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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?

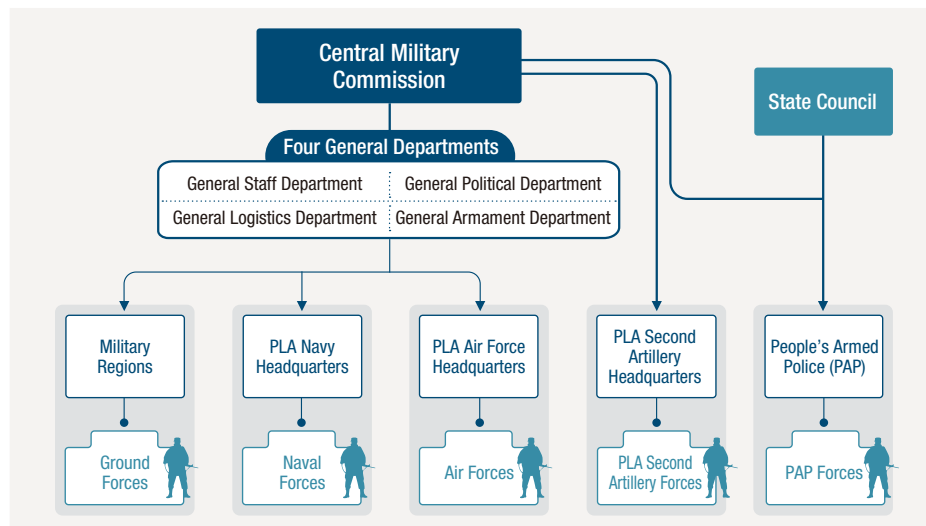
The Xi Jinping regime has implemented organizational restructuring of the military, centered around strengthening the leadership of the Party. Through these changes, it attempts to more powerfully leverage cognitive domain operations and organizations such as the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the maritime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

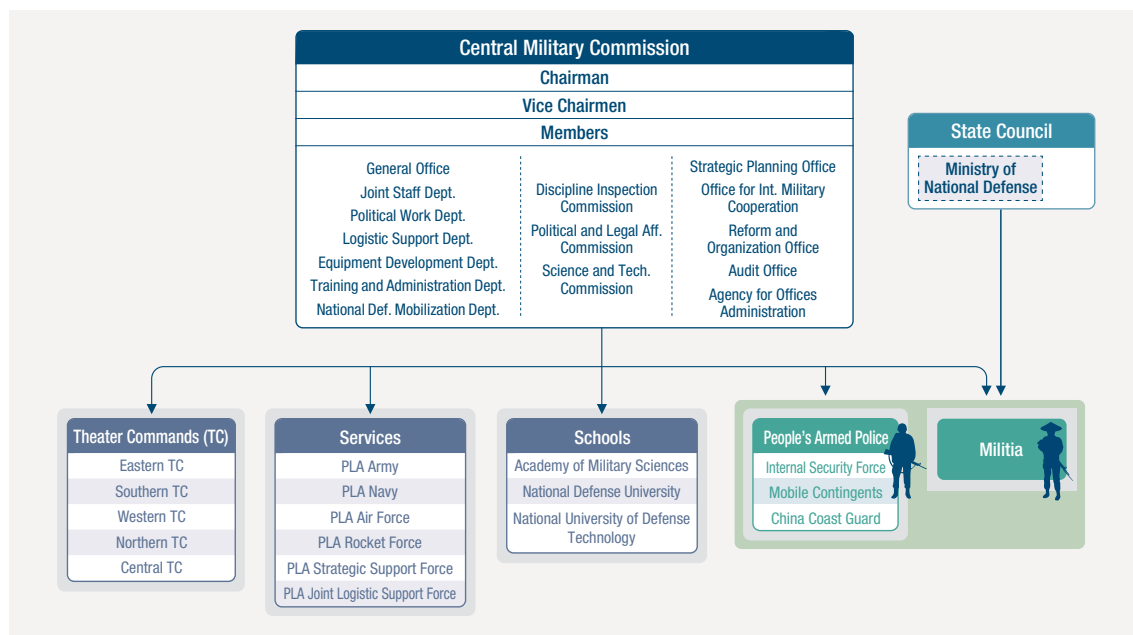
Figure 1.1 PLA prior to Reforms



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.

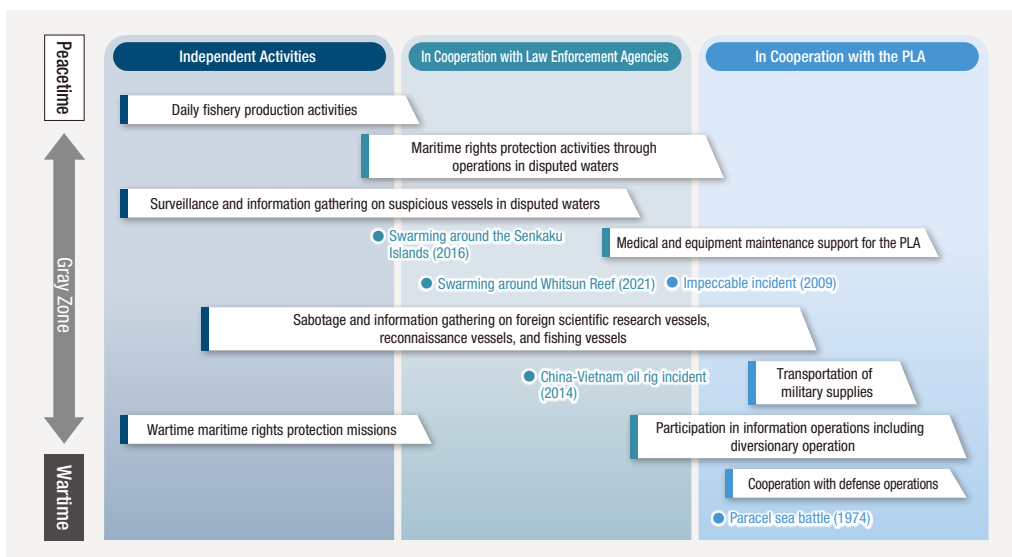
A most conspicuous example of the struggles in the psychological and cognitive domain is the influence operations against Taiwan. They include spreading fake news through cyberspace and personal connections, alongside outreach to Taiwanese people, including members of the military. Influence operations 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.