

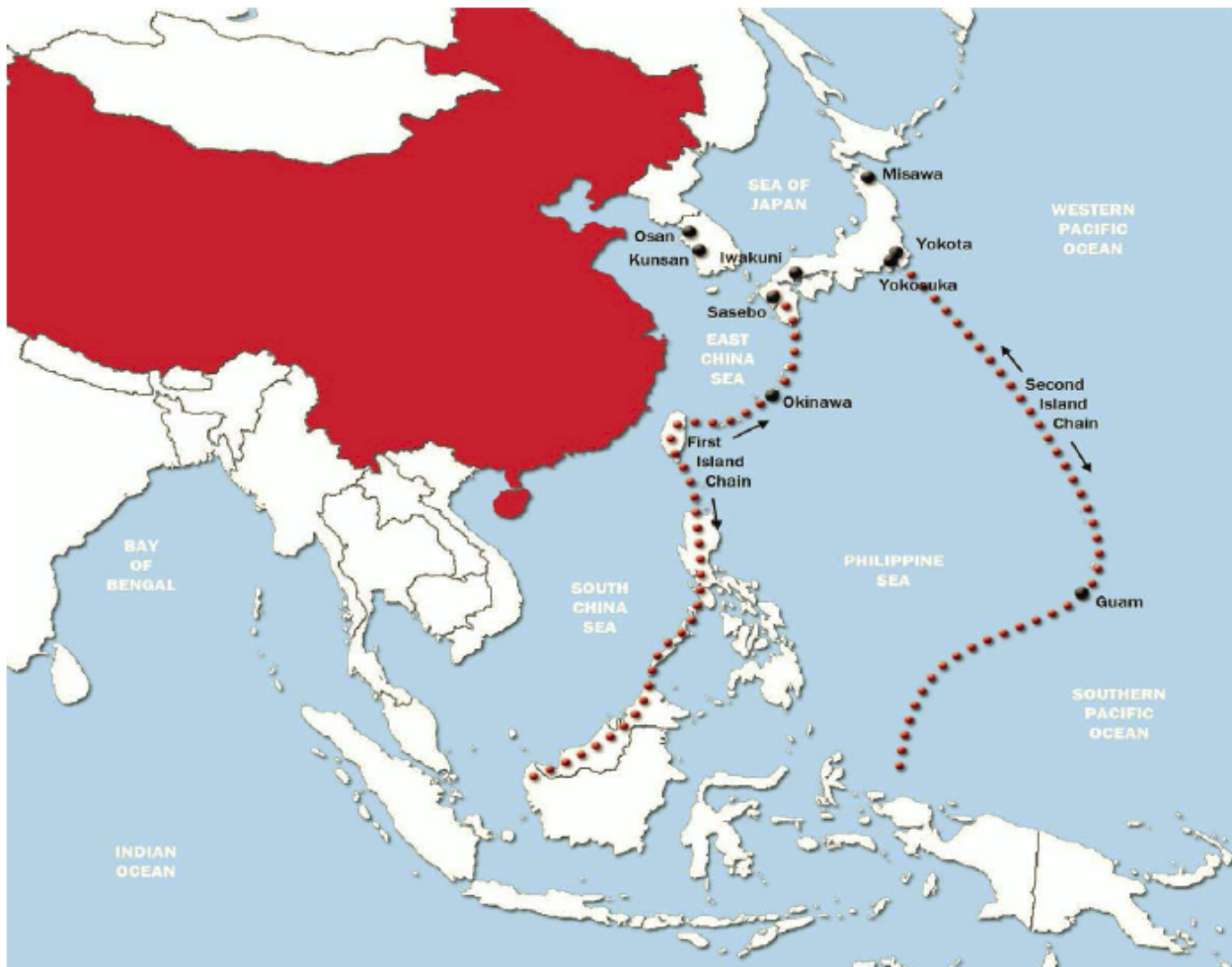
Information Operations Countermeasures to Anti-Access/Area Denial

thestrategybridge.org (<https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/5/11/information-operations-countermeasures-to-anti-accessarea-denial>) · by Brian D. Wieck · May 11, 2017

This essay is part of the #WhatIsInformationOperations (<https://thestrategybridge.org/search?q=%23WhatIsIO>) series, which asked a group of practitioners to provide their thoughts on the subject. We hope this launches a debate that may one day shape policy.

