

# Hybrid after All: The 'Grey Zone', the 'Hybrid Warfare' Debate, and the PLA's *Science of Military Strategy*

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## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

Are China's operations in the context of the many maritime and territorial contestations of the Asia-Pacific aptly described by the 'grey zone' paradigm that first emerged in Japanese and American policy and academic environments? Or is the Euro-Atlantic 'hybrid warfare' paradigm a more effective tool to understand how China operates below the threshold of war? This study provides a new perspective on the debate between grey zone and hybrid warfare literature by examining how short-of-war military operations are discussed in two quasi-authoritative sources, both titled *Science of Military Strategy*, published within the People's Liberation Army ecosystem: the 2013 edition published by the Academy of Military Science and the 2020 edition published by the National Defense University. Ultimately, the two texts suggest that PLA strategists' understanding of the use of military forces to support Beijing's expansive sovereignty claims and 'maritime rights and interests'

closely resembles Western conceptions of hybrid warfare, rather than grey zone scenarios. Nevertheless, in partial contrast with recent scholarship on Chinese hybrid warfare, the sources examined suggest that Beijing's short-of-war operations are not conceived to produce a 'cognitive impasse' over the objectives, geographical scope, and modus operandi among its counterparts in the Asia-Pacific. Rather, they are conceived as an explicit form of deterrence.

## Introduction

The assertive turn of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the protection of its 'national interests' that occurred between the late 2000s and early 2010s<sup>1</sup> has decisively contributed to the (re-)emergence of multiple maritime and territorial contestations across the Asia-Pacific, from the East China Sea to the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. In the midst of these contestations, Beijing has displayed a vast repertoire of operations involving military and constabulary actors to defend and advance its interests in the region. Such operations include changes in troop deployments, basing, military exercises, attempted enforcements of Air Defence Identification Zones, challenges to US freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in international waters, and blunt engagements with both coast guards and fishing crews from states engaged in competing claims. In detail, the bureaucratic actors tasked with the conduct of such operations covered virtually all the different branches of the country's armed forces, all under the command of the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): its military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA); its constabulary force, the China Coast Guard (CCG), which since 2018 has been an organ of the paramilitary wing of the CCP, the People's Armed Police (PAP);<sup>2</sup>

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1 Nien-Chung Chang Liao, 'The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?', *International Affairs* 92 No 4 (2016): 817–33.

2 Between 2013 and 2018 the CGG was under the civilian control of the State Oceanic Administration. See Lyle J. Morris, 'Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty: The Rise of Coast Guards in East and Southeast Asia', *Naval War College Review* 70 No 2 (2017): 75–112; Joel Wuthnow, *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reforms*, China Strategic Perspectives 14 (Washington, DC: INSS, 2019), p. 15.

and the maritime arm of the militia (*minbing*) forces, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, this study tests assumptions from the grey zone and hybrid warfare literatures on Beijing's sovereignty-affirming operations. It does so by examining Chinese sources on those operations that in PLA terminology are defined as 'non-war military operations' (NWMO, *fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong*).<sup>4</sup> As stated in the 'Trial Outline on Non-War Military Operations' announced on 14 June 2022 by state media, Chinese NWMO cover not only emergency response, protection of the lives and properties of Chinese people, but also the prevention and neutralisation of risks and challenges to Chinese interests, the protection of national sovereignty, security, and development interests, innovations in the employment of military force, and the maintenance of 'global peace and regional stability'.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Outline also defines the parameters for standardising the organisation and conduct of NWMO and, crucially, provides a 'legal basis' for their implementation. Consisting of six chapters and fifty-nine articles, the Outline is an authoritative overview of how the Chinese party-state conceives operations routinely discussed in the grey zone and hybrid warfare literature.<sup>6</sup> However, as is generally the case with such official guidelines from the party-centre, the Outline's text has never been released to the public.

This study partially makes up for the fact that it is impossible to access doctrinal documents by examining two quasi-authoritative PLA documents concerned with NWMO, both titled *Science of Military Strategy* (*Zhanlüe Xue*, SMS). While the first SMS (henceforth SMS 13) was published under the supervision of the PLA's Academy of Military

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3 On the command and control of the PAFMM and its relationship with the PLA, see Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, *China's Third Sea Force, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA*, CMSI China Maritime Report 1 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, Naval War College, 2017), pp. 2–5.

4 The Mandarin locution *fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong* is the translation of the term officially adopted by the US Department of Defense between 1995 and 2006. See James Siebens and Ryan Lucas, *Military Operations Other Than War in China's Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2022), p. 4.

5 'Fabu "Jundui fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong gangyao (shixing)"' [Release of the Trial Outline on Non-War Military Operations], *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], 14 June 2022.

