


Chapter 12

Below the Threshold of War: China's Gray Zone Tactics and Vietnam's Strategic Adaptation in the South China Sea

Tien Nam Tran

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0135-5252>

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Trang Thu Nguyen

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5324-9614>

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines China's gray zone strategy in the South China Sea and its implications for Vietnam. Through documentary analysis and case study methodology, it demonstrates how China employs paramilitary forces, legal warfare, economic coercion, and information operations to incrementally alter the maritime status quo while remaining below the threshold of armed conflict. The study traces the evolution of Chinese tactics through three distinct phases (2009-2020), revealing increasing sophistication in coordination across military, legal, and diplomatic domains. Vietnam's response combines firm diplomatic protests, adherence to UNCLOS, defense modernization, and “bamboo diplomacy”—flexible yet principled engagement balancing cooperation and resistance. The chapter concludes with policy

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recommendations emphasizing ASEAN unity, maritime capacity-building, economic diversification, and multilateral cooperation to enhance Vietnam's resilience against gray zone pressures while preserving regional stability.

1. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea (SCS) has emerged as one of the most contested maritime spaces in contemporary international relations, where traditional concepts of conflict and peace have been increasingly challenged by what scholars and policymakers term “gray zone” operations (Tatad et al., 2020; Hoffman, 2016; Mazarr, 2015). These activities, characterized by their deliberate ambiguity and positioning below the threshold of conventional armed conflict, represent a fundamental shift in how states pursue their strategic objectives in disputed waters (Mazarr, 2015). China’s systematic employment of gray zone tactics in the SCS exemplifies this evolving security paradigm, combining paramilitary forces, legal warfare, economic coercion, and information operations to incrementally alter the regional status quo without triggering overt military confrontation (Tatad et al., 2020). For Vietnam, a country with substantial maritime claims and economic interests in the SCS, China’s gray zone strategy poses multifaceted challenges that extend beyond traditional security concerns to encompass sovereignty, economic development, and regional stability (Hoang, 2022; Sutter, 2021).

This study examines China’s gray zone strategy in the SCS with particular focus on its implications for Vietnam. The research is guided by four interconnected questions: First, what are the principal gray zone tactics China has deployed in the SCS, and how have they been specifically applied in incidents involving Vietnam? Second, what are the concrete implications of China’s gray zone strategy for Vietnam’s sovereignty, maritime economic interests, and regional security stability? Third, what measures has Vietnam adopted in response to China’s gray zone strategy, and how effective have these responses been? Fourth, what policy recommendations can be formulated to help Vietnam enhance its deterrence capabilities, improve its response capacity, and foster more effective multilateral cooperation in the maritime security context? These questions are critical not only for understanding the dynamics of great power competition in the SCS but also for developing viable strategies that smaller states can employ to protect their legitimate interests in an increasingly complex security environment.

This chapter makes both theoretical and policy-oriented contributions to the study of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. It advances the conceptual understanding of China’s maritime gray zone strategy by examining how non-military instruments are systematically employed to alter the status quo while remaining below the threshold

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