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China's gray zone operations in the maritime domain can be framed within a context of cultural thinking that is effective in the development of strategy and identification of weaknesses in the current environment. Through careful analysis of gray zone activities in the East and South China seas, three fundamental differences are identified under a concept of efficacy that differs from traditional Western thinking. This framework provides strategic leaders an alternative approach to understanding China's gray zone actions in the maritime environment, and identifies weaknesses in the current international system predicated on the Western liberal order.

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Executive Summary

Title: China in the Gray Zone: A Comparative Cultural Study

Author: Major Jeremiah R. Wood, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Applying a Chinese cultural framework to gray zone activities in the maritime domain can provide a more comprehensive understanding to the dynamics of these interactions and illustrate weaknesses in the current Western system.

Discussion: The United States is increasingly finding itself challenged at managing gray zone actions of adversaries. China has led the charge in altering the Indo-Pacific power balance through a variety of Maritime gray zone actions aimed at expanding its influence in the region, while expertly keeping these actions below the threshold for military response. Current Western literature of gray zone operations lacks rigorous analysis of Chinese cultural thinking behind these actions, and strategists can benefit from the understanding of cultural perspective in this domain. Through cultural analysis of China's maritime gray zone operations, three major incongruencies of thought appear between Eastern and Western cognitive thought processes. Furthermore, Chinese cultural differences appear to nest under an over-arching theme of efficacy in the military domain. This analysis identifies likely Chinese thought processes in the gray zone and highlights facets of the Western liberal order that should be addressed to restrict China's effectiveness in this environment.

Conclusion: Three fundamental differences identified between traditional Eastern and Western culture nested under a concept of efficacy provides strategic leaders an opportunity to understand gray zone operations more comprehensively as well as identify shortcomings in the current international framework established under the Western Liberal Order.

Preface

First and foremost, I want to provide a special thank you to my wife Bridgette and children Rhett and Grant for their unwavering support and understanding as I found my way through this process. I could not have done this without their effort, smiles and encouragement.

When I arrived at Command and Staff college, I was eager and ready to learn what I could to become a better Marine. Since I embarked on this journey, I am eternally grateful for the discoveries, opportunity for growth, and relationships I have made with my peers in Conference Group 11. China has been a focus of effort this school year, and I was intrigued by cultural differences and the shape of the operating environment as a consequence of 21st Century challenges. This MMS was heavily influenced by a desire to understand one of the largest challenges that the United States faces now and for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, I could not have tackled this problem alone and would like to extend another round of thank you's to the MCU staff. Particularly Dr. Lynn Tesser as my mentor for this thesis and putting up with a rambling of ideas and interests early in this paper's development. Dr. Nathan Packard for guiding my thoughts and providing insightful resources to develop this conceptual framework. Dr. Anne-Louise Antonoff for focusing my thought process and inspiration to approach this topic. Finally, Dr. Andrew Scobell for his guidance during my Chinese Strategic Thought elective.

Introduction

Classification in language has a profound impact on the way we think about and perceive the world around us. Translating text from other languages requires the need to identify new classification categories and organize concepts to understand the intent of the messages it contains. There once was a belief that humans should create an artificial language with a universal system of categorization proposed by John Wilkens in the mid-seventeenth century. Several hundred years later, Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinian writer who was infamous for mixing fact and fiction, claimed the existence of the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, a Chinese text, which contained a ludicrous method of categorizing animals, emphasizing the difficulties of Wilkens' proposal. These categories were so ludicrous that most familiar with the claim dismissed it as comedy. Borges concludes, "it is clear that there is no classification of the universe not being arbitrary and full of conjectures. The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what thing the universe is."¹ While the existence of the *Celestial Emporium* is up for debate, the implications from Borges' claim are no less applicable.

This simple fact serves as the basis for many cross-cultural studies between people who do not share the same languages and philosophies. Different cultures do not necessarily follow the same rules when it comes to how they think about the world. This can also be applied to the study of gray zone interactions between China and the United States. China operates consistently and effectively within the gray zone; through cyber-attacks, theft of intellectual property, the Nine-Dash Line, and maritime fishing militias, they have challenged U.S. strategic interests not just in the Pacific, but globally in its rise to power. This paper suggests applying and evaluating a Chinese cultural framework to gray zone activities, then comparing it to existing Western literature in order to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of China's

actions in today's operating environment. To date, current literature is lacking rigorous application of cultural understanding and perceptions to adversarial actions within the gray zone.

The United States' responses in the gray zone fall in line with well-established elements of coercive national power that are losing their effectiveness in a technologically capable world, and against a near-peer competitor. The dichotomy of war and peace, prevalent in the West, has captivated the United States' focus on dominating and enforcing the international order through economic and military strength, while other elements of national power required for gray zone operations have lagged. Francis Fukuyama claimed after the Cold War, humanity has reached, "not just ... the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: That is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."² Western liberal democracy has a long way to go, and if it has any chance, the United States must become more effective when competing with China, and must take into account cultural aspects of China's approach to gray zone strategy.

