



WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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**BEFORE THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
EAST ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND INTERNATIONAL CYBERSECURITY POLICY**

**HEARING: "COMBATting PRC ILLEGAL, COERCIVE, AGGRESSIVE, AND
DECEPTIVE BEHAVIOR IN THE INDO-PACIFIC"**

OCTOBER 7, 2025

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¹ SeaLight Foundation, <https://www.sealight.live/>

² "Why Should We Care About the Indo-Pacific?" podcast, <https://linktr.ee/indopacpodcast>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chairman Ricketts, Ranking Member Coons, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on what I believe to be America's most comprehensive, pressing and underappreciated security challenge of our time: the People's Republic of China's emergence as this century's most sophisticated and successful expansionist power—one that directly threatens U.S. interests in East Asia.

Despite Beijing's protests to the contrary, I do characterize today's China as an expansionist power. While Russia's blunt-force territorial aggressions naturally capture headlines and trigger robust international responses, China has quietly achieved far greater imperial successes—primarily in the maritime domain. It has done so through its mastery of gray zone—or illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive (ICAD)³—and political warfare strategies that operate beneath thresholds of international response.

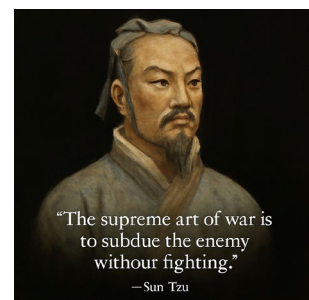
Yet despite these stunning PRC successes, the United States has to date neither articulated nor implemented anything resembling an effective counter-ICAD strategy. In essence, we are already decades into losing a gray zone war—one we largely don't even recognize we are supposed to be fighting.

Over the past five decades, China has systematically seized and consolidated effective control over vast ocean areas through a patient campaign of incremental expansion punctuated by bold moves on opportune occasions. This campaign began with direct military action—the 1974 Battle of the Paracel Islands, followed later by the 1988 Johnson South Reef skirmish—but has since evolved to employ a broad suite of innovative civilian, paramilitary and military tactics that have multiplied China's gains across maritime East Asia, and especially in the West Philippine Sea.

These tactics range from occupying Mischief Reef (1994); to first seizing and then creating an exclusion zone around Scarborough Shoal (2012-present); to building seven artificial island bases (2013-16); to isolating the Philippines' outpost at Second Thomas Shoal (2014-present); to threatening the civilian population of Thitu Island (2018-present); to swarming vessels at Whitsun and Iroquois Reefs (2021-present); and most recently to blockading the Philippine Coast Guard's presence at Sabina Shoal and forcing its retreat (2024).

China's tactics extend beyond the conquest of individual reefs and shoals to encompass systematic intrusive patrolling in its neighbors' waters throughout the South China Sea, around Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, and in the Yellow Sea. Beijing also deploys oil and gas platforms in waters around Pratas Island and aquaculture installations in the Yellow Sea Provisional Measures Zone, normalizing administrative control through economic activities that complicate countermeasures.

Unlike Moscow's costly conventional military actions, which have brought strategic contraction, comprehensive sanctions and determined resistance, Beijing is expanding its maritime empire with remarkable impunity. It is China, not Russia, that represents the more successful expansionist threat precisely because it has mastered the art of 'winning without fighting.'



³ This acronym has recently been advanced as a replacement for "gray zone". I find value in both terms in different contexts and will use both in my testimony.

For this Beijing has not relied solely on ICAD tactics, but has combined this suite of tools with an extremely sophisticated and comprehensive political warfare machinery that weaponizes information against the weaknesses in democratic systems. Beijing has enlisted advocates to carry its message of China's inevitability and the futility of resistance, so that governments eventually make 'business decisions' to accommodate Beijing's demands.

