

A Game of Battleship: Deciphering American and Chinese activities in the South China Sea and the Asia-Pacific Region

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In 2009, the People's Republic of China (Beijing) announced its reclamation of the South China Sea as per its proposed 'nine-dash line' argument. To further solidify its territorial claim over the region, Beijing initiated naval patrols, intimidated foreign investments in the region (mainly oil) and converted coral-reefs into militarised artificial islands. Their regional activities have undoubtedly unsettled several South East Asian states – despite the existence of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Increased expansionist activities attributive to Beijing have been argued to present an assertive stance towards 'pursuing coercive diplomacy against other claimant states'. The broad variety of political narratives have all but muddled the reality behind regional tensions. Therefore, this article aims to examine the scenario through multiple dimensions to develop *objective* perspectives which could assist better risk-assessments and policies. To achieve this, we explore three dimensions of legal, communicative and strategic foundations guiding the unfolding of events in the South China Sea. Collectively, these elements are gradually influencing the maritime dynamics within the greater Asia-Pacific region.

First, Arthur Laudrain explores Chinese expansionism into the region and more specifically its claims over the nine-dash line. He explores the possible consequences of the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, while China's rejects the jurisdiction of the Court and the US advocates Laws of the Sea principles through its Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPs). By reviewing the diplomatic efforts initiated by China in order to degrade the ruling's consequences, this paper advocates that the 'lawfare strategy' of weak Nations will probably not affect significantly the outcome of the dispute in the long run.

Second, Lincoln Pigman calls attention to the oft-neglected dimension of strategic communications, the art of making state messages match state interests. Beyond the build-up of naval capabilities, a war of words and signals is taking place between Beijing and Washington, a conflict in which narratives and appeals to audiences near and far substitute bullets and bombs. From the strategic implications of 'Three Warfares' to the limitations of freedom of navigation operations, stratcom pervades the South China Sea dispute, ubiquitous but invisible. Thirdly, Cheng Lai Ki, examines the strategies utilised by America and Beijing in their 'tug-o-war' for maritime and naval primacy in the region. Historically, several Southeast Asian states have participated in multilateral military exercises reinforcing American primacy within the region (i.e. Exercise Iron Fist). However, Beijing has also adopted similar strategies, primarily through industrial incentives. Their strategic methods of intelligence gathering arguably have supported several activities in the region.

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China and International Legal Norms

Arthur Laudrain

The tensions in the East and South China Sea translate in a number of ways in the legal domain. Both the People's Republic of China and the United States of America are known for their relative reluctance towards international law, especially some of its binding processes. The case of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and China's 'nine-dash' line is one of the most prominent examples. Going through the different means of peaceful settlement of disputes in the context of political tensions in the China Sea, this paper will argue that binding

legal mechanisms will probably not put an end to the tensions we currently witness.

UNCLOS: the Legal Bedrock of Nation's Relations at Sea

The UNCLOS is a founding treaty in the relationships between Nations, their neighbours and maritime borders. It is thus at the centre of current territorial disputes in the East and South China Sea. Some of the major outcomes of a decade of negotiations (1973-1982) are the birth of territorial waters (12 nautical miles from the baseline) and exclusive economic zone (EEZ, 200 nautical miles). The first gives full sovereignty to the coastal State, while the latter grants exclusive exploitation rights to all natural resources, including on the continental shelf.

In this context, ownership of small islands and archipelagos becomes of tremendous importance, since it may also redefine sovereignty and economic rights of a country on thousands of square miles. Most importantly, the treaty also sets a *Permanent Court of Arbitration*, hereafter referred to as the Court, whose aim is to settle disputes regarding the interpretation of the convention. However, interpretations of the law and inconsistencies in the public stance of some parties such as China and the U.S. entertain a discourse of double-standard towards international law.

While China signed and ratified the treaty, Article 60 clearly states artificial islands do not qualify as a legitimate way to claim a change in territorial, contiguous, EEZ or continental shelf boundaries. China nevertheless claims some of the landmasses do qualify, as they are located on a natural reef, or rock. Unsurprisingly, this position is highly litigious. First, because it is widely recognised among scholars, beyond the literal reading of Article 60, that artificial islands '« do not generate maritime entitlements' ». Second, and most of all, because international tribunals usually rule on the state of facts before the crystallisation of the dispute. In other words, a ruling would be based on the state of facts before China initiated its intensive artificial islands policy.

