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Winning Without Fighting: The Chinese Psychological Warfare Challenge

Dean Cheng

Abstract

Beijing hopes to win future conflicts without firing a shot. How? By using psychological warfare to manipulate both a nation's leaders and its populace—affecting the thought processes and cognitive frameworks of allies and opponents alike. Indeed, the PRC's psychological warfare operations are already underway despite the fact that there is no active conflict. It is therefore essential that the United States counter such psychological operations now while preparing to use its own arsenal of political warfare weapons should a conflict ever arise.

One of the elements distinguishing the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) from many of its counterparts is its continued role as a Party army. The PLA is, first and foremost, the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This distinction both obligates the PLA to help maintain the CCP's grip on power and gives it an additional set of tools with which to defend the CCP and the Chinese state. At the moment, the PLA is not only planning for operations on the physical battlefield; it is also preparing to conduct "political warfare," including what is termed the "three warfares": public opinion warfare, legal warfare, and psychological warfare.

Psychological warfare is in some ways the most far-reaching of the "three warfares." It involves the application of specialized information and media in accordance with a strategic goal and in support of political and military objectives.[1] Such efforts are aimed at a variety of potential audiences and usually involve operational missions against an opponent's psychology and cognitive capacities.

Key Points

- Over the past decade, the People's Republic of China has exhibited growing interest in waging asymmetrical warfare.
- To this end, the PRC released "political work regulations" for the People's Liberation Army addressing the importance of waging "the three warfares": public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.
- The "three warfares" represent the PRC's commitment to expanding potential areas of conflict from the purely military (i.e., involving the direct or indirect use of military forces) to the more political.
- Such expansion will be supported by manipulation of an enemy's leadership, including through intimidation and coercion, alienation, and deception.
- To avoid being psychologically outmaneuvered by a PRC intent on winning without firing a shot, the U.S. must strengthen its own psychological warfare capabilities, including strategic communications, public diplomacy, and media outreach capabilities, as well as dedicated psychological operations units.

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Specifically:

> There are myriad targets and objects of psychological warfare; it is applied against the enemy, but also against friends; it targets externally, but also internally; it must deal with allied countries, but also the entire globe, and one must rely on the media acting in multiple directions jointly, with effective coverage of many areas, in order to comprehensively realize the various goals.[2]

The goal of psychological warfare is to influence, constrain, and/or alter an opponent's thoughts, emotions, and habits while at the same time strengthening friendly psychology.[3]

Psychological Warfare and Information Warfare

Psychological warfare operations are integral to the broad concept of information warfare (xinxi *zhanzheng*). A product of the Information Age, information warfare is the struggle to dominate the generation and flow of information in order to enhance and support one's own strategic goals while degrading and constraining those of an opponent. The ability to triumph in future "Local Wars Under Informationized Conditions"—the most likely form of wars in the Information Age—rests upon the ability to secure "information dominance (*zhi xinxi quan*)." This in turn requires the ability to collect, manage, and exploit accurate information more quickly than an opponent.

Information dominance rests on two primary factors: modern information technology, which is integral to information collection and transmission, and the ability to degrade the quality of information, whether by slowing down transmission or by introducing false or inaccurate data. But in the Chinese conception of psychological warfare, the users of information—both high-level decision-makers and lower-level policy implementers (individual soldiers, clerks, etc.)—are as important as the computers and networks and the software that runs them. Efforts to secure information dominance, therefore, will target not only the physical information infrastructure and the data that pass through it, but also the human agents that interact with those data, especially those who are making decisions.

Given the nature of modern technology and informationized societies, operations designed to influence a rival nation can no longer be aimed solely at military leaders or reserved for wartime. The interconnected nature of information, as well as information systems, makes clear-cut classifications of "military" and "civilian" almost impossible. Similarly, information collection, and even exploitation, is not necessarily restricted by "wartime" versus "peacetime" categorizations. As one Chinese volume observes, information warfare is constant and ongoing, whether in wartime or peacetime. Because of the complex, intertwined nature of modern international politics and economics:

> [I]t is necessary in peacetime to undertake information warfare in the political, economic, technical, and military realms, as only then can one scientifically establish operational plans, appropriately calculate gains and losses in a conflict, appropriately control the level of attack, precisely strike predetermined targets, and seek the best strategic interest and long-term benefit.[4]

This philosophy is echoed in other PLA writings, which emphasize that modern information technology blurs the lines between peacetime and wartime, between military and civilian, and among strategy, operations, and tactics.[5] Rather than trying to draw artificial boundaries among these categories, the implication is that information should be treated as an integrated whole.

