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In the Grey Zone: Debating China's Peaceful Development in Recent Years

Tiong Wei Jie

SYNOPSIS

*China has projected its phenomenal growth in recent decades as “peaceful development”. But its detractors see China’s rise as a threat, pointing to the grey zone operations it has been conducting increasingly and to other signs of assertive behaviour. **TIONG WEI JIE** calls for a nuanced reading of China’s behaviour and highlights the numerous challenges and concerns that make it unlikely for China to initiate a large-scale conflict in the near term.*

COMMENTARY

China is clearly on a growth trajectory even if the impacts of COVID-19 and global developments have led to an economic slowdown. Since the turn of the century, it has grown to become one of the most significant global actors. According to a 2019 [study](#), China had surpassed the United States in terms of political power and influence in Southeast Asia. Economically, China’s average yearly [GDP growth](#) from 2000 to 2021 stood at 8.6 per cent. In 2000, its GDP was worth US\$1.21 trillion, 7 per cent of the world’s economy; in 2021, it shot up to US\$17.73 trillion, accounting for 18.5 per cent of the world’s economy. Although income inequality has risen, this extraordinary achievement has lifted the boats of a massive number of Chinese citizens. According to the [World Bank](#), 46.5 per cent of the Chinese population lived under the international poverty line in 1999. Twenty years later, this number stands at just 0.1 per cent. Although China faces formidable domestic and external challenges, top financial officials speaking at the recent [World Economic Forum](#) predicted that China’s economy would “drive global growth beyond expectations”.

Under this big picture, the “peaceful” element in China’s development is widely debated. “China’s peaceful development” is a developmental roadmap officially laid out by the Hu Jintao administration in 2005. It sought to assuage security concerns in the international community about China’s growing political, military and economic clout. Despite such assurances, the “China threat” perception has cemented itself in most Western policy circles. How credible and significant is this threat? Can China’s development be understood as “peaceful”?

No Major Conflict but Competition Abounds in the Grey Zone

If peace is the absence of large-scale physical conflicts, there is little debate because China has not fought a war since the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979. But this fact is no reason for complacency; one does not have to look beyond the Russia-Ukraine war to know why it should not be taken for granted that China would not launch a war. Nonetheless, many [analysts](#) have criticised China’s peaceful rise as hollow rhetoric, highlighting China’s conduct of “grey zone” operations. For the purposes of this article, grey zone operations refer to the multidimensional activities conducted by state actors that lie just below the threshold of war and are intended to gain strategic objectives. In recent years, China’s rise has been accompanied by an increase in such operations conducted not only by the Chinese side but also by contending forces.

Take as an example the hotly contested South China Sea, a perennial thorn in China–Southeast Asia relations. It is true that China continues to claim the vast majority of the South China Sea despite the 2016 international tribunal at The Hague, which ruled against Beijing’s claims. Through dredging projects, China created 3,200 acres of new land in this region from 2013 to 2016. According to an [island tracker](#) by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), China currently has 20 outposts in the Paracel Islands and seven in the Spratly Islands, many of which could be used by the military.

What is less emphasised, however, is that Vietnam too has undertaken major expansion in the Spratly Islands in the second half of 2022. A [report](#) by the AMTI states that Vietnam had created 420 acres of land in 2022 alone. Although the total land created by Vietnam in the last 10 years is still dwarfed by that created by China and is prompted by China’s unilateral activities in contested territory, the former’s visible step-up should not be understated. The same [island tracker](#) reports that Vietnam has 49–51 outposts spread across features in the South China Sea. In the meantime, the Philippines established [three coastguard outposts](#) in 2022, reportedly its largest deployment of coastguard personnel in the disputed region. There were also numerous [incidents](#) involving maritime vessels by the claimant states but each issued its own account of what transpired.

On Taiwan, many point to China’s increased military drills, incursions and economic sanctions. For example, China’s recent [drill](#) this year involved 28 warplanes crossing the median line of the Taiwan Straits. In response to criticism, Beijing has repeatedly made clear its opposition to aspects of US-Taiwan security cooperation such as the recent US National Defence Authorization Act, which provides billions in military aid to Taiwan. Beijing views such cooperation as “[military collusion](#)” that hampers its goal of reunification. In addition, detractors argue that China has grown more bellicose: they cite as evidence the [stark difference](#) in Beijing’s response to then US House Speaker

Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit last year and her predecessor Newt Gingrich's visit in 1997. However, Beijing has long seen such visits as part of a wider strategy to undermine its political goal. As its representative to the UN put it following Pelosi's visit: "[a previous mistake does not make the following mistake legitimate](#)".

Prior to the cases mentioned above, China's [espionage](#) and [influence](#) operations also came under the spotlight, with the Chinese multinational company Huawei heavily criticised for its role in technology theft. While Huawei's alleged link to the Chinese state raises concerns about the allegiance of other Chinese multinational corporations, the US National Security Agency's PRISM programme for data surveillance has also caused [controversy](#) regarding the neutrality of large US internet companies. That said, multinationals such as Google and Microsoft have categorically [denied](#) claims regarding any large-scale indiscriminate disclosures to the state. These incidents aside, state-to-state espionage activities are not peculiar to China. In 2015, a former CIA operative [claimed](#) in an interview with the *South China Morning Post* that the United States had led more than 61,000 cyber espionage efforts, many of which were targeted at mainland China and Hong Kong. The Five Eyes alliance, an intelligence-sharing partnership comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, was also recently criticised by a Chinese state newspaper for conducting covert [operations](#) against China.



The Shanghai skyline, 2016. Despite China's increasing grey zone operations, it is unlikely for China to initiate a large-scale conflict as it seeks economic stability post-COVID. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Future Large-Scale Conflict?

Although grey zone competition is on the rise and skirmishes like the Sino-Indian [border clashes](#) may occur again, Beijing is unlikely to start a large-scale conflict in the near term. Domestically, the party-state faces an arduous task to shore up its economy post-COVID. Amid the pressures of this task, President Xi Jinping is unlikely to welcome the uncertainties brought about by warfare even though he completed a power sweep at the Chinese Communist Party's 20th congress in October last year.

Externally, it is clear that Beijing views foreign trade and overseas investment as crucial to its development and does not want to alienate itself from the international community. This could be seen in several recent foreign visits by Chinese political heavyweights in which economic partnership featured as a prominent theme.

While there is little doubt that China's foreign policy has become assertive, there is a need to take a more nuanced perspective of China's behaviour. Overreaction to China's rise can precipitate a spiral of tensions that could have unintended consequences.

TIONG Wei Jie graduated from the Master of Social Sciences (China and Global Governance) programme offered by the Nanyang Centre for Public Administration (NCPA) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is currently on the NTU Research Scholarship to pursue a PhD in International Relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg