POLICY MEMO

How to Engage and Prevail in Political Warfare against China

BY DR. JOHN LEE
Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

November, 2022

Introduction

In his report to the Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party in October, Xi Jinping praised the progress made over the past decade under his leadership to advance the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation domestically and internationally. According to Xi, this is taking place in an era of "momentous changes of a like not seen in a century [and which] are accelerating across the world." For Xi, these "great changes" comprise "a significant shift [that] is taking place in the international balance of power, presenting China with new strategic opportunities in pursuing development." A pillar of Xi’s plan to realize the rejuvenation of China and to emerge as the preeminent nation in the region and beyond is to shrink the strategic, military, economic, political, and normative ground in the region on which the United States can sustain, build, and demonstrate its power and influence. This is because China knows there is no material or nonmaterial counterbalance without the US. Additionally, the more China can weaken the resolve of US allies and other countries to support American-led initiatives to counter China and the credibility of the US-led alliance system, the smaller and weaker the ground for Washington to maintain its footholds in distant lands becomes, and the closer China draws to its goal of preeminence.

The Chinese plan relies on building unmatched “comprehensive national power,” or CNP, which China can use to seduce, compel, or coerce other nations. CNP has material and nonmaterial elements. Regarding the latter, Beijing places enormous emphasis on political warfare in the form of information and influence operations. The first three memos in this series on Chinese political warfare argue that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) makes no distinction between wartime and peacetime and believes it is engaged in a perpetual "struggle" against the West. Regarding political warfare, the previous memos noted 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.
The memos focus 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. This tactic is extremely effective because such 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 third memo examines the United States and Australian information and influence doctrine and operations, especially by the defense establishments. In these two democracies, the government has largely allowed the defense establishments to lead doctrine and capability for the information and influence elements of political warfare.

However, the US and Australia tend to apply their approach and interest in political warfare only to understand the relevance of information and influence operations during a military exchange and to give greater effect to a military action. They give much less thought and develop much less doctrine for information and influence operations in a nonmilitary context, thereby hampering allied efforts to compete with and counter China in the so-called grey zone—the space between peace and war where protagonists engage in competition and rivalry.

Moreover, when it comes to information and influence operations abroad, the US and allied nations tend to focus on countering and deterring Chinese actions that directly harm our interests. In principle and practice, existing policies and efforts fall well short of proactive engagement in information and influence operations, that is, of shaping psychological and cognitive frameworks in other countries in terms of how they understand and respond to US and allied policies and actions rather than only countering another country’s efforts.

As the first three memos argue, this is a serious deficiency in the allied setup when dealing with a China relying extensively on political warfare to achieve strategic and even military objectives in the grey zone, or with Chinese efforts to manipulate and expand the grey zone within which it can operate and thrive. The memos argue that 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 and East China Seas. Material factors alone cannot account for these adverse trends. The nonmaterial drivers are at least as important. This is a reminder of why the US should not only engage in countering and deterring Chinese political warfare to limit Chinese gains but also seize the initiative by using information and influence operations to gain the strategic advantage.

Moreover, it is worth noting that developing information and influence warfare doctrine and capabilities for use in times of peace and not just war is relatively inexpensive and has disproportionately significant impacts across the continuum of conflict, from peacetime to the grey zone to conflict. When it comes to achieving strategic and military objectives, one gets tremendous bang for one’s 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.

This memo argues that the defense establishments in the US and Australia are best positioned to lead tactical and operational efforts abroad spanning the entire continuum,
subject to appropriate whole-of-government strategic guidance, oversight, and ethical guidelines. Note that the whole-of-government process exists to both assist and enable the successful conduct of political warfare and not only to restrict such activities. This effort will require a significant mindset shift that sees battling for cognitive and psychological dominance as a legitimate strategic and national security activity in peacetime. The more emphasis the US and Australia place on 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.

Competing along the Entire Continuum from Peace to War

When dealing with information operations, the American and Australian national security and defense communities recognize that the cognitive and psychological elements have important material and military effects. For example, the Pentagon adopts an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the information environment, saying that it 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.” Moreover, “human aspects frame why relevant actors perceive a situation in a particular way.”

