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HYBRID ACTIVITIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

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Introduction

Chinese strategist Sun Tzu is most widely known for *The Art of War*. More specifically, it is the art of confronting the enemy indirectly without launching a full scale war. A state that is drawn into this kind of circumstances will face an expensive war and is very vulnerable as it has to respond to uncertainty, leaving the state exposed to open targets from the opponent. Today, strategic rivalry between states are often seen in this form including deception, disruption and other non-military tactics by both state and non-state actors to indirectly weaken the opponent.

Grey zone activities are especially are at large today. Three following characteristics summarize grey zone activities; the operations represent an effort to alter the status quo, the operations employ 'unconventional' elements of state power and the operations are carried out gradually. Grey zone activities are undertaken deliberately in order to allow states to remain below the threshold of

conventional military conflict and open interstate war, meaning that exploitation is conducted without crossing established red lines. In other words, grey zone activities are something between war and peace, with which a nation seeks to make political or territorial gains against another without resorting to actual combat.

At sea, grey zone tactics are largely assigned to white hulls and civilian vessels such as large and small fishing vessels or even small individual boats. Sometimes, it is conducted by 'little blue sailors.' These individuals do not have official uniforms and are independent entities at sea, despite often being state-sponsored. In addition, these vessels are equipped with variety of sophisticated weapons. At sea, vessels conducting Grey Zone Operations (GZO) targets offshore oil and gas installations, including hydrocarbon as well as shipping terminals and pipelines.

Methods employed in the South China Sea

First is **gradual employment of actions vis-à-vis the opponent.** The combined use of both military and non-military maritime forces keeps action at a low level, controlling the possibility of war escalation. This would give the opportunity to assess how other maritime nations respond to the situation and also the ability to study a state's capabilities and capacities. The strict 'white on white' policy gives the allowances to alter its own white hulls and increase the gap in asymmetrical power with the claimant states.



Source: Map prepared by CRS using basemaps provided by Esri. EEZs are from the Flanders Marine Institute (VUZ) (2011), Maritime Boundaries Geodatabase, version 6. Available at <http://www.vliz.be/vmdcdata/marbound>.
Note: Disputed islands have been enlarged to make them more visible.

This strategy works in parallel with the use of **salami-slicing tactic**; with one move, only a small piece and increase of territory is gained and this gradual expansion, in the form of the construction of military bases with civilian structures, is for the pursuit of economic leverage as well as offers a stepping stone for forward-operating bases and the pretext to justify patrolling activities.

Second is the **cabbage strategy**. This particular strategy is not alien to states. The Times describes it as “surrounding a contested area with so many boats - fishermen, fishing administration ships, marine surveillance ships,



navy warships.” The disputed island is essentially wrapped in the same way as layers of cabbage - if the opponent is unable to match, it will then withdraw thus giving the other side the upper hand to seize the area.

Third is low-level grey zone tactics, including a variety of behaviours such as economic and cultural exchanges, diplomacy and involvement in multilateral and regional organisations. An example can be seen in the active participation of China in Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) for instance has allowed claimant states to foster good relationships with China. Beijing has been supporting in providing economic and military assistance and this may indirectly open up door to gain access, have control and decision-making capacity in the region.

Conclusion

Grey zone has taken different forms and avatars thus these tactics have been in existence since the beginning of the Ming Dynasty to the present era. In the past, hybrid activities were implemented domestically to slowly push the citizens within and abroad to support one aim of reuniting with territorial claims. In a modern context, grey zone activities consist of psychological operations, overt and covert media manipulation, exploitation of national and international legal systems. To this end, hybrid activities have long served 'Grand Strategy' in many different contexts and it is very much apparent in the SCS.

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