

# Countering China's 'Three Warfares' Strategy

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Outside military circles, a discussion on China's 'Three Warfares' stratagem, found little space in the media as information of the subject in the public domain was minimal. Discussions on China's military prowess and capacity invariably focussed on China's military modernisation and the great strides made by it in the manufacture of modern armaments, warships and fighter aircraft. While all this is important and is a vital component of warfare, China's capacity to wage information war and the methodology of doing so, which too is a vital component of modern conflict, was rarely given the space and attention it deserved, even in defence related think-tanks in the country. This changed after the India-China standoff at the Doklam plateau, where China spewed venom in its media and applied information warfare to seek conflict resolution on its own terms, without resorting to the actual use of force. This is likely to continue in the future too, and will be a component of Chinese foreign and military policy which we will have to deal with. We, thus, need to understand what exactly the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) 'Three Warfares' stratagem is, and look into means of effectively countering the same.

## **Active Defence**

Chinese military philosophy is premised on what it terms as 'Active Defence'—a military strategy that asserts that China does not initiate wars or fight wars of aggression, but engages in war only to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and attacks only after being attacked. Beijing's definition of

an attack against its territory, or what constitutes an initial attack, is, however, left vague.

PLA theorists and planners believe future campaigns will be conducted simultaneously on land, at sea, in the air, in space, and within the electronic sphere. In large measure, PLA defence planning has been shaped by the lessons it has derived from the Falklands conflict, Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO's) campaigns in the Balkans, the toppling of the Taliban, and the March 2003 march to Baghdad. PLA defence planning is shaped, in no small part, by the lessons it has derived from observing how potential opponents, especially the United States, have been waging their wars.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, as part of their 'Active Defence' policy, Chinese military planners first termed their approach to conflict as fighting "Local Wars Under Modern, High-Tech Conditions", and now use the term "Local Wars Under Informationalized Conditions". Preparation for conflict is based on the following premises:

- Future wars will be shorter, perhaps lasting only one campaign;
- They will almost certainly not entail the occupation of China, although Chinese political, economic, and military centres are likely to be attacked;
- They will involve joint military operations across land, sea, air, cyber space and outer space, and the application of advanced technology, especially information technology.

In the Indian context, an unresolved border dispute could well result in China using force to reclaim territory which it claims, and justifying the action as self-defence. Once hostilities have begun, evidence suggests that the characteristics of 'Active Defence' are distinctly offensive. Advances in military technology provide Beijing with an expanded set of limited force options. Chinese operational-level military doctrine defines these options as 'non-war' uses of force—an extension of political coercion and not an act of war. In the future, as China's military power grows, its leaders may be tempted to resort to force or coercion more quickly to press diplomatic advantage, advance security interests, or resolve disputes.

PLA preparations include an expanding force of ballistic missiles (long-range and short-range), cruise missiles, submarines, advanced aircraft, and other modern systems. The PLA is working toward these goals by acquiring new foreign and domestic weapon systems and military technologies, promulgating new doctrines for modern warfare, reforming military institutions, personnel development and professionalisation, and improving exercise and training

**Doklam stand-off showed Chinese efforts to use information warfare to seek conflict resolution without actual use of force.**

standards. Intrinsic to the above, will be efforts at space domination and the “Three Warfares’ strategy”.<sup>2</sup> This implies the following:

- Use of space assets to dictate the operational and tactical terms of the conflict, by conducting closely coordinated precision strike operations with joint forces.
- Use of the ‘Three Warfares’ to dictate the strategic terms of the conflict, by influencing domestic opinion, opposition will, and third-party support.

### **The Three Warfares Strategy**

This article is confined to a discussion on China’s Three Warfares’ strategy. To set the strategic stage of the conflict, the PLA’s Political Work Regulations, which were promulgated in 2003, set forth among the tasks of political work, the task of the three warfares—psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare.<sup>3</sup> In the Indian context, this could be aimed to:

- Sap the Indian will and thereby win without fighting.
- Attenuate alliances, thereby limiting foreign support.
- Reinforce domestic will.

**Psychological Warfare (*Xinlizhan*):** This can occur at the tactical, operational, or strategic levels. But, according to some PLA analysts, it is at the strategic level that psychological warfare may have the greatest impact, since it may undermine the enemy’s entire will to resist. Psychological warfare at that level is aimed not only at an opponent’s political and military leaders, but also at its broader population. It is also aimed at one’s own population and leadership cohort, in order to strengthen the will to fight. Finally, it also targets third-party leaders and populations, in order to encourage support for one’s own side, and discourage or dissuade them from supporting an opponent.

