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To cite this article: Joey Wang (05 Feb 2026): All roads lead to Taiwan: China's Maritime Gray Zone Strategy, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, DOI: [10.1080/09592318.2026.2625332](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2026.2625332)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2026.2625332>



Published online: 05 Feb 2026.



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All roads lead to Taiwan: China's Maritime Gray Zone Strategy

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ABSTRACT

As a precursor to seizing Taiwan, China has engaged in a Gray Zone effort to establish control over significant parts of the South China Sea. It has done this through irregular warfare; that is, while using violence, Beijing has remained below a threshold which will prompt a military response. Of particular concern is Beijing's strategic intent to restore national unity by the centennial of the 1949 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seizure of power. The first year of Trump II has seen resistance, led by the United States, but deterrence will require a more active American approach: working with allies and challenging Beijing's irregular war strategy. Neither of these required courses of action appears to be salient in present calculations by Washington.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 13 January 2026; Accepted 27 January 2026

KEYWORDS Taiwan; South China Sea; irregular warfare; political warfare; strategic intent; Trump administration; Gray Zone

In the current Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has determined, 'China is the Department's sole pacing threat, and denial of a Chinese *fait accompli* seizure of Taiwan – while simultaneously defending the U.S. homeland is the Department's sole pacing scenario [*sic*].'¹ In addition, the current Defense Budget Overview of the United States Department of Defense for Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request places the People's Republic of China front and center because of 'the direct threat that it poses to America's security and economy'.

As if to give a token expression of interest to Irregular Warfare (IW), the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2026, (1) 'Directs a briefing on opportunities for the Irregular Warfare Technical Support Directorate to complement innovation efforts by Naval Special Warfare Command for research, experimentation, and prototyping of unmanned maritime vessels', and (2) 'Authorizes the establishment of an Irregular Warfare Exercise Laboratory'.² The DoD Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request does not mention IW at all.³

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That these two cursory references are sub-categorized under 'Emerging Threats and Capabilities', which itself is under 'Modernizing for the Future Battlefield', suggests there is a fundamental difference between what the US considers IW versus the IW that America's 'pacing threat' is currently executing. The US speaks to competition, while defaulting to major activities, and is overwhelmingly tasked to special operations forces (SOF), whatever the doctrinal verbiage. By contrast, China is executing a strategy that is true to its revolutionary warfare heritage, one that not only helped China defeat Japan but also ultimately defeated the Kuomintang (KMT) in order to deliver power to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It was also an approach that was decisive in the Vietnamese communists prevailing first over the French, then over the United States. Any number of other cases could be cited.

If 'denial of a Chinese *fait accompli* seizure of Taiwan' is the most consequential national security issue facing the US for the foreseeable future, then this is the ideal starting point for analysis, because all parties to this conflict at least agree on the point of contention, Taiwan.⁴ This is particularly ominous considering the agreement is based upon diametrically opposing predicates. The CCP is intent on unification with Taiwan, by force if necessary. The United States has hitherto been intent on preventing this, by force if necessary.

As much as Beijing would like to bring Taiwan back into the fold, it has not done so due to Taipei's ties with the US. True to its revolutionary heritage, Beijing's approach is an IW strategy in which all the instruments of national power are harnessed and weaponized to either exhaust Taipei's will to resist or to slowly strangle the island and force capitulation. Unfortunately, the word 'warfare' tends to be kinetically front-loaded such that it assumes the use of military violence in some way. As this essay will argue, many, if not most, aspects of Beijing's approach to IW are a synthesis of low-level, coercive violence operating to support a leading effort of seemingly nonviolent actions. The revolutionary origins of this approach mean its psychological nature has everything to do with the ultimate objective, influencing people's minds. While violence is involved, it is not the starting point and is applied only at time and in measure as required by circumstances.

Identifying the emerging threat

China's objective is certainly the seizure of Taiwan. But this objective requires shaping, such as control of the Strait of Malacca, as well as of the South China Sea as well as the East China Sea. It will also involve building up and militarizing the various features in the South China Sea to support military operations directed as required at Taiwan. There is also a larger objective, as was the case with Japan prior to World War II, which is to push the U.S. out of Asia and back across the Western Pacific. To this end, a variety of nonmilitary

objectives will be complementary as they will be used to challenge the validity of Taiwan's legitimacy and to influence world opinion to swing toward Beijing's position. This is the essence of China's IW posture. In all its facets, there already was, even as Trump II began, an ongoing struggle in the Gray Zone.

