



Chinese and Indian troops clash in the Galwan Valley during a 15 June 2020 incident at the Line of Actual Control—the de facto border between the two countries—in the mountainous Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. (Screenshot from China State Television)

Clash in the Gray Zone

China's System to Win Without Fighting

Maj. Dustin Lawrence, U.S. Army

Folded in the wrinkles of the highest plateau on Earth, two battle formations met on opposite sides of a mountain tributary. Armed with clubs, spiked batons, and stones, they drew their battle lines on either side of a mountain stream. The two fought in the thin air for six hours. In the end, blood soaked the valley floor and flowed through the turbulent waters. Both sides claimed prisoners as the battle closed with the onset of the bitterly cold mountain night.¹ The

brutal scene, characteristic of countless skirmishes throughout the earliest pages of the historical record, was not a medieval bout or gang violence. Rather, it was a clash of two of the modern world's largest nuclear-armed states, each with a dynamic economic reach extending the world over.

The clash erupted between Chinese and Indian troops on 15 June 2020 over a long-standing border dispute at a key junction in the Galwan Valley. While

the event itself marked a significant point in the history of Sino-Indian relations, the context surrounding it sheds light on China's approach to warfare. Despite the rudimentary weapons used that day, the violence was a component of a sophisticated global system wielded by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers were employed in harmony with China's other instruments of national power in pursuit of strategic objectives. Even though PLA actions led to bloodshed, the corollary approach was tailored to remain below the threshold of armed conflict. It was a component of China's strategy in the gray zone.

Many describe gray-zone activities as actions that violate international norms without venturing into the realm of armed conflict. This categorical approach is ambiguous and misses the purpose behind conducting gray-zone activities. Revisionist actors have reasons for breaking with international norms. Hal Brands, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, expands the definition in "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone": "Gray zone conflict is best understood as activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war."² Its goal, Brands expanded, "is to reap gains, whether territorial or otherwise, that are normally associated with victory in war."³ In other words, gray-zone operations offer alternative "ways" for China to accomplish the ends that have conventionally been associated with war.

Framing China's gray-zone activities is essential because they are systematic. That is, they are open, purposeful, multidimensional, and emergent. Because of these qualities, they can produce counterintuitive results.⁴ To frame the Chinese gray-zone approach against India, this article divides activities by four categories—geopolitical, economic, cyber and information, and military. These are further divided by international, bilateral, and grassroots-level targets to contextualize the broader Chinese approach.⁵ Extrapolated across the leadup and aftermath of Galwan, the model shows the system in context.

Analyzing China's gray-zone system against a partner with a diverse population, a stable democracy, global economic reach, and a functioning nuclear arsenal offers the United States valuable insights. As the United States confronts China globally, these lessons

should inform a system to counter China in the gray zone.

Border Tension

The 2020 border clashes marked the first time since 1975 that violence led to a loss of life along the Sino-Indian line of actual control (LAC; figure 1 shows the LAC and the historic 2020 clash). At Galwan, twenty Indians and an unknown number of Chinese were killed.⁶ Tensions rose early that summer when Chinese officials objected to road construction in the Galwan Valley. Small units of PLA troops increased the frequency of their patrols and ventured further into the disputed region. By late May, however, the PLA operations transitioned to occupying key tactical positions tied to infrastructure, choke-points, and overlooks.⁷ On 15 June 2020, Indian troops responded to reports of Chinese troops camped at a bend on the Galwan River. While Chinese reports claimed India instigated the confrontation when it confronted the PLA in Chinese-controlled territory, India accused the PLA of drawing-in and deliberately ambushing its troops.⁸ By 7 September 2020, both sides accused the other of firing small arms—marking the first time in forty-five years that shots were fired along the LAC.⁹ Experts from both sides designated the violence an inflection point, decades in the making.¹⁰

In 1962 and 1975, China and India engaged in armed conflict for control over the LAC. Following these conflicts, the status of the border remained unresolved, and both countries were nuclear powers. In the following decades, both sides often patrolled the border unarmed to prevent escalation. By 2020, China changed its approach.

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Kashmir Region



Note: Represented on the map is the site of the Galwan Valley clash. The red circles show areas of conflict at the height of 2020–21 tensions. (Figure by U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Kashmir Region [Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2004]; modified by author)

Figure 1. Sino-Indian Border Map

Winning without Fighting

The foundation for Chinese gray-zone operations rests in the classics. Most famously, Sun Tzu stated, “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the highest excellence; the highest excellence is to subdue the enemy’s army without fighting at all.”¹¹ Many other axioms placed a weight on the actions before armed conflict. This idea was pervasive beyond

the *Art of War*. Ancient stories captured in the *Wiles of War* can be seen as lessons on operating within the gray zone, such as “watch a fire from across the river,” “beat the grass to frighten the snake,” or “remove wood from under the cauldron.”¹²

Foundational to ancient precepts of winning-without-fighting was the concept of *shi*. Lao Zi, who was likely an amalgamation of many ancient Taoist philosophers,

used the metaphysical concept to holistically define reality.¹³ Followers of Zi saw shi as “the external shaping force of the environment that molds each object contained within that environment.”¹⁴ In policy and war, it was often used to describe the disposition that leads to a position of relative advantage.¹⁵ Over the course of two millennia, the concept of shi transcended the lexicon, becoming a model to describe immeasurable complexity.¹⁶ Contemporary Chinese writers continue to use shi to describe the political, and by extension military, disposition during and between armed conflict.

The most pervasive example of this is *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America*. The influential work, first published in 1999 by Qiao Lang and Wang Xiangsui, explores how a weaker China could challenge a hegemonic United States and conceptualize a way of war befitting China's disposition. They determined the battlefield had expanded beyond the typical three-dimensional understanding into outer space, across the electromagnetic spectrum, and into the psychological space of the human mind. Their theory dismissed any bifurcation of war and peace and instead assumed a state of constant competition. “The battlefield is omnipresent. Just think, if it is even possible to start a war in a computer room or a stock exchange that will send an enemy country to its doom, is there non-battlespace anywhere?”¹⁷

Following the publication of *Unrestricted Warfare*, this paradigm began to permeate PLA literature. In 2003, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) published *The Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army*. Formalizing concepts from *Unrestricted Warfare* and expanding on pervasive ideas from earlier literature, the guidelines introduced the concept of “Three Warfares”—public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.¹⁸ Public opinion warfare would establish a foothold in the adversary's minds. Gaining dominance would facilitate psychological warfare, which aimed to disrupt decision-making by sapping the will and eroding support. Legal warfare operated as a subset of the previous two, further raising doubts across neutral parties and in adversarial populations.¹⁹ The three warfares would have a symbiotic relationship and represent a new age of “informatized warfare.”

