



Fight Fire with Fire: The PLA Studies Hybrid Warfare

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Introduction

Moscow's recent escalation of its invasion of Ukraine has refocused the world's attention on a war that began in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and its proxy war against Kyiv in eastern Ukraine. Russia's successes in Ukraine in 2014 and the subsequent panic over Russian interference in Western democracies' elections made "hybrid warfare," the supposedly new form of warfare that Russia pioneered, a term that is commonly used but is often only vaguely understood.

The Chinese Communist Party's military, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), recently sought to impart to its rank-and-file a proper understanding of hybrid warfare by publishing a series of articles in its official newspaper. The articles were not the first concerning hybrid warfare that the newspaper has published, but the series is significant because such series are rare. The series was clearly meant to be studied by the entire PLA, so it represents the most authoritative explanation of the PLA's conception of hybrid warfare that has been openly published.

The series indicates that the PLA conceives of hybrid warfare as it is commonly conceived outside the People's Republic of China (PRC), but it also indicates that the PLA believes that hybrid warfare is just the way that states, particularly great powers, now engage in conflict. However, the series also implies that the PLA regards the PRC's capability to defend itself from hybrid threats as inadequate. It suggests that one lesson from the Russo-Ukrainian War is that hybrid warfare itself is the most effective way to combat hybrid warfare, implying that the PRC, too, must become proficient in hybrid warfare in order to counteract hybrid threats. Because the PLA and Beijing as a whole believe that the PRC faces grave hybrid threats from the USA and American allies, Beijing may attempt to fight fire with fire by conducting hybrid warfare campaigns of its own against its adversaries.

The Significance of the Series

The series of five articles was published from mid-August to early September 2021 in the Chinese military newspaper *Liberation Army News*. The series is significant for three reasons. First, the articles were published in *Liberation Army News*' Military Forum section. The newspaper is the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission, which is roughly equivalent to the U.S. Department of Defense. Although Military Forum is ostensibly a forum, given *Liberation Army News*' primary role in "educating" the rank-and-file of the PLA, it is better characterized as a section in which important, intellectual ideas about warfare are regularly expounded to the PLA. Second, the articles were published in Military Forum's special column "Research Military Affairs, Research War, Research the Conduct of War," indicating the articles' importance. Third, the articles were explicitly linked in a progressive series that began with the history of the hybrid warfare concept and ended with the concept's application in the US-Russian conflict over Ukraine. Therefore, the series was undoubtedly meant to be a comprehensive introduction to hybrid warfare that the entire PLA should study. Consequently, understanding the lessons that the PLA intended to impart in the series will help one understand how the PLA conceives of hybrid warfare.

The Definitions of Hybrid Warfare

"Hybrid warfare" is generally not used as it was originally defined. Hybrid warfare was originally defined in 2005 as a form of warfare in which an actor combines the tactics and techniques of both regular and irregular forces, including terrorist and even criminal groups. The concept served to warn the U.S. military that in the future, an adversary's tactics would not necessarily conform to its identity as a regular or irregular force, and that even conventional forces would likely apply the methods that America's guerilla adversaries in the global counterterrorism campaign were using, particularly their techniques of disinformation and psychological warfare.

However, the origin of hybrid warfare is often traced to Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, who is credited with formulating the "Gerasimov Doctrine" of hybrid warfare in an article in 2013. But the Gerasimov Doctrine is neither Russian nor a doctrine: the term was improvised by the British scholar Mark Galeotti in 2014 to describe Gerasimov's explanation of *Western* political warfare, which Gerasimov called "hybrid warfare."¹ "Political warfare," or what the Soviet Union called the use of "active measures," refers to a country's employment of primarily nonmilitary means to influence or subvert an adversary without exceeding the threshold of war. Because Gerasimov's article seemed to presage Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2014 and against the USA and other democracies in subsequent years, much to Galeotti's chagrin, the "Gerasimov Doctrine" of hybrid warfare provided Western observers a new rubric under which to categorize post-Soviet Russia's active measures.² Consequently, in common usage hybrid warfare has become synonymous with political warfare.

The confusion of hybrid and political warfare was likely facilitated by their similar emphases on information and narrative, but the two concepts were different. First, their purposes were different: hybrid warfare was thought to be a way that weaker actors would more effectively confront stronger adversaries in war, not as a way that one state could influence or subvert another in peacetime. Moreover, while hybrid warfare was distinguished by the combination of methods

by which it is waged, political warfare is distinguished not by nonmilitary means or nonviolent methods but by its limiting principle that actions not exceed the threshold of war. Therefore, violent action by armed forces is theoretically possible in political warfare, and such could be said to occur in a gray zone between peace and interstate war. Incidentally, “gray zone operations” subsumes political warfare into a concept that better conveys political warfare’s scope of action and its limiting principle, but gray zone operations are not exclusively concerned with influencing or subverting a state.

