‘Win Without Fighting’: The Chinese Communist Party’s Political and Institutional Warfare Against the West

BY DR. JOHN LEE AND DR. LAVINA LEE
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1. INTRODUCTION

When compared to Western forms of diplomatic conversation and strategic discussion, phrases emanating from Beijing and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can appear peculiar, platitudinous, and so ambiguous as to be devoid of practical content. China’s paramount leader Xi Jinping speaks frequently about a ‘community of shared future,’ a ‘common destiny for mankind’ as part of his ‘China dream,’ or of his country’s ‘rejuvenation.’ He promises to pursue and achieve a ‘new type of great-power relations’ with the United States that will ‘expand the converging interests of all and build a big global family of harmony and cooperation.’

Yielding to the temptation to dismiss these phrases as glib and meaningless or as empty promises to the world would be a serious mistake. Emerging as the victorious side after the world was reshaped in the aftermath of the Second World War, and, more recently, the formal end of the Cold War, the United States and its allies have generally enjoyed dominance in all forms of power. The challenge and threat of China is largely understood in the context of its increase in material power, which is relatively easy to understand and quantify. In contrast, far less attention is being paid to non-material power, which is, admittedly, more nebulous and difficult to assess.

However, China’s focus has been on relentlessly building its ‘comprehensive national power’ (CNP), that is, the sum-total of its powers and strengths — economic, military affair, science and technology, education, and resource — and influence. Thus, CNP encompasses both material and non-material power, and China’s buildup of both of these forms of power best explains...
its strategic and diplomatic successes. Chinese ‘rejuvenation’ is also not just about building GDP or having the world’s largest naval fleet. Rather, the CCP’s vision of a ‘community of shared future for mankind’ is very much about displacing the dominance enjoyed by the US and other advanced democracies in shaping global discourse and conversations, norms and standards, and influence within and through institutions.

The advanced democracies have taken these less obvious forms of power for granted, a complacency that Beijing has exploited. As the CCP recognizes, "In the final analysis, the rise of a great power is a cultural phenomenon. It (that power) must be accepted by the international community. Be accommodated by the international system, rely on the international system, and be recognised by international norms.”

To be sure, there is a rich and growing literature on the CCP’s various information, influence, and institutional resources and activities, and this report does not seek to reproduce the excellent work already in the public domain. Rather, it begins from the uncomfortable but growing realization that the CCP believes it has long been at war with the US and its allies, even though kinetic force has been used in only a few instances. It looks at why this war is being waged, what the hallmarks of success for Beijing look like, and how the use of non-material strategies in the form of political and institutional warfare complements and augments China’s better known material approaches in the CCP’s determined attempts to win this ongoing war or struggle.

The report seeks to emphasize that, in understanding the challenge and threat of China, political and institutional warfare should not be treated as optional or interesting adjuncts to traditional notions of warfare or that their effects are peripheral to core strategic and even military objectives. On the contrary, non-material approaches are essential to the Chinese strategy and have real-world outcomes that are often the same ones that the use of force or economic coercion is intended to achieve. Just as the CCP views comprehensive power as encompassing material and non-material elements, its notion of waging and winning a war may or may not include a military element. We need to do the same when countering, deterring, and, if necessary, defeating Chinese strategies and actions.

Moreover, the CCP’s approach is not just about putting its views forward in overt or veiled ways in the hope that it will change our minds about various issues. Instead, Beijing’s strategy is much more proactive and profound than that. The CCP’s political and institutional approaches are about fundamentally changing and shaping even the way we begin to think about or analyze an issue or what we perceive to be its “first principles.” It is designed to shape the way we talk (or do not talk) about an issue, the presumptive and analytical frameworks we employ to do so, and the discourse regarding it that is accepted and deemed acceptable. At first glance, such a deeply cognitive approach might seem fanciful and impossible to implement. However, this report offers two recent case studies of instances where the CCP enjoyed considerable success in melding the material and the cognitive—with tangible and real-world results.

This report then offers a summary of the real-world strategic effects and their impacts on the tactical decision-making of countries and their elites that should concern those in charge of our political, economic, military, and diplomatic policies and activities. In conclusion, it suggests some general responses to the CCP’s strategy, approach, and actions in these contexts.
One of the best-known lines from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* is “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.” A later passage provides further context and content: “The highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy’s plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities.” In short, success is most likely when one avoids direct assault in favor of subversion and circumvention of an enemy’s entrenched strengths and strongholds.

The Chinese Communist Party believes it is already at war with the United States and its allies, including Australia. As with Sun Tzu, the CCP’s preferred strategy is to win without fighting, or, if there is recourse to kinetic action, to prepare the ground for victory before military hostilities begin. In this context, it is not being suggested that the importance of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the threat its presence and capabilities poses should be downplayed. On the contrary, the aim is to seek a more comprehensive and accurate understanding and appreciation of how China seeks to compete, fight, and win—and, in doing so, accept that we are already in a war and therefore need to rethink how best we are compete, fight, and prevail.

The proposition that we are already at war is a troubling one. Even though, in Western thinking war has long been understand...
stood to be the continuation of politics albeit using extreme and violent means, clear differences distinguish peacetime from wartime. In this way of thinking, one enters into a state of war only when the state formally decides to use force to achieve political and strategic objectives.

For the CCP, however, war and warfare are broader and more flexible concepts. As in the West, the aim of the use of force is to achieve political and strategic objectives. However, force is merely one form or domain of warfare, with others being political (e.g., information and influence operations) and institutional warfare. These can be used to either enhance the effectiveness of a possible use of force or to achieve the same political and strategic outcomes as the actual use of kinetic force would have. It is about mobilizing national resources to subjugate and defeat the enemy regardless of whether there is physical destruction and loss of life, even if the enemy is unaware of what is being done against them. The CCP considers political and institutional warfare as important domains within the waging of war—not just peacetime domains where one competes as a possible prelude to the use of force. It is with respect to these two domains that the CCP believes it is already at war with the US and its allies. The use of force by the PLA would merely be an extension of fighting in other domains of a war that is already ongoing.

Understanding the CCP’s Political and Strategic Objectives

If the CCP is already at war with us, what are its political and strategic objectives? To answer this question, understanding how the CCP views the regional and global order within which China is still rising is necessary. This global order has been based upon US military and economic dominance. The US has consolidated its strategic presence within the Indo-Pacific region through a system of alliances and security partnerships. In Beijing’s viewpoint, the US has provided security and public goods that have made economic development possible but with the expectation that it was also exporting its values of political and economic reform to nations within the region. From Richard Nixon’s rapprochement to George W. Bush’s encouraging China to rise to be a ‘responsible stakeholder,’ China was to rise under US leadership and within the US-led system and eventually face irresistible pressures to change its political and economic institutions. This American aspiration is, however, the Chinese vision of failure.

‘Hide your brightness, bide your time’ was the patient tactic China employed to make the most of its ‘window of opportunity’ during a time of relative Chinese weakness whilst dissuading the US and others from demanding reforms inside China or limiting the growth of Chinese power and influence. From Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, the ‘struggle’ against external forces has never ended, even as the tactics and diplomacy have changed radically over the decades. The Chinese have spent many decades and resources studying and understanding the nature and sources of US power and have concluded that a dominant nation’s position in the regional and global order derives from the following broad sources or ‘forms of control’:

- Coercive capability (based largely on material means and resolve)
- Consensual inducements (based on incentives provided to nations bilaterally or through preferred institutional arrangements)
- Legitimacy (which can be based on widely accepted or on institutional norms or conventions)

China’s vision of success consists of enhancing its ‘forms of control’ and weakening America’s. As Rush Doshi and others have noted, a weaker China focused primarily on engaging in non-kinetic warfare intended to ‘blunt’ American and allied power whereas a more powerful (or confident) China is transitioning into building and entrenching ‘forms of control’ that surpass America’s. In this sense, Xi’s ‘China dream’ of ‘rejuvenation’ envisages the country and Party enjoying and exercising dominant
forms of control over Asia and beyond. As Xi explained in his 30,000-word speech at the CCP’s 19th Party Congress, victory is a ‘new era’ of greater Chinese activism in global governance, the development of a Chinese military that is ‘world-class’ and possesses global projection and reach, and the emergence of a China that will “become a leading country in comprehensive national strength and international influence.” Achieving these goals will herald China’s arrival on the ‘world’s center stage.’

Although there is no doubt about the scale of Beijing’s global ambitions, the focus of most of its efforts (those that will negatively affect US interests) is securing hegemony over the maritime nations of Asia. The significance of geography and other material factors can never be negated or wished away by ideational or non-material considerations. There are obvious reasons for the focus on the Indo-Pacific. The region is home to more than half of the world’s population, and its combined gross domestic product constitutes around 60 percent of the global GDP. More than one-third of trade and energy flows passes through the region.

In addition to the US, the region has five nuclear armed militaries: Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—along with latent or potential nuclear powers such as Japan and South Korea. The four largest military spenders globally are Indo-Pacific nations (US, China, India, and Russia) with Japan and South Korea occupying the ninth and tenth positions. It is also the region having the highest rates of increase in military expenditure and military modernization.

In terms of security, the region is fluid. While multiple maritime and land disputes there are live and increasingly militarized, the region’s security organizations are weak, and security arrangements between countries are unclear. For example, US security guarantees are not as institutionalized as the collective security agreement in Europe, and formal treaty commitments to Indo-Pacific powers are ambiguously stated and constantly evolving based on changing circumstances.

China is a dominant geographical presence in the heart of the Indo-Pacific, sharing borders with fourteen other countries and claiming maritime territories that directly impact the interests of almost every country in the Indo-Pacific region having a maritime border. It is also a rare beast, having rapidly made the difficult transition from continental power to sea power (even though the extent to which its strategic doctrine and operational competencies have kept pace with the increases in its sea-power capabilities is uncertain). As many analysts have noted, the most strategically important geography throughout the Indo-Pacific is not its continental but rather its maritime areas, because maritime areas and activities overwhelmingly shape the security and prosperity of not just the maritime nations but also of the major continental nations and the US.

