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Introduction. "War without Gun Smoke" *China's Paranaul Challenge in the Maritime Gray Zone*

CHINA'S MARITIME GRAY ZONE OPERATIONS represent a new challenge for the U.S. Navy and the sea services of our allies, partners, and friends in East Asia. This volume is the product of the China Maritime Studies Institute's (CMSI's) conference of May 2-3, 2017, on that vital but understudied subject. More than 150 participants from the United States and allied countries gathered at the Naval War College in Newport, RI, to address key questions, including:

- What is the nature of China's operations to expand control over the near seas (Yellow, East, and South China seas)?¹
- What are the roles, missions, and organizational relationships of the China Coast Guard (CCG) and People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) in achieving China's near seas objectives?
- What are the implications of CCG and PAFMM actions for the U.S. Navy?

This volume covers China's major maritime forces beyond "gray-hulled" People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy units, with particular focus on China's second and third sea forces: the "white-hulled" CCG and "blue-hulled" PAFMM.² Increasingly, these paranaul forces are on the front lines of

China's seaward expansion, operating in the "gray zone" between war and peace. Beijing uses these forces to further its unresolved maritime claims in the near seas, an approach allowing China to "win without fighting."³

Beijing conducts these operations—more intensely assertive than normal interstate relations, but less intense than armed conflict—to alter the status quo without resorting to war. Chinese analysts and strategists regard these operations as efforts to "safeguard China's maritime rights and interests," or simply as "maritime rights protection." They include actions to assert Chinese sovereignty over waters adjacent to disputed land features and jurisdiction over other parts of the ocean, based on China's heterodox interpretation of international law.⁴ Reflecting the contentious nature of these activities, some front-line Chinese forces describe the situation at sea as "war without gun smoke."⁵ For simplicity's sake, and to focus on substance over semantics, this volume employs the widely recognized American term "gray zone operations."

The People's Republic of China (PRC) uses a range of tools from public diplomacy to economic coercion to defend and advance its maritime claims. This volume examines one aspect of that comprehensive national approach: maritime gray zone coercion. In this approach, the CCG and PAFMM operate on the front lines, asserting China's maritime claims through nonlethal means. They are backstopped by the Chinese military, especially the PLA Navy (PLAN), which compels foreign states to compete on China's terms. Together, these three sea forces—each the world's largest by numbers of ships—allow China to leverage its national power without risking armed conflict.

There is an urgent need for greater understanding of this vital topic. While China's maritime assertiveness has often been the subject of news and analysis, very few of these efforts have fully exploited the available Chinese sources. Some foreign observers understand what China is doing at sea overall, but few discuss how Chinese strategists characterize their own strategy. Nor is much published on the organizations executing this strategy, including some aspects of the CCG and nearly all aspects of the PAFMM. In seeking to fill these gaps, this volume catalogues China's maritime gray zone activities and the concepts and doctrines driving them; examines China's rapidly developing gray zone tools; and suggests countermeasures that the U.S. Navy can take now to better address these challenges.

As with all other CMSI volumes in this series, the introduction and conclusion of this volume reflect the editors' effort to synthesize the most important and interesting findings from the conference. The chapters themselves reflect the authors' personal views alone and not those of any institution with

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Like the conference on which it is based, this volume comprises five parts.

Conceptualizing the Gray Zone

Part one focuses on defining the gray zone and its significance. In chapter one, Michael B. Petersen reviews Chinese maritime assertiveness within the context of existing gray zone literature. Drawing from Phillip Kapusta, he defines gray zone activities as "competitive interactions that fall between the traditional dualities of war and peace." With insights from the work of Michael Mazarr, he outlines the key attributes of gray zone strategies. They are animated by a desire to alter, but not upend, the international order; they are intentionally ambiguous, thereby complicating efforts to respond; and they pursue their aims in a gradual manner. Drawing on comparisons with Russian operations, Petersen contends that China's gray zone actions differ from hybrid warfare. Gray zone activities deliberately remain in phases 0-I and avoid escalation to phases dominated by military action. Hybrid warfare, by contrast, employs military force as one means of compellence and therefore falls into phases II-V of the warfare spectrum.

