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NEWS SUMMARY:

- Philippine forces on Palawan, an island that borders the South China Sea, have asked for U.S. help building skills to coordinate fires, counter-drone training, nonlethal training and establishing ranges.
- The Chinese authorities boarded a Vietnamese fishing boat and bashed the crew with iron pipes in a patch of the South China Sea claimed by both China and Vietnam.
- The Army will test cargo drones and live logistics data at Project Convergence this spring.
- KORD introduced its new high-energy laser weapon system, FIREFLY, which is specifically engineered to protect forward positions and critical infrastructure, thanks to its modular architecture and scalable power ranging from 5kW to 40kW.
- A Chinese Coast Guard vessel was driven out of Indonesia's waters last week after it initially disrupted a survey by state energy firm Pertamina in the South China Sea.
- Opinion: The U.S. military needs to fix its plans for contested logistics against China.
- Opinion: China continues to blur lines between its scientific and military sectors, and it can find itself a maritime power with unique strategic capabilities.

- Opinion: It is crucial to educate the public about the astonishing extent of gray zone aggression against Western countries.

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FEATURE:

Palawan ‘key terrain’ to defend and operate from, says Marine commander in the Philippines

(Stars and Stripes, October 24)

U.S. Marines are strengthening ties with their Philippine counterparts on an island that borders the South China Sea as the U.S. ally faces an ever-assertive Beijing.

The strategic importance of Palawan, a narrow, 280-mile-long island where Marines have been training this month with the Philippine 3rd Marine Brigade, is “obvious,” said 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit commander Col. Sean Dynan.

“It controls the straights into the Sulu Sea and into the South China Sea and West Philippine Sea,” he told Stars and Stripes while standing on Palawan’s western shore Tuesday. ‘

American and Filipino marines spent that morning on live-fire coastal defense training there as part of the annual Kamandag exercise.

This year's training involves more than 1,000 Marines and sailors of Marine Rotational Force-Southeast Asia and the 15th MEU from Camp Pendleton, Calif. Kamandag began Oct. 15 and concludes Friday.

The live-fire training on Palawan took place in Aborlan, a municipality facing the South China Sea that's about 125 miles east of Sabina Shoal, where Philippine and Chinese coast guard vessels collided Aug. 31.

Philippine authorities allege a Chinese vessel rammed a Philippine ship three times; China claims the Philippine ship instigated the clash. It was the latest in a series of incidents involving the two nations' vessels in or near the Philippines' exclusive economic zone.

"It's key terrain to defend from and key terrain to operate from," Dynan said of Palawan, noting that the island hosts two sites approved for use by American forces.

Antonio Bautista Air Base in Puerto Princesa, the provincial capital, and Naval Station Narciso Del Rosario, on Balabac Island in the southern part of the province, are two of nine sites identified for U.S. use under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.

U.S. Marine units have been on Palawan often in recent years, while the 3rd Marine Brigade, based on the island, has grown in capabilities, Dynan said.

"The majority of countries around this area recognize that amphibious capability is a requirement in this environment," he said. "The U.S. has the longest-standing amphibious force, so this is our time to shine and help."

Philippine forces on Palawan have asked for help building skills to coordinate fires, counter-drone training, nonlethal training and establishing ranges, Dynan said.

Those forces are also focused on Palawan, said Vice Adm. Alfonso Torres, head of the Western Command at Puerto Princesa, which oversees operations on the island and in the disputed bits of territory in South China Sea.

"We are not just monitoring (the disputed waters)," he said at the coastal defense training event. "We are operating also." Palawan's strategic importance is growing as the Philippine armed forces shift focus from internal to external security, Torres said.

Western Command is at the forefront of that shift, he added. "We are slowly shifting our forces from the south to the west because of the declining issues with insurgency," he said.

The Philippine forces on Palawan will receive new equipment, not only to conduct operations, but also for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, Torres said.

The Philippines plans to spend \$35 billion over a decade modernizing its military, with most of that going to the navy to strengthen the country's capabilities in western waters, the Philippine Star reported May 2, quoting Philippine navy spokesman Commodore Roy Vincent Trinidad.

