



China and Cognitive Warfare: Why Is the West Losing?

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Cognitive Warfare: The Future of Cognitive Dominance

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Chapter 8 – CHINA AND COGNITIVE WARFARE: WHY IS THE WEST LOSING?

Kimberly Orinx¹ Pr. Tanguy Struye de Swielande²

“The Chinese will overtake the West in cognitive warfare.”

In recent years, we have seen the return of competition between the great powers. To counter the United States in particular and the West in general, the Chinese are applying hybrid warfare. Even though no direct military confrontation with the West has occurred in the 21st century, China and other contestants use hybrid means such as guerrilla, terrorism, economic pressure, cognitive warfare, cyber-attacks, paramilitarization, lawfare (reinterpretation of norms and standards), to weaken the West.

In doing so, they remain below the threshold of actual war in order to produce their strategic effect while preventing the activation of *jus ad bellum*. This strategy blurs the threshold between peace and war that we have come to adopt as basic understanding of interstate relations. The West must thus expect that potential adversaries will increasingly resort to this form of warfare, which is accessible and not expensive, either in support of more conventional military operations or autonomously to defend their interests.

One of the components of the hybrid warfare is the understudied cognitive warfare. The latter is defined by Bernal et al. as “the weaponization of public opinion, by an external entity, for the purpose of 1) influencing public and governmental policy and 2) destabilizing public institutions. Destabilization and influence are the fundamental goals of cognitive warfare” (Bernal et al., 2020). Cognitive warfare is moreover continuous: the Israelis are even talking about cognitive campaigns between wars (Kuperwasser and Siman-Tov, 2019).

8.1 CHINESE STRATEGIC CULTURE

Strategic culture is defined as “a distinctive and enduring set of beliefs, values, and habits about the threat and use of force that are rooted in the fundamental influences of the geopolitical environment on history and political culture” (Booth and Trood, 1999). Chinese strategic culture, influenced amongst others by Confucianism, Taoism, the interpretation of time, Sun Tzu and the 36 Stratagems is flexible, subversive, concentrates on the potential of the situation (Julien, 2015) and is better adapted to cognitive warfare than the Western strategic culture. Among other strategies, this is illustrated nowadays through the famous concept of “sānzhàn 三戰” – Three Warfare: psychological warfare, the war of public opinion and legal warfare. The objective of this concept is to “try to influence the public perception of the conflict by maintaining the support of its own population, by degrading it in the opponent’s population and by influencing third parties.” The war of public opinion is applied through various channels such as the media and social networks to disseminate information to a target audience, namely the (potential) adversaries and enemies to dominate the long-term implementation of psychological and legal warfare (Cheng, 2012). Psychological warfare, on the other hand, aims to influence the opponent’s way of thinking or behavior (undermining the opponent’s will, eroding popular support) and to consolidate the friendly psychology, i.e., reinforcing the support of partners and allies and guaranteeing the neutrality of the undecided or neutral. Legal warfare, finally, at its most basic

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level, consists of ensuring that one's own side complies with the law, presents arguments in one's favor in cases where there are nevertheless violations of the law, and criticizes one's opponent for non-compliance with the law.

These three wars are mutually reinforcing: the propagation of discourse includes the strategic narrative to convince domestic and foreign populations through the vectors of transmission (war of opinion) by creating a favorable mental environment (psychological warfare) that makes the message conform to preconceptions, while protecting itself behind the logic of cyber sovereignty, which China is trying to impose legally at the international level (legal warfare).

Furthermore, cognitive warfare does not differentiate between war and peace, between combatant and non-combatant, (everyone is a potential target), and it is permanent. This is a major difference with the West, where there is a differentiation between war and peace. At the end of the 20th century, the publication of the monograph *Unrestricted Warfare* by two Chinese army colonels, Qiao and Wang (2006), marked an important step in understanding contemporary strategic thinking in Beijing. According to the authors, technological developments, globalization and the rise of power beyond the nation-state, combined with the new capabilities of modern weapons, would provide a new context for conflict. Battlefields would thus shift from a physical dimension to a more abstract arena such as cyberspace, the morale of the population or their brains. In other words, Qiao and Wang demonstrate that war is no longer "the use of armed force to force the enemy to bend to our wishes," but rather "all means, whether armed or unarmed, military or non-military force... [uses] to force the enemy to submit to its own interests." As a result, the battlefield is everywhere, war is no longer a purely military concept but also becomes civil. This has two consequences: firstly, the victims of these new wars will not only be regular combatants who die on the battlefield, but also civilians who are indirectly affected. Secondly, war is permanent and holistic, all forces and means are combined.

