

Warfare in the Gray Zone: The Need for a Western Paradigm Shift

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Abstract: This paper examines how China's historical strategic culture informs the development of its information warfare doctrine and identifies the changes required for the United States to adapt. China's contemporary approach to warfare extends beyond the traditional battlefield, integrating information, cognitive, and influence operations as central components of strategic competition. China's strategic culture draws on classical and modern foundations, including Sun Tzu's emphasis on deception (Sawyer, 1994), Mao Zedong's theory of protracted conflict (Mao, 1938), and the concept of Unrestricted Warfare (Qiao & Wang, 1999). This study traces the institutionalization of the Three Warfares doctrine and the establishment of the Strategic Support Force, illustrating their application through case analysis in the South China Sea and Pacific Islands. The findings highlight key U.S. strategic vulnerabilities, particularly the continued treatment of information operations as peripheral rather than central to national strategy.

Keywords: Unrestricted warfare, Gray zone conflict, Cognitive and information warfare, Non-kinetic deterrence, China, Three warfares, Strategic culture, U.S. doctrine

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the historical and doctrinal foundations of China's approach to modern conflict, emphasizing its expansion beyond the conventional battlefield into the information domain. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has conducted sustained information and influence operations that blur the distinction between peace and war. In contrast, the United States employs information operations primarily in support of military objectives rather than as a central element of strategy. The strategic objective of China is to "win without fighting" to accomplish strategic purposes without having to fight. As a result, U.S. doctrine remains vulnerable, as it conceptualizes information operations as peripheral rather than foundational to strategic competition.

2. Problem

The central problem is that U.S. strategic planning continues to prioritize kinetic warfare and technological superiority, while China emphasizes information dominance and gray-zone competition. Chinese strategy treats war and peace as a continuum, enabling persistent competition through influence, legal warfare, cyber operations, and economic pressure.

The United States often responds slowly due to bureaucratic fragmentation, legal constraints, and doctrinal separation between military and civilian instruments of power. These structural gaps create exploitable seams that allow competitors to shape the operational environment prior to kinetic conflict. The United States needs a comprehensive system which connects information warfare activities with its national defense plans, because without this system, the nation will lose its strategic advantage during extended competition.

3. Purpose

This paper examines the influence of China's historical strategic culture on its information warfare doctrine and identifies changes needed in U.S. strategy. It traces the development of Chinese strategic thought from classical Chinese philosophy through to contemporary Chinese doctrine to show how China integrates its information, political, and military means into a unified whole to compete with other nations.

This paper is meant to provide a conceptual basis for understanding U.S.-China information warfare rather than serving as an operational plan. Ultimately, this paper will assist policymakers and military planners in determining how to adapt their strategies, improve agency coordination, and build societal resilience necessary for competing effectively in the information realm.

4. Literature Review

Numerous academic fields, including military history, political science, strategic studies, and communication theory, have produced scholarly works on China's information warfare and strategic culture. This review highlights the gaps this study fills, identifies important debates, and places the current paper within that corpus of work.

The basic intellectual foundation for most of the existing literature on information warfare in China is Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, read in terms of its implications for strategic competition in the post-Cold War era. Both Sawyer (1994) and Ota (2014) suggest that Sun Tzu's emphasis on deception, psychological preparation, and winning before the war begins reflects not merely ancient philosophy, but rather an enduring logic of war that continues to influence PLA doctrine. Sawyer's work expands this basic argument in *The Art of War*, arguing that the basic idea of *shi*, or shaping rather than using force, which is part of traditional Chinese philosophy derived from Taoism, underpins Chinese military thought from ancient times down to the twentieth century. This basic argument is crucial to understanding why China's approach to information warfare is so different from that of the West, which has traditionally conceived of information operations primarily in terms of their support role to kinetic force.

