



# CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

## STEALING A MARCH

CHINESE HYBRID WARFARE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC:  
ISSUES AND OPTIONS FOR ALLIED DEFENSE PLANNERS

VOLUME I

ROSS BABBAGE



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2019

## **ABOUT THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND BUDGETARY ASSESSMENTS (CSBA)**

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report has been produced by Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) in close association with Strategic Forum. Strategic Forum is an independent, not-for-profit corporation committed to fostering advanced strategic thought on the security challenges confronting Australia, its allies and its other security partners.

This report is the product of a sustained team effort. A high-level closed workshop was held in Washington, DC, and two in Canberra. Six case studies were prepared by leading experts. The case study authors contributed substantially to this project. An early draft of the complete report was circulated for comment by five senior Australians and four senior Americans. Valuable insights were contributed at all phases of this project for which the author is deeply grateful.

Particular thanks are owed to Thomas G. Mahnken, Eric Edelman, Frank Hoffman, Evan B. Montgomery, Peter Kouretsos, Whitney McNamara, Jack Bianchi, Carlyle Thayer, Toshi Yoshihara, Julian Snelder, Mick Ryan, Miles Jakeman, Joshua Kennedy-White, David Connery, Kamilla Gunzinger, and Maureen Fitzgerald. Very special thanks are owed to Lynne Babbage, who helped research many aspects of this report and was tireless in proof reading and helping to sharpen the text.

Thanks are also owed to a much larger group for their sustained encouragement of this project. These people could see the need for this work, they caught the vision, they freely contributed their insights and they have been unstinting in their practical support.

The analysis and findings presented here are solely the responsibility of the authors. CSBA receives funding from a broad and diverse group of contributors, including private foundations, government agencies, and corporations. A complete list of these organizations can be found on CSBA's website at [www.csbaonline.org/about/contributors](http://www.csbaonline.org/about/contributors).

Cover: The cover photograph shows some of the Chinese military facilities that have been constructed on the artificial island at Mischief Reef. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments wishes to thank Inquirer.net for permission to use its photographic images on the cover of this report and in one of the report's case studies.

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# Executive Summary

The Chinese leadership views the hybrid warfare battlespace very differently than Western leaders. For Beijing, the struggle against the United States and its allies has been underway for a considerable time; political warfare or united front operations have reached into the West's homelands, and hybrid warfare campaigns have been underway in key theaters for several years. China is experienced in these operations and accords them high priority.

By contrast, most decision-makers in the West still consider themselves to be in a state of "peace," are not inclined to initiate actions that they fear Beijing may consider provocative, and possess political and hybrid warfare arsenals that are weak at best, poorly organized and grossly under-resourced. Until recently, the deterrence and defeat of Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns received very limited attention.<sup>1</sup>

This report examines Beijing's hybrid warfare campaigns, their origins, means and modes, level of success, and possible future shape. It also assesses the primary options for U.S. and allied counterstrategy.<sup>2</sup> The primary conclusions reached from examining these Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns are as follows:

- Hybrid warfare has deep historical and cultural roots in China. Most elements of Beijing's recent hybrid warfare operations have echoes in the guerilla and insurgent campaigns conducted by the Chinese in the first half of the 20th century and even as far back as Sun Tzu in 500 BC.
- Since the Chinese Communist Party's seizure of power in 1949, China's hybrid operations have been driven primarily by Beijing's politico-strategic goals, and its hybrid warfare

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1 A notable sign of the increased attention now being given to authoritarian state gray zone operations is the discussion of this challenge in Commission on the National Defense Strategy (NDS), *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2018), p. 9.

2 The short definitions used in this report for hybrid warfare and its close companion, political warfare, are as follows: Hybrid warfare involves coercive and limited offensive operations with the actual or authorized use of kinetic force; Political warfare involves coercive operations without the use kinetic force.

campaigns have so far been focused in China's strategic approaches—within two thousand miles of the Chinese mainland.

- These operations are undertaken within a Marxist-Leninist world view that is markedly different from the strategic culture prevailing in the West. In particular, the Chinese capacity to design campaigns and sequence various political, non-military, and information instruments into hybrid warfare campaigns is well practiced.
- All Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns are enabled by very active political warfare components that are designed to divide, undermine, and incapacitate opponents, frequently over extended periods. China's hybrid campaigns would be seriously handicapped without closely coordinated political operations. Unlike most Western security forces, the PLA is structured to support these campaigns in an integrated manner under direct Party control.
- China's hybrid warfare campaigns do not follow a template, but they do follow distinctive patterns, which can be expected in future operations.
- China's hybrid warfare operations employ a wide range of civilian, paramilitary, and military instruments, many of which are not held in Western government inventories. This diverse range of instruments is usually marshalled in carefully choreographed, multi-dimensional, combined arms campaigns. China's conception of "combined arms" is broader than Western conceptions which focus on physical, kinetic, and military arms. Recent Chinese organizational reforms suggest that the PLA is adapting itself to better integrate political work and conventional and unconventional information systems for future operations.
- Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns against major rivals normally start in spaces that are "empty," peripheral, or perceived to be of limited importance by those rivals.
- In the early phases of Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns, military involvement is usually distant and indirect. Many Western intelligence warning indicators are of limited value.
- Many Chinese hybrid operations can be described as echeloned offensives. They often begin in a very modest and almost inconsequential manner and gradually expand in nature, scale, and sometimes in pace to adopt a completely different character that is often of great strategic importance. These operations sometimes achieve fait accompli outcomes which China's opponents have great difficulty reversing.
- When the Chinese regime launches a hybrid warfare campaign against a major power, it usually prepares for a protracted struggle that is characterized by exceptional patience and persistence. In contrast to the Western practice of striving to win victories quickly and decisively, the Chinese frequently focus more on long-term positional advantage, avoiding defeat, and sustaining the campaign over a prolonged period.

- In such campaigns, diplomatic moves and assurances are just another source of deception. Once the primary areas of contention have been occupied or key goals have been achieved, assurances Beijing has given to interested parties at earlier stages of the campaign start to dissolve or are simply abandoned.
- When a *fait accompli* is in place, China's political warfare operations are usually refocused to encourage enemy decision-makers and their publics to acquiesce, accept the "new facts" as normal, turn their attention elsewhere, and move on.
- These campaigns have produced mixed success for China. They have certainly achieved geostrategic gains, reinforced Beijing's narrative of restoring China to its rightful international place, opened new theaters for future strategic advances, and skillfully exploited the weaknesses of the United States and its allies. Yet, they are risky and difficult to manage, and China's execution has at times been imperfect. Moreover, these operations have damaged Beijing's international reputation and brought most of the West and many other countries to now regard China as more of a threat than a friend. As a result, the United States, its allies, and its international partners are considering new means of deterring and defeating such campaigns.

This report concludes that the track record of the United States and its allies in dealing with Chinese hybrid and closely associated political warfare operations has so far been unfocused and inconsistent. The Western powers and their international partners have let Beijing choose the theatres of operations, prepare the region through political warfare operations, apply its chosen strategy, determine the primary rules that govern the contest, and select the timing and duration of the campaign. In response, allied decision-makers have been slow, reactive, focused almost solely on timid frontal operations, and largely ineffective. The price for these mostly incoherent and "astrategic" approaches has been high.

However, this report also argues that the Western allies and their security partners can do much better. There are a number of options for deterring, confronting and defeating China in this field. Denial, cost imposition, attacking the opposition's strategy and; undermining the regime are all potential styles of a more effective Western countercampaign strategy that are discussed in some detail. This report argues that the best strategic concept for the West combines elements of most, if not all, of these styles at different phases of campaigns, with differing contributions being made in coordinated ways by all members of a diverse and widely dispersed counter-authoritarian coalition of states and international organizations. This will not happen without focused and sustained action by relevant governments. It will require maintenance of leadership focus, the development of deeper understanding, a redirection of some elements of government, and the commitment of modest resources for an extended period.

Most of all, deterring and defeating China's combined hybrid and political warfare campaigns will require a strategy that is proactive; seizes the initiative; and determines the theaters, the operating modes, and the timing of the struggle. This approach should not, however,

be dominated by military actions and does not need to be highly escalatory. They should be tailored to force the Chinese to halt, and they should signal coalition resolve to expand operations should Beijing persist. If this turnaround can be delivered, the United States, its allies, and its security partners will be able to generate a formidable counter to China's gray zone campaigning.

## CHAPTER 1

# Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific

The Western allies now face security challenges in the Indo-Pacific that are unlike any they have faced since the Cold War. China possesses substantial human, economic, technological, and other resources and is armed with conventional and nuclear forces that, in many respects, rival those of the United States and its allies. China is emerging as a true peer competitor of the United States, and the rise of this revisionist authoritarian party-state is generating major dilemmas for the Western allies and many Indo-Pacific states.

More troubling still, Beijing is exploiting its growing power, strategic location, and array of coercive instruments to undermine the core interests of the West. Whereas China is not yet in a position to challenge the United States and its allies directly, largely because it lacks conventional and nuclear force advantages, this has not stopped Beijing from conducting operations to subvert the cohesion of Western alliances and many regional state partnerships; erode the economic, social, and political resilience of rival states; and win strategic advances in key regions. In order to do this the Chinese leadership has employed a range of mostly indirect, asymmetric strategies that draw on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) deep expertise in unconventional, intelligence-led, subversion-heavy operations.

For instance, the Chinese regime continues to undertake tailored political warfare operations against a wide range of Western and other regional countries.<sup>3</sup> These activities include intense information campaigns, diverse cyber and espionage operations, the theft of intellectual property, the use of economic inducements and economic pressures, programs of geostrategic maneuver such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the sowing of dissent, the coercion

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3 For more information on past and ongoing Chinese political warfare operation, see Thomas G. Mahnken, Ross Babbage, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion: Competitive Strategies against Authoritarian Political Warfare* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018); and Ross Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

of foreign actors by various means, and the assertive use of legal and paralegal instruments. Within China, most of these operations are summarized within the PLA's "Political Work Guidelines" as the "three warfares"; public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.<sup>4</sup>

In selected priority theatres where the Chinese regime has judged that more assertive advances can be made without triggering a forceful U.S. or allied response, paramilitary or military forces have been authorized to initiate operations in the full understanding that the use of kinetic force may or will be required. These are the types of operations that the Chinese regime launched in Tibet in 1950, in North Vietnam in 1977–1987, in supporting communist insurgencies across Southeast and South Asia between 1950 to 1980, in the Doklam Plateau in Bhutan in 2017, in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands since 2012, and in the South China Sea from the early 1970s to the present time.<sup>5</sup> All of these campaigns have involved the use of political warfare, often over long periods. But they have also been notable for periods when military or paramilitary forces have been authorized to use kinetic force in various hybrid warfare operations. These hybrid warfare campaigns have involved a significant escalation beyond political warfare in the gray zone between what the West regards as "peace" and what it describes as "war". They have been operations to seize significant territory or another strategic advantage. They have been designed to steal a march.

So what are the best ways of defining political and hybrid warfare, and how can these two categories of mutually supporting Chinese operations be conceptualized and distinguished from conventional military campaigns? In this report, political warfare refers to "diverse operations to influence, persuade and coerce nation states, organizations, and individuals to operate in accord with one's strategic interests without employing kinetic force." Political warfare is used extensively by the Chinese regime to shape the strategic space, to undermine the Western allies and their partners, and to win significant advances without resorting to kinetic force. It is sometimes also used to prepare targeted environments for hybrid and conventional kinetic military operations. Hybrid warfare operations, by contrast, are defined in this report to be "diverse military and/or paramilitary operations undertaken to secure priority strategic interests following authorization to use kinetic force either from the outset or in the event that deployed units are forcibly challenged by rival military and/or paramilitary forces."<sup>6</sup>

Hybrid warfare encompasses a wide spectrum of operations. At the lower end of the scale, it involves military forces performing overwatch roles for civilian or paramilitary personnel moving to occupy unclaimed or disputed locations. Another category of hybrid operation involves the funding, equipping, training, and in-theater guidance or command of insurgent forces in foreign countries. A third type is paramilitary or military operations to swarm,

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4 See this discussed in Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018.

5 For details of these Chinese campaigns, please see the case studies in Annex B of this report.

6 Hybrid warfare is a contested term for which no specific definition is internationally agreed upon. Annex A of this report discusses the many previous uses of this term and of the varying contexts within which it has been used.

overwhelm, and make foreign operations untenable in areas of high strategic importance. Intense cyber operations to damage, disrupt, or destroy foreign security, defense, and critical infrastructure systems is a fourth category. And a fifth type of hybrid warfare campaign is the use of main-force military units to launch attacks on foreign forces or territories in operations that are of limited scope or duration and below the threshold of general conventional war. Distinguishing features of all hybrid operations are the involvement of military or paramilitary forces and their authorization to either launch kinetic operations from the outset or to engage in combat if challenged forcefully by foreign military or paramilitary units. In short, political warfare involves coercive operations without kinetic force, whereas hybrid warfare involves coercive and limited offensive operations with the actual or authorized use of kinetic force.

What is the distinction between hybrid warfare and general conventional war? Although there is some blurring and overlap between these categories, Chinese hybrid operations are generally indirect, are mostly gradual, usually make extensive use of civilian and paramilitary assets, and, importantly, avoid frontal confrontations with U.S. and allied military units. They are mostly conducted on a modest scale in theaters that Washington and other allied capitals often consider remote or strategically peripheral. Hybrid warfare operations can also be escalated and deescalated as required. None of these characteristics normally apply to major conventional conflicts, which are nearly always less constrained in scale and intensity.

Although hybrid warfare campaigns mostly fall short of Western conceptions of conventional warfare, they still pose a major challenge for the United States and its allies. They often involve activities launched by civilian and paramilitary agencies rather than conventional military units. They are frequently undertaken in an incremental manner over extended periods in theatres that are of greater importance to local states than to Washington and many of the other close allies. Indeed, because these operations are purposely designed to fall below the threshold that Beijing believes is likely to trigger a forceful and sustained Western response, they have often been easy for officials in Washington and other allied capitals to dismiss as being of marginal importance. Up until now, they have usually been ignored beyond the periodic expression of diplomatic concerns and occasional “flag waving” military transits through the relevant region.<sup>7</sup> However, it would be a mistake for allied and partner governments to underrate the importance of these Chinese operations. The cumulative effects of the detached and often unfocused U.S. and allied responses to Beijing’s hybrid campaigns have been profound. Over the course of decades, the Chinese communist regime has extended its territorial control over large regions of strategic importance, many states and international organizations have been intimidated into acquiescence, and great damage has been done to the credibility of the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific.

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7 See these and related themes discussed in Michael Mazarr, “This Is Not a Great-Power Competition, Why the Term Doesn’t Capture Today’s Reality,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 29, 2019; and James M. Dubik and Nic Vincent, *America’s Gray Zone Competition: The Gray Zone in Context* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2018).

As there is a need to prevent the success of Chinese hybrid and political warfare offensives, this report makes the case for the United States and its allies to adopt new, more serious approaches. The U.S. and its allies need to do what they can to prevent the sovereignty of security partners being undermined and to work with these partners to strengthen their defenses against foreign interference, harassment, and coercion. There is also a need to prevent Beijing corroding democratic freedoms, values, and the rule of law, lest it uses hybrid and political warfare to build an international authoritarian network or a neo-colonial empire.

Finding an effective way of deterring and defeating Chinese hybrid campaigns and their associated political warfare operations has special importance for many small- and medium-sized states across the Indo-Asia-Pacific. These states have been at the front line, some have felt the heavy weight of Beijing's intimidation and coercion, and many have suffered because of the West's timid and mostly incoherent responses.

There is a need to develop a much clearer understanding of these operations, appreciate their primary characteristics, understand their roots in the principles of Maoist insurgency, consider the possibility of new forms of hybrid activity emerging, and generate an appropriate strategy and set of instruments to deter and defeat such operations. This report aims to contribute some relevant insights and suggestions for allied policymakers and security planners. In Volume I, Chapter 2 considers the place of hybrid warfare in Chinese history, strategic culture, and military doctrine. It also summarizes key elements of the six case studies in Annex B and asks whether there are discernable patterns in the way Beijing designs and conducts hybrid warfare campaigns. Chapter 3 addresses the core question of how successful Beijing's hybrid campaigns have been. Chapter 4 discusses why the United States, its close allies, and its security partners are vulnerable to Chinese hybrid warfare operations and what issues need to be addressed to improve the situation. Chapter 5 is a discussion of whether Chinese hybrid warfare is likely to evolve in new ways and, if so, what they might be? Chapter 6 assesses alternative strategy options for the United States and its allies and partners to consider for deterring and defeating Chinese hybrid warfare operations. Chapter 7 draws together the primary conclusions and recommendations of the report. In Volume II, Annex A explains the background to the term hybrid warfare and some of the uses and contexts in which this term has been applied in the past. Annex B contains the full texts of the six case studies that were undertaken on Chinese hybrid warfare for this project. They are:

1. China's Annexation of Tibet, 1950–1951;
2. Chinese Support for Southeast Asian Insurgencies, 1950–1980;
3. China's Decade-Long Hybrid War Against Vietnam, 1977–1987;
4. The Doklam Incident, Bhutan, June 2017;
5. China's Coercive Posturing in the Senkaku Islands, 1971–present; and
6. China's Dominance of the South China Sea, 1970–present.



## CHAPTER 2

# The Chinese Style of Hybrid Warfare

The origins of the Chinese Communist Party’s approach to hybrid warfare extend back at least as far as Sun Tzu in 500 BC. Concepts such as politically driven subversion, psychological campaigns, and surprise outflanking operations to undermine and gradually wear down a powerful opponent are familiar to students of Chinese strategic history and culture.<sup>8</sup>

When Mao Tse-tung led the CCP’s revolutionary war against the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and the Japanese invaders in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, he drew on this deep strategic culture and refined its application to his current circumstances.

Early in this period, Mao Tse-tung and his colleagues studied closely the writings of leading foreign strategists and Marxist-Leninist thinkers. Mao read a translation of Clausewitz’s *On War* as early as 1928 and not only noted his dictum that “war was politics by other means” but strongly endorsed Lenin’s observation that the reverse was also true, that “politics was war by other means.”<sup>9</sup> Mao appreciated the potential for using innovative political actions to exploit the gap between what the capitalist societies called “peace” and what they called “war” to win important strategic advances without triggering full-scale conflict with the major powers.

There were also other Western influences at play. Chu Teh, one of Mao Tse-tung’s senior military commanders, reportedly used a short work on the tactics of General George Washington as the “first textbook on large-scale partisan warfare.”<sup>10</sup> Another of Mao’s senior army

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8 See, for example, Sun Tzu and Sun Pin, *The Complete Art of War*, translated with a historical introduction and commentary by Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 18–19.

9 Edward L. Katzenbach Jr., “Time, Space, and Will: The Politico-Military Views of Mao Tse-tung,” in T. N. Greene, ed., *The Guerrilla—And How to Fight Him* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), p. 12; and Mahnken, Babbage, and Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*, p. 10.

10 Robert S. Elegant, *China’s Red Masters: Political Biographies of the Chinese Communist Leaders* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1951), p.82.

commanders, General Lu Cheng-Ts'ao reportedly kept a translated copy of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in his tent and remarked that he and his fellow commanders considered that book to be "one of the standard reference works on strategy."<sup>11</sup>

By drawing on these diverse sources and his own experiences in the field, Mao Tse-tung wrote *The Struggle in the Ching Kang Mountains* in 1928, and a decade later the series of lectures published as *On Protracted War*. This later work describes what he terms a set of "immutable" principles and laws of warfare. Although much of the discussion is generalized, this booklet spells out the key strategic principles and doctrines that he applied to win successive victories and eventually seize power in 1949.

The Chinese Communist Party's intense struggle for its survival in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only resulted in battlefield and political success, it also produced a substantial body of hard-won experience that was enshrined in a set of foundational strategic principles and security doctrines. These principles were not discarded by the Party as it adapted to the task of governing in Beijing. Indeed, they continued to play a strong role in underlining to the PLA and to the broader Chinese community the Party's leading national role and its enduring legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> These principles also became a foundation for Chinese strategic logic and international operations in succeeding decades as the regime sought to further consolidate its power, strengthen its international security, and extend its influence. Mao Tse-tung certainly perceived a continuing and enduring role for these concepts when he argued, "These guerrilla operations must not be considered as an independent form of warfare. They are but one step in the total war, one aspect of the revolutionary struggle."<sup>13</sup> Even though the Chinese Communist Party has not needed to conduct revolutionary wars of liberation against domestic warlords or foreign colonial powers in recent years, the strategic principles and security doctrines forged during those struggles continued to be relevant.

During the last two decades, the Chinese regime's security priorities have been focused on asserting China's "historical rights" over its regional surrounds, countering and undermining its major power rivals, and progressing the goal of matching and eventually surpassing the power and influence of the United States, all the while ensuring that the regime's domestic legitimacy is enhanced. These priorities have led the regime to undertake extensive political warfare operations against its regional and global rivals together with a series of carefully planned hybrid warfare campaigns to extend Beijing's influence and control over priority areas.

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11 Walter D. Jacobs, "Mao Tse-Tung as a Guerrilla—A Second Look," in Franklin Mark Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare: Fighting Communist Guerrilla Movements, 1941–1961* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 168.

