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An assessment of the communciation processes and narrative strategies required at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels to combat the People's Liberation Army's effective information campaigns. This research is based on the study of PLA's "Three Warfares" concept in the information domain, the PLA's actions in the information environment, and the Joint Force's current structure in the information space.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**TONGUE TYING THE DRAGON: RESTRUCTURING THE JOINT FORCE TO
COUNTER THE CHINESE NARRATIVE**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Tongue Tying the Dragon: Restructuring the Joint Force to Counter the Chinese Narrative

Author: Major Alex Lim, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Considering the effectiveness of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) information warfare abilities, the Joint Force will need to make significant adjustments in its organization in order to synchronize (1) communication efforts to support service members operating in the nuances of the battlespace and (2) training to enhance its ability to combat China's narrative in the information space.

Discussion: This aim of this paper is to assess the communication processes and narrative strategies required at the tactical, operational and strategic levels to combat the People's Liberation Army's effective information campaigns. This research is based on the study of the PLA's "Three Warfares" concept in the information domain, the PLA's actions and behavior toward adversaries, and the US Joint Force's current capabilities in the information environment. This information is provided in contrast to the Joint Force's current information structure, its capabilities in the information environment and its effect on the battlespaces in which US troops operate. Two caveats are offered before moving forward. First, it should be noted that space and cyber domains are beyond the scope of this paper as they remain classified secret with authorities that are not concisely addressed doctrinally. The cyber domain, particularly the internet, as it impacts the cognitive dimension of warfare will be discussed as the information environment today is shaped largely by this medium. Second, the PLA reforms made in 2015 was bifurcated into two phases. The "above the neck" reform focused on the structural change of the PLA which also established the SSF. Whereas the "below the neck" was a granular focus on the follow-on training and formatting of the force to facilitate the structural changes. The PLA's "above the neck" structural changes will primarily be discussed as "below the neck" reforms are still ongoing according to the limited study available in this regard.

To achieve the above-stated goal, the remainder of this paper will: (1) Establish a baseline of the current information environment, covering societal impacts as it relates to the warfighter; (2) highlight the effectiveness of the PLA's comprehensive approach to strategic messaging through its IRCs as demonstrated in recent history; (3) demonstrate the shortfalls of the Joint Force in this arena ; (4) provide recommendations to enhance the Joint Force's ability to counter the PLA's influence on the information environment, derived from Marine Corps entry-level schools.

Conclusion: Many of the capabilities to influence local level tactics, tied to strategic objectives rest on the individual Marines operating in the given battlespace. The ability to affect the information environment at the user level allows servicemembers on the ground to shape the varying perceptions unique to their area of operation. Streamlined authorities that allow messaging to be shaped at the tactical and operational level, nested in a strategic narrative, is how the Joint Force, particularly the Marine Corps will need to modernize to optimally combat the narrative of adversaries such as China's PLA.

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Figure 1. China's Dashed Line Map *as Presented to the UN in 2009*.....8

Preface

Many of the ideas on this paper stem from my upbringing as a Public Affairs Officer at 1st Marine Division and RCT-1. In those moments I saw the shortfalls of my MOS but in turn, witnessed the work of amazing leaders that inspired creativity in me and the PA team to accomplish the mission. I want to thank those leaders that have impacted my life from the very beginning of my Marine Corps career. From the days of RCT-1, Col. Christopher Bronzi and Col. Fridrik Fridriksson are the leaders I mentioned that mentored me as a young officer. These men inspired me to think outside the box and to be tenacious in times of adversity.

From my time in Hawaii, Col. Brad Bartelt pushed me to communicate with excellence during a time of change within our occupational field. Through his mentorship, I was able to succeed at MARFORPAC as a CommStrat planner in the largest theater of operations.

I also want to thank my friends who helped me with this project. From the Defense Information School, Mr. Louie Sagisi and Maj. Katie Cousins took the time to point in the right direction in my research. Maj. Sharon Sisbarro, Maj. AJ Bormann and his II MIG team, and fellow members of Command and Staff College, Conference Group 15 who gave me the feedback I needed as I developed my recommendations.

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Lastly, I want to thank my wife for the continual support and taking the lead at home. I could not have done this without her.

Introduction

The establishment of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Strategic Support Force (SSF), integrating space, cyber, electronic and psychological warfare capabilities, continues to stir the discussion of China's effective use of communication to shape narratives in the region and around the world. Dominance in this domain is intended to place China's military into an advantageous position without a kinetic conflict, shaping conditions to launch a preemptive attack or quickly respond to aggression with information in support.¹ Further, this allows China to offset its disadvantages in technology and equipment through streamlined preparation and planning, particularly against a "powerful adversary" such as the United States with technological superiority.² While the PLA focuses on methods of winning wars through the information environment, the United States Joint Force remains stagnant in its ability to leverage communication assets and shape narratives.

The SSF's establishment aligns with the PLA's blurred boundaries between peace and warfare in the information environment, which is reflected in its conduct across the information spectrum.³ What was formerly entrenched between national level departments, services and military organizations has been optimized into the organization of a separate branch of information related capabilities (IRCs).⁴ This construct as well as China's concept of the "Three Warfares," puts the US and its allies into a precarious position with an adversary that means to cripple and infiltrate information systems and influence the cognitive domain to gain and maintain information superiority in its battlespace. The Joint Force has responded in kind but has not uniformly integrated information along with the other warfighting components. For example, the Marine Corps implemented Information as the Seventh Warfighting function in 2019⁵, but the Joint Force has not adopted this concept across the services. Considering the effectiveness of the PLA's information warfare abilities, the Joint Force will need to make

significant adjustments in its organization in order to synchronize (1) communication efforts to support service members operating in the nuances of the battlespace and (2) training to enhance its ability to combat China's narrative in the information space.

Scope

The aim of this paper is to assess the communication processes and narrative strategies required at the tactical, operational and strategic levels to combat the People's Liberation Army's effective information campaigns. This assessment is based on the study of the PLA's "Three Warfares" concept in the information domain, the PLA's actions and behavior toward adversaries, and the US Joint Force's current capabilities in the information environment. This information is provided in contrast to the Joint Force's current information structure, its capabilities in the information environment and its effect on the battlespaces in which US troops operate. Two caveats are offered before moving forward. First, it should be noted that space and cyber domains are beyond the scope of this paper as they remain classified secret with authorities that are not concisely addressed doctrinally. The cyber domain, particularly the internet, as it impacts the cognitive dimension of warfare will be discussed as the information environment today is shaped largely by this medium. Second, the PLA reforms made in 2015 was bifurcated into two phases. The "above the neck" reform focused on the structural change of the PLA which also established the SSF.⁶ Whereas the "below the neck" was a granular focus on the follow-on training and formatting of the force to facilitate the structural changes.⁷ The PLA's "above the neck" structural changes will primarily be discussed as "below the neck" reforms are still ongoing according to the limited study available in this regard.

To achieve the above-stated goal, the remainder of this paper will: (1) establish a baseline of the current information environment, covering societal impacts as it relates to the warfighter; (2) highlight the effectiveness of the PLA's comprehensive approach to strategic messaging

through its IRCs as demonstrated in recent history; (3) demonstrate the shortfalls of the Joint Force in this arena ; (4) provide recommendations to enhance the Joint Force's ability to counter the PLA's influence on the information environment derived from Marine Corps entry-level schools.

Information Environment Today

The information environment has been defined as the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information,⁸ and is best characterized as fast, available, and globally impactful.⁹ The internet's rise and the ubiquitous nature of social media has changed how society consumes information. By 2018, 90 percent of adults reported using online media as information sources, outperforming broadcast news and print periodicals attributed to the prevalence of mobile devices.¹⁰ A ceremonial Koran burning in the US impacted US and coalition operations against radical Islamists halfway across the world as demonstrated in 2010, when a Florida-based pastor's planned burning of a Koran led to violent protests across various provinces in Afghanistan.¹¹ Starting as mere streams of social media posts garnered worldwide attention in less than two months, resulting in acts of violence against NATO forces and the intervention of world leaders to include President Barack Obama. Since then, US adversaries have used social media to further their cause to harm US interests and increase international support.¹² The Islamic State (IS) was notorious for leveraging social media to recruit and invoke terrorist action against civilians in the western countries.¹³ Through aggressive communication strategy and branding, IS social media platforms outperformed that of similar jihadist groups, in social media activity and audience reach.¹⁴ Additionally, technological advancements exponentially increased the number of sources that transmit information to a

larger audience.¹⁵ IS is known to have bot profiles that perpetuate their original content in order to broadcast it to larger networks, moving such content from trending to viral.¹⁶

The information environment makes for an audience that is easily swayed with readily available information that is often mistaken as facts. Source credibility is becoming convoluted with limited context to the information being provided,¹⁷ making it difficult to distinguish between facts, opinions, and disinformation. The blurring lines between facts and opinions, information accessed by news outlets that are also accessible to the public and a decline in trust of government institutions contribute to the characterization of decaying truth in the information environment.¹⁸ Further decay comes from the power of individuals as influencers to an idea, brand or organization and the social media platforms that effectively tailor communication to the given audience. In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, major Chinese news outlets like China Global Television Network (CGTN) reported that the virus originated in the US following the claims made by Zhao Lijian, the deputy director of China's Foreign Ministry Information Department.¹⁹ As defined by Public Relations Review, social media influencers are third party endorsers who "shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media."²⁰ The influencers are typically in the 18-34 year age range who can relate to the communities established on the internet.²¹ As such, these social media influencers with their established followership make for the most impactful marketer of an idea or brand, sometimes with the intent to spread disinformation. In the COVID-19 case, a prominently positioned 47-year-old with a Twitter following that matches the population of Detroit and CGTN reporting, had adequate impact to make publics in the eastern hemisphere question the actual origin of the virus.²²

