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NEWS SUMMARY:

- The Department of Defense is bullish on what directed-energy weapons would offer servicemen.
- Soldiers based at Fort Liberty will be the first U.S. Army paratrooper division to receive special directed-energy weapons that can shoot down small drones that target troop squads and divisions
- Tacoma Police Community Liaison Officers apprehend a suspect who fired a shotgun loaded with rubber bullets.
- Police in Mozambique fired tear gas and rubber bullets as they dispersed protests in several cities over a disputed presidential election.
- Opinion: China's gray zone tactics in the South China Sea blur the distinction between preemption and prevention for its opponents.

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GRAY ZONE COMPETITION:

Laser, microwave, and other directed-energy weapons ready for the battlefield
(Military Aerospace Electronics, October 28)

Perhaps no technology has shaped the 21st-century battlefield as profoundly as the drone. These uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), along with their land and sea counterparts, have redefined the way wars are fought by providing military forces with unprecedented capabilities in surveillance, precision targeting, and intelligence gathering -- all while reducing the risk to their own personnel. Drones have made complex operations more efficient and less costly, enabling militaries to strike with pinpoint accuracy and maintain a persistent presence over the battlefield.

As the century progresses, the influence of drones continues to expand beyond traditional state actors. Non-state groups and non-peer adversaries increasingly have adopted this technology, leveraging it to level the playing field in conflicts around the world. With commercial drones becoming more accessible, these actors can conduct reconnaissance, drop bombs, and challenge conventional military forces in ways that previously were unimaginable.

The influence of drones flows across all domains of warfare. Loitering munitions, or "Kamikaze drones," have disrupted traditional force structures by providing smaller, more agile units with the ability to strike high-value targets such as tanks, artillery, and command centers.

Meanwhile, underwater drones and ground robots are expanding the reach of unmanned warfare to new environments, further cementing their role in the future of conflict.

Now, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and allies are looking once again to gain the upper hand with a relatively low-cost alternative counter-UAS of their own in the form of laser and other directed-energy weapons.

Conflicts that involve drones in areas such as the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and Bab al-Mandeb Strait, are wreaking havoc on U.S. military forces and commercial shipping.

Likewise, Iran and the Lebanese Islamist political and paramilitary group Hezbollah have used drones to attack Israel as part of their support for Hamas in the besieged Gaza Strip following the deadly Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023. The Houthis likewise justified their attacks as a show of solidarity with Palestinians.

In late 2023, the DOD reported that U.S. Navy destroyers shot down nearly 40 drones and several missiles in the Red Sea. While the Navy has succeeded in stopping uncrewed air and sea vehicles, they come at a steep financial cost.

It is estimated that Iranian-made drones cost approximately \$2,000 each. While the DOD - citing operational security - has not disclosed what it is using to destroy the Houthi weapons, it is believed to be employing the Standard Missile-2, which costs approximately \$2.1 million per shot.

"That quickly becomes a problem because the most benefit, even if we do shoot down their incoming missiles and drones, is in their favor," says Mick Mulroy, a former DOD official and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer. "We, the U.S., need to start looking at systems that can defeat these that are more in line with the costs they are expending to attack us."

Speed of light

Lasers -- an acronym for light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation -- have been penciled in by fiction writers as the future weapons in use across galaxies in sci-fi stories. While lasers have been in use in civilian and military applications since the technology was developed in 1960, the deployable "ray gun" remained out of reach until about a decade ago. In 2014, the U.S. Navy outfitted its Austin-class amphibious transport dock USS Ponce with the AN/SEQ-3 Laser Weapon System (LaWS), which was made by Kratos Defense & Security Solutions, Inc. in San Diego.

The AN/SEQ-3 is a 30-kilowatt solid-state ship-mounted laser developed to neutralize a range of low-level threats like small boats and drones. LaWS converts electrical energy from the ship into a focused beam of light that can be aimed at critical components of a target, such as engines or sensors, to incapacitate or destroy it. LaWS causes structural damage or detonates explosive materials onboard the target by delivering an overwhelming amount of heat. Unlike traditional kinetic weapons that rely on impact and shrapnel, LaWS employs directed energy to burn through parts of the target.

LaWS offers versatility by allowing operators to adjust its power levels. It can operate at lower intensities to dazzle or disable sensors, or at higher intensities to destroy threats. The system tracks targets through optical systems and can engage them over several kilometers with precision, providing a reliable solution for defending against several low-cost threats.

Integrated with the ship's radar and fire control systems, LaWS operates at the speed of light, enabling rapid response to emerging threats. Its precision targeting minimizes collateral damage, making it well-suited for complex and populated environments.

LaWS was developed as a prototype to test the feasibility of laser weapons in the ocean environment, and the Navy moved forward with the development and deployment of a higher-

powered system produced by Lockheed Martin's Laser and Sensor Systems division in Bothell, Wash.

Dubbed the High Energy Laser with Integrated Optical Dazzler and Surveillance (HELIOS) system, it has at least double the power of its predecessor. The company said HELIOS was rated at more than 60 kilowatts. Although the specifics of HELIOS remain classified, it may see potential increases to 100 or 150 kilowatts for future deployments. The system will also feature a lower-power optical dazzler for disrupting intelligence and reconnaissance sensors. The system was installed on the USS Preble, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, after delivery in 2022.

U.S. Secretary of the Navy, Carlos Del Toro, told Congress at a hearing earlier this year that "We've accelerated the development and the testing of the HELIOS laser program ... We also have six other laser projects and high energy projects, some of which are classified. And I can't talk about openly. But this is a high priority area for us. We obviously well into the future, cannot continue to shoot down drones which simply SM2 and SM6, we need to develop the high energy, high lasers and directed-energy programs to be able to counter these air drones that are being shot at us as well."

"Lockheed Martin and the U.S. Navy share a common vision and enthusiasm for developing and providing disruptive laser weapon systems," says Rick Cordaro, vice president of Lockheed Martin Advanced Product Solutions. "HELIOS enhances the overall combat system effectiveness of the ship to deter future threats and provide additional protection for sailors, and we understand we must provide scalable solutions customized to the Navy's priorities. HELIOS represents a solid foundation for incremental delivery of robust and powerful laser weapon system capabilities."

Earlier this year, Navy Secretary Del Toro told attendees at the McAleese Defense Programs Conference in Washington that directed-energy weapons are key to his top goal of strengthening maritime dominance.

"It is an exciting time for new technologies in our Navy and Marine Corps," Del Toro told attendees. "Our amphibious ships play a crucial role in testing and validating our newest directed-energy weapons technology, including the Laser Weapon System Demonstrator (LWSD). USS Portland (LPD 27) was fitted with LWSD and engaged a marine target in the Gulf of Aden.

He continued, "And while I was in San Diego last month, I visited USS Preble (DDG 88), fitted with the HELIOS laser weapon system. Directed energy weapons, including high-energy lasers, are the future of warfare -- offering a lower cost-per-shot against air and missile defense engagements."

In the field

The U.S. Army have also deployed a directed-energy system of its own aimed at keeping soldiers safe from UAVs and rockets, artillery, and mortars.

In 2021, the Army tested 50-kilowatt laser weapons mounted on Stryker combat vehicles, conducting additional evaluations. The Army tested the Maneuver-Short Range Air Defense (M-SHORAD) system, developed by Raytheon, which features a vehicle-mounted laser powered by a gasoline generator.

In collaboration with Kord Technologies, a subsidiary of KBR located in Huntsville, Ala., the Army integrated the high-energy laser onto an eight-wheeled Stryker vehicle produced by General Dynamics Land Systems in Sterling Heights, Mich. During the 2021 trials at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, the laser system tracked, targeted, and neutralized 60-millimeter mortar rounds and drones of varying sizes. This achievement is part of an ongoing effort to equip more powerful lasers on smaller, more mobile platforms.

The M-SHORAD system also demonstrated how laser weapons can integrate into broader command and control networks. While it includes its own radar system, it also can connect to the air surveillance data provided by the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense Command and Control system (THAAD C2), enhancing situational awareness and coordinated defense efforts.

"There's no doubt lasers will be on the future large-scale ground combat battlefield so it's great to see these initial prototypes to gain understanding of its capabilities and think through where these capabilities will fit into our organizations, the impact on how we fight, and understand how we need to adjust our doctrine," says Army Maj. General Ken Kamper, commanding general of the Fires Center of Excellence in 2022. "The laser, as part of a necessary layered set of capabilities against threat unmanned aircraft systems, has tremendous potential."

HEL on wheels

This spring, BlueHalo in Arlington, Va., won a four-year support contract for the Army's Palletized High Energy Laser (P-HEL) system. The system, which is based on BlueHalo's LOCUST LaWS, is in use to counter small UAVs. LOCUST is a short-range air defense system designed for quick deployment and mobility.

The self-contained laser is built to handle all aspects of beam control, power management, thermal regulation, and safety. The system transports on standard equipment such as forklifts or pickup trucks and runs on an internal power-management system. The LOCUST LWS features modular components that operators can service or replace in the field. It operates through a single-operator interface using familiar Xbox-style controls. Setup features an integrated checklist that brings the system to full operational status within 15 minutes of powering up.

The mobility of HEL systems adds a significant tactical advantage, enabling these systems to accompany ground forces and provide a protective shield in dynamic combat environments. Mounted on wheeled or tracked vehicles, these systems can move with troops and deliver air defense against threats that would otherwise overwhelm static defenses. By enabling real-time engagement of several threats, P-HEL systems enhance force protection and operational flexibility.

The laser offers scalable output, ranging from two to 20 kilowatts, enabling it to engage a wide range of airborne threats, including drones and projectiles. The system's radar, a pulse-Doppler

array, provides full hemispheric coverage and is capable of supporting counter-unmanned aerial systems, air defense, and detection of incoming hostile fire. Even in the event of a laser amplifier failure, the system continues to operate with reduced power.

Target tracking is handled by a specialized camera with zoom optics and a laser rangefinder, allowing for precise engagement of moving threats. The system's sensors provide high-definition imaging for day and night use, and its thermal and power management systems allow for extended operation in various environments. Powered by batteries, generators, or external power sources, BlueHalo says LOCUST is capable of continuous laser firing for extended periods and can operate for up to 24 hours in tracking mode.

"With this contract, BlueHalo is now providing full-scale Directed Energy support to our customers—at home through advanced innovation, in the field through maintenance and training support, and strategically through operational guidance and battlespace management," says Jonathan Moneymaker, BlueHalo Chief Executive Officer.

This spring, Doug Bush, the Army's head of acquisitions, told Forbes that the Army had used laser weapons in the Middle East to take down hostile drones. Bush, who was nominated and confirmed as the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology, declined to inform Forbes what laser system earned the kills, though the P-HEL has been in use overseas since November 2022.

Microwave mindset

Beyond lasers, directed-energy technologies also include microwave weapons. These function by emitting concentrated bursts of electromagnetic energy at microwave frequencies.

Microwave systems utilize non-ionizing radiation, which doesn't ionize atoms but is effective in disrupting electronic circuits and components. This may prove especially effective at combating swarms of drones.

One microwave weapon garnering attention is the Tactical High-Power Operational Responder (THOR), which is being developed by the U.S. Air Force Research Lab to combat the rising threat of swarming drones. When a swarm of drones is detected, THOR emits a wide-area burst of microwave energy that disables several drones simultaneously, making it highly effective against coordinated, large-scale drone attacks that are designed to overwhelm conventional defenses.

THOR's primary strength lies in its ability to engage several targets at once. While laser systems require precise aiming and can engage one target at a time, THOR's microwave pulses affect all drones within its range, neutralizing swarms efficiently. By disabling drones' electronic systems, THOR avoids the need for physical projectiles, reducing collateral damage and eliminating the need for kinetic engagement.

