

A Short History of China's Fishing Militia and What it May Tell Us

If history is a good indication of what to expect in the future, then Beijing is likely to double down on the Maritime Militia in virtually any scenario imaginable. That means it should be a force to be reckoned in the years to come.

China's armed fishing militia—officially called the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) by the U.S. Department of Defense—plays an instrumental role in Beijing's strategy to enforce its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea. PAFMM is a government-supported armed fishing force of unknown strength that resides under the direct command and control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It has existed for decades and augments Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and PLA Navy (PLAN) operations in the region.

PAFMM plays a particularly important role in establishing a *de facto* Chinese operating presence in disputed areas—in effect, changing the facts on the ground, or at sea, as it were—to challenge counter-claimants' ability to maintain control over disputed features. These classic “gray zone” operations are designed to “win without fighting” by overwhelming the adversary with swarms of fishing vessels usually bolstered from the rear together with CCG, and possibly PLAN ships, depending on the contingency, in escalatory concentric rings.

But the very existence of maritime militia in China is highly [unique](#), given that the only other country that has one for sovereignty disputes is neighboring Vietnam. Indeed, Hanoi officially created its own [maritime militia force](#) in 2009 for the singular purpose of competing directly with PAFMM in an ongoing [“people's war at sea.”](#)^[1] It is therefore worth asking: why did Beijing create a maritime militia to begin with and how has PAFMM evolved over time? What does this history suggest about its future?

Revolutionary Maritime Militiamen

Following the end of the Chinese civil war and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, under paramount leader Mao Zedong, sought to defend the PRC coastline from Nationalist forces that had retreated to Taiwan and other smaller islands off the coast. Nationalist incursions into PRC coastal waters posed an acute challenge as the CCP possessed weak naval capabilities at that time. Thus, PRC leaders viewed the [establishment](#) of an organized maritime militia to combat this threat as an easy and quick fix to a legitimate problem. In fact, China [possessed](#) maritime militia prior to the CCP's rise to power, but the CCP provided state funds and training to transform disparate, local forces into a national-level coherent force charged with protecting the new regime.

Evidence of the CCP's role on local forces appears in the early 1950s, when the Bureau of Aquatic Products [??] played a critical role in organizing the maritime militia. The Bureau [initiated](#) collectivization of local fisheries and delineated large fishing areas. It also dictated catch targets and formulated fishing policy. The presence of former PLAN officers in the Bureau likely indicated close military involvement in militia activities. For example, Rear Admiral Yuan Yelie, identified as Vice Commander of the PLAN Headquarters in 1957, had [assumed](#) the position of Vice Minister of the Bureau of Aquatic Products by May 1960. PLAN-level training further enabled maritime militiamen to carry out defensive operations against Nationalist forces intent on harassing local PRC shipping. Indeed, Nationalist forces had already [employed](#) irregular warfare in the form of guerilla forces at sea, reinforcing the PRC's need to do likewise.

There are at least two other explanations for the rise of China's maritime militia: collectivization and the influence of Soviet naval doctrine.

First, as part of the PRC's adoption of Marxist-Leninism, Mao sought to force collectivization

across Chinese society. Traditional coastal communities were in disarray following the Chinese civil war, and once the CCP came to power, it rapidly collectivized these areas. For [example](#), in Shandong, “by April 1956, the CCP had established 786 fishing collectives involving nearly seventy-six thousand households, which represented nine-tenths of Shandong fishermen.” Beijing probably believed collectivization of coastal fisheries was necessary to rebuild them after the war.

A second explanation for the existence of Beijing's maritime militia stems from the PRC's relationship with the Soviet Union in formulating its early naval strategy. In the 1920s, the newly formed Soviet Union gave rise to a strand of naval thought called the “Young School.” Its adherents essentially [argued](#) that their country, as a land-centric power, should focus the overwhelming majority of its resources on defending the coastline instead of the Old School's emphasis, from the days of Tsarist Russia, on naval modernization to project power out to sea.^[2] This was to prevent Moscow from overspending on a domain in which Western powers already held a significant advantage.

Ultimately, the Young School emerged victorious and led Moscow to design forces that could [protect](#) the army's seaward flank through the rapid procurement of smaller crafts and submarines to target the adversary's conventional assets.^[3] The [focus](#) would be on irregular warfare spearheaded by coastal submarines, torpedo boats, and patrol crafts, further enabled by naval aviation assets. Young School had a major impact on the CCP, which eventually adopted the naval strategy for the newly emerging PRC. For example, PLAN commander Xiao Jingguang studied in Moscow in the 1920s and learned Young School theories. To be sure, it made sense for the Chinese to adopt Young School since the PRC faced identical challenges to those of the Soviet Union: the cost of deep ocean combatants was simply too steep, and Beijing was also preoccupied with events on land.

Later, by 1965, state-run media [started](#) discussing an official maritime militia supported by the

PLAN. Around the same time, the PLAN established militia schools near its three fleet headquarters in Qingdao, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. These schools taught courses in navigation, weapons, engineering, and communications. The PLAN also [issued](#) reports describing the success of their battles, patrols, and training—all in line with carrying out Mao's "People's War" doctrine. Through the first half of the 1970s, the press [portrayed](#) the PLAN as a coastal force that never ventured more than 200 miles from the coast line. Instead, the common theme was PLAN supporting the maritime militia.

