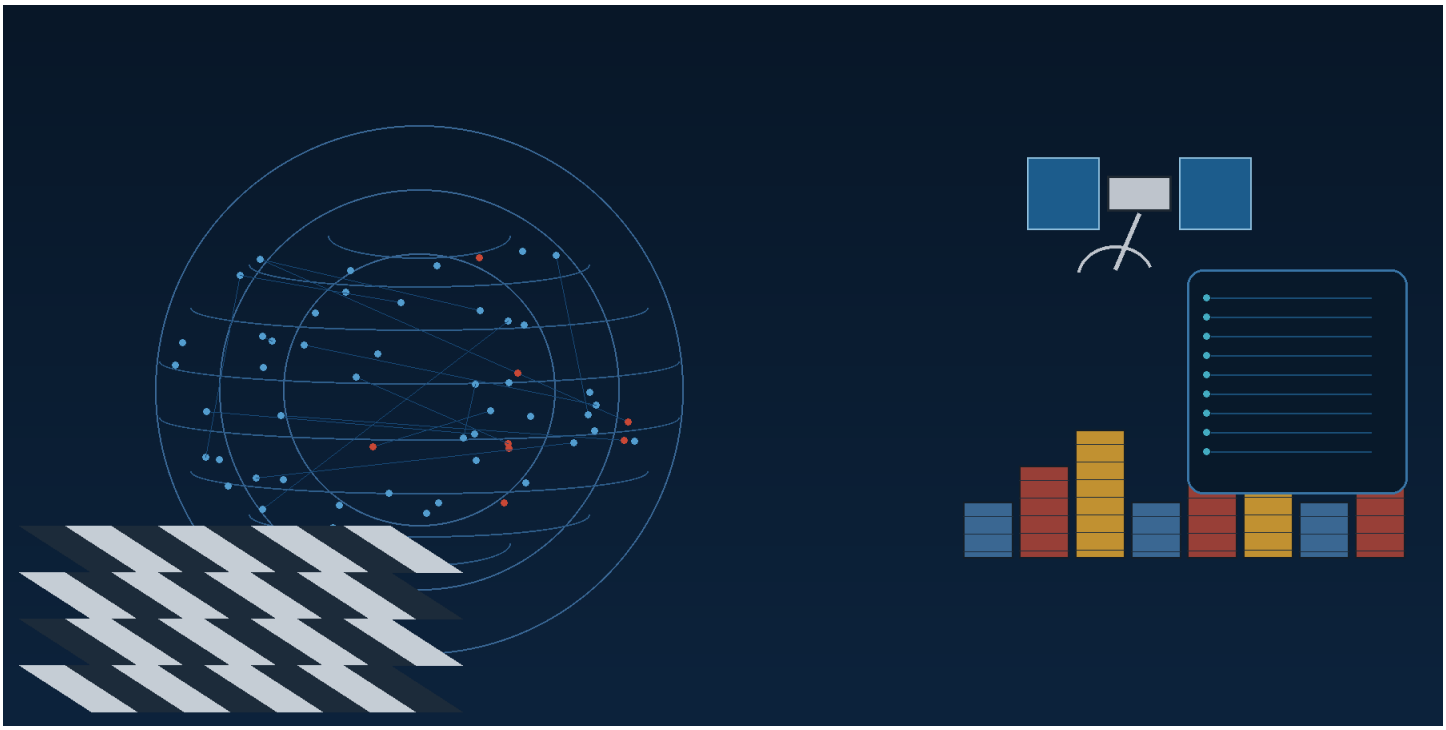

UNRESTRICTED WARFARE (超限战)

Concept, Origins, Strategic Logic, Applications, and Significance in Twenty-First-Century International Politics — Revised & Expanded Second Edition

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Method: primary-source-first analysis of the 1999 Chinese text, cross-checked against PRC official documents, U.S. government materials, and specialist research. The report distinguishes Fact, Authors' Argument, Official Doctrine, Analysis, and Inference.

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Research note. "Unrestricted Warfare" is the standard English title of the 1999 work, but the authors later argued that War(s) Beyond Limits better captures their intent. In this report, "Unrestricted Warfare" is retained as the conventional title while the underlying Chinese term is analyzed separately. [1]

Analytical Method and Evidence Hierarchy

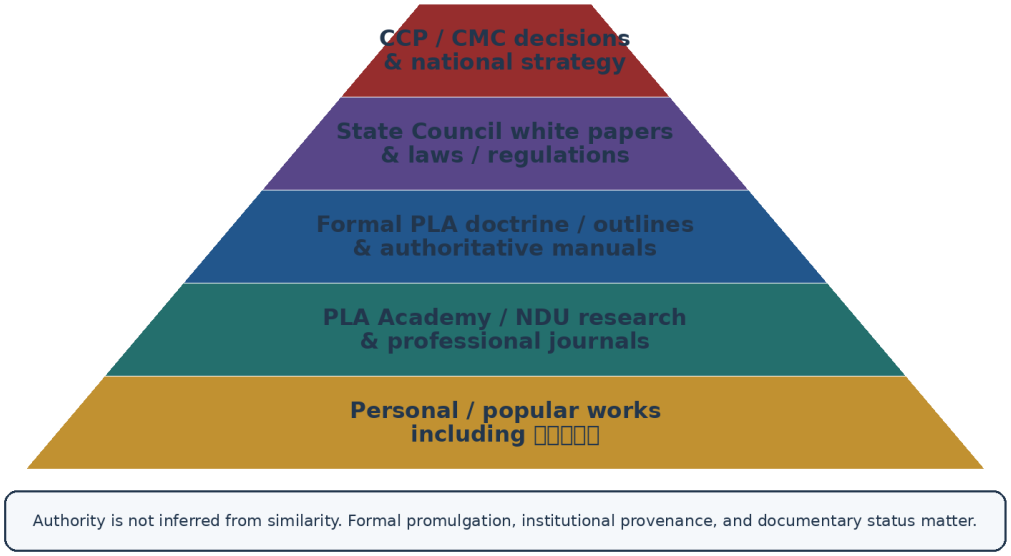


Figure FM-1. Authority hierarchy used in this report. A personal military-theory book is not equivalent to formally promulgated doctrine.

This revised edition separates three questions that are often collapsed: (1) does an activity resemble the logic described in Unrestricted Warfare? (2) is there documentary evidence that Chinese actors were influenced by or deliberately implementing the book? and (3) is the activity grounded in formal CCP/CMC policy, law, regulation, or PLA doctrine? A "yes" to the first question does not establish the second or third. [2]

Evidence category	What it establishes	Typical sources
A — Direct documentary linkage	A policy, institution, manual, speech, or record explicitly connects the activity to the concept or to a formally adopted doctrine.	CMC/CCP decisions; official manuals; authenticated orders; authoritative government records.
B — Strong institutional evidence	Consistent official practice and authoritative statements show a concept is institutionalized, though not necessarily derived from 《超限战》.	Defense white papers; PLA outlines; official ministry releases; repeated doctrinal publications.
C — Analytical similarity	An activity matches the book's cross-domain or asymmetric logic, but lineage is unproven.	Case evidence + comparative analysis.
D — Speculative attribution	The connection rests mainly on inference, rhetoric, or secondary commentary.	Opinion pieces, unsourced claims, retrospective pattern matching.

