

# China's Three Warfares



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The Delex Consulting, Studies and Analysis (CSA) Division of Delex Systems, Inc. provides our government, industry, and international partners with expert assistance in strategic and operational planning and analysis.

In order to facilitate a better understanding of leading concepts and viewpoints in China, Delex CSA has prepared the following Special Report brief on China's Three Warfares. An electronic copy of the report may be found at the Delex Special Reports archive:  
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**W W W . D E L E X . C O M**

**China's Three Warfares Addressed by Chief of Naval Operations Greenert**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2012, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) released a report examining the future of U.S. strategy in the South China Sea.<sup>i</sup> The report rollout event at the Willard Intercontinental Hotel featured a keynote address by Admiral Jonathan Greenert, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), followed by a panel discussion chaired by Richard Danzig, former Secretary of the Navy, and including Singapore's Ambassador to the United States Chan Heng Chee, and report co-authors Dr. Patrick M. Cronin, Senior Director of CNAS' Asia-Pacific Security Program, and Mr. Robert D. Kaplan, a senior fellow at CNAS.

In addition to presenting his Sailing Directions and elucidating the Navy's forward deployed status, CNO Greenert discussed in his keynote address efforts to increase integration with regional partners and allies.<sup>i</sup> During the question period, Dr. Stefan Halper a Senior Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge, asked the CNO for his thoughts on China's Three Warfares and possible reactions to it. The CNO responded that Three Warfares "is difficult and doesn't align directly with how we do business" and supported the use of international protocols in "continuing the debate" with the Chinese.

Consistent with the CNO's efforts to acknowledge the concept, this Special Report draws attention to China's Three Warfares. Drawing from the work of various experts and sources, this Special Report also builds on a more in-depth journal article prepared for *Defense Concepts* by its author, Timothy A. Walton.<sup>ii</sup> The Special Report summarizes Three Warfares and U.S. government attention brought to bear on it, ordinales the concept's place in Chinese military theory, explains the concept's three components (using case studies), and evaluates the prospects for Three Warfares' employment and effectiveness.

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<sup>i</sup> Delex CSA Current Issues Brief (CIB) No. 46 "CNAS Report on U.S. Strategy in South China Sea" covered the report and its rollout, including the CNO's remarks. An electronic copy of the CIB may be found at the Delex CIB archive: [http://delex.com/sol\\_CSA\\_CIB.aspx](http://delex.com/sol_CSA_CIB.aspx).

<sup>ii</sup> Walton, Timothy A. "Treble Spyglass, Treble Spear: China's Three Warfares." *Defense Concepts* 4.4 (2010): 49-67.

# A Summary of Three Warfares

In 2003, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee and the Central Military Commission (CMC) approved the concept of “Three Warfares” (*san zhong zhanfa*, 三种战法), a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) information warfare concept aimed at preconditioning key areas of competition in its favor.<sup>iii</sup> As defined by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) in its 2011 Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, Three Warfares consists of the following:<sup>2</sup>

- **Psychological Warfare** seeks to undermine an enemy’s ability to conduct combat operations through operations aimed at deterring, shocking, and demoralizing enemy military personnel and supporting civilian populations.
- **Media Warfare** is aimed at influencing domestic and international public opinion to build support for China’s military actions and dissuade an adversary from pursuing actions contrary to China’s interests.
- **Legal Warfare** uses international and domestic law to claim the legal high ground or assert Chinese interests. It can be employed to hamstring an adversary’s operational freedom and shape the operational space. Legal warfare is also intended to build international support and manage possible political repercussions of China’s military actions.

Over the past two decades, the PLA’s organizational structure, training, and equipment have dramatically improved. Less visible but equally important improvements in coordinated force enabling concepts seek to maximize the effectiveness of the PLA’s threat or use of force. Notable among these concepts is Three Warfares.

In 2008, the findings of the U.S. Department of State’s (DOS) International Security Advisory Board report, headed by former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, were made public. Among other recommendations, the authors of the report maintained that “it is essential that the U.S. better understand and effectively respond to China’s comprehensive approach to strategic rivalry, as reflected in its official concept of Three Warfares. If not countered, Beijing [...] can precondition key areas of strategic competition in its favor.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in its 2009, 2010, and 2011 annual reports on the military power of China, DOD has noted the development of Three Warfares. However, the U.S. has taken little action to counter or mitigate the effects of this adversarial concept.