While social media influencers may be relatively harmless, the internet as an open marketplace of ideas allow for threats with similar attributes with malign intent to manipulate an

audience. Media manipulators exploit search engines and major news sites, capitalizing on lacking or missing data on the internet with the intent to mislead, perpetuate social tensions or polarize an audience.²³ These media manipulation tactics through the information environment is what led to the Russian exploit of US democracy during the 2016 US Presidential election. Leveraging the characteristics of today's information environment, the Russian federation used state-funded media, social media trolls,¹ and covert cyber activities to manipulate social media feeds of the American population.²⁴ The impacts of Russia's tactics against the US Presidential campaign is unknown, but considering the tactics in data analysis and precision in messaging to influence the American public, it is likely Russia had an effect on the election. All things considered, an adversary like the PLA is capable of manipulating the information environment far greater than the Russian interference on the 2016 election.

While the PLA continues to leverage such interconnectivity in information warfare, the US Joint Force lags in leveraging this medium. The shape-shifting media environment along with the limited jurisdiction on internet activity create vulnerabilities that the Joint Force must overcome. Despite these societal impacts, institutional challenges of the Joint Force and the Marine Corps in the information environment hinders it from being operationalized as information continues to remain an afterthought,²⁵ often viewed as merely a support function. The PLA, on the other hand continues to make information supremacy a priority objective.²⁶

The PLA Capabilities in the “Three Warfares”

Sun Tzu in the Art of War stated, “To defeat the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”²⁷ Living up to this maxim, the PLA's strategic concept of the “Three Warfares” adopted and implemented in 2003, catapulted the PRC's ability to achieve strategic objectives in a

¹ Troll: An online antagonist deliberately posting offensive and derogatory material with the intent to disrupt or disparage

comprehensive approach.²⁸ The origins were based on China's observation of US warfare techniques leading to a quick victory in Operation Desert Storm.²⁹ Rather than competing against a more technologically capable adversary, the Chinese saw a solution in the "Three Warfares" for an asymmetric advantage.³⁰ Through this alternate means of waging war through psychological, media, and legal warfare, PLA has maximized its effects on the cognitive domain, revising the status quo and the balance of power around the world.

Psychologically, China will go through great lengths to deceive and give the impression as a supportive ally. This behavior is evidenced in its civil-military engagements, and its funding of major infrastructure projects in countries in Africa and S. America with the intent to gain a favorable impression from these governments with ulterior motives in mind.³¹ With these relationships, the Chinese government remains in power and its influence spans outside of the Asian region. Conversely, the PRC also poses economic boycotts and diplomatic pressures on regional nations to convey disapproval and assert its hegemony.³² These coercive methods were used in Southeast Asian countries to push the Belt and Road Initiative which is China's efforts to strengthen and expand its trade and investment connections.³³

