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CHINESE DOMINANCE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA : AN EFFECTIVE USE OF HYBRID WARFARE

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JCSP 44

Exercise Solo Flight

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CHINESE DOMINANCE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: AN EFFECTIVE USE OF HYBRID WARFARE

The concept of hybrid warfare is controversial; some argue that recent conflicts in Crimea and in the South China Sea are simply a modern day interpretation of time-honored combinations of conventional and unconventional approaches.¹ This paper will argue that the theory of hybrid war is valid and that China is using this strategy to effectively advance their interests in the South China Sea. The multi-faceted approach combined with the restraint in the use of unrestricted conflict, while perhaps not completely unique in history, is something that has not been employed in recent times and will require a shift in mindset in order to preserve the sovereignty of other nations in the South China Sea.

Background

During the Eighteenth National Party Congress in 2012, Chinese President Hu Jintao called for China to strengthen its maritime capabilities and reinforce Chinese interests in the South China Sea.² This was subsequently followed up by a defence white paper that signaled that a shift from a land to a sea based focus, which was required to defend China's interests.³ The interest in the South China Sea lies within what is referred to as the nine-dash line, which is shown in Figure 1. While the Chinese government has never expressly stated their policy within the nine-dash line their actions and rhetoric, which will be discussed in depth later, indicate they believe that the South China Sea is

¹ Bastian Giegerich, "Hybrid Warfare and the Changing Character of Conflict," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*; Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Spring 2016.

² China Power Team. "Are maritime law enforcement forces destabilizing Asia?" *China Power*. Last modified May 31, 2018. <https://chinapower.csis.org/maritime-forces-destabilizing-asia/>.

³ *Ibid.*

very much theirs to control.⁴ This is in direct conflict with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that ruled that China has no basis for the claims within the nine-dash line.⁵

The South China Sea is an important economic zone for example, 3.37 Trillion (USD) of trade and forty percent of global liquefied natural gas passed through the area in 2016.⁶ In addition to this economic activity, there is unknown potential that has not yet been realized. While estimates vary, there are between 28 – 213 billion barrels of oil resources yet to be explored.⁷ In addition, there is an estimated 266 trillion cubic feet of natural gas which is becoming increasingly more valuable as a cleaner fossil fuel.⁸ These undiscovered resources and the economic importance of the area drive China's desire to increase their influence. This is in the context of China's economy growing at an annual rate of six percent requiring the import of approximately two million barrels of oil per day making China the world's larger oil importer.⁹ The greatest obstacle to this is competing claims from other nations, which exist within the nine-dash line. In order to

⁴ Marina Tsirbas, "What Does the Nine-Dashed Line Actually Mean?" *The Diplomat*, last modified June 2, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/what-does-the-nine-dash-line-actually-mean/>.

⁵ H. Beech, "Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?" *Time*, last modified June 26, 2018. <http://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/>.

⁶ Council on Foreign Relations. *Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea*, last modified November 29, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/territorial-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea>.

⁷ Tim Daiss, How Oil Drives the South China Sea Conflict, *Oil Price*, last modified March 14 2018. <https://oilprice.com/Energy/General/How-Oil-Drives-The-South-China-Sea-Conflict.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Scott Montgomery. "Oil, History, and the South China Sea: A Dangerous Mix." *Global Policy*, last modified August 7, 2018. <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/07/08/2018/oil-history-and-south-china-sea-dangerous-mix>

assert their influence China has engaged in a significant effort to assert influence over the areas through the use of hybrid warfare.