To provide initial context for what is meant by culture, it must first be defined. Geert Hofstede, well known for his research on cross-cultural groups and organizations, treats the definition of culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another."³ He acknowledges this is not applicable to all persons of a group in the same work, but admits the need to recognize these collective behaviors at some basic level. This allows scholars to understand and evaluate differences in the way groups of people think and perceive the world and opens the dialogue for comparison. This paper will assume the same recognition of the term "culture" and apply it to the current literature

on elements of Chinese thought which assist in developing a framework for Chinese gray zone actions.

From the literature on cultural differences between Chinese and Western thought, there appear to be three essential differences in thinking that are directly relevant to gray zone operations, and these are further contained within a concept of efficacy. First, the Chinese tend to favor *rule by law* versus *rule of law*. Rather than subscribe to abstract concepts as governing functions, situational rule as imposed by higher authority appears to be a predominant feature in Chinese cultural history. Secondly, Chinese thought is much nimbler in areas of contradictions. Some cultural scholars argue a concept of thinking that can be described as *both/and* versus *either/or* as a fundamental difference between Chinese and Western thought, respectively. Lastly, Chinese and Western thought vary in how actions, events and concepts are categorized. The West tends to favor concrete definitions and create conceptual links, while categories in Chinese language are not fixed but contextual. In terms of efficacy, both entities approach the world differently; the West tends to develop theory and impose actions to achieve goals, while Eastern thought is more evaluative of the environment and seeks to use that as a catalyst to improve its position. Analysis of culture suggests that U.S. military leaders and policy makers could benefit from a multi-faceted approach that considers these differences while developing gray zone strategies that take these disparities into account.

The differences between rule of man and rule of law are fundamental to the perceptions of accountability within the gray zone. “Ancient Chinese culture was more predisposed to have a tendency toward rule by man rather than rule of law,”⁴ says Charles Moore, whose work coincides with other works on the philosophical and linguistic cultural predispositions of China. This concept is carried on today, as Laura Jackson explains, “China has experienced rule by law,

not rule of law, with the Communist Party viewing the law simply as one of many tools at its disposal, to be harnessed, shaped and molded as it sees fit (or as far as international public opinion will allow) given the particular legal challenge China needs to overcome.”⁵ This has strong implications to both understanding Chinese gray zone operations as well as crafting U.S. responses to these types of actions. While it is true China is subject to the perceptions of international audiences, it will capitalize on this difference to advance its strategic interests to the maximum extent possible. This concept also blends nicely into how the Chinese view contradictions.

Contradictions are another fundamental difference that can be illustrated between Chinese and Western culture. For example, Andrew Scobell identifies a ‘cult of defense’, a Chinese cultural perspective that is “comprised of both a defensive-minded Confucian-Mencian approach to strategy, as well as a Realpolitik strand that leaves them predisposed to use force when confronting political-military crisis.”⁶ This concept, coupled with his explanation of calculated risk taking he describes concurrently, offers a contextual understanding of gray zone operations that are inherently low-risk with long term benefits. Contradictions play a central role in gray zone operations, they serve to complicate perceptions and narratives, and they do not align with a framework of concise definitions and categories that have been established from a Western cultural system of thinking.

Roger Ames, academic author of interpretive studies of Chinese philosophy and culture, explains knowledge in terms of the classical Chinese model as such, “Form is not some permanent structure to be discovered behind the changing process, but a perceived intelligibility and continuity that can be mapped within the dynamic process itself.”⁷ He contrasts Western culture by claiming, “Western culture likes to grasp the “essence” or “form” or “function”

behind elusively changing appearances.”⁸ Put simply, Western thought favors concrete fixed definitions or categories, then applies a situation to those defining characteristics to understand and process concepts, while Eastern thought is less likely to impose permanent definitions and approaches concepts from a relational and non-formative perspective. This argument will assist in understanding patterns of Chinese thought which can then be applied to gray zone actions throughout this research.

This Chinese cultural lens provides three critical aspects that must be considered when developing a cohesive gray zone strategy to maintain regional influence and advance U.S. interests globally. There exists a link between Chinese strategic actions in the gray zone and an integrative series of small actions which encompass a more long-term strategic approach that does not fall neatly within Western thought. Thus far, this approach appears to be beneficial to China’s interests. These gray zone actions conducted over an expanded timeline can result in cumulative advantage while each individual action, analyzed separately, remains clearly below the threshold for conflict. A cultural comparison reveals the challenges associated with trying to classify these actions from the Western perspective of the gray zone and suggests the need for a more comprehensive approach to thinking about these actions to mitigate or eliminate the slow eradication of U.S. strategic influence through death by one thousand cuts.