Australia mirrors the US approach by conceiving of the information environment as comprising the physical, informational, and human or cognitive. 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 Australia Defence Force (ADF) and its allies can prevail.

This provides a solid doctrinal basis to develop information and influence operations to counter China and advance national and allied objectives even if there are persistent accusations that the militaries of both countries treat these operations as optional adjuncts to enhance the intended effects of using military force.

However, and in the context of comprehensively competing with China, the crippling problem is that the US and Australia are conceiving these nonmaterial approaches only when war has been formally declared and military activities have commenced. While there is deep angst about Chinese political warfare and activities in the grey zone, there is also surprising and damaging preparedness to cede the advantage to China in defining and thriving in the grey zone when it comes to the cognitive and psychological contest. As we have become accustomed to drawing hard distinctions between peacetime and wartime, we act as if warfare can only occur after adversaries formally declare war or a kinetic exchange has begun.

One suspects that civilian democratic governments feel a deep reflexive discomfort about shaping the cognitive and psychological processes of targets except in the most extreme circumstances (i.e., formal war). This reluctance is based on complacency and ignorance.

It is complacent because it stems from the comfort one feels that liberalism and democracy have already won the historical battle so that engaging in such nonmaterial activities would be overkill. Meanwhile, as previous memos argue, China is winning the battle of grand narratives, which is causing nations and governments to make decisions against our interests.
It is ignorant because it ignores the reality that all human subjects require a framework and narrative to understand and process information and events to inform action. If nations and governments use CCP-designed frameworks and narratives, then they are more likely to choose actions that favor CCP objectives.

In short, the US and Australia seek to gain an ever deeper understanding of Chinese grey zone strategies and yet are ceding the grey zone to Beijing in this important respect.

The three previous memos aim to persuade leaders in the US and Australia that the risk and cost of ceding this ground are already immense. They now exceed the perceived risk and cost associated with engaging in information and influence proactive and counter operations in so-called peacetime.

The sections below offer some suggestions as to what a US and Australian approach to information and influence operations might look like.

**The Contest of Grand Narratives**

Previous policy memos explain that the core purpose of Chinese political warfare in the region (especially by the PLA) is not merely to disrupt or confuse but to define and control grand narratives. By doing so, it can exert extreme power because it circumscribes what is possible and impossible, dictates what is considered prudent rather than reckless, and defines what appears to be 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 we believe are available—and therefore how one acts or responds.

- The key CCP and PLA grand narratives are these:
- Chinese dominance is the historical norm and is inevitable.
- The objectives of the CCP are permanent and unchanging.
- The CCP and PLA are fundamentally undeterred and prepared to pay any price to achieve an expanding list of core objectives.
- The US is an increasingly weak, unpredictable, and unreliable ally.

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 free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). They weaken the will and resolve of nations to resist. Further, they persuade decision-makers that the escalatory advantage is with Beijing, that preparing for and winning a war against China is impossible and must be avoided at any cost, that resistance will lead to catastrophic isolation and abandonment by the US and other allies, and that it is better to come to an arrangement with Beijing sooner rather than later even if the terms are heavily in favor of China. For self-serving regimes and leaders seeking to resist external attempts to impose standards of transparency and accountability on actions, the Chinese grand narratives assure them that they can be successful and prosperous with Chinese assistance.

The US and its allies need their own grand narratives to shape the way the region thinks about what is happening and to rebuff the Chinese framing. The FOIP does not achieve this. It speaks to the principles the US and its allies are promoting but does not reshape how stakeholder nations understand and interpret the structural dynamics and undercurrents shaping events. In other words, and unlike Chinese grand narratives, the FOIP does not reshape and influence the cognitive and psychological frameworks of nations and governments. A nation can agree with FOIP principles and still conclude that it is unwise to position itself on the wrong side of China's irresistible rise.