Case-study rating system. Each major case receives two separate judgments: Analytical Similarity (A) and Evidence of Direct Implementation (E). This prevents the recurrent error of treating resemblance as proof of doctrinal lineage.

Primary-source rule. Where the book is the subject, the 1999 Chinese text controls. Later translations and author interviews are used to clarify ambiguity but not to retroactively rewrite the original. Where contemporary PLA doctrine is the subject, formal PLA/CMC and PRC official sources take priority over the 1999 book. U.S. government and specialist research are used mainly to triangulate interpretation and observed practice.

1. Executive Summary

[FACT] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui published 《超限战》 in Beijing in February 1999 through the PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House: the book's afterword/prefatory material is dated January 17, 1999. Both were serving PLA officers at the time, but the book was not itself an authenticated Central Military Commission operational regulation, campaign outline, or defense white paper. [3]

[AUTHORS' ARGUMENT] The book argues that globalization, information technology, financial integration, media networks, and non-state actors were eroding the inherited boundaries of warfare. Future conflict, the authors suggested, could combine armed and non-armed, military and non-military, lethal and nonlethal means across multiple domains. [4]

[ANALYSIS] The most useful reading is not "anything is permitted," but "strategic competition can cross the inherited limits that separate military from non-military activity, battlefield from society, and war from other forms of coercion." The book's lasting contribution is therefore combinatorial and systemic rather than a specific tactical recipe. [5]

[OFFICIAL DOCTRINE] China's publicly documented military strategy emphasizes active defense, informationized warfare, integrated system-of-systems operations, and increasingly intelligentized warfare. The PLA also officially institutionalized the Three Warfares and in 2024 established an Information Support Force. These official concepts overlap with themes in the 1999 book but have distinct institutional sources. [6]

[ANALYSIS] The book was unusually prescient about the strategic importance of networks, finance, media, cyber operations, infrastructure, private actors, and cross-domain effects. Yet its categories are often conceptually overbroad, and it sometimes calls ordinary coercion, regulation, finance, crime, or political struggle "warfare," creating a risk of analytical inflation. [3]

[INFERENCE] When observers label every Chinese trade policy, investment, diaspora relationship, infrastructure project, or diplomatic initiative as "Unrestricted Warfare," they usually move beyond documentary evidence. Similarity to the book's logic is not evidence that a given policy was ordered under that doctrine. [7]

Bottom line. Unrestricted Warfare is best understood as a 1999 theory of boundary-transcending, integrated strategic coercion developed by two PLA officers in response to U.S. military superiority and globalization—not as a proven secret master doctrine governing every action of the PRC.

Ten core concepts	Meaning
1. Transcending boundaries	Break inherited separations among domains, actors, levels, means, and phases.
2. Combination of all means	Integrate instruments for cumulative effect rather than use them in isolation.
3. Non-equilibrium / asymmetry	Attack vulnerabilities and avoid symmetrical competition with a stronger opponent.
4. Omnidirectionality	View physical, social, political, economic, and technical spaces as a single strategic system.
5. Synchrony	Coordinate actions in different spaces within the same strategic time window.
6. Limited objectives	Keep political aims bounded even when the instrument set is broad.
7. "Unlimited" means within limits	Broaden available means, but only to the level required by the objective—an internal tension in the theory.
8. Multidimensional coordination	Coordinate military and non-military actors under a common purpose.
9. Minimum consumption	Seek disproportionate strategic effect at lower cost.
10. Whole-process control	Continuously update, coordinate, and manage the campaign as conditions change.

Sources: Primary basis: 《超限战》, especially chs. 7–8. [8]

2. Definition of Unrestricted Warfare

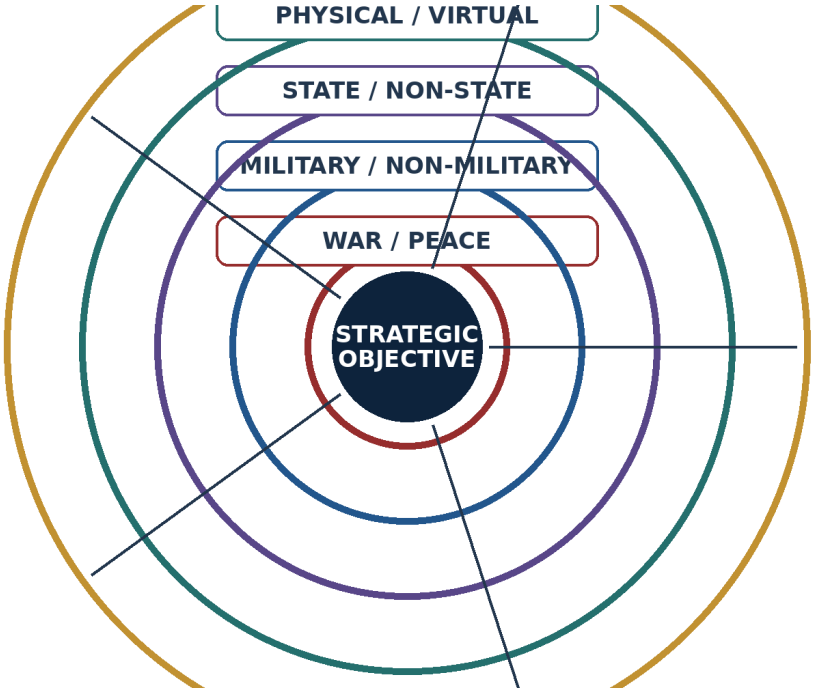


Figure 1. "超限" is best read as boundary-transcending rather than literally infinite or ruleless action.

The title contains two characters that matter analytically: 超 (chāo), "to go beyond, exceed, transcend," and 限 (xiàn), "limit, boundary, restriction." 战 / 战 (zhàn) means war or warfare. A literal rendering is therefore close to warfare that transcends limits/boundaries. In the 1999 text, the authors describe "warfare that transcends all boundaries and limits," but later explicitly stress that 超限 does not equal 无限 ("transcending limits is not the same as being limitless"). [8]

English rendering	Strength	Weakness	Assessment
Unrestricted Warfare	Established title; captures release from conventional constraints.	Can misleadingly imply no law, no ethics, no limits, or "anything goes."	Useful convention, but semantically overbroad.
War Beyond Limits	Best captures the authors' later preferred explanation of crossing inherited limits.	Slightly awkward English; "limits" can still sound absolute.	Most faithful to the authors' clarification.
Unbounded Warfare	Captures expansion across domains and spaces.	May suggest infinite scope rather than movement beyond specific boundaries.	Conceptually strong, but less standard.
Boundary-Transcending Warfare	Analytically precise.	Not an established title and sounds technical.	Best explanatory gloss, not a title.

