

NIDS China Security Report 2023

China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations

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NIDS China Security Report 2023

China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations

Yamaguchi Shinji, Yatsuzuka Masaaki, Momma Rira

How is China conducting cognitive domain operations and maritime gray zone operations?

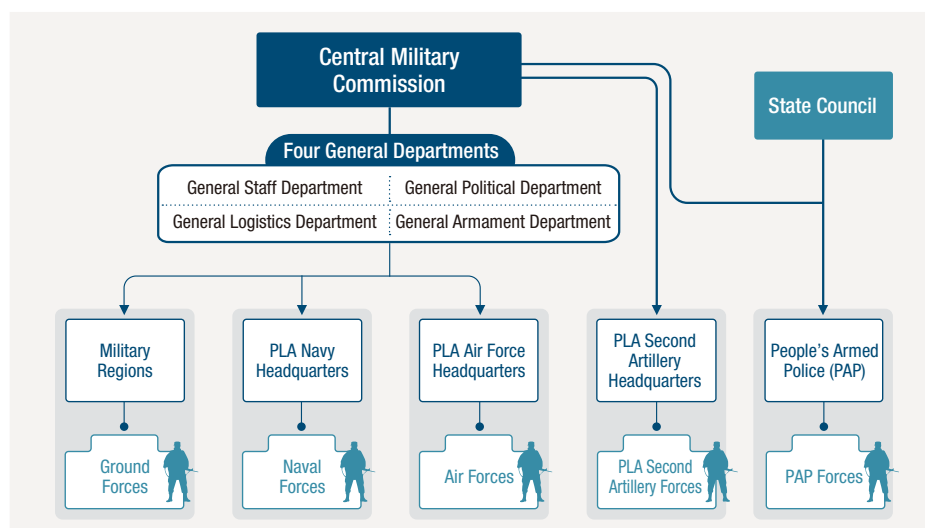
The Xi Jinping regime has implemented organizational restructuring of the military, centered around strengthening the leadership of the Party. Through these changes, it attempts to more powerfully leverage cognitive domain operations and organizations such as the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the maritime militia.

Chapter 1

China's Military Reorganization and Strengthening of Non-military Means

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the Party's army. It follows the Party's command and defines its most important role as protecting the Party's regime. Until President Xi Jinping's military reforms, the Party exercised control over the military mainly through the PLA's political work organizations, including the General Political Department, and political commissars. Such indirect control, however, was susceptible to communication issues and hindering the execution of joint operations, and caused widespread bribery and corruption in the PLA.

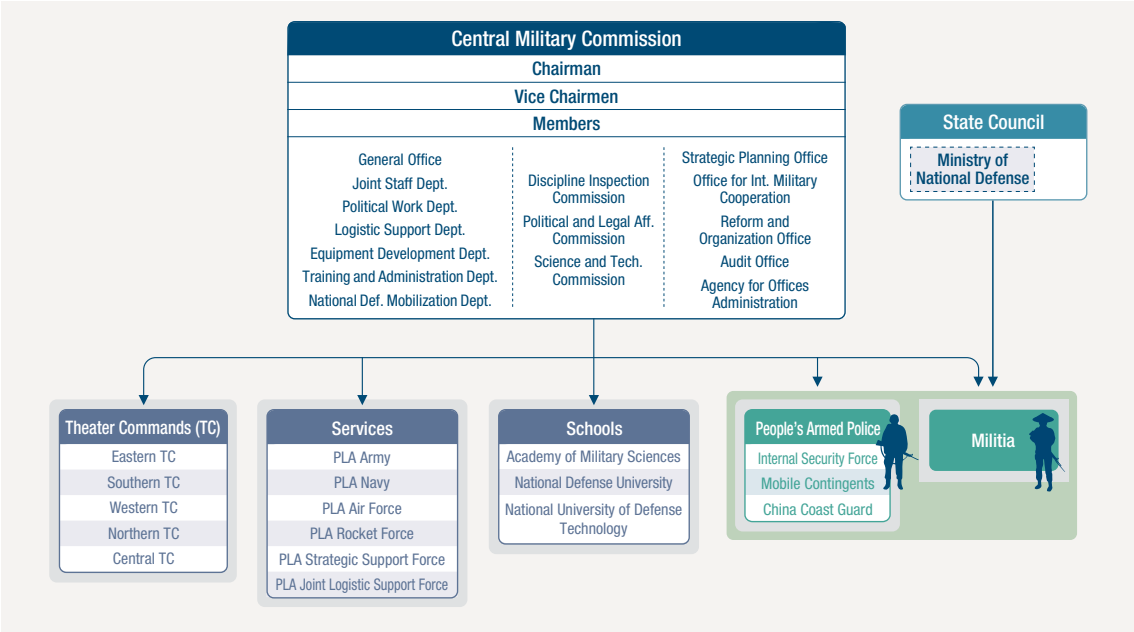
Figure 1.1 PLA prior to Reforms



Source: Compiled by the authors.

Xi Jinping’s military reforms drove the restructuring of Chinese military organizations, and in this context, the leadership of the Party has been strengthened. More emphasis is placed on direct control by the Chinese Communist Party, with focus especially on the implementation of the chairman responsibility system of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the Party committees in the military. Furthermore, military governance through laws and rules is underscored. The Party’s leadership has been reinforced not only over the PLA but also over other military organizations, and mechanisms are being developed for coordination between the military and other governmental actors. These measures were developed also as a response to modern forms of conflict that actively use non-military means.

Figure 1.2 China’s Military Organizations after Reforms



Sources: Compiled based on Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020,” August 21, 2020, among other sources.

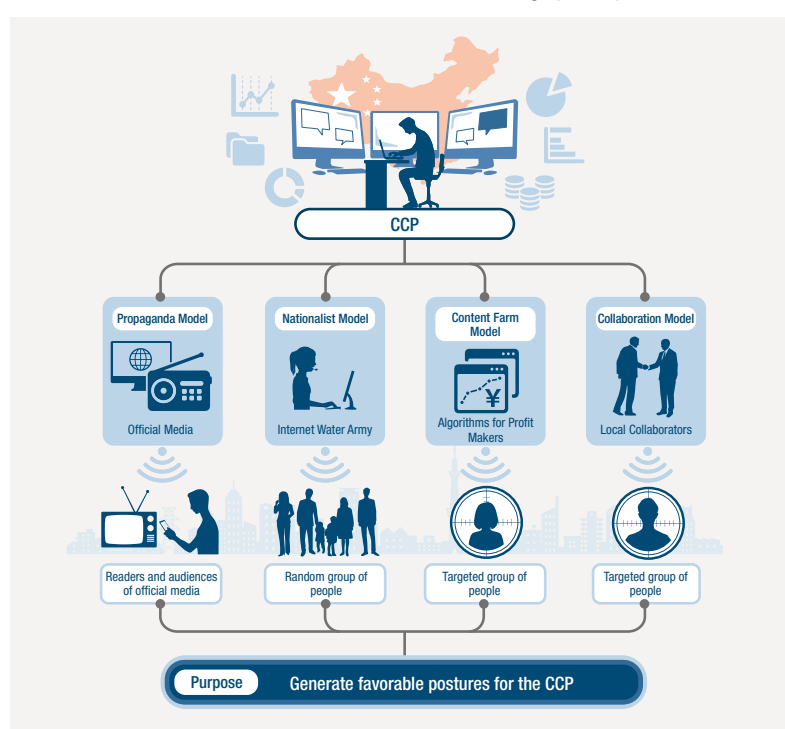
For influence operations, the Strategic Support Force (SSF) was established. The SSF appears not only to integrate functions related to cyber, electromagnetic spectrum, and outer space, but also to be deeply engaged in the struggle for the psychological and cognitive domain.

For gray zone operations, the People’s Armed Police (PAP) and the CCG were reorganized. The PAP was placed under the sole leadership of the CMC, while the CCG became subordinate to the PAP and in turn was also placed under the leadership of the PLA. As a result of the reorganization, the PAP specializes in maintaining public security in peacetime and contributes more easily to PLA joint operations in a contingency.

China's Increasing Influence Operations

China has stepped up military activities associated with the Party's overall influence operations in the name of fighting in the psychological and cognitive domain. For China, the struggle for information and influence is a struggle for ideological security and dominance with the West. Beijing must not only correct Western "misperceptions" but also actively disseminate the Chinese perspective and narrative at home and abroad. China can counter Western attempts at infiltrating its ideology by propagating the Chinese narrative in domestic and global discussions. In this way, Beijing is strengthening its influence operations both in China and overseas. For this reason, propaganda work, united front work, as well as social media activities have increased.

Figure 2.6 Diagram of the cognitive warfare approaches of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)



Source: Compiled based on Editorial Committee, 2021 National Defense Report, Republic of China, ed., 2021 National Defense Report, Republic of China, Taipei: Ministry of National Defense, 2021, p. 46.

While the Party's influence operations are primarily at the strategic level, the military's activities span both the strategic and operational levels. The PLA has a tradition of emphasizing psychological warfare, and more recently, the "Three Warfares" of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. Today, the Three Warfares are thought to be conducted by military organizations at various levels. There is a base specialized in the Three Warfares, while there are also units that execute the Three Warfares. Party activities and military activities have increasingly overlapped in recent years. The recent advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies has led to the exploration of shifting to intelligent warfare which fully leverages the technologies. Against this backdrop, the concept of operations in the cognitive domain emerged as an extension of psychological warfare.

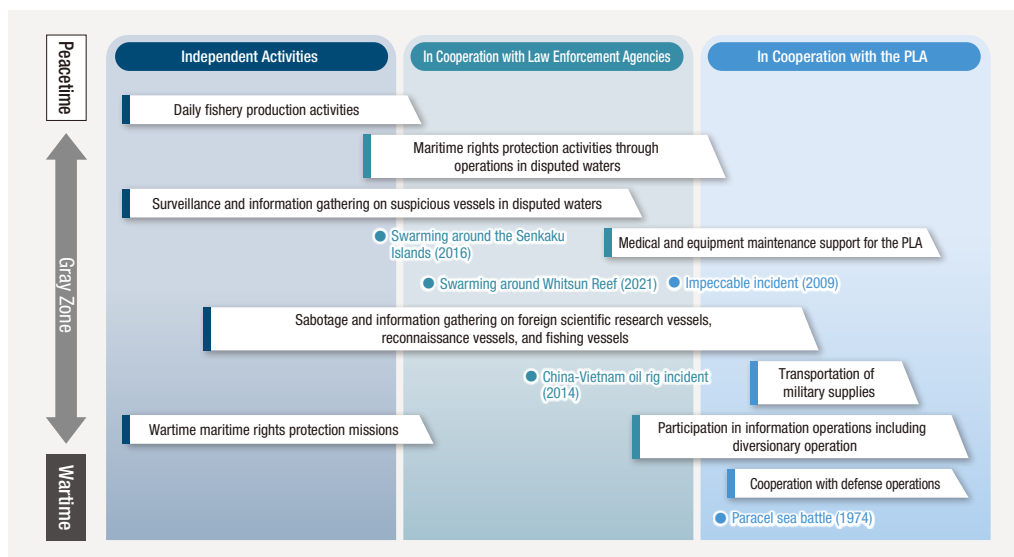
A most conspicuous example of the struggles in the psychological and cognitive domain is the influence operations against Taiwan. They include spreading fake news through cyberspace and personal connections, alongside outreach to Taiwanese people, including members of the military. Influence operations by the Party and the PLA are wide ranging and present a major threat to Taiwan.

China's Maritime Gray Zone Situations

China has attempted to change the status quo through low intensity conflicts in the maritime domain. In order to avoid war and create a favorable posture, China uses the PLA Navy as a deterrent force, while at the same time utilizing the CCG law enforcement agency and the maritime militia to manage the intensity of the dispute so that it does not lead to armed conflict, and exert pressure on the adversary, thereby gradually expanding China's rights and interests.

The specific missions of the maritime militia are considered to be the following. First, the maritime militia, taking advantage of its large number and equipment, is primarily tasked with asserting maritime rights and interests—activities which are difficult to coordinate and carry out by each respective actor. Secondly, the maritime militia plays a mediating role between the military, administrative organizations, and the civilian sector. In addition, compared to the CCG and the PLA, maritime militia units play a role in shallow waters, can operate smaller and more mobile vessels, and can conduct a wide range of surveillance activities with many fishing vessels. The Chinese government may believe that mobilizing the maritime militia can control the escalation of a crisis, rein in the adversary, avoid military skirmishes, and expand China's effective control.

Figure 3.2 Missions of the Maritime Militia



Sources: Compiled by the authors.

In order to become a “great maritime power” and maintain and expand maritime rights and interests, the Xi Jinping regime has striven to coordinate maritime actors, namely, the PLA Navy, the CCG, and maritime militia, based on the concepts of military-police-civilian and “five-in-one” joint actions. Furthermore, by integrating the chains of command of the CCG and maritime militia into the military and building up their equipment, China has improved its gray zone operations capabilities in disputed areas. Following Xi’s assumption of power, progress was made especially in the integration of the CCG and maritime militia into the military chain of command. By integrating maritime actors into the military, the Chinese leadership seeks to create gray zone situations constantly and exert pressure on the opponent while avoiding military clashes with other countries. This is to expand China’s rights and interests gradually while restricting the sovereign rights of foreign countries.

In order to enhance operations capabilities in such gray zone situations, China has expanded its outposts in contested waters, enlarged and armed the CCG’s vessels, and strengthened the operational abilities of the maritime militia. In the 2010s, the integration of the equipment procurement plans of the CCG made marked progress, while larger CCG vessels were constructed. In particular, the CCG rapidly increased its fleet of vessels with a displacement of 500 tons or more, which are capable of conducting long-term rights and interests protection activities in the open sea. Newly built CCG vessels have been observed with helicopters, fast interceptor boats, deck guns, and high-output high-pressure water cannons.

NIDS China Security Report 2023

Contents

Summary	i
Acronyms and Abbreviations	4
Introduction	6

Chapter 1: China's Military Reorganization and Strengthening of Non-military Means

1. Military Organizational Issues before the Reforms	10
(1) Basic Structure of Party-Army Relations prior to the Reforms.....	10
(2) Issues	11
2. Strengthening of Party-Army Relations under Xi Jinping's Military Reforms	14
(1) Reestablishment of the CMC Chairman Responsibility System.....	14
(2) Emphasis on the Leadership of Party Committees	15
(3) Independent Inspection Departments in the Military	16
(4) Introduction of a Patrol System.....	18
(5) Reduced Role of the Political Work Department.....	19
3. Establishment of the Strategic Support Force	20
4. Implications of the Reorganization of the People's Armed Police and the China Coast Guard	21
(1) The PAP under the Central Military Commission's Unified Command	21
(2) A Streamlined PAP without Professional Forces and Public Security Related Units	22
(3) Dismantlement of 14 Mobile Divisions and Establishment of Mobile Contingents.....	23
(4) Reorganization of the PAP Headquarters Modeled after the PLA	24
(5) The China Coast Guard as a Subordinate Unit of the PAP	24
(6) The PAP for Communist Rule	25

Chapter 2: China's Increasing Influence Operations

1. China's Influence Operations	28
2. The Chinese Communist Party's Battle for the Psychological and Cognitive Domain.....	30
(1) Propaganda Work	31
(2) United Front Work	32
(3) Social Media Campaigns	33
(4) Covert Activities	34
(5) Organizations	35
3. The PLA's Battles in the Psychological and Cognitive Domain	37
(1) The Psychological and Cognitive Domain in the PLA's Informatized Warfare.....	37
(2) Three Warfares (Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare)	39
(3) Cognitive Domain Operations	45
4. Case Study: China's Influence Operations in Taiwan.....	46
(1) Cyberattacks	47
(2) Pressure Exerted through Media Reports	47
(3) Influence Operations through Taiwanese People.....	50
(4) Maneuvering on Multinational Corporations and Military Officers	50

Chapter 3: China's Maritime Gray Zone Situations

1. China's Gray Zone Situations	54
2. Organization of Maritime Militia Units.....	55
(1) The Maritime Militia, its Chain of Command, and its Relationship with the Party	55
(2) The Role of the Maritime Militia.....	58

3. Expanding Activities by the China Coast Guard and the Maritime Militia	63
(1) China Coast Guard: Equipment Reinforcement and Expanded Activities	63
(2) Maritime Militia: Support and Organization	66
(3) Cooperation between Maritime Actors	68
4. Differences between Gray Zone Operations in the East and South China Seas.....	70
Conclusions	74
Notes	78

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
AIS	Automatic Identification System
AMS	Academy of Military Sciences
APT	advanced persistent threat
BDS	BeiDou Navigation Satellite System
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CMC	Central Military Commission
COLREG	Convention On the International REGulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea
COVID-19	novel coronavirus disease
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CUPP	Chinese Unity Promotion Party
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EEZ	exclusive economic zones
GEC	U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IoT	Internet of Things
IRSEM	Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School
JCG	Japan Coast Guard
PAP	People's Armed Police
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	PLA Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SSF	Strategic Support Force
WHO	World Health Organization

NIDS China Security Report 2023

China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations



Xinhua News Agency/Kyodo News Images

Introduction

Yamaguchi Shinji

Introduction

As China achieves rapid economic growth and develops into a strong country, it has increasingly challenged the United States-centered international order. At its basis has been Chinese military modernization built on its growing economic power and technological capabilities. Yet Beijing has actually used non-military means, such as influence operations in the psychological and cognitive domains, as well as maritime gray zone situations. What has been China's approach to these means, and what organizational structure has been adopted to pursue them?

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) marked its 100th anniversary in 2021 and has its sights set on China becoming a superpower on par with the United States. The “Two Centenaries” goal put forward by the CCP defines 2021, the centenary of the CCP's establishment, as the year for realizing a “Well-off Society” (a moderately prosperous society) in all respects and 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), as the year for completing socialist modernization. Furthermore, at the 19th National Congress of the CCP in 2017, the Party declared that the latter timeline would be shortened to basically complete socialist modernization by 2035, and that China as a great modern socialist country would have comprehensive national power and international influence comparable to the United States by the middle of this century.

Xi Jinping's regime perceives that a dramatic shift in the balance of power is fundamentally changing the traditional international structure. In China's view, the relative position of the United States has fallen significantly, while the trend toward multipolarity is unstoppable. China refers to these structural changes in international politics as “great changes unseen in a century.” Moreover, the regime considers that the pandemic since 2020 accelerated the “great changes unseen in a century,” which could lead to the United States losing its status as the sole superpower and bring an end to U.S. hegemony.

At the same time, Beijing's distrust of the United States has increased. Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy and creation of Quad and AUKUS are viewed by China as moves for strengthening military alliances against the country. In China's eyes, the United States poses a major threat by attempting to enhance ideological penetration in authoritarian nations and launch color revolutions. China has thus deepened its rift with the United States amidst the opportunities and crises presented by the great changes unseen in a century.

Modern conflicts are not only fought between highly integrated militaries. They may also employ a range of tools, such as intelligence, law enforcement agencies, economic measures, and other non-military means, blurring the line between wartime and peacetime.¹ Russia is known to use hybrid warfare that skillfully combines various means to achieve a goal, as was observed in the Russian operation in Crimea in 2014.² As part of its aggression against Ukraine since February 24, 2022, Russia has conducted information warfare, disseminating disinformation to influence perceptions about the

adversary. Spreading a narrative of a country to delegitimize other countries has become essential in contemporary international relations.³

Like Russia, China has sought to achieve its goals through a mix of military and non-military means. Since the latter half of the 2000s, China has conducted gray zone operations in the East and South China Seas, stepping up naval activities and intensifying pressure on neighboring countries via maritime law enforcement agencies.⁴ Gaining dominance in the psychological and cognitive domains has become critical amidst the advances in informatization. China has carried out a number of influence operations against Taiwan, including disinformation campaigns that spread fake news on social media.⁵

How is China employing these non-military means? How are they being combined with military means? It is not easy to coordinate numerous military and government organizations to conduct integrated activities. China's stove-piped bureaucracy has notoriously been a major impediment to coordination. China's political system is referred to as "fragmented authoritarianism" in which the CCP has a monopoly on political power, but authority in the actual political process is fragmented and disjointed. It is known that policy decisions are not necessarily made by the Party leaders in a unified manner and undergo a more complex process.⁶

China is carrying out the most sweeping reforms of its military organizations since the founding of the PRC.⁷ How has the progress of the military reforms affected China's actions in psychological and cognitive domains and the gray zone? What is the organizational structure for implementing these actions? How has the implementation structure evolved through reforming national defense and the armed forces and restructuring organizations? Alongside the changes in the military itself, the efforts of the Party-state as a whole must be examined.

This report contends that the restructuring of China's military organizations centered around the CCP's guidance to the military has reinforced operations in the psychological and cognitive domains and the gray zone. China's military organizations include not only the People's Liberation Army (PLA) but also paramilitary organizations—the People's Armed Police (PAP), the China Coast Guard (CCG), and Militia. China refers to them collectively as the "Armed Force." Such military organizations have been reorganized as an outcome of Xi Jinping's national defense and military reforms since 2015, which in turn has changed the relationship between the military and other CCP and government agencies and made coordination among them smoother. That said, this does not uniformly apply to all domains. Coordination among maritime actors has made considerable progress under the military's leadership, while on the contrary, influence operations became more fragmented and inter-organization cooperation has not necessarily improved.

Chapter 1 outlines the restructuring of China's military organizations. It provides an overview of how the CCP's guidance to the military has been enhanced through reforming national defense and the armed forces from late 2015. Focus is placed especially on the establishment of Xi Jinping's authority and the guidance provided by Party committees in the military, where changes from the

previous control mechanism are evident. This chapter also examines collaboration between the PLA and other military and government actors.

Chapter 2 presents the CCP's overall influence operations and related military activities framed as conflicts in the psychological and cognitive domains. The PLA has a tradition of emphasizing psychological warfare and, more recently, the "Three Warfares" of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. These military activities make up, however, only a part of the overall efforts of the Party-state. China has traditionally emphasized propaganda work and united front work. Such Party activities have increasingly overlapped with military activities in recent years. This chapter attempts to distill and analyze concepts that relate to CCP and military activities in the psychological and cognitive domains, as well as associated organizations. In addition, this chapter explains influence operations in Taiwan as a case study. Taiwan already has a history of confronting Chinese influence operations, and shedding light on its experience will provide important insights.

