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## China's "Three Warfares":

### People's Liberation Army Influence Operations

EDWIN S. COCHRAN\*

#### Abstract

This article examines the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the conduct of Chinese influence operations, a broad range of non-kinetic, communications-related, and informational activities that aim to affect cognitive, psychological, motivational, ideational, ideological, and moral characteristics of a target audience. China conducts influence operations on a global scale as part of a grand strategy that seeks China's "rejuvenation" as a great power and the PLA is a key executor. PLA influence operations are encapsulated in the "Three Warfares" concept of media (or public opinion) warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. Media warfare is essentially the control and exploitation of communications channels for the dissemination of propaganda and sets the conditions for dominating communications channels for the conduct of psychological and legal warfare. Psychological warfare disrupts an adversary's decision-making and ability to conduct military operations through perception management and deception. Legal warfare uses domestic and international law to claim the "legal high ground" to assert Chinese interests. PLA organizations responsible for information operations include the Central Military Commission (particularly the Joint Staff Branch and its Intelligence Bureau, the Political Work Division Liaison Branch, and the Office for International Military Cooperation), the Strategic Support Force, and PLA-controlled media enterprises.

**Keywords:** China; People's Liberation Army; Three Warfares; media warfare; public opinion warfare; propaganda; psychological warfare; legal warfare; information operations; political warfare

Influence operations include a broad range of "non-kinetic, communications-related, and informational activities that aim to affect cognitive, psychological, motivational, ideational, ideological, and moral characteristics of a target audience."<sup>1</sup> China conducts influence operations

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<sup>1</sup> Eric V. Larson et al., *Foundations of Effective Influence Operations: A Framework for Enhancing Army Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 3; [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND\\_MG654.sum.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG654.sum.pdf), accessed August 20, 2020. The authors note that the U.S. lacks a formal, official definition of influence operations.

on a global scale and through a wide range of actors as part of a grand strategy that seeks China's "rejuvenation" as a great power.<sup>2</sup> As a key executor,<sup>3</sup> the People's Liberation Army (PLA)<sup>4</sup> conducts influence operations through its "Three Warfares" concept of media warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.

This article examines the role of the PLA in Chinese influence operations. First, it describes and discusses the constituent elements of the "Three Warfares." Next, it discusses influence operations in the dual contexts of information operations and political warfare. It then describes the PLA's organizational structure for the execution of influence operations and, finally, draws a series of conclusions concerning PLA influence operations and identifies areas for further research.

### **The "Three Warfares"**

The *2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States* characterized China as a "revisionist power" engaged in long-term strategic competition with the U.S. and its allies. "It is increasingly clear that...China [wants] to shape a world consistent with [its] authoritarian model – gaining veto power over other nation's economic, diplomatic, and security decisions." China

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<sup>2</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: 2019), 112; <https://news.usni.org/2019/05/03/2019-pentagon-report-to-congress-on-chinese-military-development>; accessed August 27 2020; Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: 2019), 6; [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FIN\\_AL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FIN_AL_5MB_20190103.pdf), accessed August 27, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Other influence operations executors include the United Work Front Department, the Propaganda Ministry, and the Ministry of State Security. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 112.

<sup>4</sup> The PLA includes all of China's armed forces and consists of the PLA Army (PLAA), the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC), the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF), and the PLA Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF).

pursues a long-term strategy to assert power through a combination of military modernization initiatives, predatory and coercive economic measures, and influence operations.<sup>5</sup>

Influence connotes an attempt to change the beliefs or behaviors of others through persuasion, and influence operations have a long history in Chinese strategic thought. China has “a lengthy heritage of conceiving and implementing systematic programs” – to include the manipulation of information – “for subverting other states.”<sup>6</sup> This deep historical experience continues to serve China’s leaders. From the very beginning of the Chinese Revolution, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sought to exploit foreign contacts and audiences to shape the story of the revolution, gain support, and discredit their adversaries.<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary version of Chinese influence operations emerged in 2003 when the CCP Central Committee and the Central Military Commission approved the concept of the “Three Warfares” in the revised “Chinese People’s Liberation Army Political Work Regulations.” The “Three Warfares” (*san zhong zhanfa* or *san zhan*) concept is a dynamic, nuanced strategic approach to influence operations consisting of three interrelated elements: (1) media warfare (*yulun zhan*); (2) psychological warfare (*xinli zhan*); and (3) legal warfare (*fali zhan*). The purpose of the “Three Warfares” is to establish “discursive power” (*huayu quan*) over