The PLA’s Initial Analysis of Hybrid Warfare

The articles in the series were not the first articles about hybrid warfare that have been published in *Military Forum*. Three articles were published in May 2019, which is itself unusual, but the articles were not formally linked. This spate of articles may have been triggered by the political crisis in Venezuela in early 2019. In fact, in March 2019 the PLA’s official website published an article by Tang Chen of the PLA’s National University of Defense Technology in which Tang alleged that Caracas was a victim of hybrid warfare.³ Tang’s allegation is an indication that the PLA conceived of hybrid warfare as political warfare, but Tang never clearly defined hybrid warfare. The article was less meant to educate readers about hybrid warfare than it was meant to urge those “shouldering the mission of national security” to “adapt to hybrid warfare as soon as possible.”⁴

Two weeks after Venezuela’s political opposition called for armed revolution in April 2019, *Liberation Army News* published the first article about hybrid warfare to appear in *Military Forum*. The article was written by Chen Hanghui and Deng Xiumei and was the only article of the said three to have been published in the special column “Research Military Affairs, Research War, Research the Conduct of War.” It was also the first article that appeared in PLA media to introduce hybrid warfare outside the context of current events and to thoroughly analyze the concept, so the article is worth examining at length.ⁱ

Like Tang, Chen and Deng never succinctly defined hybrid warfare, but they did more fully characterize it, doing so in line with its popular conception. Chen and Deng’s characterization of hybrid warfare resembles the concept’s original definition in one respect. They wrote that hybrid warfare’s hybridity results from its combination of regular and irregular forces and methods as well as its combination of military and nonmilitary means and high- and low-tech weaponry.⁵ They explained that a state’s regular forces may equip, train, and cooperate with irregular forces, but they seem to have excluded the idea that regular forces may use irregular methods themselves.⁶ Ultimately, their focus on active measures overshadows their description of hybridity, subsuming

ⁱ The first publicly available article to do the same outside PLA media was written by Han Aiyong, an associate researcher at the Central Party School’s International Strategy Research Institute. The school trains the Chinese Communist Party’s high-level cadre; the institute researches and teaches about international relations at the school. The article was published by *Study Times*, the Central Party School’s newspaper, in January 2019. The writings that subsequently appeared in PLA media are consistent with this article. 韩爱勇 [Han Aiyong], “混合战争：国家安全面临的新挑战” [Hybrid warfare: a new challenge national security faces], *学习时报* [Study Times], January 18, 2019, accessed November 17, 2021, http://152.136.34.60/html/2019-01/18/nw.D110000xxsb_20190118_1-A2.htm; 韩爱勇 [Han Aiyong], “内外统筹加强国家安全能力建设” [Domestic and foreign planning strengthens improvement of national security capabilities], *光明日报* [Guangming Daily], April 12, 2019, accessed November 17, 2021, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2019-04/12/nw.D110000gmr_20190412_2-11.htm.

hybrid warfare as originally defined into a conception that is indistinguishable from political warfare.

Chen and Deng argued that three characteristics of hybrid warfare are new and distinguish it. First, they described it as a new form of “effects-based” total war, later implying that like total war, it mobilizes all a state’s means, but unlike “traditional” total war, hybrid warfare prioritizes nonmilitary means and employs them for subversive effects in politics, not effects on the battlefield, in order to “‘win without fighting’ or to ‘win with little fighting.’”⁷ Second, they stated that unlike traditional warfare, in which an enemy’s military is defeated in battle, hybrid warfare incapacitates the enemy’s military by using a “fifth column” and “information operations vilifying an enemy country’s ruling authorities and, in particular, its security agencies” to obviate the need to defeat the enemy’s military.⁸ Third, they implied that this is possible because hybrid warfare “focuses on using means of information to shape public opinion, to direct the will of the people, and to dominate the cognitive domain.”⁹ The absence of these characteristics from the history of warfare and international relations is debatable, to say the least, but Chen and Deng’s characterization is another indication that the PLA has conceived of hybrid warfare as political warfare from the beginning.

It is worth mentioning two of Tang’s and Chen and Deng’s other, related points that are repeated in subsequent articles. Tang asserted that hybrid warfare developed in response to mutually assured destruction.¹⁰ In this “post-nuclear era,” “the best way to attain victory has already become to ‘control,’ not to ‘kill and maim,’” he wrote.¹¹ Chen and Deng also stated that hybrid warfare enables a state to circumvent “the confines of the nuclear threshold, injecting a new option into great-power conflict.”¹² They thus implied that hybrid warfare is primarily a mode of conflict between great powers. In fact, Chen and Deng remarked that Russia has “proven that hybrid warfare is not only an asymmetrical tactic of the weak, but that it has also become an effective tool of the strong.”¹³

The other two articles that appeared in Military Forum in May 2019 were relatively insignificant. They were not published in the same special column. Wang Xiangsui of *Unrestricted Warfare* fame wrote the second article. Wang focused on the origins of hybrid warfare instead of the concept itself.¹⁴ He accurately summarized the original conception of hybrid warfare, but he characterized hybrid warfare himself with the hollow statement that “it breaks down the boundaries between domains, combining and employing many kinds of means to achieve a war’s objectives.”¹⁵ Xie Lei wrote the third article to argue for formulating strategy to counteract hybrid warfare, so her characterization of hybrid warfare was necessarily short, but this did approach a succinct definition—of political warfare:

Hybrid war is undeclared war. The country initiating it will not reveal itself within a certain period of time and will not conduct large-scale mobilization activities. It will destroy its adversary’s politics, economy, and cultural worldview. It will use diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and information invasions to accelerate the process of its adversary’s avalanche-style destruction.¹⁶

Xie’s recommendations about formulating strategy to counteract hybrid warfare were so general that they were both unassailable and useless, a common problem with recommendations

that the PLA publishes publicly. Although Xie's article does not indicate how the PLA would attempt to deal with hybrid warfare, it does suggest that there was concern in the PLA that it was not ready to meet the challenge of hybrid warfare—and, perhaps, that the PLA would have more to say about it.ⁱⁱ

A Definition of Hybrid Warfare at Last

The PLA openly published little about hybrid warfare between May 2019 and August 2021, but in January 2020 it published another analysis of the concept in the Global Military Affairs section of *Liberation Army News*. The section is intended to inform readers about significant military events or trends outside China, so the publication of the article in this section implies that hybrid warfare's development is a foreign phenomenon with which the PLA must grapple.