The system is highly deployable and simple to operate, designed to be mounted on various platforms, including vehicles or ground-based installations. THOR's microwave emitter is rapidly directed at incoming threats, making it highly responsive in dynamic combat scenarios. With an

effectively unlimited magazine, constrained only by its power supply, THOR offers a continuous defense solution without the need for ammunition resupply.

Microwave weapons rely on devices like magnetrons, klystrons, or other microwave generators to convert electrical energy into high-frequency microwave pulses. These devices create intense electromagnetic fields, which are harnessed to produce directed microwave energy. The microwaves are channeled through an antenna or waveguide to create a concentrated beam. Depending on the system's design, this beam can be narrow for precise targeting or wider to impact several targets simultaneously.

In 2023, the AFRL put THOR to the test against a swarm of UAVs at Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico, and observers were impressed with what they saw from the demonstration of the microwave weapon.

"The THOR team flew numerous drones at the THOR system to simulate a real-world swarm attack," says Adrian Lucero, THOR program manager at AFRL's Directed Energy Directorate. "THOR has never been tested against these types of drones before, but this did not stop the system from dropping the targets out of the sky with its non-kinetic, speed-of-light High-Power Microwave, or HPM pulses." he says.

"We couldn't have come this far without the perseverance and professionalism of the entire THOR team," says Ken Miller, AFRL's high power electromagnetics division chief. "Our scientists, Airmen and contractors worked early mornings and late nights to make this swarm demo...a great success. AFRL is committed to developing such advanced technologies to defend our service members on the front lines."

Work to do

In addition to the DOD wanting to bring down the cost of developing and deploying directed-energy weapons, the military notes that there is a lot to be desired in terms of efficacy if military branches are looking to utilize lasers where traditional air defenses are currently in use.

Earlier this year at the annual Surface Navy Association symposium, Vice Adm. Brendan McLane remarked that he was in favor of getting more directed-energy systems on more ships in short order.

"I am not content with the pace of directed-energy weapons. We must deliver on this promise that this technology gives us," McLane told a crowd at earlier this year. "I really want to put a lot of effort into accelerating [directed energy] because that gives us so much when it comes to magazine capacity and in speed and distance."

However, like nearly everything in the world of military and aerospace technology, size, weight, power, and cost (SWaP-C) are a major concern with developing and deploying directed-energy weapons systems. These weapons need a continuous power supply, which is often drawn from generators, shipboard systems, or vehicle engines. The need for stable, high-power energy sources makes deploying these systems a challenge, especially in mobile or remote environments.

On ships, laser weapons may rely on integrated power systems with large electrical capacity, while land-based or vehicle-mounted lasers require specialized generators or energy storage systems. And like embedded computer systems, keeping these weapons systems cool is a battle as high-power lasers generate significant heat during operation which necessitate cooling systems that further increase power consumption.

Earlier this year, Rear Adm. Fred Pyle told attendees at the Surface Navy Association's annual symposium that honesty about these technologies is necessary when envisioning the near-term future.

"Sometimes we have a tendency to over promise and under deliver," Rear Adm. Pyle says. "We need to flip that to where, when we're intellectually honest, when we're honest with ourselves from a technology capability, that we have an agreed upon sight picture of what it's going to look like to deliver that capability."

While Rear Adm. Pyle urged an "over-delivering" and "under-promising" mindset, he says the Navy was bullish on what directed-energy weapons would offer sailors and Marines.

"We're very focused on delivering directed-energy capability and we're building it into the future [budget requests] in mind with our frigate and the DDG(X) [the next-generation destroyer]," the officer says at the Surface Navy Association symposium in January.

That optimism was echoed by Secretary of the Navy Del Toro. "This is the way of the future," the secretary says. "And we are going to be looking in the fiscal year [2026 and 2027 budgets] and into the [future] on how to accelerate the deployment of HELIOS and HELIOS-like capabilities on our [destroyers] because it is the way that we will need to address the swarm attacks of drones on our systems."