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<sup>5</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: 2018), 2; <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; accessed August 27, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2007), 383.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Mattis, “Contrasting China’s and Russia’s Influence Operations,” *War on the Rocks*, January 12, 2018; <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/contrasting-chinas-russias-influence-operations/>; accessed May 11, 2020.

an adversary – the power to control perceptions and shape narratives that serve Chinese interests, while undermining those of an opponent.<sup>8</sup>

## MEDIA WARFARE

Media warfare (also known as public opinion warfare) is aimed at influencing public opinions and attitudes to build support for Chinese political and military actions and dissuade an adversary from pursuing actions contrary to China's interests. Media warfare leverages all information-related capabilities that inform or influence public opinion, to include films, television programs, books, the internet, and the global media network. The goals of media warfare are to preserve friendly morale, generate public support at home and abroad, and to weaken an enemy's will to fight.<sup>9</sup>

Media warfare is essentially the control and exploitation of communications channels for the dissemination of propaganda, the presentation of "written, visual, or oral information that attempts to influence, manipulate, or direct the attitudes of [foreign or domestic target audiences]."<sup>10</sup> Propaganda may be characterized as white, gray, or black. White propaganda is true information intended to mislead or deceive. Gray propaganda may be partially false or partially true. Black propaganda is wholly false. While white propaganda may be attributable to

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<sup>8</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, Office of Net Assessment, *China: The Three Warfares* (Washington, DC: 2013), 28; <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/Other/Litigation%20Release%20-%20China-%20The%20Three%20Warfares%20%20201305.pdf>; accessed May 12, 2020; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 112; John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, China Strategic Perspectives 13 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2018), 28; [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives\\_13.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives_13.pdf), accessed August 26, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *China: The Three Warfares*, 28; 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> Leo D. Carl, *The International Dictionary of Intelligence* (McLean, VA: International Defense Consultant Services, Inc., 1990), 6.

its source, black and gray propaganda are non-attributable.<sup>11</sup> Information in all forms can be propaganda if it has hostile political intent.<sup>12</sup> Media warfare is the cornerstone of the "Three Warfares" in that it sets the conditions for dominating communications channels for the conduct of psychological and legal warfare.<sup>13</sup>

Chinese propaganda targets both external and internal audiences by casting the CCP as the sole legitimate inheritor of China's long history and traditional culture (particularly vis-à-vis Taiwan), and through positive and selective presentation of Party policies and principles. General propaganda themes emphasize CCP political, economic, technological, military, and cultural achievements to present an image of political stability, prosperity, internal harmony, and military strength. Particularly for external audiences, CCP propaganda presents China as a country with a long history of "friendship with peace loving people throughout the world" and whose leaders are worthy of trust.<sup>14</sup>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

The PLA Academy of Military Sciences defines of the goal of psychological warfare as "to influence, constrain, and / or alter an opponent's thoughts, emotions, and habits while at the same time strengthening friendly psychology."<sup>15</sup> Psychological warfare is aimed at disrupting an

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 6; Angelo M. Codevilla, "Political Warfare," in *Political Warfare and Psychological Operations: Rethinking the US Approach*, ed. Carnes Lord and Frank R. Barnett (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), 79-85.

<sup>12</sup> Paul A. Smith, Jr., *On Political War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *China: The Three Warfares*, 28; 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> Mark A. Stokes, *The PLA General Staff Department Third Department Second Bureau: An Organizational Overview of Unit 61398*, Project 2049 Institute, July 27, 2015, 16; <https://project2049.net/2015/07/27/the-pla-general-staff-department-third-department-second-bureau-an-organizational-overview-of-unit-61398/>, accessed August 26, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Academy of Military Science, Operations Theory and Regulations Research Department and Informatinalized Operations Theory Research Office, *Informationalized Operations Theory Study Guide* (Beijing, PRC: Academy of

adversary's decision-making apparatus and undermining and enemy's ability to conduct military operations by shocking and demoralizing enemy military personnel and their supporting civilian populations. Psychological warfare operations seek to create doubts, foment anti-leadership sentiments, and to alter or shape adversary government or popular perceptions through deception.<sup>16</sup>

PLA doctrine identifies five broad psychological warfare tasks:<sup>17</sup>

(1) To present one's own position in any dispute as being "just" in order to achieve political mobilization and support among domestic and foreign audiences.

(2) Emphasizing one's advantages, particularly in terms of military capabilities, both to bolster confidence and will on one's own side while simultaneously influencing adversary and neutral perceptions.

(3) Undermining an adversary's will to resist by degrading morale and unravelling alliances and support from third parties.