Finally, the authors argue that the only rule is that there are no rules. Thus, military threats are no longer necessarily the main factor affecting the national security of a country. The intent is not necessarily to defeat the West on the battlefield, but to weaken the democracies to such a point, "they are unable, or unwilling, to respond to aggression" (Zeman, 2021).

Cognitive warfare conducted by Beijing (and others) attacks who we are, our history, our past, our identity. James Rogers summarizes this logic extremely well:

To be effective, a hostile positioning operation would need to involve a three-step process: Deactivate the target country's existing identity through tactics such as: The desynchronization of its historical narrative; The questioning or demolition of its self-perception of its international relevance; and The delegitimation of its international status and role; Construct – if possible working in tandem with disgruntled or separatist domestic political forces – a new identity for the target, connecting it to new or pre-existing (but often marginalized) historical myths; Encourage the adoption and spread of the new position, both: Domestically (inside the target country), particularly among disgruntled and separatist elements; and Internationally, among the elites of other countries (Rogers, 2021).

The objective is to turn people against each other from within. The center of gravity is now the population and the political processes in open societies.

Furthermore, as Vadim Shtepa explains: (2021): "while manpower and infrastructure can be restored, the evolution of consciousness cannot be reversed, especially since the consequences of this 'mental' war do not appear immediately but only after at least a generation, when it will be impossible to fix something." And the time factor, is on the side of China: China has time. Its approach to time is very different from the West. "For a Westerner," says José Frèches, "time is linear: lost time is never recovered and we perceive our life as a countdown that will end definitively on the day of our death (...); for a Chinese, time is cyclical: time passes again (...) in other words, time is not lost" (Allègre and Jeambar, 2006). In parallel, "those who do not

hesitate to lie will always have the advantage of time” (Ya’alon, 2019). Time is thus a social construct and is therefore interpreted differently in different cultures and will therefore have an impact on the way war is understood and conducted, whether at the strategic, tactical or operational level.

The Western adversaries have, like Victor Davis Hanson puts it, “mastered the knowledge of the Western mind” (Hanson, 2004). Our potential adversaries know our vulnerabilities far better than we do ourselves. They realize that the struggle can’t be won on the battlefield, but can be on the field of images, rhetoric and changing public opinions, like David took down Goliath. Simply presented, perception is the new battlefield and the mind is the weapon.

8.2 WEAKNESSES OF THE WEST

Although the Chinese strategic culture is more adapted to cognitive warfare, the West has facilitated the Chinese policy at two levels: the state of our democracies and the outdated Western strategic culture.

Polarization within democracies is a blessing for Beijing. People are more likely to look at information that confirms their ideology, rather than contradictory information. Technological developments have amplified the importance of information and data in our security environment. Information is a resource that is and will increasingly be used to destabilize countries, in particular democracies. While they are not new, disinformation campaigns, fake news, or conspiracy theories, are used to fragment Western states and polarize the public opinion, thereby weakening our democratic values and systems, increasing distrust and discontent towards political systems, and promoting populist and nationalist movements. People look for information and people on social networks that confirm their logic (echo chambers). This exacerbates existing antagonisms, sows social division, and undermines faith in institutions. This is facilitated through microtargeting and behavioral data (e.g., Cambridge Analytica) based on Open Sources Intelligence (OSINT).

