

CHINA'S GRAY ZONE STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: TACTICS, OBJECTIVES, AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This research examines China's tactics in its South China Sea gray zone strategy, contrasting them with conventional military tactics, identifying primary objectives, aligning with regional and global ambitions, and highlighting potential regional implications. This study utilizes secondary data, including academic articles, government reports, and policy papers, to analyze China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea. Qualitative content analysis will be employed to identify and interpret themes related to tactics, objectives, and regional implications. The research findings reveal that China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea involves tactics such as maritime militia, island-building, coercive diplomacy, and lawfare. These tactics differ from conventional military approaches as they allow China to assert control without overtly crossing the threshold of armed conflict. The primary objectives pursued by China through the implementation of a gray zone strategy in the South China Sea include securing territorial claims, enhancing regional influence, and safeguarding national security interests. These objectives align with China's larger ambitions of regional hegemony and global leadership. Potential regional implications of China's gray zone strategy encompass heightened territorial disputes, compromised regional security, restricted freedom of navigation, challenges to international law, and strained US-China relations. To manage and counterbalance the risks arising from China's gray zone strategy, affected nations and regional stakeholders should adopt strategies and policies such as strengthening regional alliances, increasing military presence, engaging in multilateral negotiations, promoting international law, and enhancing security cooperation. These measures can help preserve regional stability and safeguard the interests of the affected nations.

Keywords: China, Gray Zone Strategy, Regional Implications, South China Sea

INTRODUCTION

China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea refers to the use of coercive tactics by China to advance its domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. These tactics are shy of armed conflict but beyond normal diplomatic, economic, and other activities (Lin et al., 2022). Gray zone tactics are widely recognized as playing an increasingly important role in China's efforts to alter the regional status quo in its favor. China's gray zone tactics include geopolitical, economic, military, and cyber and information operations activities beyond regular diplomatic and economic activities and below the use of kinetic military force. These tactics pose significant challenges to the United States and its allies and partners in the region (Hoang Do, 2023). Gray zone activities are a form of slow intensity conflict that China has increasingly employed over the last year to assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea. China has employed many types of gray zone activities, including military exercises, missile drills, economic coercion, and cyber (or disinformation) warfare. The South China Sea is a hotbed of gray zone activity, and most of what happens there happens outside the public eye. The Philippines has been trying to illuminate this gray zone by releasing photos and videos of incidents to build resilience into its society against that activity and deter China's gray zone activities (Chin-Kuei Tsui, 2022).

China's Gray Zone Strategy in the South China Sea is an important topic to study because it involves China's use of coercive tactics that are shy of armed conflict but beyond normal diplomatic, economic, and other activities (Lin et al., 2022). These tactics are known as gray zone tactics and are increasingly being used by China to advance its domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region (Hoang Do, 2023; Lin et al., 2022). The importance of studying this topic lies in understanding the tactics, objectives, and regional implications of China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea.

Here are some reasons why studying China's Gray Zone Strategy in the South China Sea is important. To understand the tactics used by China: Gray zone tactics are a form of slow intensity conflict that China has increasingly employed over the last year to assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea. By studying these tactics, we can better understand how China is using

its power to pressure its targets and alter the regional status quo in its favor (Lin et al., 2022). To assess the regional implications: China's gray zone activities support its overarching domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives in the Indo-Pacific, which Beijing views as China's priority region (Lin et al., 2022). By studying the regional implications of China's gray zone strategy, we can better understand how it affects the security and stability of the region. To develop effective countermeasures: Understanding China's gray zone tactics is essential for developing effective countermeasures to address them. By studying these tactics, policymakers can develop strategies to deter China's gray zone activities and mitigate their impact on regional security and stability (Kuo, 2020). To promote transparency and accountability: Gray zone activities are often under the radar, making them difficult to deal with (Hoang Do, 2023). By illuminating gray zone activity, we can build resilience into our own society against that activity and deter China's gray zone activities by making them pay a reputational cost (Willemyns, 2023).