(4) Undermining cohesion among an adversary's population by sparking dissension, fostering anti-war elements, and encouraging a feeling of war weariness.

(5) Implementing psychological defenses through counter - propaganda and publicizing "enemy machinations and techniques" to "expose and highlight their futility."

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Military Science Press, 2003), 404, cited in Dean Cheng, "Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge," Backgrounder No. 2821, Heritage Foundation, July 12, 2013, 2; [http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2013/pdf/bg2821.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2013/pdf/bg2821.pdf), accessed August 21, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *China: The Three Warfares*, 28-29.

<sup>17</sup> Cheng, "Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge," 2.

In addition to the five psychological warfare tasks, PLA analysts have developed a typology of psychological warfare consisting of coercive, deceptive, alienating, and defense psychological warfare.<sup>18</sup>

### *Coercive Psychological Warfare*

Coercive psychological warfare represents a combined application of the informational and military components of national power to achieve a cognitive effect. Coercive psychological warfare is “aimed as causing an opponent to surrender or otherwise abandon a fight by leveraging his emotions, and / or will and persuading him that resistance is futile.” Examples of coercive psychological warfare include displays of military capability, weapons tests, and military exercises, combined with the insinuation or overt threat of violence to degrade an adversary’s willingness to resist.

### *Deceptive Psychological Warfare*

PLA tradition emphasizes deception and psychological manipulation to create asymmetric advantages and achieve surprise.<sup>19</sup> Deception refers to efforts taken to cause an adversary to believe something that is not true, with the goal of causing him to react in a manner that serves the deceiver’s advantage.<sup>20</sup> The fundamental purpose of deception is “to manipulate the perceptions of the target’s decision makers in order to gain a competitive advantage.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ci Weixu, ed., *100 Questions About Psychological Warfare* (Beijing, PRC: Liberation Army Press, 2004), esp. 1-2, 103-104, 236-237, 302-303, cited in Cheng, “Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge,” 6-8.

<sup>19</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Abram Shulsky, “Elements of Strategic Denial and Deception,” in *Strategic Denial and Deception: The Twenty-First Century Challenge*, ed. Roy Godson and James J. Wirtz (Washington, DC: National Strategy Information Center, 2002), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Michael I. Handel, *War, Strategy, and Intelligence* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1989), 310.



Deceptive psychological warfare employs “stratagems and other deceptive measures to implant psychological and other informative barriers in the cognitive process[es] of opponents” and complicates decision making by making it harder to distinguish true from false information.

Successful deception depends upon the distortion, manipulation, or fabrication of evidence to induce an adversary to react in a way prejudicial to his own interests.<sup>22</sup> Manipulation refers to the use of true or factual data in such a way as to create a false impression. Fabrication refers to the creation of false information or images to mislead an adversary concerning the deceiver’s true intentions or capabilities.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Alienation Psychological Warfare*

Alienation psychological warfare aims to generate “dissension and discord” among an opponent’s population and government, “creating friction and fracturing links between the population and the leadership, among leaders and between allies, and between the military and civil population.”

#### *Defensive Psychological Warfare*

Defensive psychological warfare intentionally targets an internal audience, seeking to “immunize” the country’s leaders and population against adversary messaging efforts. Defensive psychological warfare measures include shaping public opinion through control of the media, as well as strict enforcement of laws dealing with the dissemination or receipt of information from foreign sources. Defensive psychological warfare seeks to create and strengthen a broad

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Bennett and Edward Waltz, *Counterdeception Principals and Applications for National Security* (Norwood, MA: ARTECH House, 2007), 5; Joseph W. Caddell, *Deception 101 – Primer on Deception* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2004),17; Carl, *The International Dictionary of Intelligence*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Caddell, *Deception 101*, 17.

consensus among a nation's population, military and leaders not easily undermined by an adversary's psychological warfare measures.

### LEGAL WARFARE

Legal warfare (or "lawfare") uses domestic and international law to claim the "legal high ground" to assert Chinese interests. Lawfare is designed to justify China's actions as legally valid and cement psychological efforts to create doubts among adversary, neutral military and civilian authorities, and in the broader international community about the justification of an opponent's actions. Instruments of lawfare include domestic legislation, international legislation, judicial law, legal pronouncement, law enforcement and legal education – all of which can be used separately or in combination to inform and shape lawfare operations such as legal deterrence and the imposition or rejection of sanctions.<sup>24</sup>

Legal warfare reflects both traditional Chinese and Marxist perspectives that law should serve as an ideological instrument of politics. The CCP has always viewed law as an instrument of governance, but not as one that places any constraints upon the Party. In this instrumentalist view, law is a tool to be applied toward a given end, such as achieving higher military and national security objectives. From the Chinese perspective, legal warfare focuses on attaining some previously determined objective while allowing the CCP to retain the political initiative in any dispute.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *China: The Three Warfares*, 28; 30.

