

## A “Normal Means of Doing Business”: Chinese Information and Influence Operations

### KEY POINTS

- **While the U.S. is not at war with China, there is ample publicly available information to suggest that China’s leaders regard themselves as being locked in an information war with the United States.**
- **China conducts aggressive information and influence operations in support of near-term and long-term national objectives:**
  - **Near-Term: Regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region.**
  - **Long-Term: Displace the U.S. to achieve global preeminence.**
- **China’s “Three Warfares” Strategy”:**
  - **Media Warfare – Psychological Warfare – Legal Warfare**
  - **Centrally planned / managed by Chinese Communist Party and State Committee.**
  - **Executors include People’s Liberation Army, Ministry of State Security, United Front Work Department, Ministry of Educations, and state-run media organizations.**
- ***Local Impact: Monitoring of YavGOP.org website by at least one Chinese entity.***
- ***Outlook: As the United States prepares for the 2020 Presidential election, and as both the U.S. and the PRC continue to manage the consequences of the Wuhan Virus pandemic, we should expect to see increased efforts on the part of the PRC to gauge, influence, and shape American public opinion.***

### Background

On April 12, 2020, Ms. Donna Tanzi, Chair of the Yavapai County Republican Committee, released a letter to our members in which she indicated that 30 percent of the visits to the YavGOP.org website during the previous month had come from the Chinese High Tech Center in Nanshan, China. “We believe,” she wrote, “the Chinese are surveiling the public to see what is being written, posted, and discussed, and because our website is filled with Wuhan Virus articles, we have piqued their interest and they are watching.” Ms. Tanzi’s letter is a cogent example of how a significant threat to U.S. security at the national level – China’s aggressive conduct of information and influence operations – can have an impact at the local level. The

most likely reason for Chinese interest in the YavGOP.org website, only a small part of a much larger Chinese “target set,” is to collect information to evaluate and shape Chinese information and influence operations.

Information is data provided in context to inform or to provide a meaningful basis for some decision or action. Information operations refer to the employment of a nation’s information-related capabilities to influence or manipulate an adversary’s decision-making capabilities. Influence is the ability to produce or impose a desired decision outcome on a selected target audience.<sup>1</sup>

Information and influence operations have a long history in Chinese strategic thought. China has “a lengthy heritage of conceiving and implementing systematic programs” – to include the manipulation of information – “for subverting other states.”<sup>2</sup> This deep historical experience continues to serve the leaders of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). From the very beginning of the Chinese Revolution, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sought to exploit foreign contacts and audiences to shape the story of the revolution, gain support, and discredit their adversaries. For the leaders of the PRC, information and influence operations are a “normal means of doing business.”<sup>3</sup>

As one long-time observer of PRC information and influence operations recently noted,

In recent years, Beijing has been intensifying its ‘media manipulation’. It was clear that after losing a battle in Wuhan (for more than two months the Chinese authorities hid the truth about the existence and the severity of the new virus), Beijing decided to counterattack. Zhao Lijian... one of the spokesmen of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs... alleged that the Americans were at the origin of the virus: ‘It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! The US owes us an explanation!’ he reportedly said.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Information Operations*, Joint Publication 3-13 (Washington, DC: 2014); [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_13.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_13.pdf); accessed May 11, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2007), 383.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Mattis, “Contrasting China’s and Russia’s Influence Operations,” *War on the Rocks*, January 12, 2018; <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/contrasting-chinas-russias-influence-operations/>; accessed May 11, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Claude Arpi, “The Dawn of Information Warfare,” *Daily O* (India), March 3, 2020; <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/china-tibet-conflict-tibetan-uprising-day-information-warfare-dalai-lama-donald-trump-zhao-lijian/story/1/32630.html>; accessed May 12, 2020. Arpi is a French journalist and historian resident in India. He writes regularly on Chinese relations with India and Tibet, particularly on Chinese influence operations and attempts to “rewrite” history in the region. His webpage, <https://claudearpi.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2020-04-10T06:38:00%2B05:30&max-results=7>, contains a wealth of historical information on these subjects as well as current reporting on the PRC’s efforts to shape perceptions of its handling of the Wuhan Virus.