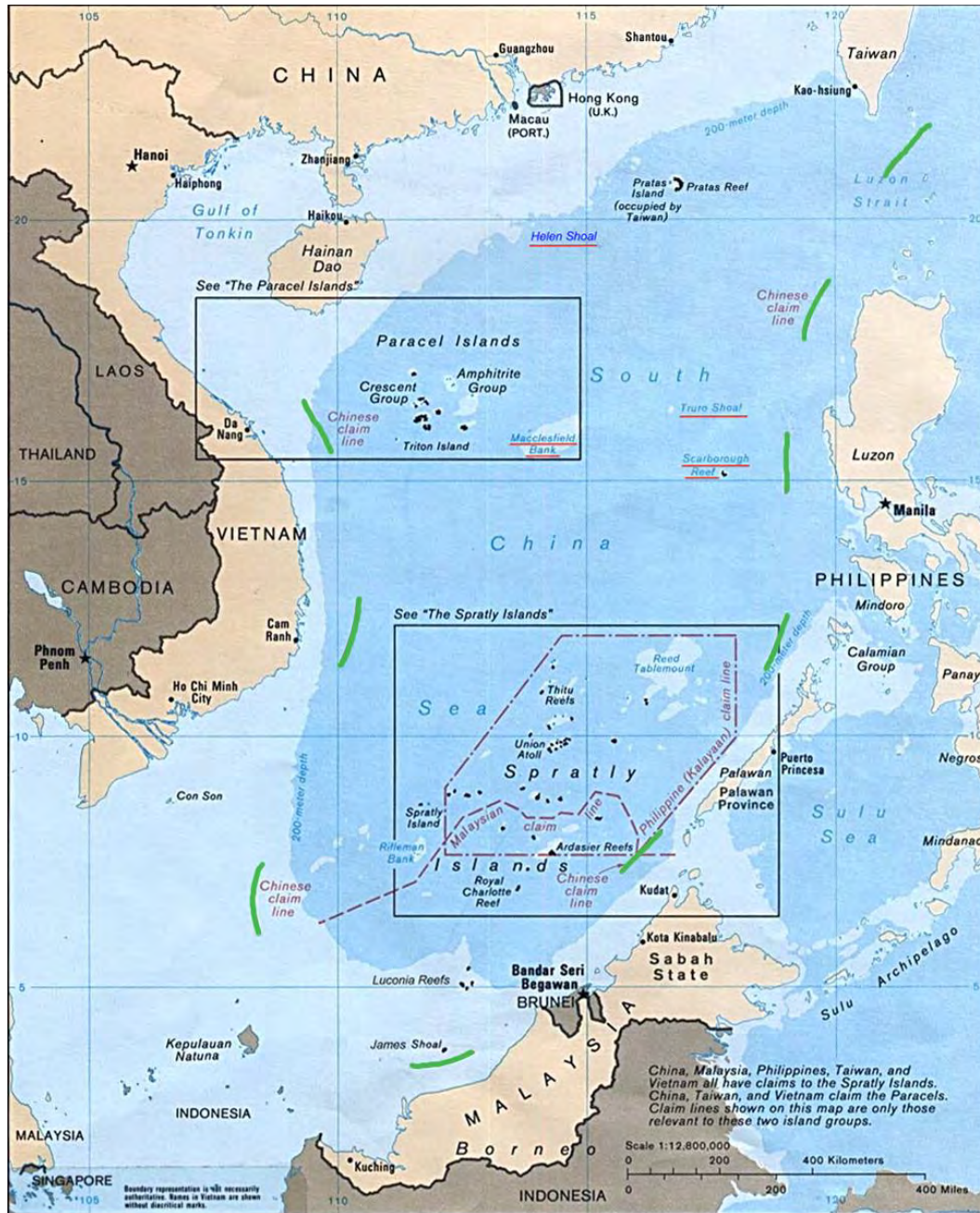


Fig. 1. China's Nine Dashed Line Claim. Created by Marina Tsirbas. From *The Diplomat*, last modified June 2, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/what-does-the-nine-dash-line-actually-mean/>.

Hybrid Warfare

The key tenant of hybrid warfare is to “find the space short of clear-cut military action with direct and recognizable tactical, operational, and strategic impact and compress it into a zone wherein sufficient ambiguity is created to allow an offensive actor a better chance of accomplishing an objective without full-blown, overt offensive action.”¹⁰ This type of conflict is also characterized as the fourth generation of war where the lines between war and politics, military and civilian are blurred to the advantage of the aggressor.¹¹ This is accomplished in a number of different ways, which will now be discussed in depth.

White Vs Grey Hulls

Hybrid warfare is an inherently irregular war using a variety of methods including terrorism and guerilla tactics in order to affect the security interests of the state.¹² In order to exert their interests in the South China Sea, China has extensively used Coast Guard and Fishing vessels as opposed to naval vessels. This has been effective and utilizes the resources that they have readily available.

Over half of the world’s fishing fleet sails under the Chinese flag a resource that can be leveraged in hybrid warfare.¹³ This amounts to over two hundred thousand vessels

¹⁰ James Stavridis. “Maritime Hybrid Warfare is Coming,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, 142/12/1366. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2016/december/maritime-hybrid-warfare-coming>

¹¹ Iulian Chifu, *Hybrid Warfare, Lawfare, informational war. The Wars of the Future*. International Scientific Conference "Strategies XXI"; (Bucharest. 203-211, 2015), 203.

¹² Ibid, 207.