In order to generate such effects, Chinese writings suggest that psychological warfare, including its subordinate areas of public opinion and legal warfare, will often begin before the formal commencement of open hostilities and will operate not only in the military and diplomatic realms, but also in the political, economic, cultural, and even religious arenas, which cannot easily be done on short notice.

**Public Opinion Warfare (*Yulunzhan*):** This refers to the use of various mass information channels, including the internet, television, radio, newspapers,

movies, and other forms of media, to generate public support both at home and abroad for one's own position and create opposition to one's enemy. In this view, public opinion is now a distinct, second battlefield, almost independent of the physical one. The ability to shape the narrative, so to speak, including establishing moral ascendancy and justification, requires long-term efforts.

**An unresolved border dispute may result in China using force to reclaim disputed territory and justify its action as self defence.**

**Legal Warfare (*Faluzhan*):** This is the use of domestic law, the laws of armed conflict, and international law in arguing that one's own side is obeying the law, the other side is violating the law, and making arguments for one's own side in cases where there are also violations of the law. It is one of the key instruments of psychological and public opinion/media warfare as it aims to raise doubts among adversary and neutral military and civilian authorities, as well as the broader population, about the legality of adversary actions, thereby diminishing political will and support—and potentially retarding military activity. It also provides material for public opinion/media warfare. Legal warfare does not occur on its own; rather, it is part of the larger military or public opinion/media warfare campaign.<sup>4</sup>As an example, the Anti-Secession Law, passed on March 14, 2005, serves as a form of military deterrent/coercion (*Junshiweishe*), through the use of legal warfare. Efforts by Taiwan to secede would, therefore, violate this law, and would lead to punishing consequences. Ultimately, the combination of the 'Three Warfares' constitutes a form of defence-in-depth, but one that is executed temporally (in order to delay an opponent) and politically (by fomenting public disagreement and doubt), rather than physically. It is aimed not only at an opponent's leadership and public support, but also those of third parties; The goal remains anti-access/area denial; it is simply the means and the battlefields that have shifted.

## **US Doctrine**

Despite the wording, the Chinese strategy is not very different from similar strategies practised in other countries. In the US military lexicon, psychological operations (psyops) relate to the delivery of information through various media such as the print and electronic media, and human contact to influence the emotions, reasoning, and behaviour of target audiences. The term 'public affairs' is used to generally inform very broad, relatively indiscriminate audiences of one's policies and actions via the media. The term 'public

diplomacy' is used when it is meant to persuade foreign audiences of the correctness of own policies, intentions, and actions. Public diplomacy works in traditional ways—indirect diplomatic and political dialogues, official press conferences, press releases, media interviews, cultural fora, etc. The timeframe is, however, compressed by instantaneous capabilities for communications and, hence,—and more importantly—by the people's expectations of it. As conflicting viewpoints are likely to be addressed simultaneously across the globe, effective public diplomacy would require attention simultaneously to several audiences.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Indian Experience**

Information Warfare (IW), presents both new opportunities and new vulnerabilities in conflict. It consists primarily of four elements: one, denial and protection of information; two, exploitation and ability to attack enemy information and data systems to include Electronic Warfare (EW) and attacks on computer networks and enemy power systems; three, deception by various means, including spoofing, imitation and distortion; and four, the ability to influence attitudes. While India and its military pay due attention to the first three aspects, the fourth aspect, pertaining to shaping attitudes and perceptions, is not woven into the discourse, despite the fact that shaping the information environment is gaining increased relevance due to the spread of information technology and the availability of mass communication tools in the hands of the people. While the subject is now being considered as the fourth pillar of a nation's power projection capability by the US, Russia, China and many Western powers, the concept has yet to gain traction in the Indian establishment and in the country's military.

