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14. ABSTRACT
The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) has existed within the PRC in some form or capacity since the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949. In approximately 2010, it gained notoriety as the main workforce of an integrated maritime campaign to advance territorial sovereignty claims within the South China Sea. Affectionately labeled a "cabbage" strategy, the campaign is focused on persisting in vicinity of contested maritime terrain features in order to create de facto control for the PRC. The Chinese integrated maritime campaign is not indomitable, and an effective counter-campaign can degrade the twin critical capabilities, ambiguity of purpose and ambiguity of size, of its center of gravity, the PAFMM. By taking the initiative, working within the bounds of historic Southeast Asian security norms, and changing its operating methodologies, the United States can succeed in this counter-campaign. The beginnings of this campaign built upon the foundations of a comprehensive surveillance network, strong regional security institutions, and administrative controls will deteriorate the PAFMM's critical capabilities. The sum effects of these actions over time will result in the restoration of decision-making time for Southeast Asian and United States maritime forces, and the re-establishment of order in the South China Sea.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**SUN TZU AT SEA:
DEGRADING CHINA'S INTEGRATED MARITIME CAMPAIGN**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJOR DOUGLAS J. VERBLAAUW, USMC

AY 2020-21

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Table of Contents

	Page
DISCLAIMER	ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	iv
PREFACE	v
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
MARITIME IRREGULAR WARFARE	2
CENTER OF GRAVITY ANALYSIS	11
COUNTER-CAMPAIGN	17
CONCLUSION	20
ENDNOTES	25
BIBLIOGRAPHY	30

Illustrations

	Page
Figure 1. Competition Continuum and Irregular Warfare Chart	3
Figure 2. Territorial Claims in the SCS	4
Figure 3. J-20 radius from PRC improved maritime terrain features	5
Figure 4. Proved and probable hydrocarbon reserves in the SCS.....	6
Figure 5. YZ-310 on patrol	10
Figure 6. PAFMM Chain of Command and Control	12

Preface

An article in *War on the Rocks* about the Chinese fishing fleet and its role in the great power competition between the United States and China was the genesis for this research paper. It was the first time I was exposed to the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), and I was intrigued. The size and temerity of the PAFMM were the initial hook, but the more time I spent investigating, the more I came to realize that they were part of something bigger. This bigger phenomenon, as I discovered, is an age-old stratagem designed to keep actions below the threshold of armed conflict, and forms the basis of my thesis.

I am indebted to Dr. Eric Shibuya for his encouragement to look beyond the obvious, CDR Stephen Kelley for his critical feedback, LtCol Misca Geter for her poised mentorship of Conference Group 7, and Col Thomas Gordon for his oversight. Most of all I am indebted to my beloved wife. A fellow sojourner in the Way, her love and support made this year a reality.

Executive Summary

Title: Sun Tzu at Sea: Degrading China’s Integrated Maritime Campaign

Author: Major Douglas J. Verblaauw, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The focus of this paper is solely on an analysis of the maritime component, and how to develop the beginnings of a United States counter-campaign that focuses on aggressive surveillance, strengthening existing regional institutions, and inducing administrative controls on the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Discussion: The People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) has existed within the PRC in some form or capacity since the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949. In approximately 2010, it began to gain notoriety as the main workforce within a Chinese campaign of maritime irregular warfare to advance territorial sovereignty claims within the South China Sea. Affectionately labeled a “cabbage” strategy by a retired Chinese admiral, the campaign is focused on creating de facto control of maritime terrain features within the infamous Nine-Dash Line. The “cabbage” is created by constricting and overlapping layers of naval, maritime law enforcement, and militia units whose tactics are designed to aggressively push the PRC agenda while remaining below the threshold of “armed conflict”. The rapid expansion, and focus of effort on the maritime services by the PRC between 2015 and 2017 further enhanced the critical capabilities of the PAFMM to serve as the source of strength for the campaign. These twin capabilities, ambiguity of size and ambiguity of purpose, have enabled the PRC to gain a persistence advantage that is gradually causing the nations of Southeast Asia to cede their South China Sea claims.

Conclusion: The maritime component of the Chinese integrated maritime campaign is not indomitable, and an effective counter-campaign can degrade the twin critical capabilities of its center of gravity, the PAFMM. By working within the bounds of historic Southeast Asian security norms, and changing its operating methodologies, the United States can succeed in this counter-campaign by taking the initiative and leading from the front. The beginnings of this campaign built upon the foundations of a comprehensive surveillance network, strong regional security institutions, and administrative controls will deteriorate its ambiguity of purpose and ambiguity of size. The sum effects of these actions over time will result in the restoration of decision-making time for the Southeast Asian and United States maritime forces, and the re-establishment of order in the South China Sea.

The notes do not exceed five, but the changes of the five notes can never be fully heard. The colors do not exceed five, but the changes of the five colors can never be completely seen. The flavors do not exceed five, but the changes of the five flavors can never be completely tasted. In warfare the strategic configurations of power do not exceed the unorthodox and orthodox, but the changes of the unorthodox and orthodox can never be completely exhausted. The unorthodox and orthodox mutually produce each other, just like an endless cycle. Who can exhaust them?

Sun Tzu, Art of War¹

If the desired outcome of great power competition is the ability to shape or control global financial, trade, and security architectures, then a state needs a way to achieve this desired capability.² One method that allows a state to pursue this goal is irregular warfare (IW) because it enables the state to “influence populations, and affect legitimacy” without the heavy losses of blood and treasure associated with traditional armed conflict.³ An appropriately developed and resourced IW campaign directs a state’s asymmetric strengths, either material or moral, against an adversary’s weaknesses in an endless cycle of unorthodox and orthodox configurations as identified by Sun Tzu above.⁴ The past decades have witnessed the rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and its orchestration of an integrated maritime campaign to gain control of the South China Sea (SCS) using IW methods. Among the various components that are integrated in this campaign are economic coercion, diplomatic intimidation, lawfare, operations in the information environment, and maritime operations. An effective analysis of all the components and their integration is beyond the scope of this thesis. The focus of this paper is solely on an

analysis of the maritime component, and how to develop the beginnings of a counter-campaign that focuses on aggressive surveillance, strengthening existing regional institutions, and inducing administrative controls on the PRC.