Sources: Translation discussion: [9].

Does the concept mean "anything is permissible"? The answer is mixed. The book contains provocative passages about combining legal and illegal, military and non-military means and places heavy emphasis on effectiveness. That rhetoric understandably generated concern. Yet the same text also states that "unlimited transcendence" is impossible and defines 超限 as an expanded form of the limited. The safest interpretation is therefore: the authors seek to break conventional category boundaries, not to produce a coherent doctrine of literal infinity or universal permission. [8]

[ANALYSIS] The translation "Unrestricted Warfare" contributed to a Western framing in which the book was often read as a Chinese endorsement of "no rules." The Chinese text supports a more nuanced reading: the authors are radical about the scope and combination of instruments, but not consistent advocates of infinite objectives or limitless resource use. [10]

2.1 What "超限" Changes—and What It Does Not

The semantic distinction is important because 超 describes a movement across or beyond a boundary, whereas 无 / would negate the existence of the boundary. The authors' later formula—"超限并不等于无限" ("going beyond limits is not the same as having no limits")—therefore addresses a real ambiguity created by the established English title. Their definition in chapter 8 says, in substance, that limitless transcendence is impossible; one can only exceed the intrinsic boundary of a particular field or direction and combine opportunities and means across more fields in pursuit of a set objective. The key idea is expanded boundedness, not metaphysical infinity. [8]

This does not sanitize the book. It still contemplates methods that Western readers may regard as unlawful, illegitimate, or morally troubling, and it sometimes treats terrorism, crime, and market manipulation as phenomena from which strategists should learn. The interpretive point is narrower: the title alone cannot establish that the authors advocate a doctrine in which every act is permissible. Ethical judgment must be based on the relevant passage and context rather than on the connotation of the English adjective "unrestricted."

2.2 Translation History and Framing Effects

The earliest widely circulated U.S. government translation used Unrestricted Warfare. That phrase became canonical in English-language security debate and was later amplified by commercial editions and commentary. Some later editions added sensational subtitles that were not the Chinese subtitle, which is normally rendered as "War and Methods of War in the Age of Globalization." Qiao later objected that "Unrestricted Warfare" could be read as "war without restrictions" and argued for a rendering closer to Wars Beyond Limits. Frank Hoffman likewise noted that "war beyond limits" better captured the concept and that a close reading did not amount to a simple call for immoral, limitless violence. [11]

Translation therefore became part of the reception history. Unrestricted primes readers to ask, "What restrictions are being rejected?" Beyond limits primes them to ask, "Which boundaries are being crossed?" Unbounded emphasizes spatial and conceptual scope. None is perfect. For analytical writing, this report retains the established title but uses boundary-transcending warfare as the explanatory gloss because it makes the underlying mechanism explicit without implying that law, ethics, objectives, or resources are literally unlimited.

Question	Too-broad reading	More precise reading
Does 超限 abolish all rules?	Yes: "unrestricted" means no rules apply.	No. The text explicitly rejects "unlimited" transcendence; it broadens the relevant domains and methods.
Does the book erase war and peace completely?	Every peacetime act is war.	It argues that non-war actions may produce strategic effects associated with war, thereby blurring—but not legally eliminating—the distinction.
Does "all means" mean every possible means must be used?	Yes, total mobilization of everything.	No. Combination is selective and subordinated to limited objectives and minimum consumption.
Does publication by a PLA press make it doctrine?	Yes, it is an official master plan.	No. Publication shows military relevance and some institutional receptivity, but formal doctrinal status requires additional evidence.

Sources: Primary-language and reception basis: [12].

3. Historical Background of Unrestricted Warfare

Figure 2. The conceptual setting: U.S. military-technological dominance, globalization, financial shocks, and the rise of information networks.

The book emerged from a specific historical asymmetry. The Cold War had ended; the United States appeared militarily dominant; the 1991 Gulf War demonstrated precision-guided munitions, stealth, space-enabled navigation, electronic warfare, rapid joint operations, and the value of information superiority. Chinese analysts viewed the Iraqi military—large, ground-centric, and equipped with Soviet-style systems—as uncomfortably analogous to important features of the PLA. The war therefore became a powerful demonstration that mass and traditional firepower were insufficient against a digitized, networked, precision-strike force. [13]

[FACT] The PLA's strategic guideline shifted in 1993 toward preparing for local wars under modern/high-technology conditions, and by 2004 toward local wars under conditions of informationization. The 2015 white paper then framed the objective as winning "informationized local wars." [14]

The authors were also writing during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, the rapid commercialization of the Internet, the globalization of supply chains and finance, and the growing visibility of non-state actors. They treated these phenomena not as background conditions but as potential components of strategic conflict. In their framework, a financial panic, network attack, media event, sanctions regime, or legal campaign could produce strategic effects that once required military force. [4]

The Gulf War and the RMA. The U.S.-led Revolution in Military Affairs emphasized information, precision, sensors, jointness, long-range strike, stealth, and networked command. Qiao and Wang did not reject these developments; they argued that the American concept was still too military-centric. Their counterproposal was to extend "revolution" from weapons and force structure into the definition of the battlefield itself. In their logic, the weaker power should not compete on the opponent's strongest dimension if it can shift the competition to domains where the stronger power is more exposed. [15]

[ANALYSIS] Unrestricted Warfare is thus both an imitation of and a critique of the U.S. RMA: imitation in recognizing the centrality of information, systems, precision, and integration; critique in arguing that the deepest revolution lies in combining military power with finance, law, networks, media, diplomacy, technology, and non-state activity. [16]

3.1 Why the Gulf War Was a Strategic Shock

The book's opening pages treat the 1991 Gulf War as one of the defining events of the decade. This was not simply because the coalition won. The war appeared to demonstrate a new relationship among sensors, command networks, air power, stealth, precision munitions, electronic attack, space support, logistics, and joint operations. The Chinese text explicitly notes the shock the war produced among Chinese military observers and describes the Gulf War as both an endpoint of an older era and a possible opening of a new one. [17]

For China, the lesson was structurally uncomfortable. The PLA of the early 1990s was still moving away from a manpower-heavy, continental orientation. Matching the United States platform for platform would have required enormous resources and time. The strategic problem was therefore not merely how to modernize, but how to avoid allowing modernization to become a race conducted entirely on U.S. terms. Unrestricted Warfare answers that problem by widening the field on which relative power is measured.

