Executive Summary
The People’s Liberation Army’s increasingly provocative and reckless activities in and around disputed zones such as Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea constitute only one means through which Beijing seeks to change key aspects of the regional order and compel others to “accept its interests.” However, the Chinese Communist Party and PLA are already decades into China’s information and influence war, which is designed to either weaken the will and capabilities of the United States and its allies should military conflict break out or, even better, eliminate the need for China to use military force to achieve its primary objectives (i.e., to “win without fighting”). In this context, the PLA is several steps ahead of the West; whereas Western analysts observe that the PLA is operating in the “grey zone,” the PLA is instead redefining and expanding this grey zone by manipulating how other countries think about it.

With respect to this so-called grey zone, a cost-benefit analysis encompassing both objective and subjective elements typically determines an entity’s decision to respond with military force. For example, crafting narratives about the PLA’s military superiority, elite capture, ability to foment disunity within a target country, or normalization of coercion raises the West’s threshold of what provocations demand a military response—thereby expanding the grey zone within which the PLA and CCP are allowed to operate. Thus, Beijing is well ahead of the US and its allies in conceptualizing and operationalizing the use of military actions other than (kinetic) war to achieve political or strategic objectives.

Finally, Asia and the Pacific constitute both the primary and most suitable region within which the Chinese can conduct information and influence warfare. These sub-regions’ unique material, geographical, ideational, and cultural characteristics...
render them especially suitable for Beijing to successfully wage political warfare.

This policy memo describes the key objectives, strategies, and tactics of Chinese information and influence warfare developed and refined for use in the Asia-Pacific region. It focuses on maritime Southeast Asia and the Pacific, the areas of highest interest for the US, Australia, and their allies. Offering Singapore, Thailand, and the Solomon Islands as three pertinent case studies, the memo also lays the groundwork for an examination of effective US and allied counters to Beijing’s activities in these contexts, which follow-up reports in this series will present.

Introduction

The first in this policy memo series on Chinese information and influence warfare argued that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views itself as engaged in a perpetual “struggle” against the West and therefore draws no fundamental distinction between peacetime and wartime. Consequently, according to a seminal work of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) on political or unrestricted warfare, contemporary warfare no longer consists of “using armed forces to compel the enemy to submit to one’s will.” Instead, it incorporates “all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.” Success therefore requires that “all boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, are totally removed.”

Hence, China does not view political warfare (which includes both information and influence warfare) as optional or as a merely interesting adjunct to traditional notions of warfare. Rather, it deems these non-material approaches essential to its approach and to furthering real-world objectives and outcomes similar or identical to those achievable through material force. The PLA therefore plays a central role in leading informational and influence doctrine and operations.

This begs the question of to what end such a comprehensive notion of war is being waged. After having spent decades and considerable resources studying and understanding the nature and sources of American and allied power, the CCP has identified the following “forms of control” as constituting the broad sources of a dominant nation’s position in the regional and global order:

- Coercive capability (based largely on material means and one’s resolve)
- Consensual inducements (based on incentives provided to nations bilaterally or through preferred institutional arrangements)
- Legitimacy (possibly based on widely accepted or else institutional norms or conventions)

In contemporary times, the CCP has made no secret of its ambition to displace the United States as the world’s foremost comprehensive power. Before it can achieve that, however, China must be dominant in the decisive maritime areas of East Asia and the Pacific. As recently as the previous decade, only the United States and its allies possessed the capabilities and relationships needed to dominate these areas strategically, economically, institutionally, and normatively. The CCP’s strategy has therefore been aimed at enhancing its own forms of control and weakening those of America and its allies. More specifically, Chinese hopes of shrinking US (material and non-material) footholds and easing it out of the region can only be achieved if maritime Asia and the Pacific become Sino-centric and China dominated.

The PLA’s increasingly provocative and reckless activities in and around disputed zones such as Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea constitute only one means through which Beijing seeks to change key aspects of the regional order and compel others to “accept its interests.” However, the CCP and PLA are already decades into China’s information and influence war, which is designed to either
weaken the will and capabilities of the US and its allies should military conflict break out or, even better, eliminate the need for China to use military force to achieve its primary objectives (i.e., to “win without fighting”). In this context, the PLA is several steps ahead of the West; whereas Western analysts observe that the PLA is operating in the “grey zone,” the PLA is instead redefining and expanding this grey zone by manipulating how other countries think about it.

