

Managing Gray Zone Operations: Developing a Strategic and Comprehensive Framework for the West Philippine Sea

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Abstract

China's use of gray zone operations, particularly in the maritime domain, has posed significant risks not only to the Philippines but also to other maritime nations in the Indo-Pacific. By remaining below the threshold of war, its use of non-military or non-kinetic tools to pursue its maritime ambitions has made it difficult for countries to develop cohesive and effective countermeasures. In this context, the paper provides an overview of recent security developments in the West Philippine Sea, highlighting the current approach of the Philippine government in managing gray zone operations in the maritime domain. It also examines trends and developments in the South and East China Seas, focusing on the similarities and variations in China's gray zone campaigns. The paper underscores the need for a strategic and comprehensive framework to identify, categorize and prioritize gray zone operations, allowing countries like the Philippines to respond and make sound decisions based on a range of policy options. It also explores the potential role of Japan in managing gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea and the merits of maximizing its strategic partnership with the Philippines.

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has continued to witness a substantial shift in its security architecture. From intense geopolitical competition to potential security flashpoints and the emergence of non-traditional security threats, it has become increasingly complex and volatile. The use of gray zone operations in various domains has also complicated the balance of power in the region. Designed to remain below the threshold of war, these covert and unconventional actions have challenged the stability of regional norms and institutions, as well as the future trajectory of the rules-based international order.²

Major powers have deliberately exploited the ambiguous space between peace and war by relying on gray zone operations to navigate the region and advance their strategic interests. For instance, China has used various non-military tools to gradually legitimize its claims and assert its dominance in the maritime domain. It has also engaged in low-intensity conflicts by strategically deploying its coastguard and maritime militia to force other countries to align with its maritime ambitions.

As a result, maritime nations, including Vietnam, Japan, and the Philippines, have become more vulnerable to the imminent risks posed by China's assertiveness in regional waters. A shared understanding of gray zone operations and their key features are crucial as the Indo-Pacific and the rest of the world seek effective mechanisms to deter and manage their potential impact.

Focusing on gray zone operations carried out by China in the maritime domain, the paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How can the Philippines strengthen its capacity to deter and address gray zone operations? 2) How can Japan contribute to developing a strategic and comprehensive framework to address gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea? and 3) How can the Philippines become a more relevant regional player, particularly in supporting Japan's vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific?

² Green, Michael, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas. "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence." Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

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In this context, the paper provides an overview of recent security developments in the West Philippine Sea, highlighting the current approach of the Philippine government in managing gray zone operations. Introduced during the administration of President Benigno Aquino III, the term West Philippine Sea refers to the waters covered by the country's maritime entitlements in the South China Sea, including the 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the Philippine Extended Continental Shelf (ECS) from its baselines. It also examines the trends and developments in both the South and East China Seas, as well as the potential role of Japan in mitigating risks in the maritime domain.

Given the complex nature of gray zone operations, the paper underscores the need for a strategic and comprehensive framework that would enable the Philippines to strategize and make sound decisions based on a range of policy options. By providing a systematic approach to identify, categorize, and prioritize gray zone operations, the framework would help accelerate the decision-making process of the Philippine government. In addition, the framework facilitates a more coordinated and consistent interagency approach that clarifies and addresses the persistent issue of overlapping roles among government agencies.

As a strategic partner of the Philippines, Japan could play an important role in this effort by leveraging its knowledge and experience in addressing gray zone operations around the Senkaku Islands and the broader East China Sea. Aside from reinforcing maritime domain awareness, it could provide valuable support to the Philippines through key initiatives such as capacity-building programs, intelligence-sharing, and joint maritime law enforcement training, as well as the transfer of defense equipment and technology.

Under the Kishida administration, there is also an opportunity for Japan to look into a possible reciprocal military access agreement with the Philippines. Maximizing the strategic partnership between the two countries is a crucial factor that would enable the Philippines to assert further its territorial and maritime claims in the West Philippine Sea and positively contribute to maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Understanding the 'Gray Zone'

The competition in the 'gray zone' or the ambiguous space between peace and war has become an integral part of the current discourse on security and international relations. In 2017,

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the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a comprehensive study about the use of gray zone operations in search of possible approaches to address China's maritime coercion in the region. The study defined gray zone operations as an "effort or series of efforts beyond steady-state deterrence and assurance that attempts to achieve one's security objectives without resort to direct and sizable use of force."³

Although the concept of gray zone operations has received a lot of attention in recent years, it is not entirely new.⁴ There are several studies that have looked into how it has been employed in the past by countries other than China and Russia. Some scholars have even attributed its renewed significance to the United States and its desire to reshape the regional order. In the Indo-Pacific, it has often been used by scholars and analysts to contextualize China's behavior in the region. For instance, a recent study conducted by the RAND Corporation directly related the concept with China's efforts to advance its domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives in the region.⁵ Focusing on its use of gray zone operations against the United States and its allies and partners, the study defined Chinese gray zone tactics as "coercive Chinese government geopolitical, economic, military, and cyber and information operations (cyber/IO) activities beyond regular diplomatic and economic activities and below the use of kinetic military force."⁶

Similarly, Japanese scholars have viewed the concept in relation to Japan's territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands. The use of gray zone operations has also appeared in various studies and policy papers concerning the future trajectory of the US-Japan security alliance. In one of his papers, Hideshi Tokuchi argued that gray zone operations violate the sovereignty and national interests of countries in a manner that does not rise to the level of armed

³ Green, Michael, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas. "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence." Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

⁴ Lin, Bonny, Cristina L. Garafola, Bruce McClintock, Jonah Blank, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Karen Schwindt, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Paul Orner, Dennis Borrman, Sarah W. Denton, and Jason Chambers, "Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China's Coercion Against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific." Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022.

⁵ Lin, Bonny, Cristina L. Garafola, Bruce McClintock, Jonah Blank, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Karen Schwindt, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Paul Orner, Dennis Borrman, Sarah W. Denton, and Jason Chambers, "A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics." Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022.

⁶ Ibid.

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attack.⁷ By examining China's actions in the East China Sea, he highlighted how these operations are being employed through military, non-military, and economic means to “put pressure on the domestic society of its targeted state to accede to its political position.”⁸

The concept also began to appear in official Japanese policy documents following the publication of the country's National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) in 2010. The document, which outlined the security environment surrounding Japan, highlighted the increasing number of gray zone disputes or confrontations over territory, sovereignty, and economic interests that do not escalate into wars.⁹ In its latest version, gray zone operations were mentioned several times, focusing on the possibility that they could develop into graver scenarios without showing clear indications.¹⁰

Moreover, the annual white paper published by Japan's Ministry of Defense last year included several points on the persistence of gray zone operations in relation to the intensifying geopolitical competition in the region. It defined the “gray zone” as a wide range of situations that are neither peacetime nor wartime. The paper also provided a detailed explanation regarding the use of gray zone operations in the region:

“In a gray-zone situation, for example, a country that confronts another over territory, sovereignty, or maritime and other economic interests uses some forceful organization to demonstrate its presence in the relevant disputed region in a bid to alter the status quo or force other countries to accept its assertions or demands.”¹¹

In contrast, Chinese scholars and analysts have viewed gray zone operations as measures used by powerful countries, including the United States and Russia, to exercise their power and influence. Although the concept and the term ‘gray zone’ are not extensively used in their discourse, some scholars have argued that China is a target of these operations, and the actions of the United States

⁷ Tokuchi, Hideshi. “The Gray Zone in the Definition of Gray-Zone Warfare: Challenges for Japan-U.S. Cooperation.” *Murky Waters in the East China Sea: Chinese Gray-Zone Operations and U.S.-Japan Alliance Cooperation*, May 2021, 1–10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2011 and Beyond [Japan]

¹⁰ National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond [Japan]

¹¹ Japan Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan (Annual White Paper).” August 2022.

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in the South China Sea have indicated its intent to engage and compete in the gray zone.¹² There are also studies that dismiss the notion that China actively carries out gray zone operations in the South China Sea, arguing that the country's activities in regional waters have always been legal and founded on historical basis.

While most of these studies have contributed to the current discourse, there is still a significant gap in understanding the complex nature and implications of gray zone operations for the region. The lack of awareness as well as the inability of leaders and policymakers to prioritize and make sense of gray zone operations have continued to challenge the capacity of countries such as the Philippines to develop cohesive and effective countermeasures. In addition, the evolving security architecture in the region as well as the advancement of technology have also provided countries competing in the gray zone with a broader set of tools to employ, making their actions difficult to identify and manage.

Key Features of Gray Zone Operations

In an attempt to reshape the current regional order in its favor, China has relied on gray zone operations to coerce smaller nations and challenge other major powers, such as Japan and the United States. Its recent actions in the maritime domain have highlighted some of the elements and key features of gray zone operations:

- Unlike conventional military tactics, gray zone operations are designed to unfold over time, prioritizing gradual progress over rapid and clear-cut results. This can be seen in how China has gradually pursued its maritime interests in the South China Sea without resorting to an outright military conflict.
- While it is more noticeable in the maritime domain, gray zone operations can also be employed in other domains of conflict such as land, air, and cyberspace.¹³ After analyzing

¹² Lin, Bonny, Cristina L. Garafola, Bruce McClintock, Jonah Blank, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Karen Schwindt, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Paul Orner, Dennis Borrmann, Sarah W. Denton, and Jason Chambers, "Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China's Coercion Against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific." Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022.

¹³ Chung, Samman. "Gray Zone Strategy in the Maritime Arena: Theories and Practices." Korean Institute for Maritime Strategy [Strategy 21], Summer 2018, Vol. 21, No. 1 (June 1, 2018).

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and tracking China's activities against the United States and its allies and partners, RAND Corporation recently published a study detailing China's use of nearly 80 different gray zone operations across various domains. The study looked extensively at how China layers various gray zone operations to exert pressure on its targets while avoiding escalation in a specific domain.¹⁴

- Remaining below the threshold of war, gray zone operations are strategically integrated into various campaigns to pursue political and security objectives through the use of non-military or non-kinetic tools such as proxies and paramilitary activities.

These key elements and features have allowed China to advance its strategic interests in both the South and East China Seas without the risks and repercussions of an outright military conflict.¹⁵

Gray zone operations have also been viewed and analyzed in relation to other concepts, such as hybrid strategies or asymmetric warfare. While these fundamental concepts are closely related, they are not the same and should not be viewed as such. For instance, hybrid strategies seek to further enhance the effectiveness of conventional military tactics by fusing them with irregular tactics such as propaganda, disinformation, and economic coercion, whereas gray zone operations heavily rely on non-military or non-kinetic tools.¹⁶

Major powers such as China choose to engage and compete in the gray zone for several reasons. One scholar suggests that it stems from their dissatisfaction with the current regional order and their desire to alter its elements to their advantage.¹⁷ In the case of China, its government has consistently questioned the structure and principles of the rules-based international order, claiming that it only serves the United States and its allies and partners in the region. In a recent speech at the United Nations, President Xi Jinping even spoke about China's vision of a regional order, one

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brands, Hal. "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone." Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 13, 2017

¹⁶ Green, Michael, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas. "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence." Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

¹⁷ Chung, Samman. "Gray Zone Strategy in the Maritime Arena: Theories and Practices." Korean Institute for Maritime Strategy [Strategy 21], Summer 2018, Vol. 21, No. 1 (June 1, 2018).

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that is based on “the pursuit of peace, democracy, and human rights as well as the rejection of unilateralism, foreign interference, and power politics.”¹⁸

The perception that their competition has an advantage at higher levels of conflict is another reason gray zone operations are employed. This is particularly evident in the way China perceives the United States and its network of allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. Considering their collective economic and military strength, as well as the rise of groups such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), China has relied on gray zone operations to compete with the United States, deliberately avoiding an outright military conflict that would put the country at a serious disadvantage. In this sense, the increasing disparity of power in the region can be viewed as a significant factor in the way countries engage and compete in the gray zone.

China’s Ambitions in the Maritime Domain

The maritime domain is integral to China's pursuit of becoming a true global power. Its use of gray zone operations as part of integrated campaigns in both the South and East China Seas has demonstrated not only its growing economic and military strength but also its ability to exert pressure on other maritime nations and undermine the legitimacy of their territorial and maritime claims.

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has taken significant steps to turn its maritime ambitions into reality. His maritime policy has been instrumental in transforming the country’s approach to defending its core interests in the maritime domain. Over the years, it has removed organizational barriers to modernize and unify its maritime forces, including the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy), the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), and the maritime militia.¹⁹ China has also integrated the CCG into the military chain of command to broaden its capacity and

¹⁸ Kelter, Frederik. “Living the ‘Chinese Dream’: Beijing’s New World Order.” Politics News | Al Jazeera, June 6, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/6/living-the-chinese-dream-beijings-new-world-order>.

¹⁹ Yamaguchi, Shinji, Masaaki Yatsuzuka, and Rira Momma. “NIDS China Security Report 2023: China’s Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations.” National Institute for Defense Studies, November 2022.

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operations beyond traditional law enforcement. Moreover, a landmark law enacted in 2021 also authorized the CCG to use lethal force on foreign vessels operating in maritime areas under the country's jurisdiction, signaling its inclusion in defense operations.²⁰

In the context of gray zone operations, China simultaneously deploys the CCG and maritime militia to conduct various operations in disputed waters while the PLA Navy serves as a deterrent force.²¹ The current operational spectrum of the CCG and the maritime militia allows them to perform both civil defense and combat roles. Their responsibilities range from safeguarding Chinese survey vessels to obstructing foreign activities in Chinese-claimed waters and conducting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations.²² The rapid expansion and development of these forces have also allowed China to assert its claims and broaden its presence in the maritime domain, raising serious concerns among other maritime nations in the region.

China's ambitions in the maritime domain and its intent to create a more favorable external environment drive its use of gray zone operations in the South and East China Seas. While both are vital to its overall development due to their economic and geopolitical importance, China has adopted distinct campaigns to navigate them.

Gray zone operations in the South China Sea, a vital trade route connecting China with the rest of the region, demonstrate a more coercive and aggressive approach. Instead of seeking a long-term solution to territorial disputes and other persistent maritime issues, China has regularly deployed the CCG and the maritime militia to coerce and harass other maritime nations, limiting their access to resources in the disputed waters.

For instance, the presence of the CCG still prevents Filipinos from accessing their traditional fishing ground in the Scarborough Shoal despite ongoing discussions between China and the Philippines on the issue of fishing rights. Despite the 2016 arbitral ruling, China has also

²⁰ "The Coast Guard Law of the People's Republic of China." Japan Ministry of Defense. Accessed April 2023. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/sec_env/ch_ocn/index.html.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Galang, Mico. "Countering Maritime Gray Zone Challenges in Southeast Asia: Examining the Strategic Context." NDCP, August 10, 2022.

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continued to impose an annual fishing ban in the South China Sea, threatening the livelihood of fishermen from Vietnam, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian countries.

Following the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, China has continued to deliberately coerce the Philippines and challenge its maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea.²³ Aside from building and militarizing artificial islands in the Spratlys, it has used its maritime forces to broaden its presence near features claimed by the Philippines.

In 2021, more than 200 maritime militia vessels were sighted in the vicinity of the Whitsun Reef, prompting the Philippine government to file a diplomatic protest and summon the Chinese ambassador stationed in Manila.²⁴ In a recent development, the Western Command (WESCOM) of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) reported the presence of approximately 400 foreign vessels within the country's exclusive economic zone. According to Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos, approximately 85% of these vessels were Chinese.²⁵ He also confirmed the presence of 190 Chinese vessels in the vicinity of Mischief Reef. This persistent problem has led to an increase in the deployment of AFP vessels and aircraft to protect the country's exclusive economic zone.

In the West Philippine Sea, China has also used various non-military tools, including water cannons, military-grade lasers, and fishing vessels, to harass Filipino fishing boats as well as Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessels. Early this year, a CCG vessel deliberately blocked and used a military-grade laser against a PCG ship that was conducting a resupply mission.²⁶ China claimed that the CCG vessels were only taking precautionary measures and accused the PCG of trespassing into its territory.

²³ Yamaguchi, Shinji, Masaaki Yatsuzuka, and Rira Momma. "NIDS China Security Report 2023: China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations." National Institute for Defense Studies, November 2022.

²⁴ Austin, Greg, and Samir Puri. "What the Whitsun Reef Incident Tells Us about China's Future Operations at Sea." IISS, April 9, 2021. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis//2021/04/whitsun-reef-incident-china>.

²⁵ "Over 400 Foreign Vessels in WPS, around 85% Are Chinese – AFP WESCOM." CNN Philippines, August 10, 2023. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/8/10/over-400-vessels-wps-85-percent-chinese.html>.

²⁶ Sadongdong, Martin. "China Coast Guard Ship Points 'Blinding' Laser at PCG Vessel." Manila Bulletin, February 13, 2023. <https://mb.com.ph/2023/02/13/china-coast-guard-ship-points-blinding-laser-to-pcg-vessel/>.

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On August 5, 2023, the PCG reported that a CCG vessel fired a water cannon at one of its ships, which was transporting supplies for military personnel stationed on the BRP *Sierra Madre*, a makeshift outpost located at the Second Thomas Shoal, a submerged reef located within the country's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.²⁷ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement accusing the Philippines of attempting to permanently occupy the disputed territory and demanded the immediate removal of its outpost. The ministry also claimed that the Philippine government had made promises in the past to remove the BRP *Sierra Madre* but had failed to do so. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. denied these claims and responded by saying that there was no existing agreement between the two countries to remove the BRP *Sierra Madre*. Should China prove that there is indeed a record of an agreement, he said that his office would rescind it.²⁸

Echoing the statement of President Marcos Jr., Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo said that the Philippine government has no record of such an agreement, and China does not have any written copy or proof that would legitimize its claims. He further stated that the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) attempted to contact its counterpart to settle the situation through the marine communication mechanism established earlier this year but received no answer.²⁹ The AFP responded in a similar manner by declaring that they would retaliate against any efforts or measures taken by any foreign powers, including China, to remove the BRP *Sierra Madre*.

Despite the efforts of the Philippine government to cooperate and maintain the status quo, China has continued to create uncertainties, taking advantage of the country's lack of resources and capacity to respond. In this context, it can be said that security issues in the disputed waters have evolved beyond competing territorial and maritime claims.

²⁷ Punongbayan, Michael. "Water Cannons on Philippine Navy Ship an Act of War." *Philippine Star*, August 12, 2023. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/08/12/2288078/water-cannons-philippine-navy-ship-act-war>.

²⁸ Mangaluz, Jean. "Bongbong Marcos Rescinds Deal with China to Withdraw BRP Sierra Madre: If It Does Exist" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 10, 2023. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1814494/bongbong-marcos-rescinds-deal-with-china-to-withdraw-brp-sierra-madre-if-it-does-exist>.

²⁹ Panti, Llanesca. "PH: China Yet to Show Proof of Agreement on Towing Navy Ship." *GMA News Online*, August 15, 2023. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/878961/philippines-china-yet-to-show-agreement-on-towing-brp-sierra-madre/story/>.

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China's coercive and aggressive approach in the West Philippine Sea and the broader South China Sea demonstrates how it exploits the fact that the majority of the region remains largely unprepared for gray zone scenarios. By blurring the lines between peace and war, it has continued to circumvent international law and pressure maritime nations, including the Philippines, to recognize its maritime ambitions.

On the other hand, China's gray zone operations in the East China Sea are more calculated and restrained than its approach in the South China Sea. While the PLA Navy and the CCG are deployed in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, the maritime militia's engagement is fairly limited when compared to its activities in the South China Sea. Although there have been a few instances similar to the Whitsun Reef incident, the swarming of fishing and maritime militia vessels in the area is not a frequent occurrence.³⁰

China has mainly relied on the CCG to challenge Japan's claims in the East China Sea. CCG vessels conduct patrol activities around the Senkaku Islands and encroach into surrounding territorial waters from time to time. These intrusions have been recurring for more than ten years, posing a significant risk to both Japan and the United States.³¹

Adding another layer to its campaign in the East China Sea, China has also intermittently deployed its navy survey ships around the area to collect data and conduct research needed for submarine navigation and other purposes.³² Moreover, it has participated in naval exercises and joint patrols with Russia in the East China Sea. Japan's Ministry of Defense recently confirmed that Chinese and Russian vessels sailed between Okinawa and Miyako Island on August 17, 2023.³³ Although these vessels did not enter its territorial waters, Japan strongly opposed the joint patrol, stating that it was a show of force against the country and a serious risk to its national security.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kyodo News "China Navy Ship Enters Japan Waters near Kagoshima Pref. Islands." Kyodo News, June 8, 2023. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/06/5eb5e86cfc76-china-navy-ship-enters-japan-waters-near-kagoshima-pref-islands.html>.

³³ Komiya, Kantaro. "Japan Scrambles Jets amid Russian and Chinese Naval Patrol in Pacific." Reuters, August 18, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-scrambles-jets-russian-spy-planes-sea-japan-east-china-sea-2023-08-18/>.

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While China considers its territorial dispute with Japan as a core interest, it has refrained from deliberately altering the status quo in the East China Sea. This could be attributed to the presence and capacity of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF). Unlike its approach in the South China Sea, where the disparity in power between countries is more apparent, the presence of Japan's maritime forces has significantly limited China's options for gray zone operations.

Consequently, its behavior and actions in the East China Sea have become more predictable than its pursuit of maritime interests in the South China Sea. The environment and power dynamics in both the South and East China Seas, as well as the presence of a credible maritime force, can be viewed as key factors that determine how China employs gray zone operations in the maritime domain.

Safeguarding the West Philippine Sea

Asserting the country's maritime rights and protecting the livelihood of Filipino fishermen are some of the important elements in the policy approach of the Philippine government in the West Philippine Sea. Although there are key differences in terms of implementation, the Philippines has continued to craft policies and initiatives to manage security challenges in the area, including China's use of gray zone operations.

This particular security issue has become one of the priorities of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Since assuming office in 2022, his administration has taken significant steps to strengthen the country's defense capabilities, fostering closer security ties with the United States, Japan, and other strategic partners in the region. President Marcos Jr. has also been outspoken in his support for the modernization of the AFP and the PCG.

Compared to the previous administration, which fostered closer ties with China for economic gains, President Marcos Jr. has been more cautious with his pronouncements and policies on issues concerning the West Philippine Sea. During his first State of the Nation Address (SONA), he assured the public that his administration would not abandon even one square inch of

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the country's territory to any foreign powers, including China.³⁴ In an effort to pursue an independent and pro-Filipino foreign policy, he stressed that the Philippines would be a friend to all and an enemy to none. In this year's SONA, President Marcos Jr. emphasized that the country would continue to address security challenges in the West Philippine Sea through diplomatic means. He vowed that his administration would protect the country's sovereign rights and preserve its territorial integrity in line with the rules-based international order.³⁵ In previous statements, President Marcos Jr. also emphasized the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 2016 arbitral ruling³⁶ in maintaining peace and stability in the West Philippine Sea, both of which were often overlooked by the previous administration.

Under his leadership, the Philippine government has continued to address security challenges in the West Philippine Sea through various policies and means. President Marcos Jr. has embarked on a number of trips to broaden the country's network of allies and partners. Recognizing the difficulty of addressing China's actions in the West Philippine Sea, he has sought ways to build collective deterrence in the maritime domain. For instance, President Marcos Jr. visited Japan early this year for an official visit. He discussed with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida ways to elevate the strategic partnership between Japan and the Philippines, focusing on fostering deeper cooperation on defense and security. He has also participated in various regional forums to discuss and help develop policies and mechanisms to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, government agencies, including civil maritime agencies, have been more vocal against gray zone operations and other Chinese activities in the West Philippine Sea. Recently, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) publicly shared the number of diplomatic protests that it has filed against China and its illicit activities in the West Philippine Sea. The DFA said that, as of August 2023, it had filed a total of 445 diplomatic protests since 2020, with 35 more

³⁴ “Transcript: President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.’s First State of the Nation Address Speech (as Delivered).” PIA. <https://pia.gov.ph/publications/2022/10/28/transcript-president-ferdinand-r-marcos-jrs-first-state-of-the-nation-address-speech-as-delivered>.

³⁵ “Transcript: Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., Second State of the Nation Address.” Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, July 24, 2023. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2023/07/24/ferdinand-r-marcos-jr-first-state-of-the-nation-address-july-24-2023/>.

³⁶ Strangio, Sebastian. “Philippines’ Marcos Pledges to Uphold Landmark South China Sea Ruling.” – The Diplomat, May 27, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/philippines-marcos-pledges-to-uphold-landmark-south-china-sea-ruling/>.

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this year.³⁷ In a similar manner, the PCG has consistently published reports of Chinese intrusions and harassment of Filipino fishermen in the disputed waters. According to PCG spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela, the agency has doubled its efforts to document and publicize China's actions in the West Philippine Sea in an effort to counter Chinese disinformation campaigns and raise awareness among the public.³⁸

The Philippine government has also been more upfront in asserting its maritime and territorial rights in the West Philippine Sea through the 2016 arbitral ruling, which invalidated the nine-dash line or the basis of China's historical rights over almost the entire South China Sea. Although China has never recognized it, like-minded countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and India have actively supported the ruling, highlighting its importance as a basis for peacefully resolving territorial disputes. Global leaders at the recently concluded G7 Summit have also expressed support for the 2016 arbitral ruling and urged China to put a stop to its militarization of the South China Sea.

In order to build a minimum credible posture and strengthen the country's defense establishments and law enforcement agencies, the Philippine government has steadily implemented its AFP modernization program. Amended in 2012, the revised AFP Modernization Act, or RA 10349, has provided a framework for the country's defense establishments, extending their modernization for another 15 years. Divided into three horizons, the AFP modernization program seeks to enable the Philippines to acquire equipment and necessary weapon platforms to manage the country's national security effectively. The Philippine government is currently implementing the third and final horizon which is set to run until 2028.

In line with this, President Marcos Jr. has consistently supported the modernization of the AFP. During a celebration of the Philippine Navy's 125th anniversary, he announced the acquisition of two new vessels that would strengthen the AFP's naval operations. He also noted that the current phase of the modernization program, Horizon 3, would concentrate mainly on acquiring equipment for the Philippine Navy. Moreover, President Marcos Jr. also directed the AFP

³⁷ Cabico, Gaea Katreena. "Philippines Government Issues Protest against China." *Philippine Star*, August 7, 2023. <https://www.philstar.com/the-freeman/cebu-news/2023/08/08/2287114/philippines-government-issues-protest-against-china>.

