

# CHINA'S *THREE WARFARE* STRATEGY. ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, APPLICABILITY

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*The Information Age is characterized not only by new challenges, but also by a new set of criteria in defining victory. Joseph Nye, the father of the concept of soft power, observed that, in the 21st century, conflicts are more about the victory of narratives than armies. States like China or Russia, two ambitious powers, took this matter seriously, being the first to ask themselves questions about **What** war is and **whether it is possible** to win without engaging into battle? In 2003, China adopted the Three Warfare Strategy/ 3Ws, a strategy that practically reinvented the understanding of war, and by combining the three types of warfare (psychological, public opinion and legal), it helped and continues to help China meet its goals. In China's view, this strategy represents a force multiplier, aimed at ensuring its domestic development, regional importance of the state, expansion as a global power and increasing influence at international level. The purpose of this article is to identify the origins and foundations of this strategy and the manner in which it produces effects.*

**Key words:** *information age, three warfare strategy, influencing actions, mass media, public opinion, legality.*

## 1. FROM UNRESTRICTED WARFARE TO THREE WARFARE STRATEGY

In 1999, three years before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Chinese Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui published their work *Unrestricted Warfare*, which was well received in the United States and other NATO countries. In addition, it provided the community of researchers the impression that it is a book that summarizes the Chinese military strategy and provides a way to understand it - the scientometric

indicators of the citation of this work in its 1999 edition, but also in the 2002 edition, published at the Pan American Publishing Company, in Panama, with the subtitle *China's Master Plan to Destroy America*, are proof of its wide reception. One of the possible factors that influenced the reception of the book was the very detail that the Chinese military left the impression of having "prophesied" the World Trade Center attacks, inducing the feeling that "were not a random act perpetrated by independent agents" (Santoli:2002, p.vii).

At the time of its original publication, the book emphasized that no country is capable of defeating a superpower like the United States of America, and presented methods of weakening such a superpower by using unconventional means, inclusive of controlling the banking system, the media, or the natural resources. In other words, the work illustrated how a nation like China can take on a technologically superior adversary through a variety of means, including the so-called *political warfare*, taking up the fundamentals of Sun Tzu's paradigm. (Codevilla and Seabury: 2006, p.151). In fact, for each of the levels of confrontation, there is a correlation with the Western military thought, in turn influenced by the military thought of Sun Tzu. The concept of *political warfare* is equivalent to the *grand strategy* concept proposed by B.H. Liddell Hart, even though the Chinese authors refer to the more recent work *Grand Strategy: Principles and Practices* by John M. Collins (Qiao & Wang:1999, p.197), defining it in the converging terms of Grand War – War Policy [dazhan – zhance]: “We call it ‘war policy’ because strategy at this level mainly involves the political stratagems for warfare” (Qiao & Wang:1999, p.197).

The strategy of a total war described in this book, considered the new art of Chinese warfare, reveals that according to Chinese military tradition, there is no sector of life that is “outside the sphere of

war” (Spalding:2022). The paper highlights that the Chinese state was preparing to confront the US and other allies through *asymmetric* or *multidimensional* attacks in all areas of social, economic or political life. Not coincidentally, this book was seen by Americans as *China's Master Plan to Destroy America*. However, the book was not a plan for a war against the West, but rather a call for innovative thinking about future warfare, being, basically, “a collection of tactics, techniques, and procedures that have been used over time and will be used by future adversaries” (Van Messel: 2005, p.iii), compensating for inferiority to the adversary through a variety of methods other than the military confrontation. The first part of the book, entitled *On New Warfare*, consisting of chapters 1-4, describes how the nature of war has changed, while the second part, *A Discussion of New Methods of Operation*, brings to light new strategies and ways of thinking in conducting military operations so as to achieve success.

The purpose of the paper is clearly stated in the introduction, with the authors providing the following arguments: “*The purpose of Unrestricted Warfare is to analyze and show how war has fundamentally changed and how future wars will be won.*” (Baughman:2022) And the evolving nature of war is described by the two authors with the following phrase: “*If we acknowledge that the new principles of war are no longer “using armed forces to compel*

*the enemy to submit to one's will", but rather are "using all means, including armed forces or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests"* (Liang and Xiangsui:1999, p.7)

This assessment led to the development of the Three Warfare strategy (*sānzhǒng zhàn fǎ* (三種戰法), officially adopted by the Central Military Commission in November 2003, which, in international perception, can be viewed as *three wars, three tactics, or three methods of combat*. (Behrendt:2022)

## 2. 3Ws – HYBRID WARFARE WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS?

Drawing an analogy with the Russian perspective and considering the roots of hybrid warfare, Mark Thomas, author of *The Chinese Roots of Hybrid Warfare* concludes that the first to ask the questions, *"What is modern warfare? What should the army be prepared for? How should it be armed?"* (Thomas:2022) were precisely the two authors of *Unrestricted Warfare*, predicting the changing nature of warfare 14 years before Gerasimov did. (Gerasimov:2013). It is true that Qiao and Wang's projection predates the American perspective on hybrid warfare (Mattis & Hoffman:2005; Hoffman:2007), which is why Thomas' perspective becomes compelling. *Unrestricted Warfare* depicts modern warfare through the presence or even absence of

hackers, commercial or financial transactions, where the mass-media becomes an extremely powerful weapon. All actions take place in an *extended domain view* (Liang and Xiangsui:1999, p.118) and not in a battlefield where lethality takes precedence. *"Everything is changing"* (Liang and Xiangsui:1999, p.134) or *"all friendship is in flux; self-interest is the only constant"* (Liang and Xiangsui:1999, p.38) are just two of the findings made by the two authors to highlight the changing nature of war, especially in the Information Age.

On the same note, Gerasimov also concludes in his first article in which he assumes the concept of hybrid war: *"no matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well-developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods for overcoming them can be found"* (Gerasimov:2016, p.29). As far as China is concerned, the Chinese maritime militia or the so-called *Blue Men* (named in relation to the Russian Green Men, as Moscow's special forces deployed in Crimea, in 2014, were called) are the epitome of the Chinese doctrine of hybrid warfare, as they combine both conventional military operations (when operating in tandem with the Chinese naval forces) and unconventional operations (by masquerading as Chinese fishermen attacking vessels transiting or operating in the South China Sea). An example of how they act consists precisely in the dual status of Chinese fishermen

who can very easily switch from the status of civilian fishermen to active military personnel and vice versa, depending on the adopted military scenarios (Miracola:2018). Also, the Chinese hybrid warfare is applied at both strategic and tactical levels. For example, Beijing adopts the so-called *salami-slicing strategy* by carrying out non-linear operations, in order to slowly and progressively gain more and more territories (Romaniuk & Burgers:2021, p.34). At the same time, we recall China's unconventional techniques for gaining and controlling more and more territories. At the tactical level, we mention the so-called *cabbage tactics* (sometimes extended to a higher level of military art, as *cabbage strategy*) which refers to the deployment of all maritime forces (conventional and non-conventional) to physically encircle the contested islands and block all types of access to the respective islands (TruOng-Minh Vu & The Phuong Nguyen:2019, p.87). First, actions in the South China Sea and beyond give the Chinese state the image of an aggressive, expansionist and hegemonic state. On the other hand, the way China conducts information warfare actions, through the 3Ws, demonstrates that the Chinese state sees this strategy as a tool to continuously deter adversaries. At the same time, this strategy "*led to the image of a China that relates to Information War as a hybrid war with Chinese characteristics*"

(Clarke:2019) Therefore, this strategy is a component of hybrid warfare.

