



# China's Application of the 'Three Warfares' in the South China Sea and Xinjiang

January 2019

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*Abstract: This article explores the development and application of the People's Republic of China's information warfare (IW) strategy to two distinct security challenges: the South China Sea and the threat of Uyghur terrorism in Xinjiang. The application of China's IW strategy in the South China Sea dispute demonstrates that, in contrast to Western understandings whereby IW is seen as an adjunct to more kinetic strategies of conflict, China's conception of IW is not just relevant in times of conflict or crisis, but applicable across the peacetime-crisis-war spectrum. The application of aspects of the "three warfares" in Xinjiang meanwhile demonstrates China's blurring of the lines between "national security" and "regime security."*

The Trump administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) asserts that the "fundamental" challenge to U.S. security "is the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition" by "revisionist" powers, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.<sup>1</sup> This competition moreover encompasses "all dimensions of power" with Moscow and Beijing pursuing "efforts short of armed conflict by expanding coercion to new fronts, violating principles of sovereignty, exploiting ambiguity, and deliberately blurring the lines between civil and military goals"<sup>2</sup> One increasingly salient "front" in this competition concerns "information warfare" (IW). As numerous observers have noted, access to—and manipulation of—information has been a central component of warfare for centuries and in the defining wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, in the contemporary "information age" where "computers are everywhere," the proliferation of information technology (IT) "incorporates information systems and resources (hardware, software, and wetware)

<sup>1</sup> *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), p. 2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf?source=GovDelivery>.

<sup>2</sup> *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*.

used by military and civilian decision-makers to send, receive, control, and manipulate information necessary to enable 21st-century decision-making.”<sup>3</sup> The IT revolution’s enabling of near real-time communication has also opened new fronts for adversaries (both state and non-state) to leverage this connectedness to manipulate information.

Indeed, developments such as Russia’s meddling in the U.S. 2016 presidential election and the Brexit referendum, in particular, have demonstrated that “nation-states, non-state actors and domestic figures have learned how to exploit factually incorrect, but emotionally resounding narratives to divide, confuse or subvert a society.”<sup>4</sup> There have also been growing concerns surrounding China’s attempts to enhance its influence in a variety of liberal democracies including Australia, New Zealand, and the United States spearheaded by the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) “United Front Work Department.” “United front” work, as Bates Gill and Benjamin Schreer have recently argued, encompass overseas activities

that seek to bolster the legitimacy, longevity, and strategic interests of the CCP by promoting and protecting the Party’s image, record, and policy preferences including through monitoring, deflection and suppression of criticism and contrary positions. This kind of united front work is primarily aimed at shaping the political environment within target countries to achieve outcomes favorable to Chinese Party-state preferences, both in its standing at home and its strategic interests abroad.<sup>5</sup>

It is thus the potential manipulation of information in open, liberal societies that has emerged as a central “front” in the strategic competition between the United States and the authoritarian and “revisionist” actors in Moscow and Beijing identified in the 2018 National Defense Strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Central to much recent discussion of Russian and Chinese approaches to IW has been a presumption that their IW strategies are primarily externally oriented in nature and application. In China’s case, for instance, there has been substantial analysis of its deployment of its IW concept of the “three warfares” (*san zhong zhanfa*)—public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare—with regard to long-standing international

<sup>3</sup> William R. Gery, Se Young Lee, and Jacob Ninas, “Information Warfare in an Information Age,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, vol. 84 no. 2 (2017), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Zappone and Matthew Sussex, “Addressing Australia’s Vulnerability to Weaponised Narratives,” *NSC Policy Options Paper*, No. 9 (June 2018), <https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/department-news/12728/addressing-australias-vulnerability-weaponised-narratives>.

<sup>5</sup> Bates Gill and Benjamin Schreer, “Countering China’s ‘United Front,’” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 41 no. 2 (2018), p. 157.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, John Garnaut, “Australia’s China Reset,” *The Monthly*, Aug. 2018, <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/august/1533045600/john-garnaut/australia-s-china-reset>; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Beijing Builds Its Influence in the American Media,” *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 21, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/21/one-of-americas-biggest-chinese-language-newspapers-toes-beijings-party-line-china-influence-united-front/>; and Anne-Marie Brady, *Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, Sept. 18, 2017), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>.

conflicts, such as Taiwan, the South China Sea (SCS), and territorial disputes with India.<sup>7</sup> However, I suggest that China also has deployed elements of the "three warfares" to counter a primarily domestic security challenge—the perceived threat of Uyghur militancy, radicalization, and terrorism in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

Here, I make two broad arguments. First, the specific cases of the deployment of IW in the SCS and Xinjiang demonstrate that China perceives IW as achieving not only deterrent, but also preventive or prophylactic effects. The application of China's IW strategy in the South China Sea dispute demonstrates that, in contrast to Western understandings whereby IW is seen as an adjunct to more kinetic strategies of conflict, China's conception of IW is not just applicable in times of conflict or crisis, but across what might be termed a "peace-crisis-war" (PCW) spectrum. In this context, IW serves as an ongoing instrument of deterrence to not only contain the offensive-defensive capabilities of adversaries, but ultimately to degrade their will and capability to initiate or sustain political-military struggle contra Chinese interests. The application of aspects of the "three warfares" in Xinjiang meanwhile most clearly demonstrates China's blurring of the lines between what would in the West be defined as "national security" and "regime security." In this context, IW strategies have served a preventive function through targeting religious and cultural manifestations of Uyghur distinctiveness that the CCP considers obstacles to "social stability."

The article proceeds in three major parts. The first section discusses the origins and applications of the "Three Warfares" strategy and how this fits within the Party's holistic conception of security (i.e., combining national, state, and regime security). The second part explores the application of the "Three Warfares" in the cases of the South China Sea, and third, the case of Xinjiang.

### **Information War and the Chinese Communist Party's Conception of Security**

Using deception and manipulation of information, of course, has a long lineage in Chinese strategic culture as illustrated by Sun Tzu's oft-quoted maxim that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." The history of Chinese Communist Party as a clandestine and revolutionary organization has also made "political warfare" central to its modus operandi. However, it was the U.S. military's display of technological superiority during the 1990s and 2000s in such conflicts as the First Gulf War, interventions in the Balkans (especially the 1999 intervention in Kosovo), and the 2003 invasion of Iraq that many observers have

<sup>7</sup> Carl Thayer, "China's Information Warfare Campaign and the South China Sea: Bring It On!" *The Diplomat*, June 16, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/06/chinas-information-warfare-campaign-and-the-south-china-sea-bring-it-on/>; and Indrani Bagchi, "Doklam standoff: China playing out its 'Three Warfares' strategy against India," *Times of India*, Aug. 13, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-playing-out-its-three-warfares-strategy-against-india/articleshow/60036197.cms>.

highlighted as catalysts for the more systematic development of China's IW strategy.<sup>8</sup> The First Gulf War, according to the Heritage Foundation's Dean Cheng, had important effects on Chinese thinking at the strategic, operational, and technological levels.<sup>9</sup> Strategically, the First Gulf War demonstrated that the nature of warfare had shifted from "the application of masses of manpower and equipment" to "high technology local wars" involving "the large-scale use of information technology, advanced materials, aerospace systems, and other advanced technologies in weapons systems."<sup>10</sup> Operationally, one Chinese military strategist asserted that "the joint operation of all branches of the military displayed in that war [the Gulf War] gave us a glimpse of things to come in the early 21st century."<sup>11</sup> Significantly, as Cheng notes, such joint-ness required "not only traditional land, sea, and air forces, but also missile forces, special operations forces, and psychological warfare units," underscoring the role of advanced technological capabilities. People's Liberation Army (PLA) Major General Wang Pufeng, writing in 1995, stressed the centrality of information in this context arguing that the First Gulf War demonstrated that "information warfare will control the form and future of war."<sup>12</sup> He continued that whereas during "the industrial age the combat power of a military was measured primarily by how much capacity that military held and could utilize," in the current "information age, the efficiency of capacity utilization is even more important." As such, "the thrust of China's military construction and development of weapons and equipment will no longer be toward strengthening the 'firepower antipersonnel system' of the industrial age, but toward the strengthening of information technology, information weapons systems, and information networking."<sup>13</sup>

This perception was highlighted further by subsequent U.S. military interventions throughout the 1990s, most particularly in Kosovo in 1999. Kosovo was viewed by some Chinese observers as the quintessential "non-contact," "high technology local war," whereby the United States leveraged its enormous technological superiority to subdue Slobodan Milosevic's Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY)

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Sangkuk Lee, "China's 'Three Warfares': Origins, Applications, and Organizations," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 37 no. 2 (2014), pp. 198-221; and Barrington M. Barrett, "Information Warfare: China's Response to U.S. Technological Advantages," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, vol. 18 no. 4 (2005), pp. 685-687.

