



Who are the “Maritime Militia”? Unmasking the Chinese Fisherman Appearing in Waters around the Senkaku Islands

The Chinese “Maritime Militia” has become the topic of discussion following reports of their appearance in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, but this image doesn’t mesh with reality. Of greater concern for Japan should be the alarming actions of the real navy in the area.

Tomisaka Satoshi, Professor for Institute of World Studies, Takushoku University,
Journalist

This is harassment, directed at Japan. That’s because the Communist Party is angry at Japan for acting as America’s puppet to hinder China on the South China Sea issue. If anything, this action comes too late,” said a Chinese diplomatic official. “Now with issues related to the Senkaku Islands, China is only worried about what action the United States may take.”

Why China Expressed Gratitude to Japan Amid an Anti-Japanese Mood

Around 1:30 p.m. on August 5, a single Chinese finishing vessel entered the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands. This was followed by the entry of a China Coast Guard vessel into those same waters. Perhaps this was a warning, because thereafter, like a dam gushing forth, the Chinese fishing vessels that surged into the surrounding waters numbered between 200 and 300.

The incursion of the fishing vessels wasn’t the only problem. Chinese government vessels also made repeated incursions, and by the latter half of the month, some 15 Chinese government vessels had assembled in the waters, where they continued to put pressure on the Japanese side.

With the Japanese media consumed with the fervor of a medal rush at the Olympics, it goes without saying that behind the scenes, the Japan Coast Guard was up to its neck trying to respond. Why did this happen?

True to the Chinese comments shared at the beginning of this article, there is no question that this was “retaliation” for the South China Sea issue. But what cannot be overlooked is how China mobilized civilian fishing vessels, and what this means.

“It’s simple. Chinese fishermen have always wanted to fish in the rich fishing grounds of the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, but the government has kept them under control. In a way, the



Tomisaka Satoshi, Professor
for Institute of World Studies,
Takushoku University,
Journalist

government has simply unleashed a dog that was eager to spring forward. But as this is also a kind of harassment, there is no need for a serious increase in tensions. In a show of controlling them, the government vessels surrounded the Chinese fishing vessels and kept watch over them while continuing to put pressure on Japan.” (aforementioned diplomatic official)

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What did not exceed the bounds of harassment was on August 11 when a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Greek freighter off the coast of the Senkaku Islands. A patrol vessel of the Japan Coast Guard rescued the Chinese fishermen who had been thrown overboard, and in response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying that “the assistance provided by the Japanese side and the humanitarian spirit it displayed is worthy of praise.” It is also clear that after this, the number of fishing vessels appearing near the Senkaku Islands and surrounding waters decreased. Traditionally, it would be almost inconceivable for China to express gratitude to Japan amid such an anti-Japanese mood.

Soldiers trained to take on clandestine work?

The multitude of misunderstandings surrounding China’s “Maritime Militia”

Even so, from the perspective of the Japanese side, the latest incursion into its waters represents the “opening of a new breach” and a problem that cannot be overlooked. The mobilization of fishermen warrants particular attention. On the other hand, the comments written up by the Japanese media are left to stand on their own, and it bears mentioning that interpretations with little resemblance to reality are being allowed to slide.

One such example is the “Maritime Militia.” In Japan, its members are taken to be “trained soldiers” masquerading as fisherman and engaging in clandestine operations at their government’s behest.

But the reality is somewhat different. While they are recognized as legitimate soldiers in the context of China’s domestic laws, in practice they are close to being “mere fishermen.”

Yamamoto Katsuya, a former SDF officer who was stationed in China, writes about this in detail in his column “China in the Eyes of an SDF Officer (Part 13)” (posted on the website of the JMSDF Command and Staff College). In the column, Yamamoto writes that the “Maritime Militia System” “may be one of the few coercive measures available to control arrogant Chinese fishermen who act as they like.” I am of the same view.

The “Maritime Militia,” which is already an obsolete term in Chinese society, was originally formed with tensions in the Taiwan Strait in mind, and in response to Mao Tse-tung’s slogan that “all people are soldiers,” males between the ages of 18 and 50 were automatically inducted into military or militia forces. This age requirement was later reduced to those between the ages of 18 and 35, and while it still continues to this day, activities such as regular training are not a part of the system.

However, these organizations are run by the civil defense offices in each province, whose top leaders are active military personnel (and also serve on provincial standing committees), and regular gatherings are held. As fishermen are paid an allowance just for attending these gatherings, they actively take part.