Chapter 3 deals with maritime gray zone situations. China has employed organizations such as the CCG and the maritime militia to routinely trigger gray zone situations and put pressure on other countries. This chapter analyzes how China has conducted these activities and intensified the activities of the maritime militia and the CCG. It also examines the key question of how far cooperation has progressed among the PLA Navy, the CCG, and the maritime militia. China advances a five-in-one model that links the Party, government, military, police, and civilians.

This report aims to furnish basic knowledge needed to understand China's actions that use non-military means, as well as academic and policy research insights. From an academic perspective, this report may serve as a case study for understanding how China's "fragmented authoritarianism" has changed under the Xi Jinping regime. From a policy research perspective, how closely organizations will cooperate in wartime, and whether or not there is inter-organization cooperation, are essential questions for states that are in dispute with China to properly assess its intentions and goals. Furthermore, understanding the status of China's inter-organization cooperation and where problems exist is critical to planning their countermeasures.

The progress of China's national defense and military reforms has been attracting significant interest from the international community. Last year's *China Security Report 2022* analyzed improvements in joint operations capabilities, focusing on changes in organizations and training. *China Security Report 2023* can be considered a continuation of this analysis. We hope that this report will contribute to a more objective understanding of China and better-informed policy discussions based on this understanding.

China's Quest for Control
of the Cognitive Domain
and Gray Zone
Situations



Chapter **1**

China's Military Reorganization and Strengthening of Non-military Means

Yamaguchi Shinji and Momma Rira

1. Military Organizational Issues before the Reforms

(1) Basic Structure of Party-Army Relations prior to the Reforms

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the Party's army. It follows the Party's command and defines its most important role as protecting the Party's regime. In democratic regimes, the mission of the armed forces is defending the state, not a particular political party, and in many cases, their main duty is to defend against foreign aggression. In China, however, the most important mission of the army is to bring and keep the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in power. Conversely, ensuring the military's loyalty to the Party is an indispensable guarantee for the CCP to stay in power.

Prior to Xi Jinping's military reforms, the basic mechanisms by which the Party exercised control over the military consisted of the following components.

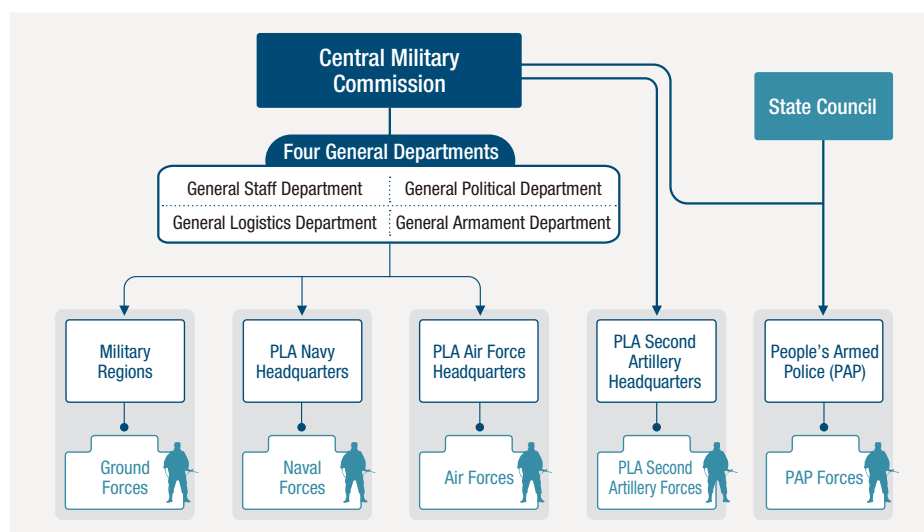
First, the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) continued to be a key post held by the Party's supreme leader. Following Jiang Zemin's rule, the Party secretary concurrently served as president of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and CMC chairman in order to concentrate a high degree of power in the secretary.

The second component was the existence of three systems: the General Political Department system; the PLA Party committee system; and the political commissar system. The General Political Department, which was in charge of political work, was established as the single agency responsible for Party-related activities and political work in the PLA. Until the military reforms, the political work carried out by political organs consisted primarily of: 1) ensuring implementation of the Party's guidelines, policies, state laws, and the CMC's directives and orders and steering ideologies in the military; 2) managing organizations; 3) cadre administration; 4) security and military justice work; 5) propaganda and cultural activities; 6) discipline inspection; 7) mass work (building relationships with the masses); and 8) liaison work (intelligence and collusion with the adversary).¹

Party committees in the military are responsible for decision making in military organizations. The CCP has established Party organizations in the Chinese government and enterprises through which it exercises firm control. Similarly, Party cells have been established in the military. There are Party committees in units and organizations at the *tuan* (regiment) level and above, grassroots Party committees in units and organizations at the *ying* (battalion) level, and Party branches in units at the *lian* (company) level. Party committees in the military are responsible for making decisions in each unit and military organizations. Party committees include all key cadres of units, such as military commanders and political commissars, with the latter usually serving as secretaries of the Party committees.

Political commissars have the same rank as military commanders and have engaged in decision making as secretaries of PLA Party committees. Military organizations were designed to have a dual

Figure 1.1 PLA prior to Reforms



Source: Compiled by the authors.

leadership system, comprised of military commanders and political commissars under the command of Party committees. Political commissars were mainly responsible for ideological education and management of units, enforcement of military regulations, cadre work under the command of Party committees, and security.² That is, ideological indoctrination, personnel and organization management, and inspections were carried out as political work to ensure that the Party had command of the military.

(2) Issues

Until the 1980s, political and military leaders exercised unified command through their experience of the revolution and espoused a common ideology. Such Party-Army relations were referred to as “symbiosis.”³ From the 1990s, however, political and military leaders were increasingly differentiated, and the PLA became a group with its own interests.⁴ Furthermore, ideology no longer played as important a role as in the past,⁵ and political commissars and the political work department, which had been mechanisms for ensuring the Party’s leadership over the military, became more embedded in the PLA.⁶ As a result, a number of problems had beset Party-Army relations as of the start of Xi Jinping’s regime.

First, CMC chairman had become a position merely in name. The Constitution of the PRC contains the phrase, “The Central Military Commission shall practice a chairman responsibility system.” It means the CMC chairman makes the final decision of the CMC. By having the supreme leader, who is also the general secretary of the CCP and PRC president, double hat as CMC chairman, the Party had final decision-making authority over the military. In reality, however, the inner workings of the CMC’s chairman responsibility system had changed. Jiang Zemin and his successor, Hu

Jintao, had no military experience and did not necessarily have significant authority over the military. Jiang Zemin, at least at the beginning of his regime, could not control the military without relying on military officers Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen, who were CMC vice chairmen installed by Deng Xiaoping. When Hu Jintao became CCP general secretary in 2002, Jiang Zemin did not vacate the CMC chairman post, thwarting Hu's establishment of authority in the PLA. Even after he became CMC chairman in 2004, Hu was unable to exercise full authority in the military, as real power lay in the hands of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, two CMC vice chairmen who had the support of Jiang Zemin.⁷

Secondly, the mid-level organizations held power, with the four general departments (General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armament Department) seizing most of the actual functions of the military. In particular, the General Political Department had internalized the functions related to military inspection, such as disciplinary inspection, safety, court procedure, and prosecution, and this created various problems.

These issues of political control generated a number of problems in the military.

The first was communication and information sharing problems. With real power in the hands of the four general departments, the military had some control over which information was reported to the political leadership. This, at times, is believed to have resulted in withholding necessary information from political leaders or delaying the sharing of such information.⁸ General Secretary Hu Jintao, for example, was reportedly unaware of the details of China's J-20 fighter test flight that was conducted while U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was visiting China in 2011.⁹

Secondly, the PLA's nature as the Party's army had the potential of obstructing efficient execution of operations. Military commanders and political commissars were of equal standing in the PLA, and decisions must go through Party committees. Such a system was unsuited for modern warfare that require immediate decisions and actions. Eliminating this system, however, could weaken the Party's control of the military. This presented a major dilemma for the Party.

The third was the problem of bribery and corruption. Corruption was a serious problem in the

PLA due to the inadequate functioning of military oversight. Illicit buying and selling of land, as well as bribery for career advancement, were rampant.¹⁰ Notably, Xu Caihou from the General Political Department amassed wealth and power by privatizing personnel selection authority and the inspection function.¹¹ Widespread military corruption can slacken military discipline and seriously impede the execution of operations. Even greater problems were the trivialization of professional and educational qualifications.



Right: Xu Caihou, former CMC vice chairman. Left: Bo Xilai, former secretary of the CCP Chongqing Municipal Committee, who was also ousted from the Party (March 2012) (Photo: Reuters/Aflo)

Promotions were influenced by personal relationships and bribery, rather than ability and performance. As a corollary, it is likely that this hindered the promotion of cadres with the skills needed to win a war and did not contribute to improving combat efficiency.¹²

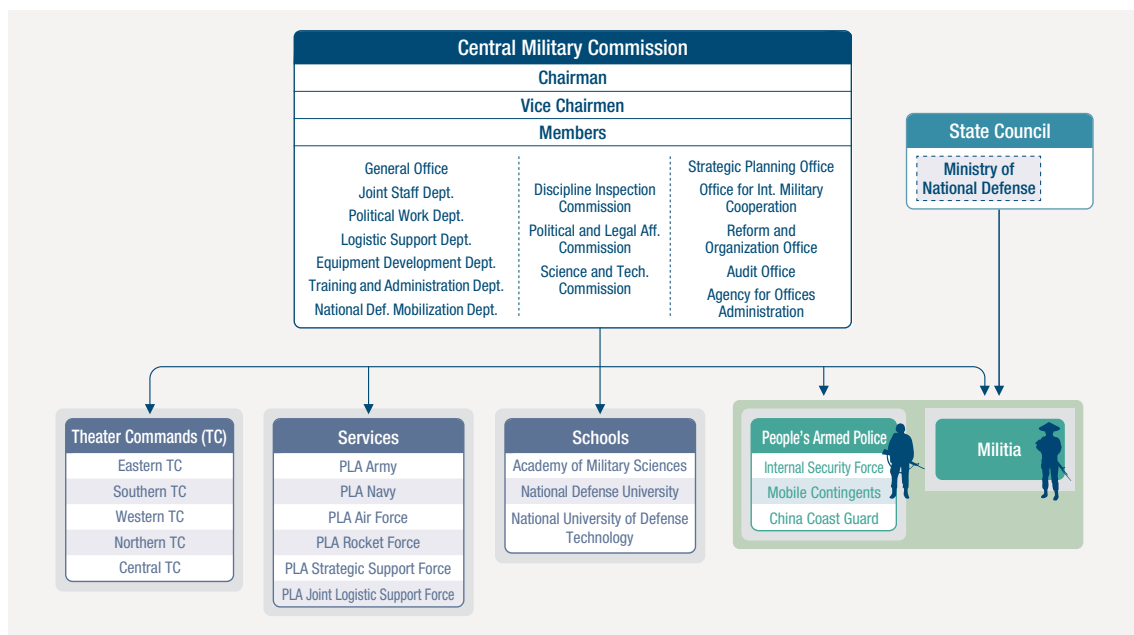
The fourth problem was slackening of ideology and discipline due to social pluralization and lack of war experience. As a result of pluralization of Chinese society, young people with diverse backgrounds and education began to join the military, making it more difficult to integrate their thoughts and ideologies. Furthermore, China has not had a major war since the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. This has reportedly caused not only lack of experience, but also a tendency among military personnel to avoid war in the hope of peace, or to take peace for granted such that they cannot envision the possibility of war.¹³

The fifth problem, related to the above, was concern over U.S. ideological penetration. Amid gradually deepening U.S.-China rifts, there was growing suspicion that the United States would not only encircle China militarily, but also employ ideological penetration to erode China from within. This suspicion has long been held by China, but it is acutely felt by Xi Jinping. In the context of “the hostile forces’ intensified penetration and subversion against China,” Xi has repeatedly expressed alarm, especially over the military, that these hostile forces are infiltrating perspectives such as “de-partyization and de-politicization of the armed forces” and “nationalization of the armed forces,” and thereby, attempting to weaken the absolute leadership of the Party.¹⁴

For these reasons, organizational reform of Party-Army relations was essential for solving the problems with political control over the military. It was also inevitable for building an army that is capable of winning wars.

2. Strengthening of Party-Army Relations under Xi Jinping's Military Reforms

Figure 1.2 China's Military Organizations after Reforms



Sources: Compiled based on Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020," August 21, 2020, among other sources.

In carrying out the most sweeping military reforms since the PRC's founding, President Xi Jinping has placed particular emphasis on strengthening the Party's leadership over the military.

Xi Jinping's military reforms largely transformed the PLA and its organizational relationships.¹⁵ The organizational structure for joint operations has already been covered in *China Security Report 2022* and will not be rediscussed. Here, focus is given to the changes in the Party's leadership over the military. Figure 1.2 shows the PLA's organizational relationships after the military reforms. The post-reform changes in military control are elaborated below.

(1) Reestablishment of the CMC Chairman Responsibility System

Xi Jinping's control over the military is characterized by his attempt to reestablish the authority of the CMC chairman post which he holds. The supreme leader is to assume the CMC chairman post through which he commands and controls the military. In reality, however, it takes time for a political leader without a military background to establish authority in the military, and in the meantime, military officers take command of the CMC.

In order to eliminate these adverse effects, Xi reestablished the CMC chairman responsibility

system. The system is a bedrock for establishing the absoluteness of the status and authority of the chairman in the CMC, and for preventing real power from falling into the hands of military officers.

In November 2012, shortly after he was appointed general secretary of the CCP and CMC chairman, Xi Jinping revised the “Regulations on Central Military Commission Work” so that the CMC chairman responsibility system was specified. In addition, in April 2014, the CMC enacted the “Opinions on Establishing and Developing Work Mechanisms Related to the Implementation and Execution of the Central Military Commission Chairman Responsibility System,” which stipulated the establishment of mechanisms for instructions reporting, supervision and inspection, and information provision.¹⁶

It was not until the Political Work Conference held in Gutian, Fujian Province in 2014 that the implementation of the CMC chairman responsibility system was emphasized.¹⁷ At this conference, CMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong vowed to “defend and carry out the CMC chairman responsibility system resolutely and consciously.”¹⁸ CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang also stated, “We must complete and implement the relevant institutional mechanisms for the realization of the CMC chairman responsibility system, and ensure that all conduct of the entire PLA follows the command of the Party leaders, the CMC, and President Xi.”¹⁹

The anti-corruption campaign expelled military officers who did not agree with Xi Jinping’s wishes, and a CMC chairman responsibility system characterized by the military’s obedience to Xi was completed. In November 2017, the CMC issued the “Opinions on Comprehensively Implementing the CMC Chairman Responsibility System.” The opinions called for implementing Xi’s thought on building a strong military and implementing the fundamental principle and system of the Party’s absolute leadership over the military. Additionally, the opinions underscored that, by guaranteeing the CMC chairman responsibility system “in politics, ideology, organization, system, and work style,” the entire military would follow the command of and be responsible to Xi Jinping, enabling Xi to feel reassured.²⁰ It signified the execution of ideological and institutional measures that would allow for the implementation of the CMC chairman responsibility system. In response, the CMC General Office called for PLA-wide education for its implementation.²¹ The 19th CCP National Congress in 2017 marked the establishment of the CMC chairman responsibility system, and the system was written into the revised Party charter (constitution).

(2) Emphasis on the Leadership of Party Committees

Xi Jinping values the leadership of Party committees in the military and highlights the need to build Party cells in the military. When Xi attended the CMC Party Building Conference in August 2018, he stressed the significance of building Party cells in the military, especially Party committees in the military. Xi reaffirmed that the PLA’s dual leadership system under the command of Party committees would be maintained, and that “All work will be conducted under the unified leadership of Party committees, and all important issues will be studied and decided by Party committees.” At the same

time, for improving combat capability, Xi stated that Party committees in the military would focus on the main responsibilities and tasks of war preparation and war execution.²²

Xi argued that by enhancing the Party's leadership, organizational, and executive capabilities, the Party's political and organizational superiority can be converted into warfare superiority. In particular, he underscored the importance and significant responsibility of high-level Party committees at or above the corps level, and demanded that high-level Party committees elevate five capabilities for war preparation, namely, strategic planning, real combat, reform and innovation, scientific management, and execution capabilities.

Interestingly, various media reports suggest that, in these same remarks, Xi Jinping talked about problems with Party building in the military, which he referred to as the “seven weakenings.” They are: 1) the weakening of political awareness and political capability; 2) the weakening of centralized and unified leadership by Party committees; 3) the weakening of leadership over war preparations and war execution; 4) the weakening of the principles and combat capability of Party cells; 5) the weakening of management of Party cadres and personnel; 6) the weakening of revolutionary will and combat spirit; and 7) the weakening of responsibility for implementing Party management and Party governance.²³ In this regard, Xi expressed the view that strengthening the leadership of Party committees is key to both the Party's command of the military and the Party's combat capability.



CMC Chairman Xi Jinping at the PLA 90th anniversary military parade (July 2017) (Photo: Xinhua News Agency/Kyodo News Images)

(3) Independent Inspection Departments in the Military

Xi Jinping seeks to promote governance in the military and give power to inspection departments to strengthen objective control. He calls this the “fundamental transformation of the military governance system.”²⁴ Under the previous four general department system, all inspection departments, such as discipline, law, and financial management, were placed in the General Political Department and were unable to exercise independent inspection capabilities. As part of the military reforms, efforts were made to enhance the inspections.

In February 2015, the CMC issued the “Decision on Deeply Promoting Law-based Governance of the Military and Strict Enforcement of Discipline in the New Situation.”²⁵ “Law-based governance of the military and strict enforcement of discipline” refers to the goal of achieving stable governance in the military through the strict application of law and Party discipline. This decision emphasizes the strategic importance of a law-based military governance and affirms its principles and missions.

Organizational reforms were undertaken to effectively promote governance. That is, as part of the reforms of national defense and the armed forces, inspection departments that had been

internalized by the four general departments were given independent status. With the dismantling of the four general departments, the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, the CMC Political and Legal Affairs Commission, and the CMC Audit Office were established in the CMC.

The CMC Discipline Inspection Commission was established in 1980 and was reorganized into the Discipline Inspection Commission of the General Political Department in 1990. The CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, which became independent by the reorganization in 2016, sent 10 inspection teams to 15 CMC departments and to each theater command for the first time since the PLA's founding and began inspection activities.²⁶ The inspections focused on: 1) the implementation status of directives to develop and bolster the Party's ways and attitude (verify problems, such as not doing even when ordered to, not stopping even when prohibited, not fully adhering to regulations, implementing selectively, and allowing for flexibility); 2) the integrity of cadres; 3) compliance with regulations on encouraging saving and opposing wasteful spending; and 4) supervision over the management and use of official military vehicles.²⁷ Other efforts to strengthen the discipline inspection system include establishing a discipline inspection commission in each military service and branch, as well as having a full-time secretary of the discipline inspection commission, which used to be a concurrent position with deputy member of the Politburo.²⁸ Song Dan, deputy secretary of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, emphasizes the importance of inspection work in real combat training.²⁹

At the theater command level, a dispatch mechanism has been established. This is not an internal mechanism in the theater command but a dispatch mechanism of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission. Responsibility for discipline inspection lies with the central state, not the theater command. The "Regulations on Discipline Inspection," revised in March 2018, lists 10 categories of discipline inspections, namely, political discipline, organizational discipline, operational discipline (obedience to orders and commands), training discipline (supervision of training), work discipline, safety discipline, integrity discipline, financial discipline, mass discipline (attitude toward civilians), and life discipline.³⁰ As the above indicates, discipline inspections are not limited to political loyalty and are highly broad in scope, extending to operations and training.

Training inspection, too, is being strengthened. In building an armed forces capable of winning wars, it is important to standardize training and acquire capabilities as intended by the central state. In this context, supervision of training has been enhanced, including enacting regulations on training inspections. While the CMC Training and Administration Department oversees the training inspections, actual inspections are carried out also by the CMC Joint Staff Department, the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, and the CMC Agency for Offices Administration, with the Training and Administration Department playing a central role.³¹ As this fact reveals, the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission is engaged in training and operations as well.

In comparison, the CMC Political and Legal Affairs Commission underwent a more subtle transition. In 1982, the Political and Legal Affairs Leading Small Group was established in the General Political Department. This became an all-military political and legal affairs commission in 2007, but

it remained under the jurisdiction of the four general departments. Although the reorganization in 2016 gave it independent status as the CMC Political and Legal Affairs Commission, its authority is considered weaker than that of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission. According to the regulations, while a political and legal affairs commission is established in each theater command and in the military services and branches, its secretary post is held by a deputy political position (e.g., deputy Politburo member).³² Their duties are different between the theater commands and the military services and branches. In the case of theater commands, the duties of secretaries include overseeing political and legal affairs work in wartime and during major military activities, cooperative legislation of law enforcement authorities, and coordination between theater command areas. In the case of military services, branches, and other units, the duties include overseeing crime prevention, comprehensive governance, as well as the purity, safety, and stability of the units.

(4) Introduction of a Patrol System

The CCP further seeks to strengthen its direct monitoring of organizations and regions by introducing a patrol system. The PLA enacted the “Regulations on Patrol Work” in January 2018. According to the regulations, patrol work is mainly conducted to monitor the discipline of high-level Party committees in the military. At the central state level, the CMC Patrol Work Leading Small Group was established to lead the patrol work. The CMC vice chairman is the head of the small group, the secretary of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission is the managing deputy head, and the director of the Political Work Department and the secretary of the Political and Legal Affairs Commission are the deputy heads. An administrative organization is established in the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission. The patrols cover the Party committees of CMC departments, theater commands, military services and branches, the National Defense University, the Academy of Military Sciences, and the People’s Armed Police (PAP). Furthermore, a Patrol Work Leading Small Group is established in the military services and branches and the PAP. The respective Party committee secretaries serve as the head of the small group, the secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission as the standing deputy head, and the director of the political work organization as the deputy head. Patrols at this level cover Party committees at or above the corps level and at or above the affiliated division level, as well as the department Party committees of the military services and branches and of the PAP.³³ As this arrangement shows, the patrol system is headed by the leader of the Party committee in the military, and the secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission is responsible for the implementation work.

