

China's Three Warfares Strategy and Its Application toward Taiwan

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Abstract

Since the 20th century China has demonstrated an assertive foreign policy to have economic and military leverage over most powerful adversaries in economics, politics and more importantly in National security and identity. The conduct of the three warfares namely (san zhong zhanfa 三種戰法, 又稱三戰) – psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare seems to be the lever that China hopes to use to propel them to such desired heights.

This article attempts to identify the motives and methods of China's three warfares by analyzing the historical foundations of Chinese strategy and examines the application of this to issues related to Taiwan.

Keywords: psychological warfare, public opinion warfare,
legal warfare, PLA

I. Introduction

The People's Republic China (PRC), has always regarded Taiwan as a part of its territory. During President Xi Jinping's speech in the 40th anniversary of issuing Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, he has reiterated that no force could alter the historical and legal facts that Taiwan and the two sides across Taiwan straits belong to China. For him the completion of reunification is a historic goal for all Chinese. With an approved defense budget of \$177.5 billion, China has become the world's second-largest defense spender next to the United States. This ambitious move on PRC's leadership to increase their military capability not only for national security but more importantly in order to unify their territories including Taiwan and its claimed independence. In a US report dated October 4, 2018, China's growing military strength has been described as posing a greater threat to Taiwan's de facto independence. In a declaration made in 2003, Beijing has shown concern over Taiwan steadily moving toward a "self-declared" independence.

Chinese officials usually make core interest declarations, especially those focused on national sovereignty and territorial integrity, to advance foreign policy objectives. As tensions in maritime disputes in the East and South China Sea have grown, China's has elevated these disputes as a core interest. In a Georgetown University Publication entitled China's "three warfares" In Theory and Practice in the South China Sea,

author Doug Livermore has quoted Strategist Sun Tzu's words, "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting".¹ China has continued to practice this tradition as evidenced by the official introduction of the *san zhong zhanfa* or three warfares to the Central Military Commission in its *Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army* published in 2003. Today, this approach has been used to in a variety of recent cases: The South and East China Sea disputes, China's opposition to Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and intensifying pressure on Taiwan. China has also used the three warfares to gain political, economic and military leverage and to criticize and immobilize its adversaries.

II. A Prime of "Three Warfares "

The PLA's strategic thinking on the three warfares, which

¹ "Highlights of Xi's Speech at Taiwan Message Anniversary Event," *China Daily*, January 2, 2019, <<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201901/02/WS5c2c1ad2a310d91214052069.html>> ; J Michael Cole, "When it Comes to Taiwan, the CCP Doesn't Have an Original Bone in its Body," *Taiwan Sentinel*, January 2, 2019, <<https://sentinel.tw/when-it-comes-to-taiwan-the-ccp-doesnt-have-an-original-bone-in-its-body/>>.

is linked to its emphasis on information warfare, could influence its efforts to utilize such techniques in future contingencies.

In 2003, the revised “Political Work Guidelines of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) released an official document which contained ideas in three categories namely: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare and legal warfare.² This was later ratified and was officially incorporated into the PLA’s education, training, and preparation for military struggle.³ Knowledge in these three warfares has given China a renewed confidence advantage both in peace and war. Knowledge of these strategies has also become popular in other Chinese writings with a political advantage that can be used to alter public or international opinion.⁴

In Michael Raska’s observation, the three warfares concept are based on three mutually reinforcing strategies: (1) the coordinated use of strategic psychological operations; (2) overt and covert media manipulation; and (3) legal warfare designed to manipulate strategies, defense policies, and

² Timothy A. Walton, *China’s Three Warfares* (Herndon, VA: Delex Systems, 2012), pp. 3-4.

³ Elsa Kania, “The PLA’s Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares,” *China Brief*, Vol. 16 No. 13 (August 2016), p. 10.

⁴ Timothy L. Thomas, “Google Confronts China’s Three Warfares,” *Parameters*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 2010), p. 106.

perceptions of target audiences abroad.⁵ Elsa Kania states in her article that the application of the three warfare is intended to control the prevailing discourse and influence perceptions in a way that advances China's interests, while compromising the capability of opponents to respond.⁶ Larry Wortzel observes that these three forms of political or information warfare can be performed together or separately, bringing into harmony the PLA's actions, the intent of the Chinese Communist Party, and the goals of the senior party leadership.⁷

The three warfares conceptual Framework are as follows: psychological warfare, media warfare or public opinion and legal warfare. Let us take a closer at each of these warfares. In the conduct of psychological warfare, the PLA seeks to undermine the will of foreign civil populations and the enemy's ability to conduct combat operations. The PLA intends to demoralize both military and civilian enemy by using domestic and

⁵ Michael Raska, "China and the 'Three Warfares,'" *The Diplomat*, December 18, 2015, <<https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/hybrid-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics-2/>>.