In this context, psychological operations are seen as an essential part of future conflicts, affecting the

1. Guo Yanhua, *Psychological Warfare Knowledge* (Beijing, PRC: National Defense University Press, 2005), p. 1.
2. Nanjing Political Academy, Military News Department Study Group, "Study of the Journalistic Media Warfare in the Iraq War," *China Military Science*, No. 4 (2003), p. 30.
3. Academy of Military Science, Operations Theory and Regulations Research Department and Informationalized Operations Theory Research Office, *Informationalized Operations Theory Study Guide* (Beijing, PRC: Academy of Military Science Press, November 2005), p. 404.
4. Li Naiguo, *New Theories of Information War* (Beijing, PRC: Academy of Military Science Press, 2004), p. 154.
5. Yuan Wenxian, *The Science of Military Information* (Beijing, PRC: National Defense University Press, 2008), pp. 77–79.

very perceptions that inform decision making, from the context to the biases. Successful psychological operations will therefore have repercussions at every level of operations, influencing the course of the conflict. To be effective, however, psychological warfare operations cannot be limited to wartime. Instead, peacetime psychological operations are necessary, both to understand an opponent better and to lay the groundwork for effective wartime operations.

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Peacetime applications of psychological warfare techniques involve influencing and altering an opponent's unconscious, implicit views in order to make that opponent more susceptible to coercion. By employing various forms of strategic communications, including diplomatic efforts, one can foster a positive national image and increase foreign sympathy and support for one's own policies and goals. At the same time, such techniques attempt to isolate opponents, undermining their positions, portraying them as fostering ill intentions, and forcing them to react to a variety of charges so that their energy is dispersed.

In addition, employing all the tools of communications, including various forms of media, emphasizes one's own strengths as well as a willingness to employ that strength to deter and coerce opponents more effectively. All the while, one must be working to counter opponents' efforts to foster their own image of strength and unity. It is also likely that an opponent will attempt to demoralize one's populace and that appropriate defensive measures will have to be taken.

In wartime, psychological operations shift emphasis towards more specifically military targets and goals. The primary objective of such efforts is to generate confusion, doubt, anxiety, fear, terror, regret, and exhaustion in an opponent, especially among senior military and civilian leaders. Ideally, such a campaign will induce neglect and maximize the chances of an opponent making mistakes. Wartime psychological warfare operations also aim to generate a sense of uncertainty and indecisiveness at all levels, thereby degrading opposition decision-making processes. The ability to interfere with an opponent's information systems, coupled with efforts to influence decision makers, can create a strong psychological impact.

Another facet of wartime psychological operations is the sowing of discord and a sense of hopelessness in the enemy. Not only will this help generate war-weariness among enemy forces and populations and discourage resistance, but once the conflict is concluded, such operations may facilitate peace negotiations and induce more concessions. "When one defeats the enemy, it is not solely by killing the enemy, or winning a piece of ground, but is mainly in terms of cowing the enemy's heart."[6] In order to undermine the opponent's morale, one must emphasize information favorable to oneself through various forms of media as well as through third parties, friendly elements in the opponent's society, and similar outlets.

Finally, offensive psychological warfare operations must be complemented by defensive measures, since an opponent will also be trying to undermine one's own forces, population, and leaders. One must therefore attempt to solidify popular support for the conflict, highlight one's successes and the enemy's failures, and instill confidence and support for the Party and the state. Such defensive measures require tight control of information flows in one's own society and the insulation of one's decision-makers and decision-making processes from enemy information warfare efforts. This need for control explains Beijing's efforts to limit cyber access to the larger population, including the "Great Firewall of China."

Chinese Concept of Psychological Warfare Tasks

For the PLA, psychological warfare is the responsibility of the General Political Department (GPD), working in coordination with the rest of the PLA. The GPD not only ensures political orthodoxy

6. Guo, *Psychological Warfare Knowledge*, p. 14.

within the PLA, but also is responsible for maintaining morale, personnel administration (e.g., assessing promotions), and countering psychological warfare attacks. As one of the four "General Departments," its purview covers the entire PLA, and its authority is second only to the war planners of the General Staff Department (GSD).

