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The “New Normal” in China’s Assertive Power Projection in the South China Sea: Maritime Hybrid Threats

Çin’in Güney Çin Denizi’nde Uyguladığı İsrarcı Güç Projeksiyonu ile Ortaya Çıkan “Yeni Normal”: Denizdeki Hibrid Tehditler

Övgü Kalkan Küçüksolak¹ 

Abstract

The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) assertive power projection in the South China Sea (SCS) and its consequences in the form of hybrid threats have increasingly become an accepted reality of the region. China has gradually constructed this “new normal” or “fait accompli” under the framework of its assertive policies which have generated geostrategic repercussions both in the regional and global landscape. Despite the fact that most of the recent studies particularly address China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or regional politics, a holistic assessment of China’s assertive behavior requires a concentrated focus on China’s employment of maritime hybrid instruments in the service of its declarative, demonstrative and coercive actions. Rather than engaging in open military confrontation in the SCS dispute, China skillfully synchronizes the military, political, economic, cyber and information sources of power in different operational domains to influence, intimidate and coerce the competing claimants. Furthermore, with a structural approach, the impact of China’s employment of assertive maritime hybrid instruments go beyond regional level to have possible repercussions on the future of global-level power shifts. The current conditions of China’s growing material power, its will to use hybrid instruments, and increasing vulnerabilities and lack of a coordinated response seem to reinforce a breeding ground for future assertiveness and a possible shift in the balance of power. However, in the long-term it would not be surprising to see stiffened counter efforts to disrupt its initiatives on a global landscape. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the context and cumulative effects of China’s assertive employment of maritime hybrid instruments while discussing increasing international concerns on the altering dynamics of balance of power.

Keywords

China’s Assertiveness, Maritime Hybrid Threats, Little Blue Men, Underwater Cable Strategy, Maritime Security

Öz

Çin’in Güney Çin Denizi’nde (GÇD) uyguladığı israrıcı güç projeksiyonu ve ortaya çıkardığı hibrid tehditler bölgenin “yeni normal” haline gelmekte ve gerek bölgesel, gerekse küresel anlamda önemli jeostratejik sonuçlar doğurmaktadır. Halihazırda literatürdeki pek çok çalışma Çin’in Bir Kuşak Bir Yol Projesi’ne odaklanmaktaysa da Çin’in israrıcı politikalarının bütüncül bir şekilde değerlendirilebilmesi için sözkonusu devletin deniz alanında bildirimsel, ortaya koyucu ve zorlayıcı nitelikte kullandığı hibrid enstrümanların tartışılması gerekmektedir. GÇD’de açık bir askeri çatışmaya girmekten kaçınan Çin’in askeri, siyasi, ekonomik, siber ve bilgi kaynaklı güç enstrümanlarını kullanarak farklı operasyonel alanlar üzerinden rakiplerini etkilemeye, sindirmeye ve zorlamaya çalıştığı görülmektedir. Çin’in büyüyen gücü ve hibrid enstrümanları uygulama iradesine karşılık artan kırılganlıklar ile koordineli karşılık verilmesi eksikliği önümüzdeki dönemde söz konusu gücün daha fazla israrıcı politikalar uygulamasına ve güç dengesinde bir kayma yaşanmasına zemin hazırlayabilecektir. Diğer taraftan, küresel düzlemde uzun dönemli düşünüldüğünde, Çin’in politika uygulamalarının önüne geçilebilmesi kapsamında sertleşen karşı politikaları görmek sürpriz olmayacaktır. Tüm bu unsurlar ışığında bu çalışma, Çin’in israrıcı güç projeksiyonunu bütüncül bir şekilde analiz etmek amacıyla hibrid deniz enstrümanlarının içeriğine ve kümülatif etkilerine ışık tutmakta ve güç dengelerinin olası değişimi kapsamında yükselen uluslararası endişeleri tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Çin’in İsrarcı Politika Uygulamaları, Deniz Alanında Hibrid Tehditler, Küçük Mavi Adamlar, Sualtı Kablo Stratejisi, Deniz Güvenliği

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Introduction

In recent years, hybrid threats have increasingly become a significant element of global security environment. While unpredictability and fusion of instruments become buzzwords for the transforming security environment, hybrid threats offer the perpetrator a wide spectrum of opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities and chance of synchronization among variety of instruments of power. Understanding the dynamics and the utility of hybrid threats under the context of states foreign policy issues requires a deeper perspective on variety of cases to be able to capture the scope and the prospects of diverse hybrid components. In that regard, China's employment of maritime hybrid instruments under the fabric of declarative, demonstrative and coercive actions deserve an in-depth research to be able to discuss on the implications of China's assertive power projection in the region. Since China's employment of hybrid instruments systematically alter the regional dynamics as well as reshape the "new normal" in the maritime periphery, then security calculations need to recognize the patterns and the cumulative effects of hybrid instruments on a regional and global politics.

