
Fight and Win Without Waging a War: How China Fights Hybrid Warfare

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Introduction

Sun Tzu, in his seminal book *The Art of War*, categorically states that “to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting”.¹ Here, the focus lies on undermining the morale of the opponent. In doing so, Sun Tzu specifically mentions that “[i]n all fighting, the direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory” for “indirect tactics, efficiently applied, are inexhaustible [...]”.² This construct by Sun Tzu exemplifies the use of ‘deception’ in Chinese warfare. The key is: how to win without use of force?

On this view, Ren Li, in his book *Lectures on Sun Zi’s Art of War*, argues that “warfare is a way of deception” and is “the most shocking concept” given by Sun Tzu because “it favours an unchoreographed, asymmetric approach to fighting while rejecting any notion of constancy in warfare”.³ This particular perspective makes it imperative to understand how China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) interprets the concept of deception in warfare, given that it acts as the benchmark to understand

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the PLA's rationale for operations. Sun Tzu's "ways of deception" find resonance in the Chinese perception of "how to fight a modern war" under the strategic guideline of "winning informationized local wars". On the same lines, the 2015 White Paper on "China's Military Strategy" notes that "the form of war is accelerating its evolution to informationization" which calls for China to build a national defence mobilisation system that can meet the requirements of "winning informationized wars and responding to both emergencies and wars".⁴

What comprises the basis of such a strategic guideline? This new Chinese way of thinking can be attributed to the significant shift in the Chinese perceptions. That is to suggest that the thought process entails a three-fold perspective:⁵ first, an understanding that the "form of war" or conduct of warfare in a given period of time, has changed. Second, Preparation for Military Struggle (PMS) has constantly evolved with the changing "form of war" and the national security situation. Likewise, the basic point of PMS has been adjusted from being "winning local wars in conditions of modern technology, particularly high technology" in 1993 to "winning local wars under conditions of informationization" in 2004 and then to calls for "winning informationized local wars" in 2015. And third, the Chinese perception of the increasing security challenges has prompted a shift from having "fixed mindsets of mechanized warfare" to "establishing the ideological concept of information warfare".⁶ In this framework of understanding, 'hybrid warfare' acts as a significant component of China's way of fighting a modern war, as witnessed in its growing interest in waging an asymmetrical form of warfare in areas that constitute its 'core interests'. Wherein, Sun Tzu's recommendation of deception and intelligence, use of regular and irregular methods with an emphasis on defeating the enemy's will to fight, act as key components of the current Chinese understanding of such warfare. The Chinese thinking to deal with a powerful adversary, as former Chinese Lieutenant General Li Jijun pointedly notes is:

To cope with wars at the age of information, when guiding thinking, we should try hard to prevent direct conflicts with the enemy in the high-technology field, and should create and select the most favorable timing, direction, form, and target to annihilate the enemy's effective forces by combining conventional assaults with the 'assassin's mace'.⁷

China's understanding of such warfare is similar to what is called 'hybrid warfare'. This assessment further exemplifies that the battlefield no longer remains limited to militaries, but has become an amalgamation of elements from society and the polity at large. With no definite rules or limits at play, hybrid warfare transcends the notion of the Clausewitzian sense of 'traditional war'.

However, what is important to note is that such warfare is not a new concept for China. Historically, China has used such tactics towards its neighbours, as witnessed in the way Imperial China dealt with its "barbarian" neighbours, based on the "four methods approach".⁸ Such an approach entailed: first, foreigners should be kept divided by "using barbarian to fight barbarians" by means of using "barbarian" mercenaries and strategic alliances to ensure division among China's nomadic neighbours. The contemporary analogy to this would be using tactics such as diplomatic warfare; neutralising unfriendly states through public diplomacy; support for local insurgencies; and exercising pressure in international organisations such as using the veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Second, if these failed, Imperial China would present bribes and tribute to foreign leaders in order to dissuade them from attacking China. The current equivalent of this would be China's aid policy as seen in the case of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Silk Road Bank, and others. Third, in ancient/those times, China would build fortifications in order to deter external attacks. To which, the current correlation can be drawn in terms of China's artificial island build-up in the South China Sea. And,

finally, if all else failed, military expeditions would be deployed.⁹ To which a link can be drawn in terms of China's overseas military base in Djibouti for gaining access to the Indian Ocean Region. These are the areas which are increasingly becoming the new domains of Chinese warfare, the 'grey zone' where China conducts its hybrid warfare.

