



National Defense College of the Philippines

EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

Issue Number 2021-08

December 7, 2021

Key Points

- Coupled with the closing gap between the hegemon and the challenger, instability and uncertainty are—according to the Power Transition Theory (PTT)—heightened when the former fears that the latter will, among others, challenge the rules and leadership of the international order.
- The intensifying US-China strategic competition presents a major challenge to the Washington-led international order established since the end of World War II.
- Gray zone coercion is a means for Beijing to achieve its strategic objectives while not provoking armed hostilities.
- Seeking to avoid the threshold of armed conflict, gray zone tactics are characterized by asymmetry, ambiguity, and gradualism.
- In the maritime domain, gray zone tactics have the following objectives: establish and maintain presence, harass, provide escort and protection, and gather intelligence.

NDCP Executive Policy Brief (EPB)

A Publication Series on National Security Issues by the Research and Special Studies Division (RSSD) of the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP).

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Countering Maritime Gray Challenges in Southeast Asia: Examining the Strategic Context¹

Mico A. Galang

In November 2021, three Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships, using water cannons, blocked two Philippine vessels en route to transport supplies to military personnel stationed in BRP Sierra Madre in Ayungin Shoal.² Although the troops subsequently received the supplies, the episode is part of a series of incidents in the South China Sea (SCS) where China has been employing gray zone coercion tactics to advance its interests in the area. Indeed, in September 2021, Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr ordered the filing of diplomatic protests against the People's Republic of China (PRC) because of, among others, the continued presence of its fishing vessels in the vicinity of Iroquois Reef, and the unlawful restriction of Filipino fishermen from conducting lawful fishing activities in Scarborough shoal.³ Days after Sec. Locsin issued his guidance, the Malaysian Foreign Ministry announced that it summoned the Chinese ambassador in order to convey related concerns.⁴

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, a Vietnamese fishing vessel was rammed and sunk by the CCG in April 2020.⁵ Having experienced a similar incident in 2019, the Philippines expressed support for Viet Nam.⁶

The aforementioned recent incidents in the SCS are part of the increasing number of gray zone challenges in the region. While not outright armed hostilities, these gray zone challenges are, in the past couple of years, becoming among the major security concerns in the region.

This two-part policy brief aims to examine the strategic context of gray zone challenges, as well as to explore the role that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can play to manage or address the said challenges.

This first part seeks to answer the question: How do gray zone coercion tactics figure in the geopolitical environment of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region? In addition, this paper will also answer the following: 1) What are gray zone challenges? 2) How does China employ gray zone coercion tactics in the maritime domain of Southeast Asia, particularly in the SCS?

Guided by the Power Transition Theory (PTT), this Executive Policy Brief (EPB) argues that gray zone coercion tactics are part of China's efforts to alter the status quo in its favor. In order to achieve its strategic objectives while not provoking armed hostilities, Beijing prefers a more incremental approach in challenging the international order. It is in this context that gray zone coercion challenges figure in the regional security environment.

Transitions in the International Order

Geopolitical transitions in international relations are not new. The rise and fall of great powers throughout history are well documented.⁷ In international relations theory, there are a number of paradigms that seek to explain such a phenomenon, among the most prominent of which is the Power Transition Theory (PTT). The theory assumes that world politics is organized hierarchically, i.e. there is a dominant nation which maintains international order.⁸ Below the dominant nation are the following types of states: great powers, middle powers, small powers, and colonies (which effectively no longer exists).

The PTT emphasizes that there are two determinants of peace and conflict: (1) power; and (2) the degree of satisfaction of other states with which the dominant nation provides goods in the international order. Thus, there is stability when the dominant nation, which has the greatest power advantage in the system, satisfies the other actors—especially other great powers—with respect to the distribution of benefits. The rise of a challenger, which is a great power dissatisfied with the current order, signals instability. Indeed, the PTT recognizes that “not all nations are satisfied with the way the international order functions and the leadership of the dominant nation. The elites of some nations are dissatisfied because they do not believe they and their societies are receiving their due from the international order.”⁹

Coupled with the closing gap between the hegemon and the challenger, instability and uncertainty are heightened when the former fears that the latter will: “(1) surpass the dominant country; (2) become increasingly unwilling to accept a subordinate position in the international order; and (3) *challenge the leadership and rules of the international order.*”¹⁰ The effective displacement of the status quo power from the apex of the international hierarchy by the challenger represents the transition from one order to another.

