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Ten questionable assumptions about future war in the Indo-Pacific

Ross Babbage

Are the Indo-Pacific allies certain that their defence planning for the coming two decades is built on sound foundations? Many Western security analysts assume that a modernised version of their highly networked, combined arms operations will be able to prevail in any major conflict in the Indo-Pacific.¹ But is this right?

If there is to be a major war in the Indo-Pacific, it is likely to involve a struggle between China and a small number of supporters on the one hand and the United States and its allies and partners on the other. The precise sequence of events in such a catastrophe is difficult to predict but it is certain that Beijing will have as much, or even more, say over the shape of the conflict as Washington. This is a serious problem for the West because the core agencies of the Chinese government bring strategic cultures, strategies, operational concepts and priorities to the Indo-Pacific that are markedly different from our own. When viewed in this context, even an advanced version of conventional Western strategies and operations could prove seriously inadequate.

The Western allies need to ensure they plan to deter and, if necessary, to fight and win a future war, not just a part of a war, or even the wrong war.

There are at least ten reasons for doubting that the West's perception of future war in the Indo-Pacific is sound.

¹ This central assumption is clear from the priorities that allied defence and national security departments accord to advanced, highly networked, combined arms capabilities in their strategic plans, in their budgets and also in their public justifications for new capability acquisitions. These priorities dwarf those given to countering authoritarian state political and hybrid warfare operations or to the types of military and non-military resilience measures that would be essential to ensure continued theatre leverage in the event of a major conflict continuing for an extended period.

Assumption 1: The Chinese way of war is similar to the West's

Western analysts often assume that Chinese strategic culture, campaign planning and military orders of battle are simply an oriental version of their own.² Nothing could be further from the truth.

China has a markedly different strategic and operational mindset that springs partly from the country's status as a continental power, partly from its long history of fending off foreign invasions through the extensive use of political and psychological as well as kinetic operations,³ and partly from the powerful influence of the strategic thinking developed by Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong.

Early in the 20th century, Mao Zedong was taken by Lenin's logic that if war was politics by other means then the reverse was also true: aggressive political action could be considered war by other means.⁴ Mao noted that this thinking helped the Soviet leaders conceptualise how they could defend against and ultimately defeat the conventionally structured and technologically superior forces of the major Western powers. Through many subversive means and mechanisms they worked to foment revolutions in other countries without triggering a military invasion by their capitalist enemies. 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, they would foster a 'fifth column' to operate in support of Russia's interests within the society. They actively exploited the gap between what the capitalist societies called 'war' and what they called 'peace'.⁵

Mao Zedong drew extensively on this thinking as he developed, tested and refined his own concept of revolutionary war to overthrow the technologically advanced forces of the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and then Japan's

2 This is most obvious when Western analysts compare US and Chinese strategic capabilities, especially interesting are the dimensions they omit or mention only in passing. One of the more detailed unclassified comparisons has been undertaken by the Rand Corporation. It leaves little doubt about what the authors consider the primary currency of strategic power in the Indo-Pacific. It concludes, as follows: 'Although China's capabilities fall behind those of the United States, it is now able to pose significant challenges to U.S. operations. China has made tremendous strides in its military capabilities since 1996.' See: Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.–China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2015), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html.

3 The continued prominence in China of the strategic and operational thinking of Sun Tzu and other early proponents of indirect strategy is notable in this context. See: Sun Tzu, Sun Pin, *The Complete Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996)

4 Thomas G. Mahnken, Ross Babbage and Toshi Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion: Competitive Strategies Against Authoritarian Political Warfare* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018), 10–11.

5 *Ibid.*, 26.

Imperial Army.⁶ The importance of early and sustained political and subversive operations throughout the theatre of operations, including in enemy strongholds, was powerfully reinforced as a foundation of Chinese military doctrine, not only for revolutionary war but also for a wide range of other operations.⁷

Once the Chinese Communist Party seized power in 1949, it immediately set about consolidating its position by subverting and then seizing Tibet, actively supporting revolutionary movements in neighbouring countries and undermining the regional operations of the technologically superior United States, Japan and other 'enemy' states. During its first 30 years, the regime achieved some notable successes, especially in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

In consequence, offensive political warfare and the many subversive instruments for its use became even more deeply etched into China's strategic culture. Although the circumstances of mid-20th century revolutionary war differ from the situation in most theatres today, the habit of early, intense and enduring offensive political operations has continued. 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 that are structured to continue indefinitely.⁸

These are the sorts of operations that Chinese government agencies and associated entities have been conducting in recent years against the leaderships and populations of the United States, its close allies and those countries adjacent to China's borders.⁹

The Chinese have launched five major categories of political warfare operation in recent years.¹⁰ The first has been intensive information and propaganda activities. The second has been the use of diplomacy, technology exports and the Belt and Road Initiative to win geostrategic gains. The third has been the extensive use of economic instruments to build dependencies, to coerce political compliance and to secure strategic positions. Within this category have been extensive programs to steal and/or purchase intellectual property to accelerate China's efforts to lead the world in key technology and industry sectors. The fourth has been the use of military, paramilitary and cyber forces to occupy va-

6 Ibid., 26.

7 Ibid., 27. See also: Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice* (London: Paladin, 1970), 32–33.

8 See this argued in some depth in: Ross Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail*, Vol. 1 (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019), 49–54.