In addition, the CMC presented the “Opinions on Patrol Inspection Work” in April 2020.³⁴ Regarding the difference between the words “patrol” [巡视] and “patrol inspection” [巡察], the head of the leading small group explained that “patrol” covers Party committees at or above the affiliated brigade level of the military services and other units, whereas “patrol inspection” also extends to the substratum levels in the field.³⁵

The purpose of the patrol inspections is fourfold: 1) supervising and giving guidance on the

implementation status of theoretical armament and real combat training under the leadership of Party cells, measurement of their effectiveness, and whether Party cells and cadres are supporting the core (Xi Jinping) and adhering to the Party's command; 2) supervising whether Party cells are taking proactive responsibility in promoting war preparation and war execution, and supervising measurements of the actual effectiveness of the training and units' fulfillment of combat capability standards; 3) understanding and resolving small issues, such as what officers and soldiers are opposed to and what they consider as hardships, and what the focus of their patrol inspections is; and 4) training the substratum Party cells and cadres through the process of patrol inspections.³⁶

(5) Reduced Role of the Political Work Department

The CMC Political Work Department, which took over the main activities of the General Political Department, has reduced its authority and role considerably. First, as mentioned above, the Discipline Inspection Commission and the Political and Legal Affairs Commission in the military were given independent status. In addition, it was stipulated that the ultimate responsibility for political work rested with the CMC, and the Political Work Department was positioned as an enforcement body.

Furthermore, it appears that the political work organization at the theater command level has reduced functions. Military regions prior to the reforms had a political department staffed by a full-time director. In the post-reform theater commands, while a political work department is established, its director is no longer a full-time post, with a deputy member of the Politburo dual hatting as the director.

In addition, as mentioned above, the leadership of the Party committees at each level over the political work organs of the same level has been strengthened. It likely signifies weakening coordination between the upper and lower-level political work organs. This is because the authority of the same-level Party committees is currently being increased, whereas in the past the General Political Department had strong leadership power over lower-level political work organs.

What are the implications of this tightening of Party control over the military for China's external activities? First, this tightening of Party control seems to be a vital means of reforming the military and creating an armed forces capable of conducting joint operations and fighting. It is very difficult for military organizations to carry out reform on their own. Especially for an organization like the PLA with rampant bribery and corruption, this requires powerful external intervention, which Xi Jinping is attempting to achieve by bolstering the Party's leadership.

Also of note is that strengthening the Party's leadership offers a means of enabling coordination between the military and other organizations. Such strengthening of the Party's leadership is essential for understanding China's activities in the maritime gray zone and in the psychological and cognitive domain.

3. Establishment of the Strategic Support Force

The PLA organization that presides over information warfare, including cyber warfare, electronic warfare, and outer space operations, is the Strategic Support Force (SSF), which was established in late 2015.³⁷ The SSF is a military service that was newly established as part of Xi Jinping's military reforms, demonstrating Xi's attachment of importance to information.

The SSF's mission is intelligence gathering, technical reconnaissance, electronic countermeasures, network offense and defense, and psychological warfare, indicating that the SSF is in charge of psychological warfare related to information technology.

According to media reports and other sources, the SSF includes the Staff Department, which provides integrated joint operations support, logistics support, and training; the Political Work Department, which is believed to be in charge of political guidance and the Three Warfares; the Equipment Department, which manages facilities and equipment; and the Discipline Inspection Commission, which cracks on corruption in the organization. The SSF's organizations that conduct operations are the Space Systems Department, which supports outer space operations, and the Network Systems Department, which is in charge of cyber warfare.³⁸ The Network Systems Department includes network units, such as the 61726 Unit (Wuhan) and the 61786 Unit (Beijing), as well as an electronic countermeasures brigade.³⁹ In addition, the 311 Base that carries out the Three Warfares is directly under the SSF. Furthermore, the SSF Information Engineering University and the SSF Space Engineering University are educational institutions directly under the SSF.

The SSF integrates functions related to cyber, electromagnetic spectrum, and outer space. The three are essential for the acquisition and transmission of information, and are spaces where control of information is contested. Furthermore, control of information has effects on the psychological and cognitive domain. Hence, the SSF will be deeply engaged in the struggle for the psychological and cognitive domain. It appears that, for this reason, some functions related to the Three Warfares have been transferred to the SSF. For example, the 311 Base in Fujian Province, known as a base specializing in the Three Warfares, is believed to have been transferred from the General Political Department to the SSF (see Chapter 2).

4. Implications of the Reorganization of the People's Armed Police and the China Coast Guard

In various laws including the National Defense Law of the People's Republic of China and the Law on the PAP of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP) is identified as one of China's armed forces, along with the PLA (including reserves) and the militia. The status and organization of the PAP have changed dramatically, as part of the military reforms that began at the end of 2015, described as the most sweeping reforms since the PRC's founding. This section attempts to shed light on the circumstances surrounding the reorganization of the PAP and its subordinate China Coast Guard (CCG), and analyze where the PAP's reorganization fits in the context of the military reforms. This analysis shows that the PAP has been reorganized to specialize in maintaining public security in peacetime and contribute more easily to PLA joint operations in a contingency, and that the reorganization was intended to strip the state of its armed forces and reassign them under the CCP.

(1) The PAP under the Central Military Commission's Unified Command

The PAP prior to the military reforms can be broadly characterized as follows. 1) The PAP was under the dual command of the CMC and the State Council. The former was primarily responsible for the organizational structure, cadre management, command, training, and political work of the PAP Forces, while the latter was responsible for assigning daily missions to the PAP Forces and providing expenses and supplies support.⁴⁰ 2) The PAP had a complex structure with the Professional Forces in charge of production and construction not directly related to maintaining public security, and Public Security Related Units in charge of border security and protection of VIPs. These characteristics of the PAP owe to then CMC Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the highest authority in the 1980s. Deng sought to downsize the PLA by shedding its public security and production related missions and to lessen the burden on the PLA, which was hurrying to reorganize into an army capable of executing "local wars under modern conditions."⁴¹

Under the dual command of the CMC and the State Council, it was not uncommon for the minister of public security to concurrently serve as PAP first political commissar. In addition, during General Secretary Hu Jintao's era, Zhou Yongkang, a member of the Standing Committee of the CCP Central Politburo, served as secretary of the CCP Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which is a high-level leadership body of the Ministry of Public Security, and had authority to move the PAP and the People's Police.⁴² Furthermore, the heads of public security departments at the local levels were able to exercise command authority over the PAP by leveraging their status as the first political commissar of the PAP's local contingents and detachments. Thus, from the 1990s to the 2000s, the PAP was frequently mobilized for local missions, such as suppressing mass public protests.⁴³ Assuming the

role of the vanguard of mass repression led to significantly undermining the image of the PAP.⁴⁴

The PAP also exerted influence over the Professional Forces by having the heads of relevant State Council departments serve as the first political commissar of the Professional Forces, as in the case of the minister of water resources of the State Council concurrently serving as the first political commissar of the Hydropower Force.

This situation began to change markedly in line with the military reforms initiated in the end of 2015. In January 2016, the CMC released the “Opinions on Deepening Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces.” They stated that the CMC would strengthen the centralized and unified leadership of the armed forces, adjust the command and control system of the PAP, and optimize the structure and formation of the units.⁴⁵ Furthermore, at the 19th CCP National Congress held in October 2017, Xi Jinping emphasized deepening the reform of the PAP Forces and building a modernized PAP.⁴⁶ The opinions reiterated China’s intention to advance PAP reform alongside the military reforms. On December 27 of the same year, a decision was announced to adjust the command structure of the PAP Forces, and from January 1, 2018, the PAP Forces were incorporated under the unified command of the CMC, eliminating dual command with the State Council.⁴⁷ The PAP Forces commander and political commissars were conferred the flag of the PAP Forces by CMC Chairman Xi Jinping on January 10 of the same year.⁴⁸

The CMC’s unified command of the PAP has brought about significant changes. First, it has enabled the CMC to exercise absolute authority over the PAP’s personnel affairs. The post of first political commissar at each level, which had been filled by the minister of public security and other public security related personnel, has been eliminated. This is evident in the changes made to the promotion ceremony for PAP generals. In the past, while the premier of the State Council never attended promotion ceremonies for PAP generals, the names of the appointing authorities were nominally listed in the order of premier of the State Council and CMC chairman. After the CMC assumed unified command, however, the State Council’s name disappeared. Expense management, too, was placed under the control of the CMC. Additionally, local governments no longer have the authority to command PAP troops. If the central state organs, local Party committees, or governments need the help of the PAP Forces, they must now apply to the CMC.⁴⁹ Thus, achieving the CMC’s unified command was instrumental in stamping out the influence of public security factions and local governments from the PAP.

(2) A Streamlined PAP without Professional Forces and Public Security Related Units

The Professional Forces and Public Security Related Units, which had been a major characteristic of the PAP, were removed from the ranks of the PAP Forces.

Accordingly, the PAP was born anew as an organization comprised of three forces: the Internal Security Force; Mobile Contingents (discussed below); and the CCG. In addition, the “Regulations on Armed Forces Audit,” revised from January 2017, was applied to the PAP. It abolished the audit

body which had been established by the PAP, and stipulated that audits of PAP units of all levels and influential cadres would be conducted in accordance with regulations.⁵⁰ This resulted in tightening the CMC's control and management of PAP expenses.⁵¹

Table 1.1 Destination of PAP Forces after Reforms

Force	Destination and Primary Mission
Internal Security Force	Remained in the PAP; comprises the main force of the PAP Forces
Gold Force	Moved to the Ministry of Natural Resources; in charge of exploring the nation's metallic mineral resources
Forestry Force	Moved to the Ministry of Emergency Management; in charge of emergency rescue missions such as extinguishing forest fires
Hydropower Force	Moved to the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council; in charge of hydraulic engineering construction
Transportation Force	Remained in the PAP and incorporated into the internal security forces
Border Defense Force	Moved to public security organizations, and all active units were incorporated into the People's Police
Firefighting Force	Moved to the Ministry of Emergency Management; in charge of firefighting, rescue and other emergency relief work
Guards Force	Moved to public security organizations, and all active units were incorporated into the People's Police

Source: Compiled based on 谢游麟 [Hsieh Yu-Lin], “析論中國大陸武警改革之意涵與發展 [The Implication and Development of China PAPF's Reform],” p. 133.

(3) Dismantlement of 14 Mobile Divisions and Establishment of Mobile Contingents

Internal security forces are assigned to all provinces except Hong Kong and Macao, directly-controlled cities, and autonomous regions. The contingents in Beijing and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region were designated as corps leader grade [*zhengjun ji*, 正军级], while the other contingents were designated as corps deputy leader grade [*fujun ji*, 副军级]. The Beijing contingent protects the capital, while the Xinjiang contingent is in charge of areas in China where oppression of the Uyghurs could spark a large-scale disturbance. Prior to the reorganization, 14 mobile divisions transferred from army divisions to the PAP were deployed in various regions. In 2018, all of these were dismantled and reorganized



The PAP conducting a military parade in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (February 2017) (Photo: Reuters/Aflo)

into and deployed as the 1st Mobile Contingent (headquarters: Shijiazhuang) and the 2nd Mobile Contingent (headquarters: Fuzhou) and other internal security forces across China. The 1st and 2nd Mobile Contingents have 16 detachments, respectively. The 1st Mobile Contingent has nine mobile detachments, three special operations detachments, two transportation detachments, one helicopter detachment, and one engineering/chemical defense detachment, while the 2nd Mobile Contingent has nine mobile detachments, two special operations detachments, three transportation detachments, one helicopter detachment, and one engineering/chemical defense detachment.⁵² Usually, the commander is a PAP major general. Under the detachments are battalions (or companies), platoons, and squadrons. When President Xi Jinping visited the 2nd Mobile Contingent in March 2021, training was held in the operation of anti-explosive equipment, decontamination for chemical protection reconnaissance, application of construction equipment, and bridge building. President Xi's directive to strengthen "training and war preparation"⁵³ provides a glimpse of the role that the PAP will play in wartime.

(4) Reorganization of the PAP Headquarters Modeled after the PLA

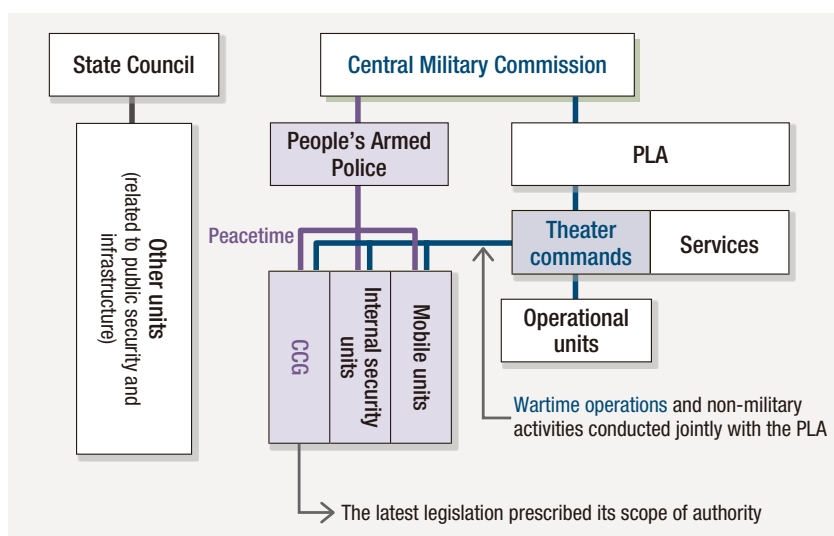
In March 2016, the Staff Department, Political Department, and Logistics Department, which had been placed under the PAP headquarters, were reorganized into the Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistics Department, and Discipline Inspection Commission. Furthermore, the Equipment Department was added in 2017. Thus, the PAP headquarters was reorganized in the same context as the dismantling and reorganization of the four general departments of the PLA.⁵⁴

The Discipline Inspection Commission was elevated from a unit of the former Political Department and was given greater autonomy by the Political Work Department.⁵⁵ Many top PAP cadres have been arrested and dismissed for corruption, including former commander Wang Jianping and political commissar Xu Yaoyuan. As to the causes of widespread corruption in the PAP, Taiwanese scholar Lin Ying Yu points to the PAP's close ties with the regions compared to the PLA, as well as to the PAP's complex relationships with the Party and central government, local governments, social groups, and the people, which created relationships and opportunities constantly conducive to the mutual exchange of interests.⁵⁶ Under the guise of strengthening corruption crackdown, it became easier to remove officers who were appointed during Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's rules and to assign officers close to President Xi Jinping to the PAP headquarters and seize domestic control, leveraging the PAP's ability to maintain public security. The crackdown on corruption in the PAP may have, to some extent, helped to restore its image, which had been damaged in the process of suppressing mass protests throughout China.

(5) The China Coast Guard as a Subordinate Unit of the PAP

In the PAP reform process, the biggest change that emerged from the reorganization was the assignment of "maintaining maritime rights and interests" as one of its new missions. The "Decision on temporarily adjusting and applying relevant legal provisions during the reform period of the Chinese

Figure 1.3 CMC-PAP-CCG Chain of Command following the Entry into Force of the Coast Guard Law



Sources: Compiled based on Sugiura Yasuyuki, *NIDS China Security Report 2022: The PLA's Pursuit of Enhanced Joint Operations Capabilities*, Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2021, p. 46; website of the Ministry of Defense of Japan.

People's Armed Police Force," which was passed at the 30th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress in November 2017, listed "maintaining maritime rights and interests" and defense operations as the PAP's new missions, along with counter-terrorism and emergency relief.⁵⁷ The subsequent "Decision on Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions" issued by the CCP Central Committee in March 2018 stated that the CCG would become a subordinate unit of the PAP.⁵⁸ It meant that the CCG was detached from the State Council's State Oceanic Administration and placed under the CMC's command.⁵⁹

The organization in charge of maintaining public security on land, together with the organization in charge of maintaining maritime law enforcement and rights and interests, have been placed under the command of the CMC. This has undoubtedly made it easier for the two organizations to coordinate with the PLA. As with PAP personnel, the commanders of the CCG are filled by officers from the PLA Navy (PLAN), which is likely to be favorable for their coordination.

Article 83 of the Coast Guard Law of the People's Republic of China, which came into effect in February 2021, states that the CCG shall carry out defense operations and other missions in accordance with the National Defense Law, the PAP Law, and other relevant laws and regulations as well as CMC orders.⁶⁰ A PLAN frigate has been converted into an official vessel of the CCG,⁶¹ illustrating its strengthening relationship with the PLAN (see Chapter 3 for more information on the CCG).

(6) The PAP for Communist Rule

The placement of both the PAP and the CCG under the command of the CMC has, inevitably, made

the CCG one of the Chinese armed forces. President Xi Jinping instructed the PAP to accelerate the integration of the entire armed forces into the joint capabilities system.⁶² Although the primary purpose of the PAP and the CCG is maintaining public security, they will presumably play a role in joint operations capabilities, which are being strengthened by the PLA. As it has become evident, the reorganization of the two into subordinate units of the CMC was an effort by the CCP to strip the state of its armed forces and place them under the control of the Party.

Furthermore, the CCP regime's attempt to increase control over the PAP and the CCG, which have public security functions, is explained by the significant importance the CCP attaches to defending its regime against domestic threats.⁶³ The PAP and the CCG are indispensable for this purpose. They could very well send a large contingent to large-scale live-fire exercises and the PLA's integrated exercises in the future.

As is already the case with the PAP, the CCG may become less of a law enforcement agency and more of a paramilitary organization that supports the PLA. The introduction of an official CCG vessel and the successive commissioning of large CCG vessels also suggest the further strengthening of armed forces.

China's Quest for Control
of the Cognitive Domain
and Gray Zone
Situations



Chapter 2

China's Increasing Influence Operations

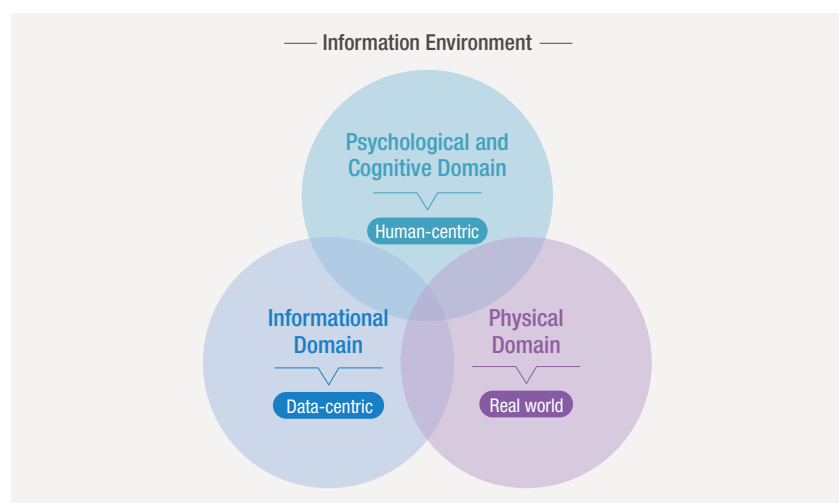
Yamaguchi Shinji and Momma Rira

1. China's Influence Operations

In recent years, attention has focused on the security implications of state activities in the psychological and cognitive domain, known as influence operations. In today's highly informatized political, social, economic, and military affairs, control of information gives states not only significant influence in the real world but also influence to shape and control psychology and cognition in the human psychological and cognitive domain.

The systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information (information environment) consist of the physical domain (physical dimension), the informational domain, and the psychological and cognitive domain. The physical domain includes newspapers, books, cables, the electromagnetic spectrum, PCs, smartphones, and any other objects that transmit and process information. The informational domain is centered on data, which is collected, processed, and disseminated. The psychological and cognitive domain refers to the minds of individuals or groups that receive, transmit, and respond to information or make decisions (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Information Systems



Source: Compiled based on "Joint Publication 3-13: Information Operations," Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 2014.

Various activities in the physical and informational domains can influence the psychological and cognitive domain to confuse, shape, or control the mind and affect decision-making. Such activities conducted mainly by state actors are called influence operations.

China is a well-known example of a state actively engaged in influence operations. Indeed, Beijing has traditionally emphasized propaganda work, and from early on, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has advocated the "Three Warfares" of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare,

and legal warfare.¹ Foreign policymakers have keyed on these developments and heightened their alert.

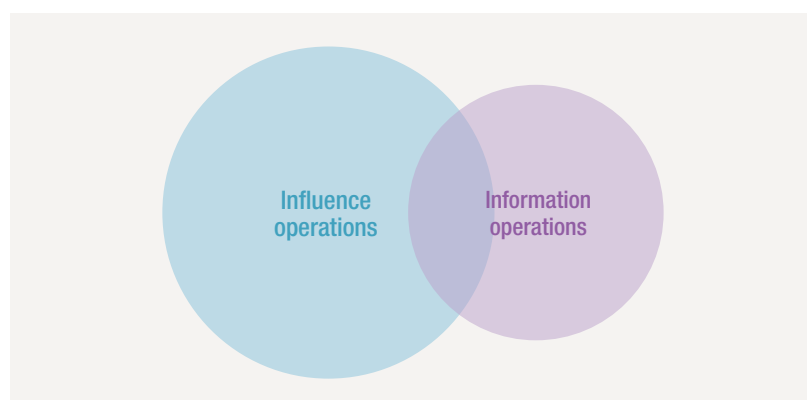
However, it is unclear what these operations actually entail. Despite the tendency to understand all Chinese actions as the Three Warfares, or as falling under the notion of unrestricted warfare, this understanding is not necessarily based on objective facts.² The “Three Warfares,” for instance, is an official PLA concept whereas unrestricted warfare is not.³ The Three Warfares were written into the 2004 “Political Work Regulation.” Furthermore, organizations, personnel, and training exist for carrying out the Three Warfares. As they illustrate, the military has taken visible steps toward their implementation. Conversely, unrestricted warfare is a concept put forward by military scholars in 1999. It has neither been mentioned by the PLA or the state, nor appeared in any official document.

Such confusion may be due in part to the many ambiguities in China’s concepts and activities as well as their numerous overlaps. China’s activities are varied, implemented across an array of organizations, and not well-defined conceptually, making them further prone to confusion for outside observers.

China does not have a collective concept for activities that exert international influence, for example, a concept that corresponds to influence operations. The term “cognitive warfare” has been employed recently as an umbrella concept but has yet to gain traction.