The current regional order of the Indo-Asia-Pacific has been largely shaped in the aftermath of World War II (WWII) where the United States (US) emerged as the preeminent power. Underpinned by Washington and its

system of alliances and partnerships, the current international order is now being challenged by rising powers, principally by China. From a poor and backward country when it was founded in 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has become, since 2010, the second largest economy in the world.¹¹ The emergence of China as a competitor of the US is a crucial development for the regional balance of power. Indeed, the PTT suggests that timing is crucial for dissatisfied powers to challenge the status quo order: “[w]henever the dissatisfied nations are weak...they cannot (in isolation or by combining with each other) pose a threat to the dominant nation and the coalition supporting the international order. *Only rarely—when the dissatisfied nation is also a great power that has managed to catch up with the dominant nation—is the setting created for challenges that lead to major conflict.*”¹²

Chinese leaders are very much aware of their increasing prominence in the international arena. When he came to power in 2012 as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping announced his vision of a “Chinese Dream” of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”¹³ The Chinese dream involves “two centenary goals”: a) “build a moderately prosperous society in all respects” by 2021, which coincides with the CCP’s 100th founding anniversary; and b) “build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious” by 2049, the PRC’s centennial anniversary.¹⁴ In July 2021, President Xi announced that China has achieved the first centenary goal.¹⁵

As China gained more confidence about its increasing international stature, Pres. Xi openly called on the development of a “distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role as a major country.”¹⁶ Noting that the world is becoming more multipolar, Xi also pledged for the “promot[ion] of democracy in international relations”¹⁷—a point elaborated by Xi in a subsequent speech: “The US took the opportunity of the second Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century and surpassed the UK, becoming the No. 1 world power. Since the second Industrial Revolution, the **US has maintained global hegemony because it has always been the leader and the largest**

beneficiary of scientific and industrial progress.”¹⁸

China's more assertive foreign policy, as well as its desire to be recognized as a major player in international affairs is a break from Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy dictum of "hiding's one talent, biding one's time." ¹⁹ Moreover, it signifies Beijing's efforts to address its dissatisfaction with the current international order. Indeed, in its 2019 Defense White Paper, China noted that the US "provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability."²⁰ China also expressed displeasure with the increasing security cooperation between the US and its allies, such as South Korea whose deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system by Washington "has severely undermined the regional strategic balance and the strategic security interests of regional countries."²¹

As the status quo power, the US is cognizant of the changes in the strategic environment of the Indo-Asia-Pacific. Building on the "Pivot to Asia" initiative²² of the Barack H Obama administration,²³ then-President Donald J Trump announced his "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision for the region in November 2017.²⁴ About two months later in January 2018, the Trump administration released the summary of the classified National Defense Strategy (NDS). Noting that "[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security," the NDS identified China as one of the "revisionist powers."²⁵ Beijing, according to the NDS, is pursuing modernization of its armed forces, "predatory economics," as well as the militarization of the SCS, among others, to "reorder the Indo-Pacific region to [its] advantage."²⁶ The long-term objective is the "displacement of the [US] to achieve global preeminence in the future."²⁷ Indeed, China's strategy to dominate First and Second Chains largely through Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) are manifestations of its strategic intentions.²⁸ As such, the NDS's objective is to "ensure [that] the balance of power remain in [America's] favor."

Despite coming from the opposite political party, the administration of incumbent US President Joseph R Biden Jr has largely similar views on regional security with its predecessor. Under the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG), the Biden administration underscored the need to "contend with the reality that the distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats. China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."²⁹ As such, the INSSG outlined an agenda aimed to "strengthen [America's] enduring advantages, and allow [the US] to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation."³⁰

Clearly, the intensifying US-China strategic competition presents a major challenge to the Washington-led international order established since the end of WWII. As the PTT underscores, "[p]eace is threatened when challengers seek to establish a new place for themselves in the international order, a place to which they believe their increasing power entitles them."³¹

The Concept of Gray Zone

As in the past, geopolitical competition among major powers are not just confined to the military domain. Major power competition also has politico-diplomatic, ideological, informational, and economic dimensions. ³² Historically, however, previous eras of geopolitical competition between the status quo powers and rising powers often resulted to armed conflict. Indeed, in his seminal work entitled *Destined For War: Can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Graham Allison pointed out that of sixteen past cases of power transitions, twelve resulted into armed aggression.³³

