

# Reconnaissance-Strike Tactics and Maneuver Warfare III

Maneuver Warfare with Chinese characteristics

by Maj B.A. Friedman

Earlier in this series, I said that the principles of maneuver warfare applied by an organization with different roles, responsibilities, strengths, and weaknesses than the Marine Corps would look quite different from *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, which is maneuver warfare applied to and for the Marine Corps. In this article, I will look at another warfighting organization that is applying many of the same principles and examining how their version is different. That organization is the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

In lieu of endnotes, which tend to get ignored, I will lay out the sources for this article here in order to highlight them and where they can be found. For translations of PLA textbooks, I have used those provided by the Air Force Chinese Aerospace Studies Institute. These include the 2013 and 2020 versions of *The Science of Military Strategy*, the 2006 version of *The Science of Campaigns*, and 2021 translations of *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations* published by the PLA's National Defense University Press. They are all available at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI>. I have also pulled context and analysis from a number of think tank reports and articles. These include the RAND reports "People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts" by Edmund J. Burke, Kristen Gunness, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Mark Cozad (published by RAND Corporation in 2020) and "Systems Confrontation and Systems Destruction Warfare: How

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the Chinese People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare," by Jeffrey Engstrom (published by RAND in 2018). All these sources are available for free online and are available to anyone.

First, some caveats. One, the PLA does not have doctrine in the same sense that U.S. forces do. The materials mentioned above are professional military education textbooks that are reinforced by regulations at the unit level, although the exact role of each is not clearly defined. Second, at times the PLA uses the same words as the United States in a number of public-facing documents, but that does not necessarily mean that they are using them in the same way. Additionally, PLA officers and academics hotly debate, discuss, and disagree on these concepts and ideas. The PLA's institutional vision, therefore, is somewhat of a moving target (as is ours). However, reading major trends and official documents reveals a sophisticated and robust warfighting vision that has a lot in common with the Marine Corps' conception of maneuver warfare. It is unclear how institutionalized these ideas are or whether or not the PLA has or can realize them but understand-

ing the mind of potential adversaries is part of maneuver warfare.

## Informatized War

The PLA divides the development of military organizations into a number of different generations or stages. The most important of which are mechanized war, informatized war, and intelligitized war. These stages are differentiated by the most decisive element in warfare. For example, mechanized war (which we might refer to as industrial-era warfare) describes much of the warfare of the 20th century where the ability to mass mechanized forces and artillery was the decisive factor in victory or defeat (according to the PLA).

The most important stage for our purposes here is informatized war, which the PLA uses to describe warfare as it is currently fought. In informatized war, victory is determined by which side is better able to acquire, process, disseminate, and exploit information. The PLA believes that the United States achieved this as early as 1991 during the Persian Gulf War. Current PLA reform efforts are aimed at achieving the same thing, although not all the PLA's forces have yet been "informationized." The



**Information Warfare is central to the PLA operating concept.** (Photo: Weibo.)

PLA's vision for how a military force should be organized and employed for informatized warfare is sometimes called system-of-systems warfare and involves two major concepts which will be discussed below: systems confrontation warfare and systems destruction warfare.

Intelligentized War is how the PLA is currently conceptualizing the future. As such, this concept is constantly changing as the PLA debates how various emergent technologies will affect warfare in the future. Broadly, however, PLA thinkers agree that artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, and other emergent technologies like quantum computing will create a new revolution in military affairs. Whatever that revolution ends up looking like, the PLA intends to get there first.

### **Systems Confrontation Warfare**

The PLA's concept for how it will organize itself to fight as an informatized force is systems confrontation warfare. The central tenet of this concept is that warfare is

no longer a contest of annihilation/attrition between opposing military forces, but rather a clash between opposing operational systems ... an enemy can be defeated if its operational system can be rendered ineffective or outright unable to function through the destruction or degradation of key capabilities, weapons, or units that compose the system.<sup>1</sup>

Much like maneuver warfare, the PLA will not seek to just destroy the opposing force but instead will target capabilities that tie that force together and enable it to operate as a cooperative system (hence systems confrontation warfare).

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For this to work, the PLA believes it has to achieve information superiority or *dominance* so it can ascertain how an opposing force is arrayed and which key components can be attacked in order to disassemble or disaggregate it. Once a system is so disordered, the now individual non-cooperative components can be attacked and overwhelmed at will. Hence information warfare is central to the PLA's entire operating concept and its main effort for its own force design efforts.

