

“The Three Warfares”: Informationized Warfare at the Strategic Level

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For the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and especially the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the evolving relationship between information and power has become ever more central in the past half-century. This is in part because information has become a central part of global economic power. Beginning in the 1970s, the proliferation of microelectronics, computers, and telecommunications technology has accelerated the ability to gather, store, manage, and transmit information. Information technology, including computers and telecommunications systems, have permeated all aspects of society and national economies and become an integral part of a nation’s infrastructure.¹ Chinese analysts have dubbed this process “informationization (*xinxihua*; 信息化).”

From the Chinese perspective,

¹ TAN Wenfang, “The Impact of Information Technology on Modern Psychological Warfare,” *National Defense Science and Technology* (#5, 2009), p. 72.

Informationization is a comprehensive system of systems, where the broad use of information technology is the guide, where information resources are the core, where information networks are the foundation, where information industry is the support, where information talent is a key factor, where laws, policies, and standards are the safeguard.²

In the face of this broad trend of economic, political, and social informationization, Chinese analysts have concluded that threats to national interests and security have also become informationized.

The spread of information technology means that potential adversaries have unprecedented access to each others' national economy, as well as the broader population and the top decision-makers. Just as the bomber and long-range missile allows an opponent to directly strike a nation without having to first break through ground or naval defenses, information technology similarly outflanks traditional military forces. Indeed, the proliferation of information technology into all aspects of society and economics makes those same aspects

² State Council Information Office, Tenth Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development, Informationization Key Point Special Plans (October 18, 2002), http://www.cia.org.cn/information/information_01_xxhgh_3.htm

now more vulnerable to a range of new pressures and threats.

These threats extend beyond the information networks (e.g., vulnerability to denial-of-service attacks) and the component computers (e.g., computer viruses, malware). Instead, the very information itself can constitute a threat, if, for example, its content erodes the morale of key decision-makers, popular support for a conflict, or the will of the military to fight. Consequently, China’s interpretation of its national interests has expanded, in step with the expanding impact of information writ large on China.

At the same time, this growing importance of information technology inevitably influences the nature of warfare. Informationized societies and economies lead to informationized wars, which in turn require informationized militaries to fight them successfully. This reflects, on the one hand, the Chinese, Marxist-Leninist view that war is a function of society and economics. But it also reflects the fundamental interplay between the military and the larger economy and society. Mechanized military forces are a reflection of the Industrial Age, including both industrial economics and, an industrialized society. Similarly, an informationized society will create an informationized military, while an informationized military can only be produced by an informationized society and economy. The PLA, and the broader Chinese security establishment must be prepared for “informationized warfare (*xinxihua zhanzheng*; 信息化战争).”

In December 2004, Hu Jintao, in his role as chairman of the Central Military Commission, gave a major speech wherein he charged the PLA with a set of “historic missions for the new phase of the new century,” commonly referred to as the “new historic missions.” The speech essentially provided guidance for what the PLA should be preparing for, in the face of changes in the international strategic context and national development. One of the new historic missions was to “provide strong strategic support for maintaining the nation’s interests.” While those interests still center on issues of territorial integrity and national sovereignty, the globalization and informationization of the international economy, science and technology, and society mean that national interests can no longer be so narrowly defined. Instead, China’s interests have extended beyond traditional geographic frontiers to outer space and the electromagnetic spectrum, and into the information domain.³

UNDERSTANDING HOW THE PLA THINKS OF FUTURE WARS

If information is central to modern society and economics, the PLA has concluded that it is also vital for fighting and

³ ZHENG Weiping, LIU Minfu, *Discussions on the Military’s New Historic Missions* (Beijing, PRC: People’s Armed Police Publishing House, 2005), p. 138.

winning future wars. The Chinese military has devoted substantial energy over the past twenty-five years to understanding the nature of warfare in the Information Age and preparing itself for the wars to come in this new era. This has required overhauling the entire PLA, including core concepts such as its strategic guiding thoughts and basic operational principles, and has led to the creation of several new services as well as a complete restructuring of the PLA’s administrative headquarters and warfighting commands.

Informationization of Conflict

Just as informationization has affected global economy and society, it has also influenced the nature of war. War, from the PRC’s perspective, is a function of not just military forces and politics, but also reflects larger social, economic, and technological trends. According to PLA writings, the shape of war (*zhanzheng xingtai*; 战争形态) is a reflection of the main types of weapons, military organizational structure, concepts of operations, and forms of combat.⁴ These factors, in combination, help define the overall nature of warfare, in light of these larger trends.

