

WINNING WITHOUT FIGHTING: CHINA'S GREY ZONE STRATEGIES IN EAST ASIA

The hybrid nature of China's actions in the conflicts in East Asia is nothing new. It is an updating of a historical tradition based on the philosophy of Sunzi and the revolutionary past of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to adapt to a reality defined by competition between major powers, technological revolutions and the rise of computerised contexts. By acting in the grey zone, where the boundaries of peace and conflict blur, China pursues its interests while avoiding open conflict with the United States (US) and other regional actors.



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In *Unrestricted Warfare*, published in 1999, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, two colonels in China's People's Liberation Army, analysed US strategy during the first Gulf War and concluded that the age of using military force to induce the enemy to submit had come to an end. Instead, contemporary warfare was characterised by an amalgamation of political, economic, cultural, diplomatic and military tactics used alongside armed and unconventional forces to bring the enemy to heel – a definition similar to the Western concept of hybrid warfare.

That book and its analysis have been seen as the Chinese conceptualisation of hybrid conflict, but some of the principles that govern contemporary hybrid threats were described by Sun Tsu in *The Art of War* (2019) over 2,000 years ago. For the ancient philosopher, wars are characterised by constant mutation and victory requires adaptive responses to each situation in order to neutralise the adversary through the constant search for

relative advantage. This vision calls for an asymmetrical approach through the unlimited use of tactics that are at once predictable and unpredictable – for example, regular and irregular troops – with the aim of confusing, demoralising and ultimately dissuading the enemy from going to war. For Sunzi, «supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting».

The implementation of those teachings is clearly visible in China's history and responses to conflicts. In the Imperial Era, the strategy to combat external threats consisted of employing multiple unconventional tactics, from using mercenaries of enemy origin against their own people in order to divide them, to making offerings, tributes and bribes to the adversary, and building fortifications, like the Great Wall, to deter attacks by northern nomadic peoples. Only if these prior strategies failed was military action deployed. More recently, the CCP achieved victory in the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) through a combination of propaganda, revolutionary militias and information warfare aimed at exploiting the weaknesses of the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) forces. The equivalent of these tactics today might be cyber warfare, using militias, supporting local insurgencies, signing lucrative business contracts and development aid packages, or building artificial islands in the South China Sea (SCS) for – theoretically – «defensive» reasons (Baker, 2015). So if the hybrid strategy is ancient, what's new?

First, China's growing regional and international rivalry and competition with the US, its military inferiority, and the need to maintain its «peaceful development» narrative favour the proliferation of hybrid tactics. These are assessed very precisely to stay short of open aggression, achieving small victories while avoiding a head-on conflict with the US and its allies in the region (Mazarr et al., 2018). Second, new technological advances have allowed new information and cyber tactics to emerge, like disinformation and cyber-attacks and, in the near future, innovative forms of **AI-led** warfare. Third, the emerging need to respond to hybrid wars given the certainty of this new type of conflict in which public opinion, institutions and legal systems can be used as weapons. The Chinese army has been preparing for this since 2003 in its «**three warfares**» doctrine, which is based upon psychological, media and legal warfare tactics that complement existing diplomatic, economic and military measures – including the deployment of military force in times of peace. The aim is to cultivate a favourable strategic environment in its neighbourhood, and to promote and defend its fundamental interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity in times of peace while preparing for possible war (PLA Daily, 2004).

In other settings, the rise of these methods is categorised as «hybrid conflict» (see chapter by Bargués and Bourekba). Nevertheless, the absence, thus far, of violence and direct military force places these operations in the grey zone, although this is not a popular concept in China. The key difference is that China feels comfortable testing the limits of peace and challenging the status quo in grey zones in which the conflict drags on for years without crossing the line into direct aggression – but it also implies no clear victory.

Geopolitics in the grey zone: from the South China Sea to Taiwan

Asia's geography and the centrality of the seas for security and relations between regional actors have allowed certain indigenous forms of grey zone tactics to emerge. In this light, China favours unconventional strategies in sovereignty disputes in areas where the US casts its shadow, but projects military superiority to deter regional powers. Such is the example of the SCS conflict and relations with Taiwan.

China claims control of maritime territories delimited by the «nine-dash line», which total around 90% of the South China Sea – including the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal, which are disputed by Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines. In order to establish its historical claims over the last decade, Beijing has rolled out a carefully designed grey zone strategy based on using civil forces and maritime militias, the construction of dual-use infrastructure – civil engineering works that can be re-purposed for military enclaves such as ports and airfields – information tactics and the reinterpretation of international laws.

DESPITE THE WIDE RANGE OF TACTICS DEPLOYED TO PURSUE ITS GOALS, CHINA'S STRATEGY IN THE GREY ZONE HAS ACHIEVED MIXED RESULTS. IT HAS PROGRESSIVELY ADVANCED ITS TERRITORIAL AIMS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA, BUT IT HAS ALSO ERODED ITS LEGITIMACY IN THE REGION WHILE INCREASING THE RISK OF CONFLICT WITH THE US.