## The Threat

Chinese leaders probably consider open, democratic societies such as the United States as being susceptible to influence operations.<sup>5</sup> Key documents developed and released under the Trump Administration clearly demonstrate U.S. policymakers' awareness of and concern with the threat posed by Chinese information and influence operations. The *2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States* identified the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security as the reemergence of long-term strategic competition by what it classified as the revisionist powers of China and Russia. "It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model – gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions." While China's near-term goal will continue to be to seek regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region, its long-term goal is to seek "displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future."<sup>6</sup> China, the *Strategy* notes, pursues a long-term, all of nation strategy to assert power through a combination of military modernization initiatives, predatory and coercive economic measures, and influence operations.<sup>7</sup>

In its *2019 Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, the Office of the Secretary of Defense found that the PRC

conducts influence operations against media, cultural, business, academic, and policy communities of the United States, other countries, and international institutions to achieve outcomes favorable to its security and international objectives. The [CCP] seeks to condition foreign and multilateral political establishments and public opinion to accept China's narrative surrounding its [strategic] priorities.<sup>8</sup>

Also in 2019, the U.S. – China Economic and Security Review Commission found that Beijing [has] stepped up its efforts to promote itself as a global political and economic leader, offering the clearest evidence yet of its ambition to reshape the international order so it benefits Chinese interests and makes the world safe for the CCP....[As part of this effort] China [has] continued its efforts to coerce or interfere in the domestic affairs of countries acting in ways contrary to its interests, detaining foreign citizens and carrying

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<sup>5</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: 2019), 113; <https://news.usni.org/2019/05/03/2019-pentagon-report-to-congress-on-chinese-military-development>; accessed May 12, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: 2018), 2; <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; accessed May 11, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 112.

out an extensive influence campaign targeting foreign universities, media, and the Chinese diaspora.<sup>9</sup>

### China's "Three Warfares"

The contemporary version of Chinese information and influence operations emerged in 2003 when the CCP Central Committee (CC) and the Central Military Commission (CMC) approved the concept of the "Three Warfares" in the revised "Chinese People's Liberation Army Political Work Regulations." The "Three Warfares" is a dynamic, nuanced strategic approach to information and influence operations consisting of three interrelated elements: (1) media warfare; (2) psychological warfare; and (3) legal warfare.<sup>10</sup>

### MEDIA WARFARE

Media warfare (also known as public opinion warfare) is aimed at influencing public opinions and attitudes to build support for China's military actions and dissuade an adversary from pursuing actions contrary to China's interests. Media warfare leverages all information-related capabilities that inform or influence public opinion, to include films, television programs, books, the internet, and the global media network. The goals of media warfare are to preserve friendly morale, generate public support at home and abroad, and to weaken an enemy's will to fight. Media warfare is the cornerstone of China's "Three Warfares" is that it sets the conditions for dominating communications channels for the conduct of psychological and legal warfare.<sup>11</sup>

Media warfare by whatever means is essentially the dissemination of propaganda, the presentation of "written, visual, or oral information that attempts to influence, manipulate, or direct the attitudes of [foreign or domestic target audiences].<sup>12</sup> Propaganda may be characterized as white, gray, or black. White propaganda is true information intended to mislead or deceive. Gray propaganda may be partially false or partially true. Black propaganda is wholly false.

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<sup>9</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2019 Report to Congress: Executive Summary and Recommendations* (Washington, DC: November 2019), 7; <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-11/2019%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>; accessed May 11, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, Office of Net Assessment, *China: The Three Warfares* (Washington, DC: 2013), 28; <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/Other/Litigation%20Release%20-%20China-%20The%20Three%20Warfares%20%20201305.pdf>; accessed May 12, 2020; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 112.

<sup>11</sup> *China: The Three Warfares*, 28; 30-31.

<sup>12</sup> Leo D, Carl, *The International Dictionary of Intelligence* (McLean, VA: International Defense Consultant Services, Inc., 1990), 6.

While white propaganda may be attributable to its source, black and gray propaganda are non-attributable.<sup>13</sup> Information in all forms can be propaganda if it has hostile political intent.<sup>14</sup>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

Psychological warfare is aimed at disrupting an adversary's decision-making apparatus and undermining an enemy's ability to conduct military operations by shocking and demoralizing enemy military personnel and supporting civilian populations. Psychological warfare operations seek to create doubts, foment anti-leadership sentiments, and to alter or shape adversary government or popular perceptions through deception.<sup>15</sup> Deception, in fact, is a key element in all aspects of the Three Warfares construct.

