

The Information Combat Element

A proposal for an addition to the MAGTF organization with asymmetric capabilities

by 1stLt Tianxing Hu

The prevailing conventional wisdom among China watchers is that as China's economy continues to grow, it will be able to invest in an increasingly modern military whose kinetic capabilities will eventually rival America's.¹ This will enable it to diminish the United States' influence in the Indo-Pacific and create a multipolar world order in which China is the undisputed regional hegemon in Asia.²

Because Beijing sees Washington's dominant blue-water navy as a vital enabler for U.S. power projection, it has fielded significant anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities intended to threaten any U.S. vessels within the first island chain and beyond (see Figure 1).³ In response, the DOD developed the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons. In brief, this doctrine calls for the disruption of China's A2/AD kill chains by targeting missile sites, air bases, and satellite and surveillance systems with long-range bombers, allowing carriers to be deployed safely.⁴

The Marine Corps has also pivoted towards the pacing threat, with planned changes in doctrine, force structure, and posture to focus on support to fleet operations in China's weapons engagement zone.⁵

While this conventional wisdom may be true, it overlooks the non-kinetic threat. The Marine Corps must be prepared to overmatch any adversary in every critical aspect of conflict and achieve full-spectrum dominance. Failing to look beyond the kinetic realm will degrade our relevancy and credibility as a deterrent force in the Indo-Pacific. To address the challenges of

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war in the 21st century, the Marine Corps must take a serious look at its structure and combat philosophy, and even consider adjusting the organization of the traditional MAGTF to include an additional element with asymmetric capabilities.

Validating the Pacing Threat

Before moving forward, it is important to validate the pacing threat as something worth planning around. China is currently the largest economy in the world by purchasing power par-

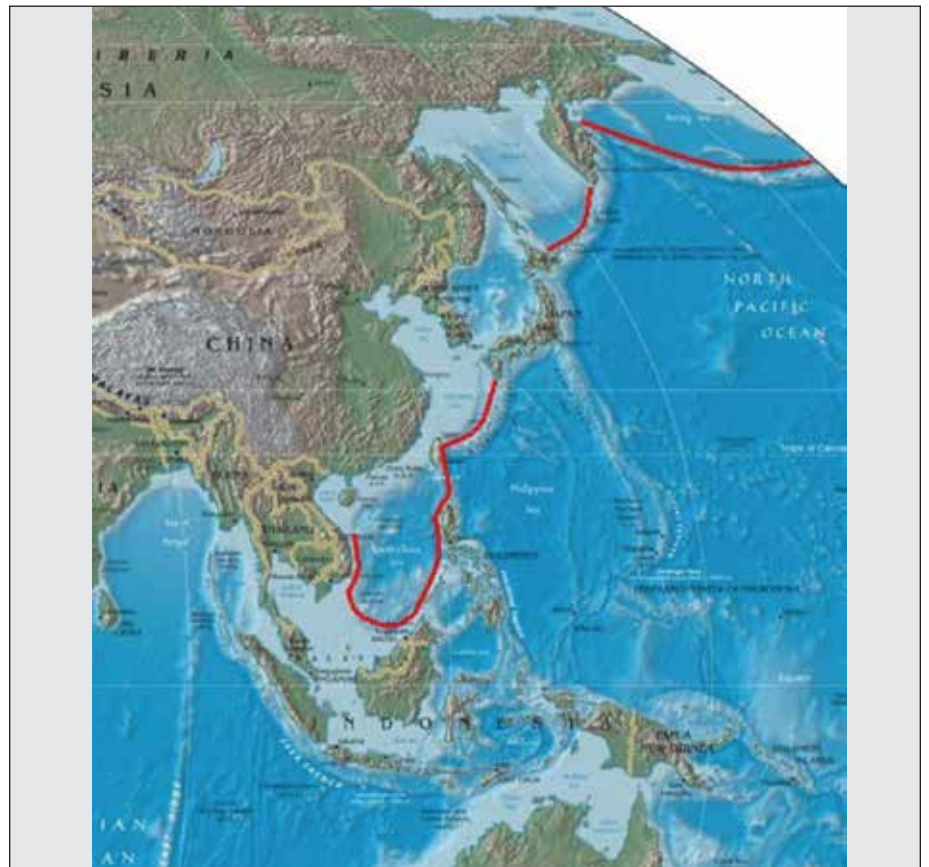


Figure 1. The first island chain.³² (Figure provided by author.)

ity.⁶ Between 1980 and 2011, the size of its economy increased one hundred-fold.⁷ This was a result of the “economic miracle” of double-digit growth in gross domestic product for three straight decades.⁸ Some projections show China’s economy growing to three times the size of America’s by 2040.⁹

