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The role of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Implications for Maritime Security and European interests

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  The Chinese fishing fleet is not solely a commercial operation; it also serves to assert Chinese maritime claims and convey political messages, and it operates under military instructions.
-  The PAFMM (People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia) is directed to function as a military auxiliary force and collect military intelligence if necessary.
-  The training and order structure of the PAFMM are flawed, posing potential danger as they have political instructions but inadequate military training and guidance.
-  The legal status of the PAFMM is unclear as they are officially designated as commercial entities but, in practice, carry out military-like operations even in peacetime.
-  They should be held to the same standards as the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and China Coast Guard (CCG) and not be allowed to operate under different regulations.
-  China has introduced a new platform for naval warfare, and Europe needs to prepare for how to address this development.

Keywords

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*Command and
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*Budgetary
challenges*

Taiwan



Introduction

With one of the largest fishing industries in the world, China boasts around 564,000 vessels accounting for roughly 15 percent of the global fish supply. Despite a significant reduction from its peak in 2013, when China had [approximately 1.07 million fishing vessels](#), the industry remains formidable mainly due to the deployment of larger, more modern ships capable of operations over vast distances. In addition to commercial fishing, China has constructed the world's largest deep-sea fishing fleet, with an [estimated 3,000 ships](#) operating globally, often near or within other nations' exclusive economic zones. However, within this expansive industry lies a specialized and strategic component. China's fishing operations are not merely commercial endeavors, as the fleet also serves to assert Chinese maritime claims and convey political messages and operating under military instructions. A significant component of this strategy is the People's armed Forces maritime Militia (PAFMM), which functions as a military auxiliary force tasked with collecting military intelligence when deemed necessary. Albeit the PAFMM operates under the guise of commercial entities, in practice it also conducts military-like operations and is mainly concentrated in key areas such as the South and East China Seas, even during peacetime. This dual role of the PAFMM distinguishes it from the main standard Chinese fishing vessels which primarily focuses on commercial fishing. Despite the multifaceted capabilities on paper, the training and order structure of the PAFMM is problematic, as military training and guidance remains inadequate despite continuous political instructions and sentiment. More importantly, the ambiguity in their legal status poses potential dangers and raises concerns about their current and future operations, especially as the PAFMM should be held to the same standards as the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and China Coast Guard (CCG), and not operate under different regulations. Moreover, when looking

at the bigger picture, China's refusal to recognize Maritime borders established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) complicates the situation further as it undermines international maritime laws and norms. As such, an un-regulated auxiliary force has negative implications of China's fishing operations and their militarization has increased impact on not only global maritime security, but also economic stability.

This paper will explore the multifaceted role of China's fishing fleet, particularly the PAFMM, and its implications for international security. This paper examines its role and implications for international order security, but also sets elements for Europeans and other regional actors to face this new form of naval warfare.

Arming the Chinese Fishing Fleet?

Besides the risk associated with overfishing and illegal fishing, the incorporation of part of the Chinese fishing fleet in the armed forces, the so-called Peoples Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) by the US Department of Defense (中国海上民兵 (China Maritime Militia) in Chinese)[1], is a growing concern. PAFMM has taken a much *more active and instrumental role* in enforcing China's maritime claims and has been reinforcing, supporting, and conducting operations for the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and the PLA Navy (PLAN) naval activities. PAFMM is a government-supported force of considerable but unknown strength under the control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). PAFMM is not a new phenomenon. It has been in operation since the 1950s when it was utilized in the maritime environment to defend China against the Nationalist forces due to the lack of naval strength in Communist-controlled China. It has also received attention in the US and among China's neighbors. Still, due to the growth of Chinese interests and maritime capabilities, it has increased in importance, and additionally, the impact on European and European interests has been less considered.

China has more recently been using PAFMM operations in the South China Sea and against Japan, and its value is indisputable, examples that will be discussed later in the brief. Still, the effects on China's security and political ambitions are less covered. Due to China's relative weakness compared to the U.S. Navy, its *grey-zone activities*, such as the *Chinese incursions* in Whitsun reef in 2021 when 200 militia vessels anchored for weeks in Filipino territory to disrupt the stability, and the Chinese unwillingness to use military vessels in its operations, PAFMM has proven very well suited for China. The Chinese government may face reduced accountability due to the ambiguous legal status of the PAFMM vessels and their operations. However, this ambiguity may increase the potential for conflict escalation as it blurs the lines between military and civilian actions, which potentially could lead to increased misunderstandings and unintended confrontations with other nations. PAFMM has a special role to play because of its official position as non-governmental and non-military, or at least non-lethal force, while operating on instructions

from PLAN and the Chinese government to enforce political and military outcomes.

