

Sailors signal to MV-22 Osprey during flight quarters aboard USS Ashland, East China Sea, March 10, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Kaleb R. Staples)



# Coercive Gradualism Through Gray Zone Statecraft in the South China Seas

## China's Strategy and Potential U.S. Options

By Kapil Bhatia

*The supreme art of war is to subdue your enemies without fighting.*

—SUN TZU

Captain Kapil Bhatia, Indian Navy, wrote this essay while a student at the U.S. Naval War College. It won the 2018 Secretary of Defense National Security Essay Competition.

China's graduated use of coercive instruments of national power in the South China Sea (SCS) constitutes an informed strategy.<sup>1</sup>

Such coercive gradualism is supported by *gray zone tactics*, which are measures that are aggressive yet designed to remain below the threshold of

conventional military conflict.<sup>2</sup> This combined approach minimizes international involvement, localizes issues, and ensures contentious outcomes in China's favor. For smaller players in the region, this implies significant security, sovereignty, and economic challenges, especially due to their limited capacity to counter the sophisticated and integrated Chinese approach. At the same time, the U.S. approach of avoiding a stake in regional issues has resulted in partner/ally nations questioning American commitment. Absence of a comprehensive U.S. response also allows China to alter the regional geostrategic landscape immutably. Potential changes in SCS dynamics also have wider implications for U.S. and global security interests with implications for international sovereignty, jurisdictional frameworks, and global commerce. There is a need for broader recalibration of the American approach to comprehensively address coercive gray zone challenges posed by China in the SCS through articulation of a coherent strategy and orchestrated employment of all diplomatic, informational, military, and economic options.

### Chinese Strategy in the SCS

*Gradualism* can be defined as principles or policies for achieving a goal by gradual steps, rather than by drastic change. As an international relations concept, *coercive gradualism* may be defined as a "state employing coercive instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve objectives by incremental steps."<sup>3</sup> Coercive gradualism allows states to advance their interests in incremental moves, as opposed to a single *coup de main*.<sup>4</sup> For China, coercive gradualism is a broader precept that informs its strategy across paradigms. Deng Xiaoping, paramount leader of the People's Republic of China, referred to gradualism as "fording the river by feeling for the stones."<sup>5</sup> This article, however, predominantly focuses on such approaches in the SCS.

China has consistently employed broader principles of coercive gradualism

in the SCS to further its interests. A chronological analysis of Chinese activities in the SCS reveals a cohesive and graduated strategy. Starting with simple firing incidents in 2005, Chinese strategy has sequentially and incrementally advanced to harassment actions from 2009, clashes from 2011, standoffs from 2012, and ship collisions post-2014.<sup>6</sup> Incremental fishing control—initially instituted as a ban in 2012—has graduated into a requirement for Chinese fishing permits since 2014.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, all disputed territory in the SCS has been placed under the administrative control of Hainan Province.<sup>8</sup> China's declaration of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Seas in 2013, in airspace controlled by South Korea and Japan, is yet another example of creeping control. Analysts contend that China could attempt to implement similar identification zones in the SCS in the future in alignment with its overall gradualist aims.<sup>9</sup> Large-scale reclamation activities in the SCS constitute another example of gradualism, where artificial islands have incrementally altered the status quo, overcoming what John Mearsheimer alluded to as the "stopping power of water."<sup>10</sup> One scholar referred to this as "gradual *fait accompli*," stating that "We make a big deal of this now, but we'll forget about it after a while."<sup>11</sup> In effect, China employs a graduated strategy of coercive actions and outcomes in the SCS to advance its interests.

The unstated Chinese strategy of coercive gradualism in the SCS is actively supported, indeed enabled, by comprehensive gray zone tactics.<sup>12</sup> A U.S. Special Operations Command white paper published in 2015 defined the *gray zone* as "competitive interactions among (and within) States and non-State actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality."<sup>13</sup> Gray zone tactics are an essential accessory to coercive gradualism, as risk management is a crucial element of gradualism. Since the purported end is to ensure that the "real or perceived reaction to incremental moves will not entail unacceptable costs," gray zone tactics activate the full potential of gradualism by supporting incremental moves through

acceptable costs.<sup>14</sup> China's gray zone strategy involves skillfully orchestrating political, military, and commercial instruments to influence, intimidate, and/or coerce target states, while containing such approaches below the threshold of unacceptable political costs or outright military provocation.<sup>15</sup>

