

Campaigning through China's Gray Zone Tactics

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Introduction

President Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy creates a generational challenge for the United States. In pursuing its goals—including maintaining Communist Party control domestically and securing China's great power status globally—China relies on a broad spectrum of tools, from diplomacy to military power. Notable within this range is a subset of approaches that fall somewhere between routine statecraft and open warfare—the gray zone. Although terminology for the gray zone phenomenon varies, analysts generally agree that savvy rivals like China are investing in ways to achieve their security goals that sidestep known thresholds for conflict escalation with the United States and its allies.¹ China, Russia, and others want to change or exploit the rules of international relations for their benefit, but they do not (yet?) want to face the United States in combat. This motivation, long present, can now be married to new means and opportunity provided by a confluence of trends, including the diffusion of traditional power, the domestic disarray of numerous democracies, and the birth of exploitable technology.

This paper briefly summarizes the main lines of Chinese gray zone activity, which fall into four broad categories: information operations, political and economic coercion, cyber and space operations, and the use of proxy forces. The paper then describes an interests-based U.S. campaign planning framework for deterring, campaigning through, and responding to gray zone challenges and concludes with specific actions the United States can take now to gain advantage in the face of Chinese gray zone actions.

China's Gray Zone Activities²

China's information operations are significant, if not as audacious as those of Russia. China's social credit and monitoring systems not only allow the government to monitor activity within China, but also provide the government information on the activities of Chinese citizens outside the country.³ Confucius Institutes, established by the Chinese Ministry of Education across the globe, appear to have a role in providing intelligence on Chinese critics and perhaps even hampering them.⁴ The director of national intelligence has cited China as one of several state actors active in influence operations during the 2018 U.S. midterm election cycle.⁵

China leverages economic sticks and carrots in conducting gray zone operations. Three cases exemplify China's use of punitive economic coercion in the Western Pacific. In 2010, China drastically curtailed the export of rare earth metals to Japan following a maritime dispute between the two countries.⁶ Amid their 2012 territorial dispute over Scarborough Shoal, China began increasing its inspection and even quarantine of fruit from the Philippines, and Chinese tour groups cancelled visits in large numbers.⁷ In 2016, China used restricted tourism as a weapon with South Korea in the wake of the United States deploying a THAAD missile defense battery to that nation.⁸ Chinese economic carrots have also been used to influence desired political behavior in the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road are creating inducements in Asia that could convince states to "deter

confrontation or criticism of China's approach to or stance on sensitive issues."⁹ In Australia and New Zealand, there is credible evidence that the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department is guiding efforts to fundraise on behalf of pro-Chinese politicians and political parties.¹⁰

China's influence operations and economic and political coercion extend well beyond Asia. Europe provides a compelling case. As Europe's economic dependency on China has grown, so too has concern about its potential side-effects for European democracy and security. Ballooning Chinese investment in European ports and other infrastructure, such as high-speed rail, is a prominent worry.¹¹ Evidence supports the conclusion that European companies looking to do business with China are being pressured into forced technology transfers, as has occurred in the United States.¹² EU members who heavily court Chinese investment, such as Italy, the first G7 nation to join the Belt and Road Initiative, encouraged the EU to water down screening measures on foreign direct investment.¹³ In the information realm, Chinese-funded journalism programs and think tanks are hiring prominent former European politicians, with an aim to project a positive image of China.¹⁴ Springer Nature, the German publisher of *Scientific American*, is reported to have pulled content seen as politically sensitive to the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁵

Cyber operations are a frequently used Chinese tactic in the gray zone. Chinese units such as APT10 regularly launch attacks against regional neighbors as well as American businesses and European entities. Cybersecurity experts have repeatedly detected activities originating from Chinese hacking groups that target foreign entities, including Japanese business lobbies, Taiwan's government ministries, and Singapore's health database.¹⁶ Targeted U.S. entities have included the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, military contractors, and universities.¹⁷ British officials have presented the European Union with evidence that a Chinese hacking group, Area 1 Security, infiltrated the EU's diplomatic communications system.¹⁸ Huawei's success in signing twenty-three contracts to supply 5G in Europe brings with it concern about China's ability to exploit the state-controlled enterprise's access for future security purposes.¹⁹

China is also exploiting space.²⁰ Through its testing program, China has demonstrated the ability to develop co-orbital anti-satellite weapons. Its directed energy program, electronic warfare capabilities, and cyber operations can also threaten U.S. and other space systems. In the absence of clear escalation thresholds, rules, and norms in space, the gray zone uses of these capabilities are easy to imagine. For instance, China could coerce the United States and its allies by degrading or threatening to degrade their commercial and/or government satellites. The Chinese have already placed jamming equipment on the Spratly Islands, which could be used to disrupt communications or satellites in the South China Sea region.²¹