An analysis of existing literature on the gray zone will set the table for this thesis and provide the background for understanding the Western approach to the gray zone and the problems associated therein. Applying the three primary differences in thinking to China’s maritime gray zone activities, this research seeks to answer the question of how the United States can better understand China’s gray zone activities in the future. Next, comparing this analysis to a historical recount of U.S. responses to China’s gray zone activities will serve as a basis for

understanding how this approach could be beneficial to crafting strategies and understanding weaknesses, better serving U.S. interests in the future. This paper is intended to inform policy makers and strategic leaders of cultural aspects that help understand Chinese thought in the context of gray zone operations and to successfully compete in this operating environment.

Defining the Gray Zone

The term "gray zone" has been utilized to cover a broad spectrum of state actions that bring about strategic consequences for the United States in its efforts to maintain the international order. Michael Mazaar's text *Mastering the Gray Zone* provides a robust analysis of these actions viewed in terms of the West. Although Mazaar fails to provide a concise definition in his own terms, he does pull from the 2015 *National Military Strategy* where it characterizes, "the future military environment as a 'continuum' on which many forms of conflict short of major war are likely."⁹ This is important because it signifies a shift from a traditional conception that states exist primarily in a state of either war or peace. He further goes on to explain, "they [gray zone actions] are classic 'salami-slicing' strategies, fortified with a range of emerging gray area or unconventional techniques—from cyberattacks to information campaigns to energy diplomacy."¹⁰ This analogy helps define an important feature of gray zone operations in that each segmented action taken is a part of a larger holistic strategic effort, which would be represented by the entire salami.

From a Western military perspective, The United States Special Operations command sees itself comfortably nested within the gray zone. General Joseph Votel, a former Special Operations Commander, provides his own definition of the gray zone as "intense political, economic, informational, and military competition."¹¹ From his definition we see that there are other aspects of this competition that exist outside traditional American coercive power, and it

would suggest that this approach should not be contained to only military and economic power, but encompass all elements of national power. A Rand report from 2016 pointed out the United States' heavy reliance on military power when its authors stated, "offensive military force has come to be the main instrument of U.S. global strategy."¹² Other counterparts of Western liberal thought approach the issue from a military perspective as well. An Australian think tank known as the Perry Group compiled a report for the Australian Defense Force and defined the gray zone as such, "activities [that] are coercive statecraft actions that are short of war."¹³ This infrastructure and mindset, based on traditional notions of war and peace, is wholly insufficient to respond to the increasing repertoire of actions that exist within gray zone strategies.

From these definitions we can derive nuanced differences and broad commonalities in an attempt to understand gray zone actions within a Western context. Few authors articulate concise definitions of the gray zone; Frier et al. even argue against a static definition, instead maintaining that a definition "may be far less useful to the defense strategy and policy community than simply describing it as it is now and as it likely will be for some time."¹⁴ Yet others will argue against the concept of categorizing these actions to the term gray zone. Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside argue that the term(s) "as well as the concepts rising from them should be eliminated from the strategic lexicon." They believe that the terms gray zone and hybrid war "cloud, distort, confuse war and peace, and undermine strategic thinking."¹⁵ Regardless of how the definition is written, or alternative terms for the gray zone, one cannot deny that nations are upending the status quo of the current international order at the expense of the Western liberal policies that the United States and its allies are struggling to uphold in today's political environment.

There seems to be no Chinese literature specifically referring to the gray zone, but there are certainly parallels to it. Liang Qiao and Wang Xiangsui have labeled this concept as "unrestricted warfare" and summarize it as such, "This kind of war means that all means will be in readiness, that information will be omnipresent, and the battlefield will be everywhere. It means that all weapons and technology can be superimposed at will, it means that all the boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally destroyed, and it also means that many of the current principles of combat will be modified, and even that the rules of war may need to be rewritten."¹⁶ It's important to note that these two authors do not speak for the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA), but to assume their arguments have not been shaped by official PLA documents would be remiss. The two Chinese colonels clearly emphasize the fact that the traditional boundaries between war and peace will break down, and that there is a continuum of action between this false dichotomy.

Unrestricted warfare may not be considered official doctrine of the PLA in China, but it has important parallels to the PLA's three warfares strategy, which does lie distinctly within PLA doctrine. Psychological warfare, media warfare, and legal warfare have become central tenets to China's strategic approach and encompass a swath of strategic gray zone actions. When coupled with Andrew Scobell's description of a state that has been "deliberate and calculating about its use of force,"¹⁷ it poses a significant implication for determining appropriate responses for mostly small but aggregating actions that are slowly eroding U.S. strategic interests in the region. These small actions, when evaluated individually, do not generate reactions that warrant military responses, something the United States relies on for coercion, with the most heavily funded armed force in the world. China is not the only adversary to address these concepts;

however, since this research is focused on Chinese gray zone actions, further definitions have been omitted.

