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CHINESE MILITARY THINKING ON SIEGE WARFARE

Drake Long and Aaron Dai

Abstract: How does the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) think about siege warfare? Through a study of four key PLA doctrinal texts, the authors trace the evolution of PLA thinking on sieges over time and clarify that while “siege warfare” in Western military thinking is not conceptualized the same way to the PLA, the PLA has their own history and tradition that can paint a picture of a rough equivalent. How to bring about the fall of a major urban area or fortified settlement is replete in PLA doctrine, primarily at the tactical level for most of its contemporary history, and this reflects the PLA experience and lessons learned from the Chinese Civil War. As the 2010s approached, PLA doctrine emphasized the importance of sieges to larger military campaigns; and in 2017, it defined the tasks and major movements of a campaign dedicated solely to besieging key targets such as Taipei or Taiwan Island. Ultimately, the authors show how the seriousness with which the PLA has thought about capturing major urban areas has increased over time and primarily draws on the PLA’s first-hand, if outdated, experience from 1945 to 1949. The authors then explain the differences in a siege campaign—or a City Offensive Campaign, as a key doctrinal text calls it—to its equivalent in U.S. military doctrine.

Keywords: People’s Liberation Army, PLA, China, Taiwan, siege warfare, besiegement, encirclement, Chinese Civil War, doctrine, urban warfare, City Offensive Campaign

Siege warfare is not a commonly used term within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) or the wider intellectual community in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) devoted to military affairs. When used in military texts, it is almost always in the context of describing how a foreign military—and not the PLA—understands the term and will often quote the phrase verbatim.

This is not to say the PLA does not think about how to execute a siege. Within PLA doctrine, the more commonly understood terms are besiegement (围困), which is usually in the context of a military operation, and encirclement (合围), a more complicated and historical term that can refer to a military campaign, or as a wider strategic condition (局势) of the overall situation (全局) that a military or government is under

(when written as 包围圈).¹ For analysts of the PLA, what is important to understand is the evolution of siege warfare in the PLA over time. From the beginning and drawn from its experience in the third period of the Chinese Civil War (1945–49), PLA military doctrine identified a set of tactics broadly applicable to seizing fortified settlements and cities. However, PLA academics did not devote the kind of detail to this tactical analysis that would indicate this is a unique or special type of mission with its own circumstances. Later, these tactics would be placed into new context as the scheme of maneuver for a campaign (战役), which refers to a series of overlapping, concurrent operations with a single overarching objective. Since 2017, however, the PLA has more seriously distinguished a siege as a type of campaign all of its own, with more specific guidance in its doctrine on how to tailor said overlapping operations for one key objective: the fall of a major urban area. For analysts interested in how the PLA thinks about potential operations against Taiwan resistance or the imposition of a blockade, this article may provide some insights.

PLA scholarship is replete with references to the Chinese Civil War, where besiegement of enemy strongholds featured prominently. But there still have been long gaps in PLA military scholarship when it comes to detailed assessments of siege warfare and urban warfare outside of restating the events of those historical battles. One of the core texts in the Chinese military tradition that explains at least some thinking on this topic is the 1987 edition of *The Fundamentals of Tactics* (战术学基础), which weaves case studies of operations from four distinct periods of PLA military history into explanations of proper tactics for a variety of local situations a commander may face.

Positional Warfare

Chapter 2 of *The Fundamentals of Tactics* covers the formative moments for tactical innovation across PLA history.² The most well-known examples of PLA siege warfare studied in the United States concern the fall of Kuomintang-held (KMT) Beijing and Tianjin—two distinct military operations with two distinct styles that have been covered in other scholarship.³ It thus stands to reason that the best place to look for examples of siege warfare in *The Fundamentals of Tactics* would be in chapter 2, part 3, section 3, which covers tactics used during the resumption of the Chinese Civil War from 1945 to 1949.

