *SSE* is one of the former, and notes only that hybrid methods exist in gray zones. The topic is not a focus of *SSE*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, "Too Important to be Left to the Admirals: The Need to Study Maritime Great Power Competition," *Security Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2020), pp. 579-600.

<sup>7</sup> See Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, "Cruising for a Bruising: Maritime Competition in an Anti-Access Age," *Security Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2020), pp. 671-700.

<sup>8</sup> *Strong, Secure, Engaged* simply says: "By staying in the fog of the grey zone, states can influence events in their

There is agreement that hybrid warfare involves the use of both conventional and unconventional methods. The conventional element is clear, but the unconventional elements can involve economic levers, electronic warfare (eg., hacking, communication disruption, spoofing), propaganda or misinformation via media/social media, unconventional weaponry, and militias and unconfirmed military personnel (eg., ‘little green men’ or ‘volunteers’).

Some analysts have argued that gray zone activities differ from hybrid warfare in that they deliberately remain at the lower end of the conflict spectrum whereas hybrid warfare moves up the spectrum if necessary.<sup>9</sup> Phillip Kapusta defines gray zone activities as “competitive interactions that fall between the traditional dualities of war and peace.”<sup>10</sup> Another study defines the strategy as “an effort or series of efforts beyond steady-state deterrence and assurance that attempts to achieve one’s security objectives without resort to direct and sizable use of force. In engaging in a gray zone strategy, an actor seeks to avoid crossing a threshold that results in war.”<sup>11</sup> The key phrase here is ‘without resort to direct and sizable use of force’ which distinguishes it from hybrid war in which force can be/is used. Thus, as Hal Brands argues, gray zone strategies seek to achieve aims “*without* escalating to overt warfare, *without* crossing established red lines, and thus *without* exposing the practitioner to the penalties and risks that such escalation might bring.”<sup>12</sup>

A Chinese expression credited to military strategist Sun-Tzu is to ‘win without fighting.’ This is a fitting description of gray zone activity. A phrase that was coined by Dan Altman is also appropriate – ‘advancing without attacking.’<sup>13</sup> According to Altman, “[r]ather than attempting to convince the adversary of one’s willingness to use force, it [advancing without attacking] succeeds by taking advantage of both sides’ reluctance to use force.”<sup>14</sup> This involves taking ambiguous steps that skirt the red lines set by others. The strongest military red line is use of force – i.e., militaries will react if you use force/violence against them. But advancing without attacking “push[es] forward without ever unmistakably crossing core red lines like those against the use of force.”<sup>15</sup> Brands argues that incremental actions are useful because they happen slowly enough that they never raise clear red flags; “they can eat away at the status quo one nibble at a time.”<sup>16</sup> It is a tactic referred to as “salami slicing” or “cabbage peeling.”<sup>17</sup>

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favour without triggering outright armed conflict. The use of hybrid methods presents challenges in terms of detection, attribution and response for Canada and its allies, including the understanding and application of NATO’s Article 5.” (p. 53). And that is the end of the discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Petersen, “The Chinese Maritime Gray Zone,” in Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson (eds), *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, China Maritime Studies Institute and US Naval Institute Press, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Phillip Kapusta, “The Gray Zone” as quoted in Petersen, “The Chinese Maritime Gray Zone,” in Erickson and Martinson (eds), *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, May 2017, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 5 February 2016 (emphasis in original).

<sup>13</sup> See Dan Altman, “Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game Around the Use of Force,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2018), pp. 58-88.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” no page number.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Sa and Evan N. Resnick, “Reciprocal Salami-Slicing in East Asia,” RSIS Commentary No. 275, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 18 December 2015.



Or, alternatively, advancing without attacking can involve taking something quickly and presenting your enemies with a *fait accompli* (eg., Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014). Having taken what you want, you then dare your opponent to take it back. This places the onus on the opponent to decide whether to escalate or to accept the changed status quo.

The goal of these strategies, whatever you call them, is to revise a particular status quo without resorting to war. The actors who undertake the actions are ambiguous (more below) and the aims are often pursued gradually.<sup>18</sup> This forces the other party to respond, and by responding, to escalate the situation.

Both Russia and China are challengers to the international status quo – in particular challengers to the United States as global hegemon. They use gray zone/hybrid warfare to get what they want in part because they recognize that they are not able to take on the United States at the high end of conflict (and that such a conflict would not serve their interests). They also recognize that their commitment to an issue in their region is greater than that of the United States and unless US red lines are clearly crossed – in particular by the use of force – the United States will not likely be motivated enough to respond with high-level escalation. This means that there is little risk of full military escalation or nuclear escalation.

## **Militias and China's Maritime Militia**

A militia is a body of citizen, as opposed to professional, soldiers (or sailors). They are called upon by the state in a time of need but otherwise carry on with their private lives, unlike the regular forces which consist of full-time military personnel. They are asked to undertake some training and give some of their time to militia work.