With respect to this so-called grey-zone, a cost-benefit analysis encompassing both objective and subjective elements typically determines an entity’s decision to respond with military force. For example, crafting narratives about the PLA’s military superiority, elite capture, ability to foment disunity within a target country, or normalization of coercion raises the West’s threshold of what provocations demand a military response—thereby expanding the grey zone within which the PLA and CCP are allowed to operate. Thus, Beijing is well ahead of the US and its allies in conceptualizing and operationalizing use of military actions other than (kinetic) war to achieve political or strategic objectives.

Finally, Asia and the Pacific constitute both the primary and most suitable region within which the Chinese can conduct information and influence warfare. These sub-regions’ unique material, geographical, ideational, and cultural characteristics render them especially suitable for Beijing to successfully wage political warfare.

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Securing Regional Submission

After identifying the relevant decision-making entities—an individual; political, business, or social elites; government officials; etc.—analysts typically apply a cost-benefit analysis to understanding the issue being examined and the entity’s decision-making process. In this common Western approach, the art and science lie in accurately identifying the deciding entity’s priority of interests prior to considering why it has reached a particular decision. Under this schema, decisions are assumed to be “rational” from the perspective of the decision-making entity, even if the construction and hierarchy of interests might seem “irrational” from another’s perspective, in this case, a US or allied one.

From the fecklessness of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and some member states in limiting Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea to the Chinese political and strategic gains in countries such as the Solomon Islands, this standard cost-benefit analysis has yielded important insights as to why China has been able to achieve substantial strategic gains in these areas. Nonetheless, such standard cost-benefit analyses are frequently inadequate. Although Japan, Europe, and the US are much more important sources of foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia than China, Beijing has been allowed to construct artificial islands in the South China Sea spanning more than 3,200 acres despite a formal 2016 ruling that Chinese claims in these maritime regions have no basis in international law. Additionally, China has militarized many of these artificial features.

In addition, despite generous and long-standing Australian assistance to Honiara, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare agreed to an open-ended security deal with China. Even considering factors such as economic reliance on China and use of Chinese resources for elite capture, such actors’ choices to submit to China, even though doing so manifestly harms their own stated and presumptive interests, seem “irrational” or at least unexplained, even by a subjective construction of interests.
The PLA “Three Warfares” framework (see table 1 below) and other Chinese approaches to political warfare applied specifically to the Asia-Pacific region help to illuminate this seeming conundrum. While the approach of many nations is to align their offerings to the perceived pre-existing interests of decision-makers in target countries, Beijing leads the West in seeking to define, influence, or alter how decision-makers construct and interpret their interests at a more fundamental level.

As this policy memo explains, doing so involves material and non-material tools of statecraft and manipulation that play out particularly effectively in Asia and the Pacific. It also drives home the importance of and urgency for US and allied nations to engage in influence and information operations capable of shaping regional dynamics and countering Chinese actions, but in ways consistent with our ethical standards.

Much has already been written about the ambition and scope of CCP and PLA information and influence activities, so this relatively short memo does not need to reiterate those observations. Most of these activities employ coercion...
and material inducements; essential techniques in Beijing’s statecraft toolkit include the arbitrary and relatively easy application and withdrawal of pain and the offering and retraction of benefits.

The focus of this memo is the non-material elements of Chinese information and influence activities (i.e., those designed to shape or manipulate how an adversary or target views an issue or problem, including the prospect of material gain or coercion, which can in turn shape and predispose its possible response to a Chinese action). Note that the material (e.g., military, economic) can interact with the non-material (e.g., cognitive, psychological). The point of Chinese political warfare is therefore to determine an adversary’s cognitive and psychological response to Chinese policies and actions, including material coercion or inducements directed against it. For example, the defiant and proactive Australian response to attempted Chinese economic coercion speaks to a Chinese political warfare campaign against Australia that has largely failed. However, as this policy memo argues, Chinese political warfare campaigns have been much more successful elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region.

Indeed, Xi Jinping has made China much more reliant on, and better positioned to engage in, political warfare due to the following changes:

• Increased centralization of power and (legal and extra-legal) authority, which enables senior CCP leadership to better harness and coordinate all government and non-government Chinese assets and capabilities in conducting such activities.

• Application of frameworks such as political-military-civil fusion domestically and, increasingly, externally. For example, the PLA Strategic Support Force established in 2015 plays a leading role in external information and disinformation operations and works with non-military entities (including commercial ones) for these purposes. These changes have had several important consequences. First is the better integration of messaging, strategy, implementation, and allocation of the resources dedicated to such activities. In addition, they have allowed the CCP to rely to a greater extent on grassroots or local entities in target countries to conduct information and influence work. Such entities have been planted, infiltrated, seduced, or coerced, and they include community and business organizations, student bodies, and local media and journalists. When offering information and exercising influence, these entities appear more authentic and sincere compared to official or government-linked Chinese entities, a distinct advantage in the conduct of political warfare directed against other countries. They also have more extensive reach in the target country’s society and community and so respond more quickly to local developments. As has been noted, the CCP employs a whole-of-government and even whole-of-nation approach to “be the first to the microphone” to convey its messages.

First impressions (cognitive and psychological) matter. As time is of the essence in non-material warfare, the CCP and PLA relentlessly refine their tactical and operational procedures to allow rapid response to evolving events, set the conversation and agenda, and frame developments to grand narratives (see discussion below). According to the PLA Air Force, which is widely recognized as the most innovative of China’s military services with respect to information and influence activities, “information is power, information is a weapon, information is confidence, information is position, and information is guidance [of public opinion]” in matters related to China’s strategic and military affairs, and therefore the PLA must develop the capacity to rapidly exercise “discursive” and “agenda-setting power.”

The core purpose of Chinese political warfare in the region, especially the PLA’s Three Warfares framework, is not only to disrupt and confuse but rather to control grand narratives that
define what is possible and what is impossible, dictate what is considered prudent rather than reckless, and determine what seems to be in one’s long-term interest. Stated succinctly, grand narratives determine how a problem, issue, or development is thought about and thereby determine the range of options and solutions perceived as being reasonable and available, thus constituting an extremely powerful weapon.

The previous memo in this series identified the following foundational grand narratives that the United Front and the PLA relentlessly pursue:

- Chinese dominance is the historical norm and is inevitable.
- The CCP’s objectives are permanent and unchanging.
- The CCP and PLA are fundamentally undeterrable and are prepared to pay any price to achieve China’s “core” objectives.
- The US is an increasingly weak, unpredictable, and unreliable ally.

The successful placement and promotion of these foundational grand narratives construct environments within which the CCP is ideally positioned to achieve its objectives. Among their more obvious consequences are weakening the will and resolve of nations to resist China and persuading decision-makers that the escalatory advantage is with Beijing. In addition, they imply that preparing for and winning a war against China is impossible and so to be avoided at any cost; that resistance will lead to catastrophic isolation and abandonment by the US and other allies; and that coming to an arrangement with Beijing sooner rather than later is to be preferred, even on terms that heavily favor China.

Examination of arguments calling for accommodation with China on Beijing’s terms reveals that these grand narratives invariably inform the assumptions underlying such advocacy. None of this is to say that these grand narratives are inherently false. However, the CCP and PLA have carefully crafted them to serve as foundational facts and assumptions to guide adversaries’ basic thinking about evolving events rather than propositions to be debated, assessed, and contested.

Moreover, these grand narratives lead to the cognitive, psychological, ethical, and institutional predisposition to accept and internalize perspectives and alternatives that directly contradict and undermine the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Consider the Chinese approach, which is based on hierarchy with China occupying the apex. This structure grants China opacity and entrenched privilege and obligates the smaller states to offer it obeisance and submission. These values and perspectives are antithetical to FOIP, so Western nations quickly assume that such values and perspectives will also be offensive to regional nations.

Yet, to the states making up the region centered around the Middle Kingdom, challenging this “natural hierarchy” seems futile, costly, and destabilizing. Moreover, as the permanent civilization-state constituting the apex of the hierarchy, China is judged by the largesse and benefits it can offer rather than the extent to which the CCP abides by principles of transparency and due process. So long as it can deliver these guaranteed benefits to smaller states, the apex entity is perceived as the appropriate primary beneficiary of any arrangement, just as a chief executive benefits disproportionately from his firm’s successes. Within a regional system viewed as hierarchical, it is appropriate that China receive the lion’s share of respect and obedience.