⁴ CHANG Long, “Tightly Grasping the Tends of the New Military Transformation—Reflections and Outlook from the Gulf War to the Iraq War,” *PLA Daily* (October 28, 2003), <http://www.xslx.com/htm/gjzl/jsgc/2003-10-38-15176.htm>

Thus, the history of warfare has evolved from “cold weapons,” i.e., swords, spears, and other edged weapons, to “hot weapons,” i.e., those based on gun-powder, to mechanized forces, as the larger societies and economies have transitioned from agrarian to industrialized forms. For the same reason, the rise of the Information Age, marked by the widespread integration of information and information technology into all aspects of modern society and economics also affects the nature of conflict, leading to “informationized warfare (*xinxihua zhanzheng*; 信息化战争).”

According to the PLA’s volume on terminology, “informationized warfare” is warfare where there is widespread use of informationized weapons and equipment and networked information systems, employing suitable tactics, in joint operations in the land, sea, air, outer space, and electromagnetic domains, as well as the cognitive arena. In informationized warfare, the main form of conflict is battles between systems-of-systems.⁵ Another Chinese volume defines informationized warfare as occurring when one or both sides in a conflict relies on informationized weapons and combat methods to undertake combat activities. It will typically include forces drawn from multiple services,

⁵ All Army Military Terminology Management Commission, *Chinese People’s Liberation Army Terminology* (Unabridged Volume), (Beijing, PRC: Military Science Publishing House, 2011), p. 48.

engaging in jointly conducted precision firepower attacks, computer network warfare, space warfare, special operations activities, etc. in the various domains.⁶ Informationized warfare involve informationized militaries, which will operate through networked combat systems, command and control systems, logistics and support systems, as part of the systems-of-systems construct.

In informationized warfare, information serves as both a force multiplier for people, materiel, and capability, as well as a form of combat power itself. Older weapons that are modernized by adding modern sensors and communications equipment (e.g., the B-52 and the A-10, or adding laser guidance modules to “dumb bombs”) can retain or even enhance their effectiveness. Improved command and control systems can better coordinate various forces. Better information can allow more effective allocation of limited resources, allowing one’s own forces to be more flexible and agile. Information weapons, such as computer viruses, in turn, can paralyze an opponent’s system-of-systems, causing them to disintegrate and decohere.

The focus of informationized warfare is establishing “information dominance (*zhi xinxi quan*; 制信息权).” This is

⁶ Large Phrase Dictionary Editorial Committee, *Large Phrase Dictionary, Military Volume*, (Shanghai, PRC: Shanghai Phrasebook Publishing Committee, 2003), p. 13.

the ability to establish control of information and information flow at a particular time and within a particular space.⁷ It entails the ability to collect more information, manage it faster, and employ it more precisely than the adversary.⁸ In doing so, in the Chinese view, the side that enjoys information dominance can seize and retain the initiative, and force the adversary into a reactive mode. This exploits a key difference between mechanized warfare of the Industrial Age, and informationized warfare of the Information Age. “Mechanized warfare focuses on physically and materially destroying an opponent, whereas informationized warfare focuses on inducing the collapse of the opponent’s psychology and will.”⁹

Establishing information dominance entails efforts that span the strategic to the tactical level. It is not simply a

⁷ All Army Military Terminology Management Commission, *Chinese People’s Liberation Army Terminology* (Unabridged Volume), (Beijing, PRC: Military Science Publishing House, 2011), p. 79.

⁸ Chinese Military Encyclopedia 2nd Edition Editorial Committee, *PLA Encyclopedia*, 2nd Edition, *Military Strategy* (Beijing, PRC: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2007), p. 68.

⁹ FAN Gaoming, “Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare, the Three Major Combat Methods to Rapidly Achieving Victory in War,” *Global Times* (March 8, 2005), http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2005-03/08/content_2666475.htm

wartime requirement, but involves intelligence gathering throughout peacetime. Because of the rapid, decisive nature of “local wars under informationized conditions,” and now of “informationized local wars,” it is not possible to wait until the formal commencement of hostilities to begin preparations. At a minimum, identifying opposition capabilities and weaknesses must be undertaken in peacetime.

Nor can this be solely a military function. As the world has informationized, the Chinese economy has had to informationize; similarly, as warfare has informationized, the Chinese military has had to evolve to prepare to fight such conflicts. Although the PLA plays a major role, though, such preparations involve all the various elements of the Chinese government and broader society and economy. Because of the interconnected nature of modern information networks, and their extensive permeation, “information dominance” involves gaining access not only to the adversary’s military networks but to decision-makers and the broader population, while defending against their efforts to do the same. As important, since information itself can be used as a weapon (beyond the incorporation of viruses and malware) by influencing its consumers, it is essential that information itself be monitored and information flow be tightly controlled, from a defensive perspective.