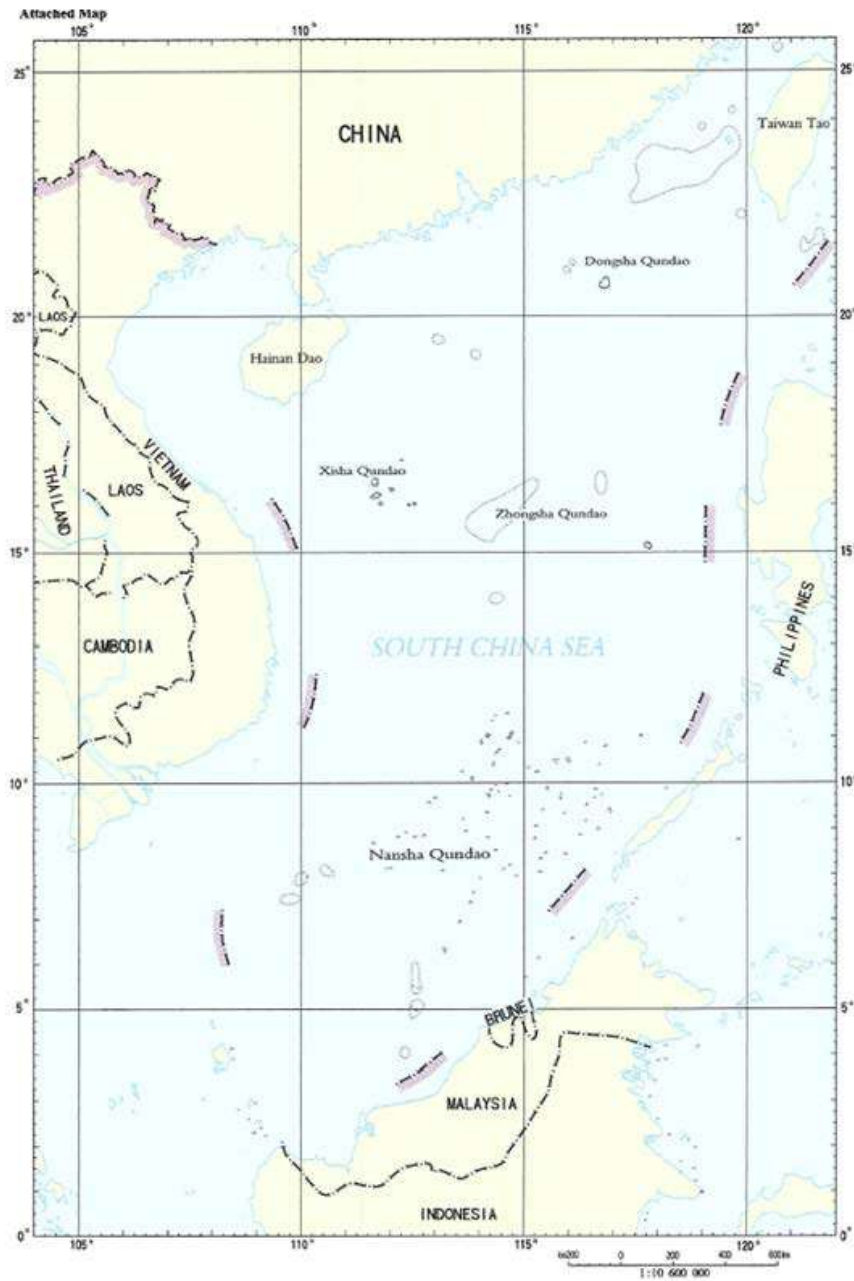
Through the media and state-run news agencies like Xinhua News, the PRC can shape public opinion and parrot the message of the Chinese Communist Party. This powerful medium is used as a propaganda tool to maintain national and international support on topics such as island disputes and territorial sovereignty. China Central Television (CCTV) is broadcasted in 183 countries as CGTN,³⁴ in the language of the host nation with messages favorable to the CCP. CCTV will also broadcast programs and documentaries that feature the PLA's contributions to international peace and stability.³⁵ With its television dramas showing the plight of the Chinese against foreign invading aggressors, these stories of its peaceful protagonists reach even US audiences.³⁶ Public opinion manipulation is not limited to television broadcasts. China makes

attempts to appear cooperative in the international community as well. Its participation in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and leading roles in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change serve to display itself as a responsible member in the international community.³⁷

In imperial China, law was viewed as an authoritative tool of state power to control the population rather than a constraint extended over the ruling authority.³⁸ The PRC witnessed an overhaul of this malleable legal construct following the Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution to the party controlled legal system present today.³⁹ Today, the PRC asserts its dominance in the region with its own interpretation of international law while using its military to expand China's sovereignty in the maritime domain.⁴⁰ As an example, the PRC often misconstrues the language of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to justify its claims in the South China Sea.⁴¹ Knowing that the classification of the disputed land features as islands were entitled to an exclusive economic zone, the PRC constructed structures and airstrips to form an artificial islands on reefs in the South China Sea. Following an arbitration over these disputed maritime territories, it was concluded that such features were considered low-tide elevation with no EEZ entitlements. This same Tribunal found that low-tide elevations within a state's territorial sea falls in that state's sovereignty⁴² which in this case, was not China's to claim.

The "Three Warfares" are seen separately in various parts of the world, but its collected application was used following the Scarborough Shoal dispute in 2012, when a Philippine Navy ship detected Chinese fishing vessels in its maritime territory allegedly conducting illegal activity. Years prior, a map with the nine-dash line was circulated to the UN in 2009 by the PRC as a means to depict China's sovereignty over the territory in the South China Sea.⁴³

