



New Wine in an Old Bottle: The PLA Invokes Mao in Support of All-Domain Operations

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Introduction

From March to April 2022 the official newspaper of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) published a series of articles arguing that all-domain operations are the application of certain Maoist military principles in the current era. The arguments were convoluted and unconvincing, but it is unlikely that the purpose of the series was scholarly. Instead, its purpose is likely to have been to convince doubters in the PLA of the wisdom of the PLA's latest addition to its doctrine and to boost their confidence in the PLA's capacity to implement it. The PLA's earnest effort to persuade the doubters would indicate that doubters exist, but it would also indicate that the PLA is serious about developing the capability to conduct all-domain operations.

Strained Arguments

The series was published in the Military Forum section of *Liberation Army News*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission, which is roughly equivalent to the U.S. Department of Defense. It began with an article about "defeating the superior with the inferior" (以劣胜优 *yi lie sheng you*). The PLA regards "defeating the superior with the inferior" as a traditional principle of its way of war. It encapsulates a frequent theme in Mao's military writings. It asserts that although the adversary may have a quantitative advantage and/or qualitative advantages, such as superior technology, training, and experience, one can still win by concentrating a greater number of forces at certain points to achieve local superiority, thereby enabling the inferior side to defeat its adversary in detail. The accumulation of the superior side's losses in these battles will eventually turn the tables in the war. In China's war with Japan in the 1930s and 40s, Chinese forces traded territory for opportunities to maneuver and mass forces for such battles, a strategy that Mao described in his "On Protracted War."

The article about "defeating the superior with the inferior" was written by Ai Zhongsong and Sun Qiangyin. Sun has been associated with the PLA Army Command College; Ai was a doctoral candidate at the same as of 2020.¹ Their article is a reprise of an article that Sun wrote with Huang Hai and Ye Xin, who were also associated with the Army Command College.² That

article was published in the Forum section of *Liberation Army News*' sister publication, *Chinese National Defense News* in 2018.³

These articles have two premises that the series' other articles share. In fact, both premises reflect the PLA's beliefs about contemporary warfare. The first is that "informationized warfare" is now the primary mode of warfare. "Informationization" or "informatization" (信息化 *xinxihua*) is a direct translation of a Chinese word expressing the change—some may say revolution—affected by the application of information technology to warfare. The second premise is that warfare is now a conflict between "systems of systems" (体系 *tixi*). The PLA tends to use "system of systems" as a shorthand for joint or combined-arms warfare, but the term emphasizes the network linking the components of an armed force, a nuance that seems more significant in the context of the first premise: as information technology links units and weapons systems across services at increasingly lower levels of war, and as its reliability and bandwidth improve, those links should fuse those components into something that is more than just joint. This is the vision of the U.S. military's Joint All-Domain Operations (JADO). Such fusion would enable the network to converge capabilities across domains or services at all levels of war to create "windows of superiority" much like "defeating the superior with the inferior" creates quantitative superiority at certain locations.

Sun and his coauthors explain that the "informationization" of warfare, and war's transformation into a contest between systems of systems—presumably due to "informationization"—have complicated the implementation of "defeating the superior with the inferior."⁴ They wrote that "informationization" has made physical space a less important factor in military operations and has made time a more important one by "dramatically" quickening the pace of operations and concomitantly shortening wars.⁵ A fully "informationized" adversary fighting as a system of systems will fight as a geographically distributed network, making it difficult for one to achieve significant effects by concentrating forces against certain locations, particularly because "informationization" enables the adversary to target one from greater distances with greater speed and precision.⁶ Consequently, depth, maneuver, and mass, all key elements of "defeating the superior with the inferior," are ineffective against such an adversary.

This problem was the focus of the third article in the series, which was written by Lu Feng and Liu Zhichao, whose affiliations are unknown. Lu and Liu's article was also a reprise of an article that Lu coauthored with one Duan Qihe, an article that *Liberation Army News* published in its Military Forum section in 2020.⁷ Lu and his coauthors took up the Maoist military principle of "concentrating superior force to annihilate the enemy one by one" (集中优势兵力, 各个歼灭敌人 *jizhong youshi bingli, ge ge jianmie diren*). This is the method by which "defeating the superior with the inferior" is accomplished, so the two principles are connected.

Because the two principles are connected, the solutions to the problem that Sun and Lu and their coauthors proposed were naturally congruent. Sun and company reasoned that the more an adversary relies on the "force-multiplying effect of information," the more devastating attacks against his information systems become.⁸ "Whether or not one can weaken the advantage of a strong enemy's operational system of systems, or deprive him of it, has already become the key link in accomplishing the defeat of the superior with the inferior in informationized wars," they wrote.⁹ Force, then, must be concentrated against the adversary's information systems.¹⁰ Lu and

Liu wrote that in the “information age,” the concentration of forces “vastly transcends the concentration of forces itself [sic], embodying itself in the concentration and employment of advantages in more diverse domains,” a feat that will itself be achieved “with the support of information systems.”¹¹ Ai and Sun concurred, writing that the construction of an “informationized operational system of systems” would enable one to achieve the “convergence of capabilities through computer networks,” among other things.¹² In essence, they all proposed conducting JADO.