With this financial muscle comes the ability to invest in a first-class military. Chinese defense modernization has been described by some experts as “unprecedented in scale and depth.”¹⁰ In 2016, China’s defense budget was officially \$146 billion or \$314 billion at purchasing power parity, second only to the US at \$611 billion.¹¹ The comparison is imperfect as a result of both Beijing’s poor accounting transparency and “latecomer advantage,” which allows China to bypass costly research and development costs by adopting (or stealing) technology from foreign militaries.¹² A true apples-to-apples comparison would likely further reduce the delta between our defense budgets.¹³

Having established that the pacing threat can afford to compete with us in military and technological buildup, we must next validate if it has the will and intent to use its increasingly capable armed forces. While the CCP’s official messaging has always been that its military expansion is defensive in nature, this belies its own regional ambitions.¹⁴ Behind closed doors, it has always been understood that “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”¹⁵

For decades, from the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis to the 1999 accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the more recent standoffs in the South China Sea, the CCP has chafed under American influence in the Indo-Pacific. People’s Liberation Army (PLA) officers and CCP leaders view Washington as an unwelcome outsider in the region that needs to be displaced.¹⁶ Despite all the economic and political goodwill Washington has extended over the years, Beijing still views the American presence in Asia as a demonstration of “hegemonism, power politics, and neointerventionism.”¹⁷

Suffice it to say, China both has the capability and will to compete militarily with the United States. The only ques-

tion left is how it will execute. Much has been written on Beijing’s A2/AD platforms. This includes missiles costing a few million dollars that are able to sink a \$4 billion aircraft carrier.¹⁸ The Dong-Feng 21 can reach out and touch an American vessel over 1,500 miles away from the shore, and China already has enough of these to wipe out every single U.S. Navy carrier strike group.¹⁹

Symphony of Engagement

As threatening as this is, substantial resources have been allocated to counter A2/AD. The Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons, the Marine Corps concept outlined in the 2019 *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, and other changes at the Pentagon all contribute toward curbing China’s growing kinetic prowess. A new Marine Corps that is highly interoperable with the Navy, postured to conduct distributed Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, and can survive and fight in the enemy’s weapons engagement zone will be able to create gaps in an A2/AD strategy and target critical vulnerabilities in the logistical kill chains of China’s long-range precision strike platforms.

What has not received enough attention is countering Beijing’s non-kinetic capabilities. For Chinese leaders, conventional military actions have always been just one facet of a holistic approach to great power competition. What is taught in Western military academies as hybrid warfare or gray-zone conflict has been the default case in the Middle Kingdom since the Warring States period of ancient-Chinese history.²⁰ Accordingly, Beijing has been developing asymmetric capabilities to deploy a symphony of engagement across the full spectrum of modern technology, and the Marine Corps must be ready to answer this threat.²¹

Space

The U.S. military is highly dependent on a secure outer space. Satellites are vital for gathering intelligence, guiding ordnance, and facilitating command and control (C2). Beijing has recognized this potential vulnerability and has said that “the mastery of outer space will be a prerequisite for naval victory.”²²

Through both civilian and military channels like the massive 863 Program, Beijing has invested in a variety of space and anti-satellite (ASAT) technologies.²³ These include directed-energy weapons, attack satellites, electronic jamming, electromagnetic pulse weapons, and more mundane options like ground-based missiles.²⁴ Since 2007, it has tested a number of anti-satellite missiles with little transparency or dialog with the international community on its intentions.²⁵

Cyberspace

Another potential U.S. vulnerability is our reliance on information systems. Beijing believes that “cyberspace has become ... a new domain of national security,”²⁶ and its actions prove it.

A Defense Science Board study revealed that 24 American weapons system designs have been accessed via malicious cyber-attacks, including “the Patriot missile system, the Aegis missile defense system ... and the Littoral Combat Ship.”²⁷ In another instance dubbed “Titan Rain,” between 2003 and 2005, a series of coordinated attacks, presumably carried out or sponsored by Beijing, gained access to the information systems of organizations such as Lockheed Martin and NASA.²⁸ The suspected perpetrator of Titan Rain is PLA Unit 61398, which has since “penetrated the networks of at least 141 organizations” around the world.²⁹

Psychological Operations

While China is still catching up to America in many conventional domains of military competency, we lag behind China in psychological operations (PSYOP). What we denigrate as propaganda is in fact the world’s most sophisticated and expansive PSYOP apparatus. We have seen this at work in the early months of 2020, with the CCP spinning the narrative of Coronavirus disease 2019. Through an intense and coordinated campaign of disinformation, it has attempted to shift the blame away from the CCP and highlight China’s assistance to other countries.³⁰

Fortunately, PSYOP is something the United States has an inherent advantage in if we choose to develop this capability.

Offensive PSYOP against our society is significantly degraded by our freedom of the press, which acts as a natural moat against misinformation. Comparatively, the CCP must wage a continuous crusade of deception against an increasingly savvy domestic audience and an increasingly wary international audience.

Proposal

To counter the asymmetric threats presented by modern military technology, the Marine Corps needs to fundamentally alter the MAGTF to include an Information Combat Element (ICE). An example of what an ICE might look like is shown in Figure 2. The purpose of the ICE is to defend against peer-adversary aggression in space, cyberspace, PSYOP, and other information domains while providing a way to achieve information dominance in the battlespace of the 21st century.