In the meantime, the U.S. government assured

it will follow UNCLOS regulations as international customary law but refused to sign the treaty, thus denying any jurisdiction to the Court on its own potential disputes.

The Philippines's Lawfare Strategy: the Dilemma of Binding yet Hardly Enforceable Law

China's historic claim over the 'nine-dash line' area, representing a vast part of the East China Sea, was challenged by the Philippines, which brought a case to the Court of Arbitration.

In December 2014, the Court declared it had jurisdiction over most of the contentious points brought by the Philippines. Less than a year later, the People's Republic of China responded by refusing to recognise this first ruling, calling any of its conclusions *null and void* and a wrongful use of the Charter. In a clear violation of its Article 288, China declared it will further reject any similar unilateral move, but would welcome negotiations and consultations.

Further refusing to abide by the law may cause a political cost to China's foreign policy, especially its image of a peace promotor, which seems of increasing importance in light of the country's involvement in UN peace-keeping missions, for instance in the African continent. As Jonathan Miller of the International Bar Association pointed out, « Beijing might be able to protest the decision but it cannot ignore it altogether and its response has repercussions for its international reputation ». On the other side, there is the risk that, as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling in *USA v. Nicaragua* lead the U.S. to abandon the ICJ's mandatory jurisdiction, the case brought by the Philippines may antagonize China towards international tribunals, further fragilising the binding mechanisms of dispute settlement in all domains.

This first of the Court's rulings only considered the jurisdiction of the Court, but it already highlighted the sensitivity of the issue. The rejection of the Court's jurisdiction by China did however not deny it a final ruling. Deemed '« a landmark for international law as a force in geopolitics'», it was released in June 2016 and rebuked most of China's claims. However,

whether this ruling will have a significant long-term impact on the tensions in the region is debated. Indeed, the real question of the dispute was removed from the Court's consideration, since it is expressly prohibited from ruling on territorial disputes as such by Articles 15, 74 and 83. The Court's power rather lies in interpreting what may qualify as a legitimate change in boundaries, not to whom the territory belongs.

Messaging and Multilateral Diplomacy: International Law in Itself Is Insufficient

Even if China's public stance was to dismiss entirely the Court, its jurisdiction and its ruling, a study by Lawfare contributors demonstrates that the country has taken slight, targeted steps to ease down some points of tension with the Philippines. According to this study, out of the 15 elements included in the ruling, China was in September 2016 violating four of them. In October of the same year, China seemed to withdraw its vessels, either from the Coastguard or Navy, from the Scarborough Shoal. It will be important to keep monitoring any further modification in the country's behaviour, and to assess whether they can be identified as long term trends. Indeed, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) released a satellite analysis the same month, showing access to the Shoal was still restricted. Although Filipino fishermen were now able to remain "just outside" of the Shoal, Chinese vessels were still in a position of blockade.

China has not abandoned its claims on other islands, neither has it slowed its plans of islands militarisation. On March 29th 2017, the CSIS spotted what appeared to be a J-11 fighter stationed on Woody Island. The same week, President Duterte of the Philippines announced his country would reciprocate and deploy armed units on some of its own islands. According to local press reports, Filipino troops arrived in May 2017 on the Pag-asa (Thitu) island, in the Spratley. They are likely to start infrastructure improvements in the summer of the same year, despite strong opposition from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Indeed, Chinese diplomacy is another means of