9 For details see: Mahnken et al., *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*, (n. 4) and also for a more detailed examination including eight case studies: Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting*, Vols. 1 & 2.

10 See a more detailed discussion of these five categories in: Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting* Vol. 1, 35–42.

cant or contested spaces, to deter escalation, to spread disinformation and to help coerce political actions that accord with Beijing's interests. And finally, the fifth has been China's use of legal and paralegal instruments to assert territorial and other claims, intimidate smaller countries and shape international debates.

So, while China and the Western allies are all investing in modern conventional military capabilities, Beijing is simultaneously expending substantial energy on penetrating and undermining its rivals through highly sophisticated, diverse and persistent political and hybrid warfare operations.

In Western countries, by contrast, political and hybrid warfare capabilities either don't exist or are rudimentary.¹¹ This means that in the event of a future crisis or war, the primary Western instruments will be standard diplomacy and kinetic military forces. This is a very traditional 'steam age' approach to the multidimensional complexities of Chinese strategy and operations. A key consequence is the West's acceptance of a much narrower concept of war, a far more limited set of campaign instruments and a strategic posture that contrasts starkly with that of the Chinese Communist Party regime.

Assumption 2: The West is currently in a 'competition'

Western leaders routinely describe the rivalry with China as a 'competition'.¹² This Western allusion to a sporting contest or a rivalry between business enterprises has very little relevance to the strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific. In the sporting and business domains a competition presumes the involvement of clearly identified actors, agreed rules, defined boundaries, common timeframes, similar sets of playing equipment and the existence of an independent umpire (in the case of businesses, regulatory authorities and the courts) that both sides obey. None of these things apply to the strategic contest between the West and China in the Indo-Pacific.

The Chinese political and military leaderships rarely talk about a 'competition' with the West. The leadership in Beijing considers their country to be in a continuous 'struggle' and engaged in 'a new Long March' against the West.¹³ The current state-of-play is routinely described as being 'united front' political warfare,

11 Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting* Vol 1, 11–19, 49–54 (n.8).

12 See, for instance, Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington DC: United States Department of Defense, 2018). <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

13 Zhou Xin, 'Xi Jinping calls for "new Long March" in dramatic sign that China is preparing for protracted trade war', *South China Morning Post*, 21 May 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3011186/xi-jinping-calls-new-long-march-dramatic-sign-china-preparing>. Also, Mahnken et al., *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*, 54 (n. 4).

'new generation war' or 'non-war warfare'.¹⁴ Xi Jinping has reportedly stated that he regards the new normal for the relationship with the West as 'embracing while fighting'.¹⁵

Language is important in security policy. There is certainly rivalry between China and the West and this rivalry is intensifying. There are also some aspects of both sides' behaviour that can be described as being competitive in nature. But what we are seeing is much more than a benign 'competition'. In an attempt to reflect this more complex dynamic, the final report of the United States National Defense Strategy Commission describes the security challenges the US and its allies currently face as 'competition and conflict'.¹⁶ However, using 'competition' to describe the full range of Chinese operations and Western counters is misleading. The campaigns that the regime in Beijing has been conducting against the Western allies and their partners are political warfare. They are being conducted to undermine the independence of targeted states, destroy the network of Western and partner alliances, and win strategic advances. James Burnham summarised the case succinctly when he wrote:

Political warfare is a form of war. It is strategic in nature. Its objective, like that of every other form of war, is to impose one's own will on the opponent, to destroy the opponent's will to resist. In simplest terms, it aims to conquer the opponent.¹⁷

A strong case can be made that China's extensive political warfare operations are no more a competition than the Cold War was a competition. There is a need for the leaders of allied and partner countries to describe these operations with care and precision.

There are many consequences that flow from the West's poor choice of language. One of the most important is to mislead the publics of Western countries into believing that their relationship with the Chinese regime is normal, largely benign and not warranting serious concern. Another consequence of visioning the challenge as a 'competition' has been to encourage some Western allies to adopt timid and reactive modes, which have almost always ceded the initiative

14 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America* (Dehradun, India: Natraj Publishers, 2007), 36–45, 107–110, 123–125.

15 See the commentary: Bill Bishop, 'Two sessions; Controlling core technologies; Socialist market economy in the New Era', *Sinocism*, 20 May 2020, <https://sinocism.com/p/two-sessions-controlling-core-technologies>.

16 National Defense Strategy (NDS) Commission, 'Executive Summary', *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace [USIP], November, 2018), p. v, available at <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>

17 James Burnham, 'Sticks, Stones and Atoms' in Franklin Mark Osanka (ed.), *Modern Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 422.

to Beijing. This, in turn, has resulted in China winning substantial territorial, psychological and political gains through its political and hybrid warfare operations without encountering robust resistance.

In summary, continuing to apply the concept of ‘competition’ to China’s recent political and hybrid warfare activities risks misdiagnosing Beijing’s operations. They are better described as comprehensive and persistent coercion—a long-standing habitual form of Chinese warfare.¹⁸

Assumption 3: China is not a serious rival because its defence spending is a quarter the size of the United States’ defence budget

Think tanks, media commentators and others sometimes downplay or dismiss China as a military threat because, they say, China’s defence spending is only a quarter or a third that of the United States. The following remarks are typical:

China today has the largest military on the planet, with two million active personnel in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). However, China only spends slightly over one-third as much as the United States, accounting for 13 percent of annual global military spending in 2017, compared to 35 percent by the United States according to SIPRI.¹⁹

If one compares China’s official defence expenditure with that of the United States using market exchange rates for the respective currencies, China’s spending is, indeed, about 26 per cent that of the US.²⁰ However, a strong case can be made that a more accurate measure of Chinese defence spending is gained by applying the Purchase Power Parity methodology. This formula accords equal value to the production of like products and removes the vagaries of international currency distortions. Using Purchase Power Parity calculations, China’s defence spending rises to about 70 per cent that of the US. If, in addition, adjustments are made for the real level of Chinese defence spending (as against the official figure) and the markedly lower costs of Chinese personnel, the figure rises further, to between 90 and 120 per cent of the US defence budget. Indeed, using similar reasoning, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley has testified to Congress that there is a strong possibility that China is spending more on defence than the United States.²¹

18 Mahnken et al., *Countering Comprehensive Coercion*, 3–8 (n. 4).

19 Sebastien Roblin, ‘Superpower Military Showdown: China vs. America: Which Nation Would Win a War?’ *The National Interest*, 10 June 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/superpower-military-showdown-china-vs-america-land-sea-the-26217>

20 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2019* (London: Routledge, 2019), 513–514.

21 Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., ‘US Defense Budget Not That Much Bigger Than China, Russia: Gen. Milley’ *Breaking Defense*, 22 May 2018, <https://breakingdefense.com/2018/05/us-defense-budget-not-that-much-bigger-than-china-russia-gen-milley/>

These comparisons still, however, fall short of an accurate comparison because they fail to take account of Beijing's spending on the vast array of non-military and paramilitary instruments that are the regime's weapons of choice in the layers of war other than intensive conventional conflict.

A key conclusion is that accurately comparing United States and Chinese defence spending is like comparing apples with oranges. They are substantially different entities, structured and trained to conduct markedly different types of war, using dissimilar mixes of instruments over different timeframes. Certainly, China's level of investment is sufficiently large to pose a serious challenge to the Western allies. Underestimating its scale and sophistication risks generating complacency in the West.

Assumption 4: Beijing's initiation of a major war against the Western allies would be so risky that it is very unlikely to happen²²

There are great dangers in Western security analysts making firm judgements about the levels of risk that Xi Jinping and his successors will be prepared to accept. An obvious problem is the ethnocentric tendency of Westerners to conclude that because a US president might not initiate a risky action, the Chinese regime would not do it either. In fact, the history of the last decade shows that the regime has been prepared to take highly assertive and risky actions in the South China Sea, the Senkaku Islands and elsewhere that few Western leaders would contemplate in similar circumstances.²³

A Chinese decision to initiate a conventional kinetic war with the Western allies may result from a set of circumstances where Xi Jinping or his successor is placed under exceptionally strong domestic and/or international pressure. Were the regime confronted by a failing economy, a rapidly ageing workforce, a re-surgent United States, rising dissent in the Party or any other direct challenge to its survival, the leadership might conclude that drastic action was needed to unite the country and deliver the 'China dream', 'reunify Taiwan with the motherland' or launch another international adventure. Such a step would likely be a product of the dynamics at the top of the regime.²⁴ It would probably be driven

22 For example, the primary conclusion of a Rand Corporation Study was, as follows: 'Even as China becomes a near peer competitor, armed conflict between China and the United States will be unlikely.' For details see: James Dobbins, David C. Gompert, David A. Shlapak, Andrew Scobell, *What's the Potential for Conflict with China, and How Can It Be Avoided?* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 2012), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9657.html.

23 For details see: Ross Babbage, *Stealing a March: Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific—Issues and Options for Allied Defense Planners* Vol. 1 & 2 (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

24 For an excellent discussion of the dynamics within the Chinese regime see: Richard McGregor, *Xi Jinping: The Backlash* (Sydney: Penguin Books, 2019).

by a perceived need to reinforce the Party's legitimacy and authority in tough times rather than by simplified strategic judgements that may be front-of-mind in Western capitals.

