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Grey Zone Operations: The Rules of the Game

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SYNOPSIS

Grey zone operations, especially in a maritime context, can have strategic and economic ramifications for the future global order. This makes the absence of so-called “rules of the game” all the more politically vexing. Nevertheless, past experience suggests that there are potentially useful counter-measures for states at the receiving end of such grey zone operations.

COMMENTARY

The idea that grey zone operations — competitive acts between opposing states short of all-out warfare — have “rules of the game” may seem problematic. To begin with, “rules” is an ambiguous term. It covers the normative values and principles that define the nature of a country's regime and its relationship with others. Rules like this can be an important element in the arsenal for winning the battle of the narrative and in rallying support. But there also is a second sense of “operating procedures”, about what works, not just about what is right. Both concepts of “the rules” matter because they inform both policy and strategy.

Secondly, the conduct of grey zone operations is no game. Instead, it is a deadly serious conflict even though it does not involve all-out warfare. It is largely kept below the level of conventional war-fighting operations in order to limit the costs of victory — or defeat. However, it can also be a prelude to a large-scale conventional attack. A further complication is that grey zone operations will be conducted both by the insurgent who wants to change the situation, and the counterinsurgent who seeks to prevent that change. The challenge is to be able to do this while retaining the capacity to shape events and determine outcomes.



Container vessel off the coast of San Francisco. Maritime trade underpins global trade and the international political order. *The appearance of U.S Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

The strategic and economic importance of the sea means that grey zone operations are likely to take place mostly on the world's oceans. The sea frames the international order, because of its resources, its role as a medium of communication, its centrality to global trade on which so much depends, and because of the strategic opportunities that it offers to shape outcomes ashore. The extent to which competing countries control what takes place at sea makes it an increasing focus of strategic concern. What may be at stake are the rules, in both senses, which will define the future global order and in whose interests they are.

Grey Zone Operations at Sea: Theory and History

None of the techniques of this sneaky kind of largely sub-kinetic maritime conflict are new. The first hundred pages of Julian Corbett's magisterial account of the Seven Years War (1756–1763) between Britain and France are a masterclass in how such operations should be conducted, and a reflection of current preoccupations: both protagonists engaging in diplomatic campaigns to win allies; a vicious, only partly controlled, proxy war between both protagonists and their native American allies, employing both regular and irregular forces; both backing up their diplomatic efforts with the calculated and cleverly coordinated manoeuvre of their land and sea forces; these signalled messages of threat and counter-threat, occasionally spilling over into low-level kinetic engagement.

The first purpose of the fleet, said Corbett, was “to support or obstruct diplomatic effort”. It wasn't just a question of preparing to fight to win battles at sea. Economic interests also both motivated, and were an instrument of, the strategic effort; they could change things too, sometimes working with the naval effort, but sometimes not.

Although both sides came up with grand strategies that were notable for their “unscrupulousness”, international and domestic support depended in part on their winning the battle of the narratives. Neither side could afford to be seen as the aggressor. In this, for the British especially, journalists were a real problem: “Even intentions and thoughts are guessed at and made public by those abominable writers of daily papers.” “Intelligencers” (spies) were an important part of the information campaign too, as was leveraging the power of international law, or at least the protagonists' understanding of it.

In the early days, the action was in what Corbett called “the debatable march-land within which the frontier of peace and war existed but which could never be traced” and where “reprisals” ranging from the seizure of vessels engaged in illegal fishing all the way up to operations that were “scarcely if at all distinguishable from full hostility” could be conducted. Corbett called it the “hostile intercourse short of war”. Success at this level could, he thought, enable one side to seize the strategic initiative early on, making it “master of the game”.

But prevailing in this “debatable march-land” requires an innovative approach in which both insurgent and counterinsurgent readily adapt to the challenge of each other's methods. The bloody campaign between the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) and the Tamil Sea Tigers is instructive. The Sea Tigers based their operations from outside the immediate theatre; invested in clouds of small but deadly specialist craft that could hide within the fishing fleets that operate in the Palk strait and Sri Lankan waters, from which they could launch lethal ambushes on larger, more conventional SLN patrol boats and run military and other supplies to insurgents operating ashore; and even launch attacks on SLN bases. They almost wrested sea control from the SLN. Their tactical successes encouraged the Tamil diaspora around the world to fund a dark fleet of merchant ships that supported the whole campaign afloat and ashore. That support was further strengthened by a vigorous propaganda campaign that exploited the SLN's mistakes, especially when they involved apparent atrocities against innocent fishermen.

