POLICY MEMO

Chinese Political Warfare: The PLA’s Information and Influence Operations

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Introduction

Material power is relatively easy to understand and quantify. Much less attention is given to nonmaterial power, which is admittedly more nebulous and difficult to assess. Even so, if power is broadly defined as the capacity to exercise or impose one’s will over another, then nonmaterial forms of power need to be taken seriously. This means understanding them, increasing one’s capacity to operationalize and exercise them, and institutionalizing their use to achieve national and security interests.

The issue of nonmaterial power (especially information and influence operations, which will fall under the term political warfare) is arising because these forms of power have been taken for granted or have been largely ignored by the advanced democracies. Beijing is exploiting our complacency.

There is already a rich and growing body of literature on the various information, influence, and institutional resources and activities of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This brief does not seek to reproduce the excellent work already out there.

Instead, it will make the following points:

- China does not treat institutional and informational warfare as optional or interesting adjuncts to traditional notions of warfare. In fact, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) plays a central and even dominant role in leading influence and information doctrine and operations.

- These nonmaterial approaches are essential to the Chinese strategy and have real-world objectives and outcomes that are often similar or identical to those that could be achieved through (material) force.

- The US and allied Defense establishments are well positioned to work with the rest of government to play a
similarly central role, not only in countering the Chinese use of political warfare but in leading national and allied efforts to responsibly and ethically deploy political warfare to achieve defense and national objectives and outcomes.

The PLA and Information/Influence Operations

Regarding the CCP, the importance of political warfare is reflected in the importance of the entities overseeing such activity. The CCP’s Central Committee (a political body comprising over two hundred of the most senior leaders of the party), the State Council (the chief administrative entity comprising the premier and the heads of cabinet-level departments and ministries), and the Central Military Commission or CMC (the peak military decision-making authority) are jointly responsible for domestic and international political warfare.

Within this structure, the PLA is given extensive authority, responsibility, and resources to work with other bodies, such as the United Front Work Department or UFWD, which has functional and policy responsibility for information and influence activities. Formally, all Chinese government entities

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<tr>
<th>WARFARE</th>
<th>ACTIONS</th>
<th>PURPOSES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>• Use or disseminate specific information or arguments to affect the psychology and subsequent behavior of the enemy.</td>
<td>• Encourage a potential adversary to be cautious about joining an action (including war) against China.</td>
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<td>• Focus on the psychology of coercion (compelling a subject to behave in certain ways); mystification or obfuscation (spreading confusion and uncertainty about facts or issues); division (encouraging and exploiting disagreement among enemies); and defense or resilience (ensuring the same cannot be done to Chinese entities).</td>
<td>• Encourage the enemy to base their policies and actions on false or irrelevant information to dilute the effectiveness of their decision-making.</td>
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<td>• Enhance the CCP’s capacity to control the nature and pace of escalation by manipulating the way the enemy calculates costs/benefits and understands risk.</td>
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<td>• Undermine the enemy’s will to resist or endure costs/losses.</td>
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<td>Public Opinion</td>
<td>• Disseminate disinformation through media (newspapers, radio, television, the internet, films, books, and social media) to affect discussion and shape desired narratives in an enemy’s environment.</td>
<td>• Degrade public resolve to oppose CCP policies and actions.</td>
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<td>• Shape not only public opinion but how the public thinks and talks about an issue (such as Taiwan, human rights, or Chinese history.)</td>
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<td>• Create social license to support and propagate the CCP’s view of history and deny others the social license to oppose the CCP’s view of history.</td>
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<td>Legal</td>
<td>• Use legal and pseudo-legal arguments to redefine notions of legality and legitimacy.</td>
<td>• Redefine legality and legitimacy to justify Chinese actions (such as in the South China Sea.)</td>
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<td>• Develop favorable norms and processes in international organizations.</td>
<td>• Increase the sphere of “legitimate” coercive and subversive Chinese actions.</td>
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<td>• Use the threat of legal action to intimidate or silence, or to impose financial or reputational costs on entities and individuals promoting views against Beijing’s interests.</td>
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Source: Author.
are expected to engage in "United Front work." In practice, the UFWD and the PLA are the two entities leading political warfare policy and activity.

The PLA's political warfare doctrine and operations are the responsibility of the General Political Department (GPD). As an indication of the high priority given to the GPD, it is one of four general departments under the CMC—the others are the General Staff Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armaments Department.