6 Ibid.

Science and was last updated in 2013,<sup>7</sup> the second SMS (henceforth SMS 20) was published under the supervision of the PLA National Defense University, and it was last updated in 2020.<sup>8</sup> SMS publications have been described as ‘an essential source for understanding how China’s thinking about military strategy is changing’.<sup>9</sup> Their relevance can be further appreciated when considering that ‘the PLA has no tradition of published doctrine where any officer (or soldier) can read strategic-level documents’.<sup>10</sup>

The rest of this study consists of four sections. The first section provides a concise outline of the grey zone and hybrid warfare literatures on China, identifying points of contacts and major fault lines. The second examines the discussion over NWMO within SMS 13, while the third makes use of SMS 20. The conclusion sums up the findings and compares them with the Western literature on Chinese grey zones, hybrid warfare, and strategic communications, while also framing them within broader discussions over the scope and value of doctrinal documents.

## Chinese Behaviour in Maritime and Territorial Contestations: Grey or Hybrid?

Western attempts to make sense of Beijing’s operations have relied on two constructs: the ‘grey zone’ and ‘hybrid warfare’. Operations in the grey zone have been authoritatively described as: ‘an effort or a series of efforts intended to advance one’s security objectives at the expense of a rival using means beyond those associated with routine statecraft and below means associated with direct military conflict between rivals’.<sup>11</sup>

7 Junshi Kexue Yuan junshi zhanlue yanjiubu, *Zhanlue Xue (2013 nian ban)* [Science of Military Strategy (2013 Edition)] (Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 2013)—SMS 13.

8 Xiao Tianliang (ed.), *Zhanlue Xue (2020 nian xiuding)* [Science of Military Strategy (2020 Revised Edition)] (Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 2020)—SMS 20.

9 M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s Changing Approach to Military Strategy: The Science of Military Strategy from 2003 to 2013’, in *China’s Evolving Military Strategy*, Joe McReynolds (ed.), (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2017), p. 41.

10 M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 29.

11 Kathleen Hicks and Alice Hunt Friend (ed.), *By Other Means: Campaigning in the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019), p. 4.

Consequently, grey zone operations are designed to be conducted below ‘a threshold that results in open war’.<sup>12</sup> The definition of hybrid warfare, instead, has been subject to intense debate. Originally, from the mid to late 2000s, the term referred to battlefield-related advances, and thus described ‘a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including violence and coercion, and criminal disorder’.<sup>13</sup> However, Russia’s operations in Ukraine since 2014, the following politicisation of the term among Western practitioners and academic environments, and increasing Western attention towards Chinese sovereignty-affirming operations at sea, in turn, have led to a more expansive understanding of hybrid warfare.<sup>14</sup> This development, in turn, has shifted the focus from the battlefield to the full spectrum of great power competition, revealing an unresolved ‘tension between the idea of hybrid warfare as a form or mode of warfare versus its understanding as part of a strategy’.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the term has been used to define also, in broader terms, ‘the blending of conventional and non-conventional methods to achieve political-military objectives by both state and non-state actors’.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars and analysts focusing on China’s expansive, sovereignty-affirming operations in the Asia-Pacific have fallen into two categories. A majority has embraced the grey zone construct as the primary conceptual tool to understand Beijing’s actions in the region.<sup>17</sup> A minority, instead, has assessed Chinese operations through the conceptual prism of hybrid warfare. Studies and commentaries on the subject have thus compared a Western understanding of hybrid warfare, primarily shaped by the Russian

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12 Ibid.

13 Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare* (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), p. 14.

14 Ofer Fridman, *Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Resurgence and Politicization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 158–59; Chiara Libiseller, “[Hybrid Warfare](#)” as an Academic Fashion”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2023).

15 Chiyuki Aoi, Madoka Futamura, and Alessio Patalano, ‘Introduction “Hybrid Warfare in Asia: Its Meaning and Shape”’, *Pacific Review* 31 N° 6 (2019): 701.

16 Ibid., 707.

17 Michael J. Mazarr, *Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015); Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Grey Zones Deterrence* (Washington, DC: 2017); Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson (eds), *China’s Maritime Grey Zone Operations* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

experience in Ukraine since the events of 2014, with Chinese doctrines of non-kinetic warfare—in particular the ‘three warfares’ (*sanzhan*).<sup>18</sup> Yet, given the dominance of the grey zone paradigm, scholars concerned with hybrid warfare have inevitably addressed the relation between the two, providing a wide range of (at times contradicting) views. Aoi and her co-authors have framed grey zone operations as a type of hybrid strategy.<sup>19</sup> Mumford and Carlucci, instead, have argued that while the grey zone should be understood as a ‘strategic term’ defining ‘the space of competition short of war’, ‘hybrid warfare’ should be framed as a concept belonging to the realm of ‘operational art’—the supposed intermediate level connecting strategy to tactics.<sup>20</sup> Finally, a number of analysts have questioned the need to distinguish between the two, effectively using both terms in an interchangeable fashion.<sup>21</sup>

Indicative of the conceptual contiguity between the two constructs, as well as of a fragmented and unsystematic research landscape, is the common use of the term ‘ambiguity’. Among those working within the grey zone paradigm, Feng defines ambiguity as one of the ‘fundamental characteristics’ of grey zones;<sup>22</sup> Wirtz argues that Chinese grey zone operations ‘exploit deterrent ambiguities’, namely ‘a lack of well-defined red lines’;<sup>23</sup> Pronk too sees ambiguity ‘utilised’ in grey zone conflicts ‘to

