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CHINESE VIEWS OF THE SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT: THEORY AND ACTION

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Abbreviations

ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
AMS	Academy of Military Science
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organization
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CFISS	China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies
CITIC	China International Trust Investment Corporation
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
EU NAVFOR	European Union Naval Force
GSD	General Staff Department
LAC	Line of Actual Control
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDU	National Defense University
PAP	People's Armed Police
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SMS	Science of Military Strategy
SSF	Strategic Support Force
THAAD	Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense
UN	United Nations
USNS	United States Naval Ship
USS	United States Ship

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Key Findings

The Chinese Government Does Not Produce An Official Publicly Available Model Of The Spectrum Of Conflict

China has no official unified model of the spectrum of conflict or the ladder of escalation in publicly available sources, but several coherent models can be derived from official People's Liberation Army (PLA) doctrine documents. These models can be synthesized to form a possible picture of Chinese strategic thinkers' views on how different actions relate to each other along the spectrum of conflict. This framework may aid in understanding Chinese actions and how they view the potential for escalation.

Chinese Literature On The Spectrum Of Conflict Is Often Ambiguous About The Boundaries Between Different Stages Of Conflict

Chinese spectrum of conflict models leave room for ambiguity about the thresholds that mark the transition between different stages of escalation or types of conflict. This ambiguity is likely deliberate and does not reflect a lack of thinking about conflict escalation: in fact, the PLA and Chinese academia have written a great deal about escalation control and crisis management.

Chinese Academic Publications Often Reject The Characterization Of "Gray Zone" Operations

China does not have a theoretical concept of "gray zone" tactics and most Chinese writers consider the term pejorative. However, PLA strategists embrace the idea of strategic ambiguity, escalation control, and pursuing national interests through means (military or otherwise) that do not provoke adversaries to war. Thus, while China rejects the term and concept of gray zone, it actively engages in many activities that fall within the scope of gray zone.

China Engages In Some Activities That Do Not Fit Into Its Domestic Models Of The Spectrum Of Conflict

Many of the means through which China pursues its security interests during peacetime do not fit into Chinese models of the spectrum of conflict. In particular, non-military activities and military preparedness (such as infrastructure construction that might be considered provocative) are not included in the models. However, China's Active Defense strategy sheds light on the role of such activities in China's security strategy; namely they are considered normal and necessary operations during peacetime that may help prevent war while improving China's position in case of contingencies. This consideration is rarely extended to neighboring countries' similar activities during peacetime which may provoke Chinese concerns.

Introduction

There is a widespread consensus among Western scholars that Chinese actions have become more aggressive in recent years. Foreign vessels have been rammed in disputed waters, transits of neighboring countries' Air Defense Identification Zones have increased in number and scale, and border disputes have turned deadly in the Himalayas. Many of these actions generate concern about conflict escalation. For the United States and other countries to avoid accidentally triggering war with China, it is important to understand Chinese perceptions of the spectrum of conflict; that is, the theoretical model that presents a nation's range of actions in the security realm and how they might relate to conflict escalation. However, Chinese theorists rarely use the same vocabulary that features in American discourse. China's use of information operations and maritime militia, for instance, are described in Western media as "hybrid" or "gray zone" operations but do not appear to be described in the same terms by China. Similarly, in Chinese publications from the AMS, NDU, state media, and academic institutions, the few references to irregular warfare [非常规战争], hybrid warfare [混合战争], or the "gray zone" [灰色地带] appear to be mostly in regard to foreign developments and discourse. At the same time, China places major emphasis on non-kinetic means to achieve its goals, in line with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) emphasis on the political nature of warfare. This study attempts to provide an overview of authoritative Chinese writings on the spectrum of conflict, gray zone operations, and related topics, and contextualize these theoretical ideas with current events.

Scope Note

This study compiles various authoritative People's Liberation Army (PLA) sources as well as Chinese scholarly work on the spectrum of conflict and related topics, with the intent of understanding PRC views of that spectrum. The most authoritative documents referenced include China's defense white papers; various versions and editions of the Science of Military Strategy [战略学], which are strategic texts published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science and National Defense University; the Academy of Military Science's Military Terms [军语]; and the Academy of Military Science's 2013 Lectures on Non-War Military Activities [非战争军事行动教程]. Writings by PLA officers and influential academics are consulted for topics that are not sufficiently covered in publicly accessible official sources, such as the "gray zone."

Organization Of This Study

Section 1 explores how Chinese military thinkers have described the spectrum of conflict, the ladder of escalation, and the gray zone. It attempts to construct a unified theoretical model based on Chinese authoritative sources that encompass the different types of conflict, military activities, and stages of escalation within the continuum from peace to full-scale war. It also includes a discussion of China's Active Defense strategy and conceptions of "stability maintenance," which provide key context for understanding Chinese thinking about war and peace.

Section 2 examines China's actual behaviors in the realm of security competition, organized according to the spectrum of conflict model derived earlier. It uses these models and other strategic concepts from Section 1 to explain the principles underpinning many of China's security-related activities in the last 15 years.

Finally, the conclusion offers an assessment of how the various models capture (or fall short of capturing) China's behavior.

Section 1: The Spectrum Of Conflict

The following section will first provide context for the forthcoming models by introducing the concepts of the spectrum of conflict and the "gray zone" as understood by Western thinkers, as well as the Chinese strategic concepts of "active defense" and "stability maintenance." Next, it will examine conceptions of spectrum of conflict in authoritative Chinese military sources, and attempt to combine these models to construct a unified "spectrum of conflict" model ranging from non-war military activities to total war, as well as a model of escalation from crisis to war. Finally, it will examine Chinese perspectives on the Western concept of the "gray zone."

1.1: Western Conceptions Of The Spectrum Of Conflict And The Gray Zone

Particularly after the end of the Cold War, scholars and strategists have struggled to characterize the range of non-state and interstate conflicts that have become more common and do not easily fit into the categories of war or peace. Common approaches have included linear models which show a step-by-step progression from peace to war, with intermediate stages representing conflict of increasing intensity, eventually culminating in full-scale war. Such models have variously been called "spectrum of conflict," "ladder of escalation," "conflict continuum," "competition continuum," or similar terms.[i] However, not all forms of conflict can be sorted neatly into a linear chain of escalation: for instance, a border conflict may be considered more or less intense than a counter-terrorism operation, but one is not necessarily expected to "escalate" into the other. Thus, a "spectrum of conflict" model can also be expressed more generally as the full range of activities through which conflict between two countries or non-state actors can manifest, including a wide variety of conflict scenarios that fall between peace and full-scale war which do not necessarily form a sequential progression. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff's 2019 joint doctrine note on the "Competition Continuum" emphasizes that many of the activities that occur below the level of armed conflict can occur in conjunction with armed conflict, and that while competition is a continuum, actions do not necessarily progress in a linear fashion.[1] .

The intermediate stages between war and peace are rife with ambiguity and difficult to categorize. Over the past decade, one of the most popular terms that has arisen in Western military discourse to describe this middle region of conflict is "gray zone." The U.S. Special Operations Command describes "gray zone challenges" as "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality," characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict and the intentions of the parties involved.[2] While this broad definition suggests all competition between peace and war may be "gray zone," other uses of the term place "gray zone" conflict on one rung of a multi-stage ladder of escalation.[3] It is an evolving concept within an evolving field.

Particularly within the past ten years, friction between the United States and China has grown, with confrontation increasingly occurring in these spaces between war and peace. Although China does not use the same theoretical concepts and vocabulary that prevail in Western thought, China's strategists likewise recognize the need for a more complex understanding of conflict than the dichotomy of war and peace. The remainder of this study will examine how China has come to understand the full range of conflict and how its theoretical concepts have shaped its security behavior in recent years.

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[i] See for example Herman Kahn's ladder of nuclear escalation, Frank Hoffman's Spectrum of Conflict model, or the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 Competition Continuum, etc.

1.2: Context For China's Spectrum Of Conflict Models: Active Defense And Stability Maintenance

The following subsections will examine Chinese thoughts on the spectrum of conflict from authoritative sources such as Defense White Papers published by the Ministry of National Defense, books published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science and National Defense University, theoretical articles in official media including PLA Daily, and other news and journal articles by prominent experts in the PLA and academia. Chinese models of the spectrum of conflict must be pieced together from multiple sources because there is no official and comprehensive model that can be seen as equivalent to Western models (at least, not one which is available publicly). Before delving into the models, however, it is important for context to understand two concepts that are omnipresent in Chinese military writings: active defense [积极防御] and stability maintenance [维稳 or 维持稳定]. Besides being referenced in the spectrum of conflict models themselves, these concepts shed light on China's overall way of thinking about its activities in the security realm.

