



A New Approach: Countering China's War without Rules

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Central Committee of the Communist Party of China at a session in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing on March 13, 2014. | Mirko | Adobe Stock

IN THEIR MILITARY TREATISE *Unrestricted Warfare*, Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui articulated a new doctrine of warfare: nothing is off limits or out of bounds. Their doctrine drew on centuries of Chinese strategic thinking and deviated radically from the Western doctrine of war—a deviation from the status quo and peace. Western democracies have not yet developed an effective counter to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) approach. To do so, there are three concepts the West must embrace to advance a counter doctrine that both embodies Western principles and effectively opposes what *Unrestricted Warfare* represents. We must shift from a rule-based order to an

interest-based order, from offense to defense, and from finite order to infinite order. Failure to incorporate any of these will result in a world that tilts toward authoritarianism.

The two colonels’ words accurately describe the thought foundation of such a world:

Acknowledge that the new principles of war are no longer using force to compel the enemy to submit to one’s will but rather are using all means including armed force and non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.¹

FROM A RULE-BASED ORDER TO AN INTEREST-BASED ORDER

Academics and policy experts simultaneously cite and deride *Unrestricted Warfare* as a Chinese grand strategy. The words’ principles, however, clearly point to this as a doctrine document. According to RAND, “military doctrine is the fundamental set of principles that guides military forces as they pursue national security objectives.”²



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We define doctrine as a guide for “military forces,” but the two PLA colonels developed a doctrine beyond the military norm and instead encompassed the entirety of civilization.

For centuries, Western militaries have set accepted parameters for warfare. We have recorded these rules in the *Law of Armed Conflict*. For example, one must “distinguish between military objectives which can be attacked and civilian objects which must be respected.”³

In *Unrestricted Warfare*, the colonels believe these accepted parameters aid Western militaries and continue their global dominance: compliance with the *Law of Armed Conflict* sets new entrants to the battlefield at a disadvantage. This is because Western militaries have adapted their warfighting doctrine to be successful according to these rules. The colonels might have viewed the contemporary battlefield along the lines of the famous test in *Star Trek*, the “Kobayashi Maru,” said to be unwinnable.⁴ Spoiler alert: to succeed, Captain Kirk hacks the computer and changes the rules to win. Like Kirk, the colonels must have questioned when the rules themselves compel the Chinese military into a losing position, why abide by them? In their treatise, the two colonels hack Western warfighting rules by eliminating the rules altogether.



Escorted by Deng Xiao Ping, President Gerald Ford inspects the Honor Guard at Peking Capital Airport upon his arrival in China. | David Hume Kennerly CC public domain



Antiaircraft rockets silhouettes on background of Chinese flag | Paopano | Adobe Stock

To counter *Unrestricted Warfare*, the West must recognize that Chinese doctrine is no longer confined to accepted parameters but encompasses the whole of society. This more closely reflects politics, economics, finance, and the media. This also resembles Mao’s conception of the Protracted People’s War, in which political indoctrination and the support of the people became the paramount objective versus military prowess. The idea embraced victory achieved through the wearing down of the enemy.

Thus, the doctrine of *Unrestricted Warfare* seeks to break all the established rules and to weaken from within, using the enemy’s openness to corrupt their political system. Success encourages other nations to adopt rule-breaking to stay competitive. The rule makers will be defeated by their own adherence to the system they built. An effective counter doctrine begins with an acknowledgement that the accepted rules do not apply to the CCP regime.

FROM DEFENSE TO OFFENSE

Either the West adopts a doctrine that forsakes the rules, or they accept defeat. This course of action destroys international order by withholding respect for the rules, which leads to

mistrust of Western institutions. This further erodes the concepts of Rule of Law, civil liberty, free trade and human rights. These are the goals of the Chinese Communist Party and must be avoided. Therefore, we must defend international order by preserving adherence to the rules of the road. We accomplish this by excluding those regimes who denounce and defile the rules.

A defensive strategy is counter to the military approach established for the first Cold War. In that conflict, the threat of nuclear weapons forced a strategy of offense.

Lt. General Glenn Kent, Thinking About America's Defense, discusses this in his analytical memoir published by RAND. He writes that:

To achieve the level of 70-percent survival of the U.S. population (against a stated Soviet deployment of ICBMs and SLBMs), the United States would have to spend a total of \$28 billion... When the values were revised on the basis that the costs to the Soviets to purchase ICBMs and SLBMs were comparable to our own costs, the ratio was more like 2:1 at the 70 percent survival level. At the 90-percent level, the ratio was more adverse—probably 6:1.