This section details the contemporaneous PLA thought on military operations in urban terrain and seizing key population centers, but not in a way modern military analysts would

¹ Throughout the Chinese Civil War, additional usage of the term can be found in the Encirclement and Suppression Wars [圍剿戰爭/围剿战争], which refers to specific existential military campaigns waged by the Chinese Nationalist Party against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

² 中国人民解放军总参谋部 [General Staff Department of the PLA], *战术学基础* [*The Fundamentals of Tactics*] 截港军出版社 (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 1986), 71–75

³ Note: the authors will refer to the Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist Party, previous ruling party of Taiwan and adversary of the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War, as either the KMT or the Nationalists. See Elsa B. Kania and Ian Burns McCaslin, “Urban Warfare in CCP History,” in *The PLA's Evolving Outlook on Urban Warfare: Learning, Training, and Implications for Taiwan*, Military Learning and the Future War Series (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2022).

expect. The early attitude of the PLA was that battling for towns and cities is a matter of positional warfare, alternating periods of static frontlines with quick, small, mobile offensive action at key points of an enemy force's defense.⁴ Yet, the PLA attributes far more speed to operations and tactical engagements in that framework than the Western tradition normally does. The examples used are the relatively swift 1946 Dingtao Campaign, which ended in only 10 days, and the 1947 Yellow River Crossing Campaign, which took five months. These are used to illustrate the functions and benefits of a positional offense and defense.

The specifics of the Dingtao and Yellow River Campaigns are not important for this analysis but their usage in this text is interesting. They represent two cases wherein the PLA seized a number of key KMT-held towns and bases to restrict and contain a larger KMT army's movement. During the Dingtao Campaign, for example, the PLA succeeded in drawing out, dividing, and destroying an overextended division of KMT soldiers and then rolling up reinforcements in a succession of battles across small exurban areas around Kaifeng, Heze, and Dingtao.⁵ But this was after the PLA suffered a series of losses, driving them to retreat west. Ultimately, the campaign's success came from KMT lines and soldiers being seriously overstretched by the time they reached the bulk of the PLA force they were pursuing.

The Yellow River Crossing Campaign was part of the initial stages of a countrywide counteroffensive by the PLA that commenced in June 1947.⁶ After receiving directives from Mao Zedong, the four PLA columns of the Central Plains Field Army totaling approximately 120,000 men (the 1st, 2d, 3d, and 6th) commanded by Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping crossed the Yellow River on the night of 30 June 1947 under the cover of darkness.⁷ The PLA destroyed numerous KMT blockhouses along the Yellow River embankment and seized control of many Nationalist-held towns in the area following the crossing. The PLA's success in this campaign caused significant disruptions to the KMT's strategy of containing the CCP in North China, forcing the Nationalists to divert troops attacking Communist bases in northwestern China and other parts of Shandong to reinforce their positions in southwest Shandong. The maneuver enabled PLA forces to advance into and seize control of the strategically important Dabie Mountains (大别山), consolidating the CCP's strategic position in the Central Plains region. In conjunction with follow-up maneuvers by other field armies, the campaign ultimately drew out and pinned down more than one-half of the KMT's forces in the southern Central Plains.⁸ Liu and Deng's successful crossing effectively

⁴ *The Fundamentals of Tactics*, 71–75; and Harry B. Halem, "Positional Warfare," Marine Corps Association, 15 August 2024.

⁵ Christopher R. Lew, *The Third Chinese Revolutionary Civil War, 1945–49: An Analysis of Communist Strategy and Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 46–49.

⁶ 求是网“刘邓大军强渡黄河，激战鲁西南 [Liu-Deng Army Forcibly Cross the Yellow River; Fierce fighting in southwest Shandong],” QS Theory.net, 25 May 2021.

⁷ “Liu-Deng Army Forcibly Cross the Yellow River.”

⁸ 百度百科。“挺进大别山 [Advancing into the Dabie Mountains],” Baidu Encyclopedia, accessed 6 May 2026. The specific area for this campaign was actually the vast area of land between the lowest reaches of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River.

ended Nationalist hopes of using the Yellow River as a natural defensive line to halt further Communist advances into and beyond the Central Plains.

