IDSS COMMENTARIES (22/2002)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

UNRESTRICTED WARFARE AND CHINESE MILITARY STRATEGY

Nan Li *

3 October 2002

This essay reviews *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: Liberation Army Arts and Literature Press, 1999), a book written by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, both of whom are PLA (People's Liberation Army) Air Force officers. Specifically, the essay summarizes the major argument of the book, discusses its background and implications for the Chinese military strategy, and offers a critique.

A Summary

The central argument of Qiao and Wang is that in contrast to the past wars where nation state-based militaries dominate and rules and limits apply, future warfare may be more and more waged by non-state actors who use non-military means and hold little regard for rules and limits.

What accounts for the rise of unrestricted warfare (UW)?

Qiao and Wang have identified several major factors that may have contributed to this change. First, the decline of state-sponsored military violence due to the mounting constraints of international conventions (forbidding the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), landmines and the killing of civilians, etc.) and increased military professionalism (its narrower concentration on military-technical-operational domain and technological advances such as precision strikes that reduce collateral damage). US military dominance renders it particularly foolish for a challenger to confront the US on military terms. Similarly, the almost total concentration of the US military on the narrow military-technological domain may provide windows of vulnerability that can be exploited by a challenger.

Secondly, economic integration-based globalisation may have created conditions that may render unrestricted warfare more likely. The weakening of the nation-states, for instance, may allow for multiple interests, identities, space, goals and actors, and therefore the more likelihood of non-state conflicts. It may also lead to the declining constraints of state-based rules and limits on non-state actors. Globalisation may have also created vulnerabilities for the vested interests and opportunities for the challengers. The easier transnational flow of capital, for instance, makes it easier to wage financial warfare and raise funds for warfare by non-state actors. The faster advances and diffusion of technology provide the opportunities for non-state actors to get access to and employ dual-use technologies and WMD for warfare. The loosening of immigration rules can be exploited for

transnational training and deployment for warfare. And the freer flow of information makes it easier to wage information warfare and to amplify the effects of attacks.

Thirdly, the employment of rules by governments for narrow self-interests also increases the chances for non-government actors to break these rules and engage in warfare to constrain government behaviour.

What are the major types of UW?

Qiao and Wang believe that unlike the "weapons of new concepts," which motivate technological innovation in the narrower military field, what drives UW is the "new concepts of weapons," i.e., ways and means that are non-military but can be employed as weapons for warfare to achieve political objectives. In this sense, UW really refers to non-military warfare (as opposed to military operations other than war (MOOTW) such as peacekeeping, disaster relief, etc.). It encompasses diplomatic warfare (through alliance building and diplomatic bargaining and deception, for instance), economic warfare (through trade, aid, and sanctions), financial warfare (through stock speculation and currency devaluation or forgery), cyber warfare (through hacking and virus attacks), media and information warfare (through media management and control of information), network warfare (through disrupting critical infrastructure such as electricity grids, traffic dispatching, financial transactions, telephone communications, and mass media networks), and environmental warfare (through man-made natural disasters such as earthquakes).

It can also be resources warfare, technology warfare, intelligence warfare, psychological warfare, cultural warfare, international law/organization warfare, regulatory warfare, terrorism, and crimes such as counterfeiting, smuggling, hostage taking, and assassination.

What are the strategic principles for waging UW?

Qiao and Wang identify three major principles: asymmetry, combination, and optimality. Asymmetry means that in UW, the challenger would attack targets that are the most vulnerable, least protected, but strategically significant, while the points of infiltration and attack, the direction, the means, and the timing are the least expected. In the meantime, UW would also give full play to the comparative advantages of the challenger with regard to the deployment and the stratagem.

Qiao and Wang further argue that UW is in essence combined warfare. But unlike the traditional combined arms/joint services operations that are bounded within the military domain, UW combination transcends boundaries and limits. Such combination can be supra-national (combining transnational organizations such as the UN and non-state actors such as business firms and NGOs), supra-domain (combining military and non-military domains), supra-means (combining military means with diplomatic, economic, financial, technological, cultural, and other legal and illegal means), and supra-tiers (reducing stages to the point a tactical move such as a truckload of explosive-based terrorist attack can realize strategic objective).

To achieve optimal effectiveness, Qiao and Wang suggest that UW must have limited objectives (smaller than the measures), employ unlimited measures (supra-means combination), and operate in different spaces and domains (supra-domain combination), but

within a single time. Moreover, effectiveness also requires optimal coordination among various domains and means, and adjustment and control throughout the entire process of UW.

Background, Implications for Chinese Military Strategy, and a Critique

Background

From the 1985 PLA "strategic transition (from preparing for early, total, and nuclear war to preparing for local, limited war)" to the 1996 "two fundamental transformations (transforming the PLA from preparing for local war under ordinary conditions to preparing for local war under high-tech conditions, and from a manpower-intensive military to a technology-based force)" and thereafter, the discourse on Chinese military strategy has largely been dominated by the school of local war under high-tech conditions.

