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Chinese Irregular Warfare

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As our National Defense Strategy (NDS) changes from insurgency or counter terrorism operations to great power of competition. We have fallen behind some key actors. In fact, some players have been playing this game for a long time while the US has been focused on other areas. One focus area is the South China sea. While the US is gearing up for a conventional war in the area. China has been engaging in irregular war for the last decade, and they are winning.

Conventional War Vs Irregular War

While the US spends 1.92 trillion dollars on the military every year there are ways to circumvent your opponent. The US focuses on conventional warfare. This is where the government uses the military to project its influence throughout the world. This is conducted by using conventional weapons and battlefield tactics between two or more states in open confrontation. The forces on each side are typically well defined and the primary target is the opponent's military.

China focuses on its government influencing the other countries population. This is done by violent struggle among state and on state actors for legitimacy and influence over the population. Forces are not well defined and prefer to be hidden or changeable. They are not just focused on their military capability, but also social dynamics as tribal politics, social networks, religious influences, and cultural. Mao's strategy is to start with irregular warfare, then transition conventional warfare when ready. The US thinks that great power of competition will be a conventional war. We must be able to understand both irregular and regular war compete.

China has focused on three different types of irregular warfare Psychological, Legal, and Public Opinion. Psychological warfare focuses on pre-conflict posturing. This is where their military or paramilitary forces use national capabilities with the intention of encouraging their

desired outcomes. Legal warfare looks to confuse legal precedent. Leveraging legal precedent and processes to constrain adversary behavior, contest disadvantageous circumstances, to maximize an advantage. Lastly public opinion warfare uses new services to influence domestic and international perspective to favor objectives. All three of these different types of warfare are irregular warfare. All three currently being used in the conflict in the South China Sea (Kania 2016)

South China Sea Conflict

The south China sea gives China global reach and power. The South China Sea lanes are the busiest, most important, maritime waterways in the world. One third of global trade, which is 40% of China's total trade goes through this area. Where international waters begin and end in this area can be murky. China has published its own map of the region which shows its ownership of the entire region to be Chinese sovereign territory.

This sovereign territory, China has named the "Nine Dash Line." The South China Sea encompasses several hundred small islands that are uninhabitable. China is claiming that these small islands are theirs causing the boarder to be pushes over the area. Under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, countries claim 200 nautical miles from a continental shoreline or around island that can support habitation. This has led to China to terraform these small islands and adding military installations to them. Adding to their claim and giving them greater military reach in the area.

The United States still views this area as international waters. The United States needs transit between Pacific/Indian oceans for maritime security. The US also still has strong alliances with Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Thailand, and Australia that it must uphold.

While China sees this as an US encroachment. From their point of view the South China Sea is a significant artery for them. The entire region is a military/economic base of operations. These islands provide firepower, situational awareness, and logistical to China. No island does this better than the island of Taiwan.

China Taiwan Strategy

Taiwan is currently being governed independently since 1949. However, Chinese leaders are near obsession with maintaining stability in the South China Sea at all costs. China views the island of Taiwan as a part of its territory. Thus, expanding its territory in the South China Sea another 200 miles. China's overall strategy is devoted to their "One China" policy. This is a claim by China that there is only one China, and Taiwan is a part of that China. The republic of China government is the sole legitimate government representing the whole of China (Eidal 2009). In 2017, President Xi gave his plan called "Chinese Dream" by 2049. "We stand firm in safeguarding China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will never allow the historical tragedy of national division to repeat itself. Any separatist activity is certain to meet with the resolute opposition of the Chinese people. We have the resolve, the confidence, and the ability to defeat separatist attempts for "Taiwan independence" in any form." (Ward 2021)

China can trace its One China policy back to 1949, the end of the Chinese civil war. After the People's Republic of China (PRC) defeated the Republic of China (ROC). The defeated ROC fell back to Taiwan to form their own democracy. The PRC began ruling main land China as a communist country. This is the legal precedence that China is using to say it owns both mainland and the island of Taiwan. In China's eyes they view Taiwan as a territory with their government acting on behalf of the PRC.

China is trying to sway public opinion about the One China policy through social media. Similar to Russia using fake news in its operations in Crimea. “Taiwan’s National Security Bureau revealed that a significant volume of disinformation that had circulated on Taiwan social media networks came from ‘content farms’ with China’s Communist Party (Tung n.d.)” This is how China is using public opinion warfare.

China has been escalating the situation for some time now. They started to employ psychological warfare this April when they moved two aircraft carriers near Taiwan. China claimed that this was just a routine naval exercise, and a drill to “assist in improving the ability to safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interest.” However, China sent 25 fighters through Taiwan’s national air defense zone. Airspace that China views as their territory. The move made Taiwan scramble its own fighters and readied its surface to air defenses. This has become almost routine now, China doing this almost daily. Lastly China has been using maritime militia disguised as fishing vessels near a disputed reef in the South China Sea. China has been using them to dig up small areas to stake further claim to the area.

The US Response

Its clear that the US needs to send some type of response to the South China Sea. While there are many different things that the US could do to show power in the region. I would propose that setting up an MQ-9 combat air patrol in the area, armed or unarmed, out of Kunsan Air Base.

As our national defense strategy changes from counter insurgency operations to near peer, the MQ-9 is looking for new operations to be a part of. Gone are the days for the MQ-9 to be high valued individual targeting, flying circles around the middle east. Now it must be a part

of the great power of competition with other players. Patrolling the South China Sea could be a part of this shift. The MQ-9 has the ability to search out to 100KM of ocean with it's Maritime Wide Area Surveillance (MWAS) system. Being able to prove that these fishing vessels are actually Chinese militia. Combine that with its over 24 hour of continuous flight time it would be perfect to search for China's maritime militia, or as an early warning for China's aircraft carriers

This could be a way of showing force with little to no risk for the US. One of the greatest strengths of Remotely Piloted Aircraft, is their ability to push the limit. Being able to contest air space with little blowback if a country chooses to act. We saw this with Iran shooting down a RQ-4 Global hawk. While the shoot down cost the US taxpayers money, the lack of losing a life caused the situation to be quickly deescalated. This would allow the US to test contested airspace with China, while not risking a life.

Showing the public Chinese aggression is the first step in countering the Chinese irregular warfare. Showing the rest of the world how China is pushing their claim to the South China Sea by building up islands, is the first part of fighting their legal claim to the area. Second that by showing how their carrier group is infringing on Taiwan's waters and intimidating them. Combine these two factors and the US is fighting China's public opinion warfare.

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