pressure of the country, and a way to evade the consequences of the Court's judgement. On both unilateral and multilateral fronts, China seems to have made significant progress. The statement of the ASEAN summit of early May 2017 did not mention the Court ruling, and barely made a reference to the importance of peace in the region. As of the United States, the U.S. Navy declared its intention to pursue more aggressive Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in waters claimed by China, by not following innocent passage procedure but normal (e.g. military) operations instead. However, this was before the election of Donald Trump, and the new President's policy towards the country remains to crystallise. An anonymous source reported by Reuters confirmed on May 24th that a U.S. destroyer performed a FONOP a few days earlier by the Mischief Reef in the Spratly, which would be the first FONOP under the Trump administration. The source also confirmed it was the first FONOP targeting a territory concerned by the Court's ruling. Despite this significant signal, Trump's focus these past few months appears to have been North Korea and its nuclear proliferation programme. This was the main topic of the Trump – Jinping meeting at Mar A Lago. Given China's perceived or real influence on this issue, President Trump may be willing to make some concessions, as it did by refusing to coin China a currency manipulator, despite this being a campaign trail promise. The two countries instead signed mid-May a trade agreement opening Chinese financial institutions to the U.S. market, *inter alia*. Such U-turn from the Trump administration should improve Beijing's disposition to cooperate on the North Korea issue, to the detriment of upholding the rule of law in the China Sea.

The lawfare strategy initiated by the Philippines may have a tangible yet limited impact on China's behaviour. On this specific case, China's diplomatic efforts supported by strong economic ties may prove stronger than a hardly enforceable piece of law. This said, it is tremendously important that the international community persists in advocating a rule-of-law based international order. Court rulings and FONOPs-like military messaging will contribute in the long run to densify the corpus

of law, including customs.

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Strategic Communications

Lincoln Pigman

In the South China Sea, victory demands more than just naval superiority. Triumphant is the state with a compelling strategic narrative that legitimates one's own behaviour while casting suspicion upon, and constraining, that of the enemy. The art of crafting a potent state narrative, constructed out of gestures, signals, and messages, is referred to as strategic communications, or stratcom.

Once the domain of corporations, stratcom is now a key concern of governments. The United States (US) Department of Defense defines stratcom as 'focused [state] efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favourable for the advancement of ... government interests, policies, and products synchronised with the actions of all instruments of national power'. In other words, stratcom involves coordinating state messages, whether articulated through statements or actions, with policy objectives and strategic interests. Good stratcom wins hearts and minds, and poor stratcom turns them against one's cause.

Stratcom's importance in contemporary conflict is ubiquitous, yet unseen. Russia's 'information warfare blitzkrieg' has forced its rivals in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to not only bolster conventional defences, but also devise narratives that counter the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns. In Afghanistan, King's scholar David Betz attributes the war's protraction to the International Security Assistance Force's 'failure to communicate ... purpose ... resolve ... and what success will look like'. Even non-state actors have undertaken extensive stratcom efforts. On Facebook, Twitter, and encrypted instant messaging apps, Islamic State's recruitment and propaganda activities have involved the concerted promotion of the group's territorial gains in Iraq and Syria and its terrorist attacks abroad, earning it the title of 'digital caliphate.'

Lessons from the South China Sea Dispute

The ongoing South China Sea dispute is no exception. In fact, China's strategy of claiming contested islands and waters appears to rely on a successful stratcom effort. As part of a doctrine of 'Three Warfares', which has featured prominently in Chinese strategic literature since 2003, Beijing has committed itself to waging 'public opinion warfare'. It involves disseminating narratives favourable to the *raison d'état* that decisively influence the views of targeted audiences. The Nine-Dash Line, an informal diplomatic *communiqué* outlining one version of China's territorial claims, serves as an excellent example of such a narrative, convincing uncritical observers that China's claims cover most of the South China Sea. By exaggerating the scale of its claims, China can later seem open to compromise when moderating its demands and claiming the very territory it actually sought in the first place.

With China's enemies disoriented into strategic impotence, public opinion warfare allows Beijing to 'undermine international institutions, change borders, and subvert global media, all without firing a shot'. Adopting an approach that Sun Tzu would approve of, China seeks to establish *de facto* territorial control of the South China Sea by inducing indecision among rival governments: at worst, through a barrage of disinformation, at best, through the building of a pro-China consensus that renders moot the legality of Beijing's claims, in question after the ruling of the Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016.

Although its land reclamation activities have met opposition from various actors, on unilateral and multilateral bases—the United States and the Association of South East Asian Nations, for example—China is not without its allies. However irresolute their statements of support, Russia, Cambodia, Brunei, and Laos have nonetheless provided China with ammunition in its war of rhetoric with the United States, insulating it from accusations of unilateralism. China's case also benefits from the fact that other regional actors currently pursue similar land reclamation policies, allowing China to frame its actions as no more transgressive than those of its neighbours.