⁶ Elsa Kania, "The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares," pp. 10-11.

⁷ Larry M. Wortzel, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Information Warfare* (Carlisle, PA., U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), pp. 29-30.

International law, while seeking to use to justify its actions and assert its interests. In addition, China uses psychological warfare against its enemies by using tactics such as diplomatic pressure, rumors, false narratives and harassment to express their displeasure and threaten opposition. These tactics seek to influence, disrupt or cause doubts in the enemies decision-making capability. Furthermore, China also uses economic pressure and product boycotts or restrictions in imports and exports specifically on rare materials to cause pressure on its opponents similar to the pressure given to US businesses and investments in China.⁸ From the PLA's strategy psychological warfare or operations essentially involves using military drill to scare the opponent. This is backed by the massive military power which are reported in the official media to "shock and awe" the opponent.⁹

Influencing both domestic and international public opinion in ways that build support for China's own military operations, but at the same time preventing an adversary to justify its actions against China is PLA's main goal when it

⁸ Stefan Halper, *China: The Three Warfares* (Washington D.C.: Office of Net Assessment, 2013), p. 12.

⁹ Bhaskar Roy, "Reading China on Sino-Indian Border Issue," *South Asia Analysis Group*, July 26, 2013, <<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1325>>.

uses the public opinion warfare effort.¹⁰ The idea in public-opinion warfare refers to the establishment of morale inside of the country, inspiring the army and providing it with a fighting spirit, while aiming to decrease the morale of the enemy. The media and information resources, such as newspapers, books, radio, television, the internet and electronic mail, are all considered operational tools. Some commonly used tactics are “emphatic blow” (which affects enemy leaders’ decisions) and “information control” (spreading advantageous information and limiting unfavorable information).¹¹ Some of these activities are close to traditional propaganda operations, but others border on sophisticated deception operations or perception management.¹² In this sense, psychological warfare and media warfare have similarities.

Legal warfare also tries to establish an argument by using a precedent in customary international law for China’s position

¹⁰ Michael Clarke, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Xinjiang,” *East Asia Forum*, November 27, 2017, <<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/11/27/chinas-three-warfares-in-xinjiang/>>.

¹¹ The Strategic Research Group, “Defining the Relationship between China’s ‘Three Wars’ and its Air Power ‘Three Wars’ Case Study,” *Air Power Studies*, No. 2 (June 2016), p. 116.

¹² Stephen Collins, “Mind Games,” *NATO Review*, Summer 2003, <<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2003/issue2/english/art4.html>>.

on an issue, when possible and tying the matter with a Chinese domestic law.¹³ For China, legal warfare is equated with 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 , 以法制敵或用法制敵).¹⁴ It uses international and domestic laws to claim the legal high ground or assert Chinese interests”. Moreover, it seeks to legitimize Chinese policies while sometimes undercutting the authority or justification of enemy reactions. Legal Warfare is not necessarily a revisionist to the legal system itself; instead, it may aim to gradually set a new precedent or a fait accompli situation backed by legal authority.¹⁵

Furthermore, legal warfare is one of the key instruments of psychological and public opinion warfare. It is typically used in conjunction with one or both of the other two types of warfare as maximum effectiveness is achieved when they build

¹³ Peter Dutton, “Three Disputes and Three Objectives,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, (Autumn 2011), pp. 43-67. *Annual Report to Congress 2011* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2011), p. 26;

¹⁴ Dean Cheng, *China Cyber Dragon: Inside China's Information Warfare and Cyber Operations* (Santa Barbara, Cal.: Praeger, 2016), p. 48.

¹⁵ Timothy A. Walton, *China's Three Warfares*, p. 9.

upon each other. In this way, legal warfare provides the basis that strengthens public opinion warfare and psychological warfare. By definition, legal warfare is designed to provide justification for a course of action.¹⁶ 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.

