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China's Preoccupation with Asymmetric War: Lessons Learned from the Hezbollah-Israeli War by Ehsan Ahrari

Chinese leaders have decided long ago that, in the wake of a conflict, their military cannot fight and win a battle against the U.S. military on a force-on-force basis. However, that reality was not going to discourage a country whose strategic culture has produced original thinkers of the caliber and reputation of Sun Tzu and Mao Zedong.

In answering this question, one has to remind oneself of a few famous quotes of Sun Tzu: "All warfare is based on deception." "If your enemy ... is in superior strength, evade him..." and "Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant." One must also recall *Unrestricted War*, published in 1999, by two senior Chinese colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. It stated that, when faced with a technologically superior enemy, it is "necessary to dare to completely upset the order of the cards in one's hands and reorganize them in accordance with the needs of war and the interests of a nation."

The conventional wisdom regarding China's asymmetric war doctrine is that it is "aimed at finding key vulnerabilities in American forces."¹ In the post-9/11 era, that doctrine is focused not only on military-related susceptibilities, but also on other weak points. In this context, one has to keep in mind Chang Mengxiong's concept of "assassin's mace" ("shashou jian"). Using the analogy of acupuncture for fighting asymmetric wars, this concept argues that even a superpower like the United States has a great number of points of vulnerabilities. If the focus of asymmetric attack is on those points, then the military giant can be brought down by a "weak" power like China.

Because of space limitations, a full-blown discussion of this concept is not possible. Suffice it to say that it goes beyond developing a variety of military operations and tactics. It also focuses on exploiting America's vulnerabilities in the realm of oil imports, causing a run on the U.S. dollar, or on suddenly switching China's reserve currency from the dollar to the Euro or the Yen, as well as finding new techniques of conducting cyberattacks on U.S. computers. Given the ever escalating dependence of the U.S. civil and military sectors on the use of information technology, America's vulnerability to cyberattacks will never disappear completely. From the asymmetric war-related penchant of China for "leveling the playing field," this vulnerability holds virtually infinite promise.

¹ Christopher P. Towmey, "Chinese Doctrines As Strategic Culture: Assessing their Effects," *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, October 2005, <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2005/Oct/twomeyOct05.asp>

Proliferation of low-tech weapons and transfer of low-tech military platforms formulate a very crucial aspect of China's attempt to "completely upset the order of the cards" that Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui talked about in *Unrestricted War*. Depending on the significance of its friends and allies in different regions of the world, China has been steadily proliferating these platforms as an essential aspect of upsetting the order of the cards.

The least publicized—indeed, a virtually unknown—aspect of this policy is how much information the PRC has been providing in the use of low-tech weapons, or in training its friends on fighting asymmetric war, either with the U.S. or with its allies. The chief purpose of this policy is to create regional surrogates in order to contain the United States. For instance, China's concentration on Iran, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran has consistently challenged the U.S. hegemony and presence, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-9/11 era. Iran is also one of the chief backers of Hezbollah of Lebanon in its fight with Israel. The fact that Iran is following a policy of proliferating asymmetrical weapons and platforms to Hezbollah also complements China's own predilection for the proliferation of these weapons and technology, tactics, and techniques.

The Hezbollah-Israeli war of July-August 2006 (aka, the second Lebanon war) is important for China because it was, first and foremost, an asymmetric fight. According to one observer, "The professors of the University of Hezbollah have just rocketed past all the theoretical thinkers at cushy U.S. war colleges."² Hezbollah did not anticipate an intense Israeli response when it kidnapped two Israeli soldiers on July 12, 2006. However, an important aspect of their fighting strategy was to use Katyusha rockets—known for their lack of precision—as terror weapons. Hezbollah's use of mobile launchers to fire those rockets would have been more effective than it was, had it not been for Israel's capabilities to effectively search for and destroy them.