The rise of populist leaders and increasing support for digital authoritarianism worldwide illustrates the penetration and success of cognitive warfare by authoritarian states. Our democratic and open information society will increasingly be targeted by such operations of information manipulation. Disruptive technologies will increase this trend, as the operational surface and speed increase tenfold with AI and quantum computing. The human brain is the battlefield of the 21st century (MWI, 2018). By relying on human cognitive flaws such as confirmation bias or our natural intellectual laziness (leading to an absence of critical thinking), manipulating information through the information environment will continue to be a preferred means to weaken our democracies. These clashes of narratives, storytelling and communication will be an integral part of the operational strategy in future conflicts.

The opponents of democracies have understood, as Nick Reynolds (2020) notes, that “in political warfare, disgust is a more powerful tool than anger. Anger drives people to the polls; disgust breaks up countries.” Moreover, citizens of democratic countries participate in this decline, reinforcing these logics of silos and tribalism, as this false information is “liked” and/or re-shared. Alicia Wanless talks about “participative propaganda.” All this is further facilitated by bots and troll factories as well as by repetitive and characterized exposure, by mutually reinforcing stories. Therefore, the development of more and more sophisticated means such as artificial intelligence, communication strategies, marketing, branding and neurosciences facilitate manipulation and form a major challenge because of the inherent characteristics of human brain functioning, such as cognitive bias and heuristics.

In a world in which the dominance of “Western values” is increasingly challenged by other cultures and models, it would be naïve to believe that the way of fighting, implying rules of engagement and codes of honor, will be maintained in the wars to come. On the contrary, opposing cultures and strategic visions will multiply in the coming years. One of the two colonels who wrote *Unrestricted Warfare* amplified his thoughts in August 1999: “War has rules, but they are set by the West.... If you use these rules, then the weak

states don't stand a chance... We are a weak state, so should we fight according to your rules? No." There is a tendency in the West towards "mirror imaging" the enemy, presupposing that he will follow the same rationality. The contemporary vision of conflicts is in this way still too much impregnated with "the Western paradigm of war": the confrontation between States with the same political, cultural and ideological concepts. Consequently, Western strategic culture is not adapted to hybrid and cognitive warfare. The West appears to forget too often that war is a contest of wills, and even more today than in the past, a battle for perceptions and worldviews. We can retain different reasons for this.

First, Western strategic culture is linked to a binary approach to things: good or bad, white or black. The West finds itself in a predetermined theory-practice relationship, leaving little room for out-of-the-box thinking. For Womack, Western thought is determined by a "transaction logic." This is characterized by a contractual relationship and a desire to be in a win-lose, cost-benefit relationship (Pan, 2016). The Chinese will place more emphasis on the relationship itself and its mutual benefits by playing on respect in order to ultimately gain an advantage. Also, unlike the West, for example, China will avoid calling states enemies. This is a big advantage in cognitive warfare. In other words, Western strategy is often going to be pre-established in a well-defined canvas, from which it is difficult to break out – the facts having to fit the conceptualization or modeling, even forcing the facts into the model. Hence also, that China defends the principles of non-interference, and that it often avoids taking a definitive and clear-cut position in international issues (e.g., Syria, Libya, etc.). By refusing to see things through a binary reading (good-evil, democracy-dictatorship), it leaves itself a continuous margin of maneuver, avoiding forcing or imposing the situation, allowing it to ride the wave of the situation's potential, which is not the case for the West.

Second, the Western way of war is based on technology and is kinetic in a logic of a zero sum game. The Revolution in Military Affairs or Offset strategies of the US for example are based on technologic superiority in the different domains (air, land, sea, space and cyberspace), the cognitive or human domain is absent. Chinese approach is more people-centric, less techno-centric, based on relative wins and subversion and deception. China plays Go, the West chess. Technological superiority is not synonymous with winning wars as Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq have shown. The West suffers from strategic atrophy and incompetence, always fighting the last war, and not understanding the next one. Cognitive warfare is an excellent example of this Western strategic paralysis.

Third, the West additionally differentiates peace from war: this is not the case for China. The rules of war are not determined anymore by the West but by our adversaries and we have not yet grasped it: "Cunning adversaries leverage the space between war and peace for devastating effect. Washington has a buzz phrase for this: the "Gray Zone." Others have a strategy" (McFate, 2019). The peace-war distinction is outdated and the West has not conformed and adapted to this new reality.

