

2019

China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations

Charles Horner

Andrew S. Erickson

Ryan D. Martinson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Horner, Charles; Erickson, Andrew S.; and Martinson, Ryan D. (2019) "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 72 : No. 4 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol72/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

the purpose of avoiding escalation. But ultimately, no government intervenes for the sake of keeping a conflict limited; regardless of that goal, its actions will be determined most by the political objective it seeks to achieve. The author's theory sheds light on one aspect of the actors' motives in cases in which the desire to avoid escalation is relatively strong. But, as in the case of any such theory, understanding such situations requires a full assessment of the goals and circumstances of each of the actors.

ABRAM N. SHULSKY



China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations, ed. Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019. 352 pages. \$50.

In its long history, China has deployed substantial naval power, but only episodically. It never faced sustained naval threats, so the country's maritime frontier was not a perennial strategic concern. But in more modern times, seaborne pressures from the Western powers and Japan became unrelenting. Foreign navies even sailed deep into the country's interior, establishing "treaty ports" hundreds of miles from the coast. This ended with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Still, even though Western naval power was pushed offshore, seaborne forces nearby could attack China with impunity.

This rankled, but what to do? In 1965, Marshal Lin Biao (perhaps Chairman Mao's closest comrade in arms) looked to the earlier defeat of Japan by the once-tiny People's Liberation Army (PLA) to ask, "How was it possible for a weak country finally to defeat a strong country?" His answer was found in

Mao Zedong's idea of "People's War." Although land based, the concept held promise for menacing forward naval positions of the United States, perceived as the foremost opponent. Having backed an insurgency in the Philippines, a coup attempt in Indonesia, and guerilla wars in Malaya and Vietnam, Beijing could imagine pushing the United States out of great anchorages such as Subic, Cam Rahn, and Singapore. As for Yokosuka, Japan—the U.S. Navy's most important base in the western Pacific—a successful political campaign might chase the United States four thousand miles east, back to Honolulu.

This was naval warfare de facto, but it did not succeed. In the end, China learned that American sea power could not be neutralized on the cheap. However, China began to rise economically through its seaborne connections, and in the 1980s Admiral Liu Huaqing—sometimes called "China's Mahan"—made a case for a strong navy. This vision was realized more fully in 2012 when Communist Party leader Hu Jintao announced a new national goal: "to enhance our capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect the marine maritime rights and interests, and build China into a strong maritime power."

During this same period of an economically rising China, the Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute became a leading center for analyzing China's naval power. Two of the Institute's mainstays, Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson, again have contributed to our understanding by assembling and editing twenty papers prepared for a 2017 conference on what could turn out to be the most significant component of China's *modus operandi* at sea: exploitation of the so-called gray zone.

This anthology reminds us that the naval battle with China already is underway, and that it is about more than big ships, aircraft, and submarines. The PLA Navy, which certainly likes to show off its new fleet, also relies on a coast guard, fishing boats, and maritime militia, which are perfectly suited for a gray-zone space of neither war nor peace. As a result, China has succeeded in enclosing and then militarizing areas once thought of as high seas. China, in best Leninist fashion, continues to probe and push, encountering “mush” instead of the steel of real resistance.

This is certainly not “decisive naval battle-ism,” nor is it quite “people’s war at sea.” Still, Mao’s dicta echo: a struggle is 10 percent military / 90 percent political; avoid the decisive encounter until the very last moment; and, above

all, protract, to enable one to build from weakness to strength. Soon after becoming a Communist Party leader in 2013, Xi Jinping told his comrades in a private speech that China would remain weaker than the West for some time. China’s naval operations in the maritime gray zone—patient, purposeful, relentless—embody Maoist patience, buying time to maneuver from a position of relative weakness to one of strength.

The papers collected in this new work, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, can help us better understand this maneuvering and meet the challenges the West already faces—challenges that only will grow as China’s naval strength and presence grow.

CHARLES HORNER

OUR REVIEWERS

Marc D. Beaudreau is a military professor in the Strategy and Policy Department at the Naval War College. He earned a BA from Ole Miss and an MA from the Naval Postgraduate School and was a Seminar XXI Fellow at MIT.

Charles Horner is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. His most recent book is *A China Scholar’s Long March, 1978–2015: Reflections on a Changing China* (2018).

Kevin D. McCranie is on the faculty of the Naval War College. He is the author of *Admiral Lord Keith and the Naval War against Napoleon* (2006), as well as *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812* (2011).

Abram N. Shulsky is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. He served as an adviser to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2001 to 2009.