Similarly, establishing information dominance involves a multi-pronged effort, addressing all aspects of information. Not

only is it necessary to target an adversary's data, but also the systems involved in data collection and management, as well as the users and analysts of data. Similarly, it requires defending all three aspects of one's own information architecture, i.e., data, systems, and users.

The human element is especially important in informationized warfare. Chinese analysts note that the advent of more advanced weapons technologies did not necessarily lead to a change in the basic nature of war. Instead, the core of informationized warfare is the expanded range of abilities to influence and control an opponent's judgement and will to fight.¹⁰ The ability to influence people, in terms of their politics, their thinking, their morale and spirit, and their psychology can be as decisive and effective as the ability to interfere with databases or computer networks. The ability to influence an adversary through the proper application of suitable information is embodied in the Chinese concept of political warfare.

Political Warfare as Informationized Warfare

The Chinese conception of political warfare epitomizes its

¹⁰ CHANG Long, "Tightly Grasping the Tends of the New Military Transformation—Reflections and Outlook from the Gulf War to the Iraq War," PLA Daily (October 28, 2003), <http://www.xslx.com/htm/gjzl/jsgc/2003-10-38-15176.htm>

views of informationized warfare. “Political warfare” involves the use of information to undertake sustained attacks against the enemy’s thinking and psychology, so as to eventually subvert their will.¹¹ Successfully waging political warfare can help secure information dominance at the most basic level, influencing adversary thinking and perceptions. Conversely, failure to establish information dominance leaves oneself open to attacks on one’s political stability. From the Chinese leadership’s perspective, there is a constant threat of “westernization” and “splittism,” at the root of Western calls for greater democratization and liberalization, which endangers the nation’s political security and the Party’s hold on power.

Although the tools for political warfare are mainly forms of strategic communications, including television, radio, the Internet, and news organizations, it is nonetheless seen **as a form of warfare**. It is envisioned as the use of information as a weapon to attack opponents, by eroding will, imposing psychological pressure, and influencing cognitive processes and the framework of perceptions. Because of the informationized condition of the global economy, political warfare efforts are no longer limited to front line military forces, but can now be applied against the adversary’s

¹¹ YANG Chunchang, SHEN Hetai, Chief Editors, *Political Warfare/Operations Under Informationalized Conditions* (Beijing, PRC: Long March Press, 2005), p. 15.

population and leadership. It is the weaponization of soft power.

Similarly, because modern information technology blurs the lines between peacetime and wartime, between military and civilian, and among strategy, operations, and tactics, political warfare is not limited to when hostilities have formally commenced, and is not focused solely on military targets.¹² Instead, informationized warfare includes activities that are undertaken in peacetime, many of which are aimed at the adversary's political leadership and broad population. Informationized warfare, even more than Industrial-Era mechanized warfare, encompasses the entire society of both sides.

Given the importance of political warfare, it should not be surprising that it has been historically entrusted to the highest bureaucratic levels of the PLA. According to the 2003 “Political Work Regulations of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army,” and the subsequent 2010 revision, the General Political Department, one of the four General Departments that ran the PLA until 2015, is responsible for the conduct of political warfare.

In the wake of the 2015 PLA reorganization, it is less clear who is responsible for the conduct of political warfare. It

¹² YUAN Wenxian, *The Science of Military Information* (Beijing, PRC: National Defense University Press, 2008), pp. 77-79.

may remain the responsibility of the Political Work Department, whose head is one of the four members of the revised Central Military Commission. There are reports, however, that the unit responsible for the conduct of political warfare (Base 311) prior to the reorganization has been shifted to the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), one of the new services established in 2015. How Base 311 fits into the PLASSF remains unclear.¹³ It is likely that this will be clarified in a new edition of the PLA’s work regulations, but as of 2019, this author is not aware of an official revision.

Nonetheless, there is little evidence that the PLA has downgraded its interest in waging public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare, the so-called “three warfares.” Taken together, the “three warfares” seek to employ information, expressed through various elements of national power (e.g., diplomatic, political, economic, as well as military), consistent with military strategic guidelines and objectives, to win the political initiative and achieve a psychological advantage. The aim is to strengthen one’s own resolve while disheartening the adversary, since the lack of will makes even the most sophisticated weaponry irrelevant. An essential element of achieving this psychological advantage is

¹³ John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China’s Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, China Strategic Perspectives Paper #13 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2018), p. 17.

to present oneself as the aggrieved party and holding the moral, and legal, high ground. Not only does this serve to stiffen one's own will, but it can be an important part of influencing bystanders and third-parties.¹⁴ At the same time, however, political warfare complements, but does not necessarily displace, traditional use of force.

