



Grey Zone Warfare in the Indian Ocean Region

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19499546>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 21-03-2026

Published: 10-04-2026

Keywords:

Grey Zone Warfare, Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Maritime Security, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), Hybrid Naval Tactics

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of Grey zone warfare has become a defining characteristic of modern maritime competition, especially in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where the line between war and peace is becoming increasingly blurred. This article will look at how state and non-state actors, particularly China and Pakistan, use ambiguous, non-kinetic and deniable means to achieve their strategic aims while avoiding open conflict. Using a structured analysis of actors, instruments and operational spaces, the study highlights the increasing weight of maritime militias, dual-use infrastructure, cyber intrusions and undersea surveillance activity. Based upon selected case studies, including Chinese research vessel deployments and the strategic development of Gwadar Port, the paper argues that grey zone tactics systematically exploit gaps in existing frameworks of maritime governance (particularly UNCLOS) and impose cumulative strategic costs on India through constrained maritime domain awareness, complicating deterrence positions and revealing weaknesses in coastal and offshore infrastructure. The article argues that the current Indian response is reactive and fragmented; and requires a doctrinal adjustment that integrates technological capabilities, legal innovations and multilateral cooperation. Additionally, by locating grey zone warfare within an overall Indo-Pacific security environment, the paper emphasises grey zone warfare as an enduring and normalised way to contest at sea.



Introduction

The socio-economic landscape of the Indian Ocean continues to evolve, blue water grey zone operations increasingly shape the maritime security environment throughout the region. Both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Pakistan have sophisticated and diverse sets of ambiguous and asymmetrical maritime tools or methods (e.g., civilian militia-style fishing fleets and dual-use ports) that allow them to pursue their strategic objectives without triggering open hostilities or conventional military engagement. This article attempts to identify and analyze common definitions associated with grey zone maritime conflict, major actors within this grey zone (with an emphasis on PRC and Pakistan), and the motivations of those actors. This effort examines specific tactics being employed by these actors (e.g., maritime militias and weaponized fishing fleets; dual-use research ships; sabotage of undersea cables; cyber intrusions; illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing) and assesses vulnerability, in terms of geography, for India. In the maritime realm, the geographical areas of interest where India appears to be at most significant risk include chokepoints, small island states, and Indian coastal territories.

This article posits that grey zone warfare within the Indian Ocean region (IOR) constitutes not only an additional method of pursuing strategic competition but is also a primary method of pursuing competitive strategies; PRC and Pakistan utilize both differentiated and complementary methods in their respective maritime grey zone activities. The PRC uses economic development strategies (e.g., economic tools of statecraft) and quasi-civilian maritime assets to build a visible and effective presence within the region, while Pakistan uses its geographic proximity to India's western coast and asymmetry to bring pressure on the western maritime flank of India. Thus, India needs to create a balance between deterrence and restraint while improving its shortcomings and developing documental clarity.

Conceptualizing Maritime Grey-Zone Warfare

Grey-zone warfare involves state-sponsored violence and aggression at or below the level of regular warfare. This form of warfare uses a combination of coercive actions and irregular methods of operation that cannot be easily identified or attributed (Till 2022, Tomar 2026). Maritime experts suggest the ocean can act as a “contested battle zone,” with acts of aggression at sea (i.e., capturing fishing boats and acts of aggression close to real warfare can result from the actions carried out). These forms of warfare exploit the absence of either legal or normative standards or frameworks. For example, the acts committed by vessels conducting research or harvesting fish may also be carried out under the guise of civilian activity and have the intent to conduct surveillance or intimidate. Grey-zone conflicts can be extremely dangerous, above and beyond what could be characterized as actual warfare (Till, 2022). The nature of



attempts to intimidate adversaries at sea often expose those using a combination of proxies (i.e., fishing boats, militia, etc.) and national capabilities (i.e., coastguards, navy, etc.) to extreme legal ambiguities, whether they are based in peacetime or wartime (Till 2022-Kumar & Bhatt 2025).

