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China's "Second Battlefield"

Political Warfare in Combat Operations

Kerry K. Gershaneck

Abstract: This article addresses how the People's Republic of China (PRC) will conduct political warfare against the U.S. Marine Corps in combat operations. The PRC has inextricably intertwined political warfare in its naval and maritime strategies to set the conditions for success in such a kinetic war. If the PRC perceives that political warfare alone will not achieve its goals, it threatens to achieve them through armed conflict, which may result in U.S. Marine Corps operations as a counter. This article examines key aspects of PRC political warfare in combat operations, to include a brief historical overview; goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics employed; targeting of U.S. and allied combat units, military base communities, and overseas Chinese; and the likely progression of political warfare operations throughout the combat campaign.

Keywords: political warfare, cognitive warfare, three warfares, united front, active measures, gray zone operations, hybrid warfare, People's Liberation Army, Chinese Communist Party, People's Republic of China, People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, China Coast Guard

Introduction

Political warfare is defined as "the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives," as explicated in a 1948 policy planning memorandum that prepared the United States to fight and ultimately win the Cold War. The concept of political war-

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fare is not new to the People's Republic of China (PRC), spanning thousands of years, but the PRC has used it to achieve notable strategic victories in recent years—victories accrued not necessarily without struggle but won without fighting major kinetic warfare. Declaring sovereignty over the South China Sea and militarizing manmade islands there is one such significant victory, achieved after years of preparation that ensured “a feckless global response,” according to former U.S. assistant secretary of defense Wallace C. Gregson. Further, the combined failure of the United States, Australia, and other democracies to combat well-reported PRC political warfare against the Solomon Islands—location of the storied Battle of Guadalcanal of U.S. Marine Corps World War II fame—has allowed the PRC a security pact with Honiara, which allows the “rapid and unopposed acceleration of the transformation of the Solomons into a (PRC) power projection base.” Effectively, the PRC has now bypassed the first and second island chains that had long provided a defensive barrier to PRC expansionism. These victories provide the PRC's rapidly expanding amphibious fleet the means to implement the PRC's aggressive naval strategy, which includes assertion of illegal claims to the West Philippine Sea, South China Sea, and East China Sea and setting the conditions for a successful amphibious assault against Taiwan.¹

Despite such success, if the PRC's rulers perceive that political warfare alone will not deliver the results desired, they threaten to achieve their goals with combat operations. In fact, Xi Jinping has strongly signaled that he is preparing for kinetic war. For example, PRC propaganda organs began reporting in May 2020 that, after three decades of Beijing espousing peaceful reunification with Taiwan, CCP policy no longer called for “reunification” to be peaceful and that military force remains “a final solution.” In Xi's speeches to the National People's Congress (China's parliament) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (China's top political advisory body), he directed his cadres to prepare for war in terms such as “dare to fight” and “prepare to undergo the major tests of high winds and waves, and even perilous, stormy seas.” One key indicator of war preparation is vastly increased military coercion against Taiwan, but there are other strong indicators as well. These include a 7.2 percent increase in the PRC's defense budget (which has doubled during the past decade), new military readiness laws, new air raid shelters in cities across the Taiwan Strait, and a new national defense mobilization structure to more easily mobilize reservists and replenish combat troops in the event of war. To quote seasoned *Washington Post* columnist John Pomfret and former deputy national security advisor Matt Pottinger, “If Xi says he is readying for war, it would be foolish not to take him at his word.”²

A PRC combat operation would likely be a deliberate attack undertaken without a formal declaration of war, consistent with the PRC's past invasions

of other nations. Also, a seemingly inadvertent war might result in violent gray zone/hybrid warfare at sea by maritime forces such as the China Coast Guard (CCG). For example, CCG water cannon attacks on Philippine vessels that have injured (and risk killing) Filipino sailors have been called “an act of war” by Armed Forces of the Philippines chief of staff Romeo Brawner.³ Such attacks may provoke an armed response. Regardless of the spark that ignites a war, in a war the PRC’s fight for public opinion will be its “second battlefield” according to retired U.S. Navy captain James E. Fanell, an expert on PLA doctrine and capabilities.

This article examines key aspects of PRC-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) party-state political warfare in combat operations, to include a brief historical overview, and likely goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics employed.⁴ Also addressed are conceptual pillars; narrative shaping; the roles of the three warfares, united fronts, the PLA, active measures, gray zone operations, and hybrid warfare; targeting of allied combat units, military base communities, and overseas Chinese; the likely progression of political warfare operations throughout the combat campaign; and recommendations for the U.S. government in general, and the U.S. Marine Corps in particular, should begin preparing to combat the PRC’s foreseeable wartime political warfare.

Historical Overview

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employed a wide range of political warfare operations to defeat the Nationalist government (Kuomintang, KMT) from the 1920s through the Chinese Civil War and the KMT’s retreat to Taiwan in 1949.⁵ Once the PRC was established in 1949, it used political warfare to support numerous military operations internally and externally. These include the 1950 Korean War intervention, its 1951 annexation of Tibet and crushing of the Tibetan uprising in 1959, its seizure of East Turkestan (Xinjiang) in 1960 and subsequent continued subjugation of that region, its attacks against the Republic of China (Taiwan) during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954–55 and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, its combat operations in northern Burma in 1960–61, the 1962 Sino-Indian War, its combat support of Communist forces across Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War from 1965–75, the 1969 Sino-Soviet Union border conflict, its 1974 seizure of Vietnam’s Paracel Islands, its invasion of Vietnam during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, its 1988 attack on Vietnam’s Spratly Islands, its 1994–95 occupation of the Philippines’ Mischief Reef and 1996 naval skirmish there, its firing of ballistic missiles during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, its 2012 seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines and current aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea, its 2017 standoff with India and Bhutan, and periodic kinetic skirmishes with India from 1967 through today.