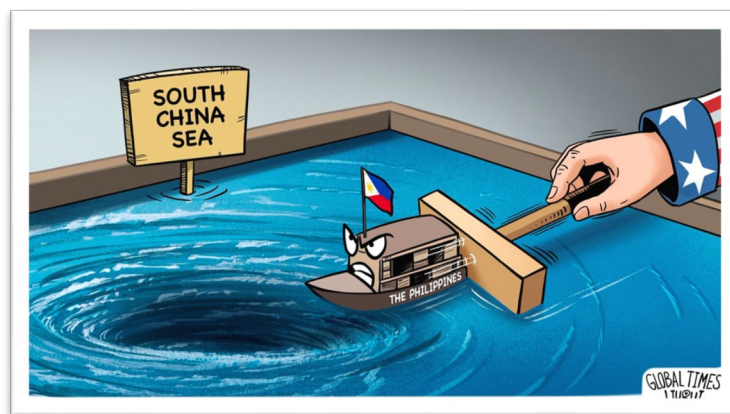
The goals of gray zone and political warfare are complementary: the steady erosion of our collective will to contest China's ever-expanding ambitions, and our gradual acceptance of a new normal—one of Chinese regional supremacy.

I. CONQUEST WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE: CHINA'S FIVE-DECADE EXPANSIONIST CAMPAIGN

China's systematic seizure of maritime features and consolidation of maritime control demonstrates a level of strategic patience and tactical sophistication that has consistently outmaneuvered U.S. and international response mechanisms, largely because those mechanisms were largely designed long ago against historical, conventional threats.

We now have sufficient evidence to understand the CCP's ICAD and political warfare tactics: Beijing identifies strategic maritime features or regions; establishes initial presence through ostensibly civilian means (fishing vessels, oil and gas platforms, aquaculture installations, etc.); then escalates through maritime militia and coast guard deployments backed by military force.

Beijing accomplishes all this while maintaining the twin fictions of its 'peaceful' rise and defensive responses to foreign 'provocation.' It promotes these narratives through an equally sophisticated political and legal warfare campaign, which advances the story of China's predetermined victory alongside America's inevitable withdrawal from the region.



PRC state propaganda consistently depicts a sinister U.S. hand⁴

The message to regional leaders is simple: *China will be supreme, so you would be wise to welcome your new imperial overlords so that all will be well for you in this inescapable new order.*

⁴ "Aligning with Washington on South China Sea policy too risky for Manila." Global Times, November 28, 2023. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202311/1302647.shtml>

A. FOUNDATIONAL PRECEDENTS

China's maritime expansion began with direct military action that established crucial precedents. The January 1974 Battle of the Paracel Islands saw Chinese naval forces decisively defeat South Vietnamese forces, seizing complete control over the strategically vital archipelago. Despite this clear act of territorial conquest, the international response was muted—no sanctions, no military assistance to the victim, no sustained diplomatic pressure.

Beijing chose its moment well—there was little interest in coming to the aid of an abandoned and rapidly collapsing South Vietnamese regime.

This established a dangerous template: maritime territorial seizure would face minimal international consequences compared to land-based conquest. The lesson was reinforced in March 1988 at Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Archipelago, where Chinese forces gunned down over 60 Vietnamese sailors while gaining a foothold on the southwest end of Union Banks. Once again, Beijing picked an opportune moment—with the Soviet Union in retreat and Hanoi still diplomatically isolated from Washington, Vietnam had no friends of consequence on the world stage. The international response was a collective shrug, allowing China to consolidate its bloody gains without meaningful cost.

The Johnson South Reef massacre marked the last instance of military-led conquest, but it provided a preview of the opportunism and calibrated use of violence that would characterize China's gray zone campaign moving forward.

B. TACTICAL EVOLUTION

China refined its approach moving forward, developing increasingly sophisticated methods that exploit legal ambiguities and international response gaps. Its 1994 conquest of Mischief Reef—which took advantage of America's 1992 withdrawal from its Philippine military bases and post-Cold War 'peace dividend' signaling—marked an evolution from direct military confrontation to quieter aggressions.

This initial occupation of Mischief Reef—located in the heart of the Philippines' exclusive economic zone—was characterized as the construction of mere 'fishermen's shelters' for humanitarian purposes. As with previous aggressions, the muted international response to this obvious fiction emboldened China to expand its gray zone campaign.

The establishment of Mischief Reef as a Chinese-occupied feature provided the legal veneer China needed to circumvent the constraints of its 2002 agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—the Declaration of Conduct of the Parties to the South China Sea (DOC)—intended to maintain the tense status quo in the Spratly Archipelago, where overlapping claims and reef-grabs threatened to explode into open conflict.