At the national level in India, the perception management efforts are dealt with by the National Information Board (NIB). Set up in 2002, the NIB is chaired by the National Security Advisor (NSA). It acts as the highest policy formulation body at the national level and periodically reports to the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) of the Government of India, headed by the Prime Minister. The NIB consists of 21 members and most of them are Secretaries of the Government of India of various ministries. It is responsible for psyops targeted at both external and internal audiences. It functions through the National Task Force (NTF) which is responsible for overseeing the psychological warfare and perception management efforts of the government. The NTF has representatives from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Ministry of Defence (MoD), Ministry of

Information and Broadcasting (I&B) and Director General Defence Intelligence Agency (DG DIA), who is the Services' representative. The NTF's role is to obtain inputs from various agencies and administer the functioning of five media advisory groups on Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Left Wing Extremism (LWE), the northeast and Bangladesh, communal harmony and national integration, and human resources.

The new information environment makes psyops more important but they can be effective only if they are coordinated among all the agencies of the government. In the Indian context, three challenges will have to be overcome. First, the decision-makers will have to understand the complexity of the new informational battlespace. Second, the concerned organisations will have to come to terms with an environment where a growing part of perceptual management must be conducted via private media organisations or in competition with them. The third challenge is to overcome the legacy of institutional fragmentation and diverse approaches to perception management.

## **Countering the Chinese Challenge**

Holistic management of psychological operations at the national level would require a more integrated approach. This task cannot be left to a particular government department and must also be de-conflicted from other associated activities such as media operations and public information. At present, the NIB, headed by the NSA, is responsible for psyops targeted at both the internal and external audience. This structure is recommended to be changed and replaced with an apex body for directional guidance.<sup>6</sup>

An empowered Group of Ministers (GoM), with the Ministers of Defence and Home Affairs being co-chairs, is recommended to be established as an apex body. Other members in this group are recommended to be the Ministers for External Affairs, Information and Broadcasting, and Human Resource Development. The Member Secretary is recommended to be a new appointment termed as the National Information Advisor (NIA), with similar authority as the NSA. The NSA would, however, be in attendance for all GoM meets. The NIA should preferably be a person with tremendous media knowledge, and with a lifetime of work in the field. He could be from the government, if suitable, but preferably should be from outside it. The tasks for this GoM are suggested as under:

- Enunciate a doctrine for national level perception management.
- Lay down a national perception management policy.

- Provide periodical directional guidance.
- Review the impact of perception management measures every six months.

For the Indian Army, three levels for policy formulation and execution are recommended. The first level is recommended at the level of the Service Headquarters for strategic perception management; the second is recommended at the level of Regional Commands for operational and tactical level perception management; and the third, at the level of corps and division to oversee execution of the psyops campaign in their respective areas of operation. No formal structure is recommended at the level of brigade and below where aspects pertaining to perception management are recommended to be looked after as a command responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

The role of the Army would largely be related to issues at the operational and tactical levels. Strategic level issues as they pertain to the Army would need to be addressed at the level of Service Headquarters. In addressing internal conflict issues, the Army would have to work in close coordination with government agencies as the target audience for the psyops campaign would include the general public in the target area, social organisations, opinion shapers, civil officials and any others who could have a bearing on the conduct of operation. The Army must, however, not get involved in issues which are to be dealt with by the political and administrative leadership but may provide assistance and advice if called upon to do so.

Perception management as a war-winning factor is a new concept which is still in its infancy. The Chinese have a structure to pursue psychological warfare through their 'Three Warfares' strategy, which we need to counter through a holistic approach to manage perceptions and shape opinions. Appropriate organisational structures are required at the national level and at the level of Service Headquarters to create the ability to exert real strategic influence, as part of our war-fighting capability and these would have to be funded to achieve the desired aims. Warfare today is about shaping perceptions and opinions to win the psychological war before the first bullet is fired. It is, however, not a substitute for hard power, but an enabler to win wars without fighting and to terminate conflict on own terms.

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## Notes

1. Report submitted before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission on January 26, 2011, available at <http://www.heritage.org/testimony/chinas-active-defense-strategy-and-its-regional-impact>. Accessed on December 01, 2017.
2. Franz-Stefan Gady, "China to Embrace New 'Active Defense' Strategy," *The Diplomat*, May 26, 2015 available at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-to-embrace-new-active-defense-strategy/> Accessed on December 03, 2017.
3. Chapter 2, Section 18 of the Regulations.
4. Dean Cheng, "Winning Without Fighting: Chinese Legal Warfare," The Heritage Foundation, May 2012, available at <http://www.heritage.org/asia/report/winning-without-fighting-chinese-legal-warfare>. Accessed on December 03, 2017.
5. CLAWS Study Report, Perception Management in the Indian Army.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.