In terms of the Western understanding of siege warfare, these examples from the Chinese Civil War are incongruous or confusing, since they feature pinning enemy forces across a vast area of land rather than focusing on one major stronghold. But this reflects the early understanding of siege warfare in the PRC. The object of a siege was a wide area, possibly an entire subregion in the case of the Yellow River Crossing Campaign, and did not focus primarily on a single objective. Rather, it served to identify multiple towns, blockhouses, and points to control that would allow for the bottling up and annihilation of a large field army. This is not congruous with a Western understanding of a siege, but it is very much a reflection of the PLA's experience from grappling with *encirclement campaigns* (围剿战争), which refer basically to counterinsurgency operations launched by the KMT during the early periods of the Chinese Civil War, before the conflict changed to large conventional field battles from 1945 onward. It stands to reason, then, that the early understanding of siege warfare in the PLA blends some elements of classic insurgency and counterinsurgency theory, specifically on how to think about geography and the effective control of it. The tactics employed in these case-studies are notable if they later inspired *The Fundamentals of Tactics'* doctrinal recommendation to the PLA Army for this mission-set in 1987.

Positional Warfare Tactics for Seizing Cities (according to The Fundamentals of Tactics)

1. Divide troops into multiple subgroupings.
2. Each echelon must be composed of small-group assault teams, demolition teams, fireteams, mobile offense teams, support and logistics teams, as well as reserve units.
3. Clear periphery around a town by annihilating enemy forces outside the city walls.
4. Concentrate fires to breach city wall.
5. Send in assault teams in-between fires to break through into the urban center.
6. Fight street-to-street, encircle enemy forces, and block their retreat.
7. Annihilate enemy within encirclement.

There is remarkably little detail beyond a generalized list of tasks commanders should take before and during an attack on a fortified city. The text provides a little more emphasis on the topic—the section titled “Offensive against an enemy in a strong fortification”—but it does not add substantive detail or diagrams to illustrate its point, like other areas of the book. One explanation for this approach to studying siege tactics is that *The Fundamentals of Tactics* is attempting to codify and formalize the PLA's historical practice of *raid warfare* (袭击战).

More context can be found in the 2012 *Introduction to the Science of Tactics* (战术学导论). The *Introduction to the Science of Tactics*, which was revised in 2023, is well-known

military scholar Jiang Lin's attempt to put the corpus of military literature written in the PRC into a digestible description of the PLA's "way of war" for the average officer. For the sake of this article, what is most useful about Lin's *Introduction to the Science of Tactics* is that he clarifies what raid warfare means to the PLA. By itself, it is a very nebulous term. Misunderstood in the United States as guerrilla warfare, to military theorists in the PLA, raid warfare refers to an all-encompassing category for the tactics employed prior to 1949: a combination of skirmishing, strategic withdrawals, and positional fighting summed up by the phrase "the enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue," known as the 16-character formula (十六字诀).⁹ For the 1987 *The Fundamentals of Tactics*, this formula on raid warfare was haltingly applied to a variety of situations. In practice, it was an operational art, designed for what the U.S. armed forces would probably call a mission command environment.¹⁰ This was a direct result of the interactions between the PLA and KMT during the early Chinese Civil War, where fairly large territories were subject to encirclement campaigns that functioned more like a traditional counterinsurgency operation, and the PLA continually had to break out of KMT-controlled cordons.

Joint Tactics and Joint Offensive Operations

Astute military analysts would probably critique that this formula is too simplistic when applied to sieges or military operations in urban terrain. They may also be confused just by the title of *The Fundamentals of Tactics* when compared with its content. That is because this text is trying to describe raid warfare as a discrete set of tactics, but besiegement is not a tactical mission-set. In most Western militaries, there are distinct levels of war, as discussed by Jiang Lin in the Introduction to the Science of Tactics. At their most basic, the levels are tactical, operational, and strategic. For the 2012 volume of *Introduction to the Science of Tactics*, the big difference from the 1987 volume of *The Fundamentals of Tactics* is that it upgrades the PLA's understanding of raid warfare and situates its use in seizing urban centers as part of *campaign tactics* (战役战术).

Virtually all modern PLA theory on the proper use of military force to achieve strategic objectives is built around the concept of the campaign—a level of war broadly comparable to the operational level in the United States. It is the most critical type of activity for the PLA, constituting a decisive action with multiple groupings of troops to achieve one partial objective for the overall, wider war.¹¹ From 1987 to 2012 then, the PLA adjusted its understanding of siege warfare, taking it from the local, tactical level and elevating it to the campaign level; hence, the critical usage of the phrase campaign tactics. In the *Introduction to the Science of Tactics*, several campaigns are namedropped that are worth

⁹ 江林 [Jiang Lin], 战术学导论 [*Introduction to the Science of Tactics*] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2012), 16–18. The full phrase in Chinese is “敌进我退, 敌驻我扰, 敌疲我打, 敌退我追.”

¹⁰ *Mission Command*, Air Force Doctrine Publication 1-1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Air Force, 2023).

¹¹ *Introduction to the Science of Tactics*, 13–15.

deeper study, specifically the Second (April–May 1931) and Third (July–September 1931) Encirclement and Suppression Campaigns, which saw the PLA fight positional battles to resist KMT counterinsurgency operations prior to 1945.

The Encirclement and Suppression Campaigns (five in total) during the Chinese Civil War inform not only the PLA's understanding of how to break a siege, but how to institute one as well. The *Introduction to the Science of Tactics* draws some lessons from these battles and clarifies that sieges require campaign tactics but does not necessarily add to the list first elucidated in *The Fundamentals of Tactics*. This changed in 2014 with the publication of *Joint Tactics* (联合战术学), and subsequently with the 2017 *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* (新形势下新型陆军战役理论比较研究).

For the PLA, what is meant by *joint tactics* (联合战术) appears on first glance to be close to joint operations. That is, the use of two or more armed services under a complex joint command. However, the actual book *Joint Tactics* still draws a distinction between joint tactics and a military campaign, dwelling primarily on the interplay between local battles and the wider strategic situation a military finds itself in. This is perhaps best summed up by the advice given to commanders, “strategic-level decision-making, tactical-level action.”¹² *Joint Tactics* primarily focuses on an elevated, complex form of the latter.

Joint Tactics describes the seizure of a town or city as a “joint offensive operation,” using the strengths of different specialized armed services together to take one key objective. This is expanded to include information operations and electromagnetic spectrum management. More specifically, the PLA recommends an overlapping layer of dominance in multiple dimensions—land, sea, air, space, psychological, and the electromagnetic spectrum—before carrying out a relatively quick multidimensional offensive on a “key target.”¹³

How to Conduct Joint Offensive Operations (according to Joint Tactics)

1. Build up forces through dispersion and concealment around and in position to key target. Concentrate diverse forces across a dispersed area by their role in the offensive operation, maintaining the functions of the joint force without making it too noticeable.
2. Launch simultaneous attack on the key target from multiple dimensions—sea, air, land, space, and elsewhere—under a unified command and under an understanding of the overall campaign plan.
3. Paralyze the enemy's system-of-systems, through a combination of continuous, deep strikes across multiple dimensions aimed at vital hubs and rear areas identified via their importance to the enemy command and control capability.
4. Collaborate between services and subgroupings to achieve desired effects

¹² 檀松 [Song Tan] and 程永朋 [Cheng Yongpeng], 联合战术 [*Joint Tactics*] (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2014), 185.

¹³ *Joint Tactics*, 184–88.

on the battlefield. Continuously understand objectives of the joint offensive operation, but be flexible and cross-service in achieving tactical objectives in pursuit of this.

5. Prevent enemy forces from relieving, resupplying, or assisting the key target of the joint offensive operation. To do this, switch from offense to defense as the situation permits, preserving combat forces tasked with seizing the key target and setting up a stiff resistance to any enemy reserves coming to the battlefield.

What is notable about *Joint Tactics* is its seemingly focused on rehabilitating the usefulness of seizing a fortified area to the PLA. Chapter 10 advises the reader to consider the tradeoffs, when attacking a static, strong enemy position versus a mobile, concealed, weak enemy force, and explicitly states that sometimes attacking the former is the correct idea. Besieging a city is classified as a “momentum-building maneuver” (造势性机动).¹⁴ It should only be done when necessary to create a favorable overall battlefield situation, such as an encirclement of a critical node or enemy force. This is not entirely about balance of combat forces. *Joint Tactics* actually stresses that the selection of key targets must include objectives that would have a deleterious effect on enemy morale and public sentiment of the civilian populace behind them. In that sense, it is more about a favorable battlefield situation that disrupts the perceived system that keeps an enemy force operating properly.