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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE:

Fort Liberty paratroopers first to receive directed-energy drone killers; battlefield swarms a growing threat

(Nexstar Media, November 3)

Soldiers based at Fort Liberty will be the first U.S. Army paratrooper division to receive special directed-energy weapons that can shoot down small drones that target troop squads and divisions, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.

As the war between Ukraine and Russia continues, drones (which the military calls Unmanned Aircraft Systems) are becoming more deadly with the conflict on the cutting edge of drone warfare development. Ukrainian and Russian armies have been able to adapt small quad-copter drones into efficient, cheap one-way bombs — at times Ukraine has sent small drones at 125 mph smashing into and destroying Russian targets.

The size of deadly drones is shrinking, and the Pentagon is now training soldiers to deal with small UAS threats — called by the military small-Unmanned Aircraft Systems. The program that tackles these new weapons is called C-sUAS — Counter-Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems.

Already, the Fort Liberty troops and the U.S. Marines have a training course to teach “dropping grenades with sUAS, and employment of C-sUAS systems.”

A key concern in the future could be an enemy who deploys swarms of small drones at squads of U.S. troops, individual soldiers, vehicles, or missile defense systems, based on current army training.

In June, the U.S. Army demonstrated systems “capable of detecting and defeating swarms of sUAS.”

The 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Liberty has already undergone an initial fielding of sUAS equipment and will receive job-specific equipment by the end of the year, U.S. Army officials said.

At U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground over the summer, up to 50 small drones were used at one time in “a mass sUAS attack scenario” that U.S. troops could face, officials said. In that simulation, nine different defense systems were evaluated, officials said.

In May, General James J. Mingus, U.S. Army vice chief of staff, told a U.S. Senate committee about the “proliferation of UAS” and efforts to take down sUAS threats.

“One of the primary focus areas of the Army’s counter-UAS efforts is the development of directed-energy systems, including high-energy lasers and microwave weapons, capable of disabling or destroying UAS platforms at extended ranges,” Mingus told the Readiness Committee on Armed Services.

“Directed-energy systems offer several advantages over traditional kinetic weapons, including rapid engagement times, reduced collateral damage, and unlimited magazine capacity,” he said.

The Fort Liberty troops along with the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Cavazos, Texas are the first by the end of 2024 to receive counter-small UAS (C-sUAS) Division Sets “to protect division critical assets and maneuver formations from the sUAS threat,” Mingus said.

Last year, 82nd Airborne Division paratroopers at Fort Liberty trained with an M4 Carbine with a Smart Shooter counter unmanned aircraft system attachment.

The army said the Smart Shooter system activates after detecting and identifying UAS by using advanced algorithms and assisted vision to destroy moving targets “by reducing human errors such as fatigue and stress.”

General Mingus said the U.S. Army has already fielded prototype counter-UAS systems such as Directed Energy-Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense (DE-MSHORAD) to forward-deployed forces in critical theaters of operation, including the USCENTCOM area, which is largely in the Middle East and southwest Asia.

So far this year, troops have been trained on The Dronebuster, a handheld, “non-kinetic mitigation device” that can disrupt the signal between a drone and its controller.

The U.S. Army also used the Drone Defender last year. The U.S. Marines have used a NightFighter S counter-unmanned aerial vehicle system.

In the past, soldiers have also used a weapon called the Dronekiller. Some officers and soldiers have noted that 30 mm machine guns can also be effective when used with tracking hardware and software.

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DOMESTIC:

Rubber bullets fired, suspect leaps from building in Tacoma police encounter

(KIRO7, November 1)

Tacoma Police Community Liaison Officers were nearby when they heard gunshots on October 23, close enough to smell the lingering gunpowder.

Officers immediately moved in to secure the area near the 900 block of North 2nd Street, Tacoma, WA 98403, quickly discovering that the shots had been fired from a shotgun loaded with rubber bullets.

While officers worked to contain the scene, a suspect unexpectedly jumped from the second story of a nearby building.

Police soon secured the area without further incident, and no injuries were reported.

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OTHER FOREIGN COUNTRIES:

Clashes in Mozambique as police disperse election protests

(Agence France-Presse, November 3)

Police in Mozambique fired tear gas and rubber bullets Saturday as they dispersed protests in several cities over a disputed presidential election, according to local sources and AFP reporters.

Unrest has rocked the southern African nation since an October 9 election, which was won by the ruling Frelimo party, in power since 1975, but denounced as fraudulent by opposition parties.

Election observers, including some from the European Union, have noted irregularities and denounced violence before, during and after the vote.

The leading opposition candidate, Venancio Mondlane, has called for nationwide protests until November 7, with a final rally planned in Maputo.

On Saturday, hundreds of people who had gathered to protest the election results in Maputo were dispersed by police with tear gas and rubber bullets, according to AFP reporters on the scene.

Police were seen patrolling the city Saturday to try to dissuade residents from other parts of the country from coming to next week's protest.

In the northern province of Nampula, almost 2,000 kilometers (more than 1,200 miles) from the capital, clashes broke out in several areas Saturday between protesters and police, a witness and a local group told AFP.

In the city of Nampula, "at approximately 9 a.m. almost 500 people took to the street on Trabalho Avenue to contest election results," said Constantino Jose, a taxi driver in the city.

"Protesters also gathered in Arresta [the largest market in Nampula] and blocked some roads," said Jose.

"Police shot tear gas and real bullets to disperse the crowd," he said, without giving further details.

A local civil society group, Plataforma Decide, told AFP that "Nampula province is in chaos" and that "in Nampula City ... the police fired tear gas."

Police did not respond to AFP's request for comment on the reports.

In the town of Namialo, some 95 kilometers (60 miles) from Nampula, "over 100 demonstrators burnt tires on the street," a local journalist said, adding that "a strong police contingent" had been deployed to the area.

He asked to remain anonymous as he feared for his safety.

Another source said that at least nine people had been shot, but it wasn't immediately clear if it was by tear gas or bullets.

A local official, Melchior Focas, an administrator in Meconta-Namialo, confirmed to AFP there had been "clashes" in the area.

Mozambique has imposed internet restrictions since post-electoral violence broke out, including blocking access to Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

Mondlane has widely used social media platforms to communicate with his supporters and rally them to protest.

The spiral of unrest started shortly after the election, turning violent on October 24 when the electoral commission declared Frelimo's Daniel Chapo, 47, winner with almost 71% of votes.

Mondlane, 50, of the small Podemos party, came in second with 20% but said the results were "false."

Police have said that 20 people have been injured in post-electoral violence and that two people have died, without giving details.

An investigation was opened into Mondlane following the unrest and his calls for "25 days of terror."

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COMMENTARY:

The Philippines' Near-Standoff with China at Sabina Shoal: Bolstering Preventive Deployment

(Fulcrum, November 4, Edcel John A. Ibarra)

The Philippines and China have nearly sparked a standoff at Sabina Shoal in the Spratly Islands. It began in April 2024 when the Philippines deployed Teresa Magbanua, a coast guard ship, to observe Chinese forces suspected of preparing to occupy the area. It ended in September when the Philippines withdrew Teresa Magbanua after Chinese vessels blockaded and rammed the ship. A replacement ship has since been sent, so far without any reports of harassment.

The Philippines' deployment of a coast guard ship was a preventive measure to forestall a probable attempt at occupation of the shoal by an adversary. This is a new tactic, enabled by the maritime capabilities the country has gained in the past decade. The Philippines began to modernise its coast guard after the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with China. That crisis erupted in part because Manila lacked a civilian maritime law enforcement asset available for dispatch then and instead deployed a military ship. As deploying a military ship (a "grey hull") can be misconstrued as an act of war, it raised the tone of the 2012 encounter. A different scenario might have unfolded if Manila had deployed a coast guard ship (or a "white hull") as these are traditionally regarded as benign.

