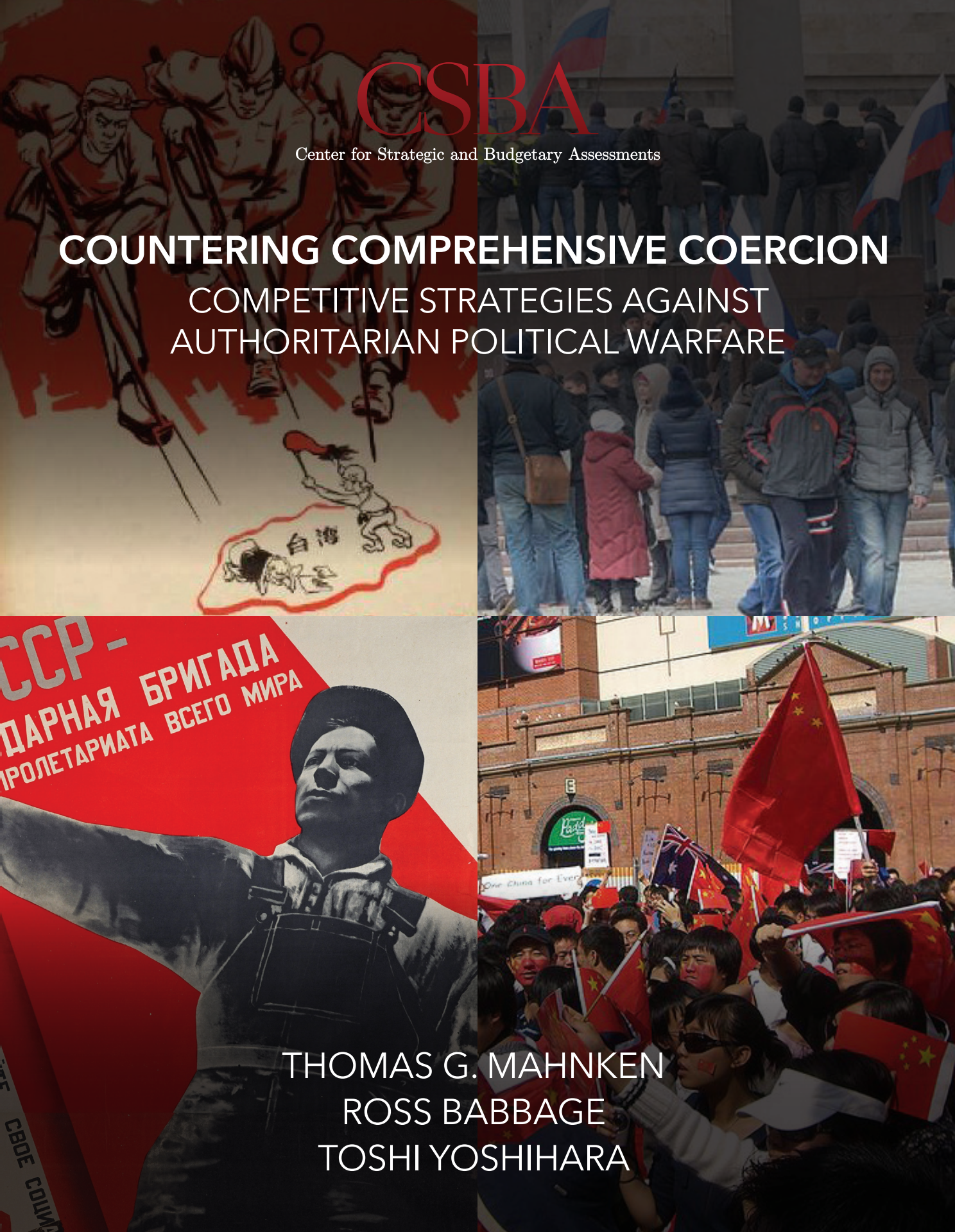


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# COUNTERING COMPREHENSIVE COERCION

## COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES AGAINST AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL WARFARE



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THOMAS G. MAHNKEN  
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СВОЕ СОЦИАЛИЗМ



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THOMAS G. MAHNKEN  
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# Introduction

Despite the considerable attention that has been devoted to Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Syria, China's construction and militarization of islands in the South China Sea, and efforts by both nations to improve their armed forces, one of the most worrisome security trends over the past several years has been their repeated efforts to manipulate public and domestic political debate within the United States and within and among its allies. As the 2017 National Security Strategy cautioned, U.S. rivals "are using information tools in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of democracies," for instance by targeting "media, political processes, financial networks, and personal data." From Russia's attempts to shape electoral politics to China's willingness to buy influence abroad, it has become increasingly apparent that authoritarian states are waging political warfare against their democratic opponents.

Although this trend is now widely recognized, there has been a tendency among the targets of political warfare to view Russian and Chinese actions as a series of ad hoc activities rather than individual elements of an overarching strategy. As a consequence, the United States and its allies have been ineffective in defending against or countering these actions. The purpose of this monograph, therefore, is to help remedy this situation by providing scholars and policymakers with a better understanding of political warfare threats. Specifically, it argues that although Russian and Chinese approaches to political warfare differ in some respects, they are sufficiently distinct from the types of approaches adopted by other nations and share enough attributes with one another that they should be viewed as examples of a unique form of authoritarian political warfare: comprehensive coercion.

Chapter 1 of this monograph describes the general concept of political warfare and explains what makes comprehensive coercion distinct. Chapter 2 describes the Russian approach to political warfare, including its origins, features, and targets. Chapter 3 similarly describes the Chinese approach to political warfare, and Chapter 4 is a case study of China's United Front Work Department. Chapter 5 details the central features of comprehensive coercion. The monograph

concludes with recommendations for the United States and its close allies for defending against and countering authoritarian political warfare.



## Chapter 1

# From Political Warfare to Comprehensive Coercion

How should the United States and its allies conceptualize political warfare in general and contemporary political warfare in particular? Seventy years ago, during his tenure as the State Department's first Director of Policy Planning, George Kennan famously described political warfare as "The employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives." It was, in his words, the "logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace."<sup>1</sup> Others have subsequently further defined the phenomenon. Historian Paul Smith, for example, specifies that political warfare is a tool of compellence that is usually directed against adversaries rather than allies, while strategist Frank Hoffman observes that political warfare can include violent activities in peacetime as well as non-violent activities during periods of conflict.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Kennan's definition and these caveats point to the core features of political warfare: the coercive use of mainly nonmilitary instruments to alter adversary behavior.

Political warfare is not a new phenomenon, of course, nor is it practiced only by authoritarian nations such as Russia and China. Indeed, the United States has its own history of engaging in

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<sup>1</sup> Department of State, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare," 269. Policy Planning Staff Memorandum, May 4, 1948, available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d269>. Brian Michael Jenkins also explains political warfare with reference to Clausewitz, noting that if war is the extension of politics by other means, then "political warfare is the extension of armed conflict by other means." Brian Michael Jenkins, "Strategy: Political Warfare Neglected," *The RAND Blog*, June 26, 2005, available at [www.rand.org/blog/2005/06/strategy-political-warfare-neglected.html](http://www.rand.org/blog/2005/06/strategy-political-warfare-neglected.html).

<sup>2</sup> Paul A. Smith Jr., *On Political War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), pp. 3–28; and Frank Hoffman, "On Not-so-new Warfare: Political Warfare vs Hybrid Threats," *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2014, available at [warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/](http://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/).

political warfare, including efforts by the Committee on Public Information during World War I to positively influence public opinion and counter enemy propaganda, as well as the covert influence operations carried out by the Office of Strategic Services during World War II.<sup>3</sup> During the Cold War, moreover, political warfare was elevated from its past role as a supporting effort in conventional conflicts to a principal instrument of peacetime competition—one that was especially attractive to U.S. officials given the all-encompassing nature of the Soviet-American rivalry as well as the prohibitive costs of a direct military clash.<sup>4</sup>

Today, however, the major practitioners of political warfare are the governments of Russia and China, which engage in this form of competition to avoid dissent, discourage foreign narratives that are inimical to their interests, generate support for policies they favor, enhance their freedom of action by keeping rivals distracted, and mitigate pushback against overt acts of revisionism. Moreover, shaped by their respective past experiences and strategic cultures, these authoritarian states practice a form of political warfare that is notable in three respects. First, due to their long history of using political warfare to consolidate and maintain Communist Party control during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Moscow and Beijing continue to lean heavily on influence campaigns and view them as a core element of their competitive toolkit. Second, because these regimes remain deeply insecure and fearful of both internal challengers and external threats, they often eschew restraint and conduct a particularly aggressive form of political warfare. Lastly, thanks to their centralized governments, Russia and China enjoy a significant unity of effort and can engage in highly coordinated whole-of-nation campaigns to manipulate public opinion and political debate. Considering the inherent vulnerabilities of open democratic societies and decentralized governments against which these efforts are utilized, these attributes make comprehensive coercion an especially appealing strategy for authoritarian nations. The remainder of this chapter develops these arguments in greater detail.

## The Characteristics of Comprehensive Coercion

As Colin Gray has argued, national strategies are often shaped by assumptions, habits, and traditions, many of which are the cumulative product of historical experience.<sup>5</sup> Russian and Chinese styles of political warfare are no different, although there are enough similarities between them to merit a common label. Three similarities in particular stand out.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed history on how the United States carried out political warfare through its history, see Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2018), available at [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1772.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1772.html).

<sup>4</sup> Mario Del Pero, “The United States and ‘Psychological Warfare’ in Italy, 1948–1955,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 4, 2001; Kenneth A. Osgood, “Form Before Substance: Eisenhower’s Commitment to Psychological Warfare and Negotiations with the Enemy,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 3, 2000; and Scott Lucas and Kaeten Mistry, “Illusions of Coherence: George F. Kennan, U.S. Strategy and Political Warfare in the Early Cold War, 1946–1950,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 1, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 28–29.

First, due to their violent pasts, Russia and China view political warfare as a standard instrument of statecraft rather than a specialized tool—and have spent decades refining that instrument. Marxist-Leninist theory and practice, including the tactics of subversion and cooption, were essential to the survival, rise, and consolidation of the communist parties in Russia and China. To the Soviets, the boundary separating war and politics was permeable. Soviet leaders understood the nature of interstate relations and practiced statecraft in ways that diverged sharply from their opponents in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Although they adhered to the Clausewitzian view that war was an extension of politics, they went one step further by elevating war to near equal status with (and in many ways indistinguishable from) politics. According to this worldview, the contest for political power was akin to war. If so, warlike activities should extend beyond the battlefield into the sphere of politics. This mindset is etched deeply into Chinese institutional memories and identities as well. The Chinese Communist Party still touts the “united front”—a type of political warfare it borrowed from Lenin in the 1920s—as an essential instrument for guaranteeing the regime’s longevity. This casual attitude toward subversion and covert operations stands in sharp contrast to the tendency in the West to view these operations as something distinct from and more escalatory than traditional statecraft. As Peter Mattis, an expert on Chinese political warfare, observes, “Beijing and Moscow both approach influence operations and active measures as a normal way of doing business.”<sup>7</sup>

Second, although Russia and China have long relied on political warfare to preserve domestic control and compete with rivals abroad, they continue to remain highly fearful of internal and external threats—as well as the possible linkages between the two. Consequently, they are willing to engage in an aggressive form of political warfare with very few self-imposed limitations. Both nations perceive themselves to be in a perpetual contest for strategic independence and even for survival. Fritz Ermarth, for example, has argued that “traditional Russian strategic culture . . . has been one of the most martial and militarized such cultures in history,” and explains that “the Russian state and empire emerged and expanded in conditions of almost constant warfare, initially defensive, then increasingly offensive as the empire expanded.”<sup>8</sup> This threat perception is also informed by the Chinese and Russian interpretations of 20<sup>th</sup> century history. After all, both engaged in a decades-long life-or-death struggles against the United States and the U.S.-led alliance system. The Soviet Union collapsed under the weight of that long-term competition, while China underwent a near-death experience in 1989 following the wave of democratization in

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<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Neumann and Mark von Hagen, “Engels and Marx on Revolution, War, and the Army in Society,” in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 263.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Mattis, “Contrasting China’s and Russia’s Influence Operations,” *War on the Rocks*, January 16, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Fritz W. Ermarth, *Russia’s Strategic Culture: Past, Present, and . . . in Transition?* (McLean, VA: SAIC, October 31, 2006), paper prepared for Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, available at <https://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dtra/russia.pdf>.

Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>9</sup> Both saw the U.S. strategy of engagement and enlargement during the 1990s and the 1999 Kosovo campaign as direct strategic and ideological threats. To leaders in Moscow and Beijing, the West remains determined to contain and perhaps roll back their geopolitical and ideological space. This belligerent paranoia leads these regimes not only to consolidate their power at home but also to engage in revisionist behavior abroad, with the ultimate goal of ensuring regime survival by creating a favorable balance of power along their periphery and beyond. As Princeton scholar Aaron Friedberg memorably put it, the best form of protection for regimes in Moscow and Beijing is “making the world safe for authoritarianism.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, because of the organizational character of authoritarian regimes, nations like Russia and China can draw upon and integrate a diverse array of political warfare tools. It is no surprise that both nations have demonstrated the ability to leverage economic, financial, political, diplomatic, news media, social media, educational, civic, social, military, paramilitary, and other tools to achieve their aims. Putin and Xi sit atop highly centralized and personalized executive bodies that are not only well-arranged to do their bidding but can also coordinate influence campaigns across many different organs of government. In fact, authoritarian political warfare goes beyond whole-of-government approaches and into whole-of-nation efforts. Put another way, Russia and China can mobilize all elements of society for political warfare, to include not just diverse elements of government but also non-governmental organizations, industry, think tanks, civic associations, and individuals. As one former Russian diplomat quipped, “We engage in foreign policy the way we engage in war, with every means, every weapon, every drop of blood.”<sup>11</sup>

## The Calculus of Comprehensive Coercion

Although Russia and China may be predisposed to use political warfare often and aggressively due to their historical experiences and strategic cultures—and adept at leveraging and integrating political warfare tools thanks to their centralized governments—there are other reasons why this option is an attractive one to them. First, political warfare is less escalatory than military threats and less costly than military conflict. Second, it is also a less ambitious alternative to military conflict, insofar as the main goal is not hard victories, but simply sowing doubt, creating confusion, and imposing costs. And third, technological change has provided new avenues to engage in manipulation with a lower probability of attribution, in addition to creating new ways to

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<sup>9</sup> For analyses of Chinese views of the Soviet collapse, see Arthur Waldron, “Chinese Analyses of Soviet Failure: The Party,” *China Brief* 9, no. 23, November 19, 2009; and Arthur Waldron, “Chinese Analyses of Soviet Failure: Humanitarian Socialism,” *China Brief* 10, no. 11, May 27, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, September 1, 2017), available at [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling\\_chaos\\_how\\_russia\\_manages\\_its\\_political\\_war\\_in\\_europe](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe).

flood target populations with disinformation. As one study notes, Russia and China are successfully leveraging “the anonymity, immediacy and ubiquity of the digital age.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the chief reason that comprehensive coercion is a smart strategic option for nations such as Russia and China, however, is that it exploits Western vulnerabilities. For instance, democratic nations operate within a relatively open environment where all politicians and officials are accountable under the law that is administered by independent judiciaries, and in which government operations are ultimately scrutinized by Congressional or Parliamentary committees, legal authorities, and media organizations. Comprehensive coercion attacks the seams of Western institutions, those twilight areas that fall outside the writ of government agencies. For example, Chinese political warfare on American university campuses largely takes place beyond the immediate purview of the State Department and the Department of Defense. Yet the substance of those Chinese influence operations, including attempts at shaping or curtailing academic debate on cross-strait relations for example, pertain directly to the foreign and security policies that those U.S. executive agencies are responsible for carrying out. Even when Chinese subversive activities are subject to U.S. domestic law enforcement, efforts by the FBI to draw attention to the threat have triggered political backlash, including accusations of racial profiling and of hostility to academic freedom. Western governments have been disinclined to act over concerns about accusations of overreaction and by fears that certain responses might harm the health of their democratic institutions and values. In other words, comprehensive coercion can hide behind the very liberties that are the foundations of free Western societies.<sup>13</sup>

Owing to legal, normative, and institutional checks and balances built into Western polities, inaction or even policy paralysis can often be the result. Agents of political warfare benefit from the West’s self-restraint, which allows them to pursue their goals with relative impunity. In this context, the concept of gray zone tactics takes on new meaning; comprehensive coercion also takes place in the gray zones between the jurisdictional boundaries of key Western institutions.

