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Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

STEALING A MARCH

CHINESE HYBRID WARFARE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC:
ISSUES AND OPTIONS FOR ALLIED DEFENSE PLANNERS

VOLUME II: CASE STUDIES

ROSS BABBAGE

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND BUDGETARY ASSESSMENTS (CSBA)

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.

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Cover: The cover photograph shows some of the Chinese military facilities that have been constructed on the artificial island at Mischief Reef. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments wishes to thank Inquirer.net for permission to use its photographic images on the cover of this report and in one of the report's case studies.

Contents

ANNEX A: CONTEXTUALIZING CHINESE HYBRID WARFARE	1
<i>by Peter Kouretsos</i>	
A Literature Review	1
Defining Hybrid Warfare	2
Where Do We Go from Here?	5
ANNEX B: CASE STUDIES OF CHINESE HYBRID WARFARE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC	7
CASE STUDY #1: CHINA'S ANNEXATION OF TIBET, 1950–1951	9
<i>by Evan B. Montgomery</i>	
CASE STUDY #2: CHINESE SUPPORT FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN INSURGENCIES, 1950–1980	15
<i>by Jack Bianchi</i>	
CASE STUDY #3: CHINA'S DECADE-LONG HYBRID WAR AGAINST VIETNAM, 1977–1987	23
<i>by Carlyle Thayer</i>	
CASE STUDY #4: THE DOKLAM INCIDENT, JUNE 2017	29
<i>by Whitney McNamara</i>	
CASE STUDY #5: CHINA'S COERCIVE POSTURING IN THE SENKAKUS	33
<i>by Toshi Yoshihara</i>	
CASE STUDY #6: CHINA'S DOMINANCE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA	41
<i>by Ross Babbage</i>	
LIST OF ACRONYMS	51

FIGURES

FIGURE 1: CHINA'S NINE-DASH LINE CLAIM IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA	42
FIGURE 2: CHINESE FACILITIES ON SUBI REEF	46
FIGURE 3: CHINESE FACILITIES ON MISCHIEF REEF	46
FIGURE 4: CHINESE FACILITIES ON FIERY CROSS REEF	47

Annex A: Contextualizing Chinese Hybrid Warfare

A Literature Review

By Peter Kouretsos

Much like the discussion of political warfare, talk of “hybrid threats” and “hybrid warfare” has returned.¹ A recent Google Scholar search for the term produced roughly 9,990 results, with most publications—some 6,970—produced since 2014. This renewed attention should not come as a surprise, especially after recent Russian operations in Georgia and Eastern Ukraine and Chinese campaigns in the South and East China Seas and beyond. For the better part of three decades, Russian and Chinese military leaders have learned many lessons from observing U.S. and allied operations. From studying these recent conflicts, and those from their own histories, they have decided that taking a different approach is necessary to achieve their aims in the face of U.S. military power.² They have also concluded what the current generation in the West has yet to fully grasp and implement: it is increasingly essential to coordinate and apply all tools of national power in the pursuit of national objectives.

Competitors of the United States and its close allies will likely favor hybrid warfare over other forms of warfare. Paradoxically, this challenge represents both a success and a failure of deterrence: a success in that U.S. military power, alliances, and other structures have largely deterred and punished outright military aggression, but a failure in that it has pushed

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- 1 Thomas G. Mahnken, Ross Babbage, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion: Competitive Strategies Against Modern Authoritarian Political Warfare* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018); Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018); and Hal Brands and Toshi Yoshihara, “How to Wage Political Warfare,” *The National Interest*, December 16, 2018, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-wage-political-warfare-38802>.
 - 2 Mark Galeotti, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-Linear War,” *In Moscow’s Shadows*, July 6, 2014, available at <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>; and Peter Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ In Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

competitors to develop asymmetric approaches to the dominant American forces that were doing the deterring in the first place.³

Before turning to China specifically, it is helpful to review some of the literature and come to a better understanding of what is meant by “hybrid warfare.” To date, the literature on hybrid warfare suggests that military and civilian leaders and scholars are all in violent agreement that there is no consensus on what constitutes hybrid warfare.

Defining Hybrid Warfare

Since 1946, interstate war has become increasingly rare, but other forms of conflict have been on the rise. Those challenging the U.S.-backed international order have exploited America’s binary view of war—one of war and peace, regular and irregular—by conducting operations in the space between.⁴ Operations in this “gray zone” are used to seize objectives normally associated with overt military operations and designed with enough ambiguity to leave victims unsure how to respond. Do too little, and you run the risk of encouraging similar behavior and suffering small but cumulatively significant defeats; do too much, and you risk being accused of escalating.⁵ The gray zone lends itself to what is dubbed in Western circles as hybrid warfare, a blurring of military, economic, diplomatic, intelligence, and criminal means to achieve a political goal.⁶

The term “hybrid warfare” appeared at least as early as 1998, when it was used to describe both the British counterinsurgency efforts in Malaysia (1960s) and the approaches used by the insurgents themselves.⁷ Its origin in more contemporary literature was shaped by a 2005 James Mattis and Frank Hoffman article, and the phrase was later used to describe the

3 Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 5, 2016, available at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>.

4 Nathan P. Freier et al., *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Press, 2016).

5 “Shades of Grey: Neither War nor Peace,” *The Economist*, January 25, 2018.

6 Definitions vary, but the use and threat of violence—be it regular military, irregular, proxy, or a combination of any thereof—are what separate hybrid warfare from other forms of operations in the gray zone, such as political and information warfare.

7 “The conflict was a hybrid war, combining low-intensity conventional engagements with insurgency,” and “Confrontation in Borneo was a hybrid conflict combining counterinsurgency with conventional operations.” From the British side, the blending of Special Air Service units, border scouts, and new technologies such as the helicopter were important elements highlighted by the author as “hybrid.” Thomas R. Mockaitis, “A Hybrid War: The Indonesian Confrontation,” in Thomas R. Mockaitis, ed., *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-imperial Era* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 16, 142.

approach used by Hezbollah in Israel's 2006 war in Lebanon.⁸ The U.S. Army defines a hybrid threat as "the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects."⁹ This definition, and many other U.S. military definitions, were heavily influenced by Frank Hoffman's work, which defined hybrid warfare as the simultaneous and adaptive employment of "a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives."¹⁰ In 2009, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates described the problem in Joint Force Quarterly: "The categories of warfare are blurring and no longer fit into neat, tidy boxes. One can expect to see more tools and tactics of destruction—from the sophisticated to the simple—being employed simultaneously in hybrid and more complex forms of warfare."¹¹

One feature Gates highlights is the association of the hybrid threat with complexity and simultaneity: some combination or coordination of destructive techniques that are used by conventional and irregular groups. Separately they are more easily identified and countered, but not when they are combined. Although Gates laments that this character of warfare is not easily categorized, he still bounds the description of the hybrid threat as more military than anything else. Over his tenure, Gates presided over a defense establishment that witnessed the Russian invasion of Georgia and the IDF's war with Hezbollah, and he deliberated over U.S. troop surges for the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Grappling with these challenges of state and non-state actors behaving like one another was the primary challenge that confounded Gates and bounded his frame of reference.

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- 8 James N. Mattis and Frank Hoffman, "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Proceedings*, November 2005, p. 18. This definition has been revised several times by Hoffman but remains consistent in emphasizing the fusion of different means of war to gain an advantage. See also Timothy McCulloh and Richard Johnson, *Hybrid Warfare*, JSOU Report 13-4 (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University, August 2013); William J. Nemeth, *Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare*, thesis (Monterey, CA: U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 2002); and Erin M. Simpson, "Thinking About Modern Conflict: Hybrid Wars, Strategy, and War Aims," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, 2005. Simpson's early work in the subject explores hybridity in forms of conflict, in the context of groups' strategic aims. In Nemeth's earlier work on the subject, he observes the emergence of devolved "hybrid" societies giving rise to hybrid warfare as observed in Chechnya. This is later cited in Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Its Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 52, January 2009, p. 36, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-52.pdf>. Hoffman also cites a Master's thesis that uses the "hybrid" term to describe the Marine Corps as "a hybrid force, capable of conducting operations within both the conventional and unconventional realms of warfare." See Robert G. Walker, *Spec Fi: The United States Marine Corps and Special Operations*, thesis (Monterey, CA: U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 1998).
- 9 U.S. Army, *Unified Land Operations*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016), p. 4. ADP 3-0 also notes that hybrid threats may involve nation-states that use protracted forms of warfare, proxy forces, or nonstate actors with capabilities traditionally held exclusively by nation-states.
- 10 Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid vs Compound War," *Armed Forces Journal*, October 1, 2009; and Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).
- 11 Robert M. Gates, "A Balanced Strategy," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 52, January 2009, p. 5, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-52.pdf>.

David Maxwell argued that hybrid warfare is just a new name for irregular warfare and a subset of unconventional warfare.¹² Irregular and unconventional warfare are defined, respectively, by the Joint Staff as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations,” and “activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerilla force in a denied area.”¹³ While the irregular elements described by Maxwell are important, his description of hybrid warfare falls short, failing to account for the conventional elements identified by Gates, Hoffman and Mattis, and others. Still wary of defining it but recognizing hybrid warfare as more than just irregular warfare, Nathan Freier suggests that it is an adversary’s integration of at least two of the following modalities (illustrated in a “quad chart”): traditional warfare, irregular warfare, terrorism, and disruptive use of technology.¹⁴ Freier’s framework contrasts with Hoffman’s definition, which does not include disruptive technology but rather disruptive social behavior, or criminality, as the fourth element.

Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky argued that the term “hybrid” simply “denotes a combination of previously defined types of warfare, whether conventional, irregular, political or information,” and that its “analytical utility is limited.”¹⁵ Russell Glenn, heavily influenced by his work on Vietnam and North Vietnamese Army theory, described hybrid warfare as closer to Hoffman’s definition, when an adversary, “employs some combination of (1) political, military, economic, social, and information means, and (2) conventional, irregular, catastrophic, terrorism, and disruptive/ criminal warfare methods. It may include a combination of state and non-state actors.”¹⁶

While there is disagreement among all of the above, these definitions and descriptions suggest an extremely complex form of warfare, difficult to pin down or define adequately. Ultimately, hybrid threats, like political warfare, attack the many seams of conventional strategic thought.¹⁷

12 David Maxwell, “Taking a Spoon to a Gunfight,” *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2014, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2014/04/taking-a-spoon-to-a-gunfight/>.

13 The Joint Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2013).

14 Nathan P. Freier, *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century: Irregular, Catastrophic, Traditional, and Hybrid Challenges in Context* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007); and Nathan P. Freier, “The Defense Identity Crisis: It’s a Hybrid World,” *Parameters*, Autumn 2009.

15 Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, “A Closer Look at Russia’s ‘Hybrid War’,” *Kennan Cable*, no. 7, Woodrow Wilson Center, April 2015.

16 Russell Glenn, “Thoughts on ‘Hybrid’ Conflict,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2009, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/thoughts-on-hybrid-conflict>.

17 Mahnken, Babbage, and Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*, p. 57.

Where Do We Go from Here?

When Clausewitz wrote that “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test [of war as an instrument of policy] the kind of war on which they are embarking,” he acknowledged that war can be waged in many different ways.¹⁸ In this regard, the battle over defining hybrid warfare highlights the West’s inability to adjust to an adversary that employs all available tools to achieve their goals. The focus then, should be to examine what the opponent is trying to achieve and what ways and means they are using to achieve it; in other words, how are they using engagements for the purpose of the war to further a political goal?¹⁹

Sir Hew Strachan points out that in the case of the British Army in 1909, “It had to fight the small wars in hand and to prepare intellectually for the Great War,” and that its solution was not a binary view of war, but a unitary one “to see the principles of war—and the need for flexibility in their application—as common to all wars.”²⁰ In recent years, the United States and its close allies have begun to relearn that war is not only a chameleon that changes its character but also essential to leverage and coordinate all state tools and resources in pursuit of it. Moreover, as Frank Hoffman noted, recent secretaries of defense and senior military leaders have put this hybrid concept into their visions and strategies as part of the future operating environment, recognizing its centrality in the continuum of conflict and the many varieties of the use of force.²¹

However, some have mistaken the U.S. focus on great power competition, as outlined in the National Defense Strategy, as synonymous with only preparing for conventional war. This would be a mistake. Rather, as Michael Mazar observed, the gray zone in which hybrid threats are spawned is not a distraction from great power competition but a central environment where the competition to shape the international system will take place.²² To use a boxer’s analogy, while the *prioritization* of the NDS may be to help protect the United States from “knockout blows to the head” in the form of conventional wars, it must also learn to absorb and counter “body shots” in the form of other operations along the continuum designed to grind it down and keep it off balance.

18 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 88–89.

19 James M. Dubik, “By Any Other Name, War Is Still War,” *The Association of the United States Army*, May 20, 2016, available at <https://www.ausa.org/articles/any-other-name-war-still-war>.

20 Hew Strachan, “One War, Joint Warfare,” *The RUSI Journal* 154, no. 4, 2009.

21 Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4, November 8, 2018, available at <https://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/1680696/examining-complex-forms-of-conflict-gray-zone-and-hybrid-challenges/>.

22 Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: The Strategic Studies Institute, 2015), available at <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB1303.pdf>; and Seth Jones, “The Future of Warfare is Irregular,” *The National Interest*, August 28, 2018, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/future-warfare-irregular-29672>.

