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## CHINA'S USE OF HYBRID TACTICS IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN

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**Solo Flight**

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**By Lieutenant-Commander Andrew Tunstall**

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## CHINA'S USE OF HYBRID TACTICS IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN

### INTRODUCTION

In all respects, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is an emerging superpower on the world stage. Despite the incredible growth of both military and economic power since Mao's People's War, the PRC remains challenged by the still dominant West, particularly the United States. Cognizant of its position of relative weakness, China has resorted to methods other than armed conflict to pursue competition with the West to achieve its national objectives. These methods integrate all facets of national power, including traditionally military and civilian means.

China's action in both its near and far abroad in recent years have led many in the defence and security industries to draw parallels to the Russian Federation's actions in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> This has resulted in suggestions that the PRC has been influenced by the supposed success of these tactics and, as such, has shaped its policy and actions to achieve similar operational benefits. Contrary to perceptions of hybridity or multi-dimensional approaches as a modern phenomenon, China has a long tradition of incorporating these tactics in its execution of state-level competition.

This paper will examine how China uses grey-zone operations incorporating hybrid tactics in the maritime domain to achieve its national objectives and how these tactics differ across geographical regions. In doing so, this paper will argue that China's use of grey-zone operations and hybrid tactics enables the state to pursue territorial and expansionist objectives while remaining below the threshold to instigate a response from

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<sup>1</sup> Frans-Paul van der Putten, ,Minke Meijnders, Sico van der Meer, and Tony van der Togt. "Hybrid Conflict: The Roles of Russia, North Korea and China: Clingendael." *Netherlands Institute of International Relations* (2018): 1-2.

both the broader international community and intraregional actors. These issues will be examined by first defining what are grey-zone operations and hybrid conflict, identifying China's national objectives in the maritime domain, examining how China approaches grey-zone operations and hybrid tactics in the maritime domain and finally looking at several case studies to illustrate how China is employing hybrid tactics in a variety of geographical settings.

### **GREY-ZONE OPERATIONS AND HYBRID CONFLICT DEFINED**

The concept of grey-zone operations and hybrid warfare have become '*en vogue*' amongst policy experts and military forces in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014. In response to these tactics, the West has dedicated considerable focus to attempting to define and understand the issue in an attempt to determine the best means to counter the use of these tactics. While the two terms are not completely analogous, they are complementary and the two form a basis for understanding the concept as a whole. Grey-zone operations are "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality."<sup>2</sup> As stated by Philip Kapusta, a planning officer in United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), activities must possess three characteristics to place them within the grey-zone. Firstly, they must be aggressive in some manner and not be conducted in accordance with customary international law and customs. Secondly, these activities are perspective-dependent within which the involved actors may interpret their actions as occurring in different positions along the peace and war spectrum. Thirdly,

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Kapusta, "The Gray Zone." *Special Warfare* 28, no. 4 (October-December 2015): 20.

these activities are generally ambiguous concerning their conduct, those actors involved, and the policy or legal frameworks justifying the activities.<sup>3</sup>

The Multi-National Capability Development Campaign (MCDCC) with an effort being led through the United Kingdom's Development, Concepts, and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) has described hybrid warfare as "the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects."<sup>4</sup> While this definition provides a high-level starting point to understanding the concept of hybrid warfare it does not adequately provide enough detail for a fulsome discussion on the topic. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, in 2014, defined hybrid warfare as "where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design."<sup>5</sup> While many aspects of hybrid warfare have existed and been exploited by states throughout history, "it is the civilian element that distinguishes hybrid from regular warfare to the extent that non-military actors and stakeholders are explicitly involved in the political, informational and economic components of war."<sup>6</sup>

When examining these two definitions, it is clear that both grey-zone operations and hybrid warfare share many commonalities in the ends, ways, and means in which they are utilized to achieve their actor's objectives. Where they differ is in that grey-zone

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick J. Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, "Understanding Hybrid Warfare," last accessed 25 April 2020 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/647776/dar\\_mcdc\\_hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/647776/dar_mcdc_hybrid_warfare.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization Press Release (2014) 120, "Wales Summit Declaration," last accessed 25 April 2020 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm)