In practice, grey-zone maritime warfare employs a variety of hybrid techniques to employ low level of force against individuals engaged in countering a particular adversary's aggression through the use of lawfare (law, lawsuits, etc.), economic coercion (i.e., manipulating markets and resource flows) or other forms of economic coercion, and exploiting information warfare (i.e., using false information to persuade the public, etc.). Corbett wrote about naval warfare as "a hostile relationship that could not be properly classified as an act of war"—a sentiment echoed by several current analysts (Till 2022-Till 2022). Examples of grey-zone maritime warfare in today's world include the actions taken by Sri Lanka's Sea Tigers (fishing boats that have become attackers) and Iran/Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps versus Israel in skirmishes involving unmarked missile strikes against vessels (Till 2022-Till 2022). According to Geoffrey Till, grey-zone actions and strategies are designed to change the outcome of a conflict without the high cost and risk associated with traditional warfare; this task requires innovative behavioral counter-strategies and building multilateral support for the counter-strategy (Till 2022-Till 2022).

As a result of the emergence of China, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has transitioned from being an insignificant strategic region into one that is highly fought over due to rising power competition (Tomar, 2026). Today, leaders within India face a "No War, No Peace" environment where they are confronted with greater tensions and increased interference below the level of war (Tomar, 2026). As such, these conditions require robust and vigilant maritime domain awareness (MDA) and the development of an integrated civil-military approach to responding to them.

Key actors and Motivations

China (PRC): China's strategic and economic interests have driven them to operate within the IOR. As one of the largest energy customers in the world, they have an interest in protecting their maritime trade routes (Hormuz, Malacca, etc.) (Fazilat, 2025)(Tomar, 2026). More specifically, China has sought to increase its ability to project power, obtain intelligence and protect its sea lines of communications (SLOC's) without provoking a war. As noted, China has become very active in the IOR by conducting anti-piracy and anti-submarine patrols with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and investing in (String of Pearls)(Fazilat, 2025) ports, some of which will have dual-use capabilities (military). Furthermore, through China's three warfare strategy, the Navy's operations are integrated with lawfare (asserting legal claims) and propaganda which creates ambiguity regarding the legal framework of their



naval operations (Till, 2022). China's vision of Two Oceans and One Sea indicates their intent to create a sphere of influence that encompasses the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea (Funaiolo et al., 2024).

Pakistan: Pakistan's maritime strategy centres on balancing India. With a smaller navy, sea denial (hurdling Indian naval freedom) rather than outright control (Fazilat, 2025) is the goal. China is Pakistan's partner at sea, particularly because of CPEC and Gwadar Port connecting the economy of Pakistan with that of sealed Chinese (Fazilat, 2025). In Islamabad's perspective, Chinese naval cooperation and port investments deter Indian actions against Pakistan. For example, joint exercises such as Sea Guardian or Chinese warships' calling at Pakistani ports (ET Columnist, 2025) (Fazilat, 2025). Analysts warn that Pakistan's over-dependence on China risks it being embroiled in the great-power rivalry, and that trepidation increases that Chinese control of Gwadar would restrict Pakistani autonomy (Cannon, 2026) (ET Columnist, 2025).

Non-State Actors: Irregular "naval" forces also have their roles. China's People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) - ostensibly civilian fishing crews trained by the PLA who constitute, in effect, a 'quasi-navy' (Wong, 2026) (Kumar & Bhatt, 2025). Islamist terrorists or pirates e.g. Lashkar, Tahrik-i-Taliban might exploit coastal weaknesses, but India's primary concern is that of use of state-directed grey-zone. Separatists e.g. Baloch militants have attacked Chinese projects on land (e.g. Gwadar) and also port facilities, showing how land-based proxies provide challenges at sea. In general criminal non-state activity (e.g. piracy, smuggling) exists in the area, but the strategic focus in the grey-zone remains state-linked groups seeking to apply pressure through ambiguity.