“This is the west side of the Philippines,” Torres said of Palawan. “We are protecting the peace and security of the West Philippine Sea.”

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GRAY ZONE COMPETITION:

Bullied By China At Sea, With The Broken Bones To Prove It

(The New York Times, October 28)

Nguyen Thanh Bien winced as he rubbed his side, turning toward a portrait of Ho Chi Minh in a living room filled with conch shells. He said he was still dealing with internal injuries two weeks after the Chinese authorities boarded his fishing boat and bashed him with iron pipes in a patch of the South China Sea claimed by both China and Vietnam.

“I got hit first in the head from behind — I was running to the front of the boat,” he said, sitting beside his father, who taught him to fish near their home on Vietnam’s south-central coast. “With the second blow, I lost consciousness.”

When he awoke, his catch, worth nearly \$8,000, was gone. His ribs were broken. And three other crew members were injured.

China’s aggressive policing of disputed territory has produced the latest clash in a long, complex relationship. China ruled Vietnam for a millennium, leaving an indelible cultural mark, but Vietnam’s national identity and fierce independence spring from its resistance to Chinese empire-building, as its school students learn from a young age. And the South China Sea is where Vietnam’s defiance is being tested — on its own and alongside other countries, including the Philippines and Indonesia, which are also struggling to hold on to parts of the sea that China seeks to control.

If Beijing succeeds and bullies the region into submission, China would effectively own one of the most important waterways for global trade, giving it the power to disrupt supply chains and punish countries that do not fall in line with its demands, and also mine for resources below the ocean floor.

Breaking the bones of foreigners is visceral geopolitics, and the latest dark omen. The Chinese Foreign Ministry denied that its law enforcement officers had hurt anyone while stopping a boat that it said was fishing illegally near the Paracel Islands on Sept. 30. But the violence, described in interviews, insurance claims and letters to the Vietnamese government, fit a pattern: China has already used water cannons, boat-ramming, ship-sinking and lasers in its effort to assert dominance over the South China Sea. Last week, it held a bombing exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin, issuing an “entering prohibited” warning for waters 75 miles from Vietnam’s coast.

The beatings and military operations, which closely followed more extensive drills around Taiwan, occurred less than a month after Vietnam’s new leader, To Lam, met with President Biden in New York. He had gone first to Beijing, and some analysts suggested that China was

expanding its intimidation tactics to scare Hanoi — and others — away from Washington and alliances with neighbors.

“It shows that China may be harder on the new Vietnamese leadership going forward in the South China Sea,” said Alexander Vuving, a professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu. “It also shows that the new Vietnamese leadership does not have much space to further accommodate China.”

Beijing’s tight squeeze may change Hanoi’s calculus. Ever since China and Vietnam traded angry accusations over the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel near a Chinese oil rig in 2014, Hanoi has preferred to say very little while bolstering its defenses with a not-quite-military strategy similar to China’s.

When the oil rig issue faded — China pulled out its equipment ahead of schedule — Vietnam gave preferential loans to fishermen. Seeing China’s maritime militia, Vietnam formed a smaller version of its own, giving some fishermen steel boats stronger than Mr. Bien’s wooden one and offering military training. The government also pays fishermen for four fuel loads a year to keep them on the water. It is quietly dredging and expanding small islands it occupies near China’s built-up outposts.

When incidents occur, and they frequently do — some fishermen keep folders of citations from the Chinese authorities going back to 2009 — Vietnamese officials have preferred to work behind the scenes, in part because Chinese aggression is such a combustible domestic topic. For Vietnamese leaders, intense pressure can come from both Beijing and from the public’s anti-China rage.

So while the Philippines, facing its own conflicts with China, has begun to document and publicize almost every perceived act of Chinese bullying in disputed waters, Vietnam has been more selective. In June, a fishing boat and its crew from Mr. Bien’s village, Chau Thuan Bien, about 80 miles south of Danang, disappeared after reporting by radio an encounter with the Chinese authorities.

Vietnamese officials kept quiet. Relatives say they have still not heard anything from the men since one called to say they were being held on China’s Hainan Island. The Foreign Ministry in Hanoi did not respond to questions about the case, which has not previously been reported.

The assault on Mr. Bien, however, appears to have crossed a line, prompting a response on Oct. 2 that was far stronger than usual.

“Vietnam is extremely concerned, indignant and resolutely opposes the brutal behavior of Chinese law enforcement forces against Vietnamese fishermen and fishing vessels operating in the Paracel archipelago of Vietnam,” said the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Pham Thu Hang.

The attack has also shaken Mr. Bien’s coastal hamlet of 300 families, many of whom have been fishing for generations. Vietnam’s war with the United States exacted a heavy toll across the area, but in communities where nets sparkle at dusk and round basket boats brighten the beaches, China and the sea are timeless, elemental threats.

At a sun-yellow shrine with smoke dancing above incense, people pray for safety from the dangers that have wounded and killed loved ones for generations, from storms and wars to the risky local method of diving deep to spearfish.

At the port, where Mr. Bien's boat engine was being repaired, a few dozen wooden haulers were crammed together, as if pushed in by a typhoon. Several captains said not a single vessel had left for the daylong journey to the usual fishing area since the news of the beating.

About a dozen boats that had already been out remained at sea, their crews hesitant to cut short what is usually a monthlong trip. At least one captain reported by text that his ship was being chased from fish-rich reefs by Chinese law enforcement.

"Many people are afraid," said Nguyen Tan Van, one of the captains sitting in the shade at the port. "It will take time for the fear to die down before we go back out."

The people of Vietnam have been drawing sustenance and wealth from what they call the East Sea for centuries. For a fishing crew, one good month there can yield a profit of \$12,000, more than three times what the average worker makes in a year. And with Beijing also claiming an ancient right to the area, fishing has taken on near-military significance.

Mr. Bien's uncle and father, elder statesmen of the community, said fishermen saw themselves as Vietnam's information gatherers. Asked if they and their sons might be the last of a particular breed, they said the local fishing fleet had actually grown in recent years despite the challenges, as more fishermen sought to become boat captains for wealth and patriotism.

They stressed that as China's forces grow bigger and bolder, Vietnam should do more: build up its own maritime defenses, speak up more forcefully and compensate fishermen who lose their catch. Mr. Bien, 41, said his insurance company categorized what had happened on Sept. 30 as "an act of war" and was still rejecting his claim.

"It's very stressful," said his wife, Nguyen Thi Dung, who did not know if he was alive until a full day after she heard about his emergency call. But for their family and others, worry at sea is the way it was, is and must be.

"Why should we stop? It's our waters, our territory," said Nguyen Thanh Nam, Mr. Bien's uncle, who helps run a radio system that lets fishermen stay in contact with land and track Chinese activities. Many Vietnamese, he said, raising his voice, see the Chinese as "terrorists."

Mr. Bien heard the comment and did not react. He smoked a slim cigarette a few steps from where his father taught him to dive. Along with seashells, his home décor included spent artillery shells collected from the South China Sea.

"I know the reefs and currents like the back of my hand," he said. "As long as my father and I are healthy, we'll keep going."

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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE:

Army wargame to test cargo drones and live logistics data

(Defense One, October 23)

In a future war, Army tanks growling around the battlefield may be able to send live data back to their headquarters showing every time they fire a round or burn a gallon of fuel.

Using that data, logisticians back at the base might then send swarms of drones buzzing back to the tanks with new ammo, or guide fleets of drone boats laden with fuel to a beach somewhere.

None of these ideas is ready for prime time yet — but the Army will test all three at Project Convergence this spring, according to Brig. Gen. Shane Upton, commander of the Contested Logistics Cross-Functional Team. Upton spoke to Defense One on the sidelines of the recent AUSA conference.

Some of the work, like the tank-ammo project, consists of updating logistics for the modern era.

Historically, Upton said, logisticians typically receive radio reports from units about how many rounds they have left, then add those numbers to an enormous spreadsheet by midnight each day.

