

2020 Kiser Family Irregular Warfare Contest: First Place

# Closing the Gray Zone Gap

Future Marine Corps civil-military operations in the South China Sea

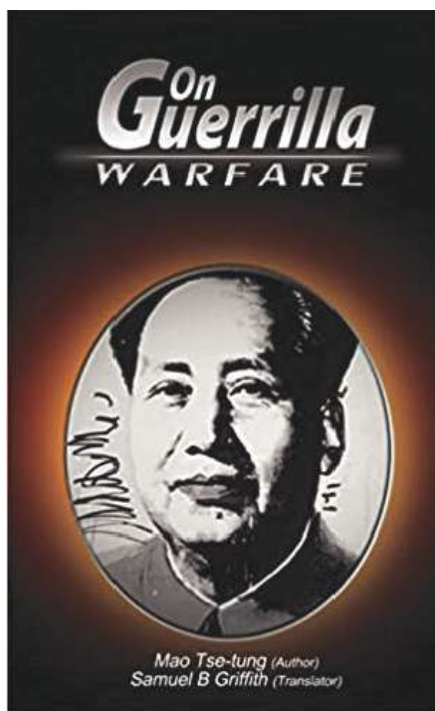
by 1stLt Matthew Beattie-Callahan

According to Mao Zedong, We must unite the strength of the army with that of the people ... Thus the time will come when a gradual change will become evident in the relative position of ourselves and our enemy, and when that day comes, it will be the beginning of our ultimate victory.<sup>1</sup>

While Mao was referring to combatting a militarily superior Japanese enemy in his 1937 book, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, his words would be just as apt today in describing Chinese strategy in the South China Sea (SCS). In this region, China has proven extremely adept at mobilizing civil capabilities (“the people”) in concert with the limited application of hard power (“the army”) to achieve “gradual change” that now amounts to a substantial departure from the status quo of two decades ago. Chinese success in synergizing civil and military capabilities has occurred in a portion of the conflict continuum frequently referred to as the gray zone, where the American military is ill-equipped doctrinally and operationally to act.

In response, Marine Corps civil-military operations (CMO) must shift away from its traditional stability-centric model and focus on leveraging civil capabilities to facilitate military action in the gray zone. Relying on their understanding of both the military and civil society, civil affairs (CA) Marines can identify, plan, and coordinate mutually reinforcing or joint actions between the two domains. Among the Services, the Marine Corps is especially well suited

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***Mao Tse-tung On Guerrilla Warfare originally published 1937. Translated and introduced by Gen Samuel B. Griffith. USMC, also available as FMFRP 12-18 Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare. (Public Domain.)***

for this task in the littoral environment of the SCS; Marines can serve as the vital connective tissue linking military actions in the maritime arena with the landbased economic, political, and social

orders affected by them. This is a radical shift from our traditional understanding of CMO and CA, yet it is necessary to close a widening non-traditional capability gap that has left our Service and country floundering to re-gain initiative in a vital maritime environment.

## The Gray Zone Gap

Even as China strives to build its conventional military arsenal, it is clear China does not seek a frontal confrontation with the United States. Instead, China again looks to Mao, who advises (in true maneuver warfare fashion), “strike the weak spots in the enemy’s flanks, in his front, in his rear.”<sup>2</sup> China finds these American weak spots in the gray zone. The gray zone is alternately defined by the Center for Strategic and International Studies as:

a form of conflict that: pursues political objectives through integrated campaigns; employs mostly nonmilitary or nonkinetic tools; strives to remain under key escalatory or red line thresholds to avoid outright conventional conflict, and; moves gradually toward its objectives rather than seeking conclusive results in a relatively limited period of time,

or more succinctly, “the contested arena somewhere between routine statecraft and open warfare.”<sup>3</sup>

The existing gray zone gap between China and the United States is in large part because of cultural differences in their military doctrine and civil society. While the American military establishment has only recently looked beyond the traditional binary of war and peace toward a new conflict continuum, the Chinese state was born

lawfare campaign in support of its “9-dash line,” which arbitrarily claims 80 percent of the SCS.<sup>5</sup> China’s civilian fishing fleet is one of its most visible and oft used gray zone tools. These civilian vessels have been central to some of China’s most high-profile actions in the SCS, including the *USNS Impeccable*, Scarborough Shoal, and *Viking II*

and hybrid warfare arsenals are weak at best, poorly organized, and grossly under-resourced. There is clearly a strategy mismatch between China and the Western allies.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the United States is unable (or unwilling) to fully utilize its hard power and lacks the doctrinal and operational ability to leverage soft power or civil capabilities. This has left the United States with no credible strategy to counter Chinese gray zone actions. While most of the American military establishment remains hyperfocused on preparing for a future conventional conflict, China is winning that future fight now. With a full-throated conventional response considered too bellicose, and no response an unacceptable surrender, we must look to Marine Corps CMO to lead the way in developing a new more aggressive strategy that leverages civil capabilities to not only blunt but also push back against Chinese actions in order to close the formidable gray zone gap.