The influence of the Chinese Civil War on this section is telling. This understanding of physical space, and the psychological effects therein, is similar to how the KMT successfully executed their Encirclement and Suppression Campaigns against the CCP. The importance of seizing population centers is actually a return to form for the PLA. The 1945–49 period of the Chinese Civil War saw extensive campaigns to successfully seize large urban centers by the PLA as it slowly switched to fighting a conventional war. *Joint Tactics* thus represents a new appreciation for urban warfare in the PLA after the entire idea was left in the wilderness for most of the Cold War. For most of the PLA’s early academic history, it had taken a backseat to somewhat romantic ideas of people’s war, the importance of which may be overemphasized in their victory during the Chinese Civil War.

Nonetheless, *Joint Tactics* does not give a thorough treatment of what commanders should consider when fighting in urban terrain or how to cause a city to fall.¹⁵ It elevates the understanding of joint operations among the PLA, lays out general guidance for how to perform them, and clarifies the utility of fortified positions and cities as their targets. The modern PLA understanding of siege warfare was fully refined and fleshed out in the 2017

¹⁴ *Joint Tactics*, 218.

¹⁵ See Sale Lilly, “‘Killing Rats in a Porcelain Shop:’ PLA Urban Warfare in a Taiwan Campaign,” in *Crossing the Strait: China’s Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2022), chap. 5, for further information on how PLA efforts to sort out implications of urban combat in Taiwan may have been misled by taking wrong lessons from the United States in Iraq.

Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances.

City Offensive Campaigns (陆军城市进攻战役)

Written right after the monumental reform period in the PLA, the *Study on New Army Campaigns* is thus far the most comprehensive text in the PRC corpus that identifies recommended courses of action for a variety of campaigns. As mentioned above, these are the core engagements the PLA focuses its doctrine around, even describing its tactical manuals as ultimately in service to the objectives of larger campaigns.¹⁶ The *Study on New Army Campaigns* breaks down how a PLA ground forces commander should approach a variety of very specific objectives. This includes detailed guidance on executing island landing campaigns, border control campaigns, and nearshore island blockade campaigns. Most notably, the study provides the most comprehensive detail to date on the prescribed steps for assaulting and seizing a major urban center. Chapter 15 covers Army City Offensive Campaigns, and chapter 24 covers Army City Defense Campaigns.

*How to Seize a City according to the Study on New Army Campaigns*¹⁷

1. Campaign coordination and planning

- a. Identify blockade zones and forces necessary for a blockade to isolate the enemy.
- b. Identify the main assault direction to penetrate into city center, insertion means for subgroupings assigned this mission, and targets for high-intensity strikes.
- c. Identify key buildings in the city center to occupy.

2. Blockade and isolate key target

- a. Identify avenues, or key points, by which enemy force may be resupplied or supported from outside the city.
- b. Launch a series of sustained joint offensive operations, including cyber-attacks, information operations, and firepower strikes on key points and avenues of approach on the periphery of the city.
 - i. Launch high-intensity precision strikes against enemy urban defense command centers and other military targets and large groupings of enemy forces.
 - ii. Launch high-intensity precision strikes against certain nonmilitary targets conducive to isolating the urban population and lowering morale, such as local government buildings, radio and TV stations, power

¹⁶ *Joint Tactics*, 184–85.

¹⁷ 张利华 [Zhang Lihua] et al., [新形势下新型陆军战役理论比较研究] *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2017), 238–48.

plants, and water supplies.

- c. Send assault subgroupings to seize peripheral areas of the city conducive to positional defense against enemy reinforcements and positional offense against supply lines into a city.
 - i. Use electronic warfare, artillery, air assault, and special operations forces to assault and raid airfields, radars, and all sources of enemy forces' air transport.
- d. Seize information dominance, air supremacy, and command of the seas.

