

White Hulls, Gray Zones: China, Russia, and a Habituated World

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Pale hulls painted with “China Coast Guard” cut the waters [around Taiwan](#), the Philippines, [near Alaska](#), and across the deep blue of the Pacific. Such actions are not, however, common patrols so much as sublimated aggression to which the world has become habituated.

Overt invasions, military aggression, and acts of war are unacceptable in today’s world order. Such actions undermine the legitimacy of foreign policy, leaving only the exercise of power. To preserve at least some international legitimacy, nations therefore pursue aggression in a more undeclared manner. China and Russia best exemplify this in their maritime operations. [The coordination of these powers](#) in this aggressive grey-zone policy reflects a larger shift in how the world applies legitimacy and force.

The China Coast Guard (CCG) and the Border Service of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) function primarily as domestic forces, tasked with serving state security and sovereignty, while upholding legal precedents through their internal authority. Their actions, however, have been less about policing than about perpetration. In 2018, the CCG shifted its official status from the People’s Armed Police to the [Central Military Commission](#), giving it authority to enforce laws in areas under Chinese jurisdiction that [statutes do not clearly define](#). It is [authorized to use all necessary means](#) to prevent any infringements of sovereignty or jurisdiction. As a result, it acts like a military force in the region. Since 2023, it has expanded its operations, reaching as far as the Aleutian Islands and the [waters around Alaska](#).

The following year, [Chinese Coast Guard Regulation No. 3](#) was implemented, allowing the detention of foreign nationals suspected of border violations and the detention of ships in Chinese territorial waters. The [USINDOPACOM legal](#) team assessed this development as the first document permitting CCG detention and emphasized the vagueness of the territory in question. In February 2026, CCG activity in the Taiwan Strait increased, underscoring, on the law’s fifth anniversary, [“institutionalized control](#) in sensitive maritime areas.” CCG deployments spiked, reaching [933 ship-days](#) in the first six months of 2026. The following months were no less eventful, with CCG operations [expanding east](#) of the main Taiwan island and into [outlying islands](#).

Additionally, 2026 saw striking aggression in both diplomacy and physical action between China and the Philippines, as CCG cutters [blockaded](#) Philippine resupply ships to the grounded military outpost BRP Sierra Madre in September 2026. This followed high diplomatic tensions preceding [Chinese claims](#) to the Batanes and surrounding waters, increased military presence and operations, including an incident in which Chinese personnel [struck a Filipino](#) sailor with a baton, as well as the [persistent harassment](#) of fishing boats by the CCG. Japan Coast Guard data records Chinese vessel activity in the Senkakus’ region on [357 of 365 days](#) in 2025, with a constant presence [spanning 335 days](#), from November 2024 to October 2025, with over [1,300 vessels](#) recorded in the region. [Japan’s Naha](#) Coast Guard director said Chinese vessels have

grown increasingly aggressive, while Japan has not acted to deter them, given that China operates more [than twice as many](#) coast guard vessels as Japan and is more heavily armed. Such aggressive actions pose clear threats that require a response; however, the long, slow build-up of involvement has become habitual.

Russia's gray-zone aggression tactics parallel those of China, particularly around the Baltic and the Gulf of Finland, as well as in the Pacific. [Japan Coast Guard](#) figures from 2006 cite Japanese boats and crews seized near Hokkaido, 30 of which occurred between 1994 and 2005, including a fisherman injured by Russian Coast Guard fire. The legal frameworks established in the case of China are reflected in Russia as well, as the [2024 Defense Ministry decree](#) proposed revising baselines that bind Russia's territorial limits in the Gulf of Finland and Kaliningrad. Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania objected. Days later, Russian border guards removed nearly half of the [navigation buoys](#) established by Estonia, an act the EU deemed a hybrid action by Moscow. In May 2026, the head of the [FSB Border Service](#) accused Estonia of shifting away from agreements regarding Lake Peipus and the Narva River, a framing used to justify Russian actions as defensive rather than aggressive. When Estonia tried to halt the shadow-fleet tanker [Jaguar](#), Russia responded with a fighter jet. Russia then detained ships, such as the Greek Green Admire, as it left the Estonian Sillamäe port.

On land and on the river, the border service role is clearer. A Russian coast guard cutter flew a [Wagner banner](#) on the Narva in early November 2025, and on December 17, 2025, three Russian border guards entered Estonian territory near the breakwater where the Narva meets Lake Peipus for about 20 minutes; Estonia's interior minister said it was unclear whether the incursion was intentional. This year, the FSB also imposed temporary restrictions on movement, hunting, and river access along a five-kilometer [strip](#) on its side of the border, citing frontier security, through September 2026.

Overall, Russia and China have acted in gray-zone regions using aggressive tactics that skirt overt aggression, while projecting power in international waters. They have justified these maritime actions under legal, albeit deliberately vague, frameworks, ultimately expanding not only Russia's and China's reach but also their justification for force.

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