3.2 RMA: Admiration, Critique, and Strategic Countermove

The U.S. Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) was built around the proposition that information technologies, precision strike, advanced sensors, command-and-control integration, and new organizational concepts could generate discontinuous increases in military effectiveness. Qiao and Wang accepted much of that diagnosis but challenged its scope. In their view, the U.S. debate was still constrained by the institutional boundaries of the military profession. If globalization connected finance, communications, media, trade, infrastructure, and political legitimacy to military power, then a revolution confined to weapons and operational art was incomplete. [18]

This helps explain one of the book's recurring rhetorical moves: it praises the sophistication of U.S. technology while simultaneously searching for the systemic dependencies created by that sophistication. The more networked and specialized a military becomes, the more it depends on satellites, communications, software, logistics, industry, capital, and political consent. The authors turn the RMA inside out: integration is a source of U.S. power, but interdependence can also create vulnerable nodes.

3.3 Globalization and the Asian Financial Crisis

The timing of the book matters. The 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis had demonstrated that capital flows, currency expectations, leverage, banking fragility, and investor psychology could impose national-level costs without a shot being fired. The authors drew strategic significance from such events. In a globalized system, financial and informational flows can propagate shocks faster than armies can move. This observation was conceptually important even where the book's causal analysis of particular crises was speculative.

The same decade saw the commercial Internet move from a specialist network to mass infrastructure, cable and satellite media compress political time, and transnational companies become operators of systems once dominated by states. Terrorist organizations and criminal networks also demonstrated that non-state groups could create political effects disproportionate to their conventional military power. The authors' broader thesis emerged from this convergence: the international system itself was becoming an operational environment.

3.4 What the Book Was—and Was Not—Responding To

It is therefore misleading to read Unrestricted Warfare only as an anti-American tract. The United States is the principal reference adversary because it represented the strongest high-technology military model, but the intellectual target is broader: traditional military categories. Equally, it is misleading to detach the book from China's strategic circumstances. The asymmetry with U.S. power, the Taiwan problem, the PLA's modernization agenda, and Chinese study of foreign wars all shaped the questions the authors asked.

[ANALYSIS] The most useful historical interpretation is that the book sits at the intersection of three shocks: U.S. precision/networked military dominance, global economic and informational integration, and China's search for asymmetric paths to strategic effectiveness. Remove any one of those contexts and the text becomes harder to understand. [19]

4. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui

At publication, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui were PLA Air Force senior colonels associated with political work and strategic writing. Later biographical notes describe Qiao as a retired PLAAF major general and military thinker, and Wang as a retired senior colonel who became a professor and strategic studies scholar. The key point for source evaluation is their status in 1999: they were serving officers, not anonymous civilians, which gave the book military relevance; but they were not issuing an authenticated CMC directive. [20]

The book was published by the PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House rather than as an operational gangyao (纲要), regulation, or Academy of Military Science / National Defense University doctrinal manual. This distinction is decisive. As CNA's doctrinal research emphasizes, "authoritative" PLA doctrine is tied to formal institutional endorsement and promulgation. A provocative monograph can influence debate without being doctrine. [21]

[ANALYSIS] The strongest defensible formulation is that the book reflects a strand of late-1990s Chinese military thought. It should be treated as evidence of debate, conceptual experimentation, and threat perception—not as self-authenticating evidence of state policy. [22]

5. Core Strategic Logic

The theory is built around a systems problem: how can a weaker actor impose strategic costs on a stronger actor whose conventional military advantages are difficult to match? The answer is to refuse the opponent's preferred geometry of conflict. Instead of seeking symmetrical parity in tanks, aircraft, ships, or precision munitions, the challenger identifies vulnerable nodes in the opponent's broader political-economic-information system and combines actions across domains. [23]

Core proposition	Meaning in the book	Strategic implication
War/peace boundary becomes porous	Non-war actions may have warlike strategic effects.	Competition can be persistent before formal hostilities.
Military/non-military distinction weakens	Finance, trade, media, law, diplomacy and networks can be integrated with military activity.	National power matters more than armed force alone.
State/non-state distinction blurs	Corporations, NGOs, criminal groups, terrorists, hackers, media and international organizations can affect outcomes.	Attribution and command relationships become more complex.
Battlefield expands	Natural, social and technical spaces are all potentially relevant.	Critical infrastructure and information ecosystems become strategic terrain.
Asymmetry is a method	Avoid strength; target dependency, expectation, timing and systemic vulnerability.	A weaker actor can generate disproportionate effects.
Combination is central	The value of means lies in the interaction among them.	Campaign design becomes cross-domain and cross-institutional.

Sources: Primary basis: [4], especially chs. 5–8; synthesis compared with [24].

"Combination of all means." Qiao and Wang compare effective combinations to a cocktail: the important innovation is not that any one ingredient is new, but that tools that were institutionally separated can be orchestrated for a shared strategic purpose. They describe four major forms of boundary crossing: supra-national (state, transnational and non-state actors), supra-domain (military and non-military fields), supra-means (different instruments and methods), and supra-tiers (tactical actions producing strategic effects). [4]

"Transcending boundaries." The authors' argument is not merely "use more tools." It is to break organizational assumptions that prevent coordination. A finance ministry, broadcaster, technology company, intelligence service, military command, regulator, and diplomatic coalition may be strategically connected even when each actor thinks it is operating in a separate domain.

5.1 The Eight Operating Principles in Chapter 8

Principle	Original term	Operational logic	Critical observation
Omnidirectionality	全向度	Scan all relevant physical, social and technical spaces; avoid a single-domain picture.	Useful systems principle, but risks strategic overextension if every variable is treated as equally actionable.
Synchrony	共时性	Coordinate actions in different spaces during the same strategic time window.	Anticipates cross-domain timing; real synchronization is constrained by intelligence and bureaucracy.
Limited objectives	有限目标	Define political goals within the range of achievable effects.	A significant restraint that contradicts simplistic readings of "unlimited war."
Unlimited means	无限手段	Keep the instrument set open-ended until the limited objective can be achieved.	The phrase is rhetorically extreme, but the authors themselves subordinate means to objectives.
Non-equilibrium	非均衡	Search in the opposite direction from symmetry and attack weak nodes.	The clearest expression of asymmetric strategy in the book.
Minimum consumption	最小耗费	Spend only the resources needed to cross the threshold of strategic effect.	Echoes economy of force and indirect strategy rather than a uniquely Chinese principle.
Multidimensional coordination	多维协同	Coordinate all available military and non-military forces toward one objective.	Central to the "all means" thesis; difficult under fragmented institutions or coalitions.
Whole-process control	全程调控	Continuously gather information, revise actions and manage escalation from beginning to end.	Modern in its feedback logic, but assumes a degree of controllability that war rarely provides.

Sources: Primary source: Chapter 8 of the Chinese text. [8]

5.2 The Asymmetric Neutralization Logic

The authors do not claim that a weak state can magically erase a stronger state's military advantage. Their claim is conditional: a strong state's superiority is embedded in complex systems that create dependencies. Precision weapons depend on sensors, satellites, software, logistics, data links, skilled personnel, communications, finance, political authorization and public support. If an opponent can impose costs on the supporting system, the value of the superior weapon system can fall without being destroyed directly.