The unique conditions governing Asia and the Pacific lend themselves to such cognitive and psychological capture. China has unique advantages, dominating the region geographically and occupying the center of the Indo-Pacific region. Chinese culture and civilization are foundational with respect to the region’s history and evolution. Anything Chinese—economic, military, diplomatic, cultural, linguistic, and even culinary—is
linked to the People’s Republic of China, which is inextricably conflated with the CCP. Thus, the CCP’s is determined to define “Chineseness” to the exclusion of all other nations and voices, and the CCP expends enormous amounts of resources to control and influence Chinese communities in other countries. As the CCP cannot tolerate alternative Chinese voices or thinking within or outside China, such communities are the primary targets of disinformation through Chinese-language media and content.

In Asia and the Pacific, the growing presence of all things Chinese is a constant reminder that CCP-ruled China is a perpetual, natural, and legitimate feature of existence in the Indo-Pacific and that Xi Jinping’s “community of shared future for mankind” in the region is inexorable. As Xi explained in 2014, such a community is one in which “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold security in Asia”—with China at the helm and synonymous with Asia.13

In this context, the PLA’s role and purpose is one of creeping omnipresence—not only to secure expanding Chinese external claims and interests but also to assume ever more non-military duties. For example, the PLA is charged with deepening military connections and exchanges in the Pacific under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).14 These include counterterrorism, peacekeeping operations, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They form part of the BRI’s “security support system,”15 which is an extension of the “new historic missions” allocated to the PLA earlier this century to engage in military political work for the CCP.16

To be sure, many countries deploy their militaries to engage in non-warfighting purposes as part of defense diplomacy to achieve broader goals. However, the PLA’s missions and objectives are not comparable. The PLA is loyal to the CCP rather than to the Chinese nation-state, so its primary purpose is to make the world safer for the CCP and pursue the regime’s political objectives abroad (whether they be military or non-military). Therefore, to achieve CCP goals, the PLA works closely with and offers support to Chinese non-military entities, including Chinese commercial firms, state media, and United Front operatives. As a military entity, the PLA represents the most coercive element of the CCP’s apparatus for political warfare. In this sense, the PLA plays a special role in demonstrating not only China’s menacing and lethal reach but also its technological advancement and operational prowess in the region. Whether it is the PLA or another Chinese entity, the subliminal message is clear: CCP-ruled China has presence and feelers everywhere in the region and so is both terrifying and awesome.

The notion of an omnipresent and omnipotent China affirms the incomparable vastness and greatness of contemporary China in contrast to the “smallness” and even insignificance of all other continental and maritime nations. Moreover, plans to entrench Chinese preeminence (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative) are associated with China’s perceived strengths: its geographical and economic size and centrality; the inevitable success of the blueprint and emergence of a hierarchical Sino-economic and normative order promising guaranteed rewards for all those who submit; and an enveloping Chinese-led ecosystem from which regional nations cannot escape or opt out unless they are prepared to accept catastrophe and the loss of immense opportunity.

In short, a smooth, peaceful, and prosperous transition to an inevitable Sino-centric region is only possible, according to Beijing, when the region’s smaller states mount little or no resistance. That can only occur when these states accept the “natural propensity of things”—the notion of shi and harmony17—and seek to work with rather than against it. As Xi Jinping stated, “When the big river is full of water, the smaller ones never run dry,”18 thus linking the material (and therefore the political and security-related) destiny of these nations to a sense of dependency and an acceptance of powerlessness.
with respect to China. In this way, all pathways begin and end with China.

The primary objective of positive messaging, exaggeration of China’s strengths and the enemy’s (i.e., US and key allies’) weaknesses, disinformation, and the sowing of confusion is not primarily mischief-making but rather changing perceptions of the region’s irreversible evolution. Thus, Beijing seeks to instill a *learned helplessness* in the mindsets of other regional nations (i.e., a sense of loss of strategic agency resulting from a perceived absence of control over how the future is to unfold).

If China succeeds, consider the powerful cognitive and psychological bind in which these smaller states will find themselves, especially developing countries and those that are not favored allies of the US. Resistance to China will fade because wisdom and prudence will demand their submission to the “propensity of things.” Over time, these states will become conditioned to act in accordance with China’s wishes. Moreover, since the enduring political, economic, and social structures in many of these regional states are hierarchical, opaque, and self-serving, the characteristics of the Chinese order are not as inherently offensive or alien there as they might be in states having liberal institutions, such as the US and Australia.

