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Emulating China's Systems Confrontation Warfare Concept for U.S. Army Training

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After observing the U.S. military's performance in the first Gulf War, Chinese military theorists concluded that advanced weapons and equipment have changed the character of armed conflict, leading the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to develop an approach to warfare known as 'systems confrontation.'¹ Since then, the PLA has refined and evolved its new concept, but the underlying principle remains consistent—warfare as confrontations between integrated, high-technology systems using joint forces across all domains of warfare, rather than engagements between individual units or combined-arms maneuver formations.² Systems include individual elements joined to form a greater whole, and systems themselves can join to form systems of systems. All systems depend upon critical nodes, which, if disrupted, will render it ineffective.

The PLA does not limit its warfare domain concept to the same domains as the U.S. military. In addition to land, sea, air, space, and cyber; Chinese forces consider the cognitive dimension and electromagnetic spectrum to be domains.

The primary objective of systems confrontation is to paralyze the enemy by disabling what the PLA identifies as the five critical military operational systems: command, firepower-strike, information, intelligence, and support. Rather than focusing on destroying individual units or platforms, systems confrontation seeks to render the enemy's operational systems ineffective.³ By targeting systems, the enemy is prevented from coordinating and supporting its forces, leading to isolation on the battlefield. Once isolated, the attacker can surround and annihilate unsupported formations that have been rendered combat ineffective. The tools used in systems confrontation warfare should already be familiar to U.S. Army Soldiers because they are represented in tactical doctrine. The U.S. Army employs one or more of the four defeat mechanisms—destroy, disintegrate, isolate, and displace⁴—to prevent enemy forces from achieving their objectives, which closely parallels the PLA's principles of systems confrontation warfare.⁵

Systems confrontation warfare relies on PLA forces' ability to focus attacks against key nodes connection points essential to the enemy's operational systems. Chinese forces prefer to attack weak but vital nodes where they have a relative advantage. These focused attacks are executed through a combination of "soft" and "hard" fires, including cyber and electromagnetic warfare with lethal fires.⁶ Nonlethal means may be the main effort, with lethal fires as the supporting effort.



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Figure 1: In systems confrontation warfare, the PLA will use all seven domains to target the enemy's five operational systems. The intent is to degrade, destroy, or isolate the enemy at the operational level, thus weakening the enemy's ability to fight while avoiding direct engagement with combat forces. (Source: TRADOC G-2)

The PLA aims to neutralize the enemy's ability to fight by targeting the most critical operational systems, focusing first on command and control to paralyze decisionmaking and disrupt communications. As depicted in Figure 1, likely targets at each echelon include command posts and headquarters, which the PLA may attack kinetically based on electronic and other signatures, as well as through nonlethal means such as electronic warfare (EW) and cyberspace attacks. After disabling command systems, the PLA will target high-tech weapon systems, then support systems, and finally seek to undermine enemy morale.⁷ Information systems are especially vital because Chinese forces view the information network as the central nervous system of the fighting force, making it a top priority in systems confrontation.

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PLA Operational Systems	Types of Enemy Targets by Echelon		
	Strategic	Operational	Tactical
Command	 National command centers Theater command centers Nuclear C2, and communications Coalition/allied headquarters 	 Corps and Army command posts Joint task force headquarters 	 Corps and Army command posts Joint task force headquarters
Firepower Strike	 Nuclear triad bases Global strike command Satellite navigation systems 	 Theater ballistic missiles Corps artillery Theater air component Theater naval component C2 ships 	 Division surface fires Division strike aviation Naval surface vessels Tactical aircraft and airfields
Information Confrontation	 Satellite communications National communications networks Public opinion/ influence operations Lawfare 	 Early warning radars Satellite communications Theater networks Psychological operations 	 Fire direction radars Tactical radios Tactical networks
Reconnaissance Intelligence	 National ISR platforms Intelligence community facilities Satellite ground stations 	 Theater ISR assets Theater intelligence units 	 Uncrewed systems Ground signals intelligence Human intelligence
Support	 Homeland airports & seaports Homeland road & rail hubs Air movement command Transportation command 	 Corps support area Lines of communication Overseas ports and airfields 	 Field trains Combat trains Division support brigade

Figure 2: Types of Targets by Echelon in Systems Confrontation Warfare (Source: TRADOC G-2)

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SYSTEMS CONFRONTATION WARFARE UNDER LSCO CONDITIONS

The PLA's systems confrontation concept enables it to exploit the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the key conditions that will shape future large-scale combat operations, as described in TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92, The Operational Environment 2024-2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations. Systems confrontation warfare is likely to manifest under these 12 LSCO conditions as follows:



All-domain Competition and Warfare: The PLA can operate in and employ fires across all domains, degrading an opponent's freedom of movement on land, sea, and air, as well as space-based capabilities.