Security analyst Frank Hoffman characterizes hybrid threats as those "simultaneously and adaptively employ a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to obtain desired political objectives" (Hoffman, 2009). In parallel to growing uncertainty of the geography of the battlespace, growing number of cases reveal the rise of hybrid threats in a proliferating number of areas that ranges from critical undersea infrastructure to cyber campaigns. The utility of diverse elements of hybrid campaigns allows states to stay below the threshold of open military conflict as well as to minimize external interference. Particularly, external interference is a controversial issue on the face of rising Chinese power both in the regional and global context where as the course of the SCS dispute represents a critical hotspot to contain China in the region. In fact, China's employment of hybrid instruments to thwart external interference do not necessarily seem surprising given the debates of a peaceful rise or dissatisfied-revolutionary power on the projects and ambitions of China. Obviously, China's structuring of hybrid instruments in a historical process and their systematic conduct through the codes of coercive gradualism render it more interesting to be able to gain new insights on the SCS dispute.

While most of the recent studies in the literature particularly focus on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or regional politics regarding the SCS dispute, the utility of maritime hybrid instruments in the service of China's declarative, demonstrative and coercive actions under its assertive behavior fall short of a comprehensive analysis. Since the BRI represents one side of the China's assertive power projection¹ with incentives and challenges on a global and regional scale, the utilization of hybrid instruments in the maritime theatre depicts the other side of the picture. Therefore, a meaningful assessment of China's imprecise policy framework under the features of an assertive behavior requires a systematic study on the underlying dynamics of its diversified policy instruments that

¹ The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) component of the China's BRI project has generated discussions on the issues of the future of China's growing maritime economy and port investments in the region. Amid the rising concerns on the regional security, some have argued that BRI can take form of a predatory economics through unsustainable debt levels where as China's port investments may turn into a forward military base for its growing blue-water navy (Gerstel, 2018, p.12; Gong, 2020, p.41).

serve to strengthen its growing clout. In this regard, this study seeks to present a holistic assessment of China’s assertive policy conduct with a special focus on the utilization of maritime hybrid instruments.

The Chinese Case

The rising power of the region China considers SCS among its “core national interests”² and employs hybrid maritime means to advance its security objectives in the region. In parallel to its growing position in the international arena, China’s presence and assertive actions accelerate and its strategic instruments diversify in the SCS. China strives to maximize its power with an assertive conduct and hence employs hybrid maritime means which go beyond the routine statecraft instruments yet designed to stay below the elements associated with direct military conflict.

Under the imprecise label of assertiveness, it is possible to read China’s actions both in its search for security in the region and quest for global power competition. While defensive realists evaluate China’s maximization of power in its search for security in the region, offensive realists concentrate on China’s pursuit of a hegemony position in the region which can have geostrategic repercussions on a global scale in the long run. Under the perspective of offensive realists’ historical claim which holds the narrative that rising power usually transforms into a revisionist power (as in the previous cases of Japan and Nazi Germany) (Bjällstrand, 2014, p.8), China’s maximization and utilization of different power instruments can be expected to serve for a shift in the balance of power. In this vein, China’s policy implications have crucially echoed in the US to generate Rebalance Strategy to Asia under the term of former President Barack Obama. With a view to undermine China’s potential regional hegemony, the US pledged to “play a larger and long-term role in shaping the region and its future” (The White House, 2011) under this strategy. During his presidency, Barack Obama concentrated on shoring up relations with the SCS disputants and followed a tougher line against China to contain the rising power on the SCS area (Sevastopulo, Dyer, & Mitchell, 2016). While Obama’s successor President Trump has built his fluctuating policy on the aspects of preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence (Dahiya, 2021), this policy seems to be stiffened by the current President Biden who ensured that the US will prevent China to become the most powerful country in the world (Renshaw, Shalal, & Martina, 2021). Since the US has signalized its aim to secure its global dominant position by countering the challenges in the region, then it will not be wrong to claim that a longstanding and unresolved SCS dispute under the threat of external intervention will be instrumental to tame the rising China. By acknowledging this challenge of global power competition, Chinese leadership strives hard to remain below the threshold of open military conflict and opts for a third way to ensure incremental gains in the SCS dispute. Within this competition analysts will notice that China is not the sole power who employs hybrid instruments in its strategic calculus. Despite the fact that big powers such as Russia and the US also utilize hybrid instruments to pursue a set of national objectives, this study presents a focused case study analysis of China’s policies to discuss on the employment of maritime hybrid instruments as a conventional national asset in its assertive power projection.

