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## China's Maritime Grey-Zone Strategy and Its Impact on Regional Stability

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of the maritime grey-zone strategy by China has become one of the characteristic aspects of modern security relationships in the Indo-Pacific. This approach, which exists in the grey area between peace and armed conflict, has been based on non-military and quasi-military tools (maritime militia, coast guard actions, legal warfare, economic coercion) to pursue strategic goals without provoking a conventional military reaction. The paper reviews the theoretical principles of maritime grey-zone operations, evaluates how China has been applying such tactics from different contested maritime areas, and determines their consequences to the stability of the region. The research is based on qualitative analysis of official texts, incident databases, international legal texts, and peer-reviewed literature, stating that the grey-zone policy of China has facilitated gradual change to the status quo, but it has also led to the heightened risks of miscalculation, instability of the crisis, and long-term degradation of the maritime norms. The paper also considers the regional and international reactions, such as legal countermeasures, capacity building, and unilateral security cooperation. It finds that although grey zone strategies can help to mitigate the risk of a large-scale conflict in the

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short run, they undercut long-term stability by institutionalising coercion and ambiguity in the maritime environment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific maritime space has become one of the major arenas of strategic rivalry in the twenty-first century, fuelled by overlapping territorial claims, sea lines of communication, and the growing geopolitical competition. The growing maritime operations of China in this area are increasingly evidence of the application of grey-zone strategies as coercive steps that do not go beyond the limits of armed conflict but have profound strategic consequences.<sup>1</sup>

Such strategies are typified by ambiguity, deniability, and incrementalism and suit the maritime sphere because of the ambiguities of jurisdiction, attribution difficulties at sea, and the law-enforcement nature of much maritime interaction.<sup>2</sup>

The maritime behaviour of China is shown to be systemically dependent on these grey-zone behaviours, such as the operation of persistent presence, mobilisation of civil and paramilitary forces, and the strategic exploitation of legal discourses to legitimise coercive action.<sup>3</sup> Although such tactics may minimise the risk of immediate military escalation, they produce chronic tensions and pose severe challenges to the overall stability in the region.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic interest in the grey-zone conflict has grown enormously as scholars attempt to conceptualise a type of strategic behaviour that exists between war and peace. Grey-zone strategies are typically interpreted as coercive measures with the purpose of attaining the political or territorial goal without necessarily reaching the point of triggering a conventional military retaliatory response.<sup>5</sup> These are strategies that are based on ambiguity, deniability, and incrementalism so that they can bring about revisionist change without any overt conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Early theorising about grey-zone conflict puts such behaviour in wider contexts of coercion and limited revisionism. In this opinion, incremental actions over time have the potential to change the status quo cumulatively and take advantage of political and legal limitations that targeted states may experience.<sup>7</sup> In this perspective, grey-zone strategies are not exceptions, but logical attempts to adapt to the environment where outright military force is too expensive or self-defeating.



Further recent research expands the concept of grey-zone to the sea, where the lack of enforcement mechanisms and jurisdictional uncertainty provide an ideal place for below-threshold coercion. Maritime security scholars underscore the fact that maritime spaces are especially vulnerable to grey-zone operations due to the high number of civilian vessels, the police-like nature of most maritime encounters, and the difficulty of international maritime law.<sup>8</sup>

The maritime behaviour of China has become the key empirical concern of this literature. There is an extensive literature on the application of maritime militia and coast guard forces by China as coercive tools that do not demarcate the line between civilian and military operations. Research on maritime militia activity also emphasises their contribution to a sustained presence, the blocking of foreign vessels, and their support of state interests at levels of plausible deniability.<sup>9</sup> Analyses of China's coast guard activity also underscore its transformation into a highly armed paramilitary force able to enforce maritime claims in the name of law enforcement.<sup>10</sup>

The application of domestic law and regulatory means to maritime coercion is also examined as a legal issue in China. These works hold that legal and administrative claims, often termed as maritime lawfare, are used to legitimise disputed claims and restrict the space of operation of other states by creating alternative interpretations of international law.<sup>11</sup>

Although this literature has become very sophisticated, there are still a number of gaps. To begin with, much of the current literature is devoted to the study of separate instruments, including the work of maritime militia or coast guard, without enough attention to the role of such tools as a part of the integrated grey-zone strategy. Second, most of the studies focus on incident-based analysis, which does not provide much information on the cumulative impact of sustained coercion on stability in the region. Lastly, although the short-term success of grey-zone strategies is well-known, their long-term consequences on the escalation process, the normative order, and the crisis management are under researched.