This school, which represents the view of the PLA's command and staff departments and colleges, is based on the scenario of "superior fighting inferior." Such a scenario assumes that without superpower intervention, the PLA can achieve local and temporary superiority over the militaries of China's smaller or weaker neighbours in case diplomatic efforts fail and a war is inevitable. As a result, the strategic principles guiding such local, limited wars would be pre-emptive strike, quick battle and quick resolution, and an emphasis on technology. This is a substantial departure from the concept of people's war, which is driven by the scenario of "inferior fighting superior" and stresses second strike, protracted warfare, and manpower and revolutionary consciousness.

The impact of such a departure on the PLA is quite significant: It has led to the narrowing down of the war aims, the substantial downsizing of the PLA, particularly in manpower-intensive sectors such as the bureaucracies, the infantry units and the provincial forces, and the shifting of investment emphasis to the technological components of the ground forces and the technology-based services such as the air force, the navy, and the strategic missile force.

Unrestricted Warfare can be seen as the first serious challenge to the high-tech local war school by the people's war school. UW smacks of the people's war in two major aspects: First, it assumes that the civilians (or the "people") would dominate future warfare, but not the military professionals. Second, this warfare, being not restricted by rules and limits, would be non-conventional if compared to the regular, conventional war.

Qiao and Wang's preference for people's war is also reflected in their criticism of the doctrine-driven (air-land battle or two-theatre war scenario) and combat laboratory (digital force) approach of the US military in war planning ("build the weapons to fit the (doctrine-guided) fight," a concept associated with "superior fighting inferior"), which they believe is "preparing food for banquets not knowing who is coming." To the extent this approach has significantly informed the advocates of the high-tech local war in the PLA, the real target of the implicit criticism is quite clear. Similarly, Qiao and Wang clearly favour the idea of "fighting the fight that fits one's weapons" (a dictum of PLA marshal Zhu De, meaning that you fight with whatever weapons that are available), a concept closely related to the "inferior fighting superior"-based people's war.

A major event that may have served as the catalyst for the idea of UW, as Qiao and Wang implicitly acknowledge, however, is the 1996 PLA exercises in the Taiwan Strait,

which the two authors participated in, and where two US aircraft carriers intervened. The possible US intervention in a future PLA-related local war, for instance, raises serious questions about the scenario of "superior fighting inferior" (which underlies the high-tech local war school), and may have motivated Qiao and Wang to explore alternatives for the possible new scenario of "inferior fighting superior."

Finally, to the extent the two authors are political officers and the book was published by a PLA press known for publishing propaganda-based military scenarios, the view of UW may be widely shared among the ranks of the political commissars.

Implications for Chinese Military Strategy

It is likely that some important aspects of UW (such as cyber warfare) would be gradually integrated into the Chinese military strategy, and there are three major reasons for this. First, the possible superpower intervention in a PLA-related local war may shift the balance of forces and turn the PLA from the superior side to the inferior side. This may force the PLA to avoid the brunt of the adversary's superiority in the formal military domain by exploiting its vulnerabilities in the non-military areas, which may in turn help the PLA to regain its initiative. UW seems to be an ideal concept that helps to explore such alternatives.

Moreover, September 11 shows that the inferior side can indeed employ UW to achieve strategic objective, and the superior side does have many vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

Finally, what Qiao and Wang argue for is not a complete return to the old people's war, but one that is modified by the new conditions of globalisation. Therefore, UW and high-tech local war school share quite a few similarities. Both, for instance, argue for limited objectives, short operations (collapsing stages within one single time, as opposed to the protraction of the old people's war), and operations in virtual space or on foreign soil (as opposed to "luring the enemy deep" into the homeland or base areas, which is associated with the old people's war). While both disagree over the domains/means and actors for warfare (one argues for the non-military and the other for military), both share the view that these domains/means and actors should be mainly dominated by technology and technical experts (as opposed to the peasants of the old people's war). These similarities may render it easier to integrate the UW into the high-tech local war school-dominated Chinese military strategy.

A Critique

Even though UW represents an important aspect of the Chinese military strategy, there are major constraints for its implementation. September 11, for instance, has led to homeland defence measures aimed at reducing and eliminating the vulnerabilities in civilian domains of strategic importance. These include the Internet, the financial sector, air and border security, telecommunications and other crucial networks, and inter-agency coordination. These may render it much more difficult to wage UW.

Furthermore, unlike the old people's war where warfare is waged in the familiar natural and cultural environment of the homeland or base areas, UW may have to be conducted on foreign soil. The unfamiliarity with the foreign countries may mean that mobilizing local human and logistical support can be next to impossible, particularly for a country such as China, which does not have a highly coherent and appealing transnational

religion or ideology.

Finally, waging indiscriminate UW may undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese government and the PLA. Waging the old people's war-style guerrilla warfare against the regular armies of a much more powerful adversary or a foreign invader may gain respect and legitimacy, but indiscriminately killing civilians and destroying civil infrastructure on foreign soil does not. Hopefully the assumed concern about the face-based legitimacy may constrain the PLA from waging a full-scale UW.

---

* Dr. Nan Li is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He last taught at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio.