

Maritime Great-Power Competition

Coast Guards in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

While China has historically been a land power, it has shifted focus to the maritime domain and has undertaken a grand shipbuilding effort. Moreover, People's Republic of China (PRC) is now using its navy and other maritime forces to challenge the United States and the current world order in great-power competition (GPC). Consequently, the maritime domain has become a contested environment, especially in the Indo-Pacific. The PRC is using its Coast Guard and maritime militia to exert sovereignty and keep adversaries off balance as it employs gray-zone operations at a threshold below armed conflict, while still engaging in aggressive actions that violate the sovereignty of other nations and international norms. The United States must become more active in counterbalancing the PRC's actions with not only diplomacy and freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) but also sovereignty patrols conducted with partner nations in the South China Sea. While most commentators focus solely on high-end warfare capabilities and assets, the nature of GPC is different from the nature of armed conflict and requires more flexibility politically, legally, and operationally. The US Coast Guard possesses a unique set of authorities and operational capabilities that make it particularly effective in gray-zone operations, which could allow the United States to exert a less escalatory military presence that bridges gaps between the high-intensity warfighting capabilities of other armed services and the diplomatic arm of the Department of State. Consequently, the US Coast Guard should be employed as a key cog for aligning US efforts with other armed services and partner nations in the region to provide more flexibility and capability in the gray zone of GPC.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Introduction

China has historically been a continental or land-centric power; however, in the 1990s Beijing began shifting its focus to the maritime domain, and in the 2000s

China started transitioning its focus from its near seas to the far seas.¹ This change of focus is largely due to a growing economy that is more dependent on maritime trade and China's increasing need for natural resources from the maritime domain.² The People's Republic of China's (PRC) modern maritime strategy is to establish dominance in the near seas, where it has claimed territorial sovereignty over a vast majority of the features in the South China Sea (SCS) and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea (ECS).³ After establishing dominance in the near seas, the PRC's 2015 and 2019 military strategy documents indicate that it will transition to projecting influence onto the far seas.⁴

As the PRC's economy has grown, its other instruments of power have grown as well, allowing Beijing to engage in great-power competition (GPC) with the United States for global influence. As part of this GPC, the PRC is conducting gray-zone operations in multiple domains that are aggressive in nature but are below the threshold of armed attack.⁵ A major component of the PRC's strategy is projecting power in the maritime domain through the employment of a robust China Coast Guard (CCG) that effectively asserts maritime governance and provides low-intensity war-fighting capabilities in disputed areas of the SCS and ECS.⁶ The PRC's forward-leaning use of the CCG as an instrument of power is particularly advantageous due to the multifaceted purposes of coast guard organizations, which include maritime safety, law enforcement, maritime security, and low-intensity combat capabilities.⁷ This strategy places competing states in the awkward position of responding to coercive territorial challenges by armed, white-hulled CCG ships. In many cases, CCG operations are conducted in concert with the quasi-military maritime militia, which is increasingly referenced as the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In general, PLAN vessels patrol within a detectable distance of CCG and PAFMM vessels to deter adversarial high-end naval assets from taking action.

This article will provide background on the growing emphasis that the PRC places on its maritime power and then focus on the current operational framework it uses to implement China's maritime strategy. Specifically, the article will examine how the PRC uses the CCG to project sovereignty and low-intensity combat capabilities in disputed areas of the SCS and ECS, allowing PLAN vessels to provide overwatch and project power to the far seas.⁸ This article concludes with recommendations about the crucial role the US Coast Guard (USCG) can perform to help the United States form an international counterbalance to the PRC's current maritime strategy. The USCG is unique in that it is the only armed service imbued with the authorities, core competencies, and experience to unite partner nations, establish rule of law, and bolster maritime security and law en-

forcement capacity, while simultaneously projecting low-intensity combat capabilities.⁹ Accordingly, the USCG should be further integrated into Indo-Pacific operations to help the joint force and partner nations achieve national and common international objectives. Doing so will provide a new and effective solution to the gray-zone wrinkle that the PRC's strategy presents in the maritime portion of GPC.¹⁰ The result of the gray-zone competition in the SCS will likely have strategic effects on the overall GPC between the United States and the PRC and, ultimately, the entire world.¹¹

Background

The PRC's Maritime Strategy: Dominate Near Seas and Expand Influence and Deterrence to the Far Seas

China is no longer limited solely to being a continental power, and the PRC has clearly shifted its focus to maritime power projection. While the PRC's specific maritime strategy is not crystal clear, its general strategy guidance, administrative actions, and operations express a coherent national strategy.¹² One of the PRC's overarching goals is to achieve dominance in the SCS to control the sea lanes and natural resources located therein.¹³ The SCS has significant natural resources in the form of fisheries, natural gas, and petroleum products.¹⁴ One of the primary weaknesses of the PRC's economic growth is its scant supply of natural resources.¹⁵ Therefore, the PRC prioritizes access to natural resources for achieving greater economic success.¹⁶ Notably, the PRC is the world's largest importer of oil and perceives itself as having the greatest need for resources in the SCS and securing sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷ The PRC views the United States as its primary obstacle to achieving control over these resources and, ultimately, global economic primacy.¹⁸

With an eye toward claiming nearly all the SCS for itself, the PRC began asserting unique legal theories to justify its claims.¹⁹ If successful, the PRC would be afforded internationally recognized legal rights throughout the SCS, as depicted in its Nine-Dash Line, which stretches hundreds of miles from the Chinese coast.²⁰ However, in 2016, an Arbitral Tribunal found the PRC's maritime claims to the SCS inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), effectively rejecting the legal theories upon which the PRC based its claims.²¹ Nonetheless, the PRC disputed the authority of the Tribunal's decision and has continued to assert its territorial and maritime claims unabated, as the UNCLOS lacks enforcement mechanisms to implement the decision and the international community has not demonstrated sufficient will-

power and cohesion to hold the PRC accountable for its noncompliance with international law.²²

In the context of national security, the PRC recognizes that adversaries can not only threaten its mainland from the near seas but also from hundreds of miles away.²³ Consequently, the PRC strategy is to establish a decisive military deterrent beyond its near seas to the far seas by implementing extensive antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities.²⁴ As part of this strategy, the PRC has vastly expanded its overseas presence by obtaining agreements for base or port access in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Yemen, Oman, Seychelles, Djibouti, and Pakistan.²⁵ Furthermore, the PRC has undertaken a remarkable island-building campaign in the SCS that has created thousands of acres of land, which China has militarized by establishing airfields, bunkers, port facilities, radar sites, and air defense facilities.²⁶ These artificial islands provide the ability to maintain a continuous and permanent forward presence that allows the PRC to simultaneously assert maritime claims and project military power hundreds of miles away from the Chinese mainland.²⁷

As would be expected with its renewed focus on maritime power, the PRC has invested heavily in modernizing and growing the size and capability of the PLAN.²⁸ Accordingly, there has been greater investment in the PLAN's capability to establish dominance within the first island chain and project power further out into the far seas.²⁹ For example, before 2012, the PRC did not have any aircraft carriers but now has two operational aircraft carriers, with another under construction and expected to be delivered in 2021.³⁰ While not a focus of this assessment, the PRC has also invested heavily in upgrading the quantity and quality of air and space assets that will also provide military deterrence far from the Chinese mainland.³¹ Additionally, one of the primary efforts has been improving the PLAN's submarine assets and capabilities.³² Such actions are similar to strategies in previous world wars, for example when Germany was presented with more dominant sea powers, it invested in submarines in hopes of neutralizing more powerful adversarial fleets.³³ The PLAN has also increased naval exercises with Russia in contested areas, including the SCS and ECS, presenting an international force that combines two great powers to bolster the appearance of naval dominance and international cooperation in disputed areas.³⁴

The PRC's disregard for the rules-based order by building artificial islands and military outposts and exercising sovereignty in violation of other nations' interests and international law by patrolling the waters of other nations is an assault on national sovereignty and international maritime security. These destabilizing actions require a firm, united response from the international community. Unfortu-

nately, the international community has been unable to establish such a united front.

In the face of the PRC's diplomatic, information, military, and economic maneuvering, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been equivocal in its response to the PRC's aggressive pursuit of territorial and maritime claims in the SCS.³⁵ This is largely due to the complex economic relationships between the PRC and individual ASEAN nations, which provides the PRC with substantial economic leverage over other nations in the region. For instance, the PRC can entice developing nations with promises of economic development loans and investments or threaten to exclude nations from economic initiatives if they officially oppose China's territorial and maritime claims.³⁶ Although ASEAN nations have been vague within that international body, individual member nations have increasingly expressed willingness to enter into agreements with the United States for maritime security and naval presence.³⁷

Nonetheless, the United States has largely decided not to conduct joint patrols or other multinational operations designed to protect the territorial sovereignty or maritime resource rights of its allies.³⁸ In fact, so long as there is no direct use or threat of armed attack, inaction by the United States has largely afforded the PRC freedom of action.³⁹ Consequently, the PRC's use of joint gray-zone operations has mostly been successful, achieving dominance in the SCS, complete control of the Scarborough Reef, significantly increasing patrols in waters surrounding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, creating large manmade islands throughout the SCS, and constructing military bases on many of those artificial islands.⁴⁰ It should be noted that the PRC has successfully assumed exclusive or partial control over disputed islands and features that are claimed by nations with which the United States has defense treaties, thereby eroding US credibility with allies and adversaries.⁴¹ Independently, many Southeast Asian nations and Japan have begun to increase defense spending to build up their naval forces to counter PRC dominance.⁴²

The PRC's success at establishing maritime dominance by projecting the appearance of legitimate governance and low-intensity combat capability far from its shores has changed the nature of the competition in the Indo-Pacific.⁴³ Effective joint operations between the PLAN, CCG, and maritime militia could be instructive for effective joint-United States and international operations in the Indo-Pacific. The joint operational approach of the PLAN, CCG, and PAFMM overwhelms other nations in the SCS and ECS.⁴⁴ Consequently, the United States should provide a cornerstone patrol force to create a nucleus around which other nations in the SCS can form to protect their territorial integrity from an increasingly powerful and assertive PRC. The USCG is the most reasonable and

operationally agile instrument for gray-zone competition with the PRC and should be further incorporated into Indo-Pacific operations to assist partner nations in projecting maritime security and low-intensity war-fighting capabilities. The USCG has the authorities and competencies to unite partner nations in the Pacific with the goal of maintaining rule of law and enhancing maritime security, while simultaneously projecting low-intensity war-fighting capabilities and a low risk of escalation.⁴⁵

It is vital that the international community establish a legitimate and dynamic counterbalance to the PRC's increasingly assertive actions. Such a counterbalance will promote stability and reduce the risk of conflict in the face of the PRC's destabilizing actions in the Indo-Pacific. If the international community does not act, such challenges will extend to other locations around the globe, further undermining confidence in the current rules-based order and increasing the likelihood of conflict.⁴⁶ At least one commentator has specifically articulated that using force to resist or confound the PRC's destabilizing actions is more effective than international diplomacy and legal options.⁴⁷ Indeed, diplomacy on its own has yielded mixed results at best.⁴⁸

The CCG's Role in the PRC's Modern Maritime Strategy

The CCG is a key component of the PRC's strategy to assert jurisdiction throughout the SCS and ECS and to allow the PLAN to project power on the high seas.⁴⁹ The CCG is primarily used to physically assert and buttress territorial claims to various features in the SCS to control the maritime areas surrounding them.⁵⁰ The PLAN is never far away and always at a distance that is detectable to adversaries, providing overwatch and protecting CCG vessels and personnel.⁵¹ The PLAN has indicated that the PRC's territorial claims in the SCS are "core national interests."⁵² Accordingly, there has been vigorous concentration and investment in CCG and PAFMM capabilities to exert dominance within the SCS to allow the PLAN to begin transitioning its efforts further from the Chinese mainland to the open seas.⁵³ As part of this strategy the PRC has vastly expanded the size and capabilities of the CCG and PAFMM, enabling them to assert jurisdiction and authority throughout the disputed SCS region.⁵⁴

PRC representatives have characterized the CCG as a "law enforcement force that is militarizing and has the attributes of a police force."⁵⁵ The emphasis on using the CCG in this manner serves to assert sovereignty within the near seas constituting the SCS and ECS by using law enforcement, policing, and military power from the CCG.⁵⁶ According to the PRC's strategy, using the CCG to essentially "hold down the fort" in the near seas allows the PLAN to present military deterrence to the far seas together with the People's Liberation Army Air

Force (PLAAF) and People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), thereby establishing an integrated A2/AD capability as far from the Chinese mainland as possible.⁵⁷

The CCG is a relatively new organization, being formed in 2013 from the integration of four other maritime law enforcement agencies to reduce redundancies and inefficiencies and to standardize operations.⁵⁸ As part of the Chinese military reorganization in 2018, the CCG was transferred to the People's Armed Police under the Central Military Commission (CMC), which is the PRC's equivalent to the US Department of Defense.⁵⁹ During this time, the CCG has rapidly grown in size and has been optimized to conduct gray-zone operations in coordination with the PLAN and the PAFMM.⁶⁰ The growth in the CCG is not just a quantitative expansion in vessel numbers but also includes qualitative improvements as well. These qualitative improvements include data-link communications, improved sea-going and sea-keeping capabilities, greater ranges, faster speeds, and improved lethal and nonlethal weapon systems.⁶¹ While the CCG's organic military capabilities and size have been greatly improved, its ability to communicate and coordinate with the PLAN has also been drastically improved following the transfer of the CCG to the CMC.⁶²

Recently, the CCG has been recognized as the largest coast guard service in the world, and the PRC is aggressively deploying it to establish maritime governance and project power in disputed regions of the Indo-Pacific.⁶³ The PRC has invested significant amounts of personnel, funding, and assets over the past eight years to substantially boost the capabilities of the CCG. As a result, the PRC now boasts a coast guard with the most vessels over 500 tons and the largest coast guard vessels in the world.⁶⁴ In fact, the two Zhaotou-class CCG vessels are larger than the US Navy's Arleigh-Burke destroyers and Ticonderoga cruisers.⁶⁵ Consequently, if these CCG vessels ever engage in shouldering maneuvers, they could simply push the US Navy vessels out of the way. Moreover, CCG vessels are increasingly armed with 30- and 76-millimeter weapon systems.⁶⁶ The extraordinarily rapid growth in size and capability of the CCG to the world's largest in less than eight years of existence is astounding. Moreover, the CCG's increased coordination with the PLAN, now the world's largest navy, and PAFMM have resulted in a far more cohesive approach to maritime operations. This growth and coordination have allowed the PRC to become much more assertive in expanding maritime claims because there is no regional nation or alliance that can match the CCG's quantitative and qualitative advantage.⁶⁷

The use of the CCG, even if it is more heavily armed and larger than other coast guards, reduces the likelihood of armed conflict and allows the PRC to project effective governance while limiting response options available to adversar-

ies.⁶⁸ This presents an asymmetric approach due to the dual humanitarian and military aspects of the CCG, which dissuades regional adversaries from responding with the only maritime forces capable of outnumbering or outgunning today's CCG, high-end war-fighting naval forces. At the same time, it allows the CCG to employ the use of weapons up to and including 76-millimeter cannons under the claim of law enforcement authority, not military force.⁶⁹

The PRC has begun to consistently employ the CCG in a manner that asserts sovereignty and projects low-intensity combat power in disputed maritime areas.⁷⁰ The use of the CCG to assert sovereignty in disputed areas is a unique use of the coast guard in power competition because it presents an appearance of maritime governance and legitimacy by using it for law enforcement and to project military power. All the while, the PRC puts maritime forces in place and intimidates neighboring nations but avoids the appearance of a military invasion that a traditional navy such as the PLAN would present.⁷¹

CCG Operations and Joint Operations with the PLAN and PAFMM

The CCG has been increasingly deployed to patrol and establish a presence within the SCS, ECS, and along the periphery of the Nine-Dash Line to establish governance and authority off the coasts of Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and other nations in the SCS.⁷² In some instances, the CCG has deployed 800 miles from the Chinese mainland to assert territorial jurisdiction in disputed areas within the exclusive economic zones of other nations.⁷³ From the perspective of other Southeast Asian nations, "The Chinese are not doing this under any commercial logic, they are doing it as an act of [asserting] sovereignty backed up by the Chinese government."⁷⁴

The CCG is also increasingly used in joint operations with the PLAN and the PAFMM.⁷⁵ The use of militia for defense operations and civil support is not a new concept for the PRC. Ever since the "Everyone a Soldier" initiative in 1958, the PRC has been developing locally based militia units with varying degrees of success.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, as the focus on the maritime domain has grown, so has the PRC's interest in employing maritime militia assets to help secure the near seas. To that end, vessels used by PAFMM units, which are also often used for fishing activities, have received upgrades to communication capabilities that enhance its effectiveness as a reconnaissance element that often operates under the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) chain of command.⁷⁷ The PLA has also started to standardize training programs and provide better compensation to PAFMM personnel to reduce the risks caused by poor order and discipline.⁷⁸ Some PAFMM units, such as the Sansha City maritime militia unit, primarily focus on military duties and engage in little or no fishing activities.⁷⁹ On the other hand, some

PAFMM units regularly engage in fishing activities, which adds to confusion about the status of these units and whether they are acting of their own volition or under orders of the PLA.

Adding to the confusion is the PRC's apparent lack of a single, standardized strategy for utilizing the PAFMM.⁸⁰ The use of the PAFMM appears to differ based on the particular location and operation being conducted, which creates confusion for other nations' militaries and law enforcement agencies that respond to actions by PRC fishing vessels because it is unknown whether they are acting under official orders from the PLA, or if they are acting in a civilian capacity. In the SCS, however, operations appear to be more standardized and entail a three-pronged joint operational strategy that employs the PAFMM on the first tier, the CCG on the second tier, and the PLAN on the third tier.⁸¹

Since the PAFMM switch back and forth between civilian and military status, it is usually relied upon to execute operations that would be too provocative for official PLAN or CCG units to undertake.⁸² For instance, the PAFMM will engage in aggressive surveillance operations and will also harass foreign military and civilian vessels in disputed areas.⁸³ Nonetheless, given the PAFMM has stronger connections with the PLA and regularly operates under the PLA chain of command, the PRC is very likely responsible for the actions conducted by the PAFMM, especially when under orders or the command and control of the PLA.⁸⁴ Consequently, the real question is whether the international community has the will and determination to hold the PRC accountable for the actions of the PAFMM.⁸⁵ Given the actions fall below the threshold of an armed attack, there appears to be little desire to confront the PRC over PAFMM activity due to the military, diplomatic, and economic risks to the nations in the SCS.⁸⁶

One prime example of the coordinated use of PLAN, CCG, and PAFMM assets occurred in 2014. In disputed waters between the PRC and Vietnam, the PRC employed more than 100 PAFMM, CCG, and PLAN vessels to cordon off an area around the exploratory drill rig Hai Yang Shi You 981 so that Vietnamese vessels could not penetrate the cordoned area around the drill rig.⁸⁷ The Vietnamese responded by sending dozens of vessels to the area in an attempt to breach the cordoned area and force the drill rig to leave.⁸⁸ Although no shots were fired, some vessels collided, resulting in the death of one Vietnamese civilian and the sinking of two vessels.⁸⁹ Vietnam's response imposed large financial costs to the PRC because it required more than 100 PRC vessels to protect the drill rig, but it also significantly increased the risk of escalation to armed conflict.⁹⁰

Additionally, the CCG has deployed to the disputed waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to conduct patrols in the territorial sea and escort Chinese fishing vessels operating in the territorial sea.⁹¹ At times, the number of

CCG vessels and their escorted fishing vessels overwhelms the capabilities of the Japan Coast Guard, which is internationally recognized as one of the best coast guard services in the world.⁹² Interestingly, PLAN vessels do not conduct such patrols, indicating the PRC's calculated use of the CCG to assert jurisdiction in the territorial sea while keeping the risk of escalation to armed conflict low. Nonetheless, PLAN vessels are often stationed near the CCG patrols to deter action by Japan's high-end naval assets.⁹³ Such actions demonstrate that the PRC will escalate its maritime claims with gray-zone operations backed by conventional military capabilities in disputed areas. The CCG has proven to be a critical feature in the PRC's assertion of maritime governance and military power to underwrite its expansionist maritime claims over disputed waters, all while avoiding the impression of a hostile military invasion.⁹⁴ Since 2016, the CCG has maintained a nearly continuous, rotating presence of increasingly capable, armed CCG vessels to assert sovereignty in the territorial seas of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.⁹⁵

One reason for the PRC's actions is that territorial sovereignty requires a state to continuously and effectively exercise authority and jurisdiction of the territory to the exclusion of other nations.⁹⁶ The PRC regularly uses its three naval forces, with the CCG as the coordinating mechanism between the PLAN and PAFMM, to demonstrate authority and jurisdiction over the territory surrounding man-made islands and features to the exclusion of other nations.⁹⁷ Even if this display of authority and jurisdiction is not to the exclusion of all others, the presence of the PRC's maritime forces undermines the territorial claims of other nations.⁹⁸

One factor of a territorial claim is whether the exercise of exclusive authority and jurisdiction existed at the time the territorial dispute arose.⁹⁹ This date has been called the "critical date," and some have posited that the PRC's exercise of authority and jurisdiction has no effect on territorial claims because the disputes arose before the PRC assumed control or exclusion via the CCG.¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, this hypothesis fails to account for the long-term strategy of the PRC. The PRC's strategy is not based on quick, decisive action but upon gradual shifts in the political, economic, and operational environments at the international and regional levels.¹⁰¹ If the PRC retains the initiative by continuing to build islands, conducting regular patrols, and excluding other nations from the area,¹⁰² determining the critical date that a territorial dispute arose can get murky. This hypothesis becomes even less reliable if the territorial claims are adjudicated many decades into the future. Moreover, the 2016 Tribunal decision demonstrates that counting on an international tribunal decision is not a reliable course of action. Five years after the tribunal issued its decision, the PRC continues to claim the maritime territory of other nations and increasingly uses the presence of over-

whelming maritime forces to exclude others and assert sovereignty throughout the SCS and ECS.¹⁰³

The PRC is imposing a methodical campaign of “quasi-aggression”¹⁰⁴ that overwhelms its opponents but does not rise to the level of an armed attack, allowing China to avoid international condemnation and reciprocal armed response.¹⁰⁵ On the continuum where peace is at one extreme and war is at the other, the PRC has chosen the middle of the continuum by engaging in offensive gray-zone operations within the conflict continuum to assert dominance and authority.¹⁰⁶ The PRC is shrewdly employing an increasingly powerful collection of diplomatic, information, military, and economic instruments to exploit gaps in the traditional margins between these instruments of power.¹⁰⁷ On the front lines of the disputes over sovereign territory, the combined operations of its sea services effectively implement an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy that employs force below the threshold of an armed attack.¹⁰⁸ The effect is a cohesive foreign policy that incrementally achieves national strategic goals while forgoing decisive operations, thereby complicating the international community’s response.¹⁰⁹ Given the significant hesitancy for nuclear powers to engage in high-intensity armed conflict, the volume of gray-zone operations is likely to increase.¹¹⁰ Therefore, although the United States must continue to enhance its ability to execute high-end warfare, it must also become more adept at conducting operations in a highly competitive operating environment below the threshold of high-intensity armed conflict.¹¹¹

The United States can establish a counterweight to the PRC’s strategy in the SCS by demonstrating resolve and leading a multinational response that provides allies in the region with the ability to secure their sovereign rights in the maritime domain. First and foremost, the United States should bring all its instruments of power to bear in the GPC unfolding through gray-zone operations in the SCS. This includes not only high-end war-fighting capabilities but also gray-zone capabilities that specialize in security, law enforcement, and rule of law. The USCG is the armed force designed for maritime gray-zone operations and should be further incorporated into operations in the SCS. The USCG has unique authorities, core competencies, and experience that make it the ideal instrument for uniting partner nations and bolstering the rule of law.¹¹²

The USCG’s Role as an International Counterweight to the PRC’s Modern Maritime Strategy

The United States’ approach has largely relied on diplomacy, international legal pressure, and unilateral freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) to curtail or slow the PRC’s expansion in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific.¹¹³ These

efforts have received mixed results, leading some to suggest the United States has lost credibility throughout the world for its failure to work with its allies to stop the PRC's infringements upon the national sovereignty of neighboring nations.¹¹⁴ Many have begun to call for the United States to not only utilize diplomacy and targeted economic instruments of power to contain the PRC's aggressive maritime expansion but also to employ the military instrument of power by utilizing seapower on the front lines with our allies.¹¹⁵ As Pres. John F. Kennedy explained so eloquently in 1961, "Diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another. Either alone would fail."¹¹⁶ Indeed, this advice is applicable to the GPC of today.

While most agree that more US military support to allies in the Indo-Pacific is needed to shore up the other instruments of power already in play, the US Navy should not be the only means of employing the military instrument of power. Even the commentators who advocate for additional US Navy assets concede it risks escalating the situation and giving the appearance of US Navy combatants "bullying" fisherman and coast guard forces.¹¹⁷ Accordingly, a better approach would be to adopt portions of the PRC's operational framework and couple them with US and international strengths and values.

To keep pace in the GPC underway in the maritime domain, the USCG should be the fulcrum for maritime gray-zone operations. The USCG regularly partners with allied nations' navies, coast guards, and law enforcement agencies to train, advise, assist, and conduct joint patrols.¹¹⁸ These joint patrols can also include shipriders from partner nations. Moreover, given recent indications that the CCG is training for amphibious assaults,¹¹⁹ the USCG should be incorporated into planning, training, and exercises for such scenarios to prepare for joint operations with US Navy task forces and US Marine Corps (USMC) littoral regiments.¹²⁰ This approach achieves the US Navy, USMC, and USCG Triservice "Advantage at Sea" strategy's stated goal of delivering and generating "Integrated All-domain Naval Power" from all three US sea services with partner nations to prevail.¹²¹

While the new "Advantage at Sea" is a great start for addressing the PRC's skillful use of gray-zone operations to exploit gaps between traditional instruments of power, it falls short by failing to "tightly integrate" the USCG into planning, exercising, and experimentation.¹²² This is a significant shortcoming given the nature of GPC and that the PRC has already achieved a *fait accompli* with many of its expansionist activities in the SCS. The United States has failed to adequately design and plan for joint operations in the maritime gray zone, and simply doing more of the same will not alter the outcome of gray-zone operations within the current GPC. Specifically, the joint force should include forces that are better designed and purposed for gray-zone operations. As stated by the Commandant of the Coast Guard, "Our niche is operating in that threshold below the

level of armed conflict, the gray zone. . . . Our broad unique authorities and our people and partnerships are a tremendous asset.¹²³ Accordingly, the USCG must be properly resourced and prepared for greater focus on defense operations in the Indo-Pacific, otherwise the PRC's strategic gray-zone victories will continue.¹²⁴

The USCG's unique authorities and competencies include law enforcement, maritime security, search-and-rescue, and low-intensity military capabilities.¹²⁵ Some commentators have suggested that the US Navy needs to develop new commands, create new platforms, and establish new training programs so that it can develop competencies in maritime security and gray-zone operations.¹²⁶ This would create a costly and redundant scenario, as the commands, platforms, and training programs already exist in the USCG, which is the US agency with primary responsibility for these competencies.¹²⁷