Their use is not new – indeed depending on how you define militias, in some places they pre-date state forces. The United States, for example, has had a militia since before its independence. In colonial times able-bodied men of a certain age were members of the militia, and militias were often formed by towns for their own defence. The Second Amendment of the US Bill of Rights mentions “a well-regulated militia” and its right to bear arms. The US Constitution empowers Congress to “organize, arm, and discipline” the national militia, but left most control in the hands of the states. We can see a version of militia today in the National Guard and the military reserve forces.<sup>19</sup>

Depending on your definition, Canada also has a militia – the Reserves. In Canada, the Reserve Force is composed of CAF members who are enrolled for part-time military service. It is a force “ready with reasonable notice to conduct or contribute to domestic and international operations to safeguard the defence and security of Canada.”<sup>20</sup> It is integrated into the CAF chain of

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<sup>18</sup> See Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: US Army War College Press, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> It has become common in recent years to refer to private organizations – for example the Oath Keepers and the 3 Percenters in the United States – as militias. This does not fit the discussion here, which is focused on *state-*organized forces.

<sup>20</sup> See Department of National Defence, “Canada’s Reserve Force,” available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/departmental-results->

command. The CAF Reserve Force, including the Naval Reserve, is longstanding and has an extensive history across Canada. It was created to provide depth to CAF capabilities and a link to communities within Canada. According to the government, a reserve force “is a critical enabler to CAF strategic and operational success.”<sup>21</sup>

Our focus here is *maritime* militias. Maritime militias are less common than militias on land, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of the environment and the fact that most conflicts occur on land. There are few maritime militias – although that depends on how you define naval reserves. In Asia both China and Vietnam have them, as part of their tradition of ‘people’s war.’

As noted, in the past two decades China has changed its focus from security on land via the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to an emphasis on the People’s Liberation Army *Navy* (PLAN) – which has more than tripled in size from 2000 to 2021.<sup>22</sup> China’s 2015 defence White Paper notes that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”<sup>23</sup> China keeps building its navy but recently it has begun using the PLAN in the background. In the foreground of China’s regional maritime foreign policy activities, we find the Coast Guard and the maritime militias.

Canada has a Naval Reserve, and China has a maritime militia – the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). Like other militias, the personnel are not professional or full-time. Most members of PAFMM have day jobs, usually as fishermen, but some are merchant mariners or retired PLAN personnel. PAFMM is organized into military formations, and members receive some training from PLAN. They are managed by PLA officers assigned to People’s Armed Forces Departments (PAFDs) in the city or town in which the militia unit is located. The PAFMM units are separate from the PLAN and Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), but are tasked, among other things, with assisting the PLA “by performing security and logistics functions in war.”<sup>24</sup>

The PAFMM is important to study not because of what it is, but because of how it is being used by China. It has huge potential as a maritime actor. While not all are members of PAFMM, China has the world’s largest fishing fleet – with approximately 187,211 marine fishing vessels by the end of 2015.<sup>25</sup> And it is clear that Beijing has understood the possibilities inherent in these

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report/departamental-results-2017-18-index/supporting-documents-index/canadas-reserve-force.html.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Report by leaders of US Navy, USMC and USCG, December 2020. Note: Crucial to the goal of building the PLAN is the China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC), China’s leading military shipbuilding state-owned enterprise from 1999 to 2019. Yet the arrest of several high-level CSIC personnel illustrates that corruption exists among China’s military shipbuilders. This will affect PLAN plans! See Zi Yang, “The Invisible Threat to China’s Navy: Corruption,” *The Diplomat*, 19 May 2020, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-invisible-threat-to-chinas-navy-corruption/>.

<sup>23</sup> The State Council Information Office of the PRC, *China’s Military Strategy*, Beijing, Ministry of National Defence, 2015, no page number. It should be noted that China also has been enhancing other elements of maritime power, such as shipbuilding, ports and shipping/maritime transport.

<sup>24</sup> Shuxian Luo and Jonathan G. Panter, “How Organized is China’s Maritime Militia?” *The Maritime Executive*, 9 April 2021.

<sup>25</sup> See Conor Kennedy, “Maritime Militia: The Unofficial Maritime Agency,” China Maritime Studies Institute, 2016, available at <https://mscconference.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Kennedy-Maritime-Militia.pdf>.

vessels as it has begun building up PAFMM in nationwide reserves.

What makes the Chinese militia different from Canadian Naval Reserves? For one thing, the Canadian reserves use RCN ships – not their own personal vessels. They are thus distinguishable as agents of the Canadian state. That is a major difference – and part of the problem for Western states in dealing with the PAFMM. PAFMM uses fishing boats, sometimes their own, sometimes owned by a fishing company or a municipal government. But to all appearances these boats are private, not marked as government agents. We will return to this topic below.

