Hybrid CoE Paper 31

China's maritime hybrid warfare: How Beijing uses lawfare and civilian entities to amplify military power

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Contents

Abbreviations

A2/AD – anti-access/area denial
CCG – China Coast Guard
CCP – Chinese Communist Party
CMC – Central Military Commission
CSSC – China State Shipbuilding Corporation
EEZ – exclusive economic zone
MCF – Military-Civil Fusion
MM – Maritime Militia
PAP – People's Armed Police
PLA – People's Liberation Army
PLAN – People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC – People's Republic of China
SCS – South China Sea
UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

Summary

This Hybrid CoE Paper demonstrates how China employs lawfare by utilizing military, paramilitary, and pseudo-civilian entities within the legal grey zone to enhance its maritime military power and project power below the threshold of war. Specifically, the paper highlights how China exploits the grey zone between war and peace through the deployment of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the China Coast Guard (CCG), and the Maritime Militia (MM) in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the East China Sea. In doing so, China asserts its sovereignty over disputed territories and coerces neighbouring countries into compliance, while ensuring that its provocations remain below the clearly delineated threshold of armed conflict.

In recent years, China has rapidly expanded its capacity to project military power while making detection and attribution more difficult. Lessons from this hybrid threat strategy can also be applied beyond the maritime domain. Understanding Beijing's strategic approach to hybrid maritime power projection and how it exploits international norms to achieve a strategic advantage over its adversaries is crucial for identifying and countering this global hybrid threat actor's long-term strategy.

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (hereafter China) has employed various hybrid threat tactics to influence, coerce and attack the institutions and populations of democratic states.[1] In the maritime domain, this has included deploying its large navy to block waterways far from its own shores; using ostensibly civilian armed vessels to defend its claims to disputed territories; and harassing foreign vessels and aircraft by engaging in unsafe and coercive conduct. China has also reinforced these kinetic effects by utilizing multi-domain hybrid threat tools, including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, all while insisting that international law is on its side and seeking to bend existing norms to its will.

Such increasingly frequent and effective methods of power projection and harassment have demonstrated China's significant and rapidly growing capabilities, as well as its ability to apply military power against its neighbours during peacetime.

This paper explores how China has managed to expand and increasingly exert coercive military power against its neighbours. The paper also seeks to increase understanding of Chinese hybrid warfare tactics in general, and of how China projects maritime power in particular.[2] To this end, it focuses on China's deployment of maritime military power during peacetime, analyzing current trends in China's maritime power projection and the use of lawfare in its long-term hybrid warfare strategy.

The findings are relevant for a better understanding of Chinese military and hybrid warfare strategies. Unlike the current Western approach, which clearly distinguishes military affairs from civilian aspects of society and separates war and peace into two distinct legal frameworks, Chinese military strategic thinking does not make these distinctions.[3] Under Xi Jinping, China has successfully blurred the lines between the military and civilian sectors to project military power below the threshold of war and gain a long-term strategic advantage over its adversaries.

The paper argues that a key element of Chinese military power projection in peacetime is the deliberate complication of attribution and response, including through the exploitation of grey zones in international norms and through the diffusion of military power across civilian entities, particularly the coast guard and maritime militia. This diffusion involves civilian and pseudo-civilian entities in projecting power, including through the use of force. If China's hostile actions continue largely unchallenged, they risk setting precedents that over time could alter the understanding and application of international law. It is therefore crucial to recognize this trend, analyze the underlying strategy, and respond strategically.

1 For examples of Chinese hybrid threat tactics, see: Jukka Aukia and Lucjan Kubica, "Hybrid CoE Research Report 8: Russia and China as hybrid threat actors: The shared self-other dynamics," Hybrid CoE (March 2023); or Jukka Aukia, "Hybrid CoE Research Report 9: China's hybrid influence in Taiwan: Non-state actors and policy responses," Hybrid CoE (April 2023).

2 For more on hybrid warfare in the context of the hybrid threat landscape, see: Giannopoulos, G., Smith, H., Theocharidou, M., *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A conceptual model*, Hybrid CoE (2021), 41–42: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/conceptual_framework-reference-version-shortened-good_cover_-_publication_office.pdf.

3 Timothy Thomas, "China's Concept of Military Strategy," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, Volume 44 (2014): https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2968&context=parameters.

The paper is situated at the intersection of research on China's maritime military strategy, civil-military integration, and the growing literature on grey-zone tactics and lawfare. Existing research has examined the expansion of China's naval power, coast guard, and maritime militia to advance Beijing's coercive power projection below the threshold of armed conflict, as well as China's instrumentalization of international law to legitimize its behaviour and complicate attribution and response. The paper contributes by arguing that China's expansion and application of maritime military power cannot be fully understood without analyzing how lawfare and pseudo-civilian actors are deliberately combined to exploit and operate within legal grey zones.

The following sections provide a brief overview of China's use of lawfare in its near seas and recent trends in Chinese military developments, followed by an analysis of the country's navy, coast guard, maritime militia, and other maritime actors. The analysis is accompanied by short case studies demonstrating how these institutions are used strategically. The paper concludes with a summary of Beijing's strategic approach to maritime grey-zone tactics and offers suggestions on how to counter China's aggressively deployed lawfare and disguised military tools.

China's maritime lawfare

Changing and exploiting international law

For the purposes of this paper, lawfare refers to a form of hybrid threat tactic that utilizes the legal domain. It includes the use of legal norms, actions, processes, and institutions to achieve both legal (i.e. normative) and non-legal (i.e. physical) effects in the context of hybrid threat campaigns.[4] For over a decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has successfully and aggressively employed lawfare to influence the international order and international law in pursuit of its strategic goals. This has included attempts to alter the rules-based order, shape global governance within the UN,[5] and distort existing resolutions[6] and norms.[7]

China has also become highly skilled at exploiting existing international norms and the legal loopholes they contain[8] as part of the CCP's multi-domain hybrid threat operations against its adversaries. This paper places particular emphasis on this latter aspect, examining how China employs both normative and military power to project power below the threshold of armed conflict.[9] The CCP's coordinated and strategic cross-domain approach in this regard can currently best be illustrated by analyzing its approach to power projection in the South China Sea (SCS).

China's lawfare approach also includes legal claims to territories beyond its universally recognized borders, including those in the SCS. Although many of these territorial claims run counter to current international norms, Beijing persistently frames them as being supported by existing international law and seeks to convince other states to recognize them as such.

China's territorial assertions in the South China Sea (SCS)

China claims the vast majority of the SCS, which it roughly delineates through its nine-dash line (Map 1). China's claims to the SCS rest on many