The defense and security agencies of the United States and its allies are not well structured to combat and defeat the types of asymmetric, multi-disciplinary political warfare campaigns being waged by Moscow and Beijing. By operating in those shadowy seams, comprehensive coercion does not easily lend itself to traditional diplomatic, military, and other government solutions. Conventional diplomatic, military, and counter-espionage capabilities remain critically important

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<sup>12</sup> Peter B. Doran and Donald N. Jensen, “Putin’s Strategy of Chaos,” *The American Interest*, March 1, 2018, available at [www.the-american-interest.com/2018/03/01/putins-strategy-chaos](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/03/01/putins-strategy-chaos).

<sup>13</sup> Josh Rogin, “Waking Up to China’s Infiltration of American Colleges,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 2018; Rachele Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education* (New York: National Association of Scholars, April 2017 [amended June 2017]); and Tim Johnson, “FBI Says Chinese Operatives Active at Scores of US Universities,” *McClatchy*, DC Bureau, February 14, 2018, available at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/national/national-security/article199929429.html>.

but, on their own, are inadequate to the security challenges that comprehensive coercion brings to bear. Since no one institution or body is solely responsible for combating or even monitoring these operations, comprehensive coercion measures can appear discrete and tactical rather than part of a concerted, overarching strategy to undermine the West. These measures may even seem unremarkable observed in a vacuum, but the effect is cumulative as they become greater than the sum of its parts.

Because of the disadvantages conferred to Western democracies, comprehensive coercion is likely to be a permanent feature of the foreign policies of Russia and China. With the return of great power competition, greater consideration must be given to how the West will compete in this space.

## Chapter 2

# The Russian Approach to Political Warfare

Russia has long been a leading developer and practitioner of political warfare. Indeed, Russia's current approach to political warfare displays considerable continuity with Russia's revolutionary past.

## The Origins of Political Warfare in Russia

Political warfare in Russia sprang from the strategic thinking of a group of Marxist revolutionaries early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Vladimir Lenin and his colleagues were driven by a vision of rallying the proletariat and overthrowing the bourgeois order not only in Russia but also beyond its borders. They saw their destiny to be leading a class struggle against imperialism that transcended national boundaries and viewed their Bolshevik coup in October 1917 as a starting point and convenient base from which to launch a much larger revolutionary enterprise.

From the very beginning, the leaders of the Bolshevik government felt threatened by the White Army revolt and foreign military interventions. In order to deter and defeat such threats, Lenin and Trotsky quickly raised a Red Army of over five million men. While this led to the speedy defeat of the Whites and bought the regime some breathing space, Lenin saw an urgent need to further strengthen the regime's position both domestically and abroad.

Early priority was given to developing a strong narrative to drive united action at home and also to provide firm foundations for the revolutionary campaigns planned in other countries. Strengthening Russian political will and morale along with demonstrated economic progress were

key foundations for international operations. There were six key themes in the Bolshevik narrative that proved to be enduring.<sup>14</sup>

- **We are special:** The Russian revolutionaries and their supporters argued that they were markedly different from the corrupt elitist dynasties of the past. They were driven by working class interests and values, they foreshadowed revolutionary change elsewhere, and they were the shape of the future.
- **The country is threatened:** Russia's neighbors were working to undermine the Bolshevik government and deny the country its rightful place as a prosperous society with a leading role on the world stage. Russia was surrounded by adversaries and needed to stand united.
- **All Russians are involved:** Lenin and his colleagues emphasized that all Russians needed to be involved in defending and developing their country.
- **A sacred mission:** The Bolsheviks argued that Russia was at the vanguard of a global proletarian revolution. The regime's leaders stated that Russians had a sacred mission to free the oppressed workers of the capitalist world and win independence for the peoples of the imperialist colonies. Their goal was to bring socialism to the world: a just and heroic cause.
- **Russia's power will be restored:** The communists asserted that they would make Russia powerful and universally respected. They promised not only to keep Russia safe but also build it into a country that was at the forefront of world economic and social development.
- **Victory is assured:** A strong theme of communist propaganda was that victory of the international proletariat was a scientific inevitability and was absolutely assured. Russians were repeatedly told that they were on the winning side of history.

When considering the practicalities of actually bringing about global revolution, Lenin and Stalin were intrigued by Clausewitz and studied his writing in detail. They were especially taken by the logic that if war was viewed as politics by other means, then the reverse was also true: aggressive political action could also be considered war by other means. This thinking helped them conceptualize how proletarian revolutions could be fostered in other countries. They saw the scope

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<sup>14</sup> These six themes were generated following an extensive review of relevant literature. Particularly relevant are key themes in Stephen R. Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2016); and Jeffrey V. Dickey et al., *Russian Political Warfare: Origin, Evolution, and Application*, thesis (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2015), especially pp. 14–16.



for exploiting the gap between what the capitalist societies called “war” and what they called “peace.”

The young Soviet regime needed to consider how it could help launch revolutions in other countries without triggering a military invasion by its capitalist enemies. In the 1920s Russia was still in a relatively weak state, and it was in no position to mobilize and sustain a major conventional war. Moreover, if forced to fight a major war, Lenin and his colleagues worried that domestic pressures could trigger a revolt and force the Bolsheviks from power.

Rather than abandon their plans, they developed a first-generation form of political warfare and decided that Russian foreign policy would be driven by revolutionary propaganda tailored to achieve the greatest traction in each targeted country. For example, in countries possessing few Russian speakers, they would encourage a revolt of the working classes and generate dissension within the ruling government. In countries containing significant Russian-speaking or multi-ethnic populations, strong efforts would be made to foster a “fifth column” to operate in support of Russia’s interests within the society. During this time, many subversive means and mechanisms were developed. Local communist parties were established, and cells were raised to conduct unconventional operations. Extensive training, funding, and other support started to flow from Moscow, normally via indirect modes.

Much of this subversive activity could, by its very nature, be undertaken in a disavowable manner. While the target country was starting to experience serious internal security problems and considerable disruption, Moscow could claim ignorance, feign disinterest, or even express sympathy. The ambiguity surrounding the source of their troubles made it difficult for any of the major capitalist countries to give serious consideration to launching a military counter-offensive into Russia. Were a powerful country to contemplate such a response, Moscow could proclaim its innocence and emphasize that its policy was one of peaceful coexistence, making the opposing country look like the aggressor. In order to provide further deterrence of this risk, the Soviet regime took early steps to maintain and gradually modernize the Red Army.

Lenin and his colleagues appreciated from an early stage the potential of what they called their “indirect strategy.” Their political warfare campaigns would exploit contradictions in capitalist societies and distract enemy governments, forcing them to focus on domestic troubles. They believed that if they could drive changes in neighboring regimes, strengthen Moscow’s political leverage, and eventually force some opposing governments to collapse, they would be succeeding in their core mission of propagating the global socialist revolution. Moreover, Russian planners concluded that their propaganda and associated subversive operations into foreign countries could be mounted and sustained at a bearable cost. Given Moscow’s goals, the strategic case for sustained political warfare operations was strong.

The Soviet Union's leaders gave initial priority to those countries nearest Russia, offering the potential to build a network of buffer states that would provide greater security to the regime. The relatively large numbers of ethnic Russians residing in these neighboring states also provided fertile ground for stirring local dissension and revolts. The leaders of the Soviet regime appreciated that progress in these campaigns would take time. They fully understood that they were embarking on a long and very demanding struggle.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, Lenin, Trotsky, and their colleagues developed an unconventional model for assessing the "correlation of forces" that Russia faced. Whereas the major capitalist countries focused their assessments on standard measures of economic, technological, and military strength, the communists went much further to include assessments of ideological coherence, leadership strength, propaganda leverage, capacity to conduct rapidly paced political warfare operations in foreign theatres, and related capabilities.<sup>16</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union progressed unevenly, largely because of practical problems in implementing a socialist economy, serious droughts, debilitating political campaigns against bourgeois members of the society, and a major purge of the Red Army officer corps. Stalin greatly strengthened the regime's security organizations and massacred or dispatched to the Siberian gulag millions of people suspected of disloyalty. Media control was tightened, and considerable use was made of European and American agents of influence to serve as apologists for the regime and deflect domestic and international attention from the regime's excesses.

In 1939, sensing danger from the rise of Nazi Germany, Stalin negotiated a Non-Aggression Treaty with Hitler, guaranteeing that neither side would attack the other for at least ten years. However, less than two years later, in June 1941, Hitler launched a massive invasion of the Soviet Union. The resulting human and territorial losses were vast, but by the end of the year, German forces were close to exhaustion and stymied in reaching many of their objectives.

The full mobilization of the Russian economy and society produced modernized armed forces that eventually overwhelmed Germany's defenses on the Eastern Front. During this four-year struggle, the Soviets did not rely solely on conventional military operations. They excelled at organizing networks of partisan units behind German lines that supplied intelligence, attacked German supply lines and rallied popular resistance not only in occupied Soviet territory but also across most of Eastern Europe.

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<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Frunze, a leading commander in the Red Army, wrote in some detail about the extended struggle the regime anticipated. See Jacob W. Kipp, "Lenin and Clausewitz: The Militarization of Marxism, 1914–1921," *Military Affairs*, October, 1985, p.189.

<sup>16</sup> This reformulation of "the correlation of forces" is discussed in Stephen J. Blank, "Class War on a Global Scale: The Leninist Culture of Political Conflict," in Stephen J. Blank, Lawrence E. Grinter, Karl R. Ware, and Bryan E. Weathers, *Culture and History: Regional Dimensions* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1993), pp. 19–25.

By the end of the “Great Patriotic War,” not only was the Soviet Union a victor but the Russian Communist Party and its associates through Europe were also in a far better position to accelerate their propaganda, disruption, and subversion operations. By 1948 these re-energized political warfare campaigns and the support of the Soviet Army, though mainly indirect, resulted in fraternal communist regimes being established in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania. Moscow moved rapidly to boost political, secret police, and media controls in each of these countries and, as far as possible, lock them into the Soviet-aligned Eastern European block.

Although the war had been a traumatic experience for the Soviet Union, the end result was the establishment of a substantial buffer zone, the opportunity to pursue security dominance over all of Europe and parts of the Far East, and the creation of a firm base from which it could work to undermine the influence of the United States. Although Moscow continued to support revolutionary change in colonial states and other parts of the world, from the late 1940s the priorities became consolidating the Soviet Union’s advances in Europe, winning further local gains, and undermining the power and coherence of the Western alliance.

In order to pursue these refined goals, Moscow’s foreign policy included enhanced support for international communist and socialist parties, programs to build political and economic interdependence between Russia and regional states, and the negotiation of arms control agreements that reinforced Soviet conventional force dominance on the continent. In order to weaken Western European governments and separate the continent from the United States, clandestine political warfare operations were intensified and pursued in more diverse and sophisticated ways. Jeffrey Dickey summarizes many of the instruments employed by Soviet intelligence agencies during this period:

Operations ranged from basic intelligence collection and analysis to subversion, media manipulation, propaganda, forgeries, political repression, political assassinations, recruiting agents of influence, the establishment of opposition parties and criminal organizations, antiwar movements and front organizations, and proxy paramilitary operations.<sup>17</sup>

Following his defection from the USSR in the 1970s, the former Deputy Chief of the Soviet Research and Counter-Propaganda Group, Yuri Bezmenov, identified four phases of Soviet subversion.<sup>18</sup> The planned sequence was demoralization, destabilization, crisis, and normalization. All available instruments were used to undermine and force collapse in non-socialist states so as to

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<sup>17</sup> Dickey et al., *Russian Political Warfare*, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Full text of Bezmenov (alias Tomas Schuman) Love Letter to America (1984) available at [https://archive.org/stream/BezmenovLoveLetterToAmerica/YuriBezmenov-LoveLetterToAmerica\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/BezmenovLoveLetterToAmerica/YuriBezmenov-LoveLetterToAmerica_djvu.txt).

provide a pathway for local communist parties to seize power and progress their country's futures in close partnership with the USSR.<sup>19</sup>

During the destabilization and crisis phases, the KGB and GRU didn't hesitate to adopt violent measures to secure key interests, particularly in Eastern Europe and Russia's southern periphery:

Direct forms of subversion, in turn, include acts of terrorism and sabotage carried out by KGB-trained militias (who are presented as spontaneous resistance groups), assassinations (i.e., the liquidation of social and political activists), and also (in the case of anti-Communist revolutions) armed interventions, such as Operation "Whirlwind" in Hungary in 1956 (to defeat the anti-Communist uprising), "Danube" in Prague in 1968 (to remove the pro-democratic government), and the installation of Babrak Karmal and the intervention in Afghanistan in 1979.<sup>20</sup>

Armed interventions into NATO and other allied countries would have entailed far higher risks during the Cold War and so alternative methods were employed:

Outside the Eastern Block, the KGB relied heavily on *agenty vliyania*, or "agents of influence" such as journalists, government officials, academics, labor leaders, and prominent citizens to support Kremlin policies. . . . There were three primary categories. Actual MGB/KGB or Soviet Main Intelligence (GRU) operatives and their recruited agents formed the foundation of the program. "Fellow travelers" were individuals who were ideologically sympathetic to perceived Soviet objectives and conducted both directed and desultory activities to support these aims. The third category were unwitting agents, ranging from social contacts passing information or executing an operational act without awareness of the hidden hand behind the activity, to "useful idiots" that *en masse* helped unsuspectingly drive the Soviet agenda.<sup>21</sup>

Important roles were played by a vast array of Soviet front organizations that the Kremlin regarded as extensions of the KGB. Jolanda Darczewska and Piotr Zochowski have listed some of the main front organizations, highlighting the number of national branches that each organization operated:

World Council of Peace (which includes 135 national organizations), the World Federation of Trade Unions (90), the Organization of Solidarity of Peoples of Asia and Africa (91), the World Federation of Democratic Youth (210), the International Union of Students (118), the International Association of Journalists (114), the International Democratic Federation of Women (129), the Christian Peace Federation (86), the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (64), the World Federation of Science (33), and others. These groups acted in the interests of Moscow and were financially

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<sup>19</sup> For details see Dickey et al., *Russian Political Warfare*, pp. 49–53.

<sup>20</sup> Jolanta Darczewska and Piotr Zochowski, *Active Measures: Russia's Key Export*, Point of View Number 64 (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, June, 2017), p.15.

<sup>21</sup> Dickey et al., *Russian Political Warfare*, pp. 54–55.

supported by it. The World Council of Peace enjoyed Moscow's special favor: as revealed in the 1990s, 90% of its funding came from the Soviet Union and the so-called socialist block.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, the institutions conducting these diverse political warfare operations were well practiced and deeply entrenched in Russian strategic culture. Large numbers of people had been trained in relevant skills, and a substantial number had risen to senior levels in the Russian government, the military, and in other key institutions. International networks of agents, specialist communications systems, and many other elements of Russia's political warfare apparatus remained in place and continued to play a very influential role into the 1990s and beyond.

## The Nature of the Putin Regime and Its Key Goals

The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union brought a markedly different strategic environment for Moscow's security planners. Communism had been overthrown as the driving ideology in Russia. Most of the fraternal states in Eastern Europe disowned communism and several took early steps to join the European Union and NATO. The more open democratic experiences of the later phases of the Gorbachev regime and through the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin left the Russian official community and many parts of the broader society unimpressed. Russia's dramatically reduced international status, the "loss" of the Eastern European buffer states, the appearance of Western meddling in Russian affairs, and the threat of further encroachment by NATO brought a stiffening of Russian resolve. Most members of the governing elite and Russian security services felt deeply aggrieved. The time was ripe for a more assertive leadership for the nation.