<sup>25</sup> Dean Cheng, *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese Legal Warfare*, Backgrounder No. 2692, Heritage Foundation, May 18, 2012, 3; 6; [file:///C:/Users/v\\_coc/Downloads/bg2692%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/v_coc/Downloads/bg2692%20(2).pdf), accessed August 27, 2020.

## **Influence Operations, Information Operations, and Political Warfare**

Influence operations are anchored in the informational instrument of national power. The concept of power in international relations is often viewed as the possession of some set of capabilities or instruments – diplomatic, informational, military, or economic – that allow a nation to achieve its objectives in relation to other nations or non-state actors.<sup>26</sup> Information is data presented in context to inform or provide meaning for action.<sup>27</sup> Informational power refers to a nation’s ability to organize, process, and integrate information for decision making, and to communicate its intent and views to shape the external (or internal) environment in ways that support its national objectives.<sup>28</sup>

### INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Current U.S. military doctrine defines information operations as the use of information-related capabilities to “influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries while protecting [one’s] own.”<sup>29</sup> This definition indicates that influence is an *effect* of information operations, designed to produce a desired outcome or end state on a given target

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<sup>26</sup> Vladisov B. Sotirović, “What is Power in International Relations?,” *OrientalReview.org*, May 18, 2020, <https://orientalreview.org/2020/05/18/what-is-power-in-international-relations/>, accessed August 21, 2020. This is the familiar DIME model and is not necessarily inclusive of all elements of national power. For instance, Sotirović also identified natural resources, population resources, and geographical features as additional elements of national power. Herman argued that a nation’s intelligence capabilities also constitute an element of national power. Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 379-385.

<sup>27</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Information Operations*, Joint Publication 3-13 (Washington, DC: 2014), I-3; [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_13.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_13.pdf); accessed May 11, 2020. Hereinafter Joint Pub 3-13. Hereinafter Joint Pub 3-13.

<sup>28</sup> Commander Jeff Farlin, “Instruments of National Power: How America Earned Independence,” Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 2014, 5; <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/87.pdf>, accessed August 21, 2020. This is a good, short study of application of the DIME model of national power in a specific historical context.

<sup>29</sup> Joint Pub 3-13, ix.

audience. Influence operations attack the cognitive dimension of the information environment, which encompasses

the minds of those who transmit, receive, and respond to or act on information. It refers to individuals' or groups' information processing, perception, judgment, and decision making. These elements are influenced by many factors, to include individual or cultural beliefs, norms, vulnerabilities, motivations, emotions, experiences, morals, education, mental health, identities, and ideologies....[The cognitive] dimension constitutes the most important dimension of the information environment.<sup>30</sup>

Potential target audiences in the cognitive dimension may include "an individual leader, members of a decision- making group, military organizations and personnel, specific population subgroups, or a mass public."<sup>31</sup>

While Chinese information operations doctrine reflects PLA study of U.S. experience and doctrine,<sup>32</sup> there is at least one significant difference in approach. Whereas U.S. policy and doctrine limit information operations to activities conducted during military operations,<sup>33</sup> the Chinese view is far more aggressive. From the Chinese perspective, information operations are constant and ongoing, whether in wartime or peacetime and are better viewed as information

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, I-3. The information environment is the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information (I-1). In addition to the cognitive dimension, the information environment also includes the physical dimension and the informational dimension. The physical dimension is composed of command and control (C2) systems, key decision makers, and supporting infrastructure that enable individuals and organizations to create effects (I-2). The informational dimension encompasses where and how information is collected, processed, stored, disseminated, and protected (I-3).