Tools and Tactics

Grey-zone tools deployed by China and Pakistan at sea:

- **Fishing fleets/maritime militia:** China's (distant-water) fishing fleet is really an armed auxiliary. Civilian trawlers are trained to do military tasks and sometimes have surveillance equipment (Wong, 2026; Kumar & Bhatt, 2025). They do "floating presence" patrols, harassing vessels, gathering intelligence, and developing hostile swarm tactics (e.g., forming massed swarms of 1,400 vessels off disputed reefs seen in the South China Sea, similar patterns are emerging in the IOR as well) (Wong, 2026; Till 2022). Fishermen-friendly states (e.g., Pakistan) sometimes also turn a blind eye to the nation's IUU fishing, which can be used to further strategic aims. There is a degree of deniability with



the militia being dual-use; it is not a war but proceeds without formal military troops in order to change facts on the ground—in this case, on the sea.

- **Weaponized Fishing/IUU Fishing:** The illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing by China's fleets have some strategic side-effects. These deplete marine resources in others' EEZs, which undermines local fishing industries, and potentially creating resource insecurity (i.e. pulling local more towards Chinese imports or even labour). There are studies claiming Chinese companies run 8 of the top 10 world's IUU fishing firms. The vessels operate under “flags of convenience” (e.g. Liberia, the Pacific nation of Tanzania) to bypass the rules of Regional Fishery Management Organization (e.g. SPRFMO); (ii) they start turning their AIS off and spoofing identities, so that it's very difficult to know who is operating them. Vessels also shut off AIS or spoof their identities, making them difficult to detect; (iii) in one striking incident, inspection-trawlers of the India Coast Guard during Cyclone Vayu spotted 10 vast Chinese trawlers with 80,000-ton storage tanks and high-powered lights – evidence of industrial-scale IUU fishing near India's west coast; (iv) beyond resource theft, IUU fishing vessels use for surveillance purposes, or to pressure villages e.g. incidents where guys are next each other fishing and a dispute happens; more recently, these are increasingly politicized.
- **Research/Survey Ships:** China's state-run research and survey vessels are dual-use assets. Officially on scientific missions, many are linked to the PLA or China Coast Guard (Funaiole et al., 2024). Analysts have identified around 64 Chinese “civilian” research ships worldwide, with 13 operating in the IOR (2020–23) (Funaiole et al., 2024). These ships usually map the seabed, oceanic conditions, and even undersea cables (Funaiole et al., 2024) (Funaiole et al., 2024). In reality, such data supports China's submarine and surveillance needs (Funaiole et al., 2024). For example, Xiangyanghong 06 deployed hundreds of ocean sensors in the Indian Ocean (2019–20) (Funaiole et al., 2024). Unauthorized surveys have provoked incidents: in 2019 an Indian warship expelled the Chinese research ship Shi Yan 1 from India's Andaman Islands EEZ, as it was “operating without permission” (Panda, 2019) (Patranobis, 2019). China defended the vessel, claiming its experiments were in international waters (Patranobis, 2019) – illustrating the legal grayness around EEZ research.
- **Satellite/Drone Surveillance:** China have leverage over space and unmanned systems for maritime ISR. Reconnaissance drones (air and underwater) and satellite signals can extend surveillance (Funaiole et al., 2024) (Wong, 2026). These advance data-collection in areas difficult for China's



navy (e.g. around Andamans). China can scale up AI-enabled sensors (e.g. AI-driven maritime surveillance drones) to maintain presence at distance with low-profile assets.