### 3. PUBLIC OPINION WARFARE, PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AND LEGAL WARFARE

In Chinese military writings, beginning with Sun Tzu and ending with this work by Qiao and Wang, achieving information superiority is considered a prerequisite for achieving and maintaining battlefield supremacy. Contrary to this perspective, for example, in the Romanian specialized literature, the issue of information supremacy was approached only tangentially. Based on this projection, for example, Colonel Adrian Lesenciuc (Lesenciuc:2014, p.138), proposed a principle formulated in accordance with the projection of Liddell Hart's principles, more precisely: "do not allow the interruption of communication flows among own troops during military operations"[2]. Through the 3Ws, the People's Liberation Army seeks to ensure victory before entering battle. In other words, the strategy according to which one can subdue one's enemy without fighting, can be achieved by influencing the behavior of the opponent, by using non-kinetic means, which are not only limited to wartime but can also be operated in peacetime.



Fig.1 Three Warfare Strategy

All elements of the 3Ws are *interdependent*, *complementary* and *inseparable* (Behrendt:2022) because public opinion warfare creates an environment conducive to psychological and legal warfare, legal warfare creates the basis for psychological and public opinion warfare and psychological warfare creates the tools to implement the public opinion warfare and legal warfare. The war of public opinion aims at the manipulation of public opinion in order to raise the morale of own troops and weaken the morale of the opposing troops (the action does not exclude propaganda means) and involves the appeal to classic media as well as to new media (social networks). Yusheng (Yusheng:2015, p.1020) draws attention to the fact that, recently, the concept of Qiao and Wang began to be replaced by that of *public opinion struggle*, which involves the use of public opinion as a weapon.

Psychological warfare is defined along the same lines as in Western doctrines, explicitly including propaganda (Yusheng:2015, p.1021), aiming to reduce the enemy's will to fight. Legal warfare is a completely different concept from the other two, which may have a counterpart in Western doctrines in *Media Ops* and *PsyOps*, assuming "struggles for achieving legal principle superiority, the political initiative, and military victory through means and methods such as legal intimidation, legal strikes, legal counterattacks, legal restraints, legal sanctions, and legal protection, using laws as weapons, based on strategic intent and operational tasks of the Central Military Commission." (Yamaguchi et al., 2022)

Since the 1990s, China has treated law as yet another weapon and, according to the 3Ws, this weapon is used to *deter*, *attack*, *counter-attack*, *coerce* and *sanction* (Charon & Jeangène Vilmer:2021, p.49). Through this type of warfare, China wants to create the appearance of legitimacy, even in the case of the use of armed force, portraying the actions of the adversaries as illegitimate.

#### 4. 3Ws AS APPLIED BY CHINA

##### 4.1. 3Ws against Taiwan

The best example of psychological and cognitive warfare is the influence operations against the island of Taiwan. These operations involve the spread of



fake news through cyberspace, social media activities, fake news, propaganda, etc. Taiwan is seen by Beijing as a rebel province and is a target of its 3Ws strategy. The island also poses a threat to the Chinese Communist Party, especially in the ideological sphere, as the success of Taiwan's democracy contradicts the thesis promoted by the Chinese authorities that "*societies based on Confucianism are incompatible with liberal democracy*" (Behrendt:2022). The issue is extremely current and is the subject of debates at the highest level. For example, at the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi Jinping stated: "Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, it is a matter that must be resolved by the Chinese" (Davidson & Graham-Harrison:2022). In China's perception, Taiwan is an inseparable territory and constitutes a *primary interest* where China seeks to win through the *win without fight* method, through actions carried out in the cognitive sphere (Rosen:2022). To attack Taiwan, China resorted to the 3Ws, particularly through the efforts of the 311 Base, whose headquarters is located in Fujian, Fuzhou Province, considered a front-line base directly responsible for the public opinion warfare, psychological warfare or legal warfare, since 2011 (Yamaguchi et al., 2022). In other words, the Three Warfare strategy embodies real operations in the cognitive domain, and "the three warfare strategy is expected to be the effective tool, as