Hybrid warfare may be distinct from other forms of warfare, but a “doctrine-ready” definition remains elusive, and, as some have argued, unnecessary. As identified by Brian Fleming, actors employing hybrid warfare are “practitioners of unrestricted operational art . . . threat actors that combine types of warfare to achieve their end states.”²³ If the operational art that characterizes hybrid warfare is unrestricted, we can appreciate the complexity without going to war over a definition. To paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart’s threshold test for defining obscenity in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, we will know hybrid warfare when we see it. This will be challenging for concept and force developers who are tasked with anticipating the future operating environment and preparing their militaries with having the right doctrine, force design, and tools to face it.²⁴

In the spirit of Clausewitz’s guidance, Annex B of this report describes, through a series of case studies, what China has done in this gray zone that could be labeled as “hybrid warfare,” as well as what it sought to accomplish by doing so. If the United States and its close allies can look past a neat, doctrine-ready definition of hybrid warfare, they can better answer the question of how to deal with a major power when it chooses to employ its full range of national power. If at the end of the day, as Frank Hoffman writes, “we drop the hybrid term and simply gain a better understanding of the large gray space between our idealized bins and pristine western categorizations, we will have made progress.”²⁵

23 Brian P. Fleming, *The Hybrid Threat Concept: Contemporary War, Military Planning and the Advent of Unrestricted Operational Art* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army and General Staff College, 2011), pp. 1–2.

24 Mara Karlin, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, highlighted the challenge facing defense planners with competing and preparing for conflict (with China and Russia) as outlined in the National Defense Strategy: “[Competing and preparing for conflict] are different. The way you would manage and develop your force is different depending on which one you are biasing towards.” Katie Bo Williams, “What’s Great Power Competition? No One Really Knows,” *DefenseOne*, May 13, 2019, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/news/2019/05/whats-great-power-competition-no-one-really-knows/156969/>.

25 Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid vs. Compound War,” *Armed Forces Journal*, October 1, 2009, available at <http://armedforcesjournal.com/hybrid-vs-compound-war/>.

Annex B: Case Studies of Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific

The first Volume of this report assessed the role of hybrid warfare in China’s international operations. It examined Beijing’s hybrid warfare campaigns, their origins, means and modes, level of success, and possible future shape. It also assessed the primary options for U.S. and allied counterstrategy.

Chinese leadership views the hybrid warfare battlespace very differently than Western leaders. For Beijing, the struggle against the United States and its allies has been underway for a considerable time; political warfare or united front operations have reached into the West’s homelands, and hybrid warfare campaigns have been underway in key theaters for decades. China is experienced in these operations and accords them high priority.

By contrast, most decision-makers in the West still consider themselves to be in a state of “peace.” They are not inclined to initiate actions that they fear Beijing may consider provocative, and their political and hybrid warfare arsenals are poorly organized and grossly under-resourced. Until recently, the deterrence and defeat of Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns has received very limited attention.²⁶

This Volume comprises two annexes: Annex A contains a brief literature review as a point of departure to explore what is meant by “hybrid warfare” and come to a better understanding of how scholars and practitioners have used the term. Annex B contains the full text of six illustrative case studies that describe key observations and lessons from China’s style of hybrid warfare operations:

²⁶ A notable sign of the increased attention now being given to authoritarian state gray zone operations is the discussion of this challenge in Commission on the National Defense Strategy (NDS), *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2018), p. 9.

1. China's Annexation of Tibet, 1950–1951;
2. Chinese Support for Southeast Asian Insurgencies, 1950–1980;
3. China's Decade-Long Hybrid War Against Vietnam, 1977–1987;
4. The Doklam Incident, Bhutan, June 2017;
5. China's Coercive Posturing in the Senkaku Islands, 1971–present; and
6. China's Dominance of the South China Sea, 1970–present.

CASE STUDY #1

China's Annexation of Tibet, 1950–1951

By Evan B. Montgomery

China's invasion and occupation of Tibet in 1950–1951 was a watershed event during the Cold War, although it often receives only cursory attention. By seizing control of this geostrategically important region while simultaneously intervening on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing demonstrated a willingness to fight on two fronts to advance its interests. It also set the stage for a brutal suppression of Tibetan autonomy less than a decade later in response to growing opposition to Chinese rule, which created a persistent source of instability along China's southern flank. Equally important, the invasion triggered a sharp downturn in Sino-Indian relations, which had until that point been relatively friendly, ultimately leading to war between the two neighbors in 1962. Finally, China's presence in Tibet convinced the United States to intervene in an attempt to impose costs on Beijing, mainly by supplying and training insurgent forces, albeit to little effect. These weighty consequences aside, this episode displays few hallmarks of hybrid warfare as it is sometimes defined: as a simple melding of conventional and irregular military operations. Rather, it was characterized by a rapid conventional assault against a substantially inferior opponent that could not put up a serious fight on its own and enjoyed little serious international support. China did, however, conduct a significant information campaign before, during, and after its military line of effort, which is one attribute that is often highlighted in contemporary hybrid conflicts.

Context

Although China's relationship with Tibet stretches back many hundreds of years, it was not until the Qing Dynasty that the Chinese came to view Tibet as an integral part of their national territory. However, the sharp decline of China under the Qing throughout the 19th century due to foreign intervention and domestic revolts, combined with Great Britain's interest in preserving Tibet as a buffer against Russian expansion toward India, contributed to the

region's autonomy. Ultimately, China's influence was minimal and its control largely symbolic, especially after the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. For the next several decades, Tibet was a *de facto* independent actor that governed its territory, engaged directly with foreign nations, and became a party to international agreements, although key players like Great Britain continued to recognize China's *de jure* status as suzerain over the area. That changed with the conclusion of China's long civil war and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949. Immediately following the end of the conflict, Mao and his deputies decided to prioritize reestablishing control over Tibet. In their view, this was a key step toward fully reunifying their divided nation. It was also considered a critical strategic measure to insulate China against foreign interference on the part of India, Great Britain, and the United States—all of whom, Mao believed (perhaps incorrectly), would look to use Tibet to open a new front against the nascent PRC.

Sequence of Events

The PRC leadership was not subtle about its aims when it came to the future of Tibet. On January 1, 1950, China publicly broadcast via radio its intent to have the People's Liberation Army (PLA) "liberate" Tibet (along with Taiwan) that year. Indeed, Mao hoped that the invasion could be conducted in April 1950, long before winter snows would make local roads impassable. He feared that a lengthier delay into 1951 would only increase the odds of Tibet gaining international recognition or support. According to one scholar, Mao and his lieutenants "believed that China must assert control over Tibet as soon as possible, that the use of military force was inevitable, and that the only question was how much force to use and when."²⁷

Not long after China announced its intentions, Mao directed the Southwest Military District to draw up plans for the invasion of Kham, or eastern Tibet.²⁸ Based on its recommendations, Mao directed the construction of new roads to transport and sustain troops from adjacent Chinese provinces, as well as the implementation of a lengthy training regime for the personnel who were expected to conduct the invasion through difficult terrain. Given the weakness of Tibet's armed forces, the main worry of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders "was how to maintain logistical supplies for their own troops, not how to crush resistance by the Tibetans," which, it was determined, could be accomplished with a relatively small fraction of the PLA.²⁹

27 Michael M. Sheng, "Mao, Tibet, and the Korean War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 3, Summer 2006, p. 17; and Chen Jian, "The Tibetan Revolution of 1959 and China's Changing Relations with India and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 3, Summer 2006, p. 57.

28 Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), p. 638; and John W. Garver, *Protracted Rivalry: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 45.

29 Jian, "The Tibetan Revolution of 1959," p. 59; and Sheng, "Mao, Tibet, and the Korean War," p. 17.

Despite his emphasis on the use of force, Mao apparently hoped that Tibet could be “liberated” through largely “peaceful” means. Specifically, he understood that Tibet was not like other areas claimed by China—it had been a *de facto* independent state for decades and had no indigenous Chinese population, which meant that other nations might not turn a blind eye to a conflict. In addition, he wanted to avoid a protracted guerrilla campaign in a harsh region. Because Tibet was unlikely to concede outright, despite the enormous disparity in military power, some application of force would almost certainly be necessary—preferably to deliver a quick and decisive PLA victory that would convince the Tibetan government to give in to all of Beijing’s demands.³⁰

By late summer 1950, preparations for the invasion were complete; the only question was whether to engage in a partial invasion before winter set in—which would entail dispatching troops, engaging the Tibetan forces, and then withdrawing the majority of PLA personnel to reduce the logistical burdens of supporting deployed forces through the winter months—or delay the entire campaign until 1951. As noted above, Mao was determined to send in troops that year unless the Tibetan government was willing to accept certain core demands: that its territory was part of China and that Beijing should control its defense policy and foreign relations. In fact, a Tibetan delegation met with Chinese representatives in New Delhi in September 1950 in the hope of reaching a compromise that would prevent an invasion. These efforts stalled, however, and the invasion soon followed.

Chinese plans called for approximately 20,000 PLA troops to enter Kham from the east, approach the key city of Chamdo along multiple axes, cut off the lines of retreat to the capital of Lhasa, and destroy or neutralize the Tibetan armed forces located in the vicinity—approximately 10,000 regular and militia troops—which constituted the bulk of Tibet’s poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly led military.

The Battle of Chamdo began on October 7 and was over by October 24. Although some Tibetan units fought back at the outset, scattered and disorganized forces were quickly overrun, and the PLA achieved a decisive victory, killing more than 5,700 Tibetan troops.³¹ The PLA opted not to advance on the capital, however, despite having a clear path. Instead, the CCP called on the Tibetan government to send a delegation to Beijing for (one-sided) negotiations, which it did the following spring. In short, the political objective of the campaign was not a large-scale occupation of Tibet, which would come much later, but rather to demonstrate China’s superior military power and willingness to fight while removing Tibet’s ability to resist.

On May 23, 1951, the Tibetan delegation in Beijing signed the “Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet.” This document codified Tibet’s status as an integral part of China, sanctioned the presence of PLA forces in Tibet, and granted Beijing control over

30 Jian, “The Tibetan Revolution of 1959,” p. 59; and Melvyn C. Goldstein, “Tibet, China and the United States: Reflections on the Tibet Question,” Occasional Paper of the Atlantic Council of the United States, 1995.

31 Garver, *Protracted Rivalry*, p. 45; and Sheng, “Mao, Tibet, and the Korean War,” p. 23.

Tibet's external relations. In exchange, China declared that it would forgo abolishing existing political, economic, and social structures absent popular demand and the consent of "leading personnel" within Tibet, at least for the time being. That fall, thousands of PLA troops moved into Tibet, where they would establish a permanent presence—especially after the domestic unrest in 1959 led to the CCP to abandon its commitments under the Seventeen Point Agreement, dissolve domestic institutions, and accelerate the transformation of Tibet into a system that mimicked the rest of China.

Hybrid Elements of the Tibet Campaign

Overall, China's invasion and annexation of Tibet displayed few elements of the complex combined operations that are often described as hybrid warfare. In particular, the PRC did not employ irregular forces or guerrilla tactics to achieve its objectives. Instead, it relied on regular troops and a coordinated offensive to defeat enemy units, seize key territory, and secure lines of communication. In large part this was because it confronted such a weak military opponent, and perhaps because the campaign's military objectives in 1950 were geographically limited to eastern Tibet, both for reasons of strategy and climate.

Nevertheless, China did conduct a significant information and broader political warfare campaign before, during, and after its military campaign, which is often highlighted as a key feature of hybrid warfare. Specifically, although Mao believed force was necessary and had no faith in "united front" tactics alone, he was determined to gain popular and elite support for his efforts, which he believed would ease immediate military opposition, reduce the probability of long term resistance, increase pressure on the Tibetan government to accept the CCP's demands, and lay the foundation for the broader transformation of Tibetan society.

To win over the local populace, PLA soldiers were instructed to show deference for local institutions, avoid requisitioning goods, and forgo abusive behavior. Meanwhile, China distributed pamphlets and engaged in radio broadcasts that declared its intention to respect local religious beliefs and avoid interfering with monasteries, all in an attempt to convince the population to provide support to the PLA—or at least remain neutral—while it fought against the forces of the capital.³²

Perhaps most importantly, China exploited overlapping class, regional, and religious tensions within Tibet. According to Melvyn Goldstein, the CCP deployed an effective propaganda campaign that exploited the weak relationship between the Khambas and the Lhasa government. It painted the Chinese Communists as a party that would improve the condition of the Khambas by using prominent Khamba political and religious figures, insinuating they would not alter the existing social and religious structures.³³

32 Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951*, pp. 643–644, 683.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 640–641; and Sheng, "Mao, Tibet, and the Korean War," pp. 29–30.

This support from key religious figures—especially followers of the Panchen Lama who had been living in exile within China and had pledged support to the CCP shortly after its victory over the Nationalists in 1949—was essential. “The public support garnered by these lamas and monks enhanced the credibility of the Chinese promises of religious freedom and thus was fundamental to China’s plan for a peaceful liberation of Tibet.”³⁴

34 Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951*, p. 686; and Sheng, “Mao, Tibet, and the Korean War,” pp. 29–30.