### **The Wrong Answers**

The Marine Corps has a large collection of recent CMO experience to draw on: two decades of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations where CMO played an integral role in winning “hearts and minds” and a Pacific Combatant Command whose real-world experience since Vietnam consists almost exclusively of humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) operations. Yet, to think that we should look backward at this substantial portfolio of experience in order to discern the path ahead is patently incorrect. In their *Gazette* article, “Forward and Enduring,” CWO4 James Jabinal and Col Valerie Jackson write, “the Marine Corps needs to break free from the prevailing misconception that CA relevancy exists only during post-combat stability oriented operations or ... HA/DR operations.”<sup>9</sup> Nowhere is this statement more relevant than in the SCS.

The SCS is a radically different environment than Iraq and Afghanistan. Because of the Marine Corps’ logistical capacity in austere environments and higher risk tolerance for personnel, CA Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan

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from two decades of insurgency where front lines were fluid, combatant definitions were ambiguous, and enemies one year became allies the next. This insurgent experience, less than a century old, has allowed a growing conventional Chinese military to remain rooted in Maoist guerilla doctrine and embrace the irregular strategy and tactics required of the gray zone. Similarly, China’s disregard for international law and ethical norms gives it greater flexibility. This Chinese outlook is again best described by Mao who writes that there is no use for “stupid scruples about benevolence, righteousness and morality in war.”<sup>4</sup> From a civil perspective, the authoritarian, centralized Chinese government can bring to bear civil capabilities (economic, informational, industrial, scientific, etc.) that typically belong to private entities outside the government’s control in a liberal democracy like the United States. These factors allow China to pursue a unified course of civil-military strategic action in the SCS, simultaneously leveraging civil and military capabilities in pursuit of regional hegemony.

Examples of Beijing’s creative combinations of civil-military actions in the gray zone are numerous. The combined threat of Chinese naval action and economic isolation is used to discourage international oil companies from working with smaller Southeast Asian countries to explore oil fields inside their exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Military information operations complement Beijing’s

incidents. While fishing trawlers played the lead role in these incidents, military vessels lurked off-stage nearby, underscoring how China’s gray zone strategy incorporates both soft and hard power.

The National Security Strategy clearly identifies the threat of these gray zone actions that operate “below the threshold of open military conflict and at the edges of international law,” stating,

such actions are calculated to achieve maximum effect without provoking a direct military response from the United States. And as these incremental gains are realized, over time, a new status quo emerges.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this, the U.S. military still has not formulated a coherent doctrinal or operational response. Kathleen Hicks of the Center for Strategic and International Studies writes,

too often the U.S. approach has been reactive and ad hoc. In particular, the United States lags in necessary capabilities in indications and warning; decisionmaking quality and speed; public-private collaboration; and transitioning to a campaign mindset for competing against gray zone challenge.<sup>7</sup>

Ross Babbage of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments agrees, saying,

most decision-makers in the West still consider themselves to be in a state of “peace” and are not inclined to initiate actions that they fear Beijing may consider provocative. Their political



**Partnering with indigenous force and Navy partners can provide access for Civil Reconnaissance.** (Photo by LCpl Allison Bak.)

performed stability tasks normally delegated to other civilian government agencies. As we transition to the more permissive environment of Southeast Asia, we must pass the torch back to agencies such as USAID, the Department of State, Department of Justice, and Department of Agriculture. These agencies are better equipped and organized to perform routine development and stability functions. Narrowing our portfolio of responsibility will allow us to focus limited capacity on true joint civil-military operations instead of civil functions performed by military personnel.

