

The “Gray Zone” Conflicts in China- U.S. Relations: From a Geopolitical Perspective

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Abstract: The “gray zone”, referring to actions below the threshold of war, is also known to as hybrid threats, sharp power, political warfare, malign influence, irregular warfare, and modern deterrence. Recently, there has been a good deal of discussion about China- U.S. “gray zone” conflicts. These conflicts can be best characterized as activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to beyond conventional military conflict and open interstate war. Although the United States and China are highly interconnected in many ways, the U.S. government has deployed extensive and diverse gray zone tactics against China, seriously infringing upon China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United States’ position on the South China Sea, Taiwan, Vietnam, India, Japan and South Korea are best understood as a gray zone conflicts. These conflicts heavily undermine strategic stability, disrupt policy-making, and cause unintended escalation, causing “gray zone challenges” to both China and the United States. However, these challenges are difficult for the two government to address in today’s complex and competitive international environment. Through a geopolitical perspective, this paper aims to offer a deep understanding of the complex gray zone conflicts within China-U.S. relations and provide feasible recommendations for Chinese government to counter U.S. gray zone aggression.

Keywords: Gray Zone Conflicts; The China-U.S. Relations; Little Green Men; Faits Accomplis; Salami Slicing; Biden Presidency; the South China Sea; Taiwan.

1. Introduction

During the period of the Cold War, Henry A. Kissinger used the term “Gray Areas” to characterize areas where the U.S. would be lured into a disadvantage (Kissinger, 1955). It was until 2010, the term “gray zone” was first introduced in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The notion broadly depicted multi-dimensional efforts to alter adversary behavior below the threshold of conventional military employment (Department of Defense,2019).

Following the inauguration of Donald Trump as the U.S. president, the strategic competition between China and the U.S. began to heat up. The 2019 Department of Defense Indo-Pacific strategy Report pointed out that, China is using a steady progression of small, incremental steps in the “gray zone”, undermining the rules-based international order (The Gray Zone, 2015). Based on a US perspective, China has been one of the most prominent gray zone challengers.

Today, as American animosity was increasingly fueled by insecurity over China’s rise, the geopolitical rivalry raises major concerns and the conception of “Gray Zone” tactics has been discussed with growing frequency. Scholars from both China and the U.S. have reach a consensus that the gray zone conflicts plays a vital role in bilateral relationship. This paper starts by defining the “gray zone” tactics and then summarizes current gray zone activities conducted by China and the United States from a geopolitical perspective, and provides policy recommendations to address the challenges.

2. Defining Gray Zone Tactics

The notion of "Gray Zone" apparently originated from policy and military discourse rather than legal doctrine. Thus, there is no universal definition of the term under international law. The U.S. government frequently defines “Gray Zone” in different ways, such as “interactions...that fall between the

traditional war and peace duality”, [1] “beyond normal international interactions yet short of overt military force” (Report on Gray Zone Conflict,2017), “the space between ... a peaceful state of affairs and full-scale war”.....[2] Some western scholars also define gray zone as the domain where the distinction between war and peace becomes impossible to draw with certainty due to the ambiguity of the tactics employed (Department of Defense,2019).

However, Chinese academic researches into the “Gray Zone” fall largely behind, focusing mainly on the introduction to the basic concepts or case study. Chinese understanding of MOOTW —military operations other than war, includes some military operations that U.S. experts define as in the gray zone. Chinese analysts only recently began using the term “Gray Zone”. They view gray zone actions as measures that powerful nations have employed both historically and recently (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

While there is currently no consensus on what exactly defines gray zone tactics: a majority of scholars and practitioners appear to agree on one unifying feature: states use gray zone tactics to gain a strategic advantage while remaining below the level that would trigger a military response (Tahir Mahmood Azad&Muhammad Waqas Haider). These tactics are implemented gradually over time, rather than involving bold, all-encompassing actions to achieve objectives in a single step. In the majority of gray zone campaigns, the aggressor attempts to disguise its role at least to some extent.

While the instruments of gray zone warfare are discrete or exclusive, they have certain traits in common, including the use of hybrid methods, a threat to war/military conventions, and ambiguity. Most studies on gray zone instruments highlight the use of "little green men", “salami slicing”, fait accompli, economic coercion, information operations, cyber warfare, proxy wars, special operations (Lin, Bonny&Cristina L. Garafola& Bruce McClintock,2022). Gray zone aggressors

may employ one or multiple instruments to achieve their desired objectives while the defender is placed in an uncomfortable position. At least three instruments — "little green men", "salami slicing" and fait accompli, are the most widely discussed.