- **Undersea Cable Sabotage:** China is trying a new way to disrupt its enemies without going to a actual war. They keep targeting undersea cables, which are like the internet's lifelines, connecting countries and islands together . In 2023, Chinese ships, possibly using other people's cargo vessels, cut some of these cables near Taiwan. This shows that China is willing to take advantage of the fact that many islands rely heavily on these cables for communication. Even though we haven't seen anything like this happen in the Indian Ocean yet, it's likely only a matter of time. The Bay of Bengal and the Pacific are home to many critical cables, and they're not very well protected. This makes them vulnerable to secret attacks, like those that might be carried out by ships in disguise. If someone were to damage these cables, it could seriously disrupt another country's communications without actually starting a war. This is a pretty sneaky tactic, and it's something we should be paying attention to.
- **Cyberattacks:** Cyber intrusion and disruption of port/ship systems is another grey-zone vector. Although specific cases targeting India's ports are rarely disclosed, global trends show port IT systems (AIS, cargo databases) are prized targets. A maritime cybersecurity report warns that Asian ports face growing cyber threats that could hamstring logistics (Sharma, 2024). Adversaries (notably China) have targeted civilian infrastructure in other domains; by extension, India's ports, ship-borne IoT, and critical navigation satellites are all vulnerable to cyber coercion in the grey zone.
- **Other ways** that countries can exert pressure on each other include using the law to their advantage, like what happened with the fishing disputes between Indonesia and India, where these issues were used to apply pressure, as noted by researchers Kumar and Bhatt. Politics also plays a big role, with countries offering economic incentives to smaller island nations, such as the Maldives, to get them on their side. Furthermore, there's even the possibility of paramilitary groups sneaking into a country's territory, like Chinese patrols or militants trying to secretly land on India's coast using small boats or submarines, which is a concern given the past interest of Pakistan and China in gathering intelligence on the Andaman islands. In fact, Indian sources have confirmed that when Chinese fishing boats entered Indian waters, the Indian Navy had to cancel a test of its BrahMos missile to avoid being observed, as reported by Wong.



Strategic Geography and Vulnerable Spaces

The IOR's geography dictates vulnerability. Key areas include:

- **Chokepoints:** The Persian Gulf/Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb (Red Sea exit), and the Strait of Malacca are crucial for energy and trade. China fears a “Malacca Dilemma” (over 80% of its oil passes through Malacca) (Fazilat, 2025). It thus builds influence in littoral states (Myanmar, Bangladesh) to hedge. India, in turn, must monitor these corridors: its western fleet keeps watch on Hormuz and Pakistan's Makran coast, while the Andaman & Nicobar Command oversees Malacca approaches.
- **Small island states:** The small island states in the Indian Ocean, such as the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka, particularly the port of Hambantota, as well as Bangladesh's coastal areas, have become key locations of competition and debt diplomacy .
- **India's littorals:** India has a really long coastline, with thousands of miles of it. If you look at the west coast, you'll see big cities like Mumbai, Goa, and Kochi, as well as important ports like Kandla and Mundra - these are all key targets for the economy. The Arabian Sea is also home to Gwadar and Iranian Chabahar, which is making the naval competition in the region even fiercer. On the other side, the east coast has the Bay of Bengal, which stretches all the way down to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, kind of like India's outpost. They're actually working on turning Great Nicobar into a major base, called Project SAGAR, to keep an eye on the Malacca Gap. One thing to note is that the Bay of Bengal has fewer radar coverages, which makes it a bit of a blind spot, especially for foreign ships that might be trying to sneak around under the cover of darkness. Overall, India's own Exclusive Economic Zone and the high seas nearby are feeling the pressure from all the extra-regional activity going on, as researchers like Kumar and Bhatt, and Wong, have pointed out in their studies from 2025 and 2026.

Let's think about what might happen in the future. We're guessing that China will keep trying to take control of important islands, like the Coco Islands near Myanmar, which could be a source of conflict soon. Also, because of climate change, the sea level is rising, which could create new paths for ships to travel and make disagreements over who owns certain areas of the ocean even worse. As the ocean gets warmer, it's changing where fish live, and this could push fishing boats into areas that are already being fought over, making tensions over illegal fishing even higher.



Case studies

A. Chinese Research/Survey Vessels	China (PLAN, CCG)	Dual-use oceanographic missions; data collection; EEZ intrusions	<i>Shi Yan-1</i> expelled from India’s Andaman EEZ in Nov 2019 (Panda, 2019); <i>Xiangyanghong 01</i> surveyed off Andamans (Mar 2025) (Wong, 2026); 13 Chinese research ships active in IOR (2020–23) (Funaiole et al., 2024). Anti-India patrols near Port Blair flagged (Panda, 2019) (Wong, 2026).	Maps sea floor, deploys sensors to support Chinese submarines; signals capability to intrude into India’s “backyard.” Undermines norms of EEZ research consent (Panda, 2019).	Strengthen India’s MDA (surveillance, patrols); clarify legal consent (UNCLOS) for research in EEZ; challenge Beijing diplomatically on unauthorized surveys.
B. Gwadar/Dual-Use Infrastructure	China-Pakistan	Port development under CPEC; potential naval facilities (e.g., deep berths, secure compounds); SIGINT base rumors	Chinese-funded Gwadar (completed 2007, \$250M) now run by China Overseas Ports Holding (2013–present) (ET Columnist, 2025); Reports of Chinese naval visits (Sea Guardian exercises). Pakistan CPEC policy brief (Feb 2026) highlights Gwadar’s	Provides China-India first-strike proximity on Arabia Sea; possible logistics/support hub for PLAN/Pak navy; strategic lever over Pakistan’s energy transit (Hormuz	Maintain naval/patrol presence in Arabian Sea; improve satellite/air surveillance of Gwadar area; coordinate with Iran/Iraq littorals to monitor Chinese