Map 1: China's Dashed-Line Map from Notes Verbales of 2009



The map was an outdated ambiguous representation of China's sovereignty and was not aligned with the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea.⁴⁴ China provided no legal basis or any additional proclamations or statements regarding this map other than what was presented to the UN.⁴⁵ Following an arrest attempt made by the Philippine Navy, Chinese surveillance ships blocked further action from the Philippines and began to execute an elaborate scheme to override

any jurisdiction the Philippines had on the shoals. Through coercive law enforcement consisting of ramming Philippine ships and harassing Filipino fishermen, China established a naval presence in the surroundings of Scarborough Shoal, and undermined the Philippines' military that attempting to penetrate the established barrier.⁴⁶ China then attacked the Philippine economy with strict regulations on major crops, inhibiting its import into China, established bans, and ultimately causing Philippine farmers to bring pressure to their government. The broadcasted narrative on media platforms portrayed China as a victim of Philippine aggression.⁴⁷ To give the perception to the international community of maintaining the moral high ground, China pushed for peace talks through diplomatic means.⁴⁸ Regardless of China's success in giving that impression, the Philippines softened its approach and yielded to China on the dispute. China imposed its will and effectively used the "Three Warfares" to do so.

Today, China reinforces economic relationships established through the Belt and Road initiatives with military partnerships. The ties established within China-Pakistan and the China-Mongolia-Russia corridors with corresponding, partnered military exercises further these economic alliances through the military. Chinese, Mongolian, Pakistani and Russian armies, navies, and air forces drilling together in military exercises as Tsentr and Vostok,⁴⁹ is a demonstration of the effectiveness of the "Three Warfares" and the Belt and Road initiative.⁵⁰ As China's security objectives are intimately tied to its national interests, the development of the SSF enhances their approach. Leading up to the years of the PLA restructure of 2015, there was a growing realization that the structural organization of the PLA was the greatest roadblock to modernization, rather than technological capabilities.⁵¹ As such, the 2015 restructure collapsed organizations and established a more direct line between the PLA command and information capabilities of the SSF. Prior to this "above the neck" reform, capabilities such as cyber and electronic warfare were organized by discipline or mission sets, vice the warfighting service it is

today.⁵² The intent of the SSF was to enable effective warfighting with a combined capabilities approach with information as the primary weapon, rather than the mission-centric IRCs, viewed as only support elements to operational objectives.⁵³ Ultimately, the goal of the PLA in information warfare is information superiority in how it is processed, detected, and channeled into decision making systems.⁵⁴

Joint Force's structure and capabilities

“It is possible that a command may be subject concurrently to the PA direction of ... the Chief of Information (CHINFO) or the Director of Marine Corps Communication (DIROMCC), the immediate superior in the administrative chain, e.g., the type commander, the operational commander in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or combined task force organization, and the applicable U.S. Embassy and Country Team.”⁵⁵ This is the guidance given in the Department of the Navy's Policy and Regulations emphasizing the Public Affairs Officer's responsibility in coordinating approval and keeping authorities informed of communication activities. In the same document the emphasis of “timely release of information” is reiterated which creates a dilemma for military communication professionals. Though coordination between services and governmental agencies is a necessity when multiple government entities are involved, it will certainly impact the timely release of information, which is critical in today's information environment. While Chinese media and officials claimed COVID-19 originated in US Army labs, introduced into Wuhan during the Military World Games, neither the US Army nor the Dept. of Defense responded to or disputed the baseless claim.⁵⁶ Instead, it would take President Trump and members of his cabinet to correct the record weeks after the initial claims, doing little to turn the tide of disinformation.⁵⁷ The impact of the false narrative could have been mitigated with earlier messaging, regardless of its sensitivity, executed within the Army. These friction

points in the current joint force exist in the structure of communication assets, which leads to the bureaucracy that hampers the timely release of information.

An obstacle for timely release of information is created when the approval process requires cross-coordination between multiple entities as demonstrated in the scenario given in the Navy's Public Affairs policy. For example, the US ambassador or the chief of mission has the ultimate authority in releasing information regarding the US military within a sovereign state, as the acting executive authority and the most senior US representative.⁵⁸ Though a combatant command or its service component commands could have its own internal clearance process, information would still require diplomatic clearance. This diplomatic clearance is to ensure messaging released from the military aligns with the US strategic narrative in that nation, but it also hampers the speed of its release. If truth is determined by the most readily available information, timeliness of information is critical in the eyes of the public. In this arena, the Joint Force is at a disadvantage compared to the PLA that streamlines its strategic communication abilities through an authoritarian regime.