<sup>9</sup> Dean Cheng, "Chinese Lessons from the Gulf Wars," in Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples Wars* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute: U.S. Army War College, 2011), pp. 158-159.

<sup>10</sup> *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples Wars*, p. 159; and Arthur S. Ding, "China's Growing Military Capability in Search of a Strategy," *The International Spectator*, vol. 44 no. 2 (2009), pp. 97-100.

<sup>11</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Wu Jianchu, "Joint Operations—The Basic Form of Combat on High-Tech Terms," *China Military Science*, No. 4, 1995, Foreign Broadcast Information Service--China (FBIS-CHI), April 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Major General Wang Pufeng, "The Challenge of Information Warfare," *China Military Science*, Spring 1995, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Pufeng, "The Challenge of Information Warfare."

without recourse to the deployment of ground forces.<sup>14</sup> Beyond issues of military strategy and capability, U.S. intervention in Kosovo was also viewed as problematic since “the articulation by Western countries of universal values, such as human rights, as the rationale to intervene in Yugoslavia’s internal affairs without authorization from the United Nations” created a precedent that could be followed in the future vis-à-vis core Chinese interests with respect to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.<sup>15</sup>

A central lesson of these conflicts for Chinese military strategists was that “non-military operations and non-kinetic capabilities” were central to fighting and winning contemporary conflicts. Significantly, Chinese leaders and strategists assessed U.S. success during these conflicts as not only the result of the efficient harnessing of its technological superiority, but also of U.S. capacity to “manipulate” international law and domestic and international public opinion in pursuit of its political and strategic objectives.<sup>16</sup> In particular, from the Chinese perspective, was the U.S. capacity to attain a UN mandate for the use of force during the First Gulf War and its manipulation of Western public opinion during its intervention in Kosovo.<sup>17</sup> According to *Unrestricted Warfare*, authored by two PLA Air Force colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsu, that contemporary warfare was characterized not by using “armed forces to compel the enemy to submit to one’s will,” but rather by using “all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.” To conduct successfully such “unrestricted warfare,” Qiao and Wang argued, “All boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally removed.”<sup>18</sup>

Such assessments have fed into the development of China’s IW “three warfares” concept/strategy, officially adopted by the Central Military Commission (CMC) in November 2003. Psychological warfare focuses on “disseminating particular information via various channels” to influence or disrupt an adversary’s decision-making capabilities and foster doubt about its capabilities to degrade its will to act. Public opinion warfare is geared to influence both domestic and international public

<sup>14</sup> See, June Teufel Dreyer, “People’s Liberation Army Lessons from Foreign Conflicts: The Air War in Kosovo,” in Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples Wars*, pp. 33-40; and Jacqueline Newmyer, “The revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 33 no. 4 (2010), p. 495.

<sup>15</sup> See, Dreyer, “People’s Liberation Army Lessons from Foreign Conflicts,” p. 39; and Ding, “China’s Growing Military Capability,” p. 98. For a Chinese view, see, Guo Yuan, “The Enlightenment of Kosovo War on National Splittism,” *Journal of Northwest University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition) vol. 4 (2000).

<sup>16</sup> Cheng, “Chinese Lessons from the Gulf Wars,” p. 171.

<sup>17</sup> Jin Yang, “Framing the NATO air strikes on Kosovo across countries: Comparison of Chinese and U.S. newspaper coverage,” *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, vol. 65 no. 3 (2003), pp. 231-249.

<sup>18</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsu, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), tr. by Foreign Broadcast Information Service, <https://www.cryptome.org/cuw.htm>; also published as Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsu (tr. by Al Santoli), *Unrestricted Warfare: China’s Plan to Destroy America* (Pan American Publishing, 2002).

opinion with the objective of supporting the Party's objectives and dissuading adversaries from pursuing contrary actions. Finally, legal warfare involves the exploitation of legal systems, both international and domestic, in order to claim the legal high-ground, assert the legitimacy of Chinese claims, and constrain an adversary's operational freedom.<sup>19</sup>

This strategy has led some to conceive of China's approach to IW as "hybrid war" with "Chinese characteristics."<sup>20</sup> "Hybrid war" is generally conceived of as an adversary utilizing conventional and non-conventional means and modes of coercion to achieve military-political objectives. For instance, Retired U.S. Army Colonel John J. McCuen, argues:

Hybrid conflicts therefore are full spectrum wars with both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for, control and support of the combat zone's indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community.<sup>21</sup>

Russia's recent operations in Crimea and Ukraine have been seen by many commentators as the most recent manifestation of "hybrid war" in action. Yet, as the Kennan Institute's Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky note, the labelling of Russian operations as "hybrid" here may be problematic for several reasons as it: (1) "simply denotes a combination of previously defined types of warfare, whether conventional, irregular, political or information"; (2) obscures the fact "that the combination of war across domains is not new, but in fact is as old as warfare itself"; and (3) obscures the fact that rather than being a Russian strategic concept "built from the ground up by the Russians," "hybrid war" in fact is "merely a label attributed to Russian actions in Ukraine by the West, in an effort to make sense of cascading phases of a security crisis."<sup>22</sup>

Conceptualizing China's approach to IW as simply a variation of "hybrid war" can be questioned on similar grounds. Most importantly, such an approach ignores two central elements of the Chinese case. First, its IW strategies are not solely conducted by military or intelligence arms of the state, and second, its IW is ultimately defined by the central role of the Chinese Communist Party. Peter Mattis, of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, reminds us here that the PLA, for example, "is the party's army; the party is not an extension of the PLA." Thus, in

<sup>19</sup> See, Stefan Halper, *China: The Three Warfares* (Report prepared for Director, Office of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Washington, D.C., May 2013), pp. 28-30.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Michael Raska, "Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics," *RSIS Commentary*, No. 262, Dec. 2015, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/CO15262.pdf>; and Benjamin David Baker, "Hybrid Warfare With Chinese Characteristics," *The Diplomat*, Sept. 23, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/hybrid-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics/>.