The fact that China was able to claim compliance with the 2002 DOC while later transforming Mischief Reef (together with Fiery Cross and Subi Reefs) into massive artificial islands with military-grade runways, harbors and anti-ship missiles demonstrates how China views international agreements on its own terms, counting on its rivals' collective impulse toward de-escalation to overlook the sins of a feared adversary.

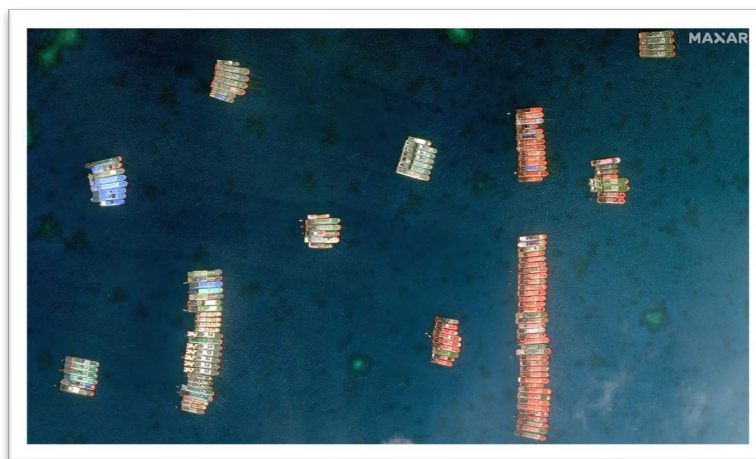
As a result, Mischief Reef would become the chief forward operating base that now anchors China's quarantine of the Philippine outpost at Second Thomas Shoal, its area denial operations around Sabina Shoal and its militia-led occupation of Iroquois Reef.

To the north, the 2012 seizure of Scarborough Shoal demonstrated China's ability to dominate its smaller neighbors through overwhelming sustained paramilitary and civilian presence. Since that year's tense standoff with Philippine forces—in which U.S. diplomatic errors facilitated the confiscation—China has deployed increasing numbers of coast guard and militia vessels to deny access to Philippine government and traditional fishing vessels alike, while its own industrial giant clam harvesting operations systematically devastated the reef's ecosystem.⁵

In early 2024, China took its next steps toward total conquest, enforcing a 25-30 nautical mile exclusion zone around the shoal, while also issuing a 'scientific' report giving the shoal a clean bill of environmental health (though it simultaneously withdrew its giant clam harvesters, a telling indicator of the likely grim reality).⁶ China subsequently announced straight baselines around the reef to bolster its "indisputable sovereignty" narrative—one it has deployed with increasing brazenness across its vast maritime claims.

The breaching of China's newly established exclusion zone by a 44-meter Philippine Coast Guard patrol vessel in August 2025 likely prompted the alarming intervention by a PLA Navy destroyer, which aggressively pursued the Philippine vessel before colliding with a China Coast Guard vessel within just a few meters of the Philippine ship's stern. While tragic for the Chinese sailors who perished in this mishap, this reckless maneuver brought the region dangerously close to a catastrophic incident that may have defied Beijing's usual calibration and triggered invocation of the 'armed attack' provisions of the 1951 U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty.

Two of China's most recent seizures—Whitsun Reef in 2021 and Sabina Shoal in 2024—demonstrate the continued refinement of these tactics. At Whitsun Reef, hundreds of Spratly Backbone Fishing Vessels sit silently at anchor to constitute an effective occupation force. These maritime militia vessels don't fish but receive generous government subsidies to lash themselves together to establish enduring presence through sheer mass.



PRC maritime militia swarm "rafted" together at Whitsun Reef in 2021

⁵ Powell, Ray. "Beijing is Lying About the Condition of Scarborough Shoal". SeaLight, May 5, 2025.

<https://www.sealight.live/posts/beijing-is-lying-about-the-condition-of-scarborough-shoal>

⁶ Powell, Ray. "China's Expanding Control over Scarborough Shoal". SeaLight, May 5, 2025.

