

# CHINA'S GREY ZONE ACTIVITIES AND TAIWAN'S RESPONSES: LESSONS FOR INDIA

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A new phrase has recently been added to the military language. The term “grey zone” has come to represent the uneasy ties between various Indo-Pacific countries and China. Despite being equally baffling and unnerving, this new species of strained inter-state ties, thankfully, avoids war. However, due to the unique nature of these activities, the armed forces are significantly involved in addressing the issues they create. Although military actions are almost non-existent, combat fighters can be found in grey zones.

The paper examines the grey zone primarily at the strategic level and from a defence standpoint. It explores what a “grey zone” is and, just as importantly, what it is not, to draw some conclusions that will be helpful when deciding how to respond. The second half explores China's activities in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, as well as Taiwan's responses. The final section discusses China's actions in the Indian Ocean and how they differ significantly from those it conducts in the Western Pacific.

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## DEFINING THE GREY ZONE

One of the odd types of operations that does not fall under either peace or conflict conditions is the grey zone operation. These grey zone strategies are employed to fulfil specific strategic objectives. These actions take place at a significantly lower level than regular military operations but higher than typical activity during times of peace.<sup>1</sup> Whether done deliberately or accidentally, all the activities fall somewhere between acts of war and acts of peace. On design, the aggressor maintains an uneasy peace. To prevent problems from cooling off, processes are meticulously planned. The activities are gradual, controlled, and cautious, salami slicing the problem rather than seeking quick, clear remedies. To achieve the intended outcome, the status quo is gradually changed. Care is taken to avoid reaching critical escalatory thresholds to avoid conflict. All forms of national power including kinetic and non-kinetic, military and non-military, are used.<sup>2</sup>

In a landmark piece published in 2015, Michael Mazarr studied the concept of the grey zone. Grey zone operations do not include starting wars but actively work to avoid them.<sup>3</sup> The concept of a “grey zone” blurs the lines between the two, providing an ambiguous middle ground by simultaneously excluding conflict but not ensuring peace. If peace is defined as “the absence of violence,” the concept of a “grey zone” creates a conceptual conundrum because it is neither war nor peace.

This definitional minutiae draws attention to the fact that the success of aggressors’ activities in the grey zone depends on the resilience of the peace that currently exists. Many consequences follow from these general grey zone properties. Grey zone initiatives seek to progressively build up successes. In the classification scheme, they comprise a cumulative strategy rather than a sequential method, as J.C. Wylie noted in the middle of the 1960s. Wylie believed that air combat methods involved a cumulative approach, in which

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1. Peter Layton, *China's Enduring Grey Zone Challenge* (Canberra: Air and Space Power Centre, 2021).
  2. Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milevski, “War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction”, *Survival*, 63:1, 2021, pp. 101-112, p. 105.
  3. Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), p. 58.

aircraft flew out daily to engage in minor tactical battles that they eventually won.<sup>4</sup>

So-called “grey zone” operations are not a concept or strategy that China devised independently. Instead, the United States was responsible for developing and introducing grey zone operations. The US Department of Defence stated in the Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR), which was released in 2010, that “the future strategic landscape will increasingly feature challenges in the ambiguous grey area that is neither fully war nor fully peace”.<sup>5</sup> The term “grey zone challenges” is further described in the 2015 US Special Operation Command White Paper<sup>6</sup> as “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.” Notably, Japan has identified “grey zone situations” and flagged probable confrontations owing to territorial sovereignty and objectives in the Asia-Pacific area since 2013, much like the United States. In both the Defence of Japan 2014, and Japan’s 2013 National Security Strategy, the idea of “grey zones” is openly stated.<sup>7</sup>

It additionally implies that grey zone activities are not haphazardly executed; rather, they follow a carefully thought-out campaign strategy that is overseen by commanders at the strategic level. The Communist Party of China (CPC) and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) command structures are involved at the highest levels. The activities of tactical commanders in the grey zone are not ad hoc. This demonstrates how, although coordinating with several non-military actors, Chinese grey-zone operations ultimately rely on hard military strength supplied by the PLA and used by the Party. China’s

