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China's Grey Zone Activities in Philippine Waters and India's Stand

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China is seeing an increase in international backlash following allegations that its coast guard deployed water guns against a Philippine boat near Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea¹. Analysts believe that the incident may escalate an already tense situation and spur the involvement of the US and its allies. The incident took place on December 10, 2023 when a considerably small vessel of the Philippine tried to deliver supplies to a garrison near Second Thomas Shoal, a South China Sea feature, situated in Philippine exclusive economic zone but claimed by China as its sovereign territory known as Renai reef.

The Long-Standing Dispute in South China Sea

Historically, the South China Sea (SCS) has remained a source of contention between Manila and Beijing. The Chinese government asserts “indisputable sovereignty” over practically the entire 1.3 million square mile of SCS, in addition to the majority of its islands, including those that are hundreds of miles off the Chinese mainland.² This comprises the Spratlys, referred to as the Nanshas in Beijing, a collection of 100 tiny islands and reefs disputed by the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan in whole or partial.³ The Philippines, on the other hand, refers to that region as the West Philippine Sea. It purposefully established a military transport ship, the BRP Sierra Madre, staffed by Filipino marines, on Second Thomas Shoal in 1999 in order to assert its claim to the territory.⁴

The UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in Hague upheld Philippine’s assertions in 2016, ruling that China lacks legal basis for claiming historical ownership over the majority of the SCS. Beijing since then has ignored the ruling and continues to assert its presence in the SCS by indulging itself in ‘grey zone activities’ and erecting infrastructure on disputed islands. The nine-dash line has been utilised by the Chinese Communist Party in the past to represent its SCS claims. The West Philippine Sea, over 90% of which China claims maritime sovereignty, was divided into nine dashes. Ten dashes are now visible on China's standard map from 2023.⁵

What are Grey Zone Activities Employed by China

The precise meaning and understanding of what defines grey-zone activity continues to be unclear. Such disruptive measures often fall outside the threshold of armed conflict and might not be deemed acts of war, yet they accomplish the goal of establishing influence over a region.⁶ For instance, in the years leading up to and following the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s (PCA) decision in favour of the Philippines in 2016, China used a variety of maritime grey-zone techniques to further its

objectives in the SCS. These measures involve constructing artificial islands and military facilities in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, using its maritime militia to chase Filipino fishermen away from their conventional fishing grounds, and disrupting replenishment missions with military-grade lasers and water cannons.

In this scenario, classifying operations as grey zone activity permits offenders to take advantage of amorphousness and uncertainty to achieve their objectives.⁷ While there has been considerable global interest on the subject as grey-zone actions are not entirely unnoticed, the fact that many similar methods are grouped together under the umbrella term 'grey zone' makes it difficult to identify viable countermeasures. Although China does not use the term 'grey zone' to characterise its strategy, its use of these methods in the SCS leads to regional instability and undermines the laws that regulate maritime space. Such actions are referred to in China as "maritime rights protection" or "peacetime use of military forces."⁸ Whatever nomenclature is employed, it is evident that these military tactics serve as a cover for China's aggressive attempt to control the whole West Philippine Sea.

Grey Zone Activities in Philippine Waters

Chinese forceful practices in the Philippines' maritime area are capable of being classified into two categories: militarised or non-militarised. The Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and maritime militias engage in military activities that range from shadowing and swarming to overtly risky operations.⁹ Non-militarised techniques, on the other hand, make use of official diplomatic approaches and information exploitation. In the case of the West Philippine Sea, China has used both forms of coercive means to further its goals.

A June 2019 event along Recto Bank in which a Chinese warship sank a Philippine fishing boat and stranded the 22 Filipino fishermen who were struggling for their lives in the surrounding waters is a prime instance of China's oppressive militaristic activities in the West Philippine Sea.¹⁰ A Vietnamese fishing trawler later rescued all of the Filipino fishermen on board. Another instance is a case that occurred in February 2023 near the coast of Ayungin Shoal, also known as Second Thomas Shoal, in which a CCG warship pointed a military-grade laser light at a Philippine Coast Guard frigate on a normal resupply operation for the Philippine Navy.¹¹ Another CCG warship used water cannons and dangerous obstructing actions in early August 2023, delaying a rotation and replenishment mission.

Swarming is the act of moving in huge groups in order to frighten other vessels. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), for example, detected at least 48 fishing boats around Reed Bank in July 2023. In early September 2023, the AFP Western Command initiated aircraft surveillance that discovered Chinese fishing vessels around Recto Bank, as well as five Chinese vessels in Escoda Shoal and a pair in Baragatan Bank.¹²

In addition to the use of armed, political, and diplomatic measures, Chinese repressive activities are reinforced by propaganda efforts that are ingrained in domestic discourses. For instance, a persistent storyline on Philippine social media asserts that the CCG is a civilian organisation, negating the need to invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the United States in order to counteract CCG-led operations in the West Philippine Sea. According to the narrative, China is saving the Philippines by not deploying the Chinese Navy, which might have required the Philippine Navy to respond.

India's Stand on South China Sea Dispute

India is unwilling to get involved in matters that have no immediate impact on it and is not a party to any regional disputes in SCS. India, though, indulges itself in regional stability talks and maintains defence and security relations with regional nations. Despite all this, New Delhi is nonetheless realistic about the consequences of its meddling in the waterways to the east of Malacca.

India's primary maritime objectives are in the Indian Ocean, where China has not yet reached a tipping point with its growing presence. India would undoubtedly be forced to react over a larger area, perhaps even in the SCS, if China started to intrude in India's vital space in the Andaman Sea. Meanwhile India is unlikely to change its security stance in the coastal regions east of Malacca until then.

India's priorities in the Western Pacific are mostly economic, with rising trade across the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and oil holdings off the shores of Vietnam. New Delhi is aware of its limited ability to exert consistent influence in the SCS. India purely intends to send China a message that it will not interfere in the neighbouring littorals as long as Beijing respects its limits in the Indian Ocean and the Himalayas. This is why India occasionally issues joint statements with friendly Association of South East Nations countries referring maritime standards in Southeast Asia.

India should focus on creating a long-term strategy for handling China's challenge in the Indo-Pacific. Increasing maritime awareness among the Quad nations could be a solution. To

keep an eye out for any suspicious activity by Chinese ships, India should make use of its vast information network, which is spread across the Indian Ocean and contains data from the Fusion Centre and space-based marine monitoring.

NOTES:

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