Active defense has been at the core of CCP military strategy since before the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded. Its current iteration has several basic principles, outlined here from the PRC perspective. First, the fundamental goal of active defense is to defend China's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. Second, active defense is considered a posture of self-defense rather than aggression, but it is an 'offensive defense': a defense-oriented strategy carried out through offensive tactics, "fully taking the initiative," and even preemptive strikes during campaigns and combat. This emphasis on acting defensively (even when carrying out offensive operations) can be seen in the way conflicts have been framed in official media and histories. For example, China's participation in the Korean War is referred to as the "War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid (North) Korea" [抗美援朝战争].[4] The 1962 border conflict with India is regularly called the "China-India Border Self-Defensive Counterattack" [中印边界自卫反击战].[5] A months-long invasion of northern Vietnam in 1979 is officially called the "Self-Defense Counterattack Against Vietnam" [对越自卫反击战].[6] Likewise, a skirmish with Vietnam in 1988 over Johnson Reef [赤瓜礁] was framed in similar terms.[7]

Third, active defense requires vigorous preparation during peacetime to prepare for the most challenging possible military conflicts, based on the reasoning that it is "preferable to be prepared and not fight, but...definitely impossible to fight if you are not prepared." Fourth, active defense requires strategists not only to consider how to win wars, but also how to avoid or control them. Finally, active defense holds that wars are won by people, and that therefore China must maintain the ability to mobilize "the masses" to aid in the war effort, coordinate combat by the PLA with combat not done by the military, and coordinate military efforts with "various political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural battle lines."[8] The tenets of active defense can be seen in many of China's recent actions in the security domain, including maritime militia confrontations, the military-civil fusion strategy, building of military facilities in disputed areas, small-scale border conflicts, and others.

The AMS's 2013 Lectures on Non-War Military Activities stresses that "in safeguarding rights and interests, the military must […] adhere to the strategic policy of active defense."[9] According to the authors, non-war military actions to safeguard rights and interests [维护权益行动] can range from political, diplomatic, and economic means, to deceptive means [欺骗行功] (especially through the use of information technology [信息技术]), the use of non-lethal weapons, and the use of lethal weapons when Chinese personnel, sovereignty, or property are in danger.[10]

Stability maintenance [维稳] is a key goal for China's ruling Communist Party and a broad term encompassing the range of state activities intended to maintain the country's internal stability as well as the Party's continued rule. It covers activities from ordinary law enforcement and disaster relief to crackdowns on (regime-threatening) protests. "Stability maintenance" also includes military activities such as combatting terrorism or quelling riots, even though it is typically thought of as a peacetime priority. Within the military context, the phrase "combatting terrorism and maintaining stability" [反恐维稳] is commonly used and describes the basic mission of the People's

Armed Police (PAP), China's paramilitary force for internal security.[11]

While active defense and stability maintenance are not the only important concepts in CCP strategic thought, together they demonstrate how China's interpretations of war and peace are not always clear-cut and do not necessarily mirror Western definitions. The wide range of military and non-military operations prescribed by both active defense and stability maintenance creates considerable ambiguity about how to interpret China's actions.

Thus, while the Chinese spectrum of conflict models presented later in this study will include categories for "peacetime" or "non-war" activities, which in practice encompass the majority of Chinese military actions, it is important to remember that "peace" in PLA strategic thought does not mean an absence of conflict or even an absence of violence. Activities that Western observers may consider escalatory or aggressive (such as military buildup and violent repression of "separatists") are thought of as normal peacetime operations by Chinese policymakers. A corollary of this is that because the CCP firmly insists on China's indisputable sovereignty over all its territorial claims (including Taiwan, the South China Sea, and several border regions), Chinese leadership may present (and possibly view) confrontational activities involving these territories as peacetime internal security operations or self-defense.

1.3: Models Of Spectrum Of Conflict In Authoritative Chinese Sources

Chinese official statements of policy, such as the defense white papers published by the Ministry of National Defense, do not provide models of the spectrum of conflict directly. However, such sources clearly articulate China's strategic priorities and offer some insight into PLA thinking about its security environment and development strategy. The most recent defense white paper, published in July 2019, calls the Asia-Pacific security environment "generally stable," though it acknowledges the existence of some disputes.[12] The 2015 defense white paper has some language on escalation control in its section on Active Defense, which states that "the basis for military struggle preparations is to […] effectively control major crises, properly respond to chain reactions, and resolutely defend national territorial sovereignty and unity and safety." The Lectures on Non-War Military Activities also advise against escalating conflicts, preferring instead to keep responses proportional, though with the caveat that sometimes one must use military force to prevent a war [以战止战].[13] These references to controlling crises and chain reactions hint at China's thinking about the escalatory potential of its actions.[14]

The apparent tension between stressing escalation control and calling a region full of turbulent territorial disputes "stable" is explained partly by the propagandistic function of such white papers, which (among other goals) seek to portray China to foreign observers as a benevolent power committed to diplomacy and win-win cooperation. Furthermore, China views itself as a reactive and defensive power and often frames (and may well see) sovereignty disputes as inherently internal matters. In the Chinese view, many of its actions, no matter how seemingly aggressive, fall on the peacetime side of the spectrum under the concepts of internal policing and stability maintenance. It is awkward for authorities to acknowledge that 'peacetime internal policing' might be linked to the outbreak of external conflict.

Guiding materials published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS) and National Defense University (NDU) are more useful as sources on the PLA's spectrum of conflict theories. One book published by AMS, Science of Military Strategy [战略学] (SMS), is one of the clearest articulations of PLA views of strategy. While not an official statement of policy, the SMS is written by PLA experts for use as a teaching material in PLA training and education. Thus, it may be regarded as a relatively comprehensive and authoritative source on Chinese strategic thinking.

The most recent edition of the AMS SMS was published in 2013 under the direction of Major General Shou Xiaosong [寿晓松], the former director of the AMS's War Theory and Strategic Research Department.[15] Its section entitled "Wars China May Face in the Future" [我国未来可能面临的战争] presents one of the clearest "spectrum of conflict" models that can be found in authoritative Chinese sources. It describes the four main types

of war (military) activities China anticipates having to fight, listed in decreasing order of scale and intensity. The model is represented in Table 1:[16]

Table 1: AMS SMS Spectrum of Conflict Model

Type	Description	Danger Level	Probability
Large-scale, high-intensity defensive war [大规模、高强度的防卫战争]	"[A] hegemonic nation [i.e. the United States] might provoke a war with the goal of delaying or interrupting the progress of China's rise". This war might arise through gradual escalation or a premeditated plot. This scenario would be a high-end local war under informationized conditions [在信息化条件下进行的高端的局部战争].	High [高]	Low 低]
Relatively large-scale, relatively high-intensity anti-separatist war [较大规模、较高强度的反分裂战争]	Taiwan, with foreign support, will cross a "red line" and China "will be forced to attack" to ensure reunification. China will have to take precautions against military intervention from foreign enemies. This scenario will be a "political military battle" [政治军事仗] and a high-level local war under informationized conditions [在信息化条件下进行的高端的局部战争].	Relatively High [较高]	Relatively High 较高]
Small-to-medium-scale, low-to-medium intensity self-defense and counterattack operations [中小规模、中低强度的自卫反击作战]	1. Armed conflicts and local wars triggered at sea by encroachment on islands, intensified quarrels over maritime delimitation, and plundering of large quantities of maritime oil and gas resources. 2. Counterattack operations on the border triggered by land border disputes. 3. Border blockade and control operational activities [边境封控作战行动] triggered by war in neighboring countries.	Medium [中]	Medium [中]

Small-scale, low-intensity counter-terrorism, stability-maintenance, and rights-protection operational activities [小规模、低强度的反恐、维稳、维权作战行动]	1. The "three strands/evils" [of terrorism, separatism, and extremism] instigate terrorist raids or riots, and China must undertake anti-terrorism or riot-quelling activities. 2. China must undertake rights-protection military activities beyond China's borders [境外军事维权行动] to protect national interests, strategic passages, and Chinese citizens living abroad from serious threats. These are "war (military) activities of a relatively lower level." [较低等级的战争（军事）行动]	Not given	Not goven

The writers of the SMS 2013 assess that China is much more likely to face threats along its eastern coast, that the threat of conflicts in space and cyber domains is increasingly real, and that China is facing growing odds that it will have to engage in rights defense or even limited military operations beyond its borders. They further argue that China is most likely to face a limited maritime conflict but must prepare for a large-scale high-intensity war where nuclear deterrence will play an important role.[17]

The 2013 AMS SMS further calls for the PLA to carry out three basic modes of military force employment [军事力量运用的基本方式] with regards to winning informationized local wars: operational [作战], military deterrence [军事威慑], and non-war [非战争] military activities. Operational activities mainly include "information offense and defense confrontation", joint fire strikes, air, and missile defense operations, sea and air blockade operations, island seizure and control operations, area-denial operations, border counterattack and blockade and control operations, space offense and defense confrontation operations, and network space offense and defense confrontation operations. Military deterrence activities include nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence, space deterrence, network space deterrence, and integrated nuclear and conventional deterrence. Non-war military activities[ii] chiefly include confrontational [对抗性] non-war military activities (e.g., anti-terrorism, quelling riots, and combating pirates), law enforcement [执法性] non-war military activities (e.g., international peacekeeping, and domestic martial law), rescue & assistance [救助性] non-war military activities (e.g., emergency rescue and disaster relief, and protecting and evacuating citizens living abroad), and cooperative [合作性] non-war military activities (e.g., international joint military exercises).[18]

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ii Despite similarities between this term and Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), the two concepts are not equivalent.

