POLICY MEMO

An Assessment of US and Allied Information and Influence Warfare

BY DR. JOHN LEE
Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

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Introduction
The first two policy memos in this series on Chinese information and influence warfare pointed out that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) believes it is engaged in a perpetual “struggle” against the West and makes no fundamental distinction between wartime and peacetime. These reports also explained that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) plays a central and often dominant role in leading doctrine and operations when it comes to informational and influence warfare.

Additionally, the previous memos argued that Asia and the Pacific are both the primary and most suitable subregions for the conduct of such Chinese activities. For the CCP and PLA, the region has unique material, geographical, ideational, and cultural characteristics that render it especially suitable for Beijing to successfully wage political warfare.

Previous memos focused on the PLA’s Three Warfares framework, which consists of public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare. The Chinese intent is not merely to disrupt, confuse, or create mischief but to craft and control grand narratives. Doing so is extremely effective because these narratives determine how we reflexively interpret information and situations, what seems possible or not, what seems prudent rather than reckless, and what appears to be rational and in one’s long-term interest. Grand narratives determine how we think about a problem, issue, or development. In doing so, they predetermine the range of “reasonable” options and solutions that we believe are available.

The previous memos also offered analysis and examples of how the CCP and PLA are using political warfare to achieve strategic objectives and to undermine the interests of the United States and its allies. Ominously, and in important
respects, Beijing is not just “winning without fighting” but taking the more insidious approach of achieving strategic goals without victory.¹

This third memo in the series examines US and allied information and influence doctrine and operations, especially by the defense establishments. In these democracies, the government has largely allowed the defense establishments to lead doctrine and capability for the information and influence elements of political warfare. The paper looks at the strengths and shortcomings of how the US and others conceive of information and influence warfare as it relates to responding to Chinese efforts in the region, as detailed in the first two memos. In doing so, it prepares the way for the fourth and final memo, which will look at specific policies and activities that the US and its allies could engage in to advance its interests and values and to counter some of the more damaging and insidious elements of Chinese political warfare in the region.

The memo focuses on the US and, to a lesser extent, Australia because these Five Eyes countries are the most active and invested in understanding and countering Chinese information

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<tr>
<th>WARFARE</th>
<th>ACTIONS</th>
<th>PURPOSES</th>
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<tbody>
<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).²</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.
and influencing warfare efforts in the region. It is important to remember that such warfare is different in nature, purpose, and implementation from the usual diplomatic and soft-power efforts undertaken by democracies. The first memo argues as follows:

Engaging in information and influence operations (or countering those by other countries) is a whole-of-government enterprise. [But it is] 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.²

**US and Australian Approaches**

Political warfare is not alien to the US. The contemporary discussion usually begins with George F. Kennan, who in a policy planning memo at the onset of the Cold War noted:

> In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures . . . and “white” propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements, “black” psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.³

Since the formal end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, policymakers emphasized the nonmaterial elements of warfare less as the US felt confident it had triumphed over its ideological rival. Over the past two decades, some have been increasingly interested in responding to disinformation propagated by authoritarian countries such as Russia, China, and Iran. However, whole-of-government efforts by democracies in understanding and countering these activities tend to focus more on strengthening one’s national and institutional resilience and calling out the mischief authoritarian powers cause.

When it comes to China, one suspects that the lesser emphasis on political warfare to achieve national objectives stems from the loss of strategic and institutional memory as to the importance of nonmaterial competition—the result of the Western perspective that the Cold War ended in the 1990s. However, the CCP does not share this view. For Beijing, the implosion of the Soviet Union and China’s greater participation in that post-Soviet global order merely changed the contours of the ongoing and enduring political and ideological struggle against the West.⁴

Regarding information and influence warfare specifically, the US tends to frame such activities within a narrower military context. Moreover, and unlike the PLA, the US treats this kind of warfare as an interesting adjunct to traditional military operations. For example, defense publications on information operations in the previous decade treated information operations as a set of tactics or capabilities in a traditional warfighting context. In an early Department of Defense seminal publication on information operations, such operations consisted of computer network operations (e.g., network attack), electronic warfare, operations security, military deception, and psychological operations.⁵

During the Cold War, the US defense establishments took a broader view of psychological operations. For example, a Department of Defense Directive on psychological operations in 1984 referred to “planned political, economic,
military, and ideological activities towards foreign countries, organizations and individuals in order to create emotions, attitudes, understanding, beliefs, or behavior favorable to the achievement of US political and military objectives.”