In chapter two, Peter A. Dutton outlines key strategic dynamics. Beijing's objective in the near seas is to project all dimensions of national power into the maritime domain to enhance security, resource, and geostrategic objectives by creating a ring of control around China's maritime periphery. Since the Cold War's end, Washington's objective in maritime East Asia has been to maintain stability, not uphold the status quo. This allows China to undertake nonmilitarized coercion that avoids sparking conflict. Rather than adding escalation rungs at the top of the ladder, China's strategy adds rungs at the bottom of the escalation ladder by using nonmilitary units as coercive elements. This strategy exploits two asymmetries: Washington lacks gray zone forces of its own with which to contest Beijing's paranaul activities; and neighboring countries' paranaul forces are outmatched by Chinese paranaul capabilities and therefore cannot compete effectively. China's success is based on restraint, which involves careful avoidance of operational escalation to prevent crises and clashes that could trigger conflict. Washington has restrained its use of naval and military power to counter Beijing's actions and has focused on the objective of maintaining stability. Unfortunately, there is a disconnection between American political concepts of stability, which focus on avoiding conflict and

crises, and American military concepts of stability, which focus on the regional balance of power. This difference explains much of the tension between military and civilian leaders in policy responses to Chinese gray zone activities.

Debate persists regarding whether China's gray zone activities represent an outgrowth of the people's war concept, an issue addressed by Dale C. Rielage and Austin M. Strange. While the PAFMM clearly has deep roots in the people's war tradition, Chinese strategists generally do not conceive of their activities to assert China's maritime claims as a modern form of people's war at sea. Instead, they perform peacetime operations to protect "maritime rights and interests" derived from China's distorted interpretation of international law. At least in the South China Sea, the militia are part of a "PLA-law enforcement-militia joint defense system" (军警民联防机制), with the "militia on the first line" (一线民兵), "maritime law enforcement on the second line" (二线行政执法), and the "PLA on the third line" (三线部队). This has been described as a "rights protection law enforcement formation" (维权执法格局). When employed, their operations are guided by the principle of balancing *weiquan* ("rights protection") and *weiwen* ("stability maintenance").

Jonathan G. Odom examines the legal implications of China's maritime gray zone activities. Legally, there is nothing ambiguous about what Chinese paranaul forces are doing at sea; Beijing has "state responsibility" for their dangerous actions. PAFMM forces involved in the 2009 *Impeccable* incident, Odom emphasizes, violated five rules of the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea. More broadly, future employment of China's maritime militia in a similar fashion to impair or interfere with other exercises of maritime freedom by either U.S. Navy ships or other nations' warships would also violate the international law of the sea. Odom also shows that recent PRC efforts to use the coast guard and militia to strengthen its territorial claims are "legally futile" because they have occurred after the onset (that is, the "critical date") of the disputes.

China's Coast Guard

Part two addresses the missions, organization, and force structure of China's maritime law enforcement fleet, now consolidating primarily under the CCG. The CCG is evolving into a military-style organization increasingly based on the China Maritime Police model and optimized for conducting gray zone operations.

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Despite the 2013 decision to consolidate four maritime agencies under the CCG, Chinese maritime law enforcement activities in disputed areas still face major challenges. As Lyle J. Morris documents, interoperability and command and control have improved. However, major weaknesses persist. Based on a careful review of authoritative Chinese sources, Morris suggests that the new CCG lacks a unified recruitment and training system, that its personnel lack important skills and experience, and that the service operates without a proper legal framework for its work. He concludes that these problems will pose challenges for the CCG into the foreseeable future.

When China's maritime law enforcement reform began in 2013, Chinese leaders did not indicate whether the new CCG would become a civilian agency or a component of the armed forces. Prior to the reform, the bulk of gray zone operations had been performed by two civilian agencies: China Marine Surveillance and Fisheries Law Enforcement. In July 2018 the CCG was formally incorporated into the People's Armed Police, culminating its five-year evolution into a military-style organization. This is the subject of Ryan D. Martinson's chapter. In disputed areas, the increasing presence of armed coast guard cutters crewed by personnel belonging to the People's Armed Police is leading to an arming of China's maritime frontier. This affords Chinese leaders more options in the gray zone, including the possible arrest of, and use of armed force against, foreign mariners operating "illegally" in Chinese-claimed waters.

China has by far the world's largest coast guard, operating more maritime law enforcement vessels than the coast guards of all its regional neighbors combined. As Joshua Hickey, Andrew S. Erickson, and Henry Holst explain in their chapter on CCG force structure and trends, this includes more than 225 ships of over 500 tons, far surpassing the forces of Japan (about 80 hulls), the U.S. Coast Guard (about 50), and South Korea (about 45). At more than ten thousand tons full load, its two *Zhaotou*-class patrol ships are the world's largest coast guard ships. By 2020, China's coast guard is projected to have 260 ships capable of operating offshore (that is, ships larger than 500 tons). Drawing from lessons learned while operating in disputed areas in the East and South China seas, recent classes of Chinese coast guard vessels have seen major qualitative improvements. They are larger, faster, and more maneuverable, and have enhanced fire power. Many CCG vessels are armed with 30-millimeter (mm) and 76-mm cannons.

China's Maritime Militia

Part three probes the missions, organization, and force structure of the PAFMM—China's second gray zone force. Elite units empowered to engage in international sea incidents incorporate marine industry workers (e.g., fishermen) directly into China's armed forces. While retaining day jobs, they are organized and trained in the PAFMM and often by China's navy and are activated on demand. Most new units are more professionalized and militarized, outfitted with ships that resemble fishing trawlers but that are actually optimized for gray zone operations. Since 2015, China has sought to professionalize the maritime militia by offering high salaries and preferences for former military personnel. Sansha City in the Paracels now employs eighty-four large purpose-built vessels with water cannons and external rails ideal for spraying and ramming. Lacking fishing responsibilities, militiamen⁶ train for manifold peacetime and wartime contingencies, including with light arms, and deploy regularly to disputed South China Sea features, even during fishing moratoriums.

As Morgan Clemens and Michael Weber explain, the PAFMM mission is not limited to the gray zone. The militia is also expected to serve high-end wartime functions. However, Clemens and Weber contend, many characteristics that optimize PAFMM forces for gray zone operations could hinder the maritime militia's effectiveness in executing higher intensity wartime missions necessitating closer interaction with the PLA. Likewise, the organizational and technological simplicity of many maritime militia units and vessels, which makes the force so cost-effective and versatile, may undermine the militia's capacity to execute the more specialized and technical missions and roles that Chinese policy assigns to it in wartime.

Mark A. Stokes examines the PAFMM's long-established role in peacetime and wartime reconnaissance operations. In peacetime, operating directly under the PLA chain of command, militia forces monitor foreign activities in Chinese-claimed waters. Although less technologically sophisticated than PLAN or CCG forces, their ubiquity in disputed areas enables them to fill in gaps in the common operational picture. Their civilian guise also allows them to perform missions that would be too provocative if undertaken by naval or coast guard forces. In wartime, the PLA would likely rely in part on the PAFMM to locate and target foreign naval forces. Mobilized militia units, including fixed and mobile elements, can offer various forms of reconnaissance support to the PLA. During a conflict, properly trained and equipped militia forces could supplement PLA maritime intelligence, surveillance, and

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reconnaissance (ISR) assets, providing technical and electronic reconnaissance, observation, and communication to theater component commands.