There is little doubt that the Hezbollah-Israeli war was studied with high interest by both China and Taiwan for the same reason.³ The PRC studied it to fine tune its asymmetric war doctrine in a potential conflict with the lone superpower. Taiwan studied it to develop countermeasures against the dominant PRC military.

In an article on that war, published in Taiwan's National Defense Magazine, Colonel Lu Chunsheng, an instructor at the Army Command and Staff College of the National Defense University of that country, focused on the tactics and operations of both Hezbollah and Israel and concluded that "the ROC should draw inspiration for its dealing with the mighty PRC military from the Hezbollah in its success in carrying out asymmetric warfare operations against the

² John E. Carey, "Hezbollah is Way Ahead in Asymmetric Warfare," <http://johnib.wordpress.com/2006/08/17/hezbollah-is-way-ahead-in-asymmetric-warfare/>

³ "Israel and Lebanon War- An Investigation into Military Conflict between the Israel Defense Forces and Hezbollah Guerrillas," https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_200_240_51_43/http%3B/apps.opensource.gov/v%3B7011/opensource.gov/content/Display/6849256?action=advancedSearch&highlightQuery=eJzTSM7IzEtUcPRzUUgrszNTS0pykwGc8sTi8B0Sn4yUCwvFcxwMjAw0wQAxwcOSQ%3D%3D&fileSize=76176

mighty Israeli defense forces. On the principles of ‘effective deterrence, resolute defense,’ the ROC military and our massive reserve forces should strive to attain defensive operational advantages via conducting military analyses and applications studies of specific coastal and urban landforms, namely, the Penghu and Taiwan Islands. The military should also study ways to better conduct formal guerrilla warfare operations and master the essence of asymmetrical warfare operations, while tempering a firm and tough anti-enemy spirit and understanding the importance of collaboration between the military and civilian sides, and so forth.”⁴

What type of lessons is the PLA likely to have drawn from the Hezbollah-Israeli war? Presented below are some highlights of this war, and of Hezbollah’s fighting strategy that the PLA is likely to have found interesting and worth incorporating to suit China’s version of a potential asymmetrical war with a considerably powerful enemy.

Table 1. China’s Asymmetric War-Related Lessons from the Hezbollah-Israeli War

Noteworthy Features of Hezbollah-Israeli War	Lessons for China
<p>This war was depicted as a “turning point in unmanned warfare.” Hezbollah also used drones, and four Iran-made <i>Ababil</i> UAVs during the war (None of those UAVs could do damage; however, Iran might have learned a lot about increasing the potency of those UAVs in future combat operations).⁵</p>	<p>The PRC has already built a number of short-range UAVs as well as some long-range UAVs, Cheng Hong (CH-1). So a UAV-dominated military campaign is very much a part of China’s evolving doctrine of asymmetric war.</p>
<p>4,228 short- and medium-range rockets, artillery, and missiles struck the Israeli territory; Israeli air power remained “essentially useless against small, well-concealed Katyusha-class threats. So too was the Israeli Arrow Weapon System, whose powerful interceptors were designed to defend against improved Scud-class tactical ballistic missiles, not the primitive exploding pipes that pummeled the Israeli home front.”⁶ By the end of the war, Hezbollah was launching an average of 200 weapons each day.</p>	<p>Swarming an adversary with missiles is very much a part of China’s warfighting strategy. It is reported to have stationed 790 short-range ballistic missiles against Taiwan, signaling that that strategy will be implemented against Taiwan in the wake of a conflict. It should also be kept in mind that the number of those missiles keeps increasing.⁷</p>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this subject, see “Terrorists Develop Unmanned Aerial Vehicles,” <http://www.armscontrol.ru/UAV/mirsad1.htm>

⁶ Barbara Opall-Rome, “Israel Needs Offense, Defense to Meet Missile Threat,” DefenseNews.com, October 2, 2006, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?F=2134381&C=mideast>

⁷ “Another Look At China’s Military Growth (06/07/2006),” *Periscope Special Reports*, June 2006.