The PLA and other entities have been developing concepts of "cognitive domain operations," which are referred to by some senior serving officials and military strategists as the sixth domain of warfare. It is the "use of psychological warfare to shape or even control the enemy's cognitive thinking and decision-making." The ultimate objective is to "manipulate a country's values, national spirit/ethos, ideologies, cultural traditions, historical beliefs, etc., to prompt them to abandon their theoretical understanding, social system and development path, and achieve strategic goals without victory."2

The PLA's most developed doctrinal and operational framework of cognitive domain operations is the "Three Warfares"—psychological, public opinion, and legal—which were known to be first formulated in 2003. A table summarizing the actions of the Three Warfares is on the previous page.

To be sure, the CCP is in an unchallenged position to define the objectives and lead political warfare against its own people and other nations. While all nations seek to shape public opinion and disseminate propaganda in service of their national interests, one should not entertain the false equivalence that Beijing is simply doing what all other governments do when it comes to information and influence operations.

Normal public diplomacy activities are conducted transparently and through open media networks and public engagements. The objective is to influence the views of audiences. Political warfare is intended to manipulate leaders, elites, and other entities and persons of influence through covert or underhanded approaches to achieve specific political and strategic goals—as if one is already in enemy territory and at war with them, which the CCP believes is already occurring at a national or ideological level.

Moreover, in terms of the top-down organization for the conduct of political warfare, the ability of Beijing to compel or incentivize any Chinese entity or individual to do its bidding, the manpower and economic resources allocated to the task, the willingness to interfere in or corrupt the institutions of other nations, and the ambition of the information and influence operations and objectives, the CCP is without peer. For example, the PLA's Strategic Support Force alone has a cyber unit of over three hundred thousand soldiers and pays fees to approximately two million "net citizens" to make comments on social media sites in support of CCP policies and messages.

Real-World Effects of Chinese Information and Influence

Information and influence are not just about putting one's views forward in overt or covert ways in the hope it will change our minds about various issues. Beijing is much more proactive and systematic than that. Its objective is to change and shape the way the target (which could be a government, institution, or individual) begins to think about or analyze an issue, or what the target's "first principles" might be. It is also designed to shape the way we talk about an issue, the presumptive and analytical frameworks we use, and what kinds of discourse and words are acceptable.

At first glance, all this might seem fanciful, as if it were some mythical Jedi mind trick. However, it is much more real than this. Consider the way Beijing has deliberately obfuscated and reinvented its explanations, positions, and justifications regarding claims in the South China Sea.
For example, earlier this century, it fooled many seasoned China watchers into thinking that there was no internal CCP agreement or consensus on what Beijing wanted in the South China Sea, that strategic policy was a messy and pluralistic process involving many actors and stakeholders, and that assertive actions were often performed by rogue PLA or paramilitary entities without the knowledge of the senior political and military leadership.6

Similarly, the CCP and PLA were deliberately ambiguous about what the claims regarding the nine-dash line entailed—whether China claimed all maritime territory within the nine-dash line, claimed just the exclusive economic zones around islands in that area, or viewed the nine-dash line as its sphere of influence without necessarily claiming exclusive ownership.7 Beijing consistently offered different and often contradictory legal and pseudo-legal justifications for its claims by introducing amorphous terms such as historic rights, adjacent waters, and relevant waters and by linking these to the prerogatives and unique perspectives of one of the world’s oldest and greatest “civilizations” and to a “traditional Asian order” that precedes the current Westphalia system and the contemporary regime of international law (including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea).8 Even the nomination of claims in the South China Sea as a “core interest” was kept intentionally ambiguous.9 This is a critical term because core interest has been consistently applied by Beijing to Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan and signifies the preparedness of the PLA to use military means to defend its stated positions.

Foreign governments, officials, experts, media, and the public were all targets and fell victim to the CCP’s psychological, public opinion, and legal warfare with enormous strategic and security ramifications. The obfuscation and even outright lies regarding issues such as the exact nature of China’s claims, the degree of top-down authorization of actions, the hierarchy of priorities and where the South China Sea existed within these, and the pseudo-legal nature of Chinese claims paralyzed and divided the region and the US even as China steadily and relentlessly changed facts on the ground (or, more precisely, in the water).