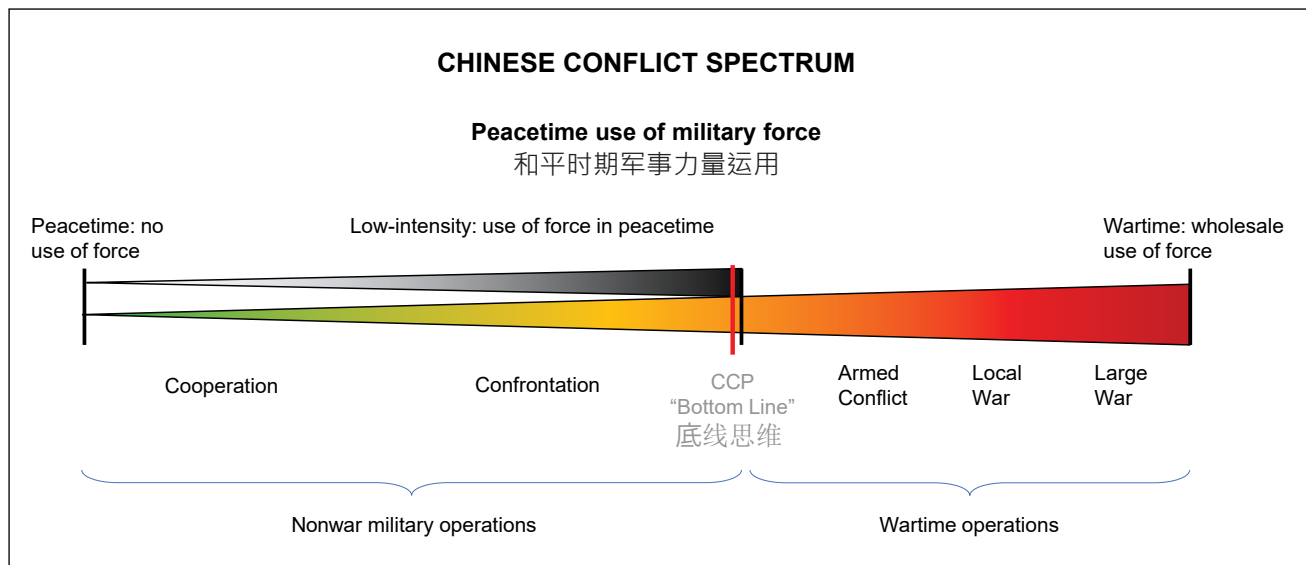
Subsequent policies, white papers, and journals embraced “informatized warfare.” The PLA guidance for “local wars under informatized conditions” emphasized

concepts and capabilities to respond to a technologically superior adversary, emphasizing “system-of-system operations” and setting conditions to degrade opponent systems.²⁰ Beginning in 2005, this vision was operationalized through the “systems confrontation” approach.²¹ This “leap” fused historical concepts such as shi with technological advancements observed during the U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and NATO operations in Serbia and Kosovo.²² Parallel to the shift from a mechanized to an informatized force was the shift from “active defense”—never attack first but respond if attacked—to a preemptive approach. This idea was especially pervasive in the information category, where blowback for such operations was politically reduced. Calls for cyber formations or “net forces” under the control of the PLA began to echo in military journals.²³

A 2009 white paper on national defense further expanded the role of the military beyond state-on-state armed conflict. Informatization tagged the military to politically important missions such as peacekeeping, antiterrorism, and military diplomacy. Such activities were captured under the term non-war military activities (NWMA).²⁴ By 2011, NWMA was officially adopted in the *People's Liberation Army's Military Terms*: “Military activities that the armed strengths carry out to protect the nation's security and developmental interests but do not constitute warfare.”²⁵ In 2013, the PLA published the *Science of Military Strategy* (SMS) and devoted a chapter to NWMA. The SMS stated that these activities “are continually expanding. They are being used more and more broadly in social, political, and economic life and in international relations, and their importance is growing ever stronger.”²⁶

Concurrently, the Chinese began to use informatized tactics more broadly. This was evident in the cyber domain. By 2009, at least thirty-five Trojan horse programs were directed by the CCP, and over two hundred and fifty hacktivist groups were operating freely in China.²⁷ Under the precept of Mao Tse-tung's “people's war,” China expanded programs like the Network Crack Program Hacker to establish an informal army of plausibly deniable hacktivists.²⁸ Keeping with their previous doctrine, the Chinese would target centers of gravity in adversary systems, including leadership institutions, command and control systems, and information nodes.²⁹

In 2016, President Xi Jinping addressed the dialectical nature of war and peace with his concept on



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. The Chinese Use-of-Force Spectrum

the “overall planning for war operations and the use of military forces in peacetime.”³⁰ Here, Xi aligned China’s means—political, economic, and military—to achieve national objectives during peace. (Figure 2 shows the Chinese use-of-force spectrum.) China’s capacities, born of the leap to informatization, would be used to “manage crisis and prevent wars through the use of military forces in peacetime.”³¹ The weight of these capacities would be applied on a use-of-force spectrum ranging from “peacetime use of military force” to “war-time wholesale use of force” (see figure 2). In between these lay China’s new *modus operandi* [low-intensity use of force in peacetime].³²

Underpinning this was the broader concept of “bottom-line thinking.” This amounted to using force to prevent relevant actors from crossing China’s “line in the sand.” Xi described this mode of thought as driving away from war, toward “harmony.”³³ The “bottom-line thinking” underlying Xi’s spectrum would act as a counterbalance to Indian transgressions—when the situation along the LAC gravitates to war, “low intensity use of force” would return it to peace. (Figure 3 shows the “means” and “ways” of this approach across the Chinese use of force spectrum.)