In this context, the US and its allies need to accept that a proxy war in the region is well underway and China is
already fighting it. The former nations need to engage by crafting and promoting grand narratives of their own. Their construction needs to be clear, consistent (among allies and within one’s own government), credible, pithy, and simple to serve as foundational cognitive and psychological frameworks that others can use to interpret events and information. They also need to be accurate and truthful to align with the higher ethical standards that democracies have to abide by.

Although such grand narratives should be a whole-of-government enterprise involving extensive consultation with allies, the US and its allies need not over-complicate the task. They need to directly counter and diminish the above Chinese grand narratives and offer alternative cognitive and psychological frameworks.

Responding to cognitive and psychological frameworks that lead to impressions of futility and ineffectiveness of US and allied actions to prevent Chinese preeminence is the highest priority. As a result, the US should consider the counternarratives listed in table 1.

### Understanding the Political Warfare Landscape

As in any warfare or campaign, understanding the terrain is an essential task. In many regional countries that China has targeted, the CCP has applied cognitive and psychological capture to achieve elite capture as elites tend to exercise disproportionate power and influence in either developing economies or those with weak or nonexistent democratic institutions.

In this context, understanding the terrain means acquiring more information and intelligence on the extent to which

---

**Table 1: Possible Countermeasures for Chinese Narratives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHINESE NARRATIVES</th>
<th>POSSIBLE COUNTERNARRATIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese dominance is the historical norm and is inevitable.</td>
<td>• Chinese history is marked by trauma, internal strife, and war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The CCP is a vulnerable and insecure regime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• China’s political economy is unsound and in serious trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The objectives of the CCP are permanent and unchanging.</td>
<td>• The CCP is an opportunistic power that pushes boundaries until it reaches resistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The CCP and PLA are fundamentally undeterrable and prepared to pay any price to achieve an expanding list of core objectives.</td>
<td>• The US and its allies are winning back the leverage and hold decisive advantages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Xi Jinping is arrogant, strategically immature, and suffering from overreach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The US is an increasingly weak, unpredictable, and unreliable ally.</td>
<td>• China is a lonely power with no trusted allies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Since World War II, the US has kept its promises to allies and is winning new friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sino-centric hierarchical order offers participants immediate and guaranteed benefits.</td>
<td>• Every middle-income and rich country in the region relies on economic integration with the US and its allies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Economies choosing to decouple from the US and its allies will fail.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
Chinese political warfare efforts have shaped the cognitive and psychological frameworks of elites and the subsequent impacts on that country’s strategic culture and decision-making.

The second policy memo offers case studies on the impact of Chinese political warfare activities in Singapore, Thailand, and the Solomon Islands. While the influence of Chinese grand narratives is evident in all three countries, elites and institutions in all countries are sui generis, and the CCP and PLA are using specially tailored emphases and tactics to target them.

The US and its allies need to make country-specific assessments regarding the following:

- Strategic dangers and opportunities in the target country or institution (contra what China is seeking to achieve).
- The elites who matter in the target country, how they construct their political and personal interests, and how they apply such narratives when pursuing such interests.
- Which Chinese narratives have taken root and are most compelling to the country’s elites in shaping their interpretation of, and responses to, events.
- The extent to which Chinese narratives have shaped and changed the implementation of strategy in the country.

In making these assessments, the US will be in a stronger position to understand why an individual leader, government, or nation is making certain strategic decisions that cannot be adequately accounted for using a material cost-benefit analytical approach (i.e., a utilitarian approach that assumes countries make decisions according to an objective analysis of how they can maximize expected material gain and minimize material costs or losses).

In assessing the political warfare terrain, one should always remember that the purpose is not to simply put forward positive messages promoting US and allied perspectives, achievements, and activities, which is the general aim of normal diplomacy. The US needs to engage in information and influence operations to achieve specific strategic and even military objectives—or deny such objectives to China—by shaping the cognitive and psychological frameworks of elites in target countries. For example, one is seeking to shape or influence third-party cognitive or psychological responses to Chinese activities in the South China Sea or the South Pacific, third-party interpretations and therefore reactions to AUKUS or the Quad, or third-party responses to US deployment of B-52 bombers in Australia.