The article provided the first succinct definition of hybrid warfare to appear in publicly available PLA media. Its author, Gao Wei, defined hybrid warfare as

a unified and coordinated act of war that is conducted at the strategic level, employing political (public opinion, diplomacy, law, etc.), economic (trade war, energy war, etc.), military (intelligence war, electronic warfare, special operations), and other such means through multiple war entities [actors] in order to achieve a certain purpose.¹⁷

Gao's definition fundamentally redefines hybrid warfare as political warfare. Hybrid warfare originally focused on the operational and tactical levels of war, not the strategic level of war, which is generally regarded as the realm of conflict between states. More important, Gao illustrates the means of hybrid warfare with mostly tools of statecraft, indicating that the state is the primary "war entity" in his definition of hybrid warfare. Gao did not mention the caveat of not exceeding the threshold of war, even calling hybrid warfare an "act of war," but the caveat is implied by his explanation of the conditions that produced hybrid warfare:

In the contemporary era, the threat of nuclear weapons limits the large-scale use of conventional armed force; globalization aggravates and drives modern conflict to extend

ⁱⁱ Perhaps indicating the degree of the PLA's interest in hybrid warfare at this time, hybrid warfare was discussed for the first time at the Second International Defense Forum that was held by the PLA's National Defense University in June 2019. 王凯 [Wang Kai], 许懿 [Xu Yi], and 毛丽燕 [Mao Liyan], "聚焦第二届国防大学国际防务论坛: 新变化、新挑战" [Focus on the Second National Defense University International Defense Forum: new changes, new challenges], 中国军网 [Chinese Military Online], June 22, 2019, accessed November 18, 2021, http://www.81.cn/201311jxjjh/2019-06/22/content_9535943.htm. Hybrid warfare had also been discussed at the Fifth Forum for 50 Young Chinese Scholars Researching International Problems, an event held in December 2017 by the Central Party School's International Strategy Research Institute (see previous footnote). Participants who spoke about hybrid warfare include Han Aiyong (see previous footnote) and Lieutenant Colonel Fang Ming, a research associate at the War Research Institute of the PLA's Academy of Military Science, which develops operational concepts and designs operations for the PLA. 徐祥丽 [Xu Xiangli], "韩爱勇: 混合战争形势对国家安全存三方面威胁" [Han Aiyong: hybrid warfare constitutes a threat to national security in three respects], 人民网 [People's Daily Online], December 2, 2017. <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1202/c1002-29681697.html>; 饶竹青 [Rao Zhuqing], "方明: 从微观角度剖析大国混合战争差异" [Fang Ming: analyzing the differences in major powers' hybrid warfare from a microcosmic perspective], 人民网 [People's Daily Online], December 2, 2017. <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1202/c415646-29681721.html>.

into nontraditional war domains; the development of high technology drives the method of struggle to expand across domains and multiple means; and the restrictions of international law impel the hybrid warfare model to become an important option.¹⁸

In other words, hybrid warfare developed as a means by which states engage in conflict without exceeding the threshold of war.ⁱⁱⁱ

Gao's article did not provide a new understanding of hybrid warfare. Its contribution was its succinct definition of the concept, but that Gao's definition conformed to previous characterizations of hybrid warfare suggests that when Gao's article appeared, there was already a well-established consensus in the PLA that hybrid warfare is political warfare. Indeed, the series that was published in the following year hardly diverged from these previous articles.

A Thorough Description of Hybrid Warfare

The series consisted of five articles. The purposes of the first two articles were to explain why hybrid warfare developed and then to describe the elements of hybrid warfare. They were both written by Xu Sanfei, the editor of *Military Forum* and a senior editor in the Theory Department of *Liberation Army News*.¹⁹ The third article was written by one Jun Tan to enumerate the characteristics of hybrid warfare.²⁰ The fourth article examined ways to counteract hybrid warfare. It was written by Xu Yan and Wan Fujuan. The former is a frequent contributor to *Military Forum*; the latter is affiliated with the PLA's National University of Defense Technology.²¹ The fifth article analyzed American and Russian hybrid warfare over Ukraine. It was coauthored by Li Xiangying, Wan Jianing, and Xia Zhenning, whose affiliations are unknown.

The third article in the series is the least analytically useful, so it will be dealt with first. It is essentially more an interminable list than it is an article—another common problem in PLA writings. Most of the “basic characteristics” that Jun enumerated, such as “chaoticness” and “integrativeness” do not delimit logical boundaries, leaving the reader with the impression that hybrid warfare's defining characteristic is formlessness. Jun did mention that hybrid warfare enables one to control risk, saying that a hybrid war is “essentially a limited war,” and this could be interpreted as a gesture towards political warfare's limiting principle, but Jun did not elaborate

ⁱⁱⁱ Gao's calling hybrid warfare an act of war is likely due to the communist conception of war, which is really a commentary on how communists conceive of peace. Lenin accepted Clausewitz's characterization of war as a fundamentally political phenomenon, but, as Marxists do, he believed that war is caused by class struggle. Because class struggle is essentially war between classes, war as it is commonly understood would then be politics by other means. Mao effectively summarized this formulation by quipping that “politics is war without bloodshed [and] war is politics with bloodshed.” Although the Chinese Communist Party has abandoned class struggle for national socialism in the literal sense of that term, it retains Marxism's dualistic worldview of continual struggle between good, now represented by the Chinese nation instead of the proletariat, and evil, still represented by the USA and other democratic countries. Therefore, Gao's “act of war” refers to an action that is undertaken in the continual state of cold war that dominates international relations instead of an action that precipitates hot war. V.I. Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), vol. 21, reproduced on the Marxists Internet Archive, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/iii.htm>; 毛泽东 [Mao Zedong], 毛泽东选集 [Selected works of Mao Zedong], vol. 2, 抗日战争时期 [The period of the war to resist Japan], reproduced on the Marxists Internet Archive, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-193805b.htm>.

on this point.²² Ultimately, Jun’s article manages to say nothing contradicting the series and previous writings while being unenlightening.