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- 18 Michael Raska, ‘Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics’, *RSIS Commentary* 262 (2015); Lora Saalman, ‘China and Its Hybrid Warfare Spectrum’, in *Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations*, Niklas Nilsson et al. (eds), (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021), pp. 95–112. On the ‘three warfares’, namely psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare, see Lee, Sangkuk, ‘China’s “Three Warfares”: Origins, Applications and Organization’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37 N° 2 (2014): 198–221.
- 19 Aoi et al., ‘Introduction “Hybrid Warfare in Asia”’.
- 20 Andrew Mumford and Pascal Carlucci, ‘Hybrid Warfare: The Continuation of Ambiguity by Other Means’, *European Journal of International Security* (2022). Mumford and Carlucci do not address either Friedman’s critique of the standard conceptualisation of operational art, nor his caveat about the application of operational art to the case of China. B.A. Friedman, *On Operations: Operational Arts and Military Disciplines* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021).
- 21 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Chronology of Possible Chinese Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019); Peter Kouretsos, ‘Annex A: Contextualising Chinese Hybrid Warfare’, in *Stealing a March. Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific: Issue and Options for Allied Defense Planners*, in Ross Babbage (ed.), vol. 2, *Case Studies* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2019), pp. 1–6.
- 22 Feng Jin, *The Gray Zone Issue: Implications for US-China Relations*, *Issues & Insights* 19, WP 14 (Honolulu, HI: Pacific Forum, 2019), p. 1.
- 23 James J. Wirtz, ‘Life in the “Gray Zone”: Observations for Contemporary Strategists’, *Defense & Security Analysis* 33 N° 2 (2017): 109.

weaken deterrence measures;<sup>24</sup> a recent RAND study includes among Chinese grey zone ‘tactics’ operations that are considered ‘ambiguous’ because of their ‘coercive potential’, even though ‘Beijing has not explicitly and officially messaged as such.’<sup>25</sup> Similarly, among those working within the hybrid warfare paradigm, Babbage argues that Beijing’s ‘hybrid campaigns’ are ‘designed to win advances where the status is unclear or ambiguous,’<sup>26</sup> while an authoritative NATO study on hybrid threats defines ambiguity—here understood as a deliberate attempt to obscure responsibility—as one of their ‘key aspects.’<sup>27</sup> In short, while for some China exploits ambiguous legal-geopolitical scenarios, for others it is China’s own operations that promote ‘hazy middle ground’ where ‘the information we need to make sense of an experience seems to be missing, too complex, or contradictory.’<sup>28</sup>

Only Mumford and Carlucci, who work within the hybrid warfare paradigm, have systematically examined to what extent Chinese operations are ambiguous. For the two authors, who focus specifically on Beijing’s conduct in the South China Sea, the ambiguous character of the PRC’s hybrid warfare can be traced back to three defining features. First, hybrid warfare leaves opposing parties guessing about all possible plausible scenarios that could emerge from its waging. Second, it constitutes a ‘strategy of dispersion’ that avoids ‘concentration of force and attrition’, forcing opposing parties to overstretch their capacities. Third, it relies on a combination of diverse tools (‘artillery, constabulary forces, [...] propaganda, [...] drones, legal claims’) and on the blurring of boundaries between domains, while remaining ‘below the threshold of legitimate

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24 Danny Pronk, *Fifty Shades of Grey: 21st Century Competition with China and Russia* (Clingendael, 2021), p. 2.

25 Bonny Lin et al., *Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China’s Coercion against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), p. 3.

26 Ross Babbage, *Stealing a March. Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific: Issue and Options for Allied Defense Planners*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2019), p. 28.

27 Ben Heap (ed.), *Hybrid Threats: A Strategic Communications Perspective* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).

28 Robert Mandel, *Global Data Shock: Strategic Ambiguity, Deception and Surprise in an Age of Information Overload* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 33. For the definition of ambiguity contained in the cited passage, see Jamie Holmes, *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* (New York: Crown, 2015), p. 15.

response'.<sup>29</sup> As a result, state actors engaged in hybrid warfare aim at leading opponents 'into a state of cognitive impasse regarding its political, strategic and tactical intentions'.<sup>30</sup> Chinese hybrid warfare thus is described as 'an ambiguous policy designed to delay hostile actions from allies and [slow] down the ability to determine Beijing's overall strategy'. Within this scenario, in which Beijing relies on the 'non-violent use of military force in an irregular confrontation', 'state banks and state-owned enterprises', together with 'state media', are 'all used harmoniously to achieve military objectives peacefully'.<sup>31</sup>