The PLA has designed joint staffs around this concept. Rather than organizing them by service component or by the traditional, Napoleonic Era functions of S-1, S-2, S-3, etc., the PLA has broken all those stovepipes and organized high-level staffs around

reconnaissance-strike tactics. The five "component systems" of these staffs are: the reconnaissance-intelligence system that collects information, prevents the adversary from collecting information, and provides situational awareness to the entire force; the information confrontation system, which is roughly similar to the MEF Information Group, employing electronic and cyber capabilities to both collect on and disrupt the adversary's systems; the command systems, which provides command and control (C2) and decision assistance to PLA commanders; the firepower strike system, which is the units that act based on intelligence gained by the other components including long-range precision fires but also maneuver forces from across the PLA services and domains; and the support system, which provides enabling functions like logistics, sustainment, medical support, and maintenance to the whole. This "operational system" will reside at the equivalent of our Joint Task Force level but is clearly organized around winning the information warfare fight and executing reconnaissance-strike tactics. Lastly, these component systems themselves may be task-organized. Once stood up, a headquarters may have only some of these component systems in combination depending on the task.

Of note, these component systems roughly correspond to the four steps of the OODA Loop (with the exception of the support system). The reconnaissance-intelligence system observes information, the information confrontation system orients that information within the system (and tries to disorient the adversary system), the command system decides, and the firepower-strike system acts.

### **Systems Destruction Warfare**

While systems confrontation warfare describes how the PLA intends to organize their high-level staffs for modern warfare, systems destruction warfare lays out how the PLA intends to attack another modern force. Systems destruction warfare "seeks to paralyze the function of the enemy's operational system."<sup>2</sup> It is intended to create the same kind of operational paralysis as described in

*MCDP 1* by dis-aggregating the enemy's ability to work as a cooperative system-of-systems. It does so by targeting four prioritized types of targets through both kinetic and non-kinetic means. The highest priority targets are those that will disrupt the ability of the adversary to transmit information. These include anything from communications to sensors to servers and command and control nodes. If successful, the adversary is "information isolated."<sup>3</sup> The second priority is "essential elements."<sup>4</sup> An essential element will most likely be defined by the type of enemy the PLA is facing. The essential element of an artillery unit is its cannons, for example, so those targets would be struck next. The third set of targets is "operational architecture."<sup>5</sup> This term is also unclear but might be referring to the logistics and mobility infrastructure required to move and support forces around the battlespace such as heavy vehicles, airfields, connectors, and ports. Lastly, PLA writings refer to attacking the adversary's "reconnaissance-control-attack-evaluation" process.<sup>6</sup> This could mean attacking any remaining command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability or directly attacking the opponent's OODA loop itself. Recall the discussion in part I of this series on information-age maneuver warfare that directly attacks OODA loops and adversary decision making.

In this way, the PLA intends to employ reconnaissance-strike tactics against a prioritized set of targets to render an opponent deaf, blind, mute, and paralyzed. It is about attacking vulnerabilities which creates opportunities that enable the attack of more vulnerabilities. Both systems confrontation warfare and systems destruction warfare are built around the core idea that warfare in the Information Age will be information-centric, making information processing both a strength and a potential vulnerability. Systems confrontation warfare exploits that fact by organizing PLA forces to foster fast, accurate, and reliable information acquisition, analysis, and dissemination while systems destruction warfare turns the necessity for information into a vulnerability for the



**The PLA will employ reconnaissance-strike tactics in any scenario.** (Photo: Weibo.)

enemy by directly attacking their ability to use it. While U.S. forces tend to have separate processes for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; targeting; and fires run by separate cells in separate staff sections which are—in theory—fused later, the PLA designed a fused process for reconnaissance-strike tactics and then built an integrated staff around it.

these concepts in the real world. They are, as of now, goals more than codified doctrine. If the PLA does succeed in putting these theories into practice though, there will be a few implications for Marine Corps forces.

In any confrontation with PLA forces, Marine Corps communications, sensors, and information systems will be targeted first, in mass, by kinetic

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***The PLA repurposed older coastal defense concepts, married them to reconnaissance-strike tactics, and applied them to their maritime operating area.***

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These concepts can also shed light on the PLA's anti-access/area denial system. In reality, the system is nothing more than a coastal defense system capable of reconnaissance-strike tactics. Recall the discussion from part II of this series about tactical adaption: newly possible tactical schema emerges and then new methods of organization are built to exploit them while retaining or repurposing older adaptations. The PLA repurposed older coastal defense concepts, married them to reconnaissance-strike tactics, and applied them to their maritime operating area.