In addition to inter-governmental approval, communicating authority in the Joint Force is top heavy in that Public Affairs and like assets reside in major subordinate commands. For example, release authority in the Marine Corps resides in major subordinate commands of the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) which is the largest Marine air-ground warfighting organization of the service.⁵⁹ Release authorities primarily reside in the air, ground, and logistics components of MEF at the aircraft wing, division, and logistics group level which is typically several levels separated from the troops operating on the ground. The perceptions in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom varied by town or province and a lack of awareness in these nuanced locations could be catastrophic to the strategy in occupying Iraq. A study on military intervention and key leader engagement in Iraq explored the varying degrees of Iraqi perceptions

of the coalition force based on the impacts of social circles, location and key leader influence within 10 districts in Baghdad.⁶⁰ The conclusion of the study was, “that no single technique, operation, series of activities, etc. is, by itself, truly decisive across large areas of operations. It is the combination of various techniques tailored to the unique requirements of different—often very tactical or local—environments and circumstances that create desired outcomes.”⁶¹ A “one size fits all” approach is how military communication is currently designed as release authority resides at higher levels with little to no room for adjustments at the user level on the ground.⁶²

The services within the Joint Force established varying methods to leverage the information environment. Information in the Marine Corps is now recognized as a warfighting function, comparable to the functions of maneuver and intelligence. To broaden capabilities in navigating the information environment, the Marine Corps established the MEF Information Group (MIG) in 2017 to augment the MEF with robust capabilities such as a Communication Strategy Operations (CommStrat) company, Radio and Intelligence battalions. The MIG’s purpose is to plan, coordinate and support operations in the information environment across MEF areas of interest supporting Marine Air-Ground Task Force operations.⁶³ As it boasts in facilitating the “whole of MAGTF” approach for MEF engagements in the information environment,⁶⁴ its separation from the MEF as a major subordinate command is counterintuitive. The MEF employs its information capabilities as support elements in deployed operations but structures them as separate command while nondeployed at the homefront.⁶⁵ Also, rather than a traditional Combat Operations Center to a MEF, the focal point that unifies efforts of the MIG into a singular objective resides in the Information Command Center.⁶⁶ It bears some resemblance to the PLA’s SSF in that information capabilities are integrated, but differs without the efficiencies since the MIG is a separate element to the MEF and its staff. To truly integrate Information into the other Warfighting functions, separation in structure and assets is not the

answer as it will only add to the friction and add layers of authority, misaligning messages to support operations on the ground.

Communication assets in the Army can be organic to the organization, down to the brigade level⁶⁷ with the brigades' public affairs sections coordinating closely with the supported command to plan and conduct public affairs activities. However, like the Marine Corps, the Army also separates its information related assets into separate detachments that can individually augment or deploy as an entire detachment to support a division, brigade, or other groups such as special forces and civil affairs.⁶⁸ The nonorganic nature of these detachments continue to hinder the actual integration of information assets with operations. These separate entities within the services lead to additional authorities with additional potential for misalignment in narratives within the Joint Force.

The MIG as well as the Joint Force's current strategic messaging authorities, do not lend itself to function efficiently in already existing bureaucracies, inter-government. In the timely release of information, the Joint Force is no match against the PLA that streamlines the authorities under one entity. The Joint Force would see immediate improvement in this process if authorities were streamlined as the PLA saw the need in establishing the SSF.⁶⁹ Arrangements to achieve diplomatic and military objectives can be made with a delegation of authority that makes releasing information more relevant and expedient. This will require improved integration in communication between the diplomatic and military arms of the US government to address the timely release of information. Lastly, the varying sentiments in the information environment today will require the Joint Force to contribute to the narrative at a much lower level. Improvements on training will need to be addressed to provide servicemembers with the capabilities to impact the information domain, while not hindering strategic narratives.

Recommendations

“Marines must understand that controlling physical terrain is no longer a sufficient condition for battlefield success; we must also navigate the landscape of knowledge and perception. Operating in the information domain will not only require us to protect our networks but take actions that inform, promote, persuade, coerce, dissuade, convince, compel, deceive, mask, and intimidate.”

- Gen. Robert B. Neller, 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps
Marine Corps Operating Concept, September 2016

Approaching Joint Force communication reforms through the “above the neck” and “below the neck” methods concurrently may be the solution against adversaries like China who comprehensively engages audiences with the “Three Warfares.” Streamlining authorities in military communication that directly support the state may be an attribute to authoritarian regimes but a work-around for the Joint Force may start with training at the initial-entry level and restructuring communication authorities.

In terms of below the neck, leveraging the First Amendment ability of free speech and the social media savvy of service members is the asymmetric advantage the US has over its adversaries in strategic communication. Rather than hampering servicemember’s ability to speak freely on digital platforms, allowing them to inundate the information environment may be the most suitable advantage to defeat adversaries like China. Influencing perceptions and behaviors of relevant actors in the battlespace is no longer limited to information related MOSs as the US has seen in nearly two decades of combat operations overseas. As Gen. Brute Krulak once stated, “the individual Marine will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well.”⁷⁰ Likewise, every service member should have the ability to shape

perception since meeting communication objectives are not the exclusive responsibility of the Communication Strategy and or the Psychological Operations occupational specialties.