Of all the articles that are analyzed in this paper, Xu’s two articles represent the clearest conception of hybrid warfare, so they, too, will be examined at length. Appropriately, Xu Sanfei began his first article by defining hybrid warfare:

Stated simply, hybrid warfare refers to an act of war that is conducted at the strategic level; that comprehensively employs political, economic, military, diplomatic, public opinion, legal, and other such means; whose boundaries are blurrier, whose forces are more diverse, whose form is more mixed, whose regulation and control is more flexible, and whose objectives are more concealed.²³

Like Gao Wei, Xu defined hybrid warfare as a type of warfare that is waged at the strategic level of war, but the rest of his definition is overly vague. Although Gao’s definition of hybrid warfare was too broad, the specific means that Gao mentioned make it relatively clear that he was defining hybrid warfare as political warfare. Xu very clearly characterized hybrid warfare in his subsequent article, but from this definition alone one can only conclude that hybrid warfare is like every other form of warfare—only more so.

Like those before him, Xu traced the origins of hybrid warfare to contemporary restrictions on the use of force, even using the same words as Gao to do so, which suggests that both were repeating an already established consensus on hybrid warfare, one that had probably been officially propagated:^{iv}

In the context of nuclear strategies maintaining mutually assured destruction, the probability of a large, full-scale war, or even a nuclear war, breaking out among the major powers is not high, and even the large-scale use of conventional armed force is restricted. Globalization aggravates and drives conflict to extend to nontraditional security domains; the development of high technology drives the method of struggle to expand across domains and multiple means; and the restrictions of international law impel the hybrid warfare model to become an important option.²⁴

Hybrid warfare has become an “important option”—“the option of first resort” in great-power conflict, Xu later wrote—for two reasons.²⁵ First, it uses methods that enable states to achieve their goals within the limits on the use of force. The “hybrid warfare model” comprises “methods whose destructiveness and collateral damage are less,” such as “trade restrictions, political pressure, economic sanctions, cyberattacks, the direction of public opinion, and psychological intimidation.”²⁶ “This has opened a path for great powers to conduct ‘war’ under the nuclear threat balance and [in a condition of] economic interdependence. For hybrid wars to occur among great powers is thought to be possible and acceptable,” Xu remarked.²⁷

^{iv} It is also possible that Xu was repeating Gao, but this is unlikely because the differences among all the articles that are analyzed in this paper are mostly differences in presentation, not differences in conception. Therefore, the authors do not seem to be engaging in a scholarly debate about hybrid warfare. Instead, one could say that their articles are like lessons that are based on an already published “textbook” concerning hybrid warfare.

Second, hybrid warfare has also become an “important option” because its indirect and long-term nature makes it “difficult to be recognized as the act of a state,” Xu wrote, indicating that states are the primary actors in this conception of hybrid warfare as well as in that of Gao.²⁸ Indeed, Xu reiterated this idea in the final line of his article: “Praxis shows that hybrid warfare is not only an asymmetrical strategy that the *strong use against the weak* [emphasis added], but that it has also become an important method for strategic conflict among the strong.”²⁹ Xu thus revised Chen Hanghui and Deng Xiumei’s characterization of hybrid warfare, in effect eliminating hybrid warfare as an option for weaker, nonstate actors. The authors of the fifth article in the series supported Xu’s point by emphasizing the necessity of military power in hybrid warfare: “Although hybrid warfare operations can force a conventional military force to be overcautious in the gray zone, if a state’s military power is insufficient, then it will face huge risk even if it fights a hybrid war.”³⁰

Xu wrote that hybrid warfare comprises political warfare, “diplomatic warfare,” “public opinion warfare,” economic warfare, “subversion warfare,” and “military warfare.”³¹ Xu stated that political warfare is the “manifestation of hybrid warfare’s essence.”³² He defined political warfare as

a form of unarmed struggle that, on the basis of a political strategy, integrates and employs economic, cultural, diplomatic, legal, and other such resources and tools in order to achieve fundamental influence over, or fundamental change of, the target country’s political system and strategic decision-making.³³

Because Xu’s political warfare manifests hybrid warfare’s essence, and because it comprises his other elements of hybrid warfare, this definition could serve as a clearer version of Xu’s earlier definition of hybrid warfare. It would thus define hybrid warfare as political warfare.

Xu’s definitions of the other elements of hybrid warfare are as clear as his definition of political warfare. Xu wrote that “diplomatic warfare” is the “primary vehicle” of hybrid warfare, saying that its purpose is to force the target country to submit by “exerting pressure” with sanctions and diplomatic blockades in order to “whittle the target country’s diplomatic resources, diplomatic vitality, and diplomatic influence away.”³⁴ Xu identified “public opinion warfare” as hybrid warfare’s “primary way,” writing that it “controls, manipulates, and takes advantage of various tools of public opinion to engage in a contest in the cognitive domain using information that has been devised and packaged as a weapon in order to suppress one’s adversary and win over the public.”³⁵