CASE STUDY #2

Chinese Support for Southeast Asian Insurgencies, 1950–1980

By Jack Bianchi

The People's Republic of China (PRC) provided support to communist political parties and insurgencies across Southeast Asia from soon after its establishment in 1949 until the late 1970s.³⁵ Chinese leaders had several underlying ideological and pragmatic geopolitical reasons to support these insurgencies, including exporting China's revolutionary model, straining unfriendly Western and regional powers, and competing with the Soviet Union.³⁶ Chinese support took several modes, both material and psychological, including strategic, operational, and tactical planning and command; ideological and military training; military items, food, communications equipment, and other supplies; advisors and technical expertise; financial support; sanctuary for training and information operations; and diplomatic advocacy. To provide analytical breadth and depth on the nature and extent of Chinese support to these insurgencies from 1950 to 1980, this paper focuses on two insurgencies that received major Chinese support at two distinct time periods: the Viet Minh in the early 1950s during the First Indochina War and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) from the 1960s to 1970s.

35 China did provide some support to communist insurgencies after the 1970s, but this was largely moral support, rather than the involved political, economic, and military efforts of the previous decades.

36 Chinese foreign policy scholars differ on their interpretation of Mao's motives for supporting communist insurgencies over this time. Some believe Mao's ideological motives were preeminent, while others argue that Mao's support for insurgencies purely reflects geopolitical calculations. For more on the ideological explanation, see Chen Jian, *Mao's China & the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001). For a more pragmatic explanation, see Harry Harding, "China's Co-operative Behavior," in Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh, eds., *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 387-389.

Chinese Support to the Viet Minh in the First Indochina War

In French Indochina, the PRC supported Vietnamese communists, led by Ho Chi Minh, against the French forces that sought to maintain colonial rule. From 1946, when the war started, through 1949, the Viet Minh had largely fought on their own.³⁷ But with the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Mao now had the attention and resources needed to influence conflicts on China's periphery. In early 1950, to secure significant aid against the French, Ho Chi Minh traveled to Moscow via Beijing to meet with Mao and Stalin, at which time Mao promised "to offer all the military assistance Vietnam needed in its struggle against France."³⁸

Mao's decision to support the Viet Minh was for ideological and pragmatic geopolitical reasons. He viewed exporting China's revolutionary model abroad as the beginning of a larger global revolution against Western imperialism. Support for the Viet Minh also coincided with China's support for the Soviet Union against the United States. China also had a national security interest in expelling a Western power from a neighboring country and installing a friendly government.³⁹ Finally, Mao sought to consolidate power domestically by ensuring the defeat of remnants of Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang [KMT]) forces which had fled to Vietnam at the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War.⁴⁰

Chinese support for the Viet Minh took a variety of forms, including strategic planning; operational and tactical planning and command; ideological and military training; military items, food, communications technology, and other supplies; advisory personnel and technical expertise; financial support; sanctuary for training; and diplomatic advocacy. Chinese leaders, including Mao, and the Chinese military advisors dispatched to Vietnam were heavily involved in the strategic, operational, and tactical planning of the Vietnamese communists. Starting in the 1950s, Chinese officials repeatedly met with the highest levels of the Vietnamese communist leadership, including Ho Chi Minh, to set strategy and plan military campaigns. Ho himself frequently traveled to China to solicit support and advice from China's leaders. Early in 1950, the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC) instructed the PLA's Third Field Army to form the China Military Advisory Group (CMAG), through which Chinese military advisors were trained and sent to Vietnam to assist Vietnamese forces. These advisors had critical roles throughout the war, including, for example, in the 1952 Northwestern offensive, in which Ho authorized Chinese advisers to command the entire campaign. At Dien Bien Phu, the battle

37 The Vietnamese communists were organized under the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) until 1945, when the party dissolved. After that point, they were the core of the Viet Minh, a national front organization that was founded by Ho Chi Minh to unify disparate Vietnamese political organizations against the Japanese occupation. In 1951, the ICP was essentially reformed with the founding of the Workers' Party of Vietnam. See Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 10–12.

38 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 121–122; and Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 16.

39 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 122–123; and Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, pp. 20–24.

40 Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 20.

that ultimately decided the war, Mao was closely involved in the Viet Minh's preparations, ongoing military planning, and operations.⁴¹

China supplied a variety of military equipment to the Viet Minh, including guns, artillery, and ammunition, in addition to communications equipment, grain, medicine, and uniforms. One study estimated that Chinese supplies increased from 10–20 tons per month in 1951 to 4,000 tons per month in 1954.⁴²

Training was another priority in Chinese assistance to the Vietnamese communists. Mao instructed the CMAG advisors to aid the Viet Minh in organizing a conventional army. In 1950, concurrent with the formation of CMAG, the CCP CMC also instructed the PLA's Fourth Field Army to establish a military school where PLA officers could train Viet Minh soldiers. One study estimated that by 1954, 40,000 Viet Minh soldiers were trained in China.⁴³

In addition, China provided diplomatic advocacy and support to the Viet Minh, especially at the 1954 Geneva Conference, which was intended to resolve questions among the great powers on Korea and Indochina. Among the Geneva Conference participants, Vietnam's interests were championed by the Soviet Union and China, which countered the weight of the Western delegation.⁴⁴

Despite providing considerable support to the Viet Minh, there were limits to the Chinese effort, including in direct involvement, exposure, and diplomatic advocacy. In 1952, the Viet Minh requested Chinese soldiers for combat operations, but China refused, citing principle.⁴⁵ Both China and Vietnam also feared that news of the extent of Chinese support could lead to U.S. intervention.⁴⁶ Finally, on diplomatic support, China toned down Viet Minh demands, which initially included an immediate national plebiscite and the recognition of Communist forces in Laos and Cambodia.⁴⁷ The Chinese convinced the Viet Minh that, to avoid potential U.S. involvement, it was necessary to negotiate a deal with the French that divided Vietnam and included the recognition of non-communist governments in Laos and Cambodia.⁴⁸

41 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 121–142; and Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 19.

42 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 126–136; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 19–20; and J. J. Zasloff, *The Role of the Sanctuary in Insurgency: Communist China's Support to the Vietminh, 1946-1954* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1967), p. v.

43 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 124–126; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, pp. 18–19; and Zasloff, *The Role of the Sanctuary in Insurgency*, p. v.

44 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 138–144.

45 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, p. 130. China was also likely hesitant to overextend itself while already fighting U.S. forces in Korea. Additionally, it risked publicizing its involvement, which would delegitimize the Vietnamese nationalist movement and portray China as actively undermining the international status quo.

46 Zasloff, *The Role of the Sanctuary in Insurgency*, p. vi.

47 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 140–141.

48 This was true except for two provinces in northern Laos, which would be controlled by pro-communist forces. Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, p. 142.

In the end, China's support for the Viet Minh was, in China's view, successful. With the conclusion of the Geneva Conference and expulsion of French forces, China had a friendly buffer state to its south. Together with the successful defense of North Korea in the Korean War, China enjoyed a more favorable periphery in which it could pivot to more pressing domestic economic development concerns. Moreover, China's role at the Geneva Conference improved the PRC's international standing by demonstrating how China could forge peace through constructive working relationships with Western powers, thereby weakening U.S. attempts to isolate the PRC.⁴⁹

Restrained Chinese Support for Southeast Asian Insurgencies: 1954–1962

After the First Indochina War and the Korean War, China's support to Southeast Asian communist parties and insurgencies was a low foreign policy priority, and, while China still provided aid to some of these parties, it did not actively encourage conflict. Meanwhile, the United States led the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955 as an anti-communist bloc to contain further communist expansion in the region. The United States and other allies also gave aid to pro-Western Southeast Asian countries.⁵⁰

From late 1962 to early 1963, China's foreign policy in the region took a more aggressive role in supporting communist insurgencies. Geopolitically, events in Vietnam catalyzed Sino-U.S. competition in the region. While China had advised North Vietnam to focus on consolidating its position, Chinese leaders found it difficult to prevent the Viet Minh from engaging in conflict with the South, as such guidance could appear ideologically inconsistent and disrupt the overall positive Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Chinese leaders also saw Vietnam as an opportunity to strain the United States by enticing it to overcommit to the region. China thus sought to counterbalance U.S. support for South Vietnam and pressure U.S. partners in Southeast Asia more broadly. Additionally, Beijing's support to these parties was driven by its competition with Moscow to be the preeminent communist benefactor of other revolutionary movements and insurgencies globally.⁵¹

Ideologically, Chinese foreign policy also generally adopted a more revolutionary character, stressing the export of China's revolutionary model and the need to support foreign

49 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 139–140.

50 China's military aid to North Vietnam was likely the most significant of these contributions. China's aid to North Vietnam included military aid over this time, including guns, artillery, bullets, artillery shells, wire transmitters, radio transmitters, trucks, planes, naval vessels, and military uniforms. Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, p. 207; and Bob Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency: The Thai Effort against the Communist Party of Thailand, 1965–ca. 1982," *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 2, June 2016, p. 26, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-60-no-2/pdfs/Bergin-Defeating-Insurgency.pdf>.

51 The Kennedy administration decided in 1961 to increase both aid and the number of U.S. advisors in Vietnam. U.S. advisors in Vietnam increased from 3,205 in December 1961 to more than 9,000 by the end of 1962. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2002), pp. 89–129; Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 207–212; and Harding, "China's Co-operative Behavior," pp. 387–389. China also criticized the Soviet Union for not supporting communist movements abroad, and necessarily had to provide support to avoid seeming disingenuous.

insurgencies and nationalist movements. Mao's power had waned after the failure of the Great Leap Forward, but with economic growth improving in 1962, he began to reconsolidate power and again stress class struggle, foreshadowing the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. Mao emphasized the threats of reactionary international forces in order to buttress his domestic legitimacy and justify the need for both domestic revolutionary actions domestically and preparation for conflict against foreign forces.⁵²

Chinese Support for Southeast Asian Insurgencies in the 1960s and 1970s: Thailand

For both pragmatic and ideological reasons then, in the early 1960s, Chinese leaders started providing more support to communist insurgencies throughout Southeast Asia and paying attention to previously disregarded movements, such as the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Until that point, the CPT had been self-sustaining, but, over most of the next two decades, China provided a range of assistance, such as sanctuary for information operations, ideological training, propaganda, financial support, and arms. The CPT armed insurgency, numbering approximately 12,000 at its peak in the 1970s, was ultimately unsuccessful and never truly threatened the Thai government's survivability. Nevertheless, it was an instrument through which Beijing placed constant pressure on Bangkok.⁵³

The CPT was founded in 1942 by ethnic Chinese and was illegal for most of its existence. Chinese support for the CPT steadily increased in the early 1960s during the U.S. military's buildup in Vietnam and its use of Thai airbases for air operations over Vietnam. In 1962, China established the Voice of the People of Thailand (VOPT) radio station, one of the two most important elements of Chinese support. This station was ostensibly located in communist-controlled areas of Thailand or Laos, but was actually in the southwestern Chinese city of Kunming.⁵⁴ From this sanctuary location, the CPT's leadership could "broadcast news and disseminate party doctrine, policy, and propaganda to mobilize the masses and denounce the US occupation of Thailand."⁵⁵ Another important element of Chinese support was ideological training for the CPT leadership at Beijing's Marxist-Leninist Institute.⁵⁶

The CPT launched its armed insurgency against the Thai government in 1965, when its followers numbered approximately 1,200 members. The Thai government responded with military-heavy and violent law enforcement crackdowns through the late 1960s and early

52 Chen, *Mao's China & the Cold War*, pp. 209–212.

53 Colin Campbell, "Many Thai Communists Give Up Their Long Warfare in the Jungle," *New York Times*, July 4, 1983; and Glenn Ettinger, "Thailand's Defeat of Its Communist Party," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 20, no. 4.

54 Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency," pp. 26–27.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

56 In other areas, the CPT was more self-reliant, as it raised money independently and obtained arms and ammunition from government forces, though China did still provide the CPT some financial support, arms, and ammunition. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

1970s, influenced by the U.S. body count approach in Vietnam. But the CPT rebounded and gained thousands of additional followers—particularly students—due to low government legitimacy from the unpopular Vietnam War, a weak Thai economy, labor unrest and strikes, and violent responses to anti-government protests in 1973 and 1976.⁵⁷ Finally, the success of communist forces in seizing Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Laos created a sense of communist momentum sweeping across Southeast Asia.

Yet the CPT grappled with several internal and external problems. China had a strong influence on the CPT leadership, which alienated Thai members.⁵⁸ Students, who were initially welcomed into the party, were not successfully incorporated into the CPT's operations and leadership.⁵⁹ Externally, the Sino-Soviet split also weakened the CPT, as Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1975 and the Vietnamese-aligned Laos government diminished Chinese influence in the region and resulted in the CPT losing its sanctuaries in those two countries. The large influx of refugees from Cambodia and Laos also overwhelmed the Thai public and led to disillusionment with communist movements.⁶⁰

Following Sino-U.S. rapprochement in the 1970s, Sino-Thai relations also improved. China sought regional partners against the Soviet-aligned Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, and Chinese foreign policy became less revolutionary due to the end of the Cultural Revolution and the rise of the pragmatic and development-focused Deng Xiaoping. In the late 1970s, Thailand secured China's commitment to end its support of the CPT, freeing up Thai military resources to prepare defenses against Vietnamese forces now stationed along the Cambodia-Thai border. In 1979, China closed the VOPT radio station, a major blow to the CPT, which lacked alternative methods of communicating ideology, policy, and other information with dispersed CPT forces, thereby damaging CPT command, effectiveness, and morale.⁶¹

Corresponding with the CPT's loss of Beijing's support, the Thai government changed its strategy for countering the CPT, shifting from military-based counterinsurgency operations to one of political and economic outreach and inclusion. The Thai government first offered amnesty to students who were living with the CPT in the jungle and allowed nearly all communists, regardless of ethnicity, to return to Thai society through Prime Minister Office Order Number 66/25233.⁶² Beyond amnesty, the government provided jobs, financial support, housing, and land, as well as the offer to buy back weapons.⁶³ From the late 1970s until the

57 Ibid., pp. 27–30.

58 Campbell, "Many Thai Communists Give Up Their Long Warfare in the Jungle"; and Ettinger, "Thailand's Defeat of Its Communist Party," p. 662.