The contemporary doctrinal literature uses Qiao and Wang's *Unrestricted Warfare* (1999) as its main reference source. The authors who served as PLA colonels after the Gulf War established their text to demonstrate that Western military power could be defeated through simultaneous attacks on all non-combat areas of an enemy nation which included its financial systems and media and legal and diplomatic and cyber operations. Mulvenon (1999) provides useful context for reading *Unrestricted Warfare* as a direct institutional response to China's observation of American precision-guided warfare in Iraq, noting that the PLA interpreted the Gulf War not as a lesson to emulate but as a vulnerability to exploit. Martin and Glodek and Behrendt (2022) show that the Three Warfares doctrine which includes public opinion warfare and psychological warfare and legal warfare reached formal establishment in 2003 because it had been embedded into PLA political work regulations which protected the doctrine from experimental status and provided institutional backing for its implementation.

Over recent years, research into how China applies certain strategies in distinct regions has expanded noticeably. Examining Beijing's efforts throughout the Pacific Islands and wider Indo-Pacific area, Brady (2017) along with Lee (2022) highlight control over Chinese-language news outlets, gaining leverage over key decision-makers, alongside funding large construction projects as tools tied to strategic pressure campaigns. Focusing on Taiwan, Cole's (2020) analysis suggests authorities there face more than just traditional security threats instead of becoming a testing ground where psychological tactics are refined. Meanwhile, investigations by the Stanford Internet Observatory including studies led by DiResta (2020) and Tiffert (2020) reveal concrete evidence of coordinated messaging guided by state interests spreading through online networks, showing how extensive such activities have become worldwide.

A lasting structural issue appears in U.S. analyses. Not according to Friedman (2023), but because the Joint Force still sees information operations as support, not strategy this sets up a core clash with China's way of thinking. Seen through Brands (2022), the difference fits a longer timeline; comparisons emerge with Cold War rivalry, though today's U.S. effort lacks the unified government-wide coordination once used against Moscow. Into that space step Lawrence (2024) and Murray (2021), pointing at broken oversight across agencies, along with no standing authority to act before crises hit.

Recent studies about cognitive warfare are shaping the leading edge of research. While focusing on China, Beauchamp-Mustafaga (2023) along with Gadzala Tirziu (2024) explore how artificial intelligence merges with insights from neuroscience within psychological strategies. These analysts suggest upcoming military information efforts may go beyond altering views aiming instead at the mental mechanisms behind decision-making itself. From another angle, Fazio and colleagues (2015) offer foundational work in social psychology showing that frequent contact with false information can still sway knowledgeable people. This insight becomes crucial when measuring how well China's campaigns influence mass perception.

Even though much has been written, key shortcomings still exist. While most research focuses on either Chinese military thinking alone or only American reactions, linking these frameworks remains rare. Some claim today's Chinese strategy grows directly from ancient ideas, yet proof through careful study of texts and institutions tends to be missing. Connecting deep intellectual roots with modern practice could offer clarity where assumptions now stand. By following how Chinese concepts evolved alongside official teachings about information warfare, contrast becomes visible when set beside U.S. approaches. Where differences are sharpest reveals space for refinement. Instead of treating doctrines as isolated traditions, examining them together shows what change might require.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative doctrinal analysis to examine the relationship between strategic culture, institutional doctrine, and operational behavior. A qualitative approach is appropriate given that

strategic culture and doctrinal evolution are not directly measurable and require interpretive analysis of primary texts and institutional practices. Strategic culture, doctrinal evolution, and cognitive influence are phenomena that are better understood through interpretive analysis of primary documents and the synthesis of secondary scholarly literature because they are not amenable to quantitative measurement.

Primary sources include classical texts (i.e., Sun Tzu), revolutionary doctrine (e.g., Mao), and modern PLA writings (Qiao & Wang; AMS 2020), which are analyzed alongside U.S. doctrinal publications such as Joint Publication 3-13. A key piece comes from Mao, written during 1938, titled “On Protracted War.” Then there is the 1999 book by Qiao and Wang that speaks beyond traditional battle lines. Another source appears late military thinking from China’s Academy updated in 2020. Each one shapes how today’s People’s Liberation Army sees conflict. Their main ideas surface repeatedly in real-world military actions. From America’s side, a guide on information operations offers contrast. This document, published under joint command rules, outlines official thinking about digital-era warfighting. It becomes the point of comparison when measuring strategic differences.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarship, RAND reports, and policy analyses focused on Chinese information warfare and gray-zone competition. Preference went to recent outputs that clearly explained their methods while incorporating original texts or doctrine issued in Mandarin.