12 See this continuity described, for instance, in Jonathan Manthorpe, *Claws of the Tiger* (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2019), pp. 3, 36; and Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 13–19.

13 "What is Guerilla Warfare?" in Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, translated with an introduction by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005).

To avoid the mistake of assessing the hybrid warfare operations that the Chinese regime has conducted in recent decades solely through a lens of Western strategic thought, this report aims to review them in the context of the Chinese Communist Party's world view. It considers the core strategic principles that Mao Tse-tung and his colleagues championed as foundations of Chinese strategic logic, which continue to be taught in Chinese military institutions and the Chinese Communist Party to this day.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese communist regime's perception of the hybrid warfare battlespace differs substantially from that in the West. For Beijing, the struggle against the United States and its allies has been underway for a considerable time. Political warfare or united front operations have reached into and beyond the West's homelands, and hybrid warfare campaigns have been underway in key theaters for several years.<sup>15</sup> Significant tactical victories have already been won, and the global environment is being prepared for the next phases of the conflict. By contrast, most decision-makers in the West still consider themselves to be in a state of "peace" and are not inclined to initiate actions that they fear Beijing may consider provocative. Their political and hybrid warfare arsenals are weak at best, poorly organized, and grossly under-resourced. There is clearly a strategy mismatch between China and the Western allies.<sup>16</sup>

In consequence, there is a need for Western defense and security planners to refresh their understanding of Chinese strategic and operational concepts and reset much of their thinking about the dynamics of Beijing's hybrid warfare campaigns. If many of the foundational strategic principles forged by Mao Tse-tung are echoed in Beijing's recent hybrid warfare operations, it would, for instance, help to explain why the Chinese regime has behaved in the way it has when confronted by difficult security challenges in recent years. How much evidence is there that these foundational elements of Chinese strategic logic and doctrine have been applied in Beijing's hybrid warfare operations during the last few decades? Insights may also be gained concerning the types of hybrid operations Beijing might launch in the future. In addition, improved perspectives may be provided for assessing alternative counterstrategies for the United States and its allies. In order to consider these issues further, the following section summarizes some of the more important strategic and operational concepts of relevance.

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14 See Juliette Genevaz, "Political Indoctrination in the Chinese Military: Towards a Post-revolutionary People's Liberation Army," *China Information* 31, no. 1, 2017; and James Holmes, "A 'People's War': How China Plans to Dominate the South China Sea," *The National Interest*, May 2, 2019.

15 One of the clearest and most detailed explanations of this Chinese thinking is in a book written by two PLA colonels: Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Masterplan to Destroy America* (Dehradun, India: Natraj Publishers, 2007), pp. 144–145, 162–166.

16 Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting*, vol. 1.

## Selected Maoist Strategic Concepts

**Stating clear political goals.** Mao Tse-tung emphasized this foundational issue on numerous occasions. For instance, he wrote, “Without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail, as it must if its political objectives do not coincide with the aspirations of the people, and their sympathy, cooperation and assistance cannot be gained. The essence of guerrilla warfare is thus political in character.”<sup>17</sup>

**Announcing an ambit claim—usually for a major political concession.** Mao Tse-tung drove each of his campaigns by making, and usually repeating, blunt demands of the enemy. These ambit demands were most prominent at the strategic level when directly addressing the enemy’s leadership. For example, in 1945 Mao wrote to Chiang Kai-shek, his nationalist rival:

I ask you immediately to abolish the one-party dictatorship, call a conference of all parties to set up a democratic coalition government, dismiss corrupt officials and all reactionaries from their posts, punish the traitors, abolish the secret services, recognize the legal status of the various parties (the Communist Party of China and all democratic parties have up to now been regarded as illegal by you and your government), annul all reactionary laws and decrees that suppress the liberties of the people, recognize the popularly elected governments and the anti-Japanese armed forces of China’s Liberated Areas, withdraw the troops encircling the Liberated Areas, release political prisoners and carry out economic and other democratic reforms.<sup>18</sup>

However, Mao also periodically made ambit claims at the tactical level when, for instance, he pressed surrounded enemy forces to surrender a key town or military position.

**Expounding a compelling narrative.** Building on the first two concepts, Mao Tse-tung saw the repeated expression of a driving narrative to be a core means of winning domestic support and undermining the legitimacy of his enemies. When fighting against Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalists, Mao denounced the regime’s corruption, the appalling treatment of peasants by landlords, and the CCP’s promise of land redistribution.<sup>19</sup> Against the Japanese, Mao emphasized that the communists were fighting a war of liberation against vicious foreign invaders. He also periodically promised a new era for mankind in which there would “no longer be any wars.”<sup>20</sup> However, as Katzenbach and Hanrahan have pointed out, we have no

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17 “What is Guerilla Warfare?” in Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*.

18 “Two Telegrams to the Commander-in-Chief of the Eighteenth Group to Chiang Kai-shek,” in Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961).

19 Donald M. Lowe, *The Function of “China” in Marx, Lenin, and Mao* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), p. 109; and Alexander C. Cook, “Third World Maoism,” in Timothy Cheek, ed., *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 289–290.

20 “Strategic Problems of China’s Revolutionary War” in Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1954), p. 179.

record of Mao going further to reveal that the new “peaceful” future he envisaged was intended to “make the world safe for communism.”<sup>21</sup>

**Asserting the inevitability of victory—history was on their side.** The Chinese communists adopted the Marxist-Leninist determinist maxim that, given strategic patience and persistence in exploiting enemy weaknesses, victory was inevitable.<sup>22</sup> The noted counter-insurgency author, Robert Taber, summarized several volumes of Mao Tse-tung’s writing on these issues:

An army deals from strength, seeking the enemy’s weaknesses in order to destroy him. The guerilla is sometimes said to deal from weakness, but this is an absurdity. In fact, he exploits his own kind of strength which lies in the extreme mobility of lightly armed forces without territorial or hardware investments, a bottomless well of manpower from which to recruit, and the fact that *time*—which is both money and political capital—works in his favor. Analogically, the guerilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog’s disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough . . . the dog succumbs to exhaustion and anemia without ever having found anything on which to close his jaws or to rake with his claws.<sup>23</sup>

**Perceiving the true correlation of forces more accurately than opponents and pursuing long campaigns to exhaust enemies.** Mao Tse-tung appreciated that the capitalist countries focused their assessments of relative power on standard measures of tangible economic, technological, personnel, and military strength. He also knew that the Russian revolutionaries went much further to include assessments of ideological coherence, leadership strength, propaganda leverage, and capacities to conduct rapidly paced political warfare operations.<sup>24</sup> Mao Tse-tung extended this thinking by placing primary emphasis on time, space, and will.<sup>25</sup> He calculated that if he could buy time and prolong the struggles against his more industrialized enemies, they would be unable to sustain their efforts and be forced to withdraw. This proved to be largely true in the campaign against the Japanese invaders. Similarly, when confronted directly by the Western democracies, Mao believed that they needed to win quickly or lose the war. As was shown in Korea and Vietnam, an extended war of attrition would place great strains on the economic, social and electoral fabric of the democracies and would eventually force a compromise or a Western withdrawal. In contrast to the West, Mao’s

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21 Edward L. Katzenbach Jr. and Gene Z. Hanrahan, “The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-tung,” in Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 143.

22 Katzenbach, “Time, Space, and Will: The Politico-Military Views of Mao Tse-tung,” in Greene, *The Guerrilla*, p. 20.

23 Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerilla Warfare Theory and Practice* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 29.

24 This reformulation of “the correlation of forces” is discussed in Stephen J. Blank, “Class War on a Global Scale: The Leninist Culture of Political Conflict,” in Stephen J. Blank, Lawrence E. Grinter, Karl P. Magyar, Lewis B. Ware, and Bynum E. Weathers, *Conflict, Culture, and History: Regional Dimensions* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1993), pp. 19–25.

25 See this discussed in Taber, *The War of the Flea*, pp. 47, 50.

challenge was not to win a war quickly, but to keep it going until the other side wilted and collapsed.<sup>26</sup>

Generating a “sea” of committed supporters, especially in enemy territory, within which communist forces could operate with ease and security. Mao commenced all of his campaigns by first launching strong political offensives to persuade, coerce or intimidate key communities to either support the communist cause or acquiesce in his operations. He wrote:

[Political mobilization] is the most fundamental condition for winning the war. . . . The mobilization of the common people throughout the country will create a vast sea in which to drown the enemy, create the conditions that will make up for our inferiority in arms and other things, and create the prerequisites for overcoming every difficulty in the war.<sup>27</sup>

**Subverting the opponent in his home territory through intense political warfare operations.** Having won over a “sea” of committed sympathizers in enemy territory, Mao championed Sun Tzu’s practice of launching intense intelligence-gathering, propaganda, subversion, sabotage, and other disruptive political warfare operations against his enemies to substantially weaken their resistance prior to launching kinetic military operations. Sun Tzu wrote:

Thus one who excels at employing the military subjugates other people’s armies without engaging in battle, captures other people’s fortified cities without attacking them, and destroys other people’s states without prolonged fighting. . . . For this reason, attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.<sup>28</sup>

Mao was very active in fostering this activity, even boasting about it in a telegram to nationalist opponent Chiang Kai-shek, “In addition, in China’s Japanese-occupied areas (with a population of 160 million) we have organized extensive underground forces to strike at the enemy and puppets.”<sup>29</sup>

**Fostering support from friendly states and international organizations.**

Generating the sympathy or active support of foreign governments and international organizations was considered important because such relationships could deliver practical support to the Chinese party-state. Well-disposed foreign governments and organizations could also cause serious problems for enemy countries by damaging their international reputations, undermining their alliance partnerships, cutting their credit ratings, and reducing their attractiveness to international investors. Finally, friendly foreign states and organizations could

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26 Katzenbach and Hanrahan, “The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-tung,” in Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 135.

27 As quoted in Katzenbach, “Time, Space, and Will: The Politico-Military Views of Mao Tse-tung,” in Greene, *The Guerrilla*, p.14; and Mao Tse-tung, *Aspects of China’s Anti-Japanese Struggle* (Bombay: People’s Publishing House, 1948), p. 48.

28 Sun Tzu and Sun Pin, *The Complete Art of War*, p. 50.

29 “Two Telegrams,” in Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4.

create new fronts against enemy states and increase the burdens that rivals were forced to carry over time.<sup>30</sup>

**Seizing the strategic initiative by mostly conducting a succession of small offensive operations.** Mao Tse-tung designed his campaigns so that they comprised a long succession of small tactical victories, mostly resulting from the rapid concentration of overwhelming force to destroy weak or isolated enemy positions. These operations kept the enemy off balance. They forced the opposing commander to cycle between spreading his forces widely to hunt down guerrilla units and concentrating his units to ensure that isolated detachments were not trapped and overwhelmed by rapidly massing communist forces. The dilemma for the enemy commander was that concentrating his forces in well-defended strong points made them more secure, but it also left most of the country unoccupied and exposed to communist political warfare operations designed to win over the masses. Mao Tse-tung's flexible campaigning proved very effective. By continually demonstrating forward momentum through a succession of small victories, and amplifying the psychological effects through powerful propaganda, Mao's forces and the broader population came to see the communists as being ascendant and victory as being inevitable. The bandwagoning effects were strong. Mao wrote, "When the Red Army fights, it fights not merely for the sake of fighting, but to agitate the masses, to organize them, to arm them and to help them establish revolutionary political power."<sup>31</sup>

**Exploiting the enemy's political, psychological, and moral weaknesses.** Katzenbach explains the essence of the Chinese Communist Party's approach to exploiting the West's weaknesses:

Fundamental to all else, Mao says, is the belief that countries with legislative bodies simply cannot take a war of attrition, either financially or, over the long run, psychologically. Indeed, the very fact of a multiparty structure makes the commitment to a long war so politically suicidal as to be quite impossible. When the lines of the Communists' enemy are drawn out like strings of chewing gum, weak and sagging, when the financial burden increases from month to month, the outcry against the war will of itself weaken the ability of the troops in the field to fight. The war that Mao's theory contemplates is the cheapest for him and the most expensive for the enemy.<sup>32</sup>

Robert Taber reinforced this view:

Constitutional democracies . . . are particularly exposed to the subversion that is the basic weapon of revolutionary war. . . . Constitutional law is a further embarrassment, and sometimes might be the final impediment. . . . Fulgencio Batista fell (in Cuba) not because he was a dictator but because his situation in a country with democratic institutions . . . did not permit him to

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30 See these and related issues discussed in Taber, *The War of the Flea*, pp. 29–31.

31 Mao Tse-tung, "On the Rectification of Incorrect Ideas in the Party," in Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 1, p. 106.

32 Katzenbach, "Time, Space, and Will: The Politico-Military Views of Mao Tse-tung," in Greene, *The Guerrilla*, p.18.

be dictator enough to resolve the contradictions that confronted him. His hands were tied by conventions he could not break without losing his foreign support.<sup>33</sup>

Mao also considered that he had a major advantage in being unconstrained by the West's moral standards: "We . . . have no use for his stupid scruples about benevolence, righteousness and morality in war."<sup>34</sup> The Chinese communists operated accordingly.

**Exercising tight Party discipline.** Given the intense and sustained demands of communist-led people's war, Mao and his colleagues trained their people to abide by a very strict disciplinary code. They realized that in order to be effective in the diverse range of political and military operations required, it was essential for all personnel to observe strict Party discipline and obey all orders without question. As Kazenbach and Hanrahan observe:

Communists understand, what is frequently forgotten, that it is not simply the weapons one has in one's arsenal that give one flexibility, but the willingness and ability to use them. Assassination, sabotage, ambush, "spontaneous uprisings", or mass attacks in fanatical waves, the more typical form of revolutionary warfare, are all part of this arsenal.<sup>35</sup>

**Dominating the media with sustained propaganda.** Mao Tse-Tung and his colleagues went to extraordinary lengths to win the information war. They used radio, pamphlets, local newspapers, troupes of touring entertainers, and their military personnel to spread communist messages and assist local communities in practical ways so as to rally public support and undermine their enemies. They also sought to penetrate the enemy's media organizations, moderate their messaging, and insert stories that portrayed a "balanced" view of communist operations.

**Conducting early operations below the enemy's radar and avoiding frontal clashes with main-force enemy units.** The Chinese communists were very careful to avoid direct confrontations with the enemy's main force units until the opposing forces were so weakened by the prolonged struggle that they could be readily destroyed by more conventional attacks. In the early phases of the conflict, enemy commanders often dismissed the communists as little more than bandits, being hardly worthy of their attention. This meant that for significant periods the communists could disperse among the people to conduct political operations and work to win over the masses with only limited interference. These highly dispersed "educational" and recruiting operations provided few significant targets for the conventionally trained mechanized enemy. Then, when the enemy forces were also scattered in attempts to hunt down small guerrilla detachments, the communist forces would concentrate rapidly to overwhelm isolated units. As Mao advised, "Fight no battle unprepared, fight no battle you are not sure of winning."<sup>36</sup> He also said, "Our duty is to fight a protracted war,

33 Taber, *The War of the Flea*, p. 28.

34 Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 217.

35 Katzenbach and Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-tung," in Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 145.

36 Quoted in Robert Taber *The War of the Flea*, p.56.



avoiding the enemy if possible, never engaging him unless it can be made certain in advance that it is to our advantage.”<sup>37</sup> Through these and related means, Mao sought to exhaust his rivals and demonstrate the futility of their military campaigns.<sup>38</sup>

**Striking initially into unexpected, empty, or weakly defended locations.** A large part of Mao’s campaign strategy involved hitting the enemy where he wasn’t or, at the very least, where the enemy had little interest in being engaged. Robert Taber points out that one of the key features of Mao Tse-tung’s campaign strategy was the reverse of that practiced by Western industrial states:

Although the mobile warfare of insurgency resembles that of conventional forces, it is based on guerrilla strategy and works towards somewhat different objectives. The insurgents drive inward from rural areas towards the towns and then the cities. They occupy the hills and woods before they seize the roads. In this, they behave in a manner diametrically opposite to the dictates of Western military strategy, in which strong points—industrial centers, communication centers, population centers—are hit first and the mop-up of the rural areas is left until last. What counts for the insurgents is not strong points, but territory that the enemy cannot contest without involving himself in a contradiction, that of extending his lines and weakening his effective striking force. Hence, the rural areas first, the cities last.

**Striving for a monopoly of strategic patience.** Another core element of Mao Tse-tung’s campaign strategy was the detailed preparation of his forces both physically and psychologically for a protracted campaign. While there would be intense periods of tactical maneuver and combat, he strove to take the long view, focused on progressing political effects rather than just military or economic ones, and, above all, was determined to achieve a monopoly on patience.<sup>39</sup> He needed to win time for his enemies to overextend themselves and for the contradictions in their circumstances to foster serious internal weaknesses and force a retreat. If this meant that he needed his forces to periodically fall back from key towns or facilities in order to draw the enemy into exhausting, widely dispersed operations, Mao was content. He argued that by enticing his opponent to deploy additional forces and scatter them more widely, the enemy was making himself more vulnerable in the field and also at home. He could argue convincingly that victory was just a matter of time.

**Being prepared to progress a long struggle through three primary phases.** Mao conceptualized his insurgent campaigns as following three primary phases. In the first, defensive phase, the enemy forces were expected to be strong and strike deeply into guerrilla territory with powerful battlegroups. The communist forces were trained to disperse and conduct minor harassment operations but deny the invading forces useful targets. The guerrillas took the opportunity of dispersion to intensify their propaganda and other political

37 Wilbur V. Dinegar, “The ‘Long March’ as Extended Guerrilla Warfare,” in Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, p.153.

38 See the discussion of these issues in Katzenbach, “Time, Space, and Will: The Politico-Military Views of Mao Tse-tung,” in Greene, *The Guerrilla*, pp. 16–17.

39 Katzenbach and Hanrahan, “The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-tung,” in Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 144.

warfare operations amongst the people to win their support. In the second, or stalemate, phase, the invading forces were overextended and attempted to defend scattered locations over very wide areas. They started to show signs of strain as they realized that they were unlikely to prevail. The guerrilla forces then accentuated the enemy's problems by rapidly concentrating to overwhelm isolated units. They also continued to further rally local populations to their cause. In the third, offensive phase, the enemy forces commenced a gradual retreat. The communist forces were in a position to raise, train, and deploy more conventional military units to outflank and destroy the major units of the invading force by moving rapidly within a largely supportive local population.

Mao instructed his commanders and troops that the progression of these three phases would not be automatic or smooth. He anticipated that in some situations it may be sensible to progress from phase one to phase two operations, and then revert to phase one operations in order to thwart a determined enemy offensive.<sup>40</sup> However, he argued that so long as the guerrillas survived, were patient, and operated flexibly using the modes that were appropriate at the time, a climate of collapse would be generated in the enemy camp that would eventually force a permanent withdrawal. The bottom line was that Mao's strategy embraced continuous political warfare operations, periodic rapidly paced local offensives, and great tactical flexibility all within a clear strategy of multi-mode attrition. It proved to be a powerful combination.

## China's Hybrid Warfare Operations Since the Revolution

If the Maoist strategic concepts described above have enduring influence on Chinese strategic thinking and operational planning, it would be reasonable to expect at least some of them to feature in the diverse hybrid warfare campaigns Beijing has conducted during the last 70 years. This section of the report reviews some key features of six hybrid warfare campaigns that the Chinese regime has conducted since 1949.<sup>41</sup> Before considering these examples, it should first be noted that Mao Tse-tung warned against expecting all of the principles and doctrines that were developed during the revolutionary war to be automatically relevant to all future conflicts:

Thus the different laws for directing different wars are determined by the different circumstances of those wars—differences in their time, place and nature. . . . As for the factor of place, since each country or nation, especially a large country or nation has its own characteristics, the laws of war for each country or nation also have their own characteristics, and here, too, those applying to one cannot be mechanically transferred to the other. In studying the laws for directing wars that occur at different historical stages, that differ in nature and that are waged in different places and by different nations, we must fix our attention on the characteristics and development of each, and must oppose a mechanical approach to the problem of war.<sup>42</sup>

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40 Robert Taber *The War of the Flea*, p. 55.

41 Annex B in Volume II of this report contains full case studies on each of these six hybrid warfare campaigns.

42 Mao Tse-tung, *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1968), chapter 1.

## China's Annexation of Tibet, 1950–1951

Toward the end of the Revolutionary War in 1948–1949, Mao Tse-tung and his close colleagues turned their minds to how best to bolster the security of their new regime in Beijing. Tibet was viewed as a strategically located buffer state that was potentially open to strong influence and manipulation by unfriendly foreign powers: particularly India, Britain, and the United States. Although Tibet had effectively been an independent state for most of its history and virtually none of its residents were ethnic Chinese, the communist leadership decided that a campaign to seize control deserved priority. The following lists some of the primary features of this campaign, in broad chronological sequence:

- The Chinese leadership perceived a strong strategic imperative.
- There was an early appreciation that with the combat-hardened Revolutionary Army still mobilized, the Chinese communists possessed overwhelming superiority in the correlation of forces.
- Beijing asserted the legitimacy of China's sovereignty over Tibet.
- Propaganda and other political warfare operations commenced very early to coerce the compliance of Tibetans and exploit domestic divisions.
- The Chinese leadership announced its intention to "liberate" Tibet.
- The PLA decided to launch a military invasion and developed campaign plans. China built new roads and other infrastructure elements to facilitate the invasion.
- Relevant PLA units received intensive training for mountain operations.
- The Chinese regime intensified its political warfare operations in efforts to win the support of the Tibetan population, politically undermine the centers of local resistance, and reduce the need for a sustained military campaign.
- Beijing tried to negotiate a peaceful surrender of Tibetan forces, in part to appear to be accommodating.
- A military invasion drove into the East of Tibet but stopped well short of Lhasa, the capital.
- Despite the effective defeat of the Tibetan Army, the Chinese leadership was concerned about the possibility of ongoing resistance. In consequence, they gave numerous assurances that China would respect Tibetan culture, religion, institutions, and daily practices.
- Both sides signed a one-sided peace agreement.
- In the following months the PLA occupied all of Tibet.

- The Chinese regime abandoned almost all of the political and cultural concessions they made during the following five years.
- Tibet effectively became a province of the People's Republic of China.

### Chinese Support for Southeast Asian Insurgencies, 1950–1980

At the end of the Second World War, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal returned to their colonies in Southeast Asia and received a mixed reception. In several of these territories, resistance to the Japanese occupation had been led by strong nationalist leaders, some of whom were committed communists. For the new communist regime in Beijing, actively supporting the revolutionary nationalists in Southeast Asia was ideologically and strategically appealing. It offered geopolitical advantages in forcing Western powers to withdraw from China's approaches; it had the potential to impose serious strains on Western polities and economies; and, when Mao and his colleagues felt that their regime was under threat at home, it provided an external focus to distract the Chinese population and rally domestic support. The communist regime in Beijing tailored the form of its support to the specific circumstances of each theater. Nevertheless, there were several common features:

- The Chinese leadership had strong ideological and geostrategic motivations.
- The communist regimes in Beijing and Moscow cooperated closely on such operations until the mid-1960s. During this period Beijing was accorded primary responsibility for supporting the revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia.
- The earliest assistance usually included strong ideological and propaganda support together with political warfare training and systems.
- China made sustained efforts to divide targeted societies, recruit local populations, and weaken opposition to the revolutionary cause.
- Chinese forces provided extensive military training to local revolutionaries, together with a wide range of military systems and operational supplies.
- Beijing generally encouraged the revolutionary movements to follow the Maoist three stage military doctrine.<sup>43</sup>
- Special PLA units were raised to provide advisory services to local guerrilla units deep in foreign territory.

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43 Mao Tse-tung emphasized that a protracted war *must* pass through three stages to victory. This was certainly the case in the Chinese revolutionary and anti-Japanese wars. The Chinese also supported the Vietminh and Vietcong struggles, Castro's revolutionary war in Cuba, and the Pathet Lao victory in Laos, where they encouraged local versions of the same approach. They attempted this approach in Thailand, the Philippines, Malaya, and elsewhere, but the strategy failed in those theaters. For details see Mao Tse-tung, "On Protracted War," in Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 2, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1954), pp. 184ff. See also Katzenbach and Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-tung," in Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*.

- China provided many political leaders, local commanders, and technical specialists extensive training in southern China.
- PLA officers commanded some key military operations on these foreign battlefields.
- Beijing resisted calls to commit main force PLA units to fight in the Southeast Asian combat zones.
- The Chinese regime generally sought to hide or disguise the extensive assistance it was providing to these revolutionary movements.
- Beijing did, however, provide extensive diplomatic, propaganda, and ideological support in international forums.

### **China's Decade-Long Hybrid War Against Vietnam, 1977–1987**

Following the communist victories in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in 1975, the regime in Hanoi attempted to establish an alliance with its new communist neighbors. Although Vietnam's initiative failed, Beijing was nevertheless deeply disturbed by these developments. It feared the possibility of a Vietnamese-led coalition to its immediate south with strong links to its communist rival, the Soviet Union.

The Chinese response was multi-pronged and sustained over ten years. Beijing was determined to prevent the emergence of a Vietnamese-led bloc in Indo-China, undermine Soviet influence in the region, and demonstrate its regional pre-eminence. These goals led the Chinese to provide extensive political, diplomatic, economic, and military support to the new Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, which was much more comfortable with Maoist ideology than with the brand of communism espoused by Vietnam. Territorial disputes broke out between Cambodia and Vietnam in 1975–1976. China initially sought a mediating role but in April 1977 it urged the Cambodians to put pressure on Hanoi by harassing villages across Vietnam's southwest border and later by launching Cambodian commando raids deep into Vietnamese territory. In response, Hanoi launched a multi-divisional raid against the relevant Cambodian military units in October 1977. Nevertheless, Cambodian cross-border harassments continued. As a result, the Vietnamese launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia the following year and overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime.

In the meantime, China ramped-up its propaganda and broader political warfare operations across Vietnam's northern border. Chinese agents penetrated deeply into Vietnamese territory to encourage minority ethnic communities to side with Beijing. They also worked to secure or destroy key elements of infrastructure in the north of Vietnam. Then, in order to "teach Vietnam a lesson" for damaging Beijing's interests in Cambodia and elsewhere, some 80,000 Chinese troops invaded northern Vietnam in February 1979 and attempted to seize several provincial centers. Following fierce Vietnamese resistance, the Chinese forces withdrew from nearly all areas two months later. However, Chinese harassments continued for the next eight years, and there were a further six serious clashes. Intense political warfare and

other operations continued until Mikhail Gorbachev initiated the Soviet Union's rapprochement with Beijing in 1987.

This was a long and complex multi-party Chinese campaign. Some of its primary features were:

- Beijing held strong geostrategic and ideological imperatives.
- China maintained a deep concern not only for the behavior of neighboring states but also the involvement and influence of a major external power, the Soviet Union.
- China launched early and continuous propaganda and other political warfare operations in large parts of Indo-China.
- Beijing coopted the Khmer Rouge regime as a third-party proxy to conduct operations in support of its cause.
- China Provided substantial quantities of military equipment and training, especially to Cambodia.
- In an attempt to increase pressure on Hanoi, Beijing ceased all aid flows to Vietnam.
- Vietnam and other parts of the region were penetrated by Chinese special forces personnel and other agents who sought to gather intelligence, recruit minority communities, sabotage key facilities, secure priority infrastructure, and prepare the way for the conventional military invasion that followed.
- Beijing launched a major conventional invasion into northern Vietnam, taking substantial casualties in order to impose heavy political, human, economic, and military costs on Vietnam and underline China's predominant regional power.
- Following the withdrawal of China's invasion force, intense political warfare operations and periodic military clashes continued for a further eight years.

### **The Doklam Incident, Bhutan, June 2017**

China's long southern borders with India and Bhutan were drawn during the colonial era and have long been disputed. These border areas have been the scene of periodic skirmishes and they were at the center of a major Sino-Indian war in 1962. In June 2017, a platoon of Chinese border guards moved into part of the Doklam Plateau, an area claimed by both China and Bhutan that is close to Bhutan's border with India. The Chinese border guards destroyed bunkers used by the Bhutanese Army, and a Chinese road construction team then arrived and commenced work. In response, Bhutan's primary security partner, India, sent an army detachment that arrived a week later to block the road work. An armed standoff ensued for two months.

China's diplomats and mass media communicated numerous warnings and threats and attempted to force the Indian Government to withdraw. These Chinese political warfare operations appeared designed to intimidate Delhi, generate divisions within the Indian Government, and foster tensions between Delhi and the capitals of India's regional and global partners. Delhi fully appreciated Doklam's proximity to the narrow 17-mile "Chicken's Neck" territory linking the northeastern Indian states to the rest of the country. The Indian Government also realized that its management of this artificial crisis had the potential to set a precedent for future Sino-Indian security relations. In consequence, Delhi managed its rhetoric carefully, stood firm on the ground, and eventually persuaded Beijing to cease its operations and agree to a face-saving joint statement. In the months that followed, both sides greatly strengthened their military infrastructures and forces in the region.

Some of the key features of this Chinese campaign were as follows:

- China had a long-standing territorial claim to the area and broader geostrategic motivations. In particular, Beijing wanted to force a humiliating backdown by its Indian rival in an area of great geostrategic importance.
- Beijing aimed to exploit the security and legal ambiguities of the Bhutanese sector of the Doklam Plateau.
- Beijing's initial operations were relatively low key. They appeared to be designed to construct permanent infrastructure in order to establish effective control of the area, thus creating a "new reality."
- The Chinese border guards operated under the effective protection of much larger and more powerful PLA units located in the region.
- Once the Chinese realized that the Indians planned to respond strongly, they greatly increased the intensity of their multi-mode political warfare campaign designed to sow dissent in Delhi and partner capitals, force an Indian withdrawal, and rally the Chinese public to the cause.
- Beijing effectively challenged Delhi to escalate the issue by deploying regular Indian Army units to the area. When Delhi accepted the challenge and deployed army troops, Beijing was, in turn, impaled on the horns of a dilemma. Did it further escalate the dispute or did it freeze its border troops in place? After nearly two months of deliberations, Beijing decided to avoid escalation.
- India's leadership released details of the Chinese operations to the international media and kept them regularly updated, which served as an effective counter to most elements of the Chinese political warfare campaign.
- Beijing had little success in sowing dissent in Delhi or undermining India's international political and security relationships.

- Beijing appears to have considered this operation to be merely the first phase of what could become a larger campaign in the future. China has not renounced any of its claims, and it has continued to develop substantial military-related infrastructure in the region.
- India, relieved by China's withdrawal, did not secure any conditions or concessions that it might be able to leverage if a similar conflict arose in the future. The lack of consequences for Beijing's incursion provides little reason to think that China would be deterred or even think twice before attempting a similar incursion again, whether at Doklam or elsewhere.
- India missed an opportunity to use international institutions to enforce norms related to sovereignty. Upholding and underscoring international norms has a central role to play in countering Chinese revisionism.

### China's Coercive Posturing in the Senkaku Islands

Beijing has claimed the Japanese Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea as Chinese territory since 1971. These deserted islands are strategically located northeast of Taiwan, form part of the first island chain east of China, and possess exclusive economic zones of considerable value and strategic significance. During the last decade, Beijing has conducted an intense political warfare and paramilitary campaign to force Tokyo to acknowledge Chinese sovereignty and effective control over the Senkaku Islands and their surrounds. The scale and pace of these operations increased markedly in September 2012 when China deployed six maritime surveillance cutters to the area. In the period since, Beijing has maintained an almost continuous Coastguard presence with PLA Navy units providing overwatch support in the adjacent region. Beijing justified these operations with largely spurious legal claims, strong propaganda streams, and a sustained diplomatic campaign. Then, in August 2016, Beijing further ratcheted up its pressure by deploying between 200–300 fishing vessels of the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia and an unusually large contingent of Coastguard cutters to overwhelm the comparatively modest Japanese Coastguard presence in the area.

In recent years the Chinese have also expanded their basing and support facilities in the region for Coastguard cutters, the fishing vessels of the Maritime Militia, and the PLA Navy. The size and sophistication of the Coastguard vessels deployed to the area has grown substantially, as has the frequency of Chinese naval and air transits of the area.

Beijing has been conducting a sustained campaign of coercive posturing primarily to force Tokyo to accept *de facto* joint administration of the islands and their surrounds to pave the way for eventually securing complete control. The Chinese regime also views this struggle as a key part of its campaign to establish regional hegemony and undermine the U.S. relationships with its key allies in the Indo-Pacific.

Some of the features of this Chinese campaign have been:

- Beijing asserted an early territorial claim with little legal justification.



- China holds a revisionist geostrategic motivation.
- Beijing initiated an unprovoked multi-phased security crisis.
- China exerted substantial coercive pressure sustained over an extended period through a sophisticated multi-mode campaign.
- Chinese paramilitary forces conducted extensive operations with the moral and logistic support of powerful military forces located in the adjacent region.
- Chinese units have also periodically taken aggressive tactical actions in apparent attempts to provoke Japanese escalation to conventional combat.
- The Chinese strategy appears aimed at dividing and exhausting the Japanese, undermining Tokyo's confidence, damaging Japan's alliance relationships, and forcing concessions over time.
- The Japanese Government has so far refused to acknowledge the existence of a dispute, maintained its continuous Coastguard presence with military overwatch capabilities in adjacent areas, and continued its firm stance on its sovereignty rights. Tokyo has also reinforced its close alliance relationship with the United States, and Washington has confirmed that it considers the Senkakus to be Japanese territory; hence, Tokyo's control of these islands is covered by the U.S.-Japan security alliance.
- While Beijing has not been successful in its assertion of sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands, it does appear to have convinced the Japanese public and allied and partner governments that it has established a "new normal" around the Senkaku Islands that is markedly different to the situation a decade ago.

### **China's Dominance of the South China Sea**

Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese Government expressed very little interest in the South China Sea. However, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Chinese nationalists established two small garrisons on isolated islets in the region and published a map asserting a claim over most of the South China Sea. Following the communist victory in 1949, the Chinese claim was retained. During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese established modest facilities on a few further islets and started to more assertively press Beijing's claim to most of the South China Sea within its arbitrarily drawn nine dash line. Chinese agencies warned foreign oil companies to cease operations within the claimed area without their approval, and Chinese military and paramilitary vessels started to more actively harass transiting foreign naval vessels, most notably the USS Impeccable. Following the appointment of Xi Jinping to CCP leadership in 2012, the pace and scale of China's South China Sea operations accelerated markedly.

An early step was to intensify and extend China's political warfare campaign in all of the ASEAN and other relevant countries to reinforce the strength of Beijing's commitment on the issue. At the same time, greatly expanded base facilities were built for the PLA Navy and the Chinese Coastguard at Yulin, on the southern coast of Hainan. These facilities provided the essential infrastructure for Beijing to base and sustain very extensive, modern forces on the northern shore of the South China Sea. No regional country had the power or inclination to directly confront these formidable capabilities.

It was in this context that the Chinese then tasked civilian contractors to work with local maritime forces to dredge up seven new islands to house military bases and associated facilities. By 2017 the finishing touches were being placed on three major air, naval, intelligence, and communications bases, as well as numerous other facilities, in the Spratly Island group toward the center of the South China Sea. While the United States and other major powers protested diplomatically, no country wished to directly contest this "new normal." Hence, through a sophisticated multi-mode campaign that made extensive use of civilian and paramilitary assets, Beijing established a *fait accompli*—dominance of almost all of the South China Sea, the world's second busiest international waterway that is of comparable size to the Mediterranean Sea.

Notable features of this campaign include the following:

- China made a territorial claim based on weak legal foundations.
- Beijing demonstrated resolve to enforce its territorial claim by attacking and inflicting significant casualties on Vietnamese maritime forces on several occasions during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.
- The Chinese leadership astutely exploited of a period of opportunity in which it perceived the West to be weakened and distracted.
- China sustained political warfare operations designed primarily to divide and disrupt the decision-making of the littoral states and undermine the credibility of their alliance partners.<sup>44</sup>
- The Chinese made extensive use of civilian and paramilitary assets to undertake survey, construction, and related activities.
- Initially the Chinese promised unhindered international sea and air movements through the area, but later they insisted on a rigid interpretation of China's territorial rights and began to routinely harass ships and aircraft operating close to Chinese facilities, vessels, and aircraft.

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44 Ryan Martinson and Katsuya Yamamoto, "Three PLAN Officers May Have Just Revealed What China Wants in the South China Sea," *The National Interest*, July 9, 2017, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/three-plan-officers-may-have-just-revealed-what-china-wants-21458>.

- Beijing made extensive use of deception by, for instance, asserting that the new structures were being built to protect fishermen in bad weather, to facilitate maritime rescues, and to support international tourists.
- When the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague found in favor of the Philippines on key South China Sea issues in 2014, Beijing denounced the decision and refused to acknowledge the court's authority. Beijing's revisionist intentions for the international rule of law were highlighted.
- Despite Xi Jinping's direct assurances to President Obama in September 2015 that "China does not intend to pursue militarization," militarization continued in a phased manner during the following four years.<sup>45</sup> China now has 27 outposts in the South China Sea, many of which host military facilities.<sup>46</sup>
- Once Beijing felt that its presence in the South China Sea was secure, its propaganda switched to applauding the "prevailing calm" of neighboring states and sharply criticizing U.S. and other Western state passage operations and protests in the region as "destabilizing" and threatening peace.
- Beijing had strong geostrategic and geoeconomic imperatives. The newly developed military facilities are networked, and together they provide a strategic buffer zone in China's southeastern approaches. They also provide launching pads to support future Chinese operations into and through the Southeast Asian archipelago. In addition, China's effective seizure of most of the South China Sea underlined Beijing's regional preeminence and seriously damaged the credibility of the United States and other Western powers.

## Echoes of China's Historical Strategic Principles

Figure 1 summarizes the frequency with which the primary strategic and operational principles propounded by Mao Tse-tung during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century featured in a significant way during the six hybrid warfare campaigns conducted by the Chinese regime since it seized power in 1949.

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45 "Militarization of the South China Sea," in International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2017*, Strategic Dossier (London: IISS, 2017), p. 10.

46 For details, see "China Island Tracker," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS, as of May 9, 2019, available at <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

**FIGURE 1: MAO TSE-TUNG'S STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES IN CHINA'S HYBRID WARFARE CAMPAIGNS**

	Invasion of Tibet	Support for SE Asian insurgencies	China–Vietnam conflict	Doklam intrusion	Senkaku Islands dispute	Seizure of SC Sea territories
Clear goals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ambit claim	✓			✓	✓	✓
Compelling narrative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assert victory is inevitable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
New correlation of forces	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Work to generate “sea” of supporters	✓	✓	✓			✓
Intense political warfare	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foster international friends	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Seize initiative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Exploit political weaknesses	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tighten discipline			✓		✓	✓
Dominate media	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Avoid frontal operations		✓		✓	✓	✓
Strike empty spaces		✓		✓	✓	✓
Strategic patience		✓			✓	✓
Employ 3 primary phases		✓			✓	✓

## The Level of Continuity in Chinese Strategic Principles and Doctrine

This analysis of six hybrid warfare campaigns launched by the Chinese communist regime since it seized power in 1949 reveals not only continuity in the application of several key strategic principles but also some important variants.

### Common Features in Chinese Hybrid Warfare Campaigns

**Asserting clear goals.** In all six campaigns, the Chinese leadership had clear goals that were either stated publicly or can be readily inferred. First, Beijing was driven by strong geostrategic imperatives. China's operations were focused on border regions, mostly in the maritime approaches to China. A primary motivation was to strengthen China's security and create a deep buffer zone. Second, all six campaigns took place within an ideological framework of defending and reinforcing the CCP's version of Marxism-Leninism as it was viewed at the time. There was a sense that these operations would progress the spread of this ideology and help make the world safer for communism, including within China itself. A third motivation was to undermine regional and great power rivals either directly or indirectly. Most of these operations were designed at least in part to weaken the strategic positions of the United States and its allies and, if possible, force major concessions or a withdrawal from the region. Fourth, the Chinese regime was keen to exploit its international operations to reinforce the Party's legitimacy at home. This was reflected in intense propaganda campaigns and strong nationalist messaging aimed primarily at the Chinese public and the diaspora abroad.

**Propounding a driving strategic narrative.** The primary goals of the regime lead directly to the narratives Beijing employed both domestically and internationally to justify its campaigns. The precise form of these narratives was tailored to the circumstances of different areas and eras, but, in all six cases, there was a strong Marxist-determinist emphasis on the inevitability of victory. In recent years, China's operations in the South China Sea, around the Senkakus, and on the Doklam Plateau have been framed within the regime's storyline of China overcoming the "century of humiliation" and restoring its rightful place as the predominant power in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. The regime is portraying China as rising to be an equal, if not a superior, superpower to the United States.

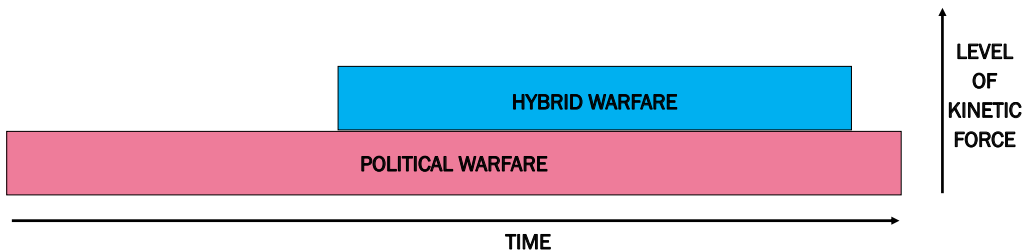
**Calculating a broad correlation of forces to identify and exploit the enemy's political weaknesses.** In each campaign, the Chinese regime used an expansive assessment of the correlation of forces to identify and directly target its perception of the enemy's political weaknesses. In most cases, the regime has correctly judged that its planned operations would not be perceived in Washington and other allied capitals as a threat deserving a forceful response. Some of China's campaigns have exploited the West's inability to sustain operations over an extended period, especially when, to U.S. and allied publics, the issue appears to be of marginal importance and the economic and military costs of engaging appear to be substantial. In most of these campaigns, the Chinese approach also sought to exploit the seams

in allied posture in order to divide and disrupt enemy societies and their decision-makers through comprehensive political warfare (united front) operations.