### Examining the *Science of Military Strategy* (2013)

NWMO are discussed in the eighth chapter of SMS 13. Following PLA official terminology, the text defines them as 'military operations that the armed forces carry out to protect the nation's security and development interests but that do not directly constitute war'.<sup>32</sup> They include operations such as counterterrorism and maintenance of stability, safeguarding national rights and interests, security and guarding, emergency rescue and disaster relief, international peacekeeping, and international rescue.<sup>33</sup> Beyond this standard definition, SMS 13 groups NWMO into four major categories: 'confrontational operations', 'law-enforcement operations', 'aid operations', and 'cooperative operations'.<sup>34</sup> While aid operations and cooperative operations play a critical role in China's global presence and influence,<sup>35</sup> only confrontational operations (*duikang xingdong*) and law-enforcement operations (*zhifa xingdong*) should be considered of critical importance to understand the design of those sovereignty-affirming NWMO that best reflect the perimeter of the grey zone and hybrid warfare constructs.

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29 Mumford and Carlucci, 'Hybrid Warfare', 8.

30 *Ibid.*, 15.

31 *Ibid.*, 14.

32 Quanjun junshi shuyu guanli weiyuanhui, junshi kexueyuan [All-Army Military Terminology Committee], *Zhongguo Renming Jiefang Junyu* [Military Terminology of China's People's Liberation Army] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2011), p. 163, as cited in SMS 13, p. 154.

33 SMS 13, p. 154.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

35 Siebens and Lucas, *Military Operations Other Than War*.



Confrontational operations concern the protection of China's sovereignty, rights and interests, and security against non-traditional security threats. They cover the monitoring, constraint, investigation, control, and ultimately attack of a potential target. While the primary targets are terrorist groups and transnational crime organisations, foreign countries too are included among the potential targets of such operations. Indeed, the alleged geographical scope of these operations, which beyond 'border regions' include also a more generic expression such as 'certain areas within the nation' (*guonei mouyi diqu*), suggests that the island of Taiwan—together with the many smaller islands controlled by authorities in Taipei—may be targeted too.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, confrontational operations are not conceived to remain below the threshold of a kinetic engagement with the opposite side. Rather, they may escalate to the point of turning into 'low-intensity confrontations' (*di qiangdu de kangdui*) and 'violent conflicts' (*baoli chongtu*)—even to the point of briefly reaching the intensity of war operations.<sup>37</sup>

Conversely, law-enforcement operations are more explicitly designed to target hostile countries or even coalitions within disputed border regions and 'international flashpoints' (*guoji redian diqu*). The rationale presented for these operations is a reactive one. They are conceived as a response to relatively large-scale and organised provocative behaviour by opponents, and they are conducted through border and coastal blockades, 'air policing' (*kongzhong jingjie*) within claimed Air Defence Identification Zones, the defence of 'maritime rights', escorting convoys, the issue of security alerts, and military patrols,<sup>38</sup> a catalogue that perfectly matches Beijing's operations not only in the South and East China Seas, but also in the Taiwan Strait following the collapse of cross-Strait relations with Taipei in 2016. Given the nature of the task and the identity of the targets, law-enforcement operations are considered not only the most frequent type of NWMO, but also the one conducted for the longest span of time. In addition, SMS 13 also highlights that law-enforcement operations must be conducted in a 'rational', 'beneficial', and 'restrained'

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36 SMS 13, pp. 162–63.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

way in order both to reduce the risk of escalation and to eliminate potential challenge to Chinese rights and interests at the earliest stage.<sup>39</sup>

While the passages reported above present sanitised, merely descriptive accounts of NWMO, the rest of the chapter also provides surprisingly explicit insights into the rationale behind them, which, in turn, casts such operations in a different light. At a broader level, the authors describe the full range of NWMO—thus including also aid operations and cooperative operations—as an ‘effective avenue’ (*youxia tujing*) to advance the achievement of Chinese interests and support their expansion on a global scale, because of their ‘relatively peaceful methods’, deterrence character, and ‘combination of soft power and hard power’.<sup>40</sup> NWMO, as a result, are conceived to ‘mentally deter opponents’ and ‘control the situation’.<sup>41</sup> The strategic calculus behind their design is ultimately summed up, perhaps stereotypically, by citing what is perhaps the most widely known passage from Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*: ‘to subjugate the enemy’s army without fighting’ (*bu zhan er qu ren zhi bing*).<sup>42</sup> In addition, the rest of the chapter emphasises how NWMO are but one component of a flux of military, political, diplomatic, and economic operations, thus requiring close and constant coordination with other organs of the party-state.<sup>43</sup> Here, it is possible to appreciate how PLA strategists’ conception of sovereignty-affirming NWMO closely resembles the emphasis on combining and coordinating different tools, bureaucratic actors, and domains to achieve strategic objectives that characterise the hybrid warfare paradigm.

The chapter also stresses an acute awareness of the impact of NWMO within the regional and international information environments.

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39 Ibid., p. 163.