² In some of the semi-official declarations by the Chinese policymakers, the SCS issues are evaluated among the “core national interests”, together with Tibet and Taiwan issues (Casarini, 2017).

According to Fravel (2011), a state can pursue cooperation, escalation or delay to manage its claims in a territorial dispute. In the Chinese case, the conduct of delaying strategy involves active policy implications which go beyond maintaining existing claims to gradually expand its maritime territories in the region without engaging in open military conflict. In this gray-zone, China considers the SCS dispute on a bilateral basis both to avoid external interference and to limit the ability of the claimants to respond. Rather than directly confronting the adversaries on the conventional military conflict, China maintains an assertive behavior through the employment of declarative and demonstrative actions whereas its coercive moves manifest a greater degree of gradual steps to reinforce its interests in the region. In that vein, China's graduated use of diverse instruments of scientific surveys, land reclamation projects, little blue men, cyber instruments and underwater cable strategy imply crucial security, sovereignty, economic and political repercussions for the claimant states which have significant vulnerabilities and insufficient means to counter integrated Chinese policy in the absence of a coherent and coordinated efforts among themselves.

Scientific Surveys and Land Reclamation Projects

China has undertaken substantial actions to increase its civilian presence and military infrastructure construction in the SCS. As a manifestation of its demonstrative actions, it has initiated scientific surveys together with intensified patrolling activities on the maritime areas which constantly expanded beyond disputed islands to encompass larger maritime spaces with huge sea resources. China's growing ambition and capacity to unilaterally administer the disputed areas in the SCS is also crystallized in its substantial program of land reclamation in the Spratly archipelago in the last decade.

From the 1970's on China's declarative actions in the form of official statements for sovereignty claims and its increasing number of scientific surveys that expand beyond the Paracel Archipelago Sea Area as demonstrative actions have become a significant feature of its assertive behavior in the region (Fravel, 2011, p.293; Chubb, 2021, p.102). While China constantly expanded its areas of scientific surveys and patrolling activities, it still did not refrain from using force such as in the cases of Paracel (1974) and Spratly Islands (1988) against the Vietnamese forces in the SCS. However, after the clashes, China turned back to its delaying strategy and continued to focus on consolidating its position in the area. In that respect, it is possible to claim that under the framework of its delaying strategy, China continued to conduct its assertive and expansionary policies through the pursuit of coercive gradualism which involves the utilization of coercive instruments in a synchronized and integrated fashion to advance its position by incremental steps (Pierce, Douds, & Marra, 2015, p.51). In that vein, China has gradually and incrementally synchronized the instruments of scientific surveys and land reclamation projects with the coercive instruments of power to alter the status quo in the region. While China does not refrain from resorting to coercive actions such as cutting of cables of Vietnamese oil survey ship which is claimed to be located within the Vietnamese EEZ (BBC News, 2011), its verbal assertion that labels its action as "completely justified" (Watts, 2011) clearly demonstrates its determination to impose punishment in cases of controversies. It is possible to claim that China's assertiveness privileges coercive instruments, as it is also seen in the maritime militia, that are designed to deter disputants from taking action and to thwart other claimants' presence in the region.

Amid the maritime disputes in the SCS, China’s actions in the region have been evaluated as an example of hybrid threats by a variety of sources such as the European Parliament (EP) briefing (2015). According to the briefing, China utilizes its economic and military pressure and combines it with the land reclamation projects in the Spratly in pursuit of its strategic objectives in the region. Since China historically preferred to prevent the SCS disputes from being considered as a multilateral issue and evaluates it under the framework of bilateral relations with the claimants³, EP’s consideration of China’s moves under the framework of hybrid threats can be viewed from a degree of anxiety and suspicion its actions have generated in the international arena and as a signal of possible pressure China can face in the long run.

The land reclamation projects in the Spratly serves to strengthen China’s grip in the SCS without open military confrontation with the other claimants. It is possible to claim that by using cabbage strategy as it is codified in the geopolitical lexicon, it encircles the area, blocks the entry or exit of any other country’s forces and converts the area into a military base. China has also employed the cabbage strategy against the Philippines to prevent it from strengthening its military infrastructure on Thitu Island. China has deployed swarming fleets of fishing vessels, which will be discussed in more detail under the section of “little blue men”, around Thitu Island to intimidate troops and to deny access to the disputed areas (Chorn & Sato, 2019). While the utilization of these non-conventional tactics gradually increase China’s power in the name of its security and national interest, they inevitably raise tension due to growing concerns on the regional dynamics and the possibility of a system-level shift in the global balance of power. Since avoiding military conflict does not constitute the only determinant factor in the disputes, then unacceptable Chinese hybrid tactics can serve to reinforce future options to balance China’s efforts on a global level.