But that method is not flawless. A typing error could change 20 rounds to 200, he said. With logistics data updated only every 24 hours, meanwhile, a commander may make unrealistic plans based on a faulty understanding of their logistics.

If soldiers in the tank can reliably send the data directly back to headquarters, by contrast, logisticians can keep a closer eye on usage rates and prioritize resupply missions. Commanders will also have an up-to-the-minute understanding of their forces' readiness.

For the upcoming Project Convergence, the starting objective will be to transfer shell and fuel consumption data while the tank is stopped, with a "stretch" goal of transferring data when it's on the move, Upton said.

Other technologies the team is prepping for Project Convergence aren't just updates, but entirely new ways of doing logistics.

During the event, the team will test two heavy cargo drones capable of carrying 1,000 pounds or more up to 250 nautical miles. The aim of such drones is to deliver multiple artillery shells or precision munitions to troops, all without risking the lives of pilots who would otherwise be tasked with ferrying in munitions by plane or helicopter.

The Marine Corps, which already fields a small resupply drone, is also testing options from Leidos and Kaman for a heavier-lift drone in the ranges Upton outlined.

Under an “aggressive” schedule, that type of heavy-lift drone could be fielded to its first unit by 2030, Upton said, though that would require many more Army organizations than Army Futures Command to achieve.

A smaller drone capable of lifting 150 pounds might be fielded to some units of the Army’s “transformation-in-contact” modernization program by 2026, Upton said.

The team will also test autonomous resupply boats that the Navy has already experimented with, Upton said. The Army wants the systems to be relatively cheap so it can send “hundreds” to the field, allowing them to disperse widely, which will make them harder for an enemy to strike.

Other tech is also in the works, even if the Army isn’t ready to pull the trigger on it yet.

The service is watching how Ukraine is using drones for casualty evacuation, he said, and while Army discussions about implementing similar practices are “pre-decisional,” he called Ukraine’s efforts “very ingenious.”

The Army is also looking into better ways to supply troops with energy, but Upton noted numerous problems with existing tech even as troops rely on more and more powered tools, from drones to directed energy.

Solar panels could offer frontline troops easy charging options, for example, but could be just as difficult to move as a towed generator, he said. Hydrogen-powered fuel cells or even small nuclear energy could help power bases, meanwhile, but both come with a host of policy, safety, and other problems.

Still, Upton was optimistic. “I think there's a lot of movement that's got to happen in the [power-generation] space,” he said.

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New FIREFLY High-Energy Laser Weapon System Unveiled at AUSA 2024 to Counter Drone Threats.

(Army Recognition, October 21)

At the AUSA 2024 event in Washington D.C., KORD introduced its new high-energy laser weapon system, FIREFLY. Designed to address the growing asymmetric threats posed by unmanned aerial systems (UAS), FIREFLY represents a significant technological advancement in aerial defense. Mobile and palletized, the system is specifically engineered to protect forward positions and critical infrastructure, thanks to its modular architecture and scalable power ranging from 5kW to 40kW.

FIREFLY is built on a common open architecture optimized to balance performance, reliability, maintainability, and transportability. With its modular Line Replaceable Units (LRU), the system adapts to a wide range of operational applications and provides the flexibility to configure, customize, and update its capabilities as required.

This design allows FIREFLY to interface with C3S systems such as FAAD and MEDUSA, as well as other autonomous detection systems like radars and optical sensors. Its modularity also simplifies maintenance at both the intermediate and field levels, reducing support costs through the use of non-developmental, commercially available components.

The FIREFLY high-energy laser system features an adaptable optical architecture, enabling power adjustments from 5kW to 40kW. It also offers increased resistance to laser damage and thermal effects, an extended magazine depth, and long continuous operation times, allowing it to neutralize multiple UAS threats simultaneously. To ensure target tracking, FIREFLY is equipped with an ISR payload that includes independent visible and infrared camera systems, enhanced by advanced artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities for long-range threat detection and classification.

FIREFLY's capabilities have been rigorously tested over 34 months of continuous operation in challenging environments, demonstrating its resilience in extreme conditions, including temperatures ranging from -15°C to 35°C, and weather conditions such as rainstorms, snow, and sandstorms. It has been deployed on both fixed and unprepared sites, proving its adaptability and ease of transport and deployment.