An irregular war, whatever its most obvious tactical manifestations, such as information warfare or political warfare, always contains violence. The only issue is in what form and at what level. American assessments that China is motivated to stay below a threshold which will provoke superior American power are in this sense misinformed. 'Struggle', in the Chinese strategic approach, involves all forms of warfare synchronized and used as determined by time, place, and circumstances. Ultimately, as it is deemed necessary, combat will involve the employment of regular forces (consider the unfolding of the end in both China and Vietnam). To gain victory without such battle is always preferred and is certainly a stance not unique to China, but *avoidance* of combat is not the objective.⁵

One of the challenges in countering China's application of IW is that many of the tools used are part and parcel of sovereign functions; for instance, the defense of the nation, international relations, cultural exchanges, or trade agreements. Policymakers, therefore, must navigate the blurred boundaries of when a state has moved beyond its normal sovereign functions to one where these functions have been weaponized to support a policy that is destabilizing to American interests (as well as interests of partners and allies) and inconsistent with normal diplomatic relations.

When Xi Jinping assumed the leadership of China in 2012, the ship of state immediately took a hard left turn. Not only did Xi set about eliminating his rivals and consolidating and centralizing power under his control;⁶ he initiated a massive reclamation project in the South China Sea to establish a network of military outposts. Public statements denying intended militarization proved false, even as thousands of acres of coral reefs were destroyed.⁷ A ruling by the Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal, in a case brought by the Philippines against China, was ignored. The territorial waters of China's regional neighbors were invaded, as were their Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ). These activities, accompanied by a cognitive warfare campaign waged globally to rally support, were part and parcel of the larger IW campaign to achieve Beijing's strategic objectives.⁸

Xi's policy ideas and priorities for national rejuvenation are deeply informed by history.⁹ China's subjugation by imperialist powers, centuries of humiliation, the Opium War, and unequal treaties, all are recurring themes in Xi's speeches and writings.¹⁰ While these historical events are in the rear view mirror, the grievances cast a long shadow over China's policymakers.¹¹ Most significantly, in the effort to make China whole again, there remains the yet unresolved issue of Taiwan and what Beijing considers America's

continuing interference in an internal issue. Xi made this priority clear at the CCP's 100th anniversary in July 2021, when he said, 'Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Communist Party of China'.¹² While Beijing has always preferred peaceful reunification, it could be losing its patience, as 'peaceful' has since been dropped in subsequent references.¹³

Given that the US is the main guarantor of Taiwan's safety, and its policy priority is the 'denial of a Chinese *fait accompli* seizure of Taiwan', it is reasonable to assume that China's 'main enemy' is Washington.¹⁴ Still, China's military modernization notwithstanding, the two powers are not likely to run headlong into major combat for the reasons previously discussed. Such an approach to conflict is generally not in the Chinese strategic psyche. In any event, a *fait accompli* of blockade created by seizure of features in the South China Sea is more feasible than attempting a direct assault on Taiwan, a thriving democracy with a bustling economy that is home to more than 23 million people. A more likely scenario hence is the one upon which Beijing is currently embarked, wherein it attempts to build a dominant physical, psychological, and political position such that the outcome of a conflict will be all but a foregone conclusion.¹⁵ Whatever it is, current evidence suggests that it is likely to be of an asymmetric (read irregular) nature such that the level of tension does not rise to an act of war. There are a myriad ways in which Beijing could simply exhaust Taiwan's willingness to resist.¹⁶ Taiwan's navy commander has aptly described this as an 'Anaconda strategy'.¹⁷

Winning through struggle

In 1999, two officers of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLA) produced *Unrestricted Warfare*, a book – which despite repeating the obvious – was widely hailed as a startling intervention, offering a 'main blueprint for China's efforts to unseat America as the world's economy, political, and ideological leader', and showing 'exactly how a totalitarian nation set out to dominate the West through a comprehensive, long-term strategy' by fusing 'the boundaries between war and non-war and between military and non-military affairs [have] systemically broken down'.¹⁸ Caught in its usual bifurcation of war and peace, the Western world, especially the American world, saw a unique blending of kinetic and nonkinetic, licit and illicit, legitimate and illegitimate ways, which in reality restated doctrine more than a century old as concerns modern China.¹⁹ By blurring lines of effort, then, the text presented what in Western parlance was *unrestricted*.

