

## Book Review

# Combating China's Political Warfare: An American Analysis

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*Political Warfare: Strategies for Combating China's Plan to Win Without Fighting,*  
by Kerry K. Gershaneck  
US Marine Corps University Press, Quantico, Virginia, 2020

*P*olitical Warfare published in 2020 is a must read. It graphically unveils the existential threat posed by China insidiously to countries the world over. Professor Gershaneck is an authority on the subject. He has not only studied it in depth but also brings to bear firsthand experience acquired as an intelligence operative closely tracking China's operations in Southeast Asia. While written out of concerns primarily for the USA it also has a message for other countries.

The author readily acknowledges that the resort to political warfare is not unique to China and has been indulged in by others, including the USA. Political warfare is also not something entirely novel but has been around for long. He indicates that he was driven to write this book as the US appeared to be facing "inevitable defeat" vis a vis China and thus must relearn the means to counter, deter and defeat it. To do so, he argues, that the US must first recognize the nature of the China threat which he laments is proving to be difficult.

The author proceeds to list the following "disturbing insights" which he garnered while researching for this book:

- While China today is good at political warfare, the USA is not. The latter had been quite good at it during the Cold War but had since allowed its political warfare institutions and capabilities to atrophy.
- In the post-Cold War world, the US had not educated its officials, media, business

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community, academe, military personnel, and society in general on the nature of political warfare. As a result, even those in government failed to recognize it.

- While sometimes the failure to recognize and confront China's political warfare was through simple ignorance and ineptitude-but often it was "willful, resulting from co-option, coercion, bribery, indoctrination, intimidation, or psychological manipulation".
- China did not merely direct the behavior of the willing, it conditioned such behaviour. Americans at the highest levels in all spheres of activity had been surprisingly susceptible to China's psychological manipulation.

While these insights are true of the USA, I am of the view that they are also true of many other countries, including India. Indeed, they perhaps explain why our China experts, particularly from the Indian Foreign Service are so soft on that country. Could they have been conditioned?

## Strategies

The book does a signal service by furnishing a brutally frank assessment of the nature of the Chinese state, its objectives, and the strategies to achieve them. Reproduced below are some gems from it in this regard:

- China is at war with the world. This is a total war for regional and global supremacy incorporating elements of military, economic, informational, and political warfare.
- We need to be concerned because China is a coercive, expansionist, hyper-nationalistic, militarily powerful, brutally repressive, fascist, and authoritarian state and its massive political, military, and economic power position it to be the greatest threat to the world's freedom.
- China's political warfare apparatus is a key weapon in its quest for regional and global hegemony. Important components of this apparatus are its propaganda machine and economic coercion. The former enables it to shape opinion within and without its borders and latter is used to cause countries to heed its political and security agenda through resort to "market-distorting economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and intimidation" as suggested by a former US assistant secretary of state. In a similar vein the book cites former U.S. National Security Council official Robert S. Spalding III describing the BRI as "infrastructure warfare," and "the most subtle and most corrosive of China's unrestricted

aggressions. Though it is always packaged as generous 'win-win' development deals, the ultimate goal is a bait and switch in which infrastructure is provided but full control of the platform is never fully given. It remains in the hands of Beijing."

- The nature of political warfare conducted by China is materially different from that conducted by other countries. Citing Bilahari Kausikan it argues that China seeks to achieve much more through its influence and political warfare operations. According to Kausikan, China takes a "holistic approach which melds together the legal and the covert" in conjunction with "persuasion, inducement and coercion." He further suggests that China's aim is not simply to "direct behavior but to condition behavior. In other words, China does not just want you to comply with its wishes. Far more fundamentally, it wants you to think in such a way that you will of your own volition do what it wants without being told. It's a form of psychological manipulation."
- China exports authoritarianism and intentionally undermines the credibility of democracy and individual freedoms to bolster support for its own totalitarian regime, which it calls the "China Model".

The book laments the absence in the USA of any comprehensive approach at the strategic and operational levels that brings together the common vision, coherence, and resources needed to fight the Chinese threat. It also underlines the deficiency in academic research in this regard and attributes this to censorship and self-censorship, as well as a clear understanding by many scholars, who might otherwise pursue this topic, that such research will face severe opposition within their academic environments.

### **Meaningful Terminologies**

The book devotes a chapter on terminology defining political warfare and a plethora of terms associated with it, two chapters each to the evolution, features, and instruments of political warfare in China, the use of political warfare by China against Thailand and Taiwan, and finally a concluding chapter with recommendations.

