China's "Informationised Warfare": Impact on the Region

By Richard A. Bitzinger

Synopsis

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has undertaken many significant reforms in recent months to better fight and win "informationised wars". This is coupled with an aggressive behaviour driven by a sense of victimisation, as seen in Beijing's posture over maritime territorial disputes. This invites offsetting actions on the part of the region.

Commentary

CHINA'S PEOPLE's Liberation Army (PLA) has been undergoing profound transformation since at least the turn of the century. These changes have permeated every facet of the PLA – technological, organisational, and doctrinal. The ongoing reorganisation of the PLA – including the putative reorganisation of its military regions; the creation of joint commands; the strengthening of top-down leadership by the Central Military Commission (CMC); and the establishment of a national Rocket Force – underline the Chinese leadership's commitment to establishing a modern military system with Chinese characteristics.

With Chinese leaders expressing their desire to develop their country into a maritime power, Beijing has also begun to demonstrate its resolve to follow through with its declarations to build a force that is capable of fighting – and winning – "informationised" wars.

Informationisation and Power Projection

"Informatisation" (*xinxihua*) means that information technologies, especially those capabilities relating to command, control, communications, computers, intelligence,

surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR), are considered paramount to expanding military effectiveness. This entails, among other things, dominating the electromagnetic spectrum through integrated network electronic warfare as well as exploiting technological advances in microelectronics, sensors, propulsion, stealth, and special materials to outfit the PLA with precision-strike weapons, including ballistic and anti-ship or land-attack cruise missiles.

In short, the PLA, in its long transition from People's War to limited local wars under conditions of informatisation, was seeking to move from being a *platform*-centric to a more *network*-centric force, or one where the crucial characteristic of the force is the network linkages among platforms, as opposed to the platforms themselves.

The most recent stage of Chinese warfighting doctrine was revealed in the PLA's most recent defence white paper, *Chinese Military Strategy*, published in May 2015. It places an even greater emphasis on informationisation and makes it central to operational concepts. According to the 2015 white paper, the PLA will continue to de-emphasise land operations, all but abandoning People's War (except in name and in terms of political propaganda), particularly in favour of giving new stress and importance to sea- and airpower: "The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests."

As a result, the PLA Navy will gradually shift towards a combined "offshore waters defence" and "open seas protection" while China's air force would, according to its most recent defence white paper, "shift its focus from territorial air defence to both defence and offence, and build an air-space defence force structure that can meet the requirements of informationised operations".

Dual Trends

It would be premature to argue that China will catch up with the defence-technological state-of-the-art any time soon. For all of its talk of becoming an "informationised" military, the PLA is still a decidedly *platform*-centric force, albeit one that is still in the process of becoming *more* network-enabled.

The process itself has been evolutionary: old weapons and military equipment were gradually replaced, as they were modified and upgraded, or else supplemented by and subordinated to more technologically advanced systems. Nevertheless, the PLA, backed by the Xi regime, appears to be progressing toward becoming a truly informationised armed force – a long-term strategy, to say the least.

At the same time, the domestic political culture in China increasingly emphasises a sense of victimisation and subsequent entitlement. More and more, Chinese foreign policy is driven by a populist nationalism, fuelled by an "official narrative of [Western] humiliation". This perception of national victimhood has spurred Beijing into becoming ever more intransigent in pressing its territorial claims in the adjoining seas, such as its illegal artificial island-building campaign.

These dual trends – the modernisation of the PLA in its embrace of extremely high-technology warfare, together with an increasingly assertive regime in Beijing that

believes it is due its place in the sun – denote a China that is less and less willing to support the status quo in the Asia-Pacific. It also implies a regional great power that is increasingly willing to use force or the show of force in support of its national interests. Most of these developments have been remarkably recent, taking place within the past decade or so.

This is the challenge that most threatens the current security calculus in the Asia-Pacific. In this regard, Washington's response – in terms of the rebalance and its FONOPS (freedom of navigation operations) in the South China Sea – are vital markers in messaging Beijing as to how far it should go in its newly aggressive behaviour. In dealing with China, engagement and containment are the conjoined twins of policy; given China's recent conduct, it might be time for a bit more of the latter.

Richard A. Bitzinger is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Military Transformations Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This Commentary is based on a recent article by the author published in Policy Forum, which can be accessed here: http://www.policyforum.net/china-taking-warfare-hi-tech.