While they were similarly compensated to mobilize this time, instead of a military campaign, this took place in the form of each province responding to requests from the China Coast Guard.

Unless we make this distinction, we could make the elementary mistake of confusing this recent incident with the moves of fishing boats that made incursions around the Ogasawara Islands and elsewhere during the red coral poaching incident. This would be a misreading of the changing signals China is putting out.

Most of the fishing boats seized during the red coral poaching incident could be described as rogue off-the-grid vessels, and were clearly different from the GPS-controlled fishing vessels that arrived off the coast of the Senkaku Islands. In the case of the latter, the Chinese government was 100% aware of their positions.

On the other hand, the former bore false bow numbers. During the red coral poaching incident, authorities struggled to gain a grasp of the situation and the fishing vessels were subjected to penalties following the incident.

The “Maritime Militia” are not military professionals masquerading as fishermen despite what you would associate with that wording. China has rapidly increased the number of government vessels it operates, and with a shortage of crew, it has placed fishermen on those vessels as a temporary measure. That’s why when experts analyze footage of Chinese government vessels, they see many cases of crew members on the deck with their hands in their pockets, or casually stepping on rope, exhibiting a lack of discipline that would be inconceivable for a trained seaman.

The 27 Degree North Latitude Issue: More Serious than the Maritime Militia

Rather than reassurance, for Japan this is a reason for caution, because current circumstances mean that an increasing number of “amateurs” are crewing Chinese government vessels, adding to fears that some might act unpredictably and heighten tensions.

If Japan wants to prevent China from encroaching upon waters under its administrative control, it is important that it doesn’t itself create an opening for China to do so, and as the situation becomes more agitated, the hole that China can take advantage of grows wider.

Here is a typical example: Since Tokyo Governor Ishihara boastfully announced the plan for the Japanese government to purchase the Senkaku Islands, there has actually been an increase in the

number encroachments into Japanese waters by China.

In other words, while it is in Japan's national interest to reduce points of contention with China, from that perspective, there is a need to calmly analyze whether it is appropriate to create a catalyst for China to advance into the South China Sea in reaction to Japan taking an offensive stance against China on the issue.

When comparing the interests of Japan, the United States and the Philippines in the South China Sea issue, while both the United States and Philippines have clear interests in the zone, Japan's interests are comparatively weaker.

The intention behind the as-yet-undetermined rapid increase in full-scale forays by the Chinese Navy.

To date, Japan has engaged in spirited diplomacy that is popular with the Japanese populace but which results in it being pushed back by China. In the future, however, that sort of haphazard response won't be accepted, because it will be the Chinese Navy appearing instead of the "Maritime Militia." This is something secretly being referred to as the "27 Degree North Latitude Issue." The Senkaku Islands are situated between 25 and 26 degrees north latitude.

"Since about a year ago, China started to go beyond the 27 degree north latitude line, one of the points used to demarcate the waters around the Senkaku Islands, and Chinese naval ships have made an increasing number of incursions south of this point. While China is yet to consolidate these incursions, if they become increasingly common, Japan will be forced to expand the scope of its response, and its already large burden will only increase. In addition, depending on circumstances Japan may be forced to deal with the issue in some way. In that case, what action would Japan take? It would be forced to engage in delicate calculations and maneuvering, but against a backdrop of fever-pitch public opinion, if it continues to prioritize populist policies, it may bring about irreparable losses to Japan." (diplomatic official).

At present, only certain vessel and aircraft captains (and certain ships and aircraft types) are seriously overstepping the 27 degree north latitude line. For this reason, Japan cannot determine whether these incidents are individual judgments made in the field, or intentional acts at the behest of the government.

In either case, judgments based on accurate information are the basis for minimizing Japanese losses. It's time to seriously distance ourselves from emotional views that don't bring results.

Translated from "Kaijo-minpei towa nanimonoka? Senkaku shuhen-kaiiki ni arawareta chugoku gyomin no shotai (Who are the "Maritime Militia"? Unmasking the Chinese Fisherman Appearing in Waters around the Senkaku Islands)," Wedge, October 2016, pp. 22-24. (Courtesy of WEDGE Inc.) [October 2016]

TOMISAKA Satoshi**Professor for Institute of World Studies, Takushoku University, Journalist**

Born in 1964. After studying Chinese abroad at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University, Tomisaka became a journalist. He continues to report on China using his extensive network of personal contacts. Recent writings include “Xi Jinping and the Demise of China” (Kadokawa SSC Shinsho) and “Chinese Puzzle” (Wedge).