With regard to geostrategy, these areas are commonly referred to as the ‘First Island Chain,’ which begins at the Kuril Islands and then extends down to the Japanese Archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo, finally ending at the southern part of Vietnam in Indo-China. The first step in dominating the Indo-Pacific is dominating the First Island Chain, thus opening the way to a presence and eventual pre-eminence in the Second Island Chain, the line running from the Bonin and Volcano Islands of Japan to Guam and then towards the eastern islands belonging to Indonesia. The pre-eminent power could then establish a dominant foothold in the middle of the Pacific, allowing a traditionally continental power like China to negate potential vulnerabilities in the form of bottlenecks and blockades in important straits and channels.

As Kamphausen explains, “These straits are of two kinds. The first run perpendicular to the Asian landmass and essentially create paths between islands from the continent to the open sea.” Examples of this type are “the Tsugaru Strait between Honshu and Hokkaido” and the “Ishigaki Strait, between Ishigaki and Miyako Islands in the Ryukyus.” The second type “runs parallel to the continent and offers access from one marginal sea to another”; examples are “the Malacca and Taiwan Straits.”
Kamphausen concludes, "The straits that pass through and between islands are decisive because they afford military and commercial advantages."6

In short, Beijing knows the fate and positioning of the US and China will depend on what occurs in the maritime space and with the maritime nations rather than in Central Asia and land-locked South Asia. Chinese plans towards China’s west, including through relevant parts of the One Belt One Road Initiative, are important in developing its poorer inner provinces and offering possible alternative trade routes that do not pass through maritime East Asia. These will not be decisive in a global geopolitical sense, however, and so Beijing has no choice but to become a great and, eventually, the dominant maritime power in East Asia.

For this reason, the primary focus of this report are China’s political and institutional warfare and its approach to the maritime nations in its neighborhood, including Australia and the rest of Oceania.

Although Japan and a unified Korea have the potential to re-emerge as regional great powers, China recognizes that it is still largely dealing with an assorted collection of ‘small states.’ While some of these ‘small states,’ including Vietnam and Indonesia, may yet become formidable strategic actors within their immediate localities, their primary strategic value is to render assistance to great powers as enablers or blockers.

Due to these regional disparities, China has long been obsessed with identifying strategic, military, and other non-material weaknesses pertaining to the US.7 Notwithstanding debates within China about whether American dominance has entered its twilight years in structural terms or whether renewal is possible, Beijing focuses on the US because it recognizes the impossibility of an enduring or effective balance without the US presence. Since the end of the Second World War, only the US has possessed the capabilities and relationships needed to dominate and/or intervene decisively in the maritime areas of East Asia. It has occurred to Beijing that the US’s much greater distance from maritime East Asia can be both a structural advantage and disadvantage. It is the former for the US because the prospect of an Asian hegemon creates more apprehension for resident smaller states than a distant one. This is because the distant US power requires greater acquiescence from regional states to retain its presence and relevance in the region. In that sense, the US is more structurally bound to provide public security goods than would be the case for an Asian hegemon. That partly explains why the US is still largely welcomed as a superpower by most states.

From the 1990s onward, China’s initial approach was to acquire the capabilities needed to dissuade the US from intervening decisively. These capabilities consisted of the ability to inflict (or threaten to inflict) prohibitive costs on US forces. As the PLA’s capacities have grown in absolute and relative terms, the conventional superiority of the US military becomes decisive only in a protracted conflict or with the luxury of significant ‘warning time’ prior to a conflict. As US military superiority in theaters at China’s periphery such as the Taiwan Straits erodes or is surpassed, the US becomes immensely vulnerable to attacks against its bases and ports and those belonging to its allies, meaning that the US becomes ever more reliant on the goodwill, acquiescence, and resolve of regional allies and partners.

In this context, the structural disadvantage for the US is that strategic neutrality or passivity on the part of these small states could be crippling whilst being only inconvenient for an Asian hegemon such as China. Thus, Beijing does not have the same strategic or military need of cooperation from local allies and partners that the US does. Thus, Beijing would have the easier task of neutralizing US allies and partners rather than the more difficult one of acquiring these for itself. Should China change the cost/benefit calculations of these allies and partners in China’s favor, then the US, as a geographically distant power, would be immensely exposed.
In other words, simply minimizing the strategic and military relevance and agency of regional states works in China’s favor given that the People’s Liberation Army is strengthening its presence in the region and not the US or its northern and southern allies. Achieving that has always been a central pillar in China’s strategy of ‘easing the US out of Asia’ and therefore ‘winning without fighting,’ and that is still China’s primary strategic approach.

In China’s view, the struggle began long ago, and war is already upon us. It is not (yet) being fought in kinetic terms, but China’s vision of success in Asia is not overly reliant on surpassing raw US power and influence as would be necessary in a simple contest on a level playing field. Rather, the key to success is gradually locking the US out of the region.

Cultivating Strategic Support States

Eventually locking out the US in military, economic, political, and normative terms on the one hand, and enhancing forms of control over regional states on the other are complementary objectives and explain the growing discourse amongst Chinese strategists about cultivating ‘strategic support states.’

In a 2015 consensus of fifty Chinese scholars on ‘China’s periphery diplomacy in the Xi Jinping era,’ it was concluded that acquiring ‘strategic support states’ can be achieved through regional cooperation and provision of economic and public goods as China expands. Cultivating such support states is closely linked to the oft-repeated Chinese aspiration to create a ‘community of shared future for mankind,’ which is central to achieving ‘national rejuvenation.’ According to one extensive analysis, one of the principles of cultivating a ‘strategic support state’ is ensuring that “China has the ability and resources to guide the actions of the country so that they fit into [China’s] strategic needs.” To reiterate, this need not mean that they become virtual allies of even client states (e.g., Cambodia). Rather, it only requires that they do increasingly less to assist the US in opposing or reversing creeping Chinese domination.

The cultivation of strategic support states has taken several primary forms and encompasses strategic, military, political, economic, non-material, and psychological forms. The military and related strategic aspects of China’s approach are well researched and not the subject of this report. Some important non-military aspects include the following:

Moving from defense to promotion of authoritarianism

In the recent past, China sought merely to deflect criticism of its authoritarian system. Although it still does so, it now also promotes its approach as a superior one for developing economies around the region and world.

According to Xi, as China becomes a leading global power from 2035 onward, the Chinese people will enjoy the “common property” of the international system. Xi has also stated that “the Chinese nation will stand with a more high-spirited image in the family of nations,” and “socialism with Chinese characteristics” represents a “new choice” for other developing nations that seek economic growth while still maintaining their independence.

Beijing’s promotion of its political values and standards goes far deeper than official pronouncements and mere declaratory policy. The CCP leadership has augmented support for authoritarian regimes—for example, that of Cambodia’s Hun Sen—and autocratic regimes are significantly overrepresented as recipients of Chinese financing.

China is not just promoting authoritarian values but teaching tactics for repression and exporting apparatuses used for domestic coercion to willing authoritarian clients. It has gone beyond forcing foreign firms to agree to its restrictive internet and social media standards to championing its standard of “internet sovereignty,” which gives every government the right to regulate online information and rejects a universal freedom-of-information standard.

In the United Nations, China promotes the innocuous-sounding “community of shared future for human beings” as an alterna-
tive to the notion of universal human rights. The former concept is based on the right of each country to interpret what ‘human rights’ actually means, and it insists that other countries respect and accept that the term ‘human rights’ has different meanings for each country. With respect to ASEAN, China is promoting an ASEAN-China Community of Common Destiny to engineer a smooth transition to a China-centric and hierarchical region. Perhaps most concerning is China’s increased willingness to interfere in, and covertly influence, the domestic decision-making institutions and debates in democratic nations, including promotion of Chinese authoritarian values.

Moreover, the ground for such messages to take hold is immensely fertile. In a Southeast Asian region where Singapore is the only high-income per capita economy, the promise of rapid development under authoritarian rule is attractive. In Asia, only Japan and the Philippines had experienced democratic governance over a sustained period of time prior to 1990. In Asia, there are few, genuine, committed democrats (i.e., those who reject all other forms of government but a democratic one, no matter what occurs), and democracy is viewed in somewhat more instrumental terms.

Setting ‘discourse, prices, and policy’ in the region

China’s previous focus was benefitting from the regional and global economic system and order while reducing its vulnerabilities to external actions and exogenous shocks.

While such participation is still essential, China now tirelessly and creatively attempts to set ‘discourse, prices, and policy’ in ways that lock in privileges, advantages, and agency for itself with respect to institutions and work through these (e.g., membership of groupings that determine norms, policies and/or actions) to normalize certain forms of economic activity and influence technological, technical, and legal standards in Asia. In this context, initiatives primarily conceived to reduce domestic vulnerabilities, create new avenues for economic growth, and export opportunities without further reforms to the Chinese political economy (such as the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] and Made in China 2025) have been transformed into a grand strategy designed to rewrite rules for how regional nations compete and interact.

Achieving the objective of setting ‘discourse, prices, and policy’ offers Beijing far more leverage over regional states than would otherwise be the case, as it places China in a unique position to predetermine or decide the current and future winners and losers of various interactions. From this point of view, the objective is to institutionalize and entrench the Communist Party’s Leninist approach to political economy (i.e., a system where all economic activity serves the interests of the Communist Party and the Chinese state) beyond China’s borders and throughout Southeast Asia.

In this sense, China does not just benefit disproportionately from economic activity with other entities. Instead, Beijing is now able to offer or withdraw opportunity according to political and strategic considerations as it cobbles together a contemporary system for Asian states to offer fealty and tribute in return for access and opportunity.

Controlling and manipulating grand narratives

Unlike his predecessors, who all stressed the scale and depth of Chinese vulnerabilities and challenges, Xi argues for the inevitability of Chinese success and dominance to an external audience.

An important corollary of this narrative is that the region is an ‘optional’ strategic interest for the US, and, in any event, the US will periodically be distracted by other global priorities (such as in the Middle East) or else be taken in inconsistent directions by the vagaries and irrationalities of different administrations and domestic politics. In contrast, the Communist Party-led China is permanently in the region and is unchanging in its objectives, fundamentally undeterrible, prepared to pay any cost to achieve its objectives, and focused first and foremost on Asia.
Buy-in into these narratives is the essential underpinning for China’s vision of success. For weaker states, the will to resist even a coercive great power is greatly diminished if there is consensus that great power will dominate regardless of whether other states disapprove of China’s behavior. Striking an uneven accommodation or removing oneself from the fray is preferable to balancing against the future dominant power; that is, one must not fight the future but learn to make the best of it.

