

## Tainted Catch: The Role of the Distant Water Fishing Fleet in China's Campaign to Defeat the West

### Description

*Editor's note: This article is part of IWI's [Maritime Program](#), which explores modern challenges and opportunities in the maritime dimension at the intersection of irregular warfare and strategic competition.*

As the death tolls mount in kinetic conflicts around the world — in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and elsewhere — the death toll is also rising in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) self-styled "non-kinetic warfare" against the West. The casualties, however, tend to be citizens of the Global South, killed as a byproduct of Chinese policies.

While the United States may diplomatically refer to China's aggressive engagement with the world as "Great Power Competition" or more recently as "Strategic Competition," China calls much of what it has been doing for the last quarter century "non-kinetic warfare." Though this term is inconsistent with the legal and even colloquial definitions of war — meaning physical hostilities between belligerent parties — it signals that China's "competition" with the West is aimed at achieving what would traditionally be accomplished through military force. China's express strategy is to "win without fighting" but even if it is not actually at war, the PRC is nevertheless killing people.

One of the PRC's most significant action arms in this effort to "win," at least in the maritime domain, is the multifaceted Distant Water Fishing Fleet (DWF). The largest fishing fleet in the world, the DWF has been linked to a [wide range of incursions on sovereignty, aggressively unsustainable practices, human rights violations, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing \(IUUF\), and even crimes](#). Operating like a mining company in a remote area, the Distant Water Fishing Fleet sends hundreds of vessels to different areas of the world's oceans to plunder all the living marine resources it can take. To sustain such an operation at sea, it is also accompanied, by tankers, refrigerated cargo vessels, and supply vessels that support the DWF. In total, the Fleet includes [nearly 3,000 vessels](#), and accounts for roughly [a third of all global high seas fishing](#).

Investigations by the [Outlaw Ocean Project](#) published in the *New Yorker* (expanding on the work of investigative journalist Ian Urbina and his book [The Outlaw Ocean: Journeys Across the Last](#)

[Untamed Frontier](#) have found significant cause for global concern in how China pursues fish around the world. Across hundreds of Chinese vessels in the DWF, non-Chinese nationals that are recruited to work as deckhands and fishermen are often provided with so little nutrition, subjected to unsanitary environments, and denied treatment for injuries that they become ill and when they do, they are not given access to life-saving medical treatment. Not even mentioning the poor working conditions and the excessive working hours with no time off, deaths on Chinese fishing vessels have become so numerous as to be considered commonplace. Certain ports such as [Montevideo](#), [Uruguay](#) have even become sufficiently accustomed to receiving and repatriating the corpses of these dead mariners that the process has become routine.

These casualties, even though they come from countries in the Global South, should be considered part of the death toll in the PRC's war against the West.

In 1999, two senior colonels in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force published a highly influential text titled [Unrestricted Warfare](#), in which they argued that the major failing of the United States and the wider West is seeing military superiority only as a matter of technology. The text goes on to identify eleven different types of non-kinetic warfare that the West tends to overlook. Included in that list is Resources Warfare which they describe as grabbing riches by plundering stores of resources. While Resources Warfare was not included in the 2003 [Three Warfares](#) doctrine focusing on Psychological, Public Opinion and Legal Warfare all eleven of the categories identified in 1999 are evident in China's conduct over the years. China's aggressive use of the DWF is an unmistakable example of how China's non-kinetic warfare pursues a variety of strategic ends.

Countless pieces in recent years have [documented](#) how the DWF has been engaging in large-scale unsustainable fisheries practices around the world, literally plundering the waters of both the high seas and of coastal states. Some of that has included illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUUF), while the rest has often been excessive and unsustainable, but not definitively illegal. Indeed, in many places around the world, China is considered the [primary offender](#) when it comes to IUUF.

But the goal is to win without fighting, not necessarily to win without killing.

What this means, therefore, is that the school cafeterias, military bases and restaurants around Europe and North America that serve fish caught by the DWF are all inadvertently serving fish tainted with the blood of people like Daniel Aritonang of Indonesia, whose story forms the backbone of [the 2023 exposé in The New Yorker](#). In a traditional kinetic conflict between China and the United States, one would expect the primary casualties to be Chinese and American nationals. In this form of non-kinetic Unrestricted Warfare, however, China is enjoying the economic benefit of serving tainted catch

to unsuspecting Americans, knowing that Indonesian and other third country nationals have died in the process of producing it.