Fourth, Western military is still too hierarchical, bureaucratic, slow, working in a logic of silos or tunnel vision, whereas society is more horizontal, networked, adaptive and flexible. As explained by General McChrystal: "Our culture does not force leaders to reckon with the intersection of strategy and adaptability (...) we must combine outside-the-box and ordered thinking. This kind of hybrid leadership will be necessary not only for success in warfare, but in other worlds as well".

Finally, these differences of strategic culture between China and the West are also reflected in cognitive differences between Asians and Westerners. R. Nisbett in different studies argues that Easterners, compared to Westerners "have a contextual view of the world" and events are seen as "highly complex and determined by many factors," whereas Westerners will follow a logic of "objects in isolation from their context" and thus "control the objects' behavior" (Nisbett, 2003). For Nisbett, Chinese thought is more dialectical for Nisbett than logical: things happen in an appropriate context. It is also more relationship based and finally where Westerners believe in stability, Easterners see more change. Still according to Nisbett, the Chinese have a holistic approach of the world, emphasizing relationships, interrelations, cycles, whereas the West separates the objects of the environment, sees a linear movement of events and has the impression to be

personally in control of events: “Asians see the big picture and they see objects in relation to their environments – so much so that it can be difficult for them to visually separate objects from their environments. Westerners focus on objects while slighting the field and they literally see fewer objects and relationships in the environment than do Asians” (Nisbett, 2003).

8.3 CONCLUSION

War remains unpredictable because it is led by humans, who are emotional and fallible beings. War is not a science but an art, open to evolution and adaptation. Complexity in war remains the key word. Each adversary forms a system, an organism that must be penetrated. As Mao once said: “if one does not understand the conditions of war, its character, the links that unite it to other phenomena, one exposes oneself to ignoring the laws of war, the way to make it, one is powerless to win.”

In the last two centuries, most of the wars, particularly in Europe, have taken a symmetric form or shape. There was not only an instrumental symmetry, but also a symmetry of norms and rationalities. The wars were thought and conducted following the same pattern, with the same code of honor. Symmetry tends more and more to give way to asymmetry. In a certain way, people and States are fighting each other, but without understanding each other’s reciprocal strategies, because they are acting according to different cultural, ontological, cognitive patterns, making it impossible to adopt common rules. The West has been outplayed thus by its adversaries on two levels – ontological-cultural and cognitive – having a direct impact on the power relation between the West and China.

In this context, social sciences although not sciences of linearity, have the advantage to open our minds to complexity, and, in fine, to a neo-clausewitzian world³. So maybe we do need more philosophy, more sociology, more history, some disciplines whose principles and applications are not, by essence, linear and can assume a better mental preparation to confront combat realities.

Our adversaries do not only perceive their comparative advantages in technological terms, but in terms of identity, cognition, culture, collective psychology and popular will. The Western strategic rationality will require, in addition to its former instrumental component, taking into account the cultural and cognitive rationality of the adversaries, something our adversaries do master.

This is important because it has a direct impact on the power of a state. As Dekel and Moran-Gilad (2019) explain, and we quote them in length:

The shaping of cognition during a conflict between adversarial actors includes several stages: formulating the narrative of the conflict by describing the reality that prevailed before; the need and the legitimacy to change the situation or to maintain it, due to an assessment that the possible end states are inferior to the current situation; the reasons for defining the political-military objectives; and the principles for conducting the campaign such that it will influence the consciousness of the various target audiences in a way that serves the strategic objective.

The various measures and powers exerted need to match the “story” that the actor wishes to convey to the designated target audiences. This is so that the construction of cognition is effective and strengthens the legitimacy of exerting hard power, especially military power; so that the achievements of exerting hard or soft power are translated into political and international achievements; so that it is possible to shape an image of victory that illustrates the achievement of the political-military objectives, or offsets the achievements of the adversary.

³ “Neo-clausewitzianism” was initially coined in a pejorative sense, trying to explain the thinking of the tenants of nuclear warfighting. Joseph Henrotin, Alain De Neve et Tanguy Struye de Swielande “Vers un monde néo-clausewitzien?” (in Henrotin et al., 2004).

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