From this perspective, the 2020 border clashes may not be a failure of Xi’s approach. The Chinese incursion into Indian territory was an attempt to change the status quo according to the Indian government.³⁴

Assuming this, the incursion marked a more deliberate approach. The bottom in the “bottom-line thinking” could be raised, in essence, redrawing a line in the opponent’s sand. Although changing the norms would invite chaos to the system, the CCP’s “low intensity use of force” would return it to harmony. Strategic adjustment of the bottom-line would demand follow-on actions in the geopolitical, economic, and cyber-information spaces to return the environment to equilibrium. China would stay in the “gray zone,” and win without fighting.

Geopolitical

Geopolitics represent the interplay of politics across space. Given the size and significance of these actors, Sino-Indian politics converge in multiple geophysical arenas. While the LAC may be the geopolitical epicenter, China’s approach spans the globe, and it presses multiple geopolitical points in the gray zone at the international, bilateral, and grassroots levels. Like a game of Weiqi, the efforts across the board ultimately support the larger objective.

Internationally, India’s most important strategic lines of communication extend over the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Historically, those lines were interwoven with other nations and great powers in an intricate tapestry of culture and trade.³⁵ Ports in Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Maldives were crucial to the flow of imports and exports from Indian markets.

CHINESE CONFLICT SPECTRUM IN ACTION

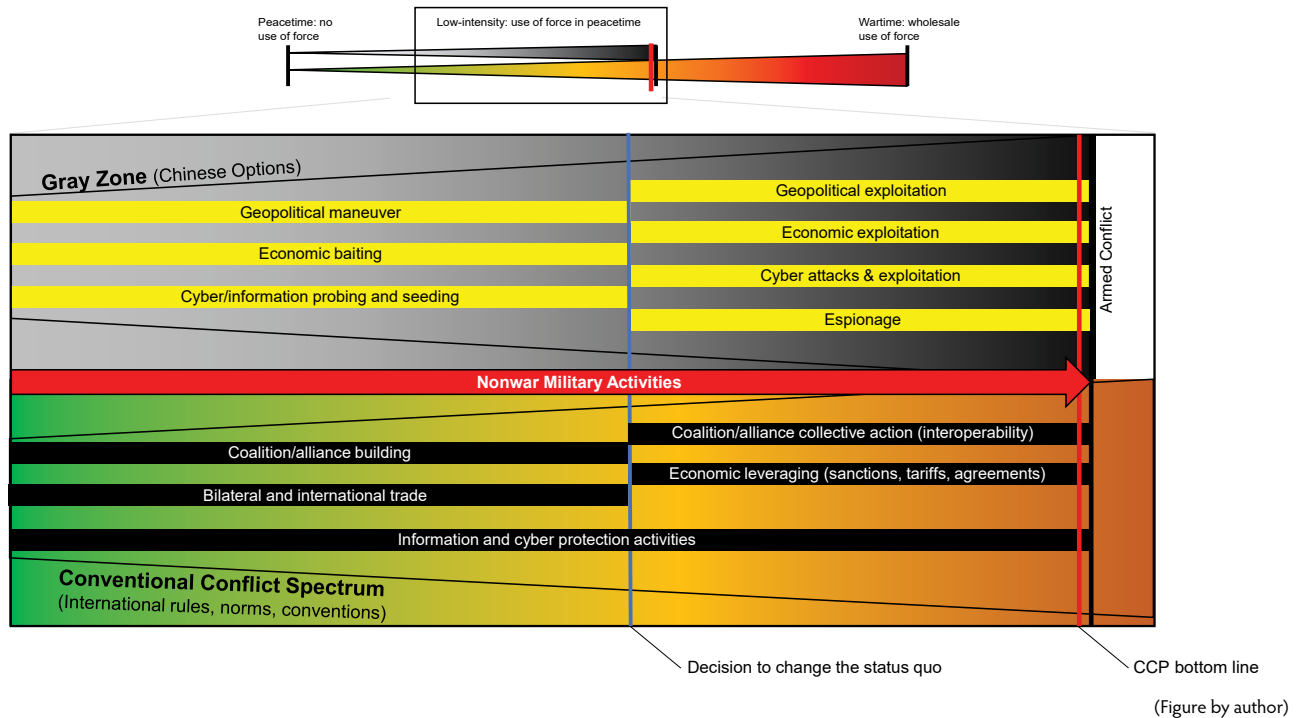


Figure 3. Chinese Use-of-Force Spectrum with “Means” and “Ways”

By 2016, 95 percent of India’s trade by volume and 68 percent by value came via the Indian Ocean.³⁶ Nearly 80 percent of India’s crude oil requirement was imported across the IOR.³⁷ Chinese policymakers understood this and attempted to shape the IOR’s ecosystem to their advantage. Indian political scientist Mohan Malik described three core elements of the Chinese strategy: encirclement, envelopment, and entanglement.³⁸

All three are seen through the “string of pearls,” visual (see figure 4), which conceptualizes China’s Belt and Road Initiative as the string with IOR trade hubs as the “pearls.” At the string’s center is Sri Lanka. The island nation, located fifty-five kilometers from India’s south-east coast, is a strategically significant waypoint for trade across the IOR. Although both China and India could benefit from relations in Sri Lanka, China maintained a zero-sum approach. It pressed on diplomatic and economic pressure points to ensure its strategic positions and deny Indian influence.³⁹ This was evident in the struggle for the Colombo and Hambantota Ports. PLA investments in Colombo extend back to 2011, when a consortium led by a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) signed a thirty-five-year agreement

to develop and operate the deep-water Colombo International Container Terminal. This promised an 85 percent stake of the terminal in exchange for \$500 million in development.⁴⁰ The port serves a broader strategic purpose for China. According to Western analysts, “for the ‘Quad [Quadrilateral Initiative of India-Australia-Japan-US]’ to be meaningful, India or Japan requires a place in Colombo Port.”⁴¹

Sri Lanka’s other deep-water port, the Hambantota Port, is currently under a ninety-nine-year lease to a Chinese SOE. Given the expansion of Colombo, the economic rationale for Hambantota’s construction is weak. Many see the development of the former fishing port as a shell of a People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operating base aimed at further control over maritime lines of communication. During the contract negotiations, India pursued a joint venture to port construction. However, China aggressively leveraged its debt positions to maintain control of infrastructure projects. These debt positions were also used to ensure Sri Lanka voted in line with Chinese interests in intranational bodies.⁴²

Another significant pearl strung on the Belt and Road string is the Gwadar Port. The port serves as a



(Figure by author)

Figure 4. The String of Pearls

critical component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a three thousand-kilometer infrastructure project that allows Chinese energy to bypass the Straits of Malacca. Construction on the port began when the Sino-Indian modus vivendi began to deteriorate as both countries expanded their economic reach. The port, however, caused significant Indian concern upon inception, not only because of its development with India's historical enemy but because it also completed the envelopment of India from the west. By Gwadar's inauguration in 2016, it was clear the port would link China's land lines of communication through Pakistan and the Himalayas with maritime lines of communication. With a Chinese SOE conducting port operations, Gwadar could serve as a gateway to the IOR from Western China.