<sup>6</sup> David Carment and Dani Belo, "War's Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare," *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, last accessed 25 April 2020, [https://www.cgai.ca/wars\\_future\\_the\\_risks\\_and\\_rewards\\_of\\_grey\\_zone\\_conflict\\_and\\_hybrid\\_warfare](https://www.cgai.ca/wars_future_the_risks_and_rewards_of_grey_zone_conflict_and_hybrid_warfare) 2.

operations are strategically calculated to occur within the peace and war duality. As opposed to hybrid warfare which is the use of these tactics during a conflict. As described by David Carment and Dani Belo, “Put another way, hybrid warfare can be a tactical subset of grey-zone conflict deployed under certain conditions and in varying degrees.”<sup>7</sup> Having laid the foundation for understanding the concept of grey-zone operations and hybrid warfare, this paper will now examine China’s national objectives in the maritime domain.

## **CHINA’S NATIONAL OBJECTIVES IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN**

In recent years, the PRC has increasingly focused its national ambition on the maritime domain. This has been reflected in both statements from senior Communist Party of China leadership as well as within government documents including several of their most recent defence white papers. President Xi Jinping, in his 2017 address at the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, discussed his desire to transform China into a great maritime power, stating, “We will pursue coordinated land and marine development, and step up efforts to build China into a strong maritime country.”<sup>8</sup>

The importance of the maritime domain to China’s continued economic growth has also been reflected in their published military strategy. The 2015 defence white paper, *China’s Military Strategy*, explicitly highlights the importance of the maritime environment to the continued success of the PRC, identifying it as one of four critical domains. The white paper stresses the impact maritime domain will have, “on the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” last accessed 14 December 2019, *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf), 29.

enduring peace, lasting stability and sustainable development of China. The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”<sup>9</sup> It further outlines China’s need to develop a modern maritime force structure, reflective of its economic and security national interests, and able to safeguard its sovereignty claims and ensure the protection of strategic sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) which are vital to the continued economic prosperity of the State.<sup>10</sup> The 2015 white paper, summarizes quite well the maritime objectives for China of sovereignty issues and economic development in both the near abroad and far abroad. This paper will examine how China uses hybrid tactics in grey-zone operations using the case studies of the East China Sea as well as the Arctic to highlight the differences in approach between the near and far abroad. As such we will expand in more detail, the PRC’s maritime objectives in those two regions.

While the 2015 defence white paper has scarce direct reference to the East China Sea region, it contains one statement that directly impacts the PRC’s conduct of grey-zone operations in the region, acknowledging the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) forthcoming transition from “‘offshore waters defense’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defense’ with ‘open seas protection...’”<sup>11</sup> While this measure coincided with the need of the PRC to protect its overseas trade routes that were being developed concurrently with the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), this paper will later examine how this also coincided with the PRC’s grey-zone operations in the East China Sea.

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<sup>9</sup> The State Council The People’s Republic of China, “China’s Military Strategy,” last accessed 16 October 2019, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



The PRC's 2019 defence white paper, *National Defense in the New Era*, is more useful in determining the state's goals in the East China Sea region. In the white paper, it delineates that two of their stated defense aims include the safeguarding of "national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security; [and] to safeguard China's maritime rights and interests."<sup>12</sup> Specifically, they call special mention to the fact that the "Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory. China exercises its national sovereignty to ...conduct patrols in the waters of the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea."<sup>13</sup> The 2019 white paper makes it clear that the protection and enforcement of sovereignty claims in its near abroad are of vital interest to the PRC. It aims to accomplish these national objectives through the use of its forces to "conduct joint rights protection and law enforcement operations, properly handle maritime and air situations, and resolutely respond to security threats, infringements, and provocations on the sea."<sup>14</sup> While this document is specifically referring to the use of its conventional forces in achieving these policy objectives, it is fair to transfer these objectives to the other forces that the PRC uses in its grey-zone operations in the region.

In 2018, the PRC released its first white paper on China's Arctic Policy. In it, they asserted that issues pertaining to the Arctic have expanded past intra-regional Arctic states and were now "having a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole."<sup>15</sup> They claim that this is due to increased climate change in the region and the impact that a more accessible Arctic

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<sup>12</sup> The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "National Defense in the New Era" last accessed 27 April 2020 [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content\\_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> The State Council of The People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," last accessed 26 April 2020, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm)

would have on the international community due to its rising strategic and economic value.