59 Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency," p. 31.

60 Campbell, "Many Thai Communists Give Up Their Long Warfare in the Jungle."

61 Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency," p. 32.

62 Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency," pp. 32–34; and Ettinger, "Thailand's Defeat of Its Communist Party," pp. 676–677.

63 Campbell, "Many Thai Communists Give Up."

early 1980s, half of the CPT leadership and thousands of insurgents and their supporters surrendered, sometimes in groups as large as 1,000 people.⁶⁴

Insights and Implications

Although China no longer supports communist insurgencies, the insights and implications from the cases of Vietnam and Thailand are significant both in understanding China's current and future support for destabilizing political movements in adversary countries, as well as in crafting counterstrategies for modern Chinese hybrid warfare.

1. Chinese support for insurgencies and destabilizing political movements has reflected trends in international geopolitics and ideological trends in Chinese domestic politics. While China scholars differ on which of the two should receive the greatest emphasis, analysts evaluating China's ongoing and potential future support for third parties should consider both geopolitical and ideological motives.
2. China's support for insurgencies can be grouped into two types: 1) aid provided to further a strategic goal of territorial gains, and 2) aid provided to further a strategic goal of cost imposition. The first category includes attempts both by China itself to seize territory and by China to aid a proxy group (such as the Viet Minh) or state to seize territory in order to increase China's sphere of influence. The second category includes Chinese aid to proxy groups (such as the CPT) or states that are in conflict with one or more of China's adversaries.
3. China's modes of support will depend on the extent to which Chinese interests are affected, the ease of providing support, and the specific circumstances of the conflict. China provided significantly more aid to the Viet Minh than the CPT for a variety of reasons. First, Vietnam directly neighbors China, and the presence of French forces was a more immediate threat compared with the U.S. presence in Thailand, which shares no border with China. Second, a direct land border between China and Vietnam also enabled aid to be more easily distributed by China to Vietnam than to Thailand. Finally, the Viet Minh, with the necessary external aid, were capable of militarily defeating French forces, whereas the CPT lacked the ability to openly challenge and defeat Thai government forces. Large amounts of Chinese aid could be used effectively by the Viet Minh, whereas the CPT lacked the ability to fully absorb China's aid.⁶⁵
4. China capitalizes on existing social cleavages and political actors in adversary countries, rather than create new third-party movements. In Vietnam and Thailand, China provided aid to existing political movements to counter French and Thai rule, respectively. Allied policymakers and other states affected by Chinese hybrid warfare could

64 Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency," pp. 33–34; Campbell, "Many Thai Communists Give Up"; and Ettinger, "Thailand's Defeat of Its Communist Party," pp. 675–676.

65 Bergin, "Defeating an Insurgency," p. 31.

therefore choose to counter Chinese aid to third parties, address the existing social cleavages and grievances of the disaffected parties, or pursue both tracks simultaneously.

5. The success of an insurgency, despite external (Chinese) support, necessarily depends on the insurgency's connection with the local people. The Viet Minh were able to succeed because of their strong leadership, notably by Ho Chi Minh, and the strength of their organization from the top down to the grassroots level. The CPT, conversely, had leadership that was overly dominated by ethnic Chinese and alienated many Thai. The main reason for national-level policy failures, thus, does not seem to be Chinese support, though this support can exacerbate local rifts and conflicts.
6. It is difficult to apply insights from the handling of one conflict to that of others. A similar amnesty offer to that offered insurgents in Thailand, for example, would not have defeated the insurgency in Vietnam. Each insurgency presents a unique situation that warrants a different approach based on the political circumstances.
7. Chinese aid is often given in secret, and efforts to publicly expose Chinese activity could limit China's ability to engage in destabilizing behavior. At the time of the conflicts, China obfuscated its support for both the Viet Minh and the CPT. Exposure campaigns could impose costs on Chinese operations by requiring China to undertake additional steps to better hide its involvement, diminishing the amount of support that can ultimately reach the third party. Exposure of outside aid could also delegitimize the third-party, both domestically and internationally.

CASE STUDY #3

China's Decade-Long Hybrid War Against Vietnam, 1977–1987

Carlyle A. Thayer

In 1975 communist-led military forces swept to power in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, but the unity of this tripartite alliance quickly dissipated. The ultra-nationalist Khmer Rouge resisted what they perceived to be Vietnam's attempt to establish and dominate an Indochina Federation. The Khmer Rouge regime quickly moved to purge itself of pro-Vietnam elements and recover territory lost during the colonial era now included within Vietnam's borders.

The conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam quickly became overlaid by the long-standing strategic rivalry between China and the Soviet Union. After 1975, China opposed the creation of a Vietnamese-dominated Indochina Federation aligned with the Soviet Union and sought to undermine Soviet-Vietnamese ties and win over Hanoi.

In 1977, China initiated what in retrospect can be classified as hybrid operations to achieve its objectives. China's hybrid operations were conducted over a decade and reached a peak of intensity in the early months of 1979, when China launched a massive conventional invasion of northern Vietnam, and continued until 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev initiated a rapprochement with Beijing.

Hybrid Operations: Origins and Development

In 1977, China's hybrid operations developed on three separate but interrelated geographic fronts—Vietnam's southwest border, Vietnam's northern border, and Vietnam's domestic front.

Southwest Border. In May 1975, after seizing control of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge launched a series of attacks on Vietnamese-occupied islands in the Gulf of Thailand and low-level skirmishes along the land border with Vietnam. Both sides reached tentative agreement in 1976 to resolve border disputes through liaison committees. Few border incidents were recorded in the period up to April 1977. At this time, China, which initially attempted to adjudicate rising conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam, now sided with the Khmer Rouge regime and provided them with political, diplomatic, economic, and military support.

In April 1977, border dispute liaison committees stopped meeting. Khmer Rouge troops once again began harassing Vietnamese border villages and towns and conducted commando raids deep inside Vietnam. In retaliation, Vietnam launched a major multi-division counteroffensive into eastern Cambodia later that year, but it failed to halt the Khmer Rouge's cross-border attacks. In 1978 China increased the number of military advisers to Cambodia and stepped up the supply of conventional weaponry, including artillery. In December 1978, Vietnam launched a major invasion and occupation of Cambodia, driving the Khmer Rouge to mountain redoubts along the Thai border. China continued to supply the Khmer Rouge through Thailand.

Northern Border. China's hybrid operations along Vietnam's northern border took the form of small-scale military incursions, political subversion, and conventional war. China instigated border incidents in the north in tandem with Khmer Rouge military operations along Vietnam's southern border. Chinese incursions increased in intensity during 1977–1978. Vietnam's northern provinces were inhabited by a variety of ethnic minorities whose clans had kin living across the border in China. Beijing directed propaganda broadcasts over radio and loudspeakers to sow division in Vietnam. Reportedly, Chinese intelligence agents attempted to win over local leaders.

Chinese hybrid operations reached a high point in 1979 in response to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia the previous year. China organized eleven armies (or jin—roughly corps equivalents) composed of regular troops, militia, naval, and air force units totaling 450,000.⁶⁶ Prior to China's invasion, thousands of PLA infantry and engineers infiltrated Vietnam to cut communications links, destroy selected facilities, and to secure road intersections.

On February 17, 1979 over 80,000 PLA troops invaded northern Vietnam in a “counterattack in self-defense” to “teach Vietnam a lesson” for invading Cambodia.⁶⁷ Chinese forces advanced on five fronts down preexisting roads from west to east toward provincial towns Lao Cai, Ha Giang, Cao Bang, and Lang Son. China's military operations ceased on March 15. During their withdrawal, the PLA laid waste to infrastructure in the northern provinces.

66 Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 45.

67 Harlan W. Jencks, “China's ‘Punitive’ War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment,” *Asian Survey* XIX, no. 8, August 1979, p. 809; and King C. Chen, *China's War With Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, Stanford University, 1987), p. 105.

Chinese hybrid warfare operations did not end with the withdrawal of PLA forces from Vietnam in March 1979. Between then and 1987, China orchestrated six major military flare-ups on the northern border—these incidents were either the most serious incident since 1979 or the most serious incident since the previous one. These six flare ups included the shelling of the provincial town of Cao Bang in July 1980; the seizure of mountainous territory in Lang Son and Ha Tuyen provinces in May 1981; a “symbolic offensive” in April 1983; land grabbing in the Vi Xuyen district, Ha Tuyen province; the shelling of Vi Xuyen district in June 1985; and the “phony war” in December 1986 to January 1987.

Domestic Front. During the post-1975 period, the status and loyalty of Vietnam’s Hoa—the Sino-Vietnamese community—became a contentious issue as tensions built up between Vietnam and China. In early 1978, Chinese embassy officials stepped up efforts to develop ties with the Hoa community in urban and rural areas. China’s hybrid operations on Vietnam’s domestic front were primarily directed at these Hoa. In 1975, there were an estimated 1.2 million Hoa living in southern Vietnam and approximately 300,000 in northern Vietnam. The Hoa comprised a sizeable part of the coal mining work force in Quang Ninh province adjacent to China, and 700,000 were concentrated in Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon. Most of the Hoa living in rural areas had acquired Vietnamese citizenship but many in the urban areas did not.⁶⁸

Rumors of war with China, combined with the operations of Vietnamese internal security forces to counter Chinese subversion and the perception that the anti-capitalist trade campaign was directed at the Hoa, resulted in panic and the outflow of Hoa from Vietnam to China. In March 1978, Vietnamese authorities launched an operation to end unregulated “capitalist” (or private) trade in southern Vietnam by sealing off major commercial areas and seizing control of private businesses. An estimated 30,000 southern merchants were affected, a majority of whom were Hoa. Between April and June of 1978, an estimated 160,000 Hoa fled from northern Vietnam. By 1979 a quarter of a million more had fled to China. China responded by denouncing Vietnam for “ostracizing, persecuting, and expelling” the Hoa, and in a well-publicized gambit, dispatched two ships to southern Vietnam to evacuate as many of them as possible.⁶⁹ Over 200,000 Hoa registered with Vietnamese authorities for repatriation. However, Hanoi refused to let the Chinese ships enter Vietnam, and in mid-1978 China cut off all aid to Vietnam.

By September 1989, Vietnam succeeded in its counterinsurgency against the Khmer Rouge (and other non-communist resistance forces) and withdrew all formed military units to Vietnamese territory. The Cambodian conflict was brought to an end in October 1991, and Vietnam and China normalized relations the next month.

68 Carlyle A. Thayer, “Building Socialism: South Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon,” in Carlyle A. Thayer and David G. Marr, *Vietnam Since 1975: Two Views From Australia*, CSAAR Research Paper no. 20 (Brisbane: Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian Relations, Griffith University, 1982), pp. 31–32.

69 Thayer, “Building Socialism,” p. 32.

China's Goals, Strategies, and Doctrine

China's goals in conducting hybrid warfare against Vietnam may be classified into two broad categories—local and regional/global.

Local Goals

- Prevent the emergence of a Vietnamese-controlled Indochina bloc
- Undermine Soviet relations with Vietnam
- Demonstrate the credibility of Chinese commitments
- Protect ethnic Chinese in Vietnam
- Pacify China's border with Vietnam
- Teach Vietnam a lesson through a counterattack in self-defense
- Relieve pressure on Cambodia by opening a second front
- Evaluate tactics, equipment, logistics and communications, and combat experience
- Become the dominant power over Indochina

Regional Goals

- Oppose Soviet social imperialism and hegemonism
- Demonstrate that China is a more credible and reliable ally than the Soviet Union
- Demonstrate that China is a regional military power
- Demonstrate that China can protect the Overseas Chinese community

China's military doctrine was focused on conducting and winning a "battle of quick decision" in order to achieve political objectives.

China's Instruments of Hybrid Warfare

China employed a combination of instruments in hybrid warfare against Vietnam:

- Use of the Khmer Rouge as a third party to apply military pressure on Vietnam
- Diplomatic influence with Vietnam's leadership to support China
- Political warfare and influence operations among ethnic minorities, local officials, and pro-Chinese members of the Vietnamese leadership
- Use of regular and paramilitary forces for kinetic operations

Assessment of China's Effectiveness

China's decade-long hybrid war against Vietnam achieved mixed results, but Beijing was largely unable to achieve many of its grand objectives. While China was able to inflict serious costs on Vietnam, including pushing it to divert more resources to defense than economic development, it did not seriously destabilize Vietnam. However, Chinese political warfare efforts did exacerbate tensions between ethnic minorities and Hoa on the one hand and the Vietnamese government on the other.