This high-energy laser system is designed to be cost-effective, with minimal logistical support, due to its simplified maintenance processes. KORD has focused on reducing production costs and delivery times by utilizing commercially available components, ensuring enhanced reliability and rapid availability of fully deployable units. FIREFLY is offered at competitive commercial terms, making it an ideal solution for armed forces seeking a modern, ready-to-deploy defense technology.

The increasing use of drones in modern warfare is radically transforming the battlefield, introducing new threats that demand innovative countermeasures. Among these, directed energy (DE) weapons, particularly lasers, stand out for their precision and efficiency. These technologies are becoming essential tools for countering UAS, which are playing an increasingly critical role in contemporary conflicts.

UAS pose a significant threat to military personnel and equipment. Their low production cost, ability to carry diverse payloads, and reduced risk to operators make them particularly attractive to both state and non-state actors. Recent conflicts, such as those in Ukraine, Yemen, and Gaza, have highlighted the growing importance of drones in military operations.

In response to this growing threat, militaries are heavily investing in counter-UAS (CUAS) systems, where laser technologies, with their rapid neutralization capabilities and long-term cost-effectiveness, play a central role in defense strategies.

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OTHER FOREIGN COUNTRIES:

Indonesia says Chinese vessel twice driven away after disrupting energy survey

(Reuters, October 24)

A Chinese coast guard vessel was driven out of Indonesia's waters for a second time this week after it initially disrupted a survey by state energy firm Pertamina in the South China Sea, Indonesia's maritime security agency said on Thursday.

While Chinese coast guard vessels have been spotted numerous times in Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the most recent incidents came just days after Prabowo Subianto took over Indonesia's presidency.

China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea via a "nine-dash line" on its maps that cuts into the 200 nautical mile EEZs of Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague in 2016 said China's claim has no basis under international law, a ruling Beijing does not recognise.

The incidents took place off Indonesia's Natuna islands, roughly 1,500 km (932 miles) from China's Hainan island. The exact locations were not immediately clear.

The Chinese vessel on Monday insisted the area was China's jurisdiction, Indonesia's maritime security agency, known as Bakamla, said in a statement.

"Bakamla will keep patrolling and intensively monitoring the waters of North Natuna to ensure seismic data gathering can go without disruption to Indonesia's sovereignty," the agency said on Monday.

On Thursday, it said the Chinese vessel returned but was intercepted and again driven out. It did not provide details on what the ship was doing.

Lin Jian, a spokesperson of China's foreign ministry, said on Thursday its coast guard carries out "routine cruises in waters under China's jurisdiction in accordance with international law and domestic law".

The spokesperson added China was willing to strengthen consultation with Indonesia "to properly handle maritime issues between the two countries".

China asserts its claim of sovereignty with an armada of coast guard ships deployed throughout the South China Sea, some of which are accused by its neighbours of aggressive conduct and of trying to disrupt energy and fisheries activities.

China typically says its coast guard operates lawfully to deter territorial infringements in what are its waters.

In 2021 vessels from Indonesia and China shadowed each other for months near a submersible oil rig that had been performing well appraisals in the Natuna Sea. China at the time urged Indonesia to stop drilling in what was its territory.

The latest incidents came as Indonesia's new defence minister, Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin, met with China ambassador in Jakarta on Thursday.

The defence ministry in a statement said Sjafrie expected to boost defence cooperation with China, including joint exercises. It made no mention of this week's maritime incidents.

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COMMENTARY:

Giving Our “Paper Tiger” Real Teeth

(Joint Force Quarterly, October 23, Zachary S. Hughes)

There is growing concern that the U.S. military is unable to deter or win a conflict with China in the Western Pacific. China's sophisticated arsenal of long-range missiles is a lethal threat to America's traditional way of deploying and employing expeditionary forces. With a rising sense of urgency, three U.S. military Services (Marines, Army, and Air Force) have embraced new concepts of operations that favor dispersed operations. On the surface, these ideas appear to restore survivability within the Pacific's first island chain by making American formations harder to find and target. Unfortunately, these concepts are astonishingly logistics-intensive. Worse still, America's military committed itself to these demanding concepts without full consideration of whether they were even logistically supportable. Now, evidence is emerging suggesting that each Service's individual concept is probably logistically unsustainable.