<sup>21</sup> Colonel John J. McCuen, "Hybrid Wars," *Military Review*, March-April 2008, p. 108.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "A Closer look at Russia's 'Hybrid War,'" *Kennan Cable*, No. 7 (April 2015), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/7-KENNAN%20CABLE-ROJANSKY%20KOFMAN.pdf>.

contrast to the U.S. or Australian militaries, “the Chinese military’s purpose is to create political power for the party.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in December 1929, Mao Zedong himself exhorted his comrades against thinking that “the task of the Red Army . . . is merely to fight.” Rather, the Party must understand that

the Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution. . . . The Red Army fights not merely for the sake of fighting but in order to . . . help [the masses, i.e. CCP] establish revolutionary political power. Without these objectives, fighting loses its meaning and the Red Army loses the reason for its existence.<sup>24</sup>

Recognizing this situation allows us to understand China’s IW approach as not primarily a military one but rather one concerned with “political warfare.” American diplomat George F. Kennan famously defined this concept as “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.”<sup>25</sup> For Kennan, U.S. efforts in the early Cold War to contain the Soviet Union were hamstrung by “a popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between war and peace, by a tendency to view war as a sort of sporting contest outside of all political context.”<sup>26</sup> This observation is relevant to the Chinese case, as the CCP has from its inception operated on a basis that does not recognize such a neat distinction. Kennan’s definition above could be more accurately rendered in the Chinese context to “the employment of all the means at the *Party’s* command, short of war, to achieve its political objectives.”

The fundamental question concerns the CCP’s political objectives. The “core” political objective lying at the heart of the CCP since 1949—indeed “obsessively” so according to some—has been to maintain its leadership of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>27</sup> While all authoritarian leaders and regimes seek to stay in power, the CCP’s is framed by its ideological Marxist-Leninist commitment and legacy which shapes its conception of “security” in a distinctive manner. Articles I and II of China’s *National Security Law* (NSL), enacted in 2015, provide the most straightforward example how the CCP conceives of security. Article I states that the purpose of the NSL is

<sup>23</sup> Peter Mattis, “China’s Three Warfares in Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 18, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

<sup>24</sup> Mao Zedong, “On Correcting Mistaken Views in the Party,” Dec. 1929, Selected Works of Mao Zedong, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_5.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_5.htm).

<sup>25</sup> “George F. Kennan on Organizing Political Warfare,” April 30, 1948, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Woodrow Wilson Center: Digital Archive International History Declassified, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320>.

<sup>26</sup> “George F. Kennan on Organizing Political Warfare.”

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Steve Tsang, “Consultative Leninism: China’s New Political Framework,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 18 no. 62 (2009), p. 866; and David Shambaugh, *China’s Future*, (London: Polity, 2017); and Bruce J. Dickson, *The Dictator’s Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party’s Strategy for Survival*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

to maintain national security, *safeguard the regime of people's democratic dictatorship and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics*, protect the fundamental interest of the people, ensure the smooth advancement of reform, opening up, and socialist modernization, and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.<sup>28</sup>

Article II then notes that “national security” refers “to the relative absence of international or domestic threats” to “the state’s power to govern, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, the welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major national interests, and the ability to ensure a continued state of security.”<sup>29</sup> A 2012 edition of a prominent textbook on U.S. national security, in contrast, suggests that “national security is the ability of national institutions to prevent adversaries from using force to harm Americans or their national interests and the confidence of Americans in this capability.”<sup>30</sup> However, as You Ji writes, Beijing’s conceptualization of “national security” embodied in Articles I and II of the NSL

combines two Western concepts of state security, which is defined as securing smooth governance based on conditions where the state’s institutions, process and structures encounter no serious threats of collapse and opposition, despite a change of government; and regime security that refers more to weak and failing states where incumbent rulers are removed from office, often in the form of government collapse.<sup>31</sup>

This “holistic” approach to “national security” was amply demonstrated in Xi Jinping’s lengthy political report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress where he stated that the Party “must take protecting our people’s security as our mission and safeguarding political security as a *fundamental task*” in order to “ensure both internal and external security, homeland and public security, traditional and non-traditional security, and China’s own and common security.”<sup>32</sup>

### The “Three Warfares” in the South China Sea: Defending a “Core Interest”?

The U.S.–China Joint Statement, released during President Barack Obama’s state visit to China in November 2009, contained the phrase: “The two sides agreed that respecting each other’s core interests is extremely important to ensure steady progress

<sup>28</sup> *National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China* (2015), [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2017-03/03/content\\_4774229.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2017-03/03/content_4774229.htm); for the Chinese language document, see, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqci/zgj/2015-07-01/content\\_13912103.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqci/zgj/2015-07-01/content_13912103.html). My emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> *National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China*.

<sup>30</sup> Sam C. Sarkesian, John Allen Williams, and Stephen J. Cimbala, *U.S. National Security: Policymakers, Processes, and Politics* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.), (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> You Ji, “China’s National Security Commission: Theory, Evolution and Operations,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25 no. 98 (2016), p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> “Full Text of President Xi Jinping’s report at 19<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress,” *Xinhua*, Nov. 3, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf).

is China-U.S. relations.”<sup>33</sup> This statement prompted much speculation as to what constituted China's “core interests.” In the Joint Statement's text, there were numerous references to the fact that “the fundamental principle of respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity is at the core” of Sino-U.S. relations suggesting Beijing's over-riding concern with advancing its sovereignty claims to Taiwan and potentially Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>34</sup> Michael D. Swaine, Senior Fellow of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, analyzed Chinese debates and uses of the term from the early 2000s to 2011. He concluded that while “its usage probably derives from growing Chinese concerns over the Taiwan issue in the early 2000s,” the term “has since been unambiguously applied to two other sovereignty-related issues (Tibet and Xinjiang), and its general coverage has been expanded to include three other general sets of state interests: the Chinese political system, national security, and socioeconomic development.”<sup>35</sup> Swaine also noted that “the Chinese application of the term ‘core interest’ to an issue is intended to convey a very high level of commitment to managing or resolving that issue on Chinese terms, without much if any discussion or negotiation. . . . In other words, it conveys a high level of resolve, and to some extent a warning of sorts to other powers.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, Swaine's analysis also mentioned significant ambiguity between official and unofficial views with China about whether or not the South China Sea constituted a “core interest.” He wrote:

a close examination of the official Chinese sources consulted for this study failed to unearth a single example of a PRC official or an official PRC document or media source that publicly and explicitly identifies the South China Sea as a PRC ‘core interest.’ In fact, when given the opportunity to clarify the official record on this issue, Chinese officials have avoided doing so. During their October 11, 2010, meeting in Hanoi, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie apparently did not mention the issue of the South China Seas to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates. And when President Hu Jintao traveled to Washington for his state visit in January 2011, he explicitly identified only Taiwan and Tibet as core interests.<sup>37</sup>

One interpretation of this ambiguity (which Swaine himself suggested) was that Beijing's reticence to redefine the SCS as a “core interest” reflected a pragmatic calculation that it would in fact enable “unfriendly forces,” such as the United States to “contain China.” Yet, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted that she was directly told by Chinese officials at the 2010 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic

<sup>33</sup> See, “In Full: U.S.-China Joint Statement,” Nov. 17, 2009,

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/in-full-us-china-joint-statement/>

<sup>34</sup> “In Full: U.S.-China Joint Statement.”

<sup>35</sup> Michael D. Swaine, “China's Assertive Behavior Part One: On ‘Core Interests,’” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 34 (Winter 2011), p. 11, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM34MS.pdf> .

<sup>36</sup> “China's Assertive Behavior Part One,” p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> “China's Assertive Behavior Part One,” p. 9.