Gray zone tactics are coercive actions that are shy of armed conflict but beyond normal diplomatic, economic, and other activities. They are widely recognized as playing an increasingly important role in China's efforts to advance its domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives, particularly in the Indo-Pacific (Lin et al., 2022). According to Chinese analysts, gray zone actions are measures that powerful countries have employed both historically and in recent decades that are beyond normal diplomacy and other traditional approaches to statecraft but short of direct use of military force for escalation or a conflict (Lin et al., 2022). China tailors its gray zone activities to the target and has an increasing variety of tactics across four key domains: geopolitical, economic, military, and cyber/IO. These activities are a way to pressure countries to act according to Beijing's interests without triggering backlash or conflict (Lin et al., 2022).

Gray zone activities support China's overarching domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives in the Indo-Pacific, which Beijing views as its priority region. They balance China's pursuit of a more favorable external environment by altering the regional status quo in its favor with a desire to act below the threshold of a militarized response from the United States or China's neighbors (Lin et al., 2022). China's gray zone activities

have been comprehended as threats and dangers by its international counterparts, especially those nations that have territorial disputes with China. By acting in the gray zone, where the boundaries of peace and conflict blur, China pursues its interests while avoiding open conflict with the United States (Escriche, 2022).

Gray zone tactics are important to China's objectives because they allow China to achieve its goals without triggering a military response from the United States or its neighbors. They also allow China to exert pressure on other countries to act according to Beijing's interests, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. By employing a variety of tactics across different domains, China can tailor its approach to the target and achieve its objectives in a more nuanced and effective way (Lin et al., 2022).



Figure 1. China Employ Gray Zone Tactics (Lin et al., 2022)

China uses a variety of gray zone tactics to pressure allies and partners, particularly on core interests. It combines geopolitical, economic, military, and cyber/IO activities, reducing the need for escalation in any single domain. China is cautious and selective in using high-profile tactics against more-capable countries. As military capabilities grow, China will use fewer military tactics, and it has become more active in international institutions and third-party actors. Since 2013, China has expanded its involvement in select regions, recruiting local proxies and engaging in information efforts (Lin et al., 2022).

Studying China's Gray Zone Strategy in the South China Sea is important for understanding the tactics, objectives, and regional implications of China's gray zone strategy. It is also essential for developing effective countermeasures, promoting transparency and accountability, and maintaining regional security and stability.

Problem Statement, objective, and research questions the South China Sea has become an area of significant geopolitical tension due to competing claims by several nations, including China, over its resources and territorial boundaries. China, in particular, has been employing a gray zone strategy in the region, utilizing a combination of military, diplomatic, and economic tactics to assert its claims without crossing the threshold of outright conflict. This research aims to analyze China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea, exploring its tactics, objectives, and the potential regional implications it carries.

China's longstanding territorial disputes in the South China Sea have heightened concerns regarding its assertive behavior and the potential consequences for regional stability. The implementation of a gray zone strategy complicates the situation further, as it blurs the boundaries between peaceful engagement and aggression. Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine the nature, objectives, and ramifications of China's gray zone strategy to better understand its implications for regional security and evaluate potential courses of action for affected nations.

The primary objective of this research is to comprehensively investigate China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea. The study endeavors to accomplish the following objectives: 1) Identify and analyze the specific tactics employed by China in its gray zone strategy, including military, diplomatic, economic, and informational aspects; 2) Assess the objectives behind China's adoption of a gray zone strategy in the South China Sea, considering both internal and external factors such as domestic politics, regional power dynamics, resource acquisition, and national security concerns; 3) Examine the potential implications and consequences of China's gray zone strategy for the South China Sea region, including impacts on the territorial disputes, regional stability, freedom of navigation, international law, and US-China relations; 4) Recommend strategies and policies for affected nations, regional stakeholders, and the international community to address and mitigate the risks associated with China's gray zone strategy.

Addressing the gray zone strategy employed by China in the South China Sea necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its tactics, objectives, and the potential regional implications it holds. By examining these aspects, this research aims to contribute valuable knowledge and

insights that can guide affected nations, regional stakeholders, and the international community in effectively managing the challenges posed by China's assertive actions while maintaining peace and stability in the region.

