

Resumen:

En la guerra política sostenida por la República Popular China (RPCCh) la competencia entre las grandes potencias no se manifiesta en forma de comportamientos, como la conquista territorial o la guerra, sino como la acumulación de influencia política, económica, militar y cultural y, a menudo, como la aplicación sutil de la coerción para obtener ventajas geopolíticas o geoeconómicas. La guerra política es un proceso permanente de conquista de pequeñas ventajas por debajo del umbral del uso directo de la fuerza, donde la zona gris se expande. La guerra política busca llegar sin estridencias a una situación de *fait accompli*, de hechos consumados o que inevitablemente se consumarán.

En el mar del sur de China, la RPCCh ha demostrado implícitamente que no necesita hacer la guerra para lograr sus objetivos. Más allá de la milla 2001 en las aguas que rodean a Iberoamérica, también ha dejado patente lo que está dispuesta a hacer sin pedir permiso y sin importar las consecuencias a medio plazo. Una permanente renuncia a ejercer el derecho de soberanía y la regulación de las capturas puede convertir una parte importante del océano americano en una extensión del suelo azul de la República Popular China.

Palabras clave:

Guerra política, República Popular China, Iberoamérica, derechos de pesca, *fait accompli*, suelo azul, guerra tecnológica.

How to cite this document:

GONZÁLEZ MARTÍN, Andrés. *The Political Warfare of the People's Republic of China: Effects on maritime security in Ibero-America*. IEEE Analysis Paper no./2021. [IEEE website link](#) and/or [bie³ link](#) (consulted day/month/year)

The People's Republic of China's political warfare

In its broadest definition, political warfare is the use of all means and mechanisms that the state can mobilise, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Political warfare employs both covert operations and clearly identified operations, which adversaries cannot or are not in a position to perceive as direct aggression, and which would inevitably provoke resistance to the aggressor's aims.

The fundamental problem facing political warfare is to prevent the enemy from feeling that—faced with each of the carefully articulated sequential challenges that the aggressor's initiative presents them—the only options available to it are retreat or combat. Strategic play consists of involving the adversary without it perceiving the danger of playing. It is even more virtuous to make the enemy understand that the interrelationship and exchanges proposed by the aggressor with its political warfare plan are within its interests. As soon as the opponent becomes convinced that it will be able to manage the aggressor's developments and decisions favourably, persuaded that time is on its side, its perceptions can be easily manipulated. Any advance or advantage of the aggressor, derived from the application of its political warfare project, will be understood by the aggressed as an advance of its positions.

The United States has long wanted to view the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a competitor, a collaborator and a potential adversary simultaneously, ignoring China's unwavering revisionist aspiration. More than a few analysts and strategists have been completely convinced that the possibility of moving closer to the PRC, favouring its economic development and inserting it into the globalisation process, would not only generate interesting benefits for all but would also, over time, bring about a social and cultural readjustment in China that would end up generating the necessary momentum for the CCP itself to open the doors first to an increasingly open market economy, and second to a progressively democratic political reform that is more respectful of human rights.

In the long telegram signed from Moscow by Mr X, George Kennan called for a strategy of containment against the USSR associated with intelligent, long-range, patient and vigilant policies.

Kennan was convinced that the ineffectiveness of the Soviet system would lead to its internal collapse in a race for world domination. The USSR was a state run by a rigid

totalitarian ideology that tried to cope with circumstances and their changes without a plan that would allow it to evolve. It was incapable of learning and adapting as a political and economic system to a new wave of technology, and would therefore fall. Kennan correctly interpreted the trends of change the world would face and understood that the United States was best equipped to take advantage of them.

The PRC has shown that its formula of Chinese socialism is capable of withstanding internal paradoxes and contradictions in order to learn from each and every trial. It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white, what matters is that it catches mice, because getting rich is glorious. It seems difficult to understand that Deng Xiaoping, an elderly communist leader, would bring about a change from above that would entail a continuous restructuring of internal balances, forcing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to a continuous reformulation of its discourse and a revision of its postulates to accommodate the successive phases of development it would have to face. The CCP concluded that the changes required major readjustments and it was up to the party to implement them using a system of controlled blasting.

