

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

**“The Gray Zone on a Black-and-White Board: A
Discussion with Kath Hicks”**

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Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to The Asia Chessboard, the podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Ben Rimland: Mike is joined by Dr. Kath Hicks, Henry Kissinger Chair, Senior Vice President, and Director of the International Security Program at CSIS, for a discussion of how "gray zone" tactics factor into grand strategy in Asia. In unpacking the effect of gray zone tactics on strategy, Mike and Kath begin by defining the parameters of gray zone tactics and the domains in which they are most effective. With these assumptions in mind, what will the knock-on effects of gray zone tactics be on theories of coercion, victory, and defense planning in Asia? What parts of the U.S. government have historically been most effective at adapting to gray zone competition? Mike and Kath further discuss Kath's journey through the Department of Defense and her advice for young women hoping to become defense professionals.

Mike: Welcome back to The Asia Chessboard. I'm here with my friend and colleague, Kath Hicks, Senior Vice President at CSIS. She leads the International Security Program and has a distinguished career in government at the highest levels of policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and continues to be called upon from both sides of the aisle to explain defense policy, and specifically, one of the topics we'll talk about today, gray zone coercion, which I'll come back to in a moment.

Mike: But Kath, I want to start as we do with many of our guests by asking you how you got into the national security business. A lot of our listeners would like to grow up to be Kath Hicks. What's your advice? How do you explain how you got here?

Kath Hicks: Sure. Well first, thanks Mike for having me on. It's funny, I often say that career trajectories can look like a straight line only in retrospect and so it certainly didn't, it felt like I sort of fell into the things I ended up doing, but they're going to sound a little more self directed. I grew up in a military family. I graduated college at the time the Berlin Wall was coming down and the Soviet Union was disintegrating. And foreign and security policy were sort of, I think, in the blood. Public service was definitely in the blood in my family. A lot of members of the military in my family.

Mike: Navy right, your family? Yeah.

Kath Hicks: Navy and Marine Corps family. My father was in the Navy. And so when I was in graduate school, which I did right out of college and in national security affairs, public policy with the national security affairs concentration, I applied for what was then called the Presidential Management Internship Program, which is now the Presidential Management Fellows Program. I was accepted into that and once you get accepted, you look at different parts of the government to work in

and I knew right away that I wanted to try to work in the Office of Secretary of Defense.

Kath Hicks: I am not of the Kennedy generation, but my family is, if you will. And we definitely had that spirit of public service and I wanted to be part of that best and brightest generation that goes into public service. And so I was lucky enough to go into the Office of Secretary of Defense. I started there at the age of 23. I worked as a career person, a decent length of time, about 13 years, left the career civil service at the senior executive level, went to CSIS actually to try to finish up my dissertation, finished my dissertation really at the end of that time. And really once I was back in the department, because surprisingly to me, I was only out of government for about two and a half years before I went back in as a political point in the Obama administration.

Kath Hicks: So that's sort of how I got here. I guess my advice has always been to people that they should be focused first and foremost on what makes them happy, what drives them, what their passion is. And as you hopefully can tell, mine was really public service and working on issues of substance. And I've been really lucky in my career, both here at CSIS and in DOD to be able to do that.

Mike: What was the master's degree in and what was your dissertation on? That was MIT, right?

Kath Hicks: My PhD is MIT and my dissertation was on civil military relations generally, and it was on why the instances and conditions under which civilian leaders in the United States choose military instruments for emerging national security threats and under what conditions they choose civilian instruments.

Mike: Who'd you study under at MIT?

Kath Hicks: I studied under a lot of people. My dissertation committee chair is Charles Stewart. Charles is an Americanist. And he was fantastic, because my dissertation really brought in quite a bit on the congressional literature of decision making, as well as the executive branch decision making. I also studied foremost with Harvey Sapolsky. He's the one who brought me to MIT. He's just a brilliant writer and funny guy and orthogonal thinker and really sort of stretches you in all kinds of ways. And obviously worked under Barry Posen and others for my classwork.