Knowledge, though, moves in cycles, and hence *Unrestricted Warfare* served the useful purpose, perhaps in China itself, of restating first principles. It appeared together with new doctrinal promulgation for the military, 'The

Three Warfares', that is, Public Opinion/Media Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare, often referred to as 'Lawfare'.²⁰ The terminology is largely self-explanatory. Obviously, in Western terms, this is a blueprint for war in the Gray Zone. What is again largely missed is the reality that the nonkinetic 'warfares' are to exist symbiotically with kinetic action.²¹ The Devil, so to speak, is in the details. Violence is to be employed in form, time, and place as required by circumstances. It is doctrine based upon 'peacetime-wartime integration', merging information operations across peace, war, and everything in between.²² This is the essence of *struggle*.²³

Nothing illustrates this better than developments in the South China Sea. After seizing Scarborough Shoal from Filipino fisherman in April 2012, China initiated an unprecedented campaign of dredging and island building in the Spratly Islands in March 2013, 'creating 3200 acres of new land, along with a substantial expansion of its presence in the Paracels'.²⁴ This occurred despite Xi's claim that China did not intend to pursue militarization.²⁵ In the process, it not only militarized a number of these islands but severely damaged or destroyed approximately 160 square kilometers of reefs.²⁶ Through civil-military fusion, it employed the sheer mass of its military and maritime militia to capture an area vastly exceeding the Crimea occupied in like fashion by Russia, 10,425 sq-mi (Crimea) versus 1.351 million sq-mi (South China Sea). Consolidation through what came to be known as Gray Zone tactics allowed the incorporation of most of this vast area within China's claimed boundaries, as included in the so-called nine-dash line delimiting the area in official Chinese documents such as the passport.²⁷

Faced with this asymmetric gambit, the Philippines, with no viable way to challenge China militarily – despite being allied with the United States – sought to respond through arbitration with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague. It asked the court to rule on the validity of China's claims and activities under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which both the Philippines and China are parties.²⁸ In fact, in its ruling in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines and found, *inter alia*, that there was no basis to China's claims to 'historic rights and resources within its nine-dash line', none of the land features claimed by China in the Spratly Islands were capable of generating a 200 nm Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and that China had violated Philippine sovereignty by interfering with Philippine oil exploration activities and preventing its fishing boats from operating, and conducting land reclamation in areas where the Philippines has the sovereign right to conduct exploration for, and exploiting its natural resources.²⁹

Beijing had made clear beforehand that it would not accept any external involvement or decision.³⁰ It not only criticized the Philippines for seeking arbitration but also the international court for taking the case.³¹ It refused to participate in the proceedings, arguing that the tribunal did not have

jurisdiction. Doubling down not only on rejecting Manila's claims even as it mocked the ruling, it asserted that the result was 'nothing but a scrap of paper'. Beijing further added a tenth dash to its nine-dash line to emphasize that the dashed lines clearly included Taiwan.³² It also embarked on a diplomatic and public relations offensive to garner support for its claims. Perhaps predictably, the campaign focused mostly on small nations that 'depend on Chinese trade or aid'.³³

According to Euan Graham, the Director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney, Australia, the ruling was expected to be in favor of the Philippines. This was the reason why Beijing had rolled out 'in a very Communist way this propaganda barrage'.³⁴ Indeed, the Three Warfares begin early for all Chinese as children 'are taught that the SCS has belonged to China since ancient times'.³⁵

China's conflict with the Philippines is one of the clearest examples of how China intends to wage its struggle in the South China Sea and beyond, with its coast guard and maritime militia, supplemented and dramatically outnumbered by an extensive fishing fleet, harassing, coercing, and intimidating its regional neighbors. The US policy in the South China Sea is that it 'takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty over the various features in the South China Sea but view with serious concern any maritime claim or restriction on maritime activity in the South China Sea that is inconsistent with international law, including UNCLOS' (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea).³⁶ The problem with this position is that the US taking 'no position ...' is a position – and hardly one to inspire a partner.