China's objective with its anti-access, area denial strategy to push the US out to what it terms the "first island chain" (Japan down through the Philippines) immediately, and to push the U.S. out to what it terms the "second island chain" (extends out to Guam) between 2020 and 2050 according to Chinese flag officer Liu Huaqing's 1980s plan.[1] The U.S. response to this strategy—a whole of government response with synchronized information operations—requires U.S. Pacific allies to deem U.S. security objectives legitimate and support these objectives. China's Three Warfares strategy attempts to undercut both of these.

[2]



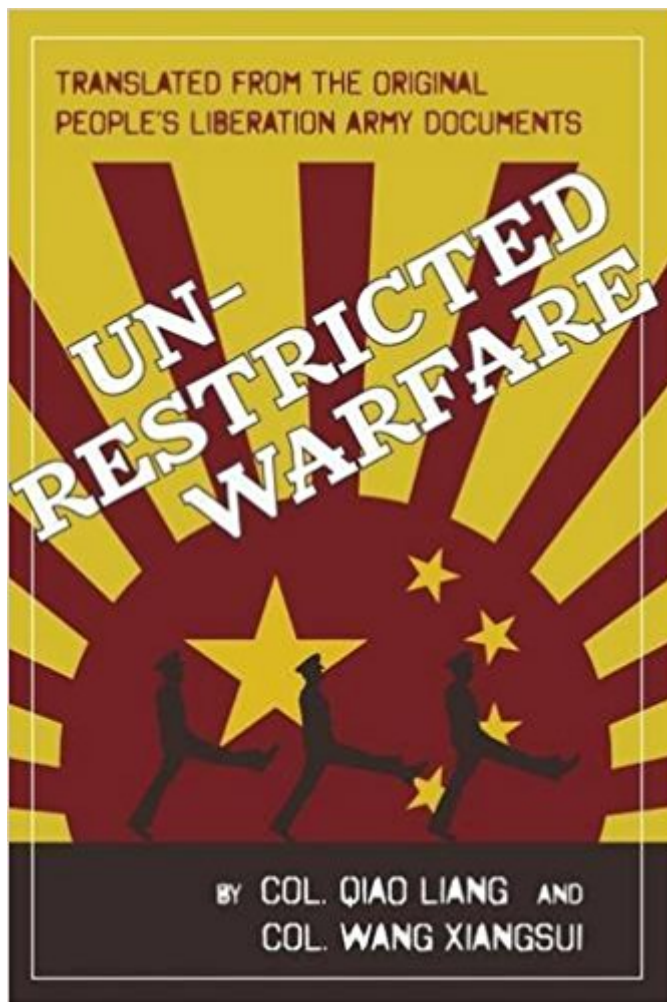
The First and Second Island Chains (Island Chains and Sea Control: China's Maritime Strategy/B.D. Cole)

The South China Sea is a source of both resources (10% of the world fish harvest, one third of China's potential oil and gas reserves) and the location of critical sea lines of communication.[3,4] China is trying to establish a sphere of maritime influence in three stages. The first stage involves controlling the first island chain that links Okinawa Prefecture Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The second stage, to be completed by 2050, involves controlling the second island chain that links Ogasawara island chain, Guam, and Indonesia. The final stage involves ending U.S. military dominance in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

[5]

China will likely take actions that appear to have relatively high gains versus costs, and act below the threshold for a U.S. military response.

Sun Tzu is still relevant to Chinese thought, and at least two of his precepts seem to be apparent in the Chinese maritime strategy which includes anti-access, area denial. First, Sun Tzu advocates attacking first an enemy's strategy, and second his alliances.[6] China's current maritime strategy has elements which attack each of these. In short, China attacks U.S. strategy by increasing risks and costs to US projected military forces, and attacks U.S. alliances through pressure on Pacific nations (political, economic, diplomatic) backed by a whole of government unity of effort. For an example of the results of such pressure one need look no further than the recent ASEAN conference which failed to make any statement condemning land reclamation or militarization of the South China Sea.[7] Sun Tzu also advocated subduing the enemy without fighting. China appears to be taking actions that achieve useful strategic effects but that fall below the threshold of an adversary's response, arguably subduing the U.S. without fighting. China will likely take actions that appear to have relatively high gains versus costs, and act below the threshold for a U.S. military response. The military component of China's maritime expansion strategy is anti-access, area denial.