Building Chinese authority, legitimacy, and leadership
China is thinking deeply and creatively about enduring and effective foundations for the accumulation and exercise of power and influence over Southeast Asian states. Beijing is cognizant of the likelihood that the significant powers in the region will not become Chinese allies in the manner that Japan and Australia are allies of the US.

For this reason, ‘dominance’ based on overwhelming material superiority is perhaps impossible, or at least will not endure even if achieved, and constant ‘coercion’ of other states might eventually convince these states to properly balance against Beijing. Thus, these tactics alone cannot provide a sound basis for future Chinese power and influence.

For these reasons, because it is also aware that its relative power will most likely not continue to increase indefinitely, Beijing is also attempting to enhance its ‘authority’ and ‘legitimacy’ as its power grows in relative terms. Whereas coercion relies on threats or actual punishments to shape or change the behavior of others, the notion of authority is based on the legitimate exercise of power. Such authority is a more efficient and enduring means to exercise power, because it induces compliance from smaller powers through their recognition or acceptance of China’s right to impose obligations on them.

The recognition of that ‘right’ might be moral or normative or might be based on a long-term material calculation. Whichever it is, smaller countries come to accept that the rules applicable to the great Chinese power differ from those for smaller powers, and so, unlike the US’s rule-based framework, the Chinese proposition is inherently hierarchical. If accepted, that hierarchy reduces the need for China to rely on mere threats or punishments.

Consider the primary forms of diplomatic messaging China employs for East Asia compared to those it reserves for Western liberal democracies such as Australia, the US, and the European Union states. With respect to the latter groups, China promotes the notion of ‘mutual benefit’ and ‘win-win.’ In contrast, the authors’ conversations with Southeast Asian interlocutors emphasize the permanence and greatness of Chinese civilization, which thus provide an enduring basis for hierarchical but stable and benevolent relationships with smaller states in Asia. Importantly, according to Beijing, the permanence and greatness of Chinese civilization both guarantees the success of China’s re-emergence (as that re-emergence is natural and so to be expected) and Beijing’s claims that the Chinese overlord will be just and fair (as it has been for millennia, according to the Communist Party’s view of history).

China has attached these narratives to actual policies directed toward Asian states. For example, the BRI is designed to spur ‘common development’ through the strengthening of infrastructure, networks, connectivity, and enhanced people-to-people interactions and exchanges. To Asians, Beijing is not apologetic that the BRI is China-centric or even that Chinese entities are the primary beneficiaries. In addition, countries are often flattered by being told that they form essential nodes in a vast China-centric network. But the overriding message is that benefits can flow to the entire region only if the great Chinese civilization-al state comprises the center of the region’s economic, political, and diplomatic life.

Whereas impersonal and ruthless market-based principles create short-term winners and losers based on the merit-based measurement of profitability, embracing the Chinese system will provide participants guaranteed and enduring benefits even
though these may be unevenly distributed. A smooth, peaceful, and prosperous transition to an inevitable Sino-centric region is only possible, according to Beijing, when there is little or no resistance from Asian states. And that can only occur when the latter states accept the ‘natural propensity of things’—the notion of ‘shi’ and ‘harmony’—and seek to work with rather than against it. As Xi Jinping puts it, “When the big river is full of water, the smaller ones never run dry.” In short, this is all about China making a moral, normative, and material case for its unique hierarchical authority.

Note that these strategies all reinforce the Chinese grand narratives mentioned previously about the inevitability of Chinese dominance and the futility of resistance.
As the discussion above indicates, Beijing views the informational and institutional as genuine domains of warfare, not simply peacetime avenues for Chinese mischief, and success in these domains can lead to two possible scenarios. In the event of a future war and during what its opponent views as peacetime, it can lay the groundwork for the CCP's success militarily by “disintegrating the opponent's war foundation” through the “application of political, economic, diplomatic, legal, and public opinion means.” However, the CCP can also employ the informational and institutional so as to cause its opponent to behave in ways and to make decisions that will ultimately achieve the same effect as its having been defeated through military means. In both contexts and in contrast to the Western preoccupation with working toward success based on strengthening oneself, much of the CCP's approach to warfare consists of creating the conditions that will lead the enemy to fail. These might be political or strategic decisions made by the opponent, the PLA's acquisition of bases on foreign territory, a reduction in the capacity of that country to resist CCP demands, or support by that country of Beijing's policies and actions elsewhere. In this sense, the CCP views the informational and institutional domains of war as having at least as significant a strategic and even military impact as would the use of kinetic force.

The term ‘political warfare’ is sometimes used to describe PLA-led actions to influence emotions, motivations, objective reasoning, and the behavior of governments, organizations, groups, and individuals of a target country in a way that is fa-
favorable to China’s own political and military goals. Given that broad mission, it is obvious that the PLA is not the only Chinese entity engaged in political warfare.

In his famed 1948 Long Telegram on the Soviet Union, George Kennan described “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.” The rich and growing literature analyzing this topic in reference to contemporary China reflects increased knowledge about and awareness of the CCP’s deep thinking and reliance on non-military means to achieve strategic and political ends.

The activities of the United Front Work Department (United Front) to organize and mobilize forces outside the CCP to support the Party and strike against its enemies are well known and infamous. Openly referring to the United Front as one of the Party’s ‘magic weapons,’ Xi has further fueled its infamy.

Increasingly serious attention is being paid to the PLA’s ‘Three Warfares’ doctrine, which was formulated in 2003 and covers psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare. Its objective is to influence an adversary’s decision-making, shape public opinion, and produce a normative and discursive environment favorable to the CCP.

The General Political Department (GPD) is responsible for the PLA’s political warfare doctrines and operations and is one of four ‘General Departments’ under the all-powerful Central Military Commission. That the PLA is charged with conducting the ‘three warfares’ does not mean that the doctrine is a military one concerned only with supporting traditional warfighting, however. As Peter Mattis explains, the PLA is the Party’s army and explicitly swears loyalty to the CCP rather than to the Chinese state. The PLA’s highest purpose is to ensure that the CCP remains in power, and it serves the Party’s political goals.

The CCP clearly takes ideas and ideology seriously. In domestic and external contexts, the CCP sees itself as threatened by both material and non-material (i.e., ideational and normative) elements—a common perspective amongst political entities with Marxist and Leninist foundations. In this sense and in the context of the PLA, it is there to carry out the political work of the Party, and the importance of this mission is permanently elevated above serving as a professional military.

Chinese leaders, officials, and academics have carried out extensive discussions on the importance of non-material warfare. For example, the PLA and other CCP entities are developing concepts of ‘cognitive domain operations,’ and some Chinese military strategists refer to the cognitive domain as the sixth domain of warfare (in addition to land, air, sea, cyber, and space). Cognitive operations involve ‘using psychological warfare to shape or even control the enemy’s cognitive thinking and decision-making.’ Their ultimate objective is to “manipulate a country’s values, national spirit/ethos, ideologies, cultural traditions, historical beliefs, etc., to prompt them to abandon their theoretical understanding, social system and development path, and achieve strategic goals without victory.”

Cognitive domain operations employ a systematic approach to understanding the way a target’s mind is constructed nationally, socially, culturally, and historically in order to exploit that knowledge and manipulate it. The concept and related operations began to appear prominently in the PLA in the second half of the previous decade and was even noted as the primary approach driving the CCP’s political influence and interference operations in the 2018 Taiwanese elections. The table below shows a summary of the actions and purposes of the Three Warfares.

The Three Warfares is only one overarching framework or schema developed by the CCP to wage political warfare. Other concepts include ‘cognitive domain operations,’ which is closely related to psychological warfare and involves using information to influence an enemy’s way of thinking in contexts ranging from peacetime decision-making to actual physical warfighting. Under this approach, the four tactics used to gain ‘mental’ or ‘mind’ superiority consist of the following:
Table 1. The Actions and Purposes of the Three Warfares

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WARFARE</th>
<th>ACTIONS</th>
<th>PURPOSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Use or dissemination of 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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on the psychology of ‘coercion’ (compelling a subject to behave in certain ways); ‘mystification’; or ‘obfuscation’ (spreading confusion and uncertainty of facts or issues); ‘division’ (encouraging and exploiting disagreement amongst enemies); and ‘defense’ or ‘resilience’ (ensuring the same cannot be done to Chinese entities).</td>
<td>Encourage the enemy to base its policies and actions on false or irrelevant information to dilute the effectiveness of their decision-making.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Enhance the CCP’s capacity to control the nature and pace of escalation through manipulation of how the enemy calculates costs/benefits and understands risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Undermine the enemy’s will to resist or endure costs/losses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Opinion</td>
<td>Dissemination of 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 the resolve of the public to oppose CCP policies and actions.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<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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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Create social licence to support and propagate the CCP’s view of history and deny others the social licence to oppose the CCP’s view of history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>Use of legal and pseudo-legal arguments to redefine notions of legality and legitimacy.</td>
<td>Redefine legality and legitimacy to justify Chinese actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of favorable norms and processes in international organizations.</td>
<td>Increase the sphere of ‘legitimate’ coercive and subversive Chinese actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use threat of legal action to intimidate or silence, or to impose financial or reputational costs on entities and individuals promoting views antithetical to Beijing’s interests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors.

- Manipulating perception through propaganda narratives.
- Restricting an enemy’s ‘historical memory’ so that its citizens will be open to new (CCP) values.
- Modifying the paradigms and ideologies of elites in enemy countries.
- Deconstructing symbols to challenge national identity.33

The purpose of these approaches is to shape and manipulate not just opinions and perceptions or frame the debate about important issues but rather to exercise dominant discursive power.34 In this context, the CCP is a keener student of Western philosophy, sociology, hermeneutics, and linguistics than the US and its allies, who have long assumed and enjoyed dominant discursive power. Of high relevance are such postmodernist thinkers as Michel Foucault, who understood that power is exercised through accepted forms of knowledge, a hierarchy of subjective truths and facts, and accepted rules and processes to distinguish fact from falsehood and that dominant views are usually based on accepted authority and wisdom rather than objective rationality.35
In short, the CCP believes that China cannot displace the US as the dominant power until it first displaces the hegemony of American and Western discourse, i.e., how we think and talk about the world and its problems—first in Asia and then beyond. This belief concerning the power of discourse applies to singular issues such as the ‘reintegration’ of Taiwan into mainland China rather than its ‘integration,’ the accurate description given that Taiwan has never been ruled by a CCP-led China. It applies to notions such as ‘Chineseness,’ with which the CCP seeks to conflate the Chinese race and culture with the Party’s values, and, more broadly, making the case that the CCP’s values represent Asian values. Discursive power applies to concepts, such as challenging the liberal and individualistic notion of ‘human-rights’ or the Westphalian approach to order and sovereignty in which the rights and privileges of one nation, regardless of its size or power, are equivalent to the rights and privileges of a larger entity. The CCP seeks to displace the principle of order based on the sovereignty of nations with a hierarchical system overseen by China and based on the superior achievements and strengths of its supposedly unsurpassed civilization. Concepts of ‘freedom,’ ‘justice,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘accountability’ are thus to be redefined.