<sup>31</sup>Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018, 2; [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND\\_RR1772.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND_RR1772.pdf), accessed August 20, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Larry M. Wortzel, *The Chinese People's Army and Information Warfare* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 20140, 1; <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2263.pdf>, accessed 27 August 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Joint Pub 3-13, ix; Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Department of Defense Directive 3600.01, Information Operations, May 4, 2017; <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/360001p.pdf>, accessed 21 August 2020.

warfare (*xinxi zhanzheng*).<sup>34</sup> Concerning China's peacetime conduct of influence operations, the U.S. Department of Defense 2019 *Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, found that China

conducts influence operations against media, cultural, business, academic, and policy communities of the United States, other countries, and international institutions to achieve outcomes favorable to its security and international objectives. The Chinese Communist Party seeks to condition foreign and multilateral political establishments and public opinion to accept China's narrative surrounding its [strategic] priorities.<sup>35</sup>

Chinese influence operations include the conduct of clandestine human intelligence operations to identify and develop agents of influence. Agents of influence are persons who are manipulated by a foreign intelligence service to use their public or private positions to influence public opinion or decision making in a manner that will advance the objectives of that service's government.<sup>36</sup> China predominantly focuses on establishing and maintaining power brokers within foreign governments to promote policies consistent with Chinese interests. China also employs Chinese citizens living abroad or ethnic Chinese citizens of other countries to advance its national objectives, often through coercion or blackmail.<sup>37</sup>

The broad scope of Chinese influence operations is consistent with the Chinese concept of "information deterrence." Information deterrence is the ability to influence decision makers and the public of one's own country, those of an opponent, or third parties. This includes not only affecting the flow of information, but also having the ability to provide one's own

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<sup>34</sup> Cheng, "Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge," 2.

<sup>35</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> Carl, *International Dictionary of Intelligence*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 112.

information and narrative to develop political support to legitimate one's actions and sway international opinion.<sup>38</sup>

## POLITICAL WARFARE

The scope and nature of China's peacetime influence operations also marks them as a type of political warfare. Political warfare is a term not well-established in U.S. usage and doctrine, "but one that seems useful for describing a spectrum of overt and covert activities designed to support [the accomplishment] of national political-military objectives."<sup>39</sup> The 19th Century Prussian soldier-scholar Carl von Clausewitz defined war as the "continuation of policy by other means," an "act of force to compel our enemy to do our will," clearly distinguishable from other means of political intercourse by the measured use of violence in pursuit of national interests.<sup>40</sup> George F. Kennan, writing at the beginning of the Cold War in 1948, characterized political warfare as "the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace."

In [its] broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures...and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunnes, and Cortez A. Cooper, *The PLA and China's Rejuvenation: National Security and Military Strategies, Deterrence Concepts, and Combat Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 46; 57; [file:///C:/Users/v\\_coc/Downloads/RAND\\_RR1402%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/v_coc/Downloads/RAND_RR1402%20(1).pdf), accessed August 21, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Carnes Lord and Frank R. Barnett, eds., *Political Warfare and Psychological Operations: Rethinking the US Approach* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), xi.

<sup>40</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

<sup>41</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945-1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Community*, Policy Planning Staff Memorandum, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare," Document No. 269; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d269>, accessed 20 August 2020.

Subsequent efforts to conceptualize or further refine the definition of political warfare have tended to focus on means – propaganda, psychological operations, guerilla warfare – rather than ends.<sup>42</sup> The authors of a recent RAND Corporation study of contemporary political warfare practices defined political warfare as

the intentional use of one or more of the implements of power (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) to affect the political composition or decision-making within a state. Political warfare is often—but not necessarily—carried out covertly, but must be carried out outside the context of traditional war.<sup>43</sup>

This definition of political warfare is largely consistent with the concept of “unrestricted warfare,” first publicly introduced by PLA Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui in 1999. The essence of unrestricted warfare is the use of all available means “including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.” In unrestricted warfare, the barriers between peacetime and wartime, and between military forces and the civilian population, are fundamentally erased. Methods of unrestricted warfare may include

environmental warfare, financial warfare, trade warfare, cultural warfare, and legal warfare [as well as] assassinating financial speculators to safeguard a nation’s financial security, setting up slush funds to influence opponents’ legislatures and governments, and buying controlling shares of stocks to convert an adversary’s major television and newspapers outlets into tools of media warfare.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018, 2-6; [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND\\_RR1772.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND_RR1772.pdf), accessed August 20, 2020. As the authors point out, “Political warfare never fit neatly in American strategic dialogue” (2).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “A New Generation of Unrestricted Warfare,” *War on the Rocks*, August 19, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/a-new-generation-of-unrestricted-warfare/>, accessed August 20, 2020.

In the parlance of the PLA, political warfare is referred to as “liaison work,” an association that is deeply entrenched and dates back to the Chinese Revolution.<sup>45</sup> The purpose of military liaison work is to “amplify or attenuate the political effect of the military instrument of national power.”<sup>46</sup> According to the PLA’s September 2010 “Political Work Guidelines,” military liaison work entails:

Establishing military liaison work policies and regulations, organizing and executing Taiwan work; researching and studying foreign military situations; leading All-Army enemy disintegration work; in conjunction with relevant [Central Military Committee Functional Organs], organizing and leading psychological warfare education and training, and technology and equipment development; guiding and executing border negotiation political work and external military propaganda work; assuming responsibility for relevant International Red Cross liaison and military-related overseas Chinese work.<sup>47</sup>

### **Role of the PLA**

Initially referred to as the “Red Army” under Mao Zedong the PLA, with which the “Three Warfares” concept is most strongly associated, is first and foremost, the military arm of the CCP. Unlike a national army dedicated to the defense of a state and its people, the PLA’s purpose is to create political power for the Party. As Mao stated, and as contemporary Chinese political leaders continue to believe, “The Red Army fights not merely for the sake of fighting, but in order to...help [the masses, i.e., the Party] establish revolutionary political power.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the historical development of PLA liaison work see Marl Stokes and Russell Hsiao, *The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics*, Project 2409 Institute, October 14, 2015, 6-14; <https://project2049.net/2013/10/14/the-peoples-liberation-army-general-political-department-political-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics/>, accessed August, 27 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 1; Cheng, “Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge,” 1; Peter Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2013, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>; accessed August 22, 2020.



The PLA is the ultimate guarantor of the Party's power and its principal means of achieving its international security objectives, and is tasked with shaping the international and regional security environments in ways conducive to the realization of the Party's goals.<sup>49</sup> In his work report to the 19th Congress of the CCP in October 2017, Chairman Xi Jinping called on the PLA to "prepare for military struggle in all strategic directions" and said the PLA was integral in achieving China's "rejuvenation" as a great power.<sup>50</sup>

As the Party's army, the PLA is organizationally part of the CCP's political apparatus. The Central Military Commission (CMC), the PLA's highest decision-making body, is technically both a Party organ subordinate to the CCP Central Committee and a government office appointed by the National People's Congress. While staffed almost exclusively by military officers, the CMC Chairman is a civilian who usually serves concurrently as the CCP General Secretary and as China's President.<sup>51</sup> (All three posts are currently held by Xi Jinping.) The PLA conducts influence operations through "functional organs" directly subordinate to the CMC, elements of the PLA Strategic Support Force, and PLA-controlled media outlets.

#### CMC FUNCTIONAL ORGANS

In 2015, the CMC underwent significant reorganization, replacing four General Departments that previously managed the PLA with 15 CMC departments and offices.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Heath, Gunnes, and Cooper, *The PLA and China's Rejuvenation*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 5; State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in a New Era* (Beijing, PRC: July 2019), n.p., Table 1, CMC Functional Organs; [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content\\_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html), accessed August 22, 2020. Hereinafter PRC State Council.

Within this new organizational structure, three organizations directly subordinate to the CMC - the Joint Staff Department, the Political Work Department, and the Office for International Military Cooperation – are likely to have responsibilities for the conduct of influence operations.

#### *Joint Staff Department*

The Joint Staff Department (JSD, formerly the General Staff Department) is responsible for formulating overall PLA strategy and requirements, operational planning, and providing command and control support to PLA forces. The JSD Intelligence Bureau (formerly Second Bureau, GSD) conducts overt and clandestine human intelligence operations (which may include influence agent operations), manages the PLA defense attaché system, provides indications and warning and other analysis to the CMC leadership, and manages intelligence produced by dedicated PLA reconnaissance assets.<sup>53</sup>

The Intelligence Bureau also controls several think tanks, such as the China Institute for International and Strategic Studies and the China Foundation for International Strategic Studies, both for research and to interact with foreign analysts. In addition, the Intelligence Bureau has used academic fronts for operational intelligence purposes, suggesting the existence of a broader network that could be used for covert influence.<sup>54</sup>

A second JSD-subordinate organization, designated Unit 61398, provides communications intelligence (COMINT) support to political warfare and influence operations. The unit, known to have been involved in cyber espionage directed against U.S. firms, is capable of intercepting email exchanges, computer files, call phone calls, and text messaging of targets

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<sup>53</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 26; 99; PRC State Council, n.p., Table 1, CMC Functional Organs.