<p>Israel found out that Hezbollah fighters were very quick about emerging from their hideouts to launch their medium-range missiles (which the Israelis depicted as “suicide launchers”) and then disappearing among the civilian residential areas within a matter of seconds</p>	<p>While one may be tempted to dismiss the incorporation of “suicide launchers” in China’s asymmetric war doctrine, one has to keep in mind that the use of the “human wave” attack was a characteristic of Mao Zedong’s warfighting strategy during the Korean War.</p>
<p>The Israeli Air Force “attained full operational capability of the World’s first Boost Phase Launch Intercept (BPLI) force, a tightly linked network of manned aircraft and UAVs that saturated the airspace to hunt and immediately kill small, mobile, medium-range missile launchers.”⁸</p>	<p>Realizing that the U.S. military will immediately incorporate Israel’s effective use of BPLI tactics, China is likely to develop countermeasures to those tactics to suit its own future campaign requirements.</p>
<p>According to one observer from the Middle East Institute, “A conventional army cannot play its role very well when fighting with an armed guerrilla group like Hezbollah, although Israel is as powerful a military force as the outside world imagines.”</p>	<p>Chinese military thinkers are fully focused on the challenge of dealing with a powerful enemy. Consider the following observation made recently by retired Lt. General Li Jijun: “To cope with wars at the age of information, when guiding thinking, we should try hard to prevent direct conflicts with the enemy in the high-technology field, and should create and select the most favorable timing, direction, form, and target annihilate the enemy’s effective forces by combining conventional assaults with the ‘assassin’s mace.’”⁹</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hezbollah’s use of TOW anti-tank missiles (which the United States supplied to Iran decades ago and might have been reproduced by Iran through reverse engineering) was effective. • Hezbollah fighters were also quite effective in hacking into Israel’s radio communications and monitoring the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to one recent report, “The line between China’s anti-ship missile development and that of longer-range stand-off weapons has become increasingly blurred in recent times. China continues to refine older and in some respects outmoded weapons (typically the YJ-6/C-60 family).

⁸ Barbara Opall-Rome, “Sensor to Shooter in 1 Minute,” DefenseNews.com, October 2, 2006, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?F=2140340&C=airwar>

⁹ From Li Jijun (Lt. General Retd.), former Deputy Commandant of the Academy of Military Sciences, “China Military Science on Strategic Thinking, Scientific Decisionmaking,” February 28, 2006.

<p>constantly changing radio frequency of Israeli troops and effectively targeting advancing Israeli armor.¹⁰</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aside from using older anti-tank guided missiles—AT-3 Sagger, AT-Spigot, and AT-5 Spandrel—Hezbollah also used AT-14 Metis-M (high-tech weapon). “The missiles include the European-made Milan, the Russian-designed Metis-M, Sagger AT-3, Spigot AT-4 and the Russian-made Kornet AT-14. The latter is a Syrian supplied missile capable of targeting low-flying helicopters. Iraqi Fedayeen irregulars used the Kornet against U.S. forces in 2003. The most portable versions of these weapons are carried in a fiberglass case with a launching rail attached to the lid.”¹¹ 	<p>Alongside these, new long-range anti-ship weapons with no obvious Chinese predecessor are now being fielded that may already be evolving into land-attack missiles.”¹²</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is hard to establish whether this tactic, which Iran provided to Hezbollah fighters, was indigenous to Iran’s own asymmetric war doctrine; however, one can be rest assured that the PLA is far more advanced in the use of this tactic than Iran.
<p>Hezbollah’s C-802, which damaged an Israeli Sa’ar 5, was originally a Chinese-made anti-ship missile (Yingji YJ-2)</p>	<p>China is considered as one of the most advanced cruise and ballistic missile producers in the world. According to one report, “In conventional terms, China is specifically focusing on targeting surface vessels and submarines at long ranges with anti-ship cruise missiles. From Beijing’s standpoint, this is a countermeasure to a possible future U.S. intervention with carrier battle groups, as occurred in the Taiwan Strait in 1995 and 1996.”¹³ <i>Jane’s Defence Weekly</i> notes, “China is reportedly developing a new cruise missile with nuclear potential.”¹⁴ The PRC is also one of the most prolific proliferators of these missiles. As one</p>