As CPEC encircled from the west, the Chinese-Myanmar Economic Corridor looked to do the same in the east. Rail and road projects were proposed to extend from Yunnan Province to the port at Kyaukpyu. This would mark an eastern "pearl," completing the string around the Indian subcontinent. However, Myanmar, concerned with excessive borrowing from China, proceeded cautiously. Before the Sino-Indian border clashes in June 2020, none of the proposed projects had commenced.⁴³ Even without

the proposed deep-water port at Kyaukpyu, China maintains influence over port operations and lines of communication through the straits of Malacca to connect operations in the SCS.⁴⁴

Where PLA military presence is an established reality is in the pearl of Djibouti. Jutting into the main arteries of the world's most important trade routes, the Horn of Africa offered China opportunities to protect its interests in Africa and project power across the IOR. When China began investing in infrastructure projects in 2013, India saw the projects as largely commercial and continued to look east toward the South Asian littorals. However, China developed a new port, two airfields, an underground basing complex capable of housing ten thousand troops, and defense agreements with Djibouti's government.⁴⁵ By 2020, expansion of the base's capabilities supported the full range of PLAN capabilities, including nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers.⁴⁶

The Himalayas crown the Indian subcontinent and China's string of pearls. Here too, China inlaid jewels. These include terrain with military and political significance. PLA troops in the 1950s circulated pamphlets declaring that "Tibet is the palm of China's hand and that all that remains to be done is to win back the fingers: the Northeast Frontier Agency, Ladakh,

Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan.”⁴⁷ The sentiment appears to live on. At the disputed junction border with India and Bhutan, China injected its entanglement strategy through development projects and policing efforts. Tension peaked in 2017 when Indian forces confronted the PLA. This raised the political stakes on India’s historic support of Bhutan’s territorial integrity. Despite the resolution in 2017, China had completed four villages in Bhutan-claimed Doklam territory after the 2020 disputes.⁴⁸ China has taken a similar approach in Nepal, encroaching on its borders. In both cases, Chinese incursions against Indian allies eroded a coherent approach from an Indian-led political bloc. For years, China entangled itself with India’s rival Pakistan, exerting pressure on New Delhi.

Grassroots-level geopolitical actions further complicated Indian regional concerns. In Sri Lanka, local power brokers and national figures were often approached in China’s bid to control their strategic ports. In the initial phases of Gwadar and Khaykpyu, key influencers were targeted to push development. Grassroot efforts, however, were not limited to India’s periphery. China actively pursued influence in Indian politics. One obvious target was the Communist Party of India-Marxist, which routinely hosted Chinese officials and maintained active dialogue in the leadup to the 2020 border tensions. More directly, Chinese efforts targeted the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), one of India’s two major political parties, which represents right-wing, traditional Hindu nationalist politics. Following a BJP delegation in 2019 to China, one member acknowledged that CCP officials “wanted to know how we have built the party, especially in the past five years. How we use the party machinery for elections.”⁴⁹ However, neither party maintained ties after June 2020. Following the death of Indian soldiers on the border, Chinese ties represented a political liability to both the Communist Party of India-Marxist and the BJP.

Economic

Celebrated economist Lionel Robbins, in his landmark essay on the nature of economics, defined the subject as the “science which studies human behavior as a relationship between given ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.”⁵⁰ As many of the earlier examples show, China reinforces its gray-zone actions with economic weight. Since liberalizing trade policies

in 1979, China’s annual gross domestic product has grown by an average of 9.5 percent, what the World Bank described as “the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history.”⁵¹ India’s growth during the same time increased, albeit at a pace well behind its burgeoning neighbor. However, China’s meteoric rise has waned since its peak in 2007.⁵² By 2020, the global pandemic hammered domestic markets and stymied trade as tensions mounted along the border. In this environment, Robbins’s emphasis on human behavior becomes evident as the critical variable in “given ends” and “scarce means” formula.

At the international level, economic gray-zone activities involve controlling or reducing the availability of resources to induce a cognitive effect on a target. Similarly economic activity at the bilateral level involves reducing trade or the flow of specific goods for the same ends. Actions at both levels are facilitated by geopolitical maneuvering. In China’s case, its domestic capacity and economic hubs across the Pacific and IOR provided additional options to the PLA in and out of the gray zone. While limiting exports to the massive Indian market would have resulted in blowback for China, the massive trade imbalance tilted toward Beijing, levying hardships disproportionately on India.⁵³ Before the 2020 border tensions, there were multiple sectors of India’s economy at risk. From 2018 to 2019, of the 375 categories of products imported to India, 80 percent came from China.⁵⁴

In 2020, China appeared to deliberately target several key sectors, most notably pharmaceuticals. Generic pharmaceutical production had made India the “pharmacy of the world.”⁵⁵ However, acquiring this status brought vulnerabilities to India’s markets. Between 90 and 100 percent of certain active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) were imported from China in 2019.⁵⁶ Turning off the flow of APIs represented an extreme option for China, not just because of the imports of life-saving drugs, but because the downstream effect across the global market would have galvanized a significant international response. CCP restraint in leveraging their hold on Indian pharmaceuticals may have been about retaining gray-zone options. Still, strategic options have shelf lives. Following the border crisis, India developed a series of policies to limit dependence on APIs.