An example especially pertinent to the present-day assessment is the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Journalist/historian Bertil Lintner reports that leading up to the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the CCP undertook “a five-year masterpiece of guile . . . (It) played on Nehru’s Asian, anti-imperialist mental attitude, his proclivity to temporize, and his sincere desire for an amicable Sino-Indian relationship.” Consistent with stratagems derived from the Warring States period, the CCP lulled India’s leadership into a false sense of complacency. India paid heavily for that complacency, writes Lintner, “when the PLA came storming across the Himalayas in October 1962.” India was humiliated militarily and politically as the PRC seized 38,000 square kilometers of territory.⁶

Another example pertinent today is the CCP’s political warfare leading up to and during the Korean War, a war in which the U.S. Marine Corps played a central role. From the 1920s, Mao Zedong envisioned his Communist revolution in China to expand globally. He wrote, “We must unite with the proletarians . . . and liberate the nations and the peoples of the world.”⁷ One country Mao wanted to “liberate” was the Republic of Korea. Accordingly, Mao and Joseph Stalin, ruler of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), approved Kim Il Sung’s June 1950 invasion of South Korea and supported it initially on the political warfare and logistics fronts. When United Nations forces successfully counterattacked in September, spearheaded by the U.S. Marine amphibious assault at Inchon, and drove the Communist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) forces into the far north, deep in the peninsula, Mao and Stalin supported Kim with combat forces as well. Soviet pilots flew North Korean aircraft against UN forces while Mao provided the DPRK so-called Chinese People’s Volunteers. By 1953, Mao had committed a peak of 1.35 million Red Army troops. To garner internal and foreign support, the CCP initiated a global political warfare campaign. Internally, the CCP used every means to generate hatred of the “U.S. imperialists” among the Chinese people while encouraging nationalism and self-confidence. Cartoons and posters portrayed President Harry S. Truman and UN forces commander General Douglas MacArthur as “serial rapists, bloodthirsty murderers or savage animals.” Loudspeakers persistently blared slogans and speeches to encourage those in China and those in occupied Korea “to hate, curse and despise the imperialists.”⁸

The 1st Marine Provisional Brigade and Marine Aircraft Group 33 were rushed into battle in the first desperate weeks following the 1950 North Korean invasion and stabilized the decimated U.S. Eighth Army’s fragile front lines at Pusan. They skillfully executed the daring amphibious assault at Inchon to reverse the North Korea attack and demonstrated conspicuous gallantry during the bitter battles of the Chosin Reservoir withdrawal. As the war dragged on for three years, most of it in stalemate and seemingly endless negotiations to end the fight, the Marines in Korea were subjected to relentless PRC political

warfare propaganda attacks. Much of the propaganda reflected Communist ideology, urging the United Nations forces to “escape their capitalist masters” and as the war dragged on the propaganda themes focused on deterring the Marines from fighting with the hint that truce talks were making progress and the fighting would soon end. The Chinese forces used pamphlets and loudspeakers to try to demoralize the Marines, but with little effect.⁹

Simultaneously, the CCP used its Korean invasion to begin an internal political warfare campaign aimed at suppressing so-called reactionaries in the PRC. Historian Frank Dikötter summarizes this brutal suppression, called “the Great Terror,” as follows:

Less than a year after liberation came a Great Terror, designed to eliminate all the enemies of the party. Mao handed down a killing quota of one per thousand, but in many parts of the country two or three times as many people were executed, often on the flimsiest of pretexts. Entire villages were razed to the ground. Schoolchildren as young as six were accused of spying for the enemy and tortured to death. Sometimes cadres simply picked a few prisoners at random and had them shot to meet their quota. By the end of 1951, close to 2 million people had been murdered.¹⁰

The Chinese people were not the only ones to suffer brutal CCP treatment for political warfare purposes during this era, of course. During the Korean War, approximately 75,000 UN and South Korean soldiers were captured by PRC and North Korean forces. Some of these prisoners of war (POWs) were secretly sent to the PRC and the Soviet Union for intelligence and other exploitation, but most remained in Korea. These POWs were both the subject of and subjected to political warfare that often amounted to egregious war crimes.¹¹ It included torture and execution as a means to extract false confessions to be used in international propaganda campaigns. It also included coerced indoctrination that constituted physical and psychological torture. Political indoctrination was standard daily fare, as the Chinese attempted to produce a long-lasting change in the basic attitude and behavior of the prisoner.¹²

The 221 Marines captured by the Chinese and North Korean military forces in Korea endured malnutrition, forced labor, and other acts of cruelty, as well as systematic efforts to coerce them into participating in a propaganda campaign. In July 1951, Chinese forces assumed control of the UN POWs, and took a different approach to the POWs than American prisoners had experienced in previous wars. According to Marine Corps records,

In this war, unlike the earlier ones, prisoners served as pawns in an ideological contest in which the Chinese and North Koreans tried to convert them to Communism or, failing that, to force them to make

statements that would further the Communist cause in its world-wide struggle against capitalism. The methods of conversion or coercion varied from unceasing lectures extolling Communism to threats and torture, with the harshest treatment meted out for acts of resistance. By using these techniques, the prison staffs sought a variety of objectives that included maintaining order, persuading prisoners to embrace Communism, obtaining military information, or extorting confessions to alleged war crimes, statements designed to turn worldwide public opinion against the United States. By 1952, the enemy was focusing in particular on forcing captured fliers of all the Services to confess to participating in germ warfare.¹³

Some captured Marines were able to escape, while others invented fictitious statements that would ease the pressure on them by creating an illusion of cooperation. Despite brutal Chinese treatment during captivity, 197 Marines survived captivity and returned in Operation Big Switch.¹⁴

In a campaign that foreshadowed the PRC's 2023 political warfare campaign alleging that the United States was directing Taiwan to establish a secret biological weapons laboratory, as well as Sino-Russian disinformation regarding the COVID-19 global pandemic that began in 2020 and the PRC-Russian allegations of U.S. biological warfare activities in Ukraine following Russia's March 2022 invasion of that country, the USSR and PRC cooperated in the 1949–50 timeframe to fabricate similar allegations. This campaign falsely alleged the United States was testing biological weapons on the Inuit populations in Alaska, in collaboration with the former chief of Japan's wartime biological weapons program for use against China.¹⁵

Further, during the Korean War, the Soviets, Chinese, and North Koreans collaborated on a global disinformation campaign alleging that the United States was conducting bacteriological warfare by airlifting insects infected with microorganisms carrying diseases such as the bubonic plague, anthrax, cholera, and encephalitis. They doctored the evidence by creating two fake zones of contamination. In concert with the Warsaw Pact and other allies, PRC propaganda outlets orchestrated outrage around the globe. They publicized "confessions" from American POWs, and widely quoted gullible foreign visitors to Chinese exhibits documenting the alleged war crimes. In Prague, the CCP cultivated Western leftist and pacifist sympathizers who amplified their claims in Western media. Leading international academics, clergy, and journalists were co-opted by this campaign. Supposed experts sent on "fact finding" visits to China were not allowed to actually investigate the biological warfare allegations: their role was merely to lend credence to the PRC's allegations by parroting the fabricated stories on Chinese soil.¹⁶

Beijing did not care that the preponderance of evidence and of scholarly opinion outside the PRC refuted the biological warfare allegations. From its perspective, this political warfare campaign was remarkably successful. Like many other subsequent PRC political warfare campaigns, it blended overt propaganda and the recruitment of credulous foreign authorities to amplify CCP talking points, it seeded doubt and suspicion regarding the U.S. and UN forces, and it enhanced the CCP's domestic and international standing at the expense of its enemies. Internally, the campaign mobilized the Chinese people behind the CCP and, as important, it eroded residual goodwill toward America built up over years of alliance in the war against Japan. Further, it sharpened divisions in Western countries between the political right and left over the nature of the CCP regime and of American power in the world. The CCP exploited every rift to weaken from within allied resolve to fight the war.¹⁷

Wartime Political Warfare Goals

In wartime, the CCP will seek to achieve four primary political warfare goals: preserve friendly morale; generate public support at home and abroad; weaken an enemy's will to fight; and alter an enemy's situational assessment.¹⁸

Conceptual Pillars

Key conceptual pillars that underlie PRC political warfare leading up to and during combat operations:¹⁹

Follow top-down guidance: Unity of effort is key. Political warfare will be aligned with the CCP's larger national strategy.

Strike first: Two key conceptual pillars that underlie PRC political warfare leading up to and during combat operations are to follow top-down guidance and to strike first. A preemptive first strike will have a significant impact on opposing forces' unit cohesion and material readiness, as well as a psychological effect that will, in turn, possibly cause the opponent's withdrawal or collapse. An action by a target country that instigates a PRC first strike need not be military.²⁰ Such a trigger could be a perceived slight, diplomatic miscommunication, or statement by a government official that upsets the CCP. A first strike provides the PRC tremendous advantages in planning and executing political warfare operations: the first to broadcast generally dominates the airwaves, framing the narrative and subsequent debate, and defining the parameters of subsequent coverage.²¹

Shaping the Narrative

To shape the narrative, the PRC will take three key actions:²²

Establish the PRC's version of the incident: Whichever side gets its

story out first has the public opinion advantage. Accordingly, statements for public release, to include polished products for broadcast, online, and print dissemination, will be prepared in advance.

Issue a statement of principles for resolution of the incident: PRC officials will use these principles at the start of any negotiations to set rigid parameters for the discussions to come and as the benchmarks for a minimally acceptable resolution that meets CCP goals.²³

Shut down unofficial but normal information channels: The CCP will quickly establish information control and dominance of the media in order to continuously shape the ensuing debate. U.S. senior officials, journalists, and academics often complain that their Chinese counterparts refuse communication once a crisis begins, but this is the CCP's standard procedure. For example, in the August 2022 crises Beijing generated over the visit to Taiwan by U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, the PLA refused to answer senior U.S. military officials calls and canceled important forums such as the China-U.S. Theater Commanders Talks.²⁴

The Three Warfares

The *three warfares* are a PLA construct and are central pillars of PRC political warfare. The warfares establish a perceptual preparation of the battlefield. Notably, PLA strategic literature particularly emphasizes their role in subduing an enemy *before* armed conflict breaks out: consequently, the PRC has employed them to successfully shape the South China Sea and Pacific Islands to support its naval strategy. The three warfares are media/public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare/lawfare.²⁵ PLA officers begin employing the three warfares early in their careers and continue as they rise in rank. They study the concept in depth in texts on military strategy, including the PLA Academy of Military Science and PLA National Defense University editions of *Science of Military Strategy* as well as teaching materials such as *An Introduction to Public Opinion Warfare*, *Psychological Warfare*, and *Legal Warfare*. Through study of history and war games, senior CCP and PLA officials learn to employ the warfares to manipulate an adversary's cognitive process both prior to and during a conflict, and how to target national and theater command structures and forward deployed units. They gain important expertise in undermining the legitimacy of opponents' positions in a conflict and undermining the willingness of other nations to support opponents.²⁶

United Front Work

In a wartime situation, the CCP will aggressively engage its united front apparatus worldwide in support of its political warfare. Australian academic Clive

Hamilton writes that a vital external united front task is to “recruit elites.”²⁷ To this end the PRC targets foreign government officials at all levels and elites in the worlds of business, the media, academia and think tanks, politics and lobbying, and the overseas Chinese community. In contemporary combat operations, the PRC will replicate what it did in the Korean War: aggressively engage *United Fronts* globally as well as Overseas Chinese and *foreign enablers*.²⁸ As examples of the CCP’s foreign enablers in the United States, the *New York Times* reports they include leftist organizations such as Code Pink and other “murky” nonprofit organizations. Many foreign enablers have supported Communist activities for decades and are well known, but many appear with new names.²⁹ For example, groups engaged in protests in San Diego against the 2024 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise included a combination of new and old groups such as the International Cancel RIMPAC Coalition, Resist NATO, Palestine Youth Movement, Resist U.S. Led War, BAYAN USA, International Migrants Alliance, and Union del Barrio. These groups condemned U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines as well as support for Taiwan, and protested the RIMPAC exercise as an effort to “contain and isolate China.” In their “People’s Summit” at University of California San Diego and on the streets of San Diego they portrayed China’s military aggression in Asia as mere attempts to defend itself against U.S. aggression.³⁰

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) oversees “a sprawling infrastructure of Party agencies, and organizations linked to the Party” and UFWD work “is the responsibility of every Party member.”³¹ Every CCP agency is tasked with engaging in united front activities, as are all PRC government departments and local authorities. Further, PRC-based businesses and foreign businesses affiliated with China’s state-owned enterprises and joint ventures will be engaged to support wartime objectives.³² In addition, political warfare operatives will pressure countries invested in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Digital Silk Road (DSR) to support (or not oppose) the PRC’s war effort.

United front strategy calls for co-opting international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol). United front operations also target environmental NGOs and other activist groups, some of which have been compromised by PRC funding and influence.³³ Hence, the PRC will utilize its leverage with these international organizations, NGOs, and activist groups to further its wartime objectives and distract attention of opponents and undermine their response.