In the chapter on terminology over two dozen terms associated with political warfare have been listed and an effort has been made to provide definitions for them. A shortcoming in this section is that it is peppered with quotations and occasionally there are contradictions. For instance, it is not quite clear whether the term political warfare encompasses the use of military force. Sometimes it is used in a manner to suggest this and sometimes not. It would thus have been better if the author had provided his own authoritative definition of each term rather than use too many quotes. Some of the more

notable terms listed in this chapter and the descriptions provided for them are as follows:

**Political Warfare:** It is all-encompassing, unrestricted warfare and constitutes a “critical component of PRC security strategy and foreign policy.” It seeks to influence the behaviour of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favourable to China's interests. It also involves measures such as violence and other forms of coercive moves. Whereas in the US such actions require special authorization in China this is not the case and it sees measures associated with political warfare as relatively routine exercises.

The chapter underlines that one must not conflate public diplomacy with political warfare. The former differs from the latter both in terms of target and intent. While public diplomacy seeks to influence the opinions of large audiences, political warfare involves a calculated manipulation of a target country's leaders, elites, and other influential citizens to undermine its strategies, defense policies, and broader international practices. Public diplomacy attracts, whereas political warfare compels.

**Three Warfares:** This constitutes the traditional foundation of China's political warfare and includes public opinion/media warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. Such operations are undertaken by China against other countries to “seize the ‘decisive opportunity’ for controlling public opinion, organize psychological offense and defense, engage in legal struggle, and fight for popular will and public opinion.”

**Lawfare:** Legal warfare, or lawfare, exploits “all aspects of the law, including national law, international law, and the laws of war, in order to secure seizing ‘legal principle superiority’ and delegitimize an adversary. Tools used in lawfare operations include “domestic legislation, international legislation, judicial law, legal pronouncement, and law enforcement,” which are often used in combination with one another. For instance, in China's efforts to control the South China Sea lawfare has involved use of tortuous interpretations of international law to oppose the Philippine position and seek to delegitimize the arbitration process. China has also used lawfare to bolster its territorial claims in the South China Sea by designating the village of Sansha, located on the disputed Paracel Islands, as a Hainan Prefecture in an attempt to extend its control far into the region.

**United Front Work:** United front work is a classic Leninist political warfare strategy, successfully employed by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War. It essentially entails cooperating with those not allied to it to defeat a common enemy. It was used by China to defeat the KMT and is today one of Xi Jinping's magic weapons. It is a vital element of PRC political warfare, “not only for maintaining control over potentially problematic groups, such

as religious and ethnic minorities and overseas Chinese, but also as an important part of China's interference strategy abroad." A key element of United Front Work is to co-opt international organizations like the WHO and Interpol.

**Sharp Power:** This is a form of asymmetric warfare that exploits the openness of democratic societies. Unlike soft power which is based on attraction sharp power centers on distraction and manipulation. In open and democratic systems, sharp power acts like a trojan horse that covertly sabotages social harmony. Sharp power can be defined as the aggressive use of media and institutions to shape public opinion abroad designed to manage their target audiences by manipulating or poisoning the information that reaches them.

**Active Measures:** China's active-measure tactics, techniques, and procedures include espionage, bribery, censorship, deception, subversion, blackmail, "enforced disappearances," street violence, assassination, and the use of proxy forces such as the People's Liberation Army of Thailand and the United Wa State Army in Myanmar.

The book details that China's political warfare capabilities which have developed so rapidly in recent years are deeply rooted in its history from ancient times going back to the bloody Warring States period (475-231 BC). Quoting Michael Pillsbury, it points out that the strategies being used by today's China are based on the following principles derived from the lessons learnt during the bloody Warring States period:

- Induce complacency to avoid alerting your opponent.
- Manipulate your opponent's advisors.
- Be patient—for decades or longer—to achieve victory.
- Steal your opponent's ideas and technology for strategic purposes.
- Military might is not the critical factor for winning a long-term competition.
- Recognize that the hegemon will take extreme, even reckless action to maintain its dominant position.
- Never lose sight of shi . . . [which includes] deceiving others to do your bidding for you [and] waiting for the point of maximum opportunity to strike.
- Establish and employ metrics for measuring your status relative to other potential challengers.

- Always be vigilant to avoid being encircled and deceived by others.