The "three warfares" of psychological warfare, legal warfare, and public opinion warfare are part of the GPD's responsibility as laid out in the 2003 and 2010 "political work regulations" of the PLA. For the GPD, Chinese writings suggest that there are five broad tasks associated with psychological warfare:[7]

- **Presenting One's Own Side as Just.** Winning future wars will require efficient political mobilization. Failure to mobilize the populace will make them vulnerable to war-weariness and moral collapse such as occurred in the 1990s Balkan conflicts. Consequently, the foremost role of psychological warfare is to emphasize the justice of one's cause, for only by portraying one's own goals as just and the enemy's as unjust can one hope to secure popular support and garner international sympathy and aid.[8] At the same time, successfully inculcating one's own population and forces with a sense of a just cause will reduce the effectiveness of enemy propaganda and allow them to weather the inevitable setbacks associated with any conflict.

- **Emphasizing One's Advantages.** Psychological warfare is intended to support larger diplomatic, political, economic, and military ends. Consequently, it is essential to emphasize one's own advantages in each of these respects. Such emphasis will bolster the confidence and will of one's own side while simultaneously influencing the other side's perceptions. In this regard, propaganda efforts—part of public opinion warfare—will extend beyond the superiority of one's military forces and equipment to note advances in science and technology, culture, and economic capacity.

- **Undermining the Opposition's Will to Resist.** This is one of the fundamental tasks of wartime psychological warfare. Because the will of an enemy is a key determinant of ultimate victory, it is essential to degrade his morale and unravel his alliances and support from third parties. Psychological warfare efforts must therefore not only bolster one's own side, but "cause the enemy to lose heart and disperse, so that even though they appear whole, they cannot exploit that." Such a campaign can involve such diverse measures as implementing policies of benign treatment of prisoners (to promote a willingness to surrender) and developing base areas in the enemy's rear (to make the enemy feel constantly insecure).

- **Encouraging Dissension in the Enemy's Camp.** This task is distinct from the previous one, insofar as such measures are more indirect than those associated with undermining the opposition's will to resist. Instead, sparking dissension involves fostering anti-war elements and encouraging war-weariness. Such an approach is similar to the creation of "united front" tactics, wherein various local elements within the opponent's camp are unified against the leadership without necessarily being openly supported by the PRC.

- **Implementing Psychological Defenses.** Since psychological warfare can have such far-reaching impacts, in the Chinese view, it is assumed that an opponent will mount psychological attacks. Consequently, in addition to negating or neutralizing such attacks, it is necessary to expose them, both to defeat them and to demoralize an opponent by demonstrating the ineffectiveness of his efforts. Thus, not only must there be counter-propaganda activities, but one must also publicize enemy machinations and techniques, thereby exposing and highlighting their futility.

It is worth noting that none of these tasks is necessarily limited to actual wartime. Erecting psychological defenses, fostering efforts to bolster popular

7. Ibid., pp. 14–16.
8. Wang Yongming, Liu Xiaoli, et al., *Research on the Iraq War* (Beijing, PRC: Academy of Military Science Press, 2003), p. 229.

and military support for the Party's leadership, and emphasizing the justness of one's own cause are all long-term endeavors that can be undertaken in part in peacetime.

Principles Governing Psychological Warfare Operations

Chinese analyses of military affairs are informed by the idea of military science; i.e., that there is a proper scientific approach to the analysis of military affairs. This method entails identifying underlying principles that govern individual aspects of military operations, including those aimed at fulfilling the key tasks of psychological warfare operations.

- **Principle #1: Maintain direction.** The principle of direction refers to the need to follow the Party's direction and leadership, incorporating its commands regarding policies, parameters, and limitations into all psychological warfare activities—whether strategic, operational, or tactical and whether aimed at foreign or domestic audiences. It closely parallels the military axioms of unity of command and effort. The principle of direction dictates that psychological warfare activities should be planned and assessed based on (1) their support of broad national interests and goals, (2) their relation to specific political and diplomatic efforts, and (3) their support of integrated operational military activities. Direction is achieved through unified, integrated command and operational implementation—something facilitated by the existence of the GPD, which spans the entire PLA.