While the gray zone concept is not new, it is the scale and sophistication of Chinese gray zone approaches that merit close attention. To be fair, several countries—including Russia, North Korea, and Iran—have effectively employed gray zone tactics over time. However, Chinese gray zone tools in the SCS are more comprehensive, coercive, and coordinated than similar strategies employed by other states in recent history. Some of the tactics include area domination, incremental fisheries controls, fishing zone denials, resource exploration in contested waters, cyber and information operations, and lawfare. Each activity is orchestrated to remain below a notional threshold to prevent broader regional/international consternation and response. The Chinese Maritime Militia, for instance, has undertaken activities that would qualify as classic military missions, such as patrols, access control, and kinetic engagements. Examples include the 2009 harassment of the USNS *Impeccable*, as well as the 2012 seizure of the Scarborough Shoal.<sup>16</sup> Yet the militia is a preferred tool, since there is a grudging admissibility to militia actions in comparison to full-scale military actions. Not surprisingly, the militia is referred to as the "third sea force of blue hulls" (after the navy's gray hulls and coast guard's white hulls), undertaking what the Chinese call a "war without gun smoke."<sup>17</sup> Use of the militia is combined with other gray zone tools, such as merchant ships, maritime surveillance vessels, fishing fleets, and information operations. Such tools signal "sea power as a 'continuum,' constituting a range of options, [where] even merchantmen and fishing boats can lay mines and monitor foreign warships."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Chinese scholars view gray zone tools as legitimate means to further national aims. One scholar notes that the "approach can yet be regarded as a flexible method to settle

disputes. . . . Such actions are *normal and justified activities* for China within its own waters.”<sup>19</sup> It is no surprise, then, that China is taking the maritime militia to new heights with vessels that include reinforced hulls, external rails to mitigate collision damage, and water cannons.<sup>20</sup> In effect, gray zone tactics constitute a conspicuous vector, supporting the broader Chinese strategy of coercive gradualism in the SCS.

Coercive gradualism combined with gray zone tactics is not an ephemeral approach, and China’s strategic calculus dictates continued impetus to such approaches. Two key reasons underscore such impetus. First, graduated gray zone tactics are particularly favored by states pursuing revisionist aims, such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. These states are “dissatisfied with the status quo and [are] determined to change aspects of the global distribution of power and influence in their favor.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time, revisionist states do not wish to risk major escalation, but rather to employ a “sequence of gradual steps to secure strategic leverage.”<sup>22</sup> These tactics present a way to challenge, and ultimately change, the way global politics work without entailing unacceptable cost and attention.<sup>23</sup> Second, China views the SCS with a strategic significance, the intensity of which is often underestimated. Just as Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico were crucial to the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, China views control of the SCS as a prerequisite to its broader maritime resurgence. Mahan believed that “geography underlies strategy” and highlighted that the strategic value of any position depended on “its situation . . . strength . . . [and] resources.”<sup>24</sup> Mahan also observed that certain regions “rich by nature and important both commercially and politically, but politically insecure, compel the attention and excite the jealousies of more powerful nations.”<sup>25</sup> China views control over key locations within the SCS from a similar lens to avoid jealousies of other powers while underwriting its own security. In Mahanian parlance, China is incrementally altering the regional geography, adding strength and resources to

key locations through an unprecedented reclamation and militarization program.<sup>26</sup> As retired Major General Peng Guangqian of the People’s Liberation Army pointed out during a U.S.-China Dialogue at the Naval War College in 2010, “Every inch of ‘blue-colored territory’ is extremely precious to China.”<sup>27</sup>