This paper fills these gaps by taking a holistic approach to the maritime grey-zone strategy and system of China and evaluating its effects on the stability of the region systematically. The study combines empirical practices with theories of coercion, deterrence and security dilemmas to go beyond descriptive explanations to assess the ways in which repeated below-threshold coercion transforms maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.



### 3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The paper uses the qualitative analytical approach based on the theories of coercion, deterrence, and security dilemmas to discuss the Chinese maritime grey-zone approach and its effect on the stability of the region. These theoretical views are common to the modern security literature in trying to examine types of strategic behaviour based on limited, ambiguous and incremental actions as opposed to the overt military action.

#### 3.1 Conceptualising the Maritime Grey Zone

This paper describes the grey zone as a field of strategic competition where the rivalry is using coercive measures that are intentionally kept below the threshold of an armed conflict. These are the kinds of actions that take advantage of the ambiguity in attribution, intention, and legality to reduce the range of reaction options the victim states have, and thus, the offender states rely on legal and administrative tools to continue their claims over the contested areas.<sup>12</sup>

Grey, zone operations in the maritime context are typically characterised by the use of non-military or quasi-military personnel, e.g. coast guards, maritime militia, and civilian ships, together with the legal and administrative measures used to support the claims to the disputed areas.<sup>13</sup>

Maritime grey zone tactics are not meant to deliver a knockout blow but rather to build up gradually. On their own, the effects of individual acts may be regarded as insignificant or even boring, yet they have the potential to change the working environment and disturb the status quo. This is one of the most typical features of grey, zone coercion (this incrementalism).<sup>14</sup>

#### 3.2 Coercion and Limited Revisionism

To analyse the maritime grey-zone strategies, the coercion theory offers a key theoretical framework of analysis.<sup>19</sup> According to scholars, states can pursue limited revisionist goals by wielding calibrated pressure that does not produce retaliation on an expansive scale, but rather by imposing persistent presence, harassment and administrative penalties that increase the costs of non-compliance to the states being affected.<sup>15</sup>

Grey-zone strategies are especially useful in cases where the state in question is politically, legally, or even strategically restricted in the deployment of force. In that case, a long-term low-level pressure can bring considerable strategic benefits in the long run.<sup>16</sup>



### 3.3 Deterrence and Escalation Control

Traditional deterrence theory assumes clear thresholds, identifiable adversaries, and credible threats of retaliation. Grey-zone strategies challenge these assumptions by operating in areas where thresholds are unclear and attribution is difficult.<sup>17</sup> China's maritime grey-zone activities complicate deterrence by taking advantage of legal and normative limits that restrict other states' ability to respond forcefully.<sup>18</sup>

Escalation control is a key aspect of grey-zone behaviour. By using law enforcement agencies and civilian actors, a state can adjust pressure while shifting the burden of escalation to its rivals.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.4 Security Dilemma and Regional Stability

The use of grey-zone strategies is illustrated with the security dilemma framework as they create long-term instability through continual use of coercive actions, which produce increased threat perceptions on behalf of the victimised states. Countries respond to these threat perceptions by enhancing maritime capabilities, increasing partnerships and increasing surveillance/patrol.<sup>20</sup>

While such a response to a situation is meant to be defensive, it might be viewed as provocative by another state, creating a reinforcement cycle of mistrust and competition. From this vantage point, a region can only be considered stable if the actors within that region can manage disputes among themselves without resorting to armed conflict; grey-zone strategies do not build regional stability, they create an atmosphere in which using coercion is accepted and escalate the potential for miscalculations leading to armed conflicts.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.5 Methodology

The research design adopted by this study is a qualitative research design that relies on the analysis of documents and secondary sources. Qualitative methods have been extensively applied in the study of international relations to study strategic behaviour, institutional practice and policy outcomes in areas where quantitative measurement is inapplicable.