In recent years as it recognized the utility of the PAFMM, Beijing made the decision to invest in the modernization of the fishing fleet. It has provided funding to subsidize fishing boat owners to replace small, old wooden vessels with larger, steel-hulled craft. It also provided some funding to update and enhance communication technology and provided some lightweight weaponry. Subsidies can be applied for by existing PAFMM members as well as other fishing boat owners who are willing to use their boat as/when requested. Interestingly, support has been allocated to specific fishermen – in particular those who are licensed to operate in the waters around the Spratly Islands, a disputed island chain. Naturally many boat owners took the funding to build new boats, and these boats are known as the “Spratly backbone fleet.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Advantage China: How has PAFMM been used by China?**

*(And how this is a problem for other states)*

Military forces exist to help advance state goals. And if we look at Beijing’s major foreign policy goals, we can see that PAFMM is a factor in achieving them. Beijing has used PAFMM to advance territorial claims in both the SCS and the ECS. It uses PAFMM units to chase off other states’ vessels, occupy and defend small islands which are in disputed territory, and thus to illustrate ‘presence’ to fortify China’s claim to sovereignty. And PAFMM has used aggression against what Beijing calls ‘incursions by foreign vessels’ to maintain the claims.

As well, maritime militia units undertake intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance roles and re-supply if necessary. While many still may not have top communications technology – although as noted, it has been upgraded – the sheer number of PAFMM-associated boats can provide excellent surveillance in waters claimed by China. PAFMM boats are out-gunned by foreign warships, but they greatly out-number the few foreign warships present in the region and this could lead to swarming and possibly prevent a warship from conducting operations. Other roles the militia has played are providing maritime transportation, harassing foreign fishing boats, and escorting legitimate Chinese fishermen to protect them from harassment by other states. Because the boats tend to be fairly small, they can operate in shallow waters and although slow they are manoeuvrable, which is important for enhancing China’s claims to disputed land forms in both SCS and ECS.

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<sup>26</sup> See Ryan D. Martinson, “No Ordinary Boats: Identifying China’s Maritime Militia,” *The Maritime Executive*, 18 May 2021, available at <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/no-ordinary-boats-identifying-china-s-maritime-militia>.



*Chinese ships at Whitsun Reef (Image from: National Task Force-West Philippine Sea)*



There are operational benefits from using militias during conflict. In a civil war, they are useful to provide local knowledge of insurgent forces, terrain, and population to enhance military operations. This is less the case for PAFMM units but they nonetheless will have excellent knowledge of the marine environment, and good connections in the maritime community.

China's maritime militia is also useful because the United States lacks similar forces, and certainly not in the theatre, and regional countries do not have forces equal in size to PAFMM. As Michael Green et al. phrase it, "China uses its asymmetric advantages to place neighboring states in positions in which they must either accept Chinese moves or escalate, placing those neighbors and the United States in a disadvantageous position."<sup>27</sup>

We cannot discuss all the incidents in which the PAFMM has (allegedly) been involved, so we will mention just a few.<sup>28</sup> Prominent incidents include:

- (Suspected PAFMM) fishing boats were chased out of waters around the disputed Senkaku Islands in September 2010 by the Japanese Coast Guard. One of the boats deliberately rammed a Japanese Coast Guard ship. This was a significant incident. Japan took possession of the ship and arrested the crew. China protested and stopped the export of rare earths to

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, May 2017), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> The word allegedly/reportedly is used here to indicate that it is difficult to be certain in most cases if the vessels are PAFMM. See discussion of deniability below. For an excellent discussion of nine incidents, see Green, et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, Chapter 3.

Japan, inflicting damage on its technology sector. Japan eventually released the ship and crew.

- PAFMM command and supply ships were (allegedly) involved in an incident with the Philippines at Thomas Shoal in February 2014.
- PAFMM was mobilized to defend Chinese state-owned oil company CNOOC's HYSY-981 oil rig in 2014. The oil rig was taken to waters in the Paracel Islands claimed by both China and Vietnam, and Vietnam tried to prevent the platform from establishing a fixed position. A PAFMM boat rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel.
- In 2019, 22 Filipino fishermen had to be rescued after a suspected PAFMM vessel struck and sank their fishing boat.
- Vietnamese and Chinese ships spent four months in a standoff in 2019 in disputed waters off the coast of Vietnam after Hanoi refused Beijing's demands to halt oil and gas work.
- A standoff between a Malaysian oil exploration drilling ship and a Chinese survey vessel started in December 2019 and ended in May 2020. The Chinese survey ship accompanied by 'fishing' vessels, harassed the Malaysian ship. Malaysia sent government ships in support, and Malaysia refused to leave the area until the surveying was complete, despite harassment. US and Australian naval ships casually sailed nearby in April 2020.
- In March and April 2021, the Philippine Coast Guard released photos of Chinese fishing boats loitering at Whitsun, in the Philippines' claimed EEZ. A series of diplomatic protests sent by Manila to Beijing did not receive a response.<sup>29</sup>

There are several PAFMM units that are very active, and they are based in areas of interest to other states in the SCS. For example, the PAFMM unit based in Sanya on Hainan Island off the south coast of China (near Vietnam) is active and was involved in harassing USNS *Victorious* and USNS *Impeccable* in 2009. Both ships were conducting surveillance in the SCS. A Sansha PAFMM unit is headquartered on Woody Island in the Paracels, a disputed region.<sup>30</sup> The Sansha City Maritime Militia has more than 80 ships (many owned by the Sansha City Fisheries Development Agency).<sup>31</sup> Among other things, this city-sponsored militia unit conducts inspections of foreign vessels whose crew are deemed guilty of 'rights infringement and illegal fishing,' as defined by PAFMM (or per instructions from land command). Tanmen Maritime Militia, not far from Sansha City, is also very active – Andrew S. Erickson and Conor Kennedy refer to members of this militia as the "little blue men."<sup>32</sup> The Tanmen Maritime Militia was (allegedly) present during the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal Incident in which 'fishing' vessels interacted with the vessels from the Philippines in disputed waters. These active PAFMM units have had high-level support. For example in April 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the Tanmen Maritime Militia company to commemorate the first anniversary of the Scarborough Shoal Incident.

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<sup>29</sup> Thanks to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), we know the identities of 23 of them. Both AMTI and the Philippines Coast Guard classified them as 'militia.' Martinson, "No Ordinary Boats."

<sup>30</sup> Sansha City governs Xisha Islands, Paracel Islands, Zhongsha Island (Macclesfield Bank) and Nansha Islands (Spratly Islands), with its government situated on Yongxing Island, 300 kilometres away from Wenchang City, Hainan. See discussion of video made by this unit at "Chinese Maritime Militia Unit Releases Video Celebrating Military Role," *The Maritime Executive*, 20 May 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Petersen, "The Chinese Maritime Gray Zone," in Erickson and Martinson (eds), *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Conor Kennedy, "Directing China's 'Little Blue Men': Uncovering the Maritime Militia Command Structure," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 11 September 2015.

From these few examples, it is clear that Beijing has made use of PAFMM on many occasions. Why? Perhaps the greatest benefit to using a militia is the deniability it provides to a state. PAFMM units can be dispatched to chase away foreign civilian vessels, take control, or strengthen control of maritime areas that China claims, while avoiding the awkward questions that arise if military forces take action. Since PAFMM boats are not marked as government boats, there is uncertainty as to whether they are agents of the state or simply fishermen going about their business. This is intentional and very useful. The PAFMM activities “appear explicitly designed to avoid triggering US security commitments by exploiting ambiguity, asymmetry and incrementalism.”<sup>33</sup>

Because militia members are usually fishermen, PAFMM boats are often at sea and often actually fishing. (This is a clear difference from the Canadian Naval Reserves in that Canadian reservists do not act as government agents when they are at sea in their own boats.) As PAFMM members may be involved in fishing, or may not, identification is a serious problem.<sup>34</sup> If these boats undertake state-sanctioned dirty deeds (such as ramming fishing boats from other states, or occupying islets that are in disputed waters), or linger or approach a foreign warship, how do you know if they are legitimate fishing boats minding their own business or government agents conducting surveillance or pursuing other foreign policy goals? According to Ryan Martinson,

This straightforward question seldom yields straightforward answers. China does not publish a roster of maritime militia boats. That would undermine the militia’s key advantages – secrecy and deniability. Nor is it common for Chinese sources to recognize the militia affiliations of individual boats. Analysts can gather clues and make a case that a vessel is likely maritime militia, or not. That process requires painstaking effort, and the results are rarely definitive.<sup>35</sup>

In the absence of clear identification, it is difficult for the RCN (or other navies) to react. Is that ‘fishing’ boat approaching too close because its crew has inadequate seamanship skills, or is it planning on disrupting operations or ramming the ship? The intent is unknown, just as the boat is unidentified.<sup>36</sup> If a warship were to react strongly to a disruptive or aggressive incident by a PAFMM boat, China would protest, claiming that they were just fishermen acting on their own initiative. And it would be difficult to refute this. This is the beauty of a militia – its deniability. And in the face of this plausible deniability, any reaction is in essence escalation of an incident.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Aside from the problem of identifying intentions and plans, the boats generate minimal radar signal and often do not indicate their position or information on the Automatic Identification System (AIS). See Shuxian Luo and Jonathan G. Panter, “China’s Maritime Militia and Fishing Fleets: A Primer for Operational Staffs and Tactical Leaders,” *Military Review*, January-February 2021, pp. 16-17. A summary by the same authors is “How Organized in China’s Maritime Militia?” *The Maritime Executive*, 9 April 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Ryan D. Martinson, “No Ordinary Boats.”

<sup>36</sup> There are analysts who have closely examined fishing boats that have been built recently to determine if they are militia boats. Evidence that the ‘Spratly backbone boats’ are militia boats has come from careful examination of bank loan statements, fishery contracts and licenses, fishery cooperatives, shipbuilding company records, and provincial and municipal governments. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) is one organization that tries to identify PAFMM boats. This helps other states identify with whom they are dealing. For a discussion of this, see Martinson, “No Ordinary Boats.”