A number of related concepts deals with the analysis, and they first need to be distilled.⁴ We divide them into strategic-level influence operations and operations-level information operations. Here, strategic-level influence operations refer to activities that influence the psychology, cognition, or decisions of state leaders or the general public, and thereby, throw a political regime or government into turmoil or induce them in desired directions while defending one’s state against such activities. They include both military and non-military.⁵ In contrast, operations-level information operations refer to activities that influence the psychology, cognition, or decisions of the adversary’s operations commander and troops, and thereby, throw forces into turmoil or induce them in desired directions

Figure 2.2 Relationship between Influence Operations and Information Operations



Source: Compiled by the authors.

while ensuring decision-making by one's army.⁶ The two are not always clearly distinct; rather, there is considerable growing overlap in today's technological environment.

According to this distinction, Party-state influence operations can be considered as strategic-level influence operations. The Party-state's propaganda work and united front work aim to exert political influence on the politicians and people of the target country.

Meanwhile, the PLA's relevant activities are diverse in scope. The military's Three Warfares encompass a broad range of activities, as is evident from the presence of Three Warfares implementing organizations at all levels of the military. Nevertheless, not all PLA activities are consolidated in the Three Warfares. Especially since informational domain operations influence the psychological and cognitive domain, their core operations in cyber, the electromagnetic spectrum, and outer space involve psychological and cognitive aspects. These operations are thought to influence the psychology and cognition of the adversary's operations commander and troops, and therefore, are considered as operations-level information operations.

China hardly conceives of "cyber warfare" as a stand-alone category. Rather, it views cyber warfare, electromagnetic spectrum warfare, and psychological warfare all as information warfare. This is similar to Russia.⁷ The need for such a holistic approach is also discussed in the United States.⁸

2. The Chinese Communist Party's Battle for the Psychological and Cognitive Domain

For China, the struggle for information and influence is a struggle for ideological security and dominance with the West. Beijing has perceived the West as trying to spread universal values such as human rights and democracy around the world and transform authoritarian states like China into regimes that are desirable for the West.⁹



"Wolf warrior diplomat" Zhao Lijian, foreign ministry spokesperson (October 2020) (Photo: ©Todd Lee/ZUMA Wire/Kyodo News Images)

A key concept in China's ideological battle is "话语权 [*huayu quan*]." It refers to "discourse power" or "discursive power," i.e., the power to create discourse and make it internationally accepted.¹⁰

China increasingly believes that strengthening its domestic and global "discourse power" is essential for its battle against the West. That is, Beijing must not only correct Western "misperceptions," but also actively disseminate the Chinese perspective and narrative at home

and abroad. Expanding domestic and international influence and maintaining domestic stability are directly interlinked. China can counter Western attempts at infiltrating its ideology by propagating the Chinese narrative in domestic and global discussions. In this way, Beijing is strengthening its influence operations both in China and overseas.

Influence operations can be divided into those that are overt and those that are covert. There is no clear dichotomy between the two. Like a gradation, influence operations are classified by the degree of covertness based on the openness of the information source.

Overt influence operations encompass publicity activities, propaganda, and dissemination of disinformation. They promote a positive image of China and outspokenly criticize discourse critical of the country. They include global publicity campaigns through official media, investment in foreign newspapers, cultivation and purchasing of friendly foreign media outlets, official publicity in social media, and activities by diplomats.

Covert influence operations encompass dissemination of disinformation and information warfare linked to espionage. They include spreading disinformation on social media, as well as information warfare combined with an advanced persistent threat (APT), meaning a cyberattack conducted by a sophisticated hacker group.

(1) Propaganda Work

We first examine overt activities, particularly external propaganda work. China has attached importance to external propaganda since the 1980s. External propaganda aims to dispel the China threat theory and increase its soft power. The missions of external propaganda are: 1) to tell China's narrative to the world and publicize Chinese government opinions and Chinese culture; 2) to counter foreign propaganda; 3) to counter Taiwan independence movements and activities by their supporters; and 4) to propagate China's foreign policy.¹¹

The Xi Jinping regime has boosted external propaganda under the banner of "great external propaganda." Xi stressed the importance of the battle for the ideological domain at the 2013 National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference, and external propaganda too has been strengthened according to this directive.

Sarah Cook at Freedom House, an international NGO, outlines that the Xi regime promotes external propaganda in the following ways:¹²

- a) Expanding the presence of state media: The government has emphasized the global expansion of state media with the rise of China. China Global Television Network (CGTN) was established by merging CCTV International and other international language channels in 2016. CGTN is said to be modelled on Russia's state media RT and serves as the central platform for China's overseas content dissemination. In 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice registered CGTN as a foreign agent.

- b) Disseminating official views through foreign media: Dissemination through foreign media primarily includes submission of op-ed articles by diplomats, publication of paid Chinese news in major foreign newspapers, and provision of free content by Xinhua.
- c) Cultivating foreign media friendly to China: China's diplomats and members of the media deepen friendly relations with members of foreign media, encouraging them to write articles favorable to China.
- d) Purchasing foreign media outlets: In documented cases, radio stations have been purchased in Mexico, Hungary, Italy, and elsewhere.
- e) Social media campaigns and activities by diplomats

(2) United Front Work

United front work is a strategy of countering a major adversary by creating internal rifts in the major adversary and gaining friendly allies. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has emphasized united front work in the process of seizing power, commended its effectiveness, and called it a “magic weapon [*fabao*, 法宝].”

Xi Jinping places particular emphasis on united front work. Since 2015, Xi has advocated the “Great United Front” and endeavored to reinvigorate united front work under a unified leadership. Rather than leaving united front work solely up to the United Front Work Department of the Party's Central Committee, the Great United Front positions united front work as an important work of the entire Party and vows to strengthen coordination among the relevant departments under the Party's enhanced leadership.¹³

There are 12 categories of united front work targets: members of minor parties (parties other than the CCP which are permitted to exist); people with no party affiliation; non-Party intellectuals; ethnic minorities; religious figures; members of the non-public ownership economy (private economy); members of new social strata; overseas and returned overseas students; compatriots in Hong Kong and Macao; compatriots in Taiwan and their relatives in the mainland; overseas Chinese, returned overseas Chinese, and relatives of overseas Chinese; and others who need to be liaised with. Many of the categories concern national integration in China. On the other hand, overseas Chinese and overseas Chinese students have direct overseas associations, and ethnic minorities and religious figures are not confined to China. In addition, united front work with private entrepreneurs and members of new social strata will have impacts overseas in line with the global development of the Chinese economy. Taiwan's unification with the mainland is also a long-time wish of China, and the united front will be critical to bringing Taiwan closer to the country.

United front work began to draw international attention when it became apparent that influence operations have an effect on overseas politics, education, and other areas. The most well-known is the case in Australia where Chinese businessman Huang Xiangmo gained influence by developing close ties with Sam Dastyari of the Labor Party and providing him funds.¹⁴ Similar cases are also found in

countries such as New Zealand.¹⁵




(3) Social Media Campaigns

Social media campaigns are a new domain in which propaganda work, united front work, and military activities overlap.

According to Puma Shen (Shen Boyang) at National Taipei University, China's social media activities can be categorized into the following four types.¹⁶

- a) External propaganda: Dissemination by official media.
- b) Activities by nationalists: Cyberattacks and information activities by Chinese nationalists who are not under the direct command of the Party-state.
- c) Content farms: Websites that create and disseminate large volumes of disinformation and propaganda. These may be created by enterprises with ties to the Central Committee's United Front Work Department. They may also be operated by ordinary people for increasing visitors and generating advertising revenue without knowing that they are part of Chinese propaganda.¹⁷ Recent emphasis has been on video websites.
- d) Collaborators: Pro-China individuals, groups, and political parties in Taiwan and elsewhere

Table 2.1 Number of Followers of Chinese Media's Official Accounts on Major Social Media Platforms (as of September 2022)

						
	Language	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube	Weibo
CGTN	English	110 million	13.28 million	2.37 million	2.91 million	5.98 million
China Daily	English	100 million	4.22 million	1.46 million	53,300	
中国日报 [China Daily]	Chinese	52,000				64.94 million
Xinhua	English	93.17 million	12.23 million	1.55 million	56,000	
新华网 [Xinhua Net]	Chinese		1.31 million			95.67 million
新華社 [Xinhua]	Japanese		50,000			
People's Daily	English	85.08 million	6.81 million	1.31 million	409,000	
人民日报 [People's Daily]	Chinese					150 million
人民网 [People's Daily Online]	Chinese	2.76 million	800,000			83.13 million
人民網 [People's Daily Online]	Japanese	160,000				
Global Times	English	70.05 million	1.90 million		79,600	
环球时报 [Global Times]	Chinese	21.05 million				30.92 million
环球网 [Global Times Net]	Chinese	55.81 million	6,000			26.75 million
環球網 [Global Times Net]	Japanese		500			
CCTV English	English	49.40 million	1.01 million	933,000	475,000	
CCTV中文	Chinese	4.17 million		73,000	1.48 million	
China News	English	1.35 million	630,000			
中国新闻网 [China News Net]	Chinese	1.14 million	480,000		141,000	76.69 million

(Unit: people)

Source: Compiled based on the number of followers of each media organization's official social media accounts (approximate figures).

that cooperate with China's united front work to disseminate information. In some cases, the disinformation is both created and disseminated outside of China.

China publishes propaganda on Western social media platforms, in Chinese to some extent but mainly in English. This tells us that overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals are not necessarily the prime targets of the content. Additionally, dissemination in non-English/Chinese languages is not a great strength of China. In particular, dissemination in the Japanese language is very weak, and the number of followers and other factors indicate it has not garnered attention.

Chinese diplomats have also actively disseminated content in foreign languages on Western social media platforms, often using extreme rhetoric to ridicule foreign governments and proliferating fake news. Content disseminated by diplomats on social media and content disseminated by state media and other outlets are coordinated. In 2019, China stepped up its information campaigns on Western social media platforms.¹⁸ This was likely aimed at countering the growing protests in Hong Kong. Many of the accounts created at this time began to promote China's views on the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and criticize Western viewpoints. The increased dissemination by diplomats is linked to these developments. On Twitter, for example, Chinese diplomats opened 4 accounts in 2017, 3 in 2018, and 19 in 2019. Furthermore, Chinese embassies and consulates opened 3, 3, and 13 accounts in the respective years.¹⁹ According to the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), the number of Twitter accounts created by China's diplomatic corps increased by more than 40 from September to December 2019 alone.²⁰ While each of the above is thought to adopt different calculation criteria, they nonetheless demonstrate that China ramped up diplomatic Twitter activity in 2019.

(4) Covert Activities

In addition to overt activities, there is covert spread of disinformation. The use of fake accounts and bots on social media is an example.

Many of the suspect Twitter accounts linked to the Chinese government appear to have been created through OneSite, according to a study by ProPublica, a U.S. investigative media outlet. OneSite is a market research company that supports the overseas social media activities of Chinese enterprises and the Chinese government and is reportedly under the command of the CCP Central Committee's United Front Work Department. Originally, the accounts made numerous posts criticizing the Hong Kong protests. From January 29, however, they began to make posts that justify China's position on the novel coronavirus, criticize foreign countries, and promote the theory that the virus originated outside of China.²¹

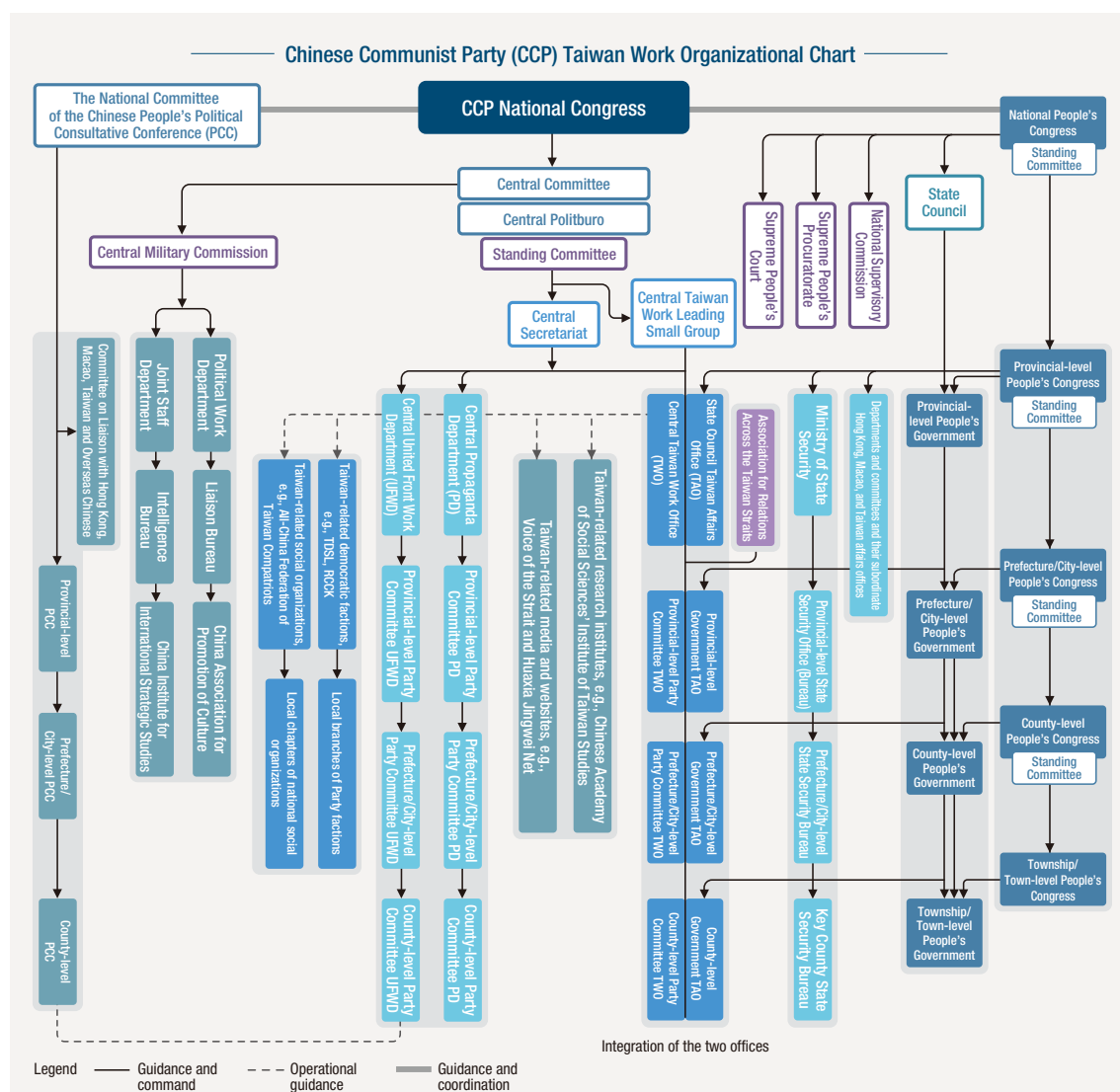
Last but not least is the concern about acts which combine cyberattacks and information warfare. According to Taiwan's Team T5, they are seeing the emergence of an "APT + InfoOp" model combining information operations with hack and leak of confidential data by Chinese APT groups,²²

citing a case in which an APT group hacked a messaging app of a Taiwanese research institute and leaked its information on a Taiwanese social media platform.

(5) Organizations

How are China's influence operations conducted and through what chain of command? Simply put, a myriad of actors is engaged in China's influence operations, and they cannot be covered exhaustively.

Figure 2.3 China's United Front Organizations



Note: TDSL: Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League; RCCK: Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang.

Sources: Investigation Bureau, Ministry of Justice, Republic of Taiwan, ed., 中國大陸綜覽2018年版 [Overview of Mainland China 2018], New Taipei City: 展望與探索雜誌 [The Publisher of Prospect & Exploration Magazine], June 2018, p. 190; 陳德育 [Chen Te-Yu], “從中共「組織戰」探討對我國之「統戰」作為 [Discussion on the CCP's Current Utilization of the United Front against Taiwan from Organizational Warfare],” 海軍學術雙月刊 [Navy Professional Journal], Vol. 56, No. 2, April 1, 2021, p. 54.

The chain of command is also complex. As this suggests, while the Party Central Committee determines China's overarching actions, coordination appears to be inadequate, and the operations are implemented in a stove-piped manner.

Of the multitude of actors engaged in China's influence operations, three major groups are identified here.

The first is the united front work group. Organizational strengthening has been undertaken to effectively lead the Great United Front promoted by Xi Jinping. At a meeting held on July 30, 2015, the CCP Central Politburo decided to establish the Leading Small Group on United Front Work in the Party. Wang Yang, member of the Politburo Standing Committee, serves as the head, and You Quan, director of the United Front Work Department of the CCP, as the deputy head. Xiao Jie (secretary general of the State Council), Xia Baolong (vice chairman and secretary general of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office), Bagatur (vice chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, deputy director of the United Front Work Department, and chairman of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission), Wang Zuoran (deputy director of the United Front Work Department and director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs), and others are members of this group, which is believed to be responsible for the overall coordination of united front work.

Furthermore, the functions of the United Front Work Department have been significantly enhanced. In the 2018 reform of the Party's political organizations, three previously independent governmental agencies were placed under the leadership of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee, strengthening the Party's command of the departments (the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, State Ethnic Affairs Commission, and State Administration for Religious Affairs). Since 2015, the United Front Work Department has scaled up remarkably, establishing the following bureaus in the department: New Social Strata Individuals Work Bureau (Bureau 6); Xinjiang Work Bureau (Bureau 8); Overseas Chinese Affairs General Bureau (Bureau 9); Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau (Bureau 10); Religious Work General Bureau (functional responsibilities) (Bureau 11); and Religious Work Bureau (responsible for specific religions) (Bureau 12).²³ Responsibility for policies concerning overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals was transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the United Front Work Department.

The second is the propaganda group. The Central Leading Small Group for Propaganda and Ideology (headed by Wang Huning) provides overall guidance and coordinates propaganda work. The 2018 reform of the Party's political organizations also strengthened the authority of the Central Propaganda Department. The press/publication and film management functions of the State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, which had been under the jurisdiction of the State Council, were transferred to the Central Propaganda Department, giving it centralized control over content.

The third is the military group. Its activities are elaborated in the next section and beyond. The

PLA's actions are all-encompassing. However, its chain of command is completely separate from that of the united front and propaganda groups, and a robust mechanism seems to be lacking for coordinating military activities and Party and government activities.

Numerous other organizations are also involved. The Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission is at the top of the organizations responsible for cybersecurity of the entire Party-state. The commission is headed by Xi Jinping and comprised of cadres from major bodies, including the PLA. Zhuang Rongwen, deputy director of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP, is the head of the office in charge of the commission's administrative functions. The Central Propaganda Department is influential in day-to-day operations. Other relevant Party and state bodies include the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Taiwan Affairs Office, and the Ministry of Education of the State Council as well as the International Department and the Communist Youth League of the Party.

3. The PLA's Battles in the Psychological and Cognitive Domain

(1) The Psychological and Cognitive Domain in the PLA's Informatized Warfare

The PLA has a tradition of emphasizing not only the execution of military operations, but also the generation of psychological and cognitive confusion to dishearten the opponent. The PLA has conventionally focused on political work. Political work included elements of psychological warfare to propagandize one's position, deny the legitimacy of enemy forces, and confuse them with disinformation.

Recent informatized warfare has placed emphasis on gaining information superiority (information dominance). Simultaneously, attention has also been given to the psychological and cognitive aspects of information. Amid the recent developments in information technology, the side with information superiority is thought to influence the psychology and cognition of the opponent in order to compel them to make decisions favorable to one's army.²⁴

Observations and analyses of U.S. wars reinforced this Chinese perception. The air strikes in Kosovo in the 1990s and the Iraq War in 2003 highlighted the power of informatization and psychological warfare. The Iraq War affirmed the importance of informatization with greater urgency, and studies were conducted on information superiority (information dominance) and psychological warfare.²⁵ In 2004, China presented the strategic policy of "local war under the informatized conditions" and began to consider an information-centered military doctrine.²⁶ It was anticipated that wars in the future would be informatized warfare where information takes a more central position.

Chinese theorists believed that informatization would prompt changes in the nature of warfare.

In particular, early theorists believed that it would usher in a new era of warfare that would not use military force.

Is informatized warfare a “new war” that does not use military force and uses other means to achieve political objectives? Some analysts advocate a vision for new war in which information alone has strategic effectiveness and determines the outcome of the war. Others stress the importance of information but seek more operational effects in combination with firepower.

The book *Unrestricted Warfare* (1999) by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui is an example of the discussion of the vision for “new war.” The starting point of the discussion is that, modern technological innovation is lowering the barriers that have created divisions in traditional warfare, such as space, means, and dimensions, and eliminating restrictions. Traditional warfare, on the other hand, has clear distinctions, such as forward and backward; military and non-military; and land, sea, and air forces. Moreover, war is to be fought between armed forces on the battlefield. The changes brought about by technological innovation are breaking down these restrictions, and the delimitations of traditional warfare are disappearing.

As a result, the means of war are diversifying. Diversification of means expands the concept of war, which in turn expands the domain of war operations.²⁷ War employs all means, including armed and unarmed, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal, in order to coerce the adversary to advance one’s interests.²⁸ A national security paradigm based on a geopolitical concept will become obsolete in such a world. Increasingly important will be economic and financial actions, terrorism, and other activities by non-state actors.²⁹

The other argument that emphasizes operational effectiveness is Dai Qingmin’s “Integrated Network Electronic Warfare.” Unrestricted warfare was no more than a concept proposed by military scholars and has not been adopted by the PLA. More important discussions emerged from the departments involved in operations in the military. An example is “Integrated Network Electronic Warfare” (early 2000s) proposed by Dai Qingmin, director of the Fourth General Staff Department (electronic countermeasures and radar department).

As the name implies, Integrated Network Electronic Warfare is an operations concept that attempts to conduct cyber warfare and electronic warfare or electromagnetic spectrum warfare in an integrated and comprehensive manner.