Generally, service members are limited in the ability to shape narratives during the conduct of an operation mainly for operational security reasons and due to the strict nature of strategic communication which only allows communicating officials and senior leaders to do so.⁷¹ In the Marine Corps, Marines are exhaustively trained on the importance of operational security and professional conduct on social media,⁷² but are rarely trained on how to affect the information environment. The negative stigma of engaging the public through media outlets stemming from the Vietnam era continues to affect how service members view these engagements. The fear of reprisal from communicating to an audience overtakes the Joint Force which keeps commanders from using media engagements as a tool to shape and communicate on the battlefield.⁷³ A unit is quick to declare “River City,” the brevity to blackout communication assets in the event of an emergency, exercising operational or information security, but doing so also halts a unit’s ability to affect change in the information environment. Just as the truism of “every Marine a rifleman,” every Marine should be considered an information related capability, able to perform mission-essential tasks in the information environment to influence the battlespace. Rather than cutting off communication as a preventative measure in operational security, maintaining the means to communicate should be the priority to shape a favorable narrative on the battlefield. The inability to communicate for even a day could damage the public’s perception of the organization. Streamlining authorities to this degree will require extensive training at the initial-entry level as well as a restructure in IRCs to work compatibly with other warfighting functions. With that said, the proposed recommendations will address training and structural changes required to counter the PRC.

Training: The short-term solution

Injecting Information into initial-entry training would be the short-term approach toward the long-term strategy of employing troops as an information related capability. Service members are first exposed to the six warfighting functions in the initial-entry programs following Officer Candidate School and Basic and Recruit Training. At The Basic School, the Marine Corps' Basic Officer Course, lieutenants are taught maneuver tactics at the platoon level, basic force protection measures, intelligence requirements, the value of logistics, the ability to call for fire, and how to operate various communication equipment.⁷⁴ Similarly, at Marine Combat Training and School of Infantry, enlisted Marines learn how to maneuver at the squad level, operate a radio, call for indirect fire, and provide intelligence updates, but nothing in these curricula (TBS, SOI and MCT) directs attention to information as an enabler or warfighting function. Marines may get a glimpse of operational and strategic messaging through media training provided by the unit CommStrat officer but its purpose is mainly aimed at preventing faux pas that could negatively impact the institution. Likewise, Marines will get a social media conduct class as a wicket of annual training. These social media classes may vary, but it often provides nothing more than the "Do's and Don'ts" of social media.

To integrate Marines as actors in the Information environment, the value of Information to the warfighter must be taught at the initial-entry level in conjunction with the other warfighting functions that are integrated into these entry-level schools. In the Marine Corps Instructional Tactics and Assessment Techniques Handbook, the inference is made that scenario-based training is optimal in adult learning, since expertise in decision-making is drawn from previous experiences.⁷⁵ As such, the Marine Corps adopted scenario-based training into their schools to enhance their training and make the learning more interactive, drawn from an actual experience.⁷⁶

The Basic School (TBS) as well as the Army Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) creates a scenario where lieutenants engage a fictitious enemy to supplement their training. This scenario is at the root of the training objectives throughout the six-month period of instruction⁷⁷ as the enemy converts from conventional tactics to unconventional tactics that facilitate the learning objectives for the TBS lieutenants. Their introductory training provides them with an understanding of leading a rifle platoon in combat with a fundamental understanding of the six warfighting functions. As the lieutenants transition from traditional offensive and defensive tactics against Centralians Revolutionary Forces in the Quantico woods or Atropian Forces in Ft. Benning Georgia, the Military Operations in Urban Terrain package is geared toward an enemy that uses unconventional methods with attributes that are similar to Al-Qaeda in OIF. These scenarios lend themselves to meet Information training objectives related to shaping the battlefield or countering the enemy's narrative. As TBS lieutenants learn about the IRCs during their Operations in the Information Environment lecture, they should be posed with corresponding problems to counter enemy actions in the cognitive domain in the fictitious scenario. Likewise, enlisted entry-level Marines at Marine Combat Training and School of Infantry are posed with a similar scenario as they train as a squad against a fictional enemy. With a problem in the information environment to navigate as a squad, enlisted Marines can be trained early to contribute to the narrative as an information related capability.