3. Peripheral area assault¹⁸

- a. Distinguish between peripheral areas of the city center and the city center. Designate subgroupings of troops specifically for clearing and seizing the peripheral areas.
- b. Concentrate subgroupings and firepower strikes to isolate periphery area forces from forces defending the city center and reinforcements outside the city.
 - i. Assault task groups must be swift and timed to attack periphery area forces right after high-intensity precision strikes.
- c. Joint, multidimensional offensive to penetrate periphery area's defenses and begin isolating periphery forces into smaller groupings cut off from one another.
 - i. After identifying a successful penetration, exploit it with additional forces drawn from other parts of the campaign.
 - ii. Cut off periphery forces from retreat or movement deeper into city.
- d. Besiege key periphery groupings of enemy forces and set the stage for an assault on the city center.
 - i. Strengthen key defensive positions to destroy any enemy counterattack from inside or outside the periphery area.
 - ii. Draw reinforcements from the city center out to the periphery and attack them in transit.
 - iii. Send sabotage and assault groups and order precision strikes to harass city center and maintain pressure on forces based there.
- e. Annihilate the now-decentralized enemy in the periphery of the city center.

4. City center assault

- a. Order new precision strikes against city center to set favorable conditions for storming and seizing core defensive areas in the city center.

¹⁸ *Peripheral areas* in this case refers to a space inside the "city walls" (郭成) but outside the city center. It is ambiguous what would be designated the city center in the text, but it likely refers to the seat of local government or military command.

- i. Core defensive areas, and thus the most important targets to occupy, include enemy command centers, communication nodes, tunnels, other concealed transit routes, and tall buildings with good views of the city.
- b. Paralyze the enemy system-of-systems determining their urban defense.
 - i. Form task groups based on assigned target core defensive areas.
 - ii. Seize the core defensive areas; for military targets, order massed fires from the campaign's constituent joint components on them and send special operations forces for sabotage-reconnaissance and seizure. For important nonmilitary targets, simply storming them with troops should be the first course of action, with massed fires being a last resort.
 - iii. Protect and avoid damaging cultural sites, financial institutions, and foreign embassies.
- c. Besiege dug-in defenders who cannot easily be routed.
 - i. At the campaign commander level, employ all the effects of a blockade, but at the local level. The goal is to have enemy forces surrender.
 - ii. Achieve enough control of surrounding areas around the besieged section to ensure counterattacks can be blunted.
- d. Commence sector by sector elimination of enemy forces in the city center.
 - i. Ideally, enemy is split into ever-smaller subgroupings and decentralized, making for easy elimination.
- e. Consolidate control over occupied areas.
 - i. Establish a command center quickly to coordinate suppression of resistance in the city center. Occupy key buildings and government seats.
 - ii. For remaining resistance, continually cycle through cutting apart, surrounding, striking, and suppressing the enemy through conventional military means and psychological warfare.
 - iii. At the campaign commander level, organize operations to block, blunt, and destroy reinforcements coming into the urban area. Ensure sufficient reserves for pivoting to counter-counterattacks and halt reinforcements. Pull from city center and peripheral area occupation forces as necessary.

There are several notable details to take away from the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances*' description of city offensive and defensive campaigns. The first most obvious one is that it situates the besiegement of a city in the context of a campaign. Detailed guidance on how to organize subgroupings of troops and identify key objectives for the campaign are written in the first volume of the book. In service of that campaign, later volumes provide detail on a multitude of joint offensive operations to

achieve campaign objectives, namely firepower strike operations, nearshore island blockade operations, information operations, special forces operations, and others.

As mentioned earlier in this article, PLA academics did not really devote much attention to this topic whatsoever prior to the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances*, instead agnostically applying some general tactical lessons from the Chinese Civil War to the problem. The text seems to show that the PLA has acknowledged the difficulty of seizing urban centers and that it deserves special treatment as a unique type of campaign uniquely difficult to pull off.

The catalyst for why the PLA wrote this in 2017 may be because of an increasing sense of systems warfare in global conflicts. The text is replete with references to enemy and friendly system-of-systems (体系), which is an unwieldy term that synthesizes a sense of the center of gravity, command and control architecture, and morale for a grouping of forces. The “new circumstances” mentioned in the book’s title are described elsewhere in its text as a reference to the current age of informatized warfare—complex computer systems allowing for more precision munitions and command relationships than before.

