

POLICY BRIEF

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The territorialization of maritime space 2: The mobilization of non-military capabilities

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Since the mid-1990s, China has considerably developed its previously non-existent naval capabilities. In terms of the number of surface vessels, the PLAN is the leader in Asia, with 370 ships equipped with increasingly sophisticated communications and weapons systems. China has two aircraft carriers, and its shipyards are building a third, as well as dozens of submarines, lending credibility to its ambitions in the China Sea and beyond. Apart from the fact that the Chinese navy has no combat experience, however, the use of the PLAN in operations to exert pressure and change the status quo in the China Sea presents a major risk of escalation, particularly with Japan and its American ally.

Chinese strategic thinking - from Sun Zi's *The Art of War* onwards - has always favored the combined use of "ordinary" and "extraordinary" forces, complementary in their action. Similarly, Mao Zedong theorized the use of militias and popular warfare. Even today, the PRC claims to fight only "defensive" wars, which means placing the responsibility for the use of armed forces, including naval forces, on the adversary. Beijing thus prefers to use officially "non-military" means to exert constant pressure, the aim being to bring about a gradual change in the status quo. This strategy also requires potential adversaries to acquire substantial "non-military" means of retaliation, which can duplicate efforts to strengthen naval capabilities and which mobilize substantial resources that are difficult for states such as the Philippines to deploy.

Alongside the PLAN, China has developed two other forces that are fully integrated into its coercive strategy. These are the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG; 海警) and the People's Maritime Militia (PMM; 海上民军). This is yet another example of the fusion of civilian and military capabilities in the service of a single objective defined by the Communist Party.

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Considerable resources

As the US Department of Defense points out, China does not officially communicate the number of vessels assigned to the CCG, which, like the PLAN, has changed dimension since the 2000s¹. It has moved on from a coastal force to become a veritable armada capable of operations on the high seas, throughout the area that the PRC claims - wrongly - as its own and even beyond. According to open sources, the CCG’s naval arsenal comprises over 200 vessels. In the 10 years since Xi Jinping came to power, the CCG fleet has become the largest in the world, thanks to the allocation of substantial funds and the acquisition of new large-tonnage vessels as well as vessels transferred from the PLAN². By 2023, the CCG had 140 vessels over 900 tons, 120 vessels between 450 and 900 tons and 450 coastal patrol vessels between 90 and 450 tons, which for a long time made up the bulk of the fleet of the security agencies that preceded the creation of the CCG³.

Particularly impressive are the new ships built for the CCG or transferred from the PLAN. The most recent cutters (Zhaotou class) are 12,000 tons helicopter carriers over 165 meters long, the largest in the world, equipped with water cannons and 30mm and 76mm guns. By comparison, the largest Japanese cutter weighs just 7,000 tons. By 2023, the CCG will have two such vessels.

The CCG was also equipped with frigates that were part of the PLAN’s arsenal. In 2016, the PLAN transferred six 3600-ton T054 frigates

to the CCG, where they were integrated as Zhaoduan-class patrol cutters. In 2021, 22 PLAN T056 1340-ton stealth corvettes will be transferred to the CCG⁴.

CCG and PMM organization

Another indication of the growing integration between the CCG and the PLAN is that all commanders of CCG regional commands are former naval officers, and numerous joint training courses are held with the PLAN to enhance interoperability between military and civilian capabilities. Similarly, the PMM, made up of fishing vessels, is trained with the help of the PLAN and the CCG, although the chain of command between military and civilian contingents remains unclear⁵. The CCG was created in 2018 by bringing together all the maritime police agencies to rationalize capabilities and resources. The CCG is part of the People’s Armed Police (PAP), whose control and public security missions also apply at sea. The PAP was placed under the authority of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2018, the year in which the CCG was restructured. According to Article 83 of the CCG Law, the CCG performs defense operations in accordance with orders from the CMC⁶. The PMM, whose status is less defined, is also placed under the authority of the CMC through the National Defense Mobilization Department. As we have seen, it can benefit from the support of the CCG and the PLAN, coordinated by the CMC, for access to resources and enhanced training capabilities.

1 US Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China”, 2023.
 2 Tim Fish, “Has the China Coast Guard reached its limit?”, *Asian Military Review*, 23-01-2024.
 3 Ibid.
 4 Ibid.
 5 Idem and <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2021/Panther-Maritime-Militia/>
 6 https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/bjhysws_674671/bhflfg/hyfxzhxfl/202303/P020230313590000926661.pdf

With the PAP under the CMC's purview since 2018, China's National People's Congress approved a 2020 revision of the People's Armed Police Law that added "executing maritime law enforcement and rescue" to the PAP's missions. The Coast Guard Law was passed in 2021 and implemented on February 1st of that year. This law defines the CCG's perimeter of action, with Beijing's unilateral claims as its only legitimacy. Article 3 states that the CCG Law applies to "maritime areas under Chinese jurisdiction" and the airspace above them. The definition of these areas under Chinese jurisdiction is extensive and includes all the territories claimed by Beijing. In its imprecision, this definition also enables the Chinese authorities to adapt the scope of their actions in line with the development of their capabilities and any resistance encountered⁷. The Coast Guard Law's purpose is to "regulate and ensure the performance of maritime police agencies, safeguard national sovereignty, security and maritime rights and interests"⁸. Even more worryingly, Article 22 authorizes the CCG "to take all measures necessary, including using weapons, to stop foreign organizations and individuals from illegally infringing China's national sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction at sea"⁹.