- **Principle #2: Adopt a systematic approach.** Psychological warfare is not a single instance or even an accumulation of instances, but must instead be organized and integrated into a systematic, coherent whole. This approach requires coordination of psychological warfare operations between higher and lower levels so that the resulting unified construct will have maximum impact. Such coordination in turn requires that psychological warfare be tailored against opponents: There cannot be a "one size fits all" mentality. Rather, the character of the implementing force, as well as of the intended targets, must be taken into account with a suitable division of labor among the various components. The psychological warfare effort, moreover, should include both military and civilian entities. Given the authority and span of the GPD, Chinese psychological warfare operations are likely to be integrated into broader military operations and incorporated into the earliest stages of military planning.

- **Principle #3: Seize and retain the initiative.** As Chinese writings on public opinion warfare and legal warfare have emphasized, with regard to political warfare, the side that gets its message out first has an enormous advantage. The same principle is true for psychological warfare. In order to seize the initiative, PLA writings stress that advance preparation is essential; only through early research can the most effective messaging be delivered, the most vulnerable targets be identified, and the best approach be determined. Securing the initiative significantly increases the likelihood of creating shifts and trends in one's own favor. At the same time, being proactive in the implementation of psychological warfare activities compels an opponent to spend time and resources countering one's own messages rather than implanting his own program. This principle again highlights the importance of undertaking some elements of psychological warfare in peacetime.

- **Principle #4: Assume an objective outlook.** In the view of the PLA, psychological warfare operations are governed by certain objective laws (including these principles). Therefore, effective implementation of psychological warfare cannot be subject to hunches and hopes; rather, it requires a full consideration of all existing conditions and contemporary realities. To this end, psychological warfare efforts should not be based on outlandish or unrealistic ruses, but instead should be consistent with larger contexts. The most effective psychological warfare efforts will reinforce preconceptions.

  In this regard, Chinese analysts are making an observation comparable to that of Allied planners in World War II, whose deceptions before D-Day played to German (and especially Hitler's) expectations that the main attack would be at the Pas de Calais. Just as it is difficult to dislodge

preconceived notions, it is far easier to exploit those same notions. Effective psychological warfare activities will therefore not try to substitute a preferred narrative, but rather will exploit the prejudices and assumptions of the other side.

- **Principle #5: Recognize linkages.** To be effective, psychological warfare techniques must be mutually reinforcing. This requires careful preplanning, coordination among the various elements engaging in activities, and the creation of a single, unified plan and command authority. Psychological operations therefore also demand a dedicated, professional cadre and cannot be conducted as an afterthought by amateurs. At the same time, local authorities and resources may well have specific—even superior—understanding of potential psychological warfare targets; consequently, their knowledge and resources should be leveraged to maximize effect. Similarly, psychological warfare operations cannot be undertaken in isolation from other activities (e.g., military attacks or diplomatic and economic maneuvers); they must be coordinated with and supportive of those operations.[9] Finally, offensive and defensive psychological warfare operations must be mutually complementary.

- **Principle #6: Retain flexibility.** Psychological warfare activities must always pay attention to the enemy, recognizing and accommodating changes in the enemy's psychology, the battlefield environment, and the relative stance of oneself and the enemy. Those responsible for implementing psychological warfare must be prepared to exploit changes in the situation in order to extract maximum effect.

Typology of Psychological Warfare Operations

In examining the long history of psychological warfare operations—foreign and domestic, historical and contemporary—one group of PLA analysts has created a typology of psychological warfare operations. In assembling a selection of 100 case studies, the authors have broken them down into coercive, deceptive, alienating, and defensive psychological warfare.[10]

Coercive psychological warfare is aimed at causing an opponent to surrender or otherwise abandon a fight by leveraging his thinking, emotions, and/or will and persuading him that resistance is futile. It requires the possession of substantial, actual military capabilities, but the objective is to obviate the necessity to use those capabilities. Coercive psychological warfare involves manipulating the psychological workings of the opponent's leadership and population through displays of martial capability and the insinuation of violence. If this manipulation is effective, one can degrade an opponent's willingness to resist to the point where he will surrender without necessitating the full employment of actual capabilities.

Chinese computer network activities should be seen as attempts to exert coercive psychological pressure. In a crisis, such activities may well raise questions about operational security and the extent to which the PRC may already have penetrated national information systems and databases.