China's actions also pushed Vietnam closer into the arms of the Soviet Union. Under the terms of a 25-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in November 1978, the Soviet Union provided increased financial support for Vietnam's socioeconomic development and military cooperation. In return, Soviet naval forces were permitted to lodge in Cam Ranh Bay.

While China's use of military force inflicted significant casualties on Vietnamese forces and resulted in massive destruction of infrastructure in the northern provinces, the PLA did not achieve a "battle of quick decision." The six-week border war was a series of ponderous ineffective operations, and approximately 28,000 PLA were killed in action. According to Edward C. O'Dowd, "The PLA proved incapable of using its masses of troops effectively through the use of suitable tactics, and incapable therefore of attaining a tempo of operations that would translate into its desired 'battle of quick decision'."⁷⁰

Assessment of Vietnam's Response

Vietnam, although suffering 35,000–45,000 casualties in the 1979 border war with China, did not lose substantial territory and was not dissuaded from pursuing its objectives in Cambodia. Its society, however, experienced serious strains in relations with ethnic minorities.⁷¹ Hanoi responded to Beijing's support for the Khmer Rouge by organizing a counterforce of Cambodians, the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation. The Front served as the basis for the regime that replaced the Khmer Rouge—the People's Republic of Kampuchea—after waging a successful counterinsurgency campaign. This led to the arrest of several ethnic minority generals and the relocation of ethnic minority communities away from the Chinese border. In 1979 Vietnam expelled Hoa who were not Vietnamese citizens back to China. Nearly 250,000 left Vietnam. In southern Vietnam, powerful syndicates organized the illegal departure of Hoa by boat. Vietnamese authorities initially tried to halt these operations, but, as the security situation worsened, security officials at first acquiesced and then took a direct hand in organizing the exodus.

70 O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, p. 46.

71 Li Man Kin, *The Sino-Vietnamese War* (Hong Kong: Kingsway Publications, 1981), p. 59; Chen, *China's War With Vietnam*, pp. 113–114; and Jencks, "China's 'Punitive' War on Vietnam," p. 812.

CASE STUDY #4

The Doklam Incident, June 2017

By Whitney McNamara

The standoff at Doklam began when a platoon of Chinese border guards entered the remote plateau, a territory claimed by both China and Bhutan that also shares a border with India. Chinese security officials destroyed bunkers used by the Royal Bhutan Army and were followed by a Chinese road construction team with a large military escort. Indian troops arrived a week later to block the road building effort, crossing the border to halt the construction.⁷² Troops from both sides engaged in a two-month standoff as India's and China's governments called for each other's withdrawal.

China's and India's 2,500-mile shared border is based on a loose collection of colonial-era treaties and surveys and is unsurprisingly contested to this day.⁷³ Although there have been multiple skirmishes over the past few decades along the border, both nations have been careful to not escalate the disagreements. The Doklam standoff, however, marked the largest escalation of these disputes since 1962.

India's decision to intervene was motivated partly by its role as Bhutan's unofficial security guarantor. However, New Delhi was also likely concerned about the Siliguri Corridor, a strategically vulnerable point for India. If China were to make inroads in Bhutan, the only remaining buffer to Beijing's unimpeded access to India is this 17-mile-wide strip of land, nicknamed India's "Chicken's Neck."

72 Jonah Blank, "What Were China's Objectives in the Doklam Dispute?" blog, RAND Corporation, September 8, 2017, available at www.rand.org/blog/2017/09/what-were-chinas-objectives-in-the-doklam-dispute.html.

73 Ibid.

China's Modus Operandi

Chinese conduct at Doklam followed an established pattern that Beijing uses to coerce other nations.⁷⁴ First, it seeks to develop a regular, physical presence in a disputed area where China already claims possession. Using the military to develop permanent infrastructure—whether it be islands or roads—helps to establish *de facto* ownership. Building infrastructure to establish *de facto* control has already proven successful in the South China Sea, and, although none of China's neighbors have recognized those claims, none have mounted any tangible resistance.

To further legitimize its territorial claims, Beijing regularly employs legal rhetoric to portray its actions as lawful. In the case of Doklam, China depicted India's actions as a violation of Chinese sovereignty. This approach works symbiotically with its efforts to establish *de facto* control through building infrastructure on disputed territories: China can claim sovereignty violations in areas where it has just established a presence.⁷⁵

Beijing also engages in coercive diplomatic messaging that underscores its resolve to protect its sovereignty and includes warnings not to underestimate its strength. Its threats—both overt and subtle—backed by its formidable military, compel the targeted state to either risk an unpalatable confrontation by escalating the situation or to back down. This allows Beijing to leverage its military power into a more favorable resolution of a conflict. This is especially effective given that, taken in isolation, most of China's actions appear too insignificant to warrant escalation. Over time, however, there is no meaningful counter to China's slow but steady attempts to consolidate its gains.

Lastly, China probes for weaknesses in alliances and bilateral relationships among neighboring nations to weaken any potential collective resolve against it. Beijing claims ownership of tens of thousands of square miles along the border with India.⁷⁶ However, it chose to build a road near the Bhutan border. By doing so, China may have been trying to drive a wedge between India and one of its closest allies, testing whether India would come to Bhutan's aid and risk war with a militarily superior nation. It was also a delicate time because Bhutan's democratization had disrupted the long-standing consensus that the nation should continue its close relationship with India to the exclusion of China.⁷⁷ India's inability to protect Bhutan would have also called into question its credibility as a security partner, which neighboring countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam—to varying degrees—rely on. Encroaching on Bhutan's territory could have also provided channels of dialogue with

74 Oriana Skylar Mastro and Arzan Tarapore, "Countering Chinese Coercion: The Case of Doklam," *War on the Rocks*, August 29, 2017, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/countering-chinese-coercion-the-case-of-doklam/>.

75 Blank, "What Were China's Objectives in the Doklam Dispute?"

76 Ibid.

77 Zack Cooper and Sarah Watson, "The Doklam Standoff and Lessons for Maritime Asia," interview with Gregory B. Poling, podcast, September 6, 2017, available at <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/asia-maritime-transparency-initiative/doklam-standoff-and-lessons-maritime-asia-zack-cooper>.

Bhutan, not only for the purposes of resolving the conflict but also exerting broader influence at a later time.⁷⁸

In this case, Delhi's rapid movement of additional forces into the region, its robust diplomatic response, its success in rallying strong international support, and India's clear preference for a cooling-off period and a face-saving mutual withdrawal convinced the Chinese regime that freezing the theater, at least for the short term, was a better option than a substantial escalation.

Key Takeaways

Due to the circumstances of this standoff, it is difficult to derive tried and true lessons from how to deter Chinese coercion. It's true that China unsuccessfully attempted to change the status quo, and India played a role in preventing that. To that end, India deserves credit for not reciprocating the virulent rhetoric Beijing is so skillful at churning out. New Delhi was able to stand firm in its position and stop short of using inflammatory language that would make China less likely to quietly find an off ramp from the conflict.

India did, however, benefit from tactical superiority at Doklam and was able to leverage its well-developed forward position in the area.⁷⁹ Such a posture made it easier to confront Chinese troops and prevent a *fait accompli*. It is unlikely that other areas of the disputed territories would be as prepared to react to a Chinese incursion, or that neighboring countries would find itself with such an advantage at the outset of a Chinese incursion. Pacific countries would do well, then, to assess where they consider themselves tactically weak.

New Delhi, nonetheless, deserves recognition for standing its ground and accepting a measure of risk in the short term to deny China its objectives. Other nation states may, too, be successful if they are able to accept short term risk in confronting China. China painstakingly calibrates escalation, and, despite its frequent aggressive posture, it purposely seeks to achieve its objectives below the level of an outright conventional conflict. When faced with firm and mounting resistance, Beijing has been known to quietly back down, at least for the interim.

This strategy of tactical flexibility allows Beijing to confront and then deescalate, focusing on achieving its goals at low risk and over time. It is likely to pursue this strategy for the foreseeable future. To counter China, its neighbors will not only need to accept risk in the short term when confronted but also sustain this more assertive posture periodically over time. This notion will likely be an unenticing one, especially for smaller nations.

Another dimension of any military or diplomatic confrontation with China is its economic might. Even India, an economic powerhouse, depends heavily on Chinese exports, and a

78 Mastro and Tarapore, "Countering Chinese Coercion: The Case of Doklam."

79 M. Taylor Fravel, "Why India Did Not 'Win' the Doklam Standoff with China," *War on the Rocks*, September 1, 2017, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/why-india-did-not-win-the-standoff-with-china/>.

prolonged military standoff has the potential to damage India's economy. Less wealthy nations are likely to be even more dependent on China's trade and cash flow, a dependence that has only expanded under the Belt and Road Initiative. These nations are likelier to give into Beijing's demands, and countries in a debt trap with Beijing are expected to be flashpoints for future Chinese hybrid operations.

Missed Opportunities

Despite India's success in temporarily preventing China from establishing a permanent presence in Doklam, there were missed opportunities to potentially deter future aggression. India, relieved by China's withdrawal, did not secure any conditions or concessions that it might be able to leverage if a similar conflict arose. The lack of consequences for Beijing's incursion provides little reason for China to be deterred or even think twice before attempting a similar incursion again, whether at Doklam or elsewhere. India, like many other countries facing Chinese expansion, has little appetite for strong offensive counters to China's revisionist behavior and focuses instead on short term wins: the withdraw of Chinese troops.

If India had brought more forces to bear in the Doklam dispute, it might have gained more international attention and support. India could also have used international institutions to enforce norms related to sovereignty or leveraged its relationship with the United States for a more forceful showing.⁸⁰ Upholding and underscoring international norms, after all, will need to play a central role in standing up to Chinese revisionism.

New Delhi might equate restoration of a status quo with victory, but, from Beijing's perspective, Indian troops withdrew first and Beijing was still able to keep its forces in the area. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted that China still claims that territory and plans to continue exercising its "sovereign rights" in the area by conducting patrols and maintaining the parts of the road that are already built.⁸¹

This focus on short-term solutions plays into China's tactical patience and, ultimately, its long-term strategy. Beijing aims to achieve its goals piecemeal and below the threshold of eliciting a larger response from adversaries. New Delhi may have claimed victory for the moment, but Beijing is likely to keep probing India for weaknesses to exploit.

⁸⁰ Blank, "What Were China's Objectives in the Doklam Dispute?"

⁸¹ Ibid.

CASE STUDY #5

China's Coercive Posturing in the Senkakus

By Toshi Yoshihara

On September 14, 2012, China dispatched six maritime surveillance cutters to the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands for the first time.⁸² The incursions were China's angry response to the Japanese government's purchase of the Senkakus from private owners, an act of "nationalization" that Beijing considered illegal and invalid. These initial intrusions inaugurated regularized "patrols" and a virtually constant Chinese presence in the islands' adjacent waters that persists to this day. In response, Japan has been contesting each infringement by monitoring, trailing, and warning off the Chinese maritime law enforcement ships.

China, Japan, and the rest of the world have seemingly come to accept this protracted faceoff as a fact of life and a permanent feature of Beijing's and Tokyo's bilateral relations. This status quo is a testament to how far things have changed, and policymakers must be alert to the potential for even more change, including greater instability as the strategic balance tilts further in China's favor. The best way to anticipate such a shift is to assess the contours of Chinese strategy and its future direction.

A strategy of coercive posturing supported by the coordinated use of national power has achieved key elements of China's aims over the Senkakus, and it could open strategic space for Beijing to pursue more ambitious aims. To advance this argument, this case study: 1) identifies China's objectives; 2) describes China's strategy of coercive posturing; 3) surveys China's integrated employment of various instruments of statecraft for coercive posturing; and 4) assesses China's strategy.

82 For an official announcement of China's first Senkakus patrol in September 2012, visit <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/diaoyudao/chn/xwdt/t969347.htm>.

China's Objectives

For decades, Beijing has repeatedly affirmed that the Senkakus are Chinese territory, leaving little doubt that China would go to great lengths to defend its claims.⁸³ Given that Japan has thus far refused to concede that a territorial dispute even exists, Beijing, at a minimum, seeks to contest Tokyo's sovereign claims. The ongoing cat-and-mouse game between Chinese and Japanese coast guard vessels has already forced Japan to settle tacitly for what amounts to a *de facto* joint administration of the waters around the Senkakus. An irreversible Chinese control of the islands through outright conquest or strategic osmosis—a process detailed below—would represent the maximum territorial goal for Beijing.

Beyond the rivalry over the islands and the surrounding seas, the Senkakus crisis is a microcosm of the larger strategic competition between China and Japan. Beijing's actions over the Senkakus should be viewed as an alliance-wedging strategy designed to test U.S. security commitments to Japan. China's ability to push back against Japan also visibly demonstrates Beijing's emergence as a major maritime power and signals its prospective dominance of the East China Sea. Compelling Japan to acquiesce to China's strategic prerogatives in maritime Asia would represent a major step toward regional hegemony.

China's Coercive Strategy

China's strategy over the Senkakus can be understood as the comprehensive and integrated exercise of national power to engage in coercive posturing. This posturing involves the display and positioning of military and non-military forces, the generation of "noise" and friction through public diplomacy and media outlets, and the advancement of various (and frequently spurious) jurisdictional and legal claims. These active measures collectively help China to change the status quo, to alter the regional balance of power, and to set the stage for achieving larger strategic ambitions, including dominance over the East China Sea. Each element of Chinese power forms a layer of influence and coercive potential around the disputed features designed to incrementally push out Japan both physically and symbolically. Over time, the effective exercise of Chinese capabilities and authority could render Tokyo strategically irrelevant around the Senkakus and in the East China Sea more broadly.