The wisdom inherited from an old and sophisticated civilisation has enabled Chinese communist leaders to discover that, at different stages of their rise, it was necessary to use new words to change the perception of reality and reality itself without altering the narrative. The key to China's grand strategy has been the successful mastery of timing in order to play a role appropriate to its capabilities and potential for progress.

At each stage in the evolution of its growing capacity for penetration and influence in its environment and in the world, the PRC has modulated a political discourse appropriate to its possibilities, containing its revisionist ambitions, but maintaining the continuity of a national narrative of rejuvenation. All this without arousing the misgivings of those who remained confident that the Chinese communist system would collapse because of its contradictions. The PRC's political warfare has so far been a form of protracted war in which the other side hoped that the next round would be the one that was definitely favourable to its game. The end result is precisely the opposite of what Western ideologues had hoped for. Only ideology can understand the obstinacy of a strategic miscalculation of the current dimensions.

In this context, competition between powers does not manifest itself in the form of behaviour, such as territorial conquest or war, but as the accumulation of political, economic, military and cultural influence, and often as the subtle application of

coercion for geopolitical advantage. The result would be a permanent mechanism of political warfare below the threshold of the direct use of force, placing us in an environment where the grey zone expands.

Political warfare seeks to arrive without fanfare at a *fait accompli* situation, a French term that has come back into fashion among analysts and journalists. *Fait accompli* literally means 'accomplished fact', but I think this translation is not entirely accurate. A fuller interpretation of the idea would be a composition of a situation that has been reached, i.e. an 'accomplished fact', and a situation that will necessarily be reached, with no possibility of reversal. *Fait accompli* would bring together both 'accomplished facts' and the facts that will inevitably be accomplished, which we can no longer do anything about.

In political warfare, a successful identification of the context and direction of trends is the basis for success. George Kennan, in his long telegram from Moscow in 1948, correctly identified that future changes were blowing in their favour, but the PRC is not the USSR.

The PRC's dazzling rise has taken place in a context and by rules that China has not chosen but has been able to exploit. China set out to control the supply chains of raw materials needed for its productive fabric, and has succeeded in doing so. It has penetrated the economies, finances and markets of commodity-producing countries with its investments and loans in order to ensure continuity of supply. The PRC has managed—not that this is new—to make the mutually beneficial relationship offered by commodity markets unbalanced because it controls many internal levers of its suppliers that allow it to exert as much pressure as necessary to impose an exchange that suits its interests.

Meanwhile, the PRC has advanced so far in mastering global production chains that it has become the world's factory. The slowdown in Chinese production or the difficulties in transporting its goods immediately have an impact on the most profitable production sectors in the rest of the world.

As a result, the PRC rides the trends of globalisation according to its own self-regulated patterns. Containing China's advance towards world leading power status would mean containing globalisation and thus disengaging not only from China but from a process of global interdependence that China now largely dominates.

The next achievement underway with the Made in China 2025 plan is the mastery of value chains through a technological and scientific leap that will enable the PRC to become the

main focus of ideas and standards that will govern the future emerging with the 4th industrial revolution. The PRC aims to make a return on its investments in dual science and technology through the dividends generated by markets that will demand new products and systems developed and produced in China. The dual status of these developments will also allow them to gain power by applying the technological revolution to their arms industries. The new stage of the PRC's political warfare is aimed at mastering the threshold of the 4th industrial revolution. Identifying this domain, science and technology, as the centre of gravity of the competition between great powers over the next decade could be the first step towards rebalancing the dynamics in which the major players in the current dispute for world hegemony ride.