However, by the second decade of this century, “psychological operations” in this US defense context seem to have become a far more restrictive concept than the PLA’s “psychological warfare,” which is part of the PLA’s Three Warfares framework.7 The former deals with military information designed to achieve certain effects within the conduct of traditional war. As a 2012 Pentagon directive states about military information support operations (which superseded psychological operations), such activities are circumscribed as

the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.⁶ (emphasis added)

In contrast, the PLA’s Three Warfares approach is designed to shape the fundamental cognitive processes and decision-making of the enemy during wartime and, more importantly, peacetime.

When it comes to the contemporary conception of the information environment within which information operations (during wartime) occur, the Pentagon does adopt an increasingly comprehensive understanding of that environment. This consists of the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, disseminate, or act on information. A 2017 update on the information environment does state that it “comprises and aggregates numerous social, cultural, cognitive, technical, and physical attributes that act upon and impact knowledge, understanding, beliefs, world views, and ultimately actions of an individual, group, system, community, or organization.”⁹ Moreover, “human aspects frame why relevant actors perceive a situation in a particular way.”¹⁰

The update also added the information function as the seventh joint function common to all operations at all levels of warfare (along with command and control, intelligence, fires of weapons and other systems, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment).¹¹ Operationalizing the information function encompasses the following steps:¹²

- Understanding information in the operational environment (i.e., perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making of relevant actors. An understanding of their culture, history, and narratives informs this effort).
- Leveraging information to influence the behavior of relevant actors through their perceptions, attitudes, etc. This facilitates informed perceptions about one’s military operations and counters adversarial disinformation and propaganda to gain military advantage.
- Supporting friendly human and automated decision-making (i.e., facilitating shared understanding across the entire force and protecting friendly information networks and systems).

Furthermore, the Pentagon understands the information environment as consisting of three dimensions: the physical dimension, where information overlaps with the physical world; the information dimension, where information is collected, processed, stored, disseminated, displayed, and protected; and the cognitive dimension, where human decision-making takes place based on how information is perceived.

In terms of activities to operationalize the information function and thrive in the information environment, the Pentagon nominates leadership engagement, public affairs, civil-military operations, military deception, military information support operations (which includes psychological operations in the limited sense described above), operations security, electronic
warfare, space operations, special technical operations, and cyberspace operations as priorities. These efforts seem to deal primarily with enhancing material capability rather than genuine cognitive or psychological elements.

Note that some often and incorrectly conflate information operations with cyberspace operations. The two are interrelated but not the same. It is true that many information operations are conducted through cyberspace, so much so that the US Army and Air Force are shifting cyber assets, operations, and command to the information warfare sections. However, cyberspace is merely one information domain, albeit an increasingly important and perhaps dominant one, within which information operations take place.

At the same time, cyber warfare can have very different objectives from information warfare and will therefore have distinct doctrinal and operational elements. For example, information warfare might rely on cyber operations to achieve an intended effect. However, the concept of information warfare deals with the weaponization of information, while cyber warfare is an attack on the informational systems of the enemy. Both might use cyber operations to achieve their objectives, but one warfare is not to be equated with the other. Maintaining the distinction matters because information war and cyber war have different intended effects. Moreover, defending against information warfare is not necessarily the same thing as defending against cyber warfare.

Although the Pentagon is constantly developing concepts and doctrine associated with information warfare, the objective largely pertains to giving greater effect to military operations and achieving military ends. Put differently, the US military is developing a deeper appreciation of the non-physical domains relevant to military operations and objectives. For example, military deception as part of “military information support operations” is intended to cause adversaries to behave in a manner that will assist US military objectives and missions.

But this is different from the much more comprehensive notion of acquiring and exercising psychological and cognitive power and influence as envisaged by the PLA as it conducts its political warfare activities.

It is worth noting that the ground is being cultivated to adopt a broader approach to information warfare beyond military contexts. Current doctrine seems to indicate that the government, even nonmilitary elements, can project and deploy all instruments of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME)—in the information environment. The 2018 National Defense Strategy refers to information warfare as relevant to a competition continuum from peace to the gray zone to war. The 2022 National Defense Strategy refers to DoD efforts to align its activities with other instruments of national power. Although the latter is in the narrower context of building US advantages over the military and coercive capabilities of enemies, pledges to operationalize the broader elements of national power are welcome.