long as the operations in the cognitive domain are intended to degrade the adversary's cognition, emotions, and will" (Yamaguchi et al.,2022). At the psychological level, China has constantly threatened Taiwan with a military invasion in the event of a unilateral declaration of formal independence from Beijing, with the Chinese spreading fake news to undermine Tsai Ing-wen's political agenda (Szeto:2022). Therefore, China is using the warfare of public opinion to create confusion and undermine the trust of the Taiwanese people in the government and public institutions. Overtime, China has tried to influence every round of elections in Taiwan, including the 2020 elections, but despite disinformation and influence operations carried out by the Chinese state, Tsai Ing-wen, the representative of the Democratic Progressive Party, a skeptical group in relation to the Beijing's policy and the principle promoted by the Chinese - "one country, two systems" -, won the elections for the position of president of the state (Allen-Ebrahimian: 2020). China's actions against Taiwan are not the only ones that can fit into the 3Ws strategy, and the warfare of public opinion is not the only way that the Beijing administration has manifested itself in relation to the Taipei government and the population of the island in the western Pacific Ocean. Examples of legal warfare directed against it can be: (1) the one waged through a series of legislative measures including the anti-secession law invented by

China, in 2005, which specifically targets the *rebellious island*, whereby any proclamation of Taiwan's independence would amount to a declaration of war on Beijing; (2) the official Chinese narratives, which include the speech given in 2019 by the Chinese president, as the supreme commander of the armed forces, who promised "China will not give up the use of force to combat Taiwan independence fighters" (Damian:2019), stating that the independence of the island of Taiwan would be a *disaster* and (3) adding a paragraph in the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party, regarding *the firm opposition and deterrence* of the independence of the Taiwanese state, as well as showing the intention to rule the island in the future, by implementing the policy of *one country two systems*. (ProTV, 2022)

#### 4.2. 3Ws in South China Sea

The implementation of the 3Ws concept has also been realized through the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, involving the islands, coastline and various boundaries in the Gulf of Tonkin. The construction of artificial islands, such as the Spratly or Paracel Islands, started decades ago, initiated by Vietnam and the Philippines, to which China was added - which built more islands in the period 2014-2016 than all the others had built throughout their history, placing military equipment on them - serves on the one hand to control some disputed areas, on the other hand to exert permanent

pressure in the area (Valencia:1988, 438-443; Marlay:1996, 195-210). The main victims of this pressure are precisely the states that started the construction of the islands and which, without the US support, could not prevent the Chinese state from expanding its military arsenal in the area (Advincula Jr.:2014, 51-65). An example of the implementation of the legal warfare is the one practiced by the Beijing administration that extended its sovereignty over the Paracel Islands due to interests such as the access to resources, maritime rights and rivalry with the US (Buszynski:2012, 139-156), building the city of Sansha on Yongxing Island in the aforementioned archipelago and claiming rights to a significant maritime territory.

The actions in the South China Sea have been described by the two previously mentioned techniques, such as the salami-slicing strategy, by conducting non-linear operations to slowly and progressively gain more and more pieces of land, or the so-called cabbage tactic, which refers to the deployment of all maritime forces (conventional and non-conventional) to physically encircle the disputed islands, to block all types of access to the islands. China perceives the information operations as a lever that produces deterrent effects in the South China Sea, clearly and intentionally producing confusion on the entire conflict spectrum: peace – crisis – war and maintaining, in the spirit of the Clausewitzian doctrine, this confusion useful for its

own manifestations. Public opinion warfare aims to influence both domestic and international public opinion in order to support the Party's goals and discourage adversaries from taking contrary actions. (Halper:2013, p.28) In the South China Sea, the 3Ws strategy was used to manipulate perception and mindset so as to set the conditions of the operating environment in China's favor. (Halper:2013, p.31).

### 4.3. 3Ws in India

The 3Ws strategy has been used extensively against India as well. With a common border of 3,200 km, largely contested by both sides, China continued the wars of the 1960s: the one won in 1962 and the one lost in 1967 (which is not mentioned in official documents) with propaganda measures, with psychological actions that contribute to the highlighting of certain aspects convenient to China's own policy, maximizing successes and minimizing or denying losses. The opposing perspective is radically different – we mention, for example, the 2017 study by Indian researchers Rajagopalan and Biswas (2017, 120-139), who also shed light on the current perspective of the Chinese policy after the current president, Xi Jinping, took power – and this reflects, on the one hand, the difference in perspective, on the other, the extent of the Chinese propaganda. In the relation between China and India, the Chinese state has often resorted to disinformation or propaganda, or other tools of psychological

operations such as misleading, media campaigns through posts on social media platforms such as Facebook (META), Instagram or Twitter.