Further, Lt. General Kent writes that the Secretary of Defense recognized “this was a race that we probably would not win and should avoid.”⁶ In other words, choosing defense over offense forces the West into bankruptcy. This led to the development of a strategy to deter an attack on the United States based on offense.

A doctrine which favors defense over offense is more suited to the doctrine proposed in *Unrestricted Warfare*. In fact, the approach adopted during the Cold War by the United States to prevent the Soviets from capitalizing on U.S. technology to improve its military uses this concept. At that time, the United States and its allies established an economic adjunct to NATO which sought to isolate the Soviet Union, known as the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export

Controls (COCOM). COCOM is a working group of 16 nations established to monitor exports of strategic goods—especially high-technology products—to potentially hostile countries. The members are Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States⁷

The United States has already revived this process by attempting to recreate this organization through initiatives like the CHIPS Act, but unfortunately the nature of the globalized internet-connected world is such that this level of defense is insufficient.⁸ While the CHIPS act may slow the Chinese chip development program, *Unrestricted Warfare* goes beyond technology, directly eroding social cohesions and political support for these types of protections.

Information weapons are a prominent example of kinder weapons. Whether it involves electromagnetic energy weapons for hard destruction or soft strikes by computer logic bombs, network viruses, or media weapons, all emphasize paralysis and undermining, rather than personnel casualties.⁹

Media weapons apply to weaponizing social media, a tactic used to divide and inflame, or control, societies. While U.S. social media platforms provide a suitable target for these types of attacks, Chinese social media platforms are an even more effective weapon. Platforms like TikTok provide an enormous advantage as the CCP can perfect algorithms and collect data on individual citizens. This direct influence on citizens of free countries is far greater than the dangers the



LIJIANG, CHINA-FEB 18: Mao statue, with the slogan on wall: “Long live the great Communist Party of China” in Lijiang on Feb 18 2012. Mao, a statesman who laying the foundation of new china. | LT | Adobe Stock

Soviets could achieve with active measures—"covert political operations ranging from disinformation campaigns to staging insurrections."¹⁰ Active measures limited the Soviet's reach into free societies.

The authors of *Unrestricted Warfare* understood the power of the internet.

Its revolutionary significance is not merely in that it is a brand-new technology itself, but more in that it is a kind of bonding agent which can lightly penetrate the layers of barriers between technologies and link technologies which appear to be totally unrelated... The emergence of information technology has presented endless possibilities for matchups involving various old and new technologies... The general fusion of technology is irreversibly guiding the rising globalization trend, which the globalization trend in turn is accelerating the process of the general fusion of technology, and this is the basic characteristic of our day.¹¹

Almost on cue, the internet and information technology have given rise to ChatGPT, a natural language model platform which appears to converse like a human and has an enormous database comprising information from the Internet.¹² COCOM, with its limited scope, would not effectively prevent this type of technology from being leveraged to undermine free societies. The defense must be broad and deep, otherwise the "bonding agent" will enable the doctrine in *Unrestricted Warfare* to break any containment.

FROM FINITE TO INFINITE

The West measures war by beginnings and endings, the latter of which defines clear winners and losers. The Western phasing concept of warfare envisions a conflict that happens in stages: "phase 0 (shape), phase I (deter), phase II (seize initiative), phase III (dominate), phase IV (stabilize), and



finally, phase V (enable civil authority)."¹³ A geopolitical issue interrupts peacetime, and leaders contemplate military force as a solution to the problem. Diplomacy or economic sanctions attempts fail. The nation then decides that the issue is so vital that force is required to coerce the other party to acquiesce. Once conflict begins, leaders task the military with creating conditions that force the enemy to submit. The Second World War established the objective of total submission: complete victory and then a return to peace where civilian authorities reestablish political control.

The Chinese concept of war is infinite. Strategy spans decades and generations adhere to the effort. Simon Sinek, a leadership expert and well-known author, discusses the difference between infinite and finite as applied to games.