PAFMM currently participates in surveillance, reconnaissance, search and rescue operations, border patrolling, and fishing vessel protection. They should also be able to function as auxiliary forces in naval operations in war, in addition to their day jobs as fishing vessels. To ensure its efficiency as a military component, the PAFMM have received training with the CCG or PLAN. The training has been modest and [often cited by](#) both Chinese military and militiamen alike as insufficient and of lesser quality. This is an area of concern as improperly trained individuals are more likely to make mistakes and cross red lines compared to a highly trained naval officer who understands the situation and equipment much better. It could very well be that this drawback is deliberate in giving Beijing some leeway, and when PAFMM crosses any redline, China can fall back on the fact that this is not very well-trained and mostly unarmed militiamen.

Operating as a civilian fleet and conducting military operations makes it difficult to manage by [international law](#) as it is nominally a non-military vessel and increases the risk for escalations of maritime insecurity. In the Chinese Defence White Papers, the PAFMM is described as part of a [“joint military-civilian land and sea border management system”](#) and are one of three branches of China’s maritime operations. It was estimated in 2023 that there were 84 significant vessels and an undefined number of lesser vessels, but a study in 1978 estimated that PAFMM consisted of 750,000 personnel and 140,000 vessels of differing sizes. The challenge to calculate the size is mainly due to the deliberate confusion of what a fishing, militia, coast guard, or PLAN vessel, and the legal constraints under which they operate. There is no doubt that PAFMM operates with military capacity and should be recognized as a military vessel. Still, the ambiguity surrounding its operations makes it vulnerable to being targeted by other nations’ military forces, regardless of whether the PAFMM vessels are engaged in civilian or military operations.

PAFMM is inherently unarmed militia, but some ships are equipped with [large water canons](#) and certain vessels have reinforced [steel hulls](#) which are suitable for ramming and shouldering. It has also been rumored that some vessels have been equipped with light weaponry, but this has not been confirmed. However, it could be assumed that some of the fishing fleets could easily be converted into carrying missiles and light weaponry if conflict were to arise. That said, it should be recognized that PAFMM is not primarily a fighting unit and functions best without direct military engagement. Despite this limitation, it does not mean that they will be without security and military function.



(Chinese fishing fleet out at sea. Photo by Dr. Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell)

The main reason for concern, as the PAFMM is increasingly assertive in its increased operational responsibilities, are dangerous maneuvers and the ramming or shouldering of other vessels. This has been particularly notable in operations against the much weaker Philippine fishing fleet and coast guard and the [Chinese operations against Vietnam in 1974](#), where the PAFMM showed its value by transporting troops. 1974 was the time when PAFMM had the most direct military application, and today, it is less integrated into indirect military operations. Still, it signals what functions PAFMM could have during a military conflict. They were also involved in the PRC seizing Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 1995 and 2012, respectively. Beijing also attempted to blockade Manila's resupply to the Second Thomas Shoal in 2014, and since 2017, has harassed Filipino fishermen at Sandy Cay and nearby Thitu (Pagasa) Island. In 2016, during the so-called Senkaku incident, China clearly showed that PAFMM could operate as a part of China's naval forces against a stronger foe, this time Japan, and that they are valuable assets when it comes to challenges and exerts administrative control over any territory in Northeast Asia.

Additionally, by using swarm tactics[2], such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy have done, PAFMM is a cheap alternative that could distract enemy navies and pose an asymmetric threat to warships. By deploying large numbers of maritime vessels, the PAFMM can create a complex operational environment that is difficult, if not impossible, to defend against. Mimicking tactics used by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy, the PAFMM represents a cost-effective asymmetric threat capable of distracting

enemy navies and posing a significant challenge to warships. This was particularly notable on [August 5, 2023](#), when the Chinese fishing fleet swarmed and blocked two civilian Philippine vessels with hundreds of PAFMM vessels. This was to deny the Philippine vessels access to their destination and reinforce the navy with food and water. The Chinese government made it evident that [PAFMM vessels could reach their military and political goals without triggering a military response](#), as long as the international community continues to accept them as civilians. It should be noted that in this specific case, the lack of funding and low levels of training were not visible; on the contrary, it was a very successful operation that indicates that at least some units can operate rather complex maneuvers and conduct semi-military operations that sustain Chinese maritime claims.

Furthermore, to the very visible grey zone operations PAFMM has long been used to gather information for the navy and monitor foreign vessels and their operations. Being a case of innocent information gathering or more direct spy operations will vary in the different cases, but the usage of the maritime militia is increasing. This is especially relevant in areas where China, for different reasons, would prefer or is not allowed to send PLAN vessels. This due to the massive amount of Chinese maritime vessels constantly operating in international or disputed waters under a non-military flag.

Why is this important?

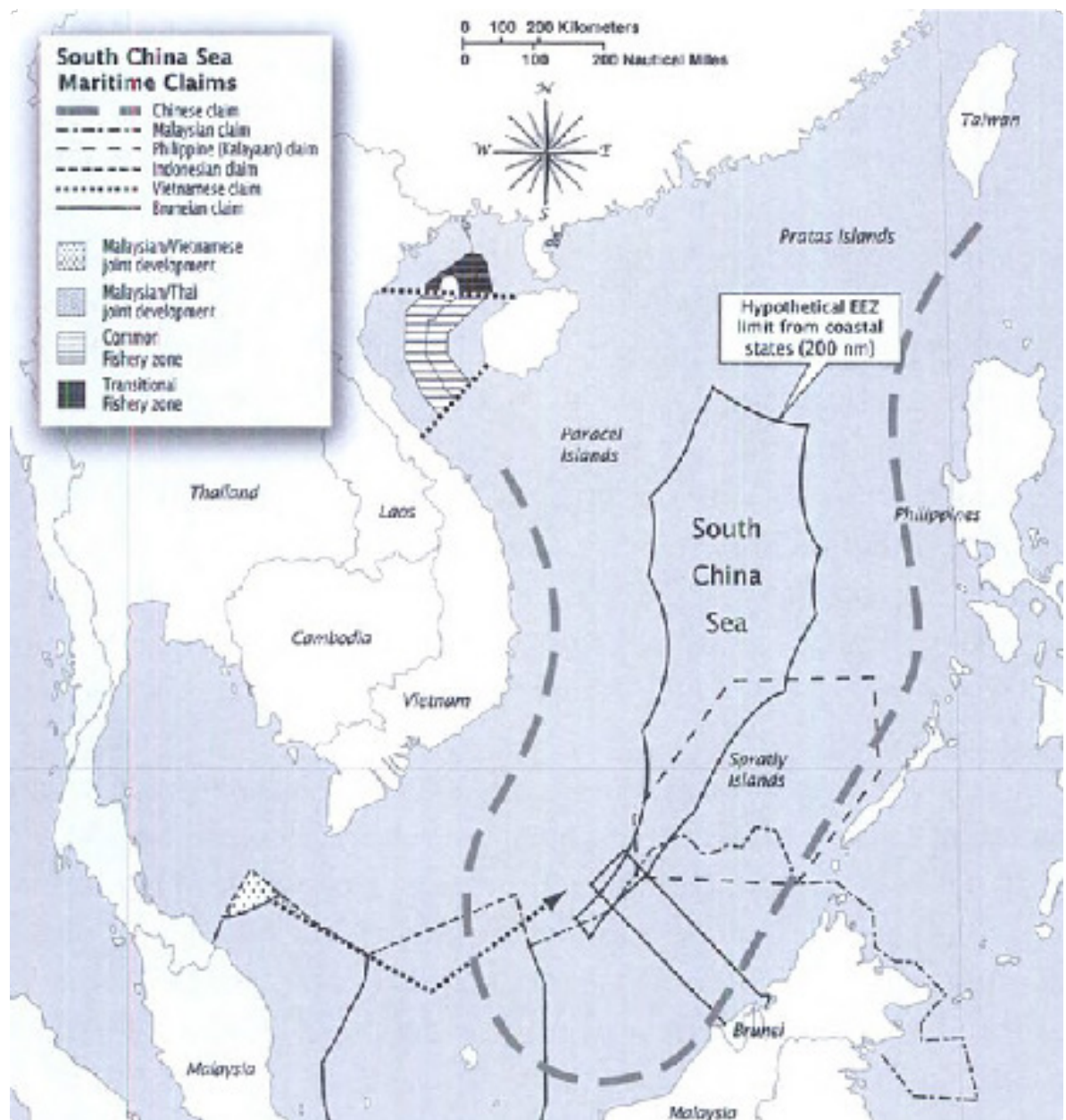
The significance of China's fishing fleet extends far beyond commercial fishing and poses for substantial concerns for international maritime security. This issue is of paramount importance to Europe and the global community because the sheer fleet's size and operational strategies challenge international regulations and norms, notably those established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The PAFMM has been particularly useful for China in rewriting the maritime rules, establishing de facto control over disputed maritime areas, securing maritime resources, especially in light of China's legally debatable historical claims, and ensuring usage and occupation of the disputed maritime areas. This is a long way from the [original idea](#) of having the maritime militia strengthen the weak PRC navy and prevent incursions from nationalist forces in Taiwan by utilizing primitive swarming tactics. Today, its functions are more diverse, and its abilities more potent, as seen in Philippine and Japanese territorial waters. Despite its increased capabilities, the training is still rudimentary for many, and the precarious situation where increased potency is combined with a lack of professionalism, could easily trigger tension and conflict with other states.