40 Ibid., pp. 160–61.

41 Ibid., p. 164.

42 Ibid., p. 160. The translation in this paper is adapted from Sawyer. See Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 161. The locution is more commonly translated in English as ‘winning without fighting’. On the use of ancient Chinese strategic thought among contemporary Chinese strategists, see Andrea Ghiselli, ‘Revising China’s Strategic Culture: Contemporary Cherry-Picking of Ancient Strategic Thought’, *China Quarterly* 233 (2018): 166–85.

43 SMS 13, p. 164.

The authors acknowledge that certain types of NWMO, because of their ‘political nature’ (*zhengzhixing*) and sensitivity, may on the one hand contribute to strengthening the image of the country at a domestic level, while on the other hand exposing Beijing to attacks by foreign countries capable of distorting events for international public opinion. Mistakes in the conduct of such NWMO, as well as an ineffective management of media, could expose Beijing to political attacks of hostile countries.<sup>44</sup>

The description of sovereignty-affirming NWMO available here, however, should be framed within the authors’ assessment of the ‘strategic space’ (*zhanlüe kongjian*) in which China operates. Tellingly, this assessment dramatically diverges from Chinese official discourses tailored to foreign audiences. The authors of SMS 13 conceive ‘strategic space’ as a contested, dynamic environment that extends well beyond Chinese borders. Furthermore, the authors argue that exercising a degree of control over such space is in fact a necessity in order to sustain the country’s continuing security and development. This strategic space is dynamic because it transcends the immutable geographical features that shape geopolitics. ‘Since the beginning of warfare’ the strategic space in which major power operated consisted of the lands and oceans. Yet, because of scientific and technological development throughout the twentieth century, the strategic space extended first towards the air and space domains and eventually, with the further development of communication technologies, to the ‘intangible space’ (*wuxing kongjian*). Great powers, as a result, compete for strategic space not only on land, sea, air, and space, but also within the ‘information network space’ (*xinxi wangluo kongjian*).<sup>45</sup> Reflecting these momentous changes, the authors note how, throughout the *longue durée* of Chinese imperial history, ruling dynasties were primarily concerned with the control of land strategic space in the Asian mainland to guarantee the security of their polities. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the country’s ascendancy in the twenty-first century, the authors argue that Beijing’s security cannot be simply limited to the defence of sovereignty within its ‘home territory’

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44 Ibid., p. 165.

45 Ibid., pp. 244–45.

(*bentu*). Rather, it must respond to a different strategic imperative: ‘relying on the home territory, stabilising the periphery, controlling the near seas, advancing into space, and focusing on the information space’.<sup>46</sup>

Why is the Chinese ‘periphery’ (*zhoubian*) in need of stabilisation? According to the authors, the reason traces back to the increasingly hardened position of regional neighbours over maritime boundaries, island ownership, and maritime rights and interests. While the expression ‘maritime rights and interests’ (*haishang quanyi*) is ubiquitous in Chinese official discourses, the terms are ‘never expressly defined [...] and encompass a highly disparate array of goals and operations’.<sup>47</sup> This contraposition between Beijing and its neighbours on these issues, in turn, has left the country exposed to the machinations of ‘great powers’ (namely the US) aiming at endangering China’s security.<sup>48</sup> From this perspective it is possible to appreciate how confrontational and law-enforcement operations are primarily conceived as components of a *tixi*-system of deterrence.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, this specific subset of sovereignty-affirming NWMO is conceived with a clearly communicative intent—in stark contrast to hybrid warfare’s emphasis on leading adversaries to a state of cognitive impasse about their opponent’s objectives. Sovereignty-affirming NWMO are conceived to deter opponents by making Chinese military presence visible, by ‘expressing security concerns’ (*biaoda anquan guanqie*), and by ‘publicly declaring the strategic bottom-line’ (*xuanshi zhanlüe dixian*).<sup>50</sup> By doing so, NWMO can unmistakably communicate Beijing’s ‘position’, ‘approach’, and ‘resolve’, thus—at the same time—*helping* other polities to commit ‘strategic misjudgements’

46 Ibid., p. 246. The near seas ‘consist of the waters adjacent to China’s borders, i.e. the East and South China Seas, and the Yellow Sea’. Tom Guorui Sun and Alex Payette, *China’s Two-Oceans Strategy: Controlling Waterways and the New Silk Road*, Asia Focus 31 (Paris: IRIS, 2017), p. 5.

47 Isaac B. Kardon, *China’s Maritime Rights and Interests: Organizing to Become a Maritime Power* (CNA, 2015), p. 8.

48 SMS 13, pp. 79–80.

49 A *xitong*-system is ‘a discrete system that carries out specific functions’. Conversely, a *tixi*-system is ‘a large integrated system that comprises multiple types of *xitong*-systems’ which ‘carries out numerous and varied functions’; ‘Specifically, a *tixi*-system denotes either a system of systems or a system’s system’. Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the People’s Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare* (RAND, 2018), pp. 2–3.