<https://www.sealight.live/posts/china-s-expanding-control-over-scarborough-shoal>

At Sabina Shoal, China's coast guard and militia ships swarmed, blocked, and rammed vital resupply efforts to the Philippines Coast Guard's *BRP Teresa Magbanua* as it anchored peacefully in the shoal, forcing it to withdraw after five months once the medical condition of its crew had deteriorated to a critical point.

Today we have sufficient data to discern clear patterns in China's expansionist tactics: assertions of jurisdiction within claimed waters through intrusive coast guard patrols and hydrographic surveys; initial deployment of ostensibly civilian assets; escalation through paramilitary (maritime militia and coast guard) presence; consolidation through infrastructure development; and normalization through administrative measures.

The cumulative effect has been to bring an astonishing expanse of the South China Sea under effective Chinese control. Large portions of the West Philippine Sea have fallen under a kind of maritime occupation, achieved through methods designed to evade U.S. censure beyond the usual 'ironclad alliance' rhetoric that has long outlived its standalone effectiveness.⁷

II. JURISDICTIONAL CONTROL: NORMALIZING CHINESE HEGEMONY

China's expansionist success extends beyond the seizure of individual features and their surrounding waters, to encompass systematic assertion of sovereignty over vast maritime areas through what SeaLight has termed 'intrusive patrolling.'⁸ This constant deployment of China Coast Guard and militia vessels into exclusive economic zones allocated to its neighbors is technically legal under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, but its aggressive and coercive purpose is to normalize Chinese law enforcement presence as an assertion of jurisdictional authority.

These vessels—which can measure up to an incredible 165 meters and 12,000 tons (by comparison, U.S. Coast Guard National Security Cutters measure a modest 128 meters and 4,500 tons)—often patrol within 25-50 nautical miles of neighbors' coastlines. So routine have these near-daily intrusions become that most pass without notice, which is exactly how 'normalization' works.



The massive, 12,000-ton China Coast Guard 5901, commonly referred to as "The Monster"

A. SOUTH CHINA SEA

In the South China Sea, China Coast Guard vessels maintain near-permanent presence in the exclusive economic zones of Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines, with regular forays into Indonesia's waters as

⁷ Powell, Ray. "China's Imperialist, Maritime Occupation of the West Philippine Sea." SeaLight, November 23, 2024. <https://www.sealight.live/posts/china-s-imperialist-maritime-occupation-of-the-west-philippine-sea>

⁸ Friis, Gaute. "The Gray Zone Tactics Playbook: Intrusive Patrolling." SeaLight, November 22, 2023. <https://www.sealight.live/posts/gray-zone-tactics-playbook-intrusive-patrolling>

well. These patrols serve multiple functions: intelligence gathering, resource denial, presence assertion, and intimidation of local fishing fleets and offshore oil and gas operations.

The heaviest intrusive patrolling occurs around Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, and Sabina Shoal, where Chinese vessels maintain what amounts to selective blockade conditions, with controlled exceptions made for resupply boats to the Philippine garrison aboard the grounded *BRP Sierra Madre* at Second Thomas Shoal under the fragile agreement reached after the dramatic June 2024 close-quarters clash that saw bladed weapons drawn and a Philippine sailor seriously injured.

This blockade represents a form of territorial control achieved without formal annexation—China expands effective administrative authority over access to Philippine waters under its self-proclaimed ‘historic rights’ claim. Though China signed the very U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which clearly allocated sovereign rights to those waters to its neighbors and was intended to forestall exactly this kind of excessive claim, China’s legal reasoning simply dismisses its applicability to any such waters as it chooses for itself.

B. TAIWAN, JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA

China has also expanded intrusive patrolling to other theaters, most notably around Taiwan, where China Coast Guard and naval vessels now conduct routine patrols ever closer to Taiwan’s mainland and outlying islands. Combined with a steady dose of political warfare tactics, these activities are calibrated to convince Taiwan’s government to acquiesce to Beijing’s demands—perhaps not now, but eventually.

Simultaneously, China has placed 12 oil and gas rigs within the lawful exclusive economic zone around Pratas Island, further establishing its disregard for Taiwan’s maritime rights.⁹ That the Lai administration remained quiet about these installations until they were exposed by independent maritime researchers demonstrates both the coercive pressure they exert on government officials and the importance of independent maritime transparency efforts in exposing gray zone aggression.