Finally, the US approach is very similar to those of its Five Eyes partners, especially Australia. As is the case in many Western democracies, anything pertaining to efforts to defeat or subdue an enemy is generally left to the Australian Defense Organization, or ADO (which comprises the Department of Defense and the Australian Defense Force). This means the ADO has taken the lead in developing relevant doctrine and concepts pertaining to political warfare.

Most relevantly, dipping one’s toes in the deep pool of political warfare tends to begin with seeking a more profound understanding of both the information environment, on the one hand, and the interaction and relationship between the information and operational environments, on the other.

For example, Australia mirrors the US approach by conceiving of the information environment as comprising
the physical, informational, and human or cognitive. This evolved from earlier notions that an enemy’s cognitive characteristics affect how it makes decisions or processes information, and that the “cognitive” is an essential “target” of military operations to produce certain effects in the conduct of war. The more recent doctrinal iteration is that analysis of adversaries’ decision-making methods, their psychological strengths and weaknesses, and the nonmaterial elements that could cause them to alter or abandon their objectives are inherent elements of the environment and constitute a “critical factor” in determining whether the ADF and its allies can prevail.

Like the US and other allies, Australia accepts the reality that political warfare takes place in a continuum that spans peace, the gray zone, and war. Furthermore, the environment is complicated by the presence of elements of cooperation, competition, confrontation, and conflict (except in the event of formal hostilities, in which only confrontation and conflict occur).

**Shortcomings**

The purpose of the memo is not to engage in pedantic fault-finding with US and allied approaches to information and influence warfare. It is to point out where some essential aspects of our approach are seriously lacking and are likely to be inadequate or ineffective in responding to Chinese activities in the region, and, more specifically, to the PLA’s Three Warfares framework and operations.

**Operation across the Entire Continuum**

The PLA seeks to achieve the CCP’s objective of securing regional submission and narrowing the military, economic, diplomatic, and normative ground in which the US and its allies may operate. Kinetic force is the extreme option, but China’s main goal is achieving its objectives without fighting. The political warfare activities of the PLA and other Chinese entities should be understood in this context.

In contrast, the US and its allies are developing doctrines and concepts for such warfare primarily, and arguably exclusively, in the context of giving greater effects to military campaigns and operations. This means they are devoting little attention to preventing China from winning without fighting, let alone to how the US and allies might win without fighting.

Moreover, the PLA designed its political warfare efforts in peacetime and in the gray zone to maximize the prospect that its intended targets (political and military leadership and the general population) will react and respond in a manner that suits Beijing should hostilities begin.

In short, while the CCP and PLA view political warfare as a relatively low-cost and effective way to achieve strategic and even military objectives with or without the use of force, the US and its allies treat such nonmaterial warfare as a helpful appendage to enhance the effectiveness of military action. This US and allied approaches are not incorrect in that the nonmaterial elements of warfare (especially how the information and operational environments interact and shape each other) are critical to master to subdue the enemy during conflict. But their approaches are inadequate against a China that is conducting various forms of warfare across the entire continuum or spectrum from peace to war.

It is understandable why democracies operate in a far more restrictive space along the continuum than China does. We do not share the CCP’s perspective that international politics is partially defined by the perpetual material and ideological struggle between the Party and the West. This means the distinction between peacetime and wartime is more absolute and significant for the US and its allies than for China.

Moreover, from the start of its existence, the CCP has been engaged in a relentless campaign to shape the perspectives of targets—domestic and increasingly foreign—to achieve its
objectives. Unlike governments in the West, the CCP and PLA are hardwired to conduct information and influence warfare and have ready doctrines and apparatuses to do so.

From the US and allied side, the fact that the defense establishments have primary carriage of the conduct of warfare means that these countries will primarily understand information and influence warfare operations in the traditional warfighting context.

That the defense establishments continue to lead such doctrine and concepts is appropriate as nonmaterial warfare is an essential component of warfighting. It is also desirable as the US and allied defense establishments are far ahead of other government entities when it comes to using material and nonmaterial means to subdue targets or, more broadly, to achieve strategic objectives.

The proviso is that the US and its allies need to adapt and apply thinking about the human or nonmaterial elements of the information environment on the one hand, and the interaction and relationship between the information and operational environments on the other, across the continuum and in situations short of war.