The CCP’s preferred discourse must be imposed and reinforced domestically and then externally so as to produce uniformity and conformity of thought, conversation, debate, and action serving Party objectives. Without first upending the discursive power of America and the West, China will continue to exist in an international environment that is fundamentally and enduringly hostile to the CCP.

In all these senses, the CCP’s approach to political warfare is totalitarian, especially as it relates to information and influence, and the importance of the entities overseeing this warfare reflect its importance to the CCP. The CCP’s Central Committee (a political body comprised of over 200 members who are considered the most senior leaders of the Party), the State Council (the chief administrative entity comprising the premier and the heads of cabinet-level departments and ministries), and the Central Military Commission (the peak military decision-making body) are jointly responsible for domestic and international propaganda and messaging for the express purpose of enhancing the CCP’s ‘discourse’ power within China and throughout the world.

These three high-level organizations oversee entities such as the Publicity Department, the Taiwan Affairs Office, the State Council Press Office, and the United Front Work Department. The United Front Work Department has gained profile and international infamy due to its increasingly international (and not just domestic) focus on mobilizing Chinese diasporas, which the forensic work of courageous experts such as Anne Marie-Brady and John Garnaut has made known.

While the United Front Work Department has functional and policy responsibility for information and influence activities, all Chinese government entities are part of the ‘United Front System’ and are expected to engage in ‘united front work.’ These entities include all government ministries and agencies, media outlets and universities, business associations, and even organizations such as the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, which is responsible for managing China’s sister-city relationships. As was reported regarding CCP politburo meetings held in 2020-21, the top leadership instructed “party committees (and organizations) at all levels [to] fully recognize the importance of New Era united front work” and work collectively to “study the Party’s history, understand its theories, do practical work and make new advances.”

Unlike almost all other countries where power and influence are dispersed and diffused amongst multiple organizations and interest groups, the CCP’s position to define the objectives and lead political warfare against its own people and other nations is unchallenged. While all nations seek to shape public opinion
and disseminate propaganda in service of their national interests, one should not entertain the false argument that Beijing is simply doing what all other governments do with respect to information and influence operations.

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

Moreover, in terms of the top-down organization for the conduct of political warfare, the ability of Beijing to compel or incentivize any Chinese entity or individual to do its bidding, the manpower and economic resources allocated to the task, the willingness to interfere in or corrupt the institutions of other nations, and the ambition of the information and influence operations and objectives, the CCP is without peer. For example, the PLA’s Strategic Support Force alone has a cyber unit of over 300,000 soldiers and pays fees to approximately 2 million ‘net citizens’ to make comments on social media sites in support of CCP policies and messages.
All great and rising powers seek greater influence in the world commensurate with their size. In this sense, Beijing’s efforts to fill global and regional institutions with its diplomats and officials is unsurprising.

For example, Beijing has made concerted efforts to occupy senior positions in the 15 specialized agencies of the United Nations. That prominent entities such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank tend to be dominated by Europeans and Americans was a large reason why China led the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as an alternative to the IMF and World Bank. However, China has made enormous progress in filling and even infiltrating the other agencies. At the time of writing, four agencies overseeing food and agriculture, industrial development, civil aviation, and telecommunications have Chinese directors. Nine other agencies overseeing areas such as agricultural development financing, international tourism, global meteorology, and UNESCO have Chinese deputies. Recently, Beijing lost out to a candidate from Singapore for the leadership of the UN World Intellectual Property Organization.

In addition to the well-known ASEAN institutions, China has set up arrangements with different regions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, Cooperation between

Caption: China’s permanent representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun speaks during an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine, at the UN Headquarters in New York, on Feb. 28, 2022. (Wang Ying/Xinhua via Getty Images)
China and Central and Eastern European Countries (which seeks to bypass European Union institutions), and China and the Community of Latin American States.

The idea is to reframe and set regional and global “long-term institutional arrangements” as well as the “status and roles in the system.” As Doshi summarises:

> China’s great interest in shaping global political order and building ‘a community of common destiny for mankind’ has manifested itself across a broad range of efforts. These broadly help China build the foundations of hegemonic order—coercion, consent, and legitimacy—and take place across a variety of arenas: (1) the UN system; (2) global regional organisations; (3) new coalitions; and (4) exports of certain governance practices.

If all great powers advance their interests and values through institutions, why then the alarm about China’s increasingly well-known focus on institutions? The problem is that the CCP’s interests and values are becoming ever more divergent from and hostile to those of Australia and other countries explicitly supportive of the existing, rules-based order. Given China’s flagrant and systematic violation of IP rules, the prospect that the leadership of the World Intellectual Property Organization could have been a CCP-appointed official is an obvious case in point.

The blatant misuse of these institutions was also apparent when Beijing attempted to pressure the World Health Organization to unquestioningly promote its dishonest account of COVID-19’s origins in the critical early days of the pandemic with catastrophic consequences. Illegitimate political motivations were also seemingly apparent when China exerted its considerable influence within the supposedly apolitical UNESCO World Heritage Committee to suddenly recommend an ‘in-danger’ listing for Australia’s Great Barrier Reef that would have gravely impacted the local tourism industry. This occurred at a time of escalating diplomatic tensions between the two countries with Australia suffering from a series of cascading economic measures imposed against it by China as a result of political and strategic disagreements.

The CCP’s pursuance of its interests by influencing the decisions made by important institutions is an obvious way for Beijing to increase its global power. More than this, as part of its broader plan to acquire dominant discursive power in a new regional and global order, the CCP seeks to relentlessly purge liberal and democratic values, norms, and processes from existing institutions and exclude them from new ones.

An extensive examination of Chinese texts and documents over the past few decades reveals that Beijing has viewed institutions as entities through which to increase its own material and non-material power at America’s expense and to protect Chinese material power and values before eventually promoting the latter to the region and world.

In this context, the goals are not just to participate in and dominate institutions but also include entrenching CCP interests, values, processes, and solutions to challenges. As with political warfare, one of the primary objectives is to advance Chinese discursive dominance. At a global level, this is most obvious in the CCP’s attempts to redefine concepts such as ‘human rights’ and ‘democracy.’ For China, human rights ought to be based on nebulous concepts such as ‘happiness’ and ‘economic prosperity’ rather than Western notions of freedom, equality, and dignity.

China dismisses American and Western democracy as “the rule of a few over the many” and sees little value or virtue in universal suffrage or political pluralism. It advocates ‘Chinese democracy’ as the superior democratic model because the latter’s focus is achievement of superior material outcomes for all citizens.

In the regional context, it has simply insisted that its ‘historic rights’ are the equal of recognized international law and con-
vention. Diplomatically, it elevates a Chinese version of ‘pragmatism’ that prioritizes bilateral ‘negotiated settlements’ and ‘agreed outcomes’ in which China is invariably the larger and more coercive country. This is the proper intention and interpretation of then-Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s comment to counterparts at the Asian Regional Forum in Hanoi in 2010 that “China is a big country and you are small countries, and that is a fact.” In contrast, ‘principle,’ ‘rules,’ and ‘laws’ are dismissed as Western notions belonging to a different time and applicable to a fading region characterized by American liberal hegemony. This is the context of Xi Jinping’s speech at a conference on confidence-building measures for the region in 2014 when he proclaimed, “In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia.”

This offers a glimpse into the closed Sino-centric security and epistemic community which the CCP wants to create in maritime Asia, where China seeks not only to be the uncontested and preeminent strategic and material power but also to seize discursive and normative dominance. By doing so, it can control the agenda and manipulate the behavior of regional states. That grand ambition was intrinsic to its so-called ‘neighborhood’ policy in the 1990s and what this report has termed the cultivation of ‘strategic support states’ in more recent times. If the CCP can define and institutionalize its preferred discourse, norms, and terms of reference for important issues, it will have advanced several steps to winning without fighting. This constitutes what strategists in previous Chinese dynasties referred to as ‘attacking the heart’ of the enemy.
Since 2018, CCP leadership and Chinese scholars have faithfully followed Xi’s cues and consistently referred to ‘great changes unseen in a century’ that will create unparalleled opportunities for ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese.’ The ‘great changes’ refer to Xi’s apparent confidence that the balance of comprehensive power vis-à-vis the US is rapidly changing in China’s favor and that the next decade will be a decisive time in the contest between the two greatest powers. While China’s ambitions for dominance are increasingly global, the first step is to dominate maritime Asia and then the Indo-Pacific. As one influential Chinese scholar put it, an increasingly bifurcated world will see China construct a ‘community of common destiny revolving around China’ as the foundation from which it then begins to build its global presence.

As argued earlier, China seeks to build dominant and uncontested ‘forms of control’ that are buttressed by and further enable discourse dominance through a combination of material and non-material means that include political warfare and institutional approaches.

The sheer scale of the enterprise, as well as the sprawling and labyrinthine nature of the entities charged with conceiving, operationalizing, and implementing the CCP’s political and institutional warfare policies mean that efforts are invariably ad hoc.
piecemeal, often disorganized, and sometimes counterproductive. Consider the United Front Work Department, one major entity in charge of winning the hearts and minds of populations (especially Chinese diasporas) in dozens of countries and territories, including all the Five Eyes nations, Europe, Southeast Asian nations, and Taiwan. The means it employs include inviting politicians, journalists, businesspeople and civil society leaders to academic conferences, political and social gala events, and other organized gatherings. Enabling this is the United Front Work Department’s connections with countless firms, organizations, and individuals in all target countries—some of whom remain wilfully or naively unaware of the political and strategic context of their activities.