50 SMS 13, p. 120.

(*zhanlüe wupan*), and guaranteeing continued control of escalation.<sup>51</sup> In this fashion, NWMO allow the Chinese armed forces to fulfil their mission and obtain greater ‘strategic benefits’ both ‘at lower cost than war’ (*bi zhanzheng xiao de daijia*) and through ‘a more flexible method than war’ (*bi zhanzheng gengjia linghuo de fangshi*).<sup>52</sup>

To conclude this section, it is worth highlighting how SMS 13’s designs for the expansion of China’s ‘strategic space’ explicitly articulated not only Beijing’s assertive shift in national strategy at a time when international scholarship vigorously debated and even dispelled narratives of Chinese assertiveness,<sup>53</sup> but also its preference for short-of-war measures in undertaking this feat. Causal links between doctrinal (or, in this case, semi-doctrinal documents) and foreign policy outcomes should not be emphasised when it comes to a ‘black-box’ state such as China. Yet, a new reading of SMS 13 stresses the importance of carefully scrutinising and maintaining access to Chinese sources. Beijing’s new push in early 2023 to further limit access to academic and trade databases indirectly confirms this point.<sup>54</sup>

## Examining the *Science of Military Strategy* (2020)

While the Academy of Military Science’s SMS 13 was published in September 2013, at the dawn of the Xi Jinping era, the latest version of the National Defense University’s own version of the SMS was published in a profoundly different geostrategic environment. In 2013 the Chinese militarisation of the geographical features that it controlled in the South China Sea was still well under way. The country was mired deep in a vocal sovereignty dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Cross-strait relations with Taipei—then under the Chinese nationalist

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51 Ibid., p. 120.

52 Ibid., p. 120.

53 Alastair Ian Johnston, ‘How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?’, *International Security* 37 № 4 (2013): 7–48; Björn Jerdén, ‘The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7 № 1 (2014): 47–88.

54 Diego Mendoza, ‘Western Scholars Are Worried China Just Got Harder to Study: Here’s Why’, *Semafor*, 22 March 2023.

administration of Ma Ying-jeou—were still on an upward trajectory. And relations with the US, while affected by the recent ‘pivot to Asia’ of the Obama administration, had not spiralled down into an all-encompassing great power competition. By 2020, instead, Xi Jinping had emerged as the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao. The PRC’s armed forces had incrementally expanded their capacities and undergone a comprehensive set of reforms.<sup>55</sup> Continuing tensions with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands had morphed into an uneasy *modus vivendi* between the two sides characterised by regular Chinese patrolling around and at times within Japanese territorial waters. The militarisation of Chinese outposts in the South China Sea had been completed—which greatly enhanced Beijing’s presence and projection of power over this ‘near sea’. Relations with the US had turned into overt great power competition under the Trump administration. And cross-strait relations had collapsed following the victory of Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party in the 2016 and 2020 Taiwanese presidential and legislative elections, leading to increasing military presence in the waters and airspace surrounding Taiwan, and to mounting speculations of a Chinese attempt to use force to change the status quo on the Taiwan Strait to finally achieve national unification.

Against this profoundly different backdrop, SMS 20 does not provide explicit insights into the role of short-of-war military operations in the expansion of China’s strategic space. The text offers instead a new taxonomy to understand the country’s military operations short of war. In lieu of the four-category grouping present in SMS 13 (confrontational, law-enforcement, aid, and cooperative operations), SMS 20 identifies nine types: anti-terrorism, stability maintenance (quelling of domestic protests), rescue and disaster relief, security and guarding of major events, international peacekeeping, international rescue, convoy escort, border closure (in response to cases such as infiltration by hostile forces, sabotage, epidemics, refugee crises), and overseas evacuation.<sup>56</sup>

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55 For a comprehensive view of the PLA reforms: Phillip C. Saunders et al. (eds), *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (National Defense University Press, 2019).

56 SMS 20, pp. 290–96.

Sovereignty-affirming operations which are associated to the realm of NWMO in SMS 13, such as ‘military deterrence’, ‘border control’, ‘establishment of no-fly zones’, and ‘limited military strikes’, have been instead deemed ‘quasi-war military operations’ (*zhun zhanzheng junshi xingdong*, QWMO).<sup>57</sup>

Comprehensively, QWMO are conceived as a ‘mode of military conflict’ that is situated between ‘war operations’ and non-war military operations, to be implemented in those scenarios where ‘contradictions and crises’ between China and its opponents have severely intensified without, however, crossing the threshold of war. From a Chinese perspective, the aim of QWMO is thus to contain, control, and eliminate threats before the eruption of a conflict,<sup>58</sup> an approach which explains the direct mention of ‘military deterrence’ (*junshi weishe*) highlighted above. Yet, when one considers the contested theatres in which Chinese QWMO would be conducted, such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, it is possible to appreciate how such operations do not simply constitute a form of conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence.<sup>59</sup> Rather, they also reflect the country’s distinctive view of deterrence, one that does not simply aim at ‘forestalling an adversary’s undesired action’, but that also ‘includes aspects of compellence, meaning that China often uses its military to coerce other countries to take actions Beijing desires’.<sup>60</sup> This reading is indeed confirmed elsewhere in the text, as the authors state that conventional deterrence is easier to control and less prone to escalation to nuclear war, thus both more convenient to achieve political objectives and more credible as a form of deterrence in itself.<sup>61</sup>

Here, it is necessary to highlight how the SMS 20 outline for the implementation of QWMO is in broad strokes consistent with Beijing’s response to the visit by then US House of Representatives speaker Nancy

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57 Ibid., p. 86.