Each of the three “warfares” employs information in a different manner to achieve these goals, but reinforces the other two. Psychological warfare exploits information by drawing upon the political, economic, and cultural, as well as military elements of power. Information of each type can serve as a powerful weapon, influencing values, concepts, emotions, and context.¹⁵ Legal warfare can build psychological support and sympathy among bystanders, and erode an opponent's will by constraining their preferred courses of action for fear of legal repercussions. Public opinion warfare can directly build support, persuading domestic and foreign audiences of the justice of one's own cause and the success of one's own

¹⁴ Academy of Military Sciences Operations Theory and Regulations Research Department and Informationalized Operations Theory Research Office, *Informationalized Operations Theory Study Guide* (Beijing, PRC: AMS Press, November, 2005), p. 403.

¹⁵ TAN Wenfang, “The Impact of Information Technology on Modern Psychological Warfare,” *National Defense Science and Technology* (#5, 2009), p. 73.

efforts, while undermining an adversary’s attempts to do the same. In particular, the growth and expanded reach of media of various sorts makes public opinion warfare especially important, as it can have global effects. Broad domestic and international support, in turn, will generate psychological benefits for oneself and adversely affect the enemy.

Psychological Warfare

One of the central elements of “the three warfares” is psychological warfare (*xinli zhan*; 心理战). Psychological warfare involves the application of psychological principles and methods to attack an opponent’s psychology and erode their will to resist, while also engaging in psychological defensive measures to protect one’s own will and encourage greater effort.¹⁶ Psychological warfare pressures an opponent by employing information to affect their thinking, to create damaging or deleterious habits and ways of thinking, to reduce their will to resist, and perhaps even to induce defeatism and surrender.¹⁷ At the same time, it seeks to limit the effect of

¹⁶ Chinese Military Encyclopedia 2nd Edition Editorial Committee, *PLA Encyclopedia*, 2nd Edition, *Military Strategy* (Beijing, PRC: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2007), p. 143.

¹⁷ TAN Wenfang, “The Impact of Information Technology on Modern Psychological Warfare,” *National Defense Science and Technology* (#5, 2009), p. 76.

enemy psychological warfare operations on one's own troops, population, and leadership, building morale, encouraging greater resistance and effort, and strengthening will. Psychological warfare employs a variety of measures including terror, intimidation, deception, enticement, as well as propaganda, including media warfare. Although psychological warfare draws upon a variety of non-military resources, for the Chinese, it has always been a military responsibility, as part of the military political work structure.¹⁸

In many ways, all of the “three warfares” are ultimately aimed at influencing the adversary's psychology, whether it is by undermining popular support or imposing legal challenges and constraints. Psychological operations are seen as an essential part of future conflicts, affecting and influencing, at a basic level, the very perceptions that inform decision-making, from the context to the biases. Successful psychological operations in informationized warfare will therefore have repercussions at strategic, operational, and tactical levels of operations, influencing both military and civilian leaders as well as the masses, and thereby affecting the course of the conflict.

It is important to note that the Chinese are likely to commence psychological operations long before the formal

¹⁸ GUO Yanhua, *Psychological Warfare Knowledge* (Beijing, PRC: NDU Press, 2005), p. 10.

onset of hostilities. According to Chinese analyses, psychological warfare operations blur the line between wartime and peacetime, as well as between front line and rear areas, military and civilian. Indeed, to be effective, such operations **cannot** be limited to wartime or just military targets. Instead, peacetime psychological operations are necessary, both to better understand an opponent and to lay the groundwork for more focused efforts in wartime.

Legal Warfare

Chinese analyses of legal warfare see this as a central means of political warfare, supporting both psychological and public opinion warfare by “controlling the enemy through the law, or using the law to constrain the enemy (*yifa zhidi huo yong fa zhi di*; 以法制敌 或 用法制敌).”¹⁹ Indeed, based on recent conflicts, the Chinese have concluded that “military warfare and legal warfare have already thoroughly combined,” with legal warfare permeating conventional military operations, while military conflict intrinsically contains legal warfare.²⁰

¹⁹ ZONG Wenshen, *Legal Warfare: Discussion of 100 Examples and Solutions* (Beijing, PRC: PLA Publishing House, 2004), p. 5.

²⁰ Chinese Military Encyclopedia 2nd Edition Editorial Committee, *PLA Encyclopedia, Military Strategy* (Beijing, PRC: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2007), p. 143.

As with all forms of political warfare, legal warfare is typically undertaken before the formal commencement of military hostilities. By applying various forms of legal information, including international and domestic laws, the laws of armed conflict, legal pronouncements, legal education, and law enforcement, the Chinese hope to influence both foreign and domestic audiences in order to garner support, deter action and even influence military behavior, such as the choice of targets or weapons.²¹

Legal warfare depicts “one’s own side is obeying the law, criticizing the other side for violating the law (*weifa*; 違法), and making arguments for one’s own side in cases where there are also violations of the law.”²² The ultimate goal is to secure the initiative in time of conflict, by gaining the legal high ground, portraying oneself as the side more firmly grounded in legal standing, and implicitly as being more virtuous and just. As one Chinese analyst observed,

²¹ WANG Mei, “Research on Several Issues of Legal Warfare,” *National Defense University Newspaper* (#7, 2004), p. 66. Cited in SONG Yunxia, *Legal Warfare Under Informationalized Conditions* (Beijing, PRC: AMS Publishing, 2007).

²² HAN Yanrong, “Legal Warfare: Military Legal Work’s High Ground: an Interview with Chinese Politics and Law University Military Legal Research Center Special Researcher Xun Dandong,” *Legal Daily* (PRC), (February 12, 2006)

implementing “legal warfare” is to gain the right in warfare. Regardless of whether a war is just or not (*zhenyi yu fo*; 正义与否), the two sides in a war will both make every effort to develop “legal warfare,” and seek out means of constructing legal bases for undertaking the war, and confirm that they themselves are the reasonable and legal side.²³

The employment of legal information can play an important role prior to, during, and after the outbreak of formal hostilities. In peacetime, it influences domestic and foreign populations and leaders, weakening opposing coalitions while building support for one’s own side. Indeed, legal warfare is seen as an integral part of the political preparation of the battlefield, employing legal information and arguments to influence various audiences in support of deterrent or coercive goals. It is especially important to broadly propagate the Chinese legal position and perspective, so that they are “recognized by the international community.”²⁴ Achieving this will be useful for influencing democracies, whether as opponents or as neutral observers, as it manipulates the rule of

²³ FAN Gaoming, “Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare, the Three Major Combat Methods to Rapidly Achieving Victory in War,” *Global Times* (March 8, 2005).

²⁴ LIU Jiaxin, “General’s Views: Legal Warfare—Modern Warfare’s Second Battlefield,” *Guangming Ribao* (November 3, 2004).

law in order to “destroy the will to fight by undermining the public support that is indispensable” for successful warfighting.²⁵

Thus, Chinese passage of the 2005 Anti-Secession Law provides the political justification for any future move against Taiwan (or Tibet or Xinjiang), but also politically signals Chinese resolve to both the native populations of these areas as well as any states or actors that might support them. Similarly, China’s idiosyncratic interpretations of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea signals not only China’s position but its commitment to them, which will potentially influence other claimants and players. For similar reasons, however, China dismissed the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration rulings regarding the South China Sea in the harshest possible terms.²⁶ The findings clearly undermined China’s legal warfare measures towards the region.

²⁵ Charles J. Dunlap Jr., “Law and Military Interventions: Preserving Humanitarian Values in 21st Century Conflicts,” Working Paper, Carr Center for Human Rights, Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, (Cambridge, MA; November 29, 2001), p. 8.

²⁶ People’s Daily Editorial Board, “People’s Daily Assesses South Sea Arbitration: This Is Our Territory, We Will Not Give Up an Inch,” People’s Daily (July 12, 2016) http://rmrbimg2.people.cn/data/rmrwap/2016/07/12/cms_1745920168805376.html

The Chinese use of law enforcement vessels in many of its maritime territorial disputes is both a form of legal warfare and psychological warfare. It minimizes escalatory pressures, since it is civilian, and not military, vessels that are being employed. At the same time, however, the use of law enforcement vessels and agencies sends the implicit message that a given piece of territory or water is Chinese—hence, it is subject to Chinese law enforcement as a matter of internal or domestic security, rather than the military.

Public Opinion Warfare

Chinese analysts see public opinion warfare (*yulun zhan*; 舆论战) as the effort to shape an intended audience through the application of information derived and propagated by various types of mass information channels, including the Internet, television, radio, newspapers, movies, and other forms of media. In particular, it involves transmitting selected news and other materials with a consistent message to the intended audience in accordance with an overall plan, so as to guide and influence their public opinions towards views and conclusions that are beneficial to oneself and detrimental to the adversary. Public opinion warfare is therefore also sometimes termed “media warfare” or “consensus warfare.”

Chinese analysts see public opinion warfare as a special part of informationized warfare. Because of the wide permeation of information technology, public opinion warfare

has global reach, extends to every part of society, and has an especially wide impact. The goal of public opinion warfare is to shape public and decision-maker perceptions and opinion, so as to shift the perception of overall balance of strength between oneself and one's opponent.²⁷ To this end, it is especially important that communications efforts associated with public opinion warfare be mutually reconciled and coordinated, so that specific messages are clearly transmitted, in support of specific goals. While the news media plays an important role in the Chinese conception of public opinion warfare, it is only a subset of the larger set of means available for influencing public opinion.²⁸

Successfully conducted public opinion warfare will influence three audiences: the domestic population, the adversary's population and decision-makers (both military and civilian), and neutral and third-party states and organizations. It will preserve friendly morale, generate support at home and abroad for oneself, weaken the enemy's will to fight, and alter

²⁷ Academy of Military Sciences Operations Theory and Regulations Research Department and Informationalized Operations Theory Research Office, *Informationalized Operations Theory Study Guide* (Beijing, PRC: AMS Press, November, 2005), p. 405 and LIU Gaoping, *Study Volume on Public Opinion Warfare* (Beijing, PRC: NDU Press, 2005), pp. 16-17.

²⁸ LIU Gaoping, *Study Volume on Public Opinion Warfare* (Beijing, PRC: NDU Press, 2005), p. 5.

the enemy’s situational assessment. Public opinion warfare is both a national and a local responsibility, and it will be undertaken not only by the PLA’s own assets, but through the People’s Armed Police, national and local media, spokespeople, netizens, etc.*

Public opinion warfare is an autonomous activity, in the sense that it can be undertaken independent of an actual, formal conflict; consequently, it is a central element of political warfare. According to Chinese analyses, the side that plants its message first enjoys a significant advantage influencing public opinion. Indeed, Chinese analyses of public opinion warfare repeatedly emphasize that the “the first to sound grabs people, the first to enter establishes dominance (*xian sheng duoren, xianru weizhu*; 先声夺人，先入为主).” Essentially, the objective of public opinion warfare is to establish the terms of the debate and define the parameters of coverage. By presenting one’s message first, the PLA expects to shape all others’ views of a conflict. Thus, the Chinese side can underscore the justice and necessity of its operations, better display national strength, exhibit the superiority of its forces, and shake an opponent’s will to resist.²⁹ By contrast, adversaries must overcome the

* The People’s Armed Police are part of the Chinese armed forces, along with the PLA, and the reserve forces.

²⁹ YAO Fei, “Some Thoughts Regarding Our Military’s Anti-Secessionist Public Opinion and Propaganda Policies,” *Military Correspondent* (PRC)

ideas that are already planted and taking root by Chinese public opinion warfare efforts. Therefore, in a very real way, Chinese decision-makers see public opinion warfare as being waged even in peacetime, as part of the larger effort to shape peoples' perceptions of the PRC. There is a constant effort to influence audiences to accept China's narrative and perceptual framework.

To maximize the effectiveness of public opinion warfare, it is essential to exploit all possible channels of information dissemination, so that a given message is reiterated, reinforced by different sources and different versions. Public opinion warfare efforts, then, will embody the ideals of "combining peacetime and wartime operations; civil-military integration of resources; military and local resources unified (*pingzhan jiehe, junmin jiehe, jundi yiti*; 平战结合, 军民结合, 军地一体)."

Not surprisingly, the Chinese have established an Information Office within the Ministry of Defense, responsible for engaging the press. An essential role is to serve as the main mechanism for disseminating China's position on military and security-related issues. This includes promoting the image of the PLA as a competent, capable force, and countering any

(#5, 2009). http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/jsjz/node_22972.htm; and JI Chenjie, LIU Wei, "A Brief Discussion of Public Opinion Warfare on the Web," *Military Correspondent* (PRC) (#1, 2009). http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/jsjz/2009-01/14/content_1619064.htm

negative impressions, including as a secretive organization. Established in 2008, spokespeople from the Information Office have held monthly press conferences since 2011.³⁰

Civilian resources play an especially prominent role in public opinion warfare, because there are substantially more civilian and commercial media assets, whether in terms of broadcasting facilities, Internet users, or news organizations and reporters. Moreover, those non-military assets often can access better techniques and information than might be available through purely military channels.³¹ Public opinion warfare efforts, moreover, can piggy-back on the reputation and long-term presence (e.g., branding, established relationships) of those assets. In this regard, China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” provides an excellent backdrop and support for public opinion warfare efforts. BRI allows China to appear

³⁰ Matthew Boswell, Media Relations in China’s Military: The Case of the Ministry of National Defense Information Office, *Asia Policy* (#8, Jul 2009), pp. 97-120, and Ben Blanchard, “China Takes Step at Openness, Allows Foreigners at Defense Briefing,” Reuters (July 31, 2014), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/31/us-china-defence-idUSKBN0G011K20140731>

³¹ WANG Zijun, Chen Tao, Mo Jinshan, “Explaining People’s Armed Police Public Opinion Warfare Thought,” *Hebei Legal Newspaper* (April 6, 2010).
<http://jiuzhan.hbfzb.com/html/article/201004/201046104703823.html>

omnipresent, bearing enormous funds (and therefore economic benefits). One risks losing major economic benefits if one opposes the PRC on political or security grounds.

At the same time, it is essential that the messaging be flexible, taking into account shifts in the strategic, political, and military contexts. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, different messages should be tailored for different audiences. Thus, when engaging in public opinion warfare against what the PRC regards as secessionist elements, for example, “one must make distinctions between the more stubborn elements and the general populace.”³²

To successfully conduct public opinion warfare requires careful preparation of the public opinion battleground in peacetime. That is, there must be extensive research into tactics and methods for undertaking public opinion warfare, understanding potential opponents’ psychology and national moods, and the nurturing of public opinion warfare specialists. For this reason, PLA writings consistently invoke the saying, “Before the troops and horses move, public opinion is already underway (*bingma weidong, yulun xianxing*; 兵马未动，舆论先行),” emphasizing that the preparation for public opinion warfare must begin far in advance of the actual outbreak of

³² YAO Fei, “Some Thoughts Regarding Our Military’s Anti-Secessionist Public Opinion and Propaganda Policies,” *Military Correspondent* (PRC) (#5, 2009). http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/jsjz/node_22972.htm

hostilities.³³ The Chinese record is more mixed in this regard, as Chinese cyber behavior and other activities such as the Confucius Institutes have created growing skepticism of Chinese intentions.³⁴

Indeed, it is not clear that there is a differentiation between peacetime and wartime in the conduct of public opinion warfare. In the first Gulf War, the US is said to have fully used its advantage in information dissemination to constantly bombard the Iraqi military and civilian population with various messages to undermine Iraq’s will (and especially to induce uncertainty in Saddam Hussein), long before the first cruise missiles struck or first air raids began. In the US war with Afghanistan, Washington employed public opinion warfare mechanisms to create an anti-terrorism coalition; gained support from other major nations; and allayed concerns among Arab and Muslim nations prior to actually invading Afghanistan.³⁵

³³ Nanjing Political Academy Military News Department Study Group, “Study of the Journalistic Media Warfare in the Iraq War,” *China Military Science* (#4, 2003), p. 28.

³⁴ Elizabeth Redden, “Closing Confucius Institutes,” *Inside Higher Education* (January 9, 2019)

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/09/colleges-move-close-chinese-government-funded-confucius-institutes-amid-increasing>

³⁵ SHENG Peilin, Wang Lin, Liu Ya, editors, *100 Examples of Public*

Defensive public opinion warfare is intended to limit the impact of enemy public opinion warfare efforts. It entails strong education and news management efforts, to ensure that the domestic population is not exposed to enemy messages, and, even if they are, that those messages will not take root. Defensive public opinion warfare builds public skepticism towards external and internal criticisms of the government. It nonetheless also requires prompt, credible responses to enemy criticisms and charges, which will inevitably leak through even the tightest cordon and most vigilant attempts at censorship and control. .

KEY TAKEAWAYS REGARDING CHINA'S INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

The most important element, as reflected in Chinese writings regarding informationized warfare, information warfare, and information operations, is that ***the Chinese leadership sees information as inextricably linked to both the broader national interest, but also to regime (or at least CCP) survival***. It is important to note here that this is not simply apply to the role of information in wartime. The Chinese leadership are not solely focused on the role information might play in a military conflict; rather, they see it as being a

Opinion Warfare (Beijing, PRC: PLA Publishing House, 2006), pp. 162-163, 208-209.

determinative factor in the ongoing competition among states writ large.

This, as Chinese writings emphasize, is because of the ascendant role of information in the 21st Century’s economic and political realities. This is the Information Age, and the ability to gather accurate information in a timely manner, transmit and analyze it, and then rapidly exploit it, is the key to success in this new age. These abilities are the centerpiece of any effort to achieve “information dominance.”

At the same time, however, the free flow of information constitutes a dire potential threat to CCP rule. While the Chinese Communist Party may no longer espouse ideological arguments of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs,” it remains firmly committed to its role as the “vanguard party,” and therefore, the sole legitimate political authority in the PRC. It also likely sees the collapse of the Soviet Union, in some ways, as a consequence of the failure to retain the “vanguard party” role, and as important, the liberalization of informational controls. The policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, of opening and reform, led to the downfall of the other major Communist Party. Just as information is the currency of economic and military power, it is also the basis for political power.

This *maodun*, or conundrum, sets the stage for the second key takeaway. As an authoritarian party, and with the fate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as an object lesson,

the CCP cannot afford to allow the free flow of information. This would allow too many challenges to its rule. ***The PRC, in terms of the CCP leadership, will seek to control the flow of information.*** This task assumes greater urgency as the PRC, and especially the CCP, also sees itself, however, as increasingly in competition with the other major powers, especially the United States. It is the United States that champions Internet freedom and, more broadly, the free flow of information. Moreover, as many Chinese officials have argued, it is American policies that encourage China's neighbors to challenge Chinese hegemony over its littoral waters, or help sustain the Dalai Lama and other sources of internal instability.

To some extent, efforts at exerting this control are merely sustaining longstanding policies. The CCP has long demonstrated a willingness to employ extravagant lengths, such as the massive organizational infrastructure to support censorship, to limit that flow. However, because of the nature of the Information Age, including extensive interconnections and linkages across various information networks, the CCP cannot only control the flow of information ***within*** China. Instead, it must also control the flow of information ***to*** China.

This constitutes a fundamental, qualitative change in how nations approach the flow of information. Of course, states have long sought to shape and influence how they are portrayed. Nor is limiting access to outside information a new

phenomena. However, the Chinese efforts, in light of their views of the qualitative changes wrought by the rise of the Information Age, are different in scale and scope. Controlling information now means limiting not just newspapers and television programs, but the functioning of the Internet, on a global scale.

This conundrum is replicated in how the PRC looks upon the international system, including the governance of the international common spaces. ***If the Chinese are going to control and influence information flow to China, then it will have to shape and mold the international structure which manages that information flow.*** This is not to suggest that China is about to overthrow the current system. Chinese writings regularly note that the PRC is still in the period of “strategic opportunity,” which China needs to exploit, if it is to improve itself, and elevate itself to the ranks of middle-developed powers. Thus, China must continue to pursue policies of peaceful development and interaction.

As China has grown steadily more powerful, it has questioned the underlying international structures that more and more often constrain its behavior. These structures, as Chinese writings note, were often formulated without input from the PRC. A reviving China, as well as a CCP intent on staying in power, increasingly chafes at these externally imposed limitations.

This does not mean that the PRC believes that war or

armed conflict is inevitable. Indeed, there is no reason to think that, in the short-term (the next decade or so), that the PRC would actively engage in an armed attack on its neighbors. Unlike the Cold War, there is no “Fulda Gap” scenario to concentrate upon.

At the same time, however, the Chinese leadership is well aware of the utility of pursuing its ends through a variety of means, including “hybrid warfare.” China has demonstrated an ability to employ fishing boats and civilian law enforcement vessels to pursue its territorial agenda. If Chinese warships are not shooting at foreign craft, Chinese fishing boats have had fewer compunctions about physically interfering with foreign vessel operations. The world’s information networks, where attributing actions are much harder, would seem to be the ideal environment for waging the kind of gray conflict typical of hybrid warfare.

Thus, at the strategic level, the PRC will be constantly striving to shape both domestic and foreign views of itself through the information that it transmits and projects. At the same time, it will be trying to determine how others views China, as well as identifying their strengths and weaknesses. These efforts are no different than how every state behaves, in terms of collecting intelligence about potential allies and adversaries.

Where the PRC has begun to diverge, however, is their growing focus on dominating the information-space in both

peacetime and wartime. In particular, Chinese efforts to establish information dominance, while somewhat constrained in peacetime by the international system, is likely to be more comprehensive as well as much more pronounced in event of war.

This is reflected in Chinese military developments of the past several years, which are themselves ***the culmination of nearly a quarter century of thought regarding the shape and requirements of future warfare***. The Chinese concept of “informationized local wars” reflects this ongoing evolution, with its focus on the role of information in all aspects of future warfare. This concept grows out of the lessons initially derived from observing the allied coalition in the first Gulf War of 1990-1991, leavened with observations from the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, the PLA initially conceived of future wars as “local wars under modern, high-technology conditions,” but then concluded that not all high-technology was equally important.

Having determined that information technology was the foremost element of high technology, reflecting the larger strategic shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, the PLA then began to develop new doctrine. This effort to link its concept of future wars to the kinds of forces it would have to field and the kinds of operations they will have to conduct has led to a focus on “informationized local wars,” and preparing for conflict “under the new circumstances.” Integral

to these efforts will be information warfare at the strategic level, including the “three warfares.”