



TUCSON COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

China's Silent Conquest: The Art of Subduing the Enemy Without Fighting



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On January 11th, Founder and Director of Sealight Maritime Transparency Agency, Ray Powell, delivered an insightful presentation providing an overview of the escalating tensions between China and its neighboring countries. In his presentation, he illuminated the complexities of maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), emphasizing how China's resolve to assert territorial claims in sea zones overlapping with other nations' territorial limits carries implications for both the U.S. and the global economy.

What is Happening in the South China Sea?

The South China Sea, twice the size of the Gulf of Mexico, holds immense strategic importance with about 30% of global shipping passing through its waters. Powell explained how China seeks to enforce its claim in this region by building artificial islands complete with refueling stations, airfields, port facilities and considerable weaponry. China wants to reshape the regional security order and solidify a sphere of influence, establishing both military and economic dominance over the first island chain.

Despite signing the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, China claims the South China Sea is excluded from UNCLOS because it is Chinese sovereign territory. China's disruptive actions against the other claimant states (especially Vietnam and the Philippines), including blockades, aggressive maneuvers, laser dazzling, water cannoning, and militarized fishing ships, pose a great threat to UNCLOS and the use of international law in general. The complex dynamics underscore the need for international attention to uphold rules-based order in the region.

- *Amid escalating territorial disputes worldwide, exemplified by conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, does China believe it can advance its SCS claims while the world is distracted with these other wars?*
- *To what extent can China continue its "salami-slicing" strategy before it results in escalating military action?*
- *Is the fact that the U.S. has not signed the UNCLOS a hurdle in its enforcement?*

Why Should We Care?

Despite China's unscrupulous tactics being aimed primarily at neighboring countries, this situation poses significant complications with far-reaching consequences. Powell effectively emphasized the global importance of this region, citing the Red Sea Crisis where Yemeni Houthi militia attacks rerouted 60% of commercial shipping, incurring an estimated \$1 million cost per shipment. Comparatively, the South China Sea, claiming 80% ownership by China, accounts for one-third of all global shipping—far surpassing the Red Sea's 15% of global shipping. If China replicates the Yemeni Houthi strategy, it could result in substantially higher shipping prices and inflation worldwide, considering 40-50% of U.S. trade relies on maritime routes.

China's implementation of gray zone tactics has the potential to disrupt the global supply chain, allowing them to wield economic warfare and employ military and economic coercion to assert dominance and intimidate other nations. Currently, China appears to be exerting substantial pressure on the Philippines, and if this continuous harassment persists until their objectives are met, it could escalate to a point where a potential attack might necessitate U.S. intervention as a treaty ally.

- *Does China see the current global conflicts, including the war in Ukraine and Israel, as an opportunity to act while the United States is preoccupied with other conflicts and internal divisions leading up to the upcoming election?*

- *If China is ultimately able to exert control over 1/3 of global shipping, how will they try to leverage this position to become the new world leader?*

Combating the Issue: Current Initiatives in Action

In the face of China's assertive moves in the South China Sea, efforts are underway, including Sealight, a maritime transparency project led by Ray Powell. Sealight's aim is to utilize cutting-edge commercial technology to expose the gray zone actions taken by China, strategically complicating their maneuvers. Sealight aims to fill the gap by providing clear evidence that undermines China's false win-win rhetoric. Drawing from the events of 2014 when China deployed oil rigs in Vietnamese waters, Vietnam successfully deescalated the conflict by exposing China's tactics on YouTube and garnering international support. Leveraging this historical insight, Sealight aims to employ a similar strategy in the ongoing conflict between China and the Philippines.

In addition, Powell outlined a broader objective of challenging China's inclination for bilateral negotiations. He highlighted China's advantage in such negotiations due to economic power, emphasizing the critical importance of collective efforts to mitigate China's influence. Powell also underscored the pivotal role of deterrence as the foremost tool for preventing war, emphasizing the importance of having China wake up daily with the thought that "Today is not the day to invade Taiwan or the Philippines." In our exclusive one-on-one interview, he elaborated on how the AUKUS submarine deal is a proactive measure aimed at enhancing deterrence. This suggests that the United States is already implementing strategic actions to compel China to rethink any inclination towards invasion.

- *Is another Cold War inevitable?*
- *How can we elevate awareness of China's gray zone tactics within the United States to prevent these tensions from continuing to be overlooked without international support?*

Sources:

Ray Powell “Indo-Pacific Flashpoint” Presentation, Jan. 11, 2024