The analysis compares Chinese and U.S. doctrinal approaches across three dimensions: conceptual foundations, institutional organization, and operational application. Where differences surface, they shape the suggestions offered later in Section 6. Though separate in origin, these doctrines reveal contrasts that matter.

Limitations include reliance on publicly available sources and the absence of classified PLA materials; however, triangulation across doctrinal texts and observed behavior mitigates these constraints. Access to confidential Chinese military plans remains impossible, so examination draws instead on public doctrinal material alongside unclassified evaluations of field practices sources that might miss parts of real PLA capacity or aims. The work centers on ideas, not hands-on evaluation, nor does it aim to deliver secret-level findings. A key point made that today’s Chinese strategic thinking links to long-standing beliefs is one some scholar’s challenge; while the article enters that discussion, closure lies beyond its reach.

6. Analysis and Background: Historical Foundations, Doctrinal Development, and Case Studies

6.1 Classical Foundations: Sun Tzu, Shi, and the Logic of Pre-emptive Shaping

Chinese strategic thought emerged in the fifth century BCE with emphasis on subtle tactics, mental readiness, and merging war with governance. Rather than emphasizing winning wars against armies, Sun Tzu’s The Art of War establishes strategies on winning situations, where outcomes are evident even before war is engaged. The often-quoted passage winning without fighting best encapsulates an approach where knowledge is supreme, with success not being determined by physical prowess but by molding beliefs, decisions, and environments (Sawyer, 1994). Even though ancient, it is evident that there was an early comprehension of control of knowledge.

What is at the core of all this is shi both in terms of arrangement and in terms of energy. When a leader is good at arranging conditions in this way, opposition dissolves even before conflict begins, dissolving in both mind and body. Influencing perception, shaping how an opponent makes decisions, pushing on cracks in their allies, building pressure until defeat is inevitable all of these contribute. Unlike in Western thought, which is centered around clear battles and building strength as key elements, this approach does not see these elements as supportive. For Chinese thought, they are the central act (Ota, 2014; Sawyer, 2007).

Looking at this in another way, this dichotomy is the basis for the way in which the Chinese approach conflict and peace. Rather than having delineated moments of conflict, the struggle is one that continues over time in ancient Eastern philosophy. Rather than waiting for the open conflict to begin, the tactics of misinformation and mental strain continue unabated. The delineations that are made in conflict and peace appear to be artificial in this approach. In this way, the approach that the Chinese take in the digital influence campaigns makes more sense. The approach that the United States takes in conflict appears to be one that is based on delineated moments of conflict.

6.2 Mao Zedong and the People’s War: Turning Everyone Into Political Actors

From within the turmoil of civil conflict and foreign invasion, Mao Zedong shaped a strategic outlook rooted in endurance and influence rather than brute strength. Instead of matching firepower, he emphasized persistence

through popular engagement, framing struggle as much about belief as territory. His 1938 essay “On Protracted War” proposed that prolonged resistance could erode even dominant foes when their will to fight faded under mounting strain. Success came not just from combat but from shaping how events were seen at home and abroad. Each clash served broader aims strengthening unity among allies, lifting spirits in villages, shifting global opinion. Victory unfolded slowly, fed by patience, messaging, and unrelenting pressure. What mattered most was not who won battles, but who held support when exhaustion set in.