			strategic value (Cannon, 2026) (Cannon, 2026).	chokepoint). Heightens Indian security dilemma (encirclement fears).	ships; pursue diplomatic engagement (multilateral norms on foreign naval bases).
C. IUU Fishing as Strategic Pressure	Chinese DWF fleet (private/ state Co.)	Massive illegal fishing in others’ EEZs; surveillance/obser vation hidden in fishing; AIS spoofing; economic coercion via fish depletion	Chinese fishing vessels grew from ~300 to ~450 in IOR by 2019 (Kumar & Bhatt, 2025); 2020s surge near India – e.g. 2025 Chinese trawlers night-fishing in Andaman waters (Wong, 2026). African/IOR losses: ~\$143M/yr (2015– 21) from shrimp/tuna (Wong, 2026); >\$5B regionally (2023) (Wong, 2026). Cyclone Vayu (2019): ICG inspections found 10 Chinese boats with 80,000t tanks (Kumar & Bhatt, 2025).	Diminishes coastal state fisheries and food security; creates resentment and diplomatic tensions; provides cover (Chinese vessels double as MIL-MIL liaison/eyes) (Kumar & Bhatt, 2025) (Kumar & Bhatt, 2025). Activates bilateral frowns (e.g. Bangladesh-Sri Lanka fishing disputes with China involvement).	Enforce fisheries laws robustly; improve AIS/coastal radar to spot dark fleets; negotiate multilateral IUU crackdown (RFMO pressure on flags); integrate coast guard in national security planning.



Impacts on India's Maritime Security and MDA

India is facing some serious security concerns due to certain activities in the grey area. These activities are creating gaps in surveillance and intelligence, which is a major worry. For instance, Chinese research vessels and militia are keeping an eye on India's naval bases, like the ones in Andamans and Karwar, by posing as civilians. This is not just a one-time thing, as reports from 2019 and 2026 by Panda and Wong show. Moreover, illegal fishing fleets are hurting India's fishing economy, which is forcing the coastguard to increase patrols and making the public unhappy. The situation is getting tense, with India now facing maritime tension on two fronts - one near Pakistan on the west coast and the other near China-influenced areas on the east coast.

Although the Indian Navy has improved its ability to keep an eye on things, it still lacks the coverage it needs. A report from the parliament in 2025 pointed out the gaps in coastal radar and intercept capabilities, especially on the eastern side. For example, early-warning networks around Lakshadweep and Nicobar are still being set up, as noted by Ramsay in 2016. This shows that there's still a lot of work to be done to ensure India's security. The Indian Navy's domain awareness architecture, which includes shore radars, aerial patrols, and satellites, has seen some progress, but it's not enough. The gaps in coverage are a concern, and the fact that India is facing a two-front maritime tension makes it even more important to address these issues. The reports and studies mentioned earlier highlight the need for improvement, and it's crucial that India takes steps to enhance its security and surveillance capabilities to deal with these grey-zone activities.

India's leaders are aware of the problems, but they also have to deal with legal issues. For example, when the Shi Yan-1 incident happened in 2019, India openly criticized the violation, but China used certain parts of the UNCLOS law to claim that it had "implied consent". This shows that there's a grey area in the law: while a country can't unreasonably say no to something, it's not clear what's considered "legitimate research" and what's actually secret spying. When it comes to illegal fishing, India can catch boats that are doing it, but the process of dealing with the country that owns the boat and the organizations that regulate fishing is often slow, and India doesn't have the power to enforce the rules outside of its own waters. This makes it hard for India to effectively stop these activities.