Although not necessarily a novel concept for the 21st century and was present in other periods of strategic rivalry, gray zone challenges appear to be a major component of the US-China geopolitical competition. Gray zone has been defined as "an effort or series of efforts beyond steady-state deterrence and assurance that attempts to achieve one's security objectives

without resort to direct and sizable use of force. In engaging in a gray zone strategy, an actor **seeks to avoid crossing a threshold that results in war.**³⁴

Gray zone coercion has three key characteristics, the first of which is asymmetry. Power and national interests are key concepts in international relations. Indeed, a state's strategic calculus and assessment of the security environment would likely involve the power capabilities and interests not just of itself but of other states' as well. Hence, asymmetry must be understood in two dimensions: interest and power.³⁵ There is interest asymmetry when one state has more concern about a certain objective than its adversary.³⁶ While both states may have similar interests, the value which they place on such interests may vary in different degrees because of a whole range of issues such as "geographic positions, strategic circumstances, alliance relationships, domestic politics, historical perspectives, ethnic characteristics, religious identities, bureaucratic dynamics, or individual biases," among others.³⁷ In this context, a state which values a disputed issue more than others would likely be more willing to take risks, *ceteris paribus*.³⁸ This may explain why in some cases the weaker parties were able to defeat powerful states.³⁹

As its name suggests, capability asymmetry refers to the situation in which one state has more military capabilities over another state. However, it is important to underscore that such capability asymmetry may differ in various domains (e.g. one country may have superior naval prowess but may find it difficult to compete in the realm of the coast guard).⁴⁰

The second characteristic of gray zone is ambiguity.⁴¹ Like asymmetry, ambiguity also has different forms. One type of ambiguity is information ambiguity which creates vagueness about facts.⁴² This form "makes it difficult for other parties to determine what happened, where, when, by whom, and why."⁴³ Another type of ambiguity is normative, i.e. if a certain action or behavior is deemed acceptable or otherwise.⁴⁴ Indeed, "this type of ambiguity makes it difficult for other parties to determine whether a law was broken, a norm was violated, a treaty commitment should be invoked, or even whether the status quo was altered."⁴⁵

In the context of gray zone coercion, ambiguity has four interrelated implications: a) the obfuscation on the objectives sought, the participants involved, and whether laws/norms have been violated; b) the provision of opportunities to avoid declared "red lines"; c) the difficulty of states on the receiving end of such gray zone coercion tactics to rally support to counter such actions; and d) effectively respond overall to such forms of coercion.⁴⁶

The third major characteristic of gray zone is gradualism. Otherwise known as salami-slicing, strategic gradualism refers to "slow accumulation of small changes, none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli*, but which add up over time to a substantial change in the strategic picture."⁴⁷ This third characteristic provides the key link to the Power Transition Theory (PTT). As pointed out earlier, PTT postulates how one major power seeks to displace the incumbent preeminent power at the apex of the international order. Gray zone coercion is a means towards this end since the architects of such gradual actions intend "for these incremental steps to sum up to **a decisive change in the status quo**. Such strategies thus involve measured revisionists acting in a deliberate and **gradual manner to achieve partial revolution in the existing system.**"⁴⁸

The challengers to the status quo power seek to employ gray zone coercion tactics because of continued dominance of the latter in the realm of conventional military forces.⁴⁹ Assuming that there is relative parity between the challenger and the status quo power in terms of conventional and nuclear forces, the former can still challenge the latter in areas below the threshold of armed conflict. Hence, gray zone coercion is used to achieve strategic objectives while not provoking armed hostilities.⁵⁰

Situated between what is generally considered as war and peace, there are different forms of gray zone coercion tactics.⁵¹ The first is information operations and disinformation, which entails the use of various media outlets (including social media) to enhance preferred narratives through propaganda, as well as to foment doubt, dissent, and falsehoods.⁵² An example is Russia's meddling in the 2016 US presidential election in part through the use of disinformation in social media.⁵³

The second is political coercion, which refers to the use of various instruments to affect decision-making or political composition of a state.⁵⁴ An example is China's influence operations in Australia ranging from financial inducements to politicians to alter their positions on key issues, and threats to mobilize Australians of Chinese descent to vote against parties that do not support pro-China policies.⁵⁵

The third is economic coercion, which is the use of coercive tools to achieve economic goals or inflict economic harm to an adversary.⁵⁶ While there are varying views,⁵⁷ an example of this is China's reported use of loans as geopolitical leverage.⁵⁸

The fourth is cyber operations, which entails the use of a whole range of tools (e.g. hacking, electronic viruses) in order to cause physical damage, disrupt political processes, expose secrets, disrupt political processes, or other similar acts in the cyber domain.⁵⁹