**Systems-of-Systems Warfare in Practice**

First, it is not clear how well-positioned the PLA is to practice any of

and non-kinetic means. The PLA takes these information-centric tactics so seriously that they recently formed an entire branch, the Strategic Support Force, to manage them. Space, electronic, and cyber capabilities will be used to guide PLA Air Force and PLA Rocket Force strikes against key platforms and enablers as well as "essential elements" like long-range precision fires, fixed-wing aircraft, and amphibious platforms. Next, critical logistics enablers and infrastructure will be destroyed, leaving Marine Corps operations unsustainable. Finally, Marine Corps combat arms forces—unable to act, react, or even detect PLA forces—will either be attacked from unexpected directions in unexpected ways or simply bypassed altogether as PLA maneuver and surface

forces seize objectives with little opposition. Even as the PLA is untested and it is not clear that they have the level of training, or even the necessary human capital, to execute this vision, it still behooves Marines to understand their goals and intentions. In fact, the Marine Corps may be best positioned to understand the PLA's warfighting philosophy as the two are so similar.

First, both philosophies are focused on fighting the enemy as a system, rather than its individual pieces and platforms. They are less about having technological or numerical superiority or acquiring better platforms and more about understanding the adversary as a system, identifying critical capabilities and critical vulnerabilities, and then attacking those vulnerabilities with the most advantageous tool available.

Second, both philosophies are rooted in a Clausewitzian paradigm of war rather than a Jominian one. Jomini viewed war in linear terms: the right amount of force at the right place at the right time in the right manner according to predictable and repeatable rules would predictably and repeatedly lead to victory. Clausewitz did not; he viewed war as inherently unpredictable and chaotic and intangible psychological factors as being just as, if not more important than physical factors, making war and warfare non-linear. Boyd agreed and *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, makes this explicit, but PLA works do not. Instead, the PLA focuses more on the writings of Mao Tse-Tung. Mao's theory and practice, however, were also based on Clausewitz's work. Mao cited Clausewitz in his most important work and his most famous phrase, "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," is simply a reframing of Clausewitz's core idea of war as the continuation of politics with the addition of violence. As for Boyd's influence on PLA doctrine, he is not mentioned by name but his ideas are obviously influential as noted above.<sup>7</sup>

This is important because the current Marine Corps (along with the efforts of all the other Services as well) is still predicated on linear conceptions of platforms defeating platforms while ignoring the enemy system as a whole.

This platform-centric mindset is characterized by the idea of kill chains or kill webs, which are reductionist depictions of how platforms interact, stripped of all human decision making and context. The PLA does not think in terms of kill chains, physical attrition, stovepiped domains, or linear operations but rather in holistic systems and non-linear effects. If the Marine Corps falls into a trap of platform-centric thinking and gets stuck in a linear, domain-centric Jominian paradigm, the more maneuverist PLA will have the conceptual high ground.

That being said, there are major differences between Marine Corps and PLA philosophies. The PLA does not and will not pursue decentralized decision making along the lines of mission command, which features mission-type orders, commander's intent, and empowered subordinates. The PLA does not have a competent and empowered non-commissioned officer or staff non-commissioned officer corps. The PLA is still beholden to a Leninist system that favors centralized planning. However, they are well aware of the disadvantages of this system and are seeking ways to mitigate those disadvantages. Marines tend to take it as a matter of faith that maneuver warfare cannot be pursued without mission command, but this may not be the case.

### Conclusion

We must be careful not to "mirror-image" potential opponents when highlighting similarities, so we should not take conclusions too far. The PLA serves the Chinese Communist Party, not the Chinese people or China itself. The People's Republic of China's government is totalitarian, oppressive, currently engaged in large-scale ethnic cleansing on its own territory, and is clear about its aims to expand that territory at the expense of free, democratic nations in its proximity. Just because there are similarities between the warfighting philosophies of the PLA and the Marine Corps does not mean those principles will be applied the same way by two vastly different organizations that serve two vastly different nations.

While it is still unclear how the PLA will put system-of-systems warfare into practice on the battlefield, one thing is very clear: it is not attrition warfare. It is a sophisticated and clever warfighting philosophy designed to enable the People's Republic of China to build a modern military force capable of meeting and defeating other modern military forces, not just to shore up a regime or protect its own borders. We should not underestimate it or them.

It is, in my opinion, not yet clear that the Marine Corps should update or rewrite *MCDP 1, Warfighting*. In fact, it probably should not. However, some or all of the other MCDP publications should undergo a review. The world has changed a great deal since the publication of *MCDP 1*. Reconnaissance-strike tactics were a distant dream but are now a reality. The world itself is now interconnected by a global digital communications network and inhabited by both manned and unmanned systems, meaning the information environment is everywhere and occupied by everyone all the time. Lastly, the Marine Corps has a stated pacing threat which it did not when *MCDP 1* was published. While our philosophy has not changed, the application of that philosophy has to change as quickly as the world changes in order to stay relevant.

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### Notes

1. Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and Systems Destruction Warfare*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. For more on Mao Tse-Tung and Clausewitz, see B.A. Friedman, "The Strategy of Small Wars," in Nathan K. Finney, ed. *On Strategy: A Primer*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2020).