PLA Political Warfare

To support its political warfare the PRC draws on the resources of “the Party, the Chinese state, the PLA, and the private sector in China, as well as on

Chinese companies abroad” in what is called the party-state-military-market nexus.³⁴ One example of the PLA’s role is its massive military intimidation of Taiwan in the form of its combat aircraft incursions into Taiwan’s airspace and circumnavigation of the island by flotillas of naval combatants. The PLA is conducting significant air combat, missile attack, amphibious assault, and logistics exercises as well. While these exercises are preparations for war, they are also psychological warfare operations intended to terrorize, demoralize, and divide the population of Taiwan and erode its sense of security.³⁵ The PLA’s coercion and psychological terror extends to threats of nuclear attack to terrorize countries like Japan to make them conform with CCP demands.³⁶

Another example of a PLA psychological terror campaign is its operations against India’s forces during the 2017 confrontation on the Doklam plateau. The PLA template was to trumpet its plans to attack India if it does not acquiesce to Beijing’s demands. The plans were conveyed through propaganda platforms such as *China Daily*, with relentless threats such as “the countdown has begun (for) all out confrontation.” The PLA attempted to intimidate leaders and soldiers with videos showing military exercises in Tibet, not far from the Indian border, and military equipment and materiel were moved closer to the front line to indicate preparations for war. Further, propagandists revived memories of India’s devastating defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian War to demoralize Indian soldiers. Beijing will likely employ similar diverse narratives and strategies against adversaries during wartime.³⁷

In addition to the PLA’s overt coercion and intimidation capabilities, its Political Work Department (PWD) is responsible for liaison work, which augments traditional diplomacy and formal military-to-military relations. These PWD relations are “the most important aspects of international relations.”³⁸ The PWD establishes and facilitates the activities of a wide range of friendship and cultural associations such as the China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC). The role of CAIFC is to co-opt foreign elites, to include senior active-duty and retired military officers and executive assistants supporting senior civilian and military officials. CAIFC has reaped significant victories, such as when a former U.S. vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff wrote a guest editorial for a major publication to support the PRC against Taiwan and allegedly lobbied for Huawei’s entry into U.S. markets. The PLA will utilize those co-opted by CAIFC during wartime operations.³⁹

PLA forces will support combat operations by employing media and psychological warfare forces for subversion, propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, and cyberattacks. Difficult-to-attribute cyberattacks will be combined with social media warfare that it will conduct along with the PRC’s so-called netizens and 50 Cent Army. As part of civil-military fusion, the PLA will likely employ criminal gangs affiliated to assist its cyber warfare.⁴⁰ These attacks will

be designed to distract, deceive, demoralize, and paralyze the actions of opponent governments, combat forces, and general publics. The operationalization of psychological warfare with cyber is key to this strategy.⁴¹ Central to this effort, particularly regarding a Taiwan-related contingency, is its subordinate 311 Base (also known as Unit 61716, the Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare Base) in Fuzhou, along with the extensive resources of the PLA News Media Center.⁴²

Active Measures, Gray Zone Operations, and Hybrid Warfare

In combat operations, the PRC will employ active measures just as it does in peacetime, to include sabotage, kinetic attacks, terrorism, bribery, discredit operations, deception, subversion, blackmail, kidnapping, counterfeiting, forgery, street violence, assassination, false flag operations, and destabilization of foreign governments. For example, retired U.S. Marine colonel Grant Newsham, an expert on political warfare, assesses that fifth columnists and special forces will use tracts of land PRC-affiliated buyers have obtained near American military installations in the United States and Japan to attack those installations and to “shred” operational forces deploying to combat from them.⁴³

Another CCP active measure is to take hostages, primarily to ensure compliance with its demands and to deter an adversary’s potential response. Hostage taking is not a new concept, but the PRC is especially adept at so-called hostage diplomacy. Many democracies woke up to this fact during the 1,000-day ordeal of the two Michaels in the 2018–21 timeframe. Two Canadian citizens working in the PRC were taken hostage by the PRC to pressure Canada to not comply with a U.S. extradition request for Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, who the United States alleged was engaged in widespread illegal activities. The PRC held the two Michaels in jail for nearly three years, until it got the results it wanted. “China was sending a message not just to Canada, [if you] don’t toe the line the way Beijing has instructed you to do, [it will] kidnap your citizens,” said Margaret McCuaig-Johnston of the University of Ottawa.⁴⁴ Currently the PRC has “wrongfully detained” more than 200 U.S. citizens who are held on “exit bans” in prisons and detention centers, some persecuted for religious reasons and others “likely victims of geopolitics,” according to human rights groups.⁴⁵ In wartime, the CCP’s opportunities and rewards for taking Americans and citizens of allied and friendly countries hostage expand exponentially.

As part of its maritime strategy, the PRC is heavily engaged in gray zone operations and hybrid warfare in the West Philippine Sea, South China Sea, East China Sea, and increasingly the Western Pacific Ocean. It will likely expand both operations dramatically in preparation for hostilities. Gray zone and hybrid warfare operations involve military and paramilitary forces that operate

below the threshold of war but in combat operations the PRC will employ them to distract, deceive, and attack opponents. Beijing wields formidable maritime forces for these missions: the PLA Navy, the China Coast Guard (CCG), and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), as well as a massive global fishing fleet. The PLAN is numerically the largest navy in the world, with more than 370 ships and submarines, including more than 140 major surface combatants, according to a 2023 Pentagon report.⁴⁶ Working closely with the PLAN is the CCG, the largest maritime law enforcement fleet in the world with perhaps more than 700 vessels that include more than 150 patrol vessels of more than 1,000 tons and 50 patrol combatants of 500 tons.⁴⁷ Working in tandem with both is PAFMM, a military reserve force with, at times, roughly 200 vessels operating across the South China Sea alone on a daily basis. The Pentagon reports the PAFMM "plays a major role in coercive activities to achieve the PRC's political goals without fighting" and has engaged in combat operations during past decades.⁴⁸

Together, the CCG and PAFMM "flood the zone" in the South and East China Seas, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. With a continuous and overwhelming presence, the CCG and PAFMM conduct missions such as violently obstructing the Philippines resupply of its military personnel aboard the BRP *Sierra Madre* (LT 57) on the Second Thomas Shoal and coercing countries such as Vietnam to cease drilling for oil in their waters. Often the PRC vessels turn off their automatic identification system (AIS) data transmitters to make tracking them difficult.⁴⁹ In the lead up to hostilities, the PRC may increase CCG, PAFMM, and fishing fleets vessels in contested waters to create confusion and dangerous congestion. As previously discussed, these vessels may spark conflict when, for example, an opposing South China Sea claimant such as the Philippines, Vietnam, or Japan responds.⁵⁰

Further, just as the Soviet Union armed fishing trawlers with weapons such as torpedoes during the Cold War to attack NATO naval forces before and during hostilities, these ostensibly nonmilitary PRC forces may carry clandestine firepower to attack and destroy U.S. and allied forces. In a wartime situation, it is likely that these supposedly noncombatant PRC vessels will attack both military and civilian shipping and aviation in international waters. These attacks may include ramming of opponents' vessels and using lasers to blind pilots of opponents' civilian and military aircraft, as well as electronic warfare and kinetic attacks. Such attacks by supposed noncombatants will elicit lethal response, with resultant lawfare complications.⁵¹

Beijing will also likely engage in gray zone and hybrid warfare actions like those used by Russia in its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁵² The PRC's employment of proxy armies, such as the United Wa

State Army and Kokang Army in Myanmar, is one example of these types of warfare.⁵³ For example, in a Taiwan or SCS conflict, the Communist New People's Army (NPA) in the Philippines, which has *party-to-party* relations with the CCP, would likely be encouraged and supplied to conduct operations to undermine allied war efforts. It is also likely that radical terrorist and organized crime organizations that interact directly with the PRC and CCP, such as those in Japan that violently attack U.S. and Japanese military facilities, will be encouraged to attack military installations and critical infrastructure.⁵⁴

Target: Overseas Chinese

During wartime, the PRC will rely heavily on its united front operations that target China's global diaspora for co-option and recruitment. Although a very large proportion of these people have been resident in their "new" countries for generations, have gained full citizenship rights, and are fully integrated into their societies, the CCP sees them as subject to PRC law and orders them to assist in intelligence collection and political warfare operations.⁵⁵ One target set is ethnic Chinese-Americans or Taiwanese-Americans, whom Beijing regards as both "more accessible (via Chinese-language communications) and more amenable to the PRC's influence."⁵⁶ To ensure *narrative dominance* in the overseas Chinese communities, the CCP has invested tremendous resources into taking control of Chinese-language media in foreign countries to both influence and control its diaspora. According to P. Charon and J. B. Jeangene Vilmer, Beijing "seeks to control the Chinese-language outlets abroad, which has proven so successful that the CCP now effectively enjoys a near-monopoly among them, and it also seeks to control the mainstream media."⁵⁷ Countering the CCP's massive effort to co-opt the Chinese diaspora will be particularly sensitive, but it is vitally important to recognize and combat it.

It is clearly foreseeable that prior to and during the armed conflict, some overseas Chinese will be coerced or enticed to spy for the PLA and Ministry of State Security (MSS). Under the PRC's legal system, "all Chinese citizens and companies (operating in China or Chinese companies abroad) must collaborate in gathering intelligence."⁵⁸ Those targeted by the PRC include members of the U.S. military. While the UFWD and MSS target overseas Chinese in general, the PLA targets foreign military personnel of Chinese descent. A Rand study concludes that in a conflict "one of China's first targets of disinformation on social media will be ethnic Chinese U.S. military officers and service members" along with the servicemembers' extended families and friends as indirect vectors to reach U.S. troops.⁵⁹ A recent example of persons of Chinese descent assisting PRC espionage is the arrest in early August 2023 of two U.S. Navy petty officers who allegedly provided the PRC classified information to assist the PLA defeat U.S. forces in Asia. According to U.S. prosecutors, the mother of one of the

petty officers “encouraged him to keep helping the Chinese intelligence officer because it might get him a job someday with China’s Communist party after he leaves the U.S. Navy.”⁶⁰

It is important to note that, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *nationality* is a more important factor than *ethnicity* in the PRC’s success in recruiting intelligence and other covert operatives in the United States. The CSIS report examines 224 publicly reported incidents of Chinese espionage against the United States from 2000 to 2023 and states this number does not reflect the full scope of Chinese espionage incidents. Still, if reflective of reality, the report is useful in that it concludes roughly 90 percent involved PRC citizens but only about 10 percent involved “non-Chinese actors,” to include Americans of Chinese descent. Per the report, “Chinese nationals who come to the U.S. to work or study are fertile ground for recruitment. Often they intend to return to China or have close family members resident in China, making them more susceptible to coercion. In contrast, Americans of Chinese descent are very unlikely to be recruited.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, those recruited to serve the PRC based on appeals to the ethnicity, such as former CIA case officers Jerry Chung Shin Lee and Alexander Yuk Ching Ma, have done significant damage to U.S. national security.⁶²

Several factors complicate combating the CCP’s co-option, coercion, and recruitment of overseas Chinese. Globally the PRC is aggressively coercing and enticing overseas Chinese to act as espionage and influence agents, and one study indicates that in nearly 600 PRC-related espionage cases worldwide, 90 percent of those involved were ethnic Chinese. Nevertheless, U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies are not permitted to consider ethnic Chinese (to include Chinese-Americans) as possible greater security threats due to “racial profiling” concerns. Counterintelligence officials fear “profiling” concerns will hamper espionage and influence investigations by U.S. counterintelligence and law enforcement agencies during combat operations. The CCP is well aware of concerns within the United States about the perception of racial profiling of Americans based on Chinese ethnicity. If, during hostilities, investigations of ethnic Chinese do become public, they will likely be used by the PRC for lawfare, psychological warfare, and media warfare purposes.⁶³

Target: Military Base Communities

In addition to overseas Chinese communities, in Taiwan the CCP will target communities near military facilities. Its operatives will attempt to disrupt and degrade military operations from those bases in advance of and during the conflict. The operatives will use rumors, disinformation, and other tactics that have proven effective in those countries. Base-hosting communities may also be targeted in Australia, Singapore, the Philippines, the United States, and Pacific

Island nations hosting (or potentially hosting) U.S. forces. According to one Pacific Island national leader, the “wholesale subjugation of the region to Chinese rule [is] underway.”⁶⁴

Disinformation campaigns, combined with protests organized by the CCP and its enablers, will

strive to shut down operations by generating popular opposition; create an impression that the military is engaged in covering up accidents, crimes, or military setbacks; sow doubt about the wisdom and necessity of undertaking military operations in the face of Chinese opposition as a way to degrade morale; or encourage broader political opposition to decisions made in Washington, D.C., including by striving to split any allied war effort.⁶⁵

Political Warfare Progression in Combat Operations

The PRC will conduct political warfare operations before, during, and after any hostilities that it initiates. On a daily basis, the PRC routinely engages in united front and propaganda work—such as narrative-shaping, public opinion management, and information warfare that includes disinformation campaigns—against Taiwan and other target countries. Prior to hostilities, it will greatly accelerate those operations.⁶⁶ One key objective will be to obscure its naval combat operations and supporting maritime actions by the CCG, PAFMM, and fishing fleet to deceive the United States and its allies. Further, PRC propaganda organs will sensationalize PLAN successes and cover up its failures as part of both internal and external psychological warfare operations.

The PRC will seize the initiative in the opening phase of an armed conflict by striking the first blow, which gives it tremendous political warfare advantages. First strikes come in different forms, some overt and some deceptive. As Colonel Grant Newsham writes, prior to initiating major combat operations, the PRC will likely conduct difficult-to-attribute and false flag attacks and sabotage. The mission will be to destroy key systems such as ships and aircraft and facilities such as fueling and transportation hubs before it initiates major combat operations. To cover its tracks, the PRC will likely use social media warfare and other political warfare tools to deceive the United States and allies regarding who executed the attack. Part of the political warfare-related pre-attack sabotage will include acts such as cutting internet cables to the target country such as Taiwan in order to block the world from seeing what is about to happen and to better shape the narrative of “inevitable PRC success” globally.⁶⁷

Prior to initiating combat operations, PRC political warfare will support strategic deception operations designed to confuse or delay adversaries’ defensive actions until it is too late to effectively respond. This deception will be particularly important to protect its naval deployments aimed at annexing Tai-

wan or destroying the U.S. Seventh Fleet at sea. Once armed conflict ignites, the CCP will coordinate political warfare activities to support—and sometimes conceal—its conventional, gray zone, and hybrid warfare operations. Deception will be conducted through propaganda and controlled-foreign media outlets as well as through the use of united front organizations.⁶⁸ The CCP will publicize false or misleading reports and ruses, such as false reports of surrender of national governments and/or forces, and atrocities and other violations of international law.⁶⁹ Other reports will likely focus on alleged civilian casualties, environmental damage, racial discrimination, and other issues that will cause division.

One likely ruse the PRC might employ in its disinformation and deception operations is for the PRC to covertly establish “an interim government” with pro-PRC elements cooperating from within Taiwan, according to Dr. Ying Yu Lin. This bogus “interim government” would announce that it has taken over the military and replaced the current government. A vast array of PRC and pro-PRC platforms would be used to widely disseminate the announcement. Such an announcement, regardless of its legitimacy, “could create considerable turbulence and even reduce the will of the military to fight. . . . Such measures are meant to disrupt people’s will to rebel and to reduce the willingness of other countries to intervene. In such a scenario, the media—not military might—is likely to become the final winning factor.”⁷⁰

As part of the PRC’s worldwide political warfare campaign, united front organizations and surrogates will aggressively engage elites and other key influentials in opponent countries, as well as in regional countries affected by the hostilities and those globally with the ability to impact the outcome. Diplomacy, economic persuasion and coercion, and active measures will play major roles in this effort. Key goals will be to generate support for the PRC’s war objectives, to create confusion and paralyze decision making, and to initiate actions such as protests and peace rallies to confuse debate and stymie response. All party-state media organizations and platforms will be engaged, to include co-opted foreign media and fake accounts on foreign social media platforms similar to the CCP’s subversive campaign against the 2019 Hong Kong democracy protests.⁷¹

In its lawfare operations, the PRC will conjure up law—or use bogus law—to justify its reasons for initiating hostilities, which will be amplified globally via its media warfare organs. Through these lawfare and media warfare attacks, the PRC will attempt to justify its aggressive actions as legally valid. For example, a leading CCP-directed publication, *Global Times*, is a significant international propaganda publication as it is published in English, routinely runs articles such as “U.S. Military Ramps up Activities in S. China Sea, Risking Conflicts: Report.” Articles such as this seek to establish justification for PRC military action against U.S. forces for operating with the South China Sea, which PRC

illegally claims as its own under its contrived “Nine-Dash Line” claim. As with many similar articles, this 22 March 2024 article warns that “the US’ increasingly aggressive military activities targeting China will inevitably lead to strong countermeasures by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.”⁷² Such legal and media warfare attempts to not only intimidate the United States; it also seeks to psychologically undermine key audiences globally by creating doubts among adversaries, neutral nations or “fence-sitters” who have not yet chosen to support one side or another, and the broader international community about the justification of the actions of the PRC’s opponents.

Beijing will conduct its strategic psychological warfare by integrating psychological attacks and armed attacks and executing them on the offense and defense at the same time. Once combat commences, psychological warfare will be closely integrated to intensify the efficacy of conventional attacks while seeking to continuously strike first to seize the initiative. The PLA will aggressively employ psychological operations to demoralize and dissuade opposing forces, to make them doubt the value of the fight and the judgment of their officers and civilian leaders, and to terrorize them. Against senior national leadership in Taipei, Washington, Tokyo, Manila, and NATO countries, the goal will be to disrupt decision making.⁷³

Part of the CCP’s strategic psychological warfare will be to terrorize the target country’s population into submission. In, for example, a Taiwan invasion, this terror campaign will range from raining missiles down on unprotected civilian population areas to terror attacks by PLA special forces, Taiwan fifth columnists, and pro-CCP criminal gangs such as Bamboo Union. Anticipated attacks such as shooting up schools, playgrounds, police stations, and bus stops are foreseeable, and would have a tremendous impact on Taiwan society and government.⁷⁴ It is foreseeable such attacks will be launched in the United States and allied and other supporting nations as well.

Overseas Chinese—particularly those in the armed forces of their home countries—will be specifically targeted for UFW, MSS, and PLA support, whether through enticement, intimidation, or co-option. In one likely scenario, they will be encouraged (or directed) to undermine and obstruct the allied war effort, to include antiwar and other protests designed to influence elected officials and policy makers. Such subversion will also include creating division within adversary populations by intentionally exposing pro-PRC elements in the military ranks to generate racial distrust and animosity and demoralize the force.

As the PLA engages in kinetic combat against enemy forces, the PRC will employ all of its resources to confuse, divide, and demoralize its enemies at the national and operational levels. These efforts will include cyberattacks and propaganda exploitation of such activities as labor union strikes, protests and

demonstrations, and acts of sabotage and terrorism. These activities may occur spontaneously in targeted countries, but more likely they will be directed by Beijing intelligence and political warfare apparatchiks. Widespread media coverage of these actions will be part of a larger effort to subvert public support for any response to PRC's aggression.

Prisoners of war (POWs) will play prominently in the PRC's wartime propaganda and other political warfare operations, in ways similar to the CCP's exploitation of them in the Korean War. For example, POWs taken by the PLA will likely be subject to intense indoctrination, some will be coerced into false confessions of contrived atrocities and other violations of the law of war, and others will profess their refusal to fight against the PRC on moral grounds. The PRC's propaganda will be amplified globally by united fronts, PRC-owned or controlled foreign media, and the CCP's well-groomed foreign surrogates.