The track record of Western analysts predicting the decisions of authoritarian regimes in crises is patchy at best. Great caution is needed.

Assumption 5: The West has superior strategies, operational concepts and forces

For most of the period since the Cold War, the predominant Western assessment concerning the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific has been that while China had modernised and expanded its military, the US and its allies remained clearly superior. For instance, in 2015 the Rand Corporation's US–China Military Scorecard report concluded that:

Over the past two decades, China's People's Liberation Army has transformed itself from a large but antiquated force into a capable, modern military. Its technology and operational proficiency still lag behind those of the United States, but it has rapidly narrowed the gap.²⁵

Assessments such as these understate the challenge posed by China but they have been sufficient to shake Western complacency and stimulate efforts to design, develop and test a range of new strategies and operational concepts for the Indo-Pacific.²⁶ American and allied staffs have displayed innovation and a laudable sense of entrepreneurship. Numerous approaches have been gamed and many lessons learned, some of which have been debated publicly. As a result of these efforts, greatly improved theatre strategies and operational concepts have been developed and significant changes made to both acquisition and training priorities.²⁷ Indeed, there is a strong prospect that by the mid-2020s the capabilities of the Western allies to conduct intensive conventional operations will be sufficiently enhanced to restore clear conventional military superiority to the allies in the Indo-Pacific.

There is a danger, however, that Western decision-makers will assume that these greatly improved capabilities for advanced conventional operations promising favourable exchange ratios and other traditional measures of combat performance

25 Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html (n. 2)

26 See, for instance: Thomas G. Mahnken, Travis Sharp, Billy Fabian, Peter Kouretsos, *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/implementing-a-strategy-of-maritime-pressure-in-the-western-pacific/publication/1>.

27 See this discussed in the aerospace domain in Steve Trimble 'Back to the Future' *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, (23 December 2019–12 January 2020), 32–35.

will produce victory in a major war. If the opponent loses 50 ships but you only lose 10, it does not necessarily mean that you are winning the war. Body count and equipment loss comparisons have borne little relationship to the achievement of theatre victories against determined opponents in Korea, Vietnam and a number of other conflicts.

A large part of the problem is that strategic planners in the West routinely perceive the primary elements of power in a more shallow and limited manner than do the Chinese.

The West, for its part, routinely describes the primary dimensions of power in its international 'competition' with China as diplomacy, information, military and economic forces—frequently abbreviated as DIME. Sometimes this acronym is extended to DIMEFIL, standing for diplomacy, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence and law enforcement. What's more, when Western analysts consider these categories they often view them in isolated 'stovepipes' rather than in multidimensional combinations.

Chinese strategic thinking, by contrast, views the 'correlation of forces' in the struggle with the West to include DIMEFIL but it goes much deeper into each of these factors, extends the list substantially and then considers highly creative combinations of such elements to achieve tailored effects in each environment. For instance, in the information domain the Chinese carefully weigh the power of public statements together with disinformation, the roles of 'agents of influence', the coercion and bribery of individuals and key groups, and several other components in various mixes. In addition to much more detailed consideration of each of the components of DIMEFIL, the Chinese pay great attention to many political, ideological, psychological, resilience and other factors. They have not forgotten that during the wars in Korea and Vietnam, as well as in a number of more recent conflicts, leadership strength, national unity, human resilience, propaganda leverage, capacity to conduct rapidly paced political warfare operations and related capabilities were at least as important as those factors traditionally given prominence in the West. Addressing these more fundamental aspects of the 'correlation of forces' is rare in allied defence planning.

There is a sense in which the Chinese and Western conceptions of conflict and war in the Indo-Pacific have sets of goalposts that are of different shape and size and are positioned in different locations. The mixes of weapons, the concepts of operations and the investment priorities are also markedly different. The Chinese Communist Party regime simply plans to fight a different kind of war.

In the event of a major conflict in the Indo-Pacific, the outcome is most likely to be determined by the relative strength and resilience of the two sides' political

will. The West's relative inattention to this foundational dimension needs to be remedied if effective preparations are to be made to deter and fight a major war in this theatre.

Assumption 6: A major war will be geographically confined

There is a tendency by many in the United States and the other Indo-Pacific allies to assume that the kinetic effects of a major war in the Indo-Pacific would be confined to the sea, land and air space in the Western Pacific and that allied homelands would be spared direct attacks. This assumption is demonstrated by the fact that nearly all allied military bases and key elements of support infrastructures are highly vulnerable to even simple, low technology attacks. Were a major conflict to erupt with little notice, many strategic assets would probably be damaged or destroyed by the kinds of surprise 'assassin's mace' strikes that have long been championed by Chinese strategic leaders. Any presumption that the United States and its allies would be immune from such attacks would be heroic.