“Little Blue Men” At Work

What began as a coastal patrol and surveillance force eventually evolved into a maritime sovereignty support force by the 1970s. The PRC's "little blue men" increasingly [acquired](#) the roles of maritime rescue, combat operations, anti-smuggling, and, ultimately, sovereignty enforcement.

Regarding Chinese sovereignty enforcement operations, early PAFMM forces demonstrated their significant contributions to island seizure campaigns starting in January 1974 with the Battle of the Paracel Islands against South Vietnam. In truth, Beijing did not have much of a PLAN to speak of in 1974, and perhaps the PAFMM was more capable of amphibious operations than the navy itself. Either way, the presence of Chinese fishing vessels around the Paracels [slowed down](#) South Vietnamese decision-making on the use of force against PAFMM as well as their response times to counter PLAN maneuvers. Additional time [allowed](#) Beijing to coordinate more effectively. When two fishing trawlers [delivered](#) 500 PLA troops to the Western Paracels, it resulted in the immediate surrender of the South Vietnamese soldiers defending the disputed features.

A key lesson learned for Beijing was that leveraging fishing militia forces was far less likely to

trigger U.S. intervention in the matter even when the threatened neighbor was a U.S. ally. It is fair to say that this was the genesis of Beijing's strategy to routinely employ irregular forces in gray zone operations in the East China Sea and South China Sea. PAFMM's debut on the world stage was a resounding success, elevating the narrative that fishing militia forces were essential to the success of China's maritime strategy in the South China Sea. Following the Battle of the Paracel Islands in 1974, the PAFMM has been observed in nearly every major PLAN and CCG operation to harass maritime counter-claimants at disputed features or to seize the features from them.

Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy have carefully [catalogued](#) PAFMM activities in support of the CCG and PLAN since 1974.^[4] Among these incidents, the PAFMM in 1978 engaged in swarming operations at the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, disputed with Japan, and since 2016 the militia ramped up their presence there. Erickson and Kennedy note the proliferation of incidents in the South China Sea since the Battle of the Paracels, to include PRC seizure of Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 1995 and 2012 respectively. Beijing also attempted to blockade Manila's resupply mission of Second Thomas Shoal in 2014, and since 2017, has harassed Filipino fishermen at Sandy Cay and nearby Thitu (Pagasa) Island. PAFMM has also routinely bothered Vietnamese vessels, and in May 2014 helped enforce Beijing's emplacement of the *Haiyang Shiyou-981* oil rig in disputed waters by ramming Vietnamese fishing and coast guard vessels. Separately, Beijing appears confident that PAFMM harassment of the U.S. naval ships is below the threshold of a forceful and escalatory response. It has consequently employed fishing militia against the *USNS Impeccable* in 2009 as well as the *Howard O. Lorenzen* in 2014.

What Might the Future Hold for PAFMM?

PAFMM has evolved from being a small and near seas force to a robust and critical element of China's national maritime strategy. The fact that PAFMM has not only survived, but thrived,

during the PRC's naval modernization beginning in the 1980s, implies that further modernization prioritizing increasingly advanced systems will not necessarily reduce PAFMM's value over time. Actually, the opposite seems to be the case—that is, PAFMM's role will likely grow in parallel with the PLAN and CCG to better support their operations. PAFMM's humble origins as a product of collectivization and the Soviet “Young School” also suggest that if China experiences slowing military modernization due to economic or other circumstances, Beijing could instead rely more heavily upon PAFMM as a cheaper and lower technology alternative to sovereignty disputes and coastal defense. If history is a good indication of what to expect in the future, then Beijing is likely to double down on the PAFMM in virtually any scenario imaginable. That means it should be a force to be reckoned in the years to come.

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Notes

[1] For more on Vietnam's fishing militia, see Nguyen Khac Giang, “Vietnam's Response to China's Militarized Fishing Fleet,” *East Asia Forum*, August 4, 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/08/04/vietnams-response-to-chinas-militarised-fishing-fleet/>. According to Nguyen, Vietnam as of 2014 only had 30,000 fishing militia vessels to China's

700,000. For Vietnam possessing the only other comparable fishing militia in the world, see comment by Andrew Erickson, “Understanding China’s Third Sea Force: The Maritime Militia,” *Fairbank Center Blog*, September 8, 2017, <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/understanding-chinas-third-sea-force-the-maritime-militia-228a2bfbbedd>. For more on Vietnam’s plans to compete against China in a “people’s war at sea,” see Derek Grossman and Nguyen Nhat Anh, “Deciphering Vietnam’s Evolving Military Doctrine in the South China Sea,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, May 11, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/deciphering-vietnams-doctrine-south-china-sea/>.

[2] An authoritative narrative on the Soviet “Old School” versus “Young School” may be found in Robert W. Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy: Fifty Years of Theory and Practice*, Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1968, pp. 9, 21-22.

[3] The “Old School” of Soviet naval strategy refers to the Tsarist period that sought to match Western navies one-for-one in seafaring combatants. For more, and the Young School’s relationship to the PRC, see Muller’s narrative on “Soviet Naval Strategy.” An authoritative narrative on the Soviet “Young School” may be found in Robert W. Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy: Fifty Years of Theory and Practice*, Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1968, pp. 9, 21-22.

[4] The remainder of this paragraph is based on their work. For more, see Andrew S. Erickson, “Shining a Spotlight: Revealing China’s Maritime Militia to Deter its Use,” *The National Interest*, November 25, 2018, <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2018/12/the-complete-china-maritime-militia-bookshelf-latest-greatest-4/>. Though Kennedy is not listed as a co-author, he is noted as a heavy contributor to this research.