The SLN had to radically shift its approach to first contain and then defeat this insurgency campaign, regain sea control and recapture the strategic initiative. It did so by adopting the Sea Tigers' methods, investing in better, more agile patrol boats, and engaging in intelligence-led tactics that beat the insurgents at their own game, and facilitated the successful interception and capture of several of the all-important supply ships. Combined, these counterstrokes cut off the insurgents ashore from their sources of supply and eventually doomed them to a bloody and controversial defeat.

The low-level operations between specialist elements of the naval forces of Israel and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are another, if much less kinetic, example of this kind of shadowy engagement fought out below the level of an all-out war that would suit neither contestant. Attack methods have focussed on covert missile and other attacks on selected merchant ships, sabotage, and cyber operations against

port facilities. The targets and attack methods appear carefully selected and calibrated to have the necessary coercive effects on each other's economic and strategic interests and often take advantage of legal complexities. "We are at war", said the IRGC-aligned analyst Hossein Dalirian in March 2021, "but with the lights off".

China's Grey Zone Operations in the South China Sea

So how might this apply to that other obvious arena for maritime grey zone tactics — the South and East China Seas? Here, large numbers of fishing boats of uncertain civilian or combatant status operate in close combination with energetic, large and well-armed China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels, along with stronger forces from the People's Liberation Army (Navy) lurking in the distance. Such efforts, coupled with industrial-scale development and the militarisation of many South China Sea features, are transforming the facts on the ground materially if not legally. They are conducted in conformity with China's "three warfares approach", closely integrated with legal, economic, and diplomatic campaigns to secure strategic advantage in the bid to control the "rules of the game".

This at least seems to be the approach taken by China in its multidimensional campaigns over and in the South China Sea. Just as seizing and fortifying one feature in the South China Sea makes taking other ones nearby much easier, nothing succeeds like success. Now, similar but potentially even more dangerous campaigns over Taiwan are unfolding. These are potentially insurgent in that they could substantially change the established global order.

Countering Grey Zone Operations?

Past experience suggests that countering such insurgencies may well call for the "liberal West" (to restore the term) to adopt the same tactics, if in a far nobler cause. It is also worth identifying the characteristics typical of the arena in which grey zone operations are more likely to take place. Obviously, they will be in areas of disputed jurisdiction. In part for that reason, there may well be actors present in these areas who can act effectively as proxies. The use of proxies inevitably means less than perfect degrees of control over events. Added to the inherent ambiguity of the situation, using proxies underlines the possibility of grey zone operations generating their own momentum and escalating into open conflict. The potential risk and costs of this approach reinforce the need for support by allies and partners.

How should the victims of such grey zone operations, the counterinsurgents, respond? Their responses are easy to enumerate in theory:

- Identify clear, agreed and attainable policy objectives.
- Wield all the levers of national power, so they work together in mutual support. Military and coastguard responses need to be coordinated with, and supplemented by, diplomatic, political, commercial, and legal ones in MULTI-DIMENSIONAL strategies.
- Establish clear command and control arrangements.
- Focus heavily on winning the "battle of the narrative" to secure wider support.
- Deliver capability at sea that is sufficient to help achieve policy objectives, but not necessarily to "win" in outright conflict.

In practice, these measures are very hard to implement fully. This is especially true for ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea for two different reasons.

In the first place they form a quite loose coalition of fairly like-minded states that have differing interests and perceptions of what is at stake, have their own internal jurisdictional disputes, and lack an authority in overall charge. This means that their collective effort is unlikely to compensate for their individual lack of capability, relative to China.

Secondly, they are all, in varying degrees, democracies and led by people who are sensitive to election cycles and the vagaries of public opinion and afflicted by the “short-termism” that results. Hence, the urge to seek the involvement of external players, whose discretionary support might do something to redress the imbalance. But they will all be aware that such support is indeed “discretionary”, with all the limits that that implies.

Manifestly, there is no quick and easy solution to these problems. But one thing can certainly be concluded with confidence. Success will be especially unlikely in these grey zone conflicts if protagonists do not realise they are in one and act accordingly.

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