### Regional/International Commitments and Response

A crucial subtext of the gradualist gray zone approaches is the orchestration of issues so as to avoid strong regional/international opposition or response. In essence, the core intent is to minimize external interference, while systematically altering regional dynamics. One scholar notes that Chinese efforts “remain below thresholds that would generate a powerful U.S. or international response, but nonetheless are forceful and deliberate . . . to gain measurable traction over time.”<sup>28</sup> Chinese rationale for creating 10,000-foot airstrips on artificial islands is, ostensibly, for a “better response to typhoons and other climate-related disasters.”<sup>29</sup> Reclamation activities are projected by the Chinese as being insignificant, in addition to being based on precedence, since other claimants have also undertaken reclamation in the past. Yet reclamation activities, even though insignificant in isolation, are alarming in aggregate. From 2013 to 2015, for instance, China reclaimed 17 times more land over a period of 20 months than all other claimants combined over the past 40 years.<sup>30</sup> This includes approximately 95 percent of all reclaimed land in the Spratlys.<sup>31</sup> Even where regional mechanisms exist, China has attempted to sidestep its underlying spirit and erode its effectiveness through ambiguity and diversion. An example would be the 2002 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Seas. The declaration requires parties to “refrain from inhabiting the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features.”<sup>32</sup> Chinese reclamation and militarization activities have, nonetheless, continued

apace on prevaricate grounds such as “what activities should be ‘frozen’ have not been listed and stipulated definitely in the [declaration].”<sup>33</sup> The situation is aggravated by ASEAN’s inability to bring about a consensus and consolidate its response, a situation often orchestrated by China itself, allowing Chinese strategies to continue unabated.

Even where a state may lodge a strong protest against the Chinese approach, China often disregards such concerns, provided that the response lacks adequate international traction or is not forceful enough. An example would be the landmark 2015 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) involving the Philippines and China over rights and responsibilities in the SCS. Even though the ruling was a legitimate international instrument in unequivocal favor of the Philippines, the Chinese simply rejected the ruling. An explanation of the Chinese stand lies in the scale and coherence of the international response to such an outcome. In the aftermath of the ruling, international pressure on the Chinese to admit that the ruling was muted failed to register as a conspicuous factor in Chinese considerations. With the international response, an entreaty—rather than an ultimatum—that China perceived was that the “reaction to [its] incremental moves” did not entail “unacceptable costs.” Thus, the gradualist gray zone approach was preserved. This is especially relevant, given the limited Philippine capacity to impose costs upon the Chinese.

Alternately, analysis shows that whenever a concrete and forceful regional/international response is encountered, Chinese strategy is suitably revised and recalibrated. For instance, in 2004, when a Chinese submarine made its maiden submerged passage through the Ishigaki Strait, a sharp Japanese response forced China to retract from its position and express regret in public.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, China has not proceeded with the same island-building approach in the Senkaku Islands, due to an unambiguous U.S. articulation of Senkaku being part of the U.S. security umbrella to Japan.<sup>35</sup> A similar approach can be seen regarding Taiwan, where tacit U.S. involvement limits the





One of 24 Airmen on U.S. Navy EP-3 aircraft involved in April 1 accident with Chinese F-8 aircraft salutes as he departs C-17 Globemaster III, while en route to Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, April 12, 2001 (U.S. Air Force/Adrian Cadiz)

scope for Chinese gradualist gray zone actions.<sup>36</sup> Even where smaller players are involved, resolute action has sometimes forced China to recalibrate its approach. One example would be the 2014 Hai Yang Shi You 981 oil platform standoff between China and Vietnam, where China deployed its state-owned National Offshore Oil Corporation oil platform near the disputed Paracel Islands.<sup>37</sup> The incident involved an aggressive response to Chinese gray zone tactics by Vietnam. Vietnamese fishing boats and coast guard vessels collided with and used water cannons against Chinese fisheries enforcement/maritime militia vessels, based on similar practices employed by the Chinese. In the face of persistent and resolute action by the Vietnamese, the Chinese finally withdrew, stating that the exploratory work had been completed (even though most analysts contest this).<sup>38</sup>

In essence, the distinction between action and inaction on the part of the

Chinese, in respect to its overall strategy in the SCS, may be attributed to the adequacy and coherence of the regional/international response to such incidents. In addition, the unambiguous intent and capability of concerned states to impose costs on Chinese actions is a significant factor. As the PCA ruling shows, Chinese admittance of such outcomes is contingent on the ability of the protagonists to pressure and persevere with outcomes. At the same time, the Hai Yang Shi You 981 standoff reflects the ability of a regional state (Vietnam) to persevere with its stand by imposing equivalent costs within the gray zone. A paradigm thus emerges, where international involvement and integral capacity of regional claimants are the key to containing Chinese gradualist gray zone approaches within the SCS.