58 Ibid., pp. 85–86.

59 James J. Wirtz, ‘How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12 N° 4 (2018): 58–75.

60 Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signaling in the New Era: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2021), p. viii.

61 SMS 20, p. 129.

Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022.<sup>62</sup> The same caveats previously mentioned in relation to SMS 13 remain valid for SMS 20. In other words, there is no ground to argue that the source provides a script that Beijing would mechanically follow according to the emergence of a specific scenario. Nevertheless, the extent to which Beijing's response was consistent with the outline present in SMS 20 should not be ignored. It is further evidence of the relevance of SMS publications as quasi-doctrinal sources capable of providing a glimpse into the black box of Chinese decision-making processes. Furthermore, the consistency of Beijing's actions with the design outlined in SMS 20 shows once again how short-of-war operations, while conceived in terms closely resembling the hybrid warfare paradigm, leave no space for ambiguities regarding political and strategic intentions, as instead argued by Mumford and Carlucci.<sup>63</sup>

To conclude this section, it should also be mentioned that the tripartite war/quasi-war/non-war taxonomy, beyond being absent from the official statements regarding the 'Trial Outline' issued in 2022, appears only in the fifth chapter of SMS 20, the one exploring 'strategy implementation'. Such taxonomy is not applied throughout the rest of the text. For instance, law-enforcement operations by the CCG—the constabulary force under the command of the PAP since 2018—in waters where Beijing claims jurisdiction are never explicitly designed as QWMO, even though it is necessary to note that they do not fall in the detailed description of NWMO provided in the earlier chapters.<sup>64</sup> Further uncertainty emerges from the text's claim that both the PLA Navy *and* the CCG are tasked with the vaguely defined protection of China's 'maritime rights and interests' in the 'far seas' (*yuan hai*).<sup>65</sup> This statement raises doubts over the scope and jurisdiction of Chinese laws, while at the same time reflecting the expansive definition of the country's 'strategic space' sketched in SMS 13.

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62 Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2022: Cross-Strait Security Spirals Further Down', *Asia Maior* 33 (2023) [forthcoming].

63 Mumford and Carlucci, 'Hybrid Warfare'.

64 SMS 20, p. 426.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 364, 426.



## Conclusion

Any expectations to extrapolate information predicting the course of actions of a state actor from documents possessing ‘doctrinal’ status must be severely tempered with caution. As Høiback notes, state actors always release doctrinal documents ‘with an eye to how it would be comprehended by adversaries and opponents, especially so unclassified doctrines’.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, a doctrine can gradually turn into something akin to ‘a weathercock or a thermometer, only revealing tendencies and policies it is ultimately unable to do anything about’.<sup>67</sup> These warnings are even more relevant when examining quasi-authoritative documents such as the SMS, even though it is still worth highlighting how (1) SMS 13 provided an articulated explanation for Beijing’s assertive shift and its reliance on short-of-war measures, and (2) SMS 20 reliably outlined the PLA’s response to the Pelosi visit to Taiwan.

Keeping in mind these caveats, this study has offered a new perspective on the debate on grey zone operations and hybrid warfare regarding China. International anglophone scholarship has failed to reach a consensus on Chinese operations in the maritime and territorial contestations of the Asia-Pacific. By examining PLA strategists’ conception of a specific subset of operations short of war (dubbed NWMO in SMS 13, and divided between NWMO and QWMO in SMS 20), this study found that the Chinese vision closely resembles the Euro-Atlantic conceptions of hybrid warfare, rather than the grey zone paradigm dominant in the Japanese-American milieu. While such operations are seen as a method to ‘win without fighting’, nowhere in the Chinese sources examined here is it possible to find prescriptions for the construction and exploitation of ‘grey zones’ designed to achieve politico-military objectives without risking the eruption of a major military engagement with opposing sides. In fact, especially in SMS 13, the risk that such operations might result in a major military engagement is openly stated. The PLA conceptualisation of short-of-war operations should then be understood both as a form of

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66 Harald Høiback, ‘What Is Doctrine?’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34 N° 6 (2011): 895.