During the 1990s, the FSB (successor to the KGB) and the other security services continued to provide intelligence and other support to the national leadership. They played key roles in the privatization of state-owned industries; strengthened their links to like-thinking Russian institutions, business people, and criminal networks; and played an important political role in holding the country together. The security agencies also encouraged the development of a stronger Russian international policy and worked to promote individuals who could provide more robust national leadership.

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<sup>22</sup> Darczewska and Zochowski, *Active Measures*, p. 16.

One person with a strong background in the KGB and related security agencies was Yevgeny Primakov. From the 1980s he advocated a shift to geopolitical realism, which defined Russia's vital interests as:

Its territorial integrity; close integration with the Commonwealth of Independent States; maintaining the state's defense capabilities, including the option of the nuclear deterrent; guaranteeing the conditions for Russia's inclusion into the global trade system; maintaining the strategic balance in the world; and maintaining a buffer zone in the immediate vicinity of the borders of the Russian Federation.<sup>23</sup>

Central to this vision of Russia's future was an energetic modernization of the country's economy and society and a return to full superpower status. This concept received widespread government and business support, particularly during Primakov's term as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister from 1996–1999. It helped generate a national consensus for bolstering resistance to NATO enlargement and a more strident anti-American tone.

When Vladimir Putin was elected President in 2000, he brought a wealth of international intelligence experience and a very strong personal network from decades of service in the KGB and related agencies. He moved rapidly to change the direction of the country, instill greater discipline and cohesion to the instruments of government, eliminate political opposition, reinvigorate Russia's intelligence and covert capabilities, and place trusted associates in key official and non-official roles.

Putin drove hard to thwart external threats and what he saw as manipulated foreign news and information flows. He moved rapidly to seize control of key Russian media organizations and forged strong alliances with trusted business leaders, elements of organized crime, and the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church. A notable feature of his administration became the frequent promotion of trusted officers from the FSB and related intelligence agencies to key positions not only across government but also to senior business, media, and other roles. It was estimated that by 2005, up to 70 percent of Russia's ruling elites had career backgrounds in the FSB, KGB, and associated security agencies.<sup>24</sup> Many had been made wealthy by the crony capitalist practices that came to characterize Russian society.

Eric Edelman and Whitney McNamara have argued convincingly that Putin pursues his policy objectives through a combination of autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationalism.<sup>25</sup> Putin's autocracy is driven by his pre-eminent leadership of the security force elite, his continuing strong involvement

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 32–33.

<sup>24</sup> This and related estimates are discussed in Sharon Werning Rivera and David W. Rivera, "The Russian Elite Under Putin: Meritocratic or Bourgeois?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22, no. 2, 2006, available at [http://academics.hamilton.edu/documents/Russian%20Elite%20Under%20Putin\\_Militocratic%20or%20Bourgeois.pdf](http://academics.hamilton.edu/documents/Russian%20Elite%20Under%20Putin_Militocratic%20or%20Bourgeois.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Eric S. Edelman and Whitney Morgan McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), pp. 16, 17.

in Russian security operations, his championing of the Russian military, his removal of any credible political opposition, and his effective control of nearly all parts of the Russian media. The regime permits the operation of some independent media organizations (though not broadcast television), but journalists are frequently harassed and periodically killed if they address sensitive subjects. Putin's autocracy is reinforced by his cultivation of an image as a strong, healthy, and energetic leader who is steadfastly patriotic.

Putin's orthodoxy springs in part from his political alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin strongly supports the traditional values espoused by the church and frequently contrasts the purity of the church's Russian values with the social pollution and corruption of the West. The church, for its part, has helped Putin project an image of sound ethics and has contributed significantly to the legitimization of the regime.

Putin's nationalism springs from his view that Russia has been betrayed by the West and is under sustained psychological attack by the United States and its allies. He argues that the "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and elsewhere have been organized by the West to contain and isolate Russia and manipulate its society. His task is to "raise Russia from its knees," aggressively defend the "Russian world," and champion the cause of the Russian diaspora and the broader Eastern Slavic communities, wherever they reside. Putin has justified his direct and indirect use of military force to intervene in Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbas as "the gathering of the Russian lands" and the retrieval of parts of the "stolen empire."

The consequences of Putin's worldview for the way Russia undertakes political warfare operations are profound. A notable case, as Mark Galeotti points out, is the regime's effective recruitment of the Russian big business to the cause. It has done this by fostering and actively protecting many powerful industry leaders and their organizations. But the catch is that, in return, the resources of these industrial oligarchs must be made available to support the regime when needed.<sup>26</sup> From time-to-time business leaders will receive requests that they cannot refuse to help fund foreign political parties or campaigns, persuade foreign governments and other organizations to be compliant, and assist in numerous other ways.

## Moscow's International Targets

Vladimir Putin's political warfare operations appear to be driven by five core goals. First, the regime is deeply committed to strengthening its, and hence the Russian Federation's, defenses against a wide range of current and potential threats. Substantial efforts are made to defend against physical attacks, as well as against attempts to undermine the Russian economy and the wealth of the regime's leadership from the "pollution" emanating from Western media

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<sup>26</sup> Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos*, p. 4.

organizations and non-government agencies. The dominant view in the regime is that the most effective way to defend itself is to be perpetually on the front foot, conducting disruptive and subversive operations against threatening states, keeping them off-balance, and forcing them to direct much of their security attention internally. This forward-leaning strategy also diverts Russian domestic attention away from the endemic corruption and economic malaise at home; the stifling of domestic dissent; and the harassment, imprisonment, and even murder of opposition politicians.

A second strong focus is to reinforce and extend Moscow's control over the country's immediate neighbors. In the south, the priority is Georgia and the rest of the Trans-Caucases region. To the west, the core priorities are to maintain the effective client status of Belarus and regain control over Ukraine. To the northwest, Moscow seeks to re-establish a strong influence over the Baltic states. While this goal has a geo-strategic rationale, it is also driven by a determination to prevent Western encroachment undermining the patronage networks of the regime's cronies, who are able to extract vast rents from the near abroad.

Third, the Putin regime aims to expand its sphere of influence beyond its immediate surrounds, with a particularly strong focus on the decision-making elites in Europe and East Asia. Extensive efforts are made to convince key individuals and organizations in these countries to cooperate with Russia, to talk extensively with relevant Russian officials, and to take full account of Moscow's views.

Fourth, Moscow aims to sow division, discord, and distraction in Western Europe. The Putin regime would like to see the end of both of the European Union and NATO. In consequence, it encourages the development of competing camps in Western Europe. Moscow hopes to coax some of these countries to side with Russia against their immediate neighbors.

A fifth Russian goal is to de-legitimize the United States as a credible partner for the countries of Western Europe and other allied states. The aim is to foster a worldview in which the United States is seen to be in serious decline; heavily distracted elsewhere; and led by an administration that is incompetent, erratic, and untrustworthy.

## Key Features of Recent Russian Political Warfare Operations

Russian strategic thinkers see political warfare as a response to Western efforts to wage hybrid war on them. During the last two decades, leading Russian strategic thinkers have produced numerous assessments of how the Western allies were able to trigger the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. They also watched with concern the roles played by Western agencies in fostering revolts against long-standing regimes in the color revolutions in Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine. Then they perceived similar Western forces at work during the Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. Two successive Chiefs of the (Army) General Staff in Russia concluded that the Western allies were making substantial geo-



strategic gains by employing a broad range of mostly non-military instruments in combined operations that they labeled “new generation warfare.”

General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, wrote in 2013 that:

The trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to erase the line between war and peace. . . . The role of non-military methods of achieving political and strategic goals, in some cases, has far exceeded the force of arms in terms of effectiveness. The emphasis of the methods of confrontation has shifted towards widespread use of political, economic, information, humanitarian, and other non-military measures, implemented by taking advantage of the protest potential of the population. All this is complemented by covert military measures including information warfare and activities conducted by special operations forces. . . . Widespread asymmetrical actions allow for the neutralization of an enemy’s superiority, and include the use of special operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanent front throughout the opposing state, as well as informational influence, forms and methods of which are constantly being improved.<sup>27</sup>

Gerasimov’s predecessor as Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Bogdanov, together with Colonel Chekinov, wrote further about new generation warfare, describing it as:

[A] combination of political, economic information, technological, and ecological campaigns in the form of indirect actions and nonmilitary measures . . . mass propaganda to drag the target country deeper into chaos and further out of control . . . (using agents to) . . . stoke up chaos, panic and disobedience.<sup>28</sup>

These Russian analyses of recent disturbances and revolts were largely self-serving. They grossly understated the powerful domestic drivers behind the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the color revolutions, and the Arab Spring. They also dramatically overstated the roles of Western agencies in each of these cases, reflecting Russian paranoia about what they see to be Western manipulation and attempted encirclement. These exaggerations, however, generated a pretext for Russia’s military leaders to urge an early resuscitation of the political warfare capabilities of the Soviet era. They saw an urgent need to develop a more capable 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of the active measures and other political warfare techniques that Moscow had employed since the 1920s.

In effect, the new form of warfare described by Gerasimov, Bogdanov, Chekinov, and others is not new at all. The political warfare campaigns that Russia has subsequently conducted in Crimea and the Donbas closely resemble the operations the Soviet Union launched in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

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<sup>27</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “Value of Science in Foresight: New Challenges Require Rethinking Forms and Methods of Warfare,” *Military-Industrial Courier*, February 27, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> S.G. Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov, “The Nature and Content of a New Generation War,” *A Russian Journal of Military Theory and Strategy*, no. 4, 2013.

There have, however, been some refinements of strategy, technologies, and operational concepts. Mark Galeotti argues that Moscow tailors its political warfare operations as effectively as it can to exploit local conditions.<sup>29</sup> When targeting countries with which Russia shares strong cultural, historical, and language affinities, the core aim is usually social capture, with a strong focus on winning local hearts and minds. In countries with weak government and security institutions, Moscow may aim to strongly influence policy on key issues and possibly, over time, capture the state by winning or buying the loyalty of powerful networks of individuals and organizations within the country.

In countries where domestic institutions are of only moderate strength, such as in many developing states, Moscow may seek a degree of influence through specific individuals, organizations, or political parties, with an aspiration of acquiring greater leverage at a later date. However, in countries which have little affinity with Russia and few institutional vulnerabilities, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, Moscow will generally focus on sowing disruption and confusion and undermining these states' international credibility.

The primary categories of Russian tactical political warfare activities are as follows:

**Operations to shape or influence the information space.** These include building close relationships with media outlets in target countries, creating credible online channels that camouflage Russian sponsorship, and recruiting a strong network of “agents of influence” and “fellow travelers” who are committed to Russia’s cause.<sup>30</sup>

**Mobilization of the Russian diaspora in targeted countries.** Ethnic Russian and other Slavic populations usually provide a welcoming base for Moscow’s operations overseas and are often co-opted to provide a reliable cadre for local operations.<sup>31</sup>

**Use of the military for coercive psychological purposes.** Military exercises and related activities are periodically used to demonstrate Russian superiority over local allied forces, undermine public morale, and convince targeted leaderships that resistance is futile.

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<sup>29</sup> Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos*, pp. 6–8.

<sup>30</sup> Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu was quoted in official Russian statements as saying, “The day has come when we all acknowledge that words, cameras, photographs, the internet, and information in general have become another branch of weapon, another branch of the Armed Forces.” Quoted in Igor Popov and Musa Khamzatov, *The War of the Future: A Conceptual Framework and Practical Conclusions: Essays on Strategic Thought* (Rome: NATO Defence College, 2017), p. 7. British Prime Minister Theresa May said in November 2017 that Russia was “seeking to weaponize information, deploying its state-run media to plant fake stories and Photoshopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.” Alexander Smith, “U.K. PM Theresa May says Russia seeks to ‘weaponize’ information,” *NBC News*, November 15, 2017. For more details on the Russian approach to agents of influence and fellow travelers, see Dickey et al., *Russian Political Warfare*, pp. 54–56.

<sup>31</sup> Keir Giles et al., *The Russian Challenge* (London: Chatham House Report, June 2015), pp. 41–43.

**Assistance to local groups including criminal and terrorist organizations.** Some of this activity is a medium-to-long-term effort to build business, educational, sporting, media, and other relationships. Key personalities and organizations are not infrequently bribed, blackmailed, and corrupted. Russian agencies also periodically engage criminal, terrorist, and extremist paramilitary organizations in addition to other groups to help penetrate official organizations; smuggle weapons, people, and funds; and corrupt key officials and community leaders. Criminal organizations have also been engaged to provide surge capacity when major cyber operations are required. A broader goal is to weaken Western societies and enrich the regime's cronies by institutionalizing corrupt business practices and other crony-driven activities.<sup>32</sup>

**Exploitation of the dependency of neighboring countries on Russian gas, oil, and electricity supplies.** Coercive negotiations, threats of price hikes, supply disruption, and actual cuts of energy supplies have been used on numerous occasions to advance Moscow's political goals. Between 1991 and 2004, Russia cut gas and oil supplies to its neighbors over forty times for political purposes.<sup>33</sup>

**Leveraging the price and trade dependency of trading partners.** Moscow aims to build trade dependencies and then exploit them to lever political concessions. These tactics have been employed repeatedly against Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland, amongst others.<sup>34</sup>

**Recruitment of business leaders who have strong economic interests in Russia.** Moscow has ensnared Western corporate leaders with attractive business opportunities and prestigious appointments and then pressed them to support Russia politically, and sometimes to assist Russia's covert operations.<sup>35</sup>

**Integration of sophisticated cyber-attacks within campaigns.** Russian cyber capabilities have advanced substantially during the last decade. They are now used to influence, undermine, coerce, confuse, and damage targeted organizations and individuals, mostly in combined operations with other instruments. In some operations used in the Crimean, Donbas, and Syrian

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<sup>32</sup> For details see Dickey et al., *Russian Political Warfare*, pp. 47–48. See also Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Michael Carpenter, *How to Stand Up to the Kremlin: Defending Democracy Against Its Enemies* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, December 5, 2017), p.4.

<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Larsson, *Russia's Energy Policy: Security Dimensions and Russia's Reliability as an Energy Supplier* (Stockholm: Division for Defence Analysis at the Swedish Defence Research Agency [FOI], 2006), p.262, available at <https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2007106453.xhtml?jsessionid=1cb9a2e034e0cd884d71d81ca723>.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of this manipulation of economic dependencies, see Dickey et al., *Russian Political Warfare*, pp. 161–162, 192–194. See also Giles et al., *The Russian Challenge*, pp. 43–36.

<sup>35</sup> Biden and Carpenter, *How to Stand Up to the Kremlin*, pp. 6–7.

campaigns, information flows to the opposing forces have been manipulated so effectively that the opposing decisionmakers' sense of reality has been fundamentally altered. On occasion, this has brought targeted decisionmakers to voluntarily select courses of action that are supportive of Russia's interests.<sup>36</sup>

**A much broader range of information operations.** In recent years, the task of planting false stories in the Western media has often been outsourced to proxies funded by Putin's close associates. One of the larger "troll farms" is the Internet Research Agency, based in St. Petersburg. Prior to and during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russian operatives reportedly purchased tens of thousands of dollars of advertisements with fake content published over multiple online platforms, which were viewed by over 120 million [later revised upwards to 150 million] users.<sup>37</sup> These and related information warfare capabilities have also reportedly been used to sway political campaigns in Italy (on economic reforms and the far-right Five Star movement), in the Netherlands (on EU membership), and in Spain (on Catalonia's secession), as well as to manipulate international energy markets. In this latter category, there is evidence that regime-aligned Russian entities have used sophisticated indirect routes to boost anti-fracking campaigns in the West.<sup>38</sup>

**Intelligence, espionage, sabotage, assassinations, and other active measures.** While the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Federal Security Service (FSB), and the military intelligence organization (GRU) have different foci of attention, their roles do overlap, and, in some fields, such as signals and electronic intelligence, they compete. Amongst their active measures are a broad range of politically directed operations including computer hacking, gathering or fabricating compromising material, spreading disruptive disinformation, and blackmail. In selected environments, they also engage in sabotage, directly fomenting unrest, assassinations, and organizing coups and armed insurrections.<sup>39</sup>

**Innovative military support of militias and other forces within targeted states.** Once a targeted state has been sufficiently weakened; its leadership compromised; and a local (preferably pro-Russian) militia is mobilized, armed, and trained, the Kremlin may launch a military operation to seize important territory or, potentially, the entire country. Security services and

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<sup>36</sup> Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Miller and Richard Fontaine, "Cyber and Space Weapons are Making Nuclear Deterrence Trickier," *Defense One*, November 27, 2017, available at <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/11/cyber-and-space-weapons-are-making-nuclear-deterrence-trickier/142767/>; and Hannah Kuchler, "Russian Meddling in U.S. Election Reached 150m Facebook Users," *Financial Times*, November 2, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> For details see Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Michael Carpenter, *How to Stand Up to the Kremlin: Defending Democracy Against Its Enemies* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, December 5, 2017), pp. 5, 6, available at [https://foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-12-05/how-stand-kremlin?cid=nrc-fa\\_twofa-20171207](https://foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-12-05/how-stand-kremlin?cid=nrc-fa_twofa-20171207).