Coercive psychological warfare is the preamble to actual conflict. That is, if it is not successful, then conflict will occur; successful coercion will mean that conflict is avoided because the opposition will have given way. In many ways, it harkens back to Sun Tzu's observation that the apex of achievement is to win without fighting. Successful coercive psychological warfare is the realization of ends for which one is prepared to go to war without having to take that final step and engage in active, kinetic, destructive warfare. From the Chinese perspective, given the destructiveness of nuclear weapons and even

9. Wang Yuping, "Strengthen Research into Psychological Warfare Under Informationized Conditions," *People's Liberation Army Daily*, May 18, 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2004-05/18/content_1475394.htm (accessed June 14, 2013).
10. Ci Weixu, ed., *100 Questions About Psychological Warfare* (Beijing, PRC: Liberation Army Press, 2004), esp. pp. 1–2, 103–104, 236–237, and 302–303.

conventional forces, there is also significant incentive to develop coercive psychological approaches in order to achieve strategic ends without having to resort to the use of force.

Coercive psychological warfare can be implemented through military exercises, weapons tests, and other displays of capabilities. A triumphant history of previous wars is also important, as such success demonstrates the capabilities at one's disposal and, along with other displays of martial prowess, leaves one's opponent feeling overmatched and outclassed. Interestingly, Chinese analysts suggest that this approach is used most by the United States, which sees great benefit in achieving its political aims without having to engage in actual combat. The range of annual military exercises, both national and multinational, not only allows the United States to experiment with a variety of new weapons and tactics, but also demonstrates American military effectiveness, thereby intimidating both real and potential opponents.

Chinese computer network activities should be seen as attempts to exert coercive psychological pressure. The constant reconnoitering of computer networks raises serious questions about the security of information systems and potentially affects state and non-state actors' willingness to communicate. In a crisis, such activities may well raise questions about operational security and the extent to which the PRC may already have penetrated national information systems and databases.

Deceptive psychological warfare entails the use of various ruses and other steps including camouflage, dummies, disguises, and the like to give wrong impressions and generate mistaken assessments. It is rooted in the idea of "garbage in, garbage out"; if misleading or deceptive information is fed to decision-makers, the resulting decisions will themselves be wrong. It is another aspect of the struggle for information dominance (*zhi xinxi quan*), which is seen as the keystone for fighting and winning future "Local Wars Under Informationized Conditions." While the advances in modern information technology allow for more rapid acquisition, transmission, and exploitation of information, deceptive psychological warfare degrades the quality of such information available to an opponent. Thus, it is an important complement to modern information systems.

Although deceptive psychological warfare has long been a staple of military operations (more than 2,000 years ago, for example, Sun Tzu observed that "all war is deception"), its impact is described in terms of modern psychology. The purpose of deceptive psychological warfare is to employ stratagems and other deceptive measures to implant psychological and informative barriers in the cognitive processes of opponents. Not only will this make it harder to differentiate between what is true and what is false; it will also complicate decision making. For example, perhaps opposing commanders are given incorrect information, or perhaps their thought processes are retarded as they try to reconcile accurate data with inaccurate data. Either way, the result is the same: a military advantage.

While the advances in modern information technology allow for more rapid acquisition, transmission, and exploitation of information, deceptive psychological warfare degrades the quality of such information available to an opponent and is an important complement to modern information systems.

Deceptive psychological warfare depends upon creating false impressions while masking reality, much as the deceptive measures for D-Day entailed both hiding the mountains of supplies and various actual forces and creating false formations upon which the Germans would fixate. Such a strategy in turn requires that the deceptive information be both credible and consistent with the opponent's psychological activities and patterns. In the Allied deception efforts prior to D-Day, for example, the Allied planners not only encouraged German preconceptions of an invasion at the Pas de Calais, but even

11. For a more extensive discussion of the D-Day deceptions, see Roger Hesketh, *Fortitude: The D-Day Deception Campaign* (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 2000).

"assigned" General George S. Patton to command the assault forces embodied within the fictitious "First US Army Group."[11]

An essential element for deception operations is to exploit "confirmation bias," or "the tendency of individuals to look for, and attach more importance to, information that validates their existing beliefs," while dismissing or explaining away information that invalidates or contradicts those same beliefs.[12] As Chinese authors note, an opponent will be looking for deceptions and false leads. Deceptive psychological warfare efforts will therefore be much more likely to succeed—i.e., the ideas presented will be accepted—if they support or are consistent with preconceived notions and frameworks, since they will then fit more readily into the opponent's cognitive and psychological framework and be subjected to less careful scrutiny.