Owing to this perspective, the paper seeks to examine the Chinese understanding of hybrid warfare. In doing so, it will assess the components that define the Chinese way of fighting hybrid warfare in the 21st century.

The Chinese Conception of Winning by Fighting with Deception

Stating that "[a]ll warfare is based on deception"¹⁰, Sun Tzu posited that:

[W]hen able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. [...] Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.¹¹

Owing to this perspective, China's current military thinking is distinctively interpreted on the lines of deceiving the 'other'. That is to suggest, given the PLA's perception of the changing nature of warfare that cannot be fought with preconceived and predetermined strategies, Sun Tzu's policy of 'deception' equated with 'surprise' is applied dynamically and provides the means to mislead the adversaries while employing agile and flexible responses to the actual conditions encountered on the battlefield. In this regard, in the Chinese understanding, 'deception' as Sun Tzu suggests, is practised in the following ways: first, the supremacy of unconventional warfare as opposed to the conventional; second, the value of 'cheating' as a traditional underpinning of deceptive warfare; third, the recognition that change keeps warfare in a constant state of

flux; finally, the imperative to focus on benefiting from, and controlling, one's superiority in warfare.¹²

If that is the case, then why the need for 'deception' as a strategy? In the Chinese viewpoint, as Ren Li argues, the goal of the "way of deception" is "to as much as possible increase our advantageous conditions and reduce the adversary's advantageous conditions".¹³ This suggests that deception not only involves manipulating an adversary's understanding of one's own capabilities and intentions, but also includes manipulating the situation with the goal of further degrading the adversary's capabilities.¹⁴ In drawing a parallel, such a practice is noted in China's policy towards securing its claims in the South China Sea. Wherein, earlier, Beijing utilised conventional operations such as military clashes with Vietnam (1974) and the Philippines (2012), it now uses unconventional ways such as constructing artificial islands as well as employing paramilitary operations by fishermen to secure its claims by exerting psychological pressure on its adversaries.¹⁵

In doing so, this new form of warfare, based on deception and surprise, employs civilian technology as military weapons "without morality" and "with no limits"¹⁶—breaking the will of the adversary. China calls this new form of warfare "unrestricted warfare". Given this amalgamated understanding of "hybrid warfare", it becomes imperative to comprehend the Chinese way of fighting such warfare. Is it any different from the Western perspective?

The term 'unrestricted warfare' entered the Chinese lexicon in 1999, when two Chinese Colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, published a book titled *Unrestricted Warfare* that claimed that the battlefield had changed fundamentally and was no longer limited to the militaries for fighting. What comprises such a non-traditional form of warfare, as the book notes, are elements such as financial warfare, smuggling warfare, cultural warfare, drug warfare, media and fabrication warfare, technological warfare, resources warfare, psychological warfare, network

warfare, international law warfare, environmental warfare and economic aid warfare.¹⁷

Given this broad definition, a direct linkage can be drawn between the Chinese view of “unrestricted warfare” and the Western notion of “hybrid warfare” which, in the US perspective, is defined as the simultaneous and adaptive employment of “a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behaviour in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives”.¹⁸ Michael Kofman and Mathew Rojansky of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre, based in Washington, have argued that the term “hybrid” denotes a combination of previously defined types of warfare, when an adversary, “employs some combination of previously defined types of warfare, whether conventional, irregular, political or information,” and that its “analytical utility is limited”.¹⁹

This suggests that the Chinese “unrestricted warfare” is synonymous to the Western idea of “hybrid warfare”. The only difference lies in the conception of terminologies, however, the perception remains the same. This very difference makes it significant to understand the elements that comprise the Chinese idea of fighting hybrid warfare.

Elements of China’s Hybrid Warfare: San Zhong Zhanfa Strategy to Safeguard National Interest

Ideating on Sun Tzu’s dictum of “winning without waging a war”, in 2003,²⁰ the Communist Party’s Central Committee and Central Military Commission (CMC) put forward the concept of “Three Warfares” (*san zhongzhanfa*, 三战) as a set of codes for the PLA to conduct political warfare. Calling it the “Political Work Guidelines of the People’s Liberation Army”, Beijing’s three warfares strategy entailed : public opinion (media) warfare (*yulunzhan*, 舆论战), psychological warfare (*xinlizhan*, 心理战), and legal warfare (*faluzhan*, 法律战). Wherein, the “three warfares strategy” mainly focusses on the following functions: control of public opinion (舆论控制); blunting an adversary’s determination (意志挫伤);

transformation of emotion (情感转化); psychological guidance (心智诱导); collapse of (an adversary's) organisation (组织瓦解); psychological defence (心理防御); and, restriction through law (法律制约).²¹