Another advantage of deniability is the use of militias to commit violent acts against civilians. In some cases, states use militias to perpetrate violence and evade state accountability for it. If a militia acts violently – for example, by ramming and sinking fishing boats causing casualties, or roughing up foreign civilians and/or forcibly removing them from their boats – the state can plausibly deny responsibility whereas it could not deny responsibility if uniformed naval or coast guard personnel were to commit the act.

In sum, the PAFMM units are more assertive than civilians but their actions are less obviously aggressive than military forces. PAFMM thus provides a useful middle ground for Beijing. In addition to surveillance, reconnaissance and disruption of foreign state activities, the maritime militia has been helpful for China in taking control of features in the SCS. Since identification is difficult, it is hard to react. Weaker regional states are hesitant to press their rights by engaging with what they suspect are government-affiliated boats for fear of Chinese reaction. Unless clear red lines are crossed – i.e., use of force – non-regional states (the United States in particular) will be reluctant to act forcefully. China is careful not to involve the PLAN in PAFMM actions to avoid military confrontation and possible escalation – Coast Guard ships may be in the near vicinity but not PLAN warships.

## **Disadvantage China: PAFMM Causes Problems for China**

In many ways PAFMM is useful to advance Chinese foreign policy goals. But there are clear disadvantages to China to its use as well. (It should be noted here that just because there are disadvantages to China associated with the use of PAFMM, this does not mean advantages for other states. The problems remain, and indeed some of the problems discussed in this section are threatening to *everyone* because they can create and/or escalate tense situations.) There are practical problems with militias in general and PAFMM in particular – for example, loss of control of the force and problems related to organization, funding, management and training.

### ***Deniability versus Control***

While challenged in places by multinational corporations, transnational criminal organizations and civil society organizations, the state remains the primary actor in international relations. One of the elements of statehood is that the state must have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within its territory. Delegating the use of force can be problematic.

Militias can undermine the state's monopoly on the use of force and, thus, its authority. We have seen examples of militias in use on land in recent years. For example, Shiite and Kurdish militias played a major role in Iraq to defeat the Islamic State/ISIS. In Nigeria, for another example, militias have been used by the state to fight against terrorist forces. In both these cases, the militias illustrate a weakness in the state security forces – i.e., they were unable to do the job themselves. These examples also illustrate the problem of controlling and dismantling the forces. They often take on a life of their own, and can be extremely difficult to rein in. To all appearances this is not the case for China. It has a firm grip on the use of force on land. But the question of control of PAFMM remains open – as will be discussed below – and this will likely be seen as a problem in Beijing. The Chinese state spends more on *internal* security than on the



military, illustrating that it is concerned about domestic control and has little trust in its own citizens.

As noted, a major strength of a militia is the deniability it offers a state, but this is a double-edged sword. Deniability implies an arm's length relationship, and that means a certain lack of control. It is likely that even Beijing is not 100% certain what PAFMM units will do. There are several possible outcomes here – either PAFMM units will be so fired up by the nationalism that Beijing has been pushing that they will cause an incident by doing something stupid, *or* they will not come when called by Beijing. In the former, a fired-up militia could draw China into a military confrontation it does not want. In terms of the latter, there have been complaints by PAFMM members that the payment is insufficient for the time they have to serve. Because of this, it is possible to imagine militia units ignoring Beijing's instructions and focusing instead on their own agenda. Since they serve only part-time as militia and the rest of the time as fishermen, is their loyalty to the state or to their own livelihoods? The fishery sector in China has been privatized and fishermen are no longer employees of the state but rather working for themselves or profit-driven corporations. This means that the government has little economic leverage over PAFMM members. It is likely that some PAFMM members take the money for participating in the militia but then carry on with their own livelihoods – and, indeed, many have been contravening Beijing's prohibition against illegal fishing.

Since 2015, Beijing has been trying to professionalize PAFMM units – better training, better ships and better pay. It has thus increased the training that PAFMM members receive from the PLAN and, as noted earlier, has provided funding for new boats with steel hulls and more sophisticated technology. The training and professionalization lessen the chance of PAFMM doing something unwise, but also lessen the ability of Beijing to deny that PAFMM units are agents of the state.<sup>37</sup> There is a paradox here. The more arm's length the relationship with PAFMM is (more deniability), the less control Beijing has of it, and the less useful it is to achieve foreign policy goals.

A problem relating to control of PAFMM is that the command structure is not clear. There are many fingers in the management and command pie. Like other agencies in China, the system has a dual civilian-military command structure at each level, which adds a member of the Chinese Communist Party to each unit.<sup>38</sup> So for management, administration and mobilization of the militia, there are civilian political actors involved at all levels, plus members of the PLA/PLAN and Chinese Coast Guard (CCG). Involvement is not limited, however, to representatives of the central government; provincial, municipal and sometimes industry representatives are also

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<sup>37</sup> Deniability is not helped by some militias. In May 2021, the Sansha unit released a video (produced by the Hainan PLA Political Department!) showing the unit in military fatigues, training with weapons, marching, singing patriotic Chinese songs, and ramming a foreign fishing vessel. The Sansha municipality is responsible for all of the SCS, and the local PAFMM unit HQ is located on disputed Woody Island in Paracels. See "Chinese Maritime Militia Unit Releases Video Celebrating Military Role," *The Maritime Executive*, 20 May 2021.