First, by deploying civilian forces like the coast guard and oceanographic vessels, as well as maritime militias made up of fishermen, alongside the navy, China gradually surrounds islets to occupy territory in *faits accomplis*, exemplified by the Scarborough Shoal standoff of 2012, or the Ayungin Shoal in the Spratlys in 2013. Specifically, these Chinese fishermen, ostensibly unlinked to the government or armed forces, have been involved in harassing foreign vessels and preventing access to territorial waters and commercial activities under the pretext that they

are acting on their own initiative to «enforce the law» (Lendon, 2021). These actions also serve to exert psychological pressure and progressively test the limits and responses of rivals, as in March 2021, when 220 fishing vessels anchored near Whitsun Reef, which belongs to the Philippines, citing «rough weather». Once under its control, China has implemented an Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy in the first chain of islands in the SCS, pumping sand to construct artificial islands and **dual use** civil engineering and military works in the occupied islets, which have allowed it to extend its control in the region. This aims to deter access by rival military forces and to increase the projection of Chinese power, while offering its armed forces greater room for manoeuvre in the event of a military conflict (CSIS, 2017). For instance, by installing anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles on three reefs – Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief – China has exercised de facto control over the Spratly Islands by being able to oppose all aerial or maritime movements in the archipelago since 2018.

At the same time, China has sought to legitimise some of these claims via information strategies, conducting campaigns supporting its territorial claims by disseminating the map with the nine-dash line, including in **children's movies** (Reuters, 2019); and using international and national jurisdiction in its favour. Although Beijing vigorously advocates compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), its actions suggest that these rules are not fully enforced in the region. In 2016, China rejected the Hague Tribunal's ruling in favour of the Philippines, citing inconsistency with the principle of sovereignty and contesting part of UNCLOS, defending the right to regulate, oppose or prevent navigation in the waters under its jurisdiction. In the same vein, in 2021 China approved two new national laws – the **Coast Guard Law** and a **new maritime safety law** – that set out vessel control measures and the conditions under which the Chinese coast guard may use force against foreign vessels in «waters under Chinese jurisdiction». The lack of specificity about which territory falls within Chinese jurisdiction, along with the other coercive and psychological measures, has achieved the strategy's primary objective of deterring other regional players from acting in the area – although not the US, which systematically carries out «free navigation operations» – and securing effective control of the territory without using force.

Its contested sovereignty, complex identity issues, US support and its history and ties to mainland China make Taiwan a unique case. This translates into the deployment of other tactics to exploit specific weaknesses. Beijing uses economics, diplomacy, the press and disinformation to attract, coerce and unsettle Taiwanese society thus fuelling further polarisation in regards to its future and relations with the mainland.

In the economic field, China has introduced a **package of measures** to attract Taiwanese citizens to study, invest and work in mainland China, with the specific aim of garnering support from sections of society, as well as from politicians, businesspeople and prominent public figures. However, during electoral periods or times of heightened tension, China does not hesitate to resort to tactics of trade coercion to influence the island's politics and foment the rivalry between the two main parties, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the KMT. The most recent case was the import ban on Taiwanese pineapples in 2021 for «food safety» reasons. A familiar tactic for Lithuania, on whom Beijing imposed similar trade restrictions after Taiwan was allowed to open a de facto embassy in Vilnius in November 2021.

These tactics have been complemented by information warfare strategies ongoing since the 1950s. Via propaganda, financing Taiwanese media outlets to publish news favourable to China. More recently, the spread of fake news and disinformation campaigns over social networks even managed to tip the balance in favour of **pro-China candidates like the populist Han Kuo-yu** in 2018 (Huang, 2020).

The best possible strategy is to continue using the grey zone as a «a better alternative to a military strike», according to Cui Lei (2021). Nonetheless, the rise to power of Tsai Ing-wen (DPP) in 2016 has brought a more assertive position by the mainland, with threats of «reunification by force», military drills around Fujian and incursions into Taiwan's air defence zone aimed at discouraging any secessionist moves.

CHINA FAVOURS UNCONVENTIONAL STRATEGIES IN SOVEREIGNTY DISPUTES IN AREAS WHERE THE US CASTS ITS SHADOW, BUT PROJECTS MILITARY SUPERIORITY TO DETER REGIONAL POWERS.

Where grey may become black

Despite the wide range of tactics deployed to pursue its goals, China's strategy in the grey zone has achieved mixed results. It has progressively advanced its territorial aims in the SCS, but it has also eroded its legitimacy in the region while increasing the risk of conflict with the US. In Taiwan, success also remains elusive: at the end of 2021, over **62% of Taiwan's population defined themselves as Taiwanese**, compared to 2% as Chinese; while more than **80% opposed reunification** (NCCU, 2022). This shows that the results remain nuanced, even if hybrid tactics and grey zone conflicts have been considered especially effective in advancing certain actors' interests and goals.

Hence, it is necessary to consider the circumstances under which China could take the leap into the “black zone” and embark on a conventional war. One would be China voluntarily raising tensions and using military force, for example, by invading Taiwan – a case with parallels with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This remains unlikely at present. A more realistic possibility is an increase in strategic tensions in either of the two conflicts that brings a simple miscalculation and ends up provoking a direct confrontation or an open conflict due to the accumulation of activities that skirt the boundaries between peace and war, as we saw in the tensions on the border with India in the summer of 2020. For the time being, Sunzi’s influence continues to guide China’s strategy.

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