China's defence development and capability acquisition programs make clear that, at a minimum, the PLA and associated agencies plan heavy cyber offensives, attacks on space assets, sabotage operations conducted by 'fifth column' and inserted special force operatives, long-range missile and air attacks, the mining of ports and many other types of threat wherever allied assets are located.²⁸ While most attacks would likely be directed against military targets, key parts of civilian infrastructures and some strategic personnel would also be in the firing line.²⁹

The post-World War Two habit of assuming that allied homelands will be immune from attack, short of a major nuclear exchange, is no longer valid. Homeland resilience and strategic asset protection deserves more serious attention.

28 These matters are discussed at some length in: Ross Babbage, *Australia's Strategic Edge in 2030* (Canberra: Kokoda Foundation, 2011) and Babbage, *Stealing a March*, Vol. 1 (n. 22).

29 For an excellent discussion of the flaws in this assumption see: Thomas G. Mahnken, Grace B. Kim and Adam Lemon, *Piercing the Fog of Peace: Developing Innovative Operational Concepts for a New Era* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019), 42–44, available at <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/piercing-the-fog-of-peace-developing-innovative-operational-concepts-for-a-publication/1>.

Assumption 7: A future war in the Indo-Pacific will probably be short

The United States and its Western allies have a long-standing habit of underestimating the likely length and complexity of major wars.³⁰

This Western predilection is driven in part by its almost universal focus on advanced technology conventional forces, mostly manned by full-time personnel. Western militaries have a driving interest in planning any war to be fast-moving, clinical, militarily decisive and short. When arguing the case for new military systems before congressional or parliamentary committees, there is a strong tendency to over-emphasise the technological superiority of particular systems and underestimate the much more diverse political, ideological, social, economic and other forces that often coalesce to force Western militaries to struggle in drawn-out quagmires.

The short war assumptions prevalent in the West are also demonstrated by the limited reserve forces that are raised and trained and the modest stocks of key munitions, spare parts and even fuels. The Western allies have mostly given scant attention in recent decades to wartime mobilisation planning and preparations. The implicit, if not the explicit, assumption is that a major war in the Indo-Pacific will fit the short war paradigm.

The Chinese, by contrast, prepare extensively for a future war to be extended, multidimensional and very complex. They have vast military reserve and paramilitary formations, they have moved many strategically important military assets underground, they have hardened strategic communication systems and they have developed large reserves of fuel, spare parts and even food. They have also propagated a powerful nationalistic narrative, built formidable information control mechanisms and taken steps to prepare the Chinese population psychologically for a long struggle.

The Western allies need to ensure that their timeframe assumptions are soundly based. Failure to give adequate attention to combat endurance and broader national resilience undermines allied deterrence and war-fighting capacities.

³⁰ See, for example, the results of the British Mass–Observation survey that was conducted in November 1939. Only 19% thought that it would last three years (considerably more than before the government's prediction of a three-year war was publicised), whereas 21% expected it to last 'nine months to two years' and the same proportion thought that the war would be over in less than six months, only two decades after the 52-month Great War! The report noted 'the exceptionally high proportion [29 percent] who can't answer', many of whom had 'thought there would never be a war and since its outbreak have been wishfully thinking it away' Similarly there were predictions from 1942 at least that the war would end within the year, while battlefield victories boosted confidence in an imminent peace. Harrison and Madge, eds. 'War begins at home by mass observation.' cited in Stuart Halifax, "When will this war end?" *Great War London: London and Londoners in the First World War* (4 Jan 2015), <https://greatwarlondon.wordpress.com/2015/01/04/when-will-this-war-end/>

Assumption 8: It is sufficient for the West to plan for a single-phase kinetic conflict rather than a conflict continuum

As argued earlier, almost all Western preparations for a future major war in the Indo-Pacific involve heavy investments in advanced, highly networked, combined arms military capabilities designed for intensive kinetic conflict. The dominant allied view is that if Western forces can track all hostile forces in the theatre and strike them very rapidly, while maintaining a controlling presence in and around the first and second island chains, opposing forces will soon be defeated.³¹ The strong implication is that if the PLA suffers heavy losses in a conventional force exchange, the Chinese regime would then sue for peace.³² The logic of these assumptions is highly questionable and needs to be assessed against the Chinese Communist Party's history of suffering heavy losses in conventional battles against the Kuomintang, the Japanese Imperial Forces and the United States and its allies in Korea and then in each case fighting on to win either a complete or partial victory.

This article is not arguing that American and allied efforts to re-establish clear conventional force dominance in the Indo-Pacific are of little value. To the contrary, current and planned advances in allied conventional military capabilities are to be welcomed and strongly encouraged.³³ However, given the Chinese regime's track record and the asymmetric nature of its military and political doctrine, there must be serious doubt about whether a succession of allied campaign victories at sea, in the air or elsewhere would necessarily result in the regime's surrender or collapse.