**Striving to establish clear conventional force superiority and escalation dominance in the theater.** Preceding each of Beijing’s hybrid warfare campaigns, the regime greatly strengthened conventional military forces in the theatre in order to intimidate local opponents, deter conflict escalation, and dissuade distant powers from becoming involved. As Toshi Yoshihara remarks in his case study on China’s Senkaku Islands campaign, military proximity matters.<sup>47</sup> In some of China’s hybrid operations, these powerful, locally deployed conventional forces have performed an overwatch function just over the horizon. In other hybrid operations, they have been more directly involved. In all of the campaigns, PLA forces have either used kinetic force or appeared to be authorized to use kinetic force if the operation was directly challenged by an opponent’s military forces.

**Conducting intense political warfare operations before, during and after hybrid operations.** Intense political warfare operations have preceded and accompanied every Chinese hybrid warfare operation. These political warfare campaigns have been directed at not only the players in the operational theatre but also the more distant powers that have the capability to intervene and China’s domestic population. To these ends, the regime has always sought to dominate relevant media reporting of the campaign using leadership statements, agents of influence, cyber and other electronic operations, as well as espionage. These campaigns have been designed to recruit supporters to the cause, divide and disrupt the enemy community, and encourage passivity in targeted governments. Political warfare operations have, hence, been a foundational element of all of China’s successful hybrid warfare campaigns. The basic relationship is illustrated in Figure 2.

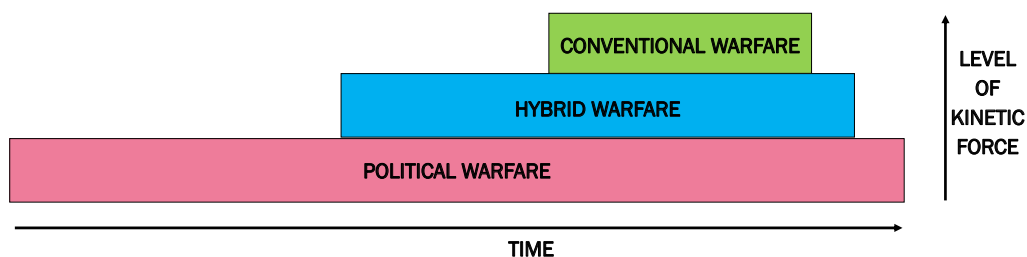
**FIGURE 2: THE RELATIONSHIP OF HYBRID WARFARE WITH POLITICAL WARFARE IN CHINESE STRATEGIC LOGIC**



47 See Toshi Yoshihara’s case study in Volume II, Annex B of this report.

In a small number of cases, China's political warfare and hybrid warfare campaigns have preceded further escalation into full-scale conventional military offensives. This has been the case, in an abbreviated form, in Beijing's offensive into Tibet in 1950–1951 and in China's operations into Vietnam from 1977–1987. The conceptual relationship between political, hybrid, and conventional operations in these cases is illustrated in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3: THE RELATIONSHIP OF HYBRID WARFARE WITH POLITICAL AND CONVENTIONAL WARFARE IN CHINESE STRATEGIC LOGIC**



The Chinese regime is particularly adept at conducting international political warfare campaigns to deter the active involvement of rivals, foster enemy divisions, and encourage timidity and token actions by opposition decision-makers. In combination, these and related measures have proven to be effective in generating appeasing and accommodating approaches by the major democracies and, over time, in winning strategically important victories for Beijing.

Understanding this close partnership between China's political, hybrid, and conventional operations is essential to an accurate understanding of Beijing's campaign logic. China's hybrid warfare campaigns would be very difficult to conduct without strong political warfare operations running in close coordination before, during, and after the hybrid warfare phase. This has many important consequences, not least of which is the criticality of any serious Western counterstrategy addressing the political and hybrid components of Chinese campaigns together. They are the two primary "arms" of Chinese gray zone campaigning. One arm alone has limited power, but, when operating in a coordinated way together, they can be formidable. This key aspect of Chinese hybrid warfare strategy is elaborated later in this report.<sup>48</sup>

**Fostering international allies.** While China has few firm international allies, it does have a number of international partners that are prepared to support Beijing out of self-interest or because of their opposition to the United States or other Western powers. Countries such as North Korea, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Iran have lent their support to Beijing's campaigns in

48 See Toshi Yoshihara's case study in Annex B of this report.

many ways.<sup>49</sup> This includes initiating major distractions, stretching U.S. and allied resources in other theatres, and supporting Beijing in international forums, such as the United Nations and ASEAN. Through these and related means, Beijing has been able to create new political fronts to distract its rivals and further undermine their resistance.

## Major Variants in China’s Hybrid Warfare Operations

Although the above characteristics of Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns are common across the six cases, analysis of those cases reveal three variants or sub-types in Beijing’s hybrid operations.

### Hybrid Campaign Type #1: For Challenging Major Power Interests

The dominant type of campaign is that which involves a significant challenge to the interests of a major power rival, such as the United States, Japan, or India. These types of hybrid operations share the following prominent characteristics:

- They are designed to win advances in areas where the status is unclear or ambiguous and Beijing’s claims are only strongly contested by minor regional parties.
- An ambit claim is announced at an early stage.
- Very strong and sustained political warfare campaigns are launched prior to hybrid operations to divide, disrupt, and weaken all opposing states and organizations and encourage either acquiescence or timid responses.
- In the early stages of these hybrid operations the primary activities are usually conducted by civilian contractors, non-military staffs, or paramilitary militia personnel.
- Powerful main force military units are not directly involved in the early phases but are held over-the-horizon to deter conflict escalation.
- Rapidly paced civilian-led operations aim to produce “new facts” or baselines on the ground for discussion when China is challenged. Modest political assurances may be

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49 North Korea’s primary distractions have derived from Pyongyang’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs, periodic bellicose language, and its involvement in the proliferation of several sensitive military technologies. Cambodia has contributed strongly to Beijing’s strategic interests by working to prevent ASEAN reaching an anti-China consensus, especially on the South China Sea. Pakistan’s military posture and periodic tolerance of terrorist groups has caused numerous security challenges for India and Afghanistan, in particular. Through its close links with Pakistan, Beijing has been able to constrain the rise of Delhi’s power and slow its emergence as a more powerful strategic balance to China. It has also been able to complicate the security challenge posed by Afghanistan to the United States and its Western allies. In recent decades, Tehran has complicated and distracted Washington and other allied capitals in ways that have been very much in Beijing’s interests. Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs, its support for separatist elements in several Middle Eastern states, and its potential threat to Persian Gulf energy resources have served as serious distractions for the United States and several of Washington’s Middle Eastern and European allies. Allied security resources and decision-maker attention focused on the Middle East is diverted from the Indo-Pacific.



given to deflect criticism and buy time, but these verbal assurances are rarely honored for extended periods.

- The Chinese regime uses strategic patience to wait out opponents and give them time to accommodate themselves to the “new realities.”

### **Hybrid Campaign Type #2: For Challenging Minor Power Interests**

Beijing uses a second variant of the hybrid campaign model against much weaker states in circumstances where the Chinese leadership judges that the danger of major power intervention is remote. In cases such as the invasion of Tibet, the Chinese leadership knew that they had combat-ready forces in the region that were capable of quickly overwhelming any conventional resistance. In cases such as this, China’s hybrid operations share the following prominent characteristics:

- The regime asserts its claims early.
- China conducts intense political warfare operations over a relatively short period designed to win over, divide, weaken, and demoralize the opposition. Additional goals are to reduce the need for kinetic military operations and lower the risk of prolonged resistance.
- Chinese forces launch rapidly paced conventional military operations at a relatively early stage to overwhelm armed resistance.
- China makes tailored political and social concessions to facilitate local accommodation to the new “facts on the ground.” Some general assurances may be provided to concerned international parties.
- Within 3–5 years, China abandons most, if not all, of the political concessions and assurances.

### **Hybrid Campaign Type #3: For Using Proxies in an Indirect Campaign**

The third variant of Chinese hybrid operation involves Beijing using and actively supporting proxy regimes or revolutionary movements to further its strategic goals. Examples of this variant of Chinese hybrid campaign include Beijing’s support for the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in the 1970s and China’s active support for a number of communist revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia from the 1950s till the 1980s. These types of campaigns share the following key features:

- China fosters ideological and broader political incitement and encouragement of the struggle.

- China launches early political warfare operations to support partners and demonize their enemies. These operations have included radio broadcasts, printed propaganda materials, and Chinese diplomatic actions internationally.
- The regime provides extensive training to proxy forces in their own environments and also in China.
- China supplies extensive military and other equipment.
- Chinese forces provide highly qualified specialist personnel including, on occasion, PLA officers to command operations.
- Chinese forces share PLA doctrine and revolutionary war experience, especially in encouraging preparations for prolonged campaigns; on the importance of winning a succession of small, dispersed victories; and on the desirability of following Mao Tse-tung's strategy of three campaign phases.

## CHAPTER 3

# Success of China's Hybrid Warfare Campaigns

The scorecard on the hybrid warfare campaigns conducted by the Chinese communist regime since it seized power in 1949 reveals many direct and indirect successes. Most the examples included in this report conclude with some form of local geostrategic, economic, ideological, or political gains. This has been most obviously the case with the campaigns in Tibet, against northern Vietnam, in the South China Sea, and against the Senkaku Islands.

Balancing those advances have, however, been some substantial costs. All of Beijing's hybrid warfare campaigns have demonstrated the regime's determination to expand its influence and political control by interfering in neighboring states and, when circumstances permit, deploying paramilitary and military forces into regional maritime zones or territories. As China's economic, military, and political strength has grown, these hybrid and associated political warfare operations have attracted closer international attention and generated deeper and more widespread concerns.

### Major Elements of Success

The Chinese regime has achieved a number of successes through its combined hybrid and closely integrated political warfare campaigns. They are as follows:

**Reinforced the regime's legitimacy at home and with some diaspora communities.** The propaganda and broader political warfare operations that have accompanied these campaigns have portrayed Beijing's actions as being significant steps toward restoring China's rightful status as the predominant power in the Indo-Pacific and a superpower rival of the United States. Nationalist themes have been used successfully to bind the Chinese people more tightly to the regime.

**Seized territory.** China seized or won partial or complete control of key land and maritime areas without provoking a conventional war with a major power. This is most obviously the case in Tibet, the 1962 border conflict with India, the extended campaign on Vietnam's northern border from 1977–1987, operations in the South China Sea, and the Senkaku Islands dispute. This territorial expansion is progressing Beijing's security goal of denying major power rivals access to its strategic approaches. In doing this, it is seizing highly strategic locations, many of which may play key roles in future conflicts. Beijing is also establishing *de facto* control over valuable fishery and seabed resources.

**Created extended buffer zones.** It increases the area of its buffer not only by seizing areas adjacent to China's borders but also by persuading or coercing a range of neighboring countries in East, Southeast, South, and West Asia to conduct their international policies in broad accord with Beijing's interests.

**Helped to create an extended sphere of influence.** China expanded its sphere of influence well beyond the buffer zones to include much of Southeast Asia, some parts of South Asia, some island territories in the Western Pacific, and even some parts of the Middle East, Africa, and South America.

**Reinforced China's economic and technological ascendancy.** China strengthened its economic and technological standing by establishing a physical presence in strategic locations and giving Beijing privileged access to valuable resources, markets, and key elements of global infrastructure.

**Helped to recruit a number of proxy or associated states.** China has formed limited strategic partnerships with a number of states holding their own revisionist agendas. These partners include North Korea, Cambodia, Laos, Pakistan, and Iran.

**Distracted, divided, and deterred rivals.** These operations have placed pressure on key strategic rivals, deterred their serious intervention by threatening disproportionate costs, undermined their credibility, divided some allies, and weakened the coherence of the international opposition that has confronted China.

**Demonstrated mastery of gray zone operations.** The Chinese have shown repeatedly that they fully understand how to conduct successful operations in the gray zone. They have demonstrated great skill in exploiting the space between Western conceptions of "peace" and "war" in ways that have perplexed and defeated their Western rivals in key regions.

## Major Elements of Failure

At the same time, the Chinese regime has borne costs from its hybrid warfare campaigns. They include the following:

**Damaged China's international reputation.** China's combined hybrid and political warfare campaigns have damaged the communist regime's reputation internationally. While

Beijing attracts some respect, it is rarely trusted and, in many countries, it is feared. Excluding economics, China has weak soft power—or the power of attraction—and these hybrid campaigns have further denuded Beijing’s soft power stocks in many countries, especially in most of the Western allies.<sup>50</sup>

**Prompted global caution.** Beijing’s hybrid and political warfare campaigns have induced widespread caution about fostering relationships with China. These assertive and intrusive operations have encouraged reviews of economic, technological, security, social, academic, and political partnerships between much of the world and relevant Chinese institutions.

**Encouraged Western allies and other powers to consider counters.** As the Chinese regime’s hybrid and political warfare operations have attracted increased attention during the last decade, many countries have started to consider potential countermeasures. These steps by like-minded, mostly democratic governments may mark the beginning of a strong international coalition to counter such authoritarian state campaigns.

**Triggered discussion of multi-domain sanctions.** The Chinese regime’s recent hybrid operations in the South China Sea, on the Doklam Plateau, and around the Senkaku Islands, together with extensive accompanying political warfare operations, have stimulated the U.S., allied, and partner governments to develop much stronger stances in multiple domains against Beijing’s interests. Declaratory policies describing China as a competitor, rival, and threat are now commonplace. Congressional and parliamentary committees routinely discuss the serious economic, technological, and security challenges China now poses. Tariffs on Chinese exports, controls on the transfer of technologies, investment restrictions, travel restrictions, and tightened border controls have been instigated by some countries and are under consideration by others. Many corporations are reducing their footprints in China and giving priority to business opportunities elsewhere. Beijing now has a substantially reduced number of supporters internationally, and many business, academic, and social organizations are working to reduce their exposure within China. Should these negative trends continue, significant difficulties will arise for the regime as it strives to sustain the country’s economic growth, technological development, and social cohesion. There are strong indications that Xi Jinping and his close colleagues are aware of these developments and are deeply concerned about the possibility that the United States and some of its allies and partners may move to detach their economies from China.<sup>51</sup> The potential economic, social, and political consequences for Beijing could be substantial.

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50 See, for example, “China Power,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, updated March 29, 2019, available at <https://chinapower.csis.org/global-views/>. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a further stiffening of opinion against China in the Western Pacific allies and other countries during 2018 and 2019. This is particularly apparent within the national security communities of many states.

51 See, for example, Zhou Xi, “Xi Jinping Calls for ‘New Long March’ in Dramatic Sign that China is Preparing for Protracted Trade War,” *South China Morning Post*, May 21, 2019; and “Calls to Harden the West’s Defences against China Suggest Despair,” *The Economist*, May 9, 2019.

## The Balance Sheet

Assessing the net gains and losses from China's hybrid warfare campaigns is more complicated than it may appear at first sight. Beijing has clearly won a number of tactical or partial victories. The regime has reinforced its nationalist credentials at home and within many parts of the Chinese diaspora. It has also strengthened its economic and political power abroad. Beijing's strategic influence has reached a level that is unprecedented in the modern era. The Chinese regime has been prepared to lose many Chinese lives, expend substantial resources, and divert much political, administrative, and military attention to conduct these campaigns. The tactical costs have not been trivial, but these operations have contributed to China's emergence as an increasingly dominant regional force and a great power rival to the United States. Beijing has also achieved a significantly reduced, and more constrained, allied presence in some strategic regions.

China's combined hybrid and political warfare operations have also generated serious divisions between some of the close allies and within most allied societies. There are strong imperatives for allied countries to stand with Washington to confront and defeat Beijing's interference and expansionist campaigns. However, within most of the allies, including the United States, there are also strong business, media, and academic voices urging the avoidance of confrontation with China at all costs. These people are quick to favor short-term economic gains over medium- and long-term security. Indeed, at times, some people appear to side with the Chinese regime against their national governments. Distant allied governments, especially in Europe, have also sought to gain advantages for themselves by standing aloof from the key security imperatives of the Indo-Pacific allies.<sup>52</sup> Beijing has exploited these divisions with considerable success.

Nevertheless, China's hybrid operations have also played a key role in alerting the decision-makers of many countries to the highly assertive and expansionist designs of the regime in Beijing. Over time, the costs at the strategic level may prove to be even more substantial. China's international reputation and trustworthiness have been seriously damaged. In contrast to the situation a decade ago, the attention of the United States, other major Western powers, and their partners is now focused intently and very critically on almost every step the Chinese regime takes. And these countries are starting to work together to actively counter Beijing's international campaigns. The result is that Beijing's combined hybrid and political warfare campaigns have helped create an international environment in which, on the one hand, China's interests have been significantly advanced, but, on the other hand, international resistance is rising. The consequences for the regime may prove to be profound. Beijing's expansionist campaigns have inadvertently built the foundations for what may become a new Cold War.

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Wright and Thorsten Benner, "China's Relations with U.S. Allies and Partners in Europe," testimony to U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 5, 2018.

## CHAPTER 4

# The West's Vulnerability to China's Hybrid Warfare Campaigns

The responses of the United States and the other Western powers to China's hybrid warfare operations have varied considerably. In response to some of Beijing's campaigns, the West has been hesitant, poorly coordinated, sometimes incoherent, and of little effect in the theater. This was the case with China's invasion of Tibet, its support of the Khmer Rouge, its invasion of North Vietnam, and its effective seizure of most of the South China Sea. In other cases, such as China's operations against the Senkaku Islands and Chinese activities on the Doklam Plateau, the most proximate democratic state has been quick to take a firm stand and deploy relevant forces, while other allies and partners have generally been slow to do more than offer diplomatic support.

This uneven track record is a consequence of the fact that the United States, its close allies, and its democratic partners bring to these operations markedly different mindsets, systems, and structures to those of Beijing. Allied governments have viewed these Chinese operations through different ideological lens—they draw on substantially different strategic histories and cultures to decision-makers in Beijing. Washington and other allied capitals have also been mostly focused on strategic priorities in other parts of the world, far distant from China's strategic approaches. Even on those occasions when Western governments have wished to take substantive action to thwart Beijing's hybrid campaigns, they have found that their defense and security organizations and operational instruments have mostly been ill-suited for the task. Their organizations and structures are designed primarily for more conventional diplomatic and military campaigns.

In short, this report argues that there has been a strategic mismatch in the hybrid warfare space between China and the West. In this field, China has been the consistent initiator, the dominant local power, the battlefield selector, the theater innovator, and the tactical

master. The West has almost always been in reactive mode with limited interests at stake. Its responses have been often delayed, usually conventional, of limited practical effect, and, in some instances, reduced to token observer duties.

Beijing has been well aware of these Western weaknesses and exploited them with skill. As discussed earlier, when Beijing has perceived the possibility of triggering a strong Western reaction to its hybrid operations, it has usually signaled its claims very early, conducted extensive political warfare operations to soften international sentiment, moved gradually, tasked civilian and paramilitary agencies to take the lead, and it been prepared to pause or order short-term tactical retreats in order to avoid a direct clash. In short, the Chinese leadership has never lost sight of its long-term political and strategic goals, and it has been prepared to be tactically flexible and exceptionally patient.

Before considering the potential for more effective Western counterstrategies, it is important to look more closely at why Washington and allied capitals have responded to Chinese hybrid campaigns in the way they have. Why has the West been so vulnerable to this type of Chinese campaign? The following summarizes the key reasons for the West's poor performance in this field so far.

**Sharply contrasting strategic cultures.** The Chinese approach to gray zone operations is driven by a completely different mindset to that of the West. The regime in Beijing views its struggle with the United States and its Western partners as being existential, continuous, and very long term. In conducting its hybrid operations, Beijing routinely employs a wide range of civilian, paramilitary, and military assets in intricate “combined arms” operations in very patient extended campaigns. And, as mentioned earlier in this report, China's hybrid campaigns are always undertaken within a “sea” of intensive political warfare.

The United States and its allies, by contrast, draw a sharp distinction between “peace” and “war,” with very little scope for active conflict in between. In this Western conception, there is scope for debates, disputes, demands, tensions, and major geostrategic contests without defying the fundamentals of “peace.” In the Western mind, “war” only occurs when formal or informal forces engage each other using kinetic force, usually on a large scale, in a relatively unconstrained manner, and ideally for the shortest possible period. Moreover, in almost all circumstances, Western decision-makers tend to view China's hybrid operations, or “incidents,” in isolation from the other elements of the regime's long-running campaign against the West. In consequence, Western leaders are inclined to focus at any given time on just a small portion of Beijing's strategic canvass, and usually only for short periods of time. Chinese hybrid operations are clearly of a quite different character and do not readily fit into the prevailing Western strategic mindset.

**Western priorities have been elsewhere.** The interests that Beijing has sought to win in its hybrid campaigns have rarely been high priorities for decision-makers in Washington. Particularly since September 11, 2001, U.S. policymakers have been preoccupied with countering terrorism, the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the dangers posed by



the emergence of new nuclear powers in North Korea and potentially Iran. In this context, the interests threatened by China's gray zone operations have generally been viewed as being of marginal importance and certainly not worth committing substantial American resources to defend. These Chinese operations have, however, been viewed with far greater concern in Tokyo, Seoul, Manila, Canberra, and Delhi. Beijing has exploited these different views skillfully to undermine alliance relationships.