When operating inside partner nations, CA personnel cannot expect the unilateral freedom of action enjoyed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Commands must place an emphasis on developing relationships with partner nation governments and securing their support and assistance for operations. Similarly, CMO operations cannot occur independent of the other military operations conducted in theater. From the combined action platoons of Vietnam to the provincial reconstruction teams of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps has a tradition of giving those carrying out CMO a general intent and then allowing them to conduct dispersed operations, independent

of ground forces and commanders. While this construct worked well during COIN campaigns, an independent mindset will prevent the coordinated action necessary for successful CMO in the gray zone. CMO needs to be an active player that shapes and integrates with the main effort scheme of maneuver, not a parallel line of effort.

We are not looking to win hearts and minds in the SCS region. SCS partner nations work with the United States because of mutual interests and our ability to credibly deter Chinese actions, not some reservoir of goodwill. Besides, most of the key players in the SCS already have an overwhelmingly positive opinion of the United States—more likely because of their fear of China than any magnanimous American actions. In Vietnam, 84 percent of those surveyed had a favorable opinion of the United States, 80 percent in the Philippines, and 68 percent in Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, 85 percent of citizens in Southeast Asian nations said they are “worried about China’s political and strategic influence.”<sup>11</sup> Actions which credibly deter China will do more to secure the cooperation of partner nations than developmental or aid projects.

Because of the region’s propensity for natural disasters, Marine Corps HA/DR operations have dominated CMO

in the SCS. HA/DR operations are a moral imperative that offer two ancillary strategic benefits: a non-incendiary medium for joint military operations and a way to preserve the economic and political capital of affected countries, so they can remain effective partners in countering Chinese aggression. Despite past successes and inherent benefits, maintaining HA/DR as the centerpiece of our CMO strategy is intellectually lazy and egregiously reactive for a region where the United States must re-gain the initiative. HA/DR should remain a supporting effort in CMO, but it can longer be pointed to or weighted as our main effort.

The connecting theme of these “wrong answers” is we cannot pursue stability as the sole end of CMO in the SCS, independent of larger military or strategic objectives. The DOD defines CMO functions as “activities that establish, maintain, influence, or exploit relationships between military forces and indigenous populations and institutions, by directly supporting the attainment of objectives relating to the reestablishment or maintenance of *stability* within a region or host nation.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, the United States categorically rejects Chinese territorial claims in the SCS and seeks to deny it regional hegemony. While most Americans would agree these are morally just and strategically sound objectives to pursue, they are also inherently *destabilizing* for the region—leaving very little room for CMO under our current definition. This poses a major problem since we need to incorporate a civil component into our operations to effectively compete in the gray zone. The solution is to broaden our conception of CMO so that we “establish, maintain, influence, [and] exploit” civil-military relationships, but in pursuit of military or strategic objectives, not stability.

Many will immediately question whether the Marine Corps can pursue this broader definition of CMO without also sacrificing our moral principles and obligations to the civilian populace. This concern is well-founded. The American claim to world leadership (and leadership in the Southeast Asia) is rooted in the belief that the



United States will protect a moral, rules-based system. Unlike China, the United States must participate in the gray zone without resorting to ethically corrupt actions. Hicks writes, “Even as the United States campaigns in the gray zone, it should do so in accordance with its principles. U.S. laws and values are fundamentally strategic advantages in the competitions the country faces.”<sup>13</sup>

### The Way Ahead

In line with this broader definition of CMO, numerous authors have already intellectually charted a new way ahead with a unified call to re-focus on a long-neglected CA core function: civil reconnaissance (CR).<sup>14</sup> One such article envisions “CA Marines operating in a distributed manner conduct civil reconnaissance: a targeted, planned, and coordinated observation and evaluation of specific civil aspects of the environment.”<sup>15</sup> Another writes of the impact CR will have in securing “access to critical pieces of terrain for future operations.”<sup>16</sup>

These articles propose a critical first step in the right direction but still fall short in two respects. One, the articles frame CMO’s potential through the lens of a future conventional fight, when we need drastic change now for the defining fight currently taking place in the gray zone. Two, they limit CMO to merely shaping the battlespace through CR, ignoring its potential during the execution phase. In the gray zone, CMO must facilitate and integrate with Marine Corps actions from start to finish, integrating civil capabilities to amplify military actions and capitalizing on CA Marines’ knowledge of the human terrain to influence our information operations. The CA battle rhythm in the SCS should be: identify opportunities, facilitate joint civil-military action, and control the narrative. Consider the following vignette.