In chapters 15 and 24, forces dug in to a city are described as having built an “urban defense system of systems,” and therefore the campaign commander in army city offensive campaigns is recommended to disintegrate the system overall and take advantage of informatized tools while doing so. The informatized tools mentioned being precision munitions for deep strike on key points of an enemy urban defense, and command and control systems allowing for the campaign commander to order quick, simultaneous penetration by relatively small, joint assault team subgroupings into concentric rings of defensive perimeters in the city.

Another takeaway is the unusual focus on the city center in the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances*. There are essentially three parts to a city offensive campaign: blockade, peripheral area assault, and city center assault. The PLA designates an area outside of a city as one type of periphery, where the forces overseeing the blockade must pay attention to and actively suppress. But oddly enough, the PLA designates another periphery inside the city limits surrounding a city center area. The key objective for the campaign commander is no less than the occupation of “key buildings” in the city center.

While this provides a simple objective for a commander to understand, a critique here is that the distinction between peripheral areas and the city center is not clear or helpful in all urban battles that have been fought post-2010. Examples from the Battle of Sievierodonezk (2022) and the Battle of Mosul (2016–17) show that defending forces can continually rotate through different districts of an urban center or relocate their de facto command post as necessary. The city center, which in the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances*’ context refers to the area where key government buildings are held, may not have as much warfighting significance in an actual conflict.

This attempt to neatly divide urban zones of operation probably reflects a couple of different strains of thought in the PLA. First, the methods of assaulting and occupying peripheral and city center areas are explicitly referred to as “cutting apart, surrounding, attacking,

suppressing,” or “割、围、打、剿。” This is a phrase drawn from the CCP experience during the Chinese Civil War, specifically their successful strategy for besieging Changchun and other major cities under KMT rule during the 1945–49 period. The focus on peripheral and symbolic city center zones made much more sense in those case studies and was used to great effect. Second, this portrayal of urban warfare could reflect a lack of operational experience since the Civil War’s active fighting period.

The PLA does have a clear understanding of urban defense-in-depth. Chapter 24 covers army city defense campaigns (陆军城市防御战役) in an exceptional amount of detail.¹⁹ It specifically mentions the suitability of urban environments for multiple, overlapping, and interlocking defense positions across periphery areas attacking forces must move through and in entrenched positions inside the city streets. It stresses the importance of denial and deception and the effectiveness of raid warfare tactics to deny an attacking force’s momentum. Yet, the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* shows the PLA more or less talking to itself about siege warfare and not necessarily drawing in what outside observers might consider meaningful case studies to inform its academic analysis. There is even a section on how to break out of an encirclement situation, clearly inspired by the PLA experience during the Civil War, which shows the prevalence of that experience in all PLA doctrinal study. A caveat worth noting is that the book was written in 2017, and an updated version very well could incorporate lessons learned from the Russo-Ukrainian War or perhaps the 2017 siege of Marawi in the Philippines.

The *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances*’ chapter on city offensive campaigns identifies three significant difficulties in seizing large cities. Enemy positions are more fortified and concealed than in other types of terrain, it is extremely hard to coordinate command and control of assault teams while the enemy attempts to reinforce from outside the target area, and forces need to avoid destroying too much civilian infrastructure. The narrow-minded focus on a city center makes more sense in the context of that latter point; fundamentally, the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* reflects how much the PLA does not want to have to send forces into a city. It is better to have the enemy forces inside a city surrender of their own volition, and to facilitate it so that their defensive system disintegrates without having to breach the perimeter with a large concentration of forces. If the PLA does need to seize a city by force, taking all major government buildings would serve a psychological impact to defending forces and the population now under occupation and possibly hasten a collapse of resistance.

Conclusion

The PLA’s most recent military exercise on 30 December 2025, dubbed Justice Mission 2025, served as a rehearsal of what a blockade of Taiwan could look like. Based on how the exercise unfolded, the principles of siege warfare that the PLA applied during the Chinese

¹⁹ *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances*, 347–57.