Dialogue “that they view the South China Sea as a core interest.”<sup>38</sup> During President Hu Jintao’s subsequent January 2011 visit to Washington, however, the Chinese again hedged on whether they did in fact define the SCS as a “core interest” with *New York Times* reporter Edward Wong noting that:

Several American officials told reporters in Beijing and Washington last year that one or more Chinese officials had labeled the South China Sea a ‘core interest.’ But despite those remarks and the public debate that came later, Chinese leaders have not explicitly come out with a policy statement describing the South China Sea as such — nor have they denied it.<sup>39</sup>

Unofficial Chinese interlocutors, such as prominent scholars and think tank analysts, also were quoted extensively at this time to the effect that Beijing was “playing chicken” with both domestic nationalist sentiment and likely international opprobrium through its indecision on defining the SCS as a “core interest.” Peking University scholar Zhu Feng, for instance, argued that while it was not Chinese policy to define the SCS as a “core interest,” a public denial could “inflame the Chinese people” and complicate President Hu’s approach.<sup>40</sup>

However, it is possible to suggest that such “indecision” may have been an illustration of the “Three Warfares” strategy in action. In particular, the psychological warfare element of the strategy, as noted earlier, is centered on “disseminating particular information via various channels” to influence or disrupt an adversary’s decision-making capabilities and foster doubt about its capabilities in order to degrade its will to act.<sup>41</sup> By disseminating conflicting narratives about whether or not the SCS’s constituted a core interest, Beijing, as Halper argues, was attempting to “manipulate perception and psychology to condition the operational environment in China’s favour.”<sup>42</sup> Creating uncertainty in Washington (and South East Asian capitals) about China’s ultimate framing of the SCS from the late 2000s onward enhanced Beijing’s ability to conduct what Jakub Grygiel, associate professor at the Catholic University of America, and A. Wess Mitchell of the Center for European Policy Analysis, defined as “probing behavior.” In other words, “low intensity and low-risk” tests “aimed at gauging the opposing state’s power and will to maintain security and influence over a region.”<sup>43</sup> Such “tests” have included China’s ramped up efforts to claim, and artificially create and militarize in some instances, features in the SCS, and use of coast

<sup>38</sup> Greg Sheridan, “China actions meant as test, Hillary Clinton says,” *The Australian*, Nov. 9, 2010, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/china-actions-meant-as-test-hillary-clinton-says/news-story/bbce0c20fb6caa5071c56de35c567c9d>.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Wong, “China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea Is a ‘Core Interest’ Worth War,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/asia/31beijing.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in “China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea Is a ‘Core Interest’ Worth War.”

<sup>41</sup> Halper, *China: The Three Warfares*, pp. 28-30.

<sup>42</sup> Halper, *China: The Three Warfares*, p. 31.

<sup>43</sup> Jakub Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 43.

guard patrols and fishing boats to encroach contested waters.<sup>44</sup> For Grygiel and Mitchell, such activities are meant to convey to the hegemon (i.e., the United States) that

the act of supporting the regional status quo is no longer cost free but will require a level of exertion that was not needed in the past, inevitably leading to questions of whether such effort and resulting escalation are worthwhile.<sup>45</sup>

The record of the Obama administration's response to such "probing" behavior in the SCS tends to suggest that Beijing was successful in generating doubt not only in Washington, but also regionally about U.S. capabilities and its will to combat such probes. According to M. Taylor Fravel, political science professor at MIT, U.S. policy toward the SCS consistently has been premised on three major pillars since the 1990s: maintenance of neutrality regarding the conflicting claims to sovereignty; emphasis on the "process and principles by which claims should be pursued more than the final outcome or resolution of the underlying disputes"; and shaping China's behavior "by highlighting the costs of coercion and the pursuit of claims that are inconsistent with international law."<sup>46</sup> The Obama administration largely followed this approach with Michael McDevitt of the Center for Naval Analyses arguing in the 2014 that U.S. policy

focuses on creating stability by exhorting all the parties to follow the rules of international law; it explicitly defines how Washington would like conflicts to be solved; and it includes hard-power initiatives aimed at redressing some of the power imbalance between the Philippines, Vietnam, and China.<sup>47</sup>

In line with the logic of Grygiel and Mitchell, as one critic has argued, the only way in which the United States could combat China's probing in the SCS would be for it to "adopt a more aggressive approach of deterrence by denial," but that this "would mean placing U.S. military forces more directly in harm's way and being willing to engage in what the Pentagon considers to be unsafe interceptions of Chinese vessels and aircraft

<sup>44</sup> See, Andrew Erickson, Austin Strange, Dean Cheng, Ely Ratner, Shawn Brimley, Robert Haddick, Mira Rapp-Hooper, and Zack Cooper, "China's Menacing Sandcastles in the South China Sea," *War on the Rocks*, March 2, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/03/chinas-menacing-sandcastles-in-the-south-china-sea/>; and Aaron Picozzi and Lincoln Davidson, "China's Secret Strategy to Dominate the South China Sea," *The National Interest*, June 10, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinas-secret-strategy-dominate-the-south-china-sea-16539>.

<sup>45</sup> Grygiel and Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier*, p. 66.

<sup>46</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, *U.S. Policy towards the Disputes in the South China Sea Since 1995*, Policy Report (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2016), [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/PR140330\\_US\\_Policy\\_Towards\\_Disputes.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/PR140330_US_Policy_Towards_Disputes.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Michael McDevitt, "The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future," *CNA Occasional Paper*, Nov. 2014, p. vii, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IOP-2014-U-009109.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2014-U-009109.pdf).

in the South China Sea.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, the U.S. approach detailed by Fravel and McDevitt was beset by a major problem in that it ultimately left considerable space for China to utilize the two other prongs of its “Three Warfares” strategy: legal and public opinion warfare. The U.S. focus on “exhorting all parties to follow the rules of international law” provided a key opening for Beijing’s pursuit of legal warfare (or “lawfare”). “Lawfare,” as noted previously, involves the exploitation of legal systems, both international and domestic, in order to claim the legal high ground, assert the legitimacy of Chinese claims, and constrain an adversaries operational freedom.<sup>49</sup> China’s efforts in this space have varied from claims of *de jure* sovereignty based on either imperial records, including Ming-era Admiral Zheng He’s voyages, or post-1945 recognition that Imperial Japan had forcibly annexed China’s claims in the SCS (and that these “returned” to China with Japan’s defeat) through to assertions that its artificially created/reclaimed features in the SCS constitute an extension of Chinese territory.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond such externally oriented “lawfare,” Beijing also has leveraged domestic legal and administrative measures in service of its claims to the SCS. This expansion has included creating a military garrison for the SCS in 2012, the Sansha garrison, which would be responsible for “national defence mobilisation . . . guarding the city and supporting local emergency rescue and disaster relief” and “carrying out military missions.”<sup>51</sup> Additionally, Sansha was elevated to a prefectural level entity highlighting Beijing’s view that its claims in the SCS are “integral” parts of China’s territory.<sup>52</sup> This action, as Uras argues, amounts to an idealization of the SCS “as in effect part of Chinese national territory,” which “despite its oceanic range, is perceived and portrayed by the Chinese government in the same way as land.”<sup>53</sup> This move, in turn, enables Beijing to argue that its efforts to physically change the “facts on the ground” via its reclamation efforts in the SCS are both “legal” and justifiable. Beijing, Laura Jackson, an independent analyst, suggests, “is challenging the nature of land features at sea by establishing artificial islands that supposedly project both territorial waters (with a limit of 12 nautical miles) and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) extending 200 nautical miles” and “the principle of freedom of navigation in the maritime commons by attempting to shift the established definition of an EEZ under UNCLOS, which

<sup>48</sup> Peter Mattis, “The Great Unravelling: U.S. Policy in the South China Sea,” *The National Interest*, Sept. 29, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-great-unraveling-us-policy-the-south-china-sea-13958?page=0%2C1>.

<sup>49</sup> Halper, *China: The Three Warfares*, pp. 28-30.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Liza Tobin, “Underway: Beijing’s Strategy to Build China into a Maritime Great Power,” *Naval War College Review*, vol. 71 no. 2 (2018), pp. 20-21; and Alessandro Uras, “The South China Sea and the Building of a National Maritime Culture: A New Chinese Province in the Making,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 57 no. 6 (2017), pp. 1008-1031.