In the case of the Philippines, for example, China continues to use a variety of tactics to harass Philippine fishing boats and ships. As the US and the Philippines are bound by their Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) of 1951, China knows that as long as its actions do not trigger the MDT, it can do virtually anything it wants without consequence. A recent example of this Gray Zone approach was when China's Coast Guard attacked Filipino fisherman with water cannons, damaging both the boats as well as injuring the fisherman.³⁷ When Xi Jinping became President of China in 2012, Beijing had virtually no military presence in the South China Sea. Now, without firing a shot, its Gray Zone tactics has allowed it to achieve a significant military presence on the Spratly and Paracel Islands, as well as other features.³⁸

Taiwan and beyond

Beijing and Washington have been in a standoff over Taiwan since the Korean War.³⁹ Yet China is now in a position of strength it has hitherto not held. Beijing has emerged from the backwaters of the world economy to become a premier global power. Its real gross domestic product

(GDP) from 1979 to 2017 grew an average of over 9% annually. According to the World Bank, China 'experienced the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history – and has lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty'.⁴⁰ During the same period, it has seen significant improvements in access to health, education, and other services.⁴¹ The rise in wealth has seen a commensurate rise in military spending to the point now where Washington is concerned over just how far Beijing is willing to go to unify with Taiwan, possibly even resorting to an actual invasion.

There is little question that with the rise of China's military capabilities, there has been a commensurate rise in the possibility of a conflict with the US. While the focus appears to be on major combat, as would accompany an invasion of Taiwan, China's irregular war is ongoing. For the foreseeable future, Beijing will likely maintain a high level of military activity around Taiwan, not only to shape the strategic military context but also to attempt to intimidate Taiwanese President William Lai. Beijing is a strong opponent of Lai as it considers him and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to be advocates of Taiwan independence. There is little ambiguity in Beijing's messaging since Lai's inauguration in 2024. The Chinese military has since flown a staggering 3075 flights into Taiwan's self-declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ), an 81% increase from 2023. These flights have not only crossed the median line more often than any other year since 2021, they have also increased in intensity.⁴² China has also staged large wargames around Taiwan.⁴³ In December 2024, China deployed its fleet 'in an area running from the southern Japanese islands down into the South China Sea', the largest deployment of its navy in nearly three decades. The last comparable deployment being just prior to Taiwan's 1996 presidential elections.⁴⁴ These deployments continue into the present day as exemplified by the 'Strait Thunder 2025A' exercise near Taiwan in April 2025.⁴⁵ Beyond its show of force, however, China is also employing other intense Gray Zone tactics, such as severing Taiwan's undersea cables.⁴⁶

Such acts establish the basis for tactical and operational control over the South China Sea for a future forced reunification.⁴⁷ For Beijing, Taiwan is not only a renegade province but a focal point in the first island chain that would provide China with what General Douglas MacArthur once referred to as an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender' to project power through the first island chain out to the second island chain in the Western Pacific and beyond (locations, see figure).⁴⁸ Indeed, Chinese military sources have concluded that without securing Taiwan, 'a large area of water territory and rich reserves of ocean resources will fall into the hands of others' and 'China will forever be locked to the west side of the first chain of islands in the West Pacific'.⁴⁹ Another Chinese military publication has further concluded that 'the biggest obstacle to the

expansion of our national interests comes from the First and Second Island Chains set up by the United States'.⁵⁰ Hence, both ideological and strategic imperatives converge to target Taiwan.

Though the recent US National Security Strategy focuses more upon economics and desire for balanced trade when it discusses China, it does specifically recognize the threat of Beijing seizing tactical and operational control over the South China Sea, with its attendant economic and geopolitical consequences. While the NSS indicates that 'strong measures must be developed along with the deterrence necessary to keep those (sea) lanes open', how these pronouncements actually drive what emerges from the National Defense Strategy *vis-a-vis* Taiwan remains to be seen.⁵¹ The recent \$11 billion in weapons sale to Taiwan would indicate, at the very least, that the US intends to maintain the status quo.⁵² The current National Security Strategy (NSS) suggests that Trump II recognizes the gravity of Taiwan's role in US national and regional security interests. Furthermore, it is a tacit understanding that officials in both Beijing and Washington appreciate the geopolitical significance and implication of Taiwan in the island chain concept.⁵³



Island chains, U.S. Naval Institute, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/december/learn-fall-philippines-prepare-third-island-chain>.