**The deficiencies of the hub-and-spoke alliance model in the Pacific.** Another constraining factor has been the hub-and-spoke model of American alliances that has been in place in the Western Pacific since the 1950s. Cross-alliance (outer wheel) cooperation and combined security planning is not common amongst the Western Pacific allies unless it is orchestrated by the United States. Indeed, the mechanisms for combined operational planning and operations in this theater are rudimentary. This contrasts markedly with the regular and well-practiced cross-alliance planning and combined operations within NATO. In consequence, timely, efficient, and effective alliance cooperation in response to Beijing's hybrid operations in the Indo-Pacific has not been straightforward.

**Poor media and broader community understanding.** Most citizens, almost all journalists, and many congressional and parliamentary representatives in allied countries have been poorly informed about Chinese operations in the Indo-Pacific during the last decade. The mainstream media, academia, and Western government agencies have done a poor job of displaying the reality of what has been happening and explaining the implications and cumulative effects of these Chinese campaigns. With rare exceptions, media attention spans have also been short.

**Countering Chinese hybrid warfare is an inherently difficult challenge.** The development of effective national and regional responses to China's hybrid campaigns has been an intrinsically difficult challenge. Beijing has applied very sophisticated strategies and operational concepts and employed unusual mixes of instruments that have not been simple to counter. It has also been hard to sustain allied attention in this theater. Indeed, in the absence of any simple or easy options, some allied staffs have periodically exhibited a sense of helplessness.<sup>53</sup> This has been particularly notable in the case of Beijing's South China Sea campaign.

**Beijing's success in fostering hesitancy in the West.** Chinese leaders, agencies, and front organizations have conducted tailored propaganda and political warfare operations with considerable success in the Indo-Pacific. They have encouraged many business people, media personalities, and policymakers to avoid taking any step that could disturb their business, economic, and personal relationships with China. These concerns have been most apparent in Western Pacific countries as well as in corporations that have invested heavily in China. Chinese agencies have been active in fostering these worries, contriving false dilemmas and

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53 See this discussed in Ross Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism in the South China Sea: Strategy Options for the Trump Administration* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), p. 28; and Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2018), pp. 255–281.

exaggerating the potential consequences for regional economies and societies of any attempts to confront China’s assertiveness.

**The effectiveness of China’s information operations.** A related factor accounting for the Western allies’ timidity over Chinese behavior in the Indo-Pacific has been the success of Beijing’s information operations. These operations have been greatly assisted by the Chinese acquisition of media enterprises in Western countries and the penetration and subversion of others. Further contributing factors have been the courting of key decision-makers, journalists, and academics, accomplished through fully paid visits to China; the contribution of substantial funds to political parties; the establishment of pro-Beijing associations of many types, including Confucius Institutes in universities; the regular insertion of Chinese-produced supplements in metropolitan newspapers; and the organization of periodic “patriotic” demonstrations, concerts, and other events by Chinese embassies, consulates, and other pro-Beijing entities. Cyber and intelligence operations have also been used to reinforce key messages; recruit Chinese intelligence agents and “agents of influence;” and, periodically, to intimidate, coerce, and deter allied counteractions.<sup>54</sup>

**The West’s unclear goals and weak strategic narrative.** Since the end of the Cold War, the West has been heavily focused on the defeat of international terrorism. When confronted by Chinese and Russian adventurism, Western leaders have generally objected, but their approaches have differed significantly, and it has been rare for the United States to champion a united front and lead the construction of a powerful coalition of forces to demand an authoritarian withdrawal. That type of leadership and rallying of a forceful Western coalition has not been demonstrated to confront an authoritarian state’s expansionism since the First and Second Gulf Wars against Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s.

Primary reasons for this incoherence have been that the strategic goals of the West in countering authoritarian states have been generalized, national leaderships have been distracted, and the publics of the United States and other Western allies have been resistant to new foreign involvements. In consequence, no powerful counternarrative has been developed. The leaderships in Washington and other allied and partner capitals have failed to agree upon clear goals in the hybrid space and clarify what they are prepared to mobilize to defend and why.

**No clear Western strategy.** The United States and its international partners have yet to define a clear strategy to combat Chinese hybrid operations. In consequence, Western responses have been reactive, delayed, and almost always focused in the immediate area of

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54 Chinese agencies have been very active in most of the developing states in South and Southeast Asia and in the South Pacific. They have also intensified their operations within close allies of the United States, most notably in Australia and New Zealand. For instance, see details of the harassment and intimidation of Professor Anne-Marie Brady in Christchurch, New Zealand. Peter Hartcher, “No Longer Safe: Researcher Harassed by China in Her Own Country,” *Canberra Times*, January 29, 2019.

operations chosen by Beijing; they have usually employed an inappropriate set of instruments, been of short duration, and almost always had modest effect.

**Inappropriate toolkits.** The defense and security systems of most Western and partner states are optimized for peacetime diplomacy and occasional deployment to conduct intense conventional warfare. Few of these capabilities are optimized for countering authoritarian hybrid operations. Many of the skills and capabilities required to deter and defeat sophisticated gray zone operations are either missing or poorly resourced. With few exceptions, Western countries are not trained and prepared to win such contests.

**The West's strong risk aversion.** The West's timidity in responding to Beijing's hybrid campaigns suggests that Western electorates are more fearful of triggering confrontation and the escalation of an argument than the Chinese polity. This ultra-cautious thinking is particularly notable in some Western bureaucracies. If the Western interest is the avoidance of confrontation and the preservation of peace at any price, that price is likely to be extremely high. There is sometimes an implicit assumption that doing nothing, or not much, is the safest course of action. However, when confronted by an expansionist, non-democratic peer revival, the repeated avoidance of confrontation results in the loss of important strategic positions and the evaporation of much international credibility.

The bottom line is that the Western defense and security communities have not responded very effectively to Beijing's hybrid warfare campaigns. In some cases, Western capitals felt that their interests didn't warrant a strong response. Western leaders have also tended to view such operations as isolated incidents rather than elements in a much broader long-term strategic campaign. Bureaucratic and operational organizations did not want to be distracted from what they perceived to be their more important and much more conventional *modus operandi*. And the skills and instruments accorded priority in investment programs have rarely been optimal for contesting such campaigns.

This mismatch of strategic focus, cultures, and capabilities between China and the West was, however, not always so apparent. During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some Western countries possessed substantial expertise and experience in gray zone operations. Following the end of the Cold War, many relevant organizations were disbanded, and some key areas of expertise were neglected. The result has been the West's generally weak performance in the hybrid domain.

Hence, a key question for the rest of this report is whether it is feasible for the Western allies and their partners to once more develop formidable capabilities to win campaigns in the hybrid warfare space. And further, were the United States and its close allies and partners to give such capabilities some priority again, what options for strategy and campaigning would be worth serious consideration?



## CHAPTER 5

# Possible New Dimensions of Chinese Hybrid Warfare Operations

A central conclusion thus far is that the Chinese regime is highly skilled in hybrid warfare campaigns; It is one category of operation in which China has an enduring comparative advantage. Beijing can thus be expected to initiate new hybrid warfare campaigns in the period ahead. Although the precise nature and timing of these new initiatives require some conjecture, the experience of the last two decades suggests that they will probably include new innovations and pose fresh challenges for the Western allies. That having been said, the Chinese regime is not likely to abandon the core principles it has employed in the successful hybrid campaigns of the past. We are much more likely to see the proven concepts taken forward in new ways in both current and additional theaters. The Chinese regime is likely to employ five categories of hybrid warfare in the future.

**1. More of the same.** First, we are almost certain to see more of the sorts of campaigns that we have observed in recent years. They will be combined hybrid and political warfare operations launched close to China's overall periphery and led initially by civilian or militia personnel who operate under the protection of powerful conventional forces nearby.

**2. Extensions of current campaigns.** Regions that have already been targets of Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns will probably be subjected to extended Chinese offensive operations in coming decades. For instance, new military-related activities can be expected in the South China Sea. Additional land areas will likely be dredged up to extend some recently created islands, and some completely new islands may also be built.<sup>55</sup> Fighter-bomber regiments will probably occupy the newly built base facilities on Mischief, Subi, and Fiery Cross Reefs, and

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55 Richard Javad Heydarian, "China Envisions an 'Island City' in South China Sea," *Asia Times*, March 26, 2019.

Coastguard, PLA Navy, and Maritime Militia units will make more extensive use of the port infrastructures that have been built at these and other locations. Over time, China will almost certainly declare air defense and maritime identification and reporting zones and introduce tighter controls on foreign operations in the region.<sup>56</sup> Further violent clashes with Vietnamese and Filipino forces are possible. Eventually, the South China Sea may come to resemble a Chinese internal waterway.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands, Chinese Coastguard, Maritime Militia, and PLA forces can be expected to sustain their assertive presence. They will likely maintain their efforts to exhaust Japan's Coastguard and Self-Defense Force whilst using expanded united front political warfare operations to simultaneously undermine Japan's willingness to maintain a firm stance. Beijing will look for signs of a weakening in Tokyo's resolve and its physical capability in the disputed area, and it may take such an opportunity to land a "civilian" presence on one or more of the islands to conduct "research," "monitor weather," or conduct some other apparently innocuous activity. The goal will be to change the status of these strategic islands and secure international recognition of its *de facto* occupation.

The largest hybrid operation that Beijing currently has under development is probably the campaign to integrate Taiwan into the Peoples' Republic. In recent years, Xi Jinping and other regime leaders have spoken bluntly about their determination to take control of Taiwan, they have intensified their political warfare and cyber operations against Taipei, they have continued to recruit many Taiwanese citizens to the cause of reunification, and they have accelerated their efforts to isolate Taiwan politically.<sup>58</sup> A key part of this campaign is to undermine the interests of the United States, Japan, and other Western states in providing political, economic, and military support to the 23 million people in this island democracy. Beijing wants to reduce the likelihood of forceful Western intervention in the event that it launches a military operation to seize Taiwan. At present, Beijing seems committed to a gradualist approach and to be patient. However, there appears to be a broad timeframe in the minds of the senior Chinese leadership for Taiwan to be incorporated into the "motherland." Senior regime leaders have implied strongly that they expect this campaign to be completed successfully by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the Peoples' Republic.<sup>59</sup> Some regime leaders have implied that they hope it can be done much sooner.<sup>60</sup>

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56 See this discussed in Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, "Getting Serious About Strategy in the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1, Winter 2018.

57 See this discussed in Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism*, p. 25.

58 See Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, *A Question of Time: Enhancing Taiwan's Conventional Deterrence Posture* (Arlington, VA: Center for Security Policy Studies, George Mason University, 2018), pp. 32–48; and "Budget Calculated to Deter an Invasion by China set to Reach \$13 Billion by 2027," *Asia Times*, April 17, 2019.

59 Michael Mazza, "Is a Storm Brewing in the Taiwan Strait?" *Foreign Affairs*, July 27, 2018.

60 Ibid.

There are also many contested areas along China's southern borders with Vietnam, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, and India. If Beijing perceived opportunities to secure additional territory and extend its political influence in these border regions, hybrid campaigns could be launched in these areas with little notice.

**3. Potential New Terrestrial Theaters.** What new areas might be the subject of Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns in the future? There are many possibilities, including some in theaters as remote as Central America, the South Pacific, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and both the Arctic and Antarctica. However, this report argues that, at least for the next few years, Beijing's primary focus will likely remain in China's strategic approaches, supplemented by a few locations that outflank or leapfrog the West's long-standing strategic positions.

In some locations, China's political warfare operations have already been underway for some years, and they have been accompanied by substantial land acquisitions and other investments. In most instances, the host government has accepted Chinese loans to fund infrastructure development, often within the framework of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>61</sup> In some cases, the Chinese loans are so large and the terms so onerous that they are unserviceable by the local state. Notable cases of these "debt traps" have been in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Tonga.<sup>62</sup> In some instances, recipient governments have had little choice but to cede elements of their sovereignty to Chinese entities in lieu of loan repayments.

From Beijing's perspective, some of these apparently civilian lodgments have the potential to be developed into strategic hubs, military support facilities, and even fully operational military bases. Most notable cases include the Kyaukpyu coastal zone adjacent to Sihanoukville in Cambodia; Scarborough Shoal, which is located within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea; several small island states in the Western Pacific, such as the Northern Mariana Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia; the port and air facilities at Hambantota in Sri Lanka; the port and related facilities at Gwadar in Pakistan; and China's research bases in Antarctica.<sup>63</sup> Beijing might also look to further expand its presence and influence in Central Asia, partly to prevent cross-border movements by Islamist radicals, partly to offset Russia's long-standing links to regional governments, and partly to help secure Belt and Road corridors to Europe and the Middle East.

61 For details, see Nadège Rolland, "China's Belt and Road Initiative," in Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting*, vol. 2, *Case Studies* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

62 John Kehoe, "China 'Debt Trap' on Australia's Doorstep," *Australian Financial Review*, May 14, 2018, available at <https://www.afr.com/news/politics/world/us-secret-report-china-debt-trap-on-australias-doorstep-20180513-hozzwd>; and Simon Mundy and Kathrin Hille, "The Maldives Counts the Cost of Its Debts to China," *Financial Times*, February 11, 2019, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/c8da1c8a-2a19-11e9-88a4-c32129756dd8?segmentId=a7371401-027d-d8bf-8a7f-2a746e767d56>.

63 David Hutt, "US, China Tensions Put Cambodia in Potential Peril," *Asia Times*, June 6, 2019; Richard Heydarian, "How the Scarborough Shoal Came Back to Haunt China-Philippines Relations," *South China Morning Post*, June 23, 2018; Grant Newsham, "China's Operations in the United States' Island Territories in the Western Pacific," in Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting*, vol. 2; Maria Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *New York Times*, June 25, 2018; Logan Pauley and Hamza Shad, "Gwadar: Emerging Port City or Chinese Colony?" *The Diplomat*, October 5, 2018; and Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Great Polar Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Beijing would be sorely tested were China's very large diaspora communities to be threatened or attacked in distant regions. The evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya in 2011 may prove to be a foretaste of what would be involved if the hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and South American countries were to be seriously threatened. Would the PLA simply evacuate personnel, or might it stay and fight, possibly for an extended period? If Beijing did decide to stay and fight, how would it operate? What types of operational and logistic systems would it need, and how easily could they be sustained militarily, economically, and politically? China's two most popular films in 2018, "Wolf Warrior 2" and "Red Sea," portrayed scenarios where the PLA fought in foreign theaters to protect ethnic Chinese communities. This suggests that these films may be preparing the Chinese people and the broader international community for such contingencies.

Another category of possibilities could involve Chinese agencies conducting hybrid operations on and under the high seas. China has already seeded key parts of the South China Sea and some of the deeper underwater canyons of the Western Pacific with passive sonar networks.<sup>64</sup> One of these underwater networks is reportedly already operating in waters adjacent to the U.S. Navy's submarine base at Guam, and another is operational in the South China Sea.<sup>65</sup>

Chinese entities have, in addition, built special vessels to operate for extended periods on or close to the seabed in strategically important parts of the Western Pacific. Deep sea research submarines have undertaken lengthy missions in the Marianas Trench east of the Philippines and elsewhere in the region.<sup>66</sup> Studies have also been undertaken into the possibility of establishing self-sustaining "floating cities" in parts of the Western Pacific.<sup>67</sup>

Some of these activities have probably been launched for civilian research purposes, some to assess the potential for mining seabed resources, some for intelligence and underwater surveillance purposes, and others to interfere with underwater telecommunications cables. In the longer run, it is possible that relevant authorities in Beijing will see these deep-water activities as initial steps toward a broader purpose. Given the pattern of Chinese operations in the South China Sea, it is not inconceivable that such activities might presage expansive maritime claims and become stepping stones to establishing permanent or semi-permanent facilities in strategically important parts of the global maritime commons.

**4. Possible Extended Use of Proxy Actors.** Another possibility is that the Chinese regime may decide to make greater use of proxy international actors to help it conduct hybrid

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64 Stephen Chen, "China's Underwater Surveillance Network Puts Targets in Focus along Maritime Silk Road," *South China Morning Post*, January 5, 2018.

65 Stephen Chen, "Surveillance under the Sea: How China Is Listening in near Guam," *South China Morning Post*, January 22, 2018; and Eli Huang, "China's Cable Strategy: Exploring Global Undersea Dominance," *Real Clear Defense*, December 4, 2017.

66 Zhang Zhihao, "Jiaolong Plumbs Deepest Region of the Ocean," *China Daily*, May 24, 2017, available at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-05/24/content\\_29469915.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-05/24/content_29469915.htm).

67 Jack Detsch, "China Is Building Giant Floating Islands in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, April 24, 2015.



operations and win strategic advances against the United States, its allies, and its strategic partners. In recent years, North Korea, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran have periodically cooperated with Beijing to reinforce their shared interests. These activities have, however, generally been limited in nature and scale, and, from Beijing's perspective, they were not always easy to control.

It is notable that during the Cold War Russia made more extensive use of proxy actors to conduct political campaigns in foreign countries, disrupt targeted economies, and even assassinate foreign leaders. Moscow also trained and equipped guerrilla fighters and supported terrorist organizations that were committed to striking the West. Most recently, the Kremlin has made extensive use of mercenary forces, especially in the Ukraine and Syria. Particularly prominent has been the Wagner Private Military Company, which contains large numbers of former Russian special force personnel. This enterprise is equipped with modern Russian-built military systems and is based in southern Russia. China has its own set of private security contractors, most notably those operating within CITIC's Frontier Services Group.<sup>68</sup> These enjoy similar relationships with Chinese government agencies and the CCP.

As earlier parts of this report make clear, Beijing has conducted proxy operations of this general type in the past. Chinese personnel trained, equipped, and even occasionally commanded guerrilla and conventional military forces in several South East Asian countries until the mid-1980s. However, in recent decades it has tended to make greater use of Chinese "civilian" engineering, construction, and other contractors backed by substantial paramilitary forces: the Peoples' Armed Police on the land and the Coastguard and the Maritime Militia at sea. Whether Beijing will consider this toolkit adequate for future hybrid warfare campaigns remains to be seen. Further evolutions and innovations in this field cannot be excluded.

**5. Potential Theaters in Other Domains.** One possibility that should not be overlooked is that Beijing may plan innovative versions of hybrid warfare campaigns in non-terrestrial domains, especially in space and cyberspace. Hybrid initiatives of this type would most likely be developed by the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force and related organizations.<sup>69</sup> Beijing could, for instance, lead an international coalition of authoritarian and developing states to contest established agreements on the allocation of space orbits and related electronic frequencies. Alternatively, Chinese entities might conceivably conduct space operations in unconventional orbits or attempt to preempt the launch of Western systems by cluttering relevant orbits with swarms of rapidly launched micro-satellites or even space debris. All of these measures may amount to the step-by-step seizure or control of key elements of the space domain.

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68 Blake Schmidt, "Blackwater Mercenary Prince Has a New \$1Trillion Chinese Boss," *Bloomberg*, February 10, 2019.

69 For details on the Strategic Support Force, see Adam Ni and Bates Gill, "The People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force: Update 2019," *The Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, May 29, 2019.

Other possibilities include the development and deployment of constellations of satellites that appear to have innocuous civilian purposes but could, in reality, have other more sinister roles in future crises and conflicts. Some of these possibilities could conceivably be marketed politically as being undertaken in partnership with the developing world in the interests of improved communications, weather forecasting, and navigation services. Over time, these unconventional approaches may be revealed as being under the direct control of Chinese military or paramilitary organizations, largely to give the Chinese regime a strategic advantage in space.

Another set of possibilities springs in part from the telecommunications and related networks being installed as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese entities are already very active in cyberspace for a wide range of purposes. Such systems perform many commercial functions; some play social networking roles; and a number perform surveillance, intelligence, and community control functions domestically and internationally.

Such capabilities have already been used to steal intellectual property, distort news, manipulate election results, and persuade and coerce communities to operate in accord with Beijing's wishes.<sup>70</sup> There have been observable Chinese attempts to penetrate strategic supply chains and key elements of national infrastructure.<sup>71</sup> In the future, some Chinese entities might be tempted to expand their operations in this field by, for example, engaging in cyber hostage operations. Other creative applications of cyber capabilities, in joint operations with other Chinese assets, can be anticipated in coming years, and they may take unexpected forms.

In sum, China already possesses an extensive range of civilian, paramilitary, and military instruments that have been developed specifically to conduct hybrid warfare campaigns. They have proven very effective in prosecuting operations in unprotected and contested spaces, in part because most are relatively inexpensive to deploy and sustain for long periods. They are well-suited to maintaining coercive pressure in priority zones in the strategic approaches to China and outflanking and outlasting any American, allied, or partner resistance.

While we can expect Beijing to conduct further hybrid operations of a broadly similar nature to those of recent years, there is a strong possibility that the West will also face new types of Chinese hybrid operation in the coming decade. These broader possibilities need to be weighed carefully as U.S. and allied security planners consider the most appropriate strategies and structures to deter and defeat such campaigns.

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70 Andrea Little Limbago, "China's Global Charm Offensive," *War on the Rocks*, August 28, 2017.