Often international and bilateral actions come with the risk of blowback because the downstream

effects extend beyond the target country or costs in the domestic markets. This is why China often surges economic actions at the grassroots level, where the PRC often use SOE to advance efforts. This was evident in Sri Lanka, where the Colombo port alone handles 40 percent of Indian transshipped cargo.⁵⁷ Six months after Galwan, China signed a deal to

Cyber actions are most often designed to be nonattributional while tailored to specific systems. Because of this, they primarily exist at the bilateral or grassroots levels. While bilateral actions consist of cyber operations against governments or targeted economic activities, grassroots action is characterized by information operations. Like economics, human behavior is the

“Chinese actions in the cyber and information dimensions are often uninhibited, viral, and persistent. Cyber actions are most often designed to be nonattributional while tailored to specific systems.”

further develop Colombo's financial district. Up to that point, China developed \$1.4 billion of a planned \$13 billion in the port city. With China's control over the Colombo International Container Terminal deep water port, India and Japan signed a tripart memorandum of cooperation in 2019 to develop Colombo's East Container Terminal.⁵⁸ Seven months after Galwan, the deal collapsed, even though Sri Lankan officials offered an alternate proposal of their West Container Terminal. Multiple Indian news outlets cited rumors of Chinese interference in the negotiations, with one citing anonymous officials claiming China influenced the West Container Terminal counteroffer.⁵⁹

Although India remained Sri Lanka's largest trading partner through the border crisis, China maintained insurmountable debt position investment packages. In addition to these were the decades of local projects accepted by key Sri Lankan officials for temporary bumps in political capital.⁶⁰ Through the border crisis, Sri Lankan currency reserves were plummeting. Rather than turning to the International Monetary Fund, which requires institutional reforms in exchange for assistance, Sri Lankan officials continued to incur debt from China. Even as the domestic population voiced concerns, and India offered assistance, officials remained wed to China.⁶¹

Cyber and Information

Chinese actions in the cyber and information dimensions are often uninhibited, viral, and persistent.

dependent variable at stake in both cyber and information activity.

This theme was echoed through the informatization literature before the 2020 border clashes and operationalized after Galwan. Nearly in sync with the incursion of PLA troops, a surge of malware flooded Indian systems. These cyber activities clustered around key infrastructure nodes. Malware linked to a PLA-affiliated hacker group targeted at least ten regionally important nodes in India's power grid and two seaports.⁶² These clusters gravitated around geopolitically significant objectives. Most clusters were in proximity to the LAC and compromised state load dispatch centers, an Indian subsidiary of a multinational logistics company, and a national emergency response system. The minimal espionage value of these targets led Recorded Future, a U.S.-based intelligence company, to assess the Chinese goal was pre-positioning to “support several potential outcomes, including geostrategic signaling during heightened bilateral tensions, supporting influence operations, or as a precursor to kinetic escalation.”⁶³ The two targeted seaports substantiate this. The first was the Jawaharlal Nehru port, which handles most of India's containerized cargo and offers the most direct route to Pakistan's port at Gwadar.⁶⁴ The other was India's southernmost port at Thoothukudi whose main competitor is Sri Lanka's Colombo port.⁶⁵

On 13 October 2020, the Chinese cyber incursions may have gone beyond seeding. Blackouts rolled through Mumbai that Tuesday, halting trains, closing the Indian stock market, and forcing hospitals to turn

to generators amid a spike in coronavirus cases.⁶⁶ Initial reports from the Indian media cited state officials who claimed malware had been discovered that may have caused the blackouts. Indian officials later rolled back these statements. Still, reports from Recorded Future suggested a coordinated cyberattack occurred at the same time as the blackouts.⁶⁷ “I think the signaling is being done [by China to indicate] that we can and we have the capability to do this in times of a crisis,” said retired Lt. Gen. D. S. Hooda, an Indian cyber expert who oversaw India’s borders with Pakistan and China. “It’s like sending a warning to India that this capability exists with us.”⁶⁸

PLA cyber activity ventured beyond messaging. In the first half of 2021, as the border dialogue continued, groups affiliated with the PLA cyber espionage groups continued to target the Indian aerospace industry, defense contractors, and telecommunication companies.⁶⁹ The patterns of these bilateral cyber actions—their timing, locations, and targets—directly linked to their objectives along the border. Chinese information actions at the grassroots level follow the same patterns. Cognitive effects were seeded in advance of the clashes at the Galwan border. This approach exudes lines of effort across India’s media ecosystem—in social media, news aggregation, and content and messaging.

Chinese state media outlets maintained active accounts on social media in Hindi, Bangali, Tamil, and Urdu, amassing a significant number of followers before the clashes. For example, China Media Group Hindi’s Facebook page had 7.2 million followers (the BBC’s Hindi page had ten million).⁷⁰ Following the clashes, the extent of Chinese influence over X (Twitter) became apparent when anti-Indian misinformation spiked on the platform. In June, #ChinaComesModiRuns became one of the top trending hashtags with the help of Chinese bots.⁷¹ These efforts were assisted from Pakistan, from which hundreds of fake X and Telegram accounts spread misinformation.⁷²

China also made massive investments into major news aggregator apps before the clashes, the largest being a Chinese firm’s investment into Dailyhunt—a news content platform designed to merge local and national content in regional languages. After a twenty-five-million-dollar investment in 2016, Chinese investors landed on the executive board.⁷³ Shortly afterward, a Chinese firm launched Newsdog, another

aggregator website. The company, completely controlled from China, aimed to open an office in every Indian state. By 2020, it had gained nearly one hundred million users.⁷⁴ A month after the clashes, the Army ordered its soldiers to delete eighty-nine apps from their smartphones because of data mining concerns. The list included Chinese apps like Newsdog, global social media apps like X and China’s TikTok, and even Indian apps like Dailyhunt.