Over time, the gray zone has become more accepted in the strategic lexicon, but its evolution highlights a critical aspect of Western thought. Varying definitions and arguing over categories demonstrates a Western propensity to deliberate, process and assign definitions when concepts do not fit neatly into well-established paradigms. Over time, there have been several terms — hybrid war, political warfare, gray zone actions, strategic competition — that all imply the same general concept with their own specific, nuanced details. This debate within the professional military dialogue and revolving struggle of defining the gray zone has proved relatively inconsequential in countering China’s efforts from a military perspective because no individual action justifies military response. Perhaps it complicates the situation even more as we try to fit worthy abstract concepts into familiar fixed categories. Meanwhile, a Chinese approach to these actions is likely adaptive to the environment, relational, and long-term focused, with each action calculated to remain below the threshold for military conflict.

The West must process how actions are perceived, what type of response is justified, whether they fit into established legal frameworks, and how they contribute to achieving an end state. Particularly confounding to Western thinking is the “salami-slicing” aspect of the gray zone. The fact that this metaphor relies on analysis of segments to derive the whole illustrates the crux of the problem. How do we, or should we, account for the aggregate of the numerous actions that remain distinctly below the threshold of armed conflict? The West has difficulty managing the strategic implications of these gray zone actions, and the goal of maintaining the status quo can be complicated if strategists do not consider the adversary’s likely strategic approach. “Westerners perceive the world in terms of dichotomies,”¹⁸ explain Jia Yuxin and Sun

Benqing. The authors compare the two cultural ways of thinking directly, “[Chinese] patterns of thinking can be well characterized as holistic, integrative, intuitive, relational, and dialectical which are almost in sharp contrast with those that can be characterized as analytical, abstract, and deductive prevalent in the West.”¹⁹ The salami-slicing strategy likely holds little bearing on Chinese thought, instead they likely see their actions as improvements to their position and influence without a clear picture of an end state.

Cultural differences cannot be attributed as the sole influence on approaches to gray zone strategy, as surely some interactions between the East and West have integrated the types of thinking. However, this cultural framework applied to gray zone operations can illustrate a more comprehensive approach that incorporates modes of thinking that are not typical in the West. There exists a predisposition for Western military strategists to categorize individual actions in the gray zone and develop appropriate responses in terms of end state as opposed to positioning. This approach should be reassessed in terms of both Western and Eastern modes of thinking and incorporate the three fundamental differences and how they apply to both perspectives in terms of efficacy. War and peace are two fundamental, albeit extreme, existences of a condition between nations, and traditional military power is structured to fall neatly into managing this conceptual environment. As the gray zone is defined from Western literature, the military is not wholly capable of achieving strategic goals through coercion.

China’s Maritime Gray Zone Actions and Chinese Thinking

Before addressing the maritime gray zone actions of the Chinese, it is helpful to address the proposed framework within official Chinese military documents and political statements. China’s *Science of Military Strategy* advises the reader of certain military principles, “act in obedience to the situation, change because of what the enemy does, and use troops after

measuring the situation, are basic military laws.”²⁰ Placed next to the United States' perspective on strategy, which states, “The ultimate goal of strategy is to achieve policy objectives by maintaining or modifying elements of the strategic environment to serve those interests,”²¹ this illustrates the point on efficacy addressed earlier. In the East, the environment or situation shapes the outcome of action, not imposing plans, but being adaptable and flexible in accordance with opportunities. François Jullien provides a model of effectiveness between Eastern and Western perspectives by saying, “two different modes of efficacy result from these two different logics: on the one hand, the relation of means to ends which we in the West are more familiar; on the other, a relation between conditions and consequences, which is favored by the Chinese.”²² China’s maritime actions when viewed under Jullien’s suggested model of efficacy and other identified cultural differences form the principle framework for its gray zone strategy.

In 2015, China published a new defense white paper entitled *China’s Military Strategy* in which it states that, “the traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned,”²³ indicating a strategic shift that emphasizes maritime operations. “China historically has viewed the sea as an invasion route by foreign aggressors, rather than as a medium for achieving national goals. This attitude appears to have changed during the past decade and a half, as China’s view of post-Cold War East Asia has focused on off-shore sovereignty, economic, and resource issues,”²⁴ points out Bernard Cole in 2000. Increasingly, China is becoming more aggressive in its maritime claims, using an array of national assets and strategies to continue to assert its interests. Therefore, China’s maritime gray zone actions will be analyzed exclusively apart from the other domains of the gray zone due to the shifted emphasis on maritime strategy.

Territorial claims within the region are complicated between the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and China’s claim of the Nine-Dash line,

emphasizing historical rights of islands within the East and South China Seas. In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague issued its ruling on a claim brought against China by the Philippines under UNCLOS, ruling in favor of the Philippines on almost every count. Yet UNCLOS lacks the proper authority to decide on sovereignty disputes over land features such as islands and rocks.²⁵ The law applies only in cases of disputes arising from maritime jurisdiction. While China is a signatory to the treaty, which established the tribunal, it refuses to accept the court's authority.²⁶ In a statement from China's Foreign Ministry, the spokesperson stated, "China's non-acceptance and non-participation position concerning the South China Sea arbitration initiated by the Philippines is fully backed by international law,"²⁷ clearly outlining China's stance on the international court ruling. This statement serves as a prime example of the perspectives of contradiction and rule by law.

