

Chinese Views of Civilian Ship Mobilization

Brian Waidelich, Patrick deGategno, Timothy Ditter, and Thomas Bickford

This summary is based on the full-length CNA report, *Chinese Views of Civilian Ships' Support to PLA Maritime Operations*, DRM-2021-C-029795-Final.

Distribution

Distribution Statement A. Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.

11/10/2021

This work was performed under Federal Government Contract No. N00014-16-D-5003.

This document contains the best opinion of CNA at the time of issue. It does not necessarily represent the opinion of the sponsor.

Approved by:

Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, Director
China Studies Program
China & Indo-Pacific Security Affairs
Division

November 2021

Request additional copies of this document through inquiries@cna.org.

3003 Washington Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201
703-824-2000

www.cna.org

Copyright © CNA 2021

This document summarizes key findings from an examination of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) writings on China’s efforts to leverage its civilian shipping fleet in support of military operations. We analyzed PLA reference volumes, technical journals, and media reports published between 2015 and 2020 to explore continuities and changes to the PLA’s approach to civilian ships amid ongoing military reforms.

Civilian ships are an important component of PLA planning for future maritime contingencies.

- Chinese military authors assert that, despite ongoing modernization and reforms, the PLA Navy still lacks sufficient organic sealift to support large-scale maritime operations.
- These authors claim that mobilized civilian ships can offset this shortfall and support a range of military operations in the run-up to and during an armed conflict.

PLA writings identify a broad range of missions that mobilized Chinese civilian ships could be called on to conduct in support of large-scale PLA maritime operations. Missions and ship types include the following.

Potential wartime missions of civilian ships	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation of military personnel and equipment • Search and rescue (SAR), medical support, and medical evacuation • Replenishment at sea • Use as a helicopter platform • Minelaying and minesweeping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance • Ship repair • Deception, camouflage, and spoofing • Air defense • Fire support
Types of civilian ships that may undertake these missions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll-on/roll-off (RO/RO) ships • Tankers • Container ships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bulk freighters • Semi-submersibles • Fishing ships

Over the past decade, the PLA has refined how it conceives of using civilian ships for wartime missions and has tested some of these applications in training. PLA logistics experts state that military training with civilian ships has expanded in recent years. These experts cite growth in the types of ships involved, the frequency of training activities, and the number of training topics covered.

PLA media have reported several apparently new or experimental applications of civilian ships during recent military training. These include: the use of a container ship for replenishment of a PLA Navy frigate at sea (2019), a semi-submersible as a PLA Army helicopter-landing platform (2020), and a RO/RO for PLA Navy Marine Corps amphibious launch (2020). (See photos below.)

PLA authors assess that China’s ability to mobilize civilian ships to support large-scale operations is improving.

- Since 2015, the PLA has streamlined the organizational structure of its logistics and mobilization systems through the creation of organizations such as the Joint Logistics Support Force and the Central Military Commission’s National Defense Mobilization Department.
- China has also been organizing state-owned shipping and logistics companies’ vessels into a “strategic projection support fleet” tasked with supporting military sealift missions. This fleet comprises at least four—and possibly as many as nine—subordinate maritime shipping groups.

However, PLA writings continue to identify command and control-related challenges.

- PLA authors identify persistent bureaucratic problems—gaps in regulations, poor compensation to ship owners, etc.—that complicate the requisitioning of civilian assets.
- Some coastal commands have integrated advanced information systems and technologies for tracking and communicating with civilian ships, but it remains unclear how widespread the acquisition of related capabilities has been across commands.
- PLA authors claim that there has been minimal recent training between civilian ships and the PLA Navy on critical topics such as command and communications.

While noting civilian ships’ great theoretical potential, Chinese writings suggest that, in practice, only a fraction of these ships may be requisitioned to execute a limited set of wartime missions.

- PLA subject matter experts indicate that, to date, few Chinese civilian ships are built to national defense standards or are otherwise suitable for supporting wartime operations. Military operators may be selective about which civilian ships to mobilize in the run-up to a conflict.
- PLA authors and media claim that most training with civilian ships over the past decade has focused on transporting personnel and equipment. This implies that Chinese civilian ships may generally be less prepared to carry out other types of missions.



Image credits (left to right): China Military Online, Nov. 16, 2019; China Military Video Net, Aug. 21, 2020; China Military Video Net, Aug. 2, 2020. This document contains materials protected by the Fair Use guidelines of Section 107 of the Copyright Act. The material is being used for informational purposes only. This material is copyrighted and CNA does not own this content. All rights and credits go directly to its rightful owner.