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China's Non-Military Maritime Assets as a Force Multiplier for Security

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Justin Chock, a Summer 2015 researcher at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “[China’s] growing civilian merchant marine and fishing fleets are more likely to be deployed before military units since they greatly enhance surveillance, logistics, and even physical defense capabilities with less risk of conflict escalation. As a result, these non-military maritime fleets deserve greater attention within the study of China’s maritime capacities and interests.”

In 2012, China’s 18th Party Congress set the overall goal of building China into a “strong maritime power,” and the 2015 China National Military Strategy makes a bold call that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned.” Often, American analyses of Chinese “maritime power” weigh heavily on military capabilities, with publications centered on the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the PLA Navy (PLAN), or the China Coast Guard, especially with advances like the new Chinese *Liaoning* aircraft carrier or the world’s largest Coast Guard Cutter.

Chinese strategists, however, see this concept in a different light. The civilian and economic aspects of China’s maritime power, although not primarily for military use, are seen as a rapidly growing tool for securing maritime space. Various official sources from the government-run *Xinhua* newspaper, to Beijing University academics, to former President Hu Jintao himself, cite economic capacity as a key aspect of maritime power, and as this sector naturally expands, the Chinese government is seeking to gain more utility through adding security functions to these economic assets.

Barring traditional military conflict, the growing civilian merchant marine and fishing fleets are more likely to be deployed before military units since they greatly enhance surveillance, logistics, and even physical defense capabilities with less risk of conflict escalation. As a result, these non-military maritime fleets deserve greater attention within the study of China’s maritime capacities and interests.

The Chinese Merchant Marine fleet is one such group of dual-purpose assets. The Merchant Marine is defined by the CIA as “all ships engaged in the carriage of goods; or all commercial vessels, (as opposed to all nonmilitary ships), which excludes tugs, fishing vessels, offshore oil rigs, etc.” Dennis Blasko, China scholar and former U.S. army attaché to Beijing, calculates the number of Chinese merchant ships (including Chinese and Hong Kong owned ships under other country’s flags or “flags of convenience”) at 5,076 vessels, the largest in the world. Merchant shipping is expanding even with the slow-down of Chinese economic growth, with the fleet tripling in size over the past 10 years, giving it an increasingly important role. At the same time, Chinese-owned ships are increasingly registered under other nations’ flags, making monitoring and inspecting them more difficult.

The capabilities of the Merchant Marine fleet have precedent, as these ships routinely participate in PLA exercises and troop movements in an effort to increase interoperability with the military. These drills proved successful during actual operations, including five merchant ships participating in the evacuation of Chinese civilians in Libya. Further interoperability will come with the introduction of the “2015

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Technical Standards for New Civilian Ships to Implement National Defense Requirements,” which are military-grade specifications and design requirements that are mandated for all private and public shipbuilding companies for building container, roll-on roll-off, multipurpose, bulk carrier, and break-bulk ships. Thus, these ships maintain powerful sealift, amphibious, surveillance, logistic, or other transport-related capabilities, and the fleet will grow as shipbuilders turn out new craft adhering to the military-grade technical standards.

Fishing vessels are another source of maritime power for China, as it maintains the world’s largest fishing fleet with 694,905 motorized vessels in 2013, in addition to employing 14.43 million workers. Chinese fishing vessels, in an effort to maintain China’s place as the world’s largest exporter of fishing products, are going as far as the waters off of West Africa in response to overfishing in the near seas, representing a growing fleet that has an increasingly global reach.

As a part of the Chinese Maritime Militia, this fishing fleet can exert a dual-use purpose. Their primary role is an external defense force, with a secondary dimension as a domestic security force. Specific operations toward these ends include sovereignty missions, logistical operations for military assets, emergency response, cover and concealment of military units, and even light-arms defense and sabotage. In recent years, the ships gained increased Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance abilities (C4ISR) capabilities through equipping ships with advanced satellite phones and radios, a step that will grant Chinese decision makers greater maritime monitoring capacity. Although the group is a reserve force recruited at the grassroots level, the Maritime Militia receives more frequent and intense training in more advanced techniques than China’s ordinary militias. These units were significant actors in notable events including the 2009 USNS *Impeccable* Incident and the 2014 *Haiyang Shiyou 981* Standoff, where a non-military force was able to eject competitors from the waters without a significantly large risk of escalation from a military force.

In order to gauge the true extent of China’s growing maritime power and whether they will bring stability or instability, the US and its allies at both the government and civilian levels should encourage further interaction and engagement with nontraditional Chinese maritime actors to observe the current and potential defense capabilities of these assets , as well as the potential situations that could lead to their employment as security forces in lieu of the military.

This discussion does not intend to paint civilian ships as a threat — Chinese civil-military coordination frequently has a degree of mistrust and miscommunication, and a thousand fishing boats are not likely to topple a single armed fleet in a conventional battle. Rather, a discussion on the dual use of the Chinese fishing fleet illuminates an often overlooked potential force multiplier of hard power that policymakers and analysts should add to their security analyses and calculations. A cautious approach must be made not to underestimate nor overestimate their value; the former risks neglecting key variables for deciding future cooperative or competitive engagement with China, while the latter leads to an overly threatening projection of China’s future actions. For now, these vessels will support the economic aspects of China’s maritime power, but should they be needed in any situation ranging from disaster relief to conflict, their utility may suddenly shift to support the military during or before the mobilization of conventional forces.

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