<sup>39</sup> See these issues discussed in Darczewska and Zochowski, *Active Measures*, especially pp. 55–58, 70, 71.

military special forces personnel are usually involved at an early stage and periodically participate in the combat phases of operations. Regular military units are sometimes deployed to provide intelligence, electronic warfare, artillery, air defense, or other specialized assistance to local militias, as was the case in the Russian seizure of Crimea and most of the Donbas region. Alternatively, Russian regular forces may deploy in a threatening manner on Russian or partner territory or in international waters to force the targeted country to disperse its defenses. However, when Russian regular personnel cross the border of the targeted country, they are normally disguised as members of local militias or civilian communities. Wherever possible, the Kremlin aims to conceal the involvement of Russian regular units, partly to support the storyline of the operation being a public uprising and partly to operate below the threshold that would trigger intervention by NATO or other major military powers.<sup>40</sup>

Putin himself appears to be in charge of these highly complex political warfare operations. He sets the strategic goals, approves all major plans, and monitors operational progress. Russian operational plans are, however, almost never rigidly set in place. They are rather characterized by a substantial degree of experimentation, flexibility, improvisation, and tactical opportunism. To support Putin and his senior colleagues in performing these functions, he has a 2,000-strong Presidential Administration that sits at the heart of the government. One rung below that is the Security Council, and then linking, coordinating, and managing all instruments at the theatre level is the National Defense Control Center. The intelligence, espionage, and security agencies and the armed forces are well represented at all levels of this political warfare apparatus.

## Have Putin's Political Warfare Operations Been a Strategic Success?

Russian strategic planners and operators rarely describe their activities as “competing” against their opponents. They rather talk about prolonged “struggles” and a form of intense warfare that is conducted almost continuously in the space that falls between the Western conceptions of peace and conventional military war.

Moreover, when Russia's current goals, strategies, doctrines, instruments, and command and control systems are compared to those used by the USSR from the mid-1940s till the late 1980s, the continuity is striking. The strategic concepts and most of the driving operational modes are almost identical. They require the employment of a very wide range of mainly unconventional instruments to weaken, undermine, coerce, disrupt, isolate, and eventually force the collapse of targeted states. Many of the senior personalities in Putin's regime received extensive political warfare training during the Cold War. These people are experts in applying diverse psychological,

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<sup>40</sup> Giles et al., *The Russian Challenge*, pp. 45–47.

moral, and physical pressures against targeted societies. In consequence, it is not surprising that the Putin regime has achieved some notable successes during the last two decades.

At home, Putin has made substantial progress in restoring national cohesion, pride, morale, and a sense of destiny. This has been achieved in part by restoring much of Russia's military and broader international status, modernizing most elements of the country's security system, and controlling all important elements of the Russian media and national political infrastructure.

Internationally, Putin has annexed or won dominant influence over parts of Georgia, Crimea, the Donbas region of the Ukraine, and Moldova. Moscow has also secured a powerful and intimidating presence in Belarus and from locations close to the borders of Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Bulgaria, and Turkey. In addition, Russian forces have secured a powerful and enduring presence in Syria, and Putin has built a loose strategic partnership with Xi Jinping's regime in China. Together, Russia and China have the potential to dominate the Eurasian landmass.

Looking ahead, the Putin regime will need to manage numerous problems, including a serious demographic challenge and a resulting reduction in the country's workforce, a relatively weak energy-focused economy, rampant crony-capitalism, and the deepening distrust of the Western world. These and other pressures may encourage Moscow to intensify its political warfare operations to distract domestic attention, keep the West off-balance, and pave the way for further coercive and territorial advances.

The Putin regime believes that its highly refined and experienced political warfare capabilities are one of its few strategic assets that is clearly superior to those currently held in the West. New versions of these coercive, psychological, and kinetic operations can be anticipated during the coming decade.

## Chapter 3

# The Chinese Approach to Political Warfare

Beijing's approach to political warfare has some strong similarities to that being conducted by Putin's regime in Moscow. Just as Russia's approach owes much to the legacy of the early Bolshevik revolutionaries and to lessons learned by the Soviet Union, the style of political warfare that China's leadership practices has its roots in the history of Chinese civilization, China's geo-strategic circumstances, China's strategic culture, and the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Union in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Origins of Political Warfare in China

For thousands of years, Chinese regimes have been forced to fight for their survival against powerful invaders that either swept across the Eurasian plains or assaulted across the eastern seaboard. The few geographical barriers on this vast land mass have provided only limited protection, and the resulting security challenges have helped foster compelling historical narratives, a strong civilizational identity, and deep nationalism. Successive regimes have mobilized these historical and cultural strengths to reinforce their legitimacy and periodically generate xenophobia.

Largely because of these demanding strategic circumstances, there have been strong incentives for China's rulers, when planning their defenses, to not only harness all of the resources of the society but also to do so in innovative ways. As far back as 500BC, Sun Tzu argued strongly for political, psychological, and other non-combat operations to subdue enemies prior to committing armies to combat:

The highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities. Thus one who excels at employing the military subjugates other people's armies without engaging in battle, captures other people's fortified cities without attacking them, and destroys other people's states without prolonged fighting. . . For this reason, attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.<sup>41</sup>

Sun Tzu also placed particular importance on developing a very strong and diverse spy network in enemy kingdoms:

Thus there are five types of spies to be employed: local spy, internal spy, turned spy or double agent, dead or expendable spy, and the living spy. . . . They are the ruler's treasures. Local spies employ people from the local district. Internal spies employ their people who hold government positions. Double agents employ the enemy's spies. Expendable spies are employed to spread disinformation outside the state, provide our expendable spies with false information and have them leak it to enemy agents. Living spies return with their reports. . . . Thus with all the Three Armies' affairs no relationship is closer than with spies; no rewards are more generous than those given to spies, no affairs are more secret than those pertaining to spies.<sup>42</sup>

Mao Tse-tung combined this tradition of unconventional, intelligence- and subversion-heavy strategic culture with insights from Clausewitz, Lenin, Trotsky, and others. He then developed, tested, and refined a new concept of revolutionary war in order to overthrow the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and to defeat the Japanese invaders. The importance of early political operations throughout the theatre of operations, including in enemy strongholds, became a key foundation of Chinese military doctrine for revolutionary and unconventional war, as well as for a broader range of operations.

Chinese leaders in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw these political campaigns as being critically important not only on home territory but also in enemy countries. As Mao Tse-tung wrote:

Lenin teaches us that the World revolution can succeed only if the proletariat of the capitalist countries supports the struggle for liberation of the people of the colonies and semi-colonies. . . . We must unite with the proletarians of. . . . Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy, and all other capitalist countries; only then can we overthrow Imperialism . . . and liberate the nations and the peoples of the world.<sup>43</sup>

Robert Taber, a leading counter-insurgency analyst of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, summarized well how the Chinese undertook these political and propaganda campaigns in "enemy countries":

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<sup>41</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Complete Art of War*, translated with historical introduction and commentary by Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 119.

<sup>43</sup> Mao Zedong, *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), p. 104.



Usually the revolutionary political organization will have two branches: one subterranean and illegal, the other visible and quasi-legitimate.

On the one hand, there will be the activists—saboteurs, terrorists, arms runners, fabricators of explosive devices, operators of a clandestine press, distributors of political pamphlets, and couriers to carry messages from one guerrilla sector to another, using the towns as communications centers.

On the other hand, there will be sympathizers and fellow travelers, those not really of the underground, operating for the most part within the law, but sustaining the efforts of the activists and, of themselves, accomplishing far more important tasks. The visible organization will, of course, have invisible links with the revolutionary underground, and, through it, with the guerrillas in the countryside. But its real work will be to serve as a respectable façade for the revolution, a civilian front . . . made up of intellectuals, tradesmen, clerks, students, professionals, and the like—above all, of women—capable of promoting funds, circulating petitions, organizing boycotts, raising popular demonstrations, informing friendly journalists, spreading rumors, and in every way conceivable waging a massive propaganda campaign aimed at two objectives; the strengthening and brightening of the rebel “image,” and the discrediting of the regime.<sup>44</sup>

Beijing funded, supplied, and helped train insurgencies employing these and related techniques in most of the countries of Southeast Asia and some in South Asia during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Although these insurgencies were ultimately only successful in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, they imposed disproportionate costs and heavily distracted the United States and its regional allies and partners for three decades.

This extensive experience of offensive political warfare is deeply etched into Chinese strategic culture. Although the circumstances of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary war differ from those in most theatres today, this habitual Chinese practice of offensive political operations bears a close familial relationship to recent Chinese international operations. Indeed, from the perspective of a Chinese strategic planner, it is difficult to conceive of large-scale operations against foreign powers that do not involve intrusive political and psychological operations from an early stage.

A key conclusion is that offensive political warfare is nothing new to the Chinese. It is a long-standing foundational component of Chinese strategic doctrine. Most of the offensive political warfare operations being undertaken by the Chinese today can best be seen as 21<sup>st</sup>-century adaptations of this deep tradition.

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice* (London: Paladin, 1970), pp. 32, 33.

## The Nature of the Xi Jinping's Regime and Its Key Goals

The Chinese context for recent political warfare campaigns is markedly different from that of the United States and its liberal democratic allies and partners. China is a one-party communist state. As a Leninist autocracy, the Chinese Communist Party has unchallenged authority over all domestic and international policies and over the domestic and international operations of all national agencies.

This builds on a long-standing theme in Chinese security culture of emphasizing centralization, cohesion, and national unity. Leninist culture does not encourage deviation, debates, or disagreements but perceives them to be symptoms of “splittism” and “warlordism” that need to be isolated and annihilated. It is not surprising then that a core objective of Chinese political warfare is to suppress dissent, humiliate opponents and doubters, and instill unquestioning loyalty to the Party.

Since Xi Jinping's election as General Secretary of the Communist Party and Chairman of the Central Military Commission in November 2012, he has worked to concentrate power further into his own hands. He now chairs not only the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee, but also personally oversees all of the important agencies of the Party and the State.

In addition, Xi has instituted a new control mechanism called “Central Leading Groups” that draw together Party leaders and domain experts to address planning, investment, and management in key areas. He personally chairs Central Leading Groups on subjects as diverse as economic and social development, military reform, and management of the Internet and broader processes of “informatization.” In addition, Xi is Commander in Chief of the Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television. When reviewing the regime's extreme concentration of power, some analysts have described Xi as the “Chairman of Everything,” and others have labeled him “the Emperor.”

A senior associate and ally of Xi Jinping, Wang Qishan, boiled down the General Secretary's core thinking as follows:

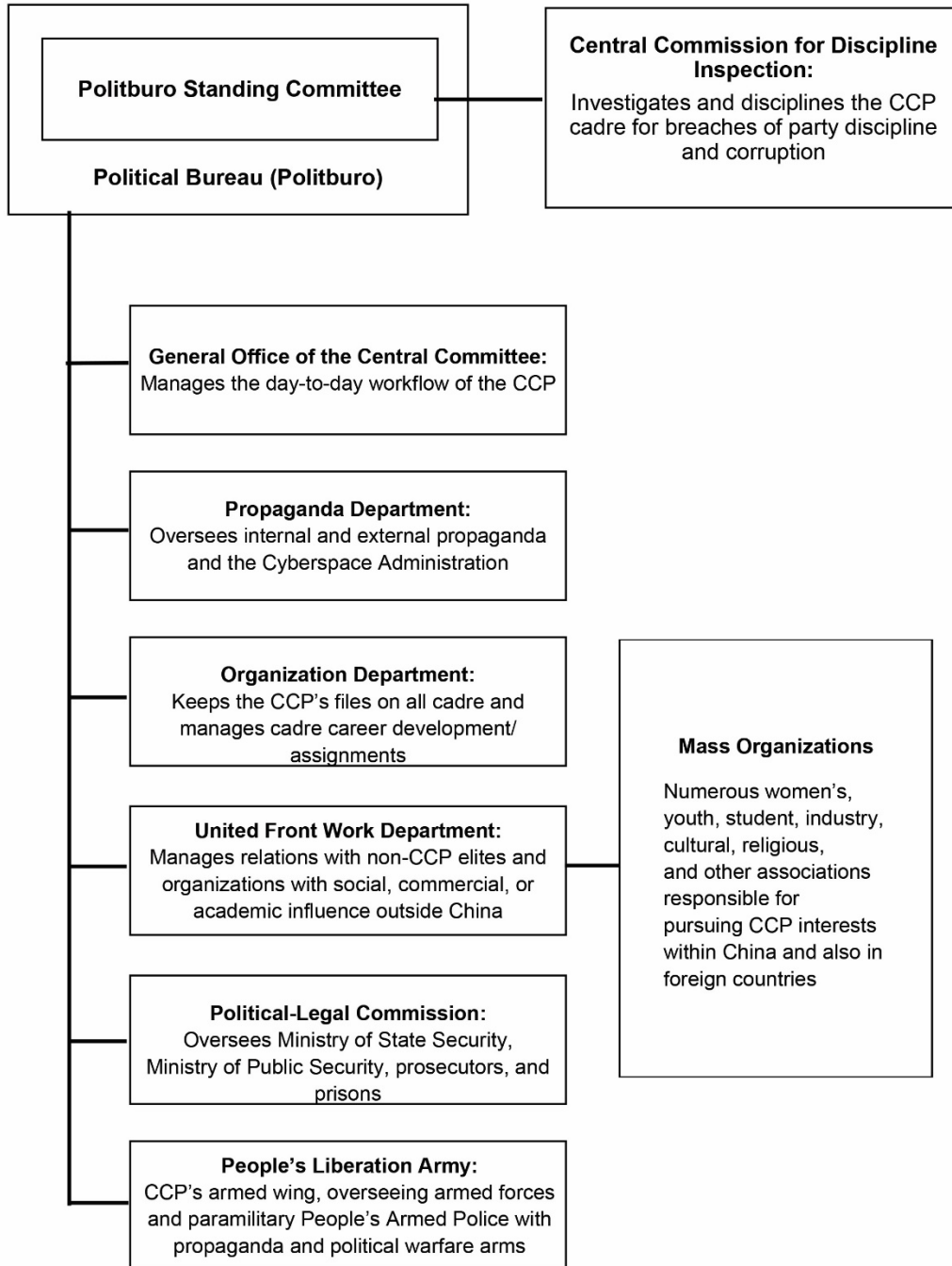
All President Xi Jinping's key speeches over the past five years can be summarized with one message: ensuring the leading role of the Communist Party in all aspects of life . . . the party, government, military, society, education, north, south, east, west—the party leads everything.<sup>45</sup>

Emphasizing the leading role of the Party effectively means that Xi Jinping has undisputed authority over every area of importance in today's China.

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<sup>45</sup> “The ‘One Simple Message’ in Xi Jinping's Five Years of Epic Speeches,” *South China Morning Post*, November 3, 2017.

FIGURE 1: CORE STRUCTURES OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY



This figure was adapted from a diagram by Peter Mattis, "Form and Function of the Chinese Communist Party," published September 28, 2017, available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/form-function-chinese-communist-party-peter-mattis>.