The Little Blue Men

As it is also illustrated in the Thitu Island case, China uses number of instruments that range from military buildup in the artificial islands to the employment of its maritime militias known as “little blue men” in the maritime theatre to enforce its maximalist claims in the region. According to the US Department of Defense’s (2018) Annual Report to Congress, People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) forms one of the paramilitary forces of Chinese military leadership that encompasses the reserve forces of civilians available for mobilization.

3 In 2002, China and ASEAN countries have agreed upon confidence-building measures in the non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DoC). However, due to China’s will to settle issues bilaterally and existing differences between the parties, little progress has been reached to realize the DoC (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

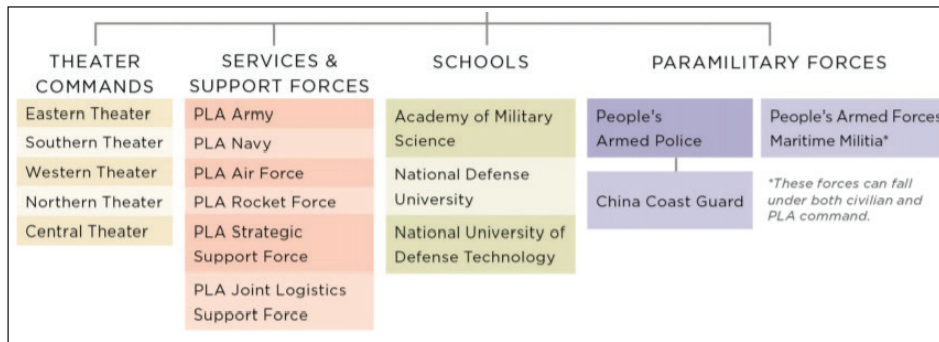


Table. Part of the China's Military Leadership

Source: US Department of Defense (2018)

China's armed forces includes three major units with maritime subcomponents. While the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA(N)) stands as the world's largest navy, the People's Armed Police increasingly leads the China's Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE) forces that includes China Coast Guard; and the Militia involves PAFMM which acts as a Third Sea Force⁴ (Erickson, 2017a). China's militia encompasses an armed mass organization of mobilizable personnel who both support China's armed forces in its operational role and continue their daily economic activities in their civilian life. The militia organization has been formed at grassroots level of Chinese society since units are organized at towns, villages, urban sub-districts and enterprises⁵ (Erickson & Kennedy, 2016, p.1). Historically, grassroots type organization was influential both in the political mobilization of society in maritime domain and in responding to emergencies across the sea (Erickson & Kennedy, 2016, p.4). Therefore, despite the recent discussions on the instruments of hybrid threats in the maritime security environment, the PAFMM, has a long history dating back to the Cold War period which is deeply rooted on the basis of grassroots organization. So, since its long history prove the extent of its institutional structure, then it becomes a necessity to grasp the historical development of the PAFMM to be able to understand the scope of the Chinese maritime hybrid instruments more clearly today.

The establishment of the PAFMM can be read in parallel to the foundation of the PRC in 1949. After that time with a view to consolidate its power and to defend the coastal waters from the nationalist forces that have retreated to Taiwan and other coastal islands, the PRC have transformed fisherman and nautical laborers into a national maritime militia. In addition to the nationalist threat which has employed an irregular warfare at sea, other factors such as the collectivization of coastal fisheries and the influence of "Young School" understanding that emphasizes coastal defense with light and inexpensive vessels and weapons that will shoo away the naval powers, also contributed to the formation and the development of Chinese maritime militia (Holmes, 2018).

4 As it is mentioned in the China Maritime Report, the militia is not technically a direct subcomponent of the PLA. Under this ambiguity, China keeps a third sea force that is subject to the command of PLA but under low profile with a freedom to enjoy civilian liberties (Kennedy & Erickson, 2017).

5 China's militia includes two major subcomponents of an "ordinary" reserve force and a "primary" force. Maritime militia units take place within the primary force, and in support of China's navy and coast guard efforts growing number of elite units are trained and deployed on operations which encompass the tasks of monitoring, displaying presence in front of, or opposing foreign actors (Erickson & Kennedy, 2015).

Throughout the institutionalization process of the maritime militia, the Chinese Communist Party has promoted a state-level funding and the Bureau of Aquatic Products has played an active role in the organization of local fisheries, identification of critical targets and formulation of fishing policy (Grossman, 2020). In its transformation to a coherent national force, the presence of former PLAN officers in the Bureau of Aquatic Products proved to be vital in military training and carrying out the operations in the PRC coastal waters. Especially from the 1970's on, the maritime militia proved to be influential at "people's war at sea" by significantly contributing to the Battle of Paracel Islands and supporting the operations of the Chinese Coast Guard (Jahangir, 2020).