The AMS's Lectures on Non-War Military Activities contains more detail on this last category of military activities. Further, most of those discussions occur under the PLA's forementioned concepts of stability maintenance and active defense. In particular, when engaging in sovereignty defense activities, the document calls for close cooperation between the military and other civilian organizations to provide logistical and operational support. For example, the authors call for public security forces to assist the military during land border disputes, and for the transportation sector to assist in maritime defense.[19] Thus, even though these activities can involve the PLA, by including civilian organizations it may decrease the likeliness that these activities are seen as a direct military threat to rival countries.

It is worth noting that although counter-terrorism and stability-maintenance activities are described in the above model as "war (military) activities of a relatively lower level," in this section of the SMS they are referred to as "confrontational non-war military activities" [对抗性非战争军事行动]. It appears that the earlier term "war (military) activities" encompasses confrontational military activities in general, which does not inherently imply a state of "war" [战争]. This minor discrepancy is also reflective of the inherent ambiguity of "stability maintenance" operations, as discussed earlier. For the purposes of this study, such activities will be categorized as "non-war."

Furthermore, some non-war military activities may be placed in more than one subcategory, and in fact, different parts of SMS 2013 are sometimes inconsistent in their categorization. Counter-terror and anti-piracy activities, for example, are called "confrontational non-war military activities" in the section discussed above but are categorized as "law enforcement" in a later section that discusses non-war activities in more detail. 2013's Lectures on Non-War Military Activities, published by the same organization, notably does not categorize non-war military activities in this way at all, possibly because it does not intend to frame them within a broader spectrum of conflict. Instead, Lectures simply subdivides these activities into the categories of Rescue and Disaster Relief [抢险救灾行动], Counter-Terrorism [反恐怖行动], Stability Maintenance [维护稳定行动], Safeguarding Rights and Interests [维护权益行动], Security and Vigilance [安保警戒行动], International Peacekeeping [国际维和行动], and International Rescue [国际救援行动].[20]

An alternative spectrum of conflict model can be derived from a revised edition of Science of Military Strategy published by the PLA National Defense University (NDU), a wholly separate doctrinal and training document that was last published in 2020 under the direction of Lieutenant General Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮], vice president of the NDU. It is represented in Table 2:[21]

Table 2: NDU SMS Spectrum of Conflict Model

Type	Description
War activities 战争行动] Total war [全面战争] Local war [局部战争]	
Quasi-war military activities [准战争军事行动]	military deterrence, border blockade and control, the establishment of no-fly zones and limited military strikes
Non-war military activities 非战争军事行动]	counter-terrorism and stability maintenance [反恐维稳], rescue and disaster relief, international peacekeeping, international rescue, escort, and overseas evacuation

This spectrum of conflict model is in fact largely compatible with the one presented in SMS 2013. What the AMS document calls "small-scale, low-intensity counter-terrorism, stability-maintenance, and rights protection operational activities" can be classified under "non-war military activities" in the NDU model, while the other three types of "Wars China May Face in the Future" from the AMS version can be categorized at the high end of the NDU's model as "war activities" (or more specifically "local wars"). Quasi-war activities occupy the space in between.

The intermediate category of "quasi-war" adds yet another element of ambiguity to the Chinese spectrum of conflict theory. It is not clear where the threshold lies between "quasi-war" and "war," given that the former may involve "limited military strikes" and thus carries an obvious risk of escalation. The threshold between "non-war" and "quasi-war" is also not well-defined, especially since peacetime "stability maintenance" (as discussed earlier) encompasses such a wide range of activities. Because China tends to consider enforcement of its territorial claims to be an internal matter and therefore "non-war," it is conceivable for a single territorial conflict to move between non-war activities, quasi-war activities, and war without it being clear when each 'boundary' is crossed.

Table 3 shows a unified model of the spectrum of conflict which was constructed by integrating the models from both the AMS's & NDU's SMS texts. At the bottom of the scale lies the non-war conflict state. This category is subdivided into four subtypes including stability-maintenance and rights-protection activities (and other confrontational non-war activities), law enforcement activities, international cooperative activities, and rescue and relief activities. The next state on the unified spectrum is quasi-war, which includes military skirmishes and low-level confrontations with a higher potential for escalation than the rights protection activities described in the non-war section. These activities may involve limited loss of life or serious destruction of property. Following the quasi-war state is local war, which contains three subtypes arranged by degree of intensity and size of forces committed. The highest-intensity state is total war, with all of society involved in the conflict and the highest potential for loss of life.

Table 3: Spectrum of Conflict combined model

Conflict state	Subtype	Mode of military force employment [军事力量运用的基本方式]	Example Scenarios
War (total)		Operational	World War II
War (local)	Large-scale, high-intensity defensive war [大规模、高强度的防卫战争]	Operational	War against the United States
	Relatively large-scale, relatively high-intensity anti-separatist war [较大规模、较高强度的反分裂战争]	Operational	War to take Taiwan
	small- to medium-scale, low- to medium-intensity self-defense and counterattack operation [中小规模、中低强度的自卫防击作战]	Operational	War over border disputes or island claims; 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war
Quasi-war		Operational deterrance	International territorial conflict below the level of war, 2020 conflicct with India

Non-war	Small-scale, low-intensity anti-terrorist, stability-maintenance, and rights protection operational activity [小规模、低强度的防恐、维稳、维权作战行动]	Non-war, Operational	Rights protection, counter-piracy, anti-separatist operations (Xinjiang)
	AND/OR Confrontational non-war military activity		
	Law enforcement	Non-war	United Nations (UN) peacekeeping counter-piracy operations
	Cooperative	Non-war	Joint military exercises, UN peacekeeping
	Rescue and Relief	Non-war	Evacuation, disaster relief

1.4 Chinese Views On Levels Of Escalation

While most of the military activities included in the SMS spectrum of conflict models have the potential to escalate, the categories of military activity in those models are not stages of escalation but rather distinct types of conflict scenario. This section will examine Chinese views on the stages of escalation, based on the SMS doctrine documents and some recent examples.

A 'ladder of escalation' model can be derived from Chinese writings on escalation control, which is most often formulated as crisis control [危机控制] or war control [战争控制]. These two terms reveal the most consistently referenced 'escalatory stages' in Chinese models of escalation: crisis and war. These two are the extreme ends of the continuum, and they (as well as intermediate stages) are primarily distinguished by differences in intensity, scope, objective, and means.

Table 4 presents the Chinese ladder of escalation (with the highest intensity conflicts at the top) alongside the categories of military activity from the spectrum of conflict in the 2020 NDU SMS (see Table 2). Note that while the latter model is not necessarily a ladder of escalation, the two models align quite closely and have identical end-stages.

Table 4: Ladder of Escalation

Stage of Escalation		Associated Type of Military Activity (NDU SMS 2020)	
War [战争]	Total war [全面战争] Local war [局部战争]	War	Total war Local war
Armed conflict [武装冲突]		Quasi-war	
Crisis [危机]	Military crisis [军事危机] Other crisis	Quasi-war (deterrence) Non-war	

1.4.1 Crisis

A "crisis" [危机] is the lowest rung of the Chinese escalation ladder, officially defined in Military Terms as "a dangerous state that poses or may pose a serious threat to national security and social stability." The definition

"includes actual crises and potential crises."[22] The 2001 edition of the AMS Science of Military Strategy gives a more detailed description: "a dangerous situation when relations between countries or political groups are reaching the crossroad of conflict or military clashes." It gives two conditions for the occurrence of crisis: 1. disputes between two or more opponents are worsening, which may increase the possibility of military confrontations between the sides, or the state of military stability that results in the existence of the two opposing sides is deteriorating significantly; 2. Serious imbalance of military forces makes the relations between two opponents deteriorate, or pose a significant challenge to the current structure of certain international relations.[23] The document states that "if a crisis is out of control, it may develop into an armed clash and a local war," and thus stresses the importance of crisis control to prevent such escalation.[24]

A "military crisis" [军事危机] may be either a type of crisis or the stage of escalation immediately above. Its official PLA definition is "a dangerous state between countries or political groups that may lead to armed conflict or war."[25] The NDU's SMS describes military crises as "the crossroads of war and peace," which must be effectively prevented and managed in order to avoid escalation into war.[26] Zhang Tuosheng [张沱生], a research fellow at the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies (CFISS), has written on China's behavior in dealing with "international military security crises" [国际军事安全危机] where there is a time limit or sense of urgency, and there is a serious danger of military conflict. He argues that while China used to resolve military crises through military means (i.e. escalation into armed conflict), since the Cold War it has transitioned to crisis management (i.e. control or de-escalation) and thus managed to avoid direct warfare with other states.[27]

By these definitions, a number of incidents in recent years may be considered crises, including the inflammation of the Senkaku Islands territorial dispute with Japan in 2012, the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system to South Korea, and various skirmishes along the border with India. The broader definition of "crisis" in Military Terms does not require confrontation with foreign opponents, and therefore could possibly also include the Hong Kong protests in 2014 and 2019-2020, periods of increased tension with Taiwan triggered by U.S. arms sales or DPP election victories, and the Xinjiang riots of 2009. The border clashes with India in particular appear to fit exactly the category of military crises, because they involved confrontations between military personnel on both sides.   The crises China has faced in the 21st century were ultimately resolved through diplomacy, "stability maintenance" operations, and other means of crisis management. Some of these issues (such as the THAAD deployment) have still not been resolved but are not currently triggering an active crisis.