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4. J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1967), and Australian Naval Institute Press reprint, pp. 23-30 .
  5. US Department of Defence (2010), Quadrennial Defense Review Report, [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR\\_as\\_of\\_29JAN10\\_1600.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf), p. 73. Accessed on November 29, 2023.
  6. US Special Operation Command (2015), US Special Operation Command White Paper: The Gray Zone, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf>, p. 1. Accessed on November 29, 2023.
  7. Cabinet Secretariat of Japan (2013), “National Security Strategy of Japan,” [https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/131217anzenhoshou/pamphlet\\_en.pdf](https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/131217anzenhoshou/pamphlet_en.pdf), p. 22.; see also Japan Ministry of Defense (2014), Defense of Japan 2014, [https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w\\_paper/pdf/2014/](https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2014/) Accessed on November 29, 2023.

actions in the grey zone would be significantly distinct and much less productive without the PLA.

A key objective of these “grey zone” activities is to deter and avert military escalation. The Chinese strategic leadership does not want to unintentionally launch a conflict, so the tactical operation must be closely monitored. It involves meticulously planned brinkmanship. Therefore, a period of durable peace is ideal for grey zone activities. The distinctive features of the grey zone set it apart from hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare is a style of conflict in which the application or prospect of violence is utilised to try to definitively win a campaign. This stands in direct opposition to the gradualism of the grey zone, which is based on carefully avoiding the use of violence. In general, China uses the grey zone, whereas Russia uses hybrid warfare; the two strategies or countries are not meant to be mixed up.

### **CHINA'S PRACTICE OF GREY ZONE AND TAIWAN'S RESPONSE**

China's foreign policy has grown increasingly assertive because of the modernisation of the PLA and the expansion of its economy, and the rest of the world, particularly those countries with which it has disputes over territory, view China's actions throughout the grey zone as threats and dangers. The idea is based on Sun Tzu's advice that “ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting.” China's strategy intends to go with the flow, or, as the proverb goes, “the trend is your friend.” The belief that the East is rising, and the West is in decline is the most significant trend.<sup>8</sup> Chinese policy-makers view the international order as becoming multipolar and, as a result, giving them a lot of room to manoeuvre strategically. This pattern is also consistent with the idea that finance, not military might, is the main factor influencing the world currently and that it is China's most powerful card. Because great power war is unlikely, China can base its decisions on the idea of a durable peace.

Japan previously highlighted its profound worries about the ongoing grey zone issues and the pressing risks presented by China in its Defence of Japan 2022. Taiwan's 2021 QDR, which was released

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8. Timothy Thomas, *The Chinese Way of War: How Has it Changed?* (McLean: MITRE, June 2020), pp. 2, 5, 45, 77.

by the Ministry of Defence, openly articulates, and refers to China's grey zone actions.<sup>9</sup> The "grey zone" is described in the document as "an ambiguous realm between peace and war" and is distinguished by "having a mix of indirect force application and paramilitary or low-intensity military means to harass, coerce, and attempt to ignite conflicts to undermine national security and regional stability."

By engaging in grey zone operations China hopes to discourage, dissuade, or lessen the competitive edge of competitors while pressuring Taiwan, the US, and others to act in accordance with its interests. Its goal is to show that it is militarily capable of resolving territorial conflicts like those involving the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the South China Sea, and Taiwan's unification. Beijing has used a variety of grey zone tactics, including economic pressure, cyber (or disinformation) warfare, military training, and missile tests. China has engaged in several grey zone actions during the past ten years that have been directed at the surrounding nations and states participating in the South China Sea issue. Without a doubt, Taiwan is at the forefront of China's actions in the grey zone.

Among the most regular actions taken by China's ruling class to handle the Taiwan issue and further the country's aim of reunification are military drills and missile tests. China showed its resolve to use military might to interfere in Taiwan's first presidential election during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis. However, since 2016, China's military operations have grown progressively more assertive; it frequently uses its armed forces to demonstrate its opposition to President Tsai Ing-wen's cross-strait policy and Taiwan's pro-American attitude, even though the majority of Taiwanese support President Tsai's hardline stance towards China.<sup>10</sup>

A minimum of 554 PLA flights entered Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) between September 16, 2020, and August 31, 2021, according to the Republic of China (ROC) National Defence

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9. Ministry of National Defence, ROC (2021), Quadrennial Defense Review, The Republic of China, 2021, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/NewUpload>. Accessed on November 25, 2023.