**Cognitive and Psychological Capture**

**Case Studies**

Interacting with the strategic cultural and institutional characteristics of a regional state, these states’ cognitive and psychological capture by China frequently causes them to behave in ways that Western analysts perceive as strategically irrational. The three case studies presented below illustrate the importance of China’s use of information and influence warfare in achieving its strategic and political objectives.

These case studies do not suggest that China has completely and irreversibly captured the countries being discussed but rather illustrate some important impacts and outcomes of Chinese information and influence warfare that should deeply concern the US and its allies. As the foreign policy trajectories of these three countries are not set in stone or uncontested internally, it is critically important and urgent that the US and its allies find ways to enter the information and influence war in ways that align with our ethics and strengths.

**Singapore**

Above all else, Singapore values stability, predictability, and maximization of its relevance vis-à-vis great powers. Understandably seeing itself as a diplomatically agile but immensely vulnerable country in a dangerous region, its primary objective is to influence and slow the pace of its descent into great power strategic rivalry rather than reverse such trends or reshape the environment, objectives it considers to be beyond its capabilities.

The Singaporean willingness to accept a permanent US military presence in Southeast Asia is more tactical than strategic in that it buys Singapore temporary security as it decreases the chances of an imminent attack by China. This is the case as any Chinese attack could inflict damage on American military assets, leading to likely American retaliation against China—something Beijing would be wanting to avoid. Similarly, Singapore’s preference for Western weapons is also largely tactical. Purchasing weapons from the West offers Singapore enhanced relevance in Washington whereas purchasing Chinese or Russian weapons fails to increase Singapore’s relevance in Beijing or Moscow, respectively, but could open the door to these great powers imposing onerous obligations onto a Singapore lacking a special relationship with the US.

Yet Singapore seems to perceive American (and allied) overreach and recklessness as the primary danger rather than expansionary Chinese policies. Glibly diagnosing the “fundamental problem” between the US and China as one of “mutual lack of strategic trust,” Singapore seemingly...
views the competitive actions of the US and China as morally and strategically equivalent. However, Singapore knows better, and underlying this false equivalence is the conviction that an undeterrable China is the only way to avoid war, even if reluctance to condemn China will lead inexorably to the normalization of Chinese coercion and possible regional preeminence for Beijing. This view partially explains Singapore’s slowness to reference the importance and authority of the 2016 Arbitration Award in favor of the Philippines, as Singapore was fearful that the US and others would use the Award to escalate measures against Chinese activities in the South China Sea. Similarly, American attempts to partially decouple supply chains from China will, according to Singapore Prime Minister Lee, “shut off avenues for regional growth and cooperation, deepen divisions between countries, and may precipitate the very conflicts that we all hope to avoid.”

For many Singaporean elites, China is the historical and permanent gateway to national and regional prosperity. Therefore, they fail to identify the far more extensive Chinese plans to decouple from the US as a source of impoverishment and instability but instead as the Middle Kingdom’s predisposition to build a hierarchical economic order centered around itself. Thus, Singapore’s attitude to China’s seeking to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership is undecided (if not open-minded) rather than alarmed, even though Chinese membership would vitiate the CPTPP’s primary and original purpose (i.e., the advancement of a liberal, rules-based regional economic order). In short, Singapore exemplifies a smaller country too easily accepting of the Chinese propensity-of-things framework in the name of stability and prosperity.

China has conducted extensive Chinese influence and information activities in Thailand—not just to distribute material favors but also to disseminate variations of the grand narratives mentioned previously. Most Thai elites already view China as the leading comprehensive power for Thailand and in the region as a whole. Indeed, many derogatorily view the primary usefulness of the existing alliance with the US as allowing Bangkok to strike a better arrangement with China than might otherwise be the case. Others among these elites believe keeping the US sufficiently onside is more about lowering the risks emanating from the US (e.g., perceived interference in Thailand’s domestic affairs) than about countering a threat from China.