Dai focused on countering the U.S. style of warfighting based on information superiority and exploiting its vulnerabilities. He believed that information and information systems would not be confined to assisting firepower in future wars and would become a critical area of struggle.³⁰ According to this belief, the intangible information domain consists of the electromagnetic domain, the network domain, and the psychological domain, and outer space will become important as a site of the struggles over these domains. The acquisition of information dominance, meaning a superior position in the information domain, will become the foundation and premise for gaining air and sea dominance.³¹

Interestingly, Dai argued that information warfare must be coupled with firepower, despite

believing that the former would play a leading role in future wars. In future wars, the information domain will certainly play a more important role, will further elevate its status, and gradually play a leading role that supersedes firepower. Nevertheless, Dai believed that traditional means (firepower) will never become unnecessary in future wars.³² In this sense, information warfare cannot replace traditional means. Rather, in Dai's opinion, "The final outcome of the struggle in the intangible information domain will be manifested in tangible space," and information warfare would be a leading operation and would be present consistently in all stages of the war.³³

Dai noted that superiority in the information domain has strategic significance and can serve as a means for "winning without a fight." Yet his discussion focused on the aspect of supporting military operations and increasing their might.³⁴

For the PLA's actual conceptual formation and subsequent military reforms, Dai Qingmin's argument was more important than the discussion of unrestricted warfare. This was because Dai occupied the key post of director of the Fourth General Staff Departments and played a central role in shaping the concept of informatized warfare in the PLA. The comprehensive approach presented by Dai was an idea that inspired the establishment of the Strategic Support Force (SSF).

(2) Three Warfares (Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare)

1) What Are the Three Warfares?

The Three Warfares, consisting of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare, approach the psychological aspects of informatized warfare from the Chinese tradition of political work.³⁵ The Three Warfares are applied broadly from the strategic level to the operations level.

The Three Warfares are an official concept that China formally introduced in the 2003 Political Work Regulation. In November 2003, Jiang Zemin, chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), received a summary report from the PLA regarding the Iraq War and instructed giving focus to public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. Research on the Three Warfares was then conducted. On July 28, 2004, the General Political Department held a PLA roundtable on public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. At around the same time, the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) held a forum on the Three Warfares. The AMS established a specialized team based on the roundtable and conducted studies on the Three Warfares.³⁶

Efforts ensued to incorporate the Three Warfares into the operations. In August 2005, the Public Opinion Warfare Outline, the Psychological Warfare Outline, and the Legal Warfare Outline were issued to the military.³⁷ The "Opinions on Strengthening Political Work in Military Training," which were issued by the General Political Department in 2006, proposed incorporating Three Warfares training into the education and training system. In December 2008, the four general departments released the "Opinions on Ensuring the Implementation of the Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare Outlines of the Chinese People's Liberation Army" to the military. The

opinions stated that the Three Warfares are integral for coordinating the state's politics, diplomacy, and military struggle, are a component of the integrated joint operations under informatized conditions, and are a vital part of wartime political work. They confirmed the importance of the Three Warfares and underscored that they should be incorporated into the preparations for military struggles.³⁸

The three non-military means of warfare—public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare—are concepts that could have emerged in any age. In other words, shaping public opinion to one's advantage, influencing the adversary's psychology, and using law for struggles were likely employed in ancient wars.

Nevertheless, the PLA presents the Three Warfares as a special operation of informatized warfare that emerged in the informatization age. Contests over the cognitive system are intense in the age of informatized warfare. In this environment, shaping public opinion, mounting psychological attacks, and battling over law will become the main means of confrontation of the cognitive system, the PLA says.³⁹ Psychological and propaganda warfares from past wars were effective only at the tactical level. In the age of informatized warfare, however, their effectiveness has extended to the strategic level.⁴⁰ In informatized warfare, the execution of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare has become indispensable to gain the political initiative. The Three Warfares can be waged against the frontline forces or against the rear forces, and can be conducted in wartime or peacetime.

The Public Opinion Warfare Outline gives the following definition. "Public opinion warfare is struggles for creating a favorable public opinion environment in order to achieve military victory by using public opinion as a weapon, comprehensively using media tools and information resources, stimulating the fighting spirit of one's side, influencing the adversary's judgment of the situation, weakening the adversary's will to fight, and seizing the political initiative, based on strategic intent and operational tasks of the Central Military Commission."⁴¹ In recent years, the term "public opinion struggle" has been used. The 2020 edition of *Science of Strategy* edited by the National Defense University positions public opinion struggle as: "a multiplier of political influence, mental lethality, and military deterrence and a war action with special power. It has an important position and function in guiding and controlling social opinion and creating a public opinion situation favorable to oneself and unfavorable to the enemy."⁴²

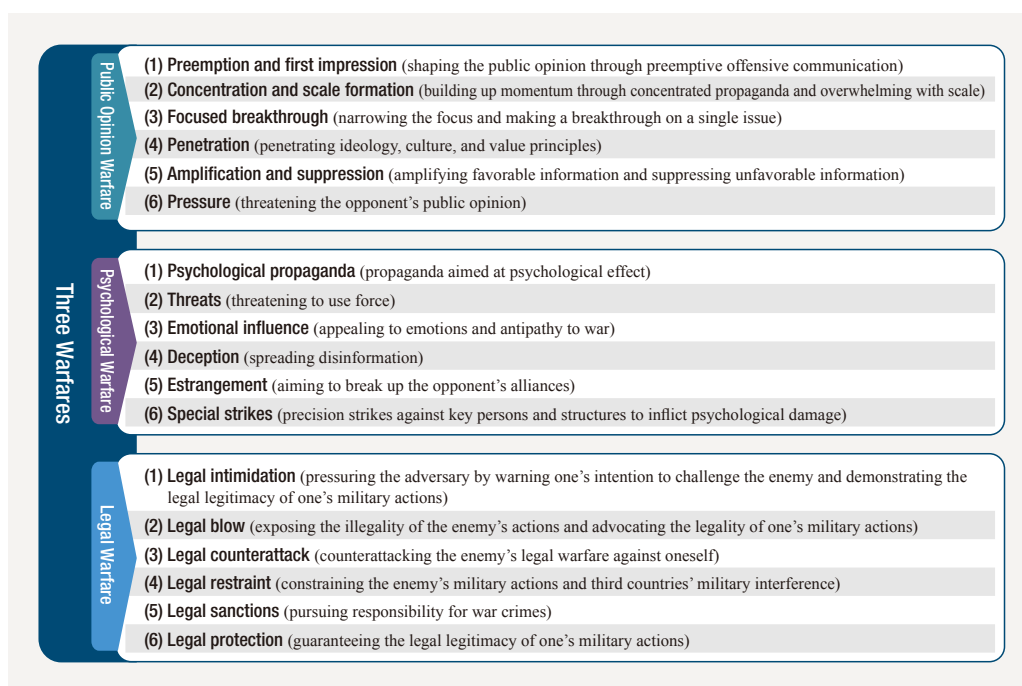
The Psychological Warfare Outline defines psychological warfare as "operations using specific information and media to influence the target's psychology and behavior through rational propaganda, intimidation, and emotional outreach in order to advance the achievement of political and military combat objectives, based on strategic intent and operational tasks of the Central Military Commission."⁴³ The 2020 edition of *Science of Strategy* uses the term "psychological offense and defense," stating that it "influences the perception and policy decisions of the adversary and its armed forces and breaks them down mentally." The primary missions of psychological offensive and defensive activities are to weaken and break down the adversary's combat capabilities, break up the enemy camp, establish one's psychological defense, and contribute to national strategy and military action

decisions. It is deemed that psychological offensive and defensive activities, which can be conducted independently and deliver enormous operational effectiveness, are the “fourth mode of operation distinguished from land, sea, and air operations.”⁴⁴

Legal warfare, according to the definition in the Legal Warfare Outline, is “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.”⁴⁵ The 2020 edition of *Science of Strategy* uses the term “legal principle struggle,” describing it as “a struggle using legal means to achieve legal principle superiority, the political initiative, and military victory.” According to this text, legal principle struggle applies to laws including domestic law, international law, and the law of war, where domestic law extends to that of the parties or belligerents and of non-intervening states or neutral countries.⁴⁶

The Three Warfares are expected to employ tactics of the kind listed in Figure 2.4.

Figure 2.4 Tactics of the Three Warfares



Source: 程宝山 [Cheng Baoshan], ed., 舆论战心理战法律战基本问题 [The Fundamental Issues of Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare and Legal Warfare], pp. 91-105, 106-121, 122-133.

Of note is that China stresses the execution of the Three Warfares in conjunction with the use of and the threat to use military means. While the Three Warfares are an essential element in informatized warfare, they cannot be executed separately from military means.⁴⁷ The Three Warfares are considered the central component of political work in informatized warfare and are effective when coupled with

joint operations.⁴⁸ The Three Warfares are thus not considered a stand-alone substitute for military force; rather, the Three Warfares and military force are always jointly employed.

2) Organizations Associated with the Three Warfares

Since the General Political Department had jurisdiction over law, propaganda, and political work, it was not unnatural that the department has jurisdiction over the implementation of the Three Warfares. However, the military reforms dismantled the General Political Department, and the functions related to the Three Warfares were also split. Today, the Three Warfares are thought to be conducted by military organizations at various levels. There is a base specialized in the Three Warfares, while there are also units that execute the Three Warfares.

a. CMC Political Work Department

Even today, the political work of the CMC Political Work Department covers “public opinion-legal principle struggles and psychological offensive-defensive measures,” suggesting that all functions have not been transferred to the SSF necessarily.

The CMC Political Work Department is thought to be in charge of domestic and global open propaganda. The PLA's official media outlets, including the *PLA Daily*, are under the jurisdiction of the Central Committee's Political Work Department. Related organizations in the department include the Propaganda Bureau (director: Zhang Yutang), the Network Public Opinion Bureau (director: Xu Yunpeng⁴⁹), and the PLA News Dissemination Center. The Propaganda Bureau is in charge of military-wide propaganda work and ideological construction, and its personnel participate in the external spokesperson system. The Network Public Opinion Bureau is believed to be primarily responsible for guiding online public opinion in the military. The PLA News Dissemination Center oversees the PLA's official newspaper, the *PLA Daily*, as well as TV propaganda, websites, and a publishing house affiliated with the PLA.

b. Strategic Support Force

How is the SSF associated with the Three Warfares? As mentioned above, the SSF handles the information domain comprehensively, and by extension, its mission encompasses the psychological and cognitive domain.

This is made clear by the 311 Base in Fujian Province. Established in 2005, the 311 Base is a frontline base for the Three Warfares against Taiwan and is believed to be directly



CMC Chairman Xi Jinping visiting the SSF (August 2016) (Photo: Xinhua News Agency/Aflo)

subordinate to the SSF following the military reform.

The 311 Base had overseen the Three Warfares since 2011 under the leadership of the General Political Department. With the 2015 military reform, the 311 Base was transferred from the General Political Department to the SSF and appears to be under the command of the Political Department or the Network Systems Department.⁵⁰

According to a report by France's Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School (IRSEM), the 311 Base has under its umbrella: media companies, such as Voice of the Strait, China Huayi Broadcasting Corporation, and Haifeng; and units, such as Unit 61070, Unit 61198, and Huaxin Training Center. In addition, the 311 Base conducts psychological warfare through other related organizations, targeting Taiwan in particular.⁵¹

c. Wartime Political Work and Three Warfares at the Unit Level

The Three Warfares at the unit level are conducted as part of wartime political work and will be more operational. The entities responsible for them are likely the Party committees and branches, political organs, political commissars, and personnel dedicated to the Three Warfares.

The first group consists of Party committees, grassroots Party committees, and Party branches in the military. Party committees in the military are said to provide unified leadership for the Three Warfares.⁵² Party committees are established in units at the regiment level and above, grassroots Party committees at the battalion level, and Party branches at the company and lower levels. The internal structure of these Party organizations is unclear. Outlined below is the organizational structure of a Party branch, which is presumed similar to that of Party organizations at the other levels. A Party branch is comprised of a secretary (political commissar), deputy secretary (military commander), organization commission members, propaganda commission members, youth commission members, discipline inspection commission members, security commission members, mass work commission members, and enemy forces work commission members (appointed when necessary).⁵³ Among them, those involved in the Three Warfares are enemy forces work commission members and propaganda commission members. Enemy forces work commission members are responsible for: 1) education on the disintegration of enemy forces and on public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare; 2) training and exercises in public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare; and 3) formulation of plans for the disintegration of enemy forces work, which is carried out in combination with the military struggle.⁵⁴ As is evident, education and training on the Three Warfares are included. Propaganda commission members have the important responsibility of carrying out internal propaganda.

The second group is political organs. Their duties are to collect information, assist the Party committees' decision-making, and supervise the execution of the Three Warfares.⁵⁵ The wartime political organs established in wartime implement the Three Warfares systematically. Not all of the Three Warfares are, however, carried out by units. The Integrated Command Platform, which is employed to

conduct joint operations, has components dedicated to and used for wartime political work. In public opinion warfare and legal warfare, wartime political organs at the corps and higher levels utilize the dedicated components, whereas division and brigade-level units do not. In short, psychological warfare is implemented at all levels, while public opinion warfare and legal warfare are carried out by wartime political organs at the corps and higher levels.⁵⁶

The third group is political commissars. Politburo members (regiment level and above) conduct all of the Three Warfares. In contrast, political instructors (battalion level) and political directors (company level) are mainly responsible for ideological and political education as well as psychological service work.⁵⁷ It indicates that high-level political commissars are engaged in all of the Three Warfares, while cadres at the battalion level and below are primarily responsible for managing ideologies and psychological conditions in their units.

In addition, an official history of political work states that one to three specialists on the Three Warfares were assigned to units at the company level and above.⁵⁸ It is unknown whether such specialists are still assigned to all units above the regiment level.

d. Militia and Reserves

Militia and reserves are also expected to play a certain role in the Three Warfares. For example, a three warfares militia squadron has been established in Bao'an District in Shenzhen City. The squadron has gathered together 78 highly educated militia members, including lawyers, journalists, psychologists, teachers, military personnel, and civil servants, 8 of whom have master's degrees and 27 bachelor's degrees.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the Party committee of the Civil Aviation University of China has organized a three warfares reserve unit under an agreement with the Tianjin Army's 1st Regiment of the Reserve Antiaircraft Artillery Division. It consisted of a 16-member public opinion warfare squadron, a 6-member legal warfare squadron, and a 66-member psychological warfare squadron.⁶⁰ They are

Figure 2.5 The PLA's Mechanisms for Implementing the Three Warfares



Source: Compiled by the authors.

likely expected to fulfill their role in stabilizing public sentiment in a contingency, but it is unclear how useful they will be in an offensive operation.

3) Education and Training

How do military organizations provide education and training on influence operations? Securing and cultivating personnel poses a significant challenge for the PLA. Talent cultivation is a major issue, given that influence operations cannot be conducted without a high level of knowledge.

A look at Three Warfares education and training shows that emphasis has been placed on cultivation of Three Warfares personnel. The 2009 Outline of Military Training and Evaluation specified the incorporation of the Three Warfares into education and training. The general departments and military region-level organizations would provide Three Warfares command training at the strategic and campaign levels, while corps level and below would provide Three Warfares education, psychological protection training, and training in identifying public opinion information. Additionally, Three Warfares units (311 Base is considered to be in mind) would provide specialized training for improving Three Warfares attack capabilities. Furthermore, the outline stipulated that organizations conducting public opinion warfare and legal warfare would strive to enhance their public opinion and legal principle struggle capabilities. The four general departments have prepared common teaching materials for Three Warfares education, indicating that efforts had been made to incorporate the Three Warfares into education and training.⁶¹ However, it is unclear how education and training are currently conducted following the military reform. It was not possible to confirm whether the 2018 new Outline of Military Training contained a section on the Three Warfares.

(3) Cognitive Domain Operations

The recent advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies is thought to necessitate a transition to intelligent warfare which fully leverages the technologies.⁶²

These circumstances have given rise to the concept of operations in the cognitive domain.⁶³ Such operations are an extension of conventional psychological warfare and aim to shape or control the adversary's cognition, thought process, and decisions. According to an article published in the *PLA Daily*, operations in the cognitive domain consist of the three layers of suppressing, shaping, and controlling. Suppressing cognition refers to concealing one's behavior, weakening the adversary's perceptive abilities, and depriving the adversary of such abilities. Shaping cognition means disseminating false information based on full knowledge of the thinking habits, operations capabilities, and operations objectives of the adversary in order to steer their decisions and behavior in the direction of one's projections. Controlling cognition refers to altering the opponent's decision-making mechanisms and directly manipulating the thinking and decision-making chain of command of the adversary's operations personnel.⁶⁴

In future wars, penetration and counter-penetration, attack and counter-attack, and control and

counter-control in cognitive space will become more intense than struggles in physical space and information space. Military confrontation in cognitive space uses means such as cultural propagation, public opinion induction, and biological weapons to destroy the cognitive capabilities of the opponent; protect one's cognitive capabilities; gain the initiative, control, and discourse power in cognitive space confrontations; and acquire information as well as control policy decisions that affect operations command.⁶⁵ Zeng Huafeng and Shi Haiming at the National University of Defense Technology call such dominance in the cognitive domain “mental/cognitive dominance.”⁶⁶

Cognition control is a new operation which will manifest itself in the era of intelligentized warfare and is considered to be the highest form of cognitive domain operations. With the rise of emerging technologies, the application of AI and other advanced technologies to warfare has become more prominent. China views this as the beginning of intelligentized warfare. Intelligentized warfare is “integrated warfare waged in land, sea, air, space, electromagnetic, cyber, and cognitive domains using intelligent weaponry and equipment and their associated operation methods, underpinned by the Internet of Things (IoT) information system.” Recently, the term “intelligence dominance” has increasingly replaced “mental/cognitive dominance” to refer to control over the intelligentized domain.⁶⁷

As indicated, the discussion on operations in the cognitive domain is an extension of past discussions on informatized warfare and the Three Warfares. Some argue that actual operations in the cognitive domain will be embodied primarily in the Three Warfares. In other words, the Three Warfares are expected to be an effective tool so long as operations in the cognitive domain are aimed at degrading the adversary's cognition, emotion, and will.⁶⁸

Concepts such as “cognitive domain operations” and the related “mental/cognitive dominance” concept are discussed in the context of the PLA's future warfare vision and are significant in this sense. That said, these have not yet been adopted as official concepts, nor have corresponding operations or organizations been established.

4. Case Study: China's Influence Operations in Taiwan

Taiwan is an inseparable territory that constitutes a “core interest” of China. Unification with Taiwan is considered integral to the realization of the “Chinese dream” of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Meanwhile, Beijing projects that a PLA invasion of Taiwan would be extremely difficult to carry out if the U.S. military were to intervene in a Taiwan Strait contingency. As such, in Taiwan's view, China endeavors to “win without a fight” and conducts “cognitive warfare” as a means to this end. According to an assessment by Taiwan's defense ministry, in cognitive warfare the PLA will use

means, such as spreading fake news, paralyzing key targets in Taiwan, boosting military activities, coordinating troop deployment, conducting exercises, and sailing naval vessels in the contiguous zone of the main island of Taiwan, which will cause psychological panic and disturb and oppress public sentiment in Taiwan.⁶⁹ This section attempts to analyze specific cases of influence operations executed by China and the PLA against Taiwan.

(1) Cyberattacks

Cyberattacks take a range of forms, including penetrating a target's network system to destroy data, stealing information from within the target, and confusing the opponent through the dissemination of harmful information. Taiwan's key political, economic, and military entities were hit by more than 1.4 billion cyberattacks from ~~September~~ 2019 to August 2020.⁷⁰ It was also revealed in March 2020 that Facebook (Meta) had removed more than 60 accounts of Chinese cyber forces that were spreading disinformation about the novel coronavirus to Taiwan. The majority of the accounts used by the Chinese cyber forces used traditional Chinese characters in their names and posed as Taiwanese users. It is unclear whether these accounts had direct ties to the Chinese government.⁷¹ Malicious cyberattacks from China and Russia against Taiwanese companies, such as CPC Corporation and Formosa Plastics, have also increased, according to the deputy chief of general staff/communications, electronics and information of Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense in his remarks at the Legislative Yuan.⁷²

Cyberspace has also been used to mount indirect attacks on Taiwan. In April 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), claimed that he had been receiving racist slurs on the Internet from Taiwan for three months.⁷³ According to the Investigation Bureau of Taiwan's Ministry of Justice, criticisms against Tedros were made from China under the guise of Taiwanese people.⁷⁴ It can be interpreted that this was an attack with elements of an influence operation to control the thought process of Director-General Tedros.

The Investigation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice has presented that 70% of the fake news originated from China, and that many were circulated from the end of February to March 2020.⁷⁵ When many "apologies" to Tedros were later posted online by "Taiwanese people," the bureau announced its opinion that the people were actually not Internet users in Taiwan but Internet users in China.⁷⁶ The Investigation Bureau has also been turned into a center of fake news, with fake official documents circulated on Facebook and Twitter stating that the bureau wished Thailand to consider incitement of a revolution. The bureau's investigation revealed that the disinformation was circulated by a Taiwanese man trained in China and was reportedly aimed at undermining the international image of Taiwan.⁷⁷

(2) Pressure Exerted through Media Reports

U.S. President Joe Biden was quick to declare that he would not send U.S. forces to Ukraine, even before Russia began its aggression against the country in February 2022. Soon after Russia commenced its

aggression, the *Global Times*, a newspaper under the *People's Daily*, reported that Taiwanese pro-independence advocates could not rely on the United States for independence, arousing the concerns of the Taiwanese people.⁷⁸ In an opinion poll conducted by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation in March 2022, 55.9% of the respondents did not believe that the United States would join the war in the event of a Taiwan contingency. When the foundation conducted the same survey in September 2020 and October 2021, the percentages were 33.4% and 28.5%, respectively. Taiwanese confidence in the United States had clearly dropped due to the U.S. response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.⁷⁹ While it cannot be said with certainty that Taiwanese people were directly swayed by the *Global Times* editorial, it can be said that China is adept at exploiting such situations.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been seized as an opportunity to deal a blow to the Tsai Ing-wen government. At the beginning of the outbreak, China reported, "Taiwan has banned the entry of passengers and students from the mainland, temporarily suspended entry through the *xiaosantong* route, and prevented Taiwanese businesspeople who had remained in Hubei Province from returning to Taiwan."⁸⁰ The reports tarnished Taiwan's image by mixing truth and lies.