It is possible to claim that the geostrategic and economic dynamics of the region have also contributed to the increasing usage of hybrid instruments as part of a Chinese campaign of safeguarding its national interests at sea. While the marine resources of the region highly contribute to Chinese food market and its export figures, the SCS stands as a critical gateway for trade and energy transportation worth of 30 percentage of global maritime oil trade and \$4.8 trillion of international trade passing through the area each year (Wood, 2020). With its unlimited sea resources and busiest maritime sea lanes in the world, SCS offers profound advantages especially on the themes of Chinese economic growth, access to critical waterways and the strategic leverage at both regional and global power struggle with the US. Therefore, the economic and geo-strategic factors highlight the vitality of the maritime area and the incentives for the Chinese leadership to dominate it.

Under this framework, China has accelerated the usage and institutionalization of hybrid instruments through the development of joint military-civilian land and sea border management system (Information Office of the State Council, 2000). As it is reflected in its Defense Paper in 2000, China has especially underlined the significance of sharing of responsibilities between the military and civilian authorities for its frontier defense. This vision is further reinforced both through the introduction of Military-Civilian Fusion concept as one of the key ambitions of Chinese strategic thinking (Jash, 2020, p.44), and realization of an increasingly routine role of the maritime militia in its support for maritime sovereignty enforcement in the following years. With respect to the 13th Five Year Plan (2016-2020) which emphasizes the significance of integrating military and civilian development as well as giving priority to the mobilization of forces for maritime operations, it is not a surprise to see that the number of maritime militia has significantly grown in proportion to outdated infantry militia units (Erickson, 2017b).

According to the Article 36 of the China Military Service Law (1984) which is revised in 1988, PAFMM is not a part of Chinese maritime law enforcement but a military auxiliary. However, since the functions of the PAFMM go beyond surveillance, maritime transportation, search and rescue to involve enforcement of China's sovereignty claims, then the role of PAFMM becomes more critical under China's assertive policies (Luo & Panter, 2021, p. 12). Through its advanced electronic equipments that encompass communication systems, satellite navigation and radar, maritime militia supplements the critical PLAN structure, gathers maritime intelligence and provides logistic support to Chinese warships (Kraska & Monti, 2015). PAFMM's transforming structure turns into one of the most significant components of the Chinese strategy of coercive gradualism in

exerting its interests over the region. In this regard, PAFMM's fishing fleet is undertaking a wide spectrum of tasks to include intimidating other claimants, enforcing China's unilateral fishing ban, harassing foreign fishermen in their traditional fishing grounds and playing a significant role in kinetic engagements (Bhatia, 2018, p.25). The maritime militia is used to challenge foreign coast guard and navies which is vividly seen in the high-profile coercive tasks of the harassment of the USNS Impeccable in 2009, the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012 and the blockade of Second Thomas Shoal in 2014 (Nguyen & Thanh, 2019).

What is striking in the Chinese case is that, under the framework of a long-term state policy, Chinese decision-makers have developed an organizational structure which is entitled to use hybrid instruments with a sovereignty-support function. Despite the fact that the organization has a long way to reach a high level of coordination and interoperability (Luo & Panter, 2021, p. 15), present picture still shows the extent of a world's largest fishing fleet with an institutional structure that has been formed as a result of a determined and assertive state policy. Chinese development of the civilian elements as the vital parts of its hybrid maritime instruments not only reflects its patient and permanent strategic thinking but also recalls the understanding of Sun Tzu's strategy of defeating the enemy without fighting. Since fishing boats shall be protected according to the regulation under the law of naval warfare (Korkmaz, 2020), China avoids risk of involving in an open confrontation with other territorial stakeholders under the umbrella of civilian structures. Therefore, while the little blue men significantly contribute to China's power projection in the region on the one hand, its assertive presence and aggressive actions can be increasingly seen as destabilizing and provocative under the context of regional security on the other hand.

Cyber Instruments

The Chinese case of assertiveness covers diverse elements of policy instruments across the spectrum of military, political, economic, cyber and information sources of power. China orchestrates variety of policy assets under different operational domains to maximize its power while significantly generating geostrategic repercussions in the maritime theatre. In this regard, cyber domain occupies a significant place in its coercive actions to disrupt critical infrastructure and to influence range of events in the SCS dispute. Chinese coercive efforts to establish Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) zones in the SCS increasingly manifest an emphasis on the utilization of cyber means to disrupt communications and GPS localization in times of conflict (Baezner, 2018, p.4). In addition to this, variety of reports indicate an increasing usage of cyber kits by the Chinese groups to target government or private institutions that are linked to the SCS issue. While the cyber domain provides the opportunities of difficulty of attribution for the perpetrators, increasing number of reports and claims against Chinese cyber groups reveal the seriousness of the situation and intensifying complaints on Chinese aggression.