Leveraging the generation literate of the tools in the digital age by training service members at the initial-entry level would require the Communication Strategy and Psychological Operations MOS training to change as well. Currently, a point of friction that arising at the CommStrat/ Public Affairs MOS school at the Defense Information School (DINFOS) in Fort Meade, MD is their accreditation process.⁷⁸ DINFOS, responsible for teaching officers to engage civilian media and meet unit and service level communication objectives, produces a

basically trained officer, able to use various communication platforms ranging from social media to news media to communicate on behalf of their organization. For the enlisted service members, DINFOS teaches the technical aspects of photography, videography, and media reproduction as content providers to meet organizational communication objectives. The accreditation requirements levied on DINFOS makes it difficult to meet the needs of the Joint Force in a rapidly changing information environment. With that said, instead of requiring DINFOS to pace with these changes, taking basic training objectives taught at DINFOS and applying them to the different entry-level schools across the services is recommended. DINFOS in turn can elevate their training for CommStrat/Public Affairs to serve as facilitators, connecting tactical level communication with strategic narratives. The expectation is that CommStrat takes on the role of managing user-level communication to fit the scope of the strategic narrative. As combatant commands have varying strategic messages based on the area of operation, ensuring messages at the tactical level fit the strategic narrative should be the responsibility of the CommStrat officer.

Release Authority Restructure: The long-term solution

The “above the neck” approach would require restructuring release authority in the Department of Defense and branches of service as a long-term solution. Department of Defense Directive 5122.05, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, provides leeway on release authority stating, “Redelegate these authorities, as appropriate, and in writing, except as otherwise indicated in this issuance or prohibited by law.”⁷⁹ Along with reformatting training to integrate Information at the initial-entry level, structure at the command headquarters must also change to better integrate IRCs into operations. The current CommStrat and Public Affairs structures of the Joint Force makes for an organization with top-heavy communicating capability. Currently, IRCs such as CommStrat reside at major subordinate commands like the

Division, Wing, Logistic Group levels and above, with no such capability at the regiments and below. To truly employ a “strategic corporal” to make an impact on the information environment, Public Affairs and CommStrat personnel should reside at lower echelons of command to facilitate the alignment of tactical level information to strategic narratives. If Marines are conducting tactical level operations with the need to influence the information environment at the local level, IRCs such as CommStrat should be placed accordingly to support the management of information. With that said, IRCs should reside at the battalions and regiments to manage information and ensure tactical level messaging is nested in strategic narratives. This recommended structure is not only for forward deployed units but for units in garrison as well. As every unit makes impacts in its local community, whether good or bad, a CommStrat representative should be managing information to shape favorable perceptions in these areas as well.

To truly integrate Information, the integration must take place at a command’s staff with IRC planners collocated to provide input into operations. Currently, synchronization of IRCs supporting operations rely on boards, bureaus, and working groups to form for the purpose of communication synchronization. Again, this adds another layer to the already time-consuming process of impacting the information environment. The G35, typically responsible for plans and future operations is a possible setting for such planners to reside. The Operations section focuses on matters concerning training, operations and plans, and force development and modernization,⁸⁰ and the G35 is responsible for the preparation and coordination of OPLANs, OPORDs, fragmentary orders (FRAGOs), and warning orders (WARNOs) to which other staff sections contribute.⁸¹ The G3 houses some IRCs but not all. The Electronic Warfare and Psychological Operations might have a permanent presence in the G3 but a CommStrat/Public Affairs Officer is not. To ensure military communication is deconflicted in a timely manner to

support operations, a CommStrat/Public Affairs Officer should be a member of the G35 to expedite coordination with other governmental entities, and tie in communication to operations on the ground.

Conclusion

Many of the capabilities to influence local level tactics, tied to strategic objectives rest on the individual Marines operating in the given battlespace. The ability to affect the information environment at the user level allows service members on the ground to shape the varying perceptions unique to their area of operation. Streamlined authorities that allow messaging to be shaped at the tactical and operational level, nested in a strategic narrative, is how the Joint Force will need to modernize to optimally combat the narrative of adversaries such as China's PLA and ultimately gain information superiority.

The changes with the PLA's restructure are to be completed in 2020,⁸² which leaves no time to spare for the Joint Force and the Marine Corps to reorganize and train its force. Both the "above the neck" and "below the neck" approach adopted by the PLA is what the Marine Corps and the Joint Force needs to compete against them in the information environment. The streamlined authorities in the PLA, particularly the SSF, is what makes it so effective in information warfare. Countering the PLA's information campaign will require a cultural shift starting at the entry level. Empowering every service member to act as an information related capability to subscribe to the narrative as it fits their unique operating environment would enhance how the joint force fights against the PLA. Though each of the services have established different structures and methods to engage in the information environment, the bureaucracy that delays the Joint Force's abilities to counter enemy narratives remains an obstacle. Engagement in the information environment would all be for naught if it did not

benefit the warfighter on the ground, and as it stands today, the Joint Force is losing in the battlefield of information against an adversary like China. Addressing these challenges will require the Joint Force to shift the traditional mindset of communication and communication authorities to facilitate operations at the lowest levels, while resourcing IRCs to reflect this change.

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