Once China has achieved cognitive and psychological capture of Thailand, the reasoning of Thai elites can proceed in concerning ways. In contrast to the perspectives of those in countries such as Japan and Australia, a common Thai elite view is that the longer it takes to recognize and accede to Chinese dominance, the poorer one’s relationship with China and the fewer or poorer one’s options will be. In this sense, Thailand does not view submitting to China as seeking short-term gains and heightening long-term costs or risks—let alone courting strategic disaster—because many Thai elites do not believe China will shrink that country’s room for strategic maneuver over the long term. Therefore, focusing only on immediate or short-term gains (e.g., letting China construct cheaper high-speed rail, allowing Huawei to develop its 5G network, or purchasing cheaper military equipment such as submarines from China) makes sound strategic sense.

Indeed, lessons drawn from recent history have been cherry-picked and manipulated so as to support the argument that Bangkok would be wise to seek a special relationship and deal with China. For example, Beijing’s support for the Thai Communist Party up to 1979 and the former’s role in agitating for revolution have been all but forgotten, whereas the memory of the US’s abandonment of Thailand during the 1997 Asian
Financial Crisis (when the Bill Clinton administration backed the International Monetary Fund’s austere approach to Thailand) is still a sore point. Barack Obama’s partial disengagement with Bangkok following the May 2014 coup is constantly referred to as evidence of a “selfish,” “arrogant,” and “spiteful” US while China’s upstream activities and self-interested vandalism of the Mekong River are downplayed. In fact, any minor Chinese concessions on this and other issues are viewed as further evidence that Thailand is uniquely positioned to negotiate a relatively favorable strategic bargain with China.

Solomon Islands
The Solomon Islands gained international attention following recent revelations of a potentially open-ended security agreement with China that could lead to the gradual establishment of a de facto Chinese naval base in this Pacific country. Preceding this was the Solomon’s severance of diplomatic ties with Taiwan and establishment of them with the People’s Republic of China in September 2019.

The common reason given for the Solomon’s deepening relationship with China is the increase in Chinese trade and investment in the Solomons in recent years. To be sure, the latest available figures show China as receiving almost 67 percent of all exports from the Solomons, which enjoys a large current account surplus with China (while maintaining trade deficits with such countries as Australia). Credible sources also accuse China of paying significant bribes to Solomons political leaders and elites.

Although these are plausible explanations for the cozy China-Solomons relationship, they are neither complete nor sufficient. Instead, Beijing is exacerbating and exploiting the growing division and dysfunction within the country, with the Sogavare government willingly absorbing and internalizing Beijing’s strategic messaging for its own self-interest. In short, Honiara is knowingly allowing itself to be cognitively and psychologically captured.

Chinese material offerings and non-material strategies are most tempting and effective when leaders of poorly governed countries are in strife and face serious and growing opposition to their rule. The Solomons has longstanding domestic political fractures that reached a critical point when Sogavare switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China after apparently having considered only one of the four government reports he himself had commissioned to examine the pros and cons of the changeover.

Indeed, on the day it was announced, the Solomon Times reported that the Central Bank of Solomon Islands had published a paper raising serious concerns about the diplomatic switch, including the consequent risks of unsustainable debt, depressed fiscal revenue, and the US response. During the consultation period, Sogavare ignored these concerns, which the task force report he relied upon excluded. Following two years of turmoil, deadly riots began in November 2021 after the government refused to meet with protesters from Malaita. Ironically, the Solomons was able to quell these riots only with the assistance of troops from Australia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and New Zealand. The following month saw the defeat of a parliamentary motion of no-confidence in Sogavare, allegedly with the assistance of Chinese funds used to pay off other MPs.

The China factor is just one sparking these divisions, and the country has long been dependent on outside assistance to support a precarious and uneasy calm. For example, from 2003–17, the Australian- and New Zealand-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was deployed to avoid the near collapse of the state and its economy. Although RAMSI prevented this collapse, it has not aided in improving the country’s institutions and economic prospects. The Solomons shares the problem of many states whose economic fortunes are dependent on external aid: lack of local business experience and skills, poor employment opportunities, over-dependence on unsustainable and low...
value-added industries such as logging, weak institutions, and poor governance.

The China factor is, however, a relatively recent one. Chinese migrants dominate the retail sectors, especially in urban areas. With a low capacity to manage its national resources in a sustainable manner, Chinese state-owned and private firms are exploiting the mineral, forestry, and fishery resources of the country with little regard for sustainable or ecological standards.

The problem is not Chinese commercial activity per se, but rather the practices associated with “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” allowed to be imported into the country. For example, Chinese businesspeople commonly bribe their way through government offices to secure licenses, work and residential permits, and planning permissions, and Chinese entities occupy or create most of the prime retail sites. Poor environmental practices enabled by the bribery of officials, politicians, and locals characterize the country’s Chinese-dominated logging industry.

Media and opposition voices are suppressed. For instance, at Beijing’s behest, Sogavare placed restrictions on the Media Association of Solomon Islands and thereby prevented it from covering Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit in May–June. In July, Sogavare announced that the government would assume full financial control of the Solomons Islands Broadcasting Corporation. Having previously criticized the national broadcaster of giving more airtime to those who oppose the government than to reporting his activities, Sogavare now expects the SIBC to serve the government rather than operate as an independent, profit-making entity under these changes.

The Solomons provide an excellent example of the material and non-material approaches China applies to countries like it. China designs its political warfare to shape the thinking, decision-making, and practices of the target country, including the deliberate creation or exploitation of division within the country in ways that best suit Beijing. Conditions in the Solomons provide fertile ground for these practices.

For example, China has directed much of its material largesse toward Honiara rather than provinces such as Malaita, the most populous and one of the most impoverished islands in the whole of the South Pacific. When Premier Daniel Suidani of Malaita objected to the switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China and subsequently emerged as a leader in the Solomons anti-China movement, the Chinese embassy in the Solomons worked with Sogavare to attack and undermine him. Moreover, Beijing and Sogavare use the resentment and unrest in the country, which Chinese actions have exacerbated, to justify a deeper security relationship between the two countries, including Chinese training of Solomon Islands police following anti-China riots and protests. As increasing political tensions and divisions in the Solomons are likely, the Sogavare government will no doubt become even more dependent on comprehensive Chinese assistance to maintain power.

Supporting and exacerbating a country’s trajectory toward political and social division, economic vulnerability, deteriorating institutions, corruption, and media suppression increase the chances of Chinese cognitive and psychological capture of that country. As has occurred in places such as Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and now the Solomons, the leader or government becomes increasingly accepting of, and dependent on, CCP perspectives and solutions. That country thus becomes less able to chart its own independent and sovereign course whilst the leader or regime becomes increasingly reliant on Chinese approaches and ways of thinking.

Here Chinese information and influence warfare come into play. A growing Chinese presence helps entrench the
perception that Chinese preeminence in the South Pacific is as inevitable and natural as in East Asia, and the BRI branding and framework has been very useful for Beijing in this context. At a 2014 meeting in Fiji between Xi Jinping and the leaders of the eight Pacific Island countries that at that time diplomatically recognized China (as opposed to Taiwan), Xi urged these leaders to “take a ride on the Chinese ‘express train’ of development.” Along with promises of substantial economic opportunities, many South Pacific leaders were delighted that their countries were now to be included in BRI trade corridors.38

Although the Solomons did not recognize China until 2019 and so did not take part in these earlier interactions, China’s state-media, its Solomons embassy, and Chinese business entities operating in the country during that time were delivering similar messages to the Solomons. (Note that all major Chinese companies operating in the Pacific receive political guidance from Chinese embassies and report to the economic and commercial counselor’s office.39) The Solomons did join the BRI one month after its diplomatic recognition of China, and Sogavare was, as a consequence, then able almost immediately thereafter to announce enormous projects.

One such was the revival of the Gold Ridge mine,40 reportedly worth more than USD 500 million and described by Chinese ambassador Xue Bing as an “early harvest” of the new relationship between Beijing and Honiara.41 The inference was that lowering resistance and seeking a cosy arrangement with China constitute the wiser course of action that will lead to prosperity.

The Gold Ridge mine is in Guadalcanal Province. Provincial and subnational governments tend to be subject to less scrutiny by media (domestic and international) as well as civil society. 42 A sister relationship between Guadalcanal Province and Guangdong Province was announced with much fanfare by local media in September 2021.43 What is not reported, and less widely known, is that the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of Guangdong Province, which is under the United Front Work Department, is responsible for working on information and influence activities with the Chinese community in the Solomons.44 The latter includes all people of Chinese ethnicity, such as those from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Chinese offerings of immediate and guaranteed gains allow another kind of cognitive and psychological capture to which leaders such as Sogavare willingly submit. After RAMSI, Chinese messaging began to say that the Solomons could become more economically vibrant and self-reliant despite its national, institutional, and governance failings—provided it embraced a relationship with China. This contrasts with the onerous and self-serving demands allegedly imposed by Western nations on other countries—and, implicitly, on leaders and regimes having different values and standards.