¹⁰ “Mohammad Bazzi, Hezbollah cracked the code: technology likely supplied by Iran allowed guerrillas to stop Israeli tank assaults,” *Newsday.com*, September 18, 2006, <http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/world/ny-wocode184896831sep18,0,3091818.story?coll=ny-worldnews-print>

¹¹ Andrew McGregor, “Hezbollah’s Creative Tactical Use of Anti-Tank Weaponry,” <http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370105>; also see Anthony H. Cordesman, Preliminary “Lessons” of the Israeli-Hezbollah War, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060817_isr_hez_lessons.pdf

¹² “Crouching Tiger: How China is Quietly Evolving its missile systems,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, February 1, 2006.

¹³ “Another Look at China’s Military Growth,” *Periscope Special Reports*, 06/07/2006

¹⁴ Congressional Service Report, “Cruise Missile Proliferation,” <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RS21252.pdf>

	<p>observer notes, the tale of the C-802 “is a classic story about the dog-eat-dog nature of the global arms trade and the destabilizing impact of weapons that are not effectively controlled by national regulation or international treaties and agreements.”¹⁵</p>
<p>Despite the fact that Israel directly targeted Hezbollah’s TV network, Al-Manar, it could not prevent its telecast that relied on commercial satellites. Even though, technologically speaking, it was easy for Israel to jam “transponders on a commercial satellite, it had to worry about others disrupting Israel’s own satellites.”¹⁶</p>	<p>China is actively pursuing the option of “blinding” American satellites, thereby blinding American forces on a large scale in the wake of a conflict.¹⁷</p>

Closing Observations

A long-term, if not permanent, aspect of China’s approach to information warfare and public diplomacy is to enhance its strategic presence in the world of Islam, regardless of what happens in Iraq and Afghanistan. China seems to have recognized the power of political Islam, and the implications of the struggle within Islam, to the stability of a number of Muslim countries in the Middle East, South Asia, as well as Indonesia. Criticizing America’s approach to the war on terror—which China has originally supported, but about which it might be in the process of developing a nuanced position—emerges as a new dimension of China’s public diplomacy.

As China sees it, the Muslim world—especially the Middle East—is a region where the U.S. presence and influence is likely to experience increasing challenges. New alignments are likely to emerge as a Shia-dominated Iraq and Shia Iran are seeking new avenues of cooperation and rapprochement. The Sunni states of the Middle East—despite the fact that Sunnis greatly outnumber the Shias all over the world of Islam—are on the defensive in the wake of the rising influence of Iran, both inside and outside the Middle East. They are seeking new avenues of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as of creating a rapprochement with Iran. China seems to have decided that it will no longer leave the ever-significant strategic affairs of the Middle East and that of the world of Islam largely for the U.S. presence and influence. This appears to be an extremely important development in China’s continuing emergence as a power of global significance, presence, and influence.

¹⁵ http://www.missilethreat.com/archives/id.29/subject_detail.asp

¹⁶ Barbara Opall-Rome, “Inability to Jam Hezbollah Satellite TV Signal Spurs Israeli Research,” *Space News*, 29 August, 2006, http://www.space.com/spacenews/archive06/jammit_0828.html

¹⁷ “Satellite Laser Ranging in China,” UCS Technical Working Paper, http://www.ucsusa.org/global_security/space_weapons/chinese-lasers-and-us-satellites.html?print=t

From the Chinese perspective, improving its capabilities in asymmetric war is a tool that sustains the concern of American strategic thinkers and warfighters at a high level. As long as the United States and China do not start a military conflict, China envisions the asymmetric war-related research and development of new operational and tactical maneuvers as an ongoing chess game with the lone superpower. China may not come out and say it; however, as an ancient civilization, it considers itself as one of the great champions of this game.

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