4 Giannopoulos *et al., The Landscape of Hybrid Threats.*

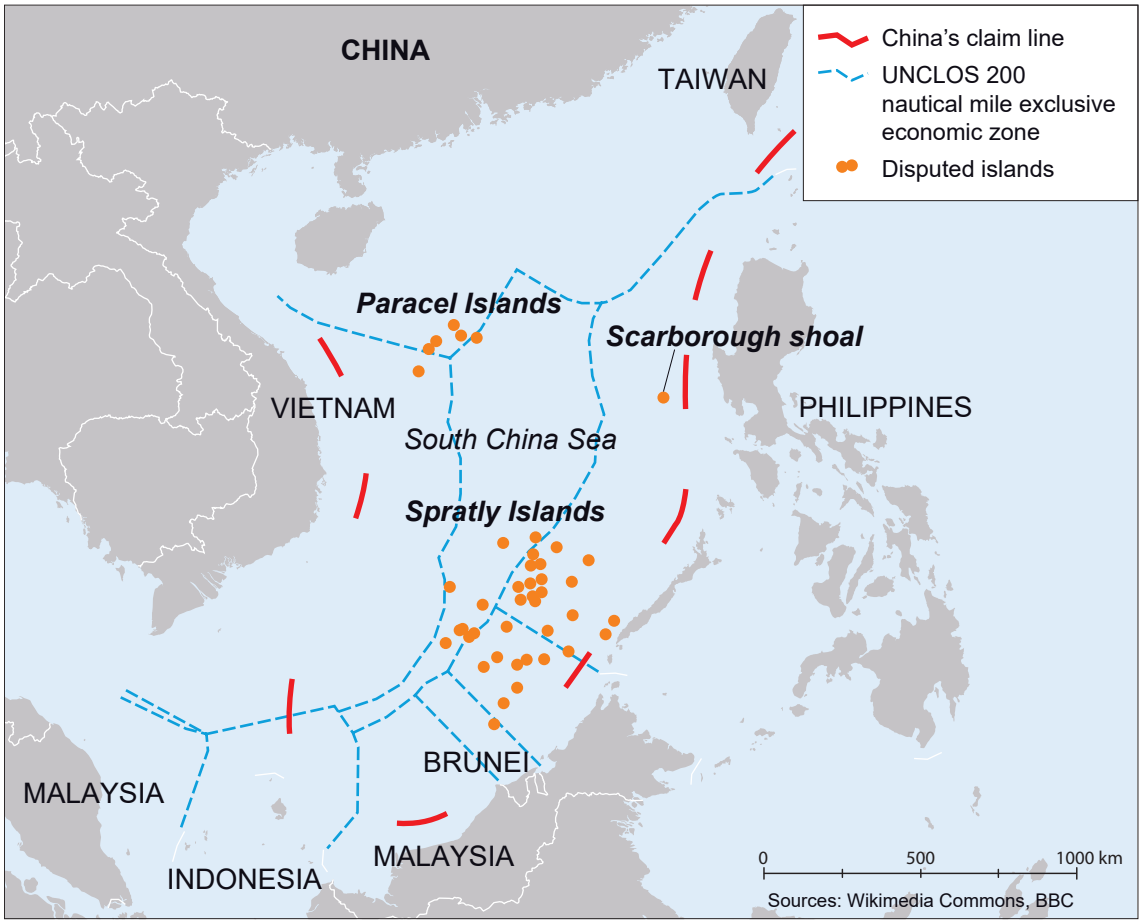
5 For more on China's aspirations towards global governance, see Liza Tobin, "Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies," *Texas National Security Review* (November 2018): https://tnsr.org/2018/11/xis-vision-for-transforming-global-governance-a-strategic-challenge-for-washington-and-its-allies/; and W. Y. Kwok, "Beijing's Latest Global Leadership Bid," Jamestown Foundation (31 October 2025): https://jamestown.org/beijings-latest-global-leadership-bid/.

6 Jessica Drun and Bonnie S. Glaser, "The Distortion of UN Resolution 2758 and Limits on Taiwan's Access to the United Nations," The German Marshall Fund (24 March 2022): https://www.gmfus.org/news/distortion-un-resolution-2758-and-limits-taiwans-access-united-nations.

7 Malcolm Jorgensen, "China is overturning the rules-based order from within," *The Interpreter* (12 August 2020): https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-overturning-rules-based-order-within.

8 Robert D. Williams, "International law with Chinese characteristics: Beijing and the 'rules-based' global order," Brookings (October 2020): https://www.brookings.edu/articles/international-law-with-chinese-characteristics-beijing-and-the-rules-based-global-order/.

9 The term "armed conflict," as recognized under international law, refers to a state of international conflict between states (i.e. war), which is prohibited except in cases of self-defence. In a state of armed conflict, international humanitarian law (i.e. the laws of war) apply. For more information, see e.g. "ICRC 2024 Opinion Paper – How is the term 'Armed Conflict' defined in international humanitarian law?" International Committee of the Red Cross (16 May 2024): https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-opinion-paper-how-term-armed-conflict-defined-international-humanitarian-law.



MAP 1. China's territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS). Map: Kauko Kyöstiö / Spatio Oy

selectively applied and creatively interpreted norms under international law. These include claims that China should enjoy the same legal rights as archipelagic states despite being a continental state; that its artificial and uninhabitable islands should have the same status as large natural islands; and that these "islands" should all be granted a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which Beijing claims should give it the right to regulate navigational and military activity, in contravention of international law. China further claims that maritime areas within the nine-dash line not covered by these assertions should also be considered sovereign Chinese territory because they constitute "historic waters".[10]

In 2016, an arbitration tribunal in The Hague, constituted under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), ruled that China's historic claims based on its nine-dash line were unfounded; the ruling was legally binding and final. Nonetheless, China, a signatory to UNCLOS, dismissed the ruling as "null and void".[11] Beijing continues to insist that international law is on its side, while usually taking care to remain within legal grey zones as far as possible when making its assertions. It has never clearly defined the coordinates of any of the nine dashes. When pressing its claims, it refrains from using clearly defined language under UNCLOS, such as "exclusive economic zone" or "territorial sea", referring instead to vague terms such as "sea areas under the jurisdiction of the [PRC]".[12]

10 Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China is bending the rules in the South China Sea," *The Interpreter* (17 February 2021): https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-bending-rules-south-china-sea.

11 "South China Sea: Tribunal backs case against China brought by Philippines," *BBC* (12 July 2016): https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36771749.

12 Peter Leavy, "Overcoming the deliberate legal ambiguity adopted by China's coast guard," *The Interpreter* (20 June 2024): https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/overcoming-deliberate-legal-ambiguity-adopted-china-s-coast-guard.

Rather than conforming to existing international law, China seeks to force other states into compliance and thereby shape the application and customs of international law in its favour over time.[13] To do so, the CCP strategically exerts pressure through various hybrid threat tactics. As previously mentioned, it induces countries around the world to support Beijing's agenda multilaterally through means such as economic incentives and economic coercion. Closer to home, China has become increasingly aggressive in exerting military might to enforce its claims of sovereignty and coerce other littoral states in the SCS into compliance.

However, to apply military power within the legal grey zone, Beijing ensures that its provocations remain below the clearly delineated threshold of armed conflict. As the following sections demonstrate, China has rapidly expanded its capacity to apply military power while exploiting the thresholds of detection and attribution. This has been achieved through the coordinated and synchronized use of various legally ill-defined institutions, including traditional armed forces, opaque paramilitary organizations, and pseudo-civilian entities.

13 Williams, "International law with Chinese characteristics."

China's expansion and diffusion of military power

The PRC does not have a national military force that is subservient to the state or its people. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the armed wing of the CCP and is loyal to, and entirely controlled by, the Party.[14]

The PLA has long been the world's largest military force by number of personnel. However, throughout the Cold War, it was an underdeveloped, technologically backward, and highly corrupt force that focused almost entirely on its ground forces. For decades, its most important role was to function as a security force that solidified the CCP's rule domestically. This could be seen, for example, in the use of the PLA to crack down on the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy protests that had erupted across the country.[15]

This started to change in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when it became clear to the CCP leadership that the US military was far superior to China's. This significantly impeded China's ability to project power beyond its borders.[16] Since then, Beijing has continuously increased investment in its armed forces and implemented a series of reforms, including modernizing the PLA's equipment, structures, and methods, as well as changing its core objectives.[17]

In 2004, Hu Jintao – the then president of China and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) – introduced the PLA's new "historic missions", which included ensuring China's territorial integrity.[18] These expanded missions also formed the foundation for the PLA to conduct "military operations other than war"[19] and adopt the military strategic concept of the "Three Warfares": psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and lawfare.[20]

One crucial strategy for the development of the PLA was to utilize China's growing commercial and technological prowess for military purposes. Xi Jinping spoke of the importance of Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) for the PLA's development soon after becoming General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the CMC in 2012. In essence, MCF seeks to synergize and, in some cases, merge the civilian and military sectors, making civilian achievements, including

14 Gisela Grieger, "The role of the army in China's politics," European Parliament Research Service (2015): https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/564375/EPRS_BRI(2015)564375_EN.pdf.

15 Larry Wortzel, "The Tiananmen Massacre Remembered at 30 Years: The Chinese Communist Party's Political and Military Considerations," Jamestown Foundation (4 June 2019): https://jamestown.org/the-tiananmen-massacre-remembered-at-30-years-the-chinese-communist-partys-political-and-military-considerations/.