¹³ Peter Apps, China goes unconventional in escalating South China Sea face-off. *Reuters*. Last modified April 12, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/apps->

that employ fourteen million people.¹⁴ These platforms can carry a number of weapons including light arms, heavy caliber machine guns, hand-held missiles, and grenade launchers.¹⁵ In addition they can carry a number of non-lethal weapons including lasers, sound weapons, tear gas dispensers, and water cannons.¹⁶ With the improvements in technology there are a number of commercial grade readily available systems such as communication and navigation technology that can facilitate command and control during engagements while ensuring that all equipment being use cannot be directly linked to the Chinese government.¹⁷ In a action by Chinese flagged fishing vessels in a disputed Filipino occupied reef of Thitu illustrates the capabilities and tactics that China can employ.

In early December 2018 two dozen Chinese fishing boats sailed to the disputed reef that by the end of the month involved over one hundred vessels in and around the archipelago.¹⁸ Fishing fleets like these have continued to become more aggressive over time. This is part of the Chinese strategy to avoid using naval vessels, which escalate the situation more than civilian boats; despite the fact the fishing vessels are likely armed and controlled by the Chinese government. Despite the fact the extensive use of fishing vessels, they are still supported by larger mostly Chinese Coast Guard ships.

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¹⁴ Reyes Cole. The Myths of Traditional Warfare: How Our Peer and Near-Peer Adversaries Plan to Fight Using Irregular Warfare. *Small Wars Journal*, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/myths-traditional-warfare-how-our-peer-and-near-peer-adversaries-plan-fight-using>.

¹⁵ Stavridis, "Maritime Hybrid Warfare is Coming."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Apps, "China goes unconventional."

In a 2018 report, the U.S. Department of Defense determined that the People's Liberation Army Navy, the Chinese Coast Guard, and China's maritime militia are now the largest maritime power in the Pacific.¹⁹ The report further finds that the three bodies are patrolling together which demonstrates a planned effort to use all three to assert China's claims in the South China Sea.²⁰ There have been claims that the Chinese Coast Guard have rammed fishing boats in their own exclusive economic zones however, this remains to be conclusively proven.²¹ This use of all three fleets fits the definition of hybrid warfare very well and blurs the lines between a civilian and military vessel. As these operations continue, it will become increasingly challenging for governments in the area and also larger powers such as the United States and European Union to support smaller nations. Most recently in the Spratley islands, the Chinese fishing boat militia has been coercing the Philippines.²²

In early December 2018, two dozen fishing vessels escorted by PLA(N) and Chinese Coast Guard ships sailed to the disputed Filipino-occupied reef of Thitu.²³ This was the beginning of a much larger effort where by early 2019 almost one-hundred vessels were operate in the vicinity of the reef.²⁴ This a suitable number which could

¹⁹ Ankit Panda, "The US Navy's Shifting view of China's Coast Guard and Maritime Militia." *The Diplomat*, last modified April 30, 2019 <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/the-us-navys-shifting-view-of-chinas-coast-guard-and-maritime-militia/>.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid.

²³ Apps, "China goes unconventional."

²⁴ Ibid.

start an armed confrontation between China and the Philippines.²⁵ Occupation of smaller reefs such as Thitu, remains one of the main efforts of the Chinese plan.

Aggressive Infrastructure

The size of the South China Sea creates a number of challenges for any nation attempting to exert its control in the area. In order to control contested areas, China has begun a project of militarization of contested reefs in order to both seize control of the reef but also increase its reach in the South China Sea.²⁶ This has resulted in the creation of 3200 acres of new land since 2013. Figure two shows the significance of these new installations, the placement of which increases the reach of the Chinese military. The four new military installations include a runway capable of operating strike aircraft as well as missiles. This increases the threat towards neighboring nations given the range from these new installations and their national borders. These installations can also serve as forward logistics bases to serve the maritime militia, which is one of the key parts of the hybrid war, which China is engaged in.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Tu, Alex. *China's Dream of the South China Sea*. Last modified July 6th, 2018. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/resource/chinas-dream-for-the-south-china-sea/>.