In using these tactics, China demonstrates its understanding of democratic governance weaknesses. Even if a current government proves obstinate, Beijing will simply continue applying pressure in the belief that a future government can ultimately be convinced toward a more compliant posture.

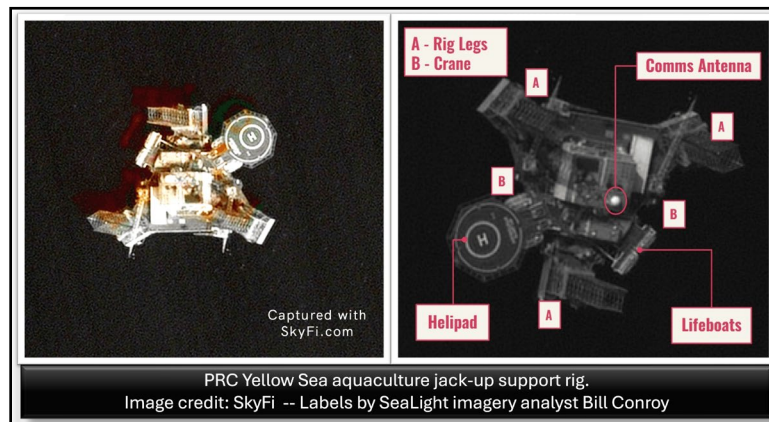
The fruit will fall when it is ripe.

Around the uninhabited Senkaku Islands, SeaLight tracks a constant China Coast Guard presence—generally four ships—as a constant challenge to Japan’s administrative control. These patrols serve to demonstrate China’s commitment to its claim while testing Japanese resolve, capacity and alliance commitments. The normalization of these patrols sets conditions for future escalation while making any Japanese response appear aggressive rather than defensive.

In the Yellow Sea Provisional Measures Zone—established in a 2001 agreement with South Korea—China has unilaterally deployed aquaculture installations that serve dual functions: legitimate economic activity and quasi-permanent presence that asserts China’s right to bypass the agreement’s provisions. In

⁹ Erickson, Andrew S., Jason Wang, Pei-Jhen Wu and Marvin Bernardo. “Rigging the Game: PRC Oil Structures Encroach on Taiwan’s Pratas Island.” The Jamestown Foundation’s China Brief, Volume 25, Issue 16. September 2, 2025. <https://jamestown.org/program/rigging-the-game-prc-oil-structures-encroach-on-taiwans-pratas-island/>

classic gray zone fashion, China takes advantage of new civilian technology to circumvent institutions designed to restrain it.¹⁰



China's massive "aquaculture support" rig in the Yellow Sea

This aggression further reflects China's view of international agreements and legal structures as potentially useful tools to exploit—not as binding constraints—for its gray-zone expansion.

III. THE SECOND FRONT: POLITICAL WARFARE

Beijing's political warfare machinery leverages local business and civic leaders and organizations across the region—especially those with mainland Chinese family and ethnic ties—to legitimize the CCP's gray-zone objectives. These efforts are foundational to its expansionist aims, wherein influence operations ashore make coercive maritime actions less costly and more effective by shaping local perceptions and undermining resistance.

Let's look at two examples from the Philippines, where the Marcos administration's recent boldness in pushing back against PRC aggression has been met with a shocking escalation of gray zone and influence operations alike.

A. EXAMPLE 1: ASSEMBLING THE INDIGENEOUS ADVOCATES

A revealing recent illustration of the boldness of Beijing's political warfare strategy was an August 15th event held in Manila, the "80th Anniversary of the Victory of the World Anti-Fascist War and the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression", part of a coordinated global effort to exaggerate the CCP's role in the Allies' WWII victory over Japan. The event was organized by the Philippine Association for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China—an entity known to be tightly linked to United Front Work Department's global efforts.¹¹

¹⁰ Kajee, Jun and Ray Powell. "Fish Farms or Footholds? China, South Korea and an OSINT Success Story: How China's Aquaculture Rigs are Testing Maritime Boundaries in the Yellow Sea." SeaLight. April 17, 2025. <https://www.sealight.live/posts/fish-farms-or-footholds>