Critically, one should also remember that the US and its allies are not conducting political warfare against the target country but are engaged in political warfare against China in a chosen environment. In other words, while a government is seeking to influence the cognitive and psychological frameworks of elites in other states, it is conducting political warfare against Chinese efforts to do the same. In this sense, political warfare is proxy warfare that the US and its allies fight against China in a third-party environment. Rather than cynical or amoral manipulation of a target, such activities seek to offer a more accurate and compelling framework for governments and nations such that they are better disposed, cognitively and psychologically, to support the principles, aspirations, and requirements of advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific.

It is also worth noting that US and allied engagement in information and influence operations is different but complementary to existing measures to encourage more robust democratic and liberal institutions and practices in various countries. As previous policy memos note, Chinese attempts at regime and elite capture, including through political warfare, tend to work best when such institutions and practices are weak or lacking. Chinese material and nonmaterial approaches also tend to encourage elites to elevate and entrench their interests above those of the broader population and country.
In contrast, and in both the traditional diplomatic and political warfare contexts, US and allied approaches seek to encourage governing elites to prioritize the interests of the broader population and country over narrower interests. For this reason, there is no ethical tension between traditional US and allied diplomacy on the one hand, and willingness to engage in information and influence operations on the other hand.

**Operationalizing Information and Influence Warfare**

Governments do not add content to and propagate grand narratives successfully by simply pronouncing such narratives in high-profile speeches or media releases. They have to weave the narratives into, or support them with, a constant and purposeful flow of information based on evolving events, policies, and developments. Below are some suggested principles for waging successful information and influence warfare.

**Detail Aligned with Narrative**

The US cannot simply issue statements that “China is a lonely great power” or “the US and its allies have enormous leverage over China.” Instead, it needs to tie these narratives to specific events and developments, many of which will not be obviously related to our desired narrative.

For example, the CCP and PLA will seize on Chinese technological or military achievements to reinforce the perception that Chinese preeminence is inevitable and the eclipse of the US and the West is at hand. Messages might not have an overt geopolitical tone but have consistency and intent in their crafting that links them to the preferred narrative, which others can infer.

The US and its allies need to do the same. We tend to treat information as if we are simply conveying facts that have no greater geopolitical or strategic impact or significance to the regional recipient. Instead, we should use facts to inspire countries and their elites to draw our desired inferences.

Moreover, rather than playing down advances in our technological capabilities, the US deployment of B-52s in Australia, or a new assistance package to a nation in Southeast Asia or the South Pacific, we should instead proactively craft and issue messages based on events and developments that underpin our desired narratives.

We also need to take advantage of evolving developments to shape how countries in the Indo-Pacific interpret them. For example, the ongoing problems with the Chinese residential property market are not just of commercial interest. The property sector’s woes relate to fundamental political economic weaknesses that the CCP’s ever-tighter control over the economy has created and exacerbated. We should tirelessly present this credible interpretation of flawed CCP economic stewardship to the region.

In short, we should examine every national or policy initiative, development, or achievement and assess its usefulness in advancing information or influence warfare objectives against a China doing the same against the US and its allies.

**Speed**

The CCP employs a whole-of-government and even a 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, the CCP and PLA are relentlessly refining their tactical and operational procedures to allow them to respond rapidly to evolving events, set the conversation and agenda, and frame developments according to grand narratives.

The US and its allies have made poor efforts at seeking to be the first to shape cognitive and psychological impressions of events and developments. We have often found ourselves in the position of having to refute Chinese versions and interpretations after they have taken root in the region. This is a losing approach.
Instead, we need to react as or immediately after an initiative, development, or achievement occurs. US and allied messages need to gain the first-mover advantage whenever possible to frame how regional elites and populations think about or interpret an initiative, development, or achievement.

This means designating teams whose sole purpose is to engage in information and influence operations on the ground in key political warfare locations and who are always ready to act or respond. They will not be the usual media and engagement officers in embassies and consulates unless these officers are specifically trained to engage in constant combative but nonmaterial political warfare activities and have developed the institutional mindset to do so.