(<https://www.amazon.com/Unrestricted-Warfare-Chinas-Destroy-America/dp/1626543054>)

In 1998, *Unrestricted Warfare* (<https://www.amazon.com/Unrestricted-Warfare-Chinas-Destroy-America/dp/1626543054>) was published, arguing for warfare by non-military means.[8] This was followed in 2003 by the Three Warfares strategy, also emphasizing non-military measures, or at least measures in which the threat of military force is merely a supporting effort.[9] In 2015 China released the white paper China's Offshore Active Defense Posture Strategy which seeks to maintain a defensive strategy at the strategic and sometimes operational level, while maintaining initiative, surprise and mass at the tactical and sometimes operational level.[10] The Chinese call their sea strategy "counter-intervention operations," purporting a defensive approach.[11]

The Chinese Narrative

China wants to portray itself in a defensive light. If China escorts its fishing vessels into other nation's Exclusive Economic Zones without permission with its naval paramilitary forces/maritime militia, and another nation confronts these with its official coast guard, China appears to be the victim. Documenting such low level encounters and placing them in an international norm context is a narrative opportunity for the U.S. and its Pacific allies. In the same situation, if China escorts with its official coast guard and is confronted with another nation's blue water navy, China again appears to be the victim. China also makes selective use of history to claim a Nine-Dash Line sea boundary in an ambiguous manner, and purports that China has continually inhabited certain South China Sea islands (Paracels, Spratley Islands) for thousands of years, with other nations making claims only in the 20th century (France before WWII, Vietnam and the Philippines after WWII).[12] China's intent in originally signing the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was arguably to give territorial sea and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rights to third world countries that they could not at the time achieve by other means.[13] At the moment, however, China is more ambivalent about the Convention, threatening to leave it recently over the Philippines arbitration issue.[14] At the same time, China sees opportunities to shape UNCLOS norms with its own international practice—a reason to remain a signatory.[15] China portrays the U.S. as a nation in decline, not committed to Asian security, and a nation that nonetheless seeks to contain China by surrounding it with bases and military capabilities. China also questions the stated neutrality of the U.S. toward South China Sea disputes,[16] and asserts that the U.S. uses territorial disputes and freedom of navigation to create pretexts to rebalance forces to surround China, based on a tunnel vision cold war mentality.[17]

The U.S. Response

The U.S. has designed various military operational concepts to China's anti-access, area denial strategy, which they called Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) and Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons

(JAM-GC, formerly Air-Sea Battle). Even though the details of these concepts are classified, the U.S. can and should promote the *existence* of approaches to addressing China's strategy to reassure allies and provide a measure of deterrence against Chinese adventurism.[19]



Planes and ships from the U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps (U.S. Navy Photo)

The U.S. should also in general increase investment in technologies associated with the so-called third offset, which seeks “to prepare U.S. military forces to cope with the proliferation of long range precision strike weapons.”[20] In addition, the U.S. can continue to promote its rebalancing to Asia. However, the response should be much broader than simply military concepts. Information operations can take the lead in synchronizing effects that could have a much better chance at countering China's anti-access, area denial strategy, imposing more costs for Chinese actions.

China's Three Warfares

The Chinese Three Warfares strategy is intrinsically tied to China's broader anti-access, area denial strategy, in that the goal of both is to retain or attain typical objects of war without resorting to lethal force if possible.[21] The Three Warfares consist of Legal Warfare, Media Warfare, and Psychological Warfare. *Legal Warfare* uses domestic and international law to secure objectives and shaping conditions on the ground to support application of legal principles, publicizing legal authorities in various media and influencing foreign decision-makers. *Media Warfare* focuses on deliberate integrated activities designed to shape attitudes and behaviors in both Chinese domestic and foreign domestic audiences, sometimes referencing legal norms or attacking other nation's legal interpretation of legal conventions such as UNCLOS. Psychological Warfare focuses on deliberate integrated activities leveraging the whole of government to influence foreign decision makers and their decision making process, raising the political cost of acting against China's interest by messaging and influencing foreign audiences. The Three Warfares strategy targets four audiences, all of which are relevant to the anti-access, area denial information operations countermeasure fight (which partially relies on cooperation of Asian partner nations): China's domestic audience, the global public, South China Sea claimants, and the U.S.[22]

Legal Warfare



The Nine-Dash Line (The Economist)