### The U.S. Stand

Given the need for a coherent and consolidated response to Chinese actions in

the SCS, the absence of a U.S. response to graduated gray zone activities in the SCS has essentially given a free pass to Chinese actions. But before the absence of a U.S. response to issues related to the SCS is lamented, it is essential to critically examine the underlying causes and effects of such actions.

The broader U.S. reticence toward participation in SCS issues emerges from a principled stand to avoid a stake in regional territorial disputes, with the United States exhorting parties to resolve issues in a “manner consistent with international law.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, the United States perceives that, other than the freedom of navigation enshrined in international law, SCS issues do not impinge on its core national interests. Thus, the U.S. strategy in the SCS is a conscious choice exercised within the politico-strategic context for nonparticipation in regional issues. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had stated in 2012 that



Two B-52H Stratofortress bombers fly over Pacific as part of joint training mission near Japan over East China Sea in support of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Continuous Bomber Presence operations, August 2, 2018 (U.S. Air Force/Gerald R. Willis)

the “United States has been clear and consistent . . . we do not take sides on the competing sovereignty claims to land features in the South China Sea.”<sup>40</sup> In 2016, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter further reiterated that the “United States is not a claimant in the current maritime disputes in the Asia-Pacific, and takes no position on which party has the superior sovereignty claim over the disputed land features.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, the United States has reiterated its right to “fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows.”<sup>42</sup> Such a strategy on the part of the United States, however, presents several conundrums.

At the outset, while the United States reiterates that its interests lie only on issues involving international maritime jurisdiction and freedom of navigation (and not on territorial disputes), it must be remembered that the Chinese interpretation of maritime jurisdiction is linked to its claims to maritime territories.

In essence, China is slowly expanding its maritime territories, each of which beget an area of expanded maritime jurisdiction within the SCS. Furthermore, Chinese interpretation of international maritime jurisdiction, on which the United States clearly has a stake, remains deeply contested between the two parties. For instance, China interprets international law to exclude innocent passage within territorial waters, as well as surveillance and intelligence collection within exclusive economic zones.<sup>43</sup> In essence, China is employing coercive gray zone tactics to expand its control over maritime territories in the SCS, which would in turn assert expanded maritime jurisdictional control over wider swathes of global commons in the SCS. Thus, the U.S. stand inadvertently facilitates Chinese expansion of the nature and definition of international jurisdiction within the SCS, which eventually impinges on its core interests. The inefficacy of U.S. “freedom

of navigation” patrols need to be seen in this light, since China is in the process of consolidating its maritime territories before jurisdictional claims under international law can invite its full consideration. Once control of disputed maritime territories is complete, China may proceed to articulate a more limiting jurisdictional entitlement to the global commons associated with these territories. Clearly, China is playing the long game, not intending to challenge the U.S. peacetime freedom of navigation enterprise yet, but nonetheless preparing for a time when it must. A short-term myopia in the American strategy, thus, becomes evident.

A connected issue is that at a time when an effective response to graduated gray zone strategies requires deeper international commitments and exhortations, U.S. noninvolvement on SCS issues fails to reassure allies, with several seeking alternatives. Even though the United States has articulated its Rebalance to

Asia approach, allies perceive a mismatch between intent and action.<sup>44</sup> Regional states find the United States unwilling to act as a bulwark and the principal architect of coherent international consensus on SCS issues. This is no small issue in East Asia, where trust and consensus are key considerations, especially with the United States seen as an “outside power.” A statement distributed by the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs in 2015 read, “America has failed us.”<sup>45</sup> General Benjamin Defensor, former Philippine chief of staff, stated in an interview that the United States will “not come to our aid . . . the Philippines [is] better off employing restraint and an appeal to world opinion.”<sup>46</sup> South Korean and Japanese officials in Track 1.5 channels indicate “rising angst that gray-zone challenges may erode the credibility of U.S. commitments.”<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, states find realignment with China an attractive proposition. As Robert Kaplan pointed out, in the “short run, a weaker American commitment to the region might result in the States on China’s periphery bandwagoning with China.”<sup>48</sup> Seen in this light, the Philippine “pivot to China” makes imminent sense. “America has lost it. . . . I [have] realigned myself in your [Chinese] ideological flow,” proclaimed President Rodrigo Duterte during the keynote address at the Philippine-China Trade Forum in Beijing in October 2016.<sup>49</sup>