As such, the white paper explicitly lists the policy goals for the PRC in the Arctic as “to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic so as to safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic, and promote sustainable development of the Arctic.”<sup>16</sup> As compared to the PRC’s objectives for the East China Sea of territorial sovereignty, the development and exploitation of natural resources form the basis of their policy goals in the region. Accordingly, the majority of their operations in the region seek to pursue these objectives.

## **THE CHINESE APPROACH TO HYBRID OPERATIONS**

As mentioned, the Russian Federation’s use of hybrid tactics during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ensuing operations in Eastern Ukraine has brought the phenomenon to the forefront of discussion in the West. While the attention that is being placed on this might suggest that this is a new style of warfare, this however, is not the case. As Weichong Ong asserts, throughout Asia utilizing a multi-dimensional or hybrid approach to war reflects “an older civilizational tradition where relative advantage is more important than immediate battlefield victories.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the spirit of grey-zone operations and hybrid tactics can be gleaned from Sun Tzu’s influential *The Art of War*. When speaking on strategy, Sun Tzu wrote how “the best thing of all is to take the enemy’s country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good...to fight and

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Weichong Ong, “The Rise of Hybrid Actors in the Asia-Pacific,” *The Pacific Review* 31, no 6. (2018): 741.

conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."<sup>18</sup> While Sun Tzu was explicitly referring to the actions of armies in the field and not the state in this quote, it is fair to assume this long-rooted cultural norm continues to persist to this day.

The hybrid or multi-dimensional approach to the accomplishing of national objectives resurfaced to prominence within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1999 when two senior colonels of the PLA, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, published *Unrestricted Warfare*. This publication was highly influential both within the PLA as well as within PRC political leadership.<sup>19</sup> *Unrestricted Warfare* argued that warfare was no longer about "using armed force to compel the enemy to submit to one's will," but rather are 'using all means, including the armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests."<sup>20</sup> Liang and Xiangsui asserted this new form of unrestricted warfare would become the norm and argued that the current boundaries existing in the conduct of warfare needed to be broken down in the interest of achieving national objectives. They argued that in unrestricted warfare the battlefield will no longer be geographically constrained and that the control and exploitation of information will be paramount.<sup>21</sup> As they stated, "It means that all weapons and technology can be superimposed at will, it means that all the boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally destroyed..."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, (London: Luzac & Co., 1910) 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ong, "The Rise of... 749.

<sup>20</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

More recently, in 2013, the PLA Academy of Military Science updated its publication the *Science of Military Strategy* in which they discussed the concept of integrated civilian and military means to achieve strategic deterrence. In this document, the PRC argued that “non-military aspects of national power, most notably diplomatic, economic, and scientific and technological strength, also contribute to strategic deterrence alongside military capabilities.”<sup>23</sup> The core tenants of hybrid or multi-dimensional operations have long been understood by both the Chinese political and military leadership and have shaped how China has developed and structured their forces. This was reflected by the concept of ‘Three Warfares,’ a concept adopted by the PLA in 2003.

Influenced by the writings of Liang and Xiangsui and the United States’ conduct during the first Gulf War and Kosovo during the 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set to modernizing the PLA Political Work Regulations. This document, released in 2003 under the Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Jiang Zemin’s guidance, affirmed the role the PLA performs in political operations and directed the requirement to engage and excel in the areas of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.<sup>24</sup>

The concept of ‘Three Warfares’ can be employed at the strategic, campaign, and tactical levels. However, it is the application of this at the strategic level that is most relevant to this paper. At the strategic level the application of the ‘Three Warfares’ “aim to protect (or expand) national interest or to defend universal human values, including

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<sup>23</sup> Michael S. Chase and Arthur Chan, *China’s Evolving Approach to ‘Integrated Strategic Deterrence’*. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Sangkuk Lee, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’: Origins, Applications, and Organizations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 200-202.