The core structures of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and some of their basic functional relationships are illustrated in Figure 1. This figure underlines that fact that all key functions of the Party-controlled Chinese state report to the Politburo Standing Committee that Xi Jinping chairs. Also notable is that most of the functions that are central to Chinese political warfare operations abroad are at the core of the Communist Party's operating structure. The Propaganda Department, the Political-Legal Commission, the People's Liberation Army, and the United Front Work Department, are all central players. A key role of the United Front Work Department is to foster many mass organizations that have branches working to progress CCP interests in key foreign countries, especially in the United States and its close allies. All of these activities are planned, directed, and overseen by the Politburo Standing Committee.

Further strengthening Xi's hand is the absence of any serious checks and balances on his or the Party's power. The Party is above the law, not only writing all legislation but also approving major prosecutions and determining all-important sentences. The Political-Legal Commission manages the operational details of this activity.

Xi Jinping is not only Chairman of the Central Military Commission, which oversees all issues relating to China's military (the People's Liberation Army, or PLA), but he has frequently emphasized that the PLA is the Party's military force. The military does not report to the state or any other element of Chinese society, but to the Party, and effectively to Xi himself. The military is, hence, available to defend Xi's regime and pursue the Party's interests with few constraints.

Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign provides a further, very powerful, layer of discipline. All members of the Party, and indeed all citizens, are aware that there is an ever-present potential for them to be subjected to investigation and prosecution for either real or manufactured indiscretions or corrupt practices. They know that they will be especially vulnerable if they pose a threat to Xi Jinping's authority or seriously question his judgment. In recent years, a succession of potential rivals and indiscreet senior officials have been investigated, charged, and given long prison sentences. Some who have been charged with "corruption" have been executed. The incentives for all key members of Chinese society, whether in the Party, the military, business, the media, or elsewhere, to toe the Party line are exceptionally strong.

More recently, Xi Jinping has established a new organization called the National Supervision Commission. Its primary roles are apparently to stand above the court and criminal justice system to review personnel performance, investigate breaches of discipline by Party officials and government employees, and administer relevant punishments under the direction of the Party leadership.

The result is that China is now ruled by a communist dictator who wields extraordinary personal power. Xi's personal political thoughts are now enshrined in the Chinese constitution, legal constraints on his continuing to rule for the rest of his life have been removed, and his acolytes have further fostered the growing cult of personality by naming him "Great Leader." Earlier eras of

collective leadership are now a distant memory, and the prospect of an early move towards a more liberal democratic system of governance is exceedingly remote.

A key conclusion is that as Xi Jinping directs political warfare operations against the United States and its allies and partners, there is little resistance from the Party or from any other quarter in China. Nor can any serious opposition be anticipated for many years.

## China's Strategic Goals

The Chinese Communist Party's expressed goals have progressed through several phases since it seized power in 1949. Initially the focus was on protecting the new regime from foreign interference, building the country's economy, socializing the Chinese community, and quietly supporting revolutionary movements in bordering countries, especially in South East Asia. In public, this was an era of "peaceful coexistence."

As the economy accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, there was talk of Beijing's "peaceful rise," but also of the regime "biding its time." As some economic reforms proved successful and the Chinese middle class started to grow, some in the West assumed that China would follow a Western development path and inevitably adopt some form of liberal democracy. Many expected China to become a responsible international citizen as Western soft power took hold of the Chinese elite. Unfortunately, these assumptions about China's political trajectory have proven to be erroneous. In reality, the power of China's Communist Party has not been diminished but enhanced, and the strong attachment of the regime to Leninist authoritarianism and mass coercion has been demonstrated repeatedly by its domestic and international behavior during the last decade.

The Chinese regime is now driven by three primary goals. The first is to maintain undisputed Communist Party rule. The second is to continue the growth of the national economy so as to build a wealthy community that is united and loyal to the regime. The third goal is to build China's international influence and prestige so as to be respected as an equal, if not a superior, rival to the United States on the global stage.

In pursuing these goals, Xi Jinping continually emphasizes his determination to fully overcome the century of China's humiliation by foreign powers and restore the nation's power, wealth, and influence by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his three-and-a-half-hour address to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2017, Xi's strongest theme was the rejuvenation of China's power, fully realizing the "Chinese dream," and achieving the promised goal of making China "a fully developed nation" by 2048, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For excellent coverage of these and related themes in Xi Jinping's address to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, see Bonnie S. Glaser, "The 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress: A More Assertive Chinese Foreign Policy," *The Interpreter*, October 26, 2017.

In that landmark speech, Xi divided the period ahead into two main brackets: that which is underway till 2035 and that which will stretch from 2035 to 2048. By the end of the current phase, Xi claimed that the PLA's modernization will be "basically completed." Moreover, by 2048 he stated that the PLA would be "fully transformed into a first-tier force." In that period, Xi declared that China would become "a global leader in terms of comprehensive national power and international influence."<sup>47</sup>

Xi also argued that international developments were working in Beijing's favor. China's technological and economic progress was advancing at a rapid rate, while the United States was weakened and Europe was in some disarray. He portrayed a sense of Marxist determinism about the inevitability of China's continued rise.

Exuding great confidence, Xi argued that the Chinese model of governance and development was a far more attractive option for developing countries than that offered by the liberal democracies of the West. He stated that China had "blazed a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. . . . It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence."<sup>48</sup> Part of Xi's vision appears to be the fostering of a growing group of like-minded revisionist countries that, over time, may constitute an international partnership, alliance, or even a China-centered empire.

In order for the Chinese communist regime to ensure its security and also to enable the Party to be unhindered in pursuit of its international objectives, an informal contractual arrangement was struck between the Party and the Chinese people some three decades ago. Richard McGregor describes it as follows:

In place of Mao's totalitarian terror, the Party has substituted a kind of take-it-or-leave-it compact with society. If you play by the Party's rules, which means eschewing competitive politics, then you and your family can get on with your lives and maybe get rich. But the deal does not exist in isolation. It is buttressed by a pervasive propaganda system which constantly derides alternatives to the Party. The underlying message is that the Party alone stands between the country and the kind of murderous, impoverishing instability that has engulfed China at numerous times in its history.<sup>49</sup>

Xi Jinping has accelerated programs to ensure mass compliance by increasing the scale and sophistication of public control mechanisms. These programs have been designed primarily to ensure that there are strict controls on unwelcome foreign influences, terrorism, crime, and any activity that could undermine the nation's progress and the leading role of the Party.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Martin Wolf, "The Challenge of Xi Jinping's Leninist autocracy," *Financial Times*, November 1, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 16–17.

Most fundamentally, the resources of the Ministry of State Security have been sustained at a level comparable to those accorded to the People's Liberation Army. In consequence, numbers of police and the quality of most of the internal security systems and equipment are relatively high.

The Great Firewall of China that censors Internet traffic within and beyond China has been greatly strengthened. Domestic Internet providers that are fully compliant with Party directives and surveillance requirements have been encouraged to dominate domestic online markets. These arrangements are being continuously updated to facilitate Party propaganda and thwart undesirable messaging.

The deployment of advanced surveillance systems has also become far more pervasive during the last decade. These systems have sprung partly from the almost universal application of computerized systems to everything from banking, health, transport, employment, criminal justice, and other domains. Closed circuit television coverage is now very extensive, using more than 170 million cameras that are networked using sophisticated coordination and tracking software. Additional surveillance capabilities have been added with reliable vehicle number plate and facial recognition scanning, DNA sampling technologies, and sophisticated telephone and internet surveillance systems. These systems can be used to combat crime, but they are also being used to detect and monitor politically sensitive behavior.

With no effective mechanisms to protect individual privacy, the Ministry of State Security has harnessed all of these, and many other, data sources into an integrated Police Cloud, or system-of-systems under a multi-year program named Golden Shield. The result is a vast searchable database that is now formally called The Integrated Joint Operations Platform. It can almost instantaneously produce detailed profiles of individuals including their education and employment histories, their shopping preferences, their financial circumstances, their social media status, their networks of personal relationships, and even their political and religious views. This system has scores of uses, many of which are deeply intrusive and would be prohibited in liberal democracies.

An even more sophisticated surveillance and mass control system that is currently being rolled out takes the form of automated Chinese social credit.<sup>50</sup> This system requires individuals to personally register their online identities and encourages them to take responsibility not only for their own actions but also for those that they encounter either online or elsewhere. Informing relevant authorities of deviant behaviors and attitudes earns favored treatment. Failure to do so attracts the attention of security forces and negative ratings when applying for jobs, bank loans, passports, and pensions.

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<sup>50</sup> See these processes discussed in greater detail in Samantha Hoffman, "Managing the State: Social Credit, Surveillance and the CCP's Plan for China," *China Brief* 17, no. 11, August 17, 2017.

Meng Jianzhu, the Politburo member in charge of internal security, has championed these systems. He described the system as a “multidimensional, all-weather and foolproof prevention and control grid.” Xi Jinping described the concept as providing “mega national security.”<sup>51</sup>

Willy Wo-Lap Lam of the Jamestown Foundation described Xi Jinping’s intent as follows:

The supreme leader’s biggest contribution to thwarting pro-democracy and other “anti-government” movements, however, has been his determination to modernize Beijing’s already formidable police-state apparatus through the application of top-notch spy and related surveillance software. Xi set up in 2014 the Central Leading Group on Cyberspace Affairs, which is charged with building the world’s largest digitalized data bank to keep tabs on “destabilizing elements” ranging from criminals and terrorists to dissidents, underground church personnel, and NGO activists. Specialized *weiwen* (to maintain social stability) cadres have the full cooperation of the country’s social-media and e-commerce platforms, as well as cloud-computing and related high-tech firms in establishing a seamless and all-encompassing intelligence network that would do George Orwell’s Big Brother proud.<sup>52</sup>

A key conclusion is that the Chinese Communist Party is investing heavily in the advanced surveillance systems of a police state. These systems are being used to coerce the mass compliance of the Chinese population. Some of these surveillance technologies and much of the same coercive culture are also evident in the regime’s political warfare operations in foreign countries.

## China’s International Targets

The primary targets for China’s international political warfare operations are the populations of the United States, its close allies, and those countries close to China’s borders. Within that context, there are three main foci of Beijing’s campaigns:

- First is the ethnic Chinese diaspora that resides abroad. This includes everyone from short-term tourist visitors; medium-term student, academic, and business residents; and long-term residents and ethnic Chinese citizens of host countries. Chinese operations aim to foster the nationalism and loyalty of these people and, so far as possible, insulate them from the “corrupting liberalism” of the West. Many of these people are encouraged to participate actively in generating support for China’s interests within host populations.
- Second are the nationals of the targeted foreign country. Particular attention is paid to senior leaders and people of influence in politics, government, the media, business, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, and defense forces.
- Third are measures to help shape messaging of the host government, media, academic, and other organizations in ways that accord with the Beijing’s worldview. A typical theme

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<sup>51</sup> Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Beijing Harnesses Big Data & AI to Perfect the Police State,” *China Brief* 17, no. 10, July 21, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



is the inexorable rise of China to dominate the Indo-Pacific and surpass the United States, implying it is futile for locals to resist. Shaping local perceptions and media messaging is important because it frequently overflows national boundaries and reinforces China's extensive global propaganda.

In all of these political warfare operations, Chinese agencies strive to communicate a consistent Marxist-Leninist ideological narrative. In instructing senior educators and teachers, Xi Jinping urged them to "educate and guide their students to love the motherland, love the people, and love the Communist Party of China." He rallied lecturers to "guard the party's ideology" and "dare to unsheathe the sword."<sup>53</sup> There is little doubt that Xi views China's political campaigns as a form of warfare that is critical to China's and the Communist Party's future.

## China's Recent Political Warfare Operations

The range of Chinese political warfare operations in recent years is vast and includes operations to influence, pressure, coerce, bribe, corrupt, and/or exploit Western countries. The following highlights some of the key categories:

**Mobilization of the ethnic Chinese diasporas.** Staffs attached to Chinese embassies and consulates as well as agents employed under various commercial and other arrangements actively recruit, surveil, and attempt to control the activities of ethnic Chinese residents overseas. Numerous Chinese front organizations play important roles, such as recruiting personnel to undertake basic intelligence functions and reporting "non-patriotic" behavior. Ethnic Chinese who refuse to cooperate have been threatened with adverse consequences for relatives in China and for their own prospects following their return home.<sup>54</sup>

**Tasking of ethnic Chinese students in foreign countries to suppress anti-Beijing views.** Chinese-sponsored student and related associations encourage members to confront, abuse and submit formal complaints against any staff, students, or members of the public who make statements or write articles that contain views contrary to those propounded by Beijing.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in John Garnaut, "Our Universities are a Frontline in China's Ideological Wars," *Australian Financial Review*, August 30, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Xiuzhong Xu, "Chinese Nationalism Jostles with Academic Freedom in Australia," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/australia/china-students-censorship.html>; and Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2018), pp. 25–36.

<sup>55</sup> Primrose Riordan, "Uni Lecturer Targeted over 'Separate' Taiwan," *The Australian*, August 24, 2017, available at <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/university-lecturer-targeted-over-separate-taiwan-materials/news-story/79febfc3fd91f84604173c79a1f249a3>; and Anders Corr, "Chinese Informants in The Classroom: Pedagogical Strategies," *Forbes Magazine*, June 28, 2017.

**Sponsorship of pro-regime “educational” institutions in universities to foster pro-Chinese worldviews.** Chinese companies and Chinese-funded associations and other entities have donated hundreds of millions of dollars to universities in the United States and other Western countries in apparent attempts to buy influence and encourage public support for Beijing’s views. Amongst these initiatives is the program funded and managed by the Chinese Department of Education to establish Confucius Institutes in Western universities and schools. There are now more than 100 Confucius Institutes in the United States and more than 500 in universities globally.<sup>56</sup>

**Substantial financial and other assistance to key individuals and institutions that are prepared to support China’s interests.** Chinese government-associated entities fund numerous supposedly independent research institutes and also prominent individuals, including the officials of some Western political parties and leading politicians. Many are offered all-expenses-paid trips to China and exceptional access to senior regime personnel. The clear intent is to foster pro-China research and public commentary. Some individuals are also recruited as intelligence agents and “agents of influence.”

**Large-scale information operations to build influence within and coerce Western media organizations.** In September 2017 Xinhua reported the following Chinese media initiatives overseas:

Xi (Jinping) has told media groups to turn up their voices on the global stage, telling stories about the new, modern China, while developing flagship media groups with a strong global influence.<sup>57</sup>

On Dec. 31, 2016, the China Global Television Network was launched with six TV channels, three overseas channels, a video content provider, and a cluster of services on social media platforms. State media outlets were established in almost all key regions and major cities across the globe. Chinese corporate and other entities have also sought to control Western media reporting on China by other means. In Australia and some other countries, pro-Beijing entities now own and tightly control almost all Chinese language newspapers and most Chinese language social media platforms. Chinese entities have also attempted to force leading Western publishers to censor their material in Beijing’s interests.

**Leveraging trade and investment dependencies to coerce partners.** On numerous occasions, Chinese officials have threatened “consumer-led” boycotts of national goods following Western and partner government announcements of policies to which Beijing objects. Notable instances have been threats against Japan, the Philippines, and Australia. In some cases, Beijing has gone further. For instance, following the decision by the Lotte Corporation of South Korea to

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<sup>56</sup> Jane Pong and Emily Feng, “Confucius Institutes: Cultural Asset or Campus Threat?” *Financial Times*, October 27, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> “China Focus: China Works Hard to Communicate its Message,” *Xinhua*, September 20, 2017.

permit an American THAAD missile defense system to be based on land it owns near Seoul, Chinese state-owned enterprises led a mass consumer boycott of Lotte department stores, forcing the company to sell its assets in China. Beijing also directed Chinese travel agents to delete tours to South Korea from their offerings, resulting in the number of Chinese tourists visiting parts of South Korea falling by 80 percent.<sup>58</sup> A disturbing consequence of this Chinese coercion is that many Western and partner country enterprises and government agencies are deterred from taking any stand that may be seen as conflicting with the preferences of the Chinese Communist Party.