Maritime Irregular Warfare

The recently published National Defense Strategy's IW Annex provides an excellent definition which lays the foundation for our understanding of IW, and a future counter-campaign:

*Irregular warfare is a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.*⁵

Building on the Annex's definition, our understanding of IW increases with the Joint Force's conception of international relations, as described in Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, *Competition Continuum*. In this document, "competition below armed conflict" occurs "over extended periods of time," "actions are more indirect," and the "expenditure of resources is less intense."⁶ These adjectives of "competition below armed conflict" are in contrast to the description of "armed conflict" which is understood to occur over a shorter period of time, with actions directly targeting an adversary, and involving intense expenditure of resources.⁷ An important aspect to stress about the Competition Continuum is the lack of distinct transitions between constructs of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict, and it is in the areas of transition that IW operations thrive.⁸

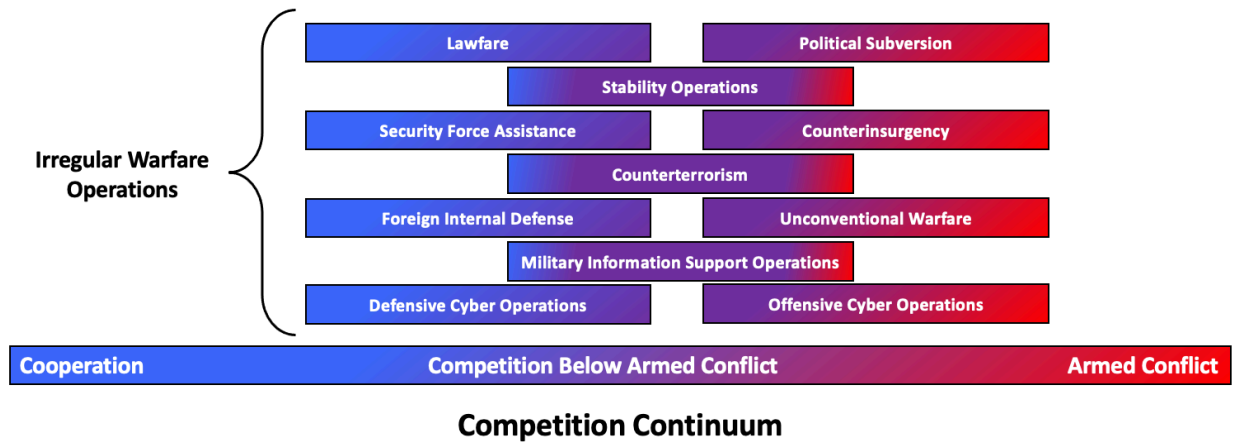


Figure 1: Competition Continuum and Irregular Warfare Operations⁹

The next element which enhances our understanding of IW is identifying where some of the specific types of IW operations fall within the Competition Continuum. At the lower end of the Continuum are operations such as security force assistance, foreign internal defense, defensive cyber, and lawfare. In the middle are Stabilization, Counterterrorism, and Military Information Support Operations. At the higher end of the spectrum closer to “armed conflict” are operations such as counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare (UW), offensive cyber, and political subversion. These various operations form an escalatory ladder of options that a state may choose to employ if it desires to remain below the threshold of “armed conflict”. The PRC’s integrated maritime campaign in the SCS for all practical purposes has remained below the traditional conception of “armed conflict” through careful management of the escalatory ladder. It is characterized by the integration of multiple IW operations as part of a struggle between China and the other states in the region, refer to Figure 2 below, for legitimacy of territorial claims over various surface and subsurface maritime features.¹⁰ Additionally, the campaign’s methodologies are designed to find the balance between the Chinese strengths over the other states in Southeast Asia, and Chinese-perceived weaknesses compared to American strengths.

The risk that China faces if the balance is not properly maintained is an armed conflict involving the United States, and at the moment it does not desire to gamble with the costs of loss in territorial claims, blood and treasure.

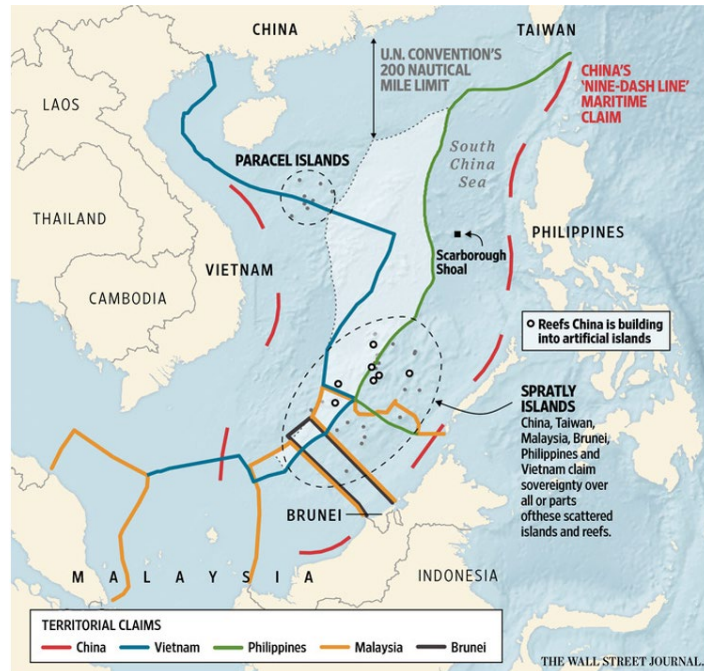


Figure 2: Territorial Claims in the SCS¹¹

The ultimate purpose of the PRC's integrated maritime campaign, and the reason for its immediate desire to remain below the threshold of "armed conflict" is the attainment of de jure control, or the official legal recognition of sovereign rights of the various surface and subsurface maritime terrain features in the SCS.¹² If the PRC is to fulfill this purpose, it must first achieve de facto control, or a state of affairs that is true in fact, but is not according to any official laws.¹³ Maritime trade is a vitally important component of international trade, and control of the SCS will allow the Chinese to safeguard a significant percentage of its global imports and exports.¹⁴ Specifically, the Center for Strategic and International Studies published a report in 2019 that estimated 64% of China's trade by volume transits the SCS.¹⁵ Additionally, control of the SCS provides greater depth to Chinese defense of the mainland.¹⁶ The construction of military