The repertoire of Chinese actions against India also includes violations of the Indian airspace by Chinese helicopters or shows of force by both sides. The 2017 Doklam plateau crisis (Panda:2017) intensified the conflict (even if the plateau is not directly disputed by India), and China's reaction, in line with the legal warfare it designed, built a village, Pangda, 2 km from Bhutanese territory, close to Doklam (Westcott:2021, 7-32). Another example of the 3Ws is the crisis in the Galwan valley, in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, which resulted in casualties on both sides, but which was not confirmed by China until four months after the end of the conflict (Kaura:2020).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Through the new mode of confrontation that exceeds the classical warfare and applying it to the entire spectrum of actions: peace - crisis - war, China uses advanced technologies to achieve effects similar to those of real military engagements. While the West uses technology to make operations more efficient, China uses technology to defeat within the confines of the 3Ws concept, not actually engaging in combat, except for the situations where it is absolutely necessary (see e.g. , the case of Galwan Valley). In Chinese view, waging war against a



well-equipped enemy entails avoiding direct confrontation and adopting a confrontational approach in the cognitive sphere. The Three Warfare strategy represents the essence of the Chinese “political warfare”, being a combination of actions of influence, information, cyber operations or economic pressure, but which do not exclude violent confrontations. From this point of view, 3Ws is a replica, or rather the original, in relation to which the Russian hybrid war (hybridnaia voina) is expressed. This strategy has the role of undermining the adversary’s confidence, inducing a sense of inferiority or intimidating him, without resorting to military force. But this strategy is not only limited to the foreign environment, but is also used in the domestic environment, both to influence the perception of own public opinion and to control narratives or even to impose or brutally repress own policy. (Gershaneck:2020, p.67) The 3Ws strategy represents a significant shift in the understanding of warfare and remains an important component of China’s information warfare strategy, continuing to evolve (Kania:2016). This does not mean abandoning *hard power*, which continues to be a powerful deterrent but may no longer be as effective or sufficient.

I believe that in order for one to truly understand what this strategy represents, it must be understood as a *complex doctrine of information operations* that contributes to the redefinition, reconsideration, and recontextualization of warfare.

## NOTES

[1] With reference to Liddell Hart, the Chinese officers define the concept of strategy and find out what the limits of its application are in this sense, in relation to the concept of the Chinese military strategy, which exceeds the classical framework of definition: “Liddell Hart [British officer and military theorist] defined the word strategy as “the art of using military means to achieve political objectives.” From this, we can see that the concept of means covers a lot of territory, on numerous levels, with overlapping functions, and thus it is not an easy concept to grasp. Only by expanding our field of vision and our understanding of means, and grasping the principle that there is nothing which cannot be considered a means, can we avoid the predicament of being confronted with too many difficulties to tackle all at once and being at wit’s end when we employ means.” (Qiao & Wang, 1999, 137)

[2] Both the principle itself, and especially the explanation that the Romanian officer brings to the principle he proposes, and which is useful in understanding the false framing of *Unrestricted Warfare* in the Sun Tzu paradigm: “But the purpose of this formulation of the principle is not the principle itself, but signaling the fact that the nomological determination of military actions does not require a nomological hierarchy, but a repositioning outside the Clausewitzian deterministic limits, in a paradigm of openness. In this horizon, “continuous peace” (our alternative to “continuous war”) is sometimes interrupted by the occasional manifestation of violence in order for it to return to better conditions of manifestation.” (Lesenciuc:2014, p.138). This work by Qiao and Wang, in agreement with the Clausewitzian projection of China’s military strategy, falls within this paradigm, just as the Russian hybrid warfare (*ghybridanaia voina*) assumes exactly the same thing.

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