According to the Cyber Power National Index 2020, China has ranked as the second "Most Comprehensive Cyber Power" after the US (Voo, et.al.). China is listed among the high-ranking countries with its high levels of both capability and intent (China has especially achieved the highest score for intent) to use cyber power to achieve its

national objectives (Voo, et.al., p.14). Cyber power constitutes one of the most significant components of national capability and as it is also mentioned in the report, state-backed cyber actors are becoming one of the greatest threats to national security (Voo, et.al., p.IV). Since operational domains increasingly become interconnected and interdependent, numerous examples show the extent Chinese groups - which are thought to be state-sponsored- embark on cyber attack campaigns to serve for China's maritime claims in the SCS.

Cyber instruments are increasingly forming the crucial part of Chinese assertiveness in the SCS. With an integrated manner, while China utilizes a militia of fishermen in the physical domain, it capitalizes on sophisticated cyber groups in the cyber domain to sustain different range of campaigns to support its ambitions. According to the FireEye Report 2015, territorial disputes in the SCS stand as one of the most significant determinants in the Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) actors' actions in the region. According to the Report, in times of growing tensions in the region APT actors intensify their actions and concentrate on targeting governments and militaries with spear-phishing emails and malware to steal intelligence especially on the strategic issues of the SCS disputes (p.12). In another report by the Centre for Security Studies, increasing frequency of malicious cyber activities with respect to territorial disputes in the SCS is examined and it is stressed that while numerous regional actors such as Vietnamese with significant capabilities and influence are involved in cyber-activities, the majority of actors originate from China (Baezner, 2018, p.4). Among the prominent APT examples, Chinese cyber group *APT40*'s targeted attacks on shipbuilding, maritime, and engineering entities, as well as government and academic institutions within countries bordering the SCS (Hlavec, 2020) and the usage of spear-phishing emails by the *Numbered Panda*, which is believed to be linked with PLA, with an aim to spy on journalists, officials and defense industries in the region can be given (Baezner, 2018, p.8).

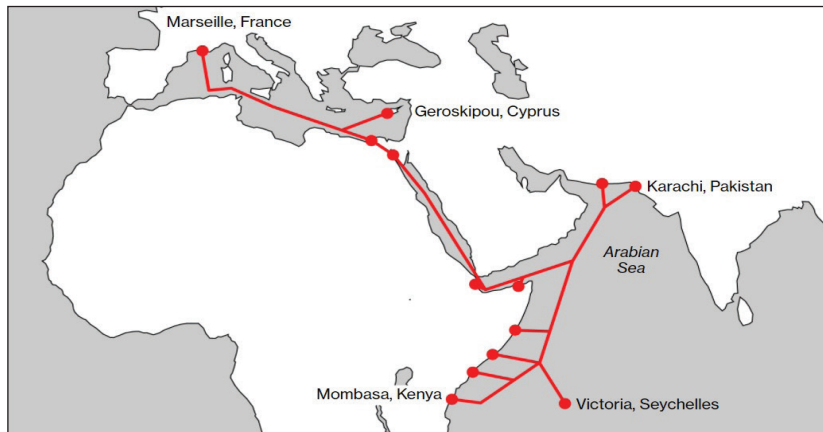
The impacts of cyber attacks are not limited to economic or intelligence assets only but rather go beyond to reach society in a broader scale to render hybrid campaigns to be more multi-dimensional and influential. It is a question of issue that whether there should be a definite time period for hybrid campaigns but given the conditions of long-lasting disputes, hybrid campaigns can continue in parallel to ongoing disputes by integrating various aspects of military, economic, technical and social impacts. In that respect, the social effects of cyber attacks in response to increasing tension or part of ongoing disputes also need to be considered among the repercussions of the maritime hybrid campaigns. For instance, the Cyber Report has highlighted the emerging cyber pattern in terms of a retaliatory move on the basis of maritime clashes, since the denial of access to an area to fishermen has triggered website defacement and DDoS attacks by the patriotic hacker groups. While the attacks by hacker groups solidify tensions in the region, their aims include defending national interest, ridiculing the opponent, weakening trust on government and generating fear in the targeted society (Baezner, 2018, p.12-13).

Quest for Underwater Domination

The underwater domain of the world oceans and seas becomes more important through the increasing dependencies on seabed hydrocarbon resources, rare earth metals and the

critical function of the underwater cable systems and pipelines. Undersea cables play a vital role in transmission of internet, data and telephone traffic since 400 of them carry %98 of international data and telephone traffic globally (Fouquet, 2021). In that respect, underwater cable systems can become an issue of hybrid maritime campaigns since any disruption in the underwater cable systems can trigger greater risks and threats both in maritime and other domains.