Lieutenant Colonel Zachary S. Hughes, USAF, wrote this essay while a student at the National War College. It won the 2024 Secretary of Defense National Security Essay Competition.

Link to full essay:

<https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1148&context=joint-force-quarterly>

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Gray-Zone Blue-Zone

(Brown Political Review, October 22, Jordan Lac)

Between 2019 and 2020, the Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 06 (向阳红 06) conducted oceanographic research missions over 10,000 kilometers of the Indian Ocean, purportedly engaging in collaboration with scientists from Sri Lanka and Myanmar to collect data on microorganisms and hydrography in the region. While the Xiang Yang Hong 06 is officially part of China's civilian research fleet and owned by the Ministry of Natural Resources, research by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) strongly suggests that the data

harvested on its mission is being used to expand China's maritime surveillance of the region, illustrating a broader trend of blurred lines between China's scientific and military sectors.

These blurred lines have been institutionalized in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) strategy of military-civil fusion (MCF, 军民融合), combining military, scientific, and economic development agendas to "strengthen all of the PRC's instruments of national power." As China pursues the status of a military superpower, it aims to build a navy capable of protecting its national economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. However, its quest for maritime dominance puts it at odds with other powers in the region. China's strategy of MCF gives it a strategic advantage in the competition for maritime influence by allowing it to blend military objectives with scientific and commercial ones in a way that creates a unique method of naval power projection. From dual-use technology to dual-use foreign ports, China uses the supposed civilian purpose of its activities to obscure its more controversial military projects.

MCF was first introduced in 2007 at the CCP's 17th Party Congress, and was officially incorporated into Chinese military strategy under Xi Jinping in 2015 as part of a larger political effort towards realizing the "Chinese Dream" and becoming a "great modern socialist country." Two key components of the MCF strategy are the integration of the defense industrial and civilian scientific bases and the coordination of commercial and military infrastructure.

China has utilized dual-use technologies to further its maritime ambitions. The Xiang Yang Hong 06 exemplifies the value China gains from this dual-use capability. The Chinese vessel is equipped with undersea gliders, autonomous underwater vehicles that use sensors to collect comprehensive oceanographic data for the purpose of creating water column profiles. While this data contributes to scientific endeavors, such as studying microorganisms in Sri Lanka and coral reefs in Myanmar, it also increases the PLA Navy's understanding of the maritime environment—a critical part of enabling the expansion of Chinese naval operations.

The ability to confidently operate in oceans abroad is dependent upon knowledge of ocean conditions and accurate oceanographic models, which inform operations like navigation, undersea warfighting, safe submarine operations, anti-submarine warfare, amphibious landings, and more. When research expeditions like that of the Xiang Yang Hong 06 collect data about the western Pacific Ocean, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean under the pretense of scientific advancement and send it to the PLA Navy through the strong integration of China's scientific and military sectors, China's naval capabilities are enhanced and the PLA becomes more confident it can project its power in regions it could not before.

While many countries use oceanographic data to support defense capabilities, China's lack of transparency is unique. More importantly, this lack of transparency gives the PRC a strategic advantage over its maritime competitors in the region. Compared to a country like India, which is hoping to increase its maritime capabilities but largely adheres to the international maritime order, China can gain more strategic information through its opaque operations and divergence from maritime norms. Chinese dual-use surveillance operations allow it to gain intelligence and

increase its capabilities without provoking overt military retaliation, operating in a perpetual gray zone that minimizes the chance for significant retaliation.

Though dual-use technologies are an important part of China's maritime strategy, the military-technology connection is just one part of the dots that MCF hopes to connect. China has also begun to fuse its military and commercial sectors in an attempt to strengthen its naval power, particularly by building commercial port infrastructure abroad that fits military requirements. These ports are effectively dual-use facilities—owned by Chinese corporations, and usable by the PLA Navy.