16 M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949*, (Princeton University Press, 2019).

17 Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew S. Erickson, "The Impact of Xi Era Reforms on the Chinese Navy," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow (NDU Press, 2019), 130–132: https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Chairman-Xi-Remakes-the-PLA/.

18 Cortez A. Cooper, "The PLA Navy's 'New Historic Missions': Expanding Capabilities for a Re-emergent Maritime Power," RAND (June 2009): https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2009/RAND_CT332.pdf.

19 James Siebens and Ryan Lucas, "Military Operations Other Than War in China's Foreign Policy," Stimson (3 Oct. 2022): https://www.stimson.org/2022/military-operations-other-than-war-and-chinas-foreign-policy.

20 Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," *War On The Rocks* (30 January 2018): https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/.

INFO BOX 1. The three lines of defence – the Paracels standoff (2014)

In May 2014, during the Paracels standoff between China and Vietnam in the SCS, hundreds of Chinese ships protected a Chinese oil rig, known as HYSY-981, as it attempted to drill within Vietnam's EEZ. The Chinese ships were organized in concentric circles, with PLA Navy frigates at the centre, coast guard ships in the middle, and militia vessels on the outside. Chinese militia vessels harassed smaller Vietnamese boats, while the coast guard sought out weaker and outnumbered Vietnamese naval, militia, and fishing vessels and rammed them repeatedly. Whenever Vietnamese vessels tried to push back, China's coast guard protected its militia ships, while its navy protected the coast guard.[21] This was the first time that the "three lines of defence" were successfully deployed through interagency cooperation by China's three maritime armed forces.

those from private enterprises and research institutions, freely available for military use. Under MCF, the CCP must be given access to any information deemed relevant to national security, including military applications.[22]

At the Twelfth National People's Congress in March 2015, MCF was officially elevated to the status of a national strategy of China. In the years since, this policy has successfully broken down barriers between the civilian and military sectors across China's government, business, academia, research, and society, with the goal of turning China into a "world-class" military power.[23]

Beyond achieving technology transfer and utilizing commercial capacities, the MCF concept has also been reflected in China's military command structure. While the CCP has always considered all forces of the state subservient to it, under Xi, non-military forces such as the militia and armed police have also been structurally integrated into its military command.

The military reforms and civil-military integration that took place under Xi are only one part of the CCP's push to strengthen its grip on all aspects of society in general, and national security matters in particular. To this end, a series of new domestic laws were introduced and older ones amended under the banner of "law-based governance". This included the CCP's own constitution, which was amended in 2017 with the clarifying formulation: "Party, government, army, society, and education – east and west, south and north, the Party leads on everything." In line with this maxim, China's constitution was amended in 2018 to cement the CCP's central role across state and society.[24]

This expanded control also includes the country's other armed forces. Besides the PLA, China also maintains the People's Armed Police (PAP), which is responsible for domestic security and includes the coast guard, as well as the militia. The CCP codified this in Article 22 of China's 2020 National Defence Law, which states that "the armed forces of the [PRC] consist of the People's Liberation Army, the People's Armed Police, and the Militia".[25] However, this law only clarified what had already become an operational fact by then (see Info box 1).

21 Michael J. Green, John Schaus, Jake Douglas; Zack Cooper, and Kathleen H. Hicks, "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia," CSIS (9 May 2017): https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia.

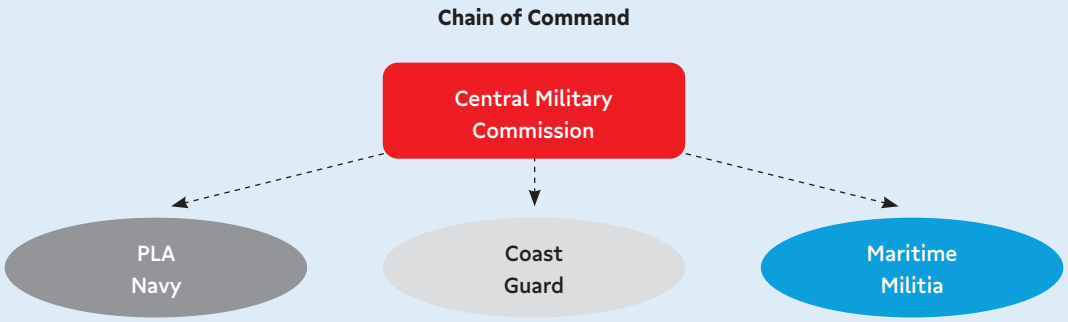
22 Alex Stone and Peter Wood, "China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy," China Aerospace Studies Institute (15 June 2020): https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020–06–15%20CASI_China_Military_Civil_Fusion_Strategy.pdf.

23 Richard A. Bitzinger, "China's Shift from Civil-Military Integration to Military-Civil Fusion," *Asia Policy* Vol. 16/1 (Jan 2021), 12: https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Asia-Policy-16.1-Jan-2021-Richard-Bitzinger.pdf.

24 Nis Grünberg and Katja Drinhausen, "The Party leads on everything," MERICS (24 Sep 2019): https://merics.org/en/report/party-leads-everything.

25 Article 22, "Law of the People's Republic of China on National Defence," The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (26 Dec 2020): http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2020–12/26/c_674696_2.htm.

FIGURE 1. Chain of command of China's three maritime armed forces



In 2015, Xi Jinping undertook arguably the most significant military reforms since the founding of the PLA. Within months of introducing the National MCF Strategy, Xi also launched wide-ranging reforms of the PLA and China's supreme military decision-making body, the CMC. The CMC was reorganized into 15 specialized departments and a joint operations command, with the aim of directly overseeing all aspects of the nation's armed forces.[26]

The PLA's troops were also reorganized based on the US model. In 2017, as part of the ongoing military reforms, the Leninist-style army structure of divisions and regiments was replaced by smaller, more flexible, and largely independent brigades. In addition, the PLA's seven military regions were replaced by five theatre commands, similar to those of the US.[27]

Apart from modernizing and expanding the PLA, the reforms had two additional noteworthy goals. First, they significantly strengthened the CMC's – and by extension the CCP's – direct control over the military. Second, they enabled interoperability, both within the PLA and across China's other de facto armed forces. Command over China's militia, including its maritime militia with its paramilitary fishing fleet, was incorporated into the CMC through the newly established National Defence Mobilization Department. The PAP, together with the coast guard, followed in 2018.[28] Consequently, the CMC now directly commands all of China's armed forces, including the military and the ostensibly civilian armed police and militia (see Figure 1). To clarify, neither the PAP nor the militia is subservient to the PLA and therefore neither falls within the structure of China's military, namely the PLA. However, all three – the PLA, the PAP, and the militia – are commanded by China's supreme military command, the CMC.

The use of these different armed organizations can be considered a form of lawfare, as it deliberately exploits grey zones in codified international law. Military combat vessels – or "warships" – are subject to certain, well-defined obligations. Article 29 of UNCLOS defines the term "warship" as a vessel that is crewed and commanded by members of a state's armed forces (i.e. the military) and is visibly marked as such.[29] This definition clearly covers the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN),

26 Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "Introduction," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow (NDU Press, 2019), 1–44: https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Chairman-Xi-Remakes-the-PLA/.

27 Christian Wirth, "The Transformation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army into a 'World-class Military'," *SWP* (12 September 2025): https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2025RP03/.

28 Lyle Morris, "China Welcomes Its Newest Armed Force: The Coast Guard," *War on the Rocks* (4 April 2018): https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/china-welcomes-its-newest-armed-force-the-coast-guard/.

29 "Article 29 (Definition of warships)," UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (10 December 1982): https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm.

as it does any other regular navy. However, it does not directly apply to supposedly civilian coast guard vessels, much less to paramilitary fishing boats. By projecting power through non-traditional armed forces, China significantly complicates attribution and response to its coercive actions. This application of de facto military power through ostensibly civilian vessels circumvents the codified definition of a warship, thereby violating the spirit of UNCLOS.