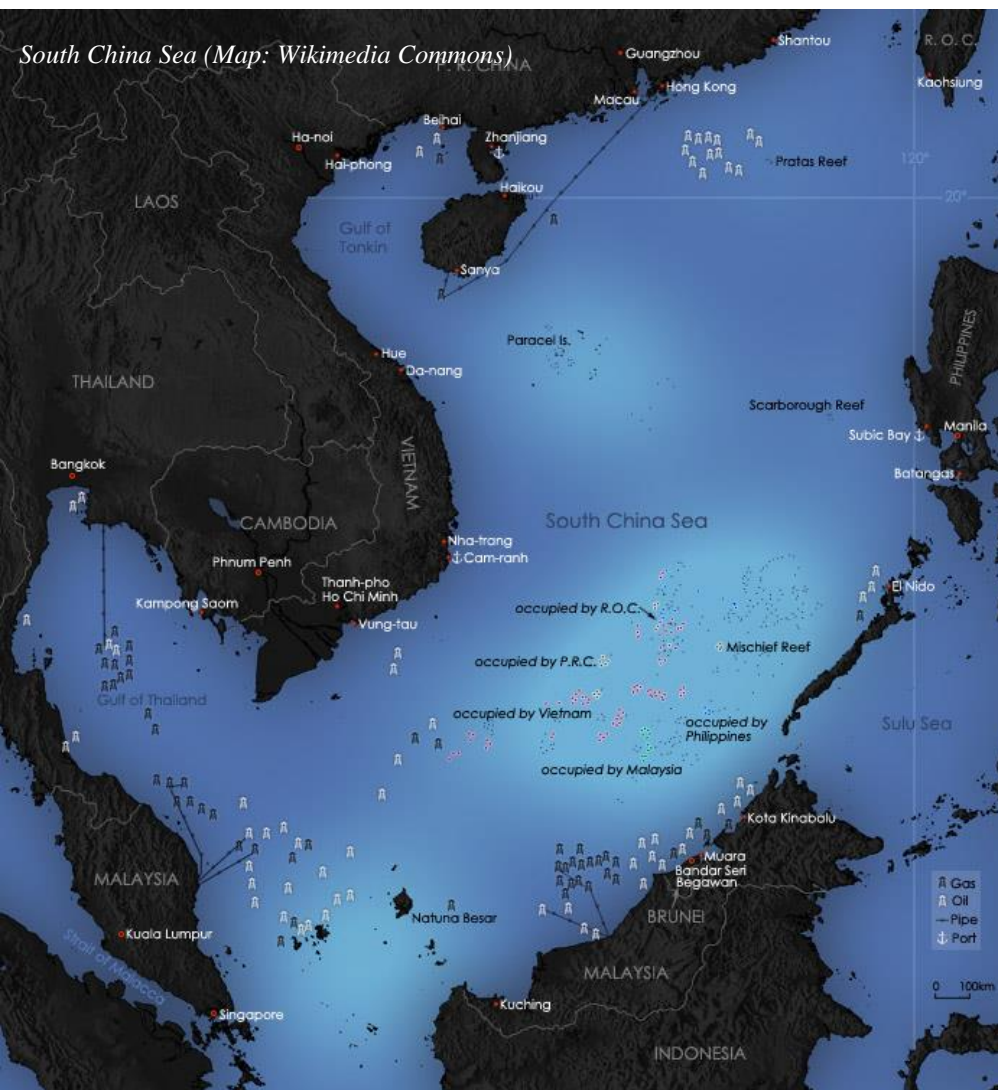
<sup>38</sup> The dual command system in PLAN means that each ship has a naval captain and a political commander representing the Communist Party. Starting in 2018, political commanders were given equal authority with the captain and are expected to take control if the captain is unable. See "Leadership: China Cripples Naval Officers," Strategy Page, 18 July 2020, available at <https://www.strategypage.com/htmw/htlead/articles/20200718.aspx>. For information on PAFMM management and organizational structure, see Luo and Panter, "China's Maritime Militia and Fishing Fleets," p. 12; and Martinson, "No Ordinary Boats."

involved in the management and mobilization of PAFMM units.

The system is thus complicated and not well coordinated. With all these agencies involved, there are bound to be conflicting agendas. The PLA/PLAN leadership is aware of the potential problems that diffuse PAFMM management could create, and there have been concerns raised within China about the risks inherent in the PAFMM lack of control, training, discipline and professionalism.<sup>39</sup> Apparently military leaders “have openly discussed the problems of who commands the militia forces, under what circumstances, and with what authorization; who is authorized to review and approve the maritime militia’s participation in what types of maritime

rights protection operations; and who is responsible for militia expenditures.”<sup>40</sup> But being aware of a problem is not fixing it.