"When research expeditions like that of the Xiang Yang Hong 06 collect data about the western Pacific Ocean, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean under the pretense of scientific advancement and send it to the PLA Navy through the strong integration of China's scientific and military sectors established by MCF, China's naval capabilities are enhanced and the PLA becomes more confident it can project its power in regions it could not before."

Since 2000, a hundred African commercial ports have been constructed by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). One of these ports, located in the Equatorial Guinean city of Bata, illustrates what dual-use can look like. The Bata port was built by the state-owned China Communications Construction Company in 2014. As part of the MCF domain resource sharing principle, Chinese construction standards require civilian port infrastructure to be built to military standards. As a SOE, the China Communications Construction Company is bound by China's national security law to allow PLA access to the port. While these ports being built by Chinese firms seem like a commercial investment at face value, the MCF principle of dual-use presents a much blurrier image.

PLA Navy ships have already utilized one-third of Chinese commercial ports constructed abroad. During peacetime, access to these ports and critical infrastructure around the world allows China to maintain the security of the trade networks that its economy relies on and generally expand its foreign presence. Bata, for instance, is a strategic foothold on the Atlantic Ocean and an opportunity for Chinese naval presence in the region. A significant PLA presence there allows China to directly protect its Atlantic shipping routes.

China's strategic competitors worry more about the wartime uses of a dual-use international port network. During a conflict with a foreign adversary, China's global trade network could be seriously disrupted. Being able to control naval shipping routes and counter any potential interference is therefore an immense advantage to the PRC. Dual-use commercial ports fill the holes of trade network vulnerability during conflict.

By blurring the lines between commercial and security initiatives, China utilizes its economic superpower status to appeal to potential host countries as a trading partner. While host countries do not have to allow PLA ships to utilize ports, a desire to maintain a close economic relationship with China erodes a host country's "strategic autonomy" and allows China to extract security gains at a lower financial and political cost than building an entire network of naval bases. As China's capabilities have strengthened and the economic benefits it can offer have grown, it has become more attractive for some states as a direct security partner. For others,

economic gains from a stronger trade relationship are worth the enhanced leverage they give to China.

For example, China is accused of trying to build a military site at its port in the United Arab Emirates without the knowledge of the Emirati government. Gray-zone tactics such as these are not a textbook case of MCF, but still reveal how the PRC pushes the boundaries of its trade partners in ways that cross the line between economic and military demands.

MCF is uniquely Chinese in character. While Chinese ambitions are often discussed in the context of US-China strategic competition, the PLA Navy does not seek to replace the US Navy as “the dominant global security provider.” It does not have the capacity to adopt the American posture of forward deployment and is not planning to engage in significant conflict outside of its near waters. Chinese naval officials have pointed out that their ambitions preclude being a “global maritime hegemon.” To achieve its more limited goals compared to the US, China does not need the expansive legacy network of US naval bases abroad.

Military-civil fusion is about accomplishing these objectives efficiently and optimizing all resources available, even if it operates within the gray zone of the international order. Blurring the lines between economic and military priorities has created a clearer and more distinct strategic identity within the PRC. As it grows its naval influence and capabilities, China will find itself a maritime power with unique strategic capabilities.

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Grayzone Warfare Intensifies as the West Dithers

(Europe's Edge, October 21, Elisabeth Braw)

There was a time, not so long ago when many viewed gray zone aggression as a marginal concern. Even those who paid attention to it mostly focused on cyber aggression and disinformation campaigns.

Now, it has become much more serious because we haven't managed to deter it. Examples of hostile activity by the authoritarian axis of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea are proliferating.

The UK faces “state-backed sabotage and assassination plots, against the backdrop of a major European land war,” MI5's Director-General, Ken McCallum, warned on October 8. The same is true for every Western country. Defending free societies against it remains extremely difficult. But Western countries are not defenseless — or rather, they don't have to be.