As Conor M. Kennedy explains in his chapter, the PAFMM can perform a broad range of maritime gray zone operations, including presence activities to demonstrate Chinese sovereignty; harassment of foreign civilian and military vessels; ISR of foreign activities; and escort operations to protect Chinese civilian vessels from foreign harassment while in disputed areas. Aside from offering a less escalatory means to assert China's maritime claims, militia forces have other advantages vis-à-vis the CCG and the PLAN: they operate smaller, more maneuverable vessels capable of plying shallower waters, and they have much greater numbers than the other sea services.

Near Seas Scenarios

Part four examines recent and potential future gray zone activities and scenarios in the South and East China seas.

Bonnie S. Glaser and Matthew P. Funaiole examine a range of Chinese gray zone activities in the South China Sea designed to demonstrate and assert jurisdiction over disputed locations. In some cases, China has relied on layered, multi-sea force "cabbage" tactics to achieve its objectives. More commonly, however, China has demonstrated a pattern of using CCG and PAFMM forces to engage in small-scale actions aimed at strengthening its administration of areas within the nine-dash line. If not countered effectively, they conclude, Beijing will continue to exploit the gray zone and make strides in advancing its expansive claims toward the goal of gaining effective control over the contested space in the South China Sea.

In the East China Sea, Adam P. Liff emphasizes, Chinese gray zone operations have focused on the Senkakus. There, Beijing's post-2012 maritime gray zone operations appear aimed at overturning the status quo of Japan's administrative control in a manner tailored to exploit existing operational, legal, and alliance gaps—as well as Japan's general reluctance to use force or otherwise escalate. The CCG's creeping militarization, expanding numbers, size, and capabilities, and growing presence in the Senkakus' contiguous zone and territorial seas, coupled with the ever-present fear of PAFMM forces occupying the islands, have prompted Japan to enhance doctrine, forces, and capabilities.

If China's current behavior is not countered, Katsuya Yamamoto contends, Beijing will almost certainly engage in more assertive behavior in the East China Sea, as it has in the South China Sea. Chinese energy companies may

position oil and gas drilling platforms east of the median line, perhaps under the escort of CCG and PAFMM forces. CCG units may obstruct Japanese economic and scientific activities by sailing dangerously close to Japanese survey ships or even cutting towed cables. The PAFMM and CCG already conduct ISR in the East China Sea and may do so more extensively in the future. In May 2017 PRC defense minister Chang Wanquan commended a PAFMM reconnaissance unit for conducting close surveillance of missile range instrumentation ship USNS *Howard O. Lorenzen* in July 2014.

Notably, after the foundational research for this volume had been completed, the U.S. Department of Defense issued its 2018 China military power report. That official document's extensive PAFMM-related content strongly validated key findings from the chapters in this and the previous section, as well as from CMSI's research more broadly. The report also revealed PAFMM participation in a recent Senkaku Islands event, which the authors had been unable to confirm conclusively with open sources: "The militia has played significant roles in a number of military campaigns and coercive incidents over the years, including . . . a large surge of ships in waters near the Senkakus in 2016." More broadly, it affirms, "The PAFMM . . . is active in the South and East China Seas."

Policy Challenges and Options

Part five identifies challenges for the U.S. Navy and government, as well as possible policy options. Of broader long-term importance, China's gray zone forces support a significant shift in maritime force posture: from a three-sea force focus on regional seas to a division of labor in which CCG and PAFMM roles and missions expand to relieve the PLAN as it significantly increases its missions overseas. China's second and third sea forces are helping to operationalize a naval strategy that has evolved from near-coast defense to near seas defense and far seas protection even as China retains its strongest maritime focus on the near seas, and the PLAN will still have a major role to play there. As these developments continue to unfold, the U.S. Navy will have to monitor them carefully and prepare effective responses.