Collateral damage is a term that applies to the unfortunate and unintentional harm that befalls civilians amid armed conflict. Responsible militaries that value human life take painstaking measures to limit collateral damage. China may consider itself to be engaged in “non-kinetic warfare,” but it certainly knows that it is not engaged in an armed conflict in the legal or traditional sense. The deaths of people like Daniel and many others – both documented and unknown – have all been eminently preventable. Their deaths are not collateral damage in China’s Resources Warfare; they are the result of gross and wanton disregard for non-Chinese lives. The onboard disparity between the Chinese nationals and the foreign nationals, as documented by [The Outlaw Ocean Project](#), reveals that China sees no need to make an effort to ensure the survival of citizens of countries like Indonesia, where a meager payment from a company is the most that will be done in the event of a death.

But the DWF is not just engaged in “Resources Warfare.”

The DWF is also playing important roles in “Smuggling Warfare” (throwing markets into confusion and attacking economic order) “Drug Warfare” (obtaining sudden and huge illicit profits by spreading disaster in other countries) and “International Law Warfare” (seizing the earliest opportunity to set up regulations). Chinese fishing vessels have been used to move contraband and serve as a key element in the prolific [exportation of precursor chemicals for fentanyl production](#). The DWF is also being used by China as a means of strategic presence under the express theory that “occupying brings about rights and interests.” In other words, China is seeking to [legitimize bogus legal claims about territorial rights](#) through the occupation and operation of the DWF in different maritime areas. They are trying to remake international law through the use of the DWF and gain territory without having to fight for it. At the same time, under the [2017 National Intelligence Law](#), it is not even a question: the DWF is an intelligence arm of the PRC. All Chinese nationals, firms and enterprise must participate in intelligence collection on behalf of the state. The DWF is no exception.

And if it ever does come to a fight, the DWF may play crucial roles in kinetic operations, as well. The DWF is supporting China’s efforts to [advance its submarine warfare and anti-submarine warfare capabilities](#), providing presence on the water for the Blue Ocean Information Network that effectively turns the lights on beneath the surface, giving China a significant military advantage. The [installation of containerized missiles on its commercial shipping fleet](#) provides further credence to this notion that all vessels affiliated with the PRC are being positioned to provide military functions even while they continue to pursue a “win without fighting” through “non-kinetic warfare.”

Reducing to a simple matter of “competition” China’s callous attitude toward the human beings that provide extra manpower for its “non-kinetic warfare” not only undermines the severity of the situation, but obscures a path toward effectively addressing it. China is intentionally blurring lines: between state and private sector action, between law enforcement issues and defense issues, between peace and war. China is not trying to beat the West in a competition, it is trying to defeat the West in a “war” “without fighting.” While no “westerners” may be dying, China is killing people all over the world through the DWF and its crimes. The West needs to recognize that, take heed of the rising death toll, and devise an approach that is more effective in combatting the adversary that China has chosen to become than merely talking about “competition.”

To that end, all countries should take concrete steps to reduce China’s ability to exploit third country nationals on the DWF, and its ability to use the DWF for nefarious purposes. An initial matter is to ensure that all states maximize fisheries enforcement within their exclusive economic zone to prevent China from plundering their sovereign resources. This necessarily includes countering corruption to foreclose avenues for China to engage in unsustainable fishing that is “legalized” by officials who are willing to accept illicit remuneration for licensing such behavior. At the same time, all states should work to bring transparency to the way the PRC is operating. Targeted education is vital “particularly in Southeast Asian states from which China recruits the fishers who end up dying on the DWF. That education also should include key market nodes so that institutions become better motivated to conduct due diligence to avoid purchasing “blood fish.” To aid that effort, undertakings like the [Fisheries Transparency Initiative \(FiTI\)](#), the [Coalition for Fisheries Transparency](#), and private sector traceability programs “allowing for verifiable tracing of the chain of custody from catch to consumer” can all make due diligence much easier. As has been the case with diamonds and other minerals, concerted efforts to change the marketplace for fish can work. There are many reasons to address the issues posed by the DWF “sustainability, human rights, unfair market practices, criminality, sovereignty, and many more. Ultimately, the composite of those motivations should be marshaled to foreclose this avenue of China’s “Unrestricted Warfare” against the West. The PRC cannot be allowed to win, with or without fighting.

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*Main Image: U.S. Coast Guard officer signals a Chinese fishing vessel during an Oceania Maritime Security Initiative mission with USS Sampson, Nov. 29, 2016. (U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Bryan Jackson, via [Flickr](#)).*

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