Civil War evidently still have considerable influence on Beijing's contemporary strategic doctrine if one lets go of a myopic view that siege warfare only applies to cities. China's approach in both the most recent and earlier drills in the Taiwan Strait have primarily focused on blockading the main island of Taiwan. As noted in this article, throughout the PLA's doctrinal history tied to the Chinese Civil War there was always an intense focus on the effective control of territory and the cordons into it. The overall lesson is that while PLA thought has evolved over time and incorporated urban warfare and siege operations as serious campaign unto themselves, the actual operations prescribed in the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* could be applied to seizing an overall area just as much as they could one city. The Justice Mission 2025 drills notably came closer to Taiwan than any other previous PLA exercise, with a record seven designated exercise zones that covered nearly the entire length of the island.²⁰ The exercise zones simulated cutting off the main island of Taiwan from its outlying territories of Kinmen and Matsu, effectively isolating Taipei in the event of a cross-strait operation and creating favorable conditions for a prolonged siege. In other words, the PLA rehearsed an encirclement of the island, an echo of how it approached (and was subject to) siege warfare during the Chinese Civil War. Siege warfare, even when applied to an entire island instead of a city, is still very much on the minds of the PLA, and they are experimenting based on the aforementioned doctrine.

One addendum to make clear here is that there is no either-or dilemma when it comes to force or coercion in the PLA. The *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* makes it clear that the PLA takes seriously the possibility of seizing a city by force and provides essentially a branch plan for campaign forces to do so. Many modern scholars of the PLA in the United States focus on the cognitive domain of warfare and the possibility of the PLA winning battles with very little resistance solely due to combined psychological effects the PLA may employ to convince a foe to give up. The unstated assumption there is that the PLA is not prepared for urban warfare or an actual siege of an opposing city. The *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* should lay that to rest, while there are some quibbles to be made with its understanding of urban warfare, there is no doubt that the PLA is seriously studying and knows of methods to seize a city and capital by force. In the aggregate, it is difficult to say the methods would not be effective either.

Two well-known case studies in the United States on how the PLA might induce an urban force's collapse are the Beiping Method and Tianjin Method, which have been discussed elsewhere and refer to the two different approaches the PLA took to seizing those cities at the tail end of the Chinese Civil War.²¹ But the PLA has written about many more. As mentioned, *Introduction to the Science of Tactics* identified the Battles of Longgang (龙冈) and Nanfeng (南丰县). The *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances* further explores the Liaoshen and Huaihai Campaigns of the Chinese Civil

²⁰ Matthew Sperzel et al., *Special Report: Surprise PRC Military Exercise Around Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2025).

²¹ Kania and McCaslin, "Urban Warfare in CCP History."

War and goes into in-depth case studies of both Iraq wars, the fall of Afghanistan, and the Kosovo War of 1999.

These case studies are instructive for understanding how the PLA thinks about siege warfare and the ideal ways to execute it. Yet, the PLA is not always honest in how it portrays these battles in textbooks. For example, the Liaoshen Campaign is heavily referenced throughout the *Study on New Army Campaigns Under the New Circumstances'* chapters on city offensive and defensive campaigns. This is probably appropriate, given some of the longest and most spectacular sieges of the Chinese Civil War happened during that campaign. However, the PLA's understanding of the campaign overemphasizes urban offensives that were not necessarily decisive unto themselves and sanitizes operational errors made on the PLA side—errors that were made clear in 1989 with the now-banned historical book *White Snow, Red Blood* (雪白血紅). The PLA writes about the final Siege of Changchun, in particular, as an exemplar of a city offensive campaign, yet that particular siege was needlessly bloody. The decision to enter the city only came after several failed earlier attempts, leading the overall commander in charge of the Liaoshen Campaign, Lin Biao, to besiege the city and starve off its population before breaching the city walls could be considered. The successful fall of Changchun came from mass defections of KMT soldiers and the conditions set by a very traditional siege of supply lines into the city more than from the actual offensive into the city.²²

Scholars may need to more seriously research those campaigns that resurface in PLA thought repeatedly, especially those drawn from the Chinese Civil War, to learn as the PLA did about how to execute those same operations in the modern day.

About the Authors

Drake Long is a senior associate with the China Warfighting Initiative at the Marine Corps War College, Marine Corps University.

Aaron Dai is a master's student in security policy studies at George Washington University.

²² 張正隆 [Zhenlong Zhang], 雪白血紅 [*White Snow, Red Blood*] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Publishing House, 1989), 172–87.