airfields and port facilities on the surface maritime terrain features, and enhancement of some subsurface maritime terrain features are the building blocks for a network of mutually supporting positions.¹⁷ The subsequent improvement of these terrain features through dredging and construction of ports and airfields has provided the campaign with excellent logistics and support nodes in the SCS. Figure 3, below, depicts the combat radius of a J-20, the PRC's 5th generation fighter, if operating from one of the three most well-known terrain features which the PRC has improved in the SCS i.e. Woody Island, Mischief Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef.¹⁸

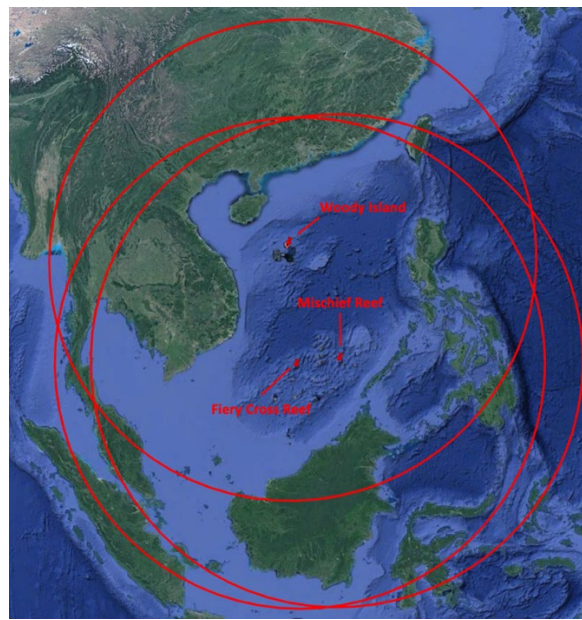


Figure 3: J-20 radius from PRC improved maritime terrain features¹⁹

Finally, control of the SCS will provide China with a boon in hydrocarbon production. An oil field is considered a major oil field if it contains at least 500 million barrels of oil, and a conservative United States Geological Service study estimated the SCS contains 750 million barrels of oil and even more natural gas.²⁰ These three benefits of trade, defense, and resources to the Chinese from controlling the South China Sea are nested within the PRC's strategic core interests of security, sovereignty, and development.²¹

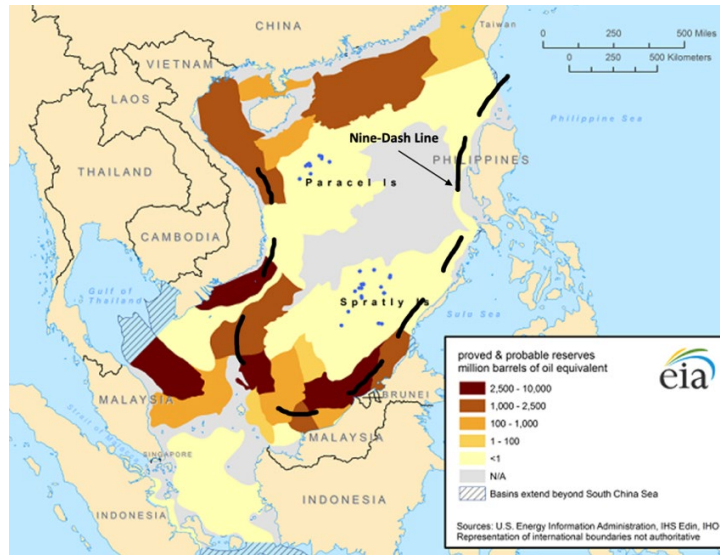


Figure 4: Proved and probable hydrocarbon reserves in the SCS²²

In spite of the benefits of controlling the SCS, there are two glaring problems that the Chinese must overcome: possession of a claim, and the nature of the sea. The first problem is one of simple logic, the requirement to possess a claim. If the Chinese are going to assert their sovereignty over a territorial claim, then it must have a territorial claim to start the process, and this is the *raison d'être* of the Nine-Dash Line. Introduced in 1947 as the Eleven-Dash Line by Yang Huairan, an oceanic cartographer in the employ of the Nationalist Koumintang, the Line was developed based on Yang's interpretation of underwater geography.²³ Specifically, he claimed that all of the deep-ocean in the SCS belonged to China because all other states lacked a continental shelf with which to justify their claims.²⁴ In 1952, Mao Zedong removed two of those dashes, renouncing claims to the Gulf of Tonkin, as a show of proletarian solidarity with Ho Chi Minh, and produced the Nine-Dash Line that is the foundation of Chinese territorial claims to this day.²⁵ The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2016 would repudiate the Nine-Dash Line as having “no legal basis” in its conclusion from the Scarborough Shoal arbitration hearing.²⁶ The PRC refused to attend these arbitration proceedings, likely because it forecasted the outcome, but officially because it asserted that the PCA lacked the jurisdiction to

make a ruling between it and the Philippines. As is its sovereign right, the PRC continues to refuse recognition of the 2016 PCA ruling.²⁷