peace, independence, global and regional security.”<sup>25</sup> These principles are designed to be executed during both peace and conflict. The ‘Three Warfares’ are conceived to be used and exploited at all levels, however public opinion and legal warfare will have their most influence and impact at the strategic level. As stated by Sangkuk Lee, the ‘Three Warfares’ are designed to be integrated into both the military and non-military means put forth by unrestricted warfare including “political, economic, negotiation, diplomatic, cultural, and military efforts in order to achieve national and military goals.”<sup>26</sup> China has implemented these strategies in a variety of means in order to achieve their national objectives. This includes firstly pursuing an increased role for foreign propaganda to foster and create public opinion that supports their international status and creates a suitable environment to achieve their national objectives. Secondly, they have placed increased reliance on a variety of legal methods seeking to further legitimize their policy with special attention placed on the maritime domain. Thirdly, they have aggressively pursued public diplomacy focusing on foreign citizens, exploiting media to target foreign citizens and the role they play in the development of foreign policy to create a positive public opinion of their policies and actions.<sup>27</sup>

The influence of *Unrestricted Warfare* and its integration of military and non-military means is also evident in the reliance of the Chinese state on maritime militia forces to conduct sovereignty and missions related to territorial disputes. As Ong argues, the inclusion of militia forces within the larger Chinese military apparatus has long been a staple to the Chinese approach to security and defence dating back to the Tang and

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-207.

Ming dynasties and more modernly reflected in Mao's concept of the 'People's War.'<sup>28</sup> In the 1950s and 60s, the PLAN adopted Mao's 'People's War' to the maritime domain and included civilian militias in their force structures. "As the CCP established control over coastal populations, it integrated Chinese mariners, especially fishermen, into national defense activities. In some cases, such as battles to retake coastal islands, militia forces played a direct combat role."<sup>29</sup> While the PLAN has discarded many of these operational tactics in view of creating a 'blue water' navy capable of contesting American dominance, there remains to this day significant involvement of militias and law enforcement agencies in the defence and security apparatuses of the state.<sup>30</sup> Beginning in 2000, China's maritime law-enforcement (MLE), including the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) have seen significant investment resulting in a 350 percent growth in ships capable of operating offshore.<sup>31</sup> These forces form the backbone of their near-abroad forces with ample capability to pursue Chinese territorial goals. As described by Andrew Erickson, Joshua Hickey, and Henry Holst, these forces,

Afford Beijing increasing influence over the regional maritime situation without the direct use of PLAN warships, demonstrating power while reducing the risk of escalation and allowing the PLAN to focus on other, more 'naval' missions farther afield.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ong, "The Rise of... 747.

<sup>29</sup> Dale C. Rielage and Austin M. Strange. "Is the Maritime Militia Prosecuting a People's War at Sea?", in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, edited by Andrew Erickson, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 40.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, Joshua Hickey, and Henry Holst, "Surging Second Sea Force: China's Maritime Law Enforcement Forces, Capabilities and Future in the Gray Zone and Beyond," *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 4 (2019): 1-3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

As detailed by Connor Kennedy, while formally a component of China's armed forces, these militia forces commonly disguise themselves as civilians allowing China to hide their state-sponsored operation from the international community. Additionally, their usage enables China to pursue expansionist objectives without direct escalation that would result from using PLAN forces. Their operations fit predominantly into the categories of presence, harassment and sabotage, escort, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).<sup>33</sup> Peter Dutton also points out the benefit that this provides against American operations in the region. As the United States does not possess a similar constabulary force forward deployed to the region, any attempt to counter Chinese aggression must be done using the United States Navy, which is inherently escalatory.<sup>34</sup> To note, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) has stated that they intend to increase operations with partner nations in the Western Pacific to counter CCG actions in the region.<sup>35</sup> Having demonstrated the historical basis for China's approach to hybrid or multi-dimensional operations and their use of the 'Three Warfares' and MLE and militia forces to pursue their national objectives in the grey-zone, this paper will now analyze case studies of the East China Sea and the Arctic to demonstrate how these elements are employed.

## **CASE STUDIES**

### **Grey-Zone Operations in the East China Sea**

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<sup>33</sup> Connor Kennedy, "The Struggle for Blue Territory: Chinese Maritime Militia Grey-Zone Operations," *RUSI Journal* 163, no. 5 (October/November 2018): 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Peter A. Dutton. "Conceptualizing China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations," in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, edited by Andrew Erickson, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 30-31.