Proactive dissemination of false images is another method used by China. The PLA published false images of an H-6K bomber flying with Taiwan's highest mountain, Yushan, in the background. In another example, Chinese television showed footage of PLA soldiers marching toward a structure resembling the Taiwan Presidential Office during an exercise conducted in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 2019.⁸¹

Furthermore, China is believed to be exerting strong influence on Taiwanese media, penetrating influence over Taiwan's traditional media.⁸² Notably, Taiwanese businesspeople with businesses in China have taken over mass media outlets and intervened in news reports. In addition, direct communication between the Chinese government and media companies has become the norm. Taiwan's CTi News television channel ceased broadcasting at midnight on December 12, 2020 because the renewal of its broadcast license was not approved. The parent company of CTi News is Want Want China Times Media Group, which is considered to have pro-Chinese inclinations. CTi News had been punished several times by the National Communications Commission, which supervises the broadcasting business, for the content of its news reports. During the 2018 election for mayor of Kaohsiung, more than 90% of the coverage was about candidate Daniel Han (Han Kuo-yu), who has a conciliatory stance toward China. Other pro-China news coverage had also been noted.⁸³

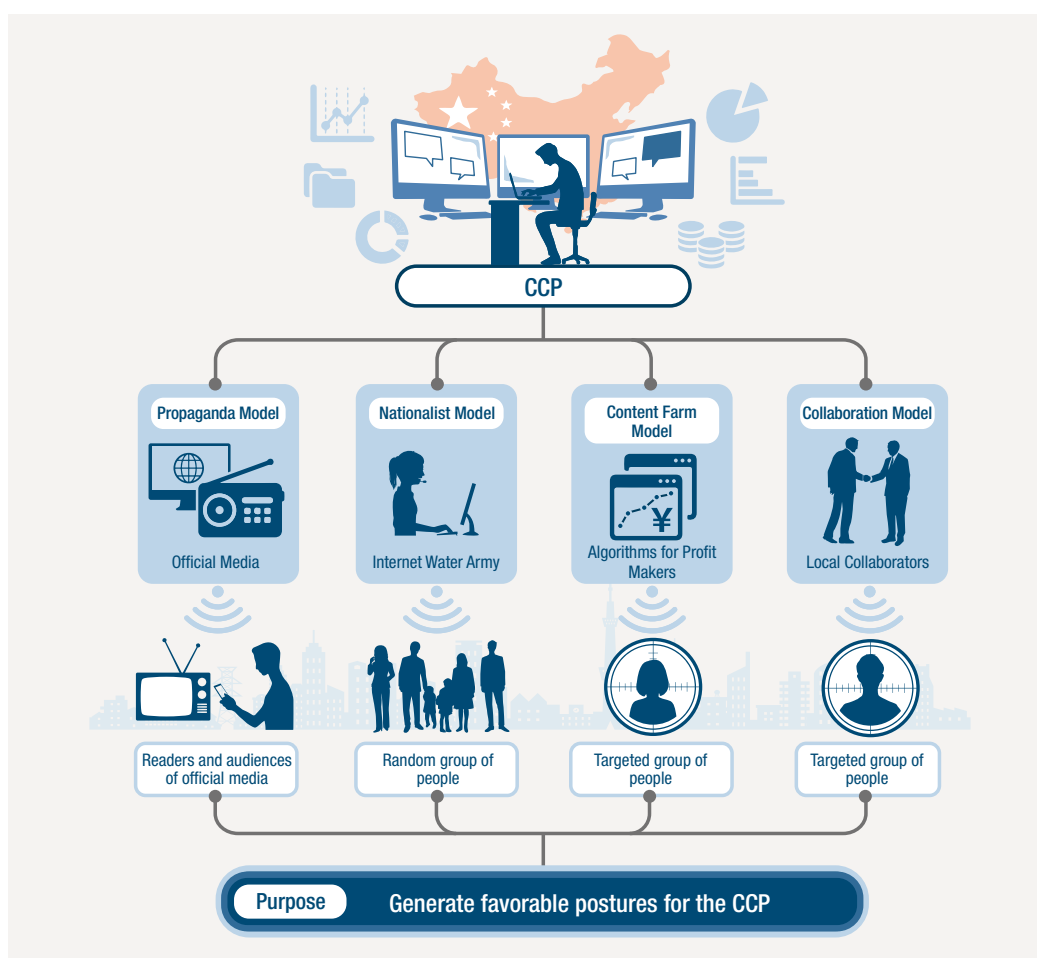
At the Fourth Cross-Strait Media Summit in Beijing on May 10, 2019, Wang Yang, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, commented to the following effect: "Media on both sides have a responsibility to promote the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations. We expect the media will contribute to realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."⁸⁴ According to a leaked recording, Wang also stated, "The United States will not come to (Taiwan's) aid" and "We depend on the efforts of our friends in the media to achieve peaceful reunification and one country, two systems."⁸⁵ The summit was organized by China's Beijing Daily News

Table 2.2 China's Information Manipulation in Cognitive Warfare

Phase of manipulation	Target of manipulation	Level of manipulation	Information format	Method of manipulation	Purpose of manipulation
<div> <div>Peacetime</div> <div>Wartime</div> </div>	<div> <div>Enemy masses</div> <div>Masses in China</div> <div>International community</div> </div>	<div> <div>National strategy</div> <div>Military strategy</div> <div>Campaign tactics</div> </div>	<div> <div>1. Selective facts</div> <div>2. Disinformation</div> <div>3. Mixture of truth and lies</div> </div>	<div> <div>Steering public opinion</div> <div>Internet penetration</div> </div>	<div> <div>1. Triggering enemy contradictions and conflicts</div> <div>2. Domestic stability</div> <div>3. Winning international public support</div> </div>
	<div> <div>Enemy elites</div> <div>Battlefield units</div> <div>Enemy masses</div> </div>			<div> <div>Cognition interference</div> <div>Electronic warfare attack</div> <div>Internet penetration</div> </div>	<div> <div>1. Erroneous decisions by commander</div> <div>2. Exerting psychological pressure on the battlefield</div> <div>3. Fostering anti-war consciousness among the masses</div> </div>

Source: Compiled based on 林正愷 [Ya-Ying Lin], “中共認知戰操作策略與我國因應作為 [The Chinese Communist Party's Cognitive Warfare Operations Strategy and China's Measures],” 國防雜誌 [National Defense], p. 10.

Figure 2.6 Diagram of the cognitive warfare approaches of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)



Source: Compiled based on Editorial Committee, 2021 National Defense Report, Republic of China, ed., 2021 National Defense Report, Republic of China, Taipei: Ministry of National Defense, 2021, p. 46.

Group, with the cooperation of Taiwan's Want Want China Times Media Group, and held at Beijing Hotel. Nearly 100 media outlets and 200 people attended from both sides of the Strait. Participants from Want Want included Chairman Tsai Eng-meng and Vice Chairman Jason Hu (Hu Zhiqiang).⁸⁶

Vincent Chen (Chen Wen-fan), deputy director-general of the National Security Bureau, has explained that the content, reporting style, point of view, and tone of some Taiwanese media reports are synchronized with China's intimidating discourse toward Taiwan.⁸⁷

(3) Influence Operations through Taiwanese People

There are numerous methods for criticizing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government through Taiwanese people. As we have seen in countless examples, pro-China celebrities have made remarks in the media in support of unification. In addition, senior members of Taiwanese pro-unification parties, such as the New Party and the Chinese Unity Promotion Party (CUPP), have made pro-China statements and participated in anti-DPP protests. In December 2020, the Taipei District Prosecutors Office filed charges against He Jianhua, general secretary of the Chinese Female Association, and others for violating the National Security Act, alleging that they had received financial support from a Chinese information agency to form a group and collect information on Taiwan pro-independence forces. In the January 2020 legislative elections, she ran as the number three candidate on the proportional list for CUPP, which supports unification with the Chinese mainland. At that time, she was accused of violating the election law by inviting voters on a low-cost trip to Kinmen and Xiamen, which was regarded as bribery. It was discovered then that she had been in contact with a Chinese information agency. According to prosecutors, she had been engaged in a series of activities since May 2017. In cooperation with China, she formed the Chinese Female Association in Taiwan, which was a group of Chinese spouses and others and campaigned for cross-strait unification and one country, two systems advocated by China. Furthermore, under instructions from China, she allegedly gathered information regarding visits to China by Taiwanese pro-independence advocates. Prosecutors note that she spread disinformation unfavorable to Tsai Ing-wen, who was seeking reelection in the January 2020 presidential election. She actively waged a negative campaign accusing President Tsai of academic fraud. In return, she received 30,000 yuan from Huang Xinyu, vice president of the Taiwan Scholar Association, a Chinese organization.⁸⁸

Individuals like her may instigate chaos from within Taiwan, such as by requesting assistance that would elicit China to take military action to reunify Taiwan, or succeed the government after the incumbent government is overthrown.

(4) Maneuvering on Multinational Corporations and Military Officers

CCP branches have reportedly been established in foreign industry, academic, and political circles. According to a report, CCP members are employed by at least 10 foreign consulates in Shanghai. Party members are also at foreign firms, such as Standard Chartered Bank, Pfizer, Boeing, and major

Taiwanese companies (Delta Electronics and Formosa Plastics), and a total of 79,000 CCP branches have been established inside them. A branch must be opened at a company with three to four Party members. Some scholars have pointed out that tensions in cross-strait relations and U.S.-China relations may trigger Party branches inside companies to infiltrate them and become the focal point of united front work and political campaigns against Taiwan.⁸⁹

China's maneuvering also extends to military officers. Taiwan's Army Lieutenant General Liu De-liang, a reserve member, retired from his post as director of the Military Intelligence Bureau of the Ministry of National Defense and had just begun working as president of a natural gas company when he received a letter from a Chinese firm stating that it was looking for a partner. Liu knew instinctively that this was a typical espionage technique and immediately reported it to the National Security Bureau and the Investigation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice. Giving priority to the situation, the Taiwanese Investigation Bureau and the military's China intelligence corps conducted an investigation and found that the sender's address and company were fake. The contact and other methods were also typical techniques used by spy agents.⁹⁰ Liu was a central figure of Taiwan's espionage activities and is the only person in Taiwan banned from traveling to China for 10 years following his retirement under Beijing's designation.

China's Quest for Control
of the Cognitive Domain
and Gray Zone
Situations



Yomiuri Shimbun/Aflo

Chapter 3

China's Maritime Gray Zone Situations

Yatsuzuka Masaaki and Yamaguchi Shinji

1. China's Gray Zone Situations

The term “gray zone situation” is used to describe China’s activities for asserting maritime rights and interests, but it is not in the parlance of the Chinese government.¹ This terminology began to appear in Japanese and U.S. policy documents in around 2010.² Since its inception, the term has referred to China’s actions for expanding its interests and sovereignty, as defined in Japan’s National Defense Program Guidelines released in December 2010: “confrontations over territory, sovereignty and economic interests that are not to escalate into wars.”³ A gray zone situation is basically a strategy employed by the side changing the status quo, and the objective is to undermine the power, legitimacy, and will of the adversary while not leading to armed conflict. Frank G. Hoffman of the National Defense University in the United States describes operations which give rise to a gray zone situation as “deliberate multidimensional activities by a state actor just below the threshold of aggressive use of military forces.”⁴

Hybrid warfare, a term which came into widespread use in the wake of Russia’s operations in Crimea, differs from gray zone operations. Hybrid warfare is defined as the simultaneous and adaptive employment of a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, catastrophic terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to achieve political objectives.⁵ The aim of hybrid warfare is to use military means more effectively by combining them with non-military means, such as “political, economic, information, humanitarian and other measures.”⁶ Whereas gray zone situations represent a particular form of conflict escalation, hybrid warfare emphasizes diversity of means. Hybrid warfare also encompasses fighting in an armed conflict, and is often considered to fall under an area of conflict which is more intense than the gray zone.

In China, strategic directives akin to gray zone operations can be found in close-to-official documents of the Xi Jinping regime and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). *China’s Military Strategy* (China’s white paper on national defense), published by the Xi regime in 2015, states, “A holistic approach will be taken to balance war preparation and war prevention, rights protection and stability maintenance, deterrence and warfighting, and operations in wartime and employment of military forces in peacetime. They will lay stress on farsighted planning and management to create a favorable posture.”⁷ In addition, the 2020 edition of *Science of Strategy* edited by the PLA National Defence University lists the following key elements of China’s strategic thinking on active defense strategy: “actively create a favorable strategic environment,” “attach importance to crisis management and deter war,” and “attach importance to safeguarding national development interests.”⁸ That is, in peacetime and in the pre-conflict phase, the strategic directive calls on China to expand the nation’s developmental interests while both avoiding war and creating an advantageous strategic environment.

China’s above strategic directive may translate as follows in the maritime domain. In order to avoid war and create a favorable posture, China will use the PLA Navy (PLAN) as a deterrent force,

while at the same time utilizing the China Coast Guard (CCG) law enforcement agency and the maritime militia to manage the intensity of the dispute so that it does not lead to armed conflict and exert pressure on the adversary, thereby gradually expanding China's rights and interests. By employing the CCG and the maritime militia, China seeks to change the status quo as it desires, while triggering crises of low intensity that do not lead to armed conflict.

Of course, unlike wars including high-intensity military operations, such low-intensity conflicts in an attempt to change the status quo cannot significantly alter the situation in a short timeframe. However, low-intensity conflicts can inflict military and political costs over a long period of time by which a state asserts its reinterpretation of the situation and gradually changes the circumstances as it desires. Herein lies the reason why China's rights expansion behaviors are referred to as "salami slicing strategy" and "creeping expansion."

To achieve the goal of becoming a "great maritime power," the Xi Jinping regime has increasingly asserted its maritime rights and interests. Furthermore, grounded on the concepts of military-police-civilian and "five-in-one" joint actions, Beijing has made efforts to strengthen and enhance coordination among the PLAN, the CCG law enforcement agency, and the maritime militia.⁹ In addition, by integrating the chains of command of the CCG and maritime militia into the military and building up their equipment, China has improved its gray zone operations capabilities in disputed areas.

2. Organization of Maritime Militia Units

(1) The Maritime Militia, its Chain of Command, and its Relationship with the Party

In April 2013, President Xi Jinping visited a maritime militia force in Hainan Province. Subsequently, the Chinese government stepped up support for the organization of maritime militia units and broadened their activities. Maritime militia forces have increased their activity linked to China's maritime expansion. While this has raised concern and drawn the attention of neighboring countries, many aspects remain unclear about the maritime militia.

In China, the National Defense Law amended in December 2020 states that the militia, "under the command of military agencies, shall assume war preparation missions, non-war military action missions, and defense operation missions." Additionally, Article 2 of China's "Regulations on Militia Work" stipulates, "The militia is an armed organization of the masses not divorced from production under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, is a component of the armed forces of the People's Republic of China, and is an assisting and reserve force of the Chinese People's Liberation Army." In other words, China's militia is an official armed organization that is an auxiliary of the PLA.¹⁰

There were 750,000 maritime militia personnel (140,000 vessels) in 1978 according to an estimate. However, no official numbers are available at this time.¹¹ According to China's FY2010 white paper on national defense, there were 8 million primary militia members, and as of 2016, there were reportedly 9.48 million people in China engaged in fishing, including in river areas.¹² Maritime militia units have been organized in a range of coastal areas facing seas such as the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea, including Guangdong Province (Zhanjiang City and Taishan City), Hainan Province (Sansha City), Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Beihai City), Fujian Province (Ningde City and Mawei District, Fuzhou City), Zhejiang Province (Zhoushan City, Ningbo City, Yuhuan County, and Xiangshan County), Shandong Province (Lanshan District, Rizhao City; Weihai City; and Rushan City), and Hebei Province (Qinhuangdao City).¹³



Militia training in Sansha City, Hainan Province (July 2015) (Photo: Xinhua News Agency/Aflo)

With regard to the chain of command, Article 5 of the “Regulations on Militia Work” of the People’s Republic of China stipulates, “Under the leadership of the State Council and the Central Military Commission, militia work nationwide is supervised by the General Staff Department of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (note: since the military reforms, the National Defense Mobilization Department of the Central Military Commission),” while “the provincial military districts, military subdistricts, and the people’s armed forces departments at the county level serve as local military command bodies and supervise militia work in their areas.” In short, while the militia is under the command of the National Defense Mobilization Department of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in the chain of command, more specific commands are provided by the provincial military districts, military subdistricts, and the people’s armed forces departments in the counties, which are the departments in charge of wartime mobilization.

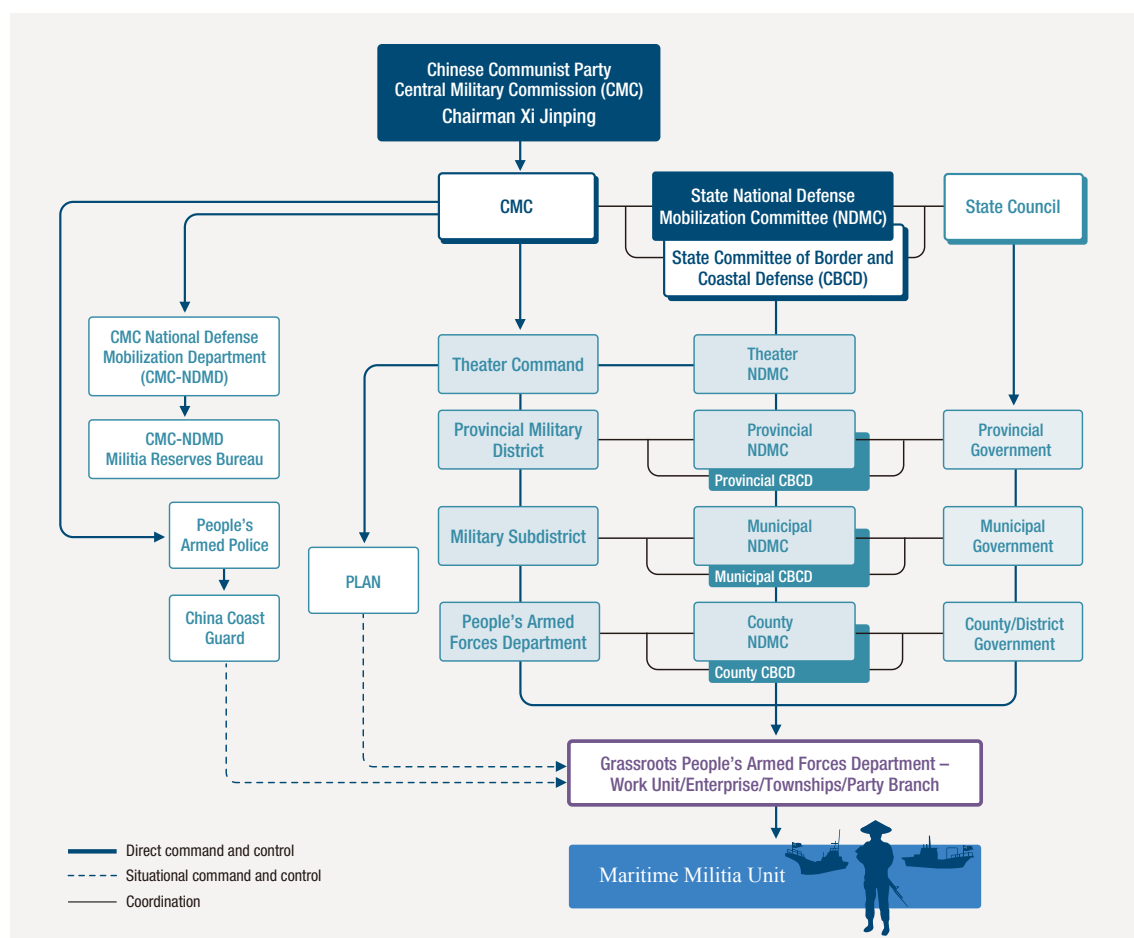
China’s maritime militia receives orders not only from the military but also from the government. The central and local governments are responsible for militia building, including subsidizing the cost of ship repairs, fuel, training, and other expenses of the maritime militia. In exchange for these subsidies, it appears that local governments may call out the militia.¹⁴

In addition to the military and the government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also has influence on the maritime militia. Like other social sectors in China, Party cells are established in the maritime militia for enforcing the directives of the CCP. For example, in Yueqing City, Zhejiang Province, a CCP member who is a senior official of the city’s health department concurrently serves as the head of a Party small group in the local maritime militia’s emergency relief division, and four Party members belong to the small group.¹⁵ In June 2021, the CCP Central Committee conferred the July

1 Medal to Wang Shumao, deputy commander of the maritime militia company in Tanmen, Hainan Province where Xi Jinping had visited. Wang double hats as secretary of the Party branch in Tanmen Village, Tanmen Town, Qionghai City.¹⁶ CCP and government officials are appointed to senior positions in maritime militia organizations, presumably to relay the commands and orders of the Party, the military, the CCG, and other law enforcement agencies to their affiliated fishermen.

Moreover, the militia has function-specific chains of command in order to systematically provide guidance from the top to each fishing vessel. The maritime militia has function-specific divisions, such as a reconnaissance division, an emergency relief division, and a maritime support division, and roles are allocated to each of them. A military officer has proposed to establish multi-layered units, such as Squad → Platoon → Company → Battalion (a squad consists of one ship; an upper echelon unit consists of three to five lower echelon units).¹⁷ Many Chinese fishermen who join the maritime militia are employed by local fishing enterprises (including fishing, food processing, ship building, and port construction), and these enterprises serve as the parent entity that systematically manages the

Figure 3.1 Chain of Command of the Maritime Militia



Source: “Exhibit 06. Command and Control of the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia,” in Erickson and Martinson, eds., *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*.

fishermen (recruitment, mobilization, and provision of fishing boat equipment and compensation). In recent years, local governments have also promoted the recruitment of military veterans.¹⁸ The maritime militia is expected to conduct not only fishing operations in peacetime but also reconnaissance of foreign fishing operations in disputed waters and reconnaissance of foreign naval movements, some have proposed incorporating not only fishing vessels but also pelagic merchant vessels for intelligence gathering.¹⁹ As described above, the maritime militia is not simply a group of fishermen; it is comprised of personnel with various backgrounds, including fishery processors, shipbuilders, port builders, medical personnel, veterans, local government officials, and members of the CCP.

Thus, China's maritime militia can be defined as an armed force that is usually engaged in fishing-related industries but, as necessary, is also engaged in various maritime rights protection activities, systematically receiving directives from the PLA, the government, as well as the Party.