“Economic warfare is hybrid warfare’s key means,” Xu declared.³⁶ It “whittles the target country’s economic base away, retarding its economic development and attacking its economic supply,” but “its fundamental purpose is to manufacture an economic panic for the target country, thereby shaking its material basis for waging war and forcing its economy to collapse,” Xu wrote.³⁷ He defined “subversion warfare” as hybrid warfare’s “special form,” writing in his most vivid description that an aggressor applying subversion warfare will

establish a semi-militarized ‘fifth column’ by supporting oppositionists in the target country’s borders in advance and, when the time is ripe, provide personnel [the

oppositionists] training, weapons and equipment, and operational guidance, and then, by slandering the target country's governing authorities—particularly its armed forces and security agencies—drive the country itself to deconstruct [their] functions. From there it will overthrow the governing authorities, demolishing the current system, controlling the nation's political power and economic lifeblood, and when necessary, occupying the country's territory in the name of a peacekeeping mission.³⁸

It is noteworthy that Xu's description echoes Chen Hanghui and Deng Xiumei's article, which again suggests that all three were repeating a prior consensus on hybrid warfare.

Notwithstanding the clarity of Xu's definitions, his use of labels like "primary vehicle" and "primary way" is perplexing. One would naturally conclude that the "key means" of economic warfare should be subordinate to the "primary way" of public opinion warfare, but a propaganda campaign could support a campaign of economic warfare. Moreover, subversion warfare seems to depend on public opinion warfare to succeed, so it cannot be regarded as an independent element of hybrid warfare. In addition, there is no discernable difference in kind between diplomatic warfare, economic warfare, and subversion warfare. Because the results of all three are catastrophic for the target country in Xu's definitions, it is natural to conclude that each one can alone achieve the aggressor's goal, so they are equally effective methods of hybrid warfare that can be applied flexibly. Nevertheless, the labels do not invalidate Xu's definitions of these elements or his overall characterization of hybrid warfare. They likely just represent a clumsy attempt to organize the elements rather than a schema for conducting hybrid warfare that is peculiar to the PLA or the PRC.

Xu's final element of hybrid warfare was "military warfare," which he identified as hybrid warfare's "basic support."³⁹ Military warfare "provides strategic support to political, economic, diplomatic, public opinion, and other nonmilitary means through the diversified, non-war employment of military forces," Xu wrote, but it also comprises "direct military action" to "accelerate the achievement of the goals of a war" when such is "necessary."⁴⁰ This statement seems incompatible with political warfare's limiting principle, but Xu immediately clarified what is meant by "direct military action." Xu said that hybrid warfare is "to a large degree" a conflict employing nonmilitary means and that in hybrid warfare, "conventional military forces usually only play an auxiliary role."⁴¹ Xu continued:

It is only in a situation in which not using conventional military force would be insufficient for completing the ultimate task that they [conventional military forces] are employed, and their primary role is to support a 'fifth column' by displaying their willingness to intervene or by directly conducting armed intervention.⁴²

Alluding to American interventions in places like Syria and the former Yugoslavia, Xu added that such "open military activity" is often conducted "under the banner of protecting civilians" and that it "wears the cloak of so-called legality."⁴³ Therefore, with "military warfare" Xu did not change the PLA's prevalent understanding of hybrid warfare as political warfare. Instead, his purpose seems to have been to emphasize that hybrid warfare does not exclude violence and military means. Hence, the conception of hybrid warfare that the series imparted

aligns with the definition of political warfare. In other words, the PLA conceives of hybrid warfare as it commonly understood outside the PRC.

Hybrid Warfare's Foreign Threat and Foreign Exemplar

Strangely enough, the authors of the series never explicitly argued that it is necessary to study hybrid warfare. The importance of doing so was implied by the naturalness of the concept's development and its status as an "important option" in great-power conflict, but it was also implied by hybrid warfare's supposed application by the USA, the archenemy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In this respect, the authors were following in Gerasimov's footsteps, explaining what is both an inescapable trend and the current threat that is posed to the CCP. However, the series indicates that just as the PLA regards American hybrid warfare as a threat, it regards another foreign country's hybrid warfare as exemplary.

The USA is presented as a relentless and devious practitioner of hybrid warfare in PLA writings about the concept. This may surprise those are aware of Washington's handwringing over its own perceived ineptitude at wielding anything besides military power and who have heard the calls for "whole-of-government" and even "whole-of-country" approaches to foreign challenges. However, Beijing's suspicions about America's supposed efforts to subvert the CCP and disfavored governments around the world are as old as the PRC itself, and it is natural for the PLA to assume that hybrid warfare is merely the latest iteration of those efforts. In that conspiratorial mindset, it is also natural to conclude that the USA is a master of political warfare because authoritarian governments, most notably that of the USSR, have indeed collapsed.

As much was said in a recent article about hybrid warfare in the International section of *Chinese National Defense News*. *Chinese National Defense News* is the sister publication of *Liberation Army News*, but unlike the latter, it is not the mouthpiece of the Central Military Commission, and its intended audience is reservists, members of the militia (which is roughly equivalent to the U.S. National Guard), government officials, and lastly the Chinese public, for whom it is intended to be a source of "national defense education." The article's author, the "scholar of international affairs" Zhou An, wrote:

Long before the theory of 'hybrid warfare' was established, the USA already employed the methods of 'hybrid warfare,' seeking a position of world hegemony and attacking adversaries. For example, it carried out the peaceful evolution [peaceful subversion] of the socialist camp through a strategy of pressure concerning democracy and human rights, a strategy of capital and economic expansion, a strategy of cultural and ideological infiltration, and other such means. Seen from the perspective of 'hybrid warfare,' since the past half century, it may be said that the USA attacks from all sides. The USA is behind almost all the various clashes, chaos, [economic] panics, and crises within the scope of the world.⁴⁴