The fifth is space operations, which entails efforts to disrupt the normal space activities of competitors, interfering with the equipment that provides space-enable services, communications to or from space, and the data or effects provided by space systems.⁶⁰

The sixth is proxy support, which refers to the use (direct or otherwise) of non-state and para-state groups in order to execute militarized forms of intimidation or control territory in order to wield influence or achieve particular politico-security goals.⁶¹

The seventh is provocation by state-controlled forces, which entails the use of non-military or paramilitary forces that have direct lines of communication to the state in order to achieve national interests without the formal use of force, including covert activities.⁶²

The seven aforementioned forms of gray zone coercion tactics are not mutually exclusive. Serving as tools in major power competition, some forms of gray zone maybe combined with each other. This paper, however, will focus on gray zone coercion tactics in the maritime domain.

Gray Zone Tactics: Context and Employment

As pointed out earlier, Washington and Beijing compete on a number of domains, including security—in particular the SCS. With the SCS being an important waterway for trade and security, it is in the interest of the concerned states that these sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) are kept open for commerce and navigation. A country which can control these SLOCs in the SCS will also partially control or affect the economies of key countries like China, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asian states like the Philippines, Viet Nam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia.⁶³

The importance of the seas in international affairs is not new. Geopolitical strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, Nicolas J. Spykman, among others, have argued that the effective control of the seas is a key to achieving the status of a world power.⁶⁴ Historical examples include the ancient city-state of Athens' dominance of the Aegean Sea, and Roman Empire's preeminence of the Mediterranean Sea, and the US dominance of the Caribbean Sea.

Hence, it is not surprising why China, now the second largest economy in the world, seeks to dominate the SCS as a precursor to its grand design of dominating the Indo-Asia-Pacific—a region in which the US, since WWII, has enjoyed pre-eminence. As the PTT suggests, the rise of a challenger will ultimately aim for a change in leadership in the international order. In other words, the objective of Beijing is to replace Washington at the apex of regional hierarchy.⁶⁵ This is coupled by an added historical and geopolitical complexity—with its power, China is now in a position to break out from what it calls as the "Century of Humiliation," a period in Sino history when huge portions of its territory were occupied by foreign powers during the 19th -20th centuries. As pointed out earlier, Beijing seeks the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

While not new, the SCS dispute is one of the major geopolitical hotspots around the world that is changing the strategic environment—i.e., the emerging power shift between the US and China—the dynamics of which have shaped how SCS issue subsequently unfolded. As pointed out earlier, China, as a corollary to the First and Second Island Chain strategy, appears to employing A2/AD tactics in

the SCS, as well as modernizing its armed forces.⁶⁶

But beyond the development of conventional forces, China is employing maritime gray zone coercion tactics to achieve its objectives in the SCS, particularly through a mixture of proxy support, and provocation by state-controlled forces. To note, Chinese leaders do not necessarily use the term “gray zone.” Instead Beijing sees its efforts to defend and advance China’s national interests in the seas as “maritime rights protection”—a goal which seeks to balance with not severely straining relations with other countries, an objective which it calls “stability maintenance.”⁶⁷ While the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is the naval branch of service of China’s armed forces, there are two other organizations that advances Beijing’s interests in the SCS: the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), and the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).

Before 2013, there were various agencies in China that performed maritime law enforcement functions (then called by some observers as “dragons”), such as Bureau of Fisheries Administration (BFA), China Marine Surveillance (CMS), local governments, among others.⁶⁸ In 2013, these different maritime law enforcement agencies were unified under the CCG. Previously under the State Council, the CCG was, in 2018, transferred to the People’s Armed Police Force, which in turn is under the command of the Central Military Commission.⁶⁹ In 2021, China enacted a new coast guard law which authorized the CCG to conduct operations related to “maritime rights protection and law enforcement on and over the waters under the jurisdiction of the [PRC].”⁷⁰ Moreover, the new legislation provided that “[w]hen the national sovereignty, sovereign rights, or jurisdiction is being illegally violated at sea by a foreign organization or individual, or is in imminent danger of illegal violation, a **coast guard agency shall have the power to take all necessary measures including the use of weapons** to stop the violation and eliminate the danger according to this Law and other applicable laws and regulations.”⁷¹ Given that China continues to assert its 9-dashed line claim, it can be argued that the new law, from Beijing’s perspective, applies to the SCS.

