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China's Understanding of Hybrid Wars

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Abstract: The article is an attempt to present China's positions in the international perspective and to derive the scope and content of the concepts of continuous war and hybrid war. The topic stands out for its topicality and significance; it requires constant analyses due to the dynamics in the development of China's policies in geopolitical and global terms. The limitations of the directional study are on theoretical overview and critical analysis of China's position in the second decade of the 21st century. The methods used are desk research and secondary analysis of previous scholarly publications and analyses. The first assumption is that China is becoming a threat to the global status quo and it is reasonable to present Chinese side of view. The second assumption is that it could be better to follow a more multilateral approach when it comes to the matter of national security, conflicts and war. The results of the analysis are a representation of China's views on the development of political, economic or other actions at the international and even global level. Conclusions are drawn about China presenting itself as a rival to the established global status quo in international affairs and how it is presented, announced and disseminated by public, political and diplomatic communication.

Keywords: China, warfare, hybrid wars, unrestricted warfare, conflict, globalisation.

Introduction

It seems that over the past few months the topic of China has been a 'very hot potato' indeed. Periodicals, such as *The Economist*, have featured pieces on the country rather frequently in 2018 warning of its growing impact on foreign policy, trade, economics, technological developments, etc. [1] China's economic and technological development are still seen as a growing concern, as some pit the country as a potential rival to the United States itself.

Setting aside the abundance of articles and books discussing the way China is becoming a threat to the global status quo, it might be worthwhile to at least discuss the idea that we should increase the amount of articles presenting the Chinese side of view. That is to say that there seems to be a lack of discussion over what the perspectives of the other side of this perceived conflict are. This is

in no way a suggestion that better understanding will lead to any sort of easing of tensions. But it might produce a more efficient way of conducting ourselves on the matter.

It is in this regard that the paper at hand will try and present the topic of what the Chinese views on the matter of the development of political, economic or other action on an international and even global level are. If we are to look at China as a rival to what is the *established global status quo*, in regards to international affairs, we should adopt the habit of examining the steps the Chinese are taking in order to achieve such a goal.

Unrestricted warfare

Unrestricted Warfare is a book, written by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui and published in February 1999. It presents the authors' understanding of what they call *the changing face of warfare*, at the time of what was still a period of rapid globalization. A time of growing rates of integration and influence of newer technologies over the daily life of most people, especially in the West.

The book at hand is the work of two officers in the People's Liberation Army. It presents itself as being partially financed by the PLA itself as well. Considering both points we could reasonably infer that the information from the current analysis has been and might still be a glimpse into the Chinese government's understanding of the way that warfare will evolve and the potential impact these new types of conflicts will have.

In Adam Segal's [2] article 'When China Rules the Web' [3] the author mentions that "*China's investment in research and development has grown by an average of 20 percent a year since 1999*". [4] That is not to say that there is necessarily a direct causal relation between the time the abovementioned book was written and the time these investments have started. But rather there could be some link between the ideas and conclusions in the authors' analysis and the priorities of policy makers in Beijing.

'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet...'

One of the main topics Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui propose is that there will always be a way of producing warlike conflict in the world. It's just the way said conflict manifests itself is where the difference lies. At the time of writing their book, the authors were faced with rapid technological advances and the way the prospects of conventional wars are being pushed aside by the ever-increasing interconnectedness of the market economy. Many might recognize that those factors have been increasing even more, regardless of what some might say about individual countries' policies.

When writing the book, the most important goal of the authors is clearly to analyse what are the new ways of waging war in a dynamically changing world.

Because of their military background it is easy to infer that their main focus is on the way how the changes of the time would mainly affect military combat. Additionally, it should be clear that the target demographic is again mainly military personnel. But as the current paper is more focused on how the authors say warfare as a whole will be transformed, more emphasis will be placed on that side of the text. Their method follows a very strict structure – categorizing the new type of warfare, explaining what methods it uses and, if possible, prescribing countermeasures.

The book starts with an explanation of the fact that the last decade of the 20th century has had a plethora of turbulent changes, bringing about a sort of *new world order*. All the rapid advancements in technology, the mass spread of the free market economic model, the substantially increased rates of interconnectedness between peoples are a few examples of the ways the world has changed. It is in the view of the authors that these changes bring about a paradigm shift, in the sense that the traditional act of war is beginning to look as an acronym – its role being relegated to the sidelines of political life.

This simply suggests that it is not that war, as an expression of force to achieve a goal, has become lessened in any way. But rather that with the increased developments, some of which were mentioned above, warfare has been proven to have too many and too great shortcomings that make it less effective when faced with problems of political, economic, cultural, ethical, religious, ethnical, or other, nature. So, the authors speculate that this could lead to diminishes in the military sector worldwide. It might be said that this point is not too plausible, as we are better informed now [5] on the way wars are exploited in order to generate huge financial flows.