China's strategy in the South China Sea involves coercive actions beyond diplomatic and economic activities to advance domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives. These tactics include military exercises, missile drills, economic coercion, and cyber warfare. China defines the "gray zone" as an ambiguous realm between peace and war, using indirect force application and low-intensity military means to harass, coerce, and attempt to ignite conflicts to undermine national security and regional stability. The South China Sea is critical for China's economic and strategic interests, given its vast reserves of oil and natural gas, fisheries, and strategic location for maritime trade. Affected nations and regional stakeholders should develop comprehensive understanding of these tactics and engage in multilateral cooperation to counter China's actions

RESEARCH METHOD

The South China Sea region has long been a contentious area, with several countries claiming sovereignty over various islands and waters within its boundaries. China, in particular, has been actively asserting its claims, employing what is known as the "gray zone strategy." Utilizing qualitative research techniques built on secondary sources, this study aims to examine the tactics, goals, and regional implications of China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea.

Qualitative research involves gathering and analyzing non-numerical data to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. This approach can effectively explore complex geopolitical issues, such as China's gray zone strategy. Creswell & Creswell (2017) emphasizes the use of secondary sources in qualitative research, which provide valuable insights from existing literature, reports, and articles. In the case of this essay, secondary sources from various experts, scholars, government reports, and think tank publications will be employed to analyze the topic

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. China's Gray Zone Tactics in the South China Sea: A Departure from Conventional Military Approaches

China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea has emerged as a subject of increasing concern and scrutiny in recent years. Deploying tactics that fall shy of armed conflict but surpassing normal diplomatic and economic activities, China seeks to advance its domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives in the region. This essay aims to delve into the specific tactics employed by China within its gray zone strategy in the South China Sea and highlight their distinctions from conventional military approaches.

Gray Zone Tactics: Coercive Actions Beyond Conventional Means

Gray zone tactics, as recognized within China's strategy, encompass a range of coercive actions beyond traditional diplomatic and economic activities, yet remain short of kinetic military force deployment. These tactics include geopolitical maneuvering, economic coercion, military exercises, cyber operations, and information warfare. By employing these tactics, China aims to exert influence, deter competitors' advantages, and shape regional dynamics to conform to its interests (Lin et al., 2022).

China's use of zone tactics is driven by its desire to establish itself as a dominant power in the region and safeguard its national security. Geopolitical maneuvering allows China to assert its territorial claims and expand its influence in disputed areas, such as the South China Sea. Through economic coercion, China leverages its economic might to pressure countries into aligning with its interests or punishing those that defy its wishes. This includes imposing trade restrictions, economic sanctions, and offering financial incentives to gain strategic advantages. Military exercises serve as a show of force, showcasing China's growing military capabilities and sending a clear message to other countries in the region that any attempts to challenge its territorial claims will be met with aggression. China's aggressive actions not only threaten the sovereignty and security of neighboring countries, but also undermine the principles of international law and norms. By disregarding the rights of other nations and disregarding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, China sets a dangerous precedent that allows for the erosion of global order and stability. It is imperative for the international community to collectively address this issue and counter China's expansionist

agenda to ensure a peaceful and rules-based international order (Yang, 2023).

The South China Sea Dispute: A Catalyst for Gray Zone Activities

The South China Sea, home to valuable reserves of oil, natural gas, and fisheries, holds critical economic and strategic significance for China. In an attempt to consolidate its claims and assert control over this disputed region, China has resorted to various gray zone activities. These activities encompass military exercises, missile drills, economic coercion, and cyber warfare specifically targeted at neighboring countries and states involved in the South China Sea dispute (Chin-Kuei Tsui, 2022; Hoang Do, 2023).

These gray zone activities have been a cause of concern for the international community, as they not only escalate tensions in the region but also challenge the established norms of international law. China's military exercises and missile drills, for instance, have not only increased the risk of accidental clashes but have also raised questions about its intentions and long-term objectives in the South China Sea. Additionally, China's economic coercion tactics, such as imposing trade restrictions and economic sanctions, have been seen as a way to exert pressure on its neighbors and force them to comply with its territorial claims. This has further strained relations between China and other countries in the region, leading to heightened tensions and potential conflicts. Furthermore, China's aggressive expansion and construction of military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea have alarmed neighboring nations and raised concerns about its ultimate goal of establishing dominance in the region. These actions have not only undermined trust and cooperation among countries in the South China Sea but also heightened the risk of a military confrontation that could have far-reaching consequences for regional stability and global security (Laksmana et al., 2023).