The PAFMM is part of China’s militia system, which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organized even before the PRC was founded in 1949.⁷² However, it was not until the 1950s when the maritime militia became fully operationalized as the CCP gained more control of the coastal regions.⁷³ At present, the PAFMM is linked and organized to the PLA through the People’s Armed Force Districts.⁷⁴ With training in intelligence, reconnaissance and sabotage, the PAFMM provides a relatively cost effective force multiplier to the PLAN.⁷⁵

The use of gray zone coercion tactics through the CCG and PAFMM provide PRC with two advantages. First, the two agencies allow Beijing to advance its maritime claims vigorously without being criticized of using traditional “gunboat diplomacy” to press for its geopolitical objectives.⁷⁶ Indeed, as some analysts pointed out, “[p]aranaval forces are much less provocative than gray-hulled warships. The Chinese coast guard operates on the pretext of routine law enforcement, and militia often pretend to be fishermen. Yet both forces can be used to pursue traditional military objectives of controlling space.”⁷⁷ Second, the use of these agencies, particularly the PAFMM, provides China some level of plausible deniability should certain operations do not go according to plan.⁷⁸

The CCG and PAFMM conduct various operations in the SCS. In the context of gray zone operations, the said agencies have four key functions. The first is to establish and maintain presence, which is at the heart of Beijing’s “maritime rights protection” objective.⁷⁹ In the case of this first function, maritime militia—pretending to be fishermen, civilian mariners—display China’s flags and assert Chinese ownership. With their presence in the area, the deployment of the CCG is then justified to ensure their safety, as well as to manage their activities.⁸⁰ An example of this gray zone operation is the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident between the Philippines and PRC. In April of that year, a Philippine Navy (PN) ship approached a number of Chinese nationals caught illegally fishing near the Scarborough Shoal—a feature 124 NM off the coast of the Philippine province of Zambales, thus well within the EEZ of the country—for inspection.⁸¹ However, shortly after the PN officers attempted to apprehend the Chinese fishermen, the CMS, one of the precursors of the CCG, prevented PN from

arresting the fishermen.⁸² Thereafter, China and the Philippines faced each other in tense standoff, which lasted two months.⁸³ Since then, however, China has exercised de facto control of the Scarborough Shoal thus depriving the Philippines to exploit the resources in that portion of its EEZ. The creation of artificial islands in the SCS not only bolsters Chinese presence but also sought to present a fait accompli in the area.

The second function is harassment and sabotage, which entails the obstruction of the activities of foreign vessels on Chinese-claimed waters in order to physically assert Beijing's claims through the use of non-lethal force.⁸⁴ The usual targets of such operations are foreign survey and surveillance ships, as well as fishing vessels.⁸⁵ Examples of this include the ramming and sinking of Vietnamese and Philippine fishing vessels by China mentioned earlier in the introduction.

The third function is to provide escort and protection to Chinese survey vessels in disputed areas.⁸⁶ An example of this function can be seen in the 2014 oil rig incident between China and Viet Nam. In May of that year, Hanoi saw *Haiyang Shiyou 981* (HYSY 981) oil rig and three Chinese oil and gas service ships move into Vietnamese-claimed waters.⁸⁷ Although the Chinese subsequently withdrew from the areas, it must be noted that the oil rig and other ships were escorted by the PAFMM in collaboration with the CCG.⁸⁸

The fourth gray zone function of the CCG and PAFMM is the conduct of intelligence,

Mico A. Galang is a Defense Research Officer II at the Research and Special Studies Division of the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP). For comments and suggestions, please email mico.galang@ndcp.edu.ph.

surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations.⁸⁹ ISR plays an important role in providing decision-makers with the accurate information and clear understanding of the operating picture. The PAFMM, in particular, has more advantage in this regard since it can operate more discreetly compared to the PLAN and CCG.⁹⁰

Clearly, gray zone operations support the overall geopolitical objectives of China in the SCS. By advancing maritime expansionism while treading carefully not to trigger an armed conflict, such gray zone coercion tactics appear to follow Sun Tzu's famous dictum: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."

Conclusion

This paper discussed how gray zone coercion figures in the geopolitical environment of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Using the Power Transition Theory, this paper argued that China is using maritime gray zone coercion tactics in the SCS as part of its objective to alter the status quo order—at present led by the US—in its favor. In order to achieve its strategic objectives while not provoking armed hostilities, Beijing prefers a more incremental approach in challenging the international order. The second part of this paper shall explore the ways in which ASEAN could play a role in countering maritime gray zone challenges.

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¹ This policy brief is the first of the two-part series on the Capacitating ASEAN Research Project.

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