For example, foreign governments and voices advanced Beijing’s strategic aims by arguing that a tougher approach would simply inflame the hard-core nationalists within China while a softer line could help the more moderate voices within China gain the ascendancy. Others argued that supposed Chinese assertiveness was a tactical ploy to placate chauvinistic elements in Chinese society and this domestically driven motivation did not amount to evidence Beijing had expansive ambitions in the South China Sea.10

Notably, some of the region’s most respected experts on this issue became unwitting enablers of the CCP’s approach.11 It was common to argue that China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea was an unfortunate response due to developments and issues such as the following:

- The US and others securitized the issue (notwithstanding that it was China that was unilaterally and forcefully changing the status quo at an incomparable pace and scale).
- The militarization of the disputes by the US and others by using naval vessels to perform Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) increased Beijing’s insecurity, which caused the latter to accelerate its activities in the disputed regions.
- The actions of other claimants to secure their claims (which despite being minuscule compared to Chinese actions) are the primary trigger for Beijing’s supposed assertiveness on this issue.
- The greater interest taken by non-claimant states such as the US, Japan, and Australia is exacerbating what ought to be a manageable issue between claimant states.
• International law is inadequate and takes an altogether too ahistorical context to disputes.

Others argued that the South China Sea was a dangerous distraction for Beijing, which is focused on preventing Taiwanese independence. One should therefore not exaggerate Beijing’s ambition and threat when it comes to the South China Sea. Another argument was that the US and allies ought to maintain a neutral stance on South China Sea issues or run the risk of being dismissed as being partial. That would cause Beijing to become even more insecure about US intentions regarding contested issues such as Taiwan and the dispute with Japan in the East China Sea—with potentially destabilizing outcomes.12

In contemporary times, when Beijing’s good intentions are increasingly being questioned, new cognitive manipulation approaches are being advanced to effectively help Beijing assist its objectives. While the CCP’s strategic objectives as described earlier are increasingly difficult to deny, it has worked tirelessly to introduce and apply a different conversation and discourse to the South China Sea and other issues. Much of it is based on these grand narratives propagated by the PLA, which can be applied to many issues:

• Chinese dominance is the historical norm and is inevitable.
• The objectives of the CCP are permanent and unchanging.
• The CCP (and PLA) is fundamentally undeterrable.
• The PLA is prepared to pay any price to achieve its core objectives.
• The US is an increasingly weak and unreliable ally.

If one accepts these propositions, the motivation for regional states to resist or counter even the most coercive policies is greatly diminished even if one profoundly disagrees with China’s behavior. These assumptions underlie the arguments of many who advocate a more accommodationist approach to China in current times.13

Even when it comes to reactive policy, these narratives and other political warfare strategies have enormous real-world impacts. Consider how the US and allies have tied themselves in knots in shifting to an ever more expansive definition of “gray zone” activities by China. Gray zone activities are those that fall under what would be considered an act of war. But the term is a subjective one. For instance, many have somehow convinced themselves that Chinese military and paramilitary incursions into the South China Sea (or into Taiwanese and Japanese air and maritime space) are gray zone activities that ought not to be treated as inherently hostile and may not require a firm response.

The intention of the CCP, which is often achieved, is that the other side perceives the cost and consequences of escalation as too uncertain and therefore too risky. If the CCP is allowed to manipulate perception and calculation of risk, then it is well on the way to win without fighting.

In recent times, other examples of PLA political warfare in action include the public and private messaging following the eruption of a submerged volcano on January 15 and the subsequent problems caused by the ash cloud and tsunami. The advances in the capabilities of PLA Navy (PLAN) vessels to overcome “immense logistical challenges” and engage in complex “military missions other than war” in the “far seas” was contrasted with “the amphibious ship HMAS Adelaide, the largest warship of the Royal Australian Navy” being “hampered by a COVID-19 outbreak and power failure on board.”14

One needs to place this in a broader setting to understand what the PLA is doing and what is at stake—lessons that are also relevant to revelations of a draft security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands. The Chinese
aid and other less legitimate forms of economic largess (such as bribes) given to Pacific Island nations are well known. Also known is what might be termed the Djibouti Strategy applied to the South Pacific Islands. This involves the PLAN joining nonmilitary missions (such as anti-piracy and humanitarian assistance), increasing the scale and frequency of PLAN “assistance,” funding and building logistics and other infrastructural support for its fleet operating far from home on sovereign territory under long-term leases, and offering additional financing for civilian and military-relevant projects before normalizing a permanent Chinese military presence that is subsequently formalized with that foreign state.

This is where information and influence operations come into it. The CCP’s material strategy underpinning the PLAN’s gradualism and mission creep relies on a successful and relentless political warfare campaign directed toward targets in that nation or region. The targeting of Tonga is one example. Chinese diplomats and PLA representatives attend countless obscure community and committee meetings. Donations of water tanks, upgrades to schools, fishing boats, tractors, etc. are accompanied by messages of affinity with another “developing” and non-Western nation in contrast to the US and its allies, who have designed and rigged the system to benefit Western interests and to impose Western and even “white men’s” values. According to Beijing, notions like corruption and transparency are defined and used by Western states to protect their own entrenched first-world privileges and leverage over other states while denying poorer countries the opportunity to fast-track economic development and outcomes. In short, while the US and its allies impose their own standards and principles on poorer states, China is there to offer these states (and their leaders) guaranteed and immediate gains.