Moreover, Chinese framing has Western nations seeking to exclude China from the South Pacific in order to perpetuate their domination from a bygone era. In contrast, Beijing claims to seek a presence so as to further friendships with the island nations without demanding that other countries be excluded. This framing makes China seem much more reasonable than the US, Australia, and other allies and helps to explain Sogavare’s dismissal of American and Australian concerns regarding the China-Solomons security deal as “nonsense” while declaring that the Solomons has “no intention of pitching into any geopolitical struggle.”45

As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang stated in response to criticism of Beijing’s relationship with Honiara, “The countries have respected each other, treated each other as equals and supported each other in pursuit of common development.” Additionally, “both sides should be wary of the attempts by a handful of countries, holding onto a Cold War mentality, to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs in the name of human rights.”46
That the Solomon Times uncritically reported Wang’s views speaks to the extent to which Beijing has been allowed to co-opt or coerce a poorly resourced local media sector into reporting favorably on the bilateral relationship. Beijing has significantly increased its engagement with media in the South Pacific and offers funding and career opportunities in return for outlets and journalists portraying Chinese actions and intentions in sympathetic terms. Since Beijing first opened a branch of Xinhua in Suva, Fiji, in 2010, China has funded a growing number of Pacific journalists to attend professional training in China, and China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department, which leads the public presentation of Chinese foreign policy, organized formal tours for Pacific Island journalists in 2013 and 2017.

Finally, the extent of his complicit cognitive and psychological capture is evident in Sogavare’s praise of China and criticism of the West. In a speech to his parliament, the Solomons leader accused Australia and its allies of undermining his government, criticized the Western response to Russia, and praised China’s treatment of Christians, who were reported to be thriving by following the rules set by Beijing. He also accused activists critical of his closeness to Beijing of having “fallen prey to the Western world,” which was manipulating them, and termed these civil society groups as “racists” and “bigots” expressing irrational hostility toward China. He also accused the US and Australia of threatening the Solomons with “invasion” should a Chinese military base be placed there.

These arguments are very similar to those offered by Chinese officials and represent targeted disinformation campaigns undertaken by the CCP and PLA, which state-owned and sympathetic media then channel. For example, an opinion piece in the state-owned Global Times argued that US interference in the South Pacific is the primary cause of instability and tension there and accused the West of treating Pacific Island countries as pawns in seeking to maintain its hegemony and restrain China’s irresistible rise. While China is helping developing countries reach their potential, Western nations remain mired in a colonial and prejudiced mindset. The notion that the West is threatening the Solomons with military action is a proposition put forward by Beijing.

While those in the West tend to treat these views as absurd, conspiratorial, unconvincing, and self-serving, their frequent and relentless propagation has important effects. In the context of grand narratives based on the spectacular and unstoppable rise of China, they offer a ready-made framework for the captured (whether willingly or unwittingly) to explain and justify their actions. In the case of the Solomons, the CCP is offering not just a seemingly attractive economic and security arrangement to an insecure leader and government but a framework and mindset to complement and complete the package deal.

Conclusion
A basic principle of human behavior is that how we think determines how we act and respond—during both peace and kinetic war. Political warfare prepares the ground for success in achieving strategic and political objectives. Asia and the Pacific constitute the region most susceptible to this Chinese approach, and the CCP can point to significant gains from its use.

The next policy memo will examine the approaches to political warfare adopted by the United States and allies such as Australia, the soundness and limitations of these approaches, and suggest some aspects of US and allies information and influence operations which ought to be emphasized or revised.

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Endnotes


2 Liang and Xiangsu.


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42 Joseph D. Foukona and Graeme Smith, “Rumblings along the Federal Fault Line in Solomon Islands,” The Lowy Interpreter,


48 Zhang, “Domestic Political Reforms and China’s Diplomacy in the Pacific: The Case of Foreign Aid.”


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