Freedom of Navigation Operations

Cue US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), which serve to undermine China's claims in the South China Sea by visibly reasserting – strategically communicating – the sea's status as 'part of the global commons governed by international law'. Sailing destroyers in disputed waters conveys not only America's naval capabilities, but also the baselessness of China's claims – were the contested areas truly China's, American vessels would not be sailing through them. Yet, in addition to China's aforementioned sources of legitimacy, out of reach of the FONOP, the United States must also account for other obstacles. In particular, the United States has yet to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the very agreement invoked in Washington's condemnations of Beijing's activities in the South China Sea. Although American policy largely adheres to its terms, the consequences of ceding maritime sovereignty to the international community continues to discourage the Senate, affording the United States flexibility in its observance of UNCLOS while undermining its invocations of the agreement in disputes with China.

However, beyond the implications of advocating an agreement that one has yet to ratify, the United States also incurs great risk in its adoption of FONOPs as the face of stratcom efforts in the South China Sea. After all, although Washington and its regional allies have international law – ratified or not – on their side, testing Beijing's resolve and calling its bluff has the potential to result in military conflict. China's acceptance of the risk of international isolation and condemnation over its land reclamation activities reflects the South China Sea's status as a vital interest to Xi Jinping's government, one for which it may be willing to go to war.

Strictly speaking, stratcom is little more than the clear yet calculated articulation of the national interest: matching words and actions and means and ends. Nonetheless, stratcom's ability to shape the outcome of any conflict or confrontation demands that strategists account for it no less than naval capabilities. Who the

South China Sea will belong to at the end of the day will not be decided by destroyers alone, but also their incorporation into a winning strategic narrative: one that undermines rival claims, generates support for one's own, and puts to rest the contest of wills at the heart of international insecurity today.

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Tug-O-War by Proxy

Cheng Lai Ki

Military historian Max Boot explores the technological developments within warfare throughout mankind in his book *War Made New*. His research revealed that mankind has consistently developed technologies increasing distances from the battlefield. However, these strategies are often plagued with significant political ramifications. Thus, states have turned to alternative methodologies to cultivate similar levels of operational dominance, while maintaining political distance and clarity. International collaboration could be considered as conventional geopolitics. However, the utilisation of weaker states to project a presence for political advantage is equivalent to deploying organic or third-party assets, and broadly categorical under 'proxy' strategies. Aside from the legal and political tensions in the South China Sea, both the America and Beijing have continuously exerted their presence in the region through various *proxy* means in a game of *tug-o-war*. The following explores the various *proxy* strategies characteristic of Sino-American tensions over the South China Sea.

American Hardware

In 2014, anti-Chinese protests erupted in Vietnam stimulated by the overtaking of oil-rigs during the Haiyang Shiyou 981 Standoff, affirming the intrinsic economical nature of regional Chinese objectives. Contrastingly, American activity has been intrinsically naval. Centralised around bilateral operations involving anti-piracy and promoting security. Although the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in October 2012 conducted by the USS Lassen around the Spratly Islands can viewed as a strategic shift, it

cannot be forgotten that such operations have been around since 1979.

Lacking the geographical edge, America depends on routine naval transits and multilateral maritime operations to maintain an almost continuous primacy. Mainly through displays of technological capabilities by its army, navy and air-force – a strategy deeply engrained in its military history. Perhaps possessing the largest operational budget globally, the American military has developed several technological capabilities deployable into aerial and maritime domains. This include aerial surveillance operations that essentially supports its FONOPs. In May 2015, its Global Hawk long-range surveillance platforms deployed into the region were inhibited by Chinese forces stationed near the Spratly Islands – ‘where China is building military facilities on Fiery Cross Reef’. Later in December, P8 Poseidon spy planes were deployed from Singapore, residing along the geographical outskirts of the disputed territories. Continuing along the tangent of operations thus far, a strategy of *containment by proxy* is evident.