The second, and scientific problem is determining how to assert control over part of the sea. How does a state accomplish the essential task of persisting for extended periods of time in a medium that is constantly shifting its form? Unlike the mainland where the PLA can dig into the earth and set up camp, neither PRC nor other nations' scientists have yet divined a method for digging trenches in water. Only machines have provided humanity with the capability of persisting on the high seas for any duration of time, and even then, both machines and sailors require maintenance after a certain period. The PRC's solution to this problem is found in the historical lineage of ancient Chinese military thought, and our understanding of centers of gravity.²⁸

Chinese operational thought is shaped by culture and history in much the same way as United States operational thought, and a narrative from the ancient Chinese saga of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*²⁹ is useful for providing contextual background to the PRC's integrated maritime campaign.³⁰ *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century, is a historical novel about the end of the Han Dynasty and the beginning of the period of the Three Kingdoms.³¹ One of the novel's narratives is about how imperial Han forces reestablished territorial sovereignty over a rebel city, Wancheng. The imperial general, Zhu Jun, uses the reputation of his generals Sun Jian, a scion of Sun Tzu³² and Liu Bei, a highly successful warrior destined for the Dragon Throne,³³ to sow doubt among the rebels before assaulting three of the four gates. The fourth gate is left open for the rebels to "escape." Under attack from three sides, the rebels buckle under the assault's pressure and "escape" out of the

unguarded east gate. Unwittingly falling into the imperial ruse, the rebels are subject to a classic military pursuit and destroyed.³⁴

The modern siege concept is initiated in vicinity of either a surface or subsurface terrain feature within the Nine-Dash Line by the PRC's capable maritime forces. Similar to the battle of Wancheng from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the PRC's besieging maritime services ensure that an opening is made available for their adversary to depart. The closest description of this operational concept from the Chinese military's perspective comes from unofficial comments made by a retired People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) admiral in 2013. Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong, then a professor at the Chinese National Defense University, referred to the integrated maritime campaign as a "cabbage strategy."³⁵ His use of the cabbage analogy was meant to elicit familiar images of layers of leaves surrounding a core in a similar manner to the concentric besieging layers of maritime forces surrounding the terrain feature.

Dr. Strange stated a center of gravity is the "primary source of moral or physical strength, power and resistance," and it exists within a specific context.³⁶ In the context of the integrated maritime campaign, it is the service which can best accomplish the essential task of persisting within the maritime environment. The Chinese do not have the opportunity to assert their claims to sovereignty if they do not possess the means to control a maritime terrain feature, and they cannot control it, if they cannot persist in its vicinity. Persistence allows the Chinese to identify interlopers, mass means for intimidation, and exercise escalatory options to remain in control of the maritime terrain feature. If the Chinese lose their means to persist, then they will no longer have the means to achieve their ultimate purpose.

The PRC's three maritime services constitute the physical "cabbage" layers which surround the core i.e. the claimed maritime terrain feature. All three of these services play

important roles in the campaign, but only one possesses the capabilities to best accomplish the essential task. The first layer is the PLAN. The technologically advanced PLAN ships allow for a centralized command and control platform while also providing an escalatory option of the threat or actual use of military force. Other Southeast Asian nations may find a PLAN ship intimidating, but in spite of the PLAN's ability to replenish their ships at sea,³⁷ they cannot persist. PLAN ships are a valuable commodity to the PRC, in terms of mission tasking and resource expenditure, and to maintain one or more ships on station in vicinity of a contested maritime terrain feature for an extended period of time is not economical.

The second layer, created in 2013 from an amalgamation of the Fisheries Law Enforcement (FLE), and the China Maritime Service (CMS), is the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG).³⁸ The life of former FLE ship Yu Zheng-310 (YZ-310) illustrates the CCG's aggressive enforcement practices. Beginning with operations backing up the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) in the Senkakus in 2010, it was engaged throughout the SCS to include the infamous Scarborough Shoal incident, "protection" of Chinese fishermen near the Paracel Islands, and an at-sea rescue in vicinity of the Spratly Islands.³⁹ It is likely that the CCG in similar fashion to the PLAN also possess the training and equipment to replenish-at-sea in order to extend their endurance. Additionally, like the PLAN, the CCG is a valuable commodity that must complete other mission sets e.g. search and rescue, fisheries enforcement, maritime law enforcement, etc., and supports sovereignty missions 'on order' in preference to PLAN involvement.



Figure 5: YZ-310 on patrol (Note the PAFMM vessel tied alongside)⁴⁰

The final and third layer is the PAFMM, and they are the PRC's best means for accomplishing the essential task of persisting. This service does not possess the same mission tasking requirements as either the PLAN or CCG, and the PRC leverages its two critical capabilities, ambiguity of purpose and ambiguity of size, to maximum effect. The PAFMM also has the capability to replenish-at-sea, albeit limited, in the form of transshipment.⁴¹ Transshipment is the process of moving cargo from one vessel to another,⁴² and in the context of ambiguity of purpose, a PAFMM vessel under the guise of fishing will exchange personnel, replenish stores, and actually transfer a catch.⁴³ The other critical capability, ambiguity of size, allows the PAFMM to rotate various ships through a station with minimal concern for maintenance, or continuity among vessels and crews. The sheer size, and nature of the PAFMM, as discussed below, facilitates a continuous stream of vessels to designated locations. These two capabilities enable the PAFMM to persist in vicinity of a contested maritime terrain feature either as individual ships, or as a mass of rotating ships. As an example of their endurance, the PAFMM have maintained a presence in vicinity of Thitu Island, an island contested with the Philippines in the Spratly Island chain, since at least December 2018 with an average of 18 ships

per day.⁴⁴ The PAFMM is the “primary source of moral or physical strength, power and resistance”, and the best means for the campaign to accomplish its essential task - persist.⁴⁵

Center of Gravity Analysis

Begun as a nautical offshoot of Mao’s militia concept, the original PAFMM had two primary tasks: provide security from foreign and Nationalist attacks along the coast, and facilitate incorporation of the coastal population into the greater state. The militia, in its modern form, can trace its lineage to the 1982 PRC constitution which states, “It is the sacred duty of every citizen of the People’s Republic of China to defend the motherland and resist aggression. It is the honorable duty of citizens of the PRC to perform military service and join the militia in accordance with law.”⁴⁶ In addition to its historic missions, the modern maritime militia enables the government to intervene in the fishing industry.⁴⁷ Two years later, the PRC defined and clarified the chain of command in Article 36 of the China Military Service Law.⁴⁸ The PAFMM was given further credibility in 2007 with the release of the Militia Military Training and Evaluation Outline.⁴⁹ This guidance was written to transform People’s Liberation Army (PLA)-focused militias into militias focused on supporting the PLAN, PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), and served to strengthen the PAFMM’s manpower and equipment.