Defense establishments cannot and ought not to be the only entities participating in this effort, which will need strong and direct political and civilian oversight. But defense establishments need to take a primary role in these tasks given the relatively advanced state of their thinking on these nonmaterial issues and the resources they can allocate to advancing doctrine and concepts.

The Influence Gap

The increased willingness of the US and its allies to understand and operationalize the relationship and interaction between the physical or material, informational, and human or cognitive to achieve strategic and military objectives should be applauded. This is evidence of growing acceptance that we are in a material and nonmaterial contest.

Most doctrines and concepts for operationalizing the human or nonmaterial elements focus on understanding the enemy’s preexisting cognitive or psychological processes and exploiting these to gain a strategic, tactical, or operational advantage. They focus far less on how to shape or change a target’s cognitive or psychological mindset in ways that would help the US or its allies attain their objectives. In short, utilizing an understanding of why and how human beings and systems respond to phenomena or make decisions is not the same as proactively shaping and changing how these entities think or respond.

Advancing or entrenching cognitive or psychological frameworks that suit our objectives is at the heart of achieving our intended strategic or military effects. Indeed, the essence of the PLA’s Three Warfare framework and other Chinese political warfare approaches is not just to work within and exploit preexisting regional perspectives and mindsets but also to shape and change these perspectives and mindsets where possible or necessary. As previously argued, the CCP and PLA do not use political warfare activities only to disrupt or confuse us or to exploit how we think, but to shape and change how and what we think to manipulate our range of likely responses. China largely achieves this goal by defining and controlling grand narratives, which determine how we think about a problem, issue, or development. By doing so, Beijing influences our range of “reasonable” options and solutions.

The US and other democracies have been reluctant to robustly engage in influence operations (in the military and nonmilitary contexts) partially because they often associated such efforts with the unethical manipulation of one’s cognitive and psychological frameworks. Such unethical manipulation is generally associated with the activities of authoritarian states
such as China and Russia—with the corollary that these activities are what ethical democratic states ought not to do.

Moreover, many link influence operations in the political warfare context with authoritarian activities involving disinformation, distortion, and deception. For example, albeit in a narrow military context, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates replaced the term *psychological operations*, or PSYOP, with the less evocative *military information support operations* on the basis that PSYOP tends to connote “propaganda, brainwashing, manipulation, and deceit.” The change was mainly one of terminology as the US military maintains deception as a legitimate tactic. However, this episode illustrates the reflexive and deep discomfort many have with the notion that democratic governments ought to be engaged in seeking to change the cognitive and psychological frameworks of targets, except in the most extreme of circumstances.

People around the world accept the idea that democracies ought to operate according to different and higher ethical standards. Inferring from this that any effort at cognitive or psychological influence, whether in the military or nonmilitary context, is ethically questionable or unacceptable does not follow. Cognitive and psychological frameworks fundamentally shape how human beings and human systems respond whether we willingly or unknowingly subject ourselves to these frameworks or not. One must proactively counter adverse information, and influence frameworks and approaches, with one’s own information and influence framework. For example, US military leaders removed the need to engage in counterpropaganda activities from relevant guidance documents at the beginning of the previous decade at a time when China was ramping up its efforts in this area.

Developing acceptable ethical frameworks and processes suitable for a liberal democracy is necessary. But walking away from the cognitive and psychological contest with a determined Chinese enemy well advanced in these types of warfare is the equivalent of vacating the ground—during peace or war—and is dangerous.

One should also resist the comfortable assumption that simply pointing out the US and its allies’ good works—or the superiority of the principles behind the free and open Indo-Pacific compared to authoritarian alternatives—will win the day when it comes to influencing regional actors’ choices and behavior. The combination of material inducements, coercion, and cleverly crafted and promoted grand narratives means the US and its allies cannot assume their offerings are inherently more attractive or compelling.

As the fourth memo will argue, more proactive influence operations that include the crafting and propagation of strategic grand narratives are essential to changing the behavior of nations in favorable ways during peacetime and wartime.