## Three Warfares as Part of Information Warfare

The PLA’s operational hierarchy of combat consists of three major levels: “war (*zhanzheng*); campaigns (*zhanyi*); and battles (*zhandou*), each of which is informed, respectively, by a distinct level of operational guidance—namely strategy (*zhanlue*); campaign methods (*zhanyi fangfa*; usually contracted as *zhanfa*) and tactics (*zhanhu*).”<sup>4</sup> Three Warfares (*sanzhong zhanfa*) can be

<sup>iii</sup> The Central Military Commission (CMC) is responsible for issuing directives for operational guidance.

identified primarily as a campaign method with secondary, mostly strategic but also tactical, applications. The PLA's operational guidance document Regulation on the Political Work stipulates it is "a reinforcement of political work in terms of media warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare." 100 Case Studies for Each Type of the Triple Warfare, published by the PLA in January 2005, serves as a corroborating supplement to the document.<sup>5</sup>

Information warfare has assumed a central role in Chinese military writings over the past decade. Achieving information superiority is seen as the precondition for achieving and maintaining battlefield supremacy. Information warfare also "greatly emphasizes the concept of 'gaining mastery by striking first.'"<sup>6</sup> In fact, some Chinese writings suggest that successful information operations require striking first electronically or kinetically. Three Warfares follows this vein of thinking as a peacetime and wartime information warfare first strike aimed at maximizing the effects of the threat or use of military force.

### **Psychological Warfare**

Although recently popularized as part of Three Warfares, psychological warfare (*xinlizhan*) is deeply rooted in classical Chinese strategy. Modern psychological operations concepts are normally aimed at the adversary's morale (*shiqi*), and employ a multitude of components including television, radio broadcasts, loudspeakers, leaflets, and calculated military operations. Conventional deterrence, as part of psychological warfare, would not only involve military components, though, but also involve whole of government political, economic, and diplomatic components. Retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Dennis Blasko explains:

"Political signals may be sent through (1) public or private diplomacy at international organizations, such as the United Nations, and/or directly to other governments or persons; (2) the use of the Chinese and foreign media in official statements or "opinion pieces" written by influential persons; (3) non-military actions, such as restrictions on travel or trade; or (4) by using military demonstrations, exercises, deployments, or tests, which do not involve the use of deadly force."<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the scope of traditional strategic communications or force signaling, the new Psychological Warfare appears to aim for a high degree of precision in targeting critical nodes (*guanjie*) to achieve nonlinear effects. Specifically, the enemy's motivation and willingness to wage war could be targeted, by eliminating opposing leadership, diminishing international support, undercutting military capabilities, affecting the economy, or sowing domestic political dissent.

An example of targeted, economic-based Psychological Warfare occurred during the 2010 Senkaku Boat Collision Incident. On 22 September 2010, in response to Japan's arresting the captain and crew of a Chinese trawler in a territorial dispute, China enacted a two-month unofficial ban on exports of rare earths to Japan. Shortly thereafter, Japan released both the trawler's crew and captain. In China the event was perceived as a Chinese diplomatic victory, while in Japan the government's acquiescence received rebuke. This use of China's "strategic natural resource" demonstrated the precise, coercive effect of affecting an adversary's economy.

## Target Taiwan

Taiwan, or the Republic of China (ROC) to be more precise, is the primary target of PLA Psychological Warfare. Newly re-elected President Ma Ying-jeou is pursuing a policy of rapprochement with the People's Republic of China (PRC). His policies have decreased the short-term likelihood of armed conflict in the Taiwan Straits. However, critics simultaneously contend that he may be weakening the mission of the ROC military. Thus, he could face the challenge of maintaining a credible defense force and a credible commitment to use it if necessary.

Chinese writings posit that during peacetime, psychological operations seek to “reveal and exploit” divisions in the enemy's domestic political establishment or alliance system and cast doubt on the enemy's value concepts (*jiazhi gainian*).<sup>8</sup> In 1997, the Chinese General Staff Department and General Political Department “reportedly formed a special unit to examine methodologies to spark a ‘soldiers movement’ (*bingyun*) to sap gradually the morale of ROC's armed forces and reduce confidence of the Taiwanese people in its military.” More recently, PLA journals alleged that during the pro-independence overtures of the Chen Shui-bian administration, “officers and men [in the Taiwanese ranks] were in ideological chaos, shaken in their faith and confused about ‘just who and what they are fighting for.’”<sup>9</sup> More recently, a series of high profile espionage cases in which Taiwanese military and intelligence officers spied for China have shocked the media and sparked concerns over deficiencies in Taiwan's intelligence apparatus.<sup>10</sup>

By presiding over the graduation ceremonies of the five ROC military schools in July 2008, President Ma demonstrated his awareness of the situation and desire to instill confidence in the armed forces. His speech to the cadets included the following lines:

“Some of you may wonder whether China is our friend or foe. What you should do is to help us build a strong military force and be prepared for war. Only by being prepared for war can we prevent it. Taiwan will not seek war, but we will not avoid or fear wars, either.”<sup>11</sup>

Taiwan's first Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), issued in March of 2009 by the Ministry of National Defense, identified the “three-front war” by China—legal, media, and psychological warfare as a threat to the defense of the country. Furthermore, in planning its “Hard ROC” defense strategy, the QDR called for “realizing an all-out (general civilian mobilization) defense” as an important measure for preventing war. Such actions aim to bolster the perceived weak or shallow morale of Taiwanese citizens. Overall, the Ma administration has developed nuanced communications in seeking to improve relations with the PRC while also improving the ROC's defenses.

The PLA is evaluating and debating coercive strategies, which would be part of Psychological Warfare to take advantage of the perceived weakened morale and unity of the ROC's military and government. Through psychological warfare tactics including the electronic transmission of media, undercutting dialogue with elements of the ROC government, etc., the PLA aims to seize and maintain the political initiative before and during military campaigns. Independent of the method of the campaign, some PRC observers posit that the ROC will, after a 48-hour

psychological and limited military campaign, not only agree to initiate unification talks, but also acquiesce to PRC terms. Whether or not such a scenario would materialize holds broad implications not only for Taiwan, but for intervening states as well—the U.S. in particular. If Taiwan swiftly loses political confidence and capitulates to Chinese demands, then U.S. forces sent to signal U.S. commitment to stability in the region or actively stop Chinese coercion would arrive too late to assist in the defense of the island. Clearly, the PLA views Psychological Warfare as an essential element of its operational level of warfare, employing it in concert with other Warfares and using the expectations of success created through it to guide the development of plans to achieve strategic effects.

### **Media Warfare**

As part of the Three Warfares, Media Warfare is “aimed at influencing domestic and international public opinion to build support for China’s military actions and dissuade an adversary from pursuing actions contrary to China’s interests.”<sup>12</sup> Domestically, PLA planners seek to control domestic information access and generate propaganda to guide public opinion and thus present a ‘united front’ among the intelligentsia, common citizens, and the CCP. Over the past few decades, China has adopted more sophisticated Media Warfare methodologies. In particular, China has incorporated methods of mass persuasion from the Western world, including political public relations, theories of mass communication, and individual and group psychology.<sup>13</sup>

Foreign Media Warfare efforts have also become more sophisticated. Foreign Media Warfare efforts have also sought to improve China’s international media voice in an effort to surmount the perceived Western information hegemony. As stated by the People’s Daily, the United States not only possesses political and military hegemony, but also media and cultural hegemony. In its view, the ‘soft strength’ of Western news media far surpasses its economic ‘hard strength.’<sup>14</sup>

Since the 1990s, improved targeting of prominent foreign elites, journalists, military personnel, and public relations firms has sought to “use foreigners as a bridge” (*yiqiao weiqiao*) to promote China and convey Chinese messages.<sup>15</sup> The government has improved the entertainment quality of CCTV, co-opted popular, formerly private TV channels, sought to develop an alternative cultural vision outside the Western model through cultural media subsidization, and by establishing the infrastructure for a global mass communication system by deploying necessary communications links such as satellites and fiber optic cables, by broadcasting CCTV in foreign languages, and by providing Chinese media content to foreign national media providers.

The most important lobbyists for China and target audience of foreign propaganda are likely Overseas Chinese, people of Chinese ancestry who are not living in the PRC or ROC. Overall, China aims to create ideational power that grows increasingly attractive to citizens of the world in general and Overseas Chinese in particular. With Overseas Chinese, China seeks to leverage its notion of a transnational culture. Transnational culture, the idea of a common ethnic Chinese people, supports Chinese public diplomacy and espionage operations throughout the world in ethnic Chinese communities, university campuses, and cultural centers such as the Confucius Institutes.

**Media Warfare, Nationalism, and Self-Binding**

Regime legitimacy in China rests on burgeoning economic growth and nationalism. Media sources cater to the nationalistic desires of the people, but also whet their desires with rich programming content that antagonistically portrays the U.S. and its allies. In his book, The Three Faces of Chinese Power, David Lampton recalls conversations with Foreign Ministry diplomats in which they speak of their online interactions with nationalistic citizens who allege the Ministry does not represent China's interests forcefully enough.<sup>16</sup> Due to this sentiment, the Foreign Ministry argues it must play two-level games with domestic citizens and foreign governments. While the claim is likely true to a large degree, the possibility also exists that exaggerating the influence of such nationalist movements or fueling them provides a form of positive "selfbinding" for China in negotiations. In this manner, stoked nationalism could precondition negotiations in China's favor, allowing Chinese officials to argue in negotiations with the U.S. or other states that they cannot fulfill obligations or requests or that their regime survival might be at stake.