<sup>54</sup> Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective."

on Taiwan, in the United States, and elsewhere, yielding valuable information for assessment of potential candidates for recruitment in influence operations conducted by the Intelligence Bureau or the Political Work Department (see below). Unit 61398 reportedly maintains a database on military officers from Taiwan, and presumably other foreign nations, with the rank of colonel or above. Profiles are update semi-monthly and include such basic information as date and place of birth, education, personal habits, family information, and current location.<sup>55</sup>

### *Political Work Department*

The Political Work Department (PWD), the successor organization to the CMC General Political Department (GPD) is primarily responsible for “Party building in the military, organization work, political education, and military human resources management.”<sup>56</sup> The PWD Liaison Bureau (PWD/LB, formerly the GPD Liaison Department, or GPD/LD), is the PLA’s principal organization responsible for political warfare. The PWD/LB functions as an “interlocking directorate that operates at the nexus of politics, finance, military operations, and intelligence [and which] was few analogous counterparts in modern democratic societies.”<sup>57</sup> While there is little publicly available information concerning the structure of the PWD/LB following the 2015 CMC reorganization, it probably continues to execute most of the functions previously associated with the GPD/LD. These include influence operations focused on Taiwan,

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<sup>55</sup> Mark A. Stokes, *The PLA General Staff Department Third Department Second Bureau: An Organizational Overview of Unit 61398*, Project 2049 Institute, July 27, 2015, 3, 11; <https://project2049.net/2015/07/27/the-pla-general-staff-department-third-department-second-bureau-an-organizational-overview-of-unit-61398/>, accessed August 26, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> PRC State Council, Table 1.

<sup>57</sup> Stokes and Hsiao, *The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department*, 3-4. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 99.

“friendly contact,” border defense, propaganda, and further development of the “Three Warfares” concept.

PWD/LB Taiwan-focused influence operations are intended to create and exploit political, cultural, or social frictions within Taiwan, and to undermine trust between political-military authorities on Taiwan and U.S. policymakers. The principal vehicle for Taiwan-focused “liaison work” is the China Association for Promoting Chinese Culture (CAPCC). Established in 2001 as a propaganda vehicle, CAPCC has subordinate sections for academic research and exchanges, and has regularly participated in cross-Strait cultural forums since 2006. CAPCC also manages at least two commercial enterprises, the Huayi Audi-Visual Company and Huayi Publishing. The Huayi Audio-Visual Company has collaborated with Taiwanese counterparts on movie production, student exchanges, and expositions. CAPCC also appears to have close relationships with both the Hong Kong-based *China Review News* and the PLA Academy of Military Sciences.<sup>58</sup>

“Friendly contact” entails establishing and exploiting relationships with foreign military, political, economic, and academic elites. The principal PWD/LB vehicle for friendly contact is the China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC), established in 1984. CAIFC’s major function is to establish and maintain rapport with senior foreign defense and security elites, to include senior retired military officers and legislators. One CAIFC project, the Sanya Initiative, was a multiyear program to bring retired senior U.S. generals and admirals to China to meet with their retired PLA counterparts. The goal of the Sanya Initiative was to soften U.S. military attitudes toward China and influence the U.S. to reduce arms sales to Taiwan. American

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<sup>58</sup> Stokes and Hsiao, 22-23.

participants were reportedly encouraged to return home and meet with active duty military leads to share what they had learned on the trip.<sup>59</sup>

CAIFC also provides foreign participants with entrée to the Chinese business community, probably in return for their support of Chinese policy positions. On at least one occasion, CAIFC reportedly required a senior retired non-U.S. military officer to agree to publish editorials critical of U.S. regional policy in return for business development support in China.<sup>60</sup>

The PWD/LB is likely to have inherited the role of the GPD/LD Border Defense Bureau in influencing border negotiations and agreements. China has a land boundary of 22,000 kilometers with 14 states, to include Russia, North Korea, India, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Many of these border areas are home to ethnic minorities who, from China's perspective, are a potential source of domestic unrest and international dispute. "Liaison work" in this context may include managing a network of border meeting sites, cross-border intelligence collection and propaganda operations, and emergency management of border issues.<sup>61</sup>

The PWD/LB has also probably also taken on the responsibilities of the former GPD/LD External Propaganda Bureau, the PLA's principal staff department for applied psychological warfare and propaganda. This would give the PWD/LB an important role in furthering development of the "Three Warfares" concept through association with the neo-Maoist Dongfang Yi Cultural Expansion Association. In 2009, Dongfang Yi established a Future Media Research Lab at Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communications as a means of competing for international public opinion. An active proponent of legal warfare, Dongfang Yi

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<sup>59</sup> Stokes and Hsiao, 24; Wortzel, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Information Warfare*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Stokes and Hsiao, 24.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

has also established a Military Law Research Center with the China Political University's International Exchange Center.<sup>62</sup>