Regular and irregular warfare: the importance of the CCG and maritime malice in Chinese strategy

Because of their ability to be mobilized below the level of military action, the CCG and PMM occupy an essential place in China's

strategy of changing the status quo by force or threat of force. The CCG, which is part of the PAP, maintains order in the China Sea as if this were an internal security issue. It enables constant pressure to be maintained, imposing a permanent effort to mobilize resources on the target states without having to resort to the PLA and limiting the level of response of the "adversary" on pain of being responsible for a possible escalation¹⁰. The PLAN usually remains on the sidelines, monitoring or intervening in the event of escalation. Incursions by PLAN vessels into Japan's territorial waters remain relatively rare, much rarer than those by the CCG, particularly around the Senkaku archipelago. Within the first chain of islands, from the Northern Territories to Indonesia, the CCG and PMM are deployed in accordance with Chinese claims and - to a certain extent - give them credibility. They regularly enter areas not recognized internationally as part of the PRC's territorial waters or EEZ but which Beijing declares to be part of its territory¹¹. The mission of the CCG is to enforce the law as defined by China as well as the "rights" (right enforcement) claimed by Beijing. It is tasked with going into disputed areas on Beijing's orders, maintaining a visible presence, enforcing laws applicable to Chinese territory (domestic laws) and challenging the administration of these maritime territories by other states, creating a "fait accompli" if possible¹². Since 1999, the PRC has been attempting to impose a unilateral summer fishing ban in a zone stretching north and south of the 12th parallel, and has mobilized the CCG, escorted by PLAN vessels, to enforce

7 Alex P. Dela Cruz, "Marching Towards Exception: The Chinese Coast Guard Law and the Military Activities Exception Clause of the *Law of the Sea Convention*", *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Summer/Fall 2021.

8 https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/bjhysws_674671/bhflfg/hyfxzhxfl/202303/P020230313590000926661.pdf

9 Ibid.

10 US Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", 2023.

11 Tim Fish, op.cit.

12 Idem.

this ban, which also applies to foreign vessels considered to be on Chinese territory¹³. The PMM is particularly active in the South China Sea, attempting to deny the Philippines access to disputed areas around Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal, Malaysia access to the Luconia Shoals and vicinity, and Indonesia access to the area around Natuna, even though this area is not part of the “nine-point line” that Beijing is trying to impose on the international community. The PMM, with the dispatch of flotillas of several hundred fishing vessels, has also been active in the vicinity of the Senkakus. The CCG and the PMM serve the irredentist “Chinese dream” of conquering territories defined as lost.

The use of these “civilian” capabilities is part of the “cabbage tactic” defined by Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong in 2013. The aim is to “overwhelm and seize control of an island by surrounding and wrapping the island in successive layers of Chinese naval ships, China Coast Guard ships and fishing boats”.¹⁴

Since coming to power, Xi Jinping has placed great importance on these non-military means, as part of a “gray zone” strategy that would enable him to complete his Chinese dream of conquest and assertion of power. He set in motion the reform of the CCG and its transfer to the CMC’s authority. During a visit to the CCG’s East China Sea Command in Shanghai, he asked the CCG to “constantly strengthen” its efforts to safeguard the sovereignty of the Senkakus, stressed the CCG’s role and asked the CCG to draft a plan to keep a presence every day in the vicinity of the Senkakus and inspect Japanese fishing boats.¹⁵ In his speech, Xi Jinping stressed the need to resolutely

safeguard China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights, bolster the nation’s capability in protecting its maritime rights and carry out effective maritime law enforcement¹⁶. In 2023, Chinese vessels were present 352 days a year around the Senkakus and, in December 2022, a CCG vessel spent 72 hours in Japan’s territorial waters around the Senkakus.

High ambitions but few results

This strategy of mobilizing non-military means to assert Beijing’s claims in the China Sea, particularly vis-à-vis Japan, requires mobilizing considerable human and material resources in response, and this pressure can only increase as Xi Jinping has declared his desire to see the CCG maintain a permanent presence around the Senkakus. However, several problems are limiting the results. As in the case of the PLA, and given the resources allocated, questions of unit loyalty and corruption arise. This is what Xi Jinping himself seemed to imply when he asked the CCG East China Sea Command in November 2023 to “boost its party building to ensure political commitment”. Despite multiple anti-corruption campaigns within the PLA, new arrests took place in 2023, up to and including the Minister of Defense himself. In terms of results, the mobilization of the CCG and PMM is heightening uncertainty, but their growing aggressiveness has had the primary effect of provoking increasingly marked opposition from the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea, and from Japan in the East China Sea. All three countries are bolstering their military and coastguard capabilities. Cooperation is being established among Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam. Despite a difficult past, Vietnam has

13 US Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China”, 2023 and “Fishing Ban Starts in South China Sea”, 17-05-2012.

14 Harry Kazianis, “China’s Expanding Cabbage Strategy”, *The Diplomat.com*, 29-10-2013.

15 <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/12/eb55266c4a9f-china-plans-to-keep-ships-near-senkakus-365-days-in-2024.html>

16 Idem.

drawn closer to the United States, as have the Philippines since President Marcos Junior came to power.

Despite Beijing's protests, freedom of movement in the China Sea is constantly reaffirmed by regional powers such as Japan and external powers such as the US, France and Australia. Tokyo for its part has successfully banned any permanent Chinese presence in the territorial waters of the Senkakus.

Finally, the increasing militarization of CCG capabilities presents a new danger: that of rendering obsolete the distinction between civilian and military operations - which lies at the heart of the gray zone strategy - and making possible an escalation that the PRC could no longer control¹⁷.

17 Tim Fish, op.cit.