The PLA was primed to see American hybrid warfare where there is none, and the authors of this paper's primary source material described their visions like ancient prophets seeing the work of Satan. It was already mentioned that Tang Chen attributed Venezuela's problems to American hybrid warfare.⁴⁵ Chen Hanghui and Deng Xiumei claimed that hybrid warfare as

political warfare is a part of U.S. military doctrine. They asserted that the U.S. Army's concept of Multi-Domain Battle, the predecessor of Joint All-Domain Operations, "embodies" hybrid warfare^v and that the American military's "new 'Trojan Horse' strategy," which uses "covert infiltration" and "fifth columns" to "disintegrate adversaries," is identical to the "disintegration warfare of hybrid warfare."⁴⁶ Xu Sanfei also mentioned the "Trojan Horse" strategy in his explanation of "military warfare."⁴⁷ Bringing things full circle, the source for this claim that the U.S. military has a "Trojan Horse" strategy was none other than Gerasimov, who "revealed" America's supposed plot in a speech in March 2019.⁴⁸

Xu Sanfei used supposed American examples to illustrate his points. He asserted that the USA conducts diplomatic warfare by "controlling the United Nations and other global and regional international organizations."⁴⁹ To exemplify political opinion warfare, he alleged that the USA "specially establishes news and propaganda organizations" in order to "manufacture pretexts for war" and to "deceive the public or to boost morale and thereby win public support" for such wars.⁵⁰ He also claimed that for subversion warfare the USA employs a team at the Central Intelligence Agency specializing in building "fifth columns" in target countries, and he accused economic and nongovernmental organizations "having countless ties with the U.S. government" of providing material support to oppositionists in target countries, helping the USA to "manufacture economic, social, and political problems" in those countries.⁵¹

In contrast, in the same writings Russia is portrayed as a victim of American hybrid warfare, one that has effectively turned hybrid warfare against the USA and American allies. The authors of the fifth article in the series, Li Xiangying, Wan Jianing, and Xia Zhenning, joined in the accusations that the USA initiated a hybrid war against Russia:

The USA actively adopted economic sanctions, military support [of Russian adversaries], color revolutions, and other such means of hybrid warfare to incessantly encroach on the strategic buffer between NATO and Russia, and it continued to constrict Russia's strategic space, plotting as it did to covertly and completely surround Russia.⁵²

According to Li, Wan, and Xia, Ukraine bore the brunt of America's hybrid war against Russia:

The USA and its allies incited the Ukrainian masses' intense discontent and threatened the Ukrainian government with sanctions, and they even secretly infiltrated and enticed the Ukrainian military to switch sides, and then by overthrowing the pro-Russian government, they caused Ukraine to fall into instability.⁵³

^v Chen and Deng are not the first to make this assertion: a professor at the PLA's National University of Defense Technology previously asserted that "Multi-Domain Battle" is just another name for hybrid warfare. However, the basis for Chen and Deng's assertion was an idea underlying Multi-Domain Battle that war is merely a sequence on a continuum of conflict between great powers. It is an idea that resembles the communist conceptions of war and peace (see previous footnote). China Aerospace Studies Institute, "Chinese Views of All-Domain Operations," Derek Solen, August 31, 2020, 2nii, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2310442/chinese-views-of-all-domain-operations/>; 陈航辉 [Chen Hanghui] and 邓秀梅 [Deng Xiumei], "是新瓶旧酒，还是别开生面" [Is it old wine in a new bottle or is it something new], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], May 16, 2019, accessed August 19, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-05/16/content_233821.htm.

The same narrative was presented in another article that was later published in the International section of *Chinese National Defense News*. The authors, Sui Changquan of the PLA's National Defense University and one Xu Shiwei, accused the USA and Europe of "scheming incessantly, intending to overthrow the governments of Russia and Belarus" by doing everything "from training proxies to launch color revolutions to supporting terrorist organizations' launching of assassination campaigns and even using a diplomatic 'iron curtain' to isolate" the two countries.⁵⁴

Li, Wan, and Xia wrote that Russia responded to this "grave threat" to its national security by applying hybrid warfare itself in the conflict over Ukraine, in which it achieved "outstanding" results.⁵⁵ In Crimea, Russia "aroused ethnic Russians' desire for separation and their pro-Russian sentiment [...] and through information warfare it won over and induced entire units of the Ukrainian military to surrender."⁵⁶ Finally, Russia "legally recovered" Crimea through the referendum on independence that Russia itself held.⁵⁷ In eastern Ukraine, Russia "used the inhabitants' feelings of discontent towards the government," and "through intelligence support and training in the use of arms," Russia prompted eastern Ukraine's separatists to "go from holding demonstrations to [engaging in] armed struggle."⁵⁸ In summary, "Russia applied what it had learned from America's hybrid warfare tricks to recover Crimea, support the forces in eastern Ukraine, and make it difficult for the USA and its allies to effectively respond in time," they remarked.⁵⁹ Incidentally, Xu and Sui praised Belarus' facilitation of illegal immigration into the European Union as a "clever playing" of the "refugee card," utterly failing to see the irony in their praise for the exploitation of desperate people as they denounced America's supposed villainy.⁶⁰

The authors of the fourth article in the series, Xu Yan and Fu Wanjuan, wrote that there are lessons to draw from Russia's experience in counteracting "the grave challenge and threat of hybrid war that is waged by Western countries, of which the USA is the leader."⁶¹ They mentioned specific examples of what they judged to be successful Russian efforts to combat hybrid warfare. Although Beijing will not necessarily adopt the same measures, these examples at least indicate what the PLA regards as tried and true in counteracting hybrid warfare.