Some tools and tactics enable China to apply just enough pressure to sustain the standoff and to escalate or to deescalate tensions when circumstances warrant. China's military and non-military forces, for example, engage in demonstrative displays of aggression to signal Beijing's resolve while falling short of redlines that might trigger escalation or conflict. Other Chinese

83 See Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, adopted at the 24th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People's Congress on February 25, 1992, available at <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/lotprocottsatz739/>; "Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China," State Council Information Office of The People's Republic of China, September 2012, available at http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474983043212.htm; and "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation," PRC State Council Information Office, January 2017, available at http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2017/01/11/content_281475539078636.htm.

instruments of statecraft, such as diplomacy and jurisdictional claims, create an atmosphere of perpetual friction. Chinese media, in the meantime, maintains a steady drumbeat of support for Beijing's position and maritime activities while attacking the legitimacy of Japanese claims and actions. The ever-present possibility of deterrence failure hangs over the scene of action, forcing Japan to stay alert and on edge. There is thus a powerful psychological element to the confrontation, whereby a seemingly unending stalemate could induce fatigue, wear and tear, dread, uncertainty, and a loss of confidence on Japan's part.

To implement this strategy, the China Coast Guard (CCG), the maritime surveillance and law enforcement service entrusted to enforce Beijing's claims, serves as the vanguard. By providing a near-constant presence around the islands, it is the most visible component of China's strategy to keep the islands and the adjacent seas in dispute and to demonstrate Beijing's administrative authority. The fishing fleet, akin to a quick-response reserve force, can surge into the contested waters when necessary. It is the object of the CCG's "protection," providing a major rationale for defending the nation's "rights and interests" at sea. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) acts as the backstop to these civilian and paramilitary units by operating just over the horizon. It adds more rungs to the escalation ladder if the standoff escalates or if deterrence fails. Additionally, Chinese naval and air forces routinely pass near the Senkakus to conduct expeditionary operations, exercises, and training. These sorties compound the pressure on Japan to respond to Chinese activism in the East China Sea.

These concentric rings or layers of power can be tightened and loosened at will.⁸⁴ China can tighten the noose to signal its displeasure and resolve on issues related (and not related) to the Senkakus, test the credibility of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and demonstrate growing Chinese prowess at sea. Conversely, China can loosen the noose to reward Japanese cooperation, signal Chinese willingness to entertain a rapprochement, and lighten the general mood in Sino-Japanese relations. The dispute, therefore, is about more than the islands themselves. The following assesses how these layers function, produce the desired strategic effects, complement each other, and fulfill China's strategy of coercive posturing.

China's Layered Posture

The CCG's regular intrusions into the contiguous zone (24 nm) and the territorial seas (12 nm) of the islands represent the first layer of China's coercive posture around the Senkakus. Over the first twelve months of the maritime standoff, Chinese vessels racked up over 60 patrols in the territorial seas and entered the contiguous zone on a nearly constant basis, averaging 22

84 The noose metaphor has its antecedent in the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis. During the artillery barrages against Jinmen Island, Mao Zedong rationalized the assault as way of testing America's security commitment to Taiwan. He likened Washington's extension of its guarantees to the offshore islands to a noose. By that, Mao meant that he could test America's bottom line at will by bombing Jinmen whenever the circumstances warranted. See Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 163–204.

intrusions per month.⁸⁵ Since then, China has gradually ratcheted up the pressure by progressively deploying more—and more capable—vessels per patrol while sending new ships of ever-larger displacement and sophistication. Although largely unreported, cutters also lurk outside the contiguous zone, maintaining a recessed presence around the islands. Each incursion has forced the Japan Coast Guard to scramble its ships to warn off the Chinese, testing the maritime service’s resolve and physical endurance.

Another arm of Chinese seapower, the maritime militia and the fishing fleet, forms a further layer around the Senkakus. These government-sanctioned flotillas can be called on to probe Japan’s defenses, raise tensions, and swarm the waters around the disputed islands. In August 2016, about 200 to 300 Chinese fishing vessels along with an unusually large contingent of coast guard cutters, including an armed one, appeared near the Senkakus and repeatedly entered the territorial seas over three days.⁸⁶ The incident demonstrated China’s capacity to overwhelm Japanese defenders by surging a large, combined fleet.

The PLAN acts as a backstop or an outer ring to the coast guard, maritime militia, and fishing fleets, performing overwatch duty just over the horizon for these frontline paramilitary units. However, Chinese naval vessels have begun inching ever closer to the disputed features. In June 2016, the Japanese spotted a *Jiangkai*-class frigate in the contiguous zone. In January 2018, a *Jiangkai*-class frigate and a *Shang*-class nuclear attack submarine sailed through the contiguous zone, drawing a sharp rebuke from Tokyo. The PLAN has also undertaken dangerous measures against Japanese forces near the disputed features. In January 2013, during two separate incidents, two Chinese warships—a *Jiangkai*-class frigate and a *Jiangwei*-class frigate—locked their fire control radars onto a Japanese helicopter and destroyer respectively. These encounters triggered an uproar in Tokyo while Beijing flatly denied that such provocations ever took place. The Chinese have not repeated such stunts, but these incidents demonstrate the potential for rapid escalation in a crisis and show that the initiative likely lies with the Chinese navy to fire the first salvo should deterrence fail.

China’s basing infrastructure for the coast guard, the maritime militia, the fishing fleet, the navy, and the air force constitutes another layer of maritime power wrapped around the Senkakus. In a contest of wills at sea, proximity to the scene of action matters, as it determines the responsiveness and staying power of the fleet. In 2015, China unveiled development plans for the Wenzhou Command and Comprehensive Logistics Base, which included the buildup of a large-scale training base, six new pier spaces with at least one capable of handling 10,000-ton ships, hangars for fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, and a headquarters building totaling

85 The Japan Coast Guard maintains a monthly tally of Chinese intrusions into the territorial waters and the contiguous zones of the Senkakus. See <https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/mission/senkaku/senkaku.html>.

86 For Japan’s official account of the incident, visit <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000179981.pdf>.

\$515 million.⁸⁷ The home to the CCG's 11th Flotilla is about 350 km northwest of the Senkakus. By comparison, Naha, Okinawa is nearly 420 km from the disputed features.

The Chinese have also expanded military facilities near the disputed islands. The Japanese media has reported the construction of radar sites, airstrips, and a naval pier on Nanji Island, located 300 km northwest of the Senkakus.⁸⁸ In May 2018, it was reported that an airbase in Xiapu, Fujian Province had undergone a substantial upgrade, including new aircraft shelters, taxiways, and buildings.⁸⁹ These new or newly enhanced positions would enable Chinese forces to more quickly reach the Senkakus and stay on station longer than their Japanese counterparts. Such geographic encroachments are likely to impose ever-heavier strains on Japanese defenders as they labor under greater distances to the theater of operations.

Beyond the material dimensions of the competition, China has declared jurisdictional and economic rights over large swaths of the East China Sea that pointedly include the Senkakus. Beijing claims an exclusive economic zone that extends to the Okinawa trough just off the western coast of Japan's Southwest Islands. In November 2013, China established an air defense identification zone covering vast portions of the East China Sea and the Senkakus. These two overlapping zones confer an aura of legitimacy to Chinese territorial assertions about the disputed islands. Moreover, they provide a patina of legal and jurisdictional authority, however dubious, to engage in the types of law enforcement actions summarized above.

Beijing has also waged a sustained strategic communications campaign to normalize the new status quo and to send a clear message: Tokyo must learn to live with Chinese seapower in the East China Sea and around the Senkakus. Beijing has regularly issued public statements conveying an impression of normalcy even as China threw its weight around at sea. Whenever the China Coast Guard sends its patrol ships to the Senkaku Islands, the dispatch is announced on government websites and dutifully reported in the Chinese media. The Chinese government has similarly insisted that PLA naval and air activities near Japan and transits through Japanese straits are normal, routine activities.

China has also sought to socialize the public at home and to overseas audiences about the new status quo. When the Senkakus crisis erupted, *China Daily*, the English-language mouthpiece of the CCP, took out full-page ads in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* asserting Chinese sovereignty over the Senkakus.⁹⁰ To advance Beijing's argument, Chinese news

87 For the announcement of the base buildup plan as reported by the Yantai Maritime Safety Administration on June 5, 2015, visit <https://news.hsdhw.com/36764>.

88 Kyodo, "Chinese Military Reportedly Building Facilities on Islands near Senkakus," *Japan Times*, December 22, 2014; and Kyodo, "Pier for Warships Built on Chinese Isle West of Senkakus," *Japan Times*, August 19, 2016.

89 Mike Yeo, "Why is China Expanding Its Airbase 160 Miles from Taiwan?" *Defense News*, May 18, 2018.

90 Jennifer Saba, "China Takes Islands Dispute with Japan to the Pages of U.S. Newspapers," *Reuters*, September 28, 2012, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-japan-ads/china-takes-islands-dispute-with-japan-to-pages-of-u-s-newspapers-idUSBRE88S0020120929>.

outlets regularly cite analysts, scholars, and retired military officers, who invariably parrot the government’s views. Social media has emerged as yet another instrument for mobilizing public opinion. Retired officers-turned-firebrand “talking heads,” including Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong, Senior Colonel Dai Xu, and Major General Luo Yuan, were permitted to create their own Weibo (a Chinese microblog) accounts from which to taunt and otherwise threaten Japan. Chinese state media has also turned to social media to stoke public anger against Japan.

Beijing has not hesitated to deny inconvenient facts or to engage in disinformation campaigns. As noted above, Chinese authorities refused to admit that their combatants illuminated a Japanese helicopter and destroyer with fire-control radar in early 2013. Similarly, the State Oceanic Administration’s website was conspicuously silent about the major confrontation that took place in August 2016 when Chinese coast guard cutters and fishing vessels swarmed around the Senkakus. Disinformation was clearly at play.

In sum, China has wrapped layers of paramilitary, civilian, military, and infrastructure power around the Senkakus while overlaying zones of regulatory authority and of economic rights over the islands. At the same time, Beijing has launched an information campaign in print media, in cyberspace, and over the airwaves to manipulate perceptions at home and abroad. The integration and coordination of these various implements of national power suggest that Japan faces a formidable competitor with the will and the means to contest the Senkakus for the long haul.

Assessment of Chinese Strategy

Beijing’s coercive posturing has achieved some of its more immediate aims:

- 8. The coast guard patrols have demonstrated China’s *de facto* joint administration of the waters around the Senkakus, even if Tokyo continues to deny that a dispute exists. China has judged correctly that realities at sea are far more persuasive than Japan’s diplomatic denial;
- 9. China’s paramilitary, naval, and air activities near the islands have tested and probed Japanese defenses, helping the Chinese assess its rival’s posture and readiness;
- 10. The protracted Chinese campaign of intrusions, sorties, and occasional surges have worn down Japanese defenders at the tactical and operational levels;⁹¹
- 11. Chinese official and media channels have normalized its presence and activism in the East China Sea and socialized domestic and foreign audiences to a new reality through its disciplined information campaign. Coast guard intrusions no longer merit front-page

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91 Indeed, China’s newfound capacity to exert unrelenting pressure compelled the Japan Coast Guard to retain aging vessels slated for retirement, even as it rushed to build more hulls for the fleet.

coverage in Japanese media, and the Japanese public has come to accept the new normal;

12. China's unremitting peacetime offensive has kept Japan off balance while the correlation of forces continues to shift in Beijing's favor. This bodes ill for Japan's longer-term position as the tug-of-war continues;
13. Finally, China's small, persistent confrontations have precluded galvanizing "Sputnik" moments or potentially catastrophic showdowns. China has applied just enough pressure without crossing the threshold of escalation and subsequent U.S. intervention. This approach deprives Tokyo the kinds of political capital necessary to harness its resources for competition and develop more potent countervailing strategies. This ambiguity about the course and destination of the stalemate has benefited China.

It is possible that, given China's larger regional ambitions, its advances are transient elements of an interim strategy. Over time China may acquire the confidence, capacity, and capability to maintain a constant rotational presence around the Senkakus, if it has not already. A more muscular form of coercive posturing would open new strategic vistas for Beijing. Would it keep coast guard vessels on station indefinitely to demonstrate the futility of resistance and thereby force Tokyo to the negotiating table? Even acknowledging the territories' disputed status would constitute a major victory for China.

Or, would China create a situation to which Japan must react and thereby trigger escalation? An alternative pathway following a Chinese decision to keep a standing maritime cordon around the Senkakus is illustrative: faced with the prospect of ceding administrative control to the Chinese, Japan could be backed into exercising military options to expel the China Coast Guard. Would Beijing seize on such a Japanese reaction as the rationale for a short, sharp war to teach Tokyo a lesson and terminate the stalemate decisively in its favor?⁹² Should a war at sea break out, a Chinese victory could upend the regional order to which the United States and its allies have grown accustomed. Given Beijing's ambitions and ascendant power, it is prudent to entertain the possibility, however seemingly remote today, that Chinese strategy might take such a radical turn.