Public opinion warfare seems to be the core concept of the three warfares because of its powerful “cognitive effect,” which is the manipulation of opinion to change ideas and behaviors. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) takes advantage of the media, and especially the internet, to manipulate information, news and knowledge for coercive purposes. Its public opinion warfare are a combination of cyber and electronic warfare; psychological warfare; and the manipulation of public opinion.

The three warfares lend themselves easily to coercion, including relative anonymity, a degree of deniability and these powerful cognitive effects information technologies can produce its global reach. This is a new kind of conflict whose

¹⁶ Emilio Iasiello, “China’s Three Warfares Strategy Mitigates Fallout From Cyber Espionage Activities,” *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2016), p. 56.

core is information and the cognitive effect it produces.¹⁷

III. PRC conducts three warfares toward Taiwan

As major features of the international system were changing, leaders of the Chinese nation took a closer look at modernizing their military. This meant raising training standards, information operations showed obvious political dimensions and modules on the three warfares were conducted.

For the PLA, success required shaping how other governments and their people as well as its own population viewed the conflict. This also required external and internal dimensions. This also meant mobilizing public opinion and shaping an adversary's mindset.

The PLA has thought of coercive strategies, which would be part of psychological warfare to take advantage of the perceived weakened morale and unity of the Taiwan's military and government. It is hoped that through psychological warfare tactics including the electronic transmission of media, undercutting dialogue with elements of the Taiwan's government, etc., Taiwan would lose political confidence and stability and not only agree to initiate unification talks, but also acquiesce to PRC terms.

On Jan. 4, 2018, an incident involving announcement of

¹⁷ Li wen Tung, "Taiwan and the CCP's 'Public Opinion Warfare'," *Taiwan Strategists*, No. 2 (June 2019), p. 40.

the activation of northbound flights on the M503 air route and of three extension routes (W121/W122/W123) was made by Beijing without consulting Taiwan. These routes are controversial, not only because of their location over the Taiwan Strait, where Beijing and Taipei have been conducting military air patrols, but also because they are adjacent to restricted flight zones and overlap with three airways (W2/W6/W8) between Taiwan proper and the outlying islands of Matsu and Kinmen.¹⁸ Prior to this action to activate M503 in 2015, practical considerations affecting aviation safety were the object of negotiations between the two sides, and an agreement on partial operations was reached.¹⁹

This move by Beijing may have been carefully planned and may have created the impression that the new routes have sufficient legitimacy under international air regulations since

¹⁸ “Special Section on M503 & 3W: News Release,” *Mainland Affairs Council*, <<https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News.aspx?n=EAB77B2C7F214EEA&sms=36D0B1920552E8A4>> ; “Special Section on M503 & 3W: Chronicle,” *Mainland Affairs Council*, <<https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/cp.aspx?n=2E2500D599632121>>.

¹⁹ Ralph Jennings, “China Wins Its Fight Over Flights With Rival Taiwan,” *Forbes*, January 25, 2018, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphjennings/2018/01/25/china-wins-the-battle-of-airlines-with-its-old-foe-taiwan/#2bc195fc2392>>.

Shanghai Flight Information Region (FIR) also has full authority as approved by the Montreal-based International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), of which Taiwan is not a member²⁰ These moves were designed to create psychological pressures on Taiwanese people so they would feel isolated, while at the same time showing incompetence on Taiwan's present DDP government.

PRC's provocative action is further complicated by restricted airspace blocks set up by the Taiwanese air force. The Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) maintains a series of patrol areas on the western border of Taipei's FIR, just a few miles from the median line over the Taiwan Strait. These blocks serve as a buffer zone against intrusions by Chinese military aircraft, and any plane entering the Taiwanese jurisdiction without clearance could be confronted by fighter jets from Taiwan. With M503 flights regularly operating just a few miles west, ROCAF alert teams could be alerted to determine whether a plane violating the restricted space is engaged in an intentional incursion, or just a passenger plane veering slightly off-course.²¹

²⁰ Hon-Min Yau, "M503 and Beijing's 'Three Warfares'," *Taiwan Sentinel*, February 7, 2018,

<<https://sentinel.tw/m503-and-beijings-three-warfares/>>.