A separate but related issue is that Beijing believes it still has some unfinished business with Tokyo, both with respect to the Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) islands in the East China Sea as well as the broader historical context of national humiliation.⁵⁴ As with similar Gray Zone tactics against Taiwan, China continues to challenge and intimidate Japan through intrusions into Japanese airspace. While Chinese intrusions had decreased in recent years, they have significantly increased over 2024.⁵⁵ If there are any lingering doubts about China's historical grievances, it is likely no accident that China's first indigenously built

aircraft carrier has been commissioned the *Shandong*, a colonial province that was ceded to Japan after World War I.⁵⁶

The full dimensionality of non-kinetic warfare

Beyond the physical intimidation and coercion, China is also putting the full weight of its three warfares campaign behind its United Front Work Department (UFWD). Uncertainty as to Trump II policies has increasingly spurred emphasis on political warfare. The main emphasis here has been an attempt to exploit contradictions within Taiwan society as well as in Taipei's international relations. Cultivating doubt as to US reliability is particularly important and is operationalized by spreading false narratives such as: Trump will sell out Taiwan; Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company will become American; and that Taiwan's resistance to China will ultimately fail. The campaign also seeks to perpetuate misinformation about the current situation in Ukraine.⁵⁷ Calling for government agencies to 'treat this as a real battle', Beijing disseminates misinformation widely and quickly,⁵⁸ using, among others, a 'specialized misinformation task force' within the United Front Work Department (UFWD).⁵⁹ Key is to shape the narrative, using all available contradictions as avenues of attack. The approach shapes 'narratives about China in foreign media, target Chinese government critics abroad and co-opt influential overseas Chinese figures'.⁶⁰

The UFWD is the quintessential example of Beijing's political warfare strategy, a central element of its operations in the Gray Zone. Much of the UFWD, in fact, operates in the open, with many of its activities reported on its web site. The problem is that its opacity increases with its depth, and its work often overlaps with other government bodies, including intelligence agencies. The blurring of these lines offers Beijing a level of plausible deniability. This is exacerbated by China's National Intelligence Law, passed in 2017, 'mandating Chinese nationals and companies to cooperate with intelligence probes, including sharing information with the Chinese government'. All thus become potential spies. Taiwan's Ministry of Education has blacklisted two Chinese schools with affiliations to UFWD. The schools purportedly used incentives, such as extremely low standards of eligibility for Taiwanese applicants, as well as subsidies, in order to enroll Taiwan students who studied, among others, 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', 'Xi Jinping Thought', 'US Skepticism', and 'CCP loyalty and nationalism'. They were encouraged to continue 'United Front' work in Taiwan after graduation.⁶¹

The narratives generated through united front work are framed to validate Beijing's position rather than to stimulate debate. Beijing employs an information warfare Gray Zone when it claims sovereignty over Taiwan and ensures that Taiwan has no voice in diplomatic circles. The implication here

is that only Beijing can represent and speak for Taiwan. Through political sophistry or outright coercion, Beijing continues to steer Taiwan's diplomatic partners toward itself.⁶²

In this sense, they are propaganda and have been given a substantial boost by the erratic US policies in Trump II, not least the effective dismantling of the American information warfare counter. At a time when China effectively has erased the fine line between public diplomacy and propaganda,⁶³ the US has retreated into near isolationism. This has become all the more serious as Beijing has dramatically increased its cyberwarfare, moving far beyond political warfare to actual penetration of US systems and preparing to disable them.⁶⁴

As the US flounders, a further effort by Beijing works to push the US and its hitherto dominant position out of Asia and the Western Pacific, if not the Pacific altogether. What Japan failed to achieve through kinetic ways in World War II, China is undertaking through action complementary to its Belt & Road campaign, developing closer relations with the Pacific Islands where it will likely need future support for its military operations. Beijing made significant progress with the Solomon Islands in 2019, when Honiara switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China.⁶⁵ Likewise, China has exploited uncertainty among the Pacific Island countries as to the American commitment to the region by committing resources to their economic and climate needs. At the islands' Foreign Ministers' Meeting in June 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was able to pursue two of China's main objectives: normalizing its relationship with the region and promoting Chinese priorities. Included in this list was promoting China as a viable alternative to the US, particularly after the US withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement in January 2025, paused foreign assistance across the region, and imposed tariffs on the Pacific Islands.⁶⁶