92 For scenarios of a short, sharp war, see James E. Fanell and Kerry K. Gershaneck, *White Warships and Little Blue Men: The Looming "Short, Sharp War" in the East China Sea over the Senkakus* (Washington, DC: Project 2049 Institute, March 2018).

CASE STUDY #6

China's Dominance of the South China Sea

Ross Babbage

Within the space of six years the Chinese have advanced from possessing a few small, scattered installations to operating larger, modern military bases and securing effective control of almost all the South China Sea. Beijing's hybrid strategy for gaining control over the South China Sea has been gradual but determined, and in a way that was unlikely to provoke a strong major power response. It has exploited the ambiguous legal status of the region's islets and reefs, the marginal interest of Washington and its allies in contested areas, and the scope for moving incrementally to consolidate its position.

Background: The South China Sea in Context

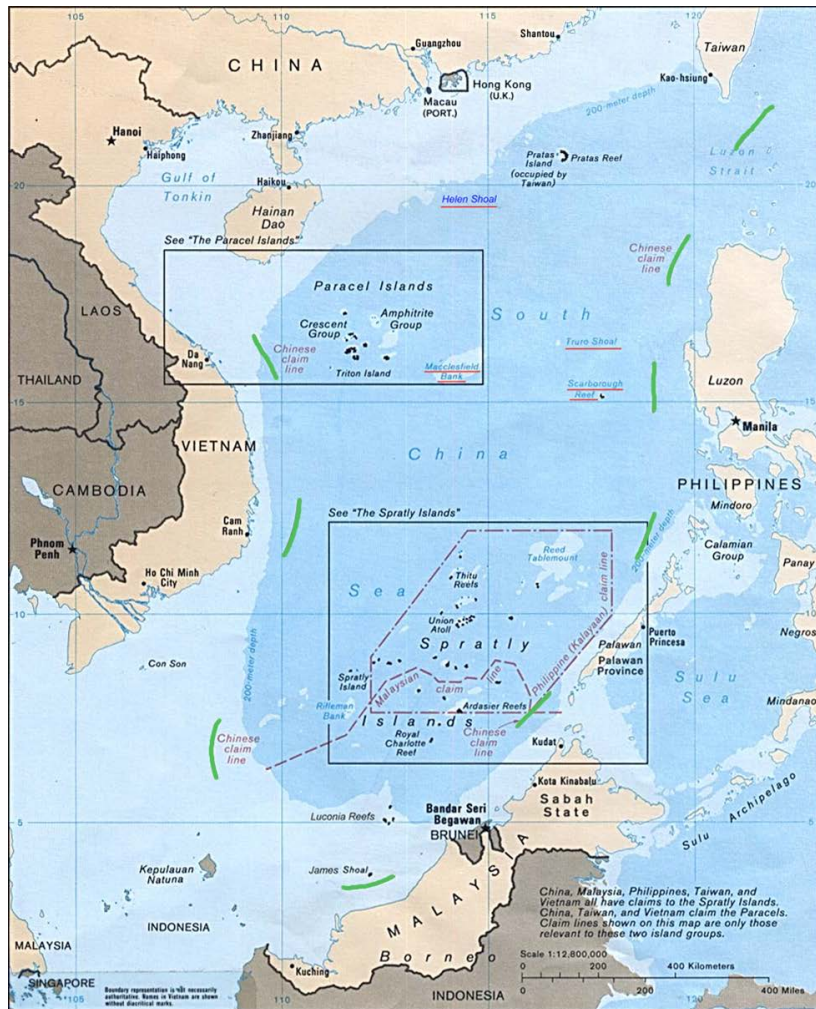
For several thousand years, Chinese emperors and warlords considered the South China Sea to be a local source of fish, a trading route, and a potential avenue of approach for maritime invaders. However, the numerous islets and reefs in this region did not garner high strategic priority or significant imperial attention until now. During the 19th century, several countries conducted hydrographic surveys of the area and published the first comprehensive sets of maps and charts. It was the British who made the first modern legal claim to the Spratly Islands, located toward the center of the South China Sea, in 1877.⁹³

In 1928 China's Republican Government stated that the Paracel Islands marked the southernmost limit of its territory. However, at the end of the Second World War, Chinese military personnel accepted the surrender of Japanese garrisons in both the Paracel and Spratly Island groups.

93 Stein Tønnesson, "The History of the Dispute," in Timo Kivimäki, ed., *War or Peace in the South China Sea?* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2002), p. 9.

In 1946 the Chinese established garrisons on Woody Island in the Paracels and Taiping Island in the Spratlys. Then in 1947 the Chinese Government drew up “The South China Sea Islands Location Map” that marked out a large U-shaped claim to nearly all the South China Sea with an eleven-dash line.⁹⁴ Following the Communist victory in 1949, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai reduced the Nationalist’s eleven-dash line to a nine-dash line that encompassed essentially the same area. In the fifty years that followed, Beijing maintained its dubious and contested claim to sovereignty, established small outposts on a few islets and reefs, and twice repelled Vietnamese forces when they attempted to assert claims over contested areas.

FIGURE 1: CHINA'S NINE-DASH LINE CLAIM IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA



Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 1988

94 Hannah Beech, “Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?” *Time*, July 19, 2016, available at <http://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/>.

Drivers of China's Hybrid Operations in the Theater

The essential motivations for Beijing tightening its control over the South China Sea were spurred by the country's surging economic, diplomatic, and military power toward the end of the 20th century. First, the Communist Party leadership saw assertive operations in the South China Sea as a way of reinforcing the regime's nationalist credentials. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the weakening attachment of the Chinese people to Marxist-Leninist ideology, the leadership in Beijing looked to strengthen its grip on power by championing a restoration of "the China dream." They talked repeatedly about overcoming the humiliation of the previous century at the hands of colonial powers and restoring China to its "rightful place" as a prosperous society wielding international power comparable to that of the United States.⁹⁵ Establishing effective control of the South China Sea fitted this narrative very well

Dominating China's southern maritime approaches also promised enhanced military, energy, and food security. Advances in the technological sophistication and range of modern surveillance and weapons systems offered greatly enhanced potential for using the small islands and reefs of the region as unsinkable bases. Senior PLA strategists appreciated that in a future crisis or war, an appropriate mix of sensors and weapon systems networked across a set of newly created and extended islands would give Beijing effective control over almost all the South China Sea, increase the risks and costs to allied forces operating in the region, and push most allied forces further from the Chinese mainland.

There are also indications that the PLA planned to use the South China Sea as a primary operating area, or bastion, for China's growing fleet of ballistic missile-firing submarines. Operating from the PLAN's Southern Fleet's bases to the immediate north of the South China Sea, these key parts of the Chinese nuclear arsenal could patrol with a relatively high level of security within extensive sonar and radar networks, as well as with the local protection of large numbers of land-based combat aircraft, hundreds of ballistic and cruise missiles, and large numbers of PLAN surface combatants. Operating within this relatively secure region would mean that China's newest ballistic missile-firing submarines could still strike critical American and allied targets without the need to venture into the open Pacific. From Beijing's perspective, this would appear to greatly enhance the strategic value of this region.

Beijing's plans for the South China Sea also promised greater security for China's shipping lanes to and through the Indonesian archipelago that deliver some 80 percent of China's oil and gas imports and an increasing proportion of China's food supplies.⁹⁶ Beijing also took account of the fact that the floor of the South China Sea is reputed to hold valuable reserves of oil and natural gas. Although estimates of these resources vary, they are thought to comprise

95 Timothy R. Heath, "An Overview of China's National Military Strategy," in Joe McReynolds, ed., *China's Evolving Military Strategy* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, January 2017), p. 34.

96 Michael Lelyveld, "China's Oil Import Dependence Climbs as Output Falls," *Radio Free Asia*, December 4, 2017, available at https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/energy_watch/chinas-oil-import-dependence-climbs-as-output-falls-12042017102429.html.

at least 7 billion barrels of oil and 900 million cubic feet of natural gas.⁹⁷ In addition, Chinese decision-makers were mindful of the fact that the South China Sea fishery is important to all the littoral communities, including those residing on the southern coast of China.

There were also broader strategic and political benefits for Beijing to dominate the South China Sea. The leadership of the regime assessed that the first two decades of the 21st century would be a period of strategic opportunity for China, with most Western economies stalled, the United States heavily distracted by domestic issues, and much of the U.S. military committed to counterterrorism and other operations in the Middle East.⁹⁸ The regime calculated that if they advanced in the South China Sea through small incremental steps, each of which was below the threshold that would trigger a forceful allied response, they could achieve their primary goals in the region by 2020.

Moreover, the Chinese leadership realized that these operations, if accompanied by well-crafted diplomacy, subversion, corruption, and other measures had the potential to stir divisions within Southeast Asia, coercing several regional countries to accommodate Beijing's key interests and distance themselves from the Western allies. Hence, they worked hard to divide, perplex, intimidate, and simultaneously woo ASEAN member states.

By seizing key reefs and islets, creating new artificial islands, and then establishing a powerful military presence in the region, all without stirring a powerful United States, the Chinese regime appreciated that serious damage would be done to allied credibility. It would be clear for all to see that China had gained effective control of one of the world's most important commercial and military thoroughfares and that Beijing had outmaneuvered and outsmarted the United States and its allies.⁹⁹

In consequence, China's territorial expansion in the South China Sea became an important part of the regime's strategy of division and disruption against the United States and its allies and partners in the Western Pacific. It demonstrated the new reality that China had not only become the dominant economic power in the Western Pacific but was also emerging as the preeminent military power in the theater. Drawing on these themes, Beijing was able to propagate a powerful narrative that the allies were weak and unreliable, and were subsequently being banished to the region's margins.

97 For details, see United States Department of the Interior and United States Geological Survey (USGS), "Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of Southeast Asia, 2010," Fact Sheet 2010-3015, June 2010, available at <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2010/3015/pdf/FS10-3015.pdf>

98 Heath, "An Overview of China's National Military Strategy," p. 34.

99 See, for example, Ryan Martinson and Katsuya Yamamoto, "Three PLAN Officers May Have Just Revealed What China Wants in the South China Sea," *The National Interest*, July 9, 2017, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/three-plan-officers-may-have-just-revealed-what-china-wants-21458>.

China's Strategies, Doctrines, and Operations

Some of the most important Chinese operations in this campaign were actually conducted elsewhere. From an early stage, Beijing launched coordinated multi-disciplinary operations to undermine opposing forces in their home countries. This use of intrusive intelligence operations, deception, propaganda, corruption, intimidation, and related activities was designed to weaken opposing forces, sow divisions and doubts, and subvert the willpower of key decision-makers.¹⁰⁰

While potential opponents of China's campaign were being undermined, compromised, and distracted, the regime also expanded the tasking of the PLA and associated agencies. Coinciding with Xi Jinping's appointment as Communist Party Secretary in 2012 and Chinese President in 2013, the PLA was told that "National security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over greater range, and cover a longer time span than any time in the country's history." The 2015 Chinese Defence White Paper stated, "The PLA Navy will shift from offshore waters defense, [to add] distant sea projection."¹⁰¹

Almost simultaneously, the Chinese regime intensified harassment of foreign vessels in the South China Sea and conducted PLAN, Coastguard, and Maritime Militia exercises and intrusive commercial operations well within the EEZs of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam. At the same time, China commenced a program of large-scale dredging, reef consolidation, island creation, and infrastructure development, mainly within the Spratly Island group toward the center of the South China Sea. Within months, seven pristine semi-submerged coral reefs were converted into substantial sand and compacted coral islands.

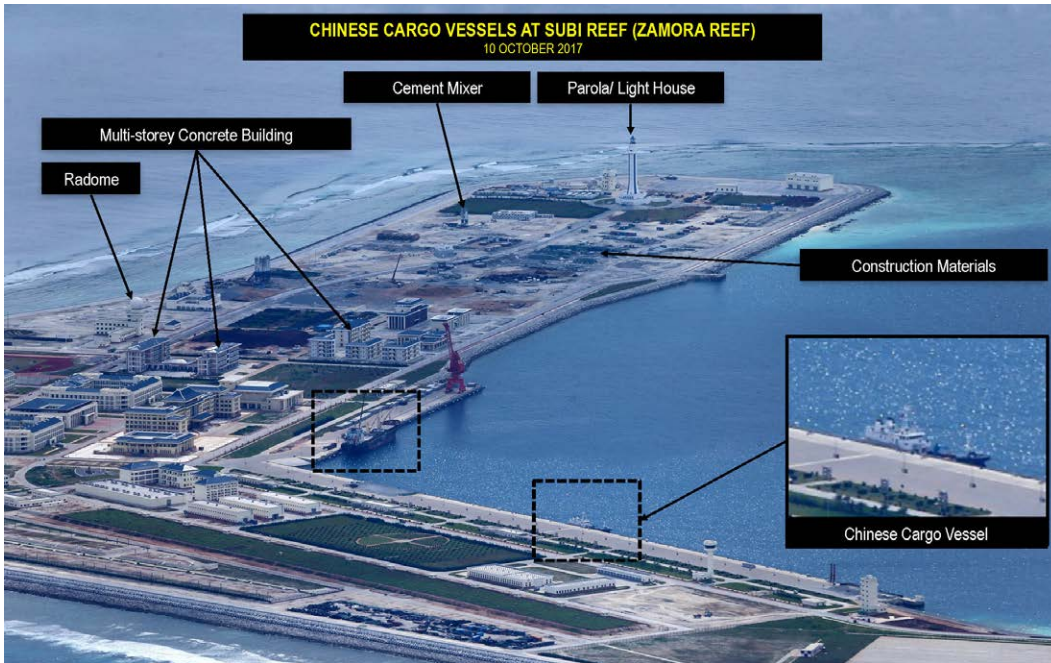
By 2016 the newly created artificial islands at Subi, Mischief, and Fiery Cross Reefs housed air bases that were being equipped to operate full fighter regiments of 24 fighter-bomber aircraft with support aircraft. These new bases feature runways long enough to handle Boeing 747 aircraft, numerous large hangars, extensive aircraft maintenance facilities, and fuel and ammunition storage facilities. The islands were also equipped with port facilities to support most types of PLAN, Coastguard, and Maritime Militia vessels. Accompanying these facilities were a comprehensive array of radar, sonar, and other surveillance and communication systems, anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile installations, and barracks. The nature and scale of these military installations dwarfed anything possessed by the military and coastguards of the other littoral states in the region. What's more, it is not clear that Beijing's program of island creation in the South China Sea has finished; indeed, there have been reports in the Chinese media of plans for further significant island building operations in the area over the coming decade.¹⁰²

100 For more detail on Chinese operations, see Mahnken, Babbage, and Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*, pp. 25–40.