It's useful to consider these different cultural perspectives on UNCLOS; China is a signatory of the charter yet picks and chooses what rules apply and when. Illustrating a likely Chinese perspective, Charles Moore says:

There is the famous Chinese synthetic attitude-sometimes called "mere eclecticism," although it is much more than that. This doctrine applies the Chinese spirit of harmony in the realm of the intellect and in the realm of religion as well as in the practical and ethical life of man. Coupled with this is the somewhat difficult-to-understand attitude of "both-and"-as contrasted with the Western tendency to think in terms of "either/or," such that the fine lines of distinction and exclusiveness so typical of Western life and thought and even religion are not common to the Chinese mind. In legal and political philosophy, one finds two of these fundamental elements-again in considerable disagreement with the West. One is the element of humanism, in which the individual person is more important than the abstract rule (in law, as in ethics), and the concept of "both-and," or non-black-or-white. / The other-also humanism-is the tendency toward rule by man rather than rule of law, although this is one area where much misunderstanding still seems to exist.²⁸

Within this passage, there are some fundamental arguments that can be made when applying this to the Chinese perspective of UNLCOS. Due to both/and perception, Chinese thought creates a rationale that while the agreement exists, they can be part of it, and also in ways, not part. The

United States is not a signatory to the treaty; however, it operates under the treaty's principles and a Western perspective would expect a signatory to honor the agreement. Furthermore, Chinese perspective on the rule by law rather than rule of law creates conflict with the Western perspective when abstract rules with supreme authority are not valued as much as situational rules are in Chinese culture.

When broaching legal matters, a Chinese approach to adjudicating arguments is far less rigid than Western perspectives. For example, Jianfu Chen stated, “The Kuomintang Codification Commission took a different approach. It believed that a vast country with a large population, would be unable to impose uniform and detailed rules on every sort of human activity. In the case of an absence of express provisions and expression of intentions of parties, the best interpreter was established local practice.”²⁹ While this specifically refers to domestic practices, it clearly demonstrates a Chinese propensity towards rule by law vice rule of law. In the case of the Scarborough Shoals incident, in absence of clear legal precedent regarding sovereignty, the Chinese were able to capitalize on the ambiguity of the situation, and forcefully took it through a series of lower threat actions that did not result in major consequences.

The Scarborough Shoals event in April of 2012 led to a two-month standoff between China and the Philippines over the actions of a group of Chinese fishermen illegally fishing. Scarborough is the largest atoll in the South China Sea, located some 220 kilometers from the Philippines and is located inside the Filipino Exclusive Economic Zone. China has claimed historical rights of ownership, arguing that it has been part of its ancestral territory since the 13th century.³⁰ When attempts were made to arrest the Chinese fisherman, escalation between the two countries ensued and the event resulted in a series of back-and-forth dialogue that lasted from April until late June with only limited agreements. By June 15, the Philippines’ vessels left

the shoal while Chinese vessels either remained or quickly returned and began denying entry to Filipino fishermen, resulting in *de facto* seizure of control by Beijing.³¹

This event shows the clear complications in adjudicating sovereign rights between UNCLOS and other aspects of international law. While China affirms its historical sovereignty, Scarborough Shoal has in fact been passed between multiple hands over time. China claims that it was the original occupant of the reef, but in 1898 the Spanish ceded the Philippines to the United States, including Scarborough along with other islands, in the 1900 Treaty of Washington. Manila claims that when the U.S recognized the independence of the Philippines the archipelago fell under its sovereign control. This example tests the limits of the Western concept of rule of law which can become bogged down in contradiction or lack of precedent, resulting in significant time lost.

Another predominant feature of China's gray zone maritime strategy encompasses an unprecedented island building campaign. Starting in 2014, China began efforts to reclaim more than 3,000 acres of land across the Paracel and Spratly island chains through massive dredging efforts. Beijing produced several ships, capable of moving tons of sand, rock and coral to create sizeable islands, with harbors. Once the islands were complete, China built runways and military facilities on them. One author, Lyle Morris, called it, "one of the most ambitious island-building campaigns in history."³² Andrew Erickson pointed out at the time, that the Islands "are growing at a staggering pace."³³ These efforts illustrate the impacts of Western categorization requirements, as well as challenges to Western based law. Once again, there was a situation where no established precedent for these actions existed. No nation had significantly pondered the idea of creating their own islands to expand their territorial seas, so it took time to develop an understanding of this environment.