Perversely, the impossibility for the United Front Work Department and other organizations to seamlessly coordinate their extensive efforts across China’s vast political, economic, civil, bureaucratic, and military networks facilitates the CCP’s denial of a comprehensive plan to use all the tools that the country has at its disposal to ‘win without fighting’—that the objective to control and dominate discourse is a spurious and paranoid accusation by the US and its allies. Fortunately, the CCP under Xi’s leadership has been far more explicit about these plans and objectives than were his predecessors, and, for this reason, complacency or denial that the CCP is deeply engaged in these forms of warfare is no longer plausible.

In many respects, achieving global discourse dominance is a far-off aspiration even though Beijing has expended enormous effort to do so and has made significant progress. While there is deep respect and admiration for the country’s material progress over the last four decades, Beijing is better known for the rise of its ‘sharp power’ than its ‘soft power.’ From the genocide occurring in Xinjiang and the repression of Hong Kongers to the deceit and obfuscation that led to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CCP remains on the defensive and is still viewed with wide-

### Table 2. Peak Bodies Overseeing Political Warfare Doctrine and Operations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORGANIZATION</th>
<th>KEY INTERNATIONAL OBJECTIVES AND MISSIONS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Front Work Department</td>
<td>Influence foreign perceptions of the successes and desirability of CCP’s policies and actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote key CCP domestic and international narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify and forge connections with institutions, collaborators, and individuals in target countries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work with and provide support/guidance with other CCP entities (including embassies and consulates) to carry out political warfare missions and objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Work Department (Central Military Commission)</td>
<td>Oversee the political and ideological development of the PLA including preparing military personnel for ‘ideological’ work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oversee and produce content and messages for and about the PLA for dissemination domestically and internationally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work with other entities such as the Internet Public Opinion Bureau and Cyberspace Administration of China to shape views of the PLA domestically and abroad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work with the recently established Strategic Support Force (which coordinates space, cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare capabilities) to develop and conduct psychological warfare and public opinion strategies against targets.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Authors
spread wariness and distrust around the world. Its ‘no limits’ friendship with Russia shortly before the latter invaded Ukraine in February 2022 does not bode well for China’s standing since 141 countries in the United Nations General Assembly—a body that is no reliable friend of America and the West—supported the non-binding resolution that Russia unconditionally withdraw its forces from Ukraine, with only five voting against. China meekly abstained.  

China’s use of its material power has been more effective in achieving the CCP’s political and strategic gains. Whereas its ‘sharp power’ side has included military intimidation and economic coercion, its inducements side has involved the use of economic resources and promises of economic opportunity to win over regimes, governments, organizations, and individuals.  

Even so, the combination of China’s material, or ‘sharp,’ use of that power and a more targeted and thoughtful implementation of non-material approaches has been very effective when employed against key ‘strategic support states’ in the region, especially in Southeast Asia. Indeed, not too much comfort should be taken from surveys consistently showing that ‘trust perceptions’ of China are persistently low. One does not always need to be ‘liked’ or even ‘trusted’ to exercise influence. Indeed, Beijing has had considerable success in building the conditions for ‘winning without fighting’ with respect to some crucial strategic support states in the region.  

Case Study: BRI and Strategic Support States  

China’s official Blue Book of Non-Traditional Security (2014-2015) states that two purposes of the BRI are to mitigate American-led geopolitical machinations and ideas and to promote a new international system of discourse and order that enhances China’s national power and soft power. While the BRI’s origin is largely attributable to the existence of domestic vulnerabilities and it is implemented opportunistically by many domestic entities (with disparate objectives) and in a fragmented manner, Xi has clearly seized upon it as a framework for an outward-focused ‘grand strategy.’ Moreover, it has several manifestations and approaches and must be taken seriously.  

The BRI is both a weapon with which the CCP conducts political and institutional warfare and an end which the CCP is using political and institutional warfare to achieve.  

Investment in BRI projects should be considered in the context of the concept of ‘strategic support states’ previously mentioned. One principle of cultivating a ‘strategic support state’ is ensuring that “China has the ability and resources to guide the actions of the country so that these fit into [China’s] strategic needs.” One former senior National Security Council official describes the BRI as ‘infrastructure warfare.’ It is also a case where the CCP’s material approaches intersect political warfare, as this report has characterized it above.  

On the material elements of inducement and coercion, a study published in March 2018 found that one-third of 68 economies receiving BRI loans are “significantly or highly vulnerable to debt distress.” Although enormous Chinese investments in Pakistan such as the Port of Gwardar have given the Pakistani economy an instant economic boost, it has also burdened that country with debt that it cannot repay and turned Pakistan into a long-term client state of China’s. A similar situation is occurring in Sri Lanka. Unprofitable and debt-heavy projects such as the Hambantota Port forced Sri Lanka into a $1.1 billion debt-for-equity swap with China, giving the latter long-term control of a military-capable port and considerable leverage over Colombo’s foreign policy. Over the past five years, China has invested over $5 billion in Cambodia, a sum equivalent to about one quarter of that country’s GDP, in return for Phnom Penh’s pushing China’s interests in organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Included is 100 percent ownership of the Koh Kong New Port, and a secret agreement allowing China to construct a military port there has reportedly been signed. Like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, Cambodia cannot change course while
caught in a Chinese-created ‘debt trap.’ A similar dynamic is playing out in the South Pacific.

With respect to the CCP’s authoritarian strategic objectives and policy implementation, the BRI fuses economic partnership and opportunity with developmental assistance and political support. Bear in mind that forms of Chinese economic assistance usually do not include the attachment of demands for good governance, respect for human rights, and relevant economic reforms that characterize assistance by organizations such as the IMF and World Bank. Beijing justifies this as being consistent with its stated principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Instead, it offers support and cover for regimes so that they can insulate themselves from reform pressures, and examples of this have been documented in Chinese investment and assistance to countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

In a broader context, a Chinese-led authoritarian revival and promotion is currently occurring. When announcing that he had abolished presidential term limits during the 19th Congress of the CCP in October 2017, Xi declared that China is moving to the “center stage” and that its authoritarian model “offers an option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving problems facing mankind.” The State Council Information Office, International Liaison Department, and United Front Work Department are the three departments primarily charged with the international dissemination of the BRI’s munificent narrative and are given considerable resources to shape and promote these massages to elites in foreign states.

Moreover, China is not just promoting authoritarian values but is also teaching tactics for repression and exporting apparatuses used for domestic coercion to willing authoritarian clients. This has gone beyond forcing foreign firms to agree to its restrictive internet and social media standards and now includes championing its standard of “internet sovereignty,” which gives every government the right to regulate online information and rejects a universal freedom of information standard. In the United Nations, China promotes the innocuous-sounding “community of shared future for human beings” or “community of common destiny” as an alternative to the notion of universal human rights. The former concept is based on the right of each country to interpret what “human rights” means and insists that other countries should respect and accept that the term “human rights” has different meanings to different countries. Perhaps most concerning is China’s increased willingness to interfere in, and covertly influence, the domestic decision-making institutions and debates in democratic nations, including the promotion of Chinese authoritarian values.

The proponents of this model in China and elsewhere adopt the position that any political system ought to be assessed according to practical outcomes and that liberal-democratic systems that emphasize individual rights and freedoms without regard to such outcomes have no intrinsic value. China argues that it has resolved the alleged contradiction between the subordination of individual rights and freedoms to one-party rule, on the one hand, and positive social and economic outcomes, on the other—a contradiction the Communist regimes in the Cold War era failed to address. As Xi argues, the CCP is meeting the basic needs of over one billion people, and thus its authoritarian system has made it possible for people to live fulfilling and materially better lives.

This is a compelling message in an Indo-Pacific region in which an overwhelming number of countries are developing economies that have yet to fully industrialize. Only Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand can be considered fully industrialized economies. The rest are straining to become middle-income economies, while only a small number of the others, such as Malaysia and Thailand, are seeking to break out of the so-called middle-income trap.
Also, authoritarian systems such as China’s have demonstrated an impressive capacity to generate rapid economic growth through the forced mobilization of capital, land, and even labor—if only at the earlier stages of development, thus contributing to the narrative that autocratic competence is outstripping democratic dysfunction. An editorial in China’s state-owned Xinhua argued that “endless political backbiting, bickering and policy reversals, which are the hallmarks of liberal democracy, have retarded economic and social progress and ignored the interests of most citizens” and thus constitute a “crisis and chaos swamp[ing] Western liberal democracy.” In contrast, China actively promotes its authoritarian model as one that is politically stable, technically superior, and better able to pursue sensible policies in a consistent manner. These messages are effective because achieving “order” and ‘development’ rather than guaranteeing “justice” for the individual remains highly valued in the region. In this context, the BRI is promoted as China’s grand plan for the region—not just to advance economic development but to reframe and reset objectives, policies, and standards in a manner which places China as the primary creator and guardian of progress in a non-US-centric Indo-Pacific region.

In this context, the case study of Thailand offers a striking example of the application of political warfare in the form of influence and information operations. In several field trips the authors have undertaken to that country over the past few years, the overwhelming finding was that Chinese narratives have taken broader and deeper hold in Thailand than in the other countries of the region. The vast majority of the roughly 30 Thai politicians, bureaucrats, serving military and bureaucratic officials, judges, and economic and social elites across all sectors. Those who are of Sino-Thai ethnicity are considered high-value and the most susceptible targets. One result is that the Thai government regularly and willingly ensures Thai media, academics, and commentators are ‘compliant’ with the CCP’s desired messaging. In recent times, this has included supporting Beijing’s official narrative about COVID-19 and even jailing some individuals who have

Remarkably, China was widely admired for its wisdom, civilization, culture, and recent economic achievements. More than that, contemporary China is seen as benevolent, fair, and generous. One only needs to accept and accede to the authority and legitimacy of Beijing as the ‘big brother’ to share in the successes of partnership with China.

For example, many brought up the signing of the 2003 early-harvest free trade agreement with China on agricultural items—seven years before the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement—as one example of the fruits of Thailand’s special relationship with China. Others raised the prospect that Thailand, the ‘glue’ or central hub for the Pan Asian railway, was too important to China for Beijing to damage the bilateral relationship through overreach.

Thai interlocutors were open about the fact that their Chinese interlocutors were explicitly and relentlessly propagating these messages at all levels, and most Thai interlocutors were prepared to welcome and accept the Chinese message. Indeed, many expressed the firm belief that Thailand enjoyed a special relationship akin to ‘kinship’ with China, with the expectation that Beijing offered Bangkok privileged access and took great care to ensure Thai concerns were addressed.