1.4.2 Armed Conflict

The PLA definition of "military crisis" quoted earlier suggests two distinct stages above it on the escalation ladder: "armed conflict" [武装冲突] and "war" [战争]. "Armed conflict" is defined in the PLA dictionary as "a small-scale, low-intensity battle between the armed forces of two opposing parties...armed conflict has not yet constituted a state of war. Under certain conditions, armed conflicts may also develop into wars." While the various versions of the SMS do not directly elaborate on armed conflicts as a distinct category, it is significant that Chinese writers recognize a type of violent military conflict that does not rise to the level of "war" but rather exists in an ambiguous middle area between crisis and war.

Some of the aforementioned clashes along the Indian border included combat with non-firearm weapons between both country's military forces, and may thus possibly be considered "armed conflicts" rather than merely "military crises." Shooting between two nations' coast guards in disputed maritime regions may be considered a potential armed conflict as well, though this has not happened so far. None of China's armed conflicts or crises in the past 40 years have escalated to war.

"Armed conflict" roughly corresponds to the "Quasi-war" state of the NDU SMS model of conflict, though it may also involve operations technically considered "non-war activities." The existence of this vaguely-defined

intermediate state may serve to give China some flexibility to carry out confrontational "stability maintenance" operations in disputed areas as well as war preparations and other potentially provocative "active defense" measures while (publicly and otherwise) maintaining that it is not at war, even if violence breaks out.

1.4.3 War

At the highest level of the escalation ladder is war [战争], which is almost always differentiated into the subtypes "local war" [局部战争] and "total war" [全面战争] (also translated as "full-scale war" or "general war"). The PLA's Military Terms defines "local war" as a "war of limited purpose, means, and scale in local areas." This is not necessarily 'local' in the sense of occurring geographically near China, though in practice all of China's past and anticipated "local wars" are also within its 'neighborhood.' A "total war" is a "fully mobilized [全面动员], fully implemented [全面实施] war," which may include world wars, wars between countries, and wars within countries. Almost all modern-day PLA writing on war preparation focuses on "local wars," and all the war scenarios included in the SMS spectrum of conflict models are described as "local wars" of varying scale and intensity. "Total war" appears to be viewed as a largely outdated and extreme form of war that China is highly unlikely to face in the modern era, characterized by full-scale mobilization of resources to the war effort, very high intensity, and a very broad scope. Even the scenario of war against a "hegemonic power" (i.e. the United States) is described as a "high-end local war" rather than a "total war." The 2013 AMS SMS specifically states that preventing "total war" is the basic objective of military deterrence.

In the past century, China has been involved in several local wars on its periphery – including the Korean War, the Sino-Indian border war, and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam – and two total wars: World War II and the Chinese civil war. However, it has not taken part in war of either type since its attack on Vietnam in 1979. Of the plausible modern-day war scenarios, the most likely possibility for local war involving China would be a conflict over Taiwan, probably sparked by a crisis that crosses one of Beijing's "red lines." While the broad range of "non-war" confrontational activities under active defense and stability maintenance creates many opportunities for escalation, the Taiwan issue holds a unique importance for China and is the only sovereignty dispute in which the CCP pointedly refuses to renounce the use of force in its official rhetoric.

1.4.4 War Control

In a 2006 paper, Major General Peng Guangqian [彭光谦], the chief writer of the 2001 AMS SMS, argued that the 21st century has marked a decline in "absolute wars" [绝对战争] (roughly equivalent to "total war") and the rise of "controllable wars" [可控性战争] (limited local wars). The basic reason for this development is that the destructive potential and cost of warfare, along with the trend of economic globalization, restricts the purpose, scale, intensity, and likelihood of war, and gives China and other countries a strong incentive to engage in "war control" [战争控制]. Peng includes within "war control" the four subcategories of "arms control" [军备控制], "crisis control" [危机控制], (armed) "conflict control" [冲突控制], and "local war control" [局部战争控制]. Arms control is an international collaborative endeavor to preemptively limit the destructive power of war which is carried out during peacetime before any crisis breaks out. The other three forms of war control map neatly onto the "ladder of escalation" model described above.

Peng describes crisis control as "the control of a tense political and military state formed by conflicts of interest or value conflicts between countries [i.e. a crisis]." The crisis itself is a "comprehensive political, economic, military, and diplomatic confrontation under relatively peaceful conditions" which "does not necessarily develop linearly toward war" but "may transform into armed conflict and war at any time." Peng does not strongly differentiate between control of armed conflicts and control of local wars, except that "the control objects differ in the scale and intensity of the conflict."[30]

After the outbreak of armed conflict or war, Peng says that war control must control both "horizontal" [横向]

and "vertical" [纵向] escalation; that is, escalation in geography and scale as well as expansion in intensity and nature of warfare. A recent example of "horizontal" escalation may be the Indian Navy patrols into the South China Sea during the period of border skirmishes in 2020. Vertical escalation in the same example might have involved a progression from hand-to-hand combat between Chinese and Indian troops to exchanges of gunfire or bombing.

1.5 Chinese Discourse Regarding The "Gray Zone"

The term "gray zone" is not present in the PLA's white papers or any version of the Science of Military Strategy and most Chinese writers are quick to point out that the concept is a Western framing. Indeed, the "gray zone" is a way of looking at the intermediate realms of conflict between war and peace that is distinct from (though overlapping with) the categorizations in the PLA models discussed earlier. However, in recent years, several prominent Chinese scholars and publications have put out writings on the subject of the "gray zone," which reveal some elucidating perspectives that reflect on China's general views of the spectrum of conflict.

A common motif in the literature is that "gray zone" is a pejorative term used by Western powers to harm China's image or justify anti-China hostility. Various writers trace the origin of the term to George Kennan and argue that its resurgence reflects U.S. insecurity about its declining status and an obsession with returning to the Cold War. Professor Li Haidong [李海东] of China Foreign Affairs University's Institute of International Relations claims that the U.S. defense establishment uses the term "gray zone" to "exaggerate the chaotic nature of this generally stable world" in order to procure more resources for the military.[31]

Another trend in the literature is that the U.S. itself engages in "gray zone" behavior. Examples cited include Cold War-era proxy wars and political struggles in the Third World, as well as the post-Cold War eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in competition with Russia. Chen Yong [陈永], a scholar at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of International Relations, argues that the U.S. uses six types of "gray zone tactics" in its maritime competition with China, including "narrative war [叙事战争], issue linkage [议题联系], civil intervention [民事介入], freedom of navigation operations, forward presence, and military coalitions." Chen distinguishes the latter three "military" gray zone tactics from the former three "non-military" gray zone tactics. Further, he warns that military gray zone tactics are particularly escalatory because they are also "war preparations" and may trigger a "fierce military response" from China. The ambiguity and asymmetry inherent to the "gray zone" also adds to the escalatory risk.[32]

Ironically, these concerns mirrors objections Western scholars have to Chinese actions under its "active defense" strategy, which prescribes war preparations during peacetime and offensive tactics that can trigger escalation. They also contrast with how Chinese sources defend China's sub-war military operations. Li Haidong writes explicitly that "China's measures to consolidate its military presence in areas such as the South China Sea and the East China Sea belong to the category of sovereignty: not a gray area."[33] The actions of China's maritime forces are construed variously as defense of China's sovereignty and legitimate maritime rights, law enforcement actions, or part of the active defense strategy. To the extent that Chinese military officials and scholars acknowledge the escalatory risk of these activities, they typically present China as showing deliberate restraint because of its commitment to peace and negotiation over war.

However, even though most authors do not admit China's engagement in gray zone tactics, the definitions of "gray zone" included in their own writings nevertheless fit activities that China is engaged in. For instance, an article in the PLA Daily described the "gray zone" as having three core aspects: intensity control to avoid crossing a red line, ambiguous intentions to delay adversary decision-making, and diversified forms that reach beyond political and military competition to areas such as economics, culture, and information security.[34] China engages in actions that meet all three criteria and clearly accepts the underlying "gray zone" logic, as will be shown in Section 2.