While Xu and Fu would certainly characterize all their recommendations as defensive, the most interesting piece of their subsequent advice was that in hybrid warfare the best defense is a good offense: "In order to formulate and perfect an effective counterstrategy to respond to hybrid warfare at the national level, one must not only become able to skillfully resolve the trouble that an adversary manufactures, but one must also manufacture trouble for those who manufacture trouble," they remarked.⁶² The Russian example with which they illustrated this point was decidedly offensive:

Russia adopted many kinds of strategic deception and deterrent measures, and by launching large-scale psychological, public opinion, and legal wars that took advantage of all kinds of information means; by quickly and covertly deploying special operations forces in advance; by firmly maintaining the initiative; and by displaying its readiness to fight a war, Russia ultimately won a military victory without shedding blood and got Crimea.⁶³

Another of Xu and Fu's points was more ambiguous. Translated literally, they also mentioned the importance in hybrid warfare of "frightening with the threat of force," but the word with which they expressed this point is the same that is used for "deterrence" as the term is

understood in Western international relations theory.⁶⁴ The example with which they illustrated this point is when Russia held military exercises in the Black Sea and thereby supposedly prevented the U.S. military from entering the sea to “exert pressure” on Russia.⁶⁵ The use of this example suggests that Xu and Fu meant deterrence, but even so, mentioning the importance of deterrence would not outbalance their previous advice.

Xu and Fu recommended cooperating with “partner countries” to detect and counteract hybrid threats, but the rest of their recommendations were domestically focused—and quite vague. Because hybrid warfare threatens everything from “political security” and “national territory” to “cultural” and even “ecological” security, they recommended building an “early warning system for hybrid warfare threats so that information with symptoms of hybrid warfare can be discovered in time from each domain and each front.”⁶⁶ They advocated combining “the power of relevant national organs, social organizations, and even individuals” in order to respond to hybrid threats, and they emphasized the importance of “a single national command structure” to coordinate the response.⁶⁷

Xu and Fu also emphasized the importance of ideological security. They reasoned that because an adversary applying hybrid warfare seeks to cause ideological divergence, the “most basic means” of responding is to “establish for one’s own country a system of mainstream ideology and values, to promote patriotism, and to condense the will of the people, thereby maintaining the stability of the national and social systems as well as that of public consciousness.”⁶⁸ They hazily recommended maintaining “the initiative and speech power [narrative power]” in the “full-spectrum information and cognitive domains” and “melting and repulsing” the adversary’s disinformation, but the Russian example that they raised was more concrete. They mentioned the importance that Moscow attaches to the “patriotic education” of Russia’s youth and that Putin apparently declared in 2020 that patriotism is “modern society’s only possible ideology.” In short, most of their recommendations can be reduced to increasing surveillance and tightening control over society.

Similar recommendations were made in another article that was published in the Mobilization section of *Chinese National Defense News*. The author, one Yu Junnan, recommended expanding the militia, “breaking” the age restrictions on service, and implementing incentives so that people providing network security in “all walks of life” could join the militia to construct a “firewall” that would ensure “information security.”⁶⁹

However, most of Yu’s advice focused on mobilizing the entire country. He, too, recommended building an “early warning system for hybrid threats.”⁷⁰ He also recommended launching an intensive campaign to educate the masses in the Total National Security Outlook,^{vi} a recommendation that has the benefit of already being policy.⁷¹ Beijing has promoted the Total National Security Outlook since 2014. It binds almost every aspect of China’s domestic affairs, including things like culture and ecology, together with China’s international security into a holistic view of national security. Yu advocated making national security central to life in China:

^{vi} This is usually translated into English as the “Overall National Security Outlook” or the “Comprehensive National Security Outlook,” but “Total National Security Outlook” better expresses the nuance of the Chinese adjective as well as the total nature of the doctrine.

One must be good at observing and analyzing problems from the perspectives of national defense and national security. One must be good at discovering and discriminating in political, economic, and cultural life—and even in daily life—people and things that will affect national security and harm the interests of national defense.⁷²

Yu frequently referenced “demon-revealing mirrors” and “the eighteen kinds of weapons” for counteracting hybrid warfare, but rather than this being a coded means of concealing the true meaning of his recommendations from non-Chinese readers, these references likely conceal his lack of any specific recommendations in the first place. However, it is understandable why Yu and Xu and Fu were unable to articulate many specific countermeasures and resorted to a vague “whole-of-country” approach. Although hybrid or political warfare is simple to define, it is almost impossible to discern because political warfare’s limiting principle is not that limiting. And devising countermeasures against an indiscernible threat is almost impossible. Those who would proactively counteract hybrid warfare must proceed from the assumption that their adversary’s every action is part of a coordinated campaign of subversion, that malice underlies every foreign interaction, and that peril lurks in popular culture and social media posts. The proactive defender against hybrid warfare is a paranoiac.

These authors’ main concern is disinformation, but the best defense against disinformation would undermine the CCP’s rule. Because political warfare’s objective is the “hearts and minds” of the people in the adversary country, the solution to hybrid threats such as disinformation lies with the people. Like a populace that has been inoculated against a virus, an informed and media-literate populace that can freely debate any and all ideas will defeat disinformation most efficiently. But it is not disinformation that Beijing fears; the CCP’s rule is founded on lies. Beijing fears the truth, which is why it will not countenance a marketplace of ideas. Consequently, it is left with the suboptimal strategy of intensifying surveillance and tightening control over the Chinese people. Throughout the past two decades Beijing has censored media and “guided” public opinion with increasing subtlety and, presumably, effectiveness, but these efforts nevertheless amount to surveillance and control. Whether Beijing would ultimately succeed in counteracting hybrid warfare by following the authors’ recommendations or not, following their recommendations will cost even more resources and effort that could otherwise be applied in the pursuit of external goals.