Regional technological strategies of the Americans are not solely centralised on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles but also Unmanned Naval Platforms – such as its Anti-Submarine Warfare Continuous Trail Unmanned Vessel (ACTUV). Unmanned platforms (or drones) have become significantly integrated into American security operations. The ACTUV is one of multiple programs undergoing development and deployment trials. Aerial platforms such as the X-47B unmanned aircraft and the MQ-8 Fire Scout are two platforms within America's growing intelligence and strike arsenal. U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter mentioned the need for ‘new undersea drones in multiple sizes and diverse payloads that can...operate...where manned subs cannot’.

America's regional strategy has not shifted away from conventional intelligence gathering and naval-diplomacy but have gradually incorporated ‘proxy’ means of unmanned platforms – could the same be said of Chinese strategies for the region?

Chinese Leverage

Despite steadily growing technological advancements, the Chinese military and navy arguably still lacks ‘combat-experience’ in comparison to their American counterparts. However, despite the deployment of military ordinances and naval platforms into the South China Sea, Beijing has alternatively employed other strategies to develop strategic advantage and political power.

Proxy through Economy

Exclusionary of possessing a geographical advantage in the region – fundamentally due to the position of Hainan Island – Beijing has been steadily expanding its regional presence at a much slower rate in comparison to the Americans. Being a global industrial power, Beijing has focused international expansion through establishing close economic but subliminally military ties. Thus, cultivating defensive power through economic proxies.

Unveiled around 2013, Beijing's ‘One Belt One Road’ (1B1R) economic strategy has steadily been brought to fruition. The 1B1R BRI strategy possess five major objectives ‘within a broad framework of connectivity and cooperation: policy coordination; facilities connectivity; unimpeded trade; financial integration; and people to people bonds’. The strategy possesses several calling points along China's ancestorist silk-road that stretches from China and throughout the Middle-East and unto Europe. In addition, the 1B1R BRI strategy also possesses a maritime component calling at ports in South East Asia, Central Asia, South Africa and the Mediterranean. The argument is made that Beijing utilised its industrial attractiveness as a “‘charm offensive” to support subsequent naval establishments in various participating nations (i.e. Djibouti and Nairobi). For example, Beijing's first overseas naval base in Djibouti strategically resides at a naval choke point, and can enable maritime logistics into the Indian Ocean. However, the vagueness of the term ‘logistics’, that could mean everything from fuel to weaponry.

Beijing has also invested significantly into supporting critical infrastructure development.

In 2016, China has invested in a \$5.5bn high-speed rail project in Indonesia – another port on its 1B1R BRI strategy. This investment is not just industrial but also political, as it limits the degree of backlash originating from Indonesia. Regardless, Beijing's industrial charm allows them to convert industrial expansionism into a 'proxy' for military expansion.

Proxy through Civilians

An element perhaps adapted from its communistic roots, propaganda and public appearance are insatiably important to Beijing. Ergo, most of its conventional military, industrial and expansionist activities are meticulously controlled to prevent manifestation of politically detrimental elements. Within the contexts of the disputed islands, Beijing steadily publishes propaganda revealing its military amongst newly constructed island facilities – a conventional expansionist media strategy.

American naval deployments into the South China Sea generates a continuous (obvious) militarised regional presence. Contrastingly, Beijing adopted classic human-intelligences (HUMINT) strategies by incorporating civilians into its maritime intelligence operations. According to Michael Herman, civilians are of valuable information sources as they provide context to collected information. Beijing has been 'using large numbers of irregular maritime militias, dubbed "little blue men", [to] expand its control over an increasingly large area' within the region. These little blue men are formed of fishing vessels, commanded by former naval officers and equipped with geolocation devices for reactive operations with the Chinese Coast Guard. Although this manoeuvre by Beijing ultimately possesses an intelligence purpose, it cannot be forgotten that these are still civilian assets. Protective institutions within international law makes this ingenuous. 'proxy' strategy difficult to counter – possessing an element akin to human-shields. These strategies can be traced back to Sun Tzu's Art of War and more recently, the 2013 publication of Science and Military Strategy from China's War College.

The consistent tug-o-war between America and

China for operational legitimacy in the South China Sea has stimulated development of 'proxy' strategies by both nations. The Americans have centralised their efforts into development, integration and deployment of unmanned platforms alongside traditional maritime diplomacy. Contrastingly, Beijing has utilised its industrial expansionist prowess and civilian militia to maintain presence in the region.