With a view to gain an upper hand in this strategic area, China has accelerated its efforts to install and use undersea cables in the SCS. Since fiber optic cables are faster and stable as compared to satellite systems, Chinese 4G fibre-optic cable stations replaced satellite stations in the Spratly Islands with a view to consolidate Chinese control and capabilities in the region (Huang, 2017). The strategic role of the underwater cable systems is not only limited to the SCS region but goes further to strengthen the impact of the BRI at a more global level (Kania, 2016). In that respect, China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) stands as one of the most critical objectives of the BRI. With a view to connect Belt and Road countries, China's 7500 mile undersea "PEACE Cable", which is expected to reach Marseille in the last quarter of 2021 also symbolizes the extent of Chinese future-oriented efforts and ambitions on the issue of underwater sea cables (Fouquet, 2021). While most of the underwater cables owned by the US companies today, the pace and the scope of the Chinese companies can challenge US dominance in the future since China's share in the underwater cable system is expected to rise from %11.4 in 2019 to %20 between the years 2025-2030 (Fouquet, 2021). Since a Chinese officer has characterized undersea cable as a battlefield where information can be obtained (Starks, 2020), then Chinese digital attempts increasingly become an issue of concern under the topics of sabotage, surveillance and espionage activities. Especially the US draws attention to the risks of espionage activities that can be carried out by the Chinese enterprises which supply sensitive communication equipments. As one of a consequence of growing concerns with regard to Chinese companies, the Pacific island of Nauru has rejected Chinese proposals for construction of undersea cables mostly on the basis of security concerns (Barrett, 2021).



Map. Peace Cable
Source: Telegeography (2021)

Underwater cables can become a target for not only an espionage or surveillance activities but they can also be attacked with an intention to disrupt the flow of information. Despite the huge transformation in the nature of communication technologies, it is possible to see examples of attacks against communication infrastructures within a history. For instance, during the First World War after declaring war on Germany, Britain has cut German undersea telegraph cables except the one that was under its own control (Ghiassy & Krishnamurthy, 2020, p.8). Today, despite their growing significance, underwater sea cables are largely owned by the private companies and they are vulnerable to attacks even by the unsophisticated vessels and equipments. In that vein, Taiwan argues on the issue of cable insecurity with a focus on the scenarios that include the consequences of Chinese damaging or corrupting the underwater cables (Everington, 2019).

Given the anxiety about China's underwater actions and projects, it will not be wrong to claim that its underwater cable strategy is evaluated under the threat of its coercive actions especially by the other claimants in the SCS dispute. Due to China's assertive conduct and increasing range of demonstrative and coercive actions in the region, its underwater cable initiatives are perceived under the options of coercive strategies which can involve the options to block or interfere with the transmission of information in times of crisis to punish the adversaries.

Responses to Chinese Assertiveness

China skillfully synchronizes the military, political, economic, cyber and information sources of power in different operational domains to influence, intimidate and coerce the claimants in the SCS disputes while remaining below the threshold of military escalation. In response to Chinese assertiveness in the SCS, claimants both utilize national assets and engage in increasing degree of cooperation with powerful states in the region to balance and to counter Chinese assertiveness which nevertheless seem insufficient to prevent China's assertive actions in the region.

The neighboring states of the SCS employ variety of administrative, legal and operational means to thwart Chinese expansion and to protect their national interests in the region. The spectrum of responses include but not limited to Malaysia's approach to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf by claiming waters beyond the 200-kilometer limit of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the northern part of the SCS to ward off China's extension to Luconia Shoals (Singh, 2020). Indonesia has deployed warships and a submarine in the waters off the Natuna Islands to counter encroachment by the Chinese fishing vessels and coast guard ships. In response to the incident in which the Chinese ship has rammed and sunk a Vietnamese fishing vessel, Vietnam has sent a diplomatic note to the UN to protest China (Singh, 2020). As it is seen in various cases and especially in the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on the Philippines and China, China disregards the protests of claimants or simply rejects the PCA ruling, which was in favor of the Philippines, given the fact that the international response is not coherent and sufficient enough to pressure China to scale back its expansion (Bhatia, 2018, p.26).

Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia have taken collective diplomatic action under the ASEAN in 2020 to recognize the UN Convention on the Law of the

SEA (UNCLOS) as the basis for resolving disputes and these states continue to hold multilateral joint exercises and receive security assistance from the US against the Chinese assertiveness (Burgess, 2020). However, since they feared the uncoordinated US effort might provoke China into escalation beyond their ability to control, they refrain from deepening the relations with the US and continue to take individual steps to counter Chinese maneuvers (Chang, 2021). In that framework, despite growing Chinese assertiveness and the anxiety it creates in the region, it is still not possible to talk about a unity among the ASEAN countries or a firm, persistent stand by the regional countries.