**Persistence, Presence, and Repetition**

Information and influence operations are a relentless activity. Even if one gains the first-mover advantage, one needs to repeat and spread one’s message relentlessly in different forms and platforms.

As marketing experts will attest, a repeated messaging campaign with accurate and compelling information creates a sense of familiarity in the receiver that has a higher chance of eventually convincing them of the campaign’s credibility and truthfulness.

This is another reason the US and its allies need dedicated information and influence operations teams whose sole purpose is to engage in such relentless campaigns. We cannot leave such activities to officers preoccupied with traditional diplomatic and media roles, in which political warfare is an afterthought.

It should also be noted that the greater the utilization of different platforms in the information environment (e.g., print media, television, social media, blogs, etc.), the more effective and entrenched the messaging becomes. For example, the CCP has achieved much with the persistent repetition and growing presence of disinformation, including multiple forms of messaging that its systematic oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang is both exaggerated by the West and better understood as a “counterterrorism” measure.

Though the US and its allies should use a whole-of-government approach, they cannot and should not seek to replicate the Chinese whole-of-nation system in which the CCP exerts control and censorship over traditional and social media outlets and content. Neither can we control what third-party and private commentators and social media users write or say.

However, we can seek to acquire the first-mover advantage in releasing accurate and relevant facts and interpretations of them to credible reporters, social media users, and other platforms and outlets. There is no guarantee that third-party entities will offer a favorable account or interpretation that aligns with our preferred narratives. However, early and persistent engagement with third-party entities and platforms through the provision of accurate and compelling information has a better chance of inspiring third parties and independent platforms to shape the subsequent conversation in ways that are more consistent with our preferred narrative. Indeed, the effectiveness of political warfare by democratic nations will depend heavily on third-party entities freely choosing to propagate accurate, compelling, and plausible accounts and viewpoints.

This is relentless and exhausting work requiring significant resources. But it is far better than belatedly responding to an alternative Chinese narrative when the latter has already taken hold in the region.

**Delegation of Tactical and Operational Authority**

Even within the narrower context of military action, Western nations tend to believe that key information and influence
activities must first seek approval from high levels in the chain of command during the campaign. When applied to the grey zone, this approach will not work.

Setting key grand narratives is properly a whole-of-government activity that should be agreed to at the highest levels. Once that is done, there needs to be a devolution of tactical authority to dedicated political warfare teams within relevant agencies and to dedicated teams on the ground in high-priority countries.

This delegation is required because effective information and influence operations need to be immediate, responsive, agile, creative, opportunistic, and relentless. Political warfare teams need delegated authority to engage in the above tactical and operational activities without lengthy and cumbersome approval processes.

Devolving tactical and operational control will cause political, civilian, and military leaders some anxiety. Teams will make mistakes and poor decisions. Some messages could be contradictory. However, the alternative is the greater danger and cost of effectively vacating the political warfare space and allowing China to fill it. Centralized control will prevent US and allied teams from responding quickly or creatively to relentless CCP and PLA campaigns or achieving a first-mover advantage in shaping responses and reactions to developments.

Moreover, even without devolution of tactical and operational authority, those higher in the chain of command will certainly make errors of commission and omission. Leaders will have less context and understanding of nuances in the information and influence terrain, or of on-the-ground conditions that ought to shape tactical and operational decisions. There is the additional disadvantage that teams are more likely to blindly replicate errors throughout and down the system as occurs in centralized models of decision-making.

In summary, there are considerably more upsides than downsides to adopting a devolved approach to tactical and operational decision-making in the battle for cognitive and psychological advantage. This policy memo further argues that effectively engaging in political warfare is impossible without a decentralized structure for tactical and operational decision-making. Senior political, civilian, or military leaders can still assess the effectiveness of tactical and operational decisions, their alignment with the preferred grand narratives, or whether such narratives are advancing strategic or military objectives.