*Office for International Military Cooperation*

The CMC Office of International Military Cooperation is mainly responsible for managing PLA "international military exchanges and cooperation" as well as "managing and coordinating the work of the armed forces related to foreign affairs."<sup>63</sup> PLA engagements with foreign military forces focus on building political ties and influence, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Engagement activities provide the PLA with opportunities to demonstrate China's growing military capabilities, enhance China's image abroad, and further China's diplomatic objectives. Visits by senior PLA officers to foreign countries are particularly important to shaping China's image abroad. During visits to the U.S., for example, senior PLA officers often use formal speeches or other events to deliver messaging consistent with Chinese defense and security interests.<sup>64</sup>

International military cooperation also includes advancing Chinese foreign relations through personal contacts and military assistance programs, to include military education programs. Many Latin American and Caribbean countries, for instance, send officers to the strategic-level College of Defense Studies at China's National Defense University. Some of these countries also send officers to other PLA schools.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 27-28.

<sup>63</sup> PRC State Council, Table 1.

<sup>64</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 19; Wortzel, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Information Warfare*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, 19-20.

## PLA STRATEGIC SUPPORT FORCE

Established in December 2015, the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) is “a new type of combat force for safeguarding national security and an important driver for the growth of new combat capabilities. It comprises supporting forces for battlefield environment, information, communications, information security, and new technology testing.”<sup>66</sup> The SSF’s Network Systems Division is responsible for strategic-level information operations, and integrates the PLA’s capabilities for cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare in a single force. The SSF was built around existing operational units and organizations from PLA CMC departments and incorporates the 311 Base (Unit 61716, formerly subordinate to the General Political Directorate).<sup>67</sup>

The 311 Base, headquartered in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, is the only PLA organization publicly known to focus on psychological warfare. The Base has at least six subordinate regiments responsible for targeting public opinion on Taiwan through network operations, television, audiovisual productions, and radio broadcasting. The 311 Base’s commercial persona is the China Huayi Broadcasting Corporation, whose primary broadcasting channel is the *Voice of the Taiwan Strait*.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> PRC State Council, n.p.

<sup>67</sup> Elsa B. Kania and John K. Costello, “The Strategic Support Force and the Future of Chinese information Operations,” *The Cyber Defense Review*, Spring 2018, 105; 108; 110; [https://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/Portals/6/Documents/CDR%20Journal%20Articles/The%20Strategic%20Support%20Force\\_Kania\\_Costello.pdf](https://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/Portals/6/Documents/CDR%20Journal%20Articles/The%20Strategic%20Support%20Force_Kania_Costello.pdf), accessed 26 August 2020; Stokes and Hsiao, *The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Costello and McReynolds, *China’s Strategic Support Force*, 17; Stokes and Hsiao, *The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department*, 29.

## PLA MEDIA OUTLETS

The PLA also plays an active role in media warfare. The PLA controls a large publishing empire, including numerous publishing houses and several newspapers to include the large-circulation *PLA Daily*. These publishing outlets employ or give voice to a number of PLA officers who are talented propagandists and who possess a flair for belligerent language that attracts attention both domestically and abroad, where international media picks up their remarks and presents them as China's "official policy."<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

Reflecting both a long tradition in Chinese strategic thought and its own historical development and role as the armed wing of the CCP, the PLA conducts influence operations to maintain and expand the Party's "revolutionary political power." The "Three Warfares" concept provides the CCP and the PLA with a flexible, and potentially powerful and effective means of leveraging aspects of Chinese informational power to gain and maintain fluence over both external and internal target audiences. Because PLA information operations doctrine recognizes no clear distinction between peacetime and wartime, the "Three Warfares" may be contextualized as an ongoing form of both information warfare and political warfare primarily intended to achieve Chinese national security objectives by means short of armed conflict. During an armed conflict, the PLA could be expected to continue influence operations, both offensively to effect adversary decision making, political relationships, public morale, and military operations, and defensively to counter adversary influence operations. The PLA could also be expected to continue influence operations during a post-conflict scenario, both in support

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<sup>69</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *China: The Three Warfares*, 30; Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective."



of diplomatic efforts to achieve an outcome most favorable to Chinese interests and to bolster CCP internal controls.

Chinese influence operations offer a wealth of opportunities for further research. Key research questions include:

- What is the role of other executors – the United Work Front Department, the Propaganda Ministry, and the Ministry of State – in Chinese influence operations? How are their activities executed and controlled?
- The development of historical case studies of Chinese employment of influence operations. What was the role of the PLA and other executors? What were the results?
- How have Taiwan, the United States, and other nations responded to Chinese influence operations? How should they respond? What challenges do democratic governments face in developing countermeasures to Chinese or other foreign influence activities?