The following sections will expand on these three armed maritime forces.

China's three navies

The PLA Navy (PLAN) – the "Grey"

During the Cold War, China's Navy played a relatively minor role in the ground forces-dominated PLA. The PLAN was only founded in 1950, with Soviet assistance. It comprised mainly smaller vessels focused on defending China's shores from raids by the then much more powerful Republic of China Navy, based in Taiwan, as well as from any other attempts to invade the mainland from the sea. This remained the PLAN's main mission until the 1980s and only really changed with China's 1993 military strategy, which marked a pivotal shift in the PLAN's role towards more broadly "uphold[ing] China's unity and security" and adopting a more aggressive "offshore defence" approach.[30]

Since then, the PLAN has been continuously expanded and modernized, while the role of the Ground Force has gradually decreased. The development of the PLAN into the powerful force that it is today began in earnest after Xi Jinping came to power. In November 2012, at the 18th Party Congress of the CCP, a new naval strategy was unveiled for "building China into a sea power nation".[31] Following this, the expansion of the PLAN accelerated rapidly, and by 2020 China possessed the world's largest navy by number of ships. The PLAN is expected to surpass the US Navy in terms of overall naval firepower before long, perhaps as early as 2027.[32]

The year 2027 will also be an important milestone for the CCP, marking the 100th anniversary of the PLA's establishment. It is commonly cited by US defence officials as the year by which Xi Jinping expects the PLA to be ready to retake Taiwan, if necessary.[33]

The PLAN's massive naval expansion in recent decades means that China now possesses one of the world's most modern and technologically advanced navies. The PLAN now controls a variety of cutting-edge systems, many of which are clearly aimed at countering and deterring US naval capabilities, including anti-aircraft carrier hypersonic missiles, nuclear-powered ballistic missile and attack submarines, and a rapidly growing fleet of unmanned surface and undersea vehicles.[34]

At the heart of this rapid development lies China's MCF policy, which has broken down civil-military barriers and successfully utilized academic and commercial actors to help develop and build the PLA's cutting-edge vessels. The policy includes China's dual-purpose use of state-owned enterprises to build both foreign civilian ships and Chinese warships.

China is now by far the world's largest shipbuilder, with its shipyards accounting for over half of all global shipbuilding by tonnage. China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC), the country's largest shipbuilder, accounts for around half of foreign orders. CSSC produces

30 Bernard D. Cole, "The History of the Twenty-First-Century Chinese Navy," *Naval War College Review* Vol. 67/3 (2014): https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol67/iss3/5.

31 Wu Xiaoyan, "China's 'Sea Power Nation' Strategy," *Institute for Security and Development Policy* (June 2014): https://www.isdp.eu/publication/chinas-sea-power-nation-strategy/.

32 Alexander Palmer, Henry H. Carroll, and Nicholas Velazquez, "Unpacking China's Naval Buildup," CSIS (5 June 2024): https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-chinas-naval-buildup.

33 John Culver, "China, Taiwan, and the PLA's 2027 milestones," *The Interpreter* (12 February 2025): https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-taiwan-pla-s-2027-milestones.

34 "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service (24 April 2025): https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33153.

more ships in a year than the US has produced since the end of the Second World War. It also produces most PLAN ships, although other state-owned enterprises can also be drawn on if needed. This dual-use approach makes China's shipbuilders highly profitable and scalable: they are at the cutting edge of technology and can easily adjust to global demand by using idle capacity to produce additional military vessels.[35]

China's continuously growing naval fleet is not only being prepared for future armed conflict scenarios but is also being used to actively exert Chinese military power below the threshold of war. This includes aggressive military exercises.

The PLAN has conducted an increasing number of military drills and exercises to practise joint operations between the PLA's different branches, as well as maritime interagency cooperation with the coast guard and maritime militia. While interagency exercises with non-military institutions do not violate international norms, Beijing's insistence on the civilian status of certain entities, such as the CCG, while using them to practise for joint hostilities alongside the PLA, would violate international law in a real-life scenario.[36] Furthermore, its maritime militia-associated fishing vessels operate in an undefined grey zone of international law, further complicating attribution and response.[37]

In addition, the PLA's maritime exercises have been used to put pressure on and intimidate China's opponents, above all Taiwan. Far from focusing on national defence, the PLAN's military exercises have, in recent years, practised invading Taiwan, usually with the added effect of functioning as a form of punishment for actions by the Taiwanese government that Beijing seeks to deter.

For example, following then US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, China conducted its largest exercises and live-fire drills since the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–96. PLAN vessels encircled the island, missiles were fired around and over Taiwan, and over 400 incursions by Chinese combat aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) were recorded over the course of the month. In addition, the exercise was accompanied by actual cyberattacks against Taiwanese military targets, as well as disinformation campaigns targeting Taiwan's population.[38]

This use of military exercises to achieve the combined effect of combat-readiness drills, military intimidation, and grey-zone attacks has since continued with increasing frequency and intensity (see Info box 2).

Beyond the announced exercises, the PLA has normalized frequent intrusions into Taiwan's territory. In 2022, more than 1,700 PLA aircraft

35 Matthew P. Funaiole, Brian Hart, and Aidan Powers-Riggs, "Ship Wars: Confronting China's Dual-Use Shipbuilding Empire," CSIS (11 March 2025): https://www.csis.org/analysis/ship-wars-confronting-chinas-dual-use-shipbuilding-empire.

36 "Air and Naval Warfare," International Committee of the Red Cross: https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/air-and-naval-warfare#text940682.

37 James Kraska and Michael Monti, "The Law of Naval Warfare and China's Maritime Militia," *International Law Studies* Vol. 91 (2015): https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol91/iss1/13/.

38 "Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," *China Power* (8 November 2023): https://chinapower.csis.org/tracking-the-fourth-taiwan-strait-crisis/.

INFO BOX 2. Joint Sword 2023 and 2024: Military exercises as punishment

In response to Taiwan's then President Tsai Ing-wen's visit to the US and her meeting with US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, China's Joint Sword 2023 exercise practised a coordinated air and sea blockade of Taiwan. Unlike the 2022 exercise, no ballistic missiles were fired; instead, additional grey-zone tactics were deployed, including repeated incursions into Taiwan's territorial waters and airspace, and large-scale information operations, which lasted for several days.[39]

Joint Sword 2024A and 2024B demonstrated more sophisticated measures and interagency cooperation, including the participation of the China Coast Guard (CCG) for the first time. The exercises were carried out in opposition to growing US-Taiwan cooperation and actions by Taiwan's government.[40] In May 2024, Joint Sword 2024A was conducted in response to the inauguration of President Lai Ching-te. It involved Taiwan's outlying islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin for the first time, with CCG vessels also patrolling nearby.[41] Joint Sword 2024B was held in October 2024 in response to President Lai's National Day address. The 13-hour exercise jointly involved the Ground Force, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, and CCG vessels and aircraft. The CCG was deployed in close proximity around Taiwan for the first time. In addition, the PLAN's focus had shifted from conducting exercises in general "zones" to targeting specific blockade points, including Taiwan's key ports. Chinese disinformation campaigns also accompanied the exercise.[42]

Apart from signalling China's readiness to punish Taiwan for not complying with Beijing's demands, the Joint Sword exercises increasingly normalized the presence of China's armed forces around Taiwan. While the scale of these exercises has increased over time, the warning time preceding them has decreased significantly, leaving little to no time to prepare and increasing psychological pressure.

violated Taiwan's ADIZ, a record at the time; this rose to more than 3,600 instances in 2024.[43] In addition, PLAN vessels were deployed around Taiwan on most days in 2024.[44]

These almost daily violations of Taiwan's ADIZ, and in some cases even territorial waters and airspace, have normalized the PLA's aggressive behaviour, continuing to wear down the equipment and morale of Taiwan's armed forces. Added to this are continuous hybrid threat operations, including cyberattacks, large-scale information operations, and the repeated severing of Taiwan's subsea cables.[45] These military grey-zone operations also have cascading economic and societal effects. For example, during China's Justice Mission 2025 in December that year – its largest exercise to date – the military drills were expanded without

39 Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Samantha Lu, Hannah Price, and Matthew Slade, "Tracking China's April 2023 Military Exercises around Taiwan," *China Power* (8 November 2023): https://chinapower.csis.org/tracking-chinas-april-2023-military-exercises-around-taiwan/.