Little of this has occurred by accident. Various investigations have shown that Beijing has relentlessly targeted and co-opted national and local-level elected officials, royal family members, senior military and bureaucratic officials, judges, and economic and social elites across all sectors. Those who are of Sino-Thai ethnicity are considered high-value and the most susceptible targets. One result is that the Thai government regularly and willingly ensures Thai media, academics, and commentators are ‘compliant’ with the CCP’s desired messaging. In recent times, this has included supporting Beijing’s official narrative about COVID-19 and even jailing some individuals who have
refused to comply. More broadly, Thailand has reproduced some of Beijing’s censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech, replicated some aspects of China’s internet infrastructure such as the Thai ‘Single Portal’ platform, which is based on China’s surveillance and censoring ‘Golden Shield Project,’ and reduced the editorial freedom of established newspapers such as The Bangkok Post and The Nation. There have even been instances of CCP influence agents actively intimidating Thai citizens to tow the CCP’s line on such issues as the BRI.

Indeed, Chinese information warfare entities are increasingly targeting the ownership of Thai media assets and have facilitated the so-called ‘Sinicization of their news,’ in which much of the content is sourced from China or sources approved by Beijing. With cooperation from the Thai government, Beijing supports and promotes such initiatives as the 2019 ASEAN-China Year of Media Exchanges. Consequently, a steady and increasing flow of direct content from Chinese state media outlets such as Xinhua is translated directly into Thai language media without the content’s original source being revealed so as to give the impression it is Thai-generated news. A survey of these stories reveals that the benefits of doing business with China, including through the BRI platform, feature heavily in these articles. There is also evidence that CCP-affiliated businesses use the carrot of advertising to entice Thai media entities to run favorable stories whilst threatening to withdraw advertising if they do not do so. The same carrot-and-stick approach is applied to Thai news outlets to run negative stories about US policies and actions.

Case Study: South China Sea
The South China Sea presents a noteworthy case study of the extent to which non-material strategies can work alongside material approaches to achieve extraordinary gains that would normally be very difficult without employing an overt military approach. The growing Chinese presence in the South China Sea is well documented and need not be reproduced here. At a broad level, the geographical distance of the US and the enduring Southeast Asian fear of abandonment exacerbated by the relative decline of American power has placed China in a structurally stronger position to engage with ASEAN states on a consistent basis.

However, these structural and geographical US disadvantages do not fully explain China’s success in advancing Chinese security interests, including through ASEAN. Indeed, whereas ASEAN was recently viewed as a diplomatic buffer against Chinese attempts at dominance, one could argue that it has now inadvertently become complicit in helping China achieve its security objectives in Southeast Asia.

The cleverness of Beijing’s institutional approach is evident in its successful exclusion of US and non-claimant allies from ASEAN-led discussions about the application of international law (and the 2016 Arbitration Award ruling in favor of the Philippines) in South China Sea debates. As one of the case studies below will show, Beijing has managed to define how disagreements over the South China Sea are spoken about and which concepts and principles apply. For example, ‘peace and stability’ is elevated over the application of rule-based principles. In this context, the enemy of peace and stability is ‘provocative action,’ and the latter is often defined as American Freedom of Navigation Operations rather than Chinese militarization of artificial islands. Even though only five of the ten ASEAN states are claimants, the non-claimant ASEAN states are deemed to be more central and relevant to the South China Sea discussion than the US, Japan, or Australia.

In other words, many regional voices treat South China Sea disputes as if they constituted a historical disagreement between China and its neighboring states that can only be settled using institutions and regimes outside the purview of the US and its allies. Southeast Asian states have found themselves in this absurd predicament because they allowed Beijing too much leeway and authority to dominate and shape the institutions and processes (e.g., an exclusionary conversation between China
and ASEAN on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea used to define the problem and the terms by which such disputes are to be managed and negotiated.

Although elevated by China as the primary framework by which an institutional solution was to be found, the deliberately drawn-out Code of Conduct negotiations allowed China to admonish other powers, especially the US and its allies, for interfering in the process. Beijing managed to exclude the 2016 Arbitration decision from the CoC negotiations which affirmed the illegality and illegitimacy of much of Beijing’s claims to the South China Sea. While dealing bilaterally with ASEAN and member states over the disagreements, Beijing continues to expand and consolidate control over contested areas. Even then, to preserve regional good will and stability, most Southeast Asian states remain reluctant to openly support any action by the US or allies that would enrage China. Indeed, one could argue that Chinese successes in the South China Sea exemplify the paradigm of how to ‘win without fighting.’

None of this is to suggest that material factors are irrelevant or important. On the contrary, the use of physical coercion (through Chinese para-military entities), as well as economic coercion and inducements, have been essential in the prevention of any ASEAN consensus against Chinese interests and manipulation of the actions of individual states. However, China has buttressed and complemented these material approaches with extremely effective and relentless political warfare and institutional strategies, without which Beijing could have achieved far less without the overt use of force.

China’s ‘divide and rule’ approach to ASEAN is a simple matter of ensuring that there is no unanimous agreement on issues or actions which are against Beijing’s interests. It has achieved this through the tried and tested Chinese approach of using material means and coercion to achieve regime and/or elite capture in several countries to ensure ASEAN is not able to act unanimously in ways that Beijing does not want. However, Beijing has achieved much more than ‘divide and rule.’ It has obtained ASEAN’s formal endorsement of the BRI even though Southeast Asian states know that China will be the primary beneficiary. It has positioned the BRI as a perfect and natural complement to sub-regional regimes such as the Greater Mekong Subregion, which came into being in 1992 as a development program overseen by the Japanese-dominated Asian Development Bank. More than this, Beijing created the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation in 2015 to enhance its own leadership and leverage involving the GMS countries and further linked the GMS mechanism with promotion of the BRI.

Yet, most broadly, most striking is its success in seemingly hoodwinking or else manipulating the thinking about ASEAN and vis-à-vis ASEAN states. Specifically, Beijing has managed to lure many Southeast Asians into thinking the following:

- Their and ASEAN’s diplomatic strategies towards China will allow ASEAN to maintain ‘diplomatic centrality’ (when China is setting the terms of reference and pace of negotiations on issues like the South China Sea disputes).
- Current decisions (or non-decisions) taken by ASEAN are consistent with both a counter-dominance and hedging approach preferred by member states.
- ASEAN is getting the benefits of cooperation with China without unacceptable risks or costs.
- The US and its allies are intent on forcing ASEAN (and its member states) to ‘choose’ sides whilst China is content for ASEAN to accept some of its initiatives and reject others.

How has China done this? Beijing has been able to do so by:

- Manipulating the hedging strategies and mindsets of ASEAN member states in ways that preserve the illusion they are hedging when in fact they are committing to strategic decisions with long-term consequences in China’s favor.
- Persuading ASEAN and member states to focus on short-term gains and/or avoidance of short-term losses rather
than on long-term gains and/or avoidance of long-term losses.

- Positioning Chinese objectives and policies as the ‘natural evolution’ of developments whilst characterizing US and allied actions as futile but disruptive counter actions that carry risk and costs to ASEAN and the region.

China is not yet the uncontested military or economic power in the region. That cannot be achieved using only material means. This objective is being pursued through a relentless combination of material coercion/inducements, institutional strategies, and political warfare – the latter including extensive use of the ‘Three Warfares’.

Consider the way Beijing has deliberately obfuscated and reinvented its explanations, positions, and justifications regarding claims in the South China Sea.

For example, earlier in this century, China fooled many seasoned China watchers into thinking that there was no internal CCP agreement or consensus on what Beijing wanted in the South China Sea, that strategic policy was a messy and pluralistic process involving many actors and stakeholders, and that assertive actions were often performed by rogue PLA or para-military entities without the knowledge of the senior political and military leadership.

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

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

For example, foreign governments and voices advanced Beijing’s strategic aims by arguing that a tougher approach would simply inflame the hard-core nationalists within China while a softer line could help the more moderate voices within China gain ascendency. Others argued that supposed Chinese assertiveness was a tactical ploy to placate chauvinistic elements in Chinese society, and so this domestically driven motivation was not evidence that Beijing had expansive ambitions in the South China Sea. Such views were encouraged by earlier arguments put forward by Chinese scholars, no doubt with the CCP’s blessing, stating that, while the South China Sea was likely not a genuine ‘core interest,’ forcing Beijing to clarify its position would ‘inflame the Chinese people,’ and ‘moderate’ leaders such as Hu Jintao required space and freedom to continue their peaceful approach.

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

- The securitization of the issue by the US and others (notwithstanding that it was China that was unilaterally and forcefully changing the status quo at an incomparable pace and scale).
- US and others’ militarization of the disputes by having naval vessels perform freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) that increased Beijing’s insecurity and caused it to accelerate its activities in the disputed regions.
- The actions of other claimants to secure their claims, which, while miniscule compared to Chinese actions, was the primary trigger for Beijing’s supposed assertiveness on this issue.
- The greater interest taken by non-claimant states such as the US, Japan, and Australia, which exacerbated what ought to be a manageable issue between claimant states.
- The inadequacies of international law, which applies an altogether too ahistorical context to disputes.

Others argued that the South China Sea was a dangerous distraction for Beijing, which was focused on preventing Taiwanese independence, and Beijing’s ambition and level of threat with respect to the South China Sea should therefore not be exaggerated. Another argument was that the US and allies ought to maintain a neutral stance on South China Sea issues or run the risk of being dismissed as failing to be impartial, causing Beijing to become even more insecure about US intentions regarding contested issues such as Taiwan and the East China Sea dispute with Japan—with potentially destabilizing outcomes.

A careful examination of the decision-making structure would have led one to question many of these complacent arguments and assumptions. For example, since around 2012, the Central Maritime Rights Protection Leading Group headed by Xi Jinping has led Beijing’s South China Sea policy. Xi was active in Small Leading Groups on these issues in the Hu Jintao era. This particular Small Group was established to formulate strategies to advance China’s maritime rights and interests, coordinate policy amongst the many state entities in charge of maritime affairs, and manage disagreements and conflict with other countries over disputed territories. Membership of this Small Group included senior representatives from at least seventeen organizations including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Public Security, State Security and Agriculture, and the PLA Navy.