Militarily, the presence of Chinese platforms complicates Indian war planning. Commanders fear that uncoordinated actions (e.g. missile tests) could be monitored or interdicted by these assets, as evidenced



when India postponed a BrahMos test to avoid giving data to shadowing trawlers (Wong, 2026). In sum, these grey-zone tactics erode India's strategic initiative and demand a whole-of-government response.

One way to look at this is by using proxy actors and irregular tactics, especially when it comes to terrorism at sea. The 2008 Mumbai attacks are a good example of this - they showed how vulnerable India's coastal security is and how non-state actors can be used as tools for a state's strategy. This happened when attackers came in through the sea, which highlights the weaknesses in India's coastal security and how groups not directly connected to a state can still carry out attacks that serve a state's interests.

Pakistan is also spending money on submarines, some of which it's getting from China, to make its defense stronger. Submarines are tricky to find or track, and it's hard to figure out what they're doing without things escalating quickly. When they're in the Arabian Sea, it makes things more complicated for India when it comes to the ocean, especially when there isn't a full-blown war going on. This means India has to think carefully about how it will move its ships and submarines around, because Pakistan's submarines could be lurking and trying to spy. Crucially, Pakistan's maritime strategy is increasingly intertwined with China's. The development of Gwadar Port under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides Pakistan with infrastructure while offering China a strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea.

India's Current Responses and Doctrinal/Legal Gaps

India is taking steps to adapt to the changing situation. The country has introduced some key strategies, like the SAGAR policy from 2015 and the more recent MAHASAGAR doctrine, which focus on working together with other countries in the region and using technology to improve its maritime domain awareness. India is also taking part in naval exercises with other countries, like the MALABAR exercise and collaborations through the Indian Ocean Rim Association, to show that it's a player in the region.

Operational steps: The Indian Navy and Coast Guard have started keeping a close eye on Chinese research ships, tracking every vessel using AIS. In 2024, the Coast Guard practiced patrolling for illegal fishing and launched new satellites to watch the ocean. Indian warships have also been sailing through certain areas to show that they can, and India has openly questioned China's claims to the sea, even taking their concerns to The Hague and the UN. This is all part of a bigger effort to make sure the seas remain open to everyone.



Legal/Policy Gaps: Despite these, gaps remain. India lacks a clear gray-zone playbook: rules of engagement for civilian or covert vessels are still being formulated. There is no specific legal framework for “maritime militia”; such vessels are technically private, complicating responses. The UNCLOS-related processes (Article 286 arbitration vs peaceful solutions) have not kept pace with hybrid tactics. Currently, Indian law (Maritime Zones Act, coast guard mandate) covers illegal fishing and pollution, but not subtle intrusions by ostensibly legal actors. Parliamentary briefings have noted that India’s coastal surveillance is “fragmented” among agencies, and legislative strengthening (e.g. a consolidated Merchant Shipping Act) is pending (Ramsay, 2016).

Assumptions: It's likely that the Navy's new approach and the proposed Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative will eventually fill in the gaps, but putting everything into action will take time - we're talking years. For instance, expanding the coast guard and making changes to the law will require patience. Additionally, India's democratic values and desire to maintain its independence in strategic decisions make it hesitant to use military force to resolve commercial disputes, which is a key factor in how it responds to these situations.

Policy Recommendations

To deter and counter grey-zone threats, India should adopt a whole-of-nation strategy, as outlined below (flowchart). Key elements include:

Identify clear objectives. Specify what unacceptable grey-zone behavior looks like, such as unauthorized research in the EEZ. Establish a government policy consensus, both civil and military, on red lines (Till, 2022).

Integrated power. Using all the available tools: military, coastguard, diplomacy, media, and law enforcement, in a coordinated manner (Till, 2022).