The USCG also provides superior operational latitude because the USCG enjoys greater authority and international recognition as a global force for safety and security, not high-intensity warfare operations. Consequently, the USCG provides a more appropriate approach and legitimizes the US goal of establishing a unified international response to the PRC's derogation of international norms, as opposed to utilizing the US Navy, which would likely increase the risk of escalation from gray-zone operations to armed conflict.¹²⁸ For example, the USCG has established relationships with partner nations around the world to enhance maritime security, including nations within the Indo-Pacific region, and regularly conducts FONOPs in the region.¹²⁹ Increasing the USCG's capacity to conduct this mission is far more effective, both operationally and financially, while also keeping the risk of escalation to armed conflict low.¹³⁰ The costs of growing USCG capacity and incorporating it more thoroughly into Indo-Pacific operations would simply require additional hulls and personnel for the USCG, but the improved authorities, capabilities, capacities, and partnerships leveraged would be invaluable to Indo-Pacific Command in gray-zone competition.¹³¹ Like PLAN and CCG operations, increasing interoperability in the joint environment, and possibly transferring the USCG to the Department of Defense, would allow for increased operational and fiscal efficiency.¹³²

Recommendations

General/Overall Recommendations: Bring All Your Players to the Big Game

Just like football teams do not leave their specialty players, such as slot receivers and dime defenders, at home when they go to the playoffs, the United States must

incorporate all national instruments of power into competing in the new era of GPC. The international community must issue a united and unequivocal renunciation of the PRC's disregard for international law governing the maritime domain and work together to counterbalance the PRC's claims and actions that are clearly outside the scope of its authority. To accomplish this goal, the United States should provide a surface force to assist and coordinate with our international allies in defending their sovereignty.¹³³ While some have recommended developing new US Navy capabilities and competencies to provide maritime security and low-intensity combat capabilities to address the PRC's operations in the Indo-Pacific, such an approach fails to account for the coordinated use of the PRC's three sea forces.¹³⁴ The first line is the PAFMM, the second line is the CCG, and the third line is the PLAN. The PRC's joint operational approach risks US Navy gray hulls engaging PAFMM or white-hull CCG vessels, which would allow the PRC to gain the moral high ground and risk further escalating the situation to one that would permit use of PRC gray hulls.¹³⁵ Additionally, it is inefficient to employ high-end military capabilities, and possibly ordnance, on low-end combat assets while high-end PLAN assets are waiting in the wings for just such an opportunity.¹³⁶

Solely employing additional US Navy assets simply provides more of the same options that the United States already possesses in relative abundance—pronounced military capabilities that would only serve to escalate the power competition and significantly increase the risk of armed conflict.¹³⁷ In fact, the US Navy already has approximately 60 percent of its fleet deployed to the Indo-Pacific.¹³⁸ What the United States truly needs is additional means of pursuing national objectives in gray-zone operations of GPC.¹³⁹ Consequently, the United States should invest in a capability that projects international legitimacy, diplomacy, maritime security and governance, low-intensity war-fighting capabilities, and has a superb international reputation as a lifesaving institution dedicated to rule of law.

The USCG is the United States instrument that already encapsulates these factors as core competencies. These competencies are most effectively and efficiently exercised by the armed service with the statutory authority and experience executing these missions.¹⁴⁰ Consequently, it is more efficient to invest in the USCG so it can assume growing mission sets aligned with its core authorities and competencies.

Recommendations for Leveraging USCG Authorities, Competencies, Capabilities, and Partnerships

The United States should increase the capacity of the USCG by expanding the number of assets and crews for executing maritime security and low-intensity power projection in coordination with partner nations in the Indo-Pacific. The USCG has already signed bilateral and shiprider agreements with many other nations, including the PRC, for conducting law enforcement and maritime security operations.¹⁴¹ While many of the agreements and operations have been in South and Central America, they could easily include nations in the SCS so long as adequate forces and platforms are provided.¹⁴²

Growing the capacity of the USCG and integrating it more closely with the US Navy and USMC allows for greater authorities, presence, and functional US involvement at more levels of the conflict continuum, which is a requisite for gray-zone operations.¹⁴³ Indeed, as recently recognized by all three US sea services, gray-zone victories can achieve strategic-level effects.¹⁴⁴ To leverage these additional authorities and competencies for gray-zone competition, the USCG should have a command incorporated into the US Navy's Seventh Fleet in support of US Indo-Pacific Command to increase coordination in the joint operational environment. This can be modeled after Patrol Forces Southwest Asia (PATFORSWA), where a USCG patrol boat squadron is assigned to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet in support of US Central Command.¹⁴⁵ For example, emulating the success of PATFORSWA by establishing a Patrol Forces Indo-Pacific (PATFORIPAC) with National Security Cutters, Offshore Patrol Cutters, and Fast Response Cutters would be simpler and would further legitimize the US effort to counterbalance the PRC's growing maritime pressure throughout the Indo-Pacific. Subic Bay, or Guam in the alternative, would be an ideal location to homeport a command with the mission to provide linchpin US support for helping to train, advise, and assist international partners in the SCS and to conduct joint operations with the US Navy and USMC.¹⁴⁶