Even if one were unaware of this, that China’s behavior had changed since the first decade of this century was obvious. Beijing started imposing more expansive fishing bans in 2009 in disputed areas and gave its entities authority to seize and detain foreign fishing boats. By 2009, Beijing had started to militarize fisheries administrative vessels (many of which were former navy ships) even if they were not formally flagged as PLA Navy, and these vessels unmistakably and regularly patrolled disputed waters. Notably, from as early as 2008, naval vessels began to perform large-scale exercises that involved some of the latest PLA Navy ships.

Even without the benefit of hindsight, the weight of empirical evidence then available communicated the nature and scale of Beijing’s ambitions in the South China Sea. Regardless, foreigners tied themselves in knots trying to decipher Beijing’s deliberately ambiguous claims, legal justifications, and degree of political resolve to defend its claims while finding comfort in assurances that China was only seeking ‘peaceful development’ and that any overly confrontational response to its activities could derail that happy trajectory and so was not worth the risk. To reiterate, all this was occurring even as Beijing was relentlessly changing the status quo in terms of advancing a permanent presence in disputed areas.

In contemporary times when Beijing’s good intentions are increasingly being questioned, new arguments are being advanced to help Beijing support its objectives. While the CCP’s
strategic objectives as described earlier are increasingly difficult to deny, it has worked tirelessly to introduce a different conversation and discourse to be applied to the South China Sea and other issues, much of which is based on the grand narratives mentioned earlier and can be applied to many other issues:

• Chinese dominance is the historical norm and is inevitable.
• The objectives of the CCP are permanent and unchanging.
• A CCP-led China is fundamentally undeterable.
• The party is prepared to pay any price to achieve its core objectives.
• The US is an increasingly weak and unreliable ally.

These assumptions underlie the arguments of many who advocate a more accommodationist approach to China in current times. Their acceptance greatly diminishes the motivation of regional states to resist or counter even the most coercive policies even though they profoundly disagree with China’s behavior.

Even with respect to reactive policy, these narratives and other political warfare strategies have enormous real-world impacts. Consider how the US and its allies have tied themselves in knots shifting the definition of ‘gray zone’ ever more expansively to describe Chinese activities. Gray zone activities are those that fall beneath the threshold of what would be considered an act of war and so is a subjective term. For instance, many have somehow convinced themselves that Chinese military and para-military incursions into the South China Sea (or Taiwanese and Japanese air and maritime space) are ‘gray zone’ activities that ought not to be treated as inherently hostile and so require a firm response.

This is not to argue that a kinetic response is the only or wise option in most cases. However, since the decision as to how to label ‘gray zone’ activities leads to compromise and de-escalation that almost always favors the CCP, China is never subject to either military or non-military punishment and so never suffers direct costs or is compelled to surrender any gains. The CCP’s intention, which it often achieves, is that the cost and consequences of escalation for the other side are too uncertain and therefore carry too much risk. Thus, if the CCP is allowed to manipulate perception and calculation of risk, then it is well on the way to winning without fighting.
6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Recommendations

As democratic governments and those leading their institutions need to accept, the CCP's intent in conducting warfare in non-material domains is to advance the same objectives that the PLA could one day deploy force to secure. Thus, in both allied and neutral countries, it seeks not just to disrupt the enemy and deny it dominance within these domains, but instead to manipulate, degrade, corrupt, dominate, or control the domains. The CCP, whose objectives are clearly hostile, is rapidly building and deploying its capabilities to translate this intent into reality.

Having accepted the reality of the above, our institutions, their personnel, and the public must prepare for this type of warfare. Countries such as Australia are further along in this respect than others, given the relatively advanced nature of that country's political and public conversation about the CCP's influence and interference activities. Such preparation constitutes the first, important step.

The next steps are to inform and educate those leading our institutions and the public as to the scale of the CCP's efforts, to
prepare our institutions for the challenges ahead, and, together with a coalition of allies, to proactively engage in non-material warfare so as to neutralize the CCP’s tactics within this area. The ten policy recommendations below are organized into these three categories and constitute the actions necessary to address the Chinese non-material strategies discussed in this report.

Category A. Inform and Educate

1). Identify the Tactics Commonly Used by the CCP Against the Five Eyes Alliance
In assessing the terrain, one early task should be to clearly define Beijing’s key strategic priorities and then identify patterns in the CCP’s activities related to various targets. For example, what tactics of non-material warfare does Beijing commonly deploy against members of the Five Eyes and other Western democracies? How do these differ from approaches used against non-Western allies such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea or developing economies within the region? Regarding the latter, identifying patterns in the CCP’s techniques/tactics/methods for elite-capture approaches would be of particular importance.

While extensive investigations and assessments on these issues have been performed, these have been scattered, and so a necessary prelude to informing national and coalition strategies is compiling and disseminating their most salient elements. For example, the US and allies could produce an annual report on the nature and evolution of the techniques/tactics/methods the CCP employs against liberal democracies. Such a report should be declassified and made widely available, as this knowledge would enable governmental and non-governmental entities and individuals to recognize and effectively respond to CCP tactics.

2). Prioritize Adequate Funding for Tracking Entities
As with any campaign, accurate assessments are needed to determine the correct strategy and tactics. Well-resourced and institutionalized entities dedicated to monitoring, tracking, mapping, and anticipating the activities and targets of relevant Chinese entities should be created, or existing ones re-tasked to accomplish the same purposes.

3). Increase Public and Media Awareness by Making Research Publicly Available
As Australia’s experience countering the CCP’s interference and covert influence demonstrates, public and media awareness (in addition to legislation prohibiting certain activities) is crucial to bringing non-governmental entities onboard and raising the standards of what is considered socially acceptable or otherwise. Governments need to work with academic institutions, business/industry groups, think tanks, and the media to explain what is at stake and so gain their help in exposing individuals and organizations carrying out, enabling, lobbying for, or funding the CCP’s non-material warfare activities. An admirable example of government activity in this area are the ongoing investigations and public reports on CCP activities in Australian universities and research organizations that the Australian Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security issues.

4). Publish an Annual Assessment of CCP Non-Material Activities
US and allied governments could also issue an annual public report on the CCP’s non-material warfare objectives and activities as well as ad hoc updates on such activities in key allied nations. To the authors’ knowledge, no such authoritative report is currently being issued by the US or allied governments.

5). Release an Annual Review of the CCP’s Social Media Disinformation Efforts
A separate report could be issued on the CCP’s assets and the evolving tactics they employ on social media, including use of fake accounts, internet and social media trolling for strategic effects, and online disinformation efforts. To date, think tanks primarily have performed this important task.
6). Establish a Legal Framework to Prosecute Foreign Interference

Within individual jurisdictions, a review of the existing laws, legislation, and policies required to investigate and prosecute illegal organizations and/or activities or regulate or restrict such organizations/activities should be performed. Such a review must include application of existing foreign-interference and covert-influence laws and regulations to social media.

Category B: Prepare Our Institutions

7). Elevate Non-Material Warfare to a Whole-of-Government Priority

Those entities charged with defending, promoting, and advancing a country’s national interests cannot view the non-material aspects of warfare as a side project or peripheral activity of the ‘real’ business of traditional warfare. Rather, they must be institutionally prepared to wage war in these domains now and not just in the event of a traditional military conflict.

Regarding China’s dominance of both existing and new institutions, US and allied efforts are already underway to slow Beijing’s advance and reverse its gains. With respect to political warfare (i.e., that involving influence and information), the rapid acceptance of the cyber domain as both a threat to national economic and civilian life and a genuine domain of warfare offers useful lessons from which we ought to learn.

For example, agencies covering the defense, foreign affairs, domestic affairs, and economic and intelligence functions currently allocate significant resources to cyber issues. Cyber expertise and career paths are being established within these agencies, which, in an independent and whole-of-government context, are continuing to expand and refine cyber strategies to be deployed against hostile actors. These agencies thus seek not only to internally entrench cyber expertise and capabilities but also link these to other areas of national capability and enlist the private sector and the public in many of these efforts. In short, cyber has been established as a major and mainstream issue between allies in both war and non-war contexts, and the same needs to be done with respect to political warfare.

Given that non-material warfare cuts across the military, diplomatic, economic, and civilian domains, strategy and tactics must be a whole-of-government enterprise. Furthermore, even if we adopt the language and mindset of non-material warfare, both defense- and non-defense-related approaches to this warfare will exist.

In addition, either one primary entity could be established to coordinate all non-material warfare strategies and efforts, or else different, already-existing entities (e.g., defense, foreign affairs, intelligence, domestic affairs) could employ specific strategies and initiatives directly pertaining to their functional responsibilities.

However traditional defense and military institutions need to play a central and prominent role in any national strategy and its execution. The intent of much of the CCP’s non-material warfare efforts is to achieve or advance strategic and military objectives. Countering these efforts is within the traditional purview of a nation’s defense organizations. Within the Chinese system, the PLA’s central role is developing doctrine, strategy, and tactics in the material and non-material contexts. As with any material capability relevant to competition or conflict, one needs to build, position, and deploy one’s own non-material assets on the one hand, and seek to track, counter, degrade, and destroy the enemy’s non-material capabilities and use of them on the other. Thus, defense entities already possess not only the capabilities required to coordinate and lead such efforts but also the institutional mindset needed to do so.

Category C. Engage in Non-Material Warfare

8). Deploy a Denial and/or Negation Strategy

Next is the all-important tactical execution of engagement in non-material warfare (or counter warfare) through a denial and/
or negation strategy aimed at reducing the CCP’s ability and effectiveness to conduct non-material warfare.

As noted earlier, this involves construction, positioning, and deployment of non-material assets on the one hand, and tracking, countering, degrading, and even destroying the enemy’s non-material capabilities and their use on the other hand. Successfully accomplishing these aims will require dedicated and permanent teams, most likely based within the Department of Defense.

9). Build a Coalition to Proactively Engage in Non-Material Warfare
Application of good denial/negate strategies and tactics are essential but not sufficient. The CCP is seeking to change the cognitive, informational, and institutional environment in the entire region, and implementing a denial approach outside one’s own jurisdiction always has limitations. Many of the ‘strategic support states’ China is targeting are not able or willing to adopt measures that might be possible in advanced liberal democracies.