The PAFMM is commanded and controlled by a dual civil-military structure in accordance with the 1984 China Military Service Law. The chain of command begins with the Central Military Commission (CMC), China’s highest level of military leadership similar to the Department of Defense, and then via the Theater Commands (TCs) to the local county/town/city’s People’s Armed Forces Department (PAFD) as depicted in Figure 3.⁵⁰ At each level is a National Defense Mobilization Committee (NDMC) that binds the civil and military leadership into one consultative, decision-making body.⁵¹

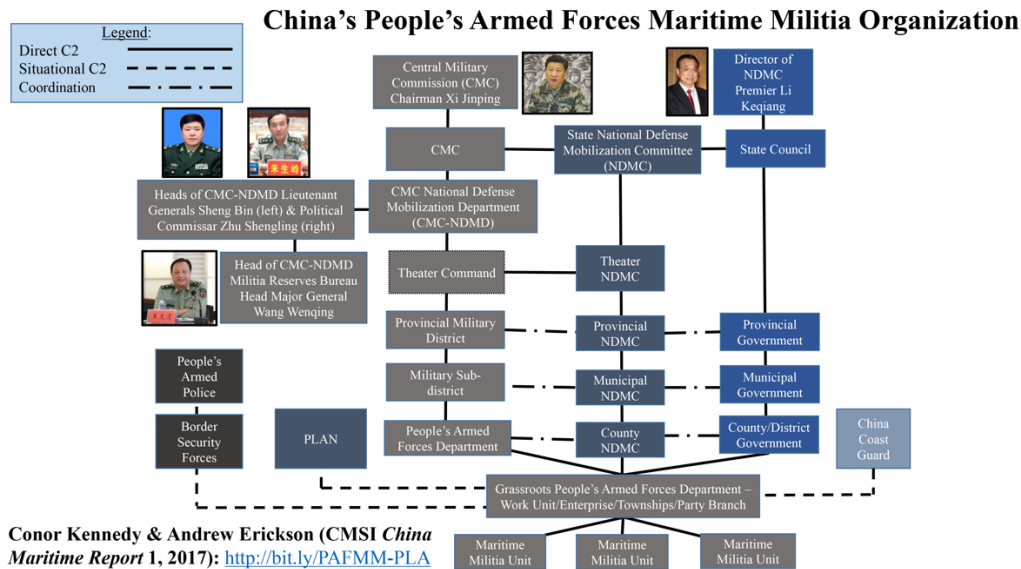


Figure 6: PAFMM Chain of Command and Control

PAFMM units fall within a broad spectrum of militarization. At the high end of the spectrum are those PAFMM units oriented on supporting Taiwan contingencies such as those based in the provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Nanjing.⁵² In the middle are those PAFMM units oriented on maritime law enforcement (MLE), and territorial sovereignty operations, like those based in the provinces of Hainan, Guangxi, and Guangdong.⁵³ On the low end of the spectrum are those PAFMM units like those based in Jiangsu provinces who focus on other tasks such as search and rescue and maritime surveillance.⁵⁴

The provincial governments each have different methods for equipping their respective PAFMM units, but all of the ships generally fall within three classifications: repurposed FLE or CMS ships, specially-designed ships, and upgraded fishing vessels. The best example of the first classification of vessel, a repurposed of a FLE/CMS ship, is the YZ-310. In May 2015, having outlived its usefulness to the CCG, it was stripped of its guns and transferred to Hainan's Sansha City NDMC for duty with the PAFMM.⁵⁵ The best example of the second classification, specially-designed ships, are also found among Hainan Province whose PAFMM units are most

active in the SCS. The Hainan provincial government placed an order for vessels equipped with “mast-mounted water cannons, collision-absorbing rails, and reinforced hulls” in the same year the YZ-310 was acquired.⁵⁶ Additional requirements for small arms and ammunition storage rooms were included in the acquisitions request.⁵⁷ The third classification, upgraded fishing vessels, compose the majority of the PAFMM’s fleet. These ships do not have the purpose-built design features of the YZ-310 or Hainan’s new fleet, but they still possess upgraded communications for coordinating with the PLAN and CCG, small arms weapon storage, and fire hoses to harass adversary vessels.⁵⁸ This classification of ships is particularly difficult for identity confirmation as every ship over 50 tons is required to register with the PRC, and the government does not keep a publicly accessible registrar of those ships belonging to the PAFMM.⁵⁹

Manning the PAFMM was made easier between 2015 and 2017. During these years, the PLA cut 300,000 soldiers as part of the overall plan to modernize the Chinese military, and these former soldiers were rapidly absorbed into the burgeoning ranks of the PAFMM.⁶⁰ The Hainan provincial government again provides an excellent example of this practice in action. As they were submitting their orders for ships, they simultaneously allocated funds to support PAFMM salaries, and aggressively recruited veterans with promises of a steady government paycheck to fill the fleet.⁶¹ The provincial governments gain threefold benefits from the practice of recruiting veterans. The first benefit is the efficient use of time. By having veterans in the PAFMM, training cadres spend less time on skills that they know the veterans already possess i.e. small arms marksmanship and communications. Second, an increase in discipline through the retention of talented leaders. Retention is made easier when a provincial government can supplement a leader’s veteran’s pension with monthly activation and training subsidies instead of

relying on only those subsidies to provide income.⁶² These incentivized leaders then in turn produce higher levels discipline through their continued presence, and adherence to standards. Third, neutralization of a threat to civil society from disgruntled veterans who wish they were still in the PLA. The repercussions of having several hundred thousand soldiers suddenly unemployed undoubtedly weighed heavily on the minds of the Central Military Commission which led them to promote the expansion of the PAFMM as one of the means for risk mitigation.⁶³