A linked issue is that even when the United States has responded, there are noticeable inconsistencies in the response, which are not lost upon allies. An example would be the declaration of the East China Sea ADIZ in November 2013. The U.S. military expressed “deep concern” at the unilateral action, and B-52 long-range bombers flew sorties through the ADIZ to demonstrate resolve. At the same time, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued Notice to Airmen instructing U.S. civil aircraft to comply with China’s ADIZ.<sup>50</sup> While such inconsistencies may be difficult to reconcile, it must be seen in light of the absence of a broader U.S. strategy on dealing with graduated gray zone challenges. Seen in his context, the

military rightly attempted to restore the status quo ante (through statements and B-52 sorties), while the FAA focused on aviation safety. A strategic reassignment and recalibration of the U.S. approach may, thus, be in order.

At a more abstract level, the U.S. stand on SCS issues also goes beyond the superficial to a more profound issue underlying the contest between a great power and rising power. Analysts see the declining U.S. engagement in the SCS as one of the possible symptoms and deeper verdict on retrenchment of a great power. Two U.S. scholars argue that whenever the “power, authority, and legitimacy of the existing order is challenged, retrenchment by the leading power marks an inflection point in the decline and eventual fall of the leading power.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, other scholars see broader gray zone challenges—to include Russian, Chinese, Iranian, and North Korean endeavors—as a means to challenge the current U.S.-led international order. Gray zone adversaries constitute a “globalizing insurgency challenging the foundational regime of the current advanced industrial nation-state-based (and largely Western) international system and order.”<sup>52</sup> The developing security matrix in the SCS, thus, calls for a deeper reassessment of U.S. strategies and priorities in the region.

### The Need for a Strategy

The more difficult question is what are the options in such a scenario. It may be argued that the United States has limited options to tackle such issues. To address this aspect, the following discussion offers certain options/recommendations.

At the outset, the U.S. approach to the SCS needs to transcend from mere tactical expedients into a broader and more comprehensive strategy. In essence, there is a need for a broader conceptual recalibration of U.S. strategy to tackle graduated gray zone tactics posed by various powers. Three aspects underscore such recalibration: acceptance, articulation, and application.

*Acceptance* is the recognition that Chinese gray zone approaches necessitate

a U.S. response, but current responses are inadequately oriented to counter the threat. The U.S. military remains oriented to war and peace dualities, while gray zones operate between two absolutes. In effect, the black-and-white Western approach to conflict “creates the very gaps and seams gray zone adversaries pursue and exploit.”<sup>53</sup> There is also an asymmetry in risk perception, where decisionmakers are “hypersensitive to the hazards associated with potential escalation in the gray zone and [thus] more conservative in response to gray zone competition.”<sup>54</sup> Authoritarian regimes are also better equipped at executing gray zone strategies in comparison to democratic checks-and-balances systems where power is diffused and decision-making is dispersed.<sup>55</sup> Gray zone issues also create a sense of persistent conflict, which is anathema to democratic systems anchored to traditional concepts of war and peace.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the United States, having unarguably the most capable military in the world, may not be poorly equipped, but poorly *oriented* to deal with such challenges.<sup>57</sup> This reinforces the need for acceptance of gray zone conflict as a distinct category of state-on-state action.<sup>58</sup> Japan, for instance, has identified the gray zone in its 2014 annual defense white paper as “situations neither purely peacetime nor contingencies.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Australia has flagged gray zone actions, such as reclamation and selective interpretation of maritime law, as areas of concern, necessitating concerted response.<sup>60</sup>

The next step in creating an overarching strategy involves unambiguous *articulation* of intent to challenge such approaches. This includes defining clear red lines in gray zone scenarios where necessitated by national interests. The breach of a red line must be responded by escalatory, multidimensional, cost-imposing measures. It must be remembered that gradualist gray zone approaches thrive in the absence of red lines. Island-building, ADIZ declaration, and disregarding PCA ruling are all examples where a red line—or a retaliatory response—was not articulated. A clear red line, as was achieved during the





Sailor takes bearing as USS *Dewey* conducts replenishment-at-sea with USNS *Henry J. Kaiser*, Pacific Ocean, July 16, 2018 (U.S. Navy/Devin M. Langer)

Cuban Missile Crisis or Russian intervention in Ukraine, asserts that “noticeable punishments [would] be imposed on an aggressor who flouts international norms with their gray zone revisionism.”<sup>61</sup> There are obvious consequences for perpetrators, which are particularly effective if the protagonist does not intend irreversible consequences, China being an example.

