



The Chinese Communist Party's Theory of Hybrid Warfare

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Key Takeaways

- Chinese Communist Party (CCP) military theorists frame hybrid warfare as how countries deploy all aspects of physical and non-physical state power, including civil society, to confront an adversary indirectly. They also view it as a means of confronting great powers within an interconnected and globalized world.
- The available CCP publications indicate that hybrid warfare accepts the premise of systems confrontation that warfare is a contest of comprehensive national strength. The publications suggest that hybrid warfare departs from systems confrontation in that it does not definitionally accept the emphasis on nested systems as the way to view warfare, however.
- The PRC is fighting a hybrid war for Taiwan by nesting it within a hybrid war against the United States. The hybrid war against the United States also targets American regional allies, such as Japan and the Philippines, to degrade the image of the American-led security architecture as providing regional stability.

Introduction

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) military theorists frame hybrid warfare as how countries deploy all aspects of physical and non-physical state power, including civil society, to confront an adversary indirectly. They also view it as a means of confronting great powers within an interconnected and globalized world. Their framing presents hybrid warfare as a competition of holistic comprehensive strength. The theorists use the concept to challenge the primacy of systems confrontation thought, which was the dominant CCP framework throughout the 2000s and early 2010s.

This framework incorporates what US policymakers refer to as hybrid warfare and “gray zone” activities, such as public opinion manipulation or the deployment of irregular forces.¹ The CCP military theorists place the concepts in a broader strategic framework that emphasizes coordination across domains and government organizations to wage war. This differs from the US conceptions that focus on tactical actions short of war.

US policies based on collaborating with, competing with, and confronting the PRC where necessary must contend with the CCP’s view that competition in countries around the PRC is a form of hybrid warfare confrontation rather than competition.² US explanations that the CCP is operating in a “gray zone” or using “hybrid threats” do not account for this. They fail to nest the party’s actions into a larger conceptualization of how the party employs coercion to achieve its political objectives. Understanding hybrid warfare on the party theorists’ terms will inform decision-making about holistically countering the CCP’s coercive aims without needing to respond to each of the party’s coercive actions.

CCP Hybrid Warfare Theory

The predominant view among CCP military theorists is that hybrid warfare is how countries deploy all aspects of physical and non-physical state power, including civil society, to indirectly confront an adversary.³ The military theorist Gao Wei captured the breadth of this concept when he provided the CCP's first precise definition of hybrid warfare in a state-sanctioned Ministry of National Defense-affiliated press outlet in 2020.

[Hybrid warfare is] “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 warfare, electronic warfare, special operations), and other such means.”⁴

Gao's use of the term 'strategic' is in the context of a discussion around Russia's military interventions in Syria and Ukraine in the 2010s, which aimed to achieve Russian political objectives. This context indicates that Gao's understanding of the term roughly corresponds to the strategic level of war, which regards the use of all forces available in a given theater to achieve all of the goals within that theater. No CCP theorist explicitly uses the levels of war framework when discussing hybrid warfare, however.

- The US military defines the strategic level of war as the level that includes national policy and theater strategy. "At the strategic level, a nation often determines the national guidance that addresses strategic objectives in support of strategic end states and uses national resources to achieve them."⁵

That at least some CCP organizations, such as the Chinese Electronics Chamber of Commerce, have repeated this definition in their work indicates a degree of consensus within party bureaucracy around Gao's conceptualization.⁶ A recent statement from a People's Liberation Army (PLA) commander reinforces this point. PLA Western Theater Commander Wang Haijiang, who has commanded in various capacities in western China, since the mid-2010s, published an article in May 2023 that echoed Gao's definition of hybrid war.⁷

Other CCP military theorists provide insight into how the party views the concept of hybrid warfare by elaborating on how to implement the concept. The perspectives that the theorists publish indicate that the party views vying for influence with the United States in geographically or politically important third-party countries on the People's Republic of China's (PRC) periphery as hybrid warfare. The theorists are representative of party thinking insofar as they either teach the elite party cadre or publish in widely distributed military-affiliated publications.