Deception refers to efforts taken to cause an adversary to believe something that is not true, with the goal of causing him to react in a manner that serves the deceiver's advantage.<sup>16</sup> Deception depends upon the distortion, manipulation, or fabrication of evidence to induce an adversary to react in a way prejudicial to his own interests.<sup>17</sup> Manipulation refers to the use of true or factual data in such a way as to create a false impression. Fabrication refers to the creation of false information or images to mislead an adversary concerning the deceiver's true intentions or capabilities.<sup>18</sup> The fundamental purpose of deception is "to manipulate the perceptions of the target's decision makers in order to gain a competitive advantage."<sup>19</sup>

## LEGAL WARFARE

Legal warfare (or "lawfare") uses domestic and international law to claim the "legal high ground" or assert Chinese interests. Lawfare is designed to justify China's actions as legally

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<sup>13</sup> Carl, *The International Dictionary of Intelligence*, 6; Angelo M. Codevilla, "Political Warfare," in *Political Warfare and Psychological Operations: Rethinking the US Approach*, ed. Carnes Lord and Frank R. Barnett (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), 79-85.

<sup>14</sup> Paul A. Smith, Jr., *On Political War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>15</sup> *China: The Three Warfares*, 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> Abram Shulsky, "Elements of Strategic Denial and Deception," in *Strategic Denial and Deception: The Twenty-First Century Challenge*, ed. Roy Godson and James J. Wirtz (Washington, DC: National Strategy Information Center, 2002), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Bennett and Edward Waltz, *Counterdeception Principals and Applications for National Security* (Norwood, MA: ARTECH House, 2007), 5; Joseph W. Caddell, *Deception 101 – Primer on Deception* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 17; Carl, *The International Dictionary of Intelligence*, 97.

<sup>18</sup> Caddell, *Deception 101*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Michael I Handel, *War, Strategy, and Intelligence* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1989), 310.

valid and cement psychological efforts to create doubts among adversary, neutral military and civilian authorities, and in the broader international community about the justification of an opponent's actions. Instruments of lawfare include domestic legislation, international legislation, judicial law, legal pronouncement, law enforcement and legal education – all of which can be used separately or in combination to inform and shape lawfare operations such as legal deterrence and the imposition or rejection of sanctions.<sup>20</sup>

## CONTROL AND EXECUTION

Effective strategic information, influence, and deception operations require the capacity to forge a consistent and coherent policy across all relevant branches and agencies of government and a centralized organizational infrastructure for planning, control, and monitoring of execution.<sup>21</sup> Like all other aspects of Chinese national security, the “Three Warfares” strategy is planned and executed through an organizational and operational infrastructure under the control of the CCP and the State Council.<sup>22</sup> This high degree of centralized control allows China to conduct a coordinated whole-of-government approach to information and influence operations through a broad range of executors.<sup>23</sup>

***The People's Liberation Army (PLA).*** The PLA, with which the “Three Warfares” are most strongly associated, is the armed wing of the CCP. It is the party's army; unlike a national army dedicated to the defense of a state and its people, the PLA's purpose is to create political power for the party. As Mao stated, and as contemporary Chinese political leaders continue to believe, “The Red Army fights not merely for the sake of fighting but in order to ... help [the masses, i.e. CCP] establish revolutionary political power.”<sup>24</sup>

In addition to its purely “military” function, the PLA conducts information and influence operations through its Intelligence Bureau and its Political Work Department. The Intelligence (Second) Bureau of the PLA's Joint Staff Department (essentially the Chinese General Staff) controls several think tanks, such as the China Institute for International and Strategic Studies and the China Foundation for International Strategic Studies, both for research and to interact with foreign analysts. The Second Bureau also has used academic fronts for operational intelligence purposes, suggesting the existence of a broader network that could be used for covert

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<sup>20</sup> *China: The Three Warfares*, 28; 30.