The sources used in the analysis are of three types:

- Maritime laws and official policy documents;
- Maritime security report and incident data;
- Articles by peer-reviewed journals in Scopus-indexed journals.



The combination of these sources would result in improving the reliability of the analysis and give the possibility to properly evaluate the maritime grey-zone strategy of China and its effects on regional stability.

#### **4. CHINA'S MARITIME GREY-ZONE STRATEGY – INSTRUMENTS AND PRACTICES**

In China, the maritime grey zone strategy manifests as a coordinated and institutionalised approach, where civilian, para-military, and legal tools come together to achieve strategic goals in maritime zones where competition is increasing, rather than relying on naval power as an instrument of compelling influence, presence, and gradual transformation of the operating environment while avoiding conflict.<sup>22</sup>

The strength of this approach rests in its repetitive application across various fields of control. Its repetitive and incremental nature allows for significant changes in patterns of control and influence without any dramatic counter-response from the opponents.

##### **4.1 Maritime Militia as a Grey-Zone Instrument**

Perhaps the most singular aspect of the maritime grey zone approach adopted by China is its deployment of maritime militia forces. The maritime militia forces comprise fishing boats and crews that may be deployed at varying levels of coordination with government agencies. This civilian status of the forces deployed makes it difficult to determine whether they belong to the government, thus offering little room for response from other nations.<sup>23</sup>

Maritime militia ships have been used in efforts to maintain a presence in disputed waters, interfere with fishing or survey efforts by foreigners, and assist in supporting coast guard operations. Swarming disputed waters and undertaking harassment or blocking tactics have been used to create a cost constraint for other claimants without crossing the threshold of armed conflict.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of the logic of incremental coercion from a grey zone perspective, the activities of maritime militia highlight the relevance of individual incidents seeming limited but adding up to the normalisation of presence and the exclusion of competitors.<sup>25</sup>

##### **4.2 Coast Guard Operations and Law-Enforcement Coercion**

The coast guard forms the central role in transforming grey-zone pressure into continuous operational control of China. Such institutional reforms, together with its expanded capabilities, have substantially



increased its operational reach and enforcement capacity to enable extended deployments in the disputed waters.<sup>26</sup>

Framing coercive activities as law-enforcement operations allows China to create a narrative of legality and restraint. Under domestic legal authority, coast guard vessels perform patrols, inspections, and expulsions. Such operations blur the distinction between civilian policing and strategic coercion.<sup>27</sup>

This approach creates a strategic dilemma for targeted states. A forceful response risks escalation and invites international criticism, while restraint enables the continued erosion of operational space and maritime access.

### **4.3 Legal and Administrative Measures (Maritime Lawfare)**

Legal and administrative measures form the other pillar of China's maritime grey zone strategy. In this, China imposes domestic legislation, regulations, and statements to claim jurisdiction in disputed maritime areas and to authorise the enforcement actions by state agencies.<sup>28</sup>

This phenomenon has been described as maritime lawfare, wherein legal frameworks are utilised strategically to justify contested claims and limit the behaviour of rival states.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, by asserting legal arguments and sustained operational presence, China attempts to bolster its de facto control, particularly in areas where the legal basis for control has been contested.<sup>30</sup>

### **4.4 Integration and Strategic Coordination**

The effectiveness of China's maritime grey zone strategy stems from the integration of these tools to create a cohesive whole. The operation of maritime militias serves to establish presence and exert gentle pressure, coast guard forces provide organisational foundation, and lawfare fills in the legitimacy gap.<sup>31</sup>

This multi-tiered approach allows for control of escalatory spirals while maintaining strategic pressure. Emphasising persistence, ambiguity, and small gains helps China reconfigure the maritime space in a manner conducive to strategic advantage while avoiding direct military confrontations.<sup>32</sup>

However, as demonstrated in the sections that follow, such tactics hold considerable implications in terms of regional stability and escalation, and the resultant maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.



