

The Art of War Without Limits: Analyzing China's 'Unrestricted Warfare' in the Context of Ukraine

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The 24th of February 2022 will go into history as the day that the Russian Federation invaded the sovereign territory of Ukraine. Invaded again that is, given the 2014 occupation of Crimea. War-like operations, though, have been going on for much longer: Russia has been known to use propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Ukraine to manipulate public opinion,¹ to use cyberattacks as a means of disrupting daily life and economic stability,² and to use covert operations to interfere in the sovereignty of other countries.³ These actions were not as consequential as driving tanks across the Russo-Ukrainian border, but the accumulation of means indicates that warfare is expanding beyond traditional domains - but what, then, is warfare when it is seemingly unrestricted?

In this article, instead of the means used, the strategy of unrestricted warfare is put at the center of this question. First, the article analyzes the strategy and arguments as they are presented in the book *Unrestricted Warfare and its guiding principles* by two senior colonels of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Afterwards, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-2022 and 2022-2023 will be analyzed for the means deployed by Russia, and how they fit in the strategy. In conclusion, this article aims to establish that present Russian operations do not display the principles of unrestricted warfare as they lack multidimensional coordination throughout the warfare efforts. The article ends by asking what the current warfare efforts presage for the future.

UNRESTRICTED WARFARE

Unrestricted Warfare (1999) was written by Liao Liang and Wang Xiangsui⁴ in the aftermath of the Cold War, especially with operation Desert Storm in mind, and reflected the authors' belief that traditional warfare, defined by military force, was no longer effective in achieving strategic objectives in the future. The authors presented their alternative: unrestricted warfare, which refers to using non-traditional means, such as information warfare and economic warfare,

to ultimately achieve military objectives. They also advance 'unrestrictedness' in terms of the locus, engaged targets, vectors, and the rules and conventions used. Through this innovative perspective, the authors expand on Clausewitz's concept of total war. While Clausewitz's total war is aimed at achieving maximal national military force, unrestricted warfare shifts the focus to the weaknesses of opponents. Then, the purpose of the authors is to showcase that a technologically superior opponent - i.e. the United States - could be defeated by circumventing military action, exploiting the weaknesses until any opponent is too weak to resist, and resorting only minimally to military means. This strategy could be applied to any case of warfare, as interconnectedness between two entities can always be exploited. At the time this was a revolutionary work as the 1990s saw traditional military operations such as Desert Storm, when technological superiority of the United States seemed to rule the world. However, it is relevant to assess the strategy behind unrestricted warfare in the light of more recent military operations, such as in Ukraine, as interconnectedness has only grown through digitalization and globalization.

The philosophy of unrestricted warfare asserts that states need to be more flexible and adaptable in their approach to



The authors of the book *Unrestricted Warfare and its guiding principles* aim to showcase that a technologically superior opponent - i.e., the United States - could be defeated by circumventing military action. Pictured is former U.S. Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis meeting his counterpart Wei Fenghe at the People's Liberation Army's Bayi Building in Beijing, China, on June 28, 2018 (photo: Flickr / U.S. Secretary of Defense / CC BY 2.0)

warfare. In a globalized and digitalized world, states should be willing to use various unconventional methods to gain an advantage over their opponents. Though the authors never enumerate a defined set of methods that are relevant for warfare (how could they if warfare is unrestricted?), it is clear that states could deploy political, **economic**, diplomatic, cultural, technological, criminal, informational, legal, psychological and other non-military means. With the introduction of this nearly unlimited list of means in the face of globalized markets, international politics, and digital (information) technologies and societies, unrestricted warfare boils down to three defining principles for the future of warfare:

1. **Omnidirectionality** is the foundation of the unrestricted warfare thesis and indicates that all national resources must be available at all times for strategic, combined deployment.

2. **Synchrony** is a logical corollary, meaning that unrestricted warfare requires the strategic deployment of resources at the right time. This could lead to simultaneously deploying means in different domains to establish asymmetrical advantages.
3. **Limited Objectives** offer a clear enough principle, but one which requires objectives to be achievable with minimum resources while befitting the grand strategy.

Omnidirectionality, Synchrony, and Limited Objectives are the authors' guiding principles for warfare in the 21st century. The underlying doctrine, though, remains multidimensional coordination. This entails that the omnidirectional, synchronized resources must be coordinated in their mobilization for a limited objective - i.e., war policy, strategy, tactics, and operations must be coordinated towards a limited objective.

UKRAINE: 2014–2022

On the 27th of February 2014, ‘little green men’ with no insignia on their uniforms seized local government buildings in Crimea after protests had taken place on the peninsula. The Russian annexation of Crimea followed after a referendum widely seen as illegitimate. The conflict in the Ukrainian Donbas region started the same year after Russian-backed separatists declared independence from Ukraine and sought to establish a breakaway state. The conflict lasted for nearly eight years when Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022. In this first phase of the hostilities, Russia deployed a variety of unrestricted means.⁵ Consider the following examples of prominent resources and their connection with the principles of unrestricted warfare.