Alienation psychological warfare is aimed at generating dissension and discord in the opponent's camp, creating friction and fracturing links between the population and the leadership, among leaders or between allies, and between the military and civilian population. By generating mutual suspicion, one causes the opposition to become more suspicious of each other, which forestalls effective cooperation. As one Chinese volume observes, "castles are inevitably easier to attack from within."[13]

Alienation psychological warfare requires a thorough understanding of an opponent at both the individual and group levels. It requires grasping group dynamics, understanding fault lines between individuals and within groups, and identifying and exploiting individual personality and character traits, as well as underlying jealousies and suspicions, in order to tailor specific operations against them as effectively as possible.

This type of psychological warfare builds on the belief that people's activities are often constrained by their underlying nature or character, especially the passive aspects. Often manifested as weaknesses or flaws in their character, such passivity is an essential vulnerability to be exploited. By emphasizing the propensities to which those passive aspects are linked, one can misguide and mislead an enemy commander with relative ease. As important, such emphasis can generate divisions within the top leadership or between the leaders and the led.

Consequently, this type of psychological warfare demands much more extensive research into an opponent as one seeks to determine weaknesses in individual character and group solidarity, as well as methods of exacerbating those weaknesses and vulnerabilities. By creating more interest groups—many of which have divergent interests—globalization facilitates alienation psychological warfare. This in turn generates ever more fault lines, which can cause an opponent to be much more brittle and easily disrupted.

Defensive psychological warfare seeks to counteract an opponent's attempt to employ coercive, deceptive, and alienation psychological warfare against one's own side. It entails a variety of methods, given the complexity of psychological offense. Some of the more important methods include:

- Strengthening indoctrination to immunize one's leadership and population against the enemy's messaging efforts.

- Preempting the enemy's psychological warfare efforts in order to create a broad consensus among one's own population, forces, and leaders that an opponent will find it harder to undermine. This often will involve undertaking psychological operations in peacetime or at least before the formal onset of hostilities. It also includes strengthening psychological warfare training to heighten awareness of enemy efforts, thus lowering domestic susceptibility.

- Controlling public opinion through such means as control of the media and strategic communications, as well as discouragement of rumor-mongering. This will limit the opportunities for an opponent to exploit differences (as in alienation psychological warfare) or otherwise undermine one's own military and popular morale.

12. Uri Bar-Joseph, "Intelligence Failure and the Need for Cognitive Closure: The Case of Yom Kippur," in *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence*, ed. Richard Betts and Thomas Mahnken (London, U.K.: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), p. 173.
13. Ci Weixu, ed., *100 Questions about Psychological Warfare*, p. 236.

- Forging greater internal consensus to increase national solidarity and unify the various social and political groups. This includes greater enforcement of laws and regulations in order to reduce the temptation to break the law and thereby create opportunities for enemy psychological warfare activities.

PLA analyses recognize that the faster tempo and operational rhythms of modern warfare impose greater pressures on both military and civilian populations. Consequently, they acknowledge the need to improve safeguards against and treatment for psychological pressure and damage, including post-traumatic stress syndrome. Moreover, as one volume observes, because of the one-child policy, young people are pampered and may therefore be more psychologically brittle and less capable of handling stress. Defensive psychological measures are therefore seen as an essential means of limiting the impact of wartime pressures on them.

PLA Assessment of Psychological Warfare in the Iraq War

The PLA has not engaged in a conflict since 1979. Consequently, its analysts have examined foreign military experiences to derive likely lessons and trends in modern warfare. The second Gulf War, with the American defeat of the Iraqi military, is seen as the epitome of conventional modern warfare, including in the application of psychological warfare operations.

In the view of PLA analysts, psychological operations were conducted at an unprecedented scale and intensity, from the tactical to the strategic levels, and engaged a range of both military and nonmilitary measures. In particular, Chinese analysts believe the United States factored psychological warfare into all of its thinking, from strategic decisions to operational plans to actual tactical employment and military battles.

According to this analysis, the U.S. began psychological warfare operations long before March 2003. Indeed, at the strategic level, psychological warfare efforts began almost upon the conclusion of Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Two decades of international sanctions had not only limited Iraq's ability to maintain its forces, but also created a siege mentality among the Iraqi population. This isolation was reinforced by the repeated charges that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, dating back to the George H.W. Bush Administration.[14]

This strategic isolation, both diplomatic and economic, coupled with the imposition of a strategic information blockade by denying Iraq access to international media and communications, imposed significant pressure on the Iraqi leadership and population long before the outbreak of hostilities.[15] Senior U.S. leaders also openly discussed post-war Iraqi reconstruction plans even before hostilities had begun—an attempt to demonstrate that Iraq's defeat was a fait accompli.