10. Ministry of National Defence, ROC (2021), ROC National Defense Report, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-are-implications-cyber-dimension-china-taiwan-crisis>, p. 42. Accessed on November 25, 2023.

Report 2021.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, at least 1,100 PLA planes and about 600 PLA boats patrolled the area near Taiwan in August and September 2022. China's PLA still engages in joint air and sea missions to improve and assess its military prowess. By engaging in grey zone activities, China hopes to persuade Taiwan and the US to change their policies towards it and make it abundantly evident to the rest of the world that there are real dangers in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan has recently expanded its national defence spending in response to the urgent dangers posed by China, by acquiring modern weapons from the US such as F-16V aircraft, M1A2T tanks, Harpoon and Sidewinder missiles, and the Surveillance Radar Programme (SRP). Taiwan will be able to identify and monitor PLA missiles and other air-breathing objects thanks to the SRP, which is anticipated to aid in countering China's grey zone actions. Six arms shipments to Taiwan were authorised by the Biden administration between January 2021 and November 2022. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was also signed by Taiwan and the United States in March 2021 to create a Coast Guard Working Group.

Taiwan is increasing bilateral maritime cooperation with the United States and boosting its defence ties with the country based on the forum given by the MoU. Taiwan has linked its survival to the stability of the Indo-Pacific area since maritime security and safety are the cornerstone of the US administration's Indo-Pacific policy. It is also important to note that during the past two years, Taiwan has vigorously unified its marine forces. The seamless transfer of Taiwan's coast guard's resources to the navy during a conflict will be made possible by the integration of the maritime forces. Taiwan's actions are seen as a reaction to China's recent forceful grey zone activities, particularly the Maritime Police Law (MPL) legislation. The MPL increases tensions among China, Japan, and Taiwan by allowing China's maritime police to use military force in certain situations.

Cyber or misinformation warfare is a different kind of action that occurs in the grey zone, as China wants to disrupt Taiwan's society and

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

bring about disorder on the island to further its political objectives.<sup>12</sup> This is done by engaging in cyber warfare or disinformation campaigns. Chinese President Tsai Ing-wen has categorically labelled Taiwan's informational assault as a "cognitive warfare tactic." The 2018 municipal elections in Taiwan served as the starting point for China's propaganda campaign against Taiwan; it also participated in the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan. The Taiwanese government has undertaken numerous anti-disinformation initiatives since 2018, which include passing modifications to the country's laws and law enforcement, ratifying changes to the so-called "five national security laws", and encouraging media literacy aimed at educating and preparing Taiwanese citizens to recognise fake news.

In addition to misinformation, economic coercion—another form of Chinese grey zone activities—has been employed by the Communist Party in Beijing to pressure its counterparts in Taiwan, particularly the Tsai Ing-wen administration. During Speaker Pelosi's recent trip to Taiwan, China implemented sanctions on Taiwanese companies and exports. It halted the entry of several products from Taiwan before Speaker Pelosi's visit citing pest worries, despite Taiwan's denials. These products included grouper fish, pineapples, wax apples, and sugar apples. Most of Taiwan's commercial commodities are sent to China, which account for 40 per cent of total exports from Taiwan each year. Taiwan has worked to lessen its reliance on China's economy and emphasise the value of economic expansion, as seen by the so-called New Southbound Policy adopted by the Tsai Ing-wen government in response to China's financial stress and unexpected penalties.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, as of now, China continues to be Taiwan's principal trading partner and the largest market for its products.

The goal of China's attempts to operate in the grey zone is to prevent, discourage, or lessen the advantages of its rivals, notably Taiwan and the United States. However, there is very little concrete

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12. Erica D. Lonergan and Grace B. Mueller, "What Are the Implications of the Cyber Dimension of the China-Taiwan Crisis?" Council on Foreign Relations, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-are-implications-cyber-dimension-china-taiwan-crisis>. Accessed on November 26, 2023.