Due to the factors such as vulnerabilities in economic and cyber domains, China's increasing military and economic power and the impact of the last COVID-19 epidemic, the efforts of the claimants fall short of effectively responding to Chinese actions. On the issue of cyber security since there is no coordinated effort put in place by the ASEAN, the region continues to remain vulnerable to cyber attacks by the Chinese hackers (Jamal, 2020). In economic terms, while China has strengthened its relationships with Cambodia and Laos through the BRI, it has achieved a highest growth rate of %13 in trade with the ASEAN countries between the years 2005-2015 (Das, 2017). Since China has become one of the most significant players in the exports and tourism sector of the ASEAN countries, the degree of dependencies between claimants and China has elevated to a strategic issue of concern in the SCS dispute. Having these economic vulnerabilities in mind, China did not refrain to utilize this asset in its SCS policy and sent coercive messages both to the claimants such as Vietnam and the foreign investors on military and economic terms to dissuade oil drilling projects in the SCS region (Kuok, 2019, p.6). In addition to this, the approach by the West toward the internal affairs of the regional countries is influential in their delicate policy toward China. The examples include West's approach toward Thailand regarding its military coup in 2014 and Myanmar on the issue of its Rohingya minority and military coup in 2021 (Chang, 2021). As it is seen in these policy actions, in parallel to China's growing power and diversification of its instruments, increasing vulnerabilities of claimants prevent them to formulate coherent and determined policy responses against China which in turn further contribute to increasing assertiveness of this rising power. In the absence of a serious response, this vicious circle seems to encourage China more to utilize hybrid instruments to reinforce its assertiveness in the region.

Despite the lack of a credible multilateral response against Chinese assertiveness in the SCS region, imprecise Chinese power still cannot escape from the rising concerns on the content and the scope of its ambitions. In this regard, China's launch of a Smile Diplomacy proved insufficient to convince international community on the benign and peaceful nature of its power due to the factors of China's reluctance to finalize the Code of Conduct, disregards for international norms and the rising concerns on the implications of its hybrid instruments. In addition to the concerns of the US and the SCS claimants, the European External Action Service of the EU has labeled China as a 'systemic rival' in its 2020 Fact Sheet by placing a special emphasis on a shift from economic partnership. As a result of this shift in approach, the general trend can entail the need to define red lines and to actively cooperate against the Chinese policy options to be able to protect the status quo in a global power competition.

Conclusion

In an interdependent and complex security framework, hybrid threats increasingly become a feature of maritime operational domain through a synchronization of variety of instruments. With many stakeholders from different operational domains and few clearly drawn boundaries, maritime domain has become a theatre of clandestine hybrid campaigns that have targeted to exploit the vulnerabilities as well as to dismantle the ability of the opponent. As a theatre of disputed maritime operations, the SCS region becomes a critical hot-spot both through conflicting territorial claims and employment of maritime hybrid instruments. In this respect, China's actions both in the SCS and in a broader maritime theatre draw international attention due to its intensified assertiveness that encompass the instruments of hybrid campaigns.

China successfully orchestrates military, political, economic, cyber and information sources of power in different operational domains with a view to pursue its national interests in the SCS geography. In that vein, while China continues to enrich its land reclamation projects in the Spratly to realize its sovereignty claims, its maritime militia strengthen its structure and facilities to carry out the mission of sovereignty enforcement. Especially in times of maritime disputes, cyber domain increasingly becomes a theatre of operations for the Chinese groups to target government or private institutions that are linked to the SCS issues. However, since China assertively employs variety of hybrid instruments to prosecute its power in the SCS, its broader projects such as underwater cable construction initiatives cannot escape from being perceived as a potential Chinese national asset that can be coercively utilized in the future hybrid campaigns.

Under the fog of ambiguities regarding the characteristics of maritime hybrid threats, the definition of Chinese hybrid instruments and maneuvers seem to be remained as a matter of concern on the international security environment. In this gray-zone, it is also the fact that China's long-lasting trend of assertiveness and disregard for the disputants' protests seem to be encouraged by the lack of a coordinated response and increasing vulnerabilities among the claimants of the SCS. However, while China's new normal or fait accompli can serve for its security in the region, the reaction it creates under the concern of altering dynamics of balance of power can produce a more coordinated and efficient response on a global level in the long-run. Therefore, since the factors of China's increasing military and economic power, claimants vulnerabilities in economic and cyber domains, the lack of a precise definition and understanding on hybrid threats and instruments can serve to maximize China's assertive power projection at the first hand, the system-level concerns on a global landscape can serve to operationalize counter efforts to disrupt Chinese initiatives at the last stage.

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