Chinese analysts believe the United States factored psychological warfare into all of its thinking before the second Gulf War, from strategic decisions to operational plans to actual tactical employment and military battles.

The strategic psychological pressure on the Iraqis was sustained even after hostilities commenced—not only through the continued isolation of Iraq, but even through the naming of allied operations. As one Chinese assessment noted, the decision to title the war "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was a masterful psychological ploy. It implied that the United States undertook this war in order to liberate the Iraqi people, with no ulterior motives.[16]

Chinese analysts believe that as the onset of open hostilities drew closer, the United States engaged in alienation psychological warfare at the strategic

14. Nanjing Political Academy, Military News Department Study Group, "Study of the Journalistic Media Warfare," p. 28.
15. Fan Gaoming, "Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare, the Three Major Combat Methods to Rapidly Achieving Victory in War," *Global Times*, March 8, 2005.
16. Hu Fengwei, *Psychological Warfare in the Iraq War* (Shenyang, PRC: White Mountain Press, 2004), pp. 94–95.
17. Wang et al., *Research on the Iraq War*, p. 86.

level by calling senior Iraqi officers directly on their personal cell phones and sending e-mails to their personal accounts, trying to induce them to surrender or otherwise not operate at full effectiveness. Such measures sowed seeds of discord and mistrust within the senior Iraqi leadership, thereby dissipating solidarity at the very top.[17] Such chaos was further exacerbated by American engagement of a variety of exiles and dissidents in order to foment additional discord and create divisions among Iraqis.[18]

Once the war began, the United States, according to Chinese assessments, employed coercive psychological warfare methods, mostly at the tactical level. These operations included such measures as "decapitation (*zhanshou xingdong*)" efforts against Iraq, which sought to kill Saddam in the first hours of the conflict. Although these attacks failed to achieve that objective, coalition forces regularly claimed that Saddam had been killed; the spread of false information and rumors is a basic component of psychological warfare. Along these lines, one PLA assessment suggests that the dispatch of relatively small armored detachments into Baghdad in April was not an unnecessary military risk, but rather an attempt to erode Iraqi military will further by showing that U.S. forces could operate at will and generating additional uncertainty within the Iraqi leadership.

However, coalition forces hardly had a monopoly on psychological warfare. Chinese authors observe that within the more constrained resources available to it, the Iraqi government also sought to employ psychological warfare both to inspire greater resistance against the invaders and to garner more support from abroad—or at least condemnation of the Anglo–American leaders of the coalition. Thus, in the Chinese view, the Iraqis chose to assume an almost passive stance in the months leading up to the outbreak of hostilities, allowing U.N. inspectors into Iraq and making clear that Baghdad had no intention of commencing hostilities.[19] Once the war began, Saddam was regularly televised, undermining coalition efforts to claim that he had been killed.

What the United States Should Do

It seems clear that the Chinese take psychological warfare very seriously and believe that America's use of such tactics is a major factor in the recent success of U.S. military operations.[20] It is ironic that the Chinese see the United States as pursuing a much more coherent, integrated approach to psychological operations when Western analyses and policy approaches seem to treat psychological operations as discrete entities.

Many Western policymakers differentiate between psychological warfare at the strategic level, involving national tools such as strategic communications and public diplomacy, and more tactical-level efforts waged by dedicated psychological warfare units. Indeed, the renaming of the latter as "military information support operations (MISO)" underscores this significant but artificial divide in the American approach. Given the radical advances in information technology and the attendant globalization and permeation of information, psychological operations need to be seen in a more holistic light.

> Only by creating and transmitting unified messages can the United States gain the initiative in influencing foreign governments and populations, whether allied, adversary, or neutral.