Now, Manila can also employ other tactics, such as proactively using its coast guard to establish presence rather than merely to ascertain an adversary's actions. However, coast guard encounters are only marginally less tense than naval confrontations, especially because Beijing operates its coast guard like a second navy. Still, Manila's tactical toolkit has expanded. In Sabina Shoal, the government seemed to be testing its new tactic.

The deployment of Teresa Magbanua was initially preemptive, based on intelligence that China was about to begin island building. This was eventually disconfirmed, so the Filipino mission became preventive. The distinction matters. Following Colin S. Gray, a British strategic theorist, preemption is purely defensive (where an adversary's imminent threat forces the preemptor's hand), requires little justification (being purely defensive), and acts at the operational level (as the threat is imminent). In contrast, prevention against threats that are not imminent is

discretionary, requires more justification, and acts on both operational and strategic levels. This distinction is useful for Philippine strategic planning: effective preventive deployment requires further justification and alignment with broader defence strategies.

China's grey zone tactics in the South China Sea (SCS) blur the distinction between preemption and prevention for its opponents. The threat presented by Chinese vessels, even if they are from their coast guard, hangs below the threshold of war and is not only imminent but already present. In Sabina Shoal, there is the constant threat of illegal Chinese presence. China does not occupy the feature but essentially blockades the Philippines from going there.

Yet, Philippine presence in Sabina Shoal is justified under international law. The shoal, a low-tide elevation, cannot be the subject of a territorial dispute as it generates no territorial sea under Article 13 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The state whose exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in which the shoal sits — in this case, the Philippines — exercises sovereign rights and jurisdiction over it. As China's controversial "nine-dash line" is contrary to UNCLOS and "without lawful effect", according to the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration award, only the Philippines has sovereign rights over Sabina Shoal.

Preventive deployment can form part of deterrence and be enhanced by hastening military and coast guard modernisation.

Still, there is an opportunity for further justification by Manila. Beijing accuses Manila of violating the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). It is unclear which DOC principle Manila has violated. Manila sent a single civilian ship, not an occupation force, to Sabina Shoal. Instead, the Philippines believes it is Beijing that is preparing for the shoal's occupation. Moreover, it is Beijing's disregard for international maritime law and resort to actions like water cannoning, ramming, and swarming that undermines the DOC.

Philippine public statements on Sabina Shoal were silent on the DOC. As the Philippines appeals to international law and the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration award, it should also walk the talk on ASEAN centrality and cite the DOC in its protests against China. Doing so could reassure ASEAN neighbours and enhance regional support for the Philippines' actions on this issue.

This was one of the missions of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr at the recent ASEAN Summit. He appealed for member states and leaders not to turn a blind eye towards undue and unlawful harassment in the SCS, and called for the swift completion of the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct. He also revealed that up to six ASEAN neighbours have privately expressed support for Manila's cause.

In addition, the Philippines should think about broader strategies. Preventive deployment can form part of preventive diplomacy. The Philippines and China rightly activated their Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea (BCM) but this is insufficient. No deal has been agreed upon and the BCM came after hostilities had peaked. Manila should seek to convene a new meeting and shift the agenda towards preventing future incidents. On condition that China will reciprocate, the Philippines should adopt confidence-building measures (CBMs),

including advance notifications of deployment of maritime assets. Traditional CBMs centre on information sharing on military matters; it is time to extend them to coast guard and maritime militia activities.

Preventive deployment can form part of deterrence and be enhanced by hastening military and coast guard modernisation. Manila must also continue working with allies and partners beyond assistance on asset modernisation. In this regard, joint patrols will continue but probably not in hotly contested areas. For instance, the Philippine military chief turned down a US commander's offer to escort Philippine ships in SCS missions. Nonetheless, Manila can conduct missions alone while collaborating with others for planning and after-mission reviews.

Standing up to the Chinese is complicated by the Philippines' developmental entanglement with Chinese trade, investment, and aid. Still, the Philippines can intensify diplomatic pressure and extend assurances, such as reducing pre-positioned US assets on Philippine soil in exchange for reduced Chinese maritime presence in the West Philippine Sea.

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