<sup>21</sup> Shulsky, “Elements of Strategic Denial and Deception,” 29; Jon Latimer, *Deception in War* (New York, NY: Overlook Press, 2001), 63.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Mattis, “China's ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2013, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>; accessed May 12, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Mattis, “China's ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective.”

influence. The Liaison Bureau within the Political Work Department operates a network of cultural exchange organizations such as the China Association for International Friendly Contact, reportedly shares operational platforms with the Chinese intelligence services, and, according to some analysts, appears to have cooperative relationships with ostensibly private Chinese companies.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to these two organizations, the PLA also plays an active role in media warfare. The PLA controls a large publishing empire, including numerous publishing houses and several newspapers to include the large-circulation *PLA Daily*. These publishing outlets employ or give voice to a number of PLA officers who “are talented propagandists who possess a flair for belligerent language that attracts attention both domestically and abroad, where international media picks up their remarks and presents them as China’s” official policy.<sup>26</sup>

***The Ministry of State Security (MSS)***. The MSS is China’s principal civilian intelligence service, responsible for conducting both domestic and foreign intelligence and counterintelligence operations. In support of the Three Warfares strategy, the MSS uses academic fronts and think tanks to present official lines in appealing ways, as well as conducts clandestine and covert intelligence operations.<sup>27</sup>

***The CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD)***. The mission of the UFWD, in Mao’s words, is “to rally our true friends to attack our true enemies.” While the principal focus of the UFWD has historically been the management of potential opposition groups inside China, it also has an important foreign influence mission, which includes mobilizing overseas Chinese to support friendly politicians and narratives as well as sponsoring research and academic contacts at foreign academic institutions through such organizations as Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) and Confucius Institutes.<sup>28</sup> In a similar manner, the PRC ***Ministry of Education*** surveils, organizes, and rallies Chinese students on college campuses.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *China: The Three Warfares*, 30; Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective.”

<sup>27</sup> Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program: China; <https://fas.org/irp/world/china/index.html>; accessed May 12, 2020; Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective;” Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 112.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Bowe, *China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*, Staff Research Report (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018), 3; [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China's%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China's%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf); accessed May 12, 2020; Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective;” Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective;” Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 112.

***State-Run Media.*** Not surprisingly, the PRC’s state-run media organizations play an important role in Chinese information and influence operations. Xinhua (New China) News Agency, the PRC’s largest state-run news outlet, is the CCP’s “official mouthpiece” and the U.S. Department of Justice considers its U.S.-based staff to be foreign agents under the terms of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). In addition to playing a role in PRC media warfare, Xinhua and other news outlets also provide journalistic cover for MSS officers operating overseas.<sup>30</sup>

### **Assessment and Future Prospects**

Although the United States is not at war with China, there is ample publicly available information to suggest that the leaders of the PRC regard themselves as being locked in an information war with the United States. Chinese information and influence operations serve both the PRC’s near-term goal of achieving regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region, and its long-term goal of displacing the United States to achieve global preeminence. China’s “Three Warfares” strategy – a combination of media warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare – is centrally planned and managed by the CCP and the State Committee, and executed through a whole-of-government approach that includes a wide range of executors to include the People’s Liberation Army, Ministry of State Security, United Front Work Department, Ministry of Education, and state-run media organizations.

While Chinese information and influence operations serve the PRC’s national strategic interests and pose a significant national security concern for the United States, as Ms. Tanzi’s letter demonstrates they also have a local impact, particularly in terms of evaluating and attempting to influence public opinion. As the United States prepares for the 2020 Presidential election, and as both the U.S. and the PRC continue to manage the consequences of the Wuhan Virus pandemic, we should expect to see increased efforts on the part of the PRC to gauge, influence, and shape American public opinion. For China, that would be nothing more than a “normal means of doing business.”

**The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Government or any of its agencies.**

**This article was written by Yavapai County Republic Party Member and Precinct Committeeman Ed Cochran. Mr. Cochran moved to Prescott Valley in October 2019. Mr. Cochran is a retired U.S. Army officer and a retired civilian employee of the U.S. Department of Defense. He holds an MA in National Security and Strategic Studies from the U.S. Naval War College and an MS in Strategic Intelligence from the Joint Military Intelligence College (now National Intelligence University). He is also a graduate of the Denial and Deception Advanced Studies Program.**

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<sup>30</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 112 – 113; Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program: China.