In contrast to the dominant Western view of major war, the Chinese concept is a multi-layered continuum that parallels Mao Zedong's model of revolutionary war. Mao argued that if communist forces are to fight a major war with powerful advanced technology opponents they must ensure that the conflict is protracted. For a start, he believed that the theatre should always be prepared by intensive political warfare operations conducted in the enemy's camps, in neutral communities and also in one's own population. The primary goals of these efforts were to gain detailed intelligence, foster local agents and other supporters, undermine and divide enemy communities, delay the opponent's campaigns and simultaneously reinforce the morale and resilience of one's own forces.

31 See, for example: William S. Murray, 'Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy,' *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 12–38; or Jeffrey E. Kline and Wayne P. Hughes Jr., 'Between Peace and the Air–Sea Battle,' *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 4 (Autumn 2012): 35–41.

32 Ibid and also David Ochmanek et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Force Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

33 See these advanced concepts discussed in Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain* (n.25).

Then Mao insisted that there must be three kinetic phases of operation on the pathway to victory.³⁴ In the first kinetic phase, the advanced technology enemy would be on the offensive and would throw all of its energy and resources into winning a rapid and decisive victory. During this phase Mao's forces would conduct a fighting retreat, inflicting serious casualties while trading space for time. Enemy forces would be drawn into energy-sapping extended operations for little substantive gain.

Mao's second kinetic phase of war was an extended stalemate in which the enemy was denied victory, suffered continuing losses and the revolutionary forces won time and space to prepare for the strategic offensive that would follow.

In the third kinetic phase, Mao's forces took the enemy by surprise by launching strategic offensives, often in unexpected areas. They forced the enemy onto the defensive, imposed further serious losses and drove home to enemy publics and leaders the futility of continuing. Eventually the enemy would collapse politically and look for a way out of the war. As Katzenbach and Hanrahan have explained, this deeply etched strategic logic of the Chinese Communist Party rested on two key assumptions.³⁵ First, that China's loss of initial conventional battles and some means of production did not mean the loss of the war. And second, that the enemy would be committed to a quick war and would strike from the outset with the totality of its power. Mao believed that so long as the communist forces survived and remained united and determined, they were winning—even if they suffered serious losses on the battlefield. He sought to prolong the war and imbue his forces with a 'monopoly on patience'.³⁶ Eventually, the enemy would be defeated because even the most powerful advanced nations could not sustain a long, costly, drawn-out war, especially when the alternative of a negotiated peace would not threaten the enemy's homelands.

Given the depth of Chinese strategic logic and doctrine it is perhaps not surprising that Beijing's planning for a future major war resembles a 21st century version of Maoist strategy. A strong case can be made that, like Mao's revolutionary

34 'On the Protracted War' Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Vol. 2 (London, 1954), 183ff. See also the excellent discussion of these issues in Edward L. Katzenbach, Jr. and Gene Z. Hanrahan 'The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung' in Franklin Mark Osanka (ed) *Modern Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 138–143.

35 'On the Protracted War' Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, 135 and Katzenbach et al., 'The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung' in Osanka (ed) *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, 138, 139 (n. 33).

36 Katzenbach et al., 'The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung' in Osanka (ed) *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, 144–146, (n. 33).

war strategy, it also comprises one preliminary political and hybrid warfare layer and three kinetic layers.³⁷

As discussed above, the preliminary political and hybrid warfare layer involves the use of a wide range of coercive instruments to shape the operational environment and to penetrate, weaken, disrupt, divide and corrupt strategically important countries and international institutions.

The first kinetic layer of the Chinese wartime plan appears to involve intensive surprise attacks on allied forces, bases and supporting infrastructures throughout the Indo-Pacific region. The PLA is structured for heavy pre-emptive ballistic and cruise missile strikes as well as bombing raids, naval attacks and cyber assaults.³⁸ These intensive strikes could be expected to inflict major damage on allied facilities and forces in the first hours. However, the Chinese expect that allied forces would strike back strongly and do serious damage to PLA forces and facilities, especially in the maritime environment. The Chinese realise that they will suffer heavy losses and would probably need to retreat from a range of positions, imposing costs on enemy forces and buying time as they go.

Diminishing munition and fuel stocks, damaged basing and other factors are likely to slow the pace of such exchanges after a few days. In consequence, this intensive conventional layer would probably not extend for more than a month.

Chinese planning presumes that fighting in the first kinetic layer would be unlikely to bring an end to the war unless the United States and its allies back down or surrender. Hence, in line with long-standing Maoist doctrine, Beijing plans two further layers of kinetic conflict.³⁹

In the second kinetic layer of war the Chinese appear to envisage an extended period of attrition, punctuated periodically by localised conventional exchanges.

37 Please note that when describing the different elements of Chinese campaign strategy, the term 'layers' is used rather than phases or stages. This is because Chinese strategy clearly envisages political warfare to be conducted simultaneously with all of the kinetic layers. Moreover, Mao made clear that he fully expected that, if pressed, communist forces might need to revert from the third kinetic layer to the second stalemate layer for a time. In other words, movement between the different layers of conflict could be two-way. This did, in fact, happen in the wars against the Nationalist Kuomintang and Imperial Japanese Armies and also, arguably, in both the Korean and Vietnam wars.

38 Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2019), <https://www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications/>; and Thomas Shugart and Javier Gonzalez, *First Strike: China's Missile Threat to U.S. Bases in Asia* (Washington DC: Center for New American Security, 2017).

39 Chinese planning for phases three and four is reflected in occasional public statements about their determination to survive and fight on beyond the initial phases of a conflict to outlast their enemies and their heavy investments in both military and civilian installations, supply chains and other capacities that are highly protected, dispersed and duplicated. This planning is also prominent in Chinese strategic doctrine, which emphasizes extending the length of conflicts to exhaust the enemy and making advanced preparations to cycle from the strategic defensive to stalemate and then to strategic offensive operations and then back again as required.

During this long and draining strategic stalemate the two sides' leadership and public determination, ideological strength, industrial mobilisation, rates of resupply and force expansion would be influential in determining who emerges with the upper hand. While not excluding the prospect of allied missile and air strikes deep into Chinese territory, the PLA does not expect substantial allied ground assaults on the Chinese homeland.

Towards the end of the second kinetic layer, both sides may be seriously wounded and the PLA may have lost most of its naval assets and overseas outposts. China would probably also be increasingly isolated with its access to international finance, technologies, resources and international markets severely constrained. Nevertheless, the regime in Beijing seems to assume that its core land-based facilities, industrial capabilities and population mass would still be largely intact and it could fight on. In accordance with Maoist strategic logic, so long as the country remained united and defiant, it could not be defeated.⁴⁰ In consequence, the regime could be expected to 'hunker down', rally its citizens and revert to using whatever military and non-military assets that remained in order to continue the struggle.

In the third kinetic layer, Chinese forces could be expected to launch offensive operations. Many are likely to be unconventional, possibly including terrorist-style attacks and the use of chemical, biological and radiological weaponry. All of these operations would be supported by intensified propaganda and other political warfare activities. Beijing's aim would be to exhaust and outlast the United States and its Pacific allies militarily, economically and, most of all, politically. This would be a 21st century version of the strategy that China used in Korea and Hanoi used to defeat the United States and its allies in Vietnam.

A key conclusion is that China's strategic doctrine and planning for a major war in the Indo-Pacific are very sophisticated. They draw extensively on the lessons from the repeated victories of communist forces over advanced technology enemies during the last century.

Chinese preparations for a multi-layered conflict continuum pose markedly different challenges to those generally assumed in Western security planning. There is a need, as a consequence, to review many of the priorities of allied defence and broader national security planning and stress-test their effectiveness in the types of war the Chinese appear to be planning.

⁴⁰ See: 'On the Protracted War' *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol.2 (London, 1954), 183. See also Katzenbach et. al., 'The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung' in Osanka (ed) *Modern Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 131-146 (n 33).

Assumption 9: Non-military capabilities will be peripheral in future major war

The discussion above makes clear that the United States and its Western Pacific allies are making rapid progress in developing and fielding very strong 'tool kits' for conducting advanced conventional military operations. The main problem here is that these capabilities are likely to be fully effective only in the first kinetic layer of a future major war. The West's capabilities to deter and win in all of the other layers of such a struggle are much more limited.

In the current phase of the 'continuous struggle', characterised by extensive political and hybrid warfare, the Western allies have relatively weak capabilities and are often reluctant to use those they do possess. This has not always been the case. In the last decade of the Cold War, the United States and its allies conducted formidable political and economic warfare operations that substantially undermined the credibility of the Soviet regime and contributed to its collapse.⁴¹ However, those capabilities were mostly disbanded in the early 1990s and the West is now poorly equipped, organised and resourced to win in the initial political and hybrid warfare layer of the struggle.

As discussed above, both sides have powerful capabilities to fight in the first kinetic layer and each side is likely to suffer heavy combat losses. In the second and third kinetic layers of a major war, Beijing might receive substantial support from Russia and possibly from Iran and North Korea. Together with its own mobilised society this may be sufficient for the Chinese regime to sustain effective resistance against the West for an extended period. Most importantly, it may make feasible Beijing's goal of fostering deep war-weariness and a climate of collapse in allied capitals.

By contrast, the West's preparations for an extended and draining conflict are comparatively limited and with some rare exceptions they do not extend far beyond their national defence organisations. Should the West focus more attention on these non-military elements, it does have the potential to mobilise powerful instruments that could be used to apply great pressure on Beijing, including by isolating China from its distant suppliers. These types of civilian and paramilitary operations would be very important to success in the second and third kinetic layers of a major war.