While this concept exists to an extent at the MEF level already in the form of the MEF Information Group (MIG), the MIG is still often considered an extension of the CE. More progress must be made in “operationalizing” the MIG.³¹ By doctrinally establishing the ICE as a separate and distinct element of the MAGTF on the same level as the other elements, it will validate the information environment as a new frontier worthy of dedicated resourcing and commanders’ attention.

More importantly, the ICE should be brought down to the O-6 level MAGTF. In so doing, the Marine Corps will have a stand-in tool that can fight and win in the enemy’s kinetic and unconventional weapons engagement zone. By consolidating the information units under one O-5 commander, the ICE will have a centralized chain of command and the ability to execute a coherent and mutually reinforcing information strategy, becoming an unprecedented force multiplier.

While it is true that many information weapon systems are strategic in nature, there are some capabilities that can be employed effectively at the colonel level and *should* be to conduct the distributed operations called for by the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*. Moreover, while some “zero-day”

exploits may require higher authority to execute, an ICE at the lower levels is necessary to coordinate efficiently with higher.

Force Structure 2030

The year is 2030. An extremist group from a stakeholder in the ongoing Spratly Islands dispute sails to the islands and begins building fortifications. The Chinese Navy responds by sending the Shandong aircraft carrier group as a show of force. The Malaysian, Philippine, and Vietnamese Navies are pulled into the conflict in an escalating tit-for-tat spectacle of geopolitical pageantry. As the number of warships in the area reaches a critical mass, an accidental collision results in the sinking of a Chinese vessel. A miscommunication then causes the CCP to believe this was a deliberate attack, sparking a kinetic conflict that puts U.S. allies and interests at risk.

III MEF is tasked to disrupt and delay the PLA in order to set conditions for the 7th Fleet to flow forces. 31st MEU is deployed to the South China Sea to act as a stand-in force in support of the MEF’s mission. As a result of a high level of interoperability with the Navy, the 31st MEU is able to successfully insert the MAGTF. In accordance with Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons, the MAGTF begins conducting distributed Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations. Intel is initially degraded because of enemy anti-satellite efforts, but III MIG, now

commanded by a brigadier general, is postured to quickly restore satellite capability. The 31st MEU is also targeted by a variety of cyberattacks, but the local ICE limits the damage and begins sending digital rounds down range at the PLA warships, compromising their C2. III MIG and the MEU ICE coordinate PSYOP to discredit the PLA narrative and win the hearts and minds of third parties, in accordance with national-level intent.

Ultimately, the MAGTF survives the enemy’s kinetic and unconventional weapons and fights back with the full spectrum of modern weapons systems. 7th Fleet exploits the gap in A2/AD created by 31st MEU to flow forces. The arrival of the U.S. Navy marks a significant turning point in the events.

At this point, the wargame ends. The PLA officers that were invited to participate have seen that the Marine Corps remains a resilient force in readiness and is prepared for the challenges of the digital age. They take their observations back to the CCP and Beijing is thus deterred from its revisionist ambitions while the Marine Corps is shown to be a credible guarantor of the U.S. security blanket in the Indo-Pacific.

Notes

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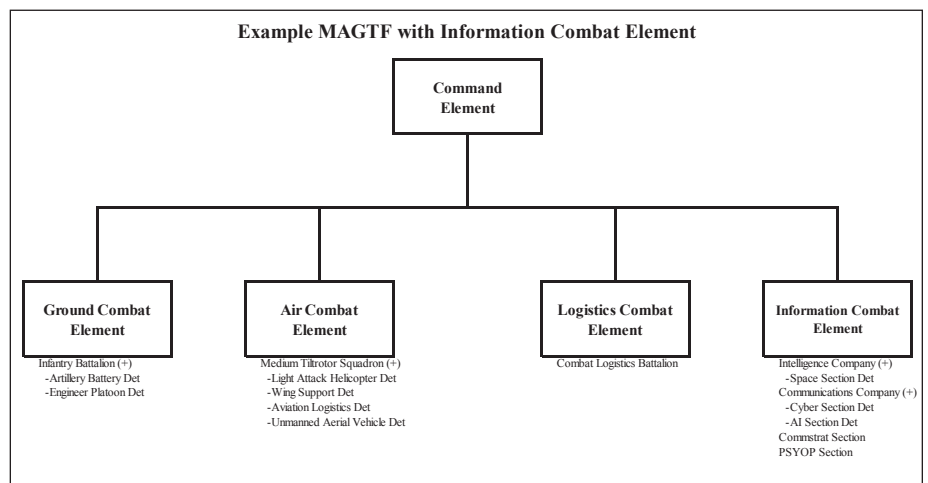


Figure 2. Example of what a potential ICE might look like at an O-6 level MAGTF.
(Figure provided by author.)

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