The Indian government feared social media and news aggregators seeding Chinese narratives amongst soldiers. These narratives, however, were also carried through Chinese journalists and agents to the general population. Numerous articles ran in national and local Indian papers following a boycott of Chinese goods after the border clashes that questioned the decision and recounted the benefits of Chinese businesses. Many of the authors had previously written pro-Chinese articles. In isolation, this reflects the diversification of an independent media. However, since 2012, China’s Foreign Ministry’s Chinese Public Diplomacy Association ran fellowship programs for journalists from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and other IOR nations.⁷⁵ On these fellowships, journalists were provided luxury housing, a sizable stipend, a degree from a Chinese University, and according to one source, iPhones that stored iCloud data in Chinese servers.⁷⁶ While journalists involved in the Chinese fellowships proclaimed their objectivity following backlash amid the border tensions, other journalists were arrested for espionage. Freelance journalist Rajeev Sharma was arrested and later admitted to passing on “sensitive information” to Chinese handlers.⁷⁷

Where journalists could not be bought off, China opted to purchase full-page advertisements supporting their narrative of Indian border aggression and advocating appeasement. These ads were deceptively formatted to mimic news coverage with subtle messaging. One such example ran in *The Hindu* with the title, “A Strategic Dealing with China: India Must Engage with China Economically Even as It Confronts It Militarily.”⁷⁸ These efforts extended across broadcast medians as well. China Radio International, for instance, actively broadcasted pro-Chinese narratives across Tamil-speaking populations. After the clashes, China Radio International criticized the Indian army actions leading to the tensions.⁷⁹

In addition to media, education centers and think tanks have been grassroots targets. These platforms, typically seen as sources of credibility, offer salient positions to turn public opinion and influence policymakers. The list of organizations with direct ties ranges from the Confucius Institute to pro-China youth leagues that maintained active memorandums of understanding with the youth wing of the CCP.⁸⁰ At multiple universities across India, China has promoted pro-China discourses through language programs, academic circles, and fellowships.⁸¹

Military

Gray-zone activities avoid the onset of armed conflict, yet paradoxically, the military plays a central role in gray-zone operations. Serving as more than just the deterrence force, the PLA actively synchronizes the instruments of national power to achieve strategic objectives.

At the border, the PLA proved active before and after the clashes at the tactical and operational levels. After 2017, despite the ongoing annual Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination, China continued to expand its military basing in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.⁸² From 2017 to 2020, the number of heliports and airbases doubled.⁸³ After Galwan, the military buildup ramped up. The PLA moved long-range strategic bombers to those airbases in 2021.⁸⁴ Around the same time, they built “militarized village[s]” that positioned electronic warfare and air defense stations close to India.⁸⁵ PLA tactical actions on the ground appeared to nest with these strategic moves. In late 2020, a Chinese academic in Beijing claimed the Chinese used microwave weapons to turn two key hilltops that had been occupied by Indian soldiers “into a microwave oven.”⁸⁶ The effects caused the Indians to withdraw, enabling the PLA to occupy the hilltops “without any exchange of gunfire,” constituting tactical-level gray-zone maneuvering.⁸⁷

Tactical gray-zone maneuver has been a staple of Chinese activities in the SCS well before the border clashes. People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia ships provide support to maneuvering commercial vessels as they cross into territorial waters. Rather than the physical effects from supporting microwave emitters, the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia provides a cognitive effect on adversaries attempting to enforce their

maritime borders. In the IOR, China used this tactic with commercial vessels to prod Indian exclusive economic zones.⁸⁸ These incursions were backed by PLAN warships just outside the exclusive economic zone.

A political organization at its core, the PLA often synchronizes these operations, applying a whole-of-government framework to link geopolitical, economic, information, and cyber activities. The PRC’s “Land Border Law, drafted during the standoff along the LAC and ratified after the 13th rounds of talks failed to reach a resolution, codified this mantle. The law organized various bureaucracies under the Central Military Commission and elevated the role of the PLA and the People’s Armed Police in enforcing Chinese territorial claims. Further, the Land Border Law prohibited the construction of permanent facilities near the border without Chinese consent.”⁸⁹ The language is aimed at India and suggests that additional defensive improvements along the LAC marks a trigger for the PLA to respond with the collective weight of its national apparatus. In other words, India building capacity to defend its sovereign territory crosses Xi’s “bottom line.”

An Uncalibrated System

Tagging Chinese actions with the gray-zone qualifier is frivolous if removed from the broader context. That is, if actions are viewed in temporal or spatial isolation. Only some of the actions presented in this case study stand-alone as gray-zone actions. Offensive cyber operations that target civilian infrastructure to degrade a military response or microwave emitters that deny adversaries key terrain are clear examples of gray-zone operations. They defy international norms and achieve objectives normally won through established warfare. Others, when viewed through a narrower lens, could be subjectively seen as normal statecraft. China leveraging debt positions to acquire port rights, for instance, could loosely be compared to U.S. basing acquisitions following World War II. It could also be argued that China’s geopolitical encirclement of India only presents a security threat once the two cross the threshold of war. However, context matters. Chinese geopolitical, economic, information, cyber, and military actions should not be viewed in isolation. They must be viewed as a whole.

Carl von Clausewitz, in his opening chapter of *On War*, implored his audience to take the broader perspective on warfare: “We must begin by looking at the