Mike: So I tell people, thinking about PhDs that you don't generally do a PhD to get a job in government.

Kath Hicks: No.

Mike: You do it and you only survive it if you're passionate about the topic.

Kath Hicks: Absolutely.

- Mike: Which you obviously were, but did you find it useful when you were in government? Did the reality of government conform with what you'd studied and research?
- Kath Hicks: I found it helpful to have both pieces. I have always liked having the theoretical underpinnings and the sense of the historical case study work that you necessarily do when you're doing political science on international relations. And even the political philosophy piece I think is really helpful to have that sort of that core undergirding how you think about the exact context in which you're working. And then for my doctoral work and then how I use my PhD, I think today I love having that practitioners skillset, because I really think you have to have both in order to understand how U.S. foreign policy gets executed and how to sort of work the system, if you will, to best effect, to execute it well.
- Mike: So I worked briefly in the Pentagon. We might've overlapped. I was in the Asia office, but I would not describe it at in those days as the friendliest work environment for women. You've done very, very well, though, within the system and now you're involved in a number of programs like Smart Women, Smart Power, Women in National Security. Do you think that the environment has changed in the Pentagon? Hopefully, if it has for the better and what needs to change? What's your advice for women going into national security, which is a field that increasingly, if you look at Georgetown and SAIS is becoming very balanced in terms of gender, in terms of who's going into this as a career, but you've seen a change-
- Kath Hicks: Sure.
- Mike: ... hopefully for the better, but what do you think?
- Kath Hicks: Definitely's changed for the better and I think the part that can seem disheartening is it changes much more slowly over a longer period of time than one would hope. When I went into the Pentagon, it was very normal to be the only woman in any given office. It wouldn't even occur to, you didn't blink at it. You'd be hard pressed if you went inside the places where I used to work, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, policy offices in particular, to find offices that had only one woman in them. There are so many women in the intervening many, I won't count the years, many years who have joined the ranks. I think the real challenge is the progression at the top is very hard.
- Kath Hicks: I have three children. I had all of my children while working in the Defense Department and really had to navigate a lot of issues around moving to the management and leadership level while having children. There's a lot of sacrifice that goes into that for men and women, because the culture of the Pentagon fundamentally is a all-in culture and the national security world because of the requirements to be able to view secure documents, it makes it very challenging to take your work home or work a day from home, things of that sort. So you do

give up a lot on work-life balance in order to succeed in the national security sector. So that's sort of been my experience.

Kath Hicks: The good news story in addition to the number of women that I think now work at the Pentagon on the civilian side is that it's a very supportive environment. Women are very much looking out for each other. That's bi-partisan. Republican women and Democratic women who've worked in the national security sector were very supportive of one another and that's really valuable to have that community.

Kath Hicks: The other thing I would just add is that until women succeed in the operational part of the military, in the uniform services at the four star level in numbers as a cohort, it will be very challenging for women to advance fundamentally in the national security field as civilians. So I always think it's important for civilian women to remember that their success is really dependent on moving the ball forward for women in the military.

Mike: Did your PhD arm you for this better in terms of how people thought about you in the building or? I had a PhD when I was in the five-sided building. I'm not sure every general and admiral on the other side of the table was so impressed, but.

Kath Hicks: No. Yeah, I mean I think it didn't matter. It doesn't matter in the Pentagon, in terms of the title. I'd say what matters is what you got from the experience. Are you a better analyst? Are you a better thinker? Are you a better leader? How does your PhD inform you in that way?

Kath Hicks: I'll tell you one sort of anecdote to show you how much it didn't help me, in terms of military viewpoint. When I was doing the murder board for, I had a Senate confirmed position and before you go into your confirmation hearing, typically you'll have a murder board session where you're run through the ringer as a dry run to see how you'll do. And the person who led my murder board said to me at the end of it, "You're fundamentally in academic. Senators hate academics." And I thought that was a really... I think it was, I'm not really an academic, I'm really a practitioner, but I thought it was a really interesting turn on the way in which academics think of themselves versus how Washington thinks of academics. And so this is where I think having both sides of it, the practitioner side and the academic side becomes so important in order to be legitimate in the eyes of different audiences.