So while the United States and its allies may well be on the way to fielding superior capabilities for the first kinetic layer of the Chinese conception of war, it would be unwise to neglect the many military and non-military capabilities that would

41 For a discussion of this history and its primary lessons for security planners see Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting* Vol. 1, 11–20 (n.8).

be crucial to gaining the upper hand in the other layers of a future conflict. Effective mobilisation, organisation and deployment of these whole-of-nation and whole-of-alliance capabilities will be essential to deter and prevail in a drawn-out major conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

Assumption 10: The West has the best structures for planning, preparing and commanding next-generation warfare

The United States and its allies possess substantial government and private sector organisations that are capable of planning and preparing for highly networked, combined arms combat. When partnered with well-trained military personnel, the resulting forces can dominate most battlefields in conventional military operations.

Nevertheless, Western forces do have their weaknesses. For a start, the United States and other allied armed forces have had no experience of fighting a major power opponent since 1951. The very concept of a major war that could be fought against a superpower rival over an extended period is far removed from their recent experience of expeditionary wars fought far from allied homelands against non-conventional opponents. In consequence, the allies have largely neglected the hardening, dispersion and protection of their key personnel and systems.

The allies are also burdened by capability acquisition systems that are mostly slow, cumbersome and difficult-to-manage.⁴² Except in unusual circumstances, a new capability requirement for aircraft, ships or tanks typically takes 20–40 years to deliver into service.⁴³ These long timeframes render the allies vulnerable to the comparably fast-moving acquisition systems of the PLA and some other authoritarian state militaries.

Even more serious are the West's structural, capability and command weaknesses in preparing for operations in the initial political warfare layer and the second and third kinetic layers of a major conflict. Operating in these spaces China has several very large and highly skilled organisations including the Propaganda Department, the United Front Work Department, the Ministry of State Security, the Cyberspace Administration, the PLA, the Peoples' Armed Police

42 Moshe Schwartz, Kathryn A. Francis and Charles V. O'Connor, *The Department of Defense Acquisition Workforce: Background, Analysis, and Questions for Congress* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 29 July 2016).

43 For an informed discussion of this challenge see: Norman Augustine, Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, *Getting to Best: Reforming the Defense Acquisition Enterprise. A Business Imperative for Change from the Task Force on Defense Acquisition Law and Oversight* (Washington DC: Business Executives for National Security, July 2009).

and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.⁴⁴ These agencies operate at the heart of the Chinese regime and they all report to the Politburo Standing Committee, chaired by Xi Jinping.

In the United States and its allies there is no array of similarly focused organisations. No Western ally currently has a centralised planning and command organisation for combating China in the political and hybrid warfare space. And their planning and preparations for long duration operations are also limited and poorly coordinated.⁴⁵ Much remains to be done.

The need for rigorous testing of Western assumptions

The primary conclusion of this article is that there is a need for greater rigour in allied planning for deterring and winning a major war in the Indo-Pacific. If core assumptions are not subjected to thorough review there is a strong possibility that the United States and its allies and partners will be vulnerable to surprises, which could prove to be disastrous. Key vulnerabilities include:

- the danger of misperceiving the nature of the multidimensional challenge posed by the Chinese Communist Party regime and attempting to address it by investing almost entirely in modernised versions of conventional diplomatic and military instruments
- misjudging the extent to which China and other authoritarian states have penetrated allied and partner societies and are positioned to conduct ‘fifth column’ operations to seriously disrupt Western activities in future crises and conflicts
- the possibility that the publics of the United States, allied and partner countries have such a shallow understanding of the challenges they would face in a future conflict that their resilience would be weaker than is often assumed
- the risk that largely unseen pressures on the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party could trigger a decision to launch a pre-emptive strike against allied forces in the Indo-Pacific that would take the Western allies by surprise
- the possibility that the allied preference for a swift and decisive victory in such a conflict would be thwarted and that the Western allies may be forced to fight a long, expensive and draining war

44 For an excellent discussion of these arrangements, see: Peter Mattis, ‘Form and Function of the Chinese Communist Party’, 28 September 2017, published via *LinkedIn* see <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/form-function-chinese-communist-party-peter-mattis>

45 The case for a strong whole-of-government working group to deal with these and related issues has been made in London. See: Alexi Drew, John Gerson, Charles Parton and Benedict Wilkinson, ‘Rising to the China Challenge: The Case for an Enhanced All-government China Strategy Group’, *News Centre, King’s College London*, 7 January, 2020, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/rising-to-the-china-challenge>

- the prospect that the physical and psychological damage to Western homelands caused by such a war could shock allied electorates, induce war-weariness and result in eventual political collapse
- the danger of underestimating the importance of economic, infrastructure, social, ideological, political and other non-military factors to the course of such a war (There are questions about whether allied planning of these and other non-military dimensions is in a fit state and is sufficiently exercised to perform effectively in a major conflict.)
- the strong possibility that it may be much more difficult to negotiate a reasonable settlement during such a conflict than most Western decision-makers anticipate.

This discussion suggests that there is a need to review these and related matters as a priority. Stress testing core assumptions in realistic competitive exercises should generate new insights and inform future priorities. We need to be sure that we get these judgements right.