**Strategic Alignment and Combined Tactical/Operational Teams**

A major strategic goal of Chinese political warfare is to either weaken US alliances or dilute the credibility and standing of the US-led alliance system. For this reason, it is critical that the US and key regional allies (such as Japan and Australia) align their grand narratives and broader messaging strategies.

Building on their existing intelligence and military intimacy and interoperability, the US and Australia should consider even closer cooperation in the form of tactical and operational teams with individuals from both countries. At the least, both countries can experiment with joint or merged teams.

Alignment in the tactical and operational aspects between the two Indo-Pacific countries most committed to responding to Chinese political warfare is an obvious virtue, especially in key battlegrounds such as Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. Moreover, the existence of joint or merged teams means that members from one country can immediately raise red flags when they believe a tactical or operational error is imminent or suggest refinements to an existing approach. Joint or merged teams reduce the likelihood that US information and influence actions undermine Australian priorities and risk tolerances, and vice versa.
Political Warfare and the Defense Establishment

Understanding the political warfare landscape or terrain, selecting key geographies to compete in, identifying strategic and military objectives, and crafting preferred grand narratives are whole-of-government activities that leaders should agree to at the highest levels. The intelligence and diplomatic functions need to play a major shaping role in this context.

Setting the rules of engagement at the tactical and operational levels and developing relevant ethical frameworks and standards are also whole-of-government enterprises. The less obvious question is the role of various government agencies and entities in executing information and influence warfare at the tactical and operational levels.

Some might argue that since the primary purpose of the defense establishment is fighting and winning traditional wars, it should not be heavily involved in activities that have not crossed the threshold of traditional conflict. The first part of the preceding sentence is uncontroversially true, but the second part does not necessarily follow.

Chinese political warfare in the grey zone is designed to advance strategic and often military objectives, without the need to use force or to render subsequent military action more effective. In this context, we should not equate information and influence warfare with usual diplomatic or public relations activities. As in all warfare, the framework is a competitive one in which a country is advancing specific objectives by weakening or eliminating resistance and seeking relative gains at the expense of an identified enemy. This is why the CCP and PLA engage in political warfare and what the US and its allies are seeking to counter.

Words have strategic and military ramifications and are weapons in this type of warfare. In this context, political warfare shares many characteristics with traditional warfare:

- The object is to achieve strategic or military aims by weakening resistance or bringing about submission.
- The conflict is enduring at the strategic level and relentless at the tactical and operational levels. Like traditional war, the information and influence war involves constant strikes and counterstrikes to advance a country’s objective.
- It is critical to be prepared and in a state of constant readiness to respond to an adversary’s actions or proactively strike when opportunities arise.
- Giving a belated or inadequate response, or opting out of the contest, cedes the advantage to the adversary and enables further Chinese psychological or cognitive capture of the target.

To be sure, there are differences with traditional war. Importantly, there is no endpoint or declaration of victory or acceptance of defeat. The struggle is a perpetual one of advancing the US and its allies’ cognitive and psychological framework at the expense of China’s. Nevertheless, the ongoing contest and campaigns to achieve information and influence dominance exhibit many similarities to warlike activity for the reasons above. It therefore makes sense for the defense establishment to assume a central role when it comes to the tactical and operational activities of political warfare in the grey zone, as it does when formal war is occurring.

As argued in previous memos, the defense establishment is already far more advanced than other departments and agencies in developing concepts of information and influence warfare, albeit still in the context of giving greater effect to military action in a traditional war. While strategic objectives and ethical rules of engagement are broader activities led by political and civilian leaders across government, it would also be sensible for the defense establishment to take a leading role in developing tactical and operational doctrine and concepts associated with political warfare in the grey zone.
The defense establishment is also in the best position to lead the tactical and operational approach of, and implementation by, the relevant political warfare department, section, unit, or team engaging in information and influence operations abroad—that is, the on-the-ground conduct of political warfare. Such political warfare entities would also include those from the intelligence and diplomatic functions. But combative tactical and operational activities against an adversary are more suited to the warfighting mindset and training provided to the defense establishment than to the usual diplomats or intelligence officers.