Given that Sun and Lu and their coauthors—and the PLA itself—judges the “informationization” of war to be an inexorable trend, it is sensible for them to propose following the trend. All- or multi-domain operations is not a new concept to the PLA, and it seems to have already become part of the PLA’s doctrine, making it all the more sensible to propose following the trend.¹³ Therefore, the significance of these articles is not in their proposals or even in their analyses of trends in military affairs; it is in their argument that their proposals are applications of Maoist military principles that validate those principles’ enduring effectiveness in the “information age.”

That argument is wrong. It can be argued that because the essence of “defeating the superior with the inferior” is using one’s relative strengths to compensate for one’s overall weakness, all-domain operations’ convergence of capabilities across domains is just how one concentrates superior force, and how one can achieve the “defeat of the superior with the inferior,” these days. But it is one thing to say that all-domain operations can be reconciled with the two Maoist military principles; it is quite another to say that they extend from, and therefore prove the perpetual validity of, those principles.

Indefensible Arguments

The arguments in the other two articles were less defensible. The fourth article in the series concerned protracted warfare (持久战 *chijuzhan*). It was written by one Hu Youcai. Hu asserted that the strategy of protracted warfare remains relevant because “the overall strategic situation” in which China faces a stronger adversary “has not fundamentally changed.”¹⁴ However, he wrote, the protracted wars of today are not like the “traditional [...] wars of attrition” that lasted several years.¹⁵ He argued that the “protractedness” of protracted warfare is now in the “long-term” and “continuous” nature of peacetime preparations for “total war,” a feature of the industrial age that Hu implies is the form of “people’s war” by which protracted wars are fought in the information age.¹⁶ In other words, he argued that protracted war is now about building the capacity to hold out in a total war, not to implement Mao’s strategy. Therefore, the connection between Mao’s and Hu’s protracted wars is nominal: Mao expounded a strategy for winning a war that could not be won quickly; Hu advocated preparing for a shorter total war.

The second article in the series was the most convoluted. It concerned the supposed Maoist military principle of “you fight your way, I will fight my way” (你打你的、我打我的 *ni da ni de, wo da wo de*). It was written by Gao Kai and Dong Wei, whose affiliations are unknown. This “principle” is derived from a statement that Mao made during the Korean War: “Our desire is not to have to fight, but if you want to fight, then we can only let you fight. You fight your way; we’ll fight our way. You use atomic bombs; we’ll use hand grenades. We’ll seize upon your weak points

and keep fighting you, beating you in the end.”¹⁷ Gao and Dong asserted that “you fight your way, I will fight my way” is the “quintessence” of the PLA’s “strategy and tactics for people’s war,” but elaborating the strategy and tactics that are supposedly contained in Mao’s bravado required groundless extrapolation that began with a laughable analysis of the “real meaning of the three words ‘you,’ ‘I,’ and ‘fight.’”¹⁸

Most important, Gao and Dong asserted that implementing the “principle” of “you fight your way, I will fight my way” in modern wars entails “optimizing and consolidating operational resources with a network-enabled information system of systems” to maintain the initiative and concentrate superior force against “key nodes” and weak points in the adversary’s operational system of systems.¹⁹ Doing so requires one to “use command information systems to integrate combat forces that have been dispersed among each domain into a composite system of systems and to use the precise flow of information to direct and converge various forces’ effects towards, and on, a single or multiple operational domains.”²⁰ Like other authors in the series, Gao and Dong essentially promoted JADO. To wit, they paradoxically implied that “you fight your way, I will fight my way” means fighting “your way.”

However, Gao and Deng could justifiably retort, in the vein of Mao, that to do otherwise would be to fail to recognize the “objective” conditions of warfare in the information age. The “key to ‘you fight your way, I will fight my way’ is to maintain the operational initiative,” they wrote.²¹ They also said that it is important to play to one’s advantages and to attack the “weak points and vulnerabilities in the massive structure of the enemy’s system of systems.”²² Ai and Sun similarly posited that one can turn the tables on a stronger adversary by targeting the weak points in the adversary’s “informationized operational platforms” in order to paralyze the adversary’s “operational system of systems.”²³ They seemed to believe that employing a system of systems combining inferior weapons and equipment with “some” advanced ones to “seize upon the flaws and gaps that the enemy may show” in his system of systems is enough to “defeat the superior with the inferior.”²⁴

This is all more muddling through than it is a distinct strategy. Nor is it necessarily the “asymmetry” that Ai and Sun claimed that the stronger adversary fears and that Gao and Deng defined as the “core” of “you fight your way, I will fight my way.”²⁵ Exploiting vulnerabilities and employing inferior weapons and equipment themselves are not asymmetrical, but a contest between two armed forces conducting all-domain operations would be symmetrical. Moreover, in such a contest, the exploitation of the vulnerabilities in an adversary’s system of systems would not be the preserve of the weaker side. After all, the weaker side will be just as reliant on its own information systems.