¹¹ Dotson, John. "The United Front Work Department in Action Abroad: A Profile of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China." The Jamestown Foundation's China Brief, Volume 18, Issue 2. February 13, 2018. <https://jamestown.org/program/united-front-work-department-action-abroad-profile-council-promotion-peaceful-reunification-china/>

Held in the lavishly appointed Rizal Hotel and attended by over 50 Chinese-Filipino business and civic organizations, the event drew more than 300 influential guests. The celebration featured speeches by the PRC ambassador and local Chinese-Filipino (or ‘Chinoy’) leaders, with all messaging, signage and materials presented solely in Mandarin and deeply aligned with CCP propaganda. Notably, the event’s contents were then broadcast uncritically over ‘Chinoy TV’ and spread via social media, amplifying key Beijing narratives directly to its target demographic.



At the 15 August gala, PRC Ambassador Huang Xilian's speech emphasized the responsibility of the assembled "overseas Chinese" leaders and organizations in promoting Beijing's objectives (Screenshot from Chinoy TV)

This approach normalizes Beijing’s accepted positions among community elites while using prestige events and business linkages as a form of narrative capture. Such meetings, highly visible and well-funded, legitimize CCP strategic aims and create an echo chamber in which opposition voices are marginalized and Beijing’s regional ambitions appear widely accepted.

B. EXAMPLE: TRAINING THE CCP’S INTERNATIONAL VOICES

Parallel to these public events and messaging, the CCP also invests in recruiting, training, credentialing and promoting Philippine academics, influencers and commentators able to give ‘local voice’ to Chinese interests on international and state media platforms. These individuals, after exposure to PRC-sponsored scholarships, trainings or junkets, are positioned as authentic, authoritative Filipino perspectives to advocate CCP talking points.

Two of the notable Philippine voices trained in Chinese universities are:

- Anna Maligdog-Uy, a pro-Beijing academic and active social media influencer currently studying Economics at Peking University on scholarship under its Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development. She writes a weekly column in the Manila Times and appears in interviews on a variety of online Philippine forums while also providing regular content to PRC state media and think tanks for international consumption.
- Rommel Banlaoi, a prominent Philippine academic, security analyst and government official who received a PhD in International Relations from Jinan University in China. Banlaoi has held leadership positions several Philippine organizations that advocate for closer relations with Beijing. He regularly appears in Chinese, Philippine and international media to support PRC narratives.

This recruitment is institutionalized, with formal agreements and training programs embedding PRC-aligned messages in academic, media and state circles. The CCP refers to this influence technique as ‘borrowing a mouth to speak’, recognizing that local messengers lend greater legitimacy and wider reach to Party propaganda.

These examples just scratch the surface of how Beijing executes the political warfare element of its gray zone expansionism, feeding acquiescence ashore while increasing control at sea.

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. MANDATE A NATIONAL COUNTER-ICAD STRATEGY

The Subcommittee should direct the administration to develop and implement a comprehensive national strategy specifically designed to counter ICAD activities. This strategy must be either integrated into the broader National Security Strategy or established as a stand-alone document, guiding both policy development and resource allocation to address the evolving gray zone and political warfare threats posed by the PRC.

The United States cannot prevail in a gray zone environment that it has not clearly recognized or organized itself to confront. Breaking up counter-ICAD efforts among disconnected agencies, such as Indo-Pacific Command, the State Department, and intelligence organizations, is insufficient. Instead, a unified national counter-ICAD strategy should coordinate all relevant diplomatic, informational, economic, legal, cyber, and security instruments, ensuring that U.S. authorities and resources are focused across the interagency to address this challenge.

