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China's Gray Zone Operations

China's gray zone operations in the South China Sea have demonstrated the escalation of the state in the region and has caused discourse on the proper response. Beijing has continually pushed the boundaries, especially with weaker nations in the region, such as the Philippines and Vietnam. The Philippines' major source of energy may be depleted within a decade, so Milan deployed research vessels at the Reed Bank, a contested area (Glaser & Funairole, 2019). Even though international law states that the Reed Bank lies within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), China has also claimed the bank. Beijing's intimidation tactics around Reed Bank have proven successful due to the Philippine's lack of strong naval forces and technology to process energy sources discovered. Thus, in 2018, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines and Xi Jinping of China signed a Memorandum of Understanding that would allow Beijing to conduct oil and gas exploration alongside Milan (2022). However, little progress has been made due to the Philippine's demand for China to recognize its sovereignty over the bank. Although international law has issued a ruling on the dispute in favor of the EEZ, the anarchic nature of international politics leaves no greater power in charge. Thus, China is left to operate in a legal gray area without any grave consequences.

Although there are no large-scale casualties due to the gray-zone operations, there have been enough to warrant outcry from nations in the region. In 2020, Vietnam issued a complaint with China due to one of its "maritime surveillance vessels" (Vu, 2020) ramming into a Vietnamese "fishing boat" (Vu, 2020) in the South China Sea; Beijing justified its actions by claiming the boat was there illegally. This instance is just one example of the People's Republic of China committing acts of violence in the region without declaring war. As the number of deaths accumulate due to the PRC's hostile approach, the need for a response increases. However, the severity of the response is the core issue. In Erikson and Martinson (2019), the central two options involve either responding proportionately or escalating by use of force; both involve responding quickly to any aggressive acts by China. When status quo states, such as Japan and the U.S., are dealing with revisionist ones, simply reacting equally may not effectively deter. Michael Mazarr suggests that the U.S. and its allies in the region should "ensure that retaliation is slightly more severe than the original provocation" (Erikson & Martison, 2019, p. 9). His response would increase tensions and lead to a greater chance for general war, but it would provide real consequences for Beijing and prove Washington's commitment to its allies.

The conflict in the South China Sea with China and neighboring states has escalated due to China's aggressive policies in the region, providing a contemporary example of brinkmanship. The People's Republic of China (PRC) have developed their major maritime forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy units, to incorporate the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia

(PAFMM) into their reconnaissance missions both during peace and war, since their gray-zone operations exist in the space between the two (Erikson & Martinson, 2019). The PAFMM utilizes citizens, specifically marine industry workers, and trains them, so they can conduct military operations under the guise of civilians. Additionally, they use ships that appear to be fishing trawlers to patrol the South China Sea, reinforcing their nine-dash line. This increased militarization of civilian boats proves China's path of escalation. McLaughlin (2022) argues that in order to prevent further advancement, a clear set of international rules concerning the South China Sea must be agreed upon by a majority of states. Thus, Beijing would be constrained by certain bounds and face greater risk of war. However, allies support one another, but their differing views make concrete agreements difficult to make. His diplomatic approach would benefit the U.S, but it may not be realistic.

The U.S. has not successfully deterred China from continuing its gray zone operations (Erikson and Martinson, 2019). Its credibility that it will retaliate is little (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2017). Instead, Washington has started to support the remilitarization of Japan in an effort to ensure the United States' military does not become increasingly spread thin, and Tokyo shares this desire (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Ministers of Defense of both states support increased military training in Japan's Southwest Islands in an effort to deter China from continuing to encroach in Japanese waters. The People's Liberation Army Navy units have been patrolling around the Senkaku Islands of Japan, testing the United States' resolve in its alliance (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2017).

Then, the question is: what should the U.S. do in response to China to save its reputation in the South China Sea and on the international stage? Should it continue to focus on aiding Japan in its remilitarization or take a more drastic approach, such as increasing naval spending and the number of ships patrolling the area? Washington is left with a difficult decision when it is contributing significantly to Ukraine, fighting Russia vicariously with its technological and military aid. Diplomatically, the U.S. has more options. If a majority of major powers can agree and implement international law concerning gray-zone operations, China would have less leeway. But, will states be willing to commit to a set of rules that may entrap them in a conflict that may not directly concern them? China's gray-zone operations exist in the area between peace and war, so the U.S. and its allies must create a dynamic response that utilizes diplomacy and force.

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