Taiwan's Responses: Navigating the Ambiguity of Gray Zone Tactics

Taiwan, in response to China's gray zone strategy, characterizes this realm as an ambiguous realm between peace and war. It highlights the employment of indirect force application, paramilitary actions, and low-intensity military means aimed at harassing, coercing, and destabilizing the country's national security and regional stability. With the use of gray zone activities, China seeks to compel Taiwan, the United States, and other relevant stakeholders to align with its own interests (Chin-Kuei Tsui, 2022).

South China Sea, it is imperative for ASEAN nations to have a comprehensive understanding of the maritime domain. By strengthening their MDA capabilities, these nations can effectively monitor and respond to any potential threats or illegal activities in their waters. This proactive approach not only safeguards their national security but also ensures the stability and prosperity of the entire region. As China continues to assert its dominance in the South China Sea through coercive tactics and the construction of military installations on disputed islands, it is crucial for ASEAN nations to strengthen their maritime domain awareness. By enhancing their surveillance capabilities, such as deploying advanced radar systems and increasing patrols, these nations can deter any further encroachment by China and protect their sovereignty. Additionally, a comprehensive understanding of the maritime domain allows ASEAN nations to engage in diplomatic negotiations from a position of strength, ensuring that their concerns are addressed in any future discussions regarding the South China Sea (Baruah, 2020; Chalk, 2019; Greenway Coey & Sipes, 2018; Singh, 2022).

2. China's Gray Zone Strategy in the South China Sea: Objectives and Global Ambitions

China's assertive approach in the South China Sea through the implementation of a gray zone strategy has attracted significant attention from scholars and policymakers. This discussion aims to discuss the primary objectives pursued by China through its gray zone strategy in the South China Sea and explore how these objectives align with its larger regional and global ambitions. Drawing from theories on gray zone tactics, regional ambitions, global ambitions, and military preparedness, this essay will shed light on China's motivations and goals in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.

Gray zone tactics involve coercive actions that fall between reactive diplomacy and outright kinetic force. China employs diverse gray zone activities, such as geopolitical maneuvering, economic coercion, military posturing, cyber and information operations, and strategic ambiguity, to advance its domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives (Lin et al., 2022). In the South China Sea, China aims to assert its territorial claims, secure valuable resources, promote its regional influence, and establish dominance over weaker states. By utilizing gray zone tactics, China seeks to

create a situation that cannot be easily reversed, effectively manifesting control as a *fait accompli* (Basu, 2023).

China's use of gray zone tactics in the South China Sea is a calculated strategy aimed at achieving its long-term goals. These tactics involve a combination of subtle coercion, ambiguous actions, and incremental encroachments that fall short of provoking a conventional military response. By operating in this gray area, China can exploit the ambiguity of international norms and exploit the vulnerabilities of weaker states in the region. This allows them to gradually establish control over disputed territories and resources, while avoiding direct confrontation with more powerful adversaries (Laksmana et al., 2023).

China considers the Indo-Pacific region as its priority area and endeavors to reshape the regional status quo in its favor. Gray zone activities in the South China Sea are instrumental in consolidating China's broader domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives in the region (Lin et al., 2022). China's increasing assertiveness aims to demonstrate its military preparedness, resolve territorial disputes, including the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue, resolve conflicts within the South China Sea, and work towards the eventual unification with Taiwan (Chin-Kuei Tsui, 2022). These actions serve to strengthen China's influence and establish its position as a regional powerhouse.

China's assertiveness in pursuing these objectives has raised concerns among neighboring countries and the international community. Its growing military capabilities, including the modernization of its armed forces and the expansion of its naval presence in the South China Sea, have heightened tensions and led to increased competition for regional dominance. Additionally, China's aggressive stance has sparked territorial disputes with countries like Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, further exacerbating regional tensions. As a result, countries in the region have sought to strengthen their alliances and bolster their own defense capabilities to counterbalance China's growing influence (Chap, 2023; A. Chubb, 2021; Turcsányi, 2018; Zhou, 2015).

Beyond regional ambitions, China has global aspirations, seeking to expand its influence across the maritime space of the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The South China Sea is of paramount importance to China due to its

significant economic and strategic interests, including vast reserves of oil and natural gas, fisheries, and its strategic location for maritime trade. By asserting control through gray zone tactics, China aims to solidify its territorial claims and establish dominance over critical sea lanes. This would enhance its economic prospects, strengthen its global standing, and project power beyond its immediate sphere of influence (Basu, 2023).