²¹ "A Primer on M503 and Civil Aviation in Asia," *The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, March 14, 2018, <

The *Global Times*, a sensationalist CCP mouthpiece well known for carrying the views of Chinese hawks, led the charge on April 16 with an article titled “Live-fire drills to check ‘Taiwan independence’” and sub-headed “Provocations by Taiwan’s leaders, others result in mainland’s stern warning.”²² This article emphasizes that China mainland is against Taiwan independence and therefore conducting some live drills on the Taiwan Straits. The focus of the upcoming drill will be long-distance attacks and amphibious landing operations, which worries Taiwan the most. This move is a clear conduct of psychological warfare on Taiwan.

PRC has used the three warfares to pressure and deter Taiwan government and push for the island’s formal independence. The PRC public opinion warfare are erosive toward Taiwan society. Because of new information and communication technologies has magnified propaganda and disinformation to an unprecedented degree.

Taiwan’s national security organs have noted a growing volume of disinformation circulating in Taiwan’s media space, the product of PRC “content farms”. Beijing is apparently

<https://amti.csis.org/primer-m503-civil-aviation-asia/>>.

²² J. Michael Cole, “Chinas Live Fire Drill in the Taiwan Strait Explained,” *Taiwan Insight*, April 19, 2018, <<https://taiwaninsight.org/2018/04/19/chinas-live-fire-drill-in-the-taiwan-strait-explained/>>.

using social media disinformation and propaganda to generate social instability in Taiwan. For instance, during a tense period in an ongoing pension reform debate in Taiwan, users of LINE—the most popular messaging application on the island—and other internet reported a flood of messages and websites that falsely claimed that the central government was planning to impose draconian restrictions on pensioners. Taiwan’s government was forced to quickly issue a statement denying the fake news.²³

In keeping with the PLA’s aforementioned conceptualization of cyber, electronic and psychological warfare as interconnected subcomponents of information warfare.²⁴ The PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) was established in December 2015 to take over the PLA General Political Department (GPD) responsible for psychological operations. Ultimately, altering the Taiwanese is the end goal of SSF. It seeks to disable Taiwan militarily, politically, and psychologically.”²⁵

²³ Russell Hsiao, “China’s Intensifying Pressure Campaign against Taiwan,” *China Brief*, Vol. 18 No. 11 (June 2018), pp. 5-7.

²⁴ John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China’s Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2018), pp. 9-10.

²⁵ Tzu-ti Huang, “Taiwan’s National Defense Think Tank Calls for Task Force to Combat False Information Online,” *Taiwan News*, November 6,

Taiwanese Digital Minister Audrey Tang in a speech has said that the spread of disinformation in Taiwanese society, were all traced back to a Chinese, region and are linked to the Chinese government. Those addresses still “can also be linked to the Chinese Communist party or to the military,”²⁶

After the military reform, local wars under informationized conditions, and securing information dominance appears to have been incorporated as elements of the military's psychological and political warfare missions. It was also noted that PLA remains to conduct three warfares as PLA's premier task are fighting and winning.²⁷ The move is said to remove organizational impediments to coordination across the information operations disciplines, integrating them in peacetime to ease their transition into a wartime structure. PLA scholars have stressed the importance of both psychological and political operations in shaping the strategic situation ahead of conflict.²⁸

2018, <<https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3568868>>.

²⁶ Alison Hsiao, “Taiwan, U.S. Join Forces in Countering Disinformation,” *Taiwan Foundation for Democracy*, November 2, 2018, <<https://bulletin.tfd.org.tw/tag/pla-strategic-support-force/>>.

²⁷ Dean Cheng, *China Cyber Dragon: Inside China's Information Warfare and Cyber Operations*, p. 198.

²⁸ John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, pp. 28-29.

IV. PRC's three warfares as tool to expand interest without war

The three warfares is not only aim to Taiwan, but overseas. PRC employs a well-resourced, comprehensive approach to draw Southeast Asia into its sphere of influence. Southeast Asia may be considered a primary case study for Beijing's political warfare operations worldwide. China employs all means of national power to win its political war here. The effect is total war, a war that goes beyond traditional liaison work and the three warfares to include use of active measures that include violence and other forms of coercive, destructive attacks such as proxy armies.²⁹

Singaporean Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan notes that China is a totalitarian Leninist state that takes a holistic approach which melds together the legal and the covert, in conjunction with persuasion, inducement, and coercion. Importantly, Kausikan identifies the aim of the PRC is not simply to direct behavior but to condition behavior. "In other words, China does not just want you to comply with its wishes," Kausikan asserts. "Far more fundamentally, it wants you to think in such a way that you will of your own volition do what it wants without being told. It's a form of