(2) The Role of the Maritime Militia

What is the specific role of the maritime militia? According to China's FY2013 white paper on national defense, the role of primary militia, which receives military training as a militia, is "to form emergency response detachments; provide support to units through joint air defense, intelligence, reconnaissance, communications support, engineering rush-repair, transportation, and equipment repair; and replenish units through combat, logistics, and equipment support." Commander Wang Zhiping of the Zhoushan Security District in Zhejiang Province outlined the following three roles of the maritime militia for protecting maritime rights and interests:²⁰

- 1) Support for the PLA: (a) participation in information operations including diversionary operation; (b) transportation of military supplies; (c) medical and equipment maintenance support for the army; (d) cooperation with defense operations
- 2) Cooperation with law enforcement agencies: (e) creation of situation favorable for maritime rights protection activities through operations in disputed waters; (f) sabotage and information gathering on foreign scientific research vessels, reconnaissance vessels, and fishing vessels
- 3) Independent maritime rights protection activities: (g) daily fishery production activities as well as surveillance and information gathering on suspicious vessels in disputed waters; (h) maritime rights protection missions in wartime.

With regard to the abovementioned support for the PLA, PLA officers and others have identified four maritime operation missions of the maritime militia: 1) maritime guerilla operations (maritime reconnaissance warning, maritime camouflage, low-intensity maritime sabotage, and securing prisoners of war at sea); 2) cooperation with maritime operations forces (cooperation with extraordinary inspections, support for ensuring the concealment of operations forces, cooperation with reconnaissance forces, and cooperation with mine forces); 3) supporting maritime operations forces in areas such as medical care, search, transport, supply, and repair; and 4) "Three Warfares" activities at sea.²¹ Mindful of such cooperation with military operations, live-ammunition exercises and various other

drills and exercises including rescue, reconnaissance, and logistics support exercises are conducted regularly, mainly during the fishing closed season, by which the command and order system for the maritime militia has been strengthened.²² However, some point out that many of the attributes and characteristics of the maritime militia are highly useful in gray zone operations but are unsuitable for coordination with the PLAN in high intensity and wartime operations.²³

The above characteristics infer that the maritime militia envisions a variety of missions which support both the government and the military. However, as actual operations will involve a multitude of agencies, the chain of command and coordination mechanisms are likely to be quite complex. For example, another military officer made the proposal below on how the maritime militia might cooperate with other agencies in the respective activities.²⁴

When the maritime militia: 1) independently carries out maritime information surveys and reconnaissance warning, a provincial military district takes command; 2) joins emergency relief efforts, a maritime search organization (presumably the CCG) or a local government takes the lead, and a provincial military district system takes part; 3) carries out maritime rights protection activities, a provincial military district system systematically commands together with relevant local departments, under the guidance of a local Party committee and government; 4) cooperates with maritime law enforcement, the CCG takes command and the provincial military district system cooperates, under the unified guidance of a local Party committee and government; and 5) assists naval activities, the PLAN exercises unified command, and the provincial military district system cooperates. These missions may be performed in a flexible manner according to each situation. Within the maritime militia, it appears that divisions are organized and roles are assigned to them. For example, the maritime militia in Sanya City, Hainan Province has formed a reconnaissance division, a specialized emergency relief division, and other divisions in each district.²⁵

The maritime militia usually conducts operations as fishermen, making it difficult to determine whether it is precisely a militia or not. Nevertheless, since the so-called Battle of the Paracel Islands in 1974, when China seized the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam, the maritime militia has been employed in maritime disputes and seemingly continues to be involved in various disputes. Table 3.1 below lists the incidents in which the maritime militia is believed to have been involved, their region, and the activities of the maritime militia.

Table 3.1 Maritime Disputes Allegedly Involving the Maritime Militia

Year	Incident / Region	Target Country / Target Ship	Activity
1974	Paracel sea battle	South Vietnam	Operated around the islands, landed on the islands, set up facilities, fired on enemy forces
1978	East China Sea (Senkaku Islands)	Japan	A total of 357 fishing boats intruded into Japan's territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands and operated illegally
1985	South China Sea	Philippines	Five fishing boats landed on Scarborough Reef
1999	South China Sea	Philippines	Harassed Philippine fishing boats off Scarborough Reef
2002	Yellow Sea	U.S. Navy (USNS Bowditch)	Collided with a towed array sonar
2009	Yellow Sea	U.S. Navy (USNS Victorious)	Tailgating
2009	South China Sea (near Hainan Island)	U.S. Navy (USNS Impeccable)	Interfered with navigation
2011	South China Sea	Norwegian survey vessel	Interfered with oil and gas surveys
2012	South China Sea	Philippines	Operated near Scarborough Reef, rescue training with China Coast Guard's participation
2013	South China Sea (Spratly Islands)		Construction of artificial islands by dredgers
2014	South China Sea	Vietnam	Protected a Chinese oil rig, Vietnamese fishing boat collision
2015–	South China Sea (Spratly Islands)		Surge of Chinese fishing boats operating from artificial islands in the South China Sea
2016	East China Sea (Senkaku Islands)	Japan	200 to 300 Chinese fishing boats swarmed around the Senkaku Islands
2018	South China Sea (Thitu Island)	Philippines	Chinese fishing boats swarmed the area, Philippine fishing boat collision
2021	South China Sea (Whitsun Reef)	Philippines	Swarming by 220 Chinese fishing boats



Source: Compiled by the authors based on various materials.

The specific missions of the maritime militia in relation to other maritime actors (see Figure 3.2) are considered to have the following characteristics. First, the maritime militia, taking advantage of its large number and equipment, is primarily tasked with asserting maritime rights and interests—activities which are difficult to coordinate and carry out by each respective actor. In other words, the maritime militia is expected to engage in a wide range of paramilitary activities that could escalate a crisis if undertaken by the military, are too costly for law enforcement agencies to carry out, and are difficult for ordinary fishermen to perform due to equipment, management, and other requirements. The maritime militia uses its unique status as “both soldier and civilian” to assert sovereignty through fishing and other activities in disputed areas for strengthening China’s effective control in peacetime, and to act as an auxiliary organization to the military in wartime by coordinating with the military and participating in diversionary operations.

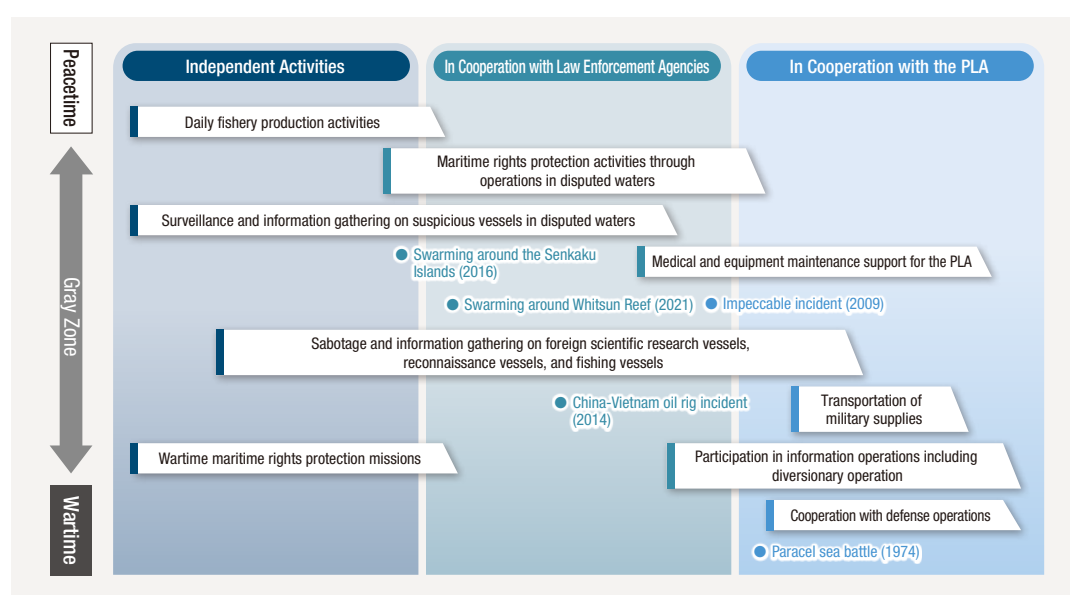
Secondly, the maritime militia is thought to play a mediating role between the military, administrative organizations, and the civilian sector. The militia, while stipulated as a military organization in the chain of command, is expected to coordinate with administrative organizations in specific missions.

Major general Fu Yi, commander of the Zhejiang Provincial Military District, notes that a chain of command and a mutual communication system should be established connecting the maritime militia and the people's armed forces departments (local marine and fishery departments), military subdistricts (security districts), and PLAN units.²⁶ Of further note is that the organizations with which the maritime militia collaborates are likely to vary depending on the crisis situation. As shown in Figure 3.2, the maritime militia coordinates with official government vessels for asserting maritime rights and interests in relatively less intense gray zone areas, such as communicating operations in disputed areas and surveillance of foreign fishing and research vessels. In contrast, the maritime militia coordinates with military organizations to conduct not only intelligence cooperation with the military in gray zone areas and interdiction activities against foreign military vessels, but also relatively intense paramilitary operations, such as support and replenishment for the military in wartime and participation in military operations.

In addition, compared to the CCG and the PLA, maritime militia units play a role in shallow waters, can operate smaller and more mobile vessels, and can conduct a wide range of surveillance activities with many fishing vessels. For this reason, from the perspective of conducting monitoring and reconnaissance of foreign fishing vessel operations in disputed waters and of foreign naval activities, some have proposed incorporating into the maritime militia not only fishing vessels but also pelagic merchant vessels and other vessels for the purposes of information gathering.²⁷

The Chinese government may believe that mobilizing the maritime militia can control the escalation of a crisis, rein in the adversary, avoid military skirmishes, and expand China's effective control. For example, in the Impeccable Incident in 2009 and the Freedom of Navigation Operation in 2015,

Figure 3.2 Missions of the Maritime Militia



Sources: Compiled by the authors.

the Chinese side reportedly interfered with U.S. Navy operations, not by mobilizing the PLAN but mobilizing nearby Chinese fishing boats. They can be understood as examples in which the Chinese side deployed the maritime militia to obstruct and check U.S. military actions and communicate China's intentions while avoiding military escalation.

If, hypothetically, a small country rather than the U.S. Navy is the adversary, the maritime militia can carry out extreme provocations to lure the adversary's armed forces to take military action and justify its own military actions, which could result in heightening military tension under China's initiative. Indeed, in the so-called Battle of the Paracel Islands in January 1974, when China seized the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam which until then had effectively controlled the islands and occupied them, Chinese fishing boats suspected to be part of the maritime militia repeatedly engaged in provocative behavior in the nearby waters even before the military skirmishes. The boats are also said to have played an important role during the war, such as providing early warning, participating in information operations, and supporting landing operations by the military.

By deploying the maritime militia in such situations interweaving between a contingency and peacetime, it is believed that the Chinese government is attempting to place a burden on the counter-measure decisions of other countries and delay a prompt response, as well as to seize the initiative for expanding and protecting China's rights and interests.

The maritime militia's status under the international law is unclear. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea stipulates, "'warship' means a ship belonging to the armed forces of a State bearing the external marks distinguishing such ships of its nationality, under the command of an officer duly commissioned by the government of the State and whose name appears in the appropriate service list or its equivalent, and manned by a crew which is under regular armed forces discipline." Thus, whereas a warship is discernible from its external appearance, an outsider cannot instantly distinguish the maritime militia from ordinary fishing vessels when they are mixed together. The legal status of the maritime militia operating in disputed waters is also unclear. Such ambiguities may give leeway to the operation of China's maritime militia, as well as burden foreign law enforcement responders by clouding their judgment.

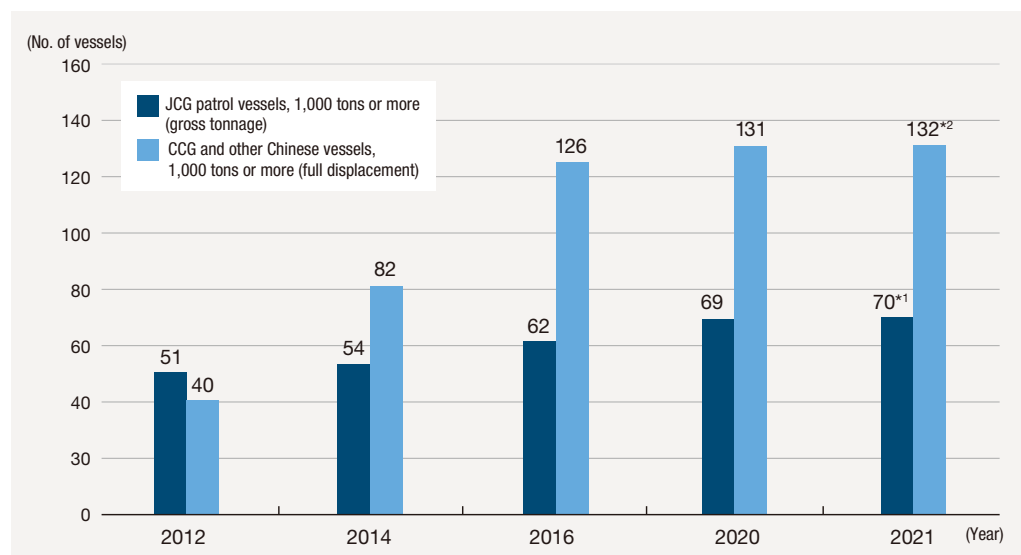
In addition, U.S. Naval War College Professor James Kraska and Michael Monti note that interference with legitimate activities (marine research, fishing) on the high seas and in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of neighboring countries violates various rules of the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (1972 COLREG).²⁸ For example, intentionally unsafe operations conducted by Chinese fishing vessels and the maritime militia in the South China Sea or East China Sea, which create the risk of collisions, violate COLREG's Rule 8 "Action to avoid collision."²⁹

3. Expanding Activities by the China Coast Guard and the Maritime Militia

(1) China Coast Guard: Equipment Reinforcement and Expanded Activities

Restructuring of maritime agencies into the CCG proceeded in the 2010s under a policy of becoming a great maritime power. The integration of the equipment procurement plans of the CCG made marked progress, while larger CCG vessels were constructed.³⁰ In particular, the CCG rapidly increased its fleet of vessels with a displacement of 500 tons or more, which are capable of conducting long-term rights and interests protection activities in the open sea. Newly built CCG vessels have been observed with helicopters, fast interceptor boats, deck guns, and high-output high-pressure water cannons.³¹ According to Japan Coast Guard (JCG) data (Figure 3.3), the number of CCG vessels of 1,000 tons or more capable of long voyages in distant waters has more than tripled in the past decade, a remarkable rate of increase even compared to that of the JCG.³² In addition, the CCG began operating two large, over 10,000-ton Zhaotou-class patrol vessels in 2015 and 2017. Also, the China Maritime Safety Administration, which is responsible for maritime traffic management at the Ministry of Transport of China, deployed a 10,000-ton-class patrol vessel in October 2021.³³ Already the CCG is the largest maritime law enforcement force in the world.³⁴

Figure 3.3 Fleet Expansion of the CCG



*1 No. of vessels at the end of FY2021.

*2 No. of vessels as of December 31, 2021. Estimates based on publicly available information (subject to change).

Source: *Japan Coast Guard Annual Report 2022*, Japanese edition, p. 16.

In addition to building new CCG vessels, PLAN vessels are being refurbished and transferred to the CCG for increased armament. The transfer of PLAN vessels began prior to CCG integration. In order to fill gaps in patrol capabilities that law enforcement agencies lacked at the time, auxiliary vessels such as a cable layer, a mine layer, and intelligence collection ships were transferred with most guns and electronic equipment removed.³⁵ Even recently, more than 10 frigates and other PLAN vessels have reportedly been refurbished without missiles but still equipped with 76mm guns, 30mm machine guns, and fire control radar.³⁶

The CCG has deepened its coordination with the PLAN not only in equipment but also in maritime operations and training. For example, the East China Sea Cooperation 2012 exercise was held in 2012, in which then China Marine Surveillance and Fisheries Law Enforcement Command jointly patrolled the East China Sea with the support of the PLAN's East Sea Fleet command.³⁷ In May 2018, PLAN and CCG ships and a local general law enforcement ship conducted a five-day joint patrol around the Paracel Islands. In this way, the military, the CCG, and local governments are enhancing their cooperation and exchanges.³⁸ In early July 2020, the CCG and the PLAN conducted a joint exercise on Woody Island (Yongxing Dao) of the Paracel Islands, in which a landing operation exercise was allegedly conducted with the participation of the PLAN's Type 071 landing ship and other vessels.³⁹

Following integration into the People's Armed Police (PAP) in 2018, the CCG has more actively spearheaded the expansion of China's rights and interests in the South China Sea. According to reports from the U.S. think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), CCG vessels have taken actions to secure exclusive rights and interests in disputed waters, such as escorting Chinese scientific research vessels sailing for seismic surveys in Vietnam's EEZ and harassing Malaysian drilling and supply ships conducting surveys in Malaysia's EEZ.⁴⁰ In addition, through the construction of artificial islands on the Spratly Islands in the mid-2010s, military facilities and other outposts have been built, and China's PLAN and CCG vessels began to regularly call at Fieri Cross, Subi, Mischief, and other reefs. This is said to have caused an explosion in the number of maritime militia ships regularly sailing in these waters.⁴¹ The expansion of PLAN and CCG activities in the area is considered to have propelled Chinese fishing vessels, which are operating in the disputed waters as maritime militia, to actively assert rights and interests without fear of being captured by foreign law enforcement agencies.

CCG activities off the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea began to be seen sporadically after the CCG intruded into Japan's territorial waters in December 2008. Provocative acts also began to be observed, such as the pursuit of a JCG survey vessel by the then China Marine Surveillance, 320 kilometers northwest of Amami-Oshima Island in May 2010. The CCG's assertions of maritime rights and interests off the Senkaku Islands became routine, triggered by the Japanese government's purchase of ownership rights of three of the Senkaku Islands from their private owner in September 2012 and the government's subsequent ownership of the islands. From around this time, two to four CCG



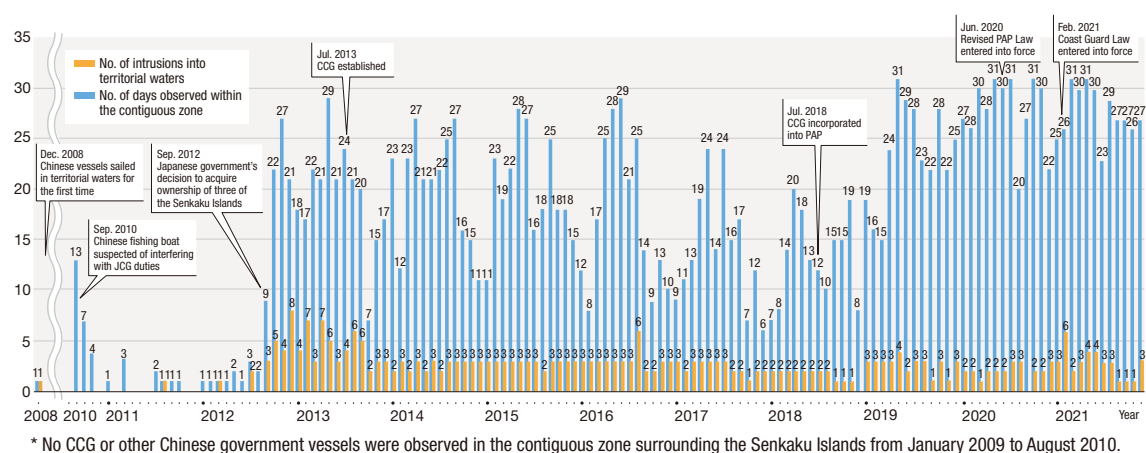
A CCG vessel patrolling around Scarborough Reef and a Filipino fisherman sailing in the area (April 2017)
(Photo: Reuters/Aflo)

vessels intruded into Japan's contiguous zone for a few hours on 30 occasions in a single month and also intruded into territorial waters on about three occasions, marking a gradual increase in the number of CCG vessels intruding into the waters, their frequency, and the number of days that the vessels stayed in the area.⁴² China's Coast Guard Law, which requires the CCG to protect maritime rights and interests in waters under China's jurisdiction, entered into force in February 2021. Since then, the CCG's activities around the Senkaku

Islands in the East China Sea have not increased significantly so as to deviate from their routine, as shown in Figure 3.4, but nevertheless, future trends should be monitored closely.

The Chinese government appears to be using the PLAN-supported CCG to strengthen and expand China's rights and interests claims through law enforcement while avoiding the risk of armed conflict. A representative example is China's use of maritime law enforcement agencies in 2012 to seize Scarborough Reef, which was effectively controlled by the Philippines.⁴³ The vessels of Chinese maritime enforcement agencies (which were then the China Marine Surveillance and the China Fisheries Law Enforcement Command) interfered with Philippine naval frigate's attempt to arrest Chinese fishing vessels anchored in Scarborough Reef in April 2012 on suspicion of illegal operation, and subsequently a standoff continued with Philippine Coast Guard vessels. The Chinese government demanded that the Philippine vessels withdraw from the area and also applied economic pressure by imposing de facto import restrictions on Philippine bananas. The Philippine vessels were forced

Figure 3.4 Number of Days Observed in the Contiguous Zone and Number of Intrusions into Territorial Waters by CCG and Other Vessels



Source: *Japan Coast Guard Annual Report 2022*, Japanese edition, p. 16.

to withdraw, and China seized control of Scarborough Reef from the Philippines. Law enforcement agencies alone were successfully able to expand China's rights and interests in a gray zone without leading to war. It also provided the background for the Chinese government to strengthen the capabilities of the CCG.

The recent enlargement and armament of the CCG could conceivably impact the nature of gray zone situations. The Coast Guard Law stipulates the authority to use weapons as "police authority." PLAN frigates, refurbished and converted into ships equipped with 72mm guns, are designed and built based on PLAN standards to withstand a certain amount of wartime bombardment and missile attacks as warships. They are equipped to prevail in skirmishes with foreign law enforcement vessels.⁴⁴ China's policy of strengthening the CCG could encourage foreign law enforcement responders to become larger and more armed, and as a result, heighten intensity within the scope of the exercise of "police authority" that does not lead to an "armed attack," i.e., extend the top of the gray zone area.

As the enactment of the Coast Guard Law revealed, the CCG usually exercises police authority under the Coast Guard Law, whereas in wartime, it is required to perform defense missions as an armed force under the command of the CMC and the PAP pursuant to the National Defense Law. However, the terms and procedures have not been clarified for changing of the authority of the CCG from law enforcement missions for the protection of maritime rights and interests as stipulated in the Coast Guard Law, to defense operation missions as required by the National Defense Law.⁴⁵ Such duality and ambiguity of the CCG's status are expected to put pressure on the law enforcement agencies and navies of neighboring countries.

(2) Maritime Militia: Support and Organization

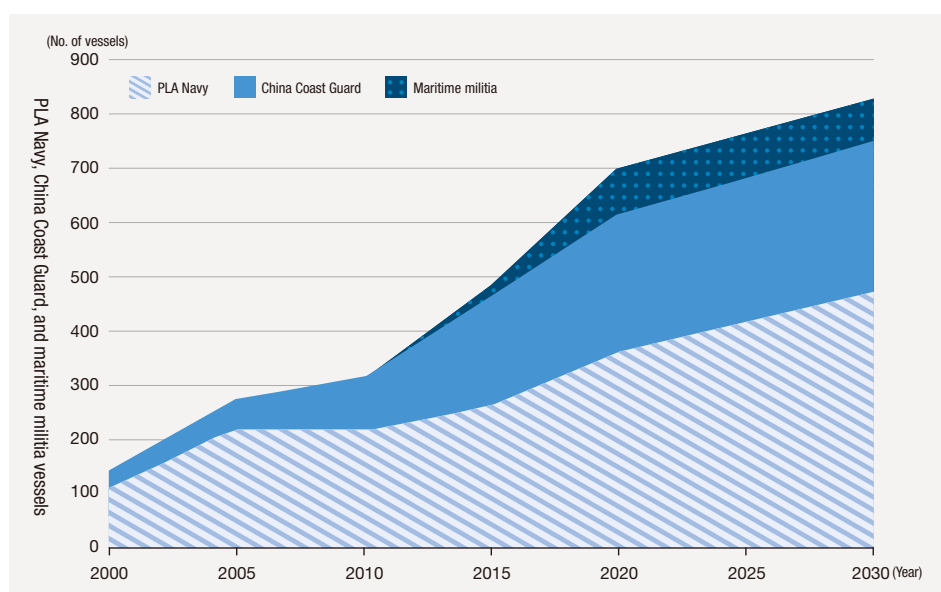
Following Xi Jinping's 2013 visit of the maritime militia force in Hainan Province, the Chinese government stepped up its support for the maritime militia operating in the South China Sea. Gregory B. Poling and other analysts at the CSIS note that the Chinese government provides at least four types of subsidies: 1) fuel subsidies for fishing vessels operating in waters around the Spratly Islands; 2) subsidies for the construction and repair of fishing vessels operating in waters around the Spratly Islands; 3) subsidies for the construction of professional maritime militia vessels; and 4) subsidies for the installation and renovation of communication, navigation, and safety equipment on board fishing vessels. According to Poling et al., the Chinese government also provides subsidies for maritime militia personnel and subsidies for the recruitment of PLA veterans.⁴⁶ Local governments, for their part, have striven to increase their presence in the open sea by providing funds to the maritime militia for ship repairs, fuel, and moving to remote islands. For example, in August 2014, the city of Sansha in Hainan Province invested 2.8 million yuan in a subsidy program for fishermen to move to remote islands and engage in commercial activities. The city began offering a daily "residence allowance" of 35–45 yuan for those who live in the Paracel Islands for 180 days or longer, and 80 yuan if they have lived in the Spratly Islands for 150 days.⁴⁷ According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the

average daily wage of agricultural, forestry, herding, and fishery workers at urban private enterprises in 2015 was approximately 80 yuan at the time. The residence allowance is thus expected to provide fishermen with some incentive to earn extra income.

Furthermore, the maritime militia until then operated by renting vessels owned by fishermen, but new vessels have been built for some maritime militia units.⁴⁸ According to a report released by the U.S. Navy and others in 2020 (Figure 3.5), the number of CCG vessels has increased rapidly since the 2010s, as mentioned above, while the number of maritime militia vessels has likewise increased rapidly, with some 80 vessels already said to exist.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the Chinese government also faces challenges in managing and controlling the maritime militia. For example, according to a 2015 survey conducted in China, 46% of maritime militia members wished only for a political position that came with militia status, and they neither understood nor fulfilled their duties and missions as militia.⁵⁰ In order to strengthen its management and control of the maritime militia, the Chinese government has been installing the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BDS) on Chinese fishing vessels. Coupled with local government subsidies for BDS terminal equipment, 70,000 fishing vessels and law enforcement vessels, such as CCG ships, are said to have already installed BDS terminals. The widespread installation of BDS on Chinese fishing vessels will lead to the formation of the maritime militia and their increased activities, and to strengthening cooperation with the PLAN and CCG. BDS supports the navigation, supervision, and port entry and exit of fishing vessels, as well as provides message communication functions (about 1,200 characters on

Figure 3.5 Number of PLA Navy, China Coast Guard, and Maritime Militia Vessels



Note: Projected figures for 2020 and beyond.

Source: U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard, *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*, December 2020, p. 4.

the latest models).⁵¹ At the same time, these functions are becoming indispensable to China's maritime expansion. For example, it is said that BDS-equipped vessels have already rescued more than 10,000 people in maritime rescue operations. In Hainan Province, which has jurisdiction over most of the South China Sea, BDS is actively used for the management of fishing vessels. Fishing vessels equipped with BDS terminals are prohibited from turning off the BDS function without permission during the closed season, and each vessel in violation is fined 5,000 yuan (over 80,000 Japanese yen).

Furthermore, ever since the Military-Civil Fusion Development Strategy was made a national strategy in 2015, there has been the issue of how to legally regulate the protection of civilian status, property, and information, all the while aiming to utilize civilian resources. In this regard, the military policy and institutional reforms unveiled in August 2020 proposed 58 policy and institutional reforms, and indicated that systematic institutional reforms, including legal reforms, would be completed by 2022 under the leadership of the CMC's Leading Small Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform.⁵² In this context, in August 2021, the Military Service Law, which is superior than the "Regulations on Militia Work" and stipulates militia status, was revised to remove militia related provisions.⁵³ At the National People's Congress, it was mentioned that new regulations on militia activities would be enacted into law. However, it appears that the legal status of military-civil relations is still being explored amid the release of the Military-Civil Fusion Development Strategy.⁵⁴

(3) Cooperation between Maritime Actors

Cooperation among maritime actors increased since the latter half of the Hu Jintao regime, and coordination mechanisms have been further developed during the Xi Jinping regime.

At the top level, the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense is the most important coordinating body.⁵⁵ The Committee, which brings together organizations engaged in border and coastal defense, was established as the State Committee of Border Defense in 1991 under the directive of the State Council and the CMC.⁵⁶ The Committee's administrative office was established in the Operations Department of the General Staff Department. The military managed day-to-day operations, but the secretary of the CCP Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission concurrently served as the director, the top post of the Committee. This position has been assumed by the minister of national defense ever since Minister of National Defense Liang Guanglie was appointed director in 2008.⁵⁷ On the one hand, this represented a downgrading of the Committee's level. That is to say, Luo Gan and Zhou Yongkang, who double hatted as secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission and director of the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense, were members of the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo, whereas Liang Guanglie was not even a member of the Central Politburo. On the other hand, this change in the director position made it clearer that the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense is managed by the military, and this may have served as a catalyst for deepening cooperation between the military and other organizations, especially in the maritime field.

Following the military reforms, the administrative office is believed to be located in the Bureau of Border Defense of the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department. It has been confirmed that the Bureau of Border Defense of the Operations Department, General Staff Department, which had served as the administrative office, was transferred to the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department, and that Sheng Bin, director of the National Defense Mobilization Department, concurrently serves as the deputy director of the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense⁵⁸ (due to his retirement, Liu Faqing has been the director of the National Defense Mobilization Department and deputy director of the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense since December 2021). Jiang Xianzhi, deputy director of the Office of the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense, is the director of the Bureau of Border Defense of the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department.⁵⁹

China is trying to advance cooperation among the Party, government, military, police/PAP, and civilians/militia [*dang-zheng-jun-jing-min*, 党政军警民] or a five-in-one model in border and maritime defense. This is an evolution of the military-police-civilian three-in-one cooperation model promoted in Sansha City (created in 2012) in Hainan Province, which claims to have most of the South China Sea under its control. Party leadership was strengthened in the five-in-one model.⁶⁰

The Fifth Conference on National Border and Coastal Defense Work was held on June 27, 2014. Meeting with the delegates of the conference, Xi Jinping stressed the importance of border and coastal defense in safeguarding national sovereignty and security, and asked delegates to leverage the features and advantages of defense through military-police-civilian cooperation.⁶¹

The Central Politburo meeting on April 23, 2018 officially adopted the five-in-one model as a method of border defense. The meeting recognized that the five-in-one model is an exemplary model distinctive to China, and declared that it has a profound meaning for strengthening the Party's unified leadership in and achieving the strategic goals of border and coastal defense.⁶² In December 2018, Wei Fenghe (minister of national defense and director of the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense) explained the roles of the respective organizations in the quintity: Party committees establish the overall direction, the government provides overall coordination, the military is the main force, the police is responsible for governance, and the civilians are the foundation.⁶³

As a whole, the five-in-one cooperation model may be described as an evolved form of the coordination mechanism among the military (central party), law enforcement agencies, and the militia, and accordingly, a model with enhanced Party leadership and strengthened coordination functions of the government.

We do not know how cooperation will unfold in wartime. We suspect that theater command officers are members of the State Committee of Border and Coastal Defense and cooperate with each other from peacetime. A reference book on theater command-level joint operations published by the National Defense University asserts that military-police-civilian cooperation is a component of joint operations, emphasizing that "the theater joint operation is a comprehensive operation based on military-police-civilian linkages and unification of ground, sea, air, space, electromagnetic spectrum, and

Figure 3.6 The Five-in-One Cooperation Model



Source: Compiled by the authors.

cyber realms.”⁶⁴ As the military plays a central role in border and coastal defense in peacetime and in the gray zone, there will likely be some degree of military-police-civilian cooperation in theater joint operations in wartime.

Information sharing is essential for these various agencies to take coordinated actions. The CCG and the maritime militia employ a variety of communication tools with the PLA, e.g., the Automatic Identification System (AIS), BDS, VHF radios, and smartphones.⁶⁵ In the eyes of the PLA, one of the most important roles of the CCG and the maritime militia is reconnaissance surveillance, especially active patrolling.⁶⁶

Currently, focus is on building information infrastructure. The problem of uneven progress in infrastructure development and informatization in border and coastal defense has been raised from before.⁶⁷ A meeting to promote national border and coastal defense infrastructure construction work was held from October 14 to 15, 2021. The meeting underscored elevating the science and technology level and promoting data sharing in border and coastal defense.⁶⁸ Informatization is progressing in border and coastal defense. At the same time, a platform for military-police-civilian cooperation using information network technologies, such as surveillance camera network and blockchain, has been created, enabling smoother coordination among the various agencies.⁶⁹

4. Differences between Gray Zone Operations in the East and South China Seas

Activities by China’s maritime actors for asserting maritime rights and interests vary between those in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. In the latter, Chinese fishing vessels suspected to be

the PLAN, CCG, and the maritime militia are engaged in a wide range of activities. In particular, the PLAN, CCG, and the maritime militia have been increasingly asserting rights and interests after the creation of artificial islands in mid-2010 established outposts in waters around the Spratly Islands. Moreover, China's activities for claiming maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea have not only demonstrated China's presence; through CCG crackdowns and intimidation by the maritime militia, the activities have also tended to deter countries in the area from using resources in the EEZ.⁷⁰ Furthermore, maritime militia units have repeatedly interfered with the U.S. Navy's Freedom of Navigation Operation. The PLAN, which in the past had no more than tracked and monitored U.S. Navy vessels sailing in the South China Sea and East China Sea to avoid accidental military skirmishes with the U.S. Navy, is now said to be taking more aggressive actions, such as demanding the U.S. Navy to leave waters under China's jurisdiction.⁷¹

In the waters around the Senkaku Islands, in contrast, while the PLAN is nearby and the CCG repeatedly intrudes into Japan's contiguous zone and territorial waters to assert Chinese rights and interests, fishing and research activities are restricted in fewer instances compared to the South China Sea, i.e., activities in the EEZ on the Japanese side of the Japan-China median line, not including the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands. In addition, while there were incidents in 1978 and 2016 in which a large number of Chinese fishing vessels gathered in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, provocative operations by Chinese fishing vessels in which the involvement of the maritime militia is suspected are not daily occurrences, excluding the aforementioned unforeseen incidents. Meanwhile, China, regardless of Sino-Japanese agreements, has conducted unilateral development activities of natural resources in waters on the Chinese side of the Japan-China median line, accelerating the construction of drilling facilities, surveying, and oil and gas drilling efforts.⁷²

A factor contributing to these variations may be the differences in environment between the two waters. In the East China Sea, the effectiveness of the JCG responses and the Maritime Self-Defense Force patrol activities in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands may narrow the Chinese government's options for gray zone operations. Some analysts also point out that a fisheries agreement framework in the East China Sea narrows the possibility of maritime militia activities.⁷³ Furthermore, since the Obama administration, the Japanese and U.S. governments have repeatedly confirmed that Article V of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which stipulates U.S. defense commitments, applies to the Senkaku Islands, and this too may have deterred provocative actions by China that would escalate into military skirmishes. Accordingly, the gray zone operation that Beijing could carry out is long-term maintenance and strengthening of its presence, led by the CCG, in order to weaken



Japan's JCG patrol vessels and China's CCG vessels near the Senkaku Islands (September 2013) (Photo: Kyodo)

Japan's administrative right in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands.

In the South China Sea, on the contrary, the disputed area is vast, and a significant capability gap exists between the law enforcement agencies of China and neighboring Southeast Asian countries. Additionally, there is a general perception in China that its rights and interests in the South China Sea are being challenged (or even undermined) by Southeast Asian countries' increasing control over uninhabited islands and by the Freedom of Navigation Operation of the U.S. forces. Based on this perception, China's maritime actors may be demanded domestically to adopt a more aggressive response. While avoiding direct confrontation with the U.S. forces, the CCG and the PLAN are urged to normalize patrol activities to maintain China's rights and interests in the South China Sea and enhance its ability to respond to sudden incidents.⁷⁴ In this case, China's gray zone operation is to promote its own economic activities in the disputed waters, while at the same time, obstructing the economic activities of Southeast Asian countries. Its means are wide-ranging and involve the CCG, the maritime militia, and Chinese civilian ships.

For this reason, even in gray zone situations, priority is given to the CCG taking the lead in maintaining and strengthening China's administrative presence in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. In the South China Sea, in contrast, both the CCG and the maritime militia put pressure on foreign vessels in disputed waters, and have a tendency to escalate moves in order to force other countries to abide by China's jurisdiction and privileges. Whereas the situation of effective control in the South China Sea is variable, actions for asserting rights and interests in the East China Sea have become routine, making them relatively predictable.

NIDS China Security Report 2023

China's Quest for Control of the Cognitive Domain and Gray Zone Situations



Xinhua News Agency/Aflo

Conclusions

Yamaguchi Shinji

Conclusions

This report has examined the relationship between military organizational reforms and struggles using non-military means. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the analysis.

First, Xi Jinping's military reforms drove the restructuring of Chinese military organizations and strengthened the Party's leadership over them. Previously, the Party controlled the military mainly through political work organizations and political commissars in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Today, more emphasis is placed on direct control by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Focus is on especially the implementation of the Central Military Commission's chairman responsibility system and the Party committees in the military. Furthermore, military governance through laws and rules is underscored. The Party's leadership has been reinforced not only over the PLA but also over other military organizations, and mechanisms are being developed for coordination between the military and other governmental actors. These measures were developed also as a response to modern forms of conflict that actively use non-military means.

We gauged the situation of the restructuring of the People's Armed Police (PAP) and its subordinate China Coast Guard (CCG), and analyzed where the reorganization of the PAP fits in the context of the military reforms. The analysis revealed that the PAP has been reorganized to specialize in maintaining public security in peacetime and easily contribute to PLA joint operations in a contingency, and that the reorganization was intended to strip the state of its armed forces and reassign them under the CCP.

Second, in the psychological and cognitive domain, the military is increasingly engaged in activities associated with the Party's overall influence operations. The PLA has a tradition of emphasizing psychological warfare, and more recently, the "Three Warfares" of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. However, these military activities are no more than a component of the overall Party-state efforts. Although the military activities can be considered part of the entire Party's influence-operation ecosystem, the military is not necessarily at its center. China has traditionally emphasized propaganda work and united front work. These Party activities have increasingly overlapped with military activities in recent years. While the Party's influence operations are primarily at the strategic level, the military's activities span both the strategic and operational levels. The cooperation relationship between the military and other Party governmental organizations is not all that clear. In reality, the Party, the government, and the military may not necessarily be conducting activities in an integrated manner under a consistent system of command. Instead, each actor may be operating under the overarching policies of the Party.

A most conspicuous example of such struggles in the psychological and cognitive domain is the influence operations against Taiwan. Influence operations by the Party and the PLA are wide ranging and present a major threat to Taiwan.

Third, in order to become a “great maritime power” and maintain and expand maritime rights and interests, the Xi Jinping regime has striven to coordinate various maritime actors, namely, the PLA Navy, the CCG, and maritime militia, based on the concepts of military-police-civilian and “five-in-one” joint actions. Following Xi’s assumption of power, particular progress was made in the integration of the CCG and maritime militia into the military chain of command. By integrating maritime actors into the military, the Chinese leadership seeks to create gray zone situations constantly and exert pressure on the opponent while avoiding military clashes with other countries. This is to expand China’s rights and interests gradually while restricting the sovereign rights of foreign countries. In order to enhance operations capabilities in such gray zone situations, China has expanded its outposts in contested waters, made the CCG’s vessels larger and more armed, and strengthened the operational abilities of the maritime militia.

The conclusions of this report offer the following insights. First, the Party’s leadership is critical to China’s external actions. The Xi Jinping regime strengthened the Party’s leadership in all domains as well as over the organizations engaged in external actions including the military. This is considered not only necessary for maintaining the Party’s rule but also for implementing more strategic external actions. By strengthening the Party’s leadership, the Xi regime succeeded in easing to some extent the problem of “fragmented authoritarianism” which was discussed in the Introduction.

Nevertheless, the Party’s coordination function remains weak depending on the domain. Influence operations are one example. Rather than the Party, the government, and the military implementing the operations in an integrated manner under a consistent system of command, each actor may be more or less conducting activities based on the Party’s overarching policy. This is because the propaganda work department and the united front work department in the Party and the political work of the military have evolved separately in a fragmented manner. Moreover, their similarities and overlaps were an outcome of recent technological changes, before which there was little need for coordination.

Meanwhile, mechanisms for maritime cooperation have evolved. China can apply pressure in the gray zone due to the coordinated activities of maritime actors. If the actions were completely uncontrolled, the possibility of unintended escalation increases. Perhaps the challenge now for neighboring countries is deeper integration of China’s CCG and maritime militia into the operations. The CCG may become less of a law enforcement agency and more of a paramilitary organization supporting the PLA.

Second, what problems and weaknesses face China’s use of non-military means? China has strengthened the Party’s leadership over the military and governmental agencies and developed coordination mechanisms. However, they will not function if the Party itself weakens or falls into chaos. In this sense, the CCP can be both a major strength and a weakness for China’s external actions. There is also no robust mechanism to correct any misjudgments that the CCP might make. Information that goes against the will of the Party is not reported precisely because the Party’s leadership has been strengthened.

In particular, influence operations always entail the possibility of being overrated. The effects of influence operations are difficult to identify. There is not necessarily coordination among the departments, making the measurement of effectiveness even more challenging. The departments involved tend to overrate the effects of influence operations, and information to the contrary is not reported. This has caused counterproductive propaganda and information dissemination to continue uncorrected, and by extension, growing antipathy toward China.

Third, it is of interest to see how the Russia-Ukraine War will affect Chinese thinking. From the war's outset, China has closely followed how the Russian military will conduct cognitive domain operations. Li Minghai, a professor at National Defense University's National Security College, argued that the essence of modern warfare is cognitive domain operations and that such elements are manifested in the Russia-Ukraine War. In short, he noted that both sides made efforts to spread their narratives as soon as the war began, that cognitive domain operations are critical in hybrid warfare, and that an area to watch closely is how artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies are employed.¹

All things considered, Russia has not gained an advantage over Ukraine and the West in cognitive domain operations. Ukraine and the West have carefully studied Russian information warfare methods and have taken countermeasures. This has proven to be effective. The United States, for example, disclosed information about Russia's war preparations and continued to warn about the aggression, reducing the effectiveness of a surprise attack and giving the United States an edge over Russian intelligence. Ukraine for its part engaged in information warfare, paying meticulous attention so as not to give the initiative to the Russian narrative. In addition, tech companies were cooperative toward Ukraine. Google and YouTube inhibited the spread of Russian disinformation. Business magnate Elon Musk provided the satellite Internet service Starlink, guaranteeing Internet connection in Ukraine. Starlink was also used for drone operations by the Ukrainian Army's aerial reconnaissance unit. Additionally, a consensus had formed on Twitter and other social media platforms that only information on Russian military units would be analyzed and disseminated, not the situation of Ukrainian military units. Satellite image analyses proliferated on social media, and information was confirmed in real time. For this reason, disinformation, especially that released by Russia, was denied immediately and proved to be ineffective.

Such Russian struggles with influence operations shocked China, and the impression of U.S. information superiority may have been imprinted strongly upon Beijing's mind. They called into question the effectiveness of China's influence operations which share many similarities with Russia's.

Russia failed to win the influence operations and has consequently struggled in the military operations for which it had not fully prepared. China was shown the limits of using non-military means. It is worth following how China is observing and analyzing the Russia-Ukraine War and what military operational considerations it will make.

A final point of interest is how technological innovation will affect influence operations and

maritime gray zone activities. The PLA and other governmental agencies have already begun to use AI and big data and are expected to do so to a greater extent going forward. Deep fakes and other technologies could be utilized more extensively and skillfully in future influence operations. Even in the maritime gray zone, technological innovations will be applied broadly to monitor the situation and share and analyze information. Meanwhile, defenders will need to leverage such technologies. In this respect, technology competition is expected to become a key aspect.

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 3

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Conclusions

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