This logic has three steps. First, identify a dependency the stronger side cannot quickly substitute. Second, select an instrument whose cost is low relative to the dependency it can disrupt. Third, combine the effect with other pressures so that the target must solve several problems at once. In modern terminology, this resembles system destruction, cross-domain deterrence, resilience competition and network coercion more than classic attrition.

[ANALYSIS] The asymmetric logic is durable because military superiority often increases dependence on networks. But it is not automatically advantageous to the weaker actor: sophisticated states can build redundancy, harden infrastructure, diversify supply chains, impose counter-sanctions and retaliate in domains where the weaker actor is exposed.

5.3 The Four Boundary-Crossing Combinations

Combination	Chinese term	What crosses the boundary	Illustrative strategic question
Supra-national combination	超国家组合	States, international organizations, corporations, NGOs, networks, and non-state actors.	Can the outcome be shaped by actors that do not sit inside the opponent's military chain of command?
Supra-domain combination	超领域组合	Military, economic, financial, political, informational, technological, legal, and social fields.	Which pressure in one domain can create a vulnerability or bargaining effect in another?
Supra-means combination	超手段组合	Armed/non-armed, lethal/nonlethal, coercive/persuasive, overt/covert instruments.	Which heterogeneous instruments reinforce one another rather than duplicate effort?
Supra-tier combination	超台阶组合	Tactical, operational, strategic, political, and systemic levels.	Can a low-cost local action trigger strategic effects through networks, expectations, or alliance dynamics?

Sources: Primary source: the discussion of "combinations" in chs. 7–8 of 《超限战》. [4]

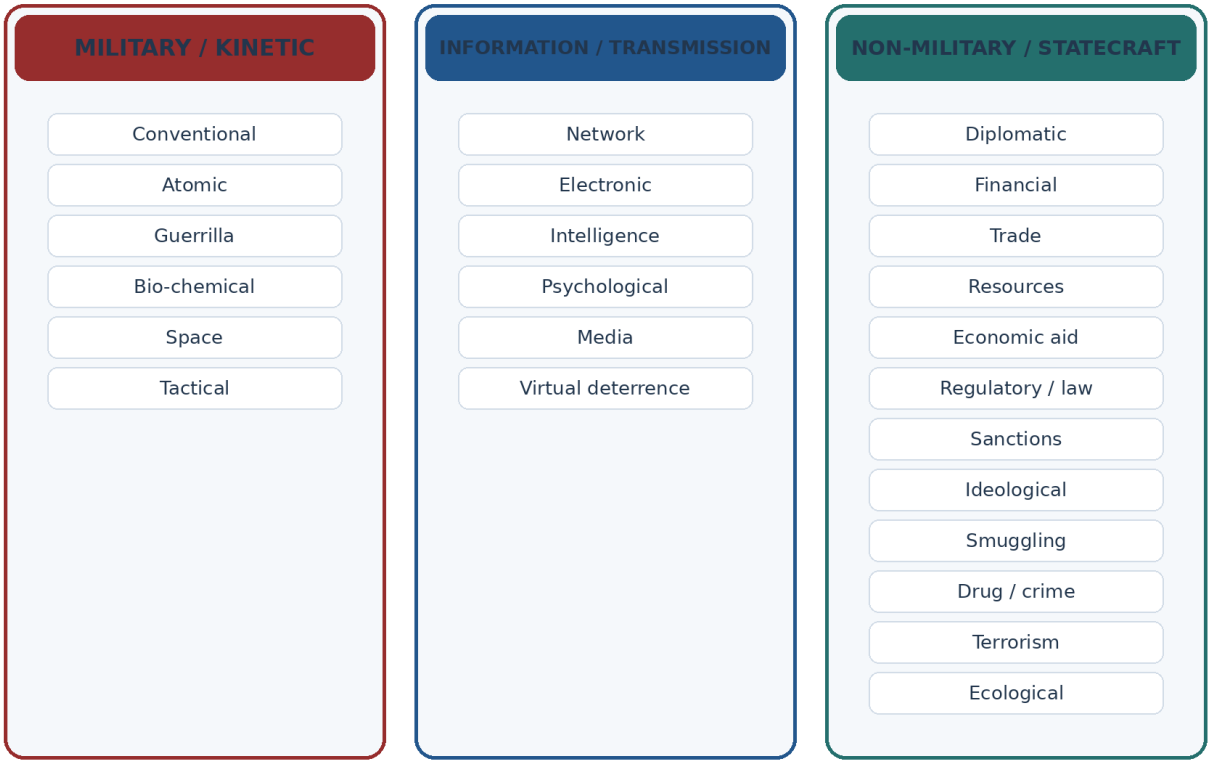
These combinations are the conceptual bridge between the book's broad taxonomy and its strategic method. Without them, the text can look like a catalog of colorful labels—financial war, network war, media war, legal war, terrorism, and so on. With them, the central claim becomes clearer: the strategic unit of analysis is the interaction among instruments, not the instrument by itself.

5.4 Limited Objectives as an Internal Restraint

The presence of "limited objectives" among the eight principles is easy to overlook because "unlimited means" receives more attention. Yet the two are paired. The authors argue that means should remain broadly selectable while objectives should be deliberately bounded and resource consumption minimized. This creates a hierarchy: objective first, combination second, instrument third. That hierarchy is one reason the book should not be reduced to indiscriminate escalation. [4]

There is nevertheless a tension. An open-ended menu of instruments can generate escalation paths the initiator cannot fully control. Financial panic may spread beyond the target; cyber effects can propagate; propaganda can radicalize audiences; proxies can acquire their own incentives; sanctions can trigger counter-coalitions. The book's principle of "whole-process control" acknowledges the need for adaptation but tends to overestimate how controllable complex systems actually are.

6. Expansion of the Domains of Warfare



Classification is an analytical reorganization of the book's 24-item list; the original categories are heterogeneous and not a formal taxonomy.

Figure 3. The book's three-part taxonomy of military, "trans-military," and non-military forms of warfare.