³⁸ Gita-Carlos, Ruth Abbey. "PCG Heightens Patrol in WPS, Makes Public Maritime Incidents." *Philippine News Agency*, February 25, 2023. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1196051>.

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to recalibrate its focus from internal to external defense, following China's illicit activities and gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea. He reassured the country's military officials that his administration would provide full support to the AFP throughout this transition period so that it could achieve its goals of improving intelligence, coordination, and capability.³⁹

President Marcos Jr. has also publicly supported and sought ways to modernize the PCG. In terms of policies, there are currently measures filed in both the Philippine Senate and House of Representatives that seek to modernize the agency. Senator Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go, the current vice chairperson of the Senate Committee on National Defense, recently filed Senate Bill No. 2112 in an effort to modernize the PCG and update its equipment as well as its capacity to protect the country's maritime interests in the West Philippine Sea.⁴⁰ Similarly, Representative Leody Tarriela filed House Bill No. 8028, or the PCG Modernization Act, in the House of Representatives to help develop and modernize the PCG's assets and communication systems. Tarriela's proposed measure includes a four-part development program that spans 12 years.⁴¹ According to Admiral Artemio Abu, current Commandant of the PCG, these proposed measures would allow the PCG to efficiently conduct its mandate and help address recurring issues that hinder the agency's efficiency.

To further establish the country's presence in the West Philippine Sea, the PCG has also recently announced its plans to increase its patrols and strategically deploy its maritime forces. In addition, the PCG has installed navigational buoys equipped with remote monitoring systems in critical areas around the country's exclusive economic zone. According to Vice Admiral Joseph Coyne, the current commander of the PCG's Task Force Kaligtasan sa Karagatan, these buoys serve not only as sovereign markers for the Philippines but also tools to ensure navigational safety for Filipino vessels and fishing boats. Moreover, the agency's Coast Guard Aviation Force (CGAF)

³⁹ Mantaring, Jelo Ritzhie. "AFP Recalibrates Focus to External Defense – Marcos." CNN Philippines, May 26, 2023. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/5/26/afp-recalibrates-focus-external-defense-marcos.html>.

⁴⁰ Valmonte, Kaycee. "House Bill Filed for Four-Part Coast Guard Modernization." Philippine Star, May 14, 2023. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/05/14/2266278/house-bill-filed-four-part-coast-guard-modernization>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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has also conducted maritime domain awareness flights over the West Philippine Sea to closely monitor developments and protect Filipino vessels transiting the area.⁴²

The AFP has also participated in the annual Balikatan exercise with the United States, while the PCG has joined a trilateral maritime exercise with the US Coast Guard and JCG. In addition, President Marcos Jr. has considered the idea of conducting joint maritime patrols with countries such as Japan and Australia, as well as other members of ASEAN, to help secure freedom of navigation and collectively address emerging security challenges in the West Philippine Sea.

Overall, the current administration's initiatives and actions show steady progress in responding to security challenges in the West Philippine Sea. While this is a positive step, the country's ability to deter and manage gray zone operations remains significantly weak. There are still policy gaps that the Philippine government should prioritize, such as the country's limited resources, the overlapping functions of its government agencies, and the absence of a strategic and comprehensive framework to address gray zone operations. Serious discussions on the implications of these actions are currently limited to defense establishments, the academic community, and think tanks. President Marcos Jr. and his administration should also initiate and actively involve policymakers to raise awareness and develop sound policies and measures that would be beneficial for the country's national security in the long run.

Developing a Strategic and Comprehensive Framework

Similar to other maritime nations in Southeast Asia, the Philippines has been at the receiving end of China's use of gray operations in the maritime domain. Its deployment of the CCG and the maritime militia as well as its use of various non-military tools have made it challenging for the country to respond effectively. Existing policy gaps and limited resources have also hampered the country's efforts to build cohesive and effective countermeasures.

⁴² Macairan, Evelyn. "PCG Marks West Philippine Sea Territory with Navigational Buoys." Philstar.com, May 14, 2023. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/05/15/2266420/pcg-marks-west-philippine-sea-territory-navigational-buoys>.

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Currently, security challenges in the West Philippine Sea are being managed through the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea (NTF-WPS), formed in 2016 to coordinate the employment of various government agencies' capabilities to advance the country's strategic interests in the West Philippine Sea.⁴³ It is currently made up of representatives from several government agencies, including the ones listed below:

1. National Security Adviser
2. Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA)
3. Department of National Defense (DND)
4. Department of Justice (DOJ)
5. Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG)
6. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)
7. Department of Energy (DOE)
8. Department of Agriculture (DA)
9. Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)
10. Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT)
11. Department of Finance (DOF)
12. National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA)
13. National Coast Watch System
14. Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)
15. Philippine National Police-Maritime Group
16. Philippine Coast Guard (PCG)
17. Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources

The NTF-WPS has played a critical role in protecting and promoting the country's maritime interests in the West Philippine Sea. It does, however, have a fragmented command structure, which often leads to government agencies issuing sporadic and inconsistent policies. Gray zone operations and their imminent risks also need a specialized unit within the task force that would focus on managing them consistently. Without this unit, different government agencies might