Furthermore, China's control over the South China Sea would also allow it to exert greater influence over regional politics and shape the balance of power in Asia. With its rapidly expanding military capabilities, China seeks to establish itself as a dominant player in the region and challenge the traditional hegemony of the United States. This pursuit of dominance in the South China Sea has raised concerns among neighboring countries and international observers, who fear potential conflicts and a destabilization of the region. As tensions continue to escalate, the international community faces the challenge of managing China's assertiveness while upholding the principles of freedom of navigation and maintaining peace and stability in the region. The United States has responded by increasing its military presence and conducting freedom of navigation operations to demonstrate its commitment to ensuring a rules-based international order. Additionally, regional countries such as Japan, Australia, and India have strengthened their alliances and partnerships to counterbalance China's growing influence. Efforts are also being made to engage in diplomatic dialogues and negotiations to find peaceful resolutions and avoid armed conflict. However, striking a balance between managing China's assertiveness and preserving regional stability remains a complex and ongoing challenge for the international community (Funairole et al., 2023; Sullivan & Brands, 2020; USIP, 2022).

China's gray zone activities in the South China Sea also serve to deter or mitigate the advantages of its counterparts, including Taiwan and the United States. China employs its militia vessels and coast guard in gray zone tactics, effectively intimidating weaker states and challenging adversaries in the region. The display of military preparedness aims to dissuade potential opposition and signal China's determination in protecting its interests. By employing these tactics, Beijing seeks to tip the balance of power in its favor

and establish itself as the dominant force in the South China Sea (Sukjoon Yoon et al., 2023).

China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea has not only caused concern among neighboring countries but also drawn the attention of major global powers, particularly Taiwan and the United States. As China utilizes its militia vessels and coast guard in gray zone tactics, the international community is closely monitoring the implications of these actions. The display of military preparedness is seen as a strategic move by Beijing to dissuade potential opposition and assert its dominance in the region. However, this aggressive behavior has further fueled tensions and raised questions about the long-term stability of the South China Sea (Chappell & Angevine, 2023; Fravel & Glaser, 2022; Ormsbee, 2022).

3. Implications of China's Gray Zone Strategy on Regional Dynamics

China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea has drawn significant attention due to its potential impact on territorial disputes, regional security, freedom of navigation, adherence to international law, and relations between China and the United States. This essay examines the implications of China's use of gray zone tactics based on theories related to territorial disputes, regional security, adherence to international law, and US-China relations.

Gray Zone Tactics and Territorial Disputes:

China's adoption of gray zone tactics, such as the deployment of maritime militia units, coast guard vessels, and paramilitary forces, has escalated territorial disputes in the South China Sea. By asserting China's territorial claims and intimidating weaker states, China has effectively challenged the regional status quo (Lin et al., 2022). This creates an environment of tension, potentially resulting in further conflicts and compromises regional security.

Furthermore, China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have also drawn the attention and concern of other major powers in the region, including the United States. The US has been actively involved in the region, conducting freedom of navigation operations and providing support to its allies and partners in order to maintain a rules-based international order. This dynamic has further heightened the stakes and complexity of the territorial disputes, as the involvement of external actors introduces an additional layer

of geopolitical competition. As a result, the South China Sea has become a focal point of strategic competition between China and the US, with both sides vying for influence and control in the region. This competition has led to increased tension and the potential for military confrontation, as both China and the US seek to assert their dominance and protect their respective interests. The strategic importance of the South China Sea, with its rich resources and vital shipping lanes, makes it a crucial battleground for power projection and geopolitical influence in the Asia-Pacific region. The actions and decisions made by these two global powers will have far-reaching consequences for not only the countries directly involved in the disputes but also for the stability and security of the entire region (Yatsuzuka, 2023).

China's gray zone activities directly challenge the freedom of navigation and overflight rights guaranteed under international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (CRS, 2023). These activities have been deemed unlawful by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (Asia Report, 2021). By disregarding international norms, China undermines the foundation of stability and cooperation in the region, impeding efforts for peaceful resolution of territorial disputes.

Furthermore, China's gray zone activities not only impact the immediate region but also have far-reaching implications for global security and trade. The increased militarization and assertiveness in the South China Sea have raised concerns among neighboring countries and international stakeholders alike. This has prompted a response from the international community, which has called for a rules-based order and adherence to international law to ensure the peaceful resolution of disputes and maintain stability in the region. However, China's continued disregard for these calls has created tensions and heightened the risk of conflict in the South China Sea (Marek, 2021; Wirth & Schatz, 2020).