**Media Warfare, Transparency, and Deception**

On 18 May 2008, the Ministry of National Defense gave, for the first time, a public press briefing at the Chinese Ministry of Defense.<sup>17</sup> Senior Colonel Hu Changming, the PLA's first spokesman, provided details of the military's role in rescue and relief efforts in the aftermath of the 12 May Sichuan earthquake. Increasingly confident, the Ministry of National Defense now holds regular press conferences and seeks to influence the international media discourse.<sup>iv</sup>

Furthermore, the PLA routinely sends "significant media teams to cover the efforts and inform the population of the PLA's, PAP's, and militia's work in non-traditional security missions."<sup>18</sup> Among other missions, the international naval review, in celebration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PLA Navy on April 23rd, was an effort to liberalize the PLA's public relations image to the world. It not only demonstrated Chinese prestige to its own citizens, but was highly oriented toward foreign consumption by portraying a strong, friendly, and transparent force. Other efforts included the launching of an official PLA English website titled "China Military Online." It now features a series of regularly updated news articles, fact sheets, photographs, and videos. It claims to offer a "window on Chinese armed forces" and to demonstrate how China's military is "open and transparent."<sup>19</sup>

Despite these overtures, the PLA fundamentally lacks transparency or openness, systematically underreporting both the cost and allocation of its budget. Moreover, Media Warfare operations stress the supposedly nascent state of PLA capabilities and publicly deny capabilities such as cyber-espionage. A high profile example of this took place 18 May 2011 when the PLA Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde delivered an address at the U.S. National Defense University. General Chen contended, as predecessors and colleagues of his have consistently argued over the past couple decades, there "still exists a 20 year gap between equipment and weaponry between

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<sup>iv</sup> Delex CSA Special Report #2, Special Report on the Translation of Yang Yi Article on AirSea Battle, includes coverage of a Ministry of National Defense press conference during which Defense Ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Geng Yansheng (耿雁生) criticized the U.S. AirSea Battle concept. An electronic copy of the report may be found at the Delex Special Reports archive: [http://www.delex.com/sol\\_CSA\\_SR.aspx](http://www.delex.com/sol_CSA_SR.aspx).

the US and China.”<sup>v</sup> This practice of deception supports Media Warfare’s aim of influencing foreign actors’ perceptions of the PLA. Whether such a policy of deception will change with greater Chinese confidence in PLA capabilities remains to be seen. Regardless, the role of Media Warfare is likely to continue to grow as China seeks a more prominent international media voice.

### **Legal Warfare**

Legal warfare “uses international and domestic law to claim the legal high ground or assert Chinese interests”<sup>20</sup> In particular, legal war seeks to legitimize Chinese policies while sometimes undercutting the authority or justification of enemy reactions. Legal Warfare is not necessarily revisionist to the legal system itself; instead, it may aim to gradually set a new precedent or a fait accompli situation backed by legal authority.

In general, China solely conducts contemporary external security operations under the mandate of U.N. resolutions. This was evidenced when China waited for U.N. Security Council Resolution 1851 before sending maritime forces December 26, 2008 to combat pirates. Similarly, China only participates in U.N.-sanctioned peacekeeping operations. Even in foreign policy trouble spots for China, such as Sudan, China’s peacekeeping presence is backed by a U.N. mandate. This is consistent with the long-standing PRC position on noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries.

China has used the concept of Legal Warfare in territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The coordinated efforts of legal experts and maritime forces aim to “shape international opinion and interpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea away from long-accepted norms of freedom of navigation and territorial limits toward increased sovereign authority out to the 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone, the airspace above it, and possibly outer space.”<sup>21</sup> Professor Peter Dutton of the U.S. Naval War College has thoroughly examined China’s legal warfare in the South China Sea in a recent *Naval War College Review* paper.<sup>vi</sup> Over the past decade, military confrontations between the U.S. and China have exhibited significant international law components, with China justifying its position in the context of or lack of international law. Incidents include the March 4-8, 2009 harassment of U.S. (Surveillance Towed Array Sensor System) SURTASS vessels (USNS Impeccable and USNS Victorious), 2006 and 2007 Chinese testing of directed energy and kinetic anti-satellite systems, and the April 1, 2001 collision of a Chinese J-8 with a U.S. EP-3E. In the future, Chinese Legal Warfare could provide advantages in areas such as treaties regulating or abolishing the emplacement of weapons in space, or the fielding of anti-satellite systems. Overall, Chinese interpretation of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea emphasizes that it strengthens stated sovereignty and denies unauthorized access to foreign militaries.