Durable strength, Mao saw, comes not just from force but from weaving together party structure, armed might, and alliances with others. Because of this view, power was never only about battles; it also meant shaping perceptions, building legitimacy, and managing narratives. One result? A military where political guidance runs through each layer, tied directly into command decisions. That setup persists today in the form of commissars placed throughout the PLA hierarchy. Rather than treating politics and warfare as separate realms, they operate as fused elements within one framework. Modern strategies focusing on media, law, and perception echo earlier ideas once championed by Mao himself. What began as revolutionary insight now underpins long-standing institutional practice inside China’s armed forces.

6.3 Unrestricted Warfare Meets the Three Warfares

Published in 1999, *Unrestricted Warfare* by PLA officers Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui offered a structured view of how China might engage in strategic rivalry without relying on force. Following closely after the U.S. airstrikes in Kosovo and informed by earlier events like the Gulf War the book proposed bypassing American military strength altogether. Instead of matching firepower, it suggested shifting conflict into areas like finance, law, information networks, global bodies, and news environments. Victory, in this framework, did not require winning battles but undermining confidence, cohesion, or credibility through coordinated non-military actions. Rather than confronting power head-on, influence could be reshaped across less visible arenas. Though written decades ago, its perspective continues to inform discussions about modern forms of state competition.

In 2003, the Central Military Commission updated the People’s Liberation Army’s political guidelines, marking a turning point this change formally adopted the Three Warfares (San Zhong Zhanfa) into its strategic framework. Shaping how events are seen at home and abroad becomes possible through public opinion warfare (yulun zhan), which relies on media narratives, diplomatic statements, along with coordinated information release. Instead of physical force, psychological warfare (xinli zhan) works by unsettling enemy leaders, weakening their unity, influencing choices under pressure. Where law appears neutral, it can still be shaped legal warfare (falü zhan) exploits national and global legal systems to justify China’s moves while pressuring opponents to defend their own positions. Sources such as Martin (2021) and Głodek & Behrendt (2022) trace these methods across recent decades.

Beyond moments of open hostilities, the Three Warfares persist without pause. Activation does not hinge on formal warfare announcements or troop movements. Instead, they unfold steadily during periods commonly labeled peace. Their influence weaves through diplomatic, informational, and psychological channels. Over time, these efforts tilt conditions ahead of potential clashes. Even when no fighting occurs, their presence alters how events are perceived. Strategic advantage builds quietly, long before any battlefield emerges.

6.4 The Strategic Support Force: Combining Cyber, Space, and Electronic Warfare

Born in 2015, the PLA Strategic Support Force brought together threads long developing within Chinese military thought. Under one roof now sit cyber efforts, electronic interference, orbital missions, along with influence campaigns not as isolated tools, but pieces of a larger design. What was once treated separately now operates as connected layers of a shared struggle for control over data flows. From Beijing’s view, information does more than stand on its own; it shapes how battles unfold everywhere else. Whether on solid ground, beneath waves, through skies, or beyond atmosphere, access to knowledge shifts advantage. This idea appears clearly in recent strategic writings approved by top defense scholars. Power over signals, networks, and perception is seen not just as another front, but as the foundation shaping every other move made. While earlier doctrines kept these realms apart, today’s framework treats them as interwoven forces feeding into one system.

What stands out is how China built an information warfare system meant for use during peace, able to run complex actions in various areas at once, while avoiding lines that might prompt American military pushback. Found within Chinese strategic thinking is a calculated approach: staying beneath the level where conflict becomes officially acknowledged, which gives the gray-zone idea its essential value in analysis.

6.5 South China Sea Case Study

China demonstrates its use of the Three Warfares through its actions in the South China Sea. China maintained its nine-dash-line claim to historical rights over the area despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration issuing a 2016 denial of its rights to the region. China rejected the arbitration court's jurisdiction and proceeded with ongoing territorial development and military expansion in the disputed region. The United States and its allies faced a critical decision between two options which required them to choose between fighting a nuclear power or accepting Chinese territorial claims. Chinese media depicted US naval operations as aggressive while they described Chinese activities on artificial islands as non-threatening. The message to Southeast Asian nations including Vietnam and the Philippines and Malaysia combined economic incentives with punitive measures. The region experienced a gradual acceptance of Chinese dominance which occurred without any official military aggression.

