
TUNED TO PERFECTION: CHINA'S IRREGULAR WARFARE AT SEA

Jason Wang

China is sure to be among the keenest students of the Iran conflict. Iran's control of the Strait of Hormuz, even when met by a US counter-blockade, had a powerful impact on the rest of the world.

Beijing's ultimate goal of taking over the First Island Chain rests on controlling the seas and key waterways in the Indo-pacific, which sit along some of the world's busiest commercial routes.

To that end, China is building dual-use seagoing forces that, even short of war, can strangle Philippines, Taiwan and Japan by cutting off vital lines of commerce and communication. The People's Liberation Army is innovating in irregular warfare. It deploys amphibious fighting vehicles using civilian vessels: roll-on/roll-off vehicle carriers and large deck cargo ships - not military "gray-hulls."

Decrepit tankers or cargo ships drag their anchors "accidentally" severing Malaysian

and Taiwanese vital submarine communication cables. Multiple PRC Unmanned Underwater Vessels (UUVs) have washed up in Indonesia. Most recently, China has massed thousands of civilian fishing vessels organized by its People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia.

But how does China continue to be so successful? Simply put, the PLA's tactics are designed to fit between the bureaucratic seams of government operations, frustrating a rapid whole-of-government response not only in Philippines but across the First Island Chain.

War in the Seams

A prime example is the threat to the world's submarine cables. These cables are critical infrastructure. They enable high-speed financial trading, allow ASML to optimize the machines that produce the world's semiconductors, and, most of all, support the world's newest growth pillar: AI data centers.

China's irregular warfare strategy targeting submarine cable security is likely to be complicated by ministerial/agency/departmental jurisdictional disputes and political turf battles. Submarine power and internet cable owners, along with their insurers, argue that submarine cable security is a matter of maritime law enforcement. The Coast Guard's primary mission is maritime safety, and its mandate ends at 24 nautical miles. The Navy avoids involvement in an effort to prevent escalation.

All this bureaucratic back-and-forth gives the PLA room to shape the battlefield to its advantage with minimal effort. The result? China achieves short-term political gains by sowing confusion, helplessness creating conditions for long-term strategic gains without ever firing a shot.

Irregular Warfare is Warfare

China's irregular warfare techniques, often called gray-zone warfare, are used to erode confidence and legitimacy. But let's call a spade a spade: irregular warfare is still warfare.

The only way to prevent war is to be prepared. Aggressively shining a light on these tactics is often the easiest and cheapest solution, especially compared with kinetic options. Enabling transparency through intelligence sharing is the cheapest form of asymmetric warfare. Intelligence shapes force posture and enables more efficient spending

across all nations seeking to counter China's revisionist expansionism.

Remember: irregular warfare succeeds only if we allow it.

Soberingly, calling for a whole-of-government approach is no longer sufficient. Given Beijing's "total war" strategy, the First Island Chain must find a way to work together - closely and quickly. The tyranny of distance requires the First Island Chain—Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, and others—to have the means to operate jointly and defend each other without support for at least 90 days.

This requires scale and, therefore, joint operations across nations. In practical terms, command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance must be integrated across countries. The Armed Forces of the Philippines will need encrypted communications and operations across the First Island Chain. This capability must be exercised routinely and regularly, well before China moves to its next phase of irregular warfare: quarantine of key waterways.

Deterrence on the Cheap

Some argue that the necessary technology does not yet exist. But the technology to enable transparency above and below the waves is already available and in use today.

Japan and South Korea are leading the way by leveraging new commercial space satellite constellations that already deliver



militarily relevant monitoring capabilities. High-resolution, wide-area synthetic aperture radar constellations that can see in the dark and through weather continue to grow in number. Even the highly capable US military uses commercial constellations today to augment their national technical means.

Beneath the waves, distributed acoustic sensing, or DAS, can already turn the very submarine cables under threat into early warning sensors. Already deployed in the North Sea and the Baltic, DAS-enabled cables continue to monitor activity even if severed, providing vital intelligence.

On the sea surface, First Island Chain nations can extend national maritime domain awareness with 5G- and satellite-connected "smart masts" on their own fishing fleets, turning the tables on the PRC's Maritime Militia. Similarly, commercial aircraft video feeds from their safety systems can also be used to provide constant EEZ surveillance.

The software already exists to aggregate and share data resiliently across a single common operating picture, providing the transparency needed to counter irregular warfare. The cost? Even when aggregated, the sensors and platforms described above amount to only a fraction of the price of a single Patriot battery.

These systems are already mature and operational at scale. Corporations would support transparency monitoring of bad actors to ensure a rules-based world order that they thrive in. No legislature on the planet could ignore such low-cost deterrence measures.

Beijing Fears Clarity

China has, for decades, successfully used bureaucratic morass to prevent a coordinated and rapid response. This is how PLA irregular warfare thrives.

Transparency is what China fears most because it cheaply negates irregular warfare tactics. Claims of immature technology or insufficient budgets are merely excuses for inaction. Time is running out.

Building national intelligence capability is asymmetric deterrence without provocation. Moreover, China's gray-zone warfare succeeds only if we allow it. The future of a free and open Indo-Pacific, and of the rules-based world order, depends on nothing less than political will.



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