Mass vs. Precision: China is rapidly advancing its precision-guided munitions stockpiles to complement its vast arsenal of area-effect weapons, enhancing its ability to conduct multidomain precision strikes while maintaining the flexibility to mass fires.



Proliferation of Uncrewed Systems: China is rapidly expanding its development of uncrewed systems, which play a crucial role in the PLA's air and sea dominance campaigns, while contributing to ground combat lethality and sustainment support.



Magazine Depth and Range: China's domestic manufacturing base can produce vast quantities of military equipment and supplies, which will afford the PLA a significant advantage, especially within the Indo-Pacific region.



Transparent Battlefield: China's ability to collect and connect information across all domains, particularly within the Indo-Pacific region, will limit an adversary's ability to maintain concealment and disguise movement and operations.



Increased Lethality: The PLA's large numbers of advanced precision-guided munitions and long-range weapons, supported by all-domain ISR, enable it to deliver and sustain lethal effects over a wide area.



Antiaccess/Area Denial: The PLA's extensive multidomain precision fires are essential to its antiaccess/area-denial capabilities, which form the core of China's counter-intervention strategy.



Contested Logistics: China's long-range lethal fires and nonlethal capabilities can disrupt an adversary's logistics at their home stations and throughout the lines of communication, making it difficult for troops, equipment, and supplies to reach the Indo-Pacific theater.



Homeland Defense: China's extensive intelligence collection and conventional, hybrid, and irregular warfare capabilities create unprecedented Homeland defense challenges for the United States.



Dense Urban Warfare: The PLA consistently trains for operations in densely populated urban areas, which would likely feature heavily in a conflict over disputed territories with some regional actors such as India, Taiwan, or Vietnam.



Information Advantage: China's doctrinal commitment to establishing information dominance, which it considers at least as important as firepower or maneuver, enables it to swiftly shape the information landscape and challenge its adversaries' ability to gain information advantage.



Weapons of Mass Destruction: China is swiftly modernizing its nuclear forces, with the objective of increasing its arsenal to more than 1,000 warheads by 2030 and enhancing survivability by developing a comprehensive nuclear triad of land-, sea-, and air-based capabilities.

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Implications for U.S. Army Training

Systems confrontation can be faithfully emulated by OPFOR in exercises to help U.S. Army units better understand and defeat adversaries using a similar operational approach.

- An OPFOR emulating systems confrontation warfare would target key network nodes and weak
 points to isolate and destroy them, disintegrating specific systems rather than formations.
 By targeting weak nodes in key systems—C2, intelligence, fires, and logistics—the OPFOR would
 deny the Blue force the ability to establish a common operating picture, communicate intent to
 subordinate commands, employ forces in a mutually supporting manner, and sustain operations.
 For an OPFOR using a systems-confrontation approach, seizing and holding key terrain is secondary
 to achieving desired effects upon key Blue force nodes.
- The OPFOR would also target the Blue force's decisionmaking by influencing its commander in the cognitive domain. In such a scenario, the OPFOR would lead with cognitive warfare to confuse the Blue force commander by restricting access to accurate and timely information and provide false and misleading information. The goal would be to cause the commander to make poor decisions and demoralize the fighting force.
- The OPFOR would then try to target the Blue force's advanced weapons systems to interdict fires early in the fight through lethal and nonlethal means. Soft kills would focus on blinding sensors or disrupting communications, while hard kills would use long-range precision munitions, prioritizing the most sophisticated Blue systems. OPFOR would try to overwhelm Blue's fires in terms of quality (i.e., exquisite systems) and quantity (e.g., drone swarms and massed fires).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jeffrey Engstrom, Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018). https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/ RR1708.html. Also available in print form.
- 2 Yuliang Zhang, et al., Science of Campaigns, trans. CASI and Project Everest (Maxwell AFB: Air University, 2020), 407-410.
- 3 Tianliang Xiao, et al., Science of Military Strategy, trans. CASI (Maxwell AFB: Air University, 2022), 262-273.
- 4 Department of the Army, Operations ADP 3-0 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019), 2-4 2-5.
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Rongren Ji et al., Services and Arms Application in Joint Operations, trans. CASI and Project Everest (Maxwell AFB: Air University, 2021), 27-29.
- 7 Rongren Ji et al., Services and Arms Application in Joint Operations, trans. CASI and Project Everest (Maxwell AFB: Air University, 2021), 25-27.
- 8 Jeffrey Engstrom, Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018). https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/ RR1708.html. Also available in print form.



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