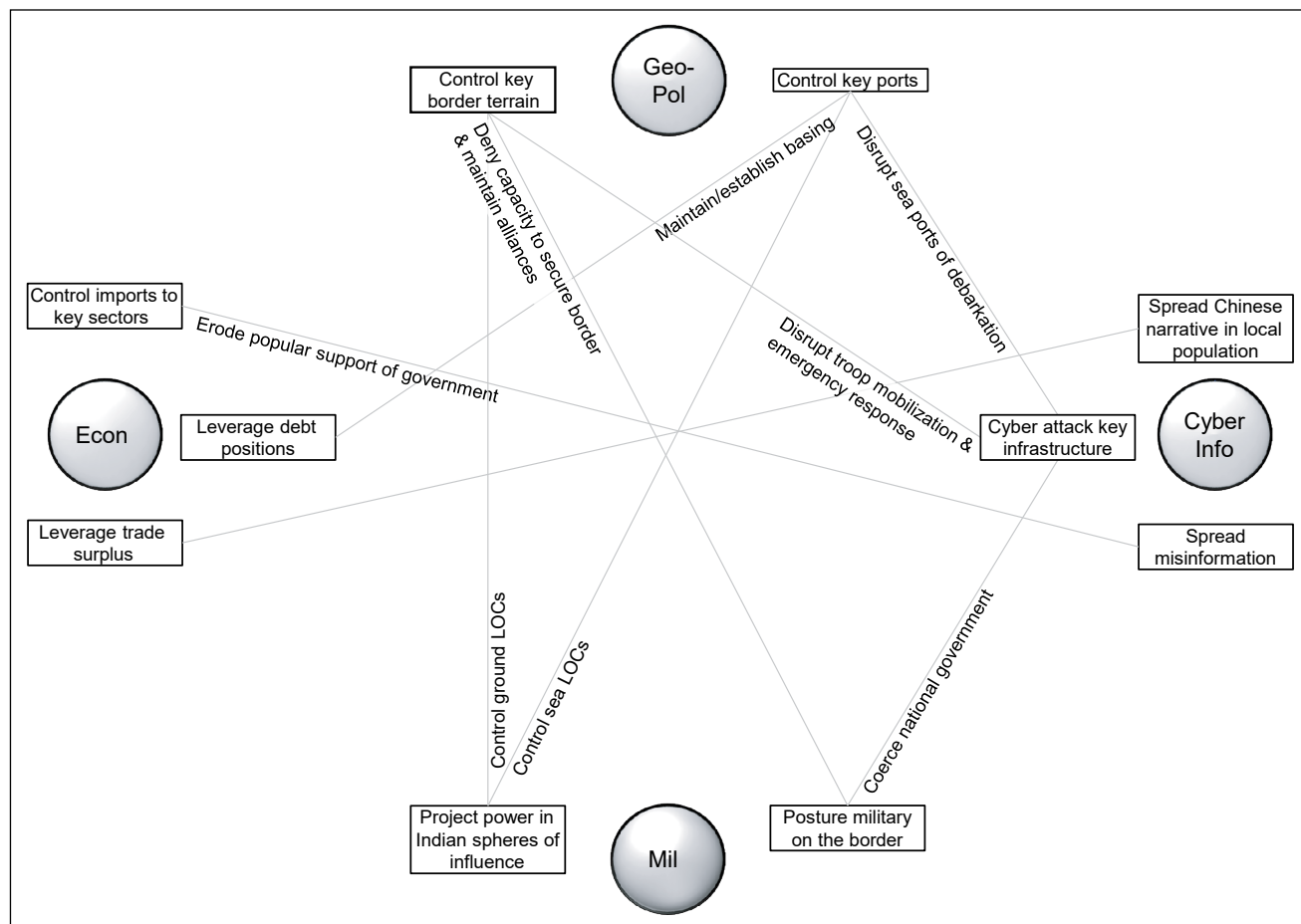
Faustin-Archange Touadéra (center), president of the Central African Republic, arrives 28 August 2024 for the Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing. (Photo by Chen Yehua, Xinhua)

nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together.⁹⁰ In the context of the Chinese understanding of warfare, the parts construct a whole anchored by the political objectives that often constitute Xi's "bottom line." Proliferating control across the string of pearls links to the seeding of malware in India's competing ports, offering further means to disrupt India's sea lines of communication. Retaining the threat over the vitally important pharmaceutical sector links to the invasive narrative of an Indian dependency on Chinese markets. Seeding doubt of India's response to border incursions within policymakers, influencers, and soldiers' links to the PLA buildup along the contested border and sending small units of unarmed PLA soldiers across that border links to the historically disputed territorial claims and the coercive "bottom line." All these actions form a purposeful whole designed, sequenced, and directed at the highest levels of the CCP. (Figure 5 depicts this system in isolation.)

However, the CCP system is still a component of the more complex and adaptive global system. The 2020 border clash and the Chinese gray-zone actions surrounding it altered that environment but not necessarily in ways anticipated by the CCP. Despite

their online information campaigns, a 2021 public opinion survey found that 77 percent of young Indians distrust China more than any leading country, expressing concerns about its military, economic reach, and interference in the politics of India's neighbors.⁹¹ The same percentage saw the United States as the most trustworthy.⁹² After the clash, the Modi government transitioned from seeking more ties with China to imposing Chinese-focused security directives and restricting Chinese activities within India. In the fallout from Galwan, Vijay Gokhale, India's former top diplomat, said, "The ambiguity that prevailed in India's decision-making and strategic circles as to whether China is a partner—or a rival has been replaced by strategic clarity. China's behavior is now perceived as adversarial, and few are willing to give it the benefit of the doubt."⁹³

Despite the CCP's economic carrot and the PLA's multidomain stick, India further militarized its northern territory. By 2022, the Chinese-India LAC looked more like the India-Pakistan LAC.⁹⁴ Most significantly for the United States, India increased its commitment to the Quad. Since Galwan, the multilateral dialogue has yielded initiatives to increase COVID-19 vaccine access, increase cyber security, and combat illegal fishing.⁹⁵ The Indian army also expanded



(Figure by author)

Figure 5. Mapping the Gray-Zone System

its annual training exercises with the U.S. joint force. In November 2022, U.S. troops conducted exercises alongside Indian troops in the Himalayas one hundred kilometers from the LAC.⁹⁶

A Future System

Chinese actions in the gray zone, the Galwan clash, and the corollary system expose key considerations for the United States as it adjusts to the future environment. First, the lines of effort stratified from Chinese political objectives expand across time and space by their own logic. Gray-zone actions were likely seeded before the tenure of a combatant commander, ambassador, or senior executive and continue well after. They link to actions beyond their geographical area of responsibility, regionally focused bureaus, or functional areas. This was evident in the decade before Galwan, when China was shoring up control across the IOR

and in the Himalayas. Even though the clash may have shaken India, conditions were already manipulated in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Djibouti, and Nepal.

Second, the Chinese gray-zone system is not perfectly calibrated to the complexity of the global system. Despite the assiduity and harmony of Chinese actions, the global environment is replete with chaos and emergence. Market dynamics, information trends, pandemics, and national passions cannot be perfectly anticipated. After Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt and inflation rose to 60 percent in May 2022, protests erupted. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the country, upending years of Chinese political and economic efforts.⁹⁷ Emergence disrupts the most well-laid plans. Even as the Chinese calculus extends decades and across every corner of the globe, shi is immeasurable and can refract actions across an endless array of potential outcomes.