40 Yasuyuki Sugiura, "Analysis of 'Joint Sword 2024B'," *SPF China Observer* (04 March 2025): https://www.spf.org/spf-china-observer/en/document-detail058.html.

41 Bonny Lin and Brian Hart, "How Is China Responding to the Inauguration of Taiwan's President William Lai?" *China Power* (31 October 2024): https://chinapower.csis.org/china-respond-inauguration-taiwan-william-lai-joint-sword-2024a-military-exercise/.

42 Erik Green and Meia Nouwens, "China's Joint Sword B exercise: a calculated follow-on," IISS (23 October 2024): https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/10/chinas-joint-sword-b-exercise-a-calculated-follow-on/.

43 "China's military coercion of Taiwan," ASPI Pressure Points (accessed 10 January 2025): https://www.pressurepoints.aspi.org.au/taiwan-and-the-taiwan-strait/chinas-military-coercion/chinas-military-coercion-of-taiwan.

44 Cheng-kun Ma and Tristan Tang, "PacNet #67 – PLA Navy adjusts operations to further undermine Taiwan's defensive capabilities," Pacific Forum (23 September 2024): https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-67-pla-navy-adjusts-operations-to-further-undermine-taiwans-defensive-capabilities/.

45 Helen Davidson, "The maps that show how China's military is squeezing Taiwan," *The Guardian* (8 January 2025): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/08/the-maps-that-show-how-chinas-military-is-squeezing-taiwan.

notice, affecting over 100,000 international flight passengers.[46] From Taiwan's point of view, the PLA's campaign of harassment against it is, in effect, a war of attrition below the threshold of war.

This approach to military exercises is not confined to Taiwan. In February 2025, the PLAN conducted live-fire drills in the Tasman Sea off the Australian coast, causing over 50 commercial flights to be rerouted, some of them midair. This is part of a trend of increasingly brazen behaviour by China as it exerts coercive military power across the hybrid threat landscape.[47]

The PLAN has also conducted many international joint exercises in recent years, most commonly with its "no limits" strategic partner, Russia.[48] However, while some of these international exercises may support the PLA's combat readiness, for example by enabling it to learn from Russia's experience in its war against Ukraine, they appear to be conducted largely for diplomatic purposes, to strengthen bilateral relations and cooperation in general. China has not taken meaningful steps to enhance interoperability with other nations' armed forces at the tactical or operational level.[49]

Another important use of the PLAN during peacetime is its role in asserting China's territorial claims and keeping foreign vessels out. China has long opposed the presence of foreign navies in its EEZ and other maritime areas it claims, including during freedom of navigation operations.[50] To this end, the PLAN has been increasingly aggressive in its conduct of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) operations across the Taiwan Strait and the SCS. This includes many instances of harassing naval vessels conducting lawful acts of innocent passage in accordance with UNCLOS.

In 2023, the US declassified 15 incidents of "coercive and risky behaviour" by the PLA over the previous two years. These included a series of near-collisions with PLA fighter jets, brought about by highly dangerous manoeuvres aimed at intimidating US forces and deterring them from operating in the SCS.[51] PLAN vessels have also repeatedly targeted Vietnamese, Philippine, and Australian naval and fishing vessels to push

46 Joe Cash, Yimou Lee and Wen-Yee Lee, "China stages record drills designed to encircle Taiwan," *Reuters* (30 December 2025): https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-military-conduct-live-fire-exercises-around-taiwan-tuesday-2025-12-28/.

47 Charles Edel and Kathryn Paik, "China's Power Play Across the Pacific," CSIS (8 April 2025): https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-power-play-across-pacific.

48 "First Joint Russian–PRC Submarine Exercise Patrols Pacific," Jamestown Foundation (8 September 2025): https://jamestown.org/first-joint-russian-prc-submarine-exercise-patrols-pacific/.

49 Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha, "China's Military Diplomacy in the New Era," *The Diplomat* (5 July 2025): https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/chinas-military-diplomacy-in-the-new-era/.

50 Orange Wang, "China challenges US freedom of navigation operations as having 'no legal basis'," *SCMP* (25 August 2025): https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3323104/china-challenges-us-freedom-navigation-operations-having-no-legal-basis.

51 "Department of Defense Releases Declassified Images, Videos of Coercive and Risky PLA Operational Behavior," U.S. Department of War (17 October 2023): https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3559903/.

them out of SCS waters claimed by China.[52] The Australian government has also published several cases of unsafe behaviour, including a PLAN vessel directing a laser beam at an Australian patrol aircraft and several instances of Chinese fighter jets releasing flares in close proximity to Australian aircraft.[53]

Indeed, the PLAN has been used extensively to project Chinese military power in peacetime, albeit only to the extent that the CCP has deemed possible while remaining below the threshold that could trigger an armed conflict. To project its military power further, the CCP's CMC has deployed its other two paramilitary forces – the coast guard and the militia – to exploit legal grey zones while actively expanding China's capacity for coercion.

The China Coast Guard (CCG) – the "White"

Under Xi Jinping, the China Coast Guard (CCG) has been established and developed into a de facto second navy, focused on enforcing Chinese law and sovereignty across maritime territories claimed by Beijing. Before Xi, China did not even have a coast guard. The CCG was established in 2013, when four separate maritime administrative agencies were merged and placed under the control of the State Oceanic Administration.[54] It was quickly developed and enlarged. More than 20 PLAN corvettes were transferred and refitted, and while missile launchers and heavy firearms were removed, many CCG vessels are equipped with guns of up to 76 mm, high-capacity water cannon, and helicopters. Within a decade, the CCG grew into the world's largest maritime law enforcement agency with the most powerful ships. It comprises perhaps more than 150 vessels with a displacement of over 1,000 tonnes, including two massive 12,000-tonne ships, which are by far the world's largest coast guard cutters, and larger than most navies' warships. The exact size of the fleet is unknown and undisclosed.[55]

The CCG is, in effect, a second, white-hulled maritime armed force, separate from the grey-coloured PLAN but capable of carrying out missions that are too sensitive for a navy. These have included offensive manoeuvres during standoffs in disputed waters with the Philippines and Vietnam, during which CCG vessels have attempted, and in some cases managed, to ram much weaker fishing or coast guard vessels.[56]

Military command over the CCG was formalized in 2018, when control over the CCG was transferred from the civilian State Oceanic Administration to the People's Armed

52 Kelly Ng, "China rams own warship while chasing Philippine vessel," *BBC* (11 August 2025): https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cev22n0lm1xo.

53 "China's Air and Maritime Coercion: Unsafe Military Interactions," ASPI Pressure Points (accessed 9 January 2026): https://www.pressurepoints.aspi.org.au/chinas-air-and-maritime-coercion/unsafe-military-interactions.

54 Ahmed Mujuthaba, "China Coast Guard: on a trajectory for peace or conflict?" CIMSEC (16 February 2022): https://cimsec.org/china-coast-guard-on-a-trajectory-for-peace-or-conflict/.

55 "China Coast Guard: what does it do and how did it become so powerful?" SCMP (1 July 2024): https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3268460/china-coast-guard-what-does-it-do-and-how-did-it-become-so-powerful.

56 Todd C. Helmus, Krista Romita Grocholski, Tyler Liggett, Ashley L. Rhoades, Scott Savitz, and Keytin Palmer, "Understanding and Countering China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations," RAND (20 Nov 2024), 32–33: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2954-1.html.