The PRC has respected the limits of the rules of the international system as much as necessary, without ever fully challenging them. In the meantime, it has applied or violated, according to its interests, the system of international norms, adjusting its level of compliance or non-compliance at each moment as much as it could, but without ever ending up provoking so much tension as to disrupt a model of global governance. It is necessary to be aware of this in order to expand one's own knowledge and protect it from the attacks on intellectual property that the CCP has used with great success. The new main front of struggle is that of knowledge and how everything intangible can be degraded by prolonged actions in the grey zone or the white zone.

The People's Republic of China is the winning power of globalisation. Globalisation is not a process that the PRC has initiated, encouraged or regulated. For the PRC, globalisation has been and remains an indisputable context in which to play its role as a revisionist power. The PRC joined the system of world governance and the globalisation process in order to instrumentalise it from within to serve its interests. Trying to stop it now would be comparable to trying to stop the world. However, a real revolution in industry and production systems is coming, requiring a change in the production structure to keep pace with the new developments. It is important to recognise that the key trend now is not about trade, but about the development of a new model of production and doing business that can give the United States and its allies a chance to compete for dominance at the threshold, and then the technological gateway to a new era.

The PRC's political warfare in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, on other, less subtle fronts, the PRC ably maintains competition. The increasing pace of aggression in the South China Sea does not seem to fit the delicate and insightful strategic formula that the PRC has thus far masterfully applied. Suddenly, everything seems to be clear and the objectives are being announced with sufficient clarity, especially if we relate them to facts that confirm the intention to achieve them. The interesting conception of the art of war as the art of deception held by the PRC seems to have been diluted.

The obscure claim to almost 85% of the South China Sea, the reclamation of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and, above all, the goal of national reunification are presented with each passing day as the final aims of a strategic mode of direct action that would break with the strategic mode of hidden and protracted struggle of political warfare. At present, the calculation of military balances is the focus of many people's attention, and the main US concern is to strengthen its conventional deterrence capability in the region.

China has not specified in detail what its claims are within the waters bounded by the well-known nine-dash line. It is true that China has repeatedly stated that it has sovereignty over the islands within the nine-dashed line and its adjacent waters, but we do not know exactly what it means precisely because it uses terms different from those used by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (COVENMAR). China's ambiguity is not accidental and responds to a clear intention to conceal what it understands to be the desired end state while acting quietly to gain positions step by step, but increasingly sustained by the militarisation of the sea.

In the South China Sea, the PRC has implicitly demonstrated that it does not need to wage war to achieve its objectives. The secular fishing rights on which Beijing bases its claims within the nine-point line do not need to be legitimised by anyone, nor do they even need to be legitimised by a victory. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea has ruled denying the validity of China's alleged historical rights, but it is not a body to which the PRC grants authority over what it understands to be part of its blue soil.

Beijing has decided to wage a political warfare of incremental steps to extend its *de facto* control over the disputed territories, using economics, diplomacy, vaccines – in short, its

ability to influence the countries disputing jurisdiction over the waters, coupled with coercion, to gain position, momentum and generate unchallenged momentum.

The continued presence in the EEZs of fishing boats, alleged fishing boats of the Chinese maritime militia, the permanent activity of coastguards, the actions to deny the use of the sea within the EEZ of other countries, the construction of artificial islands, the militarisation of artificial islands, the navigation of Chinese navy ships are all actions in tune with the pressure on economic and commercial interests linked to Chinese investments or trade with China. The result has mostly been a laissez-faire approach accompanied by diplomatic protests.

In January 2021, the 25th meeting of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress approved the Chinese Coast Guard Law. The new law has raised alarm bells in Eastern Pacific countries and also in the United States because it authorises the Chinese coastguard to use its weapons against foreign vessels that violate Chinese laws within its jurisdictional waters. China is never entirely clear and plays with ambiguity here too. The PRC might understand that everything in the water column and subsoil of the South China Sea delimited by its imposed boundaries is part of its zone of influence and therefore an area where Beijing's law applies with some discretion.