Maritime Domain Awareness. Quickly expand sensor networks, including radar chains, drones, and satellites. Invest in passive acoustic arrays and underwater gliders to detect covert activities on the seabed. Fund AI-driven analytics to identify AIS spoofing. Build a unified Indo-Pacific surveillance grid with friendly navies, such as Japan, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

Legal measures. Push for stronger international frameworks. Advocate at the IMO and RFMO meetings to address IUU and grey tactics, such as blacklisting rogue vessels and tightening flag-state responsibilities. Domestically, ratify the 2019 Amendment to the UNCLOS if not already done, and



adjust national laws to strengthen the Maritime Zones Act, making unauthorized foreign research a crime. Use UNCLOS dispute mechanisms when appropriate, such as our case against Chinese activities in the South China Sea, which has important implications.

Alliances and Partnerships. Deepen maritime cooperation with the Quad and IORA. Share intelligence on suspicious activities, like the discovery of Chinese survey ships by Sri Lanka. Conduct coordinated patrols or joint anti-piracy drills to monitor routes. Provide support to Indian Ocean littoral states so they can resist coercive pressure, for instance, by funding Maldives Coast Guard radar upgrades. Promote a narrative of collective rules-based order to counter arguments based on "might makes right" (Till, 2022).

Invest in Capabilities. Accelerate the acquisition of drones, unmanned ships, and advanced undersea sensors. The Navy's new UUV program is a step in the right direction. Expand the fleet of fast-response patrol boats and CAG interceptors for fisheries enforcement. Develop enhanced offshore patrol vessels to monitor EEZ limits consistently. Simulate grey-zone scenarios in war games to refine tactics.

Battle of Narratives. Make each incident known internationally. Frame Indian actions as enforcement of law and sea safety. Expose the hypocrisy of aggressors, such as highlighting China's reversal on "freedom of science." Maintain a fact sheet on each incursion to help build legal cases.

Continuous Adaptation. Regularly review incidents and update rules of engagement. The system must evolve in response to changes made by grey-zone actors, for instance, countering encrypted AIS and new undersea weapons.

Pro Tips. Use vivid case examples in policymaking, like the expulsion of the Shi Yan-1 or the cancellation of Goswami's BrahMos, to clarify threats. Highlight recent developments, such as IJU catches off Lakshadweep in 2024 and the installation of new Indian radars. In writing, refer to authoritative primary sources, including naval statements and UNCLOS, along with recent research, like this analysis. Structure recommendations in short lists for clarity. Prioritize a policy section with actionable items instead of generic statements.

Conclusion and Future Trajectories

India's maritime environment is now a grey zone. China, with Pakistan's help, is using covert methods to challenge India's interests in the Indian Ocean (Fazilat, 2025) (Kumar & Bhatt, 2025). This quiet pressure, from armed fishing fleets to dual-use port infrastructure, weakens regional stability. India's



recent doctrinal shift (IMD-25) and policy initiatives (SAGAR, improved MDA) are positive steps, but much work remains.

Looking ahead, technology and climate will change the competition. Artificial intelligence and autonomy will grow. China is developing large undersea drone submarines and mining-capable unmanned vessels (Honrada, 2025), which could someday pose a threat to cables or underwater assets in the Indian Ocean. India must invest in AI for maritime surveillance and autonomous systems.

Climate change adds another layer. Rising sea levels and severe weather will increase pressures. More frequent cyclones, like Vayu, could unpredictably scatter fishing fleets. Shifting fish stocks, either northward or into deeper waters, may increase illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Coastal communities facing resource loss could become politically unstable, worsening maritime insecurity, such as climate refugees and piracy. India's security planning must include climate resilience, such as protecting coastal sensors from storms and participating in regional maritime environmental governance.

In summary, India needs to understand that it is engaged in a long-term strategic contest at sea below the threshold of war. The grey zone is here to stay. India's success will depend on how the country will address these situations while covering for its other assets (Till, 2022).

Assumptions: This analysis assumes current trends continue, such as China's naval growth and CPEC expansion. We lack concrete data on covert R&D or classified operations, and we acknowledge those gaps. If Chinese or Pakistani policies change significantly, such as through a treaty to limit militarization or a breakdown in relations, we would need to revise our conclusions.

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