<sup>35</sup> Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Schults: Coast Guard Expanding Western Pacific Operations," *USNI News*, 23 July 2019, last accessed 1 May 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2019/07/23/schultz-coast-guard-expanding-western-pacific-operations>

The primary flashpoint for Chinese grey-zone operations in the East China Sea has been the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan. These islands are claimed by China, Japan, and Taiwan and have traded possession between the claimants over their history. Little attention was placed on the islands until 1969 when their potential vast oil reserves were discovered and made public in a report by the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. This knowledge incited a competition between the claimants which remained largely peaceful and initially proceeded towards joint resource development between China and Japan with a series of negotiations throughout the early 2000s. In 2010, these negotiations were derailed with the first of a series of escalations by China over the islands.<sup>36</sup> In September 2010, a collision between a Chinese fishing vessel and two JCG vessels resulted in the Chinese fishing vessel captain's arrest and detention by Japanese authorities. In response, China deployed forty-six state-owned vessels over three months to patrol in Japan's contiguous zone off of the islands.<sup>37</sup>

In 2012, the government of Japan purchased the islands from a Japanese private citizen resulting in an escalation of the dispute between both parties as both countries' political leadership used the incident to take a hard line on the issue. China surged PLA and para-naval activity in the waters and airspace around the islands. The JCG responded by deploying more than half of its strength to the disputed waters. After initial tensions reduced, the CCG began regular deployments of vessels into Japan's territorial waters (TTW) which have continued.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Zack Cooper, J. Douglas, M. Green, K. Hicks, and J. Schaus, *Countering Coercion: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017,) 67-68.

<sup>37</sup> Adam P. Liff, "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response," in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, edited by Andrew Erickson, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 127.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.



The latest escalation in the dispute occurred in August 2016, when two to three hundred Chinese fishing vessels descended upon the islands. During the four days of the dispute, twenty-four CCG vessels escorted the Chinese fishing vessels, with some reports of PAFMM personnel embarked on some of the fishing vessels, into Japan's TTW. Additionally, fifteen CCG vessels kept station within the contiguous zone. The JCG was unable to control and effectively respond to the situation with the message from Beijing being clear that it could affect a *fait-accompli* invasion of the islands without using conventional forces if it desired to do so.<sup>39</sup>

As described by Adma Liff, three factors are likely the cause for China to pursue competition with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands utilizing grey-zone competition. Firstly, unlike many of the regional actors in the South China Sea, the Japan Self Defense Force (JDSF), as well as the Japan Coast Guard (JCG), present a significant conventional deterrent. This is only increased with the backing of Japan's primary ally, the United States. Presidents Obama in 2014 and Trump in 2017, have both pledged that the United States is obligated under treaty to aid Japan if there is a military conflict over the islands.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, the actions of the CCG in probing Japan's TTW could be the exploitation of Japanese and United States security alliance, in which the United States is obligated to respond to an armed attack. A grey-zone *fait-accompli* invasion with para-naval and militia forces would arguably not meet this requirement. A further example of legal warfare employed by China in the dispute is the continued presence operations of

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-128.

<sup>40</sup> Justin McCurry and Tania Branigan, "Obama Says US will defend Japan in island dispute with China," *The Guardian*, 24 April 2014 accessed 1 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/24/obama-in-japan-backs-status-quo-in-island-dispute-with-china>.; Steve Holland and Kiyoshi Takenaka, "Trump says U.S. committed to Japan security, in change from campaign rhetoric," *Reuters* 10 February 2017, accessed 1 May 2020 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-japan-idUSKBN15P17E>.

the CCG in the TTW surrounding the islands, which Japan has argued is aimed contesting Japan's administrative control over the islands to challenge the treaty requirements of mutual defence. This has resulted in the United States being forced to acknowledge that third party actions will not affect their assessment of Japan's administration of the islands. Finally, China's grey-zone operations could be aimed at the perceived weaknesses of the JCG and JSDF to respond to Chinese aggression due to legal restraints on their operations and a political reluctance by Japan to respond with kinetic force.<sup>41</sup>