Consequently, **reducing obstacles to information flow and public outreach** is the most important thing America can do to improve its psychological warfare capabilities. Whether at the strategic or tactical level, there needs to be an overarching communications plan, incorporating all of the relevant agencies and entities, to convey to the rest of

18. Fan, "Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare."
19. Wang et al., *Research on the Iraq War*, p. 205.
20. Hu Fengwei, Ai Songru, et al., *Psychological Warfare in the Iraq War* (Shenyang, PRC: Baishan Publishing House, 2004), p. 321.

the world that the United States is a reliable ally and steadfast partner, willing to cooperate with other states to advance our mutual interests but fully prepared to counter aggression against friends and allies. Whether the United States government is seeking to deter, persuade, coerce, or placate others, it can succeed only by presenting a coherent message. To this end, the U.S. government, and especially Congress, should continue to break down such barriers, as was done recently with modernization of the Smith–Mundt Act.[21]

At the strategic level, this entails **improving inter-agency strategic communications**, including coordination of messages and efforts among the major foreign policy departments—State, Defense, Commerce, Treasury, and even the Departments of Justice and Agriculture, both of which regularly interact with foreign governments and non-governmental organizations. Only by creating and transmitting unified messages can the United States gain the initiative in influencing foreign governments and populations, whether allied, adversary, or neutral. The Pentagon, which does not necessarily have the expertise, should not head this inter-agency effort. Furthermore, such an operation should also extend beyond the State Department and might well involve the reestablishment of the United States Information Agency, drawing upon the public diplomacy resources of the entire government.

Another aspect of strategic psychological warfare operations is **the effective use of alliances and relationship building**, which should emphasize current relations while moving beyond traditional allies. In the Asia–Pacific region, for example, the United States possesses a significant foundation of strong alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia as well as special relationships with Taiwan, Singapore, and New Zealand and a revision of relations with India. The array of bilateral and increasingly multilateral relations among these states sends a strong signal to potential antagonists and adversaries that hostile actions will likely generate a concerted response from a powerful set of nations.

By exposing Chinese psychological warfare activities, America can enhance its other information flow operations. Just as the recent Mandiant report on Chinese cyber activities reveals the extent to which the Chinese military is actively engaged in both traditional national intelligence gathering and commercial espionage, the U.S. should publicize examples of Chinese efforts to influence foreign public opinion, whether through use of Chinese state-owned media, cyber espionage, or other national means. The growing Chinese assertiveness on maritime territorial disputes, including not only the Spratlys and Senkakus, elsewhere in the East and South China Sea, is as much psychological posturing as physical action and should be countered by American diplomatic and economic, as well as military, moves.

At the operational and tactical level, the U.S. military should **recognize the importance of its psychological warfare capabilities**. Labeling them "military information support operations" would seem to undercut the holistic nature of psychological warfare activities, which are neither solely the purview of the military nor focused only on military-related information. Indeed, successful psychological warfare operations cannot take a stovepiped approach; they must incorporate military and civilian public affairs specialists, press secretaries and public affairs officers, and individual military and civilian personnel.

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This holistic approach entails not only integrating MISO activities into all aspects of military

21. Helle Dale, "Smith–Mundt Modernization: Better Late than Never," The Heritage Foundation, The Foundry, May 22, 2013, http://blog.heritage.org/2012/05/22/smith-mundt-modernization-better-late-than-never/; BBG Strategy, "New Law Ends Smith–Mundt Ban on Domestic Dissemination of Content," January 4, 2013, http://www.bbgstrategy.com/2013/01/new-law-uends-smith-mundt-ban-on-domestic-dissemination-of-content/ (accessed June 14, 2013).

planning and activities, but also **recognizing that American psychological warfare assets are likely to be a major target for the PLA** in times of crisis and especially conflict. Given the limited numbers of such assets, neutralizing them, whether through cyber activities, kinetic attacks, or other means, would affect the course of the conflict. The Chinese military is therefore likely to commit significant resources to countering such units early in any conflict. American planners should recognize this threat and incorporate both active and passive security measures into their own preparations.

War in a Time of Peace

The Information Age provides unparalleled ability to influence both a nation's leaders and its population. The core of the Chinese concept of psychological warfare is to manipulate those audiences by affecting their thought processes and cognitive frameworks. In doing so, Beijing hopes to be able to win future conflicts without firing a shot—victory realized through a combination of undermining opponents' wills and inducing maximum confusion.

Indeed, although it is a time of peace, psychological warfare is already underway, employing a variety of both military and civilian means. It is therefore essential that the United States counter such psychological operations now while preparing to use its own arsenal of political warfare weapons should a conflict ever arise.

*—**Dean Cheng** is Research Fellow in Chinese Political and Security Affairs in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*