**Mobilization of Chinese-owned companies to act in the interests of Beijing's strategic goals.** All major Chinese corporations operate under dual control: the managing board and the Chinese Communist Party. Xi Jinping has made clear that Chinese corporations are expected to be responsive to CCP interests and directions and, in nearly every instance, they are.

Chinese law requires businesses of any significance to establish Party organizations and facilitate their activities, which mainly involve study sessions on Beijing's latest directives and the collection of membership fees. Among Chinese companies with full or partial foreign ownership, roughly 74,000 firms—70 percent of the total—had set up Party units by 2016. Party branches had also been established in 106,000 foreign-funded companies operating in China.<sup>59</sup>

It is not unusual for the CCP to encourage or even direct Chinese corporations to purchase an overseas asset, build a facility, enter a market or undertake some other activity for non-commercial strategic purposes. In many cases, Chinese banks will provide financial assistance at favorable rates to companies commissioned to undertake these patriotic tasks. This is the case, for instance, with many infrastructure projects being launched overseas as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>60</sup>

**Recruitment of business leaders who have strong economic interests in China.** Many senior Western businessmen and retired politicians and officials have been recruited with very high salaries to serve on the boards of Chinese companies and argue Beijing's case on trade, technology, strategic infrastructure and other sensitive issues.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Laura Zhou, "Chinese Authorities Seize Equipment from South Korean Retail Giant Lotte as Tensions Over Missile Defence Shield Continue," *South China Morning Post*, August 22, 2017. See also Hamilton, *Silent Invasion*, p. 145.

<sup>59</sup> Chun Han Wong and Eva Dou, "Foreign Companies in China Get a New Partner: the Communist Party," *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2017; and Rowan Callick, "Foreign Firms Come to the Party in China," *The Australian*, October 23, 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Amanda Hodge, "China's Debt-trap Diplomacy Snares our Asian Neighbours," *The Weekend Australian*, January 13, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Nick McKenzie and James Massota, "Andrew Robb's Secret China Contract: Money for Nothing," *The Melbourne Age*, December 6, 2017.

**Seek to apply Chinese law within the United States and other countries.** In recent years Chinese security agencies have sought to extend their operations into the United States and other allied countries in efforts to prosecute and enforce Chinese domestic law. As part of Beijing's Operation Fox Hunt against so-called corrupt ethnic Chinese, regime officials even attempted to kidnap an ethnic Chinese person in New York against whom they wished to bring charges once they transported him to China.<sup>62</sup>

**Penetration of Western research and other institutions to access cutting-edge technologies.** Chinese nationals with close ties to the Beijing regime (including at least one PLA officer) have undertaken research with potential national security applications within allied and other Western country universities and research institutes.<sup>63</sup>

**Sophisticated cyber operations against targeted countries.** In its 2015 Global Threat Report, the American cyber intelligence firm CrowdStrike identified dozens of Chinese cyber entities targeting business sectors in the West that are key to Beijing's Five-Year Plan. It found 28 Chinese cyber groups pursuing defense and law enforcement systems alone.<sup>64</sup> Other sectors targeted worldwide included energy, transportation, government, technology, healthcare, finance, telecommunications, media, manufacturing, and agriculture. Chinese cyber operations have been estimated to involve hundreds of thousands of military personnel who have collectively stolen intellectual capital valued at some \$300 billion annually.<sup>65</sup>

**Espionage operations against Western and partner countries.** Official reports indicate that Chinese espionage operations are the most aggressive of all those undertaken by foreign countries within the United States.<sup>66</sup> Primary operations include the clandestine acquisition of intellectual property, scientific and technological research, commercially sensitive information, and defense and national security data. A wide range of techniques is also used to interfere in national and allied affairs.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Kate O'Keeffe, Aruna Viswanatha, and Cezary Podkul, "China's Pursuit of Fugitive Businessman Guo Wengui Kicks Off Manhattan Caper Worthy of Spy Thriller," *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Clive Hamilton and Alex Joske, "Australian Universities are Helping China's Military Surpass the United States," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 28, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Dorothy Denning, "How the Chinese Cyberthreat has Evolved [Commentary]," *Fifth Domain*, October 9, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> For details, see the remarks of the former Director General of the NSA, General Keith Alexander, and the former Deputy Director of the FBI for Counterintelligence, cited in Michael Brown and Pavneet Singh, *China's Technology Transfer Strategy: How Chinese Investments in Emerging Technology Enable a Strategic Competitor to Access the Crown Jewels of U.S. Innovation* (Silicon Valley: Defense Innovation Unit Experimental, 2017) p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Brown and Singh, *China's Technology Transfer Strategy*, p. 3; Rob Taylor, "Cold War II: Spy Agency Sounds Alarm at Foreign-Interference Levels," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2018; and Denning, "How the Chinese Cyberthreat has Evolved."

<sup>67</sup> Charles Wallace, "The Art of Influence: How China's Spies Operate in Australia," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 3, 2017.

**Negotiation of international partnerships to alter strategic balances.** Beijing has made significant strategic gains by negotiating strategic partnerships of varying types with many countries in Southeast Asia, South and Central Asia, and Africa. Particularly notable is the strategic partnership concluded with the Russian Federation and the apparently warm personal relationship that has developed between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

**Geo-strategic maneuvers to extend Beijing's influence over new areas.** A key geo-strategic initiative has been Xi Jinping's launching of the Belt and Road Initiative. This program aspires to construct road, rail, air, port, pipeline, electronic communications, and other infrastructure to link China more effectively with Southeast, South, and Central Asia; the Middle East; Europe; and Africa. Many analysts doubt the financial viability and sustainability of many of these projects. However, Xi Jinping appears convinced not only of the economic benefits but also of the barely-disguised geo-strategic vision of China dominating the Eurasian continent in the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>68</sup>

**Extensive use of para-military and military forces to persuade, intimidate, and confront foreign forces in selected areas and forcibly to seize, occupy, and militarize strategically important locations.** In order to more effectively exploit the gray zone between peace and war, Beijing has raised a series of maritime and land constabulary and militia forces that can harass and confront opponents and seize control of contested areas with a risk that is lower than would be the case if such operations were undertaken by the PLA. Operating alongside these units in many situations are commercial organizations of many types that provide most of the engineering, construction, and transport that is required. When these militias, paramilitary forces, and commercial organizations undertake strategically important operations (such as the island building, territorial seizure, and militarization of the South China Sea), they are almost always supported by powerful PLA forces, often lurking just over the horizon. These layered gray zone offensive operations have proven to be very effective in seizing strategically important territories and deterring forceful regional or major power intervention.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> For an authoritative report on the Belt and Road Initiative, see Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017).

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Ross Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism in the South China Sea: Strategy Options for the United States and Its Allies* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and Strategic Forum, 2016), pp. 11–26.

**Xi Jinping champions China’s political warfare operations as a “Magic Weapon,” over which he exercises command and control through the United Front Work Department and other agencies.** China’s political warfare operations are well organized and centrally coordinated by key parts of the Chinese Communist Party infrastructure in Beijing. The strategic importance and scale of these operations are summarized well by Anne-Maree Brady:

In September 2014, Xi gave a speech on the importance of united front work, using Mao’s term to describe it as one of the CCP’s “Magic Weapons.” . . . As in the Cold War years, united front work not only serves foreign policy goals, but can sometimes be used as a cover for intelligence activities. The Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Public Security, PLA Joint Staff Headquarters Third Department, Xinhua News Service, the United Front Work Department, the International Liaison Department are the main, but not the only, PRC Party-State agencies who recruit foreign, especially ethnic Chinese, agents for the purpose of collecting intelligence. In 2014, one former spy said that the Third Department had at least 200,000 agents abroad.<sup>70</sup>

## Assessment of China’s Success to Date

When viewed as a whole, the Chinese regime’s diverse political warfare operations have achieved some notable successes during the last decade.

First, Beijing has emerged as the dominant economic power over most of the Indo-Pacific region, seized effective control of the South China Sea, and established a maritime presence deep into the Pacific and Indian Oceans. These advances have boosted the prestige and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, not least with the bulk of China’s domestic population.

Second, Beijing has made significant geo-strategic progress, most notably in relations with Russia and in parts of broader Southeast Asia, in Central Asia, and in the Horn of Africa. Reinforcing these advances has been the Belt and Road Initiative, bringing substantial Chinese investments in transport and communications infrastructures to locations as diverse as the Panama Canal, northern Australia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

Third, Beijing has stolen or otherwise secured vast quantities of Western intellectual property that has accelerated many categories of Chinese development, boosted the economy, and helped sustain China’s rising prosperity.

Fourth, the regime in Beijing has boosted China’s international influence substantially. Most nations now accord China the status of a very major power, and some view it as a superpower, albeit one with a different mix of attributes to the United States. The governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Pakistan have forged especially close partnerships with Beijing and may be on the way to becoming valued tributary or buffer states on China’s borders. Myanmar, the

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<sup>70</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping,” conference paper delivered at The Corrosion of Democracy under China’s Global Influence, September 16–17, 2017, Arlington, VA.

Philippines, and Sudan may progress their relationships with Beijing in similar ways in the period ahead.

Fifth, Beijing has made further incremental progress in isolating and undermining Taiwan politically and militarily and may see its way clear to engineer the “return” of Taiwan during the coming two decades.

Sixth, the Chinese Communist Party and several Chinese government agencies have established strong networks of influence within the United States and in all major allied and partner countries. While these networks differ in balance and strength, they provide the means whereby Beijing can exert pressure on Western elites and many categories of allied decision-making. In future crises, these networks could be mobilized to weaken the coherence of allied military and other operations.

Seventh, the Chinese Communist Party has developed and refined a wide range of coercive instruments that can be applied to mislead, distract, confuse, and undermine the coherence of Western and other democratic state decision-making. Most Western and partner countries have shown themselves to be poorly prepared to combat Beijing’s creative exploitation of the gray zone between peace and war.

However, Beijing’s political warfare operations have also encountered some serious challenges and stirred some regional counters. In particular, nearly all Indo-Pacific governments now have a clearer appreciation of China’s political warfare strategy, and many have increased their levels of alert. There has been a significant stiffening of resistance. Particularly notable have been the active defensive steps taken by Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, and India. In most of these countries, a new level of alertness to Chinese interference is evident beyond the national governments to include parts of local media and mass publics. In some countries, controls on foreign investments have been tightened, counter-espionage and related legislation has been strengthened, defense investment and operational plans have been reshaped to strengthen deterrence of major powers, and there has been increased media and public attention given to the challenges posed by the communist regime in Beijing.

There is also growing concern about Beijing’s activities in more distant theatres, in particular in Europe and parts of the Middle East and Africa. This is encouraging a significant expansion of cross-theatre security consultation and cooperation particularly between the Indo-Pacific democratic states and key European members of NATO.<sup>71</sup>

Some aspects of Beijing’s geo-strategic expansion are also starting to encounter significant headwinds. Some elements of China’s Belt and Road Initiative have run into difficulties, resulting

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<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, the discussion in Thorsten Benner et al., *Autocratic Advance: Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, February, 2018).

in increased political and commercial risks. Many proposed infrastructure investments appear to be poorly planned and fail to demonstrate any realistic prospect of economic return. Some Chinese infrastructure investments are only funded through substantial loans that the recipient country cannot afford to service. When the recipient defaults, the Chinese entity then takes ownership and control of what, in some cases, is a strategically important asset. In consequence, land-owners and regional governments in many parts of the Indo-Pacific are increasingly wary. Indeed, it is possible that the Belt and Road Initiative may prove to be a strategic over-stretch for Beijing that eventually embarrasses the regime and burdens the Chinese banking system with higher levels of low-quality debt.

Beijing's aggressive cyber and related espionage operations against the United States, its allies and partners have contributed significantly to a deepening distrust of Beijing. Most countries have moved to strengthen their cyber defenses, and some have developed powerful capabilities to launch cyber counter-offensives.

In summary then, the Chinese regime's diverse, persistent, and strategically reinforcing political warfare operations have won Beijing some substantial advances. Moreover, even where China's initiatives have been only partially successful, the impact of Beijing's political influence across the Indo-Pacific region has been profound. As things now stand, the momentum in the strategic rivalry between China and the West is with Beijing.

However, there are early signs that Beijing's political warfare operations have awoken many decision-makers in the United States and its close allies to the nature and scale of the strategic challenge now posed by China. There is now a widespread appreciation of the importance of developing a coherent counter-strategy across the Western alliance. There is a sense that although the Chinese regime has won the first few rounds of its strategic maneuvering against the West, the United States and its allies are only now beginning to appreciate the need to marshal resources for a complex and demanding struggle that is likely to run for decades. And there are indications that the Chinese leadership is beginning to realize that, in coming years, they may face a much better coordinated allied counter-strategy that they have a strong interest in forestalling.



## Chapter 4

# A Profile of China's United Front Work Department

To illustrate further the threat confronting Western democracies, this chapter examines China's United Front Work Department. The Department is responsible for carrying out many of the overseas operations analyzed above. This case study on the United Front will identify the motives, goals, and methods of Chinese political warfare through the CCP's own writings. In doing so, the chapter will furnish insights into the Party's worldview, values, and priorities, a deeper knowledge of which is essential to an effective allied counter-strategy.

In late 2017 and early 2018, a number of Western analysts and media outlets drew attention to a Chinese Communist Party organ that has largely escaped scrutiny.<sup>72</sup> Described as “secretive,” “obscure,” and “low-profile,” the United Front Work Department (United Front or UFWD) is a powerful Party apparatus that seeks to secure loyalty to the CCP from Chinese citizens, Chinese nationals overseas, and the vast diaspora communities around the world. Once limited largely to the mainland, the United Front's activities have extended most prominently to the United States,

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<sup>72</sup> James Kynge, Lucy Hornby, and Jamil Anderlini, “Inside China's Secret ‘Magic Weapon’ for Worldwide Influence,” *Financial Times*, October 16, 2017; Megan Palin, “China's Secretive Lobbying Agency ‘Stepping Up its Operations in Australia’,” *news.com.au*, November 30, 2017; Marcel Angliviél de la Beaumelle, “The United Front Work Department: ‘Magic Weapon’ at Home and Abroad,” *China Brief* 17, no. 9, July 6, 2017; Gerry Groot, “United Front Work After the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress,” *China Brief* 17, no. 17, December 22, 2017; and June Teufel Dreyer, “A Weapon Without War: China's United Front Strategy,” *FPRI E-Note*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 6, 2018.

Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, raising concerns about Beijing's ability to exert unwelcome influence upon Western governments and societies.

Beyond intelligence gathering and seemingly innocuous liaison work, the UFWD has made its presence felt in host nations through influence operations designed to shape opinions and even coerce actions in ways that favor China's image and interests. One expert observes that the Party increasingly feels "entitled, obliged even, to extend a form of extraterritoriality to all overseas Chinese."<sup>73</sup> The United Front's use of Chinese student associations to manipulate discourse over controversial issues like Taiwan on Western university campuses is one manifestation of the Department's growing reach and power to meddle in foreign countries.

Although the West has begun to awaken to the inroads the United Front has made abroad and to the pernicious effects of its operations, the Department remains shrouded in secrecy. The following section draws on the United Front's own publications to shine a light on the nature and character of the UFWD's overseas work. In short, this analytical excursion explores one dimension of Chinese political warfare in the Chinese Communist Party's own words.

## A Snapshot Through Open Sources

In May 2015, the United Front Work Department convened its first work conference in nearly a decade. The meeting elevated the Department's institutional importance to the Party.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, after the conference, Xi created the Leading Small Group on United Front Work charged with coordinating policy under his command. The high-level gathering also produced a set of regulations that authorities made public in September 2015.<sup>75</sup> The document, described as "the Party's first rule," serves as official guidance on the Department's vision and mission.<sup>76</sup> In accordance with the regulations, the UFWD subsequently published a series of tutorials, study guides, and course books to educate and indoctrinate the public and the rank-and-file Party cadre about the United Front's priorities.