The original taxonomy is deliberately provocative. It classifies atomic, conventional, biochemical, ecological, space, electronic, guerrilla and terrorist warfare as "military"; diplomatic, network, intelligence, psychological, technological, smuggling, drug and virtual/deterrent warfare as "trans-military"; and financial, trade, resource, economic-aid, regulatory/legal, sanctions, media and ideological warfare as "non-military." [25]

[ANALYSIS] Many categories are better described today as instruments of statecraft, coercion, influence, competition, crime, or national security rather than "warfare." The book's taxonomy is analytically useful as a map of possible strategic effects, but it should not be treated as a settled legal or scholarly classification. [4]

Domain requested in this report	Book / modern relation	Contemporary analytical treatment
Conventional military warfare	Explicit	Kinetic force, deterrence, joint operations.
Diplomatic warfare	Explicit	Coalition-building, isolation, recognition, agenda-setting.
Information / propaganda / public opinion	Explicit media + psychological + ideological elements	Narrative competition, influence operations, strategic communication.
Cyber / network warfare	Explicit "network warfare"	Cyber espionage, disruption, access operations, C2 attack.
Electronic warfare	Explicit	Spectrum attack/protection, jamming, deception.
Economic / trade / sanctions	Explicit	Economic statecraft, coercive trade measures, denial of market access.
Financial / currency warfare	Explicit financial warfare; currency examples appear in discussion	Sanctions, payments, correspondent banking, reserve assets, market access.
Resource / energy warfare	Explicit resource warfare	Critical minerals, energy leverage, chokepoints, stockpiling.
Technology / industrial warfare	Explicit technology warfare	Export controls, standards, industrial policy, dual-use innovation.
Lawfare / normative warfare	Explicit regulations / international law discussion	Legal positioning, rule-making, litigation, standards, institutional contestation.
Terrorism / crime / non-state actors	Explicit and controversial	Illustrative cases of asymmetric effect; not evidence of official endorsement.
Social disruption / infrastructure attacks	Implicit in systemic and nontraditional battlefield logic	Modern extension: critical infrastructure, platforms, logistics, public trust.

Sources: The first two columns are derived from the 1999 text [4]; the third is this report's analytical modernization.

6.1 The Book's 24 Forms of Warfare: A Heterogeneous List

The original book is often summarized as presenting "24 kinds of warfare." That shorthand is useful but can mislead. The list mixes domains (space, network), methods (guerrilla, terrorism), statecraft instruments (finance, trade, diplomacy), targets (resources, ecology), and organizational actors (smuggling, criminal networks). It is therefore not a taxonomy in the strict scientific sense. The categories overlap, differ in scale, and are not mutually exclusive. [26]

This matters for contemporary analysis. "Cyber warfare," "economic warfare," "lawfare," and "psychological warfare" are not commensurable units. Cyber can be a domain and a method; finance can be infrastructure and an instrument; law can constrain conduct or be used for strategic positioning; propaganda can be an activity conducted by states, parties, private organizations, or non-state networks. Treating the labels as equal boxes hides the mechanisms that connect them.

6.2 Mapping the User-Facing Categories to the 1999 Text

Modern label	Status in the 1999 book	Best analytical treatment
Conventional military warfare	Explicit	Classic armed-force operations; important but no longer assumed to be decisive alone.
Diplomatic warfare	Explicit	Coalition formation, isolation, recognition, agenda setting, negotiation pressure.
Information / propaganda / public opinion	Explicit through media, psychological, ideological and information categories	Narrative and attention effects; public opinion becomes both target and constraint.
Cyber / network warfare	Explicit as network warfare	Access, espionage, disruption, command-system effects, and strategic signaling.
Electronic warfare	Explicit	Spectrum denial, jamming, deception, protection of information links.
Economic / trade warfare	Explicit	Tariffs, denial, market access, industrial pressure, economic inducement.
Financial / currency warfare	Explicit financial warfare; currency examples discussed	Payments, reserves, capital markets, exchange-rate and liquidity channels.
Resource / energy warfare	Explicit resource warfare	Control of scarce inputs, transport chokepoints, energy dependence, stockpiling.
Technology / industrial warfare	Explicit technological warfare and broader industrial logic	Export controls, industrial policy, standards, manufacturing bottlenecks, dual-use innovation.
Lawfare / normative warfare	Regulations and international-law warfare are explicit	Legal claims, institutional rulemaking, sanctions authorities, litigation, standards.
Terrorism / criminal organizations	Explicit and controversial	Examples of asymmetric effect; description or strategic study is not automatically official endorsement.
Social disruption / infrastructure attacks	Not a single neat original category	Modern synthesis derived from the book's systemic battlefield logic; requires independent evidence in each case.

6.3 What the Battlefield Expansion Really Means

The expanded battlefield should not be understood as a claim that every bank branch, television studio, court, university, or social network is continuously a literal battlefield. The stronger proposition is relational: these institutions can become strategically relevant terrain when they mediate resources, legitimacy, information, access, or decision. The analytical task is therefore to identify the mechanism linking an activity to a strategic objective, not merely to attach the word "warfare."

A useful test has four questions: What is the strategic objective? What dependency or decision is being targeted? What instrument creates the effect? What evidence shows coordination or intent? If those questions cannot be answered, the unrestricted-warfare label may be decorative rather than explanatory.

7. Combination of Military and Non-Military Means

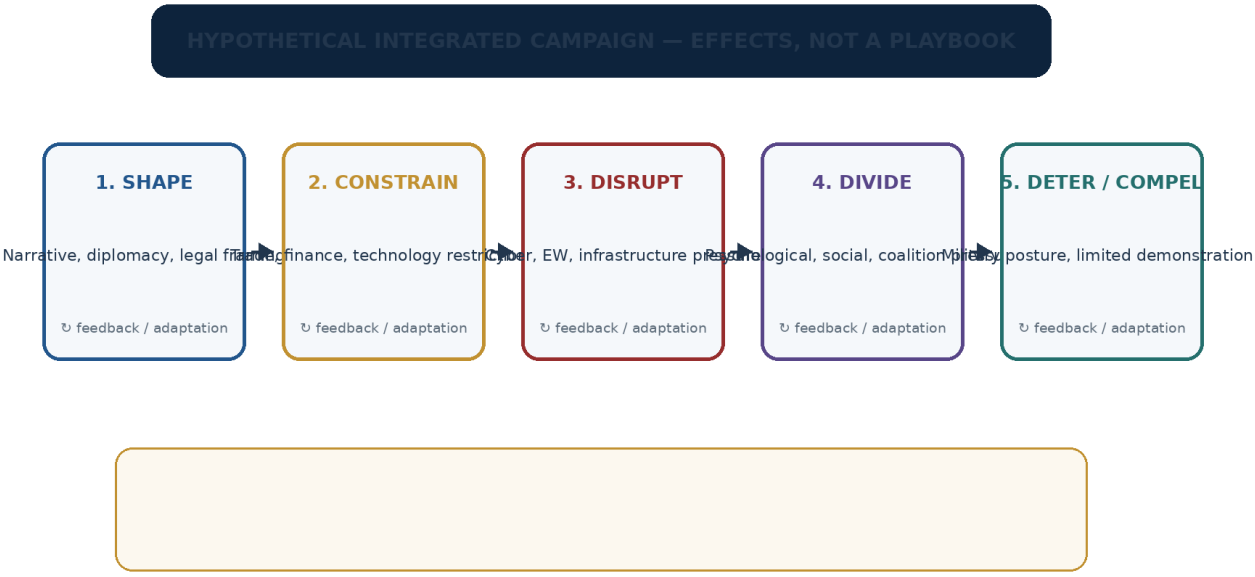


Figure 4. A non-operational hypothetical example showing cumulative cross-domain pressure. It illustrates logic, not a recommendation for conduct.