Section 2: Chinese Thoughts And Actions On Military Activities, Conflict, And The Gray Zone

The following section of the report will examine Chinese actions in the security realm in recent years and show how they relate to Chinese views of the spectrum of conflict, the ladder of escalation, active defense, gray zone operations, and other theoretical concepts explored in Section 1. It will reference concepts present in the combined model in Table 5 to provide explanations for Chinese behavior in the recent decades

Table 5: Spectrum of Conflict combined model (simplified)

Conflict State	Subtype
War (total)	
War (local)	Large-scale, high-intensity defensive war
	Relatively large-scale, relatively high-intensity anti-separatist war
	Small-to-medium scale, low-to-medium intensity self-defense and counterattack operation
Quasi-war	
Non-war	Small-scale, low-intensity anti-terrorist, stability-maintenance, and rights protection operational activities OR Confrontational non-war military activities
	Law enforcement
	Cooperative
	Rescue and Relief

2.1 Non-War Military Activities

Non-war activities represents the lowest end of this spectrum. China engages in a number of these activities during peacetime which often touch upon security goals and national interests. The PLA acknowledges the need for these activities in the 2013 AMS SMS. In a section entitled "Strategic Guidance for Non-War Activities," the PLA is directed to "focus on satisfying the nation's multiple kinds of strategic needs and requirements during times of peace, to fulfill various categories of non-warfare military activities, to use a price lesser than war and a mode more flexible than war to obtain greater strategic benefit." It goes on to describe in greater detail four types of non-warfare military activities which roughly correspond with the four non-war subtypes present in Table 3 and discussed below.[35] It should be noted that these non-war activities can occur before, during, or after incidents categorized as crises.

2.1.1 Confrontational Non-Warfare Military Activities

In the 2013 AMS SMS, confrontational non-warfare military activities (including rights-protection operations) are generally "low-intensity military activities against actual and potential opponents" and also include the use of military forces "to express security concerns, to declare strategic bottom line(s), and to detect opponents' movements." The authors stress the need to "clearly deliver our side's standpoint, attitude, and resolution, to not enable the opponent to generate an error in strategic judgment," and to "strive to avoid over-drawing the sword and upsetting the opponent, leading to a loss of control in escalation."[36] Importantly, the Lectures on Non-War Military Activities places space-based reconnaissance and missile defense activities under the concept of rights protection, since those actions will be used to prevent a preemptive strike, and thus defend China's current

interests.[37] In other words, these activities are conducted by parts of the Chinese armed forces and are designed to enforce China's views of its territorial sovereignty and claims, as well as national interests, in the face of opposition from its neighboring countries. In practice, these rights-protection activities tend to play out in several flashpoints along China's contested border and maritime claims.

In the South China Sea, these activities can take the form of harassment and arrests from China's Coast Guard, typically directed towards rival claimants the Philippines and Vietnam. For example, in February of 2014, the Philippines lodged a formal complaint with the Chinese government over the use of high-pressure water cannons on Filipino fishermen.[38] A similar incident occurred in April of 2015.[39] Likewise, in September of 2014, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel harassed a Philippine fishing vessel that contained reporters. By blinding the vessel's crew and passengers with powerful floodlights, repeatedly sounding its siren, and sending warnings to turn around, the Chinese boat successfully forced the Philippine boat to leave the area.[40] Similarly, in August of 2014, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims it captured a Vietnamese vessel that entered its territory carrying a large quantity of explosives. China's Foreign Ministry later claimed in March 2016 that Filipino fishermen threw firebombs at a Chinese Coast Guard vessel.[41]

Since March 2018, the Chinese Coast Guard has been a part of the People's Armed Police, itself under the command of the Central Military Commission, with its primary function as law enforcement rather than warfighting. While the Coast Guard's activities and actions toward foreign vessels advance China's interests, in Chinese views these actions are grounded in territorial sovereignty. These actions are justified as internal security operations under the umbrella of "stability maintenance."

The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia has a dual identity: it is comprised of fishing vessels whose crews have received special training and compensation from the government and are occasionally called upon to assist in surveillance of contested spaces, take part in search and rescue operations, and assist in rights protection operations. One source describes the force as embodying dual roles, serving as "law-abiding fishermen until they put on camouflage (uniforms) and become soldiers" [穿上迷彩是合格战士，脱下迷彩是守法渔民].[42]

China's peacetime maritime operations are among the clearest examples of Chinese "gray zone" tactics, even by the definitions of Chinese writers. The three core aspects of the "gray zone" identified in the PLA Daily are met: intensity control, ambiguity of intentions, and diversified forms of competition. The use of coast guard vessels in tandem with ostensibly civilian fishing boats to enforce China's security interests can be considered "diverse forms" of operations. The Chinese government creates ambiguity of intent by repeatedly denying that fishing fleets play a role in enforcing maritime claims, in contrast with their actions.[43] The ambiguity is compounded by the dual military and civilian functions of the militia's vessels. The use of tactics mentioned above, such as fishing boat harassment, coast guard arrests, and blockades rather than direct armed violence, is a form of "intensity control." Such actions are unlikely to trigger a military "overreaction" from the targeted country (especially when they are carried out seemingly by non-military vessels). The militia's training exercises feature rights protection operations, patrolling, and logistical support.[44] According to Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, the maritime militia can also provide fuel replenishment, train in mine and blockade warfare, and assist in concealment operations through the use of smoke, reflectors, and chaff grenades.[45] Other exercises have highlighted providing support to other parts of the Chinese armed forces using satellite navigation, long-range command and control, and techniques to interfere with electronic surveillance.[46] The Maritime Militia has directly participated in actions involving other nations, harassing the United States Naval Ship (USNS) Impeccable in 2009, cutting cables for towed arrays being used by Vietnamese seismic survey ships preventing resupply of a Philippine garrison at Second Thomas Shoal in 2014, the maneuvers around the United States Ship (USS) Lassen in 2015, and the blockade of Pagasa island in 2019, as well as a months-long harassment of Philippine-controlled Thitu island.[47] Likewise, in February of 2020, a Malaysian drilling ship was harassed by Chinese Maritime Militia fishermen in concert with a Chinese Coast Guard vessel.[48] In the words of the SMS guidance for non-war activities, maritime

militia operations are a "price lesser than war" to obtain "strategic benefit" while avoiding "over-drawing the sword" and triggering escalation. Furthermore, the cooperation of civilians with military efforts is one of the principles of the Active Defense strategy.

However, not all of China's confrontational non-war military activities fit into a "gray zone" categorization by the above definition. Another tactic China frequently employs, especially during periods of tense relations, involves flying aircraft through another country's airspace. This is typically done to push a territorial claim, test response times to the incursions, or impose costs on the other country as it scrambles jets to intercept. In 2013 China formally established an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea and territories including the Senkaku Islands. As an inauguration, a Chinese air patrol flew through the contested space and was met by two Japanese fighters.[49] Similarly, twice in 2014, Chinese fighter jets scrambled to intercept Japanese reconnaissance aircraft throughout the contested zones of the ADIZ.[50] According to Taiwan's 2006 National Defense Report, in 1998, the PLA Air Force had conducted over 400 sorties of fighters crossing the median line between mainland China and Taiwan, by 2005 that number had increased to 1,700.[51] Taiwan's Ministry of Defense keeps an updated log, detailing events of the PRC's ADIZ violations from the PRC from September of 2020.[52] Since that time, there has been a marked uptick in the number of bombers and fighters making flights near or around Taiwan.[53] These transits frequently coincide with increasing tensions and reflect China's growing displeasure with the government in Taiwan.[54]

Likewise, many confrontations occur at the Sino-Indian border due to the provocative actions of border patrols and the construction of infrastructure and logistics facilities. For example, in 2017 there was a tense stand-off in Doklam by the Bhutan-China-India border that resulted from Chinese infrastructure activities in territory controlled by Bhutan.[55] More recently, the summer 2020 clashes between the PRC and India began due to a Chinese response to India's construction of logistical infrastructure. Skirmishes began in May near Pangong Lake and again in June of 2020. Commercial satellite imagery showed a significant Chinese buildup in the Galwan Valley immediately preceding the clashes.[56] The Indian government claimed that Chinese troops crossed the de-facto Sino-Indian border, the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and attempted to construct fortifications. Conversely, a Chinese Western Theater Command spokesman blamed the Indian army for violating the two sides' agreement, crossing the LAC and deliberately launching provocative attacks while the Chinese side was trying to initiate a dialogue.[57] As of December 2021, no further clashes have occurred. However, the potential for escalation has remained as both sides have continuously engaged in infrastructure building to more quickly respond to future events.[58]

2.1.2 Law Enforcement Type Non-Warfare Military Activities

Law enforcement type non-warfare military activities mainly relate to "[countering] terrorism activities, riots, and disruptions, large-scale illegal group events, as well as other serious criminal activities."[59] Troops should "show no mercy and resolutely strike terrorist and violent activities intended to topple regimes and harm society," while limiting the use of armed force in emergencies caused by internal disputes among the people [人民内部矛盾] and "avoiding as much as possible personnel casualties and property losses."[60] In practice, these activities tend to revolve around maintaining both internal and international stability for the benefit of China's political, strategic and economic needs. Examples of these activities include China's counter-terrorism operations and police state in Xinjiang as well as anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