After signing a contract, the newly recruited militiaman joins a *fendui* which is a “grouping of personnel organized for a specific function.”⁶⁴ The *fenduis*, typically aligned to a city, are the base organization for tactical command and control. They vary in size depending on the population base and criticality of the assigned mission, but the mean size is approximately 10 boats manned by 120 men.⁶⁵ It is within these *fenduis* that the PAFMM complete their training requirements. Training common to all militiamen include small arms, communications equipment, maritime reconnaissance, ship maintenance, seamanship, and integration with the PLAN and CCG.⁶⁶ Advanced training by contrast is dependent on each *fendui*'s assigned mission e.g. at-sea repair and replenishment, engineering⁶⁷, mine warfare, obscuration through physical and technical means⁶⁸, advanced electronic countermeasures, defense of naval anchorages, and maritime rescue.⁶⁹

The training, manning, and equipping of the PAFMM are all designed to enable its two asymmetric capabilities which are critical to the proper functioning of the campaign: ambiguity of purpose, and ambiguity of size. The first asymmetric capability, ambiguity of purpose, is created by the following critical requirements: appearance and obfuscation of status. In terms of appearance, most PAFMM ships appear as regular fishing vessels, and all lack national markings

in contrast to the distinctive paint schemes of warships or MLE ships. An article written in 2014 for China's official military newspaper, *PLA Daily*, describes the appearance deception, “Putting on camouflage [uniforms], they qualify as soldiers; taking off the camouflage [uniforms], they become law-abiding fishermen”.⁷⁰ The PRC’s intent with this deception is to achieve a decisive advantage in decision-making time as a function of the increased time it takes for a foreign warship or MLE ship to positively identify a vessel as belonging to the PAFMM.

Ambiguity of purpose is further reinforced by the PRC’S deliberate obfuscation of the PAFMM’s status as either a naval auxiliary, or fishing vessel. The uncertainty of how to treat the PAFMM has left other nation’s maritime forces confused and unable to appropriately respond. If they act with force because they believe the PAFMM are naval auxiliaries, and lawful military objectives, they risk escalation to “armed conflict”, and condemnation for attacking an ‘innocent’ fishing vessel. If instead, they act with restraint, and treat the PAFMM as a fishing vessel, they risk personal harm and damage to their own ships due to the aggressive tactics of the PAFMM. This confusion has kept other nation’s maritime forces in Boyd’s observe-orient loop, and consistently unable to make decisions that lead to action.⁷¹

The second asymmetric capability, ambiguity of size, is created by the following critical requirements: lack of a formal registry for PAFMM vessels, and the PRC’s requirement to register every ship over 50 tons for national defense.⁷² This has created a theoretical size of the PAFMM that is best summed up in one adjective, large. Unfortunately, definitive estimates of the size do not exist, but are possible with the advent of artificial intelligence, and an aggregation of big data sets from various sources that are discussed later in this paper. The lowest number in the range of estimates is 480 vessels which translates to the combined strength of the PLAN and

CCG.⁷³ On the opposite side of the range is the highest estimate of 140,000 vessels from a study conducted in 1978.⁷⁴

The most realistic estimate of 20,000 PAFMM vessels comes from a combination of three factors.⁷⁵ The first factor is a plausible starting number from an excellent study about China's Deep-Water Fishing (DWF) fleet published by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), an independent international think tank. In this study, the ODI researchers identified 16,966 vessels through various technical and administrative means which were either flagged to China, or another country, but were operated by a Chinese state-owned enterprise.⁷⁶ The second factor is a hypothesis that the PRC will also allocate a number of vessels under 50 tons to the PAFMM. The third and final factor is an understanding that not every DWF ship is a PAFMM vessel, and while resource rich even the Chinese do not have the ability to train and equip every vessel to act as part of the Third Sea Force. The disclaimer to an estimate of 20,000 is that this number is the most dangerous activation level, but likely far exceeds the amount of PAFMM vessels the PRC could surge at one time. Assumptions based on maintenance levels, crew availability, out-of-area fishing, and others are required to smartly estimate the number of PAFMM vessels that would most likely receive activation orders in the event of a crisis.

The PAFMM's critical capabilities, ambiguity of purpose and ambiguity of size are powerful, but not insurmountable, and a successful counter-campaign will degrade these by attacking the vulnerable aspects of their critical requirements. The United States and the Southeast Asian nations can no longer wait for China to begin acting as a responsible power, and the following is the best available solution for immediate implementation. The sum effects of the counter-campaign are the restoration of timely decision-making and celerity of action for the

United States and the Southeast Asian nations by both directly and indirectly attacking the critical capabilities.

Counter-Campaign

A successful counter-campaign must begin by attacking the vulnerability in the PAFMM's critical requirements of appearance, status, and registry. The United States can accomplish this through three focuses of effort: creation of a surveillance network to identify and monitor the PAFMM, strengthening of regional institutions, and inducement of administrative means to control the PAFMM. The first focus of effort for this counter-campaign is the development of a robust surveillance network. This network must possess the ability to detect, identify, and monitor the movements of the Third Sea Force. The scope of amassing the information required to make the network function seems daunting under a cursory glance, but the information already exists in various databases and studies. The majority of the work will involve aggregating and organizing the information into a single archive for useful analysis. The ODI study, as one example, was compiled through big data analysis methods using inputs from Automatic Identification System (AIS)⁷⁷ signals, publicly-accessed ship registries, and Geographic Information System mapping⁷⁸. Other repositories of data devoted to this problem set are found at the Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute, and the Congressional Research Service. Finally, perusing the records from the naval and maritime law enforcement services of Japan, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia would yield yet more data. The synthesis of all these data sets through big data analysis techniques and artificial intelligence modeling can produce a reliable roster of PAFMM vessels.