The success of China's grey-zone operations in the East China Sea has been less dramatic than those of the South China Sea. Unlike the South China Sea, these actions have not currently resulted in a favourable outcome for China in the dispute. As previously described, the position of the United States has been clarified to ensure that will still support Japan's administration over the islands regardless of actions by third parties in the region. However, as described by Yamamoto, there are significant risks to established international norms and law if the international community accepts and allows China's continued exploitation of ambiguous militia forces in the pursuance of national objectives. While China's grey-zone operations in the East China Sea may not result in a change in the status quo, they have demonstrated a capability to threaten Japan's territorial sovereignty using unconventional forces and could potentially use this threat to force Japan's acceptance of territorial disputes elsewhere in China's near abroad.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Liff, "China's Maritime Gray...", 126.

<sup>42</sup> Katsuya Yamamoto, "The East China Sea," in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, edited by Andrew Erickson, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 140-141.

## **Grey-zone Operations in the Arctic**

There has been limited discussion on the implications of China utilizing grey-zone tactics in the Arctic. However, there is increasing national will on the part of the PRC to enhance its presence within the region. This is largely fueled by the dependence of the Chinese economy and by extension the survival of the regime on foreign energy sources. As demonstrated by their 2018 white paper on Arctic policy, there is evidence to suggest that China will be turning towards the Arctic to meet their continued and growing energy demands as it pivots away from energy sources in continually volatile parts of the globe.<sup>43</sup>

Grey-zone operations in the Arctic are supported by “strategic investment in infrastructure and resources that may serve military or security as well as commercial purposes (but which often make little economic sense), and scientific research that advances both military and commercial interests.”<sup>44</sup> To achieve these national objectives, the PRC has dramatically increased investments, particularly concerning resource exploitation and scientific research in the region. The PRC has operated its *Xue Long* class icebreaker in the Arctic continuously over the past decade, launched a second of the class in 2018, and also announced intentions to build a nuclear-powered icebreaker. This growing capability provides both the presence mission that the PRC relies upon its MLE and militia forces for in its near abroad but also contributes to its scientific objectives. Particularly, this includes hydrography, an important precursor to submarine operations

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<sup>43</sup> Shiloh Rainwater, “Race to the North: China’s Arctic Strategy and Its Implications,” *Naval War college Review* 66, no. 2. (2013): 62-67.

<sup>44</sup> Rebecca Pincus and Walter A. Berbrick, “Gray Zones in a Blue Arctic: Grappling with China’s Growing Influence,” last accessed 2 May 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/gray-zones-in-a-blue-arctic-grappling-with-chinas-growing-influence/>

in the region. This also fuels concerns that China could deploy conventional forces to secure the vulnerable SLOCs that dominates the entrance to the region if some future conflict threatened to isolate their established resource investments.<sup>45</sup>

The PRC is also able to exploit the immense need for foreign capital investments to fuel resource and infrastructure development in the region. This has been extremely acute in both Iceland and Greenland where Chinese foreign investment accounts for a significant portion of both their respective economies.<sup>46</sup> As Rebecca Pincus and Walter Berbrik state, “Beyond giving China access to strategic infrastructure and resources, the growing portfolio of Chinese investment throughout the Arctic region offers financial leverage that could be applied to secure political advantages.”<sup>47</sup> As seen in other investments throughout their extensive One Belt One Road initiative, there is the possibility that inclusion of the Arctic in the Polar Silk Road may lead to similar exploitation of regional governments through predatory lending schemes.

Given the strategic differences between the Arctic and its near abroad in the East China Sea, the PRC mainly focuses its grey-zone activities in the Arctic following the ‘Three Warfares’ model, predominantly through public opinion and legal warfare. As stated in their 2018 Arctic Policy, the PRC is attempting to form public opinion in the international community that the Arctic is, in fact, a global common. Notwithstanding the fact that the predominance of natural resources in the region are contained within the existing claimed economic exclusion zones (EEZ) of the existing Arctic claimants, by