Mao advocated playing a different game, not playing the same game better. His strategy and the principles underlying it were unoriginal, but he articulated a real strategy that was informed by those principles. This series, on the other hand, promotes a strategy counting on the adversary’s clumsiness and stupidity, perhaps the next best strategy resulting from a strained effort to apply principles from a different era to pursue different goals in different circumstances. That is a strategy of hope, which is really no strategy at all.

Conclusion

It is very unlikely that the authors of the series are fools, though. Their effort may not result in sound strategy, but it is likely that the purpose of the series was not to produce a strategy in the first place. It should surprise no one that some scholarly work has political purposes, and it goes without saying that *Liberation Army News* is more political than it is academic.

There are two possible purposes for the series other than informing strategy. First, it is possible that the series was written to give multi-domain operations the patina of past glory. The PLA and the Chinese Communist Party still exalt Mao, and the PLA may be borrowing Mao's "genius" to convince doubters in the PLA of the wisdom of multi-domain operations. Second, and probably more important, it is possible that the series was written to boost doubters' confidence in the PLA's capacity to conduct multi-domain operations. Another oft-cited factor of "defeating the superior with the inferior" is the weaker side's higher morale. In another article about the principle that *Liberation Army News* published in 2020, one Lou Haiqing boasted about the PLA's past victories:

The enemy may have had the advantage of men and arms, but it was absolutely impossible for him to pressure us to collapse spiritually and mentally [...] It is precisely by relying on this kind of righteous spirit that our forces achieved victory in a series of unwinnable wars, wars in which there was no way at all that we could fight when viewed from a conventional perspective.²⁶

Lou asserted that the present is no different:

Although the strong enemy that we could face today may possess very advanced weapons and equipment as well as a certain amount of real-war experience, one must also consider the injustice of his provoking war, his debilitated [state] and his impetuosity, and the spiritual deficiency of his troops, among other aspects.²⁷

Lou implied that the PLA can and will win future wars with a "strong enemy" because the PLA has higher morale stemming from the superiority of its personnel and cause. By invoking the "defeat of the superior with the inferior," the series may be attempting to tap into this mythos and the confidence that it inspires. Ironically, the implication that man is the decisive factor in war may be the most Maoist aspect of the series. Both these possibilities may indicate that there are those in the PLA who doubt the efficacy or feasibility of multi-domain operations. This would be natural and would not necessarily spell doom for the PLA's efforts to develop the capability for multi-domain operations. However, these possibilities may also indicate that the PLA is serious about developing its own JADO capability and is therefore trying to win over the doubters.

The series thus imparts a lesson for PLA watchers: even when the PLA invokes traditional concepts, those concepts' utility may lie in their status, not in their applicability. Although the series' reasoning was flawed, it served to justify the PLA's pursuit of a capability that it regards as the inevitable future of warfare, which is quite sensible. In effect, they are using tradition to slip the bounds of tradition—and perhaps buck up the troops in the process. Therefore, we must be careful about how we estimate the force of tradition in the PLA and in Beijing as a whole. One

danger is that we will settle on the beliefs about tradition that are most comforting to ourselves, e.g., that Chinese military tradition eschews direct conflict, etc. But another danger is that even when we correctly understand the PLA's or China's traditional military concepts, we will miss the purposes to which they are applied. Both may result in strategies seeking advantages deriving from the adversary's behavior, not from our own capabilities. Therefore, to avoid these pitfalls, we should trust that our adversaries are practical and will ultimately, even if not immediately, judge the value of tradition by its anticipated or actual effectiveness on the battlefield.

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Notes

¹ 张翬 [Zhang Hui] and 孙强银 [Sun Qiangyin], “夜间城市作战怎么打” [How to conduct nighttime urban operations], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], May 7, 2019, accessed June 16, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-05/07/content_233143.htm; 艾正松 [Ai Zhengsong] and 张晓楠 [Zhang Xiaonan], “无人机作战运用的典型模式” [Typical model for conducting unmanned aerial vehicle operations], 光明日报 [Guangming Daily], February 9, 2020, accessed June 16, 2022, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2020-02/09/nw.D110000gmrb_20200209_2-07.htm.

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