INFO BOX 3. Standoff with the Philippines: The CCG as a tool for power projection

Ongoing disputes over territory in the South China Sea have long strained relations between China and the Philippines, including over Scarborough Shoal. This atoll lies over 200km west from the Philippines and over 800km southeast of Hong Kong. In 2012, Beijing took control of the shoal, despite its location within the Philippines' EEZ. Since then, the CCG has employed aggressive tactics of harassment to keep both Philippine authorities and fishing vessels away.[57]

The disputes have repeatedly escalated between the CCG and the Philippine Coast Guard, as well as fishermen, around this and other contested areas off the Philippines' coast. For instance, in 2024, a Filipino sailor was injured in a clash with the CCG while trying to resupply a Philippine naval outpost at the contested Second Thomas Shoal (also within the Philippines' EEZ).[58] In August 2025, a CCG vessel crashed into a PLAN ship while chasing down a Philippine boat delivering aid to fishermen.[59] In its efforts to "safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests",[60] Beijing has used increasingly hostile coercive grey-zone tactics against the Philippines.

Police (PAP), China's paramilitary force tasked with maintaining domestic security. At the same time, the PAP came under the direct control of the CMC. This placed the CCG and PLAN under a unified military command. The outcome was quickly felt, as the CCG and PLAN continued their strong and synergistic cooperation, including in military exercises and law enforcement missions.[61]

The 2020 amendment to the National Defence Law also clarified that the PAP, which includes the CCG, shall, among other things, "enforce maritime rights" and "carry out other tasks assigned by the [CMC]".[62] In 2021, China enacted a new CCG Law, which dramatically increased the law enforcement powers of the CCG across maritime territories claimed by Beijing. This includes the CCG's power to expel foreign fishing or research vessels and to use "all means necessary", including lethal force, against foreign vessels infringing Chinese sovereignty or found to be using undefined "dangerous methods".[63]

Since then, China has enacted additional legal provisions that further strengthen the CCG's powers to exercise Chinese sovereignty and conduct law enforcement missions across territorial waters claimed by Beijing, while remaining vague on the exact boundaries of Chinese claims. In addition, Chinese laws in this regard purposefully avoid using agreed language under international law, deliberately exploiting legal grey zones. For example, the 2024 Coast Guard Law amendment further strengthened the CCG's role across the vaguely defined "sea areas under the jurisdiction of the [PRC]".[64]

Therefore, under China's domestic law, the CCG has been authorized to use all means

57 "Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal Standoff," CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (22 May 2017): https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-scarborough-standoff/.

58 Rebecca Ratcliffe *and agencies*, "Philippines accuses Chinese coastguards of piracy after violent confrontation," *The Guardian* (19 June 2024): https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/19/philippines-china-clash-south-sea-navy-injuries-coast-guard-second-thomas-shoal-severe-thumb.

59 Kelly Ng, "China rams own warship while chasing Philippine vessel," BBC (11 August 2025): https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cev22n0lm1xo.

60 "US backs Philippine ally after China warns over vessel clash," *Reuters* (14 October 2025): https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-tells-philippines-stop-provocations-after-south-china-sea-vessel-clash-2025-10-13/.

61 Todd et al., "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations," 30–31.

62 Article 22, "Law of the People's Republic of China on National Defence," The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (26 Dec 2020): http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2020-12/26/c_674696_2.htm.

63 Ryan D. Martinson, "Gauging the real risks of China's new coastguard law," The Strategist (23 Feb 2021): https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/gauging-the-real-risks-of-chinas-new-coastguard-law/.

64 Peter Leavy, "Overcoming the deliberate legal ambiguity adopted by China's coast guard," *The Interpreter* (20 June 2024): https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/overcoming-deliberate-legal-ambiguity-adopted-china-s-coast-guard.

INFO BOX 4. Justice Mission 2025: The CCG as naval auxiliary

As outlined previously, during Joint Sword 2024 A and B, the CCG was involved for the first time in large-scale military exercises around Taiwan. Its role included law enforcement activities, such as patrolling and carrying out vessel boardings and inspections.[65] In addition, the CCG participated in encircling Taiwan and practising the enforcement of a blockade.

Joint Sword 2024 was followed by Justice Mission 2025. The two-day military exercise was held in December 2025 and followed Washington's announcement that it had concluded a particularly large sale of military equipment to Taipei. The exercise rehearsed a multi-domain joint operation to blockade Taiwan's major port cities. According to the CCG, it conducted "joint protection of fishing activities, identification and verification, as well as interception and detention operations". During the exercise, a similar number of CCG and PLAN ships operated side by side, indicating a more important and integrated role for the CCG in the event of a blockade of Taiwan.[66]

necessary to offensively assert China's claims of sovereignty, including opening fire. However, it rarely uses such drastic measures, which are likely also intended to deter other countries from challenging China's sovereignty assertions, similar to the PLAN's risky and unsafe conduct for the purpose of A2/AD.

In many respects, however, the CCG can act more aggressively than the PLAN because it exploits the legal grey area in which it operates as a supposedly civilian law enforcement agency, making it more difficult to characterize its aggressive behaviour as an act of war than would be the case with PLAN vessels. As such, CCG ships have harassed fishing boats and government vessels of other SCS claimants – most commonly the Philippines – through offensive means, such as firing water cannon and deliberately ramming ships,[67] at times with coordinated support from the PLAN (see Info box 3). Nonetheless, Beijing continues to insist that the CCG is a civilian law enforcement agency, and not a military organization.[68]

The CCG has also been used to aggressively block Vietnamese and Malaysian oil and gas exploration and drilling activities in their respective EEZs, which are also claimed by China.[69]

The CCG's auxiliary role to the PLAN has been further solidified by the part it has played in PLAN exercises rehearsing an invasion of Taiwan (see Info box 4).

The Maritime Militia (MM) – the "Blue"

According to China's Military Service Law of 1984, all Chinese citizens have an obligation to serve in the militia, although in practice China relies on voluntary recruitment. The Maritime Militia (MM) is the maritime arm of this militia. While this paper focuses solely on the maritime militia, the law does not distinguish between land and sea forces.[70]

65 Anthony Marco and Nils Peterson, "Charting A Course: Addressing Chinese Maritime Coercion Around Taiwan," CIMSEC (19 January 2026): https://cimsec.org/charting-a-course-addressing-chinese-maritime-coercion-around-taiwan/.

66 "Special Report: Surprise PRC Military Exercise Around Taiwan," ISW (31 December 2025): https://understandingwar.org/research/china-taiwan/china-taiwan-special-report-december-31–2025/.

67 Alyssa Chen, "Chinese ships collide during clash with Philippine vessel at contested Scarborough Shoal," *SCMP* (11 August 2025): https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3321473/chinese-ships-collide-during-clash-philippine-vessel-contested-scarborough-shoal.

68 Leavy, "Overcoming the deliberate legal ambiguity."

69 "UPDATE: China Risks Flare-Up Over Malaysian, Vietnamese Gas Resources," CSIS Asia Maritime *Transparency Initiative* (13 December 2019): https://amti.csis.org/china-risks-flare-up-over-malaysian-vietnamese-gas-resources/.

70 Nguyen Hong Thao and Ton Nu Thanh Binh, "Maritime Militias in the South China Sea," Maritime Awareness Project (13 Jun 2019): https://map.nbr.org/2019/06/maritime-militias-in-the-south-china-sea/.

The history of the MM dates back to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, at a time when China lacked a navy and needed to protect its coasts against attacks originating from Taiwan. Since then, the blue-hulled MM has evolved into an auxiliary armed force consisting of reinforced fishing vessels, and it continues to supplement the PLAN in asserting territorial claims without the use of official Chinese warships. The MM consists exclusively of ostensibly civilian fishing vessels,[71] and the ambiguity created by a de facto paramilitary force under the guise of a civilian fishing fleet makes attributing and responding to aggression by the MM particularly difficult.