The concept of "little green men" seemingly originated from its use to describe fairies but more widely employed as instruments of gray zone warfare since 2014, when heavily armed men wearing green uniforms without identifying insignia, assaulted the regional parliament in Simferopol and raised the Russian flag atop the building. The little green men was regarded as a new style of "guerrilla geopolitics" which leverages its capacity for misdirection, bluff, intelligence operations, and targeted violence to maximize its opportunities (Elizabeth K. Kiessling,). Faced with ambiguity and confusion, the defender may not be able to initiate a response against unidentifiable factors.

Faits accomplis are one of several types of "gray zone" tactics. It is a unilateral revision to the status quo in an ongoing dispute over some distribution of benefits (Galeotti M.,2015). Since the beginning of the Cold War, faits accomplis have become the most common method by which states seek to take over territory, even though they frequently lead to armed conflict. For example, Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 can be recognized as territorial faits accomplis. However, a sudden invasion of territory that is comes with a declaration of war or is part of a larger battle plan is a surprise attack, rather than a fait accompli.

"Salami slicing tactics" was coined during the 1940s by the Hungarian communist leader Matyos Rakosi as a way to characterize his strategy of removing opposition parties one by one like slices of salami (Joshua Adam Hastey,2020). The aggressor or party trying to alter the status quo or to obtain an advantage over an opponent employs strategies that remain below the red lines and do not trigger a deterrent response from the defender. Salami tactics are most likely to succeed when the perpetrators hide their true long-term motives and maintain a cooperative and helpful posture while engaged in the intended gradual subversion. Using this strategy, an aggressive negotiator can eventually politically control the entire negotiation.

3. The Contemporary Gray Zone Conflicts Between China and the U.S.

Gray zone activities are probably a key component of long-term competition between countries. Such activities could easily lead to arms races and an escalation of tensions. Chinese experts have identified higher-intensity U.S. gray zone activities over the past ten years, including building and strengthening military alliances in the Indo-Pacific, labelling China a revisionist country, using think tanks and media to propagate anti-Chinese information...(Nyyssönen H.,2006) The U.S. is increasingly turning to gray zone operations to geopolitically advance its interests and to shape the behavior of its allies.

In the South China Sea, Washington employs a variety of gray zone tactics. Each year, the Department of Defense (DoD) released its annual Freedom of Navigation (FON) Report to "uphold the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea for the benefit of all nations" (Lin&Bonny& Cristina L. Garafola& Bruce McClintock,2022). For more than a century, the U.S. forces operate in the South China Sea on a daily basis.

It has also frequently conducted freedom of navigation operations in the sea, blatantly challenging China's requirement that ships provide notification or obtain permission before transiting through another state's territorial sea under innocent passage.

In addition to the navigation conflicts, the U.S. accused China of adopting gray zone tactics to deny Vietnam's claims in the South China Sea. One is China's reinforce its sovereignty claims over the land features and maritime area within its Nine-Dash Line. From the U.S. perspective, China routinely use gray zone tactics to shadow and harass Vietnamese fishing and coast guard vessels operating in the Paracel Islands(U.S. Department of Defense,2022). Another paramilitary coercion claimed by the U.S. is China's maritime militia, who are in reality "under state control", was trained to assert Chinese sovereignty over disputed waters.[3]

Taiwan is undoubtedly at the frontline of Washington's gray zone activities. Through conducting gray zone activities, the U.S. aims to deter, dissuade, or mitigate China's competitive advantages and seeks to lure Taiwan to act according its interests. Chinese government highlighted three of the most-challenging and most-immediate gray zone tactics that the U.S. government has adopted in Taiwan. The first one is arm sales to Taiwan. Under the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States sells Taiwan weapons to support its "self-defense" nearly every year through the foreign military sales process. In March 2023, Biden administration approved a new \$619 million sale of missiles and military equipment to Taiwan, grossly violated the one-China principle. Another form of Washington's gray zone tactic is disinformation warfare. Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, U.S. policymakers has been touting "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow", exacerbating tensions across the Taiwan strait. The third challenge Chinese scholars noted is that Joe Biden publicly said U.S forces would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion(Morris& Lyle J.& Michael J. Mazarr,2019), suggesting a shift in its Taiwan policy from "Strategic Ambiguity" toward "Strategic Clarity".