Note that the US Department of Homeland Security takes the lead in countering foreign information and influence operations within the US with assistance from policing and intelligence services such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This should remain the case. This policy memo concerns policy warfare abroad and is not suggesting that the US and its allies should conduct information and influence operations on their own populations. Correcting disinformation and dismantling covert influence activities by foreign entities in one’s own country is not the same as conducting political warfare elsewhere.

Finally, the defense establishment has the preexisting institutional setup and resources to oversee on-the-ground operations, while other arms of government, such as intelligence and the diplomatic services, do not.

Conclusion
The four policy memos in this series look at the high emphasis Beijing places on information and influence warfare to achieve its strategic and military goals and the leading role of the PLA in these activities, especially the use of strategic narratives to achieve psychological and cognitive dominance in target countries. They also detail some of the significant successes of Chinese psychological and influence operations in the region and the high price of US and allied reluctance and slowness to engage in political warfare to advance its objectives.

This final policy memo argues that information and influence activities abroad ought to be a key element of US and allied national security policy. While political leaders and civilian entities, such as diplomatic and intelligence agencies, should work with the defense establishment to derive political warfare strategic objectives and narratives, the defense establishment should take a leading role in the tactical and operational execution of political warfare abroad.

Having developed appropriate strategic narratives, the US and its allies need to attach and relate these to national security, defense, aid and assistance, trade, industry, and technology policies to achieve psychological and cognitive dominance over China in target nations and to effectively counter Chinese efforts to do the same. Conversely, the US and its allies need to ensure national security, defense, aid and assistance, trade, and technological policies align as much as possible with the strategic narratives they seek to entrench. The US and its allies also need the political warfare infrastructure and the tactical and operational nous and capabilities to enter the grey zone battlefield and execute political warfare strategy.

A key difference between Chinese political warfare and the measures I propose in these memos is that US and allied efforts do not engage in disinformation or deception. Instead, the propagation of credible and compelling strategic narratives complemented by accurate information regarding our actions, intentions, and capabilities is consistent with our liberal democratic ethical standards. Of course, this puts the onus on the US and its allies to pursue strategically sensible military, economic, and technology policies. Whereas China usually aims to confound and confuse the receiver or to achieve psychological or cognitive capture of elites, we intend to illuminate, reassure, and give courage and purpose to those in the region who are willing to support the US and allied offering of a free and open Indo-Pacific.
The US and its allies continue to enjoy considerable and even decisive leverage and advantages in the region vis-à-vis China. Getting others in the region to adopt a mindset concomitant with this assessment is a necessary step for the US and its allies to ensure that Chinese insistence on the inevitability of its success is unfounded.

Endnotes


2. Xi, “Report to China’s 2022 Party Congress.”


5. For example, the US Department of State’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) was created by Executive Order 13721 in April 2016 and subsequently codified in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. The GEC’s mandate is to “lead, synchronize, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining U.S. national security interests.” Subsequent actions have focused on exposing foreign disinformation, preventing Russian interference in democratic elections abroad, and demonstrating the dangers to other nations of policies such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (in the form of creating “debt traps.”) See Center for Strategic and International Studies, By Other Means—Part II: Adapting to Compete in the Grey Zone (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), https://www.csis.org/analysis/other-means-part-ii-adapting-compete-gray-zone.

6. As the second policy memo argued, “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 with 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 Chinese coercion raises our threshold of what demands a military response—thereby expanding the grey zone within which the PLA and CCP are allowed to operate” (1–2).


8. Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Joint Operations.”


15. See Jessica Brandt, Bret Schafer, Elen Aghakyan, Valerie Wirtschafter, and Adya Danaditya, Winning the Web: How Beijing...

16 See Lee, Understanding and Countering China’s Approach.
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.

© 2022 Hudson Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.

About Hudson Institute

Hudson Institute is a research organization promoting American leadership for a secure, free, and prosperous future.

Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, energy, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide policymakers and global leaders in government and business through a robust program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations.

Visit www.hudson.org for more information.

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

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