Meanwhile, near seas gray zone operations remain a Chinese focal point in the near term. To understand escalation control therein, retired Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Admiral Tomohisa Takei explores two possible Chinese escalation curves. He finds that the role of white hulls is becoming more important for both sides. To offset China's gray zone activities, he

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recommends that Japan and other maintainers of the status quo react quickly. Early detection of preliminary activities is critical in order to deploy countermeasures effectively. The aim, Takei writes, is to restore the status quo ante as quickly as possible. Information collecting capability in partnership with allies is therefore essential.

Michael Mazarr examines China's gray zone approaches through the prism of deterrence and escalation risks and offers a framework for developing a strategy for deterring gray zone activities that the United States considers to be unacceptable. Deciding where the real red lines actually lie with regard to such tactics, he argues, is the most important, and challenging, aspect of a deterrent strategy. The United States and its allies should not simply seek to "deter" PRC gray zone activities. They should instead formulate a broad-based strategy for dealing with them. Citing the work of Thomas Rid, Mazarr suggests that when faced with Chinese actions that cannot be easily deterred, the United States and its allies should consider the three-pronged approach that Israel has adopted against Hezbollah attacks: be sure to respond, do so immediately, and ensure that retaliation is slightly more severe than the original provocation.

In comparing responses to China's gray zone depredations, Bernard Moreland finds Hanoi's pragmatic operational resistance more effective than Manila's nebulous appeals to its U.S. alliance and international law. During the 2014 Hai Yang Shi You 981 oil rig incident—China's largest, most sophisticated gray zone operation to date—it was forced to deploy a security cordon comprising dozens of vessels and to prepare expensive military options in case Vietnam used force. Hanoi's provocative and inflammatory strategy significantly raised the cost Beijing paid for its aggression. Vietnam showed that China cannot drill for oil in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone without a security force that would render the effort sharply uneconomical. As Moreland emphasizes, China has not repeated the event. This case illustrates how other states can successfully respond to China's gray zone expansion, but they must be willing to accept some degree of risk.

Whereas the preceding chapters have probed the nature of the maritime gray zone and China's activities therein, the conclusion by Ryan D. Martinson and Andrew S. Erickson builds on these collective findings by examining how the United States has responded to China's maritime gray zone strategy. Despite some irritating behavior by Beijing, they maintain, the United States has effectively defended its rights as a seafaring state. It has done so by operating wherever international law allows and daring Beijing to stop it—an example of what James Cable called the "definitive" use of sea power. More complex are policy options for supporting allies' ability to do the same. Here, the U.S.

record has been mixed. The U.S. military has tended not to operate directly on the front lines to help U.S. allies defend their legitimate maritime rights. Instead, it has served a deterrent function. This approach, while able to discourage the most egregious Chinese behavior, has failed to prevent China from advancing in the gray zone. In the future, U.S. policymakers should consider a more direct role for American sea power by empowering it to use non-lethal methods to defend allies' rights to use and administer waters that fall unambiguously under their jurisdiction. Doing so would involve greater risk of tension with China, but the risk is manageable and ultimately is a necessary element of any effective response to China's gray zone expansion.