What is more interesting is the authors' perspective, that with the way the world has been changing, starting from the 1990s, militaries and warfare itself will also undergo an inevitable evolution. The necessity of this change is underlined by the term – evolution – being used. If warfare wants to stay effective and adequate it has to keep itself updated with the times. The increased rates of interconnectedness through globalization, information sharing and technological developments may have exposed the inefficiency of the traditional military but they have also presented a rather rich selection of new venues for exerting influence, might and dominance. This is also the essence of both authors' argument – that even if we do experience lower rates of physical, war-related violence, the new platforms and ways we're opening up are going to be used as impromptu arenas for war-like conflicts. The authors describe acts of terrorism [6], Internet based attacks, etc., as representative of a new kind of “*semi-warfare, quasi-warfare, and sub-warfare that is the embryonic form of another kind of warfare.*” [7]

The authors seem adamant in their idea that even if war is changing its battlefield, it is still remaining war in nature. The difference being that ever since the 1990s it will be launched in more atypical forms. Essentially, what we are beginning to discuss here is the dawn of China's interpretation of hybrid wars by representatives of the country's military experts.

China's understanding of hybrid wars

When it comes to the conceptualization of hybrid wars, one might say that the authors have been quite on point with the issues of their time. One of the key problems they have encountered is the need to correctly identify and categorize the means of warfare that are to be used in the wake of the increased globalization and rapid technological developments since the 1990s.

One of the key ones is the increasing influence of information technology. Humanity has been steadily growing more and more dependent on such technology and the way it conditions us to receive instantaneous results. But the authors point out that information technology, as regards to warfare, is either a means of enhancing a particular weapons system or a means of conducting warfare strictly for the purposes of obtaining or blocking information.

That is to say that the problem is presented as being too vague. Additionally, warfare is to be understood as a combination of multiple factors or elements. It is not just weapons that would be used, neither will it be just military technology. Reading through the book, one gets the sense that nothing is as straightforward as it looks. In this age of integrating technologies into our daily lives, it is easy to infer that the military will follow suit, the authors point out. Meaning that, as the means of life become more technology dependent, it is with making use of these same technologies that warfare will be conducted. What is not entirely clear is where or who will carry out such warfare.

With the integration of technologies in daily life we have also ran the risk of being subject to this new kind of warfare – i.e. influencing political processes by stirring or subduing citizens' reactions via the media, hacking, using financial instruments to make a country more submissive or even a terrorist attack. Those are risks traditionally related to war but carried over to every aspect of life due to the increased rates of globalization. What we are left with thus far is a type of war where warfare and its methods are atypical, all-encompassing and this is why the authors have dubbed it *unrestricted warfare*. Because it now transcends all boundaries and penetrates all aspects of people's lives.

“If this name becomes established, this kind of war means that all means will be in readiness that information will be omnipresent, and the battlefield will be everywhere. It means that all weapons and technology can be superimposed at will, it means that all the boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally destroyed, and it also means

that many of the current principles of combat will be modified, and even that the rules of war may need to be rewritten.” [8]

Essentially, this blurring of the lines between military and non-military existence has left us with the impression that there is a need for constant vigilance. A good example from more recent times would be the Snowden revelations from 2013. With them the former CIA employee and former US government contractor has similarly, but more vividly, pointed out the vulnerability of everyday consumers of telecommunication or information sharing technologies.

Nowadays, in a time when globalization is still ruling the narrative in regards to politics and economy, there are entirely way too many interdependent and interwoven elements creating the entire globalized system. Therefore, it stands to reason that it’s harder to pinpoint the exact methods and tools that are to be used in this new type of wars. That is to say, where once simplicity was a general rule of thumb the conceptualization of warfare has been more straightforward. In the opinion of the authors this is no longer the case as now we have a higher degree of dependency on too many various factors.

Additionally, it is important to point out one more characteristic of globalization – the way that it leads to a blurring of established boundaries. “Astonishing advances in modern advanced technology serve to promote globalization, further intensifying the uncertainty associated with the dissolution of some perceived self-interests and the emergence of others.” [9] Meaning that with the way technology is being constantly integrated into our lives there is another consequence to be outlined. Technology and information are becoming more accessible. This isn’t necessary a negative consequence, as it does lead to further developments in the realms of science, education, economy, etc. But it also contributes to the uncertainty factor when more modern conflicts arise. As anyone could own a computer and additionally could obtain the skills to hack other computers, anyone is a potential threat. Especially when it comes to the question of national security, where the system is growing ever more dependent on computers due to their efficiency.