Fig. 2. Military Infrastructure Within the Nine Dashed Line. Created by Lesilie Fong. *South China Morning Post*, last modified March 29, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2139073/whats-behind-beijings-south-china-sea-moves-and-why-us-patrols>

Little Blue Men

The large Chinese fishing fleet, which employs approximately 14 million people, provides a large pool of capable mariners for the PLA(N) to leverage.²⁷ Some have termed the phrase “little blue men” which compose the militia which in the hybrid warfare context blur the lines between military and civilian. This militia includes fisherman, paramilitary forces, and in some cases military forces in plain clothes identifying as civilians.²⁸ These “little blue men” have been involved in harassing United States Navy warships and occupied territory such as the Thitu reef mentioned above.²⁹ Using this type of hybrid force allows the Chinese government to have a large force yet not use conventional forces. This gives them the ability to deny control over the force yet still use it to assert Chinese influence over the region. This force is also well supported by the occupied islands that are identified in figure 2. While forces operating in the South China Sea can be somewhat effective in isolation, when paired with an aggressive information operation their full potential is realized.

Information Operations

In the South China Sea conflict, China has used a three warfares approach that seeks to leverage three mutually reinforcing strategies, namely:

1. “ the coordinated use of strategic psychological operations
2. overt and covert media manipulation; and

²⁷ Cole, “The Myths of Traditional Warfare.”

²⁸ Abhijit Singh, “Between War and Peace: Grey-Zone operations in Asia,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs*. 13 Feb 2018, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/paramilitaries-grey-zone-operations-asia/>

²⁹ Ibid.

3. legal warfare designed to manipulate strategies, defense policies and perceptions of target audiences abroad.”³⁰

This effort at the operational level is coordinated by the PLA’s General Political Liaison Department that works on “information weaponization and the military social media strategy.”³¹ This strategy originally was developed³¹ for use in Taiwan and has also been used recently in targeting the European Union in order to further its economic interests in Eastern Europe.³² This strategy was also used in India to undermine India’s organizational foundations and military moral.³³ This level of misinformation is very powerful particularly with the number of resources in which China has allocated. In the South China Sea, these types of information war can be used to protect its maritime militia, ensuring that enough confusion about what is occurring to prevent the establishment of direct Chinese involvement. In addition to this type of information campaign, the Chinese have demonstrated willingness to use targeted cyber attacks to achieve their objectives.

Cyber

In 2015, a group which has been linked to the Chinese government launched a cyber attack during the hearing of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague which at the time was hearing a territorial dispute in the South China Sea.³⁴ In addition to this action, a U.S. firm has been tracking groups associated with the Chinese

³⁰ Michael Raska, “China and the ‘Three Warfares’”. *The Diplomat*. December 18, 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/hybrid-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics-2/>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Singh, “Between War and Peace.”

³⁴ David Tweed, Chinese Hackers Hit U.S. Firms Linked to South China Sea Dispute. *Bloomberg*, last modified March 15, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-16/china-hackers-hit-u-s-firms-linked-to-sea-dispute-fireeye-says>.

government and have alleged that they are actively looking for information that may improve their position in the South China Sea.³⁵ What makes this particularity challenging to track, is the use of third parties to conduct the cyber operations, which are difficult to link to the Chinese government. As a result, the Chinese government can operate in a grey area where they are pursuing government objectives using non-affiliated groups. This allows the Chinese Foreign Minister to maintain the government is “opposed to all kinds of cyber attacks and they will continue to implement the important consensus on cyber security reached in 2015 between the U.S. and China.”³⁶ This type of political posturing is well used in the South China Sea conflict which has allowed China to make significant gains without any meaningful international response.

Political

During a meeting between the leader of the Philippines and the leader of China the two leaders discussed issues surrounding the contested areas of the South China Sea.³⁷ During this conversation President Duterte indicated that the Philippines would like to drill for oil in parts of the South China Sea where both nations laid claim.³⁸ Chinese President Xi indicated that “We’re friends, we don’t want to quarrel with you, we want to maintain the presence of warm relationship, but if you force the issue, we’ll go to war.”³⁹ This hard line is indicative of what the Chinese intentions are however, it

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Simon Roughneen, “How Beijing is winning control of the South China Sea: Erratic U.S. policy and fraying alliances give China a free hand.” *Nikkei Asian Review*, last modified June 13, 2018. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/How-Beijing-is-winning-control-of-the-South-China-Sea>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

does not represent the full strategy. Through the application of hybrid warfare, China has been able to mask the full scope of Chinese military involvement in the South China Sea. This has allowed Beijing to remain within the boundaries of what would generate an international response while still undertaking an aggressive campaign in the South China Sea. The confusion that has been created by the hybrid war has led to significant political advantages for the Chinese which is part of an overall strategy which is designed to appease the international community.