At the same time, the narrative is that China is the rising power and time is on its side, while Western states are becoming paralyzed and dysfunctional due to their own democratic and domestic contradictions—and therefore make poorer partners. The US delay in agreeing to terms to renew the Compact of Free Association with those countries is characterized as Western greed and dysfunction. More broadly, the PLA paints the US and its allies as focused on maximizing gains for themselves and on a strategic competition with China that does not serve the interests of smaller countries. As the PLA tells audiences in the region, accepting greater economic (and eventually military) partnership with China is both pursuing a sensible neutrality and attaining guaranteed gains at the same time.

Regarding Australian and other allied defense forces, the PLA is deliberately creating the perception that its own military and logistical capabilities now approximately match and will soon exceed those of the US and its allies in the South Pacific. The purpose is to create a psychological and public “anchor point” that the PLA is already resident in the area and it is now a matter of each small country maximizing the benefits by welcoming and enabling that presence rather than attaining nothing by resisting or opposing the presence.

All this is designed to manipulate the national, elite, and personal cost-benefit and risk calculations for smaller nations, their leaders, and their elites when shaping the contours of what remaining neutral means. It is worth remembering that Beijing has defined the discourse and debate in the following way: the US and allies such as Australia want to keep China out (of the South Pacific) and continue their domination while Beijing merely wants a presence to develop a friendship with the island nations without demanding that the US and its allies be forced out.

This framing makes China and the PLA seem much more reasonable than the US and its allies. This can help explain...
why Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare dismissed Australian and allied concerns about the China-
Solomon Islands security deal as “sowing instability” and “nonsense” while affirming that the Solomons had “no intention of pitching into any geopolitical struggle.”

The Central Role for Defense

Even if one is reluctant to adopt the term political warfare, this brief makes the following points:

- The CCP and PLA view information and influence as an essential domain of warfare to be conducted in peacetime or wartime.
- The PLA’s political warfare is intended to achieve tangible outcomes, many of which have direct strategic and military relevance to the interests of the US and its allies.
- The PLA has been successful at achieving such outcomes.

It is obvious that engaging in information and influence operations (or countering those by other countries) is a whole-of-government enterprise. One ought to be clear that information and influence operations are very different from the usual public messaging and soft power efforts led by diplomats and embassies. Engagement in this kind of political warfare is far more akin to missions undertaken by defense forces in that there must be specific objectives, tactics designed based on the objectives and resources available, and quick implementation by ready and well-resourced teams formed specifically for these tasks—even if this type of warfare is relentless and a protracted struggle. Moreover, political warfare will involve coordination of missions and tactics with allies in sustained ongoing joint operations.

Areas of government such as foreign affairs, intelligence, economic functions, and foreign missions must play an essential role in defining the objectives, the threats, and some elements of the tactics. As with traditional martial activity, political warfare operates under conditions of contest and conflict (even if it is non-kinetic). One needs a mindset of deploying one’s assets and countering or degrading those of the enemy.

In these senses, it is arguable that the institutional setup and psychological mindset needed are better suited to the defense establishment than perhaps the diplomatic or other non-military-related services. Future briefs will examine in greater strategic and tactical detail how political warfare has been conducted by countries such as China and will consider how effective political warfare and information operations might be led and coordinated by democratic nations adhering to responsible and ethical guidelines.

Dr. John Lee is a nonresident senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. From 2016–18, he served as senior advisor to the Australian foreign minister.

NB: This is the first of four briefs on countering Chinese political warfare. All briefs are prepared entirely from open-source materials.
Endnotes


About the Author

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From 2016 to 2018, he was senior national security adviser to Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop. In this role, he served as the principal adviser on Asia and on economic, strategic, and political affairs in the Indo-Pacific region.

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His articles have been published in leading policy and academic journals in the United States, Asia, and Australia. He is the author of Will China Fail?, published in 2007 and updated and reissued in 2009.

Lee’s opinions have been published in over fifty major newspapers and current affairs magazines around the world, including leading broadsheets in the United States, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania.

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The author has had informal discussions with Australian political leaders, principal advisers, and senior officials which have informed some of these views. However, the brief represents the personal views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian government.

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