The theory insists that the instruments should be integrated, not merely accumulated. Five independent campaigns do not automatically create strategic synergy. Combination requires a shared objective, timing, sequencing, feedback, and a theory of how one action changes the effectiveness of another.

Hypothetical scenario	Integrated combination	Why the combination matters
Maritime sovereignty dispute	Legal claims + coast-guard presence + diplomatic pressure + public messaging + commercial shipping data + limited naval signaling	Law and narrative shape legitimacy while civilian/paramilitary presence changes facts on the ground and military forces remain in reserve.
Technology crisis	Export controls + investment screening + standards alliances + industrial subsidies + cyber defense + diplomatic coordination	Market denial and standards can constrain capability development more durably when allied and reinforced by security measures.
Financial confrontation	Asset freezes + correspondent-banking restrictions + capital-market measures + export controls + coalition diplomacy + public attribution	Financial pressure becomes stronger when legal jurisdiction, reserve currency networks, allied coordination, and technology controls reinforce one another.
Pre-conflict coercion	Exercises + cyber reconnaissance + information operations + legal notices + economic signaling + alliance manipulation	Each action changes expectations and decision time; the combined effect may alter risk perception without crossing the threshold to war.

[ANALYSIS] The book' s strongest insight is that cross-domain interaction can be multiplicative rather than additive. Its weakest point is that it often assumes coordination is easier than it is. Bureaucratic friction, conflicting incentives, legal constraints, escalation risk, market feedback, and imperfect information can make "all-means" integration extremely difficult in practice.

7.1 Scenario A — Maritime Coercion Without Immediate War

Hypothesis. A stronger or regionally dominant state seeks to alter the status quo around a disputed maritime feature while avoiding a major shooting war. Instead of beginning with naval combat, it combines legal claims, administrative rules, coast-guard patrols, fishing or commercial presence, diplomatic messaging, selective economic incentives, media narratives, and military forces held over the horizon. None of these instruments alone necessarily compels the opponent. Together they can increase operational friction, change expectations about persistence, and make third parties uncertain about when treaty or military thresholds apply.

Integrated effect. Legal instruments provide a narrative of jurisdiction; civilian or law-enforcement vessels make presence appear routine; economic measures raise the cost of resistance; information operations portray the opponent

as the escalator; diplomatic activity discourages outside involvement; military forces create a background risk if the crisis intensifies. This combination illustrates supra-domain and supra-tier logic without requiring the conclusion that any real-world maritime campaign was copied from the 1999 book.

7.2 Scenario B — Technology and Industrial Pressure

Hypothesis. Two advanced economies compete over a dual-use technology ecosystem. One side combines export controls on bottleneck equipment, outbound-investment restrictions, subsidies for domestic capacity, standards diplomacy with allies, research-security rules, procurement preferences, and intensified cyber defense. The other side responds with industrial subsidies, indigenous substitution, export controls on critical materials, market-access leverage, standards coalitions, talent programs, and supply-chain diversification.

Integrated effect. The contest is not reducible to "trade war." Technology denial changes the cost and timing of military and commercial innovation; industrial policy changes long-term capacity; standards determine compatibility and market scale; investment rules shape capital and knowledge flows; critical-mineral policy affects manufacturing; diplomacy determines whether chokepoint controls are multilateral. The interaction among these instruments is much closer to the book's combinatorial logic than any single tariff or licensing rule. [27]

7.3 Scenario C — Financial Isolation and Network Pressure

Hypothesis. A coalition seeks to impose major costs after a severe international violation without entering direct war. It freezes designated assets, restricts selected banks' correspondent relationships, limits new debt and equity financing, controls sensitive exports, targets shipping and insurance services, coordinates legal designations with allies, and publicly signals conditions for relief. Private firms respond by reducing exposure beyond the minimum legal requirement.

Integrated effect. The coalition's power comes from network centrality rather than physical destruction. Market participants amplify government action through de-risking; financial restrictions constrain trade; technology controls reduce replacement options; public attribution strengthens coalition legitimacy; diplomatic coordination reduces evasion opportunities. The target, however, adapts through alternative payment chains, new intermediaries, trade diversion, reserve diversification, and domestic substitution. Modern financial coercion therefore resembles a dynamic campaign, not a one-time switch. [28]

7.4 Scenario D — Pre-Crisis Information and Military Signaling

Hypothesis. During a political crisis, one side conducts visible military exercises while simultaneously releasing legal notices, amplifying narratives about inevitability or resolve, conducting cyber espionage, applying selective economic pressure, and using diplomatic channels to shape third-party expectations. The goal is to alter the opponent's calculation before a decision point rather than to destroy forces.

Integrated effect. Exercises alter estimates of capability and readiness; cyber access may create uncertainty about infrastructure security; economic measures impose immediate constituency costs; narratives target morale and alliance confidence; legal messaging seeks to frame subsequent actions as enforcement rather than aggression. The scenario shows why the book's "synchrony" principle matters: the instruments are most consequential when their effects arrive within the opponent's decision cycle.

7.5 Why Combination Is Hard

The book often describes cross-domain integration as if a strategist could select instruments from a menu. Real states face agency rivalries, legal authorities that do not align, intelligence gaps, commercial actors with independent incentives, coalition disagreements, and market reactions that are only partly controllable. A cyber service may prefer secrecy while a diplomatic service prefers public attribution; a central bank may prioritize financial stability while a security agency favors pressure; a private platform may resist government requests; allies may have different exposure to retaliation. These frictions are not marginal—they are often the decisive variable.

Accordingly, a modernized version of "combination of all means" should be understood as an organizational challenge as much as a strategic insight. The actor that can coordinate across departments, allies, companies, and time horizons without destroying its own legitimacy or economic position may gain an advantage even if it possesses no novel instrument.