China's use of gray zone tactics has strained US-China relations, raising concerns among US allies and partners in the region. The United States has responded by increasing its military presence and conducting freedom of navigation operations to challenge China's excessive maritime claims (CRS, 2023). This escalation in tensions between the two major powers presents significant risks, potentially impacting regional stability and security.

Furthermore, the ongoing trade war between the United States and China has further exacerbated the strained relations between the two nations. The imposition of tariffs and retaliatory measures by both sides has not only disrupted global supply chains but also caused economic uncertainty and volatility in the international market. As a result, businesses and investors are becoming increasingly cautious, affecting the overall global economic growth. Additionally, the technological rivalry between the United States and China has added another layer of complexity to their relationship. With both countries striving to dominate emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and 5G, competition has intensified, leading to concerns over intellectual property theft and espionage. This has led to increased tensions and trade disputes between the two nations, further exacerbating the uncertainty in the international market. The fear of intellectual property infringement has also hampered collaboration and knowledge sharing between the countries, hindering the potential for innovation and growth. As a result, businesses and investors are forced to navigate a complex landscape filled with geopolitical risks, slowing down the global economic progress (Ratner et al., 2019; Swaine & Bacevich, 2023).

China's employment of gray zone tactics poses a threat to regional security by increasing the probability of miscalculation and conflict (Lin, et al., 2022). As China seeks to alter the regional status quo to its advantage, other states may respond by engaging in a destabilizing arms race and heightening tensions (Chubb, 2021). The potential for conflict resulting from gray zone activities endangers the peaceful coexistence of nations in the region.

Furthermore, the lack of clear boundaries and rules in gray zone tactics exacerbates the security dilemma, as states are left uncertain about how to interpret and respond to China's actions. This ambiguity creates a fertile ground for misunderstandings, misjudgments, and unintended escalations that can quickly spiral into open conflict. The increasing militarization and assertiveness of China's gray zone activities, such as its expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea and its aggressive cyber operations, further heighten the risk of clashes and confrontations with neighboring states (Barone, 2023).

4. Managing and Countering China's Gray Zone Strategy: Strategies and Policies for Regional Stability and Safeguarding Interests

China's gray zone strategy has emerged as a significant concern for affected nations and regional stakeholders, as it poses risks to regional stability and security. To effectively manage and counterbalance these risks while safeguarding their own interests, affected nations and regional stakeholders can adopt various strategies and policies. This discussion explores four key approaches that can be employed: (1) understanding gray zone tactics, (2) multilateral cooperation, (3) deterrence and defense, and (4) economic and diplomatic leverage.

To effectively counter China's gray zone tactics, affected nations and regional stakeholders should develop a comprehensive understanding of these tactics and their implications for regional stability and security. This understanding will enable them to identify the most problematic tactics and prioritize countering them. By learning from established frameworks, such as those by Lin et al. (2022) and Mazarr (2015), nations can enhance their capabilities to respond to China's gray zone activities effectively.

Moreover, it is crucial for affected nations and regional stakeholders to collaborate and share intelligence on China's gray zone tactics. This can be achieved through regular information-sharing mechanisms, joint exercises, and intelligence partnerships. By pooling their resources and expertise, these nations can better identify patterns and trends in China's behavior, allowing for more targeted and coordinated responses. Additionally, building strong alliances and partnerships with like-minded countries can provide a collective deterrent against China's gray zone activities, as well as increase the effectiveness of countermeasures (Forward Defense experts, 2022).

Engaging in multilateral cooperation is crucial for countering China's gray zone tactics while safeguarding regional stability and the interests of affected nations and regional stakeholders. Joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic efforts can be pursued within the framework of multilateral cooperation. Coordinated actions not only enhance the effectiveness of response but also promote adherence to international law and norms (CRS, 2023). Strengthening existing regional organizations and creating new frameworks for collaboration can further bolster regional stability and resilience.

These efforts can include enhancing the capabilities and capacity of organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU), as well as establishing new platforms for dialogue and cooperation. By fostering closer ties and promoting a sense of shared responsibility, regional organizations can play a crucial role in addressing common security challenges and fostering regional stability. Additionally, creating new frameworks for collaboration can provide opportunities for states to work together on issues such as counterterrorism, maritime security, and cybersecurity, which are increasingly transnational in nature (Luo, 2022).