One of the great misconceptions of Trump II appears to be that if the US withdraws, a vacuum will be left, with small nations having nowhere to turn for help. China has wasted no time in leveraging this misconception to its advantage. Beijing has made significant progress through its political warfare campaign in convincing such countries otherwise, with the single term for assistance being the small step (as presented) of severing ties with Taiwan and recognizing the 'one China' principle. Small states have been among the last holdouts, but with Taiwan down to just a dozen states that continue to recognize it, China has nearly completed the total isolation of the island. *The Economist* suggests that seventy countries have not only endorsed China's sovereignty over Taiwan but the principle that China 'is entitled to pursue "all" efforts to achieve unification, without specifying that those efforts should be peaceful'.⁶⁷

A two-front war or a one-front war with two enemies

It is at this point that American strategic ambivalence in Trump II proves most problematic in Gray Zone conflict. Planning for war with China, regardless of precise form – deterrence or actual warfighting – is not something that can be engaged in using hope as method. Commentary is abundant that China’s irregular effort, behind which looms rapidly increasing raw power, is being indifferently challenged. Beyond all else, there is the stark reality that the US is in no position to meet China on its own.⁶⁸ Yet, one would be hard-pressed to identify a single key ally which Trump II has not alienated if not placed in strategic danger. The recent spectacular own-goals involving India and South Korea come immediately to mind, but looming behind everything is the loss of credibility which has accompanied Trump II indifference towards Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere.⁶⁹

To be sure, there is more to come. The operation to detain Maduro of Venezuela gave ample proof of that. Trump II began with China singled out in all administration documents and verbiage as the premier threat, with positions at times bordering on identifying it as the only meaningful threat. Yet, the issued NSS has provided ample proof that a Fortress America is the actual focus, with the ‘America’ being advanced one of ethnic and cultural purity. On the one hand, a case can be made that homeland defense indeed is pressing, particularly due to penetration by both electronic and human assets. On the other hand, the refusal to deal with entire tranches of the threat, such as that from Moscow, negates even the best intentions. Turning to the declaration of a new war on drugs (see contributions by Magda Long and Craig Deare), one can hardly be sanguine about what is to come. Linked to the virtual declaration of irregular war within the polity (see John D. Marks’s contribution in this issue), there is a strong possibility of disabling the entire US defense and alliance structure (even as the rubric ‘War’ is substituted for ‘Defense’). Beyond contested authorities, there is the inappropriate use of forces and their deployment (one immediately turns to the awarding of a Mexican Border Defense Medal for service on the southern border), as well as the Venezuela operation and the continued airstrikes against alleged drug boats in the Caribbean (with the latest, in January 2026), featuring a strike platform reportedly disguised as a civilian aircraft.⁷⁰

It is within such contextual drift that the Chinese irregular threat becomes even more salient. A scenario, cited by General Alexis G Grynkewich, head of US European command, is a possible two-front war, where Beijing would first coordinate an actual attack with Moscow, its ‘very junior partner’,⁷¹ augmenting the cooperation already ongoing in the irregular arena. The idea, according to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, would be for Moscow to keep Europe busy by attacking NATO territory, while China attacks Taiwan. This, of course, is the obvious two-front scenario. However, should Beijing decide to

invade Taiwan, there are some alternatives that defense planners might consider.

One issue is that, if Moscow is going to support Beijing, why does it need to attack Europe? Russia could support China more directly by deploying its ships and aircraft into the Western Pacific to challenge the US. The presumption here is that if Russia and China are both going to war as partners and that Article 5 is going to be triggered anyway, why not trigger it in the Western Pacific? There are numerous permutations whereby such a scenario could be envisioned. Still, this is worst case conceptualization, with the eventuality hardly necessary given the steady success of Chinese irregular warfare. Of greater concern, then, is simply that in all facets of irregular and regular warfare, Moscow seems increasingly willing to support Beijing from the position of junior partner.

As the centennial of the CCP's seizure of Beijing approaches, Xi is a man in a hurry. He has argued for 'upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics', a model which in practice rejects the need to Westernize for societal advancement.⁷² This orientation has surfaced before, during the period of Japanese modernization that culminated in fascism and World War II. It now serves in China as a useful surrogate for a nationalist rally as each new generation is more divorced from the inspiration of the original revolutionary struggle that achieved communist power. As passage of time means greater emotional distance from the Long March, Xi has constructed an alternative. As a direct descendent of one of the CCP's founding fathers, he has warned that the issue of unification cannot be passed on from one generation to the next⁷³ and frequently exhorts party cadres, 'Don't forget the original intention. Stick to the mission'.⁷⁴ Some in China have argued that it is time to stop treating Taiwan with kid gloves and that 'separatists' have become entrenched to the point where only war can bring unification.