7. Findings and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Chinese and U.S. information warfare strategies are grounded in fundamentally different conceptual frameworks that shape doctrine, organization, and execution. China employs an integrated approach that synchronizes military, informational, economic, and legal instruments of power within a unified strategic framework. The analysis demonstrates that China develops its international relations through an approach which unifies all elements of its operations while maintaining ongoing efforts to establish international partnerships. The Three Warfares doctrine establishes state policy to conduct continuous public opinion and psychological and legal competition across military, diplomatic, and economic and media sectors through a unified strategic framework. The Strategic Support Force functions as the institutional framework which enables organizations to align their cyber and space and electronic warfare capabilities with the operational needs of the entire information system. China establishes an operational framework which enables all national power elements to create information dominance while maintaining strategic control over the distinction between peacetime competition and wartime conflict.

In contrast, the United States continues to treat information operations as supporting functions rather than as a central domain of continuous competition. Instead of viewing them broadly, Joint Publication 3-13 ties these efforts tightly to battlefield goals, offering little direction on how agencies might work together outside active combat. Such thinking mirrors a mindset long focused on clear boundaries between wartime and calm holding back powerful responses until open conflict begins. Yet in the blurred space China actively exploits, this line becomes a weakness: allowing Beijing room to push narratives, evaluate laws, and apply pressure without provoking America's full countermove.

The analysis yields four key implications:

- military deterrence alone is insufficient,
- cognitive resilience is underdeveloped,
- economic and legal tools must be integrated into deterrence, and
- alliance cohesion is a critical center of gravity.

While keeping strong military defenses matters, relying on them alone does not work. To avoid sudden shifts by China in places like Taiwan or the South China Sea, having troops ready and visible across the Indo-Pacific makes sense; efforts by the U.S. and partners to train together, position units ahead of time, and build fast-moving capabilities align with this need. Still, depending only on armed strength ignores subtler moves already changing the landscape before open conflict arises. When confidence in elected governments weakens, cooperation among allies' frays, and local decisions shift due to long-term pressure from Beijing, even well-prepared militaries may operate under worse conditions than expected.

It begins with cognition: defense here remains oddly neglected despite growing importance. Rather than just shifting opinions, Chinese information tactics aim deeper undermining mental frameworks and organizational resilience needed to resist collectively. Evidence shows repetition sways judgment; familiar falsehoods feel truer over time, per Fazio et al. (2015), even when people know better. This effect signals a need not urgent, yet unavoidable for strengthening how citizens process media. Awareness efforts must rise, matched by systems able to detect manipulative patterns quickly within fast-moving online spaces.

One way to respond involves weaving economics and law more carefully into strategies meant to discourage unwanted actions. Because China turns shared markets, loans for major projects, and money movements into tools for gaining influence, traditional defenses like troop readiness or media campaigns fall short. Instead,

penalties aimed at specific actors, restrictions on technology exports, efforts to strengthen production networks, alongside rules built through global agreement can form part of a broader approach. When an international tribunal ruled against Beijing's sweeping maritime claim in 2016, it showed how legal paths might draw sharp lines — yet also revealed their weakness when there is no way to force compliance. That moment confirmed that laws without power behind them may stand as principles but fail as shields.

What makes U.S. power distinct in the region is not just military reach its web of partnerships does more than any weapon system could. Though China lacks equivalent bilateral leverage, it works relentlessly behind the scenes to weaken those ties. Countries like Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines are bound by decades-old agreements; still, their unity faces quiet erosion through trade pressures and domestic political shifts shaped by external influence. Instead of treating cooperation as automatic, renewed attention must go toward aligning responses to subtle aggression below the threshold of war. Shared messaging, synchronized intelligence practices, and common methods for tracing covert interference become tools just as vital as hardware. Experience during tense global standoffs shows that trust among allies' frays without deliberate upkeep even when treaties remain signed and unchanged on paper.

8. Recommendations

To operationalize the Inverse Unrestricted Warfare framework, deterrence must be translated from conceptual alignment into coordinated, whole-of-government action. The discussion above shows that the PRC is actively engaged in gray zone activities across military, informational, economic, legal, and diplomatic areas, while the US response is scattered among different agencies, commands, and legal authorities. The following recommendations align with the five lines of effort in the Inverse Unrestricted Warfare framework. They aim to strengthen deterrence before a crisis escalates. Each recommendation points out areas the PRC is currently taking advantage of like bureaucratic confusion, gaps in understanding, cognitive weaknesses, or issues in alliance coordination — and suggests changes to fix these problems. To make this work, it is not enough to just add new activities to what we already have; the US needs to rethink its approach to competition, how it combines its tools of power, and how it collaborates with allies to impose costs and prevent gains overall. The objective is to establish a proactive, continuous, and integrated deterrence posture that operates across all domains of competition.

1. **Integrate Non-Military Warfare into National Strategy:** The United States should view non-military operations as integral parts of national security. This would involve the integrated application of intelligence, diplomacy, and private sector expertise. Similar reforms to the Goldwater-Nichols Act, which enforced the concept of jointness among the various military services, are necessary to achieve true interagency integration in the information domain.
2. **Develop Cognitive Defense Capabilities:** Investment in the monitoring of information flows, counter-narratives, and societal resilience also needs to be a priority. Public awareness campaigns and media literacy may help alleviate the consequences of disinformation. The relevance of the Fazio et al. (2015) study on the phenomenon of illusory truth also highlights the need to develop such capacities before the consequences of disinformation campaigns are already established in the minds of the public.
3. **Employ Strategic Ambiguity Carefully:** Adaptive signaling and response are needed to deter competitors that are below traditional conflict thresholds. The United States must develop a body of doctrine and authorities that allow for proportionate and prompt responses to gray-zone actions without a political declaration of armed conflict.
4. **Revise Information Operations Doctrine:** The U.S. doctrine should place greater emphasis on perception management and influence in strategic planning. Joint Publication 3-13 should be revised to make information operations a continuous peacetime activity rather than a wartime enabler.
5. **Improve Cultural and Language Competence:** An understanding of Chinese strategic culture, language, and doctrinal literature can improve analysis and foresight capabilities across the entire intelligence, diplomatic, and military communities. Investment in this competency is a long-term strategic asset currently in a state of underdevelopment.
6. **Strengthen Alliances:** The coordination of the Allied efforts in the sharing of intelligence and the conduct of counter-influence operations is vital in building resilience. It is imperative for the United States to establish common frameworks with the Indo-Pacific nations in the identification of Chinese operations in the gray zone and the response to such operations, with the cohesion of the Alliance being a strategic imperative that demands constant and active investment.
7. **Pursue Structural Reform:** Similar institutional reforms to the Goldwater-Nichols Act could also enhance the integration of the national instruments of power in the information domain. However,

without institutional reform, the fragmentation of the interagency response will continue to create the response delays that the Chinese doctrine in the gray zone was specifically designed to take advantage of.

9. Conclusion

China's information warfare strategy reflects a deliberate integration of historical philosophy and modern military doctrine. Information operations are central—not peripheral—to China's conception of national power. China uses its ability to control information and spread its narratives through technological methods to create conditions that exist between peace and war.

The United States must adapt by integrating information operations into national strategy, strengthening societal resilience, and improving interagency and allied coordination. Future competition will be determined as much by perception and influence as by kinetic force, requiring a fundamental shift in strategic mindset and doctrine. Competition needs an innovative approach because the existing mindset and doctrine do not work for handling ongoing gray-zone conflicts.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for this research.

AI Declaration: Open-source artificial intelligence tools were used solely for proofreading and citation formatting. All analysis, arguments, and conclusions presented in this paper are the original work of the authors or are derived from appropriately cited sources.

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