Russia deploys economic means toward the warfare efforts. For example, in the wake of the annexation of Crimea Russia implemented sanctions against Ukraine and the West, which have been reinstated time and again. Russian sanctions are a means of exploiting interdependency and, therefore, a means to strengthen warfare objectives. Though the interdependency was most significant with the Russian oil and gas for the Ukrainian and Western economies, these means have been significantly increased after the start of the war in 2022. Up to February 2022, Russia implemented responsive sanctions after the Western and Ukrainian sanctions.⁶ Furthermore, Russia applied **lawfare**. Lawfare is the application and exploitation of the law as an alternative instrument in conflict situations.⁷ Russia has been known to use lawfare since the dawn of international law, but the most striking example in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict remains the agreement to the annexation of Crimea and the Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015. The widely regarded illegality of the annexation document and the Minsk Agreements, which are open to vastly different interpretations, laid the foundation for the war that commenced in February 2022. Thus, Russia exploited international law to its advantage for **propaganda** and legitimizing purposes. Both economic warfare and lawfare are examples of resources that are deployed in line with the principles of unrestricted warfare. The sanctions have achieved their limited objective of cutting interdependency and conditioning for further autarky, while lawfare tries to legitimize Russia’s intervention. Still, these are not active resources, but rather supportive ones in the warfare effort. This implies that sanctions and lawfare are continuously active, but hardly adaptive, and, therefore rely on other unrestricted resources to synchronize and coordinate with them to leverage a strategic objective.

One of the key ways in which Russia has used hybrid means is through propaganda and **disinformation** campaigns.⁸ For example, Russian state-controlled media outlets, such as

RT and Sputnik, have been accused of spreading false or misleading information about events in Ukraine in an attempt to manipulate public opinion nationally. Additionally, the Russian intelligence agencies shape international perceptions of Russia. For example, during the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Russian media outlets were accused of spreading disinformation about the role of Ukrainian nationalist groups in the conflict in an attempt to portray the Ukrainian government as illegitimate and justify Russia’s intervention.⁹ With regards to the principles of unrestricted warfare, propaganda and disinformation have as a limited objective to condition national and international audiences for (military) deployment. However, propaganda and disinformation are regarded as opportunistic measures to (fail to) discredit Ukraine rather than condition toward a strategic objective. This indicates at best that propaganda and disinformation did not have time to reach their full potential, while it means at worst that Russia pursues undefined objectives.

In addition, Russia used **cyberattacks**. For example, hackers employed by Russia’s intelligence agencies have been targeting Ukrainian infrastructure, including power grids and transportation systems in 2015 and 2016, and launched the notorious malware NotPetya in 2017, which caused significant economic damage.¹⁰ Furthermore, Russian operations have been targeting election processes in an attempt to interfere with the democratic process and undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government (2014). They have interfered in other countries, including the United States in 2016,¹¹ in an attempt to shape international relations in Russia’s favor. In terms of the principles of unrestricted warfare, for cyberattacks, neither the objective, nor the synchrony with other unrestricted means is evident. Although correlation between physical operations and cyberattacks may have occurred, coordination seems to have been coincidental.¹²

Further, Russia applies **covert operations** as a means of hybrid warfare. Starting with the annexation of Crimea, Russia deployed agents from its Federal Security Service (FSB) to get two organized crime groups to work together against the local government, preparing the way for the Russian special forces - i.e., the ‘little green men’ - to take control of the peninsula.¹³ In the Donbas, Russia similarly has been covertly supporting the separatists with military equipment and training. These are some covert operations by the Russian state, while there are also private companies like the Wagner Group and hacker groups such as REvil and Conti who are condoned by the Russian government while destabilizing Ukraine. These proxy actors are valuable assets for the Russian government, but they have been deployed with relatively limited success, with the exception of Crimea. Therefore, with regards to the principles of unrestricted warfare, these operations are seemingly rogue rather than



On the 27th of February 2014, 'little green men' with no insignia on their uniforms seized local government buildings in Crimea after protests had taken place on the peninsula. Pictured are Russian soldiers with no insignia marching on March 5, 2014 in Perevalne, Crimea (photo: photo.ua / Shutterstock.com)

strategic resources: while their limited objective might have been to cause destabilization and condition Ukraine for the further invasion, in which they succeeded, the covert operations are still not fully adhering to the principles of unrestricted warfare. Covert operations have been mostly desynchronized and uncoordinated with other resources, causing them to maintain their destabilizing and conditioning effects up to a point where their deployment was wasteful rather optimized.

UKRAINE: 2022-2023

On the 24th of February 2022 Russia deployed various military means and continued its war against Ukraine. In the past year, fronts have shifted with thousands of casualties, unforeseen deliveries of modern weaponry such as HIMARS, Patriots and main battle tanks have reached Ukraine, and

four new People's Republics have declared independence. However, Russia's military objectives were supposed to be achieved rapidly on four fronts. After this failed, Russia employed additional means, which are described below.