In a sense, Xi is right to be concerned. A recent study showed that support for a military assault on Taiwan is hardly universal.⁷⁵ A survey from 2023 showed that 55.1% of mainland Chinese agreed or somewhat agreed that 'the Taiwan problem should not be resolved using force under any circumstances'.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, in Taiwan, less than 6% 'either support the immediate pursuit of independence from, or unification with, the People's Republic of China', while 'more than 88% want to maintain the status quo – at least for now'.⁷⁷ Those in Taiwan likely have no illusions about what Xi's 'peaceful unification' would bring. With continuing crackdowns in Hong Kong that began in 2020, Taiwan is likely clear-eyed about what is in store for them should China and Taiwan unify.⁷⁸ Still, the status quo is preferred.

America's myriad problems, both domestic and international, apparently have convinced Xi that the United States, as well as Western liberal democracy, is in irreversible decline,⁷⁹ that the time has come for China to construct a new world order aligned with Beijing's worldview.

Abandoning Deng Xiaoping's 'hide your strength, bide your time', Xi has now codified a new foreign policy doctrine in 'dare to fight', an exhortation he has directed at his military.⁸⁰ In fact, China's military organization and capabilities have improved greatly.⁸¹ Irregular warfare serves a purpose, but for all the claims of a 'peaceful rise', it may be questioned whether Beijing, driven by the concept of *struggle*, ever had such intentions beyond the tactical.

Conclusion

Deng Xiaoping once warned President Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brezezinski in 1978 that the arms control agreements over fifteen years had only allowed the Soviet Union to reach strategic parity with the United States. Trade with the Soviet Union, he observed, meant the US was only 'helping the Soviet Union overcome its weaknesses'. To this, Deng would offer a striking critique of American response to Soviet provocation:

Your spokesmen have constantly justified and apologized for Soviet actions. Sometimes they say there are no signs to prove that there is the meddling of the Soviet Union and Cuba in the case of Zaire or Angola. It is of no use for you to say so. To be candid with you, whenever you are about to conclude an agreement with the Soviet Union it is the product of [a] concession of the U.S. side to please the Soviet side.⁸²

Deng's position speaks to the current American situation with China. After World War I, the Chinese hoped that President Woodrow Wilson would not only help them end their civil war but also to expunge their decades of foreign humiliation. Paul S. Reinsch, dispatched as Wilson's envoy, would later write presciently, 'Never before has an opportunity for leadership toward the welfare of humanity presented itself equal to that which invites America in China at the present time. The Chinese people ask for no better fate than to be allowed freedom to follow in the footsteps of America'. He added, 'But if China should be disappointed in her confidence at the present time the consequences of such disillusionment on her moral and political development would be disastrous, and we instead of looking across the Pacific toward a peaceable, industrial nation, sympathetic with our ideals, would be confronted with a vast materialistic military organization under ruthless control'.⁸³ The Japanese imperial interlude delayed the unfolding some, but ultimately the US has found itself in a position not unlike that leading up to Pearl Harbor.

Events in the South and East China Seas suggest that as long as Xi Jinping rules China, the US and its allies can expect more irregular confrontation from Beijing, with an escalatory dynamic well underway. Exacerbating this tension is the mutual suspicion and distrust in Sino-US

relations, hauntingly reminiscent of the same between the United States and the Konoye ministry of Japan in the days before World War II.⁸⁴ It was hardly reassuring that during Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to China in June 2023, he was warned by CCP Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, 'There is no room for compromise or concessions on Taiwan', a warning that was likely repeated for current Secretary of State Marco Rubio.⁸⁵

As 2027 approaches, Xi Jinping could very well be losing patience. Wargames in recent years have shown various results, from those where the US and its allies successfully repel a Chinese amphibious invasion, to the less successful, 'US "Gets Its Ass Handed To It"'.⁸⁶ No doubt, the element of surprise of a preemptive attack might have its specious appeal. For now, however, irregular approaches involving a combination of diplomatic and economic isolation, wedded to military threat and shaping of the battle space for possible violent action, seem likely to continue. The absence of any cogent, considered strategic response from Washington presents Beijing with myriad opportunities.

Notes

1. Horton, Natanson, "Secret Pentagon Memo."
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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