The MM is also a force multiplier because, even though the exact number of vessels it can draw on is unknown, they likely number in the thousands.[72] Operating and subsidizing fishing vessels is significantly cheaper than maintaining warships, and through the civilian nature of these vessels and their protected status under international law, China deliberately exploits grey zones and complicates legal and military responses by other states. Beijing has used the ambiguous nature of the MM to supplement the PLAN and the CCG as a front-line tool in asserting its territorial claims.[73]

The first use of the MM to assert territorial claims over disputed maritime territory occurred in 1974, when Chinese fishing vessels seized control of several islands in the South Vietnam-controlled Paracels. When the South Vietnamese Navy tried to drive them away, the Chinese vessels were reinforced by PLAN ships. This "Battle of the Paracels" was ultimately won by the PLAN, but the militia vessels formed the initial spearhead, as would happen on several occasions thereafter.[74]

The MM has operated mainly from Hainan and Guangdong through various militia groups, the most prominent of which has been the Tanmen Maritime Militia Company, based in the small Hainanese fishing port of Tanmen Fishing Harbor. The Tanmen Militia has conducted illegal poaching in disputed territories and has been involved in multiple confrontations with the Philippines since the 1980s. Examples include cooperation with the PLAN to erect structures on the Chinese-occupied Spratlys in 1989–1995, multiple confrontations around the Scarborough Shoal and Mischief Reef over the poaching of endangered species and corals in the 1990s and 2000s, and the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with the Philippine Navy (see Info box 4).[75]

71 Derek Grossman and Logan Ma, "A Short History of China's Fishing Militia and What It May Tell Us," RAND (6 Apr 2020): https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2020/04/a-short-history-of-chinas-fishing-militia-and-what.html.

72 Jeffrey W. Jaeger, "One Nation's Fishing Fleet, Another Nation's Pirates: Countering China's Maritime Militia," U.S. Naval Institute, Proceedings Vol. 150 (April 2024): https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/april/one-nations-fishing-fleet-another-nations-pirates-countering.

73 James Kraska and Michael Monti, "The Law of Naval Warfare and China's Maritime Militia," *International Law Studies* Vol. 91 (2015), 450–451: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ils/vol91/iss1/13/.

74 Gregory B. Poling, Harrison Prétat, Tabitha Grace Mallory, and Center for Advanced Defense Studies, "Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia," CSIS (18 Nov 2021), 3–4: https://www.csis.org/analysis/pulling-back-curtain-chinas-maritime-militia.

75 Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, "Model Maritime Militia: Tanmen's Leading Role in the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal Incident," CIMSEC (21 Apr 2016): https://cimsec.org/model-maritime-militia-tanmens-leading-role-april-2012-scarborough-shoal-incident/.

The modern development of the MM and its structural integration into China's maritime armed forces began in earnest in 2013, when Xi publicly hailed the Tanmen Militia as a model for a greater maritime militia. The national Defence White Paper of the same year also envisioned a more central role for the militia in asserting Chinese territorial claims, while Beijing started investing heavily in the expansion and professionalization of the MM.[76]

Existing militia units have been expanded and new ones created, including the notorious Sansha Maritime Militia. The Sansha Militia was formed in 2013, after the founding of Sansha City on a small Chinese-controlled island in the Paracels, to oversee China's enforcement of sovereignty in the SCS, including in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The Sansha Militia is a heavily militarized unit with the explicit objective of conducting patrols, cooperating in maritime law enforcement, and supporting combat operations.[77]

The MM contains many different units with diverging interests, including commercial enterprises. Many of the individuals working as militia crew are employed by local Chinese fishing enterprises. However, the vessels' crews are not made up solely of fishermen, but include personnel with varied backgrounds, including military veterans. MM vessels receive lucrative subsidies, which tend to cover costs for fuel, ship repairs, and specialized training. In return, both the military and local governments can call on these vessels.[78]

The militia was formally integrated into China's supreme military command in 2015, during the PLA reforms, when the CMC's National Defence Mobilization Department was formed to oversee it. With the additional integration of the PAP into the CMC in 2018, all three maritime armed forces were integrated within one unified military command, through which the CCP asserts direct control over all three naval forces.

Following the militia's structural integration into the CMC, the National Defence Law of 2020 further clarified the militia's role as part of China's armed forces, alongside the PLA and PAP. The law stated that the militia "shall perform combat readiness service and carry out non-war military operations and defensive operations under the command of the military authorities".[79]

The MM's value as a tool for "non-war military operations" has been demonstrated on multiple occasions since, as its vessels have spearheaded the coercive assertion of Chinese territorial claims in the SCS, taken part in the CCG's law enforcement missions against other states' vessels, and more recently participated in the

76 Poling, "Pulling Back the Curtain," 6.

77 Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, "Riding a New Wave of Professionalization and Militarization: Sansha City's Maritime Militia," CIMSEC (1 Sep 2016): https://cimsec.org/riding-new-wave-professionalization-militarization-sansha-citys-maritime-militia/.

78 Yamaguchi Shinji, Yatsuzuka Masaaki, and Momma Rira, "China Security Report 2023: China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations," National Institute for Defense Studies, *Japan* (2022), 56–58: https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china_report_EN_web_2023_A01_revised.pdf.

79 Article 22, "Law of the People's Republic of China on National Defence," The National People's *Congress of the People's Republic of China* (26 Dec 2020): http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2020–12/26/c_674696_2.htm.

INFO BOX 5. Floating barriers: The Great Wall of fishing boats

On Christmas Day 2025, around 2,000 Chinese fishing vessels gathered across the East China Sea and formed a massive floating barrier, over 400 kilometres long, in the shape of an oversized L. This was followed by a similar exercise on 11 January 2026, when roughly 1,400 fishing vessels suddenly ceased their regular fishing activities and gathered in a straight north–south line of similar proportions, forcing other vessels to navigate around the massive formation. Some of the fishing boats involved are known to have previously participated in MM activities.[80]

These unannounced mobilization exercises indicate the MM's capability to be deployed for blockade operations as part of joint military operations in contested waters. They demonstrate the high level of coordination and discipline among China's dual-use fishing fleet, as well as its potential to monitor and disrupt other vessels. However, this level of sophistication in coordinating large Chinese fishing fleets is not new, as hundreds of ships regularly gather to conduct large-scale distant-water fishing operations in largely unregulated waters.[81]

PLAN's offensive military exercises.[82] See Info boxes 5 and 6 for additional examples.

Additional maritime actors

China's hybrid approach to projecting maritime power goes beyond its navy and even its paramilitary forces. It also includes the use of civilian and entirely unarmed vessels, such as sand dredgers. China's dredging activities across the SCS started in December 2013, soon after Xi Jinping came to power. Within four years, a series of artificial islands had been created across the Paracel and Spratly Islands. In total, China created over 3,200 acres of land, which now house several large military bases, complete with naval ports, airstrips, radar systems, and missile launchers.[83]

The newly created outposts enabled CCG and MM vessels to operate well over 1,000 kilometres from the Chinese coast and to patrol the entire SCS continuously, including as far as the coastal waters of Vietnam and the Philippines.[84]

However, China's sand dredgers are not only used to create new land, but also to remove it. Sand dredgers have been employed to steal vast amounts of seabed sand from Taiwan's outlying islands for use in construction projects on the Chinese mainland. In 2020 alone, Taiwan's coast guard recorded close to 4,000 incidents in which Chinese dredgers and sand transport vessels were expelled from Taiwanese waters. Apart from putting pressure on Taiwan's overstretched coast guard, these activities destroy biodiversity and quite literally steal Taiwan's land.[85]

80 Chris Buckley, Agnes Chang, and Amy Chang Chien, "Thousands of Chinese Fishing Boats Quietly Form Vast Sea Barriers," *The New York Times* (16 January 2026): https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/01/16/world/asia/china-ships-fishing-militia-blockade.html.

81 For more on China's illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) distant-water fishing (DWF) activities, see: Millicent McCreath and Valentin Schatz, "Hybrid CoE Working Paper 19: EEZ-adjacent distant-water fishing as a global security challenge: An international law perspective," Hybrid CoE (September 2022): https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-19-eez-adjacent-distant-water-fishing-as-a-global-security-challenge-an-international-law-perspective/.