- Han Aiyong views the goal of hybrid warfare as destabilizing great powers along their peripheries without directly targeting the great powers.⁸ A hybrid war does not have to conquer territory but wins over the populace, slowly degrading the surrounding security environment of a great power.⁹ Han is a researcher at the Central Party School's International Strategy Research Institute, one of the organizations that train the party elite on international relations. His role presents him with the opportunity to impart his views to the elite party cadre.
- PLA-affiliated *Liberation Army News* theory department editor Xu Sanfei stated the common argument among CCP theorists that the interconnected nature of globalization opens a path for indirect means of confrontation between major powers.¹⁰ Interconnectedness enables weak and strong countries alike to compete via hybrid warfare through all means available to the state.¹¹ He also noted that hybrid warfare emerged because major powers with nuclear weapons and large armies make

substantial direct conflict between such powers' conventional military forces a lesser possibility.¹²

- The official PLA website published an article stating that traditional military force forms the backbone of hybrid warfare even though large-scale battles are not the main avenue of competition.¹³ Irregular units and fifth-column subversion of an enemy society mutually reinforce non-kinetic means to wage war.¹⁴ The military section of the CCP media outlet *People's Daily* also wrote how non-kinetic means such as economic, diplomatic, cognitive, legal, cyber, and public opinion intertwine with kinetic activity to wage hybrid war.¹⁵ These articles demonstrate that the CCP's much-publicized "three warfares" (public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare) are means to conduct hybrid warfare.¹⁶

The CCP theorists elaborate on the use of hybrid warfare with reference to how they argue the United States and Russia have used it. This includes the importance of a veneer of legal justification in hybrid warfare. The legal justification can range from claims to uphold principles of international law to explicit requests for intervention from a host government. The theorists also explain that a country can use hybrid warfare for offensive or defensive purposes, but do not articulate differences between the uses in terms of implementation or efficacy. Labeling a hybrid war offensive or defensive is a normative statement by the CCP rather than an articulation of different categories of warfare. Notably, there have been few public-facing articles on hybrid warfare since the start of Russia's ongoing full-scale conventional invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

- Gao Wei emphasized how Russia justified its military interventions in Syria and Ukraine by claiming to legally intervene at the request of the host country throughout the 2010s. He also cited the example of Russia holding a referendum after occupying Crimea to formally incorporate it into Russia.¹⁷ An official PLA website also stressed the importance of legal justifications, such as freedom of navigation operations, for underpinning the alleged United States hybrid war against China in the South China Sea.¹⁸
- The theorists Li Xiangying, Wang Jianing, and Xia Zhenning wrote in a Ministry of National Defense-affiliated press outlet that the United States wages offensive hybrid war while the Russians do so defensively.¹⁹ They explain that the United States acted offensively in supporting the eastward expansion of NATO since the 1990s, which made Ukraine a buffer zone through which the United States and Russia compete. They argue that the United States pushed Ukraine further away from Russia via the hybrid warfare tactics of inciting the Ukrainian populace against their pro-Russian government. The latter point is presumably a reference to the 2014 Revolution of Dignity that forced the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych from office.²⁰
- The CCP military theorists broadly see Russia as the most useful case study for implementing hybrid warfare because of the frequency it has used hybrid warfare across Africa, Syria, and Ukraine.²¹ There is consensus among CCP theorists that Russia initially lagged behind the United States in implementing hybrid warfare but has caught up since 2013.²²

Intersection of Hybrid Warfare and Systems Confrontation in CCP Strategic Thought

CCP military theorists give little explicit attention in public-facing party publications to the interaction between hybrid warfare and systems confrontation, which refers to the view of warfare as a competition between opposing systems of systems.²³ The available CCP publications indicate that hybrid warfare accepts the premise of systems confrontation that

warfare is a contest of comprehensive national strength. The publications suggest that hybrid warfare departs from systems confrontation in that it does not definitionally accept the emphasis on nested systems as the way to view warfare, however.

- The CCP's thinking on systems confrontation emerged before hybrid warfare and lays out the conceptions with which the latter interacts. This nascent interaction is relevant to the body of strategic thought that the PLA general officer core draws upon.
- The rapid US-led coalition victory in the First Gulf War served as the impetus for the CCP to begin framing modern conflicts as confrontations between systems. Within this framework of systems confrontation, the CCP emphasizes establishing information and decision-making dominance.²⁴
- Systems confrontation theory and hybrid warfare theory both look to the period of globalization and technological modernization starting after the First Gulf War as conceptual starting points. Systems confrontation thought emerged throughout the 2000s and early 2010s.²⁵ Hybrid warfare initially entered the party lexicon in the late 2010s.²⁶

Some articles about hybrid warfare and systems confrontation from CCP military theorists, such as Guo Ruobing, suggest that the intersection between the two concepts is an ongoing topic of research for party theorists.²⁷ Guo used systems confrontation as a starting point to describe hybrid warfare in a 2022 article by viewing the latter as a "systematic confrontation based on the comprehensive strength of a country."²⁸ Guo embraces the view of hybrid warfare that merges kinetic and non-kinetic means in an ongoing struggle.²⁹ This indicates the importance of hybrid warfare to executing the party's political objectives within, even when two states have not declared war upon each other.