As a reliable roster is produced, the United States and other nations in the region can maximize existing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies; and communications, data storage, and distribution systems to confirm the ships on the roster. A central component of the surveillance network must include technical monitoring of AIS signals and Maritime Mobile Service Identity⁷⁹ transmissions by a secure satellite-based vessel monitoring system (VMS). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration already operates a VMS, albeit for far smaller numbers, but it is easy to envision an expansion of this system.⁸⁰ Another essential component for the surveillance network to function properly is a secure method for distributing information such as a search-engine type database i.e. ProQuest or Janes.

The final component needed to make the surveillance network work is a primary actor to bear the responsibility of constructing, maintaining, and securing the system. The logical choice to fill this role is the United States because of the historic international security positions of the Southeast Asian states, concentration of resources, and experience in leading international organizations. The type of organization within the United States' repository that is optimally suited for this role is a Combined Joint Interagency Task Force (CJIATF) established under a Combatant Command. United States Indo-Pacific Command is an excellent candidate to lead this CJIATF because it possesses the most resident expertise and experience running interagency, and international task forces and organizations, e.g., JIATF West, and the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management.⁸¹ Indonesia and Singapore are the other prime candidates to lead the CJIATF because neither possesses a contested territorial claim in the SCS. Indonesia, though, is the best of these two candidates because it is equipped with a significantly larger naval and MLE force than Singapore, second only to the Chinese, and routinely coordinates operations

across a large area.⁸² The additional benefit of Indonesia assuming the leadership of the CJATF is that it will appeal to historical Southeast Asian security sentiments, discussed more in depth below. In this scenario, the United States will serve as a key enabler, but regardless of who plays the lead role the CJATF's mission will not change: detect and monitor known and suspected vessels who are threatening regional security and sovereignty claims in order to facilitate international reporting and interdiction. The properly resourced CJATF empowered with the correct international authorities will fuse international capabilities to identify, track, communicate, and coordinate action, as appropriate, on PAFMM and other vessels who are posing a threat to regional security, and sovereignty claims.

Inherent to the creation of the surveillance network is the second focus of effort necessary to degrade the PAFMM's critical capabilities, strengthening regional institutions. In the context of the South China Sea, strengthening regional institutions is a two-part line of effort which abides by the historic norms of the region. The traditional international relations positions of these states are based on their most prized possession – independence. Only in the 20th century were most of the nations of Southeast Asia able to achieve their independence as they went through a period of decolonization. The policies that they have employed over the last several decades to maintain that independence involve a combination of hegemonic order, balancing, and institution building.⁸³ The ideal hegemonic order for states in Southeast Asia favors the United States on top because its foreign policies since the end of World War II more frequently align with and support their own.⁸⁴ Next, balancing is used to draw favorable policies or concessions out of either China or the United States by playing one power off against the other.⁸⁵ Last, institution building attempts to improve cooperation among all states in the region, and

provide a forum for communication that has most often taken the form of discussions about economic matters e.g. trade and financial regulation agreements.⁸⁶

The first and obvious choice to strengthen regional institutions would involve the reviving and bolstering the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which was established in 1994 to “foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern.”⁸⁷ Unfortunately for the purposes of the counter-campaign and the functioning of the CJIATF, this organization, consisting of 27 nations, is a consensus decision-making forum which means no decision is made “against the will of an individual or minority.”⁸⁸ Since China is a member of the ARF, it can delay or impede any decision that is not in its favor.⁸⁹ Instead, the United States should support an alternate security forum that consists of only ASEAN member states who make decisions based on a supermajority.⁹⁰ Even though this type of decision-making body would not include the United States, it more importantly does not include China, and reduces the amount of influence China has on decisions.

ASEAN nations have demonstrated their capacity for aggregating to confront China on its more blatant sovereignty gambits. As recently as June 2020, they issued an assertion for the maintenance of ‘freedom of overflight’ in the SCS in response to China’s pending declaration of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the region.⁹¹ China seems to have recognized the implications of this unified front, and adjusted its rhetoric about the ADIZ by saying it will “carefully and prudently study the relevant issue taking into account all factors.”⁹² If one meeting and common declaration from ASEAN can make China change its tone, it bears to reason that more frequent meetings by a members-only security forum will have a similar effect on negating China’s integrated maritime campaign.

The second part of strengthening regional institutions involves maximizing the use of the region's predilection for bilateral negotiations in order to improve alliances, create new partnerships and alliances, and negotiate new agreements. Historically, ASEAN states, with a few exceptions, have bypassed regional and international institutions in favor of bilateral discussions.⁹³ China recognized and exploited this behavior to its advantage which enabled its maritime forces to intimidate individual nations instead of coalitions.⁹⁴ By touting its reputation for adhering to international norms and behaviors that favor the region's traditions, the United States has the opportunity to subvert China's actions. The results of this two-part effort to strengthen regional institutions will facilitate the collection of data about the PAFMM, and imbue multiple nations with the confidence necessary to simultaneously confront China together.

The third focus of effort for the United States is to induce administrative means upon China that will force it to control the PAFMM's actions. If confronted bilaterally by an individual nation, China will not acquiesce to its demands, but if the efforts from the second focus of effort bear fruit then there is a reasonable chance of success for this effort. The process of inducing China to corral the behavior of the PAFMM must begin with multinational confrontation e.g. the 2020 ASEAN confrontation of a unilaterally imposed Chinese ADIZ,⁹⁵ and it ends with a publicly available official-PRC inventory similar to the Naval Vessel Register.⁹⁶ This inventory will serve as an official declaration and acknowledgment by the PRC of its responsibilities to discipline behaviors not in accordance with international law. An aggrieved nation can then use this inventory as evidence for legal proceedings to receive redress, or as part of ARF discussions to levy disciplinary actions against China.