China has a “tendency to calibrate its maritime assertiveness between coercive actions to enforce its extensive claims and periods of charm to consolidate gains it has made and to manage the losses it has incurred with ASEAN states, major powers, and the international community.”⁴⁰ This has been very effective to date and when paired with the hybrid warfare strategy that has allowed Beijing to continue to pursue its goals. Without a coordinated effort from the international community, the lack of action will have significant consequences for neighboring nations and the international community as a whole.

Consequences

The size of the Chinese militia in addition to its conventional forces represent a significant advantage in the South China Sea. As China continues to aggressively pursue its claims, other states will be further forced to develop their Naval and Coast Guard

⁴⁰ P. Parameswaran. “Will a China-ASEAN South China Sea Code of Conduct Really Matter?” *The Diplomat*, last modified November 13, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/will-a-china-asean-south-china-sea-code-of-conductreally-matter/>.

forces if they expect to assert their sovereignty in the region.⁴¹ This will also include increasing surveillance infrastructure in order to maintain domain awareness in their exclusive economic zone and contested areas of the South China Sea. If they are ultimately unsuccessful in maintaining their claims, China will inevitably exert control over the area.

Some nations have taken a pragmatic approach to the Chinese efforts in the South China Sea realizing that they do not have the resources to contest areas which the Chinese are actively pursuing. The Philippines and Brunei have taken this approach as they would rather partner with the Chinese than lose all potential benefits.⁴² The Chinese benefit as they are seen as a partner rather than an aggressor and they can use their own technical support, capital and other resources during exploration.⁴³ It is however, important to note that many of these arrangements are made under threat of action from the Chinese and are not equal with respect to the benefits to both partner nations. While difficult to assess at this stage, it is very possible that this approach will continue throughout the South China Sea where hybrid war will allow China to engage in oil and gas exploration through a number of pragmatic partnerships with neighboring nations. Despite the efforts of other nations, it is unlikely that the hybrid warfare being employed by the Chinese can be effectively countered.

⁴¹ Robert Kaplan, "The South China Sea is the Future of Conflict," *Foreign Policy*. August 15, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/15/the-south-china-sea-is-the-future-of-conflict/>

⁴² Mercy Kuo, "The Geo Politics of Oil and Gas in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, December 12, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/the-geopolitics-of-oil-and-gas-in-the-south-china-sea/>

⁴³ Ibid.

Western Nations must be careful when determining whether interference in the South China Sea is in their national interest. Britain and France have increased their presence in the South China Sea to demonstrate solidarity with the U.S., Japan, and Australia in order to stand against China “who they believe wants to challenge the rules-based international order that has been in place since the end of the Second World War.”⁴⁴ Despite this show of force, it is unlikely that these measures will have any substantive effect on Chinese actions. Each one of these nation’s economy is very much tied to China and a “disturbance in one nations economy can reverberate widely across the globe with unintended consequences.”⁴⁵ As a result, it is unlikely that larger nations will intervene in a manner that will prevent Chinese dominance of the South China Sea. This inaction will only result in a stronger more determined force.

Over time China will continue to develop their militia with new capabilities. It is likely that sonobuoys, sea bed sensors, underwater and surface unmanned sensor systems will soon become part of the militia’s capability.⁴⁶ These systems can be easily maintained by militia units ashore and in many cases could be off the shelf commercial units which are easily replaced.⁴⁷ If China is permitted to continue to employ this hybrid warfare strategy it will only become stronger and more proficient.

⁴⁴ Lesilie Fong. “What Behind Beijing’s South China Sea Moves – and Why the US Patrols are making things worse.” *South China Morning Post*, last modified March 29, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2139073/whats-behind-beijings-south-china-sea-moves-and-why-us-patrols>.

⁴⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note I-18*, II-5.

⁴⁶ Stavridis, “Maritime Hybrid Warfare is Coming.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

China's increasing activity in the South China Sea is driven by the nation's ambition to better control their own economic destiny particularly in oil and gas. This is being achieved using a hybrid warfare strategy which is blurring the lines between military and civilian and using their extensive maritime resources in the merchant and Coast Guard Fleets. The use of the maritime militia, enables Beijing to deny the activities which are government driven while still achieving the political and economic goals. The substantial infrastructure that has been developed enables the militia and puts pressure on neighboring nations as it increases conventional military capability. This is supported by a political strategy that ensures the response from the international community is muted. The lack of international intervention will have significant consequences for the neighboring nations. China will continue to achieve their economic goals utilizing their hybrid warfare strategy unless a substantial shift in resolve occurs in the international community.

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