Acting unilaterally, and against the resounding calls for a moratorium on reclamation from the Philippines and the United States, China continued to conduct its aggressive campaign and reinforced its self-proclaimed territorial sovereignty, which persisted well into the next two years. When ASEAN first spoke out regarding China's actions, Chinese leaders emphasized the civilian functions of these islands, although in reality, the facilities are considered dual use for both military and civilian purposes.³⁴ Over time, Beijing has restrained its use of military force to assert China's claims of sovereignty over these man-made features and U.S. military vessels have frequently traveled within 12 miles of them. Green et. al believe that the reasons for this are likely based upon constraints which "include diplomatic, legal and military aspects, [but these constraints] may be reduced in the future as China becomes a larger military power, and more influential in the region."³⁵

Challenging rights and notions of sovereignty, along with masking or denying intentions, has left the Spratly Islands with a sizeable PLA presence in the region. The buildup of "dual-use" facilities enables the PRC to fall back on the rhetoric of bolstering civilian capabilities and protecting national security to present a seemingly rational justification to its actions. In direct correlation with its concept of lawfare, China aptly exploits the environment in the gray zone by challenging the international framework for UNCLOS and, within a Western based legal system, that is insufficient to address an infinite spectrum of actions. Furthermore, the presence of military restraint on both sides enabled China to expand their presence in the Spratly Islands with little consequence, which is a critical piece to the calculated risk decisions that China has been inclined to make.

Andrew Scobell describes Chinese strategic culture, arguing that it follows two-strands, "a distinctly Chinese pacifist and defensive-minded strand, and a Realpolitik strand favoring

military solutions and offensive action.”³⁶ This seemingly paradoxical cultural view has strong implications within the gray zone and this island building campaign. It is an attempt at rationalizing the buildup of the islands as purely defensive in nature and provides an opportunity to rationalize the civil and military functions of these islands to protect Chinese interests. Utilizing the civil narrative here seeks to appease the international community while reducing risk and maintaining international standing, but more importantly, the rhetoric also justifies these actions as defensive in nature even though they are perceived as offense oriented and potentially hostile by the United States.

Another critical aspect of China’s maritime strategy is the use of its maritime militia forces. Andrew Erickson and Conor Kennedy noted that the nation’s foremost military newspaper emphasizes these fishermen’s flexibility and legitimacy, writing “putting on camouflage they qualify as soldiers, taking off the camouflage they become law abiding fishermen”³⁷; another both/and scenario as opposed to a Western perspective that would categorize the militia as a military force. In order to effectively enforce Chinese sovereign claims, the maritime militia force provides a sizeable fleet of fishing boats that can operate in large numbers to realize Chinese interests. Derek Grossman, a senior defense analyst at RAND, explains, “the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) plays a particularly important role in establishing a de facto Chinese operating presence in disputed areas—in effect, changing the facts on the ground, or at sea, as it were—to challenge counter-claimants’ ability to maintain control over disputed features. These classic 'gray zone' operations are designed to 'win without fighting'.”³⁸ Attribution becomes tricky when dealing with these militia forces for the United States as there are only certain conditions in which militia members can be deemed as combatants.³⁹ A Western approach of categorization complicates the ways and means that the

United States can act against these fishermen and provides an avenue of exploitation by China because of the West's tendency to assign terms for different actors: combatants, militia, civilian, etc.

In March 2009, multiple Chinese fishing vessels and military ships intercepted and harassed the USNS Impeccable while it was engaged in undersea intelligence collection in China's exclusive economic zone. Over the course of four days, the Impeccable encountered Chinese forces on multiple occasions, with increasingly aggressive actions including attempts to destroy a towed sonar array using long poles with grappling hooks by the Chinese fishermen.⁴⁰ U.S. Navy Captain Raul Pedrozo explained the United States was engaged in "lawful military activities in China's claimed EEZ at the time."⁴¹ He also lists several other similar incidents that have occurred since 2001, describing this trend of Chinese hostilities to show that this is not an isolated incident. The Chinese also coupled these efforts with a media narrative to discredit the U.S. operations. Oriana Mastro points out three main messages that were presented through the Chinese media following the incident: "(1) the US was being hypocritical and not forthright about what had occurred; (2) the US response was the result of a civil-military split in the US leadership, not so-called Chinese provocative action; and (3) the US policy position was based on maintaining maritime hegemony, not on international law."⁴² This example is straight out of the three warfares play book described earlier. Should the Impeccable have been harassed by purely military ships, or its sonar array attacked by a PLA Navy ship, it would likely have garnered a more assertive and direct reaction from the United States Navy.