67 *Ibid.*, 892.

conventional deterrence and as a tool to dominate escalation, a point already noted by Patalano before the reorganisation of the CCG as a branch of the PAP.<sup>68</sup>

Yet, at the same time, SMS 13 and SMS 20 qualify Mumford and Carducci's claim that Chinese hybrid warfare is ambiguous because it aims to throw adversaries into a state of 'cognitive impasse'. Chinese sovereignty-affirming NWMO/QWMO, as conceived by PLA strategists, are ambiguous due to their combining and coordinating different tools, bureaucratic actors, and domains to achieve strategic objectives 'at lower cost' and 'through a more flexible method than war'.<sup>69</sup> But there is little ambiguity in the Chinese deterrence playbook when it concerns the protection of the country's expansive sovereignty claims through NWMO/QWMO.<sup>70</sup> These operations are clearly conceived and designed to explicitly communicate threat and the possibility of retaliation. If, as Mandel argues, ambiguity is strategic when an actor promotes a 'hazy middle ground' where 'the information we need to make sense of an experience seems to be missing, too complex, or contradictory',<sup>71</sup> the operations examined here do not meet this standard. Similarly, the claim that Chinese hybrid warfare is ambiguous because it amounts to a 'strategy of dispersion', in other words, that it is designed to leave opponents guessing over the geographical scope of its 'law enforcement', have to be tamped down. Such ambiguity is more the by-product of the ever-growing asymmetry in capabilities between Beijing and its neighbouring polities, rather than the result of a design to enforce Chinese claims through unpredictable patterns. The only area where

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68 Alessio Patalano, 'When Strategy Is "Hybrid" and Not "Grey": Reviewing Chinese Military and Constabulary Coercion at Sea', *Pacific Review Studies* 31 N° 6 (2018): 831.

69 SMS 13, p. 120.

70 An awareness of party-state signalling at a rhetorical level further strengthens this point, especially considering SMS 13 and SMS 20 focus on coordinating management of the information environment together with operations short of war. See Paul H.B. Goodwin and Alice L. Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation*, China Strategic Perspectives 6 (Washington, DC: INSS, 2013).

71 Robert Mandel, *Global Data Shock: Strategic Ambiguity, Deception and Surprise in an Age of Information Overload* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 33. For the definition of ambiguity contained in the cited passage, see Jamie Holmes, *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* (New York: Crown, 2015), p. 15.

Chinese strategists appear to wilfully project ambiguity appears to be in the ‘protection’ of ‘maritime rights and interests’ in the ‘far seas’ where Beijing does not claim jurisdiction. On the one hand, the geostrategic rationale outlined in SMS 13 (and more tacitly acknowledged in SMS 20) links homeland security to the ability to conduct short-of-war operations in the many hotspots of global sea lanes of communication. On the other hand, in the absence of the ‘legal cover’ provided by sovereignty claims, explicit descriptions of Beijing’s *modus operandi* are arguably deemed not ‘politically correct’ enough to be articulated in the same terms as its actions in the ‘near seas’.

To conclude, the findings of this study are also relevant to the emerging scholarship on Chinese strategic communications, which until now has either investigated the construction of strategic communications (*zhanlüe chuanbo*) as a discourse on the effectiveness of the country’s external propaganda,<sup>72</sup> or has mapped Beijing’s strategic communications in relation to specific scenarios such as the current crisis in cross-Strait relations with Taiwan or the interstate communicative dynamics sparked by the articulation of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>73</sup> The connection may appear far-fetched at a surface level. After all, Euro-Atlantic frameworks of strategic communications, as encapsulated in NATO’s MC 0628 Military Policy on Strategic Communications, issued in 2017, emphasise its rhetorical dimension.<sup>74</sup> Yet, the NATO Terminology Working Group’s own definition of strategic communications as a ‘holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’<sup>75</sup> suggests

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72 Aurelio Insisa, ‘China’s Discourse on Strategic Communications: Insights into PRC External Propaganda’, *Defence Strategic Communications* 10 (2022): 111–52.

73 Naoko Eto, ‘Japan-China Strategic Communications Dynamics under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of “Third Country Business Cooperation”’, *Asian Perspective* 45 No 3 (2021): 533–58; Aurelio Insisa, ‘No Consensus across the Strait: Chinese and Taiwanese Strategic Communications in a Contested Regional Order’, *Asian Perspective* 45 No 3 (2021): 503–31.

74 MC 0628 states that ‘in the context of the NATO military, strategic communications is the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military operations, in order to understand and shape the Information Environment (IE), in support of NATO aims and objectives’. NATO, *MC 0628: NATO Military Policy on Strategic Communications* (2017).

75 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 46.

a more expansive understanding of the term. From this perspective, practitioners such as Fry have in fact stated that militaries can conduct ‘kinetic or coercive strategic communications activities’.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Aoi and her co-authors had previously argued how hybrid warfare can be ultimately understood as ‘the subordination of military operations to strategic communication[s]’.<sup>77</sup> Framing the subject of this study as a form of strategic communications, in turn, suggests the desirability further scrutiny of the operations undertaken by the Chinese military to shape the information environment below the threshold of high-end conflict, and whether they occur in coordination or in *apparent* contrast with both legal and propaganda tools targeting foreign audiences.

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76 Elizabeth Fry, ‘Persuasion Not Propaganda: Overcoming Controversies of Domestic Influences in NATO’s Military Strategic Communications’, *Defence Strategic Communications* 11 (2023): 203.

77 Aoi et al., ‘Introduction “Hybrid Warfare in Asia”’, 701.

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