As early as 2018, when I launched RUSI's Modern Deterrence initiative to focus on deterrence of grayzone attacks, it was clear that authoritarian states had (rightly) concluded that using aggression below the threshold of armed military violence was a cheap and effective way of hurting Western societies.

China was harming Western countries through systematic theft of intellectual property, which had helped the country advance to Western rivals' innovation standards — and thus economic power — in record time. Russia was engaging in gradual border alternations. Iran was attacking

and sometimes assassinating diaspora members living in Western societies. North Korea was subverting the global maritime system by using shadow vessels for deliveries of sanctioned goods.

These and other gray zone activities, though, were relatively limited and could have been contained if Western countries had taken them seriously – and if they had seriously tried to build appropriate defenses and deterrence.

Granted, deterring malign activities that can appear anywhere, anytime, and in any guise is extremely difficult, and deterring them without resorting to illegal means or escalating the situation is even harder. A Western country can't threaten to take a sliver of Russian territory in response to prospective gradual border alterations by the Kremlin. Deterring gray zone aggression is, in fact, so difficult that I called my book about the subject *The Defender's Dilemma*.

In his October 8 speech, McCallum observed that even though terrorism remains a significant threat to the UK and other Western countries, state-sponsored malign activity is growing fast. Hostile state “targets include sensitive government information, our technology, our democracy, journalists and defenders of human rights,” he said, and added that, “in just the last year the number of state threat investigations we're running has shot up by 48%”

Over the past three years, Belarus's weaponization of migration along its borders with Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania has caused such harm that earlier this month, Poland won EU approval for its plan to suspend asylum for anyone crossing its borders from Belarus. China, Russia, and Iran have intensified their hostage diplomacy, which is why the Merchant of Death, Viktor Bout, is once again a free man and appears to have returned to arms trading. Iran has increased its attacks on members of the diaspora living in the West and is increasingly subcontracting to criminal gangs in Western countries. This summer, Finland saw a string of break-in attempts at water plants, and earlier this month, a Swedish water plant was broken into.

It doesn't stop there. As I have noted in previous articles for CEPA, in recent weeks, a string of packages containing incendiary devices have been dispatched to German logistics firms. Had everything gone according to the perpetrators' plans, the packages would have exploded mid-air. This summer, a similar package caught fire at a DHL warehouse in the UK.

Someone, who seems to be operating from Russian-occupied Ukraine, has been sending bomb threats to enormous numbers of Czech schools. There has been an assassination plot against a German defense company CEO, and Swedish defense firms report a rise in sabotage.

China continues its maritime harassment of Philippine vessels in the South China Sea. Chinese vessels have cut the two communications cables connecting the Matsu Islands with Taiwan proper, and another Chinese-owned vessel has damaged a pipeline and two undersea cables in the Baltic Sea. (China says the latter was an accident.) A slew of other activities have also been credibly linked to hostile governments.

Grayzone activities are intensifying because the perpetrators know they can get away with them. Because we are open societies, we're vulnerable to all manner of interference, and

because we still haven't managed to stand up an effective defense against gray zone aggression, let alone deterrence of it, the cost of using it remains ridiculously low. For that reason, the list of states engaging in gray zone aggression is likely to grow.

So is the harm such countries cause our societies. Credit to Ken McCallum for being transparent with the British public about the "state-backed sabotage and assassination plots" facing the country. Credit, too, to the Swedish Security Police for telling the public about the Russian sabotage and malign-influence efforts taking place. And credit to the heads of Germany's three intelligence agencies, who, in a news conference earlier in October, told the public about Russian espionage and sabotage that have increased "both quantitatively and qualitatively" and reached a "previously unknown" level.

Educating the public about the astonishing extent of gray zone aggression against our countries is, in fact, crucial if we are to blunt the harm of this aggression because an informed public can help spot things that don't look right. And for that to happen, citizens need to know roughly what to look for.

The decisive change to hostile states' harmful activities, though, will come when we punish them for it. That extremely hard part is at the core of the defender's dilemma.

But let's begin right away, with the somewhat easier task of shoring up societal resilience. Every bit helps in the fight against the torrent of gray zone aggression.

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