Finite games are played by known players. They have fixed rules. And there is an agreed upon objective that, when reached, ends the game... Infinite games have infinite time horizons. And because there is no finish line, no practical end to the game, there is no such thing as "winning" an infinite game. In an infinite game, the primary objective is to keep playing, to perpetuate the game.¹⁴

The goal of the CCP is to survive, to "keep playing." The Western and the *Unrestricted Warfare* concepts of war are

completely at odds. Simply put, two separate civilizations do not agree on one concept of reality. For the West to develop an effective counter, it must first come to terms with the war it is fighting. This is easier than it sounds. The United States and its allies succeeded in an “infinite” conflict—the Cold War. During the Cold War, each side sought to keep playing, yet avoided conflict because of the incredible destruction that a “hot” war with nuclear weapons would entail.

The goal of the CCP is to remain in perpetual competition while systematically eroding the principles of Western constitutional democracy.

The West, however, does not just seek survival, but survival according to a set of principles. The CCP defines its survival in terms that do not accept those principles. *Document number 9*, an internal CCP document, states:

Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy: An attempt to undermine the current leadership and the socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance.¹⁵

The goal of the CCP is to remain in perpetual competition while systematically eroding the principles of Western constitutional democracy. This is accomplished by playing an infinite game where the players, both known and unknown, collaborate to corrupt the system. By inviting China to become a full partner in the rules-based system, the United States and its allies ensured a slow erosion of that order, as China does not adhere to the “rules.”

Where deterrence based on offensive power sufficed to erode the power of the Soviet Union, a similar doctrine will not prevail in Cold War II. The CCP studied the Cold War and



noted the Soviet Union’s fatal flaw: there was a complete denial of Soviet history, denial of Lenin, denial of Stalin, pursuit of historical nihilism... The great Soviet socialist nation fell to pieces.¹⁶

When faced with a Western system that is devoted to the CCP’s destruction, adherence to Chinese political doctrine is required. China will drain the West of its technology, talent and capital, but the West’s ideology must be defeated.

An effective counter doctrine recognizes the CCP’s goals and seeks to isolate its influence from those institutions which are tasked with upholding the principles of the rule-based order. An applicable example of potential doctrine enforcement denies China a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council. China does not believe in the Western conception of human rights, therefore, it should not be given a seat on the Council.

CONCLUSION

The shift from a rule-based to an interest-based order, from offense to defense; from finite to infinite, established a doctrine to counter the CCP’s “War Without Rules.”¹⁷ This does not mean Western war doctrine is not needed or is ineffective as a concept. It means that where Western liberal democracy seeks to preserve a rules-based order, new thought must be applied. Failure to do so will ensure authoritarianism as the predominant global political system.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

US Air Force Brigadier General (ret) Robert Spalding is the founder and CEO of SEMPRES, the only true technology company created to protect and secure our most critical resource: data. Rob is former White House National Security Council senior director for strategic planning, serving in senior positions of strategy and diplomacy within the Defense and State Departments for more than 26 years. His innovation while serving in the White House has led to a reset in national security and public policy regarding telecommunications in the US as well as globally. Rob is the author of two books, “STEALTH WAR: How China took over while America’s elites slept” and “War without Rules.”

ENDNOTES

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- 5 Glenn A. Kent et al., *Thinking about America’s Defense: An Analytical Memoir*, (RAND Corporation, 2008).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 S. Charnovitz, “COCOM (Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls),” *World Encyclopedia of Law*, January 29, 2016, <https://lawin.org/cocom-coordinating-committee-for-multilateral-export-controls/> (accessed January 25, 2023).
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- 9 Robert Spalding, “Chapter 4: The Weapons Revolution,” in *War without Rules China’s Playbook for Global Domination* (New York: Sentinel, 2022), 67.
- 10 Mark Galeotti, *Active Measures: Russia’s Covert Geopolitical Operations*, George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies, June 2019.
- 11 Robert Spalding, “Chapter 3: The ‘Magic Shoes’ of Technology,” in *War without Rules China’s Playbook for Global Domination* (New York: Sentinel, 2022), 44.
- 12 ChatGPT is a large language model developed by OpenAI that can be used for natural language processing tasks such as text generation and language translation...One of the key features of ChatGPT is its ability to generate human-like text responses to prompts. This makes it useful for a wide range of applications, such as creating chatbots for customer service, generating responses to questions in online forums, or even creating personalized content for social media posts. “CHATGPT: The Most Advanced AI Chatbot in 2022,” ChatGPT Pro, <https://chatgpt.pro/> (accessed January 21, 2023).
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