Next, the PRC must separate the PAFMM into two categories of service within the official inventory and in accordance with the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea:

non-commercial and commercial. A non-commercial category will encapsulate those professionalized PAFMM vessels actively engaged in maritime sovereignty operations, such as Hainan's *fenduis*. Once assigned to this category, these *fenduis* will require official markings and uniforms similar to the PLAN and CCG. While subject to sovereign immunity under both international and United States law, this categorization enhances several legal capabilities such as the justification for ordering a departure from territorial seas, justification for the use of force or an armed attack, and visual evidence for litigation involving failures of "Duties of the Flag State."⁹⁷

The second category, commercial service, are currently the greater number of PAFMM vessels. Vessels designated as commercial service are not lawful military objectives, and this is the main benefit to the PRC for choosing to register vessels in this category. Only after a commercial vessel engages in activities that directly support naval operations will its status change and make it lawful for another nation to identify it for destruction.⁹⁸ This status is in contrast to non-commercial service ships who are considered as lawful a military target as a warship. Before the PRC can register a vessel in this category though it must fulfill two requirements. The first is to cease providing military training to its crew, and the second is to remove all military or law enforcement equipment e.g. small arms and fire hoses, from the vessel. If the international community fails to make the PRC meet these two requirements in registering a vessel, it will not appreciably degrade the PAFMM's critical capability of ambiguity of purpose, and the PAFMM will continue to put on or take off their uniforms as they please.

The United States will have to take the first step, and lead by example, in order to demonstrate its commitment to countering the PRC's integrated maritime campaign to ASEAN

and other nations in the region. The following two ‘quick win’ methods are available for the United States to express this resolve: increase United States maritime presence, and staff the CJIATF. The first method is increasing the United States maritime presence within the SCS. Even though Southeast Asian nations and United States have disputed this control in court and conducted Freedom of Navigation operations,⁹⁹ the fact remains that the Chinese continue to persist either on or in vicinity of those maritime terrain features. These operations, particularly by the United States, are akin to trying to establish a presence by “raiding from remote, secure bases.”¹⁰⁰ Instead, United States forces must strive to meet the maxim from Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24), *Counterinsurgency*, to “establish and maintain a presence” by “living in the AO [Area of Operations] close to the populace” because it creates “links with the local people.”¹⁰¹ The main focus of effort for United States maritime forces, in the context of FM 3-24, is security force assistance and the process of building partner capacity among the ASEAN navies and MLE agencies. As trust is built among the ASEAN partners, United States naval forces can begin combined maritime patrols in accordance with the previously mentioned mission of the CJIATF. A difficult, but necessary, imperative for the United States Navy, United States Marine Corps, and United States Coast Guard forces participating in the combined maritime patrols are rules of engagement (ROEs) and an escalation of force (EOF) framework to guide their action when encountering the inevitable Chinese response. These ROEs and EOF framework are beyond the scope of this paper, but vital initial work on this topic was published by the Naval War College and should guide their creation.¹⁰² The benefits of using United States maritime forces are their unique abilities to rapidly deploy and re-deploy, self-sustain, and perform multiple roles. These attributes make maritime forces, in general, more palatable for the domestic politics of states in

Southeast Asia because they alleviate the perceptions of an occupying force that an Army or Air Force presence might create.

Second, staff the CJIATF with manning from all branches of the government in order to ensure it has the military, diplomatic, legal, and economic expertise necessary to succeed. The first step in the process is to create a joint manning document to identify the ideal mix of representation. The easy way is rarely the wise way, and the developers must take care to avoid over-saturation of the CJIATF by the military. While it will undoubtedly take time, the buy-in to take action against Chinese actions in the SCS has gained positive momentum in the halls of the United States government. Personnel from the Departments of State, Justice, and Commerce have a lot to contribute to the CJIATF, if the United States is to navigate the international agreements necessary for a shared surveillance network, strengthen regional security institutions, and induce administrative means on China.

The time to implement this counter-campaign is now. Every day that passes without acting is another day that the PAFMM persists near a contested terrain feature, and the PRC moves closer to achieving its near-term goal of de facto control of the maritime terrain within the Nine-Dash Line. The United States cannot wait to act until all of the pieces of a counter-campaign are in place. It must exploit the rancor among the Southeast Asian nations of the SCS towards Chinese actions.¹⁰³ As Erickson and Collins stated, “Beijing has pocketed gains without acknowledging the benefits and goodwill it has squandered.”¹⁰⁴ Eventually, China will remember the wisdom of its own history, as an ancient sage opined in the *Zuozhuan*¹⁰⁵, “Good relations are not to be neglected; enmity is not to be nurtured...By nurturing enmity and not repenting, he [Lord Huan of Chen] went the way of bringing disaster upon himself.”¹⁰⁶ Before that can happen the United States must implement a counter-campaign that attacks the

PAFMM’s ambiguity of size and ambiguity of purpose. Under the aegis of a whole of United States government approach, an international maritime surveillance network, strong regional security institutions, and administrative controls will degrade the PAFMM’s critical capabilities, neutralize China’s integrated maritime campaign, and re-establish order in the SCS.

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⁴ Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, 187.

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⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Competition Continuum*, Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 3, 2019), 9.

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⁹ Created by Author. The IW operations are not a comprehensive list as depicted on the graphic. Instead, they are a sampling from the spectrum of operations while also including those operations historically associated IW i.e. counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, etc.

¹⁰ The terrain features in contention consist of rocks, reefs, and shoals of various sizes. Surface and subsurface refers to visibility based on tides. Some of the terrain features are perpetually covered by the sea, some are only visible at low tide, and some are visible year round regardless of tides.

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