The South China Sea exemplifies the results the CCP is capable of achieving—gaining regional dominance through the way an issue is framed and dealt with institutionally and (pseudo) legally. In this case, the US and allies also helped the CCP’s cause by inadvertently vacating the space. Because of their earlier insistence that they were ‘neutral’ and ‘did not take sides’ in such disputes, the allies were unable to insert themselves more resolutely into the discussion and thus allowed China to position the issue as an exclusively China-ASEAN one to be resolved using bilaterally negotiated principles rather than international law. The allied position of ostensible impartiality also allowed China to play on enduring Southeast Asian fears that the allies lacked resolve and would abandon their allies and friends in the region, thereby also contributing to the conditioning of Southeast Asian countries to accept unequal or unfair bargains offered by Beijing.

For these reasons, the US and allies need to adopt a proactive or offensive mindset and develop the assets and capabilities to carry it out. This would require a core coalition of allies prepared to proactively engage in all areas of non-material warfare, including that conducted through institutions, lawfare, and the full spectrum of political warfare.

These allies would need to implement, institutionalize, and fund agreements to sustain constant and ongoing ‘joint operations’ in this type of warfare. As suggested previously, this could include the following: guidelines and frameworks for identifying key targets and priorities; political and operational consultation and coordination; and agreement on protocols for intelligence exchanges, staff training, and resource sharing.\(^{106}\)

To reiterate, the purpose of being proactive and going on the offensive is to shape the institutional environment, discourse, assumptions used, and principles adopted by target countries and their populations. Doing so will be beneficial, whether such warfare is waged well prior to the potential use of force or in lieu of the use of force. Moreover, in either situation, the costs and risks for China increase while the resolve of other countries to resist or rebuff the Chinese advance also increases.

10). Engage with the Private Sector and Promote Transparency
Although many of the capabilities required for the proactive conduct of such warfare can exist inside government, democracies will also require the expertise, know-how, and assistance of organizations and individuals from outside government. However, unlike China’s government, those in liberal democracies cannot compel such entities to do their bidding, and most private sector entities and individuals will be reluctant to engage in covert activity.

A virtue can be made out of these democratic circumstances, however. These countries should be transparent about their preparations to engage in this kind of warfare, thus beginning an overdue and necessary public conversation about what the
CCP is seeking to achieve, its ways and means of doing so, the outcomes at stake, and the importance of fighting and ‘winning’ this type of war.

Moreover, the messages, principles, conversations, and institutional objectives are consistent with the interests, values, and obligations of liberal democracies seeking to advance a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific.’ Democratic governments should openly appeal to private entities to advance these same principles and transparently offer funding for them to do so. Such non-governmental contributions will most likely carry more weight with the populations of target countries than would governmental ones, particularly if constructed and delivered in innovatively tactical ways.
7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary
In terms borrowed from popular culture, the CCP’s non-material approaches to warfare are NOT a ‘Jedi mind trick,’ and so one should neither be terrified of the CCP’s approaches nor dismissive of them. They arose from the CCP’s revolutionary history and totalitarian instincts and were adapted to dealings with other countries—first from a position of relative weakness but now increasingly from one of greater strength and confidence.

The CCP’s approach begins with the conviction that it is already engaged in conflict with the US and others and that the key to success is to prevail in all physical and non-physical domains where war can be fought and won. However, the CCP also believes, the lower the reliance on military action, the more glorious and excellent the victory and the greater the success for China.

As with all matters in international politics, individuals and entities exist in an environment where, although material factors can be exploited or diminished in importance, they cannot be ignored. As argued, the CCP’s non-material approaches would be ineffective were it not a material behemoth able to use material means to compel and seduce. To nations building ‘strategic support states,’ there is necessarily a material element that plays out well for the CCP, especially in Southeast Asia. Controlling narratives which can change or guide another’s behavior, the use of the Three Warfares, developing cognitive domain operations, and marching through existing and new institutions to produce real-world effects are the pre-
rogatives of great material powers. In this sense, Beijing’s material prowess complements and augments its non-material capabilities, and vice versa.

What then are these real-world behavioral effects? As argued earlier, at its essence, China’s approach is to advance two fundamental objectives:

- Maintain the viability and robustness of the current CCP-led political economy, enhance the legitimacy of a Sino-led political economic order, and promote and extend that order beyond its borders.
- Continually reduce or degrade the strategic, military, economic, political, and normative ground in the region on which the US and its allies can sustain, build, and demonstrate power and influence.

In easing or else forcing the US out of Asia, the Chinese focus is on changing, manipulating, or denying the capacity and/or resolve of regional states to assist the US in maintaining or extending its role and presence in Asia. It employs its material and non-material approaches in combination to achieve the following general effects:

- **Simplifying and reducing the complexity of the strategic map.**

  For China, the fewer active strategic players, the better. Thus, in casting the strategic competition/rivalry as only between the US (and a small band of stubborn allies) and itself, the Chinese ideal is that other regional states remain on the sidelines.

- **Manipulate, persuade, or compel smaller regional states to focus on absolute rather than relative gains—win-win Chinese style.**

  As China is invariably the larger or more powerful party, Chinese entities tend to be in a better position to negotiate a better relative outcome for China in any arrangement or agreement. However, Beijing will often present guaranteed (absolute) gains to the smaller side to entice them to agree to the arrangement.

  In the medium- to long-term, China’s intended consequence is that these countries find themselves both more reliant on Chinese acquiescence/largesse and also in a weaker relative position to it.

- **Manipulate, persuade, or compel smaller regional states to separate geo-strategic or geo-political issues from geo-economic issues.**

  This benefits China by allowing it to be the only state genuinely enhancing its comprehensive national power and thus better positioning it to deploy all the tools of national power to achieve the CCP’s objectives. Supporting this is Beijing’s increased capacity and willingness to consider and use all Chinese public and private sector entities as tools of the Party and state.

  Moreover, by getting other states to focus on economic growth rather than other forms of power, China increases its relative dominance in the other forms of power, thus increasing Beijing’s overall leverage in the longer term.

- **In every context (military, economic, diplomatic, institutional, normative, etc.), China seeks to ensure that its willingness and capacity to escalate is more credible than those of either the US or another regional state—thereby reducing the resolve of all other states to intervene.**

  Further, this strategy conditions other states to consider the cost of action, but not that of inaction.

  At the same time, to suggest that achieving one goal (e.g., Taiwan) is not a precursor to achieving another (e.g., the South China Sea), Beijing implies the existence of imitations to specific issues on which it chooses to escalate, thereby increasing the incentives for the US and others to concede each time Chinese escalation occurs in one theater.

- **Normalize forms of such Chinese behavior as coercion.** The resulting effects are not only a broader toolkit for Beijing to employ in statecraft but other states’ eventual acceptance and internalization of such Chinese behavior. These other
states will then more willingly conclude that Chinese coercion against them is caused by their misbehavior or mistakes and could have been avoided had they behaved more prudently or wisely.

For China, this has the beneficial effect that attempts by the US or others to resist or counter such Chinese behaviors are perceived to be provocative, escalatory, or futile.

**Conclusion**

To understand contemporary China is to understand the CCP, and to understand the CCP is to properly assess the ideological lens through which its leaders view the world and the material and non-material strategies and means through which it seeks to wage war. In the latter context, Beijing has done as well as it has not only because it is persistent and determined, but also because we have been complacent and too reluctant to acknowledge that we are already at war and engage in this type of warfare ourselves.

This report is not suggesting that any country declare a formal ‘state of war’ with China. However, the strict distinction between wartime and peacetime no longer reflects the true state of affairs vis-à-vis China. Beijing is building its military capabilities and relentlessly positioning them to engage in a possible (if not probable) kinetic war against the US and allies in various regional theaters. Additionally, Beijing views the cognitive and institutional domains as genuine domains of war and has already begun to wage non-kinetic warfare in them. Our refusal to recognize this does not change what the CCP is doing in the real world and in real time.

Although there is increased acceptance regarding the threat China poses, there is still reluctance to focus on its authoritarian nature or the unique challenges posed by the ideology and related practices of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, we routinely refer to the great ambition of China and the ‘comprehensive’ nature of this ambition as a challenge or threat whilst denying ourselves the analytical tools and policy responses required to respond to such a comprehensive challenge or threat.

The CCP’s preferred operational environment for this kind of warfare is covert and based on deception, obfuscation, corruption, and the lulling of targets into a sense of complacency and false security. It does not want the world to know it is engaging in this type of warfare, even though it has meticulously set up its institutions to do so. The CCP also wants other countries to quietly allow it ‘safe and unaccountable spaces’ for its operatives and sympathizers to do their work in the shadows, with the members of the targeted society remaining unaware that they are in a warzone. Therefore, the greater the extent to which members of the targeted society understand Chinese tactics and are involved in a counter-offensive against them, the better they can protect their free society and its strengths and values.


4 Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (speech, 19th Party Congress Political Report, October 18, 2017).


6 Kamphausen, 17.


The three others are the General Staff Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armaments Department. See Dennis J. Blanoot, *The Chinese Army Today: Traditional and Transformation for the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2012).


In November 2020, Australia reacted angrily to a tweet from Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian depicting a cartoon of an Australian soldier murdering an Afghan child. This incident occurred in the context of an inquiry into the alleged murder of Afghan civilians by Australian soldiers. Although the tweet of the satirical cartoon was dismissed by many in Australia as a mischievous and provocative act by a senior Chinese official, one can make the case that it was an attempt by China to degrade the standing of Australia’s special forces. If so, that action ought to be seen as an opportunistic instance of psychological warfare directed against Australia, albeit an ill-thought-through and ineffective one. See Xu Keyue, Xu Yelu, and Bai Yunyi, “China Rejects Australia’s Demand for Apology over Cartoon Tweet,” *Global Times*, November 30, 2020, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202011/1208549.shtml; Bang Xiao, “Chinese Artist Behind Doctored Image of Australian Soldier Says He’s Ready to Make More,” *ABC*, December 1, 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-01/doctored-image-of-australian-soldier-tweeted-by-chinese-diplomat/12938244.


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45 Doshi, The Long Game, 282.


48 Doshi, The Long Game, pp. 105-11.


81 See Jasmine Chia, “Thai Media is Outsourcing Much of Its Coronavirus Coverage to Beijing and That’s Just the Start,” The Inquirer, 31 January 2020, https://www.thaienquirer.com/7301/


For real-time updates, see the CSIS’s Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, https://amti.csis.org/