82 Jose M. Macias III and Benjamin Jensen, "Signals in the Swarm: The Data Behind China's Maritime Gray Zone Campaign Near Taiwan," CSIS (8 October 2025): https://www.csis.org/analysis/signals-swarm-data-behind-chinas-maritime-gray-zone-campaign-near-taiwan.

83 "China Island Tracker," CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (accessed October 2025): https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/.

84 Liu Zhen, "Chinese coastguard patrols disputed reefs controlled by Vietnam in South China Sea," SCMP (21 October 2025): https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3329731/chinese-coastguard-patrols-disputed-reefs-controlled-vietnam-south-china-sea.

85 Yimou Lee, "China's latest weapon against Taiwan: the sand dredger," *Reuters* (5 February 2021): https://www.reuters.com/graphics/TAIWAN-CHINA/SECURITY/jbyvrnzerve/.

INFO BOX 6. Interagency cooperation: The militia's role in asserting sovereignty

China uses the MM for many purposes, including participation in military exercises in the SCS and around Taiwan. The MM is frequently deployed as part of a "cabbage strategy," in which it is positioned alongside the CCG and PLAN in a layered formation to surround and harass foreign vessels or islands.[86] This is in line with the aforementioned "three lines of defence" approach, except that the cabbage strategy can involve multiple layers in several directions, ensuring that all three services are deployed to the greatest effect while each remains below a credible threshold of armed conflict. In this way, it is difficult to clearly attribute hostile actions or counter MM vessels specifically.

The MM also frequently supports the CCG in harassing and ramming foreign vessels, especially from the Philippines. Common tactics include using hundreds of militia vessels to swarm a particular location for a prolonged period, for example near Whitsun Reef in 2021[87] and Rozul Reef in 2025,[88] with the goal of establishing de facto control.

Another grey-zone tactic in support of China's military expansion is its use of civilian research vessels. Chinese research ships have long been suspected of spying, especially when surveying parts of the SCS within the EEZs of other claimants, or when passing through otherwise sensitive maritime areas, including India's EEZ.[89] Notably, conducting commercial or scientific surveys in another state's EEZ without that state's consent is against international law.[90]

Chinese research vessels have made repeated port calls to PLAN facilities, including on the aforementioned artificial islands, and in some cases have turned off their transponders when close to such military facilities. China is also known to conduct extensive ocean-floor mapping, especially across the SCS. Apart from uncovering natural resources, thoroughly surveying the ocean floor also offers clear military advantages. Furthermore, some operators of large research vessel fleets, such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences and China's Ministry of Natural Resources, have signed cooperation agreements with the PLA. Some of these survey vessels once belonged to the PLA before being transferred to civilian agencies, while others are even directly operated by the CCG.[91]

In some instances, China's research vessels have been more actively involved in spearheading China's territorial claims, for example in the Yellow Sea vis-à-vis South Korea. Between China and South Korea lies the so-called Provisional Measures Zone, which is shared by both states and belongs to neither, as agreed bilaterally in 2001. Both states may fish in this zone, but no other activities are permitted. However, China has in recent years

86 Tai-yuan Yang and K. Tristan Tan, "'Strait Thunder-2025A' Drill Implies Future Increase in PLA Pressure on Taiwan," Jamestown Foundation, (4 November 2025): https://jamestown.org/strait-thunder-2025a-drill-implies-future-increase-in-pla-pressure-on-taiwan/.

87 Samir Puri and Greg Austin, "What the Whitsun Reef incident tells us about China's future operations at sea," IISS (9 April 2021): https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2021/04/whitsun-reef-incident-china/.

88 Sweekriti Pathak, "Fishing and Force: China's Dark Fleets and Maritime Militias," Observer Research Foundation (29 January 2026): https://www.orfonline.org/english/expert-speak/fishing-and-force-china-s-dark-fleets-and-maritime-militias.

89 Liu Zhen, "Chinese research vessel expelled by Indian warship for operating near Andaman and Nicobar Islands," SCMP (4 December 2019): https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3040638/chinese-research-vessel-expelled-indian-warship-operating-near.

90 "What lies beneath: Chinese surveys in the South China Sea," CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency *Initiative* (1 March 2022): https://amti.csis.org/what-lies-beneath-chinese-surveys-in-the-south-china-sea/.

91 Matthew P. Funaiole, Brian Hart, and Aidan Powers-Riggs, "Surveying the Seas: China's Dual-Use Research Operations in the Indian Ocean," CSIS Hidden Reach (10 January 2024): https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-indian-ocean-research-vessels/.

built several illegal aquaculture platforms there. In early 2025, it emerged that China had erected a large structure, which Chinese media claim contains a research centre. When a South Korean research vessel tried to survey the structure, it was expelled from the area by the CCG, and Beijing asserted that the structure was rightfully "located in China's coastal waters". Following Seoul's protest and attempt at reciprocal measures, China declared a no-sail zone and sent in the PLAN's most advanced aircraft carrier in a show of force.[92]

92 Jennifer Jun, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and Victor Cha, "Chinese Platforms in the Yellow Sea's South Korea-China PMZ," CSIS Beyond Parallel (23 June 2025): https://beyondparallel.csis.org/chinese-platforms-in-the-yellow-seas-south-korea-china-pmz/.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has focused on Chinese maritime hybrid warfare and the main tools employed to this end. To project military power during peacetime, China has exploited existing grey zones in international law, including by diffusing its military power across pseudo-civilian entities and by using various cross-domain hybrid threat tactics. Beijing has repeatedly attacked and coerced its neighbours in the South China Sea and East China Sea while effectively remaining below the threshold of armed conflict.

This has been achieved, in part, by using armed ships that do not qualify as "warships" under international law but fall into an undefined legal grey zone instead. With the CCG and MM, the CCP has created alternative armed forces that operate outside of traditional military structures while remaining under a unified supreme military command. In addition, it has used civilian commercial enterprises and research organizations to strategically support and supplement its military institutions.

The national policy of Military-Civil Fusion has effectively blurred, and in some cases even merged, the civilian and military sectors, while seeking to maintain the appearance of separation between the military and civilian domains. This civilian façade of ostensibly non-military entities has successfully complicated efforts to attribute and respond to Beijing's provocations, with the result that a decade after the UNCLOS tribunal ruled against China's claims over the South China Sea, its control over the region is stronger than ever.

Much of this de facto control over the territories it claims is due to China's capacity for military power projection. Not only is the PLAN now the world's largest navy, but it is also supplemented by the CCG and MM, each of which has even more ships at its disposal than the PLAN. China's three navies – the grey, the white, and the blue – are directed by the same supreme military command and are deployed strategically to project power to the greatest extent possible while remaining below the threshold of war. China is, in effect, projecting military power through means that are not clearly defined as "military" under international law. This strategy of military diffusion is an example of lawfare applied for the purpose of power projection, because the difficulty in attributing and responding to China's diffusion of military power also stems from democratic states' insistence on adhering to international law and applying existing norms in good faith, while Beijing skilfully circumvents and exploits them.

However, there is in fact no clear dividing line between China's civilian and military ambitions or entities. Whether organizations are part of the military, subservient to military command, or structurally outside of such chains of command, the CCP controls them all and uses whichever means are most effective for achieving its strategic goals.

Countering China's aggressive deployment of lawfare and disguised military tools would require recognizing Chinese pseudo-civilian entities and Beijing's hybrid tactics for what they are, and treating them as the acts of military aggression they represent. This would entail holding Beijing to account and

officially recognizing the military nature of the supposedly civilian coast guard and maritime militia. It would also entail pointing out the contradictions in China's own approach, whereby the coast guard and militia are explicitly stated to be part of the country's armed forces under domestic law, while Beijing insists internationally that they are civilian. Failing to do so risks the gradual erosion of international law and its eventual reshaping along authoritarian lines.

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