71 Dorothy Denning, "How the Chinese Cyberthreat has Evolved," *Fifth Domain*, September 10, 2017.

## CHAPTER 6

# Assessing Strategy Options for the Western Allies

This chapter discusses how the United States, its allies, and its security partners might best consider strategy and operational options for countering China's hybrid warfare campaigns.

### **Accepting the Challenge**

Key initial steps are for Western and partner leaderships to appreciate the challenge that China's hybrid warfare poses to Western and partner security, state publicly the unacceptability of these operations, and allocate policy and planning resources to develop a coordinated strategy for deterring and defeating such campaigns. At first sight, these steps may appear to be straightforward and relatively easy to achieve. However, until recently many allied leaders appeared not to appreciate the long track record of Chinese hybrid warfare operations, the special skills and techniques that Beijing has employed, and the cumulative strategic effects of China's hybrid warfare campaigns. Western leaders have often appeared disinterested, viewed specific developments as being isolated events, and responded in token ways. The end result is that they have failed to focus on the serious challenge posed by China's hybrid warfare campaigns and generate a coherent and well-coordinated counterstrategy.

Many allied and partner leaders in the Indo-Pacific would rationalize their inattention by arguing that, since the turn of the century, they have been heavily distracted by domestic economic, social, and political challenges, as well as the campaign to defeat international terrorism. While these arguments have some validity, it is also the case that most of the Indo-Pacific allies have been deterred from confronting China directly for fear of provoking the types of economic and political retaliation that Beijing has launched in recent years against South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Canada. In the absence of strong leadership and coalition building by the United States, most Indo-Pacific leaders have preferred to muffle their opposition to Beijing's hybrid campaigns. While they have expressed disapproval

of some Chinese actions, they have been moderate in their language, limited what has been said publicly, and rarely moved to rally their communities to take firm stances against Beijing. Moreover, their actions in operational theaters such as the South China Sea, the Senkaku Islands, and Bhutan have been modest, almost entirely low key, and designed, at best, to preserve the status quo rather than to force a Chinese withdrawal. In effect, the United States and its regional allies have been restrained, frontal, purely defensive, and very predictable in their responses.

This combination of mostly unfocused American leadership and timidity by key Indo-Pacific partners has produced an environment for China's hybrid warfare campaigns that has been permissive and, in many respects, enticing. The Chinese leadership has been able to exploit the lead-footed predictability of the West, launch offensive hybrid campaigns with few constraints, and win successive political victories. This has given Beijing the freedom to conduct its hybrid warfare campaigns using an unusual set of assumptions about the security approaches of the Western allies and their partners:

1. China will always be the initiator. It can choose the theater of operations, the primary instruments to be employed, and the pace of the campaign.
2. Beijing can make expansive ambit claims without provoking anything but token responses from the Western allies and other regional states.
3. China's use of intensive political warfare operations to prepare the theater of operations will not trigger powerful allied political warfare counteroffensives.
4. China can establish and maintain clear conventional force superiority in the theater and, hence, will possess escalation dominance during the course of its hybrid campaigns.
5. The Western allies and their partners will not form a strong coalition to confront China and force a retreat.
6. The Western allies and their partners will continue to be risk-averse and reluctant to confront Beijing directly. China's wide-ranging political warfare campaigns will help to divide targeted states, undermine their willingness to resist, and foster timid and ineffectual responses.
7. The Western allies and their partners will permit most Chinese hybrid warfare operations to be opaque. These operations will rarely be exposed and explained clearly to Western publics, and, in consequence, they will be poorly understood globally. Western governments will not release real-time video and other evidence, not insist on high-level political condemnation of Chinese operations at the Security Council in New York and in other international forums, and not campaign energetically for Beijing to withdraw and pay a high price for its expansionist campaigns.

8. Although some Western allies may stage short-term displays of defiance in contested theaters, they will not seriously consider escalating China's hybrid campaigns into other domains or into conventional warfare.
9. Beijing can always outlast and eventually exhaust its opponents in hybrid warfare campaigns.
10. Eventually Western and partner governments will accept that China's possession of contested space cannot be reversed and a "new normal" has been established.
11. The regime in Beijing can effectively shield its domestic public from any foreign political warfare operations. The regime perceives little prospect of its hybrid operations resulting in serious domestic unease or dissent at home.

This report argues that these eleven assumptions underpinning the Chinese regime's hybrid warfare campaigns are also preconditions for Beijing's success in such campaigns. Were the Western allies and their partners to challenge them, the attractiveness of these gray zone operations to Beijing would be greatly reduced and may evaporate.

## Selecting Strategic Goals

An early step in developing an appropriate strategy for countering China's hybrid warfare campaigns is to determine the primary goal that is to drive the Western approach. What exactly should the West strive to achieve? What is the end-state that Western and partner governments wish to create in each campaign? And what should be the West's aspiration for managing China's hybrid warfare campaigns out to 2030?

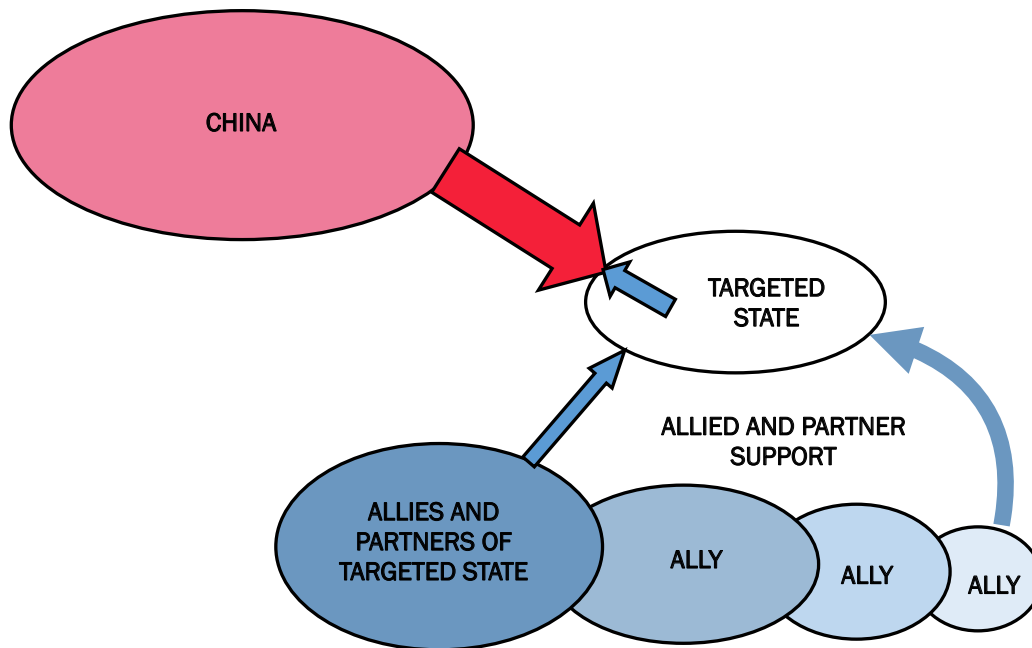
For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that an appropriate goal of a Western counterstrategy would be to defend the Western allies and their security partners from Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns and deter Beijing from attempting to undertake further gray zone campaigns in the future. If this defense and deterrence goal, or something like it, is accepted, the focus can turn to identifying and evaluating alternative strategies.

## Direct or Indirect Strategy?

In recent years U.S. and allied responses to Chinese hybrid warfare operations have mostly been reactive, frontal, and tactical. Allied leaders have tended to view each incremental step taken by Beijing in its hybrid campaigns in semi-isolation and almost exclusively within its local environment. The regime in Beijing usually commences intense political warfare and small-scale civilian and paramilitary operations against the territorial or other interests of an Indo-Pacific state in a way that has limited strategic importance for Washington. The targeted government is normally concerned not to overreact and, in the face of strong warnings from Beijing, it takes modest defensive actions in the contested area. The United States and its close allies are usually distracted elsewhere and are hesitant to become involved. Nevertheless,

allies and partners do not want to see the fundamental sovereignty of the targeted state undermined, and so they lodge diplomatic queries and protests in Beijing; they provide intelligence, training, equipment, and other resources to bolster the targeted state's security; and some of them conduct combined exercises with the forces of the targeted state to demonstrate their symbolic support. A typical allied direct-approach response to the launching of a Chinese hybrid campaign against a Western ally or security partner is illustrated in Figure 4.

**FIGURE 4: A TYPICAL FRONTAL RESPONSE TO A CHINESE HYBRID OFFENSIVE**



This pattern of frontal responses does have some advantages. It signals to domestic and international publics that Western governments are concerned, any physical actions they take are in or near the targeted area, they are proportionate, and they minimize the chance that the dispute will escalate into more serious hostilities. A frontal response also provides some assurance to the targeted state that allies and partners stand with it in defending its fundamental security. In addition, this approach keeps the immediate risks and costs to the allies at a low level.

However, a frontal response to China's hybrid operations also has some major disadvantages. This type of reactive approach always cedes the initiative to Beijing. The Chinese regime can select its targets at will, and it can choose the nature and timing of individual steps in the campaign. Moreover, a frontal or direct strategy effectively gives Beijing a permanent home-field advantage. Because all of the regime's hybrid warfare campaigns have so far been launched in its overall periphery or strategic approaches, deployed elements have enjoyed the cover of very strong air, naval, and missile forces operating from bases on the nearby Chinese mainland. This has provided Beijing with speed of access and escalation dominance in a way

that has been difficult for the United States and its primary allies to match, given the vast distances to most of their home bases. Allied attempts to balance China's conventional forces in these hybrid campaigns have been difficult, of limited strategic effect, and impossible to sustain indefinitely.

In addition to the above problems, a reactive frontal approach by the allies usually does little to counter the intense political warfare operations that Beijing always launches to support its hybrid warfare campaigns. China's many political warfare instruments will be engaged in intense combined arms operations to harass, coerce, corrupt, and divide decision-makers in the targeted and allied states so as to induce timid, hesitant, and largely ineffectual responses. Reactive frontal strategies usually fail to confront Beijing in this critical political warfare domain. The allies' limited frontal responses are also highly predictable. While in cases, such as the Senkaku Islands dispute, they can delay a Chinese victory and even impose a stalemate, they rarely force a Chinese withdrawal. They also do little to induce caution in Beijing or deter further expansionist steps. The bottom line is that reactive frontal responses to Beijing's incremental hybrid warfare campaigns rarely prevent Beijing from establishing a "new normal," which is eventually accepted by the bulk of the international community.

It is notable, in this context, that U.S. and allied reactive responses to Beijing's hybrid warfare campaigns defy many of the foundational principles of effective strategy. One of the most succinct summaries of successful strategy is the list published toward the end of his career by Sir Basil Liddell-Hart:

- Adjust your ends to your means.
- Keep your object always in mind.
- Choose the line (or course) of least expectation.
- Exploit the line of least resistance.
- Take a line of operation that offers alternative objectives, for you will thus put your opponent on the horns of a dilemma.
- Ensure that both plans and dispositions are flexible (adaptable to circumstances).<sup>72</sup>

A strong case can be made that the regime in Beijing is operating in much closer accord with these foundational principles of strategy than is the West. The Chinese regime skillfully marshals mostly civilian and paramilitary assets to seize clearly identified objectives, it routinely chooses an offensive line that is unexpected and offers low resistance, and it usually places its opponents on the horns of a dilemma about whether and how to respond. The Chinese have also shown themselves to be flexible about the pace and scale of their operations,

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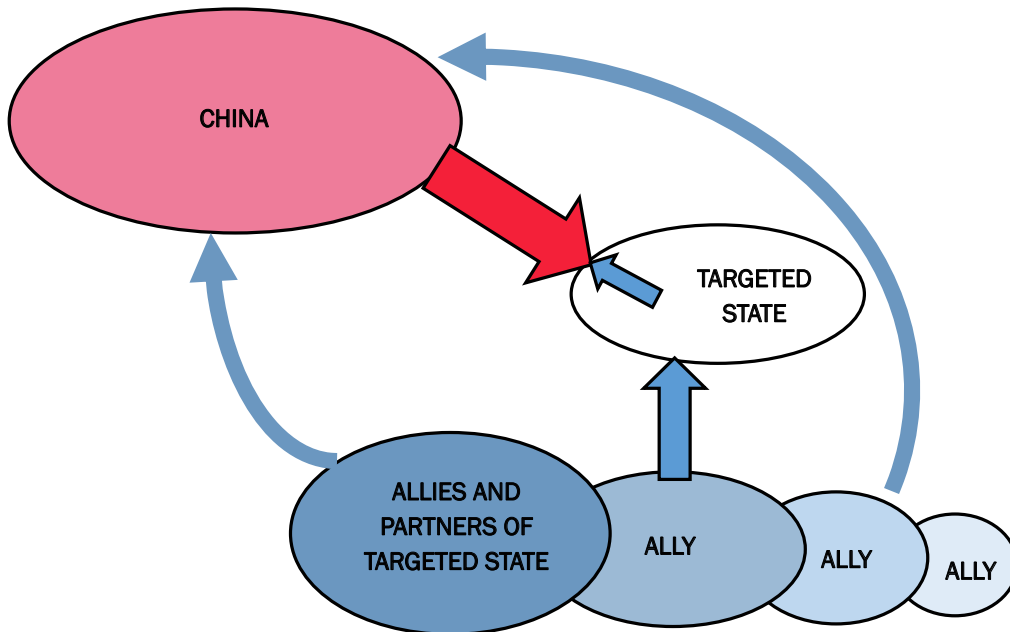
<sup>72</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber and Baber Limited, 1967), pp. 348–349.

avoiding areas and periods of stiff resistance by biding their time and periodically maneuvering around significant obstacles.

The approach of the United States and its allies has so far stood in stark contrast. The West has usually adopted minimalist goals and stated them unclearly. The initiative has almost always been ceded to the opponent, and Beijing has been allowed to select the venue for the confrontation. Western responses have been highly predictable and almost always very cautious, and U.S. and allied forces deployed to the theater have mostly been inappropriate and difficult to sustain in the area. With few exceptions, the United States and its allies have also made little effort to contest the political warfare space in which Beijing’s hybrid operations have been conducted. They have rarely confronted the Chinese leadership in a manner that places it on the horns of a dilemma. In consequence, the West’s overall approach is constrained, rigid and, arguably, “astrategic.” It courts further political defeats.

Fortunately, the United States and its allies do not need to continue their knee-jerk, frontal, and largely ineffective, responses to China’s hybrid warfare campaigns. Other strategy options are available which have the potential to be far more effective in deterring and defeating these threats. The primary alternative approaches are summarized in Figure 5.

**FIGURE 5: INDIRECT AND ASYMMETRIC STRATEGIES TO DEFEAT HYBRID CAMPAIGN**



Indirect and asymmetric counterstrategies are designed to “change the rules” by refusing to contest the hybrid campaign on Beijing’s terms. While still providing some direct support to the targeted state, the primary focus of this type of strategy is for the allies to seize the initiative by launching operations beyond the contested area so as to threaten the Chinese regime’s



sensitivities and vulnerabilities in different locations and domains. This approach does not need to be highly escalatory. Initial allied measures may be very limited in scale and type, designed to signal coalition resolve and a preparedness to expand operations should Beijing persist.

This type of strategy has the advantage of making it very clear that when the Chinese regime initiates a hybrid offensive, there will be serious consequences in areas that will cause Beijing pain. It views the launching of a Chinese hybrid campaign as a trigger for allied counter-offensive operations in areas and modes that take the leadership in Beijing by surprise, deliver some discomfort, and force the regime to seriously consider an operational halt and withdrawal.

Indirect and asymmetric strategies would require the U.S. and its allies to prepare in advance a diverse menu of campaign options for the allies to consider activating as soon as Beijing launches a hybrid offensive. Options could include the physical occupation of vacant or contested space in another theater; many types of economic, immigration, and technology control measures; and altered arrangements for international communications and transport. Other campaign options could include various types of cyber and space operations. A prominent place on the campaign menu would likely be held by political warfare operations designed to publicize the Chinese regime's hybrid operations as well as its domestic and international excesses, poor human rights record, and export of corrupt and unfair practices. Most, if not all, of these measures could be combined in a range of ways to deliver optimal political effects. They could also be scaled up or down according to the extent of Beijing's compliance with allied goals.

The selection of campaign options would need to be agreed by the primary members of the allied coalition. Key criteria for selecting the core elements of an indirect and asymmetric strategy are likely to include:

- The potential to pressure the regime to change course.
- The financial and other costs and the resulting prospects for sustainability over an extended period.
- The assessed likelihood that over time, operations will impose costs on China that are disproportionately high.
- Whether a measure, or mix of measures, can be readily scaled up and down.
- Assessments of likely Chinese responses.
- Analyses of the potential impact of alternative mixes of measures.
- The extent to which the key coalition parties endorse the proposed approach.

Indirect and asymmetric approaches have many advantages, largely because they are inherently more strategic. They provide an opportunity to seize the initiative, exploit the opposing regime's weaknesses, take Beijing by surprise, and repeatedly confront Chinese decision-makers with serious dilemmas—and to do all of these things with great flexibility in scale, pace, and location. If calibrated with skill, this type of countercampaign has the potential to induce caution in Beijing, encourage a major review of the regime's hybrid offensives, and force a withdrawal from its current hybrid warfare operations. Because many of the instruments likely to be employed in indirect and asymmetric operations don't need to be physically located in the area targeted by the Chinese campaign, most of the home-field advantages hitherto enjoyed by Beijing would also be reduced or nullified. Economic, technology, immigration, communications, transport, cyber, space, and many other types of measures could now become the drivers of the campaign, and nearly all of them can be employed with ease and great speed at transoceanic ranges. Moreover, in most of these fields, the West holds a sustainable advantage; they play to the allies' strengths.

However, indirect and asymmetric strategies do have some disadvantages. They would require American and allied leaderships to act against Chinese hybrid campaigns with greater attention and resolve than has hitherto been seen. Western leaders would also need to adopt a truly strategic approach, coordinate their operations closely, and be prepared to sustain some categories of action for extended periods. Indirect and asymmetric campaigns would, in addition, entail acceptance of more than minimal risk. Responding to a Chinese hybrid campaign by escalating horizontally into other theaters and domains would bring an interaction that is more dynamic than the semi-passive predictability of recent frontal responses. The United States and its allies nevertheless have long track records of conducting complex combined operations with considerable success and the application of similar expertise to hybrid campaigns should be effective.

Hence, a preliminary conclusion of this report is that carefully crafted indirect and asymmetric strategies offer a stronger chance of deterring and defeating Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns than would be the case with a continuation of the reactive and direct approaches of recent decades.

### **Addressing the Hybrid Warfare and Political Warfare Partnership in Strategy Development**

Before considering strategy options in more detail, it is important to emphasize the common theme of Beijing's hybrid warfare campaigns, as featured in every case study prepared for this report: they are only likely to succeed if they are accompanied by strong political warfare operations. Likewise, if the United States and its allies wish to defeat China's hybrid warfare campaigns, they will need to combat Beijing's political warfare operations. Chinese hybrid and political warfare operations are coordinated in a manner that is analogous to two very skilled hands. Both are required to be actively involved in closely coordinated activities for Beijing's gray zone campaigns to be effective.

A central weakness of Western responses to recent Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns has been that, while Beijing has been busy using both “hands” in its campaigns, the United States and its allies have been attempting to stymie Beijing’s operations not only with an inappropriate set of tools but also with their own political warfare “hand” largely incapacitated. Indeed, the political warfare “hand” has mostly been tied behind allied commanders’ backs. Approaches such as these are unworkable and never likely to succeed.

Therefore, the following discussion of potential counterstrategies for the Western allies focuses on the potential for combating combined hybrid and political warfare campaigns. No matter which allied strategy is selected to counter Beijing’s gray zone campaigns, it will need to involve highly effective operations in both the hybrid and political warfare domains. The United States and its allies need to develop strategies that can deter and ultimately defeat both “hands.”

### **Key Determinants of Western Strategy**

There remains the deeper question of which strategy, or strategies, should be selected to drive an allied campaign to deter and defeat China’s hybrid warfare operations. What will be the best game plan, and what are the key criteria that should be used to choose it? This report argues that there are five primary criteria for strategy selection. First, the chosen strategy needs to offer strong prospects for achieving the core political goals. All strategic, operational, and tactical options need to be assessed carefully for their capacities to help meet the coalition’s driving political objectives.

Second, the selected strategy needs to be sufficiently flexible to deal with opposing forces that can and will adapt in ways that cannot always be foreseen. The interactive nature of strategy and campaigning places a premium on developing deep knowledge of the opponents, incorporating high levels of flexibility and adaptability, and seizing and retaining the initiative. As the report of the U.S. National Defense Strategy Commission argued, “The United States must begin responding more effectively to the operational challenges posed by our competitors and force those competitors to respond to challenges of *our* making.”<sup>73</sup>

Third, the chosen strategy needs to take account of the fact that the circumstances of the Western allies and their partners differ significantly. The overall approach needs to accommodate these differences by providing individual governments with options for contributing in ways that are complementary and make the most of available assets.

Fourth, the chosen strategy needs to take account of the fact that both sides of this struggle possess limited resources. Choices need to be driven by priority interests, cost-benefit analyses, and assessed political and economic sustainability. The willingness of governments, bureaucracies, and national treasuries to address the requirements of countering political warfare will be critical.

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73 NDS, *Providing for the Common Defense*, p. viii.

Finally, although all strategies will take time to achieve their goals, some strategic choices are likely to require much longer timeframes to make progress than others. The political, economic, social, and international costs of extended operations thus need to be weighed carefully.

## Primary Campaign Strategy Options

The strategy options for the Western allies to deter and defeat Beijing’s combined hybrid and political warfare campaigns are available in several styles, all of which have their strengths and weaknesses. Some strategy styles may be more appropriate for some countries within a Western-led coalition than others. Some strategy styles may be more appropriate at particular stages of a campaign than others. However, if designed and implemented with care, the primary strategy styles could all be employed in ways that are mutually reinforcing. While each strategy style would operate in different ways, they all have the potential to apply substantial counterpressure on the Chinese regime. There are four categories of strategy that appear relevant. They are Denial, Cost Imposition, Attacking the Opposition’s Strategy, and Undermining the Opposing Regime.<sup>74</sup> The primary advantages and disadvantages of each of these options are summarized below.

### Strategy Option 1: Denial

A strategy of denial seeks to convince an opponent that it is impossible for him to achieve his objectives. When employed to defeat a Chinese hybrid and political warfare campaign, this strategy would require a very prompt and stout defense of the territory or space being contested. These actions would be combined with a powerful political warfare counteroffensive to highlight the seriousness of China’s illegal activities, undermine the regime’s legitimacy, and force a cessation of operations and withdrawal. The goal would be to confront the opponent physically, diplomatically, and politically with such strength and cohesion that Beijing concludes that it cannot prevail.

Denial strategy is a modified version of the reactive defense strategy discussed above. Were denial strategy to be used in a similar way to the allied reactive and direct responses to recent Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns, it would likely have many of the same flaws:

- Ceding the initiative to the Chinese leadership;
- Permitting Beijing to choose its targets and the scale and intensity of its operations with little interference;

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<sup>74</sup> Please note that the last four strategy options were first discussed in a coherent but generic way in Bradford A. Lee, “Strategic Interaction: Theory and History for Practitioners,” in Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Theory, History and Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2012), pp. 28–46; and Mahnken, Babbage, and Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*.

- Giving Beijing important home-field advantages;
- Limited in scale and scope;
- Highly predictable; and
- Defying many foundations of a successful strategy.

There is, however, an alternative way of considering how a strategy of denial might be crafted by the West. It may be feasible to conduct a powerful denial campaign should the United States and its allies and partners combine forces to challenge the eleven assumptions that underwrite Beijing's hybrid and political warfare operations, which were listed earlier in this chapter. A brief assessment of the scope for doing this successfully suggests the following:

**Chinese assumption #1:** China will always be the initiator. It can choose the theater of operations, the primary instruments to be employed, and the pace of the campaign.

**Possible counter:** If the United States and its allies and partners were united and well-organized, it should be possible for them to identify the most likely candidates for China's future hybrid/political warfare campaigns well in advance. Then, firm preemptive action might be initiated to bolster local defenses and undermine China's political warfare operations in the theater. The allies could also provide high resolution imagery and real-time reporting to highlight for international audiences any offensive actions that the Chinese then attempt.

**Chinese assumption #2:** Beijing can make expansive ambit claims without provoking anything but token responses from the Western allies and other regional states.

**Possible counter:** The Western allies and their partners could decide to be far more active in dismissing Beijing's ambit claims in multiple diplomatic forums, in international courts and tribunals, and in powerful political warfare programs.

**Chinese assumption #3:** China's use of intensive political warfare operations to prepare the theater of operations will not trigger powerful allied political warfare counteroffensives.

**Possible counter:** It is well within the power of the United States and its allies and partners to ramp up a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the political warfare campaign they waged successfully against the Soviet Union and its allies during the Cold War.<sup>75</sup> A powerful allied political warfare campaign would expose the true nature of the Chinese regime and its operations, undermine Beijing's credibility, and substantially raise the political risks of Chinese hybrid and political warfare operations. This step would likely be key to any effective allied counterstrategy. A strong political warfare campaign would also be relatively inexpensive to establish and sustain.

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<sup>75</sup> For a good summary of the political warfare operations conducted by the United States during the Cold War, please see Thomas G. Mahnken and Gillian Evans, "Soviet and American Political Warfare During the Cold War," in Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting*, vol. 2; and Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

**Chinese assumption #4:** China can establish and maintain clear conventional force superiority in the theater and, hence, will possess escalation dominance during the course of the campaign.

**Possible counter:** The United States and its Indo-Pacific allies are now taking steps to restore some semblance of military balance in the region, but the full weight of these efforts will not be felt till the late 2020s or early 2030s.<sup>76</sup> At that stage, escalation dominance will be more seriously contested, and it may be feasible for the West to be more assertive in physically and electronically blocking Chinese hybrid operations.

**Chinese assumption #5:** The Western allies and their partners will not form a strong coalition to confront China and force a retreat.

**Possible counter:** The Western allies are capable of developing a powerful coalition to confront China in its hybrid and political warfare campaigns should they give such an initiative priority and remain united.

**Chinese assumption #6:** The Western allies and their partners will continue to be risk-averse and reluctant to confront Beijing directly. China's wide-ranging political warfare campaigns will help to divide targeted states, undermine their willingness to resist, and foster timid and ineffectual responses.

**Possible counter:** Were the Western allies to restore the military balance in the Indo-Pacific, launch a powerful political warfare campaign, and bolster their economic and political resilience, the risks to the West of responding firmly to Chinese hybrid warfare offensives would be greatly reduced.

**Chinese assumption #7:** The Western allies and their partners will permit most Chinese hybrid warfare operations to be opaque. These operations will rarely be exposed and explained clearly to Western publics, and, in consequence, they will be poorly understood globally.

**Possible counter:** This could be changed easily if Western governments launch a powerful political warfare campaign, as discussed above.

**Chinese assumption #8:** While some Western allies may stage short-term displays of defiance in contested theaters, they will not seriously consider escalating China's hybrid campaigns into other domains or into conventional warfare.

**Possible counter:** If the Western allies and their partners implement the other actions listed here, there would be little need for them to consider more than modest horizontal escalation into other regions and domains or vertical escalation into conventional warfare.

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<sup>76</sup> See Steve Trimble, "U.S. Accelerates Hypersonic Weapons Push in New Spending Plan," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, March 20, 2019; Steve Trimble, "Maritime Threat," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, May 6, 2019, pp. 16–18; and Steve Trimble, "DARPA Revives Cold War Game Plan for Russia and China War Scenario," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, March 9, 2019.

**Chinese assumption #9:** Beijing can always outlast and eventually exhaust its opponents in hybrid warfare campaigns.

**Possible counter:** Beijing will have great difficulty outlasting the West if the allies continue to view the issues at stake to be important, they give early priority to mobilizing powerful political warfare forces, and they ensure that the relative costs of the struggle fall disproportionately on China, rather than the allies and their partners.

**Chinese assumption #10:** Eventually Western and partner governments will accept that Chinese possession of contested space cannot be reversed and that a “new normal” has been established.

**Possible counter:** This is a political choice for the Western allies and their partners. They have it within their power to refuse to accept Chinese encroachments, in the same way that the Western powers and many other countries refused to accept Moscow’s hegemony over Eastern Europe during the four and a half decades of the Cold War.

**Chinese assumption #11:** The regime in Beijing can effectively shield its domestic public from any foreign political warfare operations. The regime perceives little prospect of serious domestic unease and dissent at home.

**Possible counter:** Over time, strong Western political warfare campaigns would likely have an impact on China’s domestic public, should allied operations be designed with this intent. The West could employ many measures such as continually punching holes in Beijing’s “Great Firewall” and encouraging Chinese diaspora communities to spread key messages in China.

This discussion suggests that it would be possible to undercut nearly all of China’s assumptions, on which its hybrid and political warfare success is contingent—should the United States, its close allies, and its partners decide to do so. The key questions are whether allied governments yet perceive China’s hybrid and political warfare campaigns to warrant their serious attention. Are they sufficiently motivated to directly confront and stare down the regime in Beijing? Are they prepared to build a strong coalition to take powerful counteractions over a sustained period? Are they prepared to take prompt steps to preemptively short-circuit Beijing’s hybrid campaigns? And, finally, even though the financial costs of most elements of such a denial campaign would be modest, are allied and partner governments willing to pay the price?

## **Strategy Option 2: Cost Imposition**

Cost-imposing strategies aim to raise the political, economic, military, reputational, and other costs to the opponent to such a level that its leadership modifies its political objectives. In contrast to denial strategy, cost imposition strategies normally require a mix of direct and indirect actions. The direct actions are designed to blunt the opponent’s offensive campaign and impose costs in the immediate area of Beijing’s operations. Indirect actions would be designed to impose costs on Beijing wherever the regime is vulnerable and, in particular, where the comparative costs to China can be made far higher than those to the Western allies and their partners.

A historical example is the West's passive facilitation of the Soviet Union's costly adventure into Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. This failed operation undermined the credibility of the Soviet leadership at home and internationally and hastened the demise of the regime. It is possible to conceive of future circumstances where the regime in Beijing could similarly miscalculate and commit to a costly hybrid or political warfare campaign that is of indefinite duration and would drain the regime economically, socially, and politically.

One of the disadvantages of cost imposition strategies is that the full effects of such measures usually take many years to generate powerful effects on the opponent. This is generally the case, for instance, with expanded diplomatic and information operations that could do serious damage to the regime's reputation both internationally and, over time, within the authoritarian state itself. Regime representatives could be banished from international organizations; travel restrictions could be imposed on relevant Party and government agencies; and diplomats, sporting teams, and other national delegations could be either banned or restricted in various ways. Many economic measures would also have gradual effects, such as the introduction of restrictions on business and other dealings with key individuals and organizations, tightened technology export controls, and programs that highlight the risks of doing business with Chinese enterprises. More substantial measures could include tariffs or quotas on selected goods, more general import and export bans, and restrictions on authoritarian state access to international finance, banking, and other facilities.

Yet another category of cost imposition is that imposed by applying geostrategic pressure. Possibilities in this field could be for the West and its partners to expand significantly their public and covert support of Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and other countries. The costs for China in responding effectively to such measures may be disproportionate and, over time, crippling.

## **Disadvantages of Option 2**

To be effective, most cost-imposing strategies require high levels of international cooperation and coordination. This is usually complex and time-consuming. Furthermore, some features of cost imposition strategies are likely to need legislative and bureaucratic changes in many jurisdictions, and these may require extensive debates and legislative and administrative action. This may be the case, for instance, with economic sanctions, altered immigration controls, or tightened technology transfer policies that are likely to have negative side effects for some allied businesses and other interest groups. Transition measures and other compensatory arrangements may be required. And, although all of the measures likely to be considered under a cost imposition strategy would be aimed at generating disproportionate difficulties for the Chinese regime, partner countries would be unable to avoid some costs. Modest increases in budgetary burdens would need to be carried by most states in the Western-led coalition, and probably for extended periods.



### Strategy Option 3: Attack the Opponent's Strategy

This approach would aim to force the Chinese regime to question the strategic calculations that have so far justified its hybrid/political warfare strategy. It may, for example, seek to prompt Beijing to realize that a central operational concept and focus for investment in paramilitary and other hybrid and political warfare instruments is no longer viable. Should such a strategy undermine Chinese operations repeatedly, it would demonstrate to the regime the full costs of continuing the struggle and the low returns from sustaining the effort. Over time, this could induce exhaustion and undermine the credibility of the opposing regime. It may lead to serious economic and political strains.

A notable example during the Cold War was President Ronald Reagan's unveiling of High Frontier, or the so-called Star Wars program to intercept and destroy Soviet ballistic missiles before they could reach their targets in the United States. When Washington appeared to successfully test key components of such a system, the Soviet political leadership rapidly concluded that their strategic nuclear deterrent was at risk, and they didn't possess either the technological or financial resources to keep pace.<sup>77</sup>

Defeating the Chinese regime's hybrid/political warfare strategy would aim, in a similar manner, to disarm and render ineffective and wasteful their diverse armory of hybrid and political warfare instruments—as well as the large numbers of people committed to such operations. For the United States, its allies, and its security partners, creative measures would be required. In contrast to the previous strategy options, attacking the opposition's strategy would aim to do more than simply defend against and deflect China's hybrid and political warfare operations. This is a strategically active concept that would seek to trip up, short-circuit, and perplex the regime's leadership by exploiting areas of weakness that they cannot ignore and which they cannot readily overcome.

An important part of such a coalition campaign against Beijing's hybrid/political warfare would be very strong information operations to expose and discredit the regime's poor investments and waste. These themes would be supplemented by strong messaging highlighting the regime's corruption, human rights abuses, and police state activities. When done well, the effect would be to portray the authoritarian regime in Beijing as an incompetent pariah state with which the international community wished to limit contact. Over time, such a strategy would have the potential to discredit the regime globally and in the eyes of its own population.

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<sup>77</sup> See this discussed in Ken Adelman, "The Phantom Menace: How an Unproven, Widely Mocked Technology Scared the Soviets into Ending the Cold War," *Politico Magazine*, May 11, 2014, available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/the-phantom-menace-106551>; and Paul Shillito, "Did Reagan's Real Star Wars Bankrupt the Soviet Union?" *Curious Droid*, June 20, 2017, available at <https://curious-droid.com/258/reagans-real-star-wars-bankrupt-soviet-union/>.

### **Disadvantages of Option 3**

Although operations to undermine China's hybrid/political warfare strategy are feasible, they require certain demanding preconditions to be met. First, and most importantly, they need high-quality strategic leadership in Western ally and partner states to appropriately assess the situation, perceive strategic opportunities to undermine Chinese hybrid/political warfare strategy, repeatedly place the regime's leadership on the horns of dilemmas, and then execute the strategy with sufficient resources over an appropriate period. This type of Western campaign would need to divert China's international operations into areas that are less threatening to allied and partner interests, impose disproportionate costs, and distract the Chinese leadership from the primary theaters and domains of the struggle.

Second, in order to achieve the desired effects, these operations would need a high level of international cooperation or, at a minimum, political acquiescence from a wide range of countries. While feasible, this would require a sustained diplomatic effort. Other requirements might include some re-arrangement of investment priorities within national security communities; an expansion of allied and partner intelligence and special operations forces, together with mechanisms for international cooperation in those fields; and strong growth in both public and private sector information warfare capabilities. Whereas these initiatives are not likely to be excessively costly for most coalition partners, the need to expand holdings of key skills and strengthen some organizations means it may be several years before they can deliver the desired political, economic, military, and other effects.

### **Strategy Option 4: Undermine the Opposing Regime**

The primary aim of this strategy option would be to force change in the Chinese regime, but not by launching kinetic military operations or seeking to occupy Beijing. It would use multiple means to create and exploit divisions within the regime in order to force a major shift. This strategy would seek to exacerbate the sense of insecurity in the leadership in order to encourage fundamental change in Beijing's behavior or, alternatively, the regime's replacement.

A strategy aimed at undermining the regime in Beijing would be a highly activist approach. It would entail much more than defending against, deflecting, and distracting the Chinese regime's hybrid and political warfare operations. It would employ a range of direct, indirect, and asymmetric instruments to seize the initiative, force the opposing leadership onto the back foot, and make the regime's hybrid and political warfare operations untenable. If conducted with skill, it could change the course of the conflict and force major concessions or even regime change in a relatively short timeframe.

One element of this strategy would seek to expose leaders' personal indiscretions, incompetence, and corruption. Once powerful information operations of this nature had been conducted for some time, the preconditions could be established to impose more pain by stressing the opposition's domestic economy, reducing the trade and financial access of the

decision-making elite, and placing at risk the personal futures of key members and supporters of the regime. Specific measures might include the imposition of restrictions on international travel and migration, reduced access to international finance and banking, tighter controls on foreign investments, and the confiscation of international property and other assets owned by regime leaders and members of key agencies and front organizations.

As part of this strategy, Chinese nationals who are permitted to visit the West and partner countries would be greeted by carefully tailored information warfare programs designed to undermine their trust in and respect for the leadership of the regime, as well as deepen their admiration for the freedoms and achievements of the West. In current circumstances, the use of such a strategy against the Chinese regime might be designed to ensure that the Made in China 2025 program and the Belt and Road Initiative fail in spectacular fashion and in ways that rebound strongly on the regime's leadership.

Another element of a Western strategy of undermining the regime could be to encourage the business communities of Western and partner countries to give much higher priority to investment and trade opportunities in countries other than China. Over time, many businesses would be encouraged to stage a phased withdrawal of their Chinese investments and other economic links. While such a campaign might not be explicitly designed to contain China, it would aim to reduce the regime's international influence, weaken its authority, and, over time, generate powerful forces for change.

#### **Disadvantages of Option 4**

A strategy that attacks an authoritarian regime directly or indirectly is likely to trigger deep unease and fear in Beijing, and, if not well implemented, strong responses could be anticipated. Some Chinese counteroffensives would likely attack the weaknesses of the Western allies and their partners. Some of the regime's actions will likely be escalatory, may move into new operational domains, and would probably be asymmetric. However, if the allied and partner campaign is well planned and organized, implemented in a phased manner, and periodically reviewed, the costs of many of the opponent's countermeasures would likely impose significantly higher political, economic, social, and other burdens on China's society than on those of the Western allies and their partners. Nevertheless, because the level of unpredictability entailed in this type of campaign is relatively high, a strategy of undermining the legitimacy of the Chinese regime would best be accompanied by a number of supplementary measures.

First, it would be important for the publics of allied and partner countries to be prepared psychologically and organizationally for the prospect of intensified operations. A key feature of this preparatory work would be to underline to domestic publics the fundamental ideological, political, economic, and strategic case for protecting Western and partner societies from the threat of rampant authoritarianism. Second, it would be important for the Western allies and their partners to move rapidly to achieve escalation dominance in every domain of importance. Hence, were the opposing regime's leadership to attempt to gain the upper hand by

opening another front in the struggle, say in space operations or dramatically expanded cyber activities, it could be thwarted both directly and indirectly from the outset. Third, although Western and partner attacks on the regime's leadership may produce almost immediate effects and possibly some regime concessions, the struggle may still be prolonged. The Western and partner coalition would need to be prepared to sustain operations of this kind for an extended period.

## **Toward an Integrated Allied and Partner Strategy**

How then should allied and partner decision-makers weigh these strategy options? Some recent discussions of strategy to deal with the behavior of authoritarian regimes have focused on the scope for applying each of the above strategies in isolation.<sup>78</sup> Such thinking is too rigid; while there is a tendency to see these as alternatives, the boundaries between these different strategy options are more blurred than is often appreciated. For instance, it is likely that well developed denial operations implemented by the major allies and their partners would likely deliver more than a strategic denial effect. Strong denial could, in addition, impose significant costs on an opponent and, over time, even defeat the opposition's strategy. It could also potentially have the effect of applying some pressure on the opposing leadership. This is not to say that a campaign of denial on its own would be the best choice to counter Chinese hybrid/political warfare campaigns. However, it is likely to be a component of most effective strategies, and, if implemented well by a strong coalition, its strategic effects are likely to be more extensive than the strategy of pure denial might at first suggest.

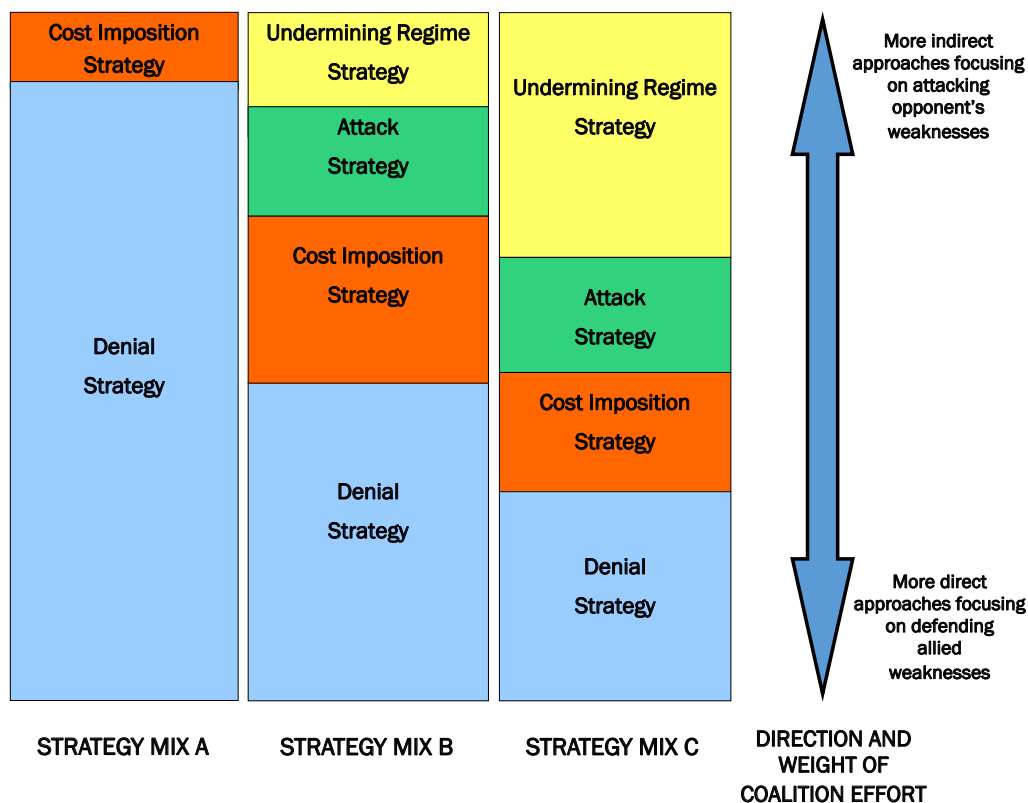
Rather than viewing the above strategy options as stand-alone candidates, it would be more productive to consider them as ingredients that could be employed in various mixes to produce more effective results and end states.