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<sup>v</sup> Delex CSA Current Issues Brief (CIB) No. 34 “PLA Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde’s Visit to NDU” covered General Chen’s presentation. An electronic copy of the CIB may be found at the Delex CIB archive: [http://delex.com/sol\\_CSA\\_CIB.aspx](http://delex.com/sol_CSA_CIB.aspx).

<sup>vi</sup> Peter Dutton, “Three Disputes and Three Objectives: China and the South China Sea”, *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2011, Vol. 64, No. 4, <http://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/feb516bf-9d93-4d5c-80dc-d5073ad84d9b/Three-Disputes-and-Three-Objectives--China-and-the>.

Additionally, legal warfare has been used to support economic coercion, urging foreign companies against investing in certain Taiwanese companies with the threat of losing business in the PRC.

Furthermore, longstanding efforts to portray the U.S. as a non-Asian power incorporate legal elements through the fostering of mechanisms and apparatuses that solely involve ASEAN+3 states (Association of Southeast Asian States plus China, Russia, and Korea).<sup>22</sup> In short, through specific policies and the advocacy of general architectures, legal warfare seeks to legitimize Chinese actions while delegitimizing adversaries' actions.

### **Anti-Secession Law: A Combined Case Study**

On the 8th of March 2005 the National People's Congress passed the Anti-Secession Law (ASL), which stipulated: "If possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity." The law served three functions. First, it was seen as a deterrent act against Taiwanese "splittists." Second, it domestically strengthened and justified the role of the security apparatus. Third, the law provided a legal, self-binding foundation for the Chinese position on the problem of the Strait. Similar to the manner in which U.S. diplomats cite the Taiwan Relations Act and the autonomy of members of the U.S. Congress in making pronouncements and passing legislation, Chinese leaders can now fall back to the ASL to justify their actions during negotiations. David Huang, a member of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council, which energetically protested the law, identified five stages of China's Three Warfares in the ASL:

1. Setting agenda and repeating messages (media)
2. Creating pressures on the government (psychological)
3. Undermining the government's public authority (legal)
4. Generating the "chilling effect" by rewarding cooperators and punishing defectors (psychological)
5. Denying Taiwan's sovereign status by isolating it (legal)

As the case demonstrates, Three Warfares achieves ideal effects through the combined application of the Three Warfares' elements, skillful statesmanship, and a credible military force. These long-term efforts by China are viewed by the Chinese leadership as a slow but sure strategy for achieving reunification with Taiwan. Commensurately, Three Warfares must be viewed through the paradigm of Chinese perception of past successes with brinkmanship and pedagogical conflicts such as the Sino-Indian War and Sino-Vietnamese War. This perception reinforces the appeal of a structured, methodical strategy that can achieve specific, almost scientific effects. Hence, Chinese leaders must avoid overconfidence and possible miscalculation in assessing their agent capabilities.

*“For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.” -Sun Tzu*

### **Prospects for Three Warfares**

Three Warfares can be primarily identified as a campaign method with secondary, mostly strategic but also tactical, applications. By itself, it is unlikely to achieve significant strategic goals. Indeed, Three Warfares will probably not “subdue the enemy without fighting.” However, the combined employment of Three Warfares with credible PLA forces as part of established operational guidance is likely to achieve significant nonlinear effects.

Integrated not only into military campaigns, but China's larger strategy regarding other applications of power, its relevance will likely continue to grow. Coordinated Three Warfares efforts aim to dexterously support China's position in regard to Asian security issues, while undercutting those of adversaries. The dedication of Three Warfares' methods against the ROC constitutes the focal point of the method, incorporating psychological, media, and legal warfare to support a long-term pacific, but if necessary swift and bellicose, reunification. The increasing relevance of Three Warfares merits continued attention by Western analysts seeking to understand how China will aim to shape, approach, and succeed in various situations. As both a guiding paradigm and operational method, the unity of effort brought about by Three Warfares will further PLA analysis of conditions and questions regarding the use of force.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>14</sup> David Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 159.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 224.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 126.
- <sup>17</sup> "Defense ministry spokesman: China open to foreign military aid in disaster relief", *Xinhua*, June 12 2008, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2008-06/12/content\\_1321556.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2008-06/12/content_1321556.htm).
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- <sup>19</sup> China Military Online, <http://english.chinamil.com.cn/>
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