101 Heath, "An Overview of China's National Military Strategy," pp. 36–37.

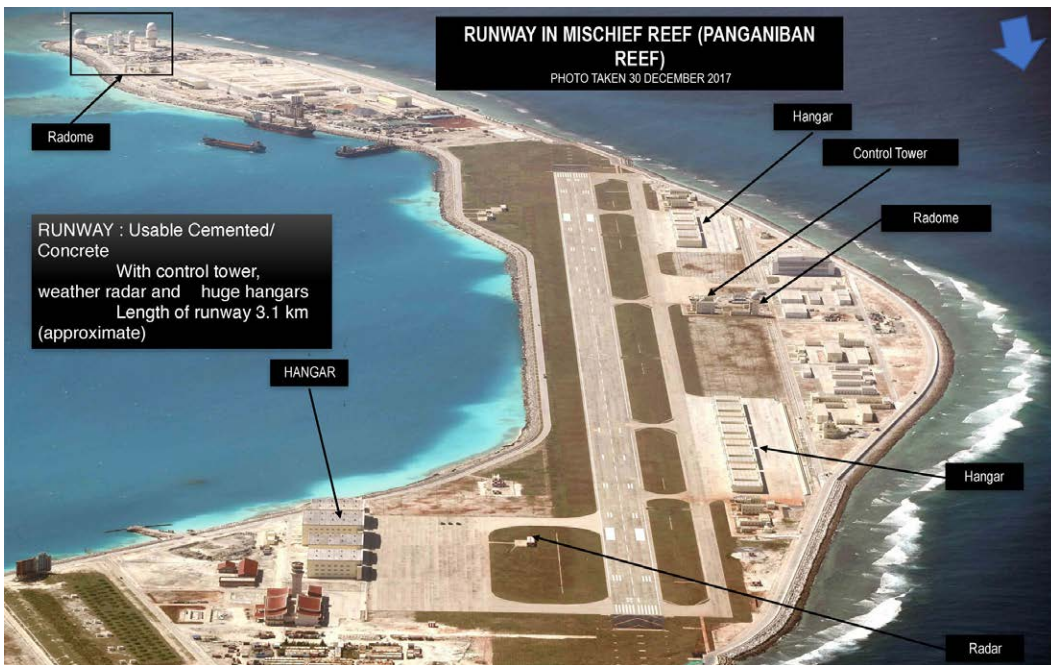
102 For example, see Wang Kaihao, "New Facilities to Aid S. China Sea Studies," *China Daily*, November 29, 2018, available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201811/29/WS5bff349da310eff30328bado.html>.

FIGURE 2: CHINESE FACILITIES ON SUBI REEF



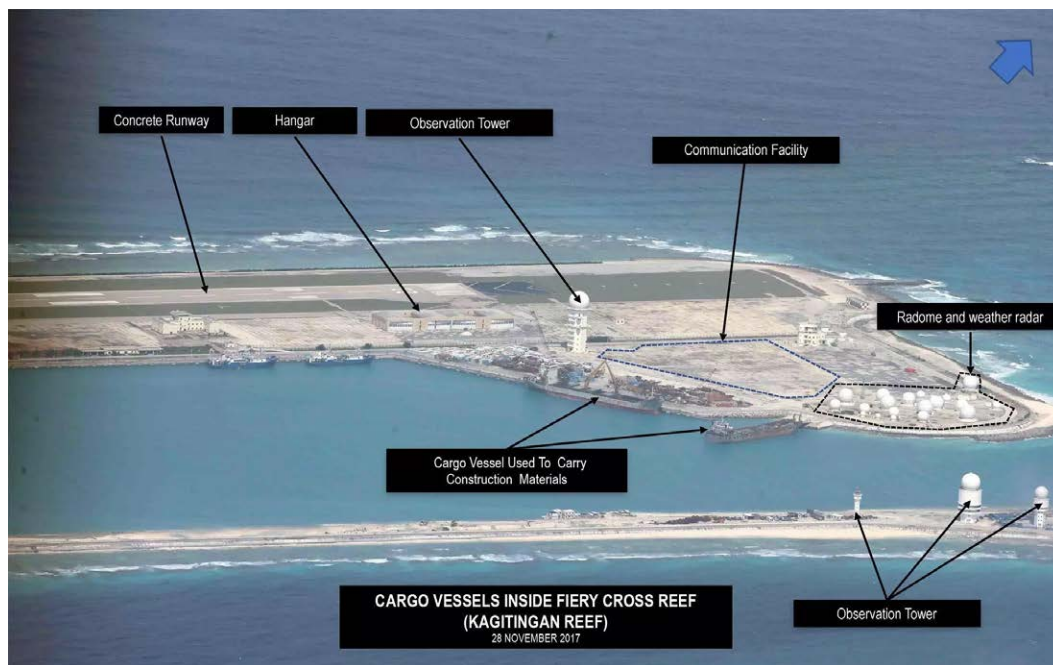
Source: Inquirer.net

FIGURE 3: CHINESE FACILITIES ON MISCHIEF REEF



Source: Inquirer.net

FIGURE 4: CHINESE FACILITIES ON FIERY CROSS REEF



Source: Inquirer.net

The coercive power of these facilities was reinforced by the large military forces that were being modernized in the adjacent coastal provinces of China. The Yulin Naval base, located on the south coast of Hainan, is one of the largest and most advanced naval bases in the Pacific, featuring extensive underground and conventional docks and a range of maintenance and support facilities.¹⁰³ It is currently homeport for eight nuclear powered submarines, 16 diesel electric submarines, nine destroyers, 11 corvettes, 24 frigates, and numerous support ships. Neighboring facilities support scores of Coast Guard ships and large numbers of Maritime Militia vessels.¹⁰⁴ Several fighter and bomber regiments operate from adjacent coastal provinces. Perhaps even more intimidating are the hundreds of short- and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles deployed in the region, that are capable of striking at land-based facilities and ships at sea across the entire South China Sea and beyond.¹⁰⁵ This Chinese power can easily overmatch the forces of all other South China Sea littoral states combined, and even those of the United States and other allied forces that periodically transit the region.

Within the space of six years, the Chinese advanced from possessing a few small, scattered installations to operating larger, modern military bases and securing effective control of almost all the South China Sea. Beijing has converted the world's second busiest commercial

103 Damen Cook, "China's Most Important South China Sea Military Base," *The Diplomat*, March 9, 2017.

104 The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2018* (London: IISS, 2018), p. 258.

105 See this discussed in Ross Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism in the South China Sea: Strategy Options for the Trump Administration* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), pp. 24–26.

seaway and a strategically important military thoroughfare into something approaching an internal waterway.¹⁰⁶ Beijing's strong positioning in the South China Sea significantly extends the reach of the PLA air, missile, and naval assets through the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagoes to Papua New Guinea, Northern Australia, and the northeastern Indian Ocean. In consequence, not only is the density and depth of China's southeastern defenses strengthened, but powerful new launching pads have been created for future operations further into the region.

For the immediate future the Chinese appear focused on consolidating their gains, gradually deploying a full suite of military capabilities to the islands, aggressively preventing other littoral states from interfering with Chinese activities, and pressing their neighbors to sign agreements to jointly develop energy and other resources even within their own EEZs (to which Beijing has no legal right). Meanwhile, Beijing's diplomatic and political warfare operations maintain the information initiative and continue to win notable successes in dividing and disrupting countervailing forces within ASEAN and the Western alliance.

Nine Key Reasons for the West's Failure

First, many in Washington and other allied capitals viewed the problems in the South China Sea as unwelcome distractions of little consequence that were best ignored. Some policymakers and commentators argued that there was little sense in risking a major power confrontation with China over a "few scattered rocks" in a far distant theater.¹⁰⁷

Second, the level of importance accorded to the strategic future of the South China Sea varied greatly between allied and partner capitals. The general view in the strategic community in Washington was that the South China Sea was important, but not vital.¹⁰⁸ In Tokyo, Seoul, and Canberra, the South China Sea was considered to be far more important because of its intrinsic strategic value and critical importance to their close partners in maritime ASEAN.

A third determinant was the constraint imposed by the hub-and-spoke alliance model that has been in place in the Western Pacific since the 1950s. Cross-alliance (outer wheel) cooperation and combined security planning was, and still is, uncommon amongst the Western Pacific allies unless it is orchestrated by the United States. But during this period, Washington was not interested in leading a powerful defense of the region; it was heavily distracted elsewhere.

Fourth, most allied and partner citizens, many journalists, and congressional and parliamentary representatives were poorly informed about Chinese operations in the South China Sea

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Craig Whitlock, "Panetta to Urge China and Japan to Tone Down Dispute," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2012; and Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "U.S. Won't Fight China Over Pacific 'Rock'; PACOM Strives for Strategic 'Ambiguity,'" *Breaking Defense*, September 19, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ In preparing the report *China's Adventurism in the South China Sea*, the author canvassed the views of many serving officials and also numerous retired officials. This judgement reflects the vast majority of those views.

and Beijing's broader strategic behavior. These issues rarely gained serious public attention during the key years of China's island-building operations, and government agencies were generally reluctant to give them prominence.

Fifth, the development of an effective response to China's incrementalism in the South China Sea was an intrinsically difficult challenge. Beijing employed a sophisticated hybrid strategy and operational concept that could be implemented without challenging U.S. alliance commitments or directly confronting U.S. or allied forces. Moreover, the Western allies and their partners did not possess well-developed capabilities for combating hybrid warfare and were not well-placed to punch back or outflank the Chinese campaign.

Sixth, the concerns of many Western business people and policy makers led them to discourage any measure that might disturb their business and broader economic relationships with China.

A seventh reason accounting for the Western allies' timidity over Chinese behavior in the South China Sea was the success of Beijing's information operations in Western countries. These operations were notable for the Chinese courting of key decision-makers, journalists, and academics; the contribution of substantial funds to political parties; the establishment of pro-Beijing associations of many types; and a very broad suite of political warfare operations.

An eighth contributing factor was the markedly different levels of commitment and determination between Washington and Beijing. The responses of the United States and its key allies were timid, minimalist, incremental, and highly predictable. By contrast Xi Jinping made clear that he would "not yield one inch" of China's territorial claim in the South China Sea.¹⁰⁹

The last factor was cultural. During this period, Western leaders appeared to be more fearful of triggering confrontation and the escalation of an argument than their Chinese counterparts. This thinking was reflected in a concentrated form of risk aversion in some Western bureaucracies.

109 See a report on Xi Jinping's approach to his meeting with U.S. Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis toward the end of June 2018: Charles Glover, "China Rejects US Concerns over South China Sea Militarization," *Financial Times*, June 28, 2018, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/faof1d78-7a7e-11e8-bc5550dafi1b720d?segmentId=6132a895-e068-7dde-4cec-a1abfa5c8378>

How Effective Were Allied Counters?

Throughout this period there were three primary themes in the allied policy:

1. The maintenance of free sea and air transit through the South China Sea;
2. An acknowledgement that the United States, Australia, and Japan had no territorial claims in the region and did not take a position on the claims of other countries, including those asserted by Beijing; and
3. The allies' strong interest in the claimants exercising restraint and peacefully resolving territorial disputes in the region in accordance with international law.¹¹⁰

This minimalist formulation of allied interests signaled clearly to Beijing that the United States and its allies would periodically express dissent, occasionally direct small numbers of military aircraft and warships to passage the region, and possibly take modest steps to enhance the maritime capabilities of other littoral states. However, it was clear to the Chinese regime that Washington and other allied capitals were not going to substantively interfere, even to uphold the sovereign rights of the Philippines, a treaty ally of the United States. This strategy and policy approach of the United States and its allies was timid, largely one-dimensional, highly predictable, and almost completely ineffective. The result is that the Chinese regime now exercises almost undisputed authority over one of the world's most strategically important waterways.

110 See this argued in Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism*, p. 32–37.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CITIC	China International Trust and Investment Corporation
CMAG	China Military Advisory Group
CMC	Central Military Commission
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
IDF	Israeli Defense Force
KMT	Kuomintang
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organization
VOPT	Voice of the People Thailand



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