Kath Hicks: And I'll just say one more thing on that, which is with the military, the PhD absolutely doesn't matter. What matters is have you been in there and dug in the trenches with them and respected the operational art that they bring and have you demanded essentially their same kind of level of respect for what you can bring from the fields of, in my case, international relations and the understanding of how Washington works.

- Mike: So you clearly, to segue to a gray zone coercion, one of your signature research themes here at CSIS the last few years, you've clearly brought that same rigor and analytical framing to a problem that's vexed the Pentagon and US allies for the last at least seven, eight years, which is how in the case of Russia and China in particular, but also North Korea, Iran and other adversaries. The other guys on the other side of the chessboard are using this not-war, not-peace, gray zone in the middle approach to shift the balance of power and influence, and essentially in a revisionist move, to undermine American leadership in key regions of the world. The most important I would argue is probably Asia. And that was your first study on gray zone coercion. But why don't you start off by telling people how you define gray zone question before we get into the specifics.
- Kath Hicks: Sure. And let me just say for some people the term they prefer is hybrid, for some it's irregular warfare, malign influence, gray zone. And I very much believe we should not get hung up, too hung up on the terms or the precise definition because we like to get, often in Washington, we like to get into the debates over definitions and terms and then we kind of miss the forest for the trees. But we did settle upon using for our studies gray zone as our preferred term. And the gist of our definition is essentially that there's this range of tactics that are being undertaken that fit somewhere between routine statecraft and direct conflict. And the desire is to seek relative gain from one side or the other. And that this is a means by which states can do that.
- Kath Hicks: As you mentioned, we focused particularly in our work on China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. Obviously, non-state actors have long been in the gray zone space, terrorists being notable in that. And then we also, to cross a very broad tool set these tactics as I referenced, so we looked at information operations and disinformation. We looked at political and economic coercion, space and cyber operations and then proxy support, state support to proxies or provocation by state control forces. So something like the Chinese maritime militia and what our basic conclusion is is that all four of those state adversaries we were thinking of are executing at one level or another gray zone tactics across all seven of the issue sets that we looked at.
- Mike: So the work you did on the Asia team at CSIS helped on the Asia piece of this focused in the study, which is available online at csis.org. I think the most comprehensive, at least unclassified study of gray zone efforts by China in the maritime domain. We focused almost entirely on ways and means and didn't get too caught up in the ends, because defining intent is hard even for the most fluent Mandarin speaking China experts. But you must have some assumptions about intentions. Do you think that the Chinese intention is revisionism, is hegemony? How do you define it looking at now for several years the gray zone efforts in the maritime domain?
- Kath Hicks: Yep. I think in the case of China, I do think it is revisionism at its broadest level. And this, again, the tactics are really in service to that end and the Chinese

tactics aren't simply in the gray zone, soft, traditional if you will. Soft power is certainly being executed. And then there's a bit of a fuzzy line, if you will, into what moves from soft power into something that looks more like a gray zone tactic. And then of course, we always face this prospect of the potentiality for escalation into conventional or even non-kinetic but military to military interaction. So I think China, what China has been able to do is identify the seams that the United States faces in terms of orchestrating its sources of power, its alliance system. And they're moving quite fluidly across a lot of this soft power to gray zone with the potentiality always out there of trying to get the United States to recognize that they're, the U.S. should not want to escalate up to the conventional realm. And in so doing, they are rewriting the map, literally, in Asia.

Mike: So this is what in planning parlance was once called phase zero. So we're not at war, it's peace time. It's happening right now. But by expanding the area that it can deny to US forces or coerce smaller states, that China's effectively changing how we would fight wars at the high end, the phase two, three, four part of the planning. Do you think gray zone coercion has gotten to the point in the Western Pacific where we need to rethink our traditional war fighting strategies for Taiwan, for Japan, Korean peninsula, or are we not quite there yet?

Kath Hicks: Well, first, I just want to say I can't say I know what the thinking is today inside the Pentagon. So hopefully, they're already, at INDOPACOM, hopefully, they are always rewriting, rethinking, innovating on the plans. But the answer is yes. I mean the way in which gray zone tactics are executed does shift how we have to think about escalation ladders. It shifts the breadth of tools we need to be thinking about integrating with regard to either maintaining the status quo, if you will, or advancing US interests in the face of those tactics.

Kath Hicks: One challenge, I think the U.S. faces is, particularly in the military, we really like clean categories, right?

Mike: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kath Hicks: So this is where the phases actually come in. Where traditionally, we've had this phase zero to phase five approach. The Department of Defense has moved away from that phasing approach, but it still likes structure and there's reasons for that, right, that have to do with the laws of war and the role of the military.

Kath Hicks: But the reality is these tactics we should anticipate the Chinese, and in other theaters the Russians et cetera, would use in conflict. So it's not just a matter of the road to war, if you will, but even in conflict we should assume for example, the Chinese will use disinformation, for example, the Chinese of course will use cyber attacks, including likely against non-military targets, not possibly even targets here in the United States, space operations, maritime militias, Coast Guard. I could go on.

- Kath Hicks: But I think the problem we have right now in DOD that hasn't really shifted is this, they're still fighting through in their own minds what they are calling competition versus conflict, meaning competition is gray zone in their parlance, conflict obviously being war, the old phase three. There is a spectrum. I'm not saying it's all one thing, but the reality is these tactics are available and are smart, frankly, for the Chinese to pull on in conflict, so we better get a grasp of how we're going to deal with them, if you will, in regular ordinary time, because they're going to come get us in conflict as well if we're not on top of it.
- Mike: My impression was that the Obama administration struggled with this problem. It was not, you tell me if I'm wrong, but in the transition it was not at the top of the national security problem set, for the White House at least, and with the building up of the artificial islands and then other acts by North Korea, such as the sinking of the Cheonan, the Pentagon was seized with this gray zone problem, but I didn't detect the same concern at the White House or the State Department. It seemed to me there was, it took it really towards the end of the administration until there was a real consensus that this was a problem. Is that a fair characterization, do you think?
- Kath Hicks: I do. I think that's a very fair characterization. I think in DOD, because the way in which it was manifesting earliest for us was in the maritime. So therefore, obviously, it was a DOD relevant issue set. There was a very strong desire to be able to demonstrate freedom of navigation, freedom of the seas through our navigation, our freedom of navigation operations. And my impression from the DOD side is that the White House decision was that this was not a important enough of a principle, if you will, to outweigh other desired gains with the Chinese.
- Kath Hicks: Now, it wasn't my job to be inside their heads, so I can understand that they had to make different prioritization approaches. But from the DOD side, it certainly looked like it was inviting the Chinese to continue to make arguments that such operations would be seen as escalatory, if you will, rather than the opposite, right, which is that freedom of navigation should be seen as operations should be seen as routine and non-escalatory.
- Kath Hicks: So I do, I think we got ourselves in quite a bad position by the time I was here. I left DOD in 2013. By the time I was over here you started to see, obviously, a very significant uptick in Chinese cyber operations, some of which we'd seen even when I was back at DOD. That's the one place where President Obama, maybe the first place is a better way to put it, came out relatively strongly with Xi. They had some agreement and there is evidence as we point out in our reports that the Chinese kind of held the line a bit on IP theft for a while after that.
- Kath Hicks: So it may not have been a hugely misguided approach, but the eye was not on the ball of what the Chinese were doing. I think that's indisputable, what the Chinese were doing in the South China sea. And then you got the militarization

of the islands and this is where, Mike, your great work with the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative comes in of being able to prove out, not from us government, from the civil society side of CSIS, being able to show that the, as I heard someone put it so well, that the audio and the video tracks weren't lined up where the Chinese were claiming they weren't militarizing and of course you were able to show the images that in they were.

Kath Hicks: So I think by the time you got to that point, as you point out the end of the Obama administration, that's when it really started to change and accelerated much more so under the Trump administration, particularly with regard to freedom of navigation operations.

Mike: What's the essence or the core of how you respond to or preempt or anticipate these kinds of gray zone coercive activities, focusing on maritime Asia in particular? People talk about cost imposition. Is there a theory of deterrence or dissuasion? I mean, how do you counter this?

Kath Hicks: First thing you do is have a good story to tell, if you will. You got to have a good offense, right? So this is about building out on US strengths, primarily in maritime Asia, this means US alliance networks, building out both the combined interoperable capacity militarily, but also building out that strength of the tensile strength to withstand pressure, the diplomatic and economic relations.

Kath Hicks: Trade would be a great example of that, where if the US had a strong trade pact or approach or set of pacts, whatever it is, has a strategy for how it's making itself indispensable to allies and partners in the region. That really gives a lot of strength to the U.S. Having a strong narrative is also important, and this is where you've seen DOD tried to move out on the free and open Indo-Pacific. I look forward to hearing how that goes. I think it's good to have a strong narrative, but it's got to be backed by more than just words. It's got to have deeds behind it, so exercises, et cetera.

Kath Hicks: So that's the strong offense or proactive piece. What we found, Mike, when you and I did our study together a couple of years ago, the cost imposition actions already secured on new status quo, that's where it's hardest. So there are new realities. As I've said, the map's been redrawn, the land reclaimed has been militarized and it's very high escalation potential if one were to try to reverse that through military operations. It doesn't mean we shouldn't retain that capability and have that in mind as we think planning-wise about how events could go in the region. But it means that we do have to focus first and foremost probably in the here and now on preventing any further such movements away from or revisions of the map in the region and shifts in alliances. So that's where the offense becomes important.

Kath Hicks: The deterrent, you asked about the deterrent piece and the dissuasion piece. I think again demonstrating that ability, that strength of the United States, that commitment to freedom of the seas and the air. We didn't talk about the ADIZ

piece of it, but the air freedom piece is very important. I think continuing to demonstrate that we believe and will exercise our forces on those principles has a deterrent effect and it also helps us in the event that there is an attempt to make a revision before it is, if you will, a fait accompli. If we can be ready to turn that back, we're in much better shape.

Mike: When we were doing our study together on this, it struck me that it's very hard for the U.S. and our allies, and in maritime Asia we're principally talking Japan and Australia, to impose tactical costs.

Kath Hicks: Right.

Mike: And because gray zone is designed to basically, I think, demonstrate that, in this case China, has a higher tolerance for risk than we do and when you respond tactically you increase the risk of escalation and that's the whole point of gray zone is to sort of make us blink first. But where we have imposed costs is on the strategic level, because the consequence of Chinese gray zone coercion is the US Japan, Australia, trilateral security cooperation, the quad. If the Chinese intention is to weaken U.S. alliances, to weaken U.S. influence, you could argue it's not working on a strategic and geopolitical level because our alliances are closer together. You can see it clearly in Australia's White Paper, in Japan's midterm defense plan and defense planning guidance, in the quad itself with the U.S., Japan, Australia, India.

Mike: So in a way we're winning at the geopolitical level, but it's hard to argue we're winning at the tactical level. So to quote Petraeus, "Where does this all end?" Is there an equilibrium that we can achieve? Are we going to be retreating constantly? Can we roll back gray zone? Where does this end? Where does this go?

Kath Hicks: Let me start with the hardest piece. I think you can roll back gray zone, but you make the most important piece here, which is where are the interests greatest for the United States and where does it make sense for the US to pursue a strategy of rollback of tactical advantage? I would say we are not at that place today, but we ought to be ready for that possibility.

Kath Hicks: To your point, on the strategic piece, I absolutely agree. I think the best thing the United States can do right now, there's a famous Napoleon Bonaparte quote, "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake." And the Chinese are their own worst enemy in this sense. They keep making pretty significant strategic mistakes that are helping us, so we need to be in a position where we can capitalize on that. And that's all about alliance relationships, it's all about building out economic approaches. It's helping the the Australians, for instance, in their sort of their approach now to look at things like political and economic coercion and identify it for what it is, to help countries think through what the cost to them might be of accepting dollars and infrastructure help from China, but also by the way providing an alternative. We can't just get mad

at them. We have to give them something. There has to be a proactive U.S. strategy and policy.

Kath Hicks: We are not in a new cold war, but this is how we did well in the Cold War. We played to our strengths. Any smart strategy starts with playing to your strengths, as well as exploiting the weaknesses of your adversary and China's giving us quite a few opportunities to do that. That said, I just want to go back to beginning, the United States does need to continue to pursue operational and tactical campaign level and tactical advantages against Chinese military capability in the region. If it's going to underwrite all those other elements of its proactive strategy.

Mike: If you could get the administration to do one thing to help advance the strategy and stop doing one thing, to Napoleon's maxim about don't stop your enemy when they're doing stupid things. We're doing stupid things too. What stupid thing would you stop and what a thing that we're not doing would you encourage the administration to start doing so we can get more purchase on this problem?

Kath Hicks: The thing I think we should do, which I honestly don't see as any possibility, but I'll say it anyways. Join TPP-11.

Mike: Hear, hear.

Kath Hicks: Oh good. That's good.

Mike: It's hard to think about this region strategically or in terms of economic interests and not be there. So it clearly relates even to gray zone coercion activities.

Kath Hicks: Yep. I think the thing to stop doing is, right now I'd focus foremost around North Korea policy for the U.S. I mean I think that's where there is a second order effect on U.S.-Chinese relations that the United States is not demonstrating its commitment to pushing back against all these missile tests, to holding the Kim Jong Un regime's feet to the fire. And in fact we are, the president is actively at times embracing him. I think if we could stop that policy and shift it more back to if I could use the phrase traditional U.S. diplomacy that is about supporting sovereignty and the UN sanctions we already have in effect supporting, if you will, that global order that, ultimately, we need to have behind us if we're going to succeed against China. We're allowing an ability for moral equivalency to be brought between the United States and China. I don't think we're morally equivalent, don't get me wrong, but I think we need to close that space. And I think North Korea policies is a place where we could close it.

Mike: Are you specifically worried about, so for example, the North Korean SLBM launches and other-

Kath Hicks: Yeah.

Mike: ... missile launches-

Kath Hicks: Yeah.

Mike: ... are clear violations as primary...

Kath Hicks: Yeah.

Mike: ... said of Security Council resolutions, but we're giving them a pass. Is that what you're mainly worried about?

Kath Hicks: That is what I mean.

Mike: Yeah. So there can be a drip, drip, drip, weakening of American credibility through gray zone coercion vis-a-vis China, and but it may be happening with North Korea.

Kath Hicks: That's exactly right.

Mike: Could it be happening with Iran?

Kath Hicks: Yes.

Mike: And other parts of the world too?

Kath Hicks: Yes. So right. Obviously, as we record this, we're seeing the U.S. pullout from Northern Syria. The Kurds are not Japan. It's not an ally. It's not treaty ally. But I think these are the kinds of things that if we cast our eyes back on the Obama administration and the rightful critique that when it gave Syria pass on the chemical weapons use that that cast a pretty long shadow on U.S. credibility. I think we're in a similar situation now. Yes. So it could be beyond the region. It could certainly be with regard to other actors, but I'd focus first on North Korea, because I suspect that's what our allies and partners in the region would look to first.

Mike: Kath Hicks, I'm glad your Navy Marine Corps family set you on a trajectory of service and that that trajectory sent you through MIT and OSD and here to CSIS and our podcast. Thank you for all of that and for joining us today.

Kath Hicks: Great. Thanks very much, Mike.

Mike: Thanks.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia Program's work, visit the CSIS website at [csis.org](https://www.csis.org) and click on the Asia Program page.