Composed and edited by members of the various bureaus comprising the Department, these writings represent the most authoritative public statements of the Chinese Communist Party's thinking and strategy on political warfare. Indeed, the literature reveals important details about the guiding principles, procedures, and best practices associated with the United Front.

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<sup>73</sup> Gerry Groot, "The Long Reach of China's United Front Work," *The Interpreter*, November 6, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> In March 2018, the UFWD acquired even more bureaucratic clout after it subsumed the Religious Affairs Bureau, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, and the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs. See Gerry Groot, "The Rise and Rise of the United Front Work Department under Xi," *China Brief* 18, no. 7, April 24, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> See 中共中央统战部 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China], 中国共产党统一战线条例 [The Regulation on the Chinese Communist Party's United Front] (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> "China Publishes Regulation on CPC's United Front Work," *Xinhua*, September 23, 2015.

It is worth emphasizing that the United Front represents only one facet of Chinese political warfare in a much larger tapestry of CCP institutions. For example, the PLA conducts parallel political activities encompassing media, legal, and psychological operations. It is also important to note that the United Front primarily focuses its operations on Chinese nationals at home and abroad as well as overseas ethnic Chinese. Other Party organs, including the International Liaison Department and the Ministry of State Security, are more explicitly charged with influencing and intimidating non-ethnic Chinese foreigners in their private and official capacities. Nevertheless, the United Front is a critical component of Xi's foreign influence operations.

Moreover, although each Party apparatus wages political war against different target audiences and employs varying methods, they share common traits, particularly concerning their views of the threat environment and of the nature of political warfare that transcend bureaucratic boundaries. The following thus draws attention to these shared attributes, using the UFWD as a representative case study of Chinese political warfare.

### **A Globalizing Strategy of Cooption**

The United Front Work Department's purpose is to befriend, entice, influence, monitor, infiltrate, and, most importantly, coopt various elements of Chinese society that do not belong to the Party. As one United Front book notes, "The fundamental mission of the United Front is to win over the people and gather strength while the work of the United Front is to unite the people and to strive after the people."<sup>77</sup> It goes on to assert, "The bottom line of the United Front is to increase as many people that support us and reduce as many people that oppose us."<sup>78</sup> By bringing non-CCP constituents under the Party's umbrella and control, the United Front seeks to enhance social cohesion. But its primary function is to guarantee the Party's dominance and to ensure that the CCP's monopoly on political power remains unrivaled.

The United Front's origins and its operational methods date back to the CCP's founding. In 1922, less than a year after the Party's creation, the CCP debated and advanced the united front concept.<sup>79</sup> Drawn from Leninism, the idea was to form strategic alliances of convenience with its more powerful opponents. Such a tactical expedient enabled the Party to penetrate the enemy camp within which the CCP plotted against, weakened, subverted, and ultimately destroyed its

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<sup>77</sup> 中共中央统战部 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, ed.], 巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线 [Consolidate and Develop the Most Extensive Patriotic United Front] (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2016), p. 175.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>79</sup> 中共中央统战部 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, ed.], 中国共产党统一战线史 [History of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front] (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2017), p. 9.

opponent, the Kuomintang.<sup>80</sup> Akin to a virus, the United Front infected the host and then ate away the host from the inside. The United Front repeatedly employed this strategy throughout the history of the Party.

In keeping with Xi's ambitions, the United Front seeks to keep the Party in power, help fulfill "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," maintain China's territorial integrity, including enforcing the "one country, two systems" model with Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, and create a favorable international environment.<sup>81</sup> To achieve these goals, the United Front targets Chinese citizens and ethnic Chinese at home and abroad, including members of non-communist parties and citizens with no party affiliations; intelligentsia; ethnic minorities; religious groups; people in the private sector; overseas students and returnees; compatriots living in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan; and overseas Chinese.<sup>82</sup> In geographic terms, the United Front is tasked to form "an alliance of two perimeters" that extends from the mainland to Greater China and beyond. All Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese, wherever they may reside in the outer perimeter, fall within the scope of United Front operations.

Chinese writings are clear about what the CCP wishes to obtain from its external targets. The political work directed at Taiwan seeks to promote the One China policy and to undercut the pro-independence movement on the island. In Hong Kong and Macau, the Party aims to advertise the virtues of the one country, two systems model, cultivate patriotism, and foster "Chinese national consciousness." The United Front is tasked to encourage overseas Chinese to "love the motherland," "love the traditions of their native land," oppose separatism, and support the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Ominously, one guidebook lists "protecting the legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese" as a key mission.<sup>83</sup>

## At War with the West

The revitalization of the United Front under Xi Jinping stems from the Party's threat perceptions. China's economic reforms and opening to the world unleashed new social forces that have deeply unsettled the state and society. The beneficiaries of China's rapid rise, including the business elite and the burgeoning middle class, have emerged as influential constituents. As their numbers have swelled, they have carried more political clout and increasingly clamored for resources and attention from the CCP. This stratification of society has added greater demands on governance

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<sup>80</sup> Charlotte Gao, "The 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress: A Rare Glimpse of the United Front Work Department," *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> 中共中央统战部 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, ed.], *党政干部统一战线知识读本* [Party and Government Cadre United Front: Knowledge Reader] (Beijing: People's Press, 2016), pp. 34–38.

<sup>82</sup> United Front, *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 80.

<sup>83</sup> United Front, *Party and Government Cadre United Front*, p. 338.

and on the Party to reassert its political control over an increasingly diverse and potentially fractious social order.

At the same time, China's outward-looking economy triggered an explosive growth in the nation's interactions with the outside world. China's integration into the global supply chain increased the flow of labor and capital in and out of the country. Socially, the boundary that separated China from the rest of the international community became ever more permeable, exposing Chinese citizens to what the Party perceives as ideological contaminants that threaten to poison the body politic. The United Front seeks, in part, to inoculate the population and Chinese nationals abroad from foreign ideas and influences that challenge Party orthodoxy.

The Party is unambiguous about the threat it perceives from the West. According to a United Front course book, "Foreign hostile forces do not wish to see China rise. They have successively viewed our nation as a potential threat and competitor and have done everything possible to contain and suppress us."<sup>84</sup> The authors of the tutorial accuse these external enemies of "marketing cultures and values to attack Chinese traditional culture and to dilute the ethnic cultural identities of the Chinese diaspora and overseas Chinese nationals, especially the new generations of ethnic Chinese."<sup>85</sup> These nefarious external forces, they claim, "seriously threaten our national security and core interests."

Another United Front guidebook written for party and government cadres identifies the West as the principal danger to China's political stability. Notably, it depicts the nature of the threat in sharp ideological terms. The authors warn:

Particularly worthy of attention is that, in recent years, the United States and other Western countries have sought to fulfill their global strategic interests under the banner of "democracy," "freedom," and "human rights." They have increased the political infiltration of some countries, attempting to subvert those regimes while propping up factions that favor Western interests. Hostile international forces have never abandoned the strategic intent of Westernizing and splitting us. They are working hard at infiltrating and disrupting us. These infiltration methods have become more varied by the day while their shapes have become stealthier. They try in vain to overturn the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and our socialist system, severely influencing our nation's political security, economic security, cultural security, and information security.<sup>86</sup>

Consistent with this worldview, the Party sees dark ideological forces conspiring to thwart its aims in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. The authors of a study guide caution that, "The circumstances

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<sup>84</sup> 中共中央统战部 中共中央党校 国家行政学院 中央社会主义学院 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Central Party School, Chinese Academy of Governance, and Central Institute of Socialism eds.], 中国统一战线教程 [Course of Study on China's United Front] (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2013), p. 97.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>86</sup> United Front, *Party and Government Cadre United Front*, p. 37.

surrounding our efforts to win hearts and minds remain complex, grim, and urgent.” They contend:

Long-term residence in capitalist environments has exposed Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and overseas compatriots to Western values. Their values and lifestyles differ sharply from those that prevail on the mainland interior. Western hostile forces have always used Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as pawns to contain us. These factors have all imposed higher demands on winning the people’s hearts.<sup>87</sup>

The CCP views the very free institutions that underpin Western political, social, and economic orders as a mortal menace to China. Indeed, the United Front writings explicitly and repeatedly reject Western multi-party political systems. According to a study guide:

These years some countries in the world blindly “transplanted” or “imported” Western political systems. From the “color revolutions” in countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States to the “Arab Spring” in countries of West Asia and North Africa, all have descended into cycles of unending regime changes and social upheaval, leading to the “turbulence of democracies.”<sup>88</sup>

The book further notes that Western democracies themselves have suffered from “decreased effectiveness” and “operational failures” in recent years. This trend, it observes, “daily lays bare the disadvantages and limits of Western political systems.”<sup>89</sup> The authors of the volume conclude that multi-party collaboration under the United Front is fundamentally superior to the Western model and better suited to China’s historical development and local circumstances.

Communism’s worldwide retreat remains an active stimulus to the Party’s anxieties. The Soviet Union’s dissolution offers a particularly powerful cautionary tale to the framers of the united front strategy. “The root cause [of the Soviet Union’s collapse],” one study claims, “is the lack of party discipline that led people to lose their hearts. We must learn from this failure.”<sup>90</sup> It warns further, “Possessing political authority does not necessarily mean one possesses the people’s hearts. And, without the people’s hearts, political authority will certainly not last.”<sup>91</sup> The lesson is clear: complacency is lethal. The Party must remain vigilant against internal and external social forces that could trigger a crisis of confidence among the people. Party activism, including the employment of united front tactics, is thus essential to the CCP’s stability and survival.

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<sup>87</sup> United Front, *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 175.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

## Waging Permanent War

A distinguishing attribute of the United Front is its expected permanence as an instrument of the CCP. In the Party's view, as long as social classes exist, the demand for United Front's work will never cease. The United Front must remain perpetually alert to threats to the Party and to the proliferation of new social groups that require indoctrination and assimilation. As one study avers, "In short, our party's establishment of the United Front is a long-term strategic policy. The policy will not shift owing to the strengthening or weakening of our power. The policy will not change due to varying circumstances or missions."<sup>92</sup> In other words, even as China continues to grow more prosperous and powerful and even as the international security environment remains relatively benign, the logic of the united front strategy will stay intact.

Another feature of the United Front is that the contest for the hearts and minds of various constituents must take place at all times and under all circumstances. Unlike conventional conflicts, political war does not have a discernible beginning or a clear end. To win over the various target audiences, the United Front must gain access, acquire information, cultivate ties, earn trust, and form durable relationships. These activities not only call for patience and resources: they also demand an indefinite commitment to forging and maintaining strategic alliances. Evoking a culinary metaphor, one study guide observes, "As our party's political advantage, strategic guideline, and important magic weapon, the United Front's work is akin to simmering food over a low flame, an effort that takes a long time to succeed. Much of the labor occurs across ordinary times and only yields results over the long term."<sup>93</sup> It is clear that Xi Jinping is prepared to sustain the human, intellectual, and financial capital necessary for the United Front to engage in such a protracted contest for hearts and minds.

## Methods Against External Targets

The Chinese literature highlights some of the tools and methods by which the Party can acquire cooperation and acquiescence from its targets in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and elsewhere overseas. CCP-affiliated bodies operating in host communities enjoy access to local networks and intelligence conducive to United Front work. They are tasked to conduct strategic communications with their counterparts to voice China's positions and to influence the discourse on topics as wide-ranging as Taiwan's independence, Tibet, Falun Gong, democracy movements, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Unofficial organizations are assigned to engage in cultural and social exchanges with local communities at the grassroots level, youth groups, and the professional class. United Front writings express a particular interest in the youth of Greater China and beyond to shape the opinion of the next generation. As one study asserts, "Only by winning the youth can the future be

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

won.” It further exhorts United Front cadres to employ “soft and subtle methods” that appeal to the youth.<sup>94</sup>

Designated as a distinct social group in 2000, Chinese students studying abroad are a relatively new target. A study guide describes them as the United Front’s “new focal point.” Since the reform era began, the volume of outbound and returning overseas students has soared at an astonishing rate. From the late 1970s to the end of 2014, according to one source, over 3.5 million Chinese have studied abroad, while over 1.8 million of them have returned to China. In 2014 alone, over 360,000 Chinese came back to their homeland, representing a thirtyfold increase compared to 2001.<sup>95</sup> While the Party welcomes the knowledge and skills these students bring home, the CCP fears the potential ideological baggage carried by these returnees—exposed as they were to foreign ideas and influence. The Party is thus determined to stamp out thoughts and activities that might contravene its doctrine.

Although most of the literature focuses on political work after the students return home, the Chinese writings explicitly instruct the cadres to engage the students while they are abroad. One guidebook calls on the United Front to “understand the basic situation of overseas students, enhance contact and communications with them through various methods, and to pay attention to their achievements in various fields.” It further urges the United Front cadres “to encourage overseas students, to the extent that the host nations’ laws permit, to undertake cooperative investments, academic exchanges, cooperative research, technical development, consulting services, and many other activities to serve the nation.” The study also calls for the United Front to attach importance to and develop the functions of overseas student groups and associations.<sup>96</sup>

## Preliminary Findings from Open Sources

Given the public nature of open sources surveyed above, the literature does not reveal fully the scale, the scope, the intrusiveness, the coercive nature, and the aggressiveness of the UFWD’s overseas operations. Indeed, the CCP has been adept at keeping the inner workings of the United Front hidden from view. Nevertheless, the writings furnish insights into the logic of Chinese political warfare, the CCP’s worldview, and the strategic value that the Party attaches to the Department’s work. It is abundantly apparent that the Party sees itself at war with the West. Indeed, the United Front-sponsored books portray a life-and-death struggle against dangerous ideological forces that could topple the regime. A related finding is that the Party is deeply insecure and paranoid. The CCP attributes substantial—and frequently exaggerated—weight to Western influence and agency behind global events. Given such threat perceptions, it is not surprising that the United Front has gone global. It appears that the Party believes that the best defense is a good

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>96</sup> United Front, *Party and Government Cadre United Front*, p. 419.



offense. To protect the regime's equities abroad, the literature shows that Xi is firmly committed to pouring resources into UFD's overseas activities on a sustained basis. It thus behooves Western policymakers to recognize that the United Front is a permanent instrument of the CCP's foreign policy and to expect the Department's activities to intensify in the coming years.



## Chapter 5

# Reassessing the Political Warfare Threat from Authoritarian Rivals

The political warfare undertaken by the regimes in Russia and China is, at its core, driven by the obsessions of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping to protect their personal rule. These leaders feel deeply threatened by the liberties and practices prized by liberal democracies. Hence, in order to defend themselves, rally domestic support, keep their enemies off balance, and weaken and potentially overthrow democratic states, they have refined powerful versions of political warfare as a means of progressing their interests at relatively low cost and risk. They appreciate that by operating aggressively and in a nimble fashion in the gray zone between the Western conceptions of peace and war, they are exploiting a substantial advantage over the United States and its allies, who are more traditionally minded, conventionally structured, and bureaucratically sluggish.

What, then, is the most appropriate categorization of the Russian and Chinese forms of political warfare? They cannot be accurately described as simply “influence operations,” comparable to those of the British Council, the Goethe Institute, or Alliance Française. This is partly because the Russians and Chinese have completely different goals and strategies for their operations than those of the British, Germans, and French. It is also because Moscow and Beijing employ a much wider range of instruments, many of which involve highly intrusive intelligence operations and deeply subversive espionage, cyber, military, and other active measures to disorientate, distract, confuse, coerce, undermine, and potentially cause the collapse of targeted societies.

A second form of misdiagnosis is to assume that the regimes in Russia and China have adopted advanced forms of political warfare as a means of engaging in a competition with the United States and its democratic partners. This very Western conception is a poor fit for several reasons. First, a competition presumes the presence of several key characteristics: for example, the involvement of clearly identified actors, the existence of rules or defined understandings, and potentially geographic boundaries. None of these characteristics is prominent in the current situation.