Due to its unique authorities as a law enforcement agency and armed service, the USCG has suffered from redundancies built into its framework. The USCG employs acquisition, maintenance, financial, travel, and other management systems that mirror systems maintained by the Department of Defense but which are funded and operated independently.¹⁴⁷ The redundancy of these systems leads to inefficiencies that can be remedied by incorporation into Department of Defense systems, since the USCG maintains the capability to coordinate and augment the US Navy. A study should be conducted to determine what efficiencies could be achieved by transferring the USCG into the Department of Defense as

an independent service.¹⁴⁸ Transferring the USCG to the Department of Defense would increase the effectiveness of joint operations, similar to what the CCG and PLAN have achieved, and the likelihood of achieving the goal for Integrated All-Domain Naval Power as set forth of the “Advantage at Sea” Triservice strategy.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, transferring the USCG to the Department of Defense could provide fiscal and operational efficiencies as acquisitions, logistics and other frameworks are merged and synchronized.¹⁵⁰

Such a move can be expected to prove financially advantageous after initial adjustments are completed. For instance, the cost of each hull for a ship or airframe for an aircraft could be reduced as the redundancies are disposed with and logistics supply lines are merged. This is particularly applicable for vessels and aircraft that have similar operating requirements, such as Sikorsky H-60 helicopters, the US Navy’s Littoral Combat Ship, and the USCG’s National Security Cutter.¹⁵¹ Moreover, both domestic and expeditionary operations, such as maritime force protection within US territorial seas¹⁵² and joint operations in the Indo-Pacific, would be improved due to tighter integration among the sea services. Nonetheless, care should be taken to ensure the USCG remains an independent entity within the Department of Defense to properly insulate it from military services that are specifically precluded from conducting law enforcement operations.¹⁵³ Moreover, the USCG’s missions should remain consistent, and care should be taken to avoid mission creep to protect and maintain the USCG’s reputation domestically and with the international community.

Conclusion

The PRC’s gray-zone operations are beginning to look very much like a “war without gun smoke,” as it continues to incrementally occupy ever-increasing portions of the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.¹⁵⁴ The PRC is employing the CCG in a manner designed to legitimize China’s claims to disputed maritime areas within the SCS and ECS and overwhelm nations with competing maritime claims. The PRC has grown its coast guard to the largest in the world and is deploying it to fill a unique niche that conveys sovereignty, law enforcement, maritime security, and low-intensity conflict capabilities, thereby successfully executing low-risk gray-zone operations.

The PRC’s approach essentially uses the coast guard’s international recognition as law enforcement entity and lifesaver to project legitimate and even-handed governance, while simultaneously leveraging the military capabilities of the CCG and nearby PLAN support to intimidate its regional neighbors. The PRC’s new joint approach to maritime disputes can only be offset by a united international

response that establishes strong maritime governance capabilities, especially by those nations in the Indo-Pacific.

The USCG has the experience, authorities, and competencies for uniting the joint and international response to counterbalance the PRC's assertion of authority and governance in these disputed regions. Research should be undertaken to determine how significantly the USCG should be integrated with the US Navy for purposes of improving economic and operational efficiency. A joint team of military and civilian representatives from the US Navy, USMC, USCG, and Department of Defense, with input from combatant commands, should assess the operational and fiscal efficiencies that would likely result from eliminating redundant acquisition, finance, travel, and personnel systems and the degree to which operational synergy could be enhanced among the three maritime services.

Although the proposition to use the USCG as a primary instrument in the ongoing maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific might seem optimistic, it provides the opportunity for a new approach. As the adage goes, simply doing the same things and expecting a different result is illogical. The change in US presidential administration in 2021, together with the 2020 change in US policy regarding the SCS, provides a great opportunity for a new approach that makes the United States and its allies more competitive while keeping the risk of escalation low.¹⁵⁵ If nothing is done to stem the growth and exercise of the PRC's projection of maritime authority and military capabilities in disputed maritime areas, the PRC and other great-power competitors are likely to further derogate international norms and pressure other nations into compromising their sovereignty and maritime resources.¹⁵⁶ In contrast to creating new commands, competencies, and assets for the US Navy that would risk escalating to armed conflict,¹⁵⁷ growing the capacity of the USCG would be a more effective and legitimate course of action. As discussed above, emulating the success of PATFORSWA in the Indo-Pacific would provide more options and operational flexibility. As stated by Admiral Tomohisa Takei, the previous Chief of Staff for the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, "China should not be the only party with flexible, finely calibrated options."¹⁵⁸ The USCG provides much more flexibility given its "niche is operating in that threshold below the level of armed conflict, the gray zone."¹⁵⁹ The USCG is the US agency designed to conduct maritime gray-zone operations and has been doing so for more than 230 years. 🌐

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