Notes

1. Since China's maritime gray zone operations appear to be by far the most extensive in the South and East China seas, this volume focuses on them and does not examine activities in the Yellow Sea.
2. This volume focuses on China's 海上民兵 (maritime militia), Beijing's third sea force, which operates in waters removed from China's immediate coast and has long been involved in international sea incidents there. This should be distinguished from another militia element, the 海防民兵 (coastal defense militia). Both the maritime militia and coastal defense militia are subsets of China's coastal defense forces (海防力量), which include the PLAN's brown water patrol craft and corvettes, coastal defense cruise missile and radar units, the PLA Air Force's coastal surface-to-air missile units and radars, and the army's coastal defense brigades found in the three maritime theaters (海防旅)—recently formed brigades that consolidate former coastal defense units, whose area of responsibility may span multiple provinces and integrate infantry, reconnaissance, artillery (including in at least one case long-range multiple rocket launchers), air defense, amphibious craft, and observation units. PLA coastal defense units (解放军海防部队) are not properly regarded as part of the PLAN but rather as PLA units based on land for defense of the coast. China's latest official compilation of military terms, approved by the Central Military Commission (CMC), defines these units (海防部队) as: "Army forces stationed in coastal areas and islands that conduct missions in coastal and island defense and associated coastal defense administrative control" (陆军中驻扎在沿海地区及岛屿, 担负沿海海岸、岛屿防卫和相关海防管控等任务的部队。) 中国人民解放军军语 [China People's Liberation Army Military Terms] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Press], 2011), 334. Similarly, "海防民兵" are today best translated as "coastal defense militia," especially as the maritime militia increase their range and coordination with China's other maritime forces. In the early decades of the PRC, Chinese fishermen did not venture far from mainland China's coastline, so militia organizations composed of fishermen (the maritime militia) were closely related to the coastal defense militia. In the contemporary context, the term "coastal defense militia" is most often used to describe coastal defense installations/outposts and primarily land-based militia engaged in defense

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of coastal waters, those surrounding disputed islands. The term "maritime militia," while referring to units comprising fishermen with many smaller units still serving the coastal defense function, is today typically used in reference to the non-land-based militia components, literally "sea-borne [海上] militia [民兵]." In an example of semantic inertia, however, some Chinese sources still refer to the maritime militia as coastal defense militia.

3. This volume uses the term "maritime claims" to cover all types of disputes involving China in the near seas, including land, jurisdiction, resources, and military activities in the exclusive economic zone.
4. One military source has described China's gray zone activities as a "low-intensity maritime rights protection struggle" (低强度海上维权斗争), a "product of full-spectrum national defense mobilization" (国防动员) to "achieve political goals by confronting the opposition at minimal cost to international reputation . . . and prevent escalation." 杨胜利, 耿跃亭 [Yang Shengli and Geng Yueting], "对加强低强度海上维权国防动员的战略思考" ["The Strategic Thinking of Strengthening National Defense Mobilization for Low-Intensity Maritime Rights Protection"], 国防 [National Defense] 1 (2017): 29–32.
5. The Chinese phrase is "一场没有硝烟的战争." It is sometimes used in the context of front-line rights protection operations conducted by coast guard forces. See, for instance, "纪念中国海监南海总队成立10周年" ["Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Founding of the South China Sea Contingent of China Marine Surveillance"], 国家海洋局南海分局 [website of the State Oceanic Administration's South China Sea Branch], September 21, 2009, www.scsb.gov.cn/scsb/fjdt/200909/of4cc3256ebf4b8cbd157b8e264dfd3e.shtml. See also 张延敏 [Zhang Yanmin], "坚定信心维护海洋权益" ["Confidently Safeguard Maritime Rights and Interests"], 中国海洋报 [China Ocean News], January 18, 2013, 3; 赵叶苹 [Zhao Yeping], "亲历中越舰船南海对峙" ["Personal Witness to a Confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese Ships in the South China Sea"], 国际先驱导报 [International Herald Leader], July 24, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/herald/2009-07/24/content_11764017.htm; and 芦垚、钱亚平 [Lu Yao and Chen Yaping], "东海海监维权十年: 如同一场没有硝烟战争" ["10 Years of CMS Rights-Protection in the East China Sea: Just Like a War without Gun Smoke"], 瞭望东方周刊 [Oriental Outlook], September 24, 2012, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sd/2012-09-24/114225240228.shtml>.
6. In this volume, "militiamen" covers both male and female PAFMM personnel.
7. Office of the Secretary of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018 (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, August 16, 2018), <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>, esp. 71–72; Andrew S. Erickson, "Exposed: Pentagon Report Spotlights China's Maritime Militia," *National Interest*, August 20, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/exposed-pentagon-report-spotlights-china%E2%80%99s-maritime-militia-29282>.