To summarize China's efforts in the gray zone, common themes exist within essentially all of its maritime actions. First, rule of law and rule by law are two fundamentally different characteristics of Western and Eastern culture and can be identified across multiple maritime

actions. China's approach to its maritime strategy becomes complicated within a Western based legal structure, which has difficulty in managing actions that are not explicitly covered. Next, Beijing makes every attempt to challenge seemingly contradictory aspects of international law. In the instance of UNCLOS and the Chinese historic claims, this is applied across the region in examples like the Scarborough Shoal and the Senkaku Islands. Couple that with the calculated risk assumptions and forceful actions to unilaterally and illegally assert claims, there will likely be no significant retribution from others with regional interests. China can continue expanding its regional influence and complicating efforts of others to maintain the current status quo within the region. The island building campaign is also particularly confounding for adjudicating and managing actions when they do not fit neatly into a Western categorization of what is and is not acceptable. When these lines are blurred it makes attribution more difficult and changes the rhetoric regarding the situation. While nations with regional interests were evaluating how to proceed against China's dredging actions, the efforts were already well underway. Looking at these actions from a holistic perspective of situational advantage, it demonstrates a slow and calculated advance of Chinese influence in the region. Beijing can capitalize on the time it takes the West to garner regional cooperation and arbitrate determinations on China's unprecedented efforts.

It is impossible to provide direct causality between culture and gray zone actions. However, we can see that examining Chinese culture can help rationalize and understand the Chinese perspective of its actions and how it exploits the situation and environment within a cultural framework. Furthermore, responses to these actions are limited when the United States relies purely on military force and economic coercion. Accepting that the United States has led the charge on the international order and law since World War II, bringing its cultural

perceptions with it, China is able to challenge and, in many ways, justify claims through legal contradictions that occur within the system. Additionally, each action specifically segmented and analyzed individually as part of an objective will likely not align with a Chinese approach. To the West however, the results of cumulative actions demonstrate a concerning shift in strategic influence within the South China Sea.

U.S. Responses to the Chinese Maritime Gray Zone

It is clear there are shortcomings of Western institutions and laws that have provided China an opportunity to exploit the situation and expand influence within the gray zone. The limitations of Western thought are painted through this cultural comparison framework and provide an opportunity for introspection. It is critical for the United States to become more effective in the gray zone. Frier et al. state, “If the United States fails to compete effectively in the gray zone, it hazards ceding power, initiative, and influence in the Asia-Pacific region, putting vital national security interests in jeopardy.”⁴³ They further point out that the United States has been, or can, make efforts generally in three specific realms: “(1) Strengthening partner relationships and alliances within the region, (2) economically the United States has championed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to counter China’s economic influence in the region, (3) Information is an exploitable aspect for the Gray Zone.”⁴⁴ Of these, only two options remain, as it is important to note that the U.S. withdrew from the TPP in January of 2017.⁴⁵ This paper recommends an additional effort that the United States can undertake — to turn the tables and understand not only a cultural framework that emphasizes adversary actions but assists in identifying its own shortcomings that can be exploited in the gray zone. To date, long-standing international agreements have clearly proven insufficient for addressing the issues that have arisen in the maritime domain.

Regarding the Scarborough Shoal incident, the United States remained fairly disengaged from the claims between the Philippines and China. In fact, during an annual military exercise, the United States included a blackout on certain exercises, such as retaking an oil rig and amphibious landings.⁴⁶ The efforts to avoid provoking Beijing spoke to the United States' desire to not serve as a mediator regarding sovereignty claims. This stance of non-intervention eventually led to the *de facto* control of the shoal to China. Furthermore, the risk-aversion associated with the United States' position is seemingly a key aspect to China's understanding of the environment and gave it an opportunity to exploit for strategic gain.

Furthermore, Chinese buildup of the islands in the Spratly archipelago took too long for ASEAN to condemn, which gave time for China to continue its efforts until it was practically too late. The United States did request a moratorium on the reclamations and conducted demonstrations of military power through an increased level of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) with the Navy.⁴⁷ Its purpose was to discredit the Chinese belief that these islands granted them the 12 nautical mile boundary that is entitled through UNCLOS. It has also publicized the actions there to gain support and credibility among its alliances in the region. When the risks of dredging seemed to become too intense, China would back off somewhat to lower the tensions and then resume operations when the situation permitted.

Western based law is perceivably a very prescriptive and complex system, which implies it can be slow to react. In the case of this island building campaign, the timeliness of a response seems to be a critical factor in allowing China to effectively expand its defensive posture while others deliberate how to approach these actions. The legal system and international agreements have been wholly insufficient to address China's manipulation and actions, which demonstrates the shortcomings of the current environment. In absence of clear legal precedent, laws require

adjudication and time to deliberate. The time it takes to do this cedes the advantage to whichever party acts first.

The U.S.S. Impeccable incident was relatively straightforward with U.S. action. The Impeccable eventually returned with a U.S. Navy Destroyer, which prevented any further engagement from the Chinese. Afterward, Washington and Beijing conducted talks and reportedly reached an agreement to prevent future incidents, although Chinese harassment of reconnaissance vessels continued intermittently. Involving the PAFMM allowed the Chinese to conduct actions more aggressively due to the optics of the situation. Responses to the incident were limited because it was not a military ship attacking the buoys; once again, actions heavily nested within the gray zone and exploiting the limitations of Western cultural framework that places large emphasis on categorical relationships. More importantly, however, the United States relies heavily on its ability to manage the status quo with military and economic force. China has found ways to exploit this and earn strategic gains with a holistic long-term approach that renders the U.S. coercive measures less effective.