China views law as a tool to leverage for political and commercial ends, and uses several creative approaches to do so. First, China claims territorial sovereignty over 80% of the South China Sea based on historical maps and domestic legislation.[23] China maintains ambiguity about the meaning of its historic Nine-Dash Line map on purpose. Second, China uses its own domestic legislation concerning the law of the sea to bolster its legal claims. Third, China focuses on legal rights within its Exclusive Economic Zones and purports to

delineate between coastal state rights (“managing and protecting ocean resources”) and international rights (“freedom of navigation and over-flight”) in these zones.[24]

For U.S. information operations, merely alluding to certain behavior as hegemonic would be disruptive to China’s Three Warfares strategy. In lawfare terms, maintaining ambiguity and not submitting claims to international organizations to facilitate dispute resolution is arguably hegemonic behavior. Because the People's Republic of China narrative equates US defending freedom of navigation in South China Sea waters as a “ploy for dominance in the region,” one information operations countermeasure should be for the U.S. to emphasize its freedom of navigation activities in other places in the world such as the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca, Sicily, and Gibraltar.[25]

Exposing Chinese violations of international norms concerning the Law of Armed Conflict and even its own national laws are also potentially useful information operations activities undermining the strategy of Legal Warfare. China’s use of its own domestic law to bolster international legal claims is of course convenient, but not entirely out of bounds. From the Chinese perspective, the U.S. was able to use legal warfare to obtain authorization for sanctions and the use of force against Iraq in the First Gulf War, and supplies Taiwan under the guise of (domestic) lawfare (Taiwan Relations Act) which states, “The United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”[26]

Information operations can raise questions about China’s reluctance to agree to measures designed to avoid escalation and help set conditions for de-escalation. Such measures include hotlines, confidence building measures, and codes of conduct. Set against China’s Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (first codified in 1954 in a treaty between China and India) which include mutual non-aggression and peaceful coexistence, the reluctance is even more curious.

[27] A Code of Practice for the South China Sea could include text holding signers to principles that nest with the Five Principles. Similar but at a lower level than a code of conduct, parties could also create agreements setting guidelines for encounters at sea and in airspace modeled on the Incidents at Sea Agreement to at least provide some (voluntary) behavior norms.[28]

Media and documentation teams, which can capture violations of international norms and treaties can coordinate to help build partner capacity through information operations.

For an example of an effective legal countermeasure program, the U.S. need look no further than the Israeli “operational verification” measures, which provide Israeli combat units with trained documentation teams. In order to counter charges of illegal activities, these teams provide real-time documentation of military activities.[29]

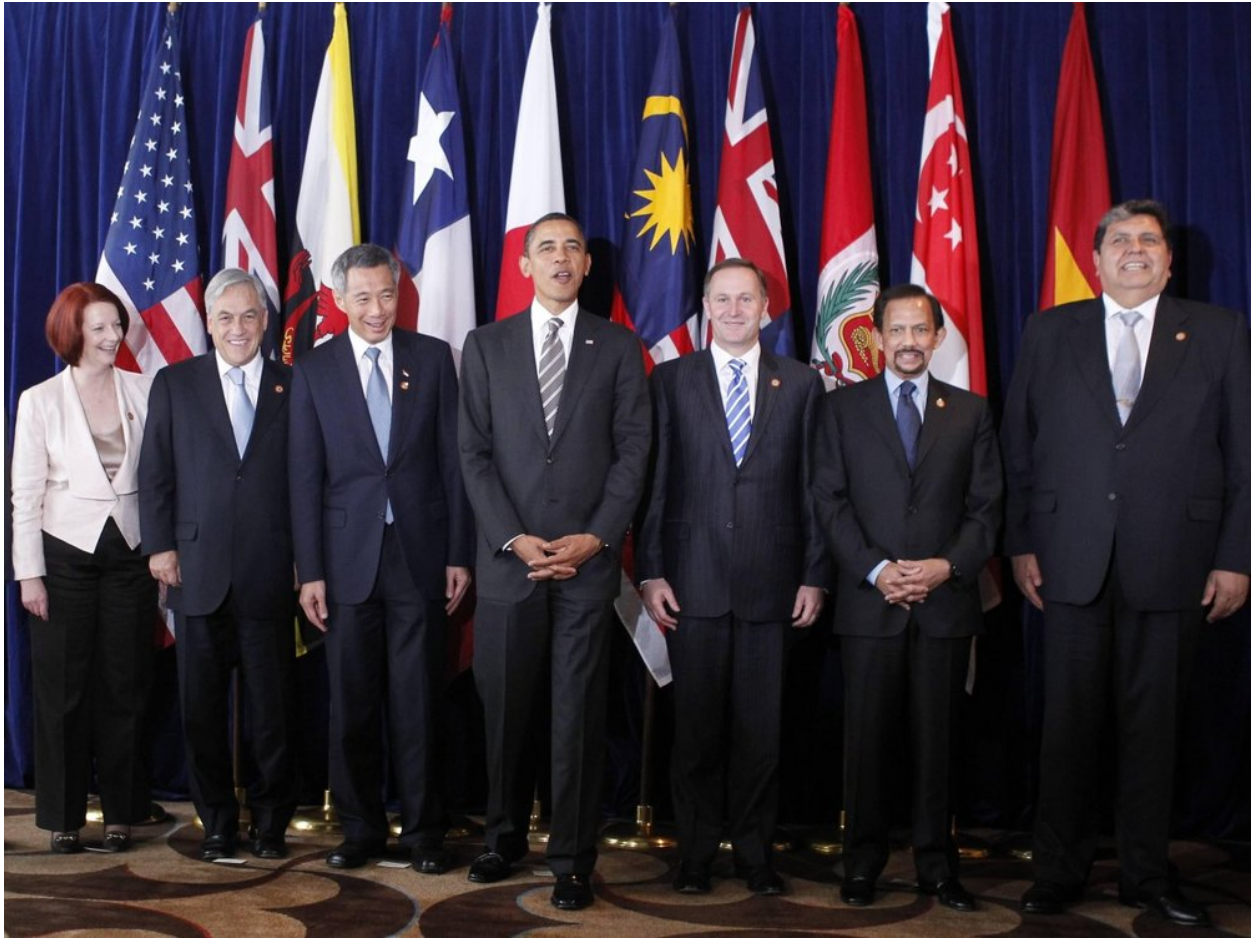
These media teams can be embedded in various types of civilian and regulatory fleets in both random and planned ways.