An arbitral tribunal convened to resolve maritime disputes between China and Philippines ruled unanimously in the Philippine’s favor in 2016. In July of 2020, the United States aligned its policy with the tribunal’s decision stating,

the Arbitral Tribunal’s decision is final and legally binding on both parties ... the PRC has no legal grounds to unilaterally impose its will on the region. Beijing has offered no coherent legal basis for its ‘Nine-Dashed Line’ claim in the South China Sea.<sup>17</sup>

In the months since then, China has continued its behavior, so the United States decides to deploy the 31st MEU and PHIBRON 11 to serve as a deterrent against illegal Chinese actions in-

information requirements, and the permission of the Filipino government, the CA team sets out to shore to conduct CR.

Upon their return, the CA Marines inform the MEU commander that Chinese harassment has most severely affected the tuna fishing industry based out of Manila. Using water cannons and aggressive maneuvers, Chinese flagged vessels prevent the Filipino fishermen from reaching their traditional fish-

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side the Filipino EEZ. Specially tailored for this mission, the force deploys with multiple Mark VI patrol boats to interdict smaller vessels and a robust civil affairs contingent. Stymied at how to deter Chinese action in an area over twice the size of California and Texas combined, the MEU commander dispatches a team of CA Marines to narrow down the problem. Armed with commander’s intent, a set of priority

ing grounds south of the Scarborough Shoal. Furthermore, the CA Marines report that the Filipino coastguard is unable to effectively respond as they only learn of the harassment after the fishermen return to shore. While this CR has already provided the commander with invaluable information unavailable in the S-2, the CA Marines propose to further exploit this information with joint civil-military action.



**Military exercises with the Philippines Army and Marine Corps leverage long-standing partnerships to contest China’s influence. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Jay Pugh.)**

Using the local relationships the CA Marines developed during their CR, the commander distributes 1,000 GPS and radio systems through the Filipino government to the fishermen. With this relatively inexpensive technology, the fishermen can contact both Filipino coast guard and American military vessels with an accurate location if they are being harassed by or sight Chinese ships inside the Filipino EEZ. This aligns civil and military interests as the fishermen acquire a means of greater protection and the MEU gains 1,000 new intelligence collection points at minimal cost. Mark VI patrol boats are pushed out with CA Marines aboard to make contact and build rapport with Filipino fishermen encountered at sea. Filipino coastguard and U.S. Marine Corps vessels responding to incidents can take legally justifiable actions to defend the Filipino civilian fishermen, all the while recording Chinese violators and sending footage to a Marine Corps Communication Strategy unit. The same CA Marines advise the Communication Strategy unit on what footage and messaging will best demonstrate American military commitment to the local Filipino population and erode false Chinese narratives in the region. The CA Marines then digitally distribute the finished IO products through their local contacts.

Thanks to the CR capabilities of the CA Marines, the commander was able to focus his resources to a critical area. He then looked to leverage the civil capabilities discovered during CR, exploiting mutual civil-military interests to encourage civil action that amplified the effectiveness of his own actions. Finally, the commander employed CA Marines to tailor and distribute IO products produced during the operation. This start to end impact is just one example of how much CMO has to offer in the gray zone if we abandon the stability-centric model. Further, it shows how we can aggressively pursue gray zone CMO without jeopardizing our moral or legal principles.

### Conclusion

As long as America retains military pre-eminence, even conventional ad-

versaries will seek out unconventional means of warfare. China has proven no exception to this rule. Through gray zone actions that use civil capabilities to augment Chinese military power, China has blunted American deterrence capability and made large strides toward its strategic objectives in the SCS. In response, the United States needs to incorporate CMO as a centerpiece of its SCS strategy to build its own gray zone capabilities. This requires a

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forward-looking perspective that does not remain rooted in our CMO experience of the last twenty years of COIN operations. Even more importantly, it requires a new CMO definition that broadens our conception of CMO from a mere executor of stability operations to a direct enabler of offensive and defensive actions. Without the will and capability to shape and leverage the civil environment of the SCS region, our military effectiveness is transient at best, non-existent at worst, and ultimately, doomed to fail.

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#### Notes

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2. Ibid
3. Kathleen Hicks and Alice Friend, *By Other Means*, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July, 2019).
4. Edward Katzenbach and Gene Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tsung," *Political Science Quarterly*, (New York, NY: Academy of Political Science, September 1955).

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16. "Forward and Enduring."

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