Implications for the United States and Taiwan

The coercive actions that the CCP is taking to control Taiwan fall within the military theorists' framework of hybrid warfare. The CCP's attempts to infiltrate all of Taiwanese society through political, economic, and military means fit the core components of Gao Wei's definition of hybrid warfare. The CCP also claims to act in concert with Taiwanese organizations representing ROC nationals to grant the party's actions a false veneer of legitimacy under the hybrid warfare framework.

- PRC Taiwan Affairs Director Song Tao met with a Taiwanese Mazu Friendship Association delegation in February. Mazu is a sea goddess worshiped in the ROC and PRC. Song framed the Mazu Friendship Association as a way to strengthen Chinese culture and "maintain the national feelings on both sides of the strait."³⁰ Using such religious organizations likely enables the CCP to spread pro-CCP narratives surrounding Chinese identity in the ROC. The Taiwanese Mainland Affairs Council warned of CCP efforts to use religious temples in this manner in October.³¹
- The PRC Ministry of Commerce began an ongoing investigation in mid-April after ROC President Tsai Ing-wen met with then-US Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy in early April. The Ministry of Commerce reserves the right to extend the investigation to January 12, the day before the ROC presidential election.³² This demonstrates that the CCP leverages economic investigations to influence political elections within the ROC through hybrid warfare.

- The PLA Air Force has increased the number of aircraft committing daily violations of Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone over the past three years.³³ This demonstrates the most salient military dimension of the CCP's hybrid warfare efforts targeting Taiwan.

The CCP perceives its hybrid war against Taiwan as defensive, which is similar to Russia's experience with NATO expansion. It fits this perception because the CCP falsely views the sovereignty of the Republic of China (Taiwan) as illegitimate due to the party's incorrect view that Taiwan is a province of the PRC. The CCP views itself as engaging in a hybrid war to force Taiwan away from its relationship with the United States, much like it perceives the Kremlin as engaging in a defensive war against the United States in Ukraine before 2022.

- The CCP-controlled media frames Taiwan as a US pawn that the United States manipulates and will abandon in the event of a crisis.³⁴ From the CCP's perspective, it needs to remove the chess player's (United States) ability to communicate and move the pawn (Taiwan) to accomplish the party's goal of "unifying" with Taiwan. The party aims to degrade American political, economic, and military influence with Taiwan, the core components of Gao Wei's definition of hybrid warfare, to achieve this goal.

The PRC nests the hybrid war against Taiwan within a hybrid war against the United States. The pursuit of a hybrid war targeting Taiwan also involves a hybrid war with the United States because the party perceives any US relationship with the Republic of China (Taiwan) as destabilizing the PRC. The CCP holds this view because it considers the ROC (Taiwan) as an illegitimate state whose annexation by the PRC is the only way to stabilize the immediate security environment. The CCP targets American regional allies, such as Japan and the Philippines, to carry out the hybrid war and degrade the image of the American-led security architecture as providing regional stability.

CCP propaganda in August falsely alleging that Japan had discharged dangerous amounts of radioactive wastewater from Fukushima is a recent example of the PRC's nested hybrid war effort. This propaganda is also part of the hybrid war against the United States because of the close US-Japan political, economic, and military collaboration in the region. The CCP framing Japan as irresponsible also serves to counter the positive role that the United States plays in the region. That image of irresponsibility enables the CCP to claim that the US-led security architecture produces chaos rather than stabilizing the region.

- The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state-run media accused Japan of "misrepresenting" the safety of the discharge. They also implied that Japan worked in concert with the IAEA to conceal the true danger that the wastewater presented on multiple occasions.³⁵ The messaging conflicts with statements from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which deemed the discharge from the Fukushima nuclear power plant safe.³⁶

The CCP military coercion of the Philippines, such as on the Second Thomas Shoal, also enables the party to violate the territorial sovereignty of a United States treaty ally, undermining the American-led security architecture as part of a hybrid war. The PRC Coast Guard and maritime militia rammed Philippine ships on a resupply mission to the Second Thomas Shoal on October 22.³⁷ The PRC Coast Guard continues ongoing harassment of Philippine ships on resupply missions in November.³⁸ The aggression aims to legitimize PRC territorial claims to the Second Thomas Shoal, which the Philippines has occupied since 1999.

Endnotes

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