## 5. IMPACT ON REGIONAL STABILITY

The Indo-Pacific region's stability has been complicatedly and frequently contradictorily impacted by China's maritime grey-zone policy. Avoiding direct military conflict lowers the chance of an immediate, large-scale conflict, but persistent below-threshold coercion has had long-term destabilising effects that have affected perceptions of regional security, escalation dynamics, and the normative underpinnings of maritime order.<sup>33</sup>

### 5.1 Stability Through Conflict Avoidance?

Because they restrict direct military engagement, grey-zone tactics may seem stabilising on the surface. States can pursue strategic goals while lowering the likelihood of inciting alliance commitments or widespread retaliation by depending on civilian and law enforcement tools rather than naval combat forces.<sup>34</sup>

Such stability is, however, constrained and frequently deceptive. An atmosphere of constant strategic friction is created when open warfare is avoided; rather, grey-zone tactics usually substitute ongoing low-intensity conflict for sporadic crises.<sup>35</sup>

### 5.2 Intensification of Security Dilemmas

By creating a sense of threat among neighbouring states, China's grey-zone operations exacerbate regional security issues. Legal claims, coercive law enforcement actions, and persistent presence operations are seen as signs of long-term strategic intent rather than isolated occurrences.<sup>36</sup> Affected states respond by stepping up maritime patrols, bolstering their surveillance capacities, and seeking closer security cooperation with both regional and international partners. Even though these reactions are meant to be defensive, they could be interpreted as provocative, which would intensify cycles of action and reaction that increase strategic rivalry.<sup>37</sup>

### 5.3 Escalation Risks and Crisis Instability

By obfuscating lines of authority, intent, and responsibility, grey-zone operations also raise the possibility of unintentional escalation. Interactions between coast guard ships, civilian ships, and maritime militia produce unclear operational environments where misunderstandings or poor judgment can quickly escalate tensions. De-escalation efforts are further complicated by the lack of clearly institutionalised crisis-management procedures for non-military actors. Grey-zone actors may not have



formal communication channels, which increases the likelihood of an unintentional escalation, in contrast to naval forces, which frequently operate under established confidence-building measures.<sup>38</sup>

#### **5.4 Erosion of Norms and Legal Order**

The legal and normative underpinnings of regional stability are also called into question by China's maritime grey-zone policy. The predictability and legitimacy of legal frameworks governing maritime behaviour are undermined by the deliberate application of domestic law and selective interpretations of international maritime law.<sup>39</sup>

Normalising coercive tactics below the level of armed conflict runs the risk of creating precedents that other governments might follow in the future. By legitimising coercion as a standard tool of maritime interaction, such diffusion could further erode restraint and increase instability.<sup>40</sup>

#### **5.5 Net Effect on Regional Stability**

The overall result of maritime grey-zone tactics is contradictory. By institutionalising coercion, escalating security quandaries, and weakening normative constraints, they threaten long-term regional stability even though they lessen the likelihood of an immediate, large-scale conflict.<sup>41</sup> Because it depends on self-control and risk tolerance, which may not hold up during times of crisis or political transition, stability attained through constant pressure and ambiguity is intrinsically brittle. As discussed in the next section, these dynamics highlight the necessity of coordinated regional and global responses.<sup>41</sup>

### **6. Regional and International Responses**

The increasing application of the concept of maritime grey-zone tactics has forced local and extra-local actors to respond to consistent below-the-line coercion by altering their instruments and strategies. States have begun to adopt a mix of legal, institutional, and capacity-based measures to address pressures of grey-zone as opposed to merely employing the traditional military deterrence strategy in order to lessen the pressure and stop the escalation without resorting to military force.<sup>42</sup>

#### **6.1 Maritime Capacity-Building and Presence Operations**

Improvement of maritime law enforcement and surveillance has been one of the most conspicuous reactions toward grey-zone coercion. States in the region have been investing in the modernisation of the coast guards as well as maritime domain awareness systems and the broadening of the patrol capabilities



in the disputed waters. These actions are aimed at enhancing surveillance, recording forceful incidents, and being present without using military force.<sup>43</sup>

Enhancing the civilian maritime agencies enables the states to respond to grey-zone activities at a similar degree of intensity and legality. This will minimise the risk of escalation and create an impression of determination and the willingness to protect maritime rights. Nevertheless, differences in capabilities between regional players are still a limiting factor to this response.<sup>44</sup>