In such a situation we are faced with another problem, as the authors point out – as everyone could be responsible for carrying out an attack, is it possible to correctly identify what are their interests? What Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui are describing is one of the big differences between traditional warfare and contemporary, both for them and for us, warfare. Generally, in traditional warfare there is a clear understanding of what are the goals that are to be achieved. Whereas “in contemporary wars, the overt goal and the covert goal are often two different matters”. [10] All this leaves us with an air of vagueness and, as mentioned above, the need for constant vigilance.

One of the more significant problems involves the fact that, with the wide spread of technology and information, any one person could pose a potential

threat. The authors use the example with hackers – a very apt example for today’s world as well. But more importantly, they raise the question of just how much of what any one hacker is doing is in fact a deliberate attack. That is to say that not all hacker activity can be judged equally maleficent – some could be innocent play. Further still, maybe it is not a single hacker’s indulgence but a coordinated strike from one state against another.

Another threat, outlined by the authors, are the so-called non-state organizations. These organizations are depicted as groups that pose a very different kind of threat, especially when being confronted. Such groups are described as being formed around a certain core, ideal, maybe even a religious dogma – the examples given are militant groups, religious cults and terrorist organizations. They are tough to handle, as the text points out, mainly due to the point that they do not adhere to conventional boundaries and decrees the same way that states traditionally do. Meaning that when a state takes up measures against a non-state organization the former is much more limited in the way it can combat the latter. This example is a very good way of understanding the atypical nature of such types of warfare.

The third type of “combatant” in these atypical conflicts is what people in social media today refer to as *an influencer*. That is to say, a person or persons with a big enough amount of popularity, or clout, to cause any sort of social impact. The authors indicate that these people aren’t necessarily just media personalities like TV hosts, movie stars or something along those lines. They could also be influential financial experts and economists, even owners of TV stations and so on.

The new types of wars Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui outline perfectly some of the contemporary concerns of their time. Firstly this would be *Trade wars* – a ways of exhausting a government’s potential for securing goods and services for its people. Its most effective tools are either isolating a country or straight-out embargos. *Financial wars* could be considered closer to home for the authors as the 1997 Asian financial crisis wasn’t that far off from when their book was published. These wars would aim at creating an economic crisis in order to set one or multiple countries back decades. It causes social and political collapse to a considerable degree. *Ecological wars* are essentially the influencing of the environment, when waging war against others, to the point of altering it to your benefit in the conflict (mostly polluting or creating a tsunami wave or making a volcano erupt).

Other ways to carry out combat in these new types of wars include the weakening of morale amongst citizens, disrupting economies via smuggling or other means, manipulation and shaping of public opinions via the media, assimilation via cultural influence, false flag operations, monopolizing certain goods such as technology, exploiting others’ natural resources, etc.

One very key aspect is that in introducing new technologies and in that way new means of influencing others, the one who introduces the mechanisms also becomes vulnerable to influence or even attack by the very same means and technologies. Because modern technologies are rapidly becoming more and more diverse and all-encompassing, the authors point out that there could be a perceived attack lurking behind every corner. Especially when it comes to the question of national security. The possibility of rogue actors disturbing states is only going to go up as the accessibility to newer and better technology grows.

Conclusion

On the one hand, we are faced with a situation of ever-changing ways to carry out wars. The authors of ‘Unrestricted Warfare’ are quite on point in describing the transformations that occur in warfare in the decades to follow the publishing of their book. In this sense it might be not be a moot point to use their advice in conducting ourselves in contemporary conflicts, even if it comes from nearly 20 years ago. As it follows, the most important message to infer from ‘Unrestricted Warfare’ is the authors’ idea that the conflicts of tomorrow are supposed to be fought by any means possible. Meaning that potential opponents are not going to be restricted by rules and regulations. And therefore, in order to be effective in our countermeasures, neither should we.

The authors recommend a more multilateral approach when it comes to the matter of national security. Since threats in the future will no longer carry strictly one (military, financial or other) aspect but will be comprised of multiple aspects striking at a certain state’s stability. The point the two officers are making is that we have not changed in our desire to wage war, but that our ways of conducting warfare has changed as the abovementioned changes have taken effect in the 1990s.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the Chinese analysis discussed in this paper, although not entirely unique in its concepts and ideas, could have been a very good topic of discussion in the whole debate about hybrid wars these past couple of decades. It is in this sense that more emphasis should be placed on introducing more points of view into the ongoing debate. It is ill-advised to continue ignoring Chinese analytical texts when discussing international political problems. Especially when we are to focus on China itself.

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