China's counter-terrorism efforts mostly involve policing and security operations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. These manifest as a proactive police state that wields both personnel and technology to keep the region under surveillance and suppress "separatism" and (religious) "extremism."[61] Both surveillance and security operations tend to be carried out by the People's Armed Police, a parallel organization to the PLA.[62] According to a 2019 report, the Chinese government estimates that since 2014, it has eliminated 1,588 violent

terrorist groups, arrested 12,995 violent terrorists, seized 2,052 explosive devices, investigated 4,858 illegal religious activities involving 30,645 people, and confiscated 345,229 illegal religious propaganda materials.[63] International elements in these counter-terrorism operations include establishing counter-terrorism cooperation mechanisms in border areas with the law enforcement agencies of neighboring countries. These mechanisms cover intelligence and information exchanges, joint border control, investigation of terrorists, counter-terrorist financing, and combating cyber-terrorism. There are elements of escalation control in China's preferred method for dealing with cyber-terrorism,[64] which calls for proportional counterattacks and other methods including employing electronic interference, high-powered jamming systems, and satellite communications countermeasures in response to a terroristic cyber-attack.[65]

Beyond China's periphery, China started participating in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in 2008. By 2013, the PLA Navy had conducted escort missions for more than 5,000 Chinese and foreign ships and claims to have rescued more than 50 Chinese and foreign ships.[66] A typical escort mission might involve Chinese ships leaving Southern China for the western Indian Ocean. Such a mission occurred in November of 2020 when an escort fleet composed of a destroyer and support ship (in this case, the Guiyang and Dongpinghu, both from the North Sea Fleet) carried out a protective mission for six fishing boats through the Gulf of Aden, around Somalia, and eventually arriving in Mauritanian fishing locations in the Atlantic.[67] The fishing boats were able to operate without fear of pirate activity while PLA Navy ships took the opportunity to practice anti-terrorism and anti-piracy deployments, radar usage, methods to monitor surrounding waters in real-time, and dispatching ship-borne helicopters for air patrols. Much like UN peacekeeping operations, many within the Chinese government consider these anti-piracy operations an opportunity to both train the PLA Navy on the open seas and test out their rapidly developing naval capabilities. According to Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, the operations "stimulate interagency coordination with the PLA Navy, provide irreplaceable naval training, and catalyze the development of critical naval skill sets."[68] China receives nearly half of its oil imports from the Middle East and ensuring security along those shipping routes is vital to China's economic self-interest.[69] These economic interests and investments may precipitate a growing need for security assurances as well, and anti-piracy patrols will most likely continue.

Law enforcement military activities almost always fall under "stability maintenance," especially when they are carried out within China's borders. Although such activities may involve armed violence, they are not considered to carry much risk of escalating into international crisis. This is because the targets of these operations are either Chinese citizens or non-state groups which are confronted with the permission or cooperation of their home nations. Such activities may escalate in intensity, however (i.e. vertically).

2.1.3 Cooperative Non-Warfare Military Activities

Cooperative activities mainly involve bilateral and multilateral military diplomacy and cooperation. This includes participation in joint military exercises, cooperation with other countries on common security interests, foreign international peacekeeping, and joint law enforcement. Unlike confrontational activities, cooperative military activities have almost no potential to trigger escalation and in fact can be considered a form of crisis prevention, since they serve to improve China's image and strengthen its international relationships.

To this end, China has recently increased its presence as part of United Nations Peacekeeping operations in numerous missions. In February 2002, China formally joined the United Nations Peacekeeping Standby Arrangement Mechanism with engineering, construction, medical, and transportation contributions to the UN Standby Arrangement Force.[70] China reportedly had a force of 8,000 peacekeepers available for deployment in 2017, with some 2,408 deployed in 2018 to support UN missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Mali, Sudan, and South Sudan.[71] According to a release from the State Council, China participates in UN peacekeeping operations to support the international order, make positive contributions to world peace, and contribute to the peaceful development of conflict areas.[72] Marc Lanteigne has noted that China's increased UN

peacekeeping presence coincided with Xi's 2015 military reforms as a way of alleviating concerns that China would be a revisionist power seeking to reshape the international order.[73]

Further, the peacekeeping operations are an opportunity for the PLA to operate in an actual international environment, needing complex planning and versatility. For example, on 15 September 2021, China held a large-scale, multinational peacekeeping exercise in Henan.[74] The exercises featured over 1,000 peacekeepers from China, Mongolia, Thailand, and Pakistan. Critically, the scenarios which were developed for these exercises were based directly on actual combat events Chinese peacekeepers saw in Mali and South Sudan, as well as scenarios where China could test out its latest security products, such as drone swarms for bomb identification and disposal.

Similarly, some of the PLA Navy's escort missions in the Gulf of Aden mentioned above could also be considered a type of cooperative activity. In fact, in January 2010, the United Nations Somali Piracy Liaison Group conference approved China, the European Union Naval Force Somalia (EU NAVFOR Somalia), NATO, and other maritime forces to implement zoning escorts within the "International Recommended Passage Corridor," opening the potential for multilateral joint naval escorts.[75] Yet, while the PLA Navy has routinely escorted foreign ships along with Chinese ones, the escort operations themselves tend to be conducted solely by Chinese vessels.

2.1.4 Rescue And Assistance Non-Warfare Military Activities

This last type of activity, rescue and assistance non-warfare military activities, mainly involves missions such as "domestic disaster relief, protection, and evacuation of residents abroad, protection of properties abroad as well as international humanitarian assistance and aid" in order to "control the aftereffects of the disasters within a relatively short period of time and maximally reduce losses in life and property."[76] These types of activities tend to occur either domestically within China, or around locations with significant Chinese presence. This can include Chinese embassies and consulates, or Belt and Road projects in foreign countries.

Perhaps the PLA's most notable rescue mission was the 2011 evacuation of nearly all Chinese nationals in Libya (around 35,000 people) following the outbreak of civil war in that country. While the evacuation itself was largely carried out with civilian vehicles (boats, planes, and buses) and assistance from neighboring countries, China dispatched the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) frigate Xuzhou to protect and support the evacuation. This was the first long-distance deployment of PLA assets to protect overseas Chinese nationals.[77] However, some types of rescue and assistance operations may overlap with other types of non-war military activities. For instance, China's Gulf of Aden patrols are claimed to have rescued more than 50 Chinese and foreign ships between 2010 and 2013, in addition to their anti-piracy operations.[78] China's maritime militia is also occasionally called upon to assist in search and rescue operations.

However, internationally, China is increasingly relying on private security firms for the protection of its Belt and Road Initiative assets. According to the China-Africa Research Initiative, by the end of 2019, there were an estimated 182,745 Chinese workers present in Africa.[79] In this context, many Chinese private security firms are rising to fill in the gaps in China's international security needs. In 2016, Caijing reported extensively on DeWe [德威], one of the more prominent Chinese international security firms.[80] Established in 2011 by Wang Dawei and other former PLA and PAP members, DeWe has grown to have a presence in both Africa and South Asia, including Kenya, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Guinea, Madagascar, and Pakistan, among others. For example, when conflict broke out in South Sudan in 2016, DeWe was part of the evacuation efforts in Juba, the capital. Reportedly, DeWe works primarily with Sinopec, while its rival company Weizhijie works with PetroChina, and another rival, Huaxin Zhongan, provides maritime escort services around the Indian Ocean.[81]

Security for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects was originally provided by local governments, but a market has developed for proper combat training for China's private security firms due to poor performance by these local forces in crisis situations. The international firm Frontier Services Group was formed as a joint venture between

the China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC) Group and Erik Prince, the founder of American former private security contractor Blackwater. On working with foreign security contractors, Wang Dawei reportedly said, "For many years, China has not had wars overseas, and has not paid attention to overseas. Therefore, it may lack experience, technology, and ability. To develop this industry, we need to find experienced and reliable overseas partners."[82] Thus, while the PLA is not directly involved in the overseas security contracting, the industry may continue to grow as an avenue of employment for veterans.

2.2 Crisis, Armed Conflict, And Quasi-War Activities

In the model shown in Table 3, "quasi-war" represents a step above non-war activities, one which loosely correlates with "military crisis" [军事危机] and "armed conflict" [武装冲突] on the escalation ladder. These categories of conflict sometimes overlap with many confrontational non-war activities. In fact, some of the incidents mentioned in section 2.1.1 may be considered "crises" in their own right. As stated in Section 1, the 2001 edition of the Science of Military Strategy by AMS gives two conditions for a crisis: 1) disputes between two or more opponents which are worsening and could lead to war; and 2) an imbalance of military forces which makes the relations between two opponents deteriorate.[83] The second condition covers a wide range of issues that have arisen over the years, including arms sales to Taiwan, deployment of the THAAD missile system, or infrastructure building along the border with India. There have been several instances over the past decade that met the first condition and led to serious tensions between China and other countries.

Crises tend to occur at the same flashpoint locations as the confrontational non-military activities described above. In the South China Sea numerous incidents have occurred with the potential for escalation. In May of 2014, the Philippine coast guard intercepted two Chinese fishing vessels and fired warning shots into the air before boarding the vessels and arresting the crew. In June 2014, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that Vietnam collided with Chinese official ships in the South China Sea more than 1,200 times. In early 2015, a Chinese Coast Guard boat rammed three Philippine fishing boats, prompting the Philippine government to lodge formal complaints.[84] During a confrontation over petroleum exploration and drilling rights in May of 2014, a Vietnamese fishing boat was sunk by Chinese vessels; the Chinese side contends that it was protecting its interests from Vietnamese sabotage.[85] In April of 2020, a Chinese Coast Guard ship reportedly sunk a Vietnamese fishing vessel in an area where Chinese authorities claimed jurisdiction.[86] However, due to state visits and joint memoranda of understanding, these situations tend to de-escalate before loss of life occurs and a military crisis can develop.[87]

The closest China has come to "military crisis" or "armed conflict" in the 21st century has been along the Sino-Indian border. The fighting that occurred in May 2020 reportedly happened near Pangong Lake and resulted in both sides brawling in a physical confrontation, though without the use of firearms.[88] Tension soon rose again in June of 2020 when Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed in Galwan Valley. Reportedly, after the arrival of Indian reinforcements, close to 600 soldiers were engaged with basic weapons including stones and clubs.[89] The agreement to restrict the use of firearms appears to have been implemented because of the potential to turn a political and confrontational crisis into a (full-blown) military one. Much like in the South China Sea, it appears both sides are aware of the dangers of escalation. Reportedly, negotiations began immediately, occurred every week for months, and culminated in state visits.[90]

However, all sides have also taken actions with the potential to exacerbate crises both vertically and horizontally (as described by Peng Guangqian in Section 1) in the past. For example, to strengthen their claims, the Philippines began large-scale exercises with the U.S. Navy and has maintained close contact with the Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF).[91] Likewise, as a show of strength, China authorized its Coast Guard to fire on non-compliant foreign vessels in January 2021.[92] According to Chinese sources, India also deployed naval forces during the 2020 border confrontation to the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca, and patrolled routes in the Indian Ocean

frequented by the Chinese navy.[93] These actions on all sides have the potential to escalate an already delicate situation from a quasi-war state of conflict to a local war. As mentioned above, many of the crises encountered recently have been resolved or at least temporarily de-escalated through state visits and bi-lateral exchanges.

If a quasi-war or military crisis is not properly contained it could lead to war. Recent historical examples of local wars involving the PLA include the 1962 Sino-Indian border war and the 1979 Sino-Vietnam war. Future scenarios within that definition could include conflicts with Japan over the Senkaku islands or an attack on Taiwan and its outlying islands. Total war would involve large-scale wars with near-peer adversaries. Chinese strategists regard local wars as the most likely to occur, with the spectrum of conflict model from the SMS 2013 describing all "wars China is likely to face in the future" as "local wars" of varying scale and intensity.

2.3 Outside The Model: War Preparation Activities

Not all of China's military activities in pursuit of its security interests are covered by the PLA's spectrum of conflict models. One important form of military activity which falls outside the defined spectrum is war preparation. This includes civil defense mobilization, space surveillance and early warning activities, as well as the buildup of military or dual-use infrastructure. These activities range from mundane and uncontroversial to potentially provocative "grey zone" activities, but in Chinese discourse they are a routine part of regular defense preparations. This ambiguity and difference of opinion tends to provoke concern or outcry from the countries that feel potentially targeted. It should be noted that this type of activity may be carried out in peacetime or at any stage in the ladder of escalation.

2.3.1 Civil Defense Mobilization

In 2015 the National People's Congress passed the National Defense Mobilization Law, which set about stipulating regulations on recruitment, strategic material storage, and deployment, as well as laying out plans for national defense mobilization, implementation, construction projects, and reserve personnel, among other topics.[94] While civil defense has been a regular feature of Chinese defense planning for decades, the Law and related policy initiatives are working to dramatically improve the quality of cooperation between civilian and military organizations. This can be seen, for example, in the "Golden Shield" exercises that began in Zhejiang Province in 2007, which prepare local government and military leadership to cooperate in the defense of more than 300 key infrastructure and economic targets.[95] Some cities have focused their training on integrating the maritime militia into defense planning, with an emphasis on evacuation and mobility, or coordination mechanisms for joint exercises and joint training for communication, evacuation, target protection, and cross-regional support.[96][iii] These laws were further adjusted in October 2021 in regard to national defense, people's armed mobilization, economic mobilization, civil air defense and traffic combat readiness, as well as leadership mechanisms of national defense education and the command and utilization of national defense resources.[97]

Since an important function of civil defense is the evacuation of civilians from dangerous areas, it may be compared to the "rescue and assistance" type of non-war activity. Like rescue and assistance operations, civil defense is a purely defense-oriented activity that is unlikely to be construed as aggressive by other countries; thus, it carries minimal risk of causing escalation. However, the October 2021 adjustment of national defense mobilization laws was mentioned by Chinese state media as a necessary action due to U.S.-Chinese tensions, signaling that even if it is not an aggressive activity, it is still related growing security competition.[98]

[iii] Fengjie County in Chongqing even took the step of extending the scope of performance assessments for all departments to include armed training, defense mobilization, training grassroots armed forces, and national defense education.

2.3.2 Strategic Infrastructure Construction

Infrastructure construction is another important part of Chinese war preparation activities. The most well-known example in recent years is the construction and fortification of islands in the South China Sea. Since 2013, China has engaged in unprecedented dredging and construction of artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago, creating 3,200 acres of new land. It has also substantially expanded its military presence in the Paracel Islands. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, the three most well-developed islands were built on the Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi reefs, which now feature dual-use airstrips, anti-aircraft weaponry, missile shelters, radar and communication facilities, and other military-support infrastructure.[99] The construction of these military facilities in different parts of the South China Sea serve to expand China's operational advantages in the region, including reconnaissance and area-denial capabilities, which would be extremely valuable in controlling access to vital sea routes in the event of war in the region.

China has also constructed strategic infrastructure along its border with India. In 2006, China completed the Golmud-Lhasa railway as a major step in connecting the Tibet region with the rest of the country. In 2017, this line was extended to Gyirong, an important point near Nepal, and to Nyingchi, a strategic town on the border with India. Reportedly, Nyingchi houses the PLA's 52nd and 53rd Mountain Infantry Brigades and has a dual-use airport, giving China a significant mobilization advantage compared in India in case of a military conflict.[100] Additionally, in 2016 China completed a four-lane highway along the McMahon line, linking it with more well-established towns in Tibet.[101] Reportedly, China has five dual-use airports in Tibet and is building three new ones, while upgrading the airports in Shigatse, Ngari Gunsa, and Gonggar with new runways and underground shelters.[102] According to Sudha Ramachandran, because of China's developing infrastructure in the region, as of 2016 it could deploy up to 32 divisions along the Line of Actual Control.[103]

China also constructs infrastructure throughout many parts of its own territory, a feature of both wartime preparedness and economic development and a normal practice for any country. Yet, China has used otherwise mundane infrastructure projects to tighten control in disputed regions and lay the groundwork for large-scale military mobilization and logistical support in the case of a crisis. Even when the construction serves legitimate civilian purposes, the dual-use functionality of this infrastructure creates ambiguity and raises concern in neighboring states. For instance, the aforementioned transportation infrastructure in Tibet can improve the economic conditions of China's underdeveloped western regions, but also aid in rapid military deployment. Ambiguity of intent is present even in the construction of primarily military facilities. Sometimes the ambiguity is deliberate on China's part: for instance, official spokespeople have denied the existence of any man-made islands in the South China Sea and claimed (despite clear evidence to the contrary) that all construction occurring there is for civilian purposes.[104] At other times the ambiguity arises simply because it is impossible for China's neighbors to know for sure whether its peripheral military facilities are meant for offensive or defensive purposes. China's active defense strategy calls for maximal war preparedness during peacetime so that China can readily handle worst-case contingencies; both infrastructure construction and civil defense are components of this strategy. While in theory overwhelming military preparedness may prevent war from occurring, in reality, this approach may lead to security dilemmas with other countries.

Another type of non-war activity during peacetime that can affect tensions with other countries is China's construction of military infrastructure in disputed territory. This activity serves the additional purpose of consolidating China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and elsewhere. This method of contesting territorial claims demonstrates classic "gray zone" logic, especially in the case of artificial island construction. Building islands is a non-violent act and thus unlikely to trigger a violent response, and China further confounds rival claimants by denying its actions and the strategic purpose behind them. Even if China were to publicly fully acknowledge its construction of artificial islands and maritime military bases, though, Chinese officials would likely still reject the "gray zone" framing due to such operations being within China's claimed territory and thus "internal" and fully

within China's rights as a sovereign nation.

These examples clearly demonstrate that the construction of military infrastructure in certain regions has the potential to provoke other states and trigger crises. This makes it all the more problematic that war preparedness activities are not mentioned in the SMS spectrum of conflict or ladder of escalation models.

2.4 Outside The Model: Non-Military Contributions To Active Defense

So far, all of the described spectrum of conflict models have focused exclusively on military operations (occasionally including those carried out by quasi-military or military-adjacent forces such as maritime militias and private security companies). However, military operations are not the full range of methods China uses to pursue its security interests. Active Defense holds that China must coordinate military efforts with "various political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural battle lines." These include activities carried out by CCP organizations (particularly the International Liaison Department, and United Front Work Department) and the PLA itself. Chinese military writers regularly reference the Three Warfares [三战]: psychological [心理战], public opinion [舆论战] and legal warfare [法律战], meant to support combat operations but also used during peacetime to help China achieve its objectives.[105] As with war preparedness, these activities may be carried out at any stage of the conflict escalation continuum.

The United Front Work Department is central to China's cultural and political influence operations domestically and overseas. The Chinese government actively recruits Chinese nationals abroad through use of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, the China Overseas Friendship Association with Foreign Countries, the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, as well as Reunification Councils, and many similar organizations with the goal of furthering its ideological and security goals through these individuals connections and local influence.[106] These various United Front-affiliated organizations are often meant to loop businesspeople and local leaders into combating the "Three Evils" [三个势力] of terrorism, extremism, and separatism discussed earlier in the context of non-war military activities. According to You Quan [尤权], the current director of the United Front Work Department, "The United Front is a political alliance, and United Front work is political work. It must maintain the party's leadership throughout, having the Party's flag as its flag, the party's direction as its direction, and the Party's will as its will, uniting and gathering members of each part of the United Front around the Party." [107]

These influence operations can be considered a type of psychological and public opinion warfare and can be diverse in action and objective. For example, according to Zach Dorfman, members of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association in California are routinely encouraged to spy on one another and report the activity of their classmates to handlers with the Ministry of State Security.[108] United Front activities in Australia can also consist of influence and campaign finance operations towards politicians. In a more serious example, in 2017 the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) reportedly identified at least ten Australian political candidates it believed had connections to Chinese intelligence agencies and the United Front.[109] Recently, Italian politicians have also reportedly been targeted by the United Front for cultivating sympathies with the CCP, particularly those without subject matter expertise.[110] These types of activities are intended to promote Chinese perspectives and interests within other countries, contributing to China's overall security during peacetime and potentially as part of war preparation.

The Chinese government, as well as other Chinese actors possibly at its behest, also frequently engages in economic pressure in the form of organized boycotts, demonstrations, arrests, or harassment of businesses and nationals from nations involved in disputes with China. For example, in 2010, after a collision incident between a Chinese trawler and the Japanese coast guard in the East China Sea, China halted exports of rare earth elements to Japan, impeding Japan's production of high-tech products.[111] Following Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku islands in 2012, many Chinese cities saw large outbreaks of anti-Japan protests, informally sanctioned by the

Chinese government. In numerous cities throughout the country, Japanese-affiliated stores were defaced, looted, or boycotted.[112] China also uses legal means to impose costs on a rival nation. For example, following the U.S. deployment of the THAAD missile system to South Korea in 2017, China placed economic sanctions on the South Korean-affiliated retail conglomerate Lotte, and many Chinese companies severed existing contracts.[113] In another example, China banned pineapple imports from Taiwan amidst rising tensions, citing biosecurity concerns about pests in March of 2021.[114] In a similar incident, Chinese vendors refused to sell Philippine mangos following the 2016 International Court of Arbitration ruling again China regarding the South China Sea.[115]

Information operations are another type of non-war activity that are often excluded from Chinese spectrum of conflict models. While these are typically carried out by the military, for this study's purposes they are placed under the same umbrella as "non-military activities serving security interests." Operations tend to be targeted towards likely future competitors and focus on giving China a strategic advantage or leverage in some way. For example, according to Mandiant's 2013 report on the cyber espionage activities of the PLA, the former General Staff Department's (GSD)'s Unit 61398 was responsible for a broad range of industrial espionage targeting intellectual property, contracts, business plans, and contacts lists over the course of months following a successful breach.[116] Likewise, members of the PLA's 54th Research Institute were reportedly responsible for the 2017 intrusion and theft of information from the Equifax credit reporting agency: stealing the personally identifiable information of 145 million U.S. citizens.[117] Similarly, there is reason to believe that Chinese nationals were connected to the 2013 hack of the Office of Personnel Management and theft of sensitive information on U.S. federal government employees.[118] Recently, Chinese entities are suspected of widely infecting over 400 government servers throughout South East Asia with malware.[119] According to Elsa Kania and John Costello, this type of activity falls under the Strategic Support Force's (SSF) current peacetime mandate to carry out cyber reconnaissance for useful information which could then be leveraged at the immediate outbreak of a conflict to take and hold information dominance.[120] Other elements of the Chinese government's security apparatus, such as intelligence agencies, have also been accused of cyber espionage and hacking. At the time of writing, only India claims to have had infrastructure taken down by a Chinese cyber-attack following their border clash in 2020.[121] However, in keeping with the nature of cyber warfare, often systems are infected early and the capabilities lie dormant until either discovered or activated.

These kinds of non-military activities and organizations could be thought of as another tool to be used in the active defense concept. They exist to put pressure on another country through methods political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural. However, they are not typically mentioned in PLA writing, mostly likely due to cultural insistence on defense and not pursuing these types of methods. Yet the potential for their use remains, and the possibility of these actions occurring increases as tensions rise and the spectrum of conflict pinches inward.

Conclusion

While China does not appear to have an official unified model of the spectrum of conflict or stages of conflict escalation, some common themes can be found across the range of official policy statements or authoritative materials published by the PLA.

First, even the PLA's most well-defined theoretical models of the conflict continuum leave significant room for ambiguity. Some of this ambiguity comes from inconsistencies in the definitions and categorizations of concepts like "confrontational non-war military activities" across various authoritative documents or even across different parts of the same source. Moreover, the definitions of various "stages" or conflict types do not clearly mark the thresholds separating each one. This is most potentially problematic in the definitions of "armed conflict" and "quasi-war," which include the use of military force against foreign adversaries yet are still considered below the threshold of war. It is not necessarily illogical for such intermediate categories to exist (the 2020 border conflict with India, for example, was a low-intensity violent conflict that clearly did not rise to the level of actual war) but the ambiguity about what constitutes cause for China's leaders to escalate from "armed conflict" to "war" represents a real risk. The same is true for the lines between peacetime "stability maintenance" operations and higher levels of conflict; in fact, the broad and vaguely defined scope of "stability maintenance" during peacetime is another major source of ambiguity.

There is reason to believe that China's vagueness is partly intentional. China's defense white papers, which are intended for an external audience, make no direct mention of spectrum of conflict concepts and only occasionally allude to escalation control. By contrast, authoritative sources intended for domestic audiences indicate that the PLA and Chinese academics have devoted considerable thought to escalation control at various levels of conflict. Furthermore, even though Chinese theories do not necessarily consider armed violence to be an act of war, in the past two decades China has avoided directly firing at adversaries in various confrontations over its border and maritime claims. This shows that China recognizes such actions as escalatory even when formal models do not, and that it may not want to reveal this to the rest of the world.

Second, China's aversion to the "gray zone" concept is largely rhetorical. Despite objections from Chinese academics about the applications of that term to Chinese actions, many Chinese operations in pursuit of security interests have demonstrated clear "gray zone" logic even according to definitions in state media. The AMS SMS's discussion of "confrontational non-war activities," for example, advocates the use of a "price lesser than war and a mode more flexible than war" by military forces to attain strategic goals without upsetting the adversary by "over-drawing the sword."

The basic reason for China's refusal to accept the "gray zone" label may stem from its legal and ideological unwillingness to call into question its own territorial claims. Because the Senkaku Islands, Spratly Islands, Aksai Chin, and other disputed regions are viewed as "inalienable" parts of Chinese territory, operations to secure China's grasp on these regions can thus be viewed as peacetime acts of internal security. By this logic, international disputes that may arise from China's "internal security" operations are incidental and China's participation in these conflicts is purely defensive. Framing sovereignty-defending operations as forms of "gray zone" competition might suggest that these conflicts are external and implicitly legitimize the claims of rival claimants, which would be contrary to Beijing's interests.

Third, many of China's actions in pursuit of security interests over the last two decades fall entirely outside the spectrum of conflict theoretical models examined in this report. One reason for this is that a portion of these actions, such as information operations and United Front work, are not within the purview of the military and thus not directly relevant to the PLA's spectrum of conflict theories. Nevertheless, the use of economic, cultural, and

diplomatic means in parallel with military operations to pursue China's interests during peacetime is fully in the spirit of the "active defense" strategy. Furthermore, some NDU experts have argued that "preparation for military struggle is not a war action" and that "only when we are prepared for war can we contain war and maintain a peaceful environment."[122] This attitude stems directly from the active defense strategy and may explain why activities to build up military strength and preparedness are not considered within the spectrum of conflict even if they seem to have potential to trigger escalation.

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