13. "China Bans 35 Taiwanese Food Exporters in Warning Ahead of Pelosi Visit," <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-bans-35-taiwanese-food-exporters-warning-ahead-pelosi-visit-2022-08-02/>. Accessed on November 28, 2023.

proof that China's actions in Taiwan have assisted the dictatorship in Beijing in achieving its stated objectives, such as changing Taiwan's and the United States' policies towards China or achieving national reunification. More than 60 per cent of Taiwanese citizens believe that the Beijing regime has an antagonistic mindset towards both the Taiwanese people and government, according to the most recent survey conducted by Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council in October 2022;<sup>14</sup> additionally, less than 10 per cent of Taiwanese citizens support unification.

### **CHINA'S IMPLEMENTATION OF GREY ZONE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

A different situation is presented by China's policy in the Indian Ocean. Beijing has made disproportionate territorial claims in the Western Pacific, where military vehicles are used in more aggressive grey zone activities. But, on the other hand, China has chosen to gradually assert its presence in the Indian Ocean. Despite being portrayed as a single region in which states may dominate through a single approach, the Indo-Pacific is divided into two sea bodies—the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific—because of its vastness.

Beijing has built bases for troops and installed military facilities on illegally claimed islands in the Western Pacific, where it asserts ownership of the appropriate oceans, the seafloor, and subsoil. Even though several of these features lie outside of China's 200-nautical mile (nm) Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Coast Guard warships are constantly stationed adjacent to them. These actions and China's conduct have been labelled as hostile by the international community on numerous occasions. Furthermore, nations like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines have frequently voiced their opposition to Beijing's violations of their individual EEZs and its overbearing maritime claims in public. However, the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean does not at first seem to be hostile. Beijing has mostly been present throughout the far-off IOR waterways with fisheries and research

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14. Mainland Affairs Council, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2022, <https://www.mac.gov.tw/cp.aspx?n=2207B0CA2CAB41B6&s=2E2500D599632121>. Accessed on November 22, 2023.



vessels, which it has claimed are fully inside its territorial waters and compliant with international law.

On the opposite side, India is concerned about the growing number of Chinese fishing and research vessels that are navigating the Indian Ocean. The PLAN may use Chinese research vessels as its “eyes and ears.” Some researchers believe that Chinese fishing boats are PLAN “auxiliary naval forces” and constitute an integral component of China’s maritime militia, which is a part of Beijing’s maritime police system. Looking at these operations through the prism of China’s goal of becoming a major maritime power by 2050 is enlightening. China might get further insight into the remote waters of the Indian Ocean as well as the experience of a naval expedition using these non-military ships, which would enable it to develop into a blue-water navy capable of imposing maritime control. Even though China claims that the objective of its research boats is purely scientific, several IOR littoral states believe that these vessels may be gathering information to improve Beijing’s maritime domain awareness by keeping an eye on ship activities near or inside these governments’ EEZs.

### **WAY AHEAD FOR INDIA**

India can no longer ignore the prospect that it could be subjected to a covert maritime blockade or other form of sustained pressure. There are signs that India’s political leaders are aware of this threat, but instead of moving on with plans to address this development, the discussion is still mired in the ideal design of the country’s future fleet. India developed its first integrated ocean strategy (SAGAR) in 2015, but it is still arguing about the size and composition of its fleet based on a struggle for limited resources among its service providers rather than the mounting threats to its ocean goals and what is required to address them. The Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of India mentions the use of island territories and submarines as alternatives, despite the Indian Navy chief’s declaration that the Indian Navy will formally write to the government regarding the urgent need for a third aircraft carrier to improve its maritime capabilities.

China’s fishing boats and research vessels do not engage in direct military activities but may lay the groundwork for future military

acts. However, if China's actions are regarded as coordinated with the ports it is purchasing in the Indian Ocean, they could have major consequences in the future. India should concentrate on developing a long-term strategy to handle this difficulty. A solution may lie in increasing maritime awareness among the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) nations. India should employ its extensive information network, which is dispersed throughout the Indian Ocean and includes data from the Fusion Centre and space-based maritime monitoring, to monitor any nefarious operations by Chinese ships.

India undoubtedly benefits greatly from its location in the Indian Ocean, but without these benefits being supported by a well-planned and adequately funded strategy, India will lag in ensuring that the foreseeable future of the region is based on its preferences.