Enhancing deterrence and defense capabilities is essential to counter China's gray zone tactics and prevent escalation. Affected nations and regional stakeholders should consider increasing their military presence in the region. Conducting freedom of navigation operations can assert the principles of the international order and challenge China's excessive maritime claims. Additionally, investing in advanced military technologies will augment effectiveness in countering gray zone activities (OECD, 2012). A robust deterrence posture can dissuade potential aggression and maintain regional stability.

Furthermore, strengthening diplomatic ties and cooperation among affected nations is crucial in addressing the escalating tensions. This can involve the establishment of multilateral dialogues and agreements to promote transparency, trust, and conflict resolution mechanisms. By fostering open lines of communication and shared understanding, countries can work together to de-escalate conflicts and prevent the outbreak of hostilities. Additionally, engaging in joint military exercises and training programs can enhance interoperability and coordination among regional stakeholders, further bolstering deterrence capabilities. It is essential for nations to demonstrate a united front and a collective commitment to upholding the principles of international law and ensuring peace and stability in the region. By adhering to established norms and treaties, such as the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Conventions, countries can create a framework for resolving disputes peacefully and addressing security concerns. Moreover, investing in diplomacy and dialogue can help build trust and confidence among nations, reducing the likelihood of miscommunication or

miscalculation that could lead to conflict. Ultimately, maintaining a peaceful and cooperative international order requires the collective efforts of all nations, working together to promote peace, security, and justice (O'Hanlon, 2019).

Leveraging economic and diplomatic tools contributes significantly to counterbalancing China's gray zone tactics. Affected nations and regional stakeholders can impose targeted economic sanctions, thereby imposing costs on China for its destabilizing actions. Promoting trade diversification by developing alternative markets and reducing dependence on China enhances economic resilience against potential coercion. Engaging in diplomatic efforts to isolate China and advocate compliance with international law and norms strengthens the regional consensus on maintaining stability (CRS, 2023).

In addition to economic measures, there are other strategies that can be employed to address China's gray zone tactics. Strengthening military alliances and partnerships in the region can serve as a deterrent against any potential aggression. Enhancing intelligence sharing and conducting joint military exercises can improve the collective defense capabilities of affected nations and foster a united front against China's destabilizing actions. Furthermore, investing in advanced military technologies and capabilities can help maintain a credible deterrent posture, discouraging China from further provocations (Carafano et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea represents a departure from conventional military approaches, as it relies on coercive tactics that operate below the threshold of armed conflict. This strategy encompasses geopolitical, economic, military, cyber, and information warfare activities, aiming to shape regional dynamics in China's favor. In response, Taiwan has recognized the risks involved and sought to navigate through this realm of ambiguity. Additionally, maritime domain awareness initiatives hold promise in deterring and addressing the challenges posed by China's gray zone activities.

China's implementation of a gray zone strategy in the South China Sea is driven by a combination of domestic, economic, foreign policy, and

security objectives. As a manifestation of its regional and global ambitions, China aims to assert control, reshape the status quo, secure valuable resources, and project power across the maritime space of the Indo-Pacific. By employing gray zone tactics, China seeks to establish dominance without overtly crossing the threshold into armed conflict. Understanding China's objectives and strategies in the South China Sea is crucial in formulating equitable and peaceful solutions to the complex challenges in the region.

China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea has far-reaching implications for territorial disputes, regional security, adherence to international law, and relations between China and the United States. By disregarding international norms and using tactics that challenge the freedom of navigation, China destabilizes the region and increases the risk of conflict. It is essential for regional stakeholders and the international community to promote peaceful resolution of disputes, uphold the principles of international law, and foster dialogue that reduces tensions and ensures a stable and secure environment in the South China Sea.

Countering China's gray zone strategy and preserving regional stability while safeguarding national interests necessitates a multi-faceted approach. Understanding China's tactics, engaging in multilateral cooperation, enhancing deterrence and defense capabilities, and leveraging economic and diplomatic tools are indispensable strategies and policies that affected nations and regional stakeholders can employ. By adopting such approaches, affected nations and regional stakeholders can effectively manage risks arising from China's gray zone strategy and safeguard their long-term interests, thus contributing to a stable and secure regional environment.

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