<sup>51</sup> David Lague, “China’s hawks gaining sway in South China sea dispute,” *Reuters*, July 26, 2012, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-china-southchinasea/chinas-hawks-gaining-sway-in-south-china-sea-dispute-idUKBRE86O1P520120725>.

<sup>52</sup> Dean Cheng, “China’s War against International Law in the South China Sea,” *The National Interest*, May 19, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-war-against-international-law-the-south-china-sea-12913>.

<sup>53</sup> Uras, “The South China Sea and the Building of a National Maritime Culture,” p. 1013.

provides coastal states the "right to regulate economic activities (such as fishing and oil exploration)."<sup>54</sup>

Finally, "lawfare" has also been augmented by public opinion warfare that seeks to influence both domestic and international public opinion with the objective of supporting the Party's objectives and dissuading adversaries from pursuing contrary actions.<sup>55</sup> Core themes of print, online, and television coverage of the SCS have emphasized the historicity of China's claims, the "loss" of the SCS during the "100 years of humiliation," and discrediting "international law" as a tool of "imperial" and "hegemonic" powers.<sup>56</sup> After the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) 2016 decision negating China's "nine-dash line" claims to the South China Sea was published, former State Councillor Dai Bingguo dismissed it as "nothing more than a piece of paper," while Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin charged that the PCA had "worked with the Philippines to cover up its act of illegally occupying China's -territory in the Nansha [Spratly] Islands."<sup>57</sup> Externally oriented platforms meanwhile, such as the English language sites of *Xinhua*, *People's Daily*, and the *Global Times*, have pushed similar themes albeit with greater emphasis on highlighting U.S., Japanese, Vietnamese or Philippino responsibility for aggravating the situation or their lack of respect for Chinese law.<sup>58</sup>

### **The "Three Warfares" in Xinjiang: From Integration to the "Transformation" of the Uyghur?**

The assumption that the "Three Warfares" are only externally directed ignores the fact that their central objective is the creation of political power for the CCP. Thus, it is as applicable to crucial aspects of domestic security and politics as it is the foreign policy core interests of the Party, such as the SCS. China's far north-western province, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), home to the Muslim Uyghurs, has long constituted a major security concern for Beijing. Since 1949, the CCP has pursued a muscular strategy of integration defined by tight political, social, and cultural control (including via Han Chinese domination of the regional government, regulation of

<sup>54</sup> Laura Jackson, "Revision of Reality: The Three Warfares—China's New Way of War," *Transitions Forum* (Legatum Institute: Sept. 2015), p. 9, <https://lif.blob.core.windows.net/lif/docs/default-source/publications/information-at-war-from-china-s-three-warfares-to-nato-s-narratives-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=2>.

<sup>55</sup> Halper, *China: The Three Warfares*, pp. 28-30.

<sup>56</sup> Linh Tong, "The Social Media 'War' Over the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, July 16, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/the-social-media-war-over-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>57</sup> Catherine Wong, "Nothing more than a piece of paper: former Chinese envoy dismisses upcoming ruling on South China Sea claims," *South China Morning Post*, July 6, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1986029/nothing-more-piece-paper-former-chinese-envoy-dismisses>.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, "Commentary: Time for Manila to End Farce of Arbitration in on South China Sea," *People's Daily*, July 17, 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/17/c\\_134421924.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/17/c_134421924.htm).

religion, and outright suppression of dissent), encouragement of Han Chinese settlement, and state-led economic development.<sup>59</sup> Although yielding economic development, this stance also has stimulated sometimes violent opposition from the Uyghur population who bridle against demographic dilution, political marginalization, and continued state interference in the practice of religion.<sup>60</sup>

With the development of the ambitious “Belt and Road Initiative,” security and “stability” in Xinjiang have now been elevated to a strategic imperative with President Xi Jinping stressing that it is “vital to the whole country’s reform, development and stability, as well as to national unity, ethnic harmony and national security.”<sup>61</sup> Although Beijing’s approach to combating Uyghur opposition and unrest has always rested on the kinetic capabilities of the security forces and police, it has been augmented by policies that are consistent with the core objective of the “three warfares”: to control and influence perceptions, both domestically and internationally, of the nature of the Xinjiang issue and to preemptively target threats to its hold over the region.

Domestically, this has been accomplished by implementing measures to ensure the “comprehensive supervision” of “stability” in the region. China’s strategy here is increasingly reliant on the CCP’s implementation of the concept of “social management” as a means of preserving its hold on power. Samantha Hoffman, Non-Resident Fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, notes that at its core, “social management” embodies an effort to optimize “interactions vertically (within the Party), horizontally (between agencies), and holistically, between the Party and society” in order “to improve governance capacity to shape, manage, and respond to social demands.”<sup>62</sup> Director of the Mercator Institute for China Studies Frank Pieke argues that this reflects the Party’s “reinvention” of itself over the past two decades as “neo-socialist,” defined by the continuity of its Leninist imperative to retain “its authoritarian leading role over state and society.” This is combined with a more recent technocratic drive “to cultivate responsible, trusting, and ‘high-quality’ citizens who inhabit an active, autonomous, and governable society” through the borrowing and adaptation of “neoliberal” modes and techniques of governance.<sup>63</sup> The outcome, Pieke asserts, is not simply an “old-fashioned Leninist party that puts neoliberal technologies to familiar uses,” but rather an innovative set of “governmental technologies” that “cut

<sup>59</sup> Michael Clarke, *Xinjiang and China’s Rise in Central Asia: A History* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, James M. Millward, “Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment,” *Policy Studies* 6 (Washington, D.C., East-West Center, 2004); and Michael Clarke, “China and the Uyghurs: The ‘Palestinization’ of Xinjiang?,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 22 no. 3 (Fall 2015), pp. 119-138.

<sup>61</sup> “Xi Jinping presides over political meeting to further promote social stability and lasting stability of Xinjiang,” *CPC News*, May 26, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Samantha Hoffman, “Managing the State: Social Credit, Surveillance and the CCP’s Plan for China,” *China Brief*, vol. 17 no. 11 (2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/managing-the-state-social-credit-surveillance-and-the-ccps-plan-for-china/>.

<sup>63</sup> Frank N. Pieke, “The Communist Party and Social Management in China,” *China Information*, vol. 26 no. 2 (2012), p.150.

right at the heart of the party-state itself, serving to support, centralize, modernize, and strengthen the Party's Leninist leading role in Chinese society."<sup>64</sup>

This dynamic is perhaps best reflected in the roll-out of China's "social credit" system, which relies on collecting and analyzing meta-data to shape and "score" the economic and social behavior of individual citizens.<sup>65</sup> The effect fuels both passive participation through the state's access to personal data linked to everyday conveniences (such as electronic payment systems)<sup>66</sup> and active participation by coercing people into allowing the state to monitor and punish individuals for non-compliance.<sup>67</sup> Human Rights Watch asserts that "social scoring" is emblematic of a system of "predictive policing," whereby monitoring an individual's social interactions, use of social media, and physical movement enables the state to make real-time assessments of their perceived "threat" to it at any time.<sup>68</sup>

Since 2014, the Xinjiang regional government systematically has implemented this dystopian vision of digitally powered totalitarianism in the service of "stability."<sup>69</sup> This vision has resulted in China's installation of the "Skynet" electronic surveillance system in major urban areas, putting GPS trackers in motor vehicles and using facial recognition scanners at checkpoints and apps that wipe smartphones of so-called "subversive" material.<sup>70</sup> Such tech-heavy endeavors, it should be noted, have also been paralleled by an intensification of more manpower-centric measures of surveillance and policing including: implementing "convenience police stations" in urban areas;<sup>71</sup> deploying thousands of CCP cadres into the countryside to "educate" the Uyghur population on government policies; and coordinated mass anti-terrorism

<sup>64</sup> Pieke, "The Communist Party and Social Management in China."