²⁹ Kerry K. Gershaneck, "Taiwan's Role in Combating China's Political Warfare in Southeast Asia," *The Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 4, No. 13(July 2019), <<http://globaltaiwan.org/2019/07/vol-4-issue-13/>>.

psychological manipulation.”³⁰ In Beijing's immense arsenal of three warfares employs in Southeast Asia, economic coercion is especially visible. Beijing entices Southeast Asian countries with its global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), lucrative military sales of submarines and other weapons, foreign direct investment, market access, and “debt traps” to compel foreign governments to comply with political and security objectives.³¹

CCP consolidates its control over every aspect of domestic society, it increasingly seeks to shape the world in its image. Mammoth multimedia platforms broadcasting the “Voice of China,” and the power to limit foreign companies' access to its lucrative market are just a few of the tools at Beijing's disposal.³² Consistent with three warfares, China conducts influence operations against cultural institutions,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Tom O'Connell, “Belt and Road Initiative: Meeting Resistance,” *Southeast Asia Globe*, September 11, 2019), [<https://southeastasiaglobe.com/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-meets-resistance-in-south east/>](https://southeastasiaglobe.com/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-meets-resistance-in-south-east/).

³² A Lloyd-Damjanovic, “A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education,” *Wilson Center*, August 20, 2018, p. 1, [<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/prc_political_influence_full_report.pdf>](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/prc_political_influence_full_report.pdf).

media organizations, and the business, academic, and policy communities of the United States, other countries, and international institutions to achieve outcomes favorable to its security and military strategy objectives.³³

Furthermore, China harnesses academia and educational institutions, think tanks, and state-run media to advance China's security interests. China's foreign influence activities are predominately focused on establishing and maintaining power brokers within a foreign government to promote policies that China believes will facilitate China's rise, despite China's stated position of not interfering in foreign countries' internal affairs.³⁴

The CCP seeks to condition domestic, foreign, and multilateral political establishments and public opinion to accept China's narrative surrounding its priorities like BRI and South China Sea territorial and maritime claims. Three warfares plays critical role to implement Chinese influence

³³ Larry Diamond, Orville Schell, "China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance," *Hoover Institute*, November 29, 2018, <<https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-influence-american-interests-promoting-constructive-vigilance>>.

³⁴ "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," *U.S. Department of Defense*, May 2, 2019, p. 112, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf>.

operations. Actually, all the operations are coordinated at a high level and executed by a range of actors, such as the United Front Work Department, the Propaganda Ministry, and the Ministry of State Security.

V. Conclusion

Three warfares—public opinion, psychological warfare and legal warfare— which involve influencing the international and domestic perception of the CCP while advancing its national interest and aiming to compromise its opponents' ability to respond. The PLA has played an important role in trying to both influence and undermine Taiwan, however it was not the main actor. "Three warfares" is just PLA terminology describing how to influence "potentially threatening actors at the source to shape their thinking away from threatening actions".³⁵

The aim of CCP's public opinion Warfare for Taiwan is to realize the ambition of Xi Jinping's China Dream to annex or conquer Taiwan (the so-called "China Dream of national

³⁵ Tasha Wibawa, "China's National Security and the 'Three Warfares': How Beijing Decides Who or What to Target," *ABC News*, February 26, 2019, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-26/chinas-three-warfares-how-does-beijing-decide-who-or-what-to/10825448>>.

unity”). The CCP, then, has national reasons to desire to capture Taiwan. After many years of lessons, the CCP has changed its strategy, which is that “purchase Taiwan better than attack Taiwan; deceive Taiwan better than purchase Taiwan.”³⁶

The PRC, and particularly the CCP, sees itself today as beset on all sides (and internally) by potential threats, and it seeks to avoid open conflict whenever possible by employing minimally offensive measures to pursue its objectives. The three warfares provide appropriate measures with which the PRC can protect its core interests while exercising what it perceives to be effective escalation control. Many countries are poorly equipped to counter these challenges. Taiwan can help. Based on Taiwan’s seven-decade fight against Beijing’s political warfare, it can help to develop Southeast Asian capacity to counter China’s malign influence. Moreover, all the countries shall stay together and routinely document and expose China’s use of its three warfares to degrade their effect

³⁶ Li wen Tung, “Taiwan and the CCP’s ‘Public Opinion Warfare’,” p. 48.