During the war, the traditional means of disinformation and propaganda have been mainly used to maintain national stability in Russia. TV remains a successful traditional medium to glorify the war, maintain popular support for the government and uphold the legitimizing narrative for the war - i.e., defeating the Western and Nazi influences in Ukraine. Further, fabricated narratives are exported, for instance, regarding the Azov regiments in Mariupol. Though this group has links with the neo-Nazi ideology, Russia brought out exaggerated, fake narrative to sow confusion among Ukraine's allies.¹⁴ However, the Azov example is an



Though the Azov battalion has links with neo-Nazi ideology, Russia brought out exaggerated, fake narrative to sow confusion among Ukraine's allies. Pictured is a rally in December 2022 in Dnipro in support of fighters of the regiment who were among the last to defend the city of Mariupol before its capture by Russia (photo: denkiska.ua / Shutterstock.com)

exception rather than the rule, as Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns are futile compared to the Ukrainian efforts. In terms of unrestricted warfare, nationally, Russia's legitimizing and glorifying objectives are synchronized with the military efforts, and, therefore, in line with the principles. Internationally, however, Russia's propaganda resources are experimental and little coordinated. Unrestricted warfare principles are not applied well in this context, as Russia cannot synchronize its disinformation efforts with its military objectives to dissuade Ukrainian allies or discredit the Ukrainian defenses in full.

Further, cyberattacks have been occurring in Ukraine, such as wiperware and a new version of the Russian Industroyer malware. Russia targets civilian infrastructure such as telecommunications, network, and electricity infrastructure.¹⁵ To this end, it uses its intelligence agencies, but also the known ransomware group Conti declared its support for the Russian government at the start of the conflict. Thus, despite having the Russian military potential at its disposal, Russia deploys proxy (criminal) actors in the digital

domain as well as on the ground with the Wagner Group's private military efforts.¹⁶ Nevertheless, these resources are at times outside of direct governmental control, with the exception of the intelligence agencies' cyberattacks, and therefore more difficult to control within the larger strategic narrative. In terms of unrestricted warfare, these resources are deployed effectively, especially the Wagner Group, towards limited objectives. Digital disruptions, however, did not achieve their limited objectives in full due to Ukraine's coordinated digital defenses. Yet, they were synchronized with the deployment of the larger warfare effort during the February 24 invasion. Though effective and important strategic assets for now, Russia will have to work hard to coordinate these resources in the future.

One last important mode of warfare since the start of the war is sanctions and economic warfare. Russian fossil fuels are no longer finding their way to Western markets, sanctions both ways have been tightened. In terms of unrestricted warfare, Russia deployed its economic warfare assets as a strategic resource against the Ukrainian allies with

the limited objective to destabilize the support for Ukraine. Despite this resource's potential, Russian sanctions could not achieve this limited objective as they appear desynchronized with the other warfare efforts.

UNRESTRICTED WARFARE IN UKRAINE?

This article has established that there have been various means that can be categorized as unrestricted warfare. The question remains if unrestricted warfare is the correct term here, following the principles from the original thesis of Colonels Liang and Xiangsui. Taking the period between 2014-2022 solely into account, the article distinguishes a range of means used, indicating omnidirectional deployment. However, these means are not synchronized; for instance, disruptive cyberattacks are not followed up by military or non-military means. Still, it could be argued that limited objectives have been achieved by solely functioning as a deterrent, test or destabilizer. Nevertheless, this hardly indicates multidimensional coordination towards a larger strategic objective. Instead, the objective seems to have been to ready the means for the military operation of February 2022, which then failed to achieve its overambitious objectives because it failed to deploy resources other than military ones omnidirectionally. Thereafter, the other elements of unrestricted warfare during the war, ranging from cyberattacks to propaganda to economic warfare, seem improvised. Thus, the Russian aggressor did not have the omnidirectionality of its means readied, which it could accordingly not synchronize to achieve limited goals. Hence, though the means of unrestricted warfare have been significantly present both in the 2014-2022 and the 2022-2023 periods, Russia has been unable or unwilling to effectively coerce these means to achieve unrestricted warfare potential.

FUTURE WARFARE, UNRESTRICTED?

It will remain unknown whether the invasion would have been more successful had Russia strategically applied the principles of unrestricted warfare. Though, this does not mean that unrestricted warfare's principles are obsolete; on the contrary, the principles are based on the ongoing trends of digitalization and globalization. Unrestricted warfare is possible, and we will likely see the multidimensional coordination of resources in the future. For instance, Taiwan could be a target for unrestricted warfare by China. At some point, there might be a military element in China's attempts at annexing Taiwan, but for as long as China can use information, covert operations, economic and diplomatic pressure, cyberattacks, and lawfare, it most likely will. China can optimize its warfare efforts by multidimensionally coordinating these unrestricted means and, in the end, fulfilling its strategic objective after minimal military struggle.

We should not find cheer in the failure of Russia to achieve unrestricted warfare, but rather become aware of the de-

velopment. In the years to come, we need to reconsider defense in the light of increasing interconnectedness in a globalizing and digitalizing world. This would be the time to be more proactive in addressing the challenges posed by the application of unrestricted warfare and develop new strategies and frameworks for dealing with these challenges.

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