<sup>65</sup> Samantha Hoffman, "Social Credit," *Policy Brief Report 6* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Mara Hvistendahl, "Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking," *Wired*, Dec. 14, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/story/age-of-social-credit/>.

<sup>67</sup> Hoffman, "Managing the State."

<sup>68</sup> "China: Big Data Fuels Crackdown in Minority Region," *Human Rights Watch*, Feb. 26, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/26/china-big-data-fuels-crackdown-minority-region>.

<sup>69</sup> Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, "Xinjiang's Rapidly Evolving Security State," *China Brief*, vol. 17 no. 4 (2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/xinjiangs-rapidly-evolving-security-state/>.

<sup>70</sup> See, Julia Famularo, "How Xinjiang Has Transformed China's Counterterrorism Policies," *The National Interest*, Aug. 26, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-xinjiang-has-transformed-china%E2%80%99s-counterterrorism-13699c>; "Vehicles to Get Compulsory GPS Tracking in Xinjiang," *Radio Free Asia*, Feb. 20, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/xinjiang-gps-02202017145155.html>; and Ninthin

Coca, "China's Xinjiang surveillance is the dystopian future nobody wants," *Engadget*, Feb. 22, 2018, <https://www.engadget.com/2018/02/22/china-xinjiang-surveillance-tech-spread/>.

<sup>71</sup> James Leibold, "Xinjiang Work Forum Marks New Policy of Ethnic Mingling," *China Brief*, <https://jamestown.org/program/xinjiang-work-forum-marks-new-policy-of-ethnic-mingling/>.

“oath-taking rallies” by thousands of security personnel in major cities such as Urumqi, Kashgar, and Khotan.<sup>72</sup>

Though these actions are consistent with the CCP’s move toward tech-driven “social management,” it is obvious that the implementation of this system in Xinjiang is defined by a racialized conception of threat whereby the Uyghur population is conceived of as a “virtual biological threat to the body of society.”<sup>73</sup> Here, promulgation of new legal restrictions on religious practice and use of “political education centres” to coerce Uyghurs displaying “deviant” behaviors have become the norm. From government officials describing Uyghur “extremism and terrorism” as a “tumour”<sup>74</sup> to equating religious observance as an “illness,”<sup>75</sup> the CCP’s discourse frames key elements of Uyghur identity as pathologies to be “cured.” Reporting by international media<sup>76</sup> and human rights NGOs<sup>77</sup> shows that the CCP’s idea of curing such “pathologies” is a program of mass internment with at least one million Uyghurs confined to “re-education” centers on the basis of data and information harvested through this system of surveillance.<sup>78</sup> By analyzing government procurement contracts for the construction of such centers, Adrian Zenz of the European School of Culture and Theology has demonstrated that they are not only of significant size, with one procurement contract for a facility in Qaghiliq County estimating a combined floor space of 82,000 square meters, but also many are prison-like compounds characterized by “comprehensive security features” such as “reinforced security doors and windows,

<sup>72</sup> “Xinjiang holds oath-taking rally to fight terrorism and tighten security,” *Global Times*, Feb. 17, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1033548.shtml>.

<sup>73</sup> Sean Roberts, “The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs,” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 50 no. 2 (2018), p. 252.

<sup>74</sup> Ben Dooley, “‘Eradicate the tumours’: Chinese civilians drive Xinjiang crackdown,” *Yahoo News*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/eradicate-tumours-chinese-civilians-drive-xinjiang-crackdown-051356550.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Adrian Zenz, “‘Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude’: China’s political re-education campaign in Xinjiang,” *Central Asian Survey*, Sept. 5, 2018, p. 20, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997>.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Josh Chin and Clement Burge, “Twelve Days in Xinjiang: How China’s Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 19, 2017, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/twelve-days-in-xinjiang-how-chinas-surveillance-state-overwhelms-daily-life-1513700355?mod=fox\\_ausralian](https://www.wsj.com/articles/twelve-days-in-xinjiang-how-chinas-surveillance-state-overwhelms-daily-life-1513700355?mod=fox_ausralian); and Megha Rajagopalan, “This Is What A 21st-Century Police State Really Looks Like,” *Buzzfeed*, Oct. 17, 2017, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/the-police-state-of-the-future-is-already-here?utm\\_term=.togmQ34ra#.hpn5xBqrD](https://www.buzzfeed.com/meghara/the-police-state-of-the-future-is-already-here?utm_term=.togmQ34ra#.hpn5xBqrD).

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, “China Runs Region-wide Re-education Camps in Xinjiang for Uyghurs And Other Muslims,” *Radio Free Asia*, Sept. 11, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/training-camps-09112017154343.html>; and *The Mass Internment of Uyghurs: “We want to be respected as humans. Is it too much to ask?”* (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project, Aug. 2018), [https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/MassDetention\\_of\\_Uyghurs.pdf](https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/MassDetention_of_Uyghurs.pdf).

<sup>78</sup> Adrian Zenz, “New Evidence for China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang,” *China Brief*, vol. 18 no. 10 (2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/evidence-for-chinas-political-re-education-campaign-in-xinjiang/>.

surveillance systems, secure access systems, watchtowers, and guard rooms or facilities for armed police.”<sup>79</sup>

As China has intensified its hard line in Xinjiang, so too has it intensified its externally oriented IW strategy with respect to Xinjiang and the Uyghurs. It has, for example, embedded “counterterrorism” as a central agenda of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the years since the 9/11 attacks, with the organization focused to a great extent on regular joint counter-terrorism exercises, judicial cooperation on the extradition of suspected “terrorists,” and information sharing.<sup>80</sup> Beijing also has engaged public opinion warfare through consistent publication in state media such as *China Daily*, *Xinhua*, and *Global Times* op-eds and reporting that explicitly attacks Western media coverage of violence in Xinjiang. After the March 2014 Kunming terrorist attack, for instance, *China Daily* published a trenchant op-ed decrying the West’s “double standards” on terrorism.<sup>81</sup>

As information about China’s mass “re-education camps” has reached international audiences since 2016, Beijing has begun to deploy several different narratives on these media platforms to combat what it views as “disinformation” about the situation in Xinjiang. After the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, chaired by Senators Marco Rubio and Chris Smith, held a hearing on “Surveillance, Suppression, and Mass Detention: Xinjiang’s Human Rights Crisis” on July 26, 2018,<sup>82</sup> for instance, a *Global Times* editorial on August 12, 2018 asserted that the Party’s “re-education” policies were justified as they had “turned around” Xinjiang’s security situation and prevented it from becoming “China’s Syria or Libya.”<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the article concluded by noting that “maintaining peace and stability in the region is the *core interest* of people of both Xinjiang and all of China.”<sup>84</sup> A subsequent editorial in *China Daily* on August 14, 2018, in contrast, emphasized that “foreign media” had “misinterpreted or even exaggerated the security measures” China had implemented in Xinjiang.<sup>85</sup> Such exaggeration, the article continued, was the result of ignorance and the “false stories” spread by those in the Uyghur diaspora bent on “splitting the region from China and turning it into an independent country.” The editorial concluded by first denying the existence of mass internment camps, labelling

<sup>79</sup> See, Zenz, “Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude,” pp. 17-20.

<sup>80</sup> Zhao Huasheng, “China’s View of and Expectations from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 53 no. 3 (2013), p. 440.

<sup>81</sup> “West’s coverage of Kunming reveals double standard,” *China Daily*, March 3, 2013, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-03/03/content\\_17318487.htm#158963](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-03/03/content_17318487.htm#158963).

<sup>82</sup> “Surveillance, Suppression, and Mass Detention: Xinjiang’s Human Rights Crisis,” Hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, July 26, 2018, <https://www.cecc.gov/events/hearings/surveillance-suppression-and-mass-detention-xinjiang%E2%80%99s-human-rights-crisis>.