Perhaps China's most aggressive gray zone activity has been its use of nominally civilian maritime militia to harass its neighbors and secure strategic positions in the South China Sea. These "little blue men" are supported by the Chinese Navy and Coast Guard in blocking access to disputed islands, harassing neighboring vessels, and collecting intelligence.²² China's recent island-building campaign in the South China Sea has continued despite international legal decisions, official complaints by its neighbors, and the presence of American military assets.²³ More and more Chinese weaponry and aircraft have begun to appear on these artificial islands, as China cements its strategic position in the South China Sea.²⁴ Complementing these maritime actions is China's declaration of an air defense identification zone over disputed waters in the East China Sea, albeit without enforcement to date.²⁵

U.S. Campaigning and the Gray Zone²⁶

The United States has been both late to recognize the patterns in rivals' gray zone tactics and often maladroit in responding. Four significant gaps stand out. First, the intelligence community's indicators and warning are not attuned to detecting gray zone activity. As such, the United States often does not realize a gray zone activity is being undertaken until it is too late. Second, even when activity is detected—as with China's artificial island

building in the South China Sea—the United States has been both slow and ad hoc in its responses. This is related to a third weakness: the failure to adopt a campaigning mindset aimed at succeeding in the strategic competition “war” rather than surviving the immediate crisis “battle.” Finally, U.S. responses to date have failed to leverage the full breadth of the nation’s multidimensional power potential, especially its public and private sources of soft power. U.S. civil society, the business community, and the public are often the targets of gray zone tactics, yet their active partnership has not been a priority in U.S. strategy.²⁷

There has been a temptation by some to attribute the above pitfalls to the nature of democratic society. Some even argue that democracies are destined to be outwitted by authoritarian regimes, such as Xi’s China, and thus must adopt autocrats’ tactics to survive. American history does not bear out this view. Conversely, the United States’ greatest relative strategic advantages over potential rivals derive directly from its attachment to the rule of law at home and abroad. The U.S. has work to do in demonstrating its continued commitment to these principles. It is this commitment that should be the basis upon which U.S. competitive strategy rests. Covert action, undertaken in accordance with U.S. laws and legislative oversight, will of course be an important component of U.S. national security strategy, but it is not and should never be the leading one.²⁸

The U.S.-China dynamic is the most consequential international relationship of this century. Advancing U.S. interests in this dynamic should be the focus of American strategy, not the tactics of the gray zone itself. However, U.S. success in any such China strategy will depend on its ability to deter, campaign through, and respond to the growing range of gray zone tactics China employs. Doing so will incorporate proactive and defensive elements; carrots and sticks; and allies and other third-party actors, including the private sector at home. Moreover, the U.S. approach must be dynamic—the context and Chinese actions will change, and the United States must be agile enough to shift faster. To avoid cycles of reactivity, the United States should frame its approach around advancing its own vital interests. These are its constitutionally derived democratic system and way of life, its economic vitality, and its ability to influence events overseas, such as through its alliances and partner networks. These interests are profoundly bipartisan in nature, enduring across multiple American presidential administrations and ideologies.²⁹

The next section provides specific examples of how the United States can improve its efforts to advance each of these interests in the face of Chinese gray zone tactics.³⁰

Protecting U.S. Constitutional Tenets

The institutions of American democracy are under assault. Since Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election, U.S. intelligence officials have added China and Iran to the list of nations that sought influence in the 2018 midterm elections and are still seeking to influence the upcoming 2020 election. There is no reason to think the judicial branch will be protected from such foreign attacks.³¹ Although the security of our electoral mechanics is vital, the American public is an even greater target than its voting machines. To build resiliency at home and to attract allies and markets abroad, the United States should be building out civil society, increasing and incentivizing national service opportunities, improving civics education and media literacy training, and improving trust and communication between American businesses and federal, state, and local governments. Social media regulation is also warranted in order to improve transparency at the same time it respects First Amendment principles.³²

Promoting Economic Vitality

A more affirmative approach to multilateral trade would improve the U.S. competitive position amid Chinese economic coercion. The Trans-Pacific Partnership remains the primary missed opportunity for the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.³³ Foreign aid is another key lever that the United States is underusing. The passage of the BUILD Act in late 2018 was a step in the right direction, opening the pathway for greater U.S. organization

efforts in infrastructure funding in Southeast Asia to respond to China's Belt and Road Initiative.³⁴ The United States should put more resources behind the new U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, but the goal should not be for government spending to outmatch Chinese government investment in overseas infrastructure.³⁵ Instead, the United States can promote transparency in such investments and provide technical assistance to countries considering agreements with China. It can also support the infrastructure efforts of allies in the region, making common cause with the Japanese and Australians, as it did in Papua New Guinea on liquified natural gas, and via such regional initiatives as the Japanese-Indian growth corridor.³⁶ Such cooperation is vital not only on infrastructure, but also on cybersecurity. The United States could provide full support for the U.S. and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) Smart Cities Partnership to create alternatives to digital infrastructure monopolization by China.³⁷