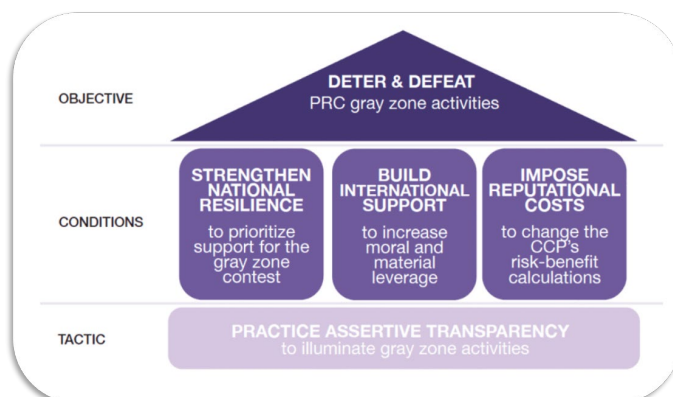
A national counter-ICAD strategy should include adoption of assertive transparency as a core tool.¹² Building on the Philippines’ transparency program, this would involve proactively collecting and rapidly releasing high-quality evidence—including imagery, video, metadata, and investigative reporting—that systematically exposes China’s gray zone aggressions. The goals would be to build resilience against ICAD activities within democratic societies and impose clear costs on aggressors. By systematically making gray zone aggression visible and undeniable, the U.S. can deny Beijing the cover of opacity and ambiguity upon which it’s built its expansionist campaign.

The strategy should thus establish mechanisms for coordination among government agencies to gather and share evidence. However, funding should also be allocated for independent transparency efforts outside government channels to ensure timely, credible disclosures that avoid the many endemic roadblocks that inevitably inhibit and delay government information release.

Lastly, counter-ICAD theory and practice should be embedded in professional education courses for current and future U.S. officials and policymakers, as well as those we provide to our allies and partners. It should be integrated into the curriculum at institutions such as military academies and war colleges, the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute, and regional security centers like the Asia-Pacific Center for

¹² Powell, Raymond M. and Benjamin Goirigolzarri, *Game Changer: The Philippines’ Assertive Transparency Campaign: How the Philippines Rewrote the Counter Gray Zone Playbook in 2023*, January 12, 2024. Stratbaswe ADR Institute. <https://adrinstitute.org/2024/01/12/adri-special-study-game-changer-the-philippines-assertive-transparency-campaign-against-china-how-the-philippines-rewrote-the-counter-gray-zone-playbook/>

Security Studies, ensuring that current and future leaders are prepared to understand the ICAD battlespace and implement countermeasures.



The assertive transparency framework

B. REPURPOSE AND FULLY RESOURCE THE U.S. AGENCY FOR GLOBAL MEDIA TO COUNTER CHINA'S POLITICAL WARFARE CAMPAIGN

The Subcommittee should introduce legislation to repurpose and resource the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) to become the nation's dedicated counter-ICAD tool against China's gray zone and political warfare campaigns. This legislation should mandate a pivot beyond traditional broadcasting to a multi-domain information warfare capability tailored to counter China's 'three warfares' doctrine—public opinion, psychological and legal warfare—and its \$10 billion-per-year global propaganda push.

The legislation should authorize the transformation of USAGM into a nimble, globally networked platform that penetrates Chinese information controls and preempts influence operations. Aligned with the ICAD framework that defines Chinese aggression as illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive, the repurposed USAGM must fund rigorous investigative journalism into United Front networks, especially in the Indo-Pacific where Beijing wields business associations, cultural organizations and academic ties to influence elites.

Leveraging its 49-language reach and credibility with over 300 million viewers, the legislation should direct USAGM to expose covert influence schemes, deliver targeted counter-narratives, and sustain a persistent information-defense posture. By transforming USAGM's current crisis into the institutional opening to create a purpose-built counter-political warfare agency, it can focus its energy on clearly demonstrating the deception, malign objectives, and predatory methods built into the CCP's expansionist international program.

C. ESTABLISH A SUCCESSOR TO USAID CENTERED ON COUNTER-ICAD

The Subcommittee should endorse the creation of a new development agency with a mandate explicitly focused on advancing U.S. national security interests by countering ICAD activities in strategically important countries and regions. This agency should adopt a mission to empower partner nations to defend their sovereignty, reinforce democratic institutions and build transparent, resilient economies, all with the explicit goal of reducing vulnerabilities to gray zone aggression and political warfare by America's adversaries.