### The Need for a Strategic and Martial Cultural Shift

Commentators and observers of US and allied approaches tend to be critical of the insufficient attention and resources that are given to nonmaterial warfare. Carnes Lord from the US Naval War College argues that Americans tend to “discount the relevance of nonmaterial factors such as history, culture and ideas” and have difficulty responding to “international settings where basic American values are under challenge.” Referring to the 1990s, Lord also observes an American “generic resistance to [psychological and cognitive operations]” in addition to “resistance stemming from the national security bureaucracy itself.” In more recent times, Cassandra Brooker, in a report published by the Australian Army, concludes that “the West has been complacent, reactive, and risk averse in dealing with this new frontier of hybrid political warfare.” Commenting on the US defense establishments, Stanford University’s Herbert Lin believes “non-kinetic military specializations are not as highly ranked
in the DoD cultural hierarchy (aka the pecking order) as kinetic specializations, and it would not be surprising if the lack of respect accorded the former translated into a lack of significant attention to such matters on the part of the latter. Lin raises an important point. As the proverbial saying goes, if all one has is a hammer, then everything begins to look like a nail.

To be fair, the primary duty of the defense establishments is to focus on the doctrine and capabilities needed to respond to threats, and these capabilities will be predominantly kinetic. The memo does not glibly suggest that nonmaterial warfare should be given as much attention and resources as traditional forms of warfare, or that there is always a nonmaterial substitute for kinetic action in achieving strategic and military effects.

However, it makes the following arguments and suggestions:

- Developing information and influence warfare doctrine and capabilities is relatively inexpensive and has disproportionately significant impacts across the continuum of conflict, from peacetime to the gray zone to conflict. When it comes to achieving strategic and military objectives, one gets enormous bang for the buck.
- Conversely, failing to give greater attention and resources to these nonmaterial elements will lead to a deteriorating strategic and military environment for the US and its allies.
- The defense establishments are well positioned to lead efforts along this entire continuum, subject to appropriate civilian oversight and ethical guidelines.
- The more emphasis given to nonmaterial warfare in the form of resources and capabilities, the more effective these nonmaterial capabilities will become in managing problems and threats across the entire continuum of conflict.

**Conclusion**

The US, Australia, and other democratic allies are increasingly concerned about an authoritarian challenge, led by China, to the rules-based order. Many worry because the once-ascendant liberal democratic virtues of personal freedom, rule of law, economic rights, and social justice are being challenged. In regional affairs, the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific does not appear as immediately appealing and compelling to many nations and elites as one might have hoped.

Importantly, there are strategic consequences to all this. As detailed in previous memos, Beijing’s cognitive and psychological capture of regional elites goes a long way toward explaining why most Southeast Asian countries seem reticent to defend their stated interests vis-à-vis China, why the Solomon Islands is leaning toward Beijing with profound strategic and military ramifications, and why such a lack of overt support for US actions, such as freedom of navigation operations, exists even though China is engaging in aggressive and illegal activities in the South China Sea. Material factors alone cannot account for these adverse trends. The nonmaterial drivers are at least as important.

This memo offered analysis and assessment of some elements of the US and allied information and influence warfare approach. The fourth and final memo will suggest some ways their national security setups, especially their defense establishments, can more effectively compete and prevail in the nonmaterial realm across the conflict continuum.
Endnotes


2 Lee, “Chinese Political Warfare.”


7 Lee, “Chinese Political Warfare.”

8 Department of Defense, “Information Operations.”


10 Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Operations.”

11 Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Operations.”


14 Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Operations.”


17 Department of Defense, “Information Operations.”


24 Campbell, Australian Defence Force Procedures 5.0.1.


26 See Lee, “Chinese Political Warfare” and “Chinese Information and influence Warfare.”

27 Lee, “Chinese Information and influence Warfare.”


Herbert Lin, “Doctrinal Confusion and Cultural Dysfunction in DoD,” 100.

About the Author

John Lee is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. He is also an adjunct professor at the University of Sydney. 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 for economic, strategic, and political affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. Dr. Lee was also appointed to be the foreign minister's lead adviser on the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, the first comprehensive foreign affairs blueprint for Australia since 2003 and written to guide Australia's external engagement for the next ten years and beyond.

He has held adjunct professorships at the Australian National University and University of Sydney. He is one of the foremost experts on the Chinese political economy and on strategic and economic affairs pertaining to the Indo-Pacific.

Dr. Lee's articles have been published in leading policy and academic journals in the United States, Asia, and Australia.

He received his master's and doctorate in international relations from the University of Oxford and his bachelor of laws and arts degrees (first class, philosophy) from the University of New South Wales.

He is based in Sydney, Australia.

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Hudson Institute
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Fourth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

+1.202.974.2400
info@hudson.org
www.hudson.org