While the three warfares are interrelated, each has a significant role to play. That is, first, public opinion or media warfare, which aims to shape public opinion, domestically as well as internationally. The means used are the materials delivered to public audiences through established news services, informal internet sites, and other social media to influence domestic and international perspectives associated with the ongoing disputes involving the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) interests.²² In demanding absolute loyalty to the Party, Xi stated that the "[n]ation's media outlets are essential to political stability" and that they need to "love the Party, protect the Party, and closely align themselves with the Party leadership in thought, politics and action" as "guiding public opinion is crucial to governance of the country".²³ This strategy of China was well-witnessed in case of the 2017 Doklam standoff, when China's state-run media agencies were pressurising India to change its stance by emphasising on "lessons from the past" in reference to the 1962 War.

Second, usage of psychological warfare, which aims at shaping the international image of China by influencing foreign decision-makers' perceptions and their approach towards China. It is operated by means of pre-conflict posturing of military/paramilitary forces or application of other national capabilities (diplomatic, economic, and cultural) with the intention of intimidating adversaries and encouraging acquiescence to PRC-desired outcomes.²⁴ In view of this, the five tasks associated with psychological warfare are: presenting one's own side as just; emphasising on one's own advantages; undermining the opposition's will to resist; encouraging dissension in the enemy's camp; and, implementing psychological defences.²⁵

Third, legal warfare, which aims at offering legal justification for China's assertive actions or policies. It is conducted by means of

exploitation of national and international legal systems. This is done by leveraging the existing legal regimes and processes to constrain the adversary's behaviour, contest disadvantageous circumstances, confuse legal precedents, and maximise advantage in situations related to the PRC's core interests.²⁶ China's use of such a strategy was witnessed in the case of the 2016 International Arbitral Tribunal on the South China Sea which gave its judgment against China and in favour of the Philippines.²⁷ In rejecting the verdict, China termed it as "null and void, and has no binding force. China neither accepts nor recognizes it" and that "China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea shall under no circumstances be affected by those awards. China opposes, and will never accept, any claim or action based on those awards." Furthermore, "China does not accept any means of third party dispute settlement or any solution imposed on China".²⁸ What is noteworthy is that China has been successful in shaping the international discourse in its favour given that the 'ruling' failed to impact China's stance, and now, the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte, is more inclined towards Beijing. Thus, it exemplifies China's 'win' without fighting a war.

With the aim to break the opponent's 'will to fight' without actual fighting, the three warfares emphasise on undertaking non-kinetic operations to influence the opponent's behaviour. The three warfares concept represents the Chinese commitment to "expand potential areas of conflict from the purely 'military' (involving both direct and indirect force) to the 'political'",²⁹ given that the doctrine is part of the PLA's regulations for the conduct of "political work".³⁰ With this strategic guideline, China seeks to depart from fighting a conventional warfare in the battlefield to launching it in the political domain by means of manipulating the societal forces such as public opinion, legal systems and leadership aspects of the adversary. This makes political warfare a crucial part of the Chinese security strategy and foreign policy and helps formulate the Chinese discourse. With this, Beijing seeks to:

... influence emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and behaviour of foreign governments, organisations, groups, and individuals in a manner favourable to one's own political-military objectives.³¹

In view of this, such a non-kinetic form of warfare is not just limited to war-time but can be operated in peace-time as well, unlike traditional warfare. Furthermore, with China's growing security challenges, which Xi Jinping defines as the "*Three Trends*" (三个前所未有, *san ge qian suo wei you*) and "*Three Major Dangers*" (三个危险, *sangeweixian*),³² the exercise of kinetic means is increasingly becoming a limited option. Here, the "Three Trends" exemplify the external environment, the international situation that is constantly changing and the new opportunities and challenges that are continually emerging, while the "Three Major Dangers" are those of China being "invaded, toppled and separated".³³ This is well-witnessed in the recent Hong Kong crisis that has got the Chinese leadership into a quandary, thus, adding to the long standing challenge from separatist forces like those of the "East Turkistan independence" in Xinjiang and the "Tibet independence" forces that have become a serious challenge to China's internal security situation. In such cases, fighting the opponent through the 'use of force' is not a viable option for the Chinese leadership, as the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident has significantly curtailed its choice of enforcing domestic control.

What adds significantly to this security perception is the Chinese understanding of 'national security'. According to Article 2 of the new national security law of the PRC passed on July 1, 2015, national security is defined as:

... the relative absence of international or domestic threats to the state's power to govern, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, the welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major national interests, and the ability to ensure a continued state of security.³⁴

Furthermore, Article 3 draws a link between national security and economic, cultural and social security by stating that an overall national security perspective regards the “people’s security as the tenet, political security as the fundamental, economic security as the basis and military, cultural, and social security as the safeguard”.³⁵ Given this perspective, China now defines national interest as including two major parts: national security and national development interest.³⁶ The very aspect of ‘national development interest’ further exemplifies the broadened scope of China’s national interest, wherein, anything that undermines China’s development can be perceived to be a threat.

This newly expanded understanding of national security reflects the shift in the way China perceives its threats, which unlike the past, are no longer limited to the physical border and have, instead, become more diversified, and as the very understanding of “absence of international or domestic threats” is mainly centred on safeguarding the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Even the PLA’s primary task lies in protecting China’s national interest, which, at the foremost, entails providing “strategic support for consolidating the leadership of the CPC and the socialist system”.³⁷ This dictum of the PLA follows from Mao Zedong’s understanding that “the Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution”.³⁸ The PLA is the Party’s Army, tasked with maintaining the political power. Here, the objectives are two-fold: first, to ensure the continuation of the Party’s control; and, second, to prevent any form of external interference in China’s foreign and domestic affairs.

Owing to these underpinnings, China’s “three warfares” strategy, earlier handled by the General Political Department of the former General Staff Department, has become the responsibility of the Political Work Department (政治工作部), after the recent organisational reforms. The Political Work Department, which is subordinate to the CMC works in coordination with the PLA with the aim to create and safeguard the

legitimacy of the CPC's political power from any international as well as domestic threat. In addition, the Party's United Front Work Department (UFD) also monitors and maintains checks and balances over 'anti-China' narratives purported and perceived outside China that might seek to threaten the CPC's control.

With such a strategy, the objective of the CPC's political warfare has extended beyond the scope of Taiwan. Currently, under the guidance of "uniting with friends and disintegrating enemies," the CPC's political warfare strategy aims to promote the "rise of China within a new international order and defend against perceived threats to state security".³⁹ With such a 'win without fight' strategy, China is able to mould and influence the perception of others towards it, be it of friends or adversaries. Most importantly, with propaganda carried out both during peace-time and in armed conflict, China is able to maximise the outcome, given that it either "amplifies or attenuates the political effects of the military instrument of national power".⁴⁰ Given its non-traditional form of fighting an adversary, the Chinese strategy of the "three warfares" exemplifies the way China has mastered the art fighting 'hybrid warfare': 'win without a fight'.

Conclusion

China under Xi Jinping seeks to hone its combat skills; the hybrid domain remains not an exception as is the case with other major powers given that warfare is no longer fundamentally military in nature. Similarly, China's idea of "winning informationized local wars" is also not just limited to the conventional domain but has increasingly come to characterise the unconventional areas where an adversary can be taken by 'surprise' without the 'use of force'. This is well-witnessed in China's justification of its actions to legitimise its claims with respect to Taiwan, the South China Sea, East China Sea, and others.

Owing to this perspective, it remains indisputable that China's "three warfares" strategy has become a definite feature of what China calls

unrestricted warfare. Such a way of waging war will only evolve with time, in tactics as well as magnitude. Likewise, with its growing impact, such a warfare strategy will also further expand the scope of Beijing's strategic interests that, in all respects, seem to be expanding beyond China's borders. In addition, this strategy also influences China's policy of safeguarding its national interests not just abroad but also domestically in order to uphold the supremacy and legitimacy of the CPC.

By applying the "three warfares" strategy in peace-time, China is able to shape the environment in a way that will facilitate the operations of the PLA in times of contingency. Thereby, China's 21st century art of war comprises 'unrestricted' war that calls for 'winning without even fighting the adversary' and if fought, then to 'fight and win'.

Notes

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19. Ibid., p. 4.
20. It was mainly introduced as a concept for the PLA towards engaging it in political warfare. With such an addition to the PLA’s guidelines, it expanded the scope of the PLA’s tasks from being limited to the military sphere, to transcending to the political sphere. This further reinforces the fact that the PLA is the Party’s Army and not the state’s.
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