A competition also requires two sides to be actively engaged in competing. Although Russia and China have been actively conducting political warfare against the West for some time, the United States and its allies and partners have only recently started to appreciate the full scope of these operations and begun to discuss how they might best respond to the challenges they now face. Internal documents of the Russian and Chinese regimes describe their campaigns as a “struggle,” “active measures,” fighting a “new generation war,” and similar descriptors. Hence, describing the current situation as a competition is hard to sustain when it has really only been the authoritarian states who have equipped themselves with appropriate instruments and employed them on a substantial scale on the field of play.

Our tendency to use the term competition is not new. This paper argues that continuing to apply the concept of competition to Moscow’s and Beijing’s recent political warfare operations risks misdiagnosing their true intent and nature, as the West has done in the past. The real nature of Russian and Chinese political warfare operations is better described as comprehensive coercion.

What, then, are the primary features of comprehensive coercion that can be seen in the political warfare operations of the regimes in Moscow and Beijing?

**Overt and covert means to influence, coerce, intimidate, divide, and subvert rival countries in order to force their compliance or collapse.** Foreign elites are also sometimes encouraged to adopt similar political systems. These and closely related goals are well understood by all senior members of the Russian and Chinese regimes. Progress towards their achievement is monitored closely by leadership.

**Clear vision, ideology, and strategy.** The Russian and Chinese regimes have developed strong narratives based around historical grievance, a deep distrust of the West, and nationalist visions for restoring their civilization’s power and influence. Their internal documentation and propaganda grossly exaggerate the West’s power to influence events. Their driving visions feature political, economic, and social incentives for domestic and international populations to get on board.

**Deep attachment to revisionist strategies that overturn domestic and international norms.** Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have aggressively pursued revisionist, coercive strategies within their own societies and also against their international rivals and opponents. Domestically, they have removed all significant political opponents, seized control of all important information

flows, made their legal systems instruments of the regime, and established a range of open and covert mechanisms to ensure compliance.

Against foreign countries, both regimes also pursue highly revisionist goals. Russian operations in Georgia, the Ukraine, Syria, and the West have shown little respect for international law, nor for established understandings and agreements. Similarly, China's operations in the South China and East China Seas and against a range of Western and partner countries have also been conducted in defiance of international law and numerous established agreements and understandings. The undermining of legal frameworks, agreements, and established norms domestically and internationally demonstrates clearly that the Putin and Xi regimes have few compunctions about wielding all available instruments in relatively unconstrained ways in pursuit of their core interests.

**Strong central command authority.** Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping wield complete authority within their regimes and face few immediate challenges to their dominance of domestic and international policies. Both leaders have also now succeeded in installing themselves in effective power for extended, and potentially indefinite, periods.

**Capable bureaucratic instruments and implementation mechanisms.** The leadership of Russia and China have established most of the instruments of police states with few domestic balancing mechanisms. Many senior members of both regimes have extensive career experience in their national intelligence, espionage, and propaganda organizations, and this is reflected in the intensity, style, and levels of risk seen in many of their international operations.

**Tight control of their domestic populations.** The leadership of both countries exercises tight control over political and social affairs, conventional and social media, and almost all activities within their own societies, even those undertaken by foreign-owned enterprises. Powerful mechanisms are in place to detect and punish deviant behavior. Transgressors are usually detected quickly and dealt with harshly by a criminal justice system that operates under regime control.

**Detailed understanding of targeted countries.** The intelligence collection and assessment requirements of political warfare operations in foreign theatres are substantial and continuous. When possible, ethnic and cultural diasporas are recruited to assist intelligence and other operations in relevant countries.

**Employment of a comprehensive range of instruments in coordinated actions.** A wide range of party, government, contracted, and other instruments are usually employed in sophisticated "combined arms" operations in foreign countries. The most important categories are both overt and covert operations in the following domains:

- **Diplomatic** operations, for instance, to forge new alliances, encourage the passivity of neutrals, and isolate adversaries.

- **Information** dominance in conventional, social, and other media by controlling storylines where possible and, in more contested spaces, introducing doubts, divisions, and confusion.
- **Military** and paramilitary forces can deter, coerce, and intimidate as well as physically seize undefended or weakly defended territories.
- **Economic** and resource pressures are mostly used to coerce those countries, corporations, and business executives that are dependent on the authoritarian state's economy and are, hence, open to persuasion or vulnerable to coercion and blackmail.
- **Social** instruments are used to mobilize ethnic diasporas and also to stir divisions and confusion within targeted countries.
- **Ideological** dimensions play a key role in drawing recruits to a higher cause, to help maintain participant morale, and also to provide clear direction to tie the diverse elements of such campaigns into a coherent whole.
- **Cyber** operations not only supply valuable intelligence and intellectual property but can also manipulate, control, damage, and destroy foreign systems. They are consequently a powerful means of persuasion and coercion, as well as of undermining the confidence, cohesion, and morale of opposing states.
- **Subversion** takes many forms, but at its heart, it attacks the loyalty, determination, and resilience of key institutions and individuals within targeted states.

In combination, these and related measures provide a comprehensive menu of instruments that are employed to coerce targeted individuals, groups, and whole societies.

**Exploit geo-strategic maneuver.** The Russian and Chinese regimes are both using geo-strategic maneuver to alter, and often broaden, the geographic theatres of their political warfare operations. Notable Russian cases have been operations against Georgia, Crimea, and the Donbas. Important Chinese operations have been the effective seizure of most of the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative that seeks to extend China's influence through Southeast, South, and Central Asia; the South Pacific; the Middle East; Europe; and Africa. These activities can induce opposing states to cede the initiative, divert attention and resources to unexpected theatres, and force defending leaderships to decide whether to concede significant interests or launch escalatory responses. Such actions can catch targeted states off balance and force reactive responses of limited value.

**Flexible in campaign implementation.** Russian and Chinese political warfare campaigns usually progress through multiple phases that require the flexible application of diverse mixes of instruments in multiple modes. Effective political warfare campaigns are constantly modified as

circumstances change in order to optimize the political effects on target audiences. This flexibility also allows Russia and China to carefully calibrate these measures to fall below the threshold of what would elicit strong U.S. and allied responses.

**Accept high levels of risk.** In pursuit of their priority goals, the Russian and Chinese regimes have both demonstrated a preparedness to take far higher strategic and operational risks than any of the Western allies. In December 2017, senior British intelligence officials briefed the Intelligence Committee of the British Parliament that Moscow was “operating to risk thresholds which are nothing like those that the West operates.”<sup>97</sup> Chinese and Russian aircraft and ships have also engaged in dangerous maneuvers in close proximity to allied forces on numerous occasions, routinely breaching relevant international protocols and risking the possibility of triggering exchanges of fire and escalation to major conflict.

**Exploitation of the many seams in conventional strategic thought.** One of the reasons the Russians and Chinese political warfare campaigns have been difficult for the United States and other democratic states to counter is that they have focused on the “gray zones” between:

- Peace and war
- State and non-state
- Overt and covert
- Military, para-military, and civil
- National, regional, and global
- Domestic and foreign
- Legal and criminal
- Government, business, and not-for-profit organizations
- Strategic, operational, and tactical operations

Russian and Chinese “combined arms” political warfare operations have been specifically designed to exploit these gray zones. When the United States and its allies have sought to counter these campaigns using conventional diplomatic and military activities, together with modest economic actions, they have mostly found themselves outmaneuvered.

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<sup>97</sup> David Bond, “UK Spymasters Say Moscow is ‘Formidable Adversary,’” *Financial Times*, December 22, 2017.

**Postured for indefinite political warfare.** Both regimes perceive their political warfare campaigns to be a permanent feature of their strategic postures. While in some instances, rapid successes have been viewed as being possible, most operations have been structured to be conducted via a succession of modest incremental steps, all of which are intended to fall below the threshold for Western escalation. Most Russian and Chinese political warfare campaigns have medium-to-long term timeframes.



# Recommendations for the United States and Its Allies

Managing the growing challenge of comprehensive coercion will not be an easy task for the United States and many of its allies. As described at the outset of this report, authoritarian rivals such as Russia and China have long histories of engaging in political warfare, deep insecurities that have driven them to embrace a particularly aggressive brand of political warfare, and highly centralized governments that enable them to integrate and coordinate the diverse elements of political warfare campaigns. At the same time, democratic nations are particularly vulnerable to comprehensive coercion because the open nature of their societies provides numerous pathways for rivals to engage in influence operations, and gaps and seams across government agencies can make an effective response difficult to mount. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for improvement. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to offer first-order recommendations for how the targets of authoritarian political warfare campaigns can better position themselves to compete, not only by reducing their vulnerability but also by adopting more forward-leaning measures of their own.

## Recognizing the Problem of Political Warfare

Perhaps the single most important step that the United States and its allies can take to manage the threat of comprehensive coercion better is to recognize fully and openly the danger that it presents. This simple guidance is more difficult to embrace than it might seem because it entails reconciling two very different perspectives on the relationship between peace and war. Whereas most democratic nations consider peace to be the natural state of affairs and view war as a temporary aberration, authoritarian states often act as though war is an enduring condition and see peace as little more than a brief interlude. Consequently, authoritarian rivals are likely to employ political warfare as a key instrument of conflict when a direct military clash is neither feasible nor desirable, as opposed to treating it as a more moderate tool of peacetime competition. Understanding this perspective is a critical first step toward developing a countervailing approach

to comprehensive coercion. Just as George Kennan once advised U.S. leaders to abandon the notion that there is “a basic difference between peace and war” and accept “the perpetual rhythm of struggle” that characterizes international politics, contemporary policymakers must not relegate political warfare to an afterthought, assume that it represents a far less significant challenge than overt military threats, or be self-deterred by the hope that authoritarian regimes will liberalize over time and scale back their efforts to influence public debate and political decisions.<sup>98</sup>

## Responding to the Problem of Political Warfare

Even if the United States and like-minded allies do begin to appreciate fully the challenge of comprehensive coercion, what measures should they implement in response? Any efforts to counter this threat must have both defensive and offensive elements. On the defensive side of the coin, perhaps the most important way to reduce vulnerability is through increased transparency. Comprehensive coercion benefits greatly from ambiguity—ambiguity regarding the origins and objectives of political warfare activities, how they are expected to achieve desired effects, and the role of third parties in deliberately or unwittingly supporting these efforts. Absent an ability to identify and expose the perpetrators, enablers, and mechanisms of manipulation, targets of political warfare might not realize they are being influenced—or, if they do, might not be able to engage in effective denial or credibly threaten serious punishment.

Defense alone is unlikely to be enough, however, and should be complemented by cost-imposing measures to alter a rival’s calculus. In general, cost-imposing strategies seek to convince an adversary’s population or leadership that the price of achieving certain aims—measured in money spent, effort expended, or risks incurred—exceeds what they are willing or able to pay. This approach may, for example, entail dissuading a rival from engaging in actions that are disruptive or threatening by convincing it that they are expensive, ineffective, or counter-productive. Alternatively, it might involve channeling a competitor toward activities that do not pose a danger or that tax its limited resources.<sup>99</sup>

Cost-imposing measures can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. In the case of political warfare, democratic nations could engage in a variety of non-military activities that seek to raise the price of manipulating Western public and political opinion. Although authoritarian regimes might be difficult to influence and better equipped to address political warfare threats in comparison to their more open and less centralized democratic counterparts, they are arguably more fearful of those threats because of their tenuous legitimacy, as well as their extreme concentration of wealth and power. Consequently, efforts to introduce new information into relatively closed societies—from sharing alternative perspectives on current events that differ from government-approved narratives to exposing political and economic acts of corruption—can be a method of competition

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<sup>98</sup> Department of State, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare.”

<sup>99</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken, *Cost-Imposing Strategies: A Brief Primer* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2014).

that imposes significant costs on regimes that constantly worry about maintaining domestic control.

By contrast, asymmetric cost-imposing measures would entail competing in a different area, such as the military domain, with the goal of building leverage over rivals and creating linkages to their political warfare campaigns. For example, recent scholarship indicates that President Reagan's 1983 announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) triggered a debate within the Soviet leadership over the wisdom of competing with the United States in space weaponry, as well as the form that competition should take. David Hoffman suggests that the announcement of SDI ultimately set up a situation by which Soviet leaders who favored a high-technology competition with the United States in space arms initially carried the day, only to be discredited by their inability to field high-technology weapons. That is, SDI put in motion a chain of events that ultimately made the Soviet leadership aware that it could not compete with the United States in high-technology weaponry.<sup>100</sup> The United States and its allies should, therefore, explore which military or economic measures would have the biggest impact on adversary decision-making, as well as how those measures could be implicitly or explicitly tied to political warfare threats.

## Reorganizing for Political Warfare

Reducing vulnerability to authoritarian political warfare through increased transparency and imposing costs on rivals that rely on comprehensive coercion will require democratic states to adapt in a number of ways, two of which stand out. First, both the defensive and offensive elements of a strategy to manage this threat will depend heavily on the acquisition of information—information that provides a better understanding of adversary activities and the danger they pose, as well as information about adversary decision-making and how it might be shaped.

For instance, to reduce the risk of comprehensive coercion, the United States and its allies must be able to detect foreign political influence operations and distinguish between benign and malign activity.<sup>101</sup> Given the covert nature of at least some of these activities, classified information collected by intelligence organizations is likely to play an important role in such efforts. Nonetheless, skilled scholars, analysts, and journalists can do much through open-source

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<sup>100</sup> David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand* (New York: Doubleday, 2009). See also Pavel Podvig, "Did Star Wars Help End the Cold War? Soviet Responses to the SDI Program," *Science and Global Security* 25, no. 1, 2017.

<sup>101</sup> For a case study of the Reagan administration's effort to detect and counter Soviet active measures, see Fletcher Schoen and Christopher J. Lamb, *Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012), available at <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-11.pdf>.

research.<sup>102</sup> During the Cold War, the United States national security bureaucracy, to include the intelligence community, was almost singularly focused on the Soviet Union. The U.S. government and philanthropic foundations undertook a wide variety of programs to build intellectual capital regarding the Soviet Union.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, U.S. intelligence organizations undertook a range of sometimes highly risky operations to gain deep insight into Soviet decision-making.<sup>104</sup> If history is a guide, then the ability of Western democracies to expose lies and spread the truth was a powerful weapon against foreign propaganda.<sup>105</sup>

At the same time, cost-imposing strategies similarly depend on a well-developed understanding of adversaries, including how they perceive costs and calculate risks.<sup>106</sup> Thus, the West will need a high volume of quality intelligence to ascertain how Russian and Chinese decision-making unfolds. Moreover, neither regime is a completely unitary actor, but rather a collection of bureaucratic entities, each of which has its own preferences, proclivities, and organizational culture. Understanding these attributes and how they impact the process and outcome of policymaking can help the United States and its allies determine which measures will shape those processes and shift those outcomes in favorable ways.

Second, Western nations have their own bureaucratic challenges that must be addressed when it comes to managing comprehensive coercion. Because this threat is so broad in scope—and, as a result, crosses so many different agency jurisdictions—the organizational barriers to adopting appropriate defensive and offensive countermeasures are quite high. The fundamental question that the targets of authoritarian political warfare must wrestle with, therefore, is whether it is possible to increase coordination between government agencies sufficiently that an effective response is feasible, or instead whether one or a few government agencies must play an outsized role in combatting this threat, even if it requires them to take on additional burdens and operate outside their traditional areas of responsibility.

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<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); and Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 2018).

<sup>103</sup> David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>104</sup> Christopher Ford and David Rosenberg, *The Admirals' Advantage: U.S. Navy Operational Intelligence in World War II and the Cold War* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2005).

<sup>105</sup> For a historical example of such an effort, see *Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986–87* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1987). For an earlier era, see Steven J. Ross, *Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Nazi Plots Against Hollywood and America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, Michael Pillsbury, “The Sixteen Fears: China’s Strategic Psychology,” *Survival* 54, no. 5, October–November 2012.

## Conclusion

Authoritarian regimes in Beijing and Moscow have clearly committed themselves to far-ranging efforts at political warfare that hope to achieve the ability to comprehensively coerce the United States and its allies. Only by clearly and frankly acknowledging the problem and organizing the respective governments to respond do we stand a chance of defending free societies from these sophisticated efforts at manipulating public opinion and the decision-making space of elected officials and government policymakers.





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