Proxy through Technology

A more recent application of China's *proxy* strategy is their recent increased digital espionage activity cannot be ignored in this discussion. The most iconic of which was the NanHaiShu Advanced Persistent Threat identified on Philippine government servers after the ruling from the Court of Arbitration on the South China Sea being against the favour of China. Research from Finnish Cyber Security Firm, F-Secure identified that the digital intrusion was traced back to 2014 and the Permanent Court of Arbitration Case between The Philippines and China.

There is little doubt about China's increasingly advanced capabilities of cyber espionage and electronic warfare over the last few years. According to research by Lindsey, Cheung, and Reveron, China has invested significant amount of national resources into cultivating an extensive civil-military community to support their various digital and electronic operations. Evident from Chinese Information and Network Warfare Militias, and the establishment of the 2010 People's Liberation Army Information Assurance Base. Regardless, as more of the world enters the digital-era, China has been progressively increasing its civil-military integration within technology communities (corporations and academia) to strengthen their cyber militias, otherwise *proxy through technology*.

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Conclusions

This paper has examined three elements mapping the tensions in the South China Sea. First, the reluctance of powerful nations

towards binding principles of international law is not new, and the territorial disputes in the East and South China Sea are just another example of this ambiguous relationship between international law and strong States. As it happened with *Nicaragua v. U.S.* in the case of the ICJ, the arbitration may stiffen and antagonise China further with UNCLOS and binding principles of international law. This said, it is tremendously important that the international community persists in advocating a rule-of-law based order.

Second, stratcom efforts—those of China and the United States in particular—have been analysed in depth. Beijing's attempts to legitimise land reclamation policies all aim at the outcome of securing Chinese control of the South China Sea, but involve a variety of methods: disorienting targeted audiences into uncertainty over the scale of Chinese territorial claims; manipulating international law to present itself as observant of international conventions; deflecting accusations of unilateralism with the support of international allies; and highlighting the land reclamation activities of other regional actors, as if to underline China's adherence to regional norms. The U.S. has not been idle, conducting FONOPs to undercut Chinese claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea. Yet the success of U.S. strategic communications is undermined by Washington's failure to ratify UNCLOS, an issue that has received inadequate attention among American decision-makers. So long as the U.S. fails to completely commit to a stratcom approach, stopping short of formalising the international principles it demands China observes, FONOPs will remain a half-measure, needlessly risking a great power conflict.

Third, this paper has examined the various 'proxy' methods employed for both power and presence in the South China Sea. Given its pre-existing geographical presence in the region through multi-lateral exercises and operations, the United States can (and has) easily deploy large amounts of military units into the region. To maintain regional presence, shifts in strategy towards the increased utilisation of unmanned ordnances aerial and naval platforms. Contrastingly, despite gradual modernisation,

Beijing has still aims to retain a meticulously crafted global image. As such, it has fundamentally deployed its navy and military for diplomatic (intelligence) and fortification purposes. However, it also employs alternatives such as controlling public opinion and the incorporation of third-party 'proxies' – supported by former naval specialists. The utilisation of civilian militias has allowed Beijing to develop a broad intelligence and operational network without the deployment of combative ordnances. This further applies to the emergence of digital technologies modernizing most of the region, and China's increasingly effective cyber capabilities to conduct malicious digital operations. However, this strategy essentially creates a legal conundrum allowing the justified deployment of its naval units for protective purposes.

The tension in the South China Sea is a complex scenario requiring a strategy that can effectively balance relevant security, political, economic, social, and legal elements. Unlike other regions suffering from similar political-security tensions, the current scenario involves several diverse political and economic priorities—as identified by Arthur. Whilst legislative avenues might provide weaker states some degree of retribution, it's effects are nullified by states who disagree with its outcome. In a world dominated by narratives, startcom has become more important than ever. However, *their* effectiveness is also undermined by the inability of participating states to comply with broader narratives—similar to legislative avenues. The limited effectiveness of these systems subsequently lead governments to adopt alternative *proxy* strategies to cultivate political and military power from the shadows. This allows them to maintain a certain surface political image, whilst coordinating potentially malicious operations which could jeopardize diplomatic primacy or influence within a region.

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