The new law allows Chinese coastguards to shoot at foreign vessels in disputed waters, and to demolish structures built by other countries.

The Filipino fishermen, frightened by the possible consequences of this law, understood that for them it was a real declaration of war.

Philippine Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin pointed out that the law in the case of the South China Sea is a verbal threat of war to any country that defies it, meaning that the only safe option is not to question it and accept submission to the imposition of the strongest.

Also, China's new maritime traffic safety law came into force on 1 September. The law has continued to heighten the growing concerns of area countries and the United States about China's intentions in its neighbouring seas. From now on, foreign vessels entering Chinese territorial waters must report name, call sign, current position, destination, estimated time of arrival and cargo to the PRC authorities. These measures would apply to five types of foreign vessels: Submarines, nuclear-powered ships, transports of

radioactive materials, ships carrying oil, chemicals, liquefied gas or any toxic substance, as well as those that may endanger the safety of China's maritime traffic.

The law would be justified if there were no dispute over what China and the rest of the world understand as PRC territorial waters. Chinese diplomacy and its legislators use the words with the Chinese meaning they assign to their translation into the other languages. We cannot be sure that they understand territorial waters as the rest of the world does. The implementation of this new law may be a problem that the Chinese government will manage at its discretion, depending on the situation and its strategic interests. Law enforcement is not the most important issue for China. It will certainly not be easy to control ships that may pass through what China would like to understand as territorial waters. However, the fact that China grants itself the authority to regulate the control of shipping by means of national laws gives Beijing the legitimacy to justify its interventions in the eyes of its public opinion and that of the rest of the world. China is writing a political discourse underpinned by a legal backing to cover its increasingly frequent sea-based attacks.

The application of Chinese law will create controversial situations, which properly administered will project a pre-written narrative at home and abroad where the aggressor is the aggrieved and vice versa. China's century of humiliation, its historical rights, its new role in the world as a superpower and its national rejuvenation will anchor a narrative of victimhood and vindication of rights that had been usurped by foreign imperialist powers. Respect for international law and established norms will not be questioned, only manipulated to blame those who oppose the implementation of its roadmap.

China is accustomed to systematic and planned violations of international trade rules, intellectual property, law of the sea, human rights, environmental commitments, health standards – in short, all kinds of constraints that impose permanent restrictions on the implementation of its policies. China has systematically flouted the rules for decades without questioning their validity. From within the system that has made globalisation possible, China has degraded its relevance by parasitising the rest of the world. The responses, when they have come, have come late and have been presented by CCP propaganda as an unjustified reactive move against a legitimate Chinese rise. The dynamics it has employed are based on an intelligent logic that it will continue to use and for which the rest of the world should be prepared by now. The CCP has demonstrated its outstanding ability to use the contradictions of the system to its advantage. The

weakness of the global governance system has allowed China to systematically flout the rules, which, combined with a general distribution of dividends, has silenced critical voices opposed to its predatory and criminal practices.

US naval strategy and the growing role of the Coast Guard

In late March 2019, two US ships crossed the Taiwan Strait, a strip of sea that separates the island from the mainland. The US Navy frequently and with some regularity transits the South China Sea. The purpose of these actions is to demonstrate to the People's Republic that the United States is prepared to uphold freedom of navigation in the Western Pacific area¹.

The US navy usually crosses the Taiwan Strait once or twice a year. However, the March 2019 trip was the sixth in seven months. The frequency of US military presence had increased. The increase in the pace of the navy's activity has been steady since then, but without the usual pattern. The increased US naval presence is a matter of sufficient interest, but the real highlight of that particular operation in March 2019 was the type of ships involved. On this occasion, it was not just navy ships. For the first time, a US Coast Guard ship sailed through the South China Sea accompanying a destroyer armed with cruise missiles.