This brings us to the question of finance. Despite what was said earlier about the increasing importance that Beijing has placed on the maritime militia, this has not necessarily been reflected proportionally in finances allocated to PAFMM. The complicated command structures are also reflected in the complicated finances of PAFMM. Since the command structure is so diffuse, it is not clear who is in control of the budget. In terms of the military (PLA/PLAN), funding is the responsibility of the central government, but for PAFMM the funding does not all come from Beijing. The lower levels of government are responsible for a significant proportion of



the budget, so financing for PAFMM is partly central government, partly provincial and partly municipal.

Naturally the provinces and municipalities complain that funding coming from Beijing is insufficient. According to Shuxian Luo and Jonathan Panter, “[t]o spread out the financial

<sup>39</sup> Luo and Panter, “China’s Maritime Militia and Fishing Fleets,” p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

burden, common practice now holds that ‘whoever uses the militia pays the bill.’”<sup>41</sup> This takes us back to the problem of control, and the possibility of contrasting agendas – a province or even a municipality could have a different agenda than the central state. As well, insufficient funding (and/or corruption leading to misuse or disappearance of funds<sup>42</sup>) leads to lack of training and possibly sub-standard equipment, which could lead to accidents or negative interactions with foreign forces.

The maritime militia thus increases uncertainty in interactions with other states. And given PAFMM’s organizational mishmash, it also introduces an element of uncertainty *within* China. Even Beijing might not be entirely certain what PAFMM units are up to. In this sense, PAFMM activities complicate relations with other states, and complicate the deterrence which is designed to keep international systems stable.

### ***Blowback***

Blowback is an obvious problem. If China increases its maritime militia in terms of size and capability, other states in the region react. Thus, for example, in response to the visit in 2013 by President Xi to the PAFMM unit responsible for sinking a Vietnamese fishing vessel, in 2014 Vietnam’s President visited fishermen, presenting gifts to the owner of the fishing vessel which was rammed and sank by PAFMM. And in July 2014, Vietnam announced disbursement of funds to help Vietnamese fishermen build larger offshore vessels in response to the larger steel-hulled Chinese fishing boats.<sup>43</sup>

The blowback may not be reflected in maritime militias but rather in the increased size and capability of naval forces of regional states. And we can indeed see this in Asia. Virtually all countries in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region have been building up their naval forces in response to Chinese actions. Furthermore, the aggressive use of Chinese maritime forces has been responsible for convincing some of these countries to enhance their relations with the United States. By pushing its claims via aggressive, but partially deniable actions, China is pushing states in the region into coordinated action against it.

The US reaction is naturally of interest to Beijing. China knows that the USN *can* act in Asia but it is betting that it *will not*. China has the greater motivation, and the use of gray zone actions can push the envelope without crossing red lines. But this strategy is a gamble. Because of a number of USN tense interactions with unidentified fishing vessels in the SCS/ECS, in 2019 the United States announced that it would treat Chinese Coast Guard vessels and maritime militia vessels as combatants. US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral John Richardson, said that the USN “will respond to provocative acts by [China’s] coast guard and fishing boats in the same way it reacts to the Chinese navy in an effort to curb Beijing’s aggressive behavior in the South China Sea.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> See Zi Yang, “The Invisible Threat to China’s Navy: Corruption,” *The Diplomat*, 19 May 2020; and Frank Chen, “Ex-PLA Navy Chief in Deep Water Amid War on Graft,” *Asia Times*, 26 June 2020.

<sup>43</sup> The Chinese Coast Guard Law, which was adopted in late January 2021, is also worrisome to regional states. It allows the CCG and other maritime law enforcement agencies to use small arms, such as rifles, or shipborne-weapons such as deck-mounted guns, when foreign ships infringe upon waters that China claims as its own.

<sup>44</sup> Admiral John Richardson, as quoted in Demetri Sevastopulo and Kathrin Hille, “US Warns China on Aggressive Acts by Fishing Boats and Coast Guard,” *Financial Times*, 28 April 2019.

The United States clearly hopes that this statement will deter the aggressive actions of the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and PAFMM. The US reaction represents a setback to Beijing as it raises the stakes. This new policy, however, will affect relations with the CCG more than PAFMM because outside forces will still have difficulty identifying which boats are PAFMM.

In sum, while PAFMM provides advantages in achieving state policy objectives, there are disadvantages to China that reduce these advantages. The deniability that encourages a state to use a militia leads to a lack of control. In PAFMM's case the convoluted organizational and command structure lessens Beijing's control, as does insufficient funding for training and professionalization. The blowback among regional states to PAFMM actions has led to more attention being paid to naval forces and pushed them closer to the United States.

## Conclusions

In naval/defence documents, the United States (more so than Canada) recognizes the challenge posed by Chinese non-naval maritime forces. The July 2021 Report to Congress about China's navy says "China also operates a sizeable maritime militia that includes a large number of fishing vessels. China relies primarily on its maritime militia and coast guard to assert and defend its maritime claims in its near-seas region, with the navy operating over the horizon as a potential backup force."<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, that is all it says on the topic (in the non-classified version). The rest of the report is an account of what ships/weapons PLAN has.

Canada and the United States (and other states) increasingly see China as a threat, but policy documents and naval procurement tend to emphasize high-end military threats relating to China. But the threat is not necessarily high-end, or not *just* high-end. What China wants – what any state wants – is to achieve its objectives. War is a policy option that China would like to avoid. Achieving its objectives without fighting a war – to win without fighting – is the goal.<sup>46</sup> Is PAFMM useful to China if we keep this in mind?

There are advantages to using PAFMM to achieve China's foreign policy objectives. It is a way of outmaneuvering adversaries, "working around certain high salience red lines like those against the use of force to apply pressure and take gains without quite crossing the lines that make war likely."<sup>47</sup> But there are definite disadvantages for China too. As noted, the benefits of deniability are reduced by the lack of control – this makes the PAFMM a wild card. These are civilians, with little training and discipline, and yet a single fishing vessel could cause a major international incident. So perhaps the biggest threat that PAFMM generates in terms of USN or RCN warships is the threat of accidents in the crowded waters of the South China Sea. If an incident caused by

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<sup>45</sup> Congressional Research Service, Report to Congress, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities: Background and Issues for Congress," July 2021, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> If the goal is to win without fighting, it is interesting that none of the options China has employed focus on peaceful resolution/diplomacy. It has not tried using international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to which it is party – and indeed has ignored the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision about its disputes with the Philippines. This may reflect the fact that it does not believe in law as it relates to what it wants. The PLAN, Coast Guard and PAFMM are all tools "for reinforcing claims, not for resolving disputes." Conor Kennedy, "Maritime Militia: The Unofficial Maritime Agency," China Maritime Studies Institute, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Altman, "Advancing without Attacking," p. 88.



PAFMM leads to escalation that would be an outcome Beijing does not want. The gains China makes via PAFMM actions will only contribute to Beijing's objectives as long as they do not push too hard against the status quo and the larger global strategic picture.

It is ironic that PAFMM is designed to operate in the gray zone – i.e., to avoid outright use of violence – but its actions can nonetheless escalate tensions which may lead to violence. The greater the size and activity of the PAFMM, the greater the likelihood of interaction with foreign vessels, and therefore the greater possibility of confrontation. In the case of PAFMM, there is a dangerous mix of economic incentive to confront boats from other states (i.e., prevent them from fishing so the Chinese fishing boats can get more fish) and political glorification (act aggressively and get rewarded by the political establishment for bravery) which may distort calculations of risk.

At the very least PAFMM complicates the maritime situation. It is useful to push against regional actors that are smaller and weaker. But the very presence of PAFMM acting aggressively has increased suspicion among other regional maritime actors, and that makes safe coexistence at sea less assured.<sup>48</sup>

The United States and China have signed agreements designed to avoid incidents between the USN and PLAN at sea.<sup>49</sup> And regional states (in particular the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) have held protracted negotiations with China to create a code of conduct that would govern behaviour at sea among claimants in the South China Sea. But the China-US agreements are for military forces, not the (ostensibly) civilian forces of PAFMM. If there could be an extension of these agreements to non-military vessels, it could be one way to counter/undermine the utility of PAFMM. Given its reaction to the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision, however, it is unlikely that China would be an enthusiastic participant in this, and agreements work only if all sides actually abide by them. Canada and the United States could build on the campaign against PAFMM begun by the Philippines and Vietnam at Whitsun Reef in which they photographed and catalogued PAFMM units. Regional and outside actors could form a surveillance effort of their own to identify PAFMM boats that are attempting to coerce the vessels of other states in the SCS/ECS. That could decrease uncertainty and deniability.

But to counter Chinese gray zone activities, other states must decide what their goals are in relation to China. In a perfect world these states would collectively agree on what their red lines are, and credibly communicate them to Beijing. Additionally, navies operating in the Asia-Pacific region must be aware of the existence and mandate of PAFMM so they can respond appropriately.

Is PAFMM a factor in the larger strategic picture? Yes and no. PAFMM is not the only tool in the Chinese policy toolbox. At the strategic level, China's tools include economic actions, anti-

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<sup>48</sup> Kennedy, "Maritime Militia: The Unofficial Maritime Agency."

<sup>49</sup> On 19 January 1998, the "Agreement between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China on Establishing a Consultation Mechanism to Strengthen Military Maritime Safety," known as the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), was signed. On 14 November 2014, the US Secretary of Defense and the Chinese Minister of Defense General signed a memorandum "Regarding Rules of Behavior for the Safety of Air and Marine Encounters." There is also a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), and Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC).

access/area-denial policies, Air Defence Identification Zones in the ECS and SCS, cyber-warfare, and sophisticated technology (including Artificial Intelligence). In the absence of clear red lines relating to gray zone activity, the worrisome problem is that while the United States and Canada are busy preparing for high-end conflict and counting (and countering) PLAN aircraft carriers, submarines, frigates, etc., Beijing could nibble its way to one of its foreign policy objectives – *de facto* if not *de jure* control of the South China Sea.



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