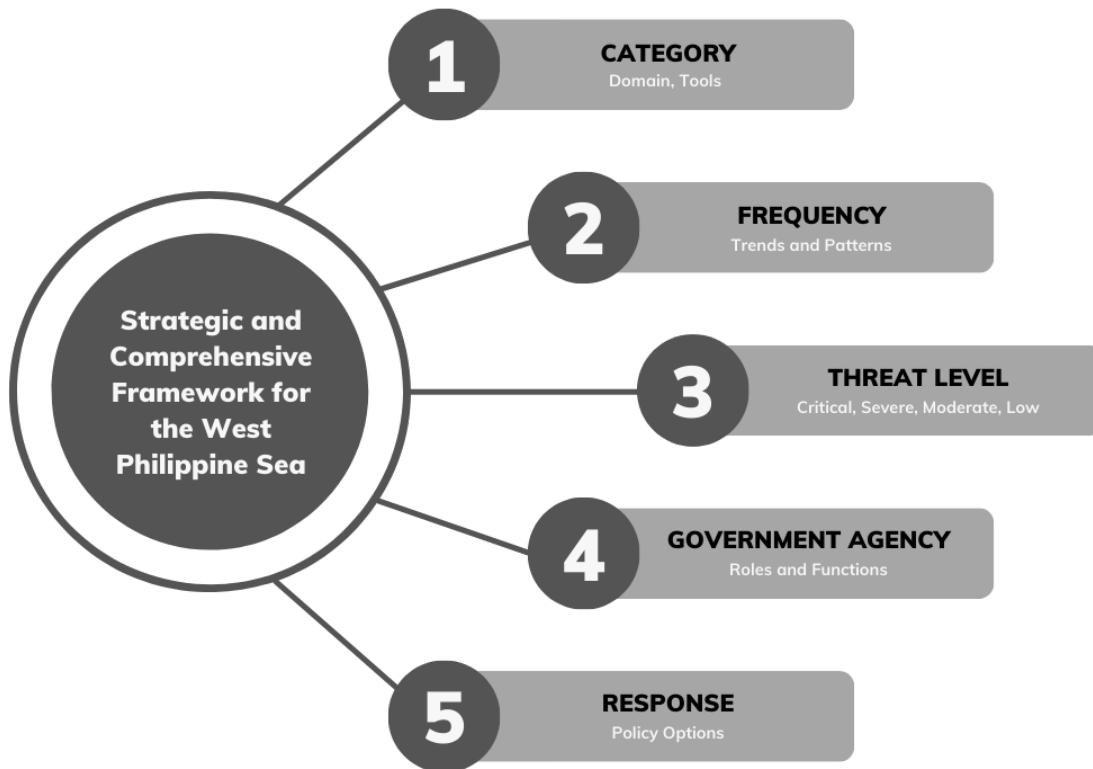
⁴³ Creation of the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea. https://lawphil.net/executive/mc/mc2016/pdf/mc_92_2016.pdf.

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devise strategies and approaches that may not be useful without the capabilities and resources of other organizations.

Given these circumstances, developing and implementing a strategic and comprehensive framework is critical for the NTF-WPS to make timely and appropriate decisions. The framework would remove the unnecessary barriers in the government's decision-making process by providing a systematic approach for identifying, categorizing, and prioritizing gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea. Furthermore, the framework would help the task force to synchronize and coordinate government agencies and other relevant organizations, allowing for a more unified and consistent interagency approach.

Developing this particular framework requires a whole-of-government approach to contextualize and organize scenarios that involve the use of gray zone operations. The figure below provides a set of indicators that would enable the Philippine government, through the NTF-WPS, to systematically identify, categorize, and prioritize the actions of China in the West Philippine Sea.



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Since China's approach in the West Philippine Sea and the broader South China Sea is less predictable, it is crucial for the NTF-WPS to understand where and how gray zone operations are employed. This necessitates a closer examination of the domains (land, air, maritime, and cyberspace) where it competes and the various tools (military or non-military) that it employs. Streamlining the collection and exchange of data between government agencies such as the DND, DFA, and PCG as well as civil maritime agencies would be vital to this effort. The NTF-WPS should also take the lead in tracking and assessing the frequency and occurrence of these operations, allowing the Philippine government to recognize trends and patterns and seamlessly delegate tasks to appropriate government agencies. Moreover, the task force would aid in the efficient allocation of resources by categorizing incidents of gray zone operations and prioritizing them based on their threat level.

In this case, the framework should not be perceived as a rigid model restricting the Philippine government from providing specific responses to various gray zone scenarios. Instead, it should be viewed as a framework that would provide the NTF-WPS and other government agencies with a broad range of policy options that they could implement and adjust as needed, allowing them to make informed decisions and achieve more substantial outcomes over time. The framework would also include the integration of various legal, military, economic, and political measures to enable the Philippine government to deal with these activities in a proactive manner.

Maximizing the Strategic Partnership between Japan and the Philippines

Under the Kishida administration, Japan has continued to turn its vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) into reality. In the latest National Security Strategy (NSS), there was a particular emphasis on the importance of multilateralism and fostering deeper cooperation with like-minded countries.⁴⁴ As a major global actor, Japan intends to increase its efforts to ensure maritime security and maintain an international order based on the rule of law. Furthermore, the NSS outlines the objectives set by the government to promote cross-government policies in various

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "National Security Strategy (NSS)." December 16, 2022. https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html.

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domains such as cyberspace, maritime security, technology, and intelligence in order to seamlessly protect Japan and its people.

Japan's core principles and current priorities enable it to take on a more substantial role in the Indo-Pacific. The strength of its alliance with the United States and its strategic partnership with like-minded countries also provides an opportunity for Japan to contribute to addressing gray zone operations and emerging security challenges in the maritime domain.

In Southeast Asia, Japan has long been viewed as a key strategic partner of the Philippines. It is currently the leading source of overseas development assistance (ODA) and is considered one of the country's major investors. Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1956, both countries have continued to forge closer ties based on their shared democratic values and common understanding of the rules-based international order.

Early this year, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. went to Tokyo seeking more robust security relations with Japan as part of his broader foreign policy agenda to develop stronger defense and security cooperation as well as economic partnerships with major countries in the region.

During the summit meeting, President Marcos Jr. and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida discussed a range of regional issues, including the current security environment in the East and South China Seas. Both leaders expressed serious concerns about the current situation and strongly opposed actions that could further escalate tensions.

In a joint statement, President Marcos Jr. and Prime Minister Kishida reaffirmed the importance of initiatives to reinforce Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and maritime law enforcement based on international law, particularly UNCLOS. Both leaders also agreed to bolster the overall security cooperation between Japan and the Philippines through strategic reciprocal port calls and aircraft visits, transfers of defense equipment and technology, and other capacity-building efforts. Moreover, President Marcos Jr. and Prime Minister Kishida agreed to improve knowledge transfer and share Japan's best practices through the "SAPPHIRE" initiative alongside the USCG.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ "Japan Philippines Joint Statement - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan." Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100457513.pdf>.

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President Marcos Jr. and Prime Minister Kishida also signed the “Terms of Reference concerning Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Activities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in the Republic of the Philippines” in order to allow Japanese troops to participate in training exercises on responding to natural disasters and humanitarian needs in the Philippines, signaling broader military cooperation between the two nations.⁴⁶

In the West Philippine Sea, Japan has been instrumental in the efforts of the Philippines to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Aside from providing the PCG with coast guard vessels and other necessary equipment, it has also consistently dispatched experts from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and supported PCG staff through various scholarships and training. Japan has also started participating in the annual Balikatan and other naval and coast guard exercises. Moreover, it took part in the first-ever trilateral maritime exercise with the United States and the Philippines, which sought to increase interoperability between the PCG, JCG, and USCG.

Sharing similar views with the Philippines over the uncertainties and risks caused by China in the South and East China Seas, Japan could help in strengthening the country’s capacity to respond to gray zone operations in the maritime domain. Aside from its initiatives to reinforce maritime domain awareness and transferring defense equipment, Japan could positively contribute through various other means.

In order to accelerate the Philippine government’s efforts to build a minimum credible defense posture, Japan could contribute by providing much-needed assistance to the country’s law enforcement agencies and its civil maritime agencies. This could be in the form of long-term capacity-building programs, maritime and civil maritime training, and educational exchanges. Japan could also facilitate new programs, dialogues, and other joint engagements between the PCG and JCG. Joint maritime patrols in the West Philippine Sea are another opportunity that both countries could explore.

One scholar has argued that high-level discussion on the advantages of the strategic partnership and how it might be more effectively integrated into the US alliance network remains

⁴⁶ “Japan Philippines Joint Statement - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Japan. Accessed May 3, 2023. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100457513.pdf>.

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relatively limited. In this regard, Japan could also gradually consider incorporating a trilateral component to its military engagements and dialogue with the United States to include the Philippines.⁴⁷

In developing a comprehensive and strategic framework for the West Philippine Sea, Japan could participate through intelligence sharing and organizing gray zone scenarios and contingency planning; sharing and integrating its data and analyses into the framework could enable the Philippine government to better understand which gray zone scenarios should be prioritized and where it may require support and assistance. For its part, the Philippines could also share data and information about China's actions in the West Philippine Sea. Moreover, Japan could consider aiding the Philippines in strengthening its remote sensing capabilities to enable wider visibility in the maritime domain.

The complex nature of gray zone operations and China's economic and military strength necessitates closer coordination with allies and strategic partners. By maximizing its strategic partnership with Japan, the Philippines could build on its current efforts to strengthen and improve its capacity to deter and manage gray zone operations in the West Philippine Sea. The development and implementation of a strategic and comprehensive framework with the participation of like-minded countries such as Japan would also enable the Philippines to protect and advance its strategic interests in the maritime domain.

As mentioned in its latest national security strategy, the Philippine government is committed to strengthening the country's role in ensuring regional peace, security, and prosperity. President Marcos Jr. and his administration should move beyond the 'small state' narrative and lead the country towards a broader and more significant role in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, the Philippine government should continue fostering deeper cooperation with the country's network of allies and strategic partners to positively contribute to promoting an open, stable, and inclusive international order. This would entail the promotion of open communication and dialogue with other like-minded countries as well as multilateral engagements to address shared security

⁴⁷ Poling, Gregory, Andreyka Natalegawa, and Danielle Fallin. "Building a U.S.-Japan-Philippines Triad." CSIS, February 1, 2023.

challenges such as gray zone operations. Guided by the enduring values and principles of democracy, the Philippine government should leverage its strength and remain committed to its long-term goal of ensuring the country's national security as well as the safety and well-being of its people.

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