Hostages will also play a key role. As discussed previously, in a wartime situation any citizens of countries the PRC is fighting—or even those noncombatant countries the PRC wants to compel to act in certain ways—are subject to being taken hostage. In a situation where the citizens are located in territory the PLA occupies, these citizens (like the military POWs in PLA hands) will be particularly vulnerable to PRC political warfare exploitation. Of particular concern, it will be quite easy for the CCP to apprehend foreigners residing in the PRC who can be exploited as useful hostage diplomacy pawns to deter response to PRC aggression and/or to end the conflict on the CCP's terms.

In areas occupied by the PLA, Beijing will quickly impose a great firewall to censor and control the narrative as well impose ruthless Xinjiang-style repression. As happened in Afghanistan after it fell to the Taliban in August 2021, citizens and foreigners living in the PLA's newly occupied zones will have no electronic means to communicate their status or to report on the activities on the occupying forces. Legitimate reporters and representatives from reliable international organizations will be barred from entering, but party-state media and perhaps some co-opted foreign media will be allowed in, as in Xinjiang. The CCP will employ a wide range of political warfare strategies and tools successfully employed in Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang to pacify and reeducate the people in Taiwan or other annexed territory. Although most of the world will have no visibility of what the occupying forces are doing behind the barbed wire, the 2019 release of the PRC's secret "China Cables" and the early 2020 release of the "Xinjiang Police Files" as well as reports from the UN, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. government of gross atrocities and brutal repression provide the likely template. If the CCP's present practice in Xinjiang is prologue, the CCP will impose political warfare tools such as mass incarceration, torture, systematic rape, forced indoctrination, summary execution, and genocide.⁷⁵

The PRC will utilize its powerful leverage within the United Nations and other international and nongovernmental organizations to obstruct alliances against it in those forums, as well as to pursue disinformation campaigns such as allegations of war crimes and the organizations' charters. Beijing's representatives hold many top-level management positions in international organizations now, and its close alignment with Russia, Iran, North Korea, and others ensures that it will use these venues to censure, discredit, distract, and demoralize the countries it is fighting.⁷⁶ Beijing will target for political warfare attack not only countries with which it is involved in direct combat operations, but also those countries that support its adversaries in any manner. These attacks may take the form of economic sanctions or psychological terror operations the PLA conducted against India during the 2017 confrontation on the Doklam plateau, as well as threats of nuclear weapons attack against countries such as Japan and Australia.

Negotiations to end the conflict will form another backdrop for political warfare ploys. In addition to threats, the PRC will dangle the possibility of negotiations in hopes of restraining allied response similar to stalling tactics in previous wars. It will delay, frustrate, and create useful propaganda that serves political warfare objectives in a manner reminiscent of the experience of the strategies and tactics the CCP employed to negotiate the 1953 Korean War armistice. Concurrently, the CCP will work closely with longtime friends of China in the United States, such as the U.S. China Business Council, to lobby for the United States and target countries to accept the PRC's terms for ending the conflict.

The political warfare campaign, designed to rally support for the PRC's actions and undermine its adversaries' will and capabilities in the armed conflict, will continue during and after combat operations, regardless of the operation's duration and success.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article provides a brief overview of how the PRC will conduct political warfare during wartime and other combat operations, with specific focus on its relationship to PRC maritime and naval strategies. The PRC's political warfare in peacetime is unprecedented in scope and threat and has often proven markedly successful; in wartime it will be ramped up to an even greater degree. Consequently, it is vitally important that U.S. national security leaders in general, and U.S. Marine Corps leaders in particular, better understand this clearly foreseeable threat and prepare to combat it.

To this end, the Marine Corps—with its rich history in understanding this complex threat as reflected in *The Small Wars Manual* and its success in Vietnam with Civic Action Programs—should encourage research into, and organize

wargames specifically focused on, PRC political warfare in wartime operations against operational forces and home bases. The Commandant of the Marine Corps should task Marine Corps University to take the lead on this research to fully assess the political warfare threat and to propose required countermeasures and capabilities.

In addition, the Commandant should direct the immediate establishment of the Marine Corps' own systemic education and training programs to ensure understanding at all levels regarding the PRC's political warfare threat. Unlike during the Cold War with the Soviet Union, there is no evidence that the U.S. government has a comprehensive national strategy to confront and defeat PRC political warfare such as the ultimately successful political warfare strategy initially promulgated by George Kennan. In partial consequence, U.S. government education and training institutions no longer formally teach about PRC political warfare. Further, there appears to be no initiative to institute such education and training. As one key indicator, in early 2023 the Department of Defense published its *Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment*, which emphasizes the need to integrate public affairs as "a key component of OIE across the competition continuum" with operations, civil affairs, defense deception, and other disciplines.⁷⁷ Yet, during the following year, there has been no follow up to ensure the education of public affairs officers and senior enlisted met this objective: the curriculum at the Defense Information School still fails to prepare the DOD's premier strategic communicators with any foundation on China's political warfare goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics.⁷⁸ A search of curriculum at National Defense University and the various war colleges and senior-level courses depicts a similar lack of focus on the existential PRC political warfare threat. In stark contrast, countries allied with the United States such as the Philippines and the Republic of Korea conduct counter-PRC political warfare courses for their government organizations, as well as civil society.

With strong, agile leadership, the Marine Corps can quickly develop and initiate counterpolitical warfare courses to orient key audiences to critical aspects of PRC political warfare and how to counter it. By doing so, the Marine Corps would fulfill a vital national security niche that has been effectively ignored in U.S. national security strategy and operational practice.