The last aspect is *application*. Gray zone actions are often shrouded in ambiguity and plausible deniability, making them difficult to counter. Dispelling ambiguity and demanding clarity from potential actors help narrow the problem and invoke red lines to penalize such actions. One example would be presenting firm evidence to the international community of Russian-backed separatists’ downing of MH-17 over Ukraine, paving the way for harsher sanctions against Moscow.<sup>62</sup> This was in light of outright Russian disassociation with the event. Application requires confronting initiators with proof, supported by a

commitment to enforce red lines. Such a move clearly requires a broader international consensus to be effective, a facet that gray zone tactics aim to avoid in the first place.

Apart from conceptual reorientation, it is apparent that present responses to gray zone challenges invariably involve pure military instruments. Yet, such an approach is flawed because gray zone actions aim to invoke the quasi-military and nonmilitary aspects of a situation. Any response through military means, therefore, suffers from an inadvertent escalation and response mismatch to begin with. There is an overarching need to integrate options beyond the U.S. Department of Defense alone. A coordinated whole-of-government approach becomes imperative to tackle graduated gray zone actions, with appropriate integration of all instruments of national power.

**Diplomatic Measures.** At the diplomatic level, there is a need to shore up greater international support

for legitimate regional concerns and highlight irresponsible graduated gray zone measures by parties concerned. Statements such as “our commitment to the Philippines is ironclad” may be inadequate, absent cogent international support for the core interest of the partner involved, such as the outcome of the PCA arbitration in the case of the Philippines.<sup>63</sup> The U.S. “three halts” diplomatic approach, which required parties to halt reclamation, construction, and militarization on disputed features in the SCS, may need to be reinvigorated.<sup>64</sup> There may also be a need for a legislative backing to coordinated U.S. response to gray zone tactics in the region. Among these, the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative Act of 2016, which recalibrates U.S. commitment to that of an actor in the SCS, may need to be pursued.<sup>65</sup> The bill, pending with the U.S. Congress, mandates that the U.S. military routinely enforce America’s right to freedom of navigation in the waterways of the Asia

Pacific and authorizes greater U.S. assistance to Southeast Asian states. Speed of action may be important considering the fact that the time involved in passage of the draft bill in the U.S. Congress has been more than the time taken by China to reclaim over 3,000 acres of land in the SCS.<sup>66</sup>

**Informational Measures.** The \$425 million Maritime Security Initiative under the National Defense Authorization Act of 2016 involves the creation of a shared maritime information network for Southeast Asia. Early conclusion of the initiative would overcome informational gaps faced by partner nations.<sup>67</sup> The United States has also pledged enhanced support to countries with claims in the SCS by “publicly disseminating information about China’s activities at sea,” an intent that needs concerted follow-up action.<sup>68</sup>

**Military Engagement.** Numerous measures could be considered in the military domain. At the outset, conventional U.S. forces would need to be structured, trained, and equipped to handle gray zone activities. U.S. forces would be required to operate within the gray zone with speed, purpose, intent, and resolve.<sup>69</sup> Synchronization of the overall effort would need to be continually steered by combatant commanders, who need to be empowered to operate against active gray zone competition with new capabilities and agile models for campaigning.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the United States could consider building “counter-gray zone capabilities” among partner nations to tackle such challenges. The aim would be to progressively reinforce the futility of gray zone actions by perpetrators by building partner capacity. These could include developing information operations—such as cyber capabilities to shape perceptions and highlight issues—and counter-gray zone capabilities through assets (fast patrol boats, coastal radar chains, surveillance capabilities, small unmanned aerial vehicles), counter-militia forces, reclamation capability, and out-post-building capability, for example.<sup>71</sup>

Diversifying military partners for regional nations, including Australia, India, and Japan, would strengthen