### **Embedded in Strategic Culture**

The book underlines that China's experiences during the Warring States period and the world view of its first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, provide the traditional strategic culture of centralized despotism, coercion, and persuasion that is the foundation for contemporary China's political warfare. From the earliest rulers of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, autocracy has been the natural order of life, with no compact like the Magna Carta or Declaration of Independence or concepts such as post-Westphalian rights intervening between emperors and control over their subjects. Emperor Qin Shi Huang imposed the first totalitarian state in China, ruling with an iron fist and regulating every aspect of his subjects' lives.

Qin's foreign policy was one of aggressive expansionism, intended to attain complete control over the region—and eventually the world—to achieve total hegemony. The relentless quest for hegemony was also inspired by a sense of racial superiority and supremacist entitlement. This also explains why China required all other states to become vassal or tributary states.

The book details how China, since the time of Mao to date influenced by its aforesaid strategic culture and learning from the Soviet model has been engaged in political warfare. While Taiwan was China's initial target, today the entire international community is its target as it aims at regional and global hegemony. It is spending massive amounts for this purpose. Of particular note is the upgradation of systems in China under Xi in the realm of perception management. For instance, in pursuit of social media dominance, China has established a PLA cyber force with an estimated 300,000 soldiers and a netizen "50 Cent Army" of about 2 million individuals to make comments on social media sites to promote its propaganda. Furthermore, China has created a Strategic Support Force in the PLA consolidating its cyber, electronic, psychological, and space warfare capabilities.

Citing Ross Babbage of the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, the book suggests that China has the following major strategic goals:

- To maintain uncontested Communist rule;
- To restore China to its preponderant place in the Indo Asia Pacific both in the maritime and continental domains;
- To build China's influence and prestige so that it is respected as equal to if not superior to USA;

- To “export its model of tight authoritarian political control coupled with a managed but relatively open economy”;

The book also points out that while China has achieved substantial strategic gains through political warfare if it feels that this alone will not bring the desired outcomes in Taiwan, the East or South China Sea, or India it may choose to achieve its goals through conventional and unconventional combat operations which could lead to war. It further suggests that in any armed conflict China's fight for public opinion will be its second battlefield on which it will conduct a “wide range” of political warfare operations as indeed done by it in the past. It further argues that China will conduct political warfare operations before, during, and after any hostilities initiated by it. Prior to military confrontation, it will undertake a worldwide political warfare campaign that employs united front organizations and other supporters to initiate protests, support rallies, and use the media to conduct propaganda and psychological operations. History proves that political warfare actions are often tied to the China's strategic deception operations designed to confuse or delay adversaries' defensive actions until it is too late to respond effectively.

The chapter on Thailand is fascinating as it details how an inherently anti- China country and pro-US country gradually turned away from the US and became close to China. Though aided by misguided US policies towards Thailand it was substantially brought about by China's deft use of political warfare strategies.

The concluding chapter lists a series of actions which could be taken by USA and other countries to counter China. These may be listed as follows:

- National leaders must educate internal and external audiences that China is engaging in political warfare and detail why and how they intend to address it;
- A national strategy must be developed to counter China and a coordinator in this regard must be appointed in the US National Security Council;
- National Institutions must be established or refurbished to counter China's political warfare;
- Education programmes should be instituted for officials, military and civil, the academe, the business community, the media, etc sensitizing them to China's political warfare and of the necessity to counter it; (The book very helpfully has an appendix which contains the outline of a five-day counter PRC political warfare course)

- Establish an Asian Political Warfare Centre of Excellence to “develop a common understanding of PRC political warfare threats and promote the development of a comprehensive, whole-of-government response at national levels in countering PRC and other political warfare threats”;
- Investigate, Disrupt, and Prosecute China's Political Warfare Activities;
- Screen, Track, and Expose China's Political Warfare Activities;
- Routinely Expose Covert and Overt PRC Political Warfare Operations;
- Raise the Costs for China's Interference;
- Take Legal Action against Chinese Officials and Affiliates Engaged in Civil Rights Offense;
- Pass Legislation to Diminish the Offensive Power of PRC News and Social Media;

### **Lessons**

To sum up, the book leads one to conclude that the China threat is existential, that one cannot address it in a business as usual mode, and that the entire national effort should be directed towards countering it. Accordingly, India too needs to be wary of any cooperative ventures with China as they will not lead to any rapprochement and should, if essential, only be undertaken as short-term tactical moves. This is all the more so as such ventures will be exploited as instruments of political warfare against India by China in order to establish its hegemony in the region. The sooner India and rest of the world realize this the better.