## **6.2 Legal and Normative Countermeasures**

Another noteworthy aspect of the efforts to cope with the grey-zone issues is legal responses. Arbitration, diplomatic protest and legal clarification have been sought by some states to challenge coercive acts and strengthen international maritime norms. These are based on the following measures that focus on compliance with the accepted legal frameworks and aim at delegitimising unilateral claims of power.<sup>45</sup>

Although legal methods strengthen the normative clarity and international support, their practical efficiency is limited by the inability to enforce the norms. Grey-zone strategies take advantage of exactly these gaps between legal judgment and operational control, and this underscores the systematic complication of only using legal remedies.<sup>46</sup>

## **6.3 Minilateral and Regional Cooperation**

Minilateral and regional cooperation systems have become the order of the day, with states trying to find common solutions to common maritime problems. Situational awareness and interoperability are improved through information-sharing arrangements, joint exercises, and coordinated patrols that do not rise to the level of commitment of formal alliances.<sup>47</sup>

These collaborative efforts also help in norm-building in terms of supporting expectations of responsible maritime behaviour. Their success, however, relies on the long-term commitment of politics, resource distribution, and coordination of strategic interests among the involved states.<sup>48</sup>

## **6.4 Extra-Regional Engagement and Balancing Behaviour**

The presence of operations, capacity-building support, and diplomatic interactions has also been among extra-regional actors that have responded to maritime grey-zone actions. These will work towards supporting the freedom of navigation, supporting international norms and enhancing resilience in the region.<sup>49</sup>



Meanwhile, there are more strategic complexities with more external involvement. China can also see such actions as containment, which strengthens competitive relations and can even encourage more grey-zone behaviour in place of restraint.<sup>50</sup>

### **6.5 Limits of Current Responses**

Regardless of such ambivalent responses, the maritime grey-zone problems remain difficult to control. Capacity limitations, divergent threat perceptions and perceived escalation issues still constrain limitations on the scope and coherence of collective action. Moreover, grey-zone coercive practices and strategies can be adapted to countermeasures, and this has ensured that the strategic competition has continued at a stable, albeit moderated level.

Overall, local and global responses have mitigated some of the short-term hazards, although they have not fundamentally altered the underlying structural motivations of maritime grey-zone behaviour. This shows the significance of more robust integrated measures of introducing legal resilience, capacity building and long-term diplomatic discussions.

## **7. Conclusion and Policy Implications**

China's maritime grey-zone strategy has become a defining feature of strategic interaction in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. By operating below the threshold of armed conflict, this approach enables the pursuit of political and strategic objectives through ambiguity, incremental coercion, and the coordinated use of civilian, paramilitary, and legal instruments. As this paper has demonstrated, these practices can enable a gradual change of the operational environment and still keep the escalation under control and prevent military conflict.

The discussion shows that the fact that the maritime grey-zone strategies can help decrease the risk of large-scale war in the near future does not ensure a stable situation in the long term. Sustained low-level coercions undermine trust among actors in the region, exacerbate security dilemmas, and raise the chances of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Moreover, the increased application of legal and administrative tools to support disputed claims undermines the predictability of accepted maritime norms and makes the operation of international legal systems more difficult. In a more strategic sense, maritime grey-zone behaviour points to the inability of conventional deterrence to deal with below-threshold coercion. Traditional military capacities are frequently ill-adapted to the reaction to the acts that intentionally stay ambiguous and difficult to legally define, placing the impacted states in awkward strategic and political circumstances. Through this, regional stability is increasingly becoming reliant on



the capability of the states to build coordinated and flexible responses that work across legal, institutional, and operational levels.

This study has implications for the policy in several ways. Improving maritime domain awareness and enhancing coast-guard and law-enforcement capability is one of the key elements to provide a good response to grey-zone operations without resorting to a military conflict. Simultaneously, it is possible to increase compliance with international maritime law and establish cooperative security systems to maintain normative stability in disputed waters. More regional coordination, information sharing and confidence building will also be required to minimise the escalation risks and manage the incidents at sea. To sum up, maritime grey-zone strategies are a long-lasting and structural issue and not a passing tactic. In the absence of long-term institutional, legal, and collaborative reactions, the further normalisation of below-threshold coercion will turn the maritime arena into a zone of enduring strategic rivalry, with huge implications for the regional order and the international maritime regulation.

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