To achieve this mission, the agency's functions should be redesigned to:

- Support partner governments and civil society in building institutions—especially in the rule of law, anti-corruption and regulatory transparency—that are resistant to foreign political interference and elite capture.
- Prioritize assistance projects that help allies and partners counter predatory lending, debt traps, and malign investment practices, ensuring that infrastructure and development remain free from coercive leverage by adversarial states.
- Offer technical and financial support for independent investigative media and open-source analysis to expose covert influence operations, covert financing and non-transparent economic activities linked to foreign actors' gray zone tactics.
- Work closely with our national security agencies to align development initiatives with U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific and other high-risk regions, ensuring that development programs directly reinforce broader counter-ICAD objectives.
- Facilitate rapid deployment of targeted aid and crisis response where ICAD tactics threaten partner nation stability, maintaining adaptive programming that evolves in response to emerging threats.

In contrast to traditional development models, this reimagined agency would explicitly integrate national security imperatives into every aspect of its work, marrying American democratic values with a pragmatic focus on resisting adversarial expansion and influence. Its aim would be to foster stronger, more resilient partners whose independence and stability directly reinforce U.S. interests in the global competition with malign state actors using gray zone and political warfare.

D. MOBILIZE OUR DEFENSE INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM FOR THE ICAD CHALLENGE

The Subcommittee should ensure that America's national security and defense innovation communities are fully engaged in addressing China's ICAD and political warfare activities. Traditional government responses have proven too slow and inflexible, while Beijing leverages rapidly evolving whole-of-society campaigns across the information, economic and digital domains.

To strengthen our ability to respond, the United States should draw on the strengths of its academic innovation ecosystem. Notable examples include the Gordian Knot Center for National Security Innovation at Stanford, the Krach Institute for Tech Diplomacy at Purdue, and the national Hacking for Defense program, each of which brings together students, faculty, technologists, policy experts and practitioners to tackle real-world national security challenges. These institutions foster diverse teams who collaboratively develop new technology solutions, policy tools and operational concepts that address urgent security needs—such as countering disinformation, exposing covert foreign networks, and safeguarding critical infrastructure—apart from traditional government limitations.

Congress should provide targeted support and funding to spur pilot projects, research collaboration and rapid technology prototyping within and across these university-led efforts, encouraging innovative solutions from both established and emerging partners. Regular coordination and partnership opportunities should be organized to allow government and university-based teams to jointly identify

priorities, evaluate promising ideas, and transition the most successful concepts directly into operational use.

Finally, resources and agile authorities for effective government incubators like the Defense Innovation Unit should be significantly enhanced to ensure that effective new counter-ICAD tools developed in the academic innovation sector can be speedily upscaled and deployed to keep ahead of evolving threats.

E. VISIT THE PHILIPPINE CIVILIAN COMMUNITY ON THITU ISLAND

When traveling in East Asia, Senators should formally request that the Philippine government add a visit to its Thitu (Pag-Asa) Island to their official itineraries. As with Taiwan visits, this symbolic stop would demonstrate support for the Spratly Islands' only civilian population, reinforce the U.S. commitment to defense of its ally in the West Philippine Sea, and make visible America's treaty obligations in the face of increasing PRC aggression.

Ideally these trips would also serve as humanitarian outreach opportunities for a geographically isolated community that wakes up every morning on the front lines, facing swarms of Chinese coast guard and militia ships that are visible from their front doors. The images of senior U.S. legislators offering aid and comfort while China's flotilla of enforcers looms threateningly nearby would itself be a powerful counter-ICAD action.

V. CONCLUSION: TO WIN, WE MUST FIRST GET ON THE FIELD

China's gradual, disciplined campaign of maritime expansion—ranging from direct confrontations in 1974 and 1988 to today's pervasive gray-zone tactics and intrusive patrols—has secured far more territory at far lower political cost than any conventional aggression. Its combination of coercion, deception, and political warfare has outpaced our existing frameworks for deterrence and response.

A cohesive U.S. counter-ICAD strategy must integrate assertive transparency, revamped information operations, purpose-built development assistance, and rapid innovation to match China's whole-of-society approach. By systematically exposing coercive actions, strengthening partner resilience, and mobilizing America's defense and innovation communities, we can restore deterrence and uphold the rules-based order.

The window to act is closing. Only a unified, well-resourced effort combining diplomatic, informational, economic, legal, cyber, and security instruments can prevent China's gray-zone successes from becoming irreversible precedents. The time for decisive, coordinated action is now.