From this, the United States must understand that coercive measures through military and economic means are not wholly sufficient to address the challenges of the gray zone. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been at least two irrefutable truisms about United States diplomacy: first is the ability to control and coerce with economic power and second is the capability to back up that coercion with military power. Regarding China, Andrew Scobell points out “doctrine has shifted from “People’s War” in the Mao era to “Limited War under High-Technology Conditions” in the post-Deng era. There has been a transformation from an internal orientation with broadband duties to an externally directed PLA focus on the narrow technical competencies required to wage war in the twenty-first century.”⁴⁸ China is going to

continue to weigh the risks involved with its actions across multiple domains against the potential for a United States response. This paper recommends that strategic leaders consider this framework of key cultural differences and apply them to develop comprehensive gray zone strategies. Understanding how the Chinese culture perceives and thinks about the world is critical to understanding how its leaders find weaknesses in the current environment and it may provide useful insight into future efforts.

Conclusion

Cultural differences can have a resounding impact on how people think and act. Between the East and West, three fundamental characteristics with implications in gray zone warfare appear to be at odds. From research, action in the West is structured within a concept of theorizing a plan and applying it physically to achieve an idealized end state. Chinese thinking aligns itself with reality and seeks to capitalize on the circumstances of the situation to achieve the best possible outcome permitted. Further, cultural differences in the realm of legal matters, contradictions and categories have been highlighted through analysis of China's gray zone actions within the maritime domain. When these nest under the Chinese model of efficacy, it emphasizes a framework that is capable of identifying weakness in the current Western system and provides an opportunity to address those shortfalls.

Within the gray zone, binary categories begin to fall apart, and it is increasingly difficult to manage the array of complex actions that can exploit traditional methods of coercion. The gray zone is essentially a zone of competition, neither at war nor at peace, but all actions here lie somewhere in between. Traditional Western infrastructure is not sufficient to manage actions inside the growing complexity of gray zone operations. New concepts create new challenges and categorizing these actions does not necessarily come easily. Even agreeing on an exacting

definition on this complicated issue is difficult. The gray zone has been a notoriously difficult arena for the United States to operate within. Throughout the field, authors continue to conflate the term amongst other concepts, fail to render concise definitions, or refute the concept altogether. Adam Elkus even mocked the concept in an article in *War on the Rocks*, claiming the gray zone is a new term that does not make sense and that it “grossly over-exaggerates its own transgressions from the norm.”⁴⁹ All Western publications regarding the gray zone share a common theme: a shared recognition that the United States is increasingly finding itself operating outside of its strengths of military and economic coercion, and into a complicated arena between war and peace that nullifies the strength of the military in national power. Through a series of salami slicing techniques, interested entities are eroding U.S. interests in favor of upending the status quo to obtain more power and legitimacy.

China’s maritime efforts have been a resounding exemplification of gray zone strategies. From the harassment of the U.S.S. Impeccable conducting legal operations in the South China Sea, the stand-off at Scarborough Shoal, and the island reclamation in the Spratly archipelago, China has been calculating and effective at expanding its influence in the region. Beijing has been able to exploit ambiguities that the gray zone provides that become clearer from a dual-cultural perspective. China does not likely want to go to war with the United States, but clearly seeks to expand its influence in the Pacific region. Directly from the *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu states, “To win a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the highest excellence; the highest excellence is to subdue the enemy’s army without fighting at all.”⁵⁰

In order to better understand these relationships, further research should include other aspects of Chinese gray zone actions, including its use of media coercion in politics, use of cyber capabilities and economic policies. Ultimately, these concepts should be combined to identify

additional shortfalls in Western thinking that are applicable to the gray zone. Moreover, the United States should seek to adopt elements of Chinese thinking into its policies and actions in order to approach the problem more holistically, it should continue to emphasize competition, and it should attempt to restructure its traditional capabilities and organizations that are predicated on outdated notions of war and peace.

In history, Chinese and Western thought evolved in separate circles for much of their existences, and there is no way of directly evaluating the influence they have had on one another since their introduction. However, understanding certain tendencies to view the world holistically and inter-relationally can open new perspectives and break old paradigms when it comes to how Westerners tend to think about the world. Applying this framework to the gray zone provides a better approach to understanding Chinese strategic actions within this realm, but it also helps in identifying one's own weaknesses and strengths. Perhaps John Wilken's dream of universal language will never come true, but in the meantime, attempting to understand another's perspective will always be useful when resolving a problem.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," *Other Inquisitions* 1952 (1937): 103.

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