PAFMM plays not only an important supporting role for the Chinese navy in the [Yellow, East, and South China Seas, but its reach extends beyond this](#), even if its primary function is in the above-mentioned regions. The potential for conflict and the challenges to international

maritime law presented by the PAFMM's operations are clear, making it a critical issue that needs to be addressed in a proactive fashion both by regions directly affected by PAFMM but also for Europe.

PAFMM has begun to operate in Pacific waters and towards Africa, not necessarily to expand territorial influence, but more importantly to gather military intelligence, monitor foreign navies, and exert pressure on states that are not working in tandem with Chinese interests. With the greater naval influence, opening up ports and fishery far outside of the disputed maritime borders of the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, similar grey operations strategies will be used elsewhere.



(South China Sea Maritime Claims, Courtesy of National Defence University Press, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons)

These grey zone operations have traditionally been enforced without much military action, but this has changed somewhat, and the risk for military action is growing, not least due to the increased chances of mistakes. Since 2005, China has preferred to employ the PLA Navy (PLAN) in background roles, relying instead on maritime law enforcement agencies and the maritime militia as its frontline responses to contingencies and testing adversaries' resolve and intentions. This is especially useful in contested areas, such as the South China Sea, where the ships are nominally civilian vessels conducting military or semi-military operations, a situation that complicates the legal situation.

PAFMM is not a unitary actor, and arguably neither is China, but the maritime militia is severely restricted by its lack of coordination, clear leadership structures, and financial support, both regionally and nationally, which has been clearly outlined by Luo and Panter in their research. The budgetary challenges have been particularly concerning and Lou and Panter estimate that in 2010 about 2-3 percent of China's national defense budget was allocated to militia units, something that has according to local sources in China decreased significantly since. There is a lack of formal communication channels, unclear lines of command, and diverse funding ranging from the central government to local government and PLAN to the fishery authorities. This has resulted in a "pay to use" scenario when it comes to PAFMM, which has further blurred the role. This is a drawback for the Chinese government, but it is also a concern for the international community. However, a stronger PAFMM would also increase risks and challenges for the international community with a stronger Chinese influence in international waters.

Implications for Europe

Even if the PAFMM is primarily operating in waters in closely proximity to Chinese territorial water and disputed areas in the South China Sea, it has created greater tension regionally and could potentially threaten stability in the region. The illegal operations by China have put it in direct conflict with civilian maritime operations as well as the government in South China Sea and the Yellow Sea. In addition to this, PAFMMs reach has been enhanced, and is reaching the shores of Africa, in addition to French territories in Asia-Pacific, and Latin America. The challenge is not only that China operate in disputed or international waters, but that it operates under false flag, i.e. under civilian flag conducting semi-military operations. The usage of non-military assets is not a surprise as all Chinese companies and citizens are obliged by law to assist when Chinese interests are threatened.

Multilateral cooperation, both in the military and the civilian sphere is deemed to be more complicated due to the ambiguous nature of China's naval operations. While the PAFMM lacks a unitary command structure and may appear uncoordinated, it is capable of employing swarm tactics and grey zone operations when directed, which will make it much more difficult for European navies, commercial fishing and trade vessels to operate in contested

regions. While there have been no recorded incidents revolving European vessels to date, it is increasingly likely that PAFMM will target European vessels if they are deemed to counter Chinese interests in, for example, the South China Sea. This is not least true if China would instigate further blockades of Taiwan in the future and deny European vessels access to legitimate trade connections.

Europe will have to ensure that it has a common strategy to counter Chinese militia at sea and ensure that there is a policy to counter grey zone operations conducted by PAFMM in and outside of Chinas immediate areas of interest. Cooperation with like-minded states in Asia, and beyond is increasingly necessary, and potentially more joint exercises in handling such developments could be initiated.

[1] Militia is defined, in simple terms, by China as “an armed mass organization composed of civilians retaking their regular jobs”.

[2] Swarming is a battlefield tactics aiming to overwhelm the defenses of the target, in this particular case use large amounts of maritime vessels to make it difficult or even impossible to defend themselves.



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