Media Warfare

To counter Chinese Media Warfare, the U.S. should follow through with public commitments to security in Asia and highlight key events with public affairs and other media activity. Examples of actions to promote in the regional and world media include:

1. deploying and modernizing equipment (rotating Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) and anti-submarine aircraft through Singapore, deploying additional Aegis cruisers to Japan, and submarines to Guam);
2. engaging in bilateral and multilateral exercises;
3. achieving the goal of 60 percent of naval assets in the Pacific as promised by Secretary of Defense Panetta in 2012; and

4. signing defense cooperation agreements.[30]



Former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2010, with (left to right) Prime Minister Naoto Kan of Japan, Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet, Prime Minister Julia Gillard of Australia, Chilean President Sebastian Pinera, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, Prime Minister John Key of New Zealand, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, President Alan Garcia of Peru, and Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. (AP/Charles Dharapak)

The U.S. can also conduct exercises with partners such as Australia to demonstrate capacities that would only be used in time of war such as offshore control operations. By demonstrating technologies such as attack submarines, mines, and air strikes and their potential threat to Chinese merchant and energy shipping lanes and chokepoints, the U.S. can both reassure allies and help deter China in the South China Sea.[31] Another way to reassure allies and at the same time impose costs to China is to bolster the capacity of allies and partners

through means such as deepening strategic dialogue, exporting professionalism and training, and especially in the form of arming and equipping.[32] Adding equipment could include devices that would facilitate capturing and transmitting evidence of inappropriate aggression, and also nonlethal devices analogous to the fire hoses the USNS Impeccable used against Chinese fishing vessels in 2009.[33]

China has taken steps to seize information operation opportunities and orchestrate psychological actions by closely integrating its fishing fleet with the Fisheries Law Enforcement agency of the Maritime Militia, and outfitting these maritime militia with military grade communication transmitters. The U.S. could build partner capacity to enable allies to fortify their own civilian fleets and possibly maritime militias, augmented by devices to capture imagery of Chinese aggression. A step in this direction was the \$50 million fiscal year 2016 Maritime Security Initiative, which improves allied capabilities to detect and monitor activities in their territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone waters and airspace, and to share this information with domestic and international partners.[34] The U.S. could work with allies to increase transparency by televising activities such as ramming in the South China Sea, exposing such behavior to international scrutiny and helping Pacific allies of the U.S. to increase their readiness to operate together and share a common operating picture.[35] The goal of such increased transparency and common operation picture capacity building is to impose higher reputation costs on China for any aggressive behavior.

Psychological Warfare

The U.S. can increase its rate of key leader engagements (an information operations-related activity) and other interactions with China to inform them of U.S. intentions and reduce mistrust. Through these engagements, the U.S. might be able to discern China's core interests tied to a series of geographical locations—these concerns could be weighted more heavily on resources or

sovereignty/sea lines of communication depending on the location. Where resources are the key issue, the U.S. and its allies could propose solutions that disaggregate disputes and allow for joint resource development. Then information operations could amplify such positive results, indirectly boxing in the participants and creating a higher information operations cost for violating the agreement(s). Amplifying any efforts to discuss joint resource development can help reduce the perception that control of the South China Sea is a zero-sum game, which in turn can assuage nationalist sentiments of involved nations. Information operations can disrupt China's attempts to apply psychological pressure through its many whole of government systems against weaker nations, typically applied by China during bilateral negotiations with these nations.

Information operations and supporting activities can mitigate the chance that China will escalate. China's active defense strategy contemplates preemptive strikes. China also might perceive it has weapons that attack key U.S. vulnerabilities, such as anti-ship ballistic missiles. Information operations can help create doubt in the efficacy of such tactics and weapons. Information operations can assist deterrence by highlighting the uncertainties facing China and adding fog to any Chinese calculation regarding localized victory and quick end to hostilities, or in other words adding doubt that they could win without fighting. In addition, the U.S. should consider using deception to influence China to invest in systems that are irrelevant or quite expensive compared to the US ability to counter them. The U.S. can also work with Pacific allies to harden and disperse likely targets. The more information operations can confuse and disrupt China's calculations, the more difficult it would be for China to plan and execute a preemptive strike. Should China find the need to employ its active defense stratagem, this would indicate that China's low-risk/high-gain stratagem of leveraging whole of government activity to gain objectives in the space short of open conflict had failed.

To disrupt China's anti-access, area denial strategy—what the Chinese call “Offshore Active Defense Posture Strategy” or simply “Counter-Intervention Strategy”—the U.S. can take the initiative with the following information operations measures:

1. Publicize and amplify Chinese tactical and operational activities in the South China Sea and Chinese operational and strategic weapon acquisitions to increase Asian allies' apprehension and willingness to engage with international organization, the US and its allies to counter this threat.
2. Build partner capacity and increase rotational base access with Asian allies.
3. Publicize and amplify the broad concepts of the U.S. pivot to Asia and its supporting military concepts (e.g., the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) and Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC)) to reassure allies and deter China from excessive adventurism.
4. Use deception and dispersion, and harden selected high risk locations.
5. Publicize and amplify Asian partner nation attempts to use international law to peacefully resolve disputes concerning the South China Sea.
6. Publicize U.S. and allied nation activities to reinforce the international norm of freedom of navigation—worldwide.
7. Publicize and amplify both China and Asian nation's agreements to de-escalation measures such as hot lines, codes of conduct and confidence building measures, and refusal to make such agreements.
8. Document and expose China's use of its Three Warfares (Legal Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Media Warfare) to degrade their effect.



The aegis cruiser USS Vella Gulf (Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Michael Sandberg/U.S. Navy Photo)

Conclusion

The good news about China's anti-access/area denial actions in the South China Sea and beyond may be that in apparently selecting a hybrid strategy, China has chosen to operate in the Phase 0/Gray Zone/Shaping area, thus avoiding activity that generates an overt military response. That said, the strategy involves brinksmanship, so proper use of information operations is critical to communicate intentions and avoid miscommunications leading to miscalculations and overt military conflict. Information operations can also cloud Chinese calculations to make preemptive strikes less appealing and more fraught with risk.

The other good news is that some of the information operations countermeasures against anti-access/area denial play to what are arguably U.S. strengths, such as building partner capacity, using international law, working with multilateral organizations, communicating and defending international norms, and credibly informing the world about aggressive behavior. More challenging is demonstrating U.S. commitment to Asia in a period of austerity and potential retrenchment; paying due attention to the defensive game involving deception, decoys, and dispersion; maintaining a consistent message between administrations for this long term problem set; understanding a nation that thoroughly embraces deception; and not only capturing but releasing information in a timely enough manner to affect an adversary's decision cycle.

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Header Image: Chinese submarines and warships participate in a 2009 fleet review to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army Navy. (AFP/Guang Niu

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