In India, Washington's geostrategic goals vis-à-vis India are a good fit for gray zone activities. Gray zone tactics enable the U.S. to advance its interests against China with a lower chance of triggering a conventional military confrontation. In India, most of Washington's gray zone activity against Beijing takes place on the military side. The U.S. continues to assist India to counter China in strengthening its military and naval capacity. In March 2023, the Centre for a New American Security (CNAS) published the report, titled "India-China Border Tensions and U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", argues that Biden administration should "be prepared to extend full support to India, in the event of another India-China border dispute"(The Wall Street Journal,2023).

U.S. officials developed in its relations with India following China-India border dispute. In 2022, India has dismissed Beijing's objections to U.S.-India military exercises, holding a high-altitude training exercise in cold, mountainous terrain near India's disputed border with China.[4] This action severely violated the spirit of relevant agreements between Beijing and New Delhi. In addition, Washington also fabricated rumors internationally that Beijing used a variety of economic tactics and cyber attacks against India.

In Japan, Washington has used a variety of economic, military, and cyber gray zone tactics against China. Relations between China and Japan have never been close. Diaoyu

islands dispute is one of the most contentious issues in China-Japan relations. Although then-U.S. President Barack Obama argue that the U.S. does not take a position on the sovereignty of the Diaoyu islands, position on the dispute cannot simply be regarded as one of neutrality(Reuters,2022). In multiple calls and statements, Biden and his top security officials have reiterated its support for Japan, signaling Washington's rejection of China's disputed territorial claims. In order to serve its strategic interests in East Asia and increase the legitimacy to act in the region, U.S. scholars also encourage Japan to resist "Chinese dominance" of Asia.[5]

South Korea has both long-standing historical ties with China and a critical alliance with the United States. However, in 2015-2017, The United States and South Korea worked closely to ensure the swift deployment of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), causing a major hidden danger that cannot be avoided in China-South Korea ties. As a retaliation, China was accused of imposing sanctions on South Korea. In 2022, U.S. Forces Korea started to upgrade its THAAD system deployed in Seongju, fostering a new phase of the inter-Korean arms race(entre for a New American Security,2023). The United States has also defamed China for adopting cyber attack in South Korea, not only for economic benefit, but also espionage and intelligence gathering.[6]

4. Counter Gray Zone Conflicts

Not all gray zone activities are alike. Washington may employ more gray zone tactics to erode Beijing's core interests particularly with respect to sovereignty and territorial disputes. China is facing a difficult task: how to counter these activities? Three recommendations may help the Chinese government to gain strategic advantage in the gray zone.

First, it's favorable for Chinese government to identify a set of criteria for determining the most problematic U.S. gray zone tactics to counter through a whole-of-government approach. Chinese government could deliberate on three distinct criteria: (1) the extent to which U.S. gray zone tactics undermine China's interests in a specific region, (2) how difficult it is for China and its partners to respond to and counter these tactics, and (3) how widely U.S. uses specific tactics (against a single or multiple states)(de Oliveira A C G). It's critical for China to decide what actions it will resolutely not tolerate in the gray zone environment and develop responses accordingly.

Second, the Chinese government could hold gray zone scenario discussions with its neighbors or partners to better solve their common concerns, responses, and needs. For example, in order to counter U.S. gray zone activities, China could enhance its relationship with the North Korea and Pakistan via bilateral and regional forums, widening the scale and scope of economic ties, expanding security exchanges, and creating new cultural and other people-to-people linkages(The Diplomat,2023).

Third, China should take measures to stabilize relations

with the United States in ways that reduce the escalatory risks of gray zone confrontations. This strategy may be more possible through initiating new dialogues to serve national security requirements of both countries. Gray zone conflicts reflect the fact that there are lack of international norms against non-military aggression. So perhaps the international community should consider creating a new norm as a way to address China-U.S. gray zone conflicts.

Gray, it seems, is the new black.[7] U.S. gray zone actions can be very damaging and dangerous to China's interests and undermine the integrity of the existing international system. Dispelling gray zone requires establishing procedures whereby Chinese governments can quickly disseminate information on gray zone challenges and their origins. Looking to the future, it is not clear how effective these recommendations will be over time. Yet Chinese officials should determine whether gray zone tactics primarily bring payoffs or blowback for its independence and sovereignty.

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