This concept of combined strategy is illustrated in Figure 6. In Strategy Mix A, the balance of strategy elements emphasizes denial with lower priority accorded to cost imposition. This fundamentally defensive approach might be particularly appropriate for small and strategically exposed states, which have few security resources but need to take immediate steps to strengthen their defenses. The dominant priorities in this mix are the strengthening of national resilience to reduce the impact of Chinese hybrid and political warfare operations, publicizing the nature and extent of foreign interference in their communities, and taking low strategic risks.

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<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism*, pp. 48–61; and Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting*, vol. 1.

FIGURE 6: ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY MIXES FOR THE WESTERN ALLIES



Strategy Mix B illustrates a different approach. By giving some emphasis not only to denial and cost imposition but also to attacking the opponent's strategy and undermining the regime, this approach aims to seize the initiative, forcing the Chinese regime onto the back foot and placing severe pressure on its decision-makers to negotiate an early compromise or escalate; it could even possibly cause the regime to lose power. This approach may be more appropriate for the United States or possibly a coalition of close allies to attempt in the middle phases of a countercampaign.

Strategy Mix C gives much greater prominence to undermining and defeating the Chinese regime. This approach might be appropriate for the later stages of a hybrid/political warfare struggle when the Western coalition is reaching its full strength and Beijing may be in serious retreat. At this stage, many small and exposed states would still be heavily focused on denial strategy and maintaining high levels of national resilience. Nevertheless, the balance of the overall coalition strategy would have shifted significantly, and many of the operational dynamics would have changed.

It would be difficult for small or medium states to attempt this type of strategic shift to Mix B or C on their own. For a start, the counter-regime and counterstrategy operations of modestly sized states would be unlikely to have sufficient impact on China to force its leaders to change. Moreover, in the event that they attempted such operations independently, they would likely

prompt aggressive Chinese responses. In most democratic states it would be difficult for governments to justify such assertive strategy mixes to their own populations unless such a campaign were reinforced by the active participation of major allies and partners.

A key conclusion is that the strategy mixes for most small- and medium-sized countries are likely to be significantly different from those of the United States and other major power democracies. It is also likely that the optimal strategy mix for some countries will change over time. For middle-sized countries like Australia and Canada, the optimal strategy mix might approximate Strategy Mix A in the early stages of an allied countercampaign. However, as allied operations progress in both scale and effectiveness, and as the weight of United States and other major powers is brought to bear, some medium-sized democracies may feel comfortable in shifting their strategy emphasis closer to Strategy Mix B. As the coalition's operations gather strength, the United States and possibly a small number of other strong allies might choose to move the focus of their operations to something more like Strategy Mix C. This would place further pressure on China's weaknesses and raise the prospects of forcing significant change within the regime.

This discussion underlines two further conclusions. The first is the importance of negotiating a strong coalition of like-minded states at an early stage to work together to counter Chinese imperialism through a combined campaign. The stronger the coalition and the more numerous the like-minded coalition participants, the better.

Second, this coalition of like-minded states could grow to be very large. At the core of this teaming is likely to be the Five-Eyes Western allies and the NATO member states who have deep experience in conducting combined operations of great complexity and operate routinely with high levels of trust. They may be prepared to operate together in relatively assertive ways from the early stages of a campaign; however, beyond those countries, many members of an anti-authoritarian coalition are likely to be hesitant about the level and nature of their involvement. For those countries, options could be provided that commit them to certain foundational principles and provide them with access to mechanisms and resources that would strengthen their national resilience and denial capabilities. While some countries would be unable to contribute much more to the coalition effort during the course of the struggle, effective operations to deny their territories and strategic resources to China would still represent a very valuable contribution to the coalition campaign. The strategic effect would be to greatly reduce those parts of the globe offering Beijing permissive environments for their hybrid and political warfare operations.

This diversity of coalition members has many other implications. Most notably, the high-level political consultation and coordination mechanisms that would be required to manage an anti-authoritarian campaign across such a large and diverse coalition do not currently exist. They would need to be established at an early stage. The requirements for the operational command and control of such a complex campaign would require the extension and adaptation of existing arrangements and the creation of new ones. Command responsibilities and authorities would need to be assigned from the outset. At the core are likely to be tried and

tested military, paramilitary, and civilian skills, but the range of deployed instruments, the complexity of diverse theaters, and the scale of the operations would require special efforts that would not just be whole-of-government but whole-of-nation and, in some cases, whole-of-coalition. These operations would be a major challenge for coalition members to plan, organize, command, and effectively control and would bring new meaning to the concept of multi-domain combined operations.





## CHAPTER 7

# Conclusions and Recommendations

This report concludes that in the field of combined political-hybrid warfare there is a serious mismatch between China on the one hand and the U.S. and its allies on the other. For Beijing, the struggle against the United States and its allies has been underway for a considerable time, political warfare operations have reached into and beyond the West's homelands, and hybrid warfare campaigns have been conducted in key theaters for several years. Significant territories and other strategic advances have already been won. In the West, by contrast, most decision-makers still consider themselves to be in a state of "peace;" they are not inclined to initiate actions that they fear Beijing may consider provocative; and their political and hybrid warfare arsenals are weak at best, poorly organized and grossly under-resourced. Even on those occasions when Western governments have wished to take substantive action to thwart Beijing's hybrid campaigns, they have found that their defense and security organizations and operational instruments have mostly been ill-suited for the task. Their organizations and structures are designed primarily for more conventional diplomatic and military campaigns.

This mismatch is particularly evident in the two sides' markedly different ideologies, gray zone campaign experiences and doctrines, strategic goals, preferred strategies, campaign time-frames, operational toolkits, and, above all, the priority given to these campaigns by the two sides' leaderships. The Chinese regime really does talk a different language, think different thoughts, and conduct different sorts of campaigns in the hybrid warfare space.

The cumulative effects of the detached and often unfocused U.S. and allied responses have been profound. The Chinese communist regime has extended its territorial control over large regions of strategic importance, many states and international organizations have been intimidated into acquiescence, and great damage has been done to the credibility of the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. There is a need for U.S. and allied strategic planners to focus more intently on this challenge and craft a coherent strategy and campaign framework that not only generates powerful deterrence and defensive power but also applies substantial

counterpressure on the leadership in Beijing, should it persist. An effective Western strategy to counter China's combined political and hybrid warfare campaigns would require Western leadership to take the following actions.

**Make it a priority in discussions.** Western leaderships need to accord a higher priority to deterring and defeating Chinese hybrid and political warfare campaigns. This is critical not only to reinforce the security of Indo-Pacific allies and security partners and rebuild U.S. and allied security credibility, it is also essential to prevent an emboldening of Beijing, and potentially Russia and other authoritarian regimes, from launching more substantial hybrid campaigns in critical theaters. The challenge posed by Chinese hybrid and political warfare needs to feature prominently in national, allied and broader coalition security discussions, dialogues, and conferences. Key themes should include the evolving nature of Chinese hybrid and political warfare operations, the sharing of practical insights and experiences, preferred counterstrategy options, policy and organizational steps being taken, progress in implementing operational counterstrategies, and ways of improving coalition cooperation and coordination.

**Champion democratic values and practices.** China's hybrid and political warfare campaigns have strong ideological drivers. Therefore, powerful counters to the CCP's Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology need to be central to the coalition's countercampaign. National and global leaders should speak frequently about the core principles that underpin the Western democracies and their international partners. They should champion democratic choice; fair elections; the freedoms of speech, association, assembly, religion; and the rule of law. Wherever possible, these foundational values should be celebrated by all major political parties as well as by a broad range of community leaders in coalition societies.

These efforts would have two primary purposes. First, to remind all citizens of coalition states of the core values that drove the foundation of their countries and for which their forebears were prepared to fight and die to defend. The second primary purpose would be to draw a stark contrast between these foundational principles of freedom, openness, and respect for human rights with those of the powerful authoritarian states. While some blunt assessments of China's track record in these fields may be delivered by national leaders, in smaller and more exposed countries, they might be better delivered by think tanks, media organizations, and academic institutes—which governments could quietly encourage. This championing of core democratic freedoms would provide a sound foundation for a powerful strategic narrative to drive the counter-authoritarian coalition.

**Develop human capital for hybrid and political warfare.** Many of the skills required to counter authoritarian hybrid and political warfare operations are in short supply in the West. This suggests a need for special education and training programs, as well as for new arrangements to harness key skills in business and the broader community through innovative contracting and special reserve force systems. There is a need for much deeper research into Chinese, Russian, and other authoritarian state use of hybrid and political warfare as well as into potential counters. Key lessons need to be published, and training programs need to

be conducted for officials, military personnel, and others. Priority skill sets need to be fostered and career streams tailored so as to generate world-class expertise in the field. In short, there is a need to establish national centers of excellence in countering political and hybrid warfare.

**Build a strong coalition.** Building a security coalition of like-minded states should be a major diplomatic task for the United States and its allies. The proposed coalition should ideally include not only developed nations but also developing states and many micro-communities. The precise form of such a coalition and its primary operational modes would best be determined following extensive consultations between interested governments. However, key elements might include a set of agreed principles, protocols for intelligence and information exchanges, a baseline commitment to participate in operations to thwart authoritarian regime political and hybrid warfare operations, and an agreement to participate in periodic discussions to coordinate coalition operations. This coalition might be called The Freedom Partnership.

**Surge coalition public education and international political warfare operations.**

While Beijing's political warfare activities have been a key enabler of the Chinese regime's hybrid offensives, they have also been a precondition for their success. Because of this dependency between the two main components of Beijing's gray zone campaigns, a sound coalition strategy might choose to energetically contest the information and broader political warfare domain and effectively remove one of the arms of Chinese gray zone campaigns. If this could be done rapidly, it would neutralize and potentially outflank Beijing's combined hybrid-political warfare campaigns in almost every domain and force a fundamental recalibration in Beijing.

In order for this to work, coalition governments would need to do a much better job of explaining to their citizenry and the broader international community the challenges posed by China's hybrid and political warfare, and subsequently make the case for taking serious countermeasures. Aside from direct statements by political and other leaders, there are many less direct ways that key messages could be communicated:

- Congressional or parliamentary committee investigations or independent commission reports;
- Annual departmental reports to congress or parliament on China's hybrid-political warfare and related operations.
- Presentations and briefings by career government officials.
- The direct or indirect funding of think tank and academic reports on China's hybrid and political warfare campaigns.
- Periodic background briefing of accredited national security journalists and media managers.

- Fostering professional conferences and university courses that detail the nature of Chinese authoritarian political and hybrid warfare and the practical options for coalition countermeasures.
- Encouragement of media organizations to strengthen their expertise in the field of authoritarian state hybrid and political warfare and increase their reporting of relevant matters.

The overall objective would be substantially improved transparency. These and related steps in public education would be designed to direct intense “sunshine” on authoritarian state hybrid and political warfare operations, markedly improve official and public knowledge and understanding, and engage all Western and partner citizens in discussions and debates about how best to respond. In short, relevant national agencies need to be tasked to launch powerful information campaigns in partnership with coalition partners

**Develop an effective and inclusive strategy.** An early priority should be devising, testing, and agreeing upon a strategic concept for deterring, defending against, and defeating Chinese hybrid and political warfare. Carefully crafted indirect strategies offer a stronger chance of deterring and defeating Chinese hybrid warfare campaigns than would be the case with a continuation of the reactive and direct approaches of recent decades.

The chosen strategic concept should be both operationally potent and scalable. It should be sufficiently flexible to provide meaningful roles not only for the United States and its close allies but also for a wide range of developing countries, including very small states. The chosen strategic approach should be capable of adapting to changing circumstances over time and counter new Chinese initiatives. It should not aim to replicate Chinese hybrid and political warfare operations, but rather have an asymmetric character by fostering operations, capabilities, and systems that exploit the Chinese regime’s weaknesses, seize the initiative, and inflict successive tactical and theater defeats. The end result is likely to be a coalition strategy that includes a mix of direct and indirect elements. All coalition members are likely to participate in denial operations, but at various stages some of the more capable members are likely to also conduct operations designed to impose disproportionate costs, defeat China’s strategy, and undermine the communist regime.

**Build a formidable arsenal of political and hybrid warfare instruments.** The Western allies and their coalition partners will need to build 21<sup>st</sup> century versions of the formidable political and hybrid warfare instruments some of them operated during the Cold War. Arguably the most important part of the West’s rebuilt toolkit will be advanced public education, media, diplomatic, cyber, and related capabilities. These operations will be critical not only for informing domestic publics but also for exposing the regime’s indiscretions, corrupt practices, human rights abuses, bribery, espionage, acts of sabotage, and fake news operations to international audiences.

Another key part of the rebuilt Western hybrid and political warfare toolkit should be economic measures designed to counter Chinese economic coercion, the theft of Western intellectual property, and their future domination of strategically vital industries. Other measures could be designed to reduce international dependencies on Chinese trade, investment, technology, and finance.

Advanced military and paramilitary capabilities would also have important roles to play within a revived Western and partner hybrid and political warfare arsenal. These forces are essential to offset growing Chinese military capabilities, ensure that the Western allies retain escalation control in future crises, and, in so doing, deter overt military attacks and rebuild international confidence in Western power.

The more extensive use of legal and paralegal instruments to highlight the illegitimacy of many Chinese hybrid and political warfare operations will also be an important addition to the toolkit. For instance, in response to China's seizure and militarization of most of the South China Sea, its campaign of coercive posturing in the Senkaku Islands dispute, and its periodic intrusions across India's northern borders, legal and paralegal instruments could be used more extensively to highlight the true nature of the Chinese regime's actions, further undermine its international reputation, and reduce its power to win new victories. The cost of these activities would be minimal, but their political value could be substantial over time.

**Develop tailored programs of denial to assist small and exposed states.** At the core of the proposed coalition should be a commitment to act together and help other members of the coalition, especially those that have limited resources and are priority targets of Beijing. Some of these vulnerable countries should be easy to identify. They should be offered special assistance with international diplomacy, training and equipping key agencies, and building skills in information management and media liaison, as well as capacity building in a broader range of economic and security fields.

A good starting point would be the desire of almost all coalition members to maintain national sovereignty and defend themselves against external interference, manipulation, and incursions. Practical steps could be taken to enhance understanding of the political and hybrid warfare challenge, share experiences on countering authoritarian state operations, strengthen national and community resilience, train and equip local personnel in priority skills, and coordinate deterrence and defensive activities. Advances in these basic denial operations across the coalition would enhance the security of all member states and markedly strengthen the headwinds that would confront Beijing's hybrid and political warfare campaigns.

**Refocus intelligence organizations and reporting.** The intelligence organizations of the United States and its close allies need to redirect some of their collection, assessment, and reporting capabilities to provide much earlier and more focused reporting on Chinese and other authoritarian state hybrid campaigns. U.S. Senator Ben Sasse has argued persuasively that more intelligence attention is needed on a broader range of domains that reach beyond military and paramilitary forces, to include cyber, trade, finance, and information operations,

and embrace tools of influence and aggression that have not typically been seen in the West as being political or strategic.<sup>79</sup> National and coalition decision-makers need to be supported with better integrated and more timely reporting in order to combat China's multi-disciplinary gray zone campaigns. In addition, there is a need to strengthen the means of sharing, discussing, and debating intelligence reporting on hybrid and political warfare operations across a diverse coalition of states.

**Modify and extend bureaucratic structures.** Government departments and agencies in the United States, their close allies, and nearly all partner states are not well-equipped and structured to lead campaigns to deter and defeat China's combined hybrid and political warfare campaigns. As mentioned earlier, key priorities are to build both knowledge and practical skills. However, in addition, there is a need to modify and extend current bureaucratic structures and processes so that they can deliver world-class outcomes in gray zone operations.

Some of the complexities derive from the fact that deterring and defeating China's combined hybrid and political warfare operations will require the marshaling of capabilities well beyond conventional national security agencies. Some tasks will need whole-of-government assets. Some will require the commissioning of whole-of-nation assets—including non-standard parts of business, transport, and communications. Yet other counteroperations will need whole-of-coalition cooperation. This will be most notably the case with rapidly paced information operations and some categories of cyber and counterintelligence operations.

Making all of this work will require each coalition government to appoint a gifted senior official to lead their national counter-authoritarian programs and coordinate closely with counterparts in other member states. The United States will have a key role to play in setting an example and encouraging strong and sustained national contributions to the coalition.

**Clarify command responsibilities and accountabilities.** Planning and conducting complex multi-domain, multi-national combined operations will be exceptionally demanding for all coalition members and especially for the United States and other countries likely to carry special leadership responsibilities. The institutions and personnel with the greatest experience of relevance in most countries will be senior military staffs. This will especially be the case with the Five Eyes partners, NATO members, and a number of other close U.S. security partners such as Japan and India. Modified versions of the command arrangements they have used in multiple conflict zones in recent decades would be the simplest and most practical approach. However, given the very wide range of non-military instruments likely to be employed and the unusually large mix of countries likely to be involved, great care will be needed in establishing appropriate command responsibilities, accountabilities, and coordination mechanisms.

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79 Ben Sasse, "The End of the End of History: Reimagining U.S. Foreign Policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 2, April 2019.

**Recalibrate the management of risk.** At the end of the Cold War, it wasn't just the physical and organizational capabilities to conduct political warfare and other gray zone operations that atrophied in the West, it was also the appetite amongst officials and the general public to take strategic risks. The prevailing attitude within many government agencies and also within the citizenry of many Western states was that with the fading of obvious existential threats, the need to take risks to protect key interests also receded. This deep culture of risk aversion is a serious constraint on effective coalition counters to Chinese hybrid/political warfare. As things currently stand, the publication of a threatening article in a Chinese publication or media channel is sometimes sufficient to stop a Western state in its tracks and deter it from contemplating serious counteraction. Given the nature of warfare in the gray zone, these instinctive behaviors need to be reviewed and recalibrated.

Some strategically important staffs will need to be retrained so that they appreciate the dangers of passive and non-strategic approaches. Some individuals may need to be reassigned to other duties. Other personnel who demonstrate strategic initiative and strong capabilities for multi-disciplinary leadership will need to be identified and promoted to priority roles if coalition operations are to succeed.

**Prepare for a long struggle.** Countering and then defeating authoritarian hybrid and political warfare operations is not likely to be achieved quickly. It may require a sustained coalition effort over several decades. In consequence, it would make sense to invest in staffs, organizational structures, legal frameworks, strategic and operational centers of excellence, and other key capabilities that will add value well beyond the short term.

**Stand and fight on two strategic feet.** A key conclusion of this report is that when confronted by China's combined hybrid and political warfare operations, the United States and its allies have been slow, reactive, and very predictable; when they have launched operations in the theater, they have used diplomacy and conventional military forces in frontal responses that have been largely ineffective. The allies have always been on the back foot.

Such approaches are inadequate and self-defeating. Powerful and highly experienced opponents are rarely deterred or defeated through purely reactive, low-key defensive operations. There is a need for coalition counters that feature operations on two feet; the back foot *and* the front foot. Standing and fighting on two feet would mean that while all coalition members would work to strengthen their national defenses, especially against China's political warfare operations, some coalition members would also take steps to pressure CCP leadership in ways that may be indirect, unexpected, uncomfortable, and potentially costly for the regime.

Moving to a mix of defensive and offensive measures need not be escalatory. Most offensive measures could be introduced gradually and modulated up and down as circumstances require. They would be designed to complicate Beijing's campaign plans and demonstrate that a continuation of its combined political and hybrid warfare offensives would be untenable. Deterring and defeating China's combined hybrid and political warfare campaigns will require

a countercampaign that is proactive; seizes the initiative; and determines the theaters, the domains, the operating modes, and the timing of the struggle.

If this turnaround can be delivered, the United States and its allies will be able to generate a formidable counter to China's gray zone campaigning that is likely to succeed and which would give great heart to coalition members. It is within the power of the leaderships of the United States, its allies, and coalition partners to take control of the situation. It is their turn to steal a march.



## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of South East Asian Nations
<b>CCG</b>	China Coast Guard
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>CITIC</b>	China International Trust and Investment Corporation
<b>CMAG</b>	China Military Advisory Group
<b>CMC</b>	Central Military Commission
<b>CPT</b>	Communist Party of Thailand
<b>CSBA</b>	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
<b>EEZ</b>	Exclusive Economic Zone
<b>IDF</b>	Israeli Defense Force
<b>KMT</b>	Kuomintang
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>PLA</b>	People's Liberation Army
<b>PLAN</b>	People's Liberation Army Navy
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>SEATO</b>	South East Asia Treaty Organization
<b>VOPT</b>	Voice of the People Thailand







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