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

seeking to shape this discussion “China perpetuates the notion that the entire Arctic ocean is the common heritage of humankind so as to expand its legal rights there.”<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the PRC pursues combined public opinion and legal warfare to shape a legal environment that is permissive of their national objectives in the region. Using a variety of state-controlled assets, the PRCs puts forth the narrative that the Arctic Council, of which the PRC is only granted observer status, does not possess the legal authority to determine the development and legal framework for which all other non-Arctic states must submit to in order to pursue Arctic development and exploitation.<sup>49</sup> By conducting these actions, as argued by Shiloh Rainwater, “Beijing propagates the notion that it has rights in the Arctic, engages in ‘lawfare’ to obfuscate the legal framework, advocates institutional reform, and cultivates hard-power measures to secure its interests.”<sup>50</sup> Their exploitation of legal warfare with regards to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is particularly curious when examined through the lens of TTW claims by the Arctic states, with special regard to the Northwest Passage. The PRC seeks to ensure free navigation through TTW and internal waters of the Northwest Passage by suggesting that “Canada would retain full sovereignty over the passage but with the provision that international shipping would be allowed free navigation rights.”<sup>51</sup> Considering the tenuous nature of the claims to territorial waters as laid out by the ‘nine-dash line’ in the South China Sea it is counter-intuitive that the PRC would pursue a strategy that intuitively counteracts their position in their near abroad.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Rainwater, “Race to the North...”, 74.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Tunstall, “China’s Use of Hard Power in the Militarization of the South China Sea” (Joint Command and Staff Programme Course Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2019), 5.

Similarly to the East China Sea, China's use of grey-zone tactics to pursue its national objectives in the Arctic has only been partially successful. There is limited evidence that their actions will lead to outcomes favourable for the PRC. Concerning pursuing institutional reform of the Arctic Council, there is limited evidence that their actions will lead to outcomes favourable for the PRC. Despite having success, potentially shaped by economic investment in the region, influencing Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden, it is unlikely that the remaining full member states will approve their standing as a full member. However, they have achieved an ability to have limited influence through their acceptance as an observer state.<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how China utilizes grey-zone operations, incorporating hybrid tactics in the maritime domain, to achieve its national objectives and how these tactics differ across geographical areas. It concluded that China's use of grey-zone operations and hybrid tactics enables the state to pursue territorial and expansionist objectives while remaining below the threshold to instigate a response from both broader international community and intraregional actors. However, concerning their grey-zone operations in both the East China Sea and the Arctic, they have only been partially successful in achieving their national objectives.

First, by examining the concepts of grey-zone operations and hybrid warfare, this paper concluded that the two concepts are separate entities while sharing many commonalities in the tactics used to achieve national objectives. Subsequently, this paper examined the national objectives of the PRC in two regions, the East China Sea and the

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<sup>53</sup> Rainwater, "Race to the North...", 74-77.

Arctic to expose whether differences in the PRC's exploitation of grey-zone operations were dependant upon national objectives. The strategic objective of territorial sovereignty was identified as the PRC's primary objective for the East China Sea, while the securing and development of natural resources to fuel its economy's energy dependence were the primary national objectives in the Arctic. Taking into consideration these differences in national strategic objectives, this paper was able to examine the conduct of grey-zone operations in the two regions, concluding that the PRC's usage of the 'Three Warfares' concept and the usage of ambiguous state actors is common to both operating environments. However, their operations in the East China Sea, and other locations in their near abroad, currently favour the usage of the maritime law enforcement agencies as well as their state-sponsored and controlled militia force. Finally, this paper concluded that despite their success in grey-zone operations in other regions of their near-abroad, the PRC has only been partially successful in achieving its strategic objectives in the East China Sea and the Arctic.

As demonstrated in this paper, the use of hybrid or multi-dimensional tactics incorporating multiple means of national power has long been understood in China as a means to achieve national objectives. Unsurprisingly, we can see evidence of this cultural norm throughout many of their interactions with the international community. By exploiting the ambiguity that is inherent within the grey-zone, the PRC seeks to generate confusion regarding their actions and objectives. Western powers must recognize the potential this ambiguity has to provoking overreaction or misinterpretation of the PRC's actions, potentially escalating a situation beyond which is necessary. Similarly, the West

must seek to determine the attribution of these actions in an attempt to remove some of their ambiguity in order to reduce their effectiveness.



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