<sup>83</sup> “Protecting Peace, Stability is Top of Human Rights Agenda for Xinjiang,” *Global Times*, Aug. 12, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1115022.shtml>.

<sup>84</sup> “Protecting Peace, Stability is Top of Human Rights Agenda for Xinjiang.” My emphasis.

<sup>85</sup> “What China is Doing in Xinjiang is Being Deliberately Distorted,” *China Daily*, Aug. 14, 2018, <http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201808/14/WS5b72d1fba310add14f385be2.html>.

the claim “far-fetched,” and then, asserting, “It is true that China shows no leniency in cracking down on terrorists and extremists.”<sup>86</sup>

However, by October 2018, Chinese officials and media had changed their tune to construct a narrative around the “re-education” centers designed to bolster domestic public opinion and combat negative international portrayals. The new focus was on an alleged link between “under-development” and “extremism” in Xinjiang and rebuttals of Western criticism as “empty talk” designed to “undermine” China’s “stability.” In an extensive interview with state-run newspaper, *Xinhua*, on October 16, 2018 the chairman of the XUAR government, Shohrat Zakir, asserted that China was simply pursuing an approach to counterterrorism “according to their own conditions.” In what amounted to a first and circuitous admission of the existence of the “re-education” centers, Zakir stated that Xinjiang’s experience of enduring terrorist attacks required that authorities not only “strictly” counter “extremism according to the law,” but must also address “the root cause of terrorism” by “educating those who committed petty crimes” so as to “prevent them from becoming victims of terrorism and extremism.”<sup>87</sup> China Central Television (CCTV) also produced a 15-minute story detailing their visit to the Khotan “Vocational Skills Education and Training Center” in southern Xinjiang.<sup>88</sup> The story depicted the center as a benevolent endeavor of the CCP to provide education to “trainees” in Mandarin, the Chinese legal code, and “vocational skills,” such as sewing, baking, and carpentry. A young Uyghur woman interviewed on camera declaimed that “the government and party found me in time and saved me” from “religious extremists” who would have led her “into a life of crime.”<sup>89</sup>

China has also sought to publicly defend and justify its approach in international forums in similar terms. Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng strenuously defended China’s approach in Xinjiang in his statement at the “periodic review” hearing on China’s human rights record before the UN Human Rights Council on November 6, 2018.<sup>90</sup> Le pointedly noted that China “will not accept politically driven accusations from a few countries fraught with bias,” regarding its internment of Uyghurs in “re-education” camps, before referring to detainees as “students” who were in fact happy to learn how to “inoculate” themselves against “extremism.” Additionally, he made the case that China’s approach has been successful, pointing out

<sup>86</sup> “What China is Doing in Xinjiang is Being Deliberately Distorted.”

<sup>87</sup> “Full transcript: Interview with Xinjiang government chief on counterterrorism, vocational education and training in Xinjiang,” *Xinhua*, Oct. 16, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/16/c\\_137535821.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/16/c_137535821.htm).

<sup>88</sup> Lily Kuo, “From denial to pride: how China changed its language on Xinjiang’s camps,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/22/from-denial-to-pride-how-china-changed-its-language-on-xinjiangs-camps>.

<sup>89</sup> The 15 minute program can be viewed at, “Focus interview: Building a Foundation,” *China Central Television*, Oct. 16, 2018, <http://tv.cctv.com/2018/10/16/VIDEVr9aq34SsDMrB6IRGnh181016.shtml>.

<sup>90</sup> Josh Chin, “China faces off with critics of Muslim detentions,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 6, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-faces-off-with-critics-of-muslim-detentions-1541523203>.

that Xinjiang had not witnessed a terrorist attack in nearly two years.<sup>91</sup> As far as Beijing is concerned, its measures in Xinjiang were a justifiable form of “preventive” counterterrorism.

In a further, and to date unprecedented, effort to dispel international criticism, recently, Beijing has permitted a “tour” of “vocational centers” in Urumqi, Kashgar, and Khotan by a select group of diplomats and international media. Between January 3 and 5, Chinese officials chaperoned diplomats from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Kuwait, and Thailand and reporters from Kazakhstan's state-run agency, *Kazinform*, *Sputnik News*, *Associated Press* of Pakistan, and Indonesia's national news agency *Antara*.<sup>92</sup> The foreign diplomats and journalists were told an identical narrative as that detailed above: the centers were implemented to “assist those affected by extremism” by provision of education in Mandarin, Chinese laws, and “vocational skills.” To judge from the report published by *Kazinform*, however, the foreign visitors were not fooled by the Potemkin tour. The *Kazinform* reporter noted dryly both the similarity of testimonies provided by various “trainees” interviewed at various centers and that “throughout the press tour in all cities and locations, interviews were taken in the mandatory presence of Chinese authorities.”<sup>93</sup>

Domestically, such narratives play directly to core assumptions underpinning both the Party's and common Han Chinese views on the Uyghurs and Xinjiang. “Religious extremism” is inherent to Uyghur identity and can only be overcome through the provision of education and integration into prevailing Chinese culture. Externally, the shift in China's stance on the “reeducation centers” from outright denial to one of pride is noteworthy for several reasons from an IW standpoint. *First*, China's various English-language media platforms increasingly have published material on Xinjiang that explicitly seeks to contrast China's supposedly “preventive” approach to counterterrorism to the militarized versions adopted in the West after 9/11. *Second*, such stories have also sought to link Western criticism, and that emanating from the United States, in particular, to the broader trend toward more adversarial relations and geopolitical competition over the past 12 months.<sup>94</sup>

The pervasive internal surveillance apparatus within Xinjiang and the externally oriented IW strategies engaged in by Beijing are not simply concerned with physically controlling space and individual citizens. Rather, they are also designed, as Deputy Xinjiang CCP Secretary Zhu Halian remarked earlier this year, to ensure that “Uyghur terrorists” will be “like a cornered beast” bereft of either practical or moral

<sup>91</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce, “At U.N., China Defends Mass Detention of Uighur Muslims,” *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/world/asia/china-detention-uighur-muslims.html>.

<sup>92</sup> “Exclusive: Kazinform reportage from China's Xinjiang,” *Kazinform*, Jan. 10, 2019, [https://www.inform.kz/en/exclusive-kazinform-reportage-from-china-s-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region\\_a3486744](https://www.inform.kz/en/exclusive-kazinform-reportage-from-china-s-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region_a3486744).

<sup>93</sup> “Exclusive: Kazinform reportage from China's Xinjiang.”

<sup>94</sup> For an example of these themes, see, “Xinjiang people know their situation best,” *The Global Times*, Aug. 31, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1117838.shtml>.

support.<sup>95</sup> This strident tone, as Peter Mattis notes, is reflective of a broader issue vis-à-vis the CCP's perception of (in)security—that many of the threats to it “occur in the realm of ideas” that “cannot be defeated by kinetic means.”<sup>96</sup>

Here, the “return” of ideology to a central position under Xi Jinping's leadership emerges as vitally important in shedding light upon China's hard(er)-line turn in Xinjiang since 2012. Upon assuming the Presidency, Xi launched an ideological campaign in April 2013, subsequently referred to as the “Seven Nos,” within the Party to combat “subversive” currents. These currents included: “Western constitutional democracy,” “universal values” of human rights, “Western-inspired” notions of media independence and civil society activism, and criticisms of the events such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere, he has revealed his core “lesson” from the collapse of the Soviet Union: it collapsed because its communist party “wavered” in its “ideals and convictions,” and “nobody” within its Party was man enough “to resist” Mikhail Gorbachev's move toward dissolution.<sup>98</sup> Speaking to the Party's August 2013 National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference, Xi made this lesson plain, opining:

The disintegration of a regime often starts from the ideological area, political unrest and regime change may perhaps occur in a night, but ideological evolution is a long-term process. If the ideological defences are breached, other defences become very difficult to hold.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, according to Xi, one of the keys to ensuring that the CCP ultimately does not share the fate of its Soviet counterparts is to revive its members' belief in the Party's mission and destiny. During the same speech, Xi stated that “education on ideals and convictions” should not simply focus on Party members, but rather must also “be launched towards the *entire* society” to “unite and concentrate the people of all ethnicities in the entire country under the magnificent banner of Socialism with

<sup>95</sup> “China holds ‘anti-terrorism’ mass rally in Xinjiang's Uighur heartland,” *Reuters*, Feb. 17, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/china-xinjiang-int-idUSKBN15W0AM>.