At home, the United States can find a more fruitful middle ground between the light touch of the Obama administration and the securitization of the Trump administration to protect the American economy from Chinese intellectual property theft and cyberattack. Investing more federal research and development dollars into priority technology fields will help American innovators compete with Chinese state-owned enterprises and put the U.S. government in a position to employ their solutions.³⁸ Expanding H1-B visa opportunities for international STEM researchers to work in the United States will assist in the same way.³⁹ It is notable that Chinese universities are "counterprogramming" U.S. messaging by offering more scholarships for ASEAN students to study in China and relaxing its immigration rules on high-skilled workers (as of July 2019).⁴⁰ Strengthened domestic counterintelligence efforts and cybersecurity requirements tied to critical infrastructure sectors and federal grant receipt by states, localities, and businesses are also warranted.

Advance U.S. Influence Abroad

U.S. alliance and partner networks are a powerful asymmetric advantage for advancing American influence overseas. China knows alliances are a key U.S. center of gravity, and it is well positioned to take advantage of fissures as they open. One fissure benefiting China is the growing divide between the United States and its European allies. President Trump's harsh rhetoric around European defense spending has proven an unhelpful backdrop to subsequent U.S. government pushes for Europeans to deny or counter China's gray zone efforts.⁴¹ Many Europeans are disinclined to work with Washington on issues relating to China. Nowhere is this tension clearer than in the current debate over Huawei's efforts to build a 5G network in various parts of Europe.

The United States must gain greater strategic appreciation of the advantages alliances and partnerships can provide rather than dwell endlessly on their costs. Having frequent, high-level affirmations of U.S. security commitments, facilitating alternative economic partnership opportunities, working closely with ASEAN, prioritizing positive Japanese-South Korean relations in a U.S. regional strategy, and building on nascent quadrilateral security initiatives are all likely to advance U.S. influence and build resiliency against Chinese coercive tactics. The United States should also work closely with like-minded nations to build out norms of conduct in cyberspace and space, as well as continue its legitimate freedom of navigation operations in international seas and airspace, to make interests and potential conflict thresholds as clear as possible.

Advancing American influence overseas will fundamentally rest on the capability and capacity of the U.S. national security enterprise. Here, there is much that the nation can do to better compete with China as it employs gray zone tactics. Relatively static conventional military capability, threats of coercive action, the use of economic sanctions, and the direct diplomatic intervention of senior-most officials are the mainstays of current U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, in the past several years, the Trump administration has actively sought to defund many activities of the U.S. State Department.⁴² In the context of gray zone approaches, this strategy is especially self-limiting because it reinforces reliance on many of the tools that gray zone approaches are designed to skirt. This includes

thresholds for military action, legal definitions, and at times even attribution.⁴³ The United States should be seeking to strengthen strategic narrative and information operations; deepen its diplomatic and development capabilities, including a full complement of economic statecraft tools; generate more dynamic intelligence and warning; and ensure it has nimble and scalable military options.⁴⁴ A simple but critical first step would be to speed ambassadorial appointments while ensuring those appointed have requisite diplomatic qualifications.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Advancing U.S. interests in the presence of a rising and assertive China requires a comprehensive, interests-based national strategy executed through means ranging from routine diplomacy to preparations for combat. Realizing the potential of U.S. societal strengths and improving resiliency around its potential vulnerabilities aids the U.S. when in competition with an authoritarian state such as China.

As part of that strategy, the United States must better deter, campaign through, and respond to China's gray zone tactics. If China believes its gray zone actions pay off, they are unlikely to abate. U.S. foreign policy should not be optimized for gray zone interaction, but it must account for it.

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¹ The authors define gray zone approaches as follows: "Efforts intended to advance one's own security objectives at the expense of a rival using means beyond those associated with routine statecraft and below means associated with direct military conflict between rivals. In engaging in a gray zone approach, an actor seeks to avoid a threshold that results in open war." Kathleen H. Hicks, Alice Hunt Friend, et al., *By Other Means Part I: Campaigning in the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2019), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Hicks_GrayZone_interior_v4_FULL_WEB_0.pdf.

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