The presence of a coastguard is even more provocative than that of a ship loaded with missiles. The Coast Guard's missions relate to the maritime defence and security of the coasts of the United States. From China's point of view, a US Coast Guard cutter has no say or no business in other countries' waters, especially those they consider their own, both those close to the mainland and those around the islands and reefs of the South China Sea, including Taiwan.

¹ 'U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress', *Congressional Research Service*, 18 March 2021. "China is involved in a dispute, principally with the United States, over whether China has a right under international law to regulate the activities of foreign military forces operating within China's EEZ. The position of the United States and most other countries is that while the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which established EEZs as a feature of international law, gives coastal states the right to regulate economic activities (such as fishing and oil exploration) within their EEZs, it does not give coastal states the right to regulate foreign military activities in the parts of their EEZs beyond their 12-nautical-mile territorial waters." Available at: <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/20522334/us-china-strategic-competition-in-south-and-east-china-seas-background-and-issues-for-congress-march-18-2021.pdf>

The presence of a coastguard, accompanying a destroyer, goes beyond the claim of a right of navigation. It can be associated with a right to monitor compliance with international law in an area fraught with tensions. The aforementioned possibility cannot be accepted by China, which places its sovereignty claims above any restrictions imposed by international law or provisions of the global governance system.

The US Coast Guard deployed in this or any other area multiplies response options and provides significant diplomatic support to coastal states that refuse to submit to unilateral impositions.

The US naval strategy since 2007 supports a comprehensive approach that links three naval services—the US Navy, the US Marines and the US Coast Guard—into a single destination.

The new US naval strategy 'Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power' highlights five key points. One is particularly interesting and novel because it points to the need for US naval forces to act on a more assertive line in order to prevail in day-to-day competition. The new arrangement invites expectations of increased tension at sea in the competition game between the United States and China. Avoiding the danger of unintended military escalation as a result of an incident or accident requires a greater role for the US and allied coastguards.

On the other hand, the express purpose of legitimising US naval action at sea, by defending a model of relations with its competitors based on respect for international rules and laws, requires new resources, new complementary capabilities and new options, surely not as brilliantly impressive as a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier at sea, loaded with state-of-the-art aircraft, accompanied by its full complement of escorts.

The US Coast Guard offers a new possibility of presence and action in the grey zone of the seas, where China acts by using its fishing vessels as subtle instruments of pressure and blackmail against riverine countries. The result is the best use of the complementary capabilities of the allied naval services, forming an integrated system ready to act across the spectrum of conflict.

However, competition in the grey zone, so typical of PRC political warfare, has not yet aroused sufficient interest to rebalance forces and capabilities in this not entirely obscure area. China's coast guard is the largest in the world and its ships are the largest in tonnage, but in addition the Chinese maritime militia, under the National Liberation Army,

has no competitors that can neutralise them – perhaps only Vietnam could do something. Concern about the urgency of achieving conventional rebalancing in the region is justified, but the desirability of having response mechanisms in the disputed grey zone where the PRC has an undeniable advantage should not be forgotten.

Fishing as a mechanism for China's dominance

The People's Republic aspires to dominate some 3 million square kilometres of the South China Sea, which is twice the size of the entire Mediterranean. China's aspirations are challenged by the other littoral states; the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei, but none are strong enough to oppose a slow but determined strategy of penetration of the sea and their economies.

The reasons behind China's claims to virtually the entire South Sea are historical. It is here that fisheries begin to emerge as a basic legitimacy argument for China's claim to sovereignty rights. The Chinese authorities claim that for more than 600 years, fishermen from the island to Hainan used shipping routes that allowed them to reach the disputed areas, fish and return home. Oral tradition and some alleged but now defunct navigation books are the basis for an alleged claim to dominion over the sea because the Chinese fishermen got there first.

For decades, the People's Republic of China has used its fishing vessels as a spearhead to assert its presence and aspire to dominate much of the seas inland from the first island chain in the Western Pacific. China is omnipresent in these waters. The activities of Chinese fishing vessels also translate into presence, information, monitoring, control and a political argument in the world's hottest and most contested region.