Third, the Chinese are not monolithically tied to their own historic literature. One of the most well-known Chinese stratagems, which underpins their concepts of gray-zone operations, is “a victorious army only enters battle after having first won the victory, while the defeated army only seeks victory after having first entered the fray.”⁹⁸ The clash at Galwan may have represented an army battling before winning. Emergence can strike when China’s fondness for gray-zone actions yields to the hard-liners’ desire to battle. In such a scenario, perspectives and resources from interagency and multinational partners are crucial to holistically analyzing the situation and forming an appropriate response. Just as too passive a response could undermine the confidence of partners, too strong of a response may unnerve them. Too passive may feed subsequent Chinese gray-zone actions. Too strong may embolden resolve.

The final lesson is that China’s gray-zone system has vulnerabilities. Targeting the geopolitical, economic, cyber, information, or military nodes can undermine that system. An approach spanning horizontally across these dimensions and vertically at the international, bilateral, and grassroots levels can erode it. But to decouple these actions from their objectives, the approach must also be synchronized across time and space and nested in purpose. Just as gray-zone actions should not be viewed in isolation, their counters should not be planned in isolation. A whole-of-government construct must underpin a counter-gray-zone strategy in such a way that detailed actions, reactions, and counteractions utilize the resources of the U.S. joint force, interagency, partners, and allies. Even when the military does not lead such an approach, it must operate in concert with the other elements of national power to both maximize effectiveness and appropriately adjust to changing conditions.

For the United States to apply these lessons requires an adjustment to its own system. The United States, with its exquisite capabilities, ready force, expansive economy, and network of allies and partners, has the tools available to counter gray-zone operations. According to Hal Brands, however, “it is not simply a matter of resources. It is a matter of orienting ourselves organizationally and conceptually to the challenge.”⁹⁹ This case, alongside Chinese actions globally, demonstrates the significance of the challenge. The 2022 U.S.

National Security Strategy states that in terms of competition with the PRC, “the next ten years will be the decisive decade. We stand now at the inflection point, where the choices we make and the priorities we pursue today will set us on a course that determines our competitive position long into the future.”¹⁰⁰

Those choices must be informed by a holistic understanding of the Chinese approach to war—from wholesale use of force to peacetime use of force. Their system thrives against disjointed allies, circumspect governments, isolated institutions, and uninformed populations. Before Galwan, India’s reluctance to commit to regional partnerships, careful maintenance of Sino-trade ties, complex political discourse, and diverse demographics theoretically presented the Chinese an ideal operational environment for gray-zone operations. Galwan changed that environment. Indian passions were inflamed, and strategic vulnerabilities were identified and hardened. According to a former senior Indian security official, the border clashes marked a “very fundamental change” that drove revisions in India’s “whole policy and discourse around China.”¹⁰¹ Given the scope and scale of China’s system, the adjustment to the U.S. system should also be fundamental.

The United States is capable of fundamental change. In 1986, the United States passed the Goldwater-Nichols Act after Operation Eagle Claw in Iran and Operation Urgent Fury in Granada exposed the military’s inability to collectively form a unified joint force.¹⁰² The congressional act fundamentally reshaped the Department of Defense’s (DOD) organizational structure and culture from the previous system established by the 1947 National Security Act. Before the Packard Commission exposed the depth of the problem, many in the services were calling for change.¹⁰³ However, history shows that militaries, bureaucracies, and governments often possess organizational inertia that stifles change. Even when the environment demands adaptation, social impetuses present barriers.¹⁰⁴ “Orienting organizationally and conceptually” must be a collective process among the DOD and every other component of the U.S. government that holds a tool or resource for countering China’s gray-zone strategy.

This collective process could start with the gaps presented by the United States’ own geopolitical construct. The U.S. Unified Campaign Plan drew the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s area of responsibility to

include thirty-six countries, including the most populous nation in the world (China), the largest democracy (India), and a tenth of the fourteenth smallest nations in the world.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile the State Department draws its regional bureaus to oversee embassies and consulates and coordinate regional issues. These include the Bureaus of Near Eastern Affairs, African Affairs, and South and Central Asian Affairs.¹⁰⁶ This means in the IOR there are three combatant commands and four regional bureaus. Given the first lesson from Galwan, this geographic misalignment between the State Department and DOD presents seams for China's global gray-zone system to exploit.

It also prevents the United States from capitalizing on the second lesson. While China may be constrained from a rigorous system-of-systems approach, the United States suffers a systems-in-systems problem. In the late 1980s, John Boyd highlighted that horizontal command channels, present multiple centers of gravity.¹⁰⁷ Targeting these horizontal command channels can lead to "non-cooperative centers of gravity," causing "strategic paralysis."¹⁰⁸ However, "non-cooperative centers of gravity" can develop organically. A horizontal system that delineates by government function and geographical alignment becomes fraught with constraints. Competition for resources, institutional heuristics, organization specific language, and fragmented discourse arise naturally. These bureaucratic barriers, wedged into a system that strives for whole-of-government in an environment that demands unity of action, fractures the strategic approach. The third lesson arises from humans breaking from the confines of an authority. Inversely, humans can work against each other in a

disjunctive system. In the gray zone, this noncooperation presents strategic targets.

Fundamental change is required to apply the final lesson and forge an adaptable whole-of-government approach to exploit the vulnerabilities of the Chinese gray-zone system. Many have offered solutions. These range from concepts of regionally based joint interagency commands to dissolving geographical combatant commands and reassigning military engagement missions to interagency leads or the joint staff.¹⁰⁹ Aligning to the threat offers another model. This would involve the iterative inputs from strategic documents to regularly guide the ratio of diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities against the threat. In China's case, it would allow the United States to regularly calibrate its system against China's gray-zone system. Aligning against purpose, rather than geography and function, would also address the institutional stove-piping that presents "non-cooperative centers of gravity."¹¹⁰ Enhancing education, either through a model such as the professional military education or utilizing private institutions, would further develop cultural connective tissue amongst departments and agencies.

Like the Packard Commission and Goldwater-Nichols Act, a collective analysis and subsequent synthesis of the current system must be driven from the highest levels of the U.S. government. This process requires academic, social, and bureaucratic drivers—processes which are themselves gray-zone targets. While a bloody clash on some disputed frontier may spur collective action in the United States, the Chinese have already learned from Galwan. Time is of the essence. ■

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