A notional five-day Introduction to PRC Political Warfare course, aimed at the operational forces and Expeditionary Warfare School levels, might cover the following topics:

- History, theory, doctrine, and practice of PRC political warfare
- Political warfare terminology
- The political warfare threat to operational forces, bases, and communities
- Political warfare mapping

- How to fight back: defensive and offensive strategies
- Legal, law enforcement, and counterintelligence implications
- Contemporary PRC political warfare campaigns and case studies (Northeast Asia, Pacific Islands and Mid-Pacific, Southeast Asia, and the United States)
- News media and social media warfare
- Interagency and friendly/allied coordination
- Civil society engagement

Meaningful study of PRC political warfare requires a broad curriculum of extended duration, longer than the five-day Introduction to PRC Political Warfare course proposed. Ultimately, Marine Corps University should incorporate such in-depth curriculum into its courses and programs. Extended courses should be embedded in the Marine Corps War College, Command and Staff College, College of Enlisted Military Education, and School of Advanced Warfighting. These courses should focus and study and research on national-level political warfare-related objectives, policies, organizing principles, strategies, campaign plans, and legal frameworks from a U.S. and friendly/allied perspective, as well as from the PRC perspective. Higher-level education courses at MCU should focus on the operational-strategic aspects of the fight. Notional content should include the following:

- Hostile political warfare problem research and analysis
- Friendly political warfare-related strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
- Counterpolitical warfare campaign objectives, duration, themes, messages, and audiences
- Strategies, tactics, and messages and the tools necessary to convey them
- Counterpolitical warfare evaluation criteria and tools
- Coordination with allies, partners, and civic society

The higher-level courses should culminate in student development of a country-specific counterpolitical warfare campaign plan or comprehensive supporting campaign plans. Assuming participation from foreign students in the courses, when appropriate courses should provide students the opportunity to discuss unique political warfare challenges they face in their home countries and exchange lessons learned and best practices. All courses should also include practical application tabletop exercises, during which students develop solutions to hostile political warfare campaigns and operations in a warroom environment.

Endnotes

1. In an interview by the author with former assistant secretary of defense (East Asia-Pacific) Wallace C. Gregson, on 2 July 2022. Gregson stated, “While (the U.S.) and the rest of the world chose to treat this as some sort of peacetime operation, one can argue that this Chinese action was essentially a daring attack to seize territory, and then fortify it, taking advantage of diplomatic, economic, and political preparation over years that set the conditions guaranteeing a feckless global response.” For the complete U.S. definition of political warfare, see George Kennan, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,” Office of the Historian of the State Department, 4 May 1948. For an analysis of the PRC’s political warfare success in the Solomon Islands, see Cleo Paskal and Grant Newsham, “How China Is Winning the Solomon Islands,” *National Interest*, 13 May 2024. The PRC’s amphibious fleet expansion is detailed in Yasmin Tadjdeh, “China Building Formidable Amphibious Fleet,” *National Defense Magazine*, 25 June 2021.
2. For a general overview of Xi’s acceleration of preparations for war, see John Pomfret and Matt Pottinger, “Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War: The World Should Take Him Seriously,” *Foreign Affairs*, 29 March 2023. For a detailed CCP overview, see this essay in *Qiushi*, the top theoretical journal of the CCP, authored under the byline “Jun Zheng” (a homonym for “military government” and assumed to refer to the Central Military Commission or Ministry of Defense): “Under the Guidance of Xi Jinping’s Thought on Strengthening the Army, We Will Advance Victoriously,” *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)*, 1 March 2023. The essay’s theme is “dare to fight, dare to win!” For the Xinhua perspective, see Ryan Woo, “China’s Xi Tells Military to Deepen War, Combat Planning, Xinhua Reports,” Reuters, 6 July 2023. For an example of the CCP’s threats via its propaganda organs, see Yang Sheng, “Taiwan Separatists Panic as Mainland Drops ‘Peaceful’ in Reunification Narrative,” *Global Times*, 23 May 2020. Regarding increased PLA military coercion, see ROC Ministry of Defense, *ROC National Defense Report 2021* (中華民國110年國防報告書) (Taipei, Taiwan: ROC [Taiwan] Ministry of National Defense, 2021), 43–46; and Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), x, 41, 136–37.
3. Michael Punongbayan, “Water Cannons on Philippine Navy Ship an Act of War,” *Philippines Star*, 12 August 2023; Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2021), 2; Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), 141; and Capt James E. Fanell, USN (Ret), “China’s Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure: Pathway to Hegemony,” testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, United States House of Representatives, 115th Cong. (17 May 2018).
4. The PRC is a party-state under the strict control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), so the terms PRC and CCP are used interchangeably in this article. It is the PRC/CCP party-state and its ideology that poses the existential threat confronting democracies today—not “China” or the Chinese people, per se.
5. Jacqueline Deal and Eleanor Harvey, *CCP Weapons of Mass Persuasion: The Past and Potential Future of the United Front Threat to America* (Jaffrey, NH: Andrew W. Marshall Foundation, 2022), 10–42.
6. Bertil Lintner, *China’s India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 118–21. For insight into Warring States stratagems, ploys, and deception, see Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015), 31–51.
7. Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1965), 104.
8. Jian Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, *The New Cold War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 53–59, 95; and Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy*

- of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 311–14.
9. Charles R. Smith, ed., *U.S. Marines in the Korea War* (Washington, DC: History Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 2007), 3, 4, 530, 560, 575–76.
 10. Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation*, 8–9.
 11. For definitions related to egregious war crimes, see “Practice Relating to Rule 90: Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment,” ICRC International Humanitarian Law Databases, accessed 15 August 2024.
 12. *Communist Treatment of Prisoners of War: A Historical Survey* (Washington, DC: Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 92d Cong., 1972), 12–17. Following the Armistice in 1953, of the roughly 75,000 soldiers believed to be taken prisoner by the Chinese and North Koreans, only about 12,000 POWs returned home.
 13. Smith, *U.S. Marines in the Korea War*, 593–95.
 14. Smith, *U.S. Marines in the Korea War*, 595.
 15. John Dotson, “Beijing Dusts off an Old Playbook with Disinformation about Taiwan Biological Warfare Labs,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 1 November 2023; and P. Charon and J. B. Jeangene Vilmer, *Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment* (Paris: Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2021), 633. The authors of this study coined the term *Operation Infektion 2.0* to name the PRC’s political warfare operations to blame the United States for the origins of COVID-19 in 2020 and draw a parallel with a similar Soviet campaign in the 1980s to blame the United States for the AIDS epidemic. For a detailed examination, see *Operation Infektion 2.0*, 593–611.
 16. Renée DiResta et al., *Telling China’s Story: The Chinese Communist Party’s Campaign to Shape Global Narratives* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Internet Observatory at the Cyber Policy Center and the Hoover Institution, 2021), 5–7; and Charon and Vilmer, *Chinese Influence Operations*, 633.
 17. DiResta et al., *Telling China’s Story*, 5–7.
 18. Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, *The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, 2013), 3–7.
 19. Dean Cheng, *Winning without Fighting: Chinese Public Opinion Warfare and the Need for a Robust American Response* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2012), 4.
 20. Anthony H. Cordesman and Steven Colley, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2015: A Comparative Analysis* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015), 109.
 21. John M. Friend and Bradley A. Thayer, *How China Sees the World: Han-Centrism and the Balance of Power in International Politics* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 71; and Professor Stefan Halper, *China: The Three Warfares* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2013), 72.
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