<sup>96</sup> Mattis, “China's Three Warfares in Perspective.”

<sup>97</sup> “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere: A Notice from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's General Office,” April 22, 2013, tr. provided by *China File*, <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>; see, also, Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 38-39.

<sup>98</sup> See, “Leaked Speech Shows Xi Jinping's Opposition to Reform,” *China Digital Times*, Jan. 27, 2013, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/01/leaked-speech-shows-xi-jinpings-opposition-to-reform/>; and Chris Buckley, “Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning,” *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/world/asia/vowing-reform-chinas-leader-xi-jinping-airs-other-message-in-private.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Rogier Creemers, “Xi Jinping's 19 August Speech Revealed?,” *China Copyright and Media*, Nov. 12, 2013, [https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/11/12/xi-jinpings-19-august-speech-revealed-translation/?utm\\_source=The+Sinocism+China+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=dd79c317a0-Sinocism11\\_12\\_13&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_171f237867-dd79c317a0-1820733](https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/11/12/xi-jinpings-19-august-speech-revealed-translation/?utm_source=The+Sinocism+China+Newsletter&utm_campaign=dd79c317a0-Sinocism11_12_13&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_171f237867-dd79c317a0-1820733).

Chinese characteristics.”<sup>100</sup> According to an editorial in the prominent Party journal *Qinshi* (Seeking Truth), “ideological work” in fact concerned “the life and death of the party, the long-term stability of the country, and the cohesion of the nation.”<sup>101</sup> This firm belief in the necessity of both idealism and conviction was displayed overtly during President Xi's three-hour long report to the CCP's 19<sup>th</sup> Congress in November 2017:

A great cause calls for leadership of a strong party. As long as our Party keeps itself competent and strong, always remains true to the people's aspiration and works in concert with the people, we can and will navigate the great ship bearing the great dream of the Chinese people to conquer the waves and reach our destination. . . . The Communist Party of China is a great Party; *it has the courage to fight and the mettle to win*. . . . History looks kindly on those with resolve, with drive and ambition, and with plenty of guts; it won't wait for the hesitant, the apathetic, or those shy of a challenge.<sup>102</sup>

The Party's renewed emphasis on “ideological work” under Xi's leadership is clearly seen as a primary means of preempting potential challenges to its political power. In this focus, Xi has elevated the previous Hu Jintao administration's obsession with “stability preservation” (*weihu wending*) to almost paranoiac levels.<sup>103</sup> The potential challenges that the Party sees to its power are not only external in origin (e.g., perceived “containment” by the United States), but also domestic, extending from internal Party corruption to concerns about separatism in Tibet and Xinjiang. Here Xi has also been clear, stating in his political report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress that: “We must rigorously protect against and take resolute measures to combat all acts of infiltration, subversion, and sabotage, as well as violent and terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities, and religious extremist activities.”<sup>104</sup> Additionally, he called for the “full” implementation of “the Party's basic policy on religious affairs” which maintains that “religions in China *must be Chinese in orientation* and provide active guidance to religions so that they can *adapt themselves* to socialist society.”<sup>105</sup>

<sup>100</sup> “Xi Jinping's 19 August Speech Revealed?” My emphasis.

<sup>101</sup> Editorial, “Never Relax Ideological Work: Implementing the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference Spirit,” *Qinshi*, no.17, Sept. 1, 2013, [http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201317/201308/t20130827\\_264732.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201317/201308/t20130827_264732.htm).

<sup>102</sup> “Full Text of President Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress,” *Xinhua*, 3 November 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf). My emphasis.

<sup>103</sup> The Hu Jintao administration's fixation on “stability preservation” for instance resulted in exponential growth in the public security budget from RMB 113.692 billion in 2001 to 630.427 billion in 2011, rivalling Beijing's expenditure on the military. See Xiaojun Yan, “Patrolling Harmony: Pre-Emptive Authoritarianism and the Preservation of Stability in W County,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25 no. 99 (2016), p. 407.

<sup>104</sup> “Full Text of President Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress.”

<sup>105</sup> “Full Text of President Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress.” My emphasis.

It is in this context, perhaps, that China's "re-education" camps in Xinjiang emerge as a depressingly logical extension of this process. That the Chinese government calls them "transformation through education" centers, which harks back to the extra-judicial institutions of "thought reform," established under Mao Zedong in the 1950s, is significant.<sup>106</sup> Those camps sought to "transform" and "rehabilitate" prisoners through such tactics as patriotic indoctrination, self-criticism sessions and forced labor. A similar theme can be seen in the camps in Xinjiang, where inmates are forced to sing patriotic songs, take part in self-criticism sessions, and sit through lectures on Xi Jinping's "Thought," Chinese language, Chinese law, and the dangers of Islam.<sup>107</sup> The objective arguably is to have Uyghurs move away from their own ethnic identity in order, in Xi's words, to "enhance their sense of identity with the motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the CCP and socialism with Chinese characteristics."<sup>108</sup>

### The "Three Warfares": Securing the Party-State

The application of IW to distinct domestic and foreign security challenges tracked in this article (South China Sea and Xinjiang) reflects the CCP's unique conception of the meaning and scope of "national security," which differs substantially from that commonly used in Western political discourse. The preceding analysis and discussion provides further evidence that for the CCP, "national security" is not largely synonymous with a focus on the protection of the nation-state and its values from external threats, but rather with the political and ideological security of the Party itself. China's "Three Warfares" is thus best understood primarily as a form of political warfare whose central purpose is to create and maintain political power for the CCP. Conceived of in this manner, China's IW strategies are thus deployable in pursuit of both domestic security objectives, such as ensuring "stability" in Xinjiang, and in defense of Chinese "rights" and interests beyond its frontiers such as in the South China Sea.

Uniting both of these distinct cases is the conception of information warfare as an ongoing instrument of deterrence to not only contain the offensive-defensive capabilities of external and domestic adversaries, but ultimately to degrade their will and capability to initiate or sustain political-military struggle contrary to the interests of the Party-state.



<sup>106</sup> Rian Thum, "What Really Happens in China's Reeducation Camps," *New York Times*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/opinion/china-re-education-camps.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Gerry Shih, "China's mass indoctrination camps evoke Cultural Revolution," *AP News*, May 18, 2018, <https://apnews.com/6e151296fb194f85ba69a8babd972e4b/China's-mass-indoctrination-camps-evoke-Cultural-Revolution>; and Nathan Vanderklippe, "'It is about Xi as the leader of the world': Former detainees recount abuse in Chinese re-education centres," *Globe and Mail*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-former-detainees-recount-abuse-in-chinese-re-education-centres/>.

<sup>108</sup> "Xi calls for safeguarding social stability in Xinjiang," *China.org.cn*, March 10, 2017, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC\\_CPPCC\\_2017/2017-03/10/content\\_40440842.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2017/2017-03/10/content_40440842.htm).