In this way, Chinese fishing vessels can become a mechanism for escalating or testing the responsiveness of states that dispute with Beijing over sovereignty of the sea or rights to exploit its resources.

The pressure on China's arable land, the overexploitation of its EEZ fishing grounds and the size of its population favour an inclination to expand its fleet in distant waters, especially on the high seas. Marine biological resources are considered the world's largest protein reserve, so owning and mastering the ocean means guaranteeing China's food sovereignty.

For the People's Republic, fishing is not only a strategic industry, it is also an instrument of power projection and influence. Securing protein supplies is important, but China has also expressed, in its adjacent seas, that fishing in waters beyond the boundaries of its EEZ is seen by them, over time and prolonged use, as a way of transforming their presence in the sea into irrevocable rights of dominance.

From the waters of Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and North Korea to those of Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and Argentina in Latin America, via the Gulf of Guinea, Angola, Senegal, Mozambique and Somalia in Africa, Chinese fishing vessels have become the new masters of the fishing grounds.

Greg Poling, director of the Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative linked to the prestigious US think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIC), argues that the scale and aggressiveness of China's fishing fleet is allowing it to exercise effective control over the world's fisheries. But even more worrying is that very few countries are willing to stand up to incursions by Chinese fishing vessels into their national waters.

Among the 15 countries with the largest marine area in the world's Exclusive Economic Zone, there are three Latin American countries. Argentina should be the fourth, but the UK occupies the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, which are recognised as dependent, non-self-governing territories. Brazil, Chile and Mexico have more than three million square kilometres of marine area in their EEZs. The Chilean case is particularly relevant because the extension of its area of influence in the sea is five times greater than its territory. In addition, Chile's maritime area of national responsibility for maritime search and rescue (SAR area) exceeds 26 million square kilometres, an area equivalent to the entire African continent. Chile is the fifth country in the world with the largest SAR area.

Conclusions

The challenge of conserving marine resources in the EEZs of Ibero-American countries and in the adjacent high seas, in the face of predatory activity and illegal fishing by China's huge distant water fishing fleet, requires cooperation between states and with international organisations. On the other hand, it is essential to have the necessary means to support research and the protection of biodiversity and the sustainability of fisheries.

The role of coastguards and oceanographic vessels is key in a mission which, in view of the immensity of the area to be protected and the degree of the threat, requires an additional effort by States to strengthen their navies, coastal surveillance services, their means of research and control of fishing grounds and protected areas and, in short, their capacity for maritime action. It is clear that international collaboration strengthens the potential of each in a combined action that must be accompanied by a strategic communication campaign.

A study of the common interests in the face of the overfishing of the PRC's deep-sea fleet could provide an interesting approach to the oceans surrounding Ibero-America in order to discover their value as a support for regional and global integration, beyond individual interests.

However, it is possible that these efforts could fail. Shared business, commercial, financial, personal and political interests with the PRC may restrict the options of Latin American republics in defending their resources at sea. A more assertive and coordinated Ibero-American position would be associated with the risk of sanctions or threats from a power with a strong presence and influence at home.

The arguments do exist. It is not about preventing the use of marine resources, especially fisheries, it is about protecting them from illegal or abusive exploitation. It is not an effort to oppose one fleet in particular or all fleets in general for fishing in distant waters. It is the defence of everyone's own fishing interests that impose the need to agree on limitations to allow for sustainable exploitation. But above all, it is the will to defend the legitimate sovereign rights of the Ibero-American republics that makes it necessary to set limits on abusive and illegal Chinese practices in order to prevent custom from ending up generating a usage that is understood as a right.

The waters surrounding America beyond mile 201 can never become part of the blue soil of the People's Republic of China or any other distant power.

*Andrés González Martín**
Artillery Lieutenant Colonel
IEEE Analyst