Conclusion

The series that was analyzed in this paper represents the clearest and most authoritative exposition of the PLA’s conception of hybrid warfare that has been openly published. Because the PLA’s conception of hybrid warfare aligns with the common conception of hybrid warfare as political warfare, it can be concluded that there is nothing in the PLA’s conception that is peculiar to the PLA or to China. Indeed, the PLA has treated hybrid warfare as a foreign concept, and it has not identified anything about hybrid warfare that is Chinese—even as Sun Tzu’s most famous aphorism, to win without fighting, was often quoted to encapsulate hybrid warfare’s purpose.⁷³

However, this does not mean that Beijing is not a practitioner of hybrid or political warfare. There are several plausible reasons why the PLA seems not to recognize the PRC as a practitioner. Given that the PLA seems to accept the common conception of hybrid warfare, it is very likely that the PLA actually regards hybrid warfare as something new and therefore just assumes that the

PRC does not practice it. Outside the PRC it is generally accepted that hybrid warfare is a new kind of warfare, so it would be natural for the PLA to accept this idea. Of course, it is very unlikely that the authors would publicly acknowledge current political warfare by the PRC—if they are even aware of it. However, Chinese history, including the history of the Chinese Civil War, should provide Chinese and even Chinese communist examples of hybrid warfare, but the authors will not find such examples if they believe that hybrid warfare is new.

Hybrid warfare's negative association with the supposed subversive activities of the concept's originator, the USA, may increase the difficulty of acknowledging Chinese political warfare. Nevertheless, hybrid warfare's stigma cannot be too strong: the PLA seems to admire Russian hybrid warfare after all. Ultimately, it is not the means or even the purpose of hybrid warfare that are objectionable; it is the practitioner. Beijing is practiced at justifying belligerence as self-defense.

Be that as it may, it is likely that the PLA considers the PRC's capability to counteract and apply this "new" kind of warfare to be inadequate. This may surprise those who assume that Sun Tzu's aforementioned aphorism defines the Chinese way of war, but the PLA would not have published a rare series to educate the force about hybrid warfare if it thought otherwise. Therefore, even if the PLA recognizes Beijing's own efforts in political warfare as being such, the PRC's defense establishment may perceive those efforts as being insufficient and/or uncoordinated. The series thus resembles Gerasimov's 2013 article in another respect: although it does not articulate a Chinese communist doctrine of hybrid warfare, it still implies that the PRC must become proficient in hybrid warfare.

The PLA is likely to consider proficiency in hybrid warfare to be imperative because it regards the development of hybrid warfare to be an ineluctable trend. According to the series, hybrid warfare is not just the way that states, particularly great powers, now engage in conflict; it is an acceptable way to do so, and it is the best way to counteract hybrid threats, as Russia's "positive" example proves. And just because America is not really waging a hybrid war against China does not mean that Beijing, like Moscow, does not sincerely believe that it faces grave hybrid threats from the USA. Years of attempts to convince Beijing otherwise have failed to allay Beijing's fear because paranoia is built into the CCP's rule. Beijing's paranoia can serve as a weapon in the hands of the USA and American allies in their competition with China. Exploiting Beijing's paranoia in a real campaign of political warfare may be their best hope for distracting Beijing and avoiding a war with China, but they cannot hope to take advantage of it at some later time when war seems imminent. The capability to do so effectively can only be developed over time.

Assuming that Beijing follows the recommendations in the series, given its paranoia, it will apply hybrid warfare against the USA and American allies regardless of whether it is actually provoked or not. Moscow's current difficulties in achieving its goals in Ukraine may cause the Russian example to lose its luster, but they may also reinforce the attractiveness—or the necessity—of hybrid warfare in Beijing's eyes because Russia's escalation of its invasion is hardly hybrid. It could be interpreted as a deviation from Moscow's earlier path of success.

Although Chinese disinformation should not be neglected, the greater danger is that Beijing will learn the real lessons from Moscow's past success. Moscow's success in 2014 cannot be attributed to disinformation and covert action. Moscow may have deceived the Russian people and fellow travelers abroad, but the complete concealment of Moscow's hand in events would have actually undermined its efforts. It is precisely because Moscow's hand was obvious that the West was reluctant to forcefully defend Ukraine from Russian predations. The USA and American allies did not deem it to be in their interests to fight Russia over Ukrainian territory, and Moscow almost certainly presumed as much. It seems that the series was correct that military power is essential to an effective hybrid warfare campaign.

Hence, the stronger the PLA becomes, the more tempting it may become for Beijing to attempt to replicate Moscow's past success, perhaps doing so in places like Taiwanese islands that are near the coast of the mainland. Like Moscow, if Beijing succeeds in taking those islands, it is reasonable to assume that it will up the ante and play another round by invading Taiwan proper, perhaps underestimating America's determination to oppose it and/or overestimating its own capabilities. The result would be disastrous just the same. Therefore, it is imperative that Washington clarify what it is determined to fight for, and under what conditions, in East Asia in order to prevent such an eventuality. It is also crucial for Washington make the case to the American people for defending those interests and be honest with the people about the potential costs of doing so. Another lesson of the Russo-Ukrainian War is that the postwar international order cannot be taken for granted, and it will take another great power like the USA to defend it. But that defense will not come cheap, so it will require a different kind of "whole-of-country" effort to defend Pax Americana.

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. Cleared for public release: distribution unlimited.

Notes

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