USS *Ronald Reagan* and *Izumo*-class helicopter destroyer *JS Izumo* break formation during combined Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and U.S. Navy exercise, South China Sea, June 15, 2017 (U.S. Navy/Nathan Burke)

regional integration as well as minimize U.S. involvement.<sup>72</sup> Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have recently signed an agreement for joint patrol of maritime borders to thwart piracy and militancy in the region. Extending such cooperation to counter regional gray zone postures could be considered.<sup>73</sup> Closer coast guard-to-coast guard ties could promote a nuanced approach to gray zone threats in lieu of more kinetic and conspicuous navy-to-navy ties.

Another line of effort could include better access to island territories. Several sea areas in the SCS remain uncharted, with hazards to navigation and limited communication facilities.<sup>74</sup> Better access to such areas, dredging operations, and charting of these areas could overcome some of the Chinese advantages in the gray zone. Additionally, there is a need to assist regional navies in building capacity for increased maritime domain awareness, along with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations.<sup>75</sup> U.S. Special Operations support remains focused on foreign internal defense, apart from security cooperation and train-and-equip

missions. Such cooperation could be diversified to counter gray zone activities, such as combat search and rescue, night capability, maritime interdiction capability, visit-board-search-seizure capabilities, and so forth.<sup>76</sup>

**Economic Measures.** Economic penalties for those actors pursuing graduated gray zone tactics constitute a visible and effective deterrent. Russian hybrid warfare activities in Crimea, for instance, were countered through economic sanctions.<sup>77</sup> In addition, funding support could be considered for states seeking to shore up their defensive capabilities against gray zone challenges.

The evolving security situation in the South China Sea is complicated by graduated strategies adopted by China that utilize coercive instruments of national power. These instruments operate in the gray zone, ensuring incremental gains without invoking an escalatory response or international intervention. The time-space synchronization of these approaches is such that they appear as incidents, instead of a series of



interconnected and cohesive elements. Furthermore, limited U.S. intervention has enabled China to successfully impose measures on smaller regional players. Limited response capability among smaller nations has considerably altered regional dynamics, to the detriment of regional players, and also broader international norms. Due to the detrimental impact of such strategies on sovereignty, maritime jurisdictional frameworks, and global commerce, there is a need for wider recalibration of the U.S. approach to gray zone tactics. The United States needs to play a more proactive role in assisting regional players in countering China's broader strategy of coercive gradualism and gray zone tactics. Toward this, apart from broader conceptual recalibration, the United States needs to implement institutional changes to respond to gray zone activities, along with whole-of-government engagement on specific diplomatic, informational, military, and economic elements. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William G. Pierce, Douglas G. Douds, and Michael A. Marra, "Countering Gray Zone Wars—Understanding Coercive Gradualism," *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (September 22, 2015), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Hal Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," Foreign Policy Research Institute (E-Notes), February 5, 2016, available at <www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>.

<sup>3</sup> Pierce, Douds, and Marra, "Countering Gray Zone Wars," 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> "The Death of Gradualism," *The Economist*, March 6, 1997, available at <www.economist.com/node/144711>.

<sup>6</sup> Analysis of incidents in the recent past reveals a graduated strategy of coercive instruments being employed:

- Firing Incidents. January 8, 2005: Chinese ships fired on two Vietnamese fishing boats from Thanh Hoa Province, killing nine people. See Cao Ngo and Ngoc Minh, "Chinese Ships 'Shot to Kill' Vietnamese Fishermen; Survivor," Vietnam Seaports Association, January 17, 2005; February 25, 2011: Chinese frigate *Dongguan* fired three shots at Philippine fishing boats in the vicinity of Jackson Atoll. See Tessa Jamandre, "China Fired at Filipino Fishermen in

Jackson Atoll," ABS-CBN News, June 3, 2011, available at <http://news.abs-cbn.com/-depth/06/02/11/china-fired-filipino-fishermen-jackson-atoll>.

- Harassment Actions. March 2009: Five Chinese ships harassed U.S. surveillance ship USNS *Impeccable*. See Yuli Yang, "Pentagon Says Chinese Vessels Harassed U.S. Ship," CNN, March 9, 2009, available at <www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/09/us.navy.china/index.html>.
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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

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