8. Economic Warfare and Financial Warfare

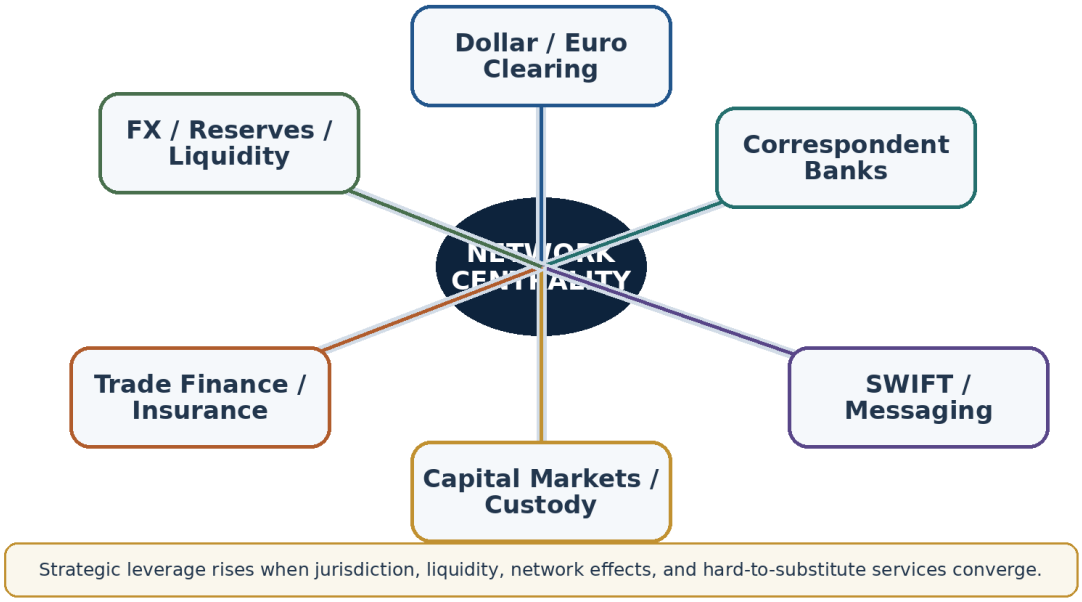


Figure 5. Finance as strategic infrastructure: power derives from centrality, jurisdiction, liquidity, market depth, and network dependence.

Financial warfare is one of the book's most consequential categories. In 1999, that was unconventional in military literature. Today, financial sanctions, payment restrictions, export controls, investment screening, sovereign-reserve freezes, anti-money-laundering rules, and market-access restrictions are standard instruments of statecraft. The book's conceptual novelty was to view these mechanisms as potentially comparable in strategic effect to military coercion. [29]

The U.S. dollar. Dollar centrality gives the United States unusual leverage because a large share of global trade, finance, debt issuance, commodities, and cross-border banking relies directly or indirectly on dollar clearing and U.S.-linked correspondent banks. Treasury's own sanctions review states that U.S. sanctions rest on the strength of and trust in the U.S. financial system and currency. [30]

SWIFT. SWIFT is a financial messaging network, not a global "bank," and disconnection does not by itself freeze assets or prohibit every transaction. Its strategic power comes from how messaging access interacts with legal sanctions, correspondent-banking relationships, and the dominant currency networks. In 2022 the EU required disconnection of designated Russian banks; the same coalition also restricted Russia's ability to deploy central-bank reserves. [31]

Capital markets and sovereign debt. Restricting access to primary or secondary markets can increase funding costs and reduce refinancing capacity. Conversely, deep and liquid markets create strategic attraction: states and firms may accept legal and policy exposure in exchange for financing and liquidity. This is a structural form of power rather than a conventional weapon.

Foreign-exchange and reserve assets. A central bank's reserves are useful only to the extent they can be converted, transferred, or pledged. The freezing or immobilization of reserve assets in jurisdictions supporting sanctions demonstrated that reserve composition has geopolitical as well as monetary implications.

Payment networks. Visa, Mastercard, correspondent banking, clearinghouses, settlement systems, and messaging infrastructure can become strategic chokepoints when legal jurisdiction and network effects coincide. Recent empirical work finds that sanctions can sever direct access to major-currency networks and force targeted banks into longer, more fragile chains of intermediaries. [32]

Supply chains and export controls. Export controls on advanced semiconductors illustrate how denial of a small number of high-leverage technologies can constrain AI, supercomputing, and military applications. BIS explicitly framed its

2025 controls as national-security measures aimed at restricting advanced computing capabilities relevant to military use. [33]

Critical minerals. China's control of significant parts of rare-earth mining, processing and magnet supply chains creates reciprocal leverage. A 2026 CSIS assessment of China's restrictions on dual-use minerals to Japan explicitly interprets the measures as coercive economic statecraft connected to geopolitical tensions. [34]

8.1 How Financial Power Produces Strategic Effects

Financial power works through networks and legal jurisdiction. A state does not need to physically seize an adversary's factories if it can make payments, insurance, trade finance, investment, clearing, settlement, or refinancing substantially more difficult. The effect is strongest where a small number of intermediaries connect many participants. That is why correspondent banks, reserve-currency clearing, major securities markets, central securities depositories, payment processors and insurance markets can function as strategic chokepoints.

A second mechanism is expectations. Financial measures can change behavior before formal restrictions take full effect. Banks, insurers, auditors, shipping companies and investors often reduce exposure in anticipation of sanctions or export-control risk. This "over-compliance" can magnify official measures. The same network effect can produce unintended humanitarian or third-country costs, which is why the U.S. Treasury sanctions review emphasizes calibration, multilateral coordination and mitigation of unintended consequences. [30]

A third mechanism is time. Military force can create immediate destruction, whereas financial restrictions often accumulate. Yet some financial actions are extremely fast: freezing accessible assets, cutting a bank from correspondent relationships, or blocking settlement can alter liquidity within hours. The strategic tempo therefore ranges from instant immobilization to slow industrial attrition.

8.2 The Dollar, Reserve Assets, and Correspondent Banking

The dollar's strategic role is often overstated as if Washington could simply "switch off" any foreign economy. In reality, leverage depends on the structure of transactions. A payment may involve a local bank, a correspondent bank, dollar clearing in New York, compliance screening, trade finance, insurance and securities settlement. U.S. jurisdiction is powerful where one or more of those links touches U.S. persons, U.S. institutions, or dollar-clearing infrastructure. The network is powerful precisely because private institutions value access to it.

Reserve assets add another layer. Foreign-exchange reserves are claims on institutions and markets. If those claims are held in jurisdictions participating in sanctions, their practical usability can be reduced. The 2022 restrictions on Russia's central-bank reserve access demonstrated that even sovereign assets can acquire geopolitical risk. At the same time, such measures create incentives for reserve diversification, bilateral settlement arrangements, gold accumulation and alternative payment systems. This is why financial coercion can both strengthen and gradually erode the network on which it relies.

8.3 Sovereign Bonds, Equity Markets, and Investment Restrictions

Sovereign debt markets matter because modern states refinance continuously. Restrictions on primary issuance can narrow financing options; restrictions on secondary trading can reduce liquidity and investor demand; sanctions on settlement or custodians can create operational barriers. Equity-market measures can restrict capital raising or force index providers and institutional investors to reconsider exposure. Investment screening and outbound-investment rules extend the logic from "deny money" to "deny capital, knowledge, and strategic linkage."

In a U.S.–China context, the strategic issue is not simply whether one side owns the other side's bonds. Large-scale financial interdependence creates mutual exposure. A sudden liquidation strategy could impose costs on the target but also on the seller through valuation effects, exchange rates and loss of reserve assets. The book's financial-warfare metaphor is therefore most useful when paired with modern network analysis and less useful when it implies one-sided financial weapons with no feedback.

8.4 Export Controls as "Technology Denial"

Advanced-semiconductor controls show how economic and military power converge. The leverage does not come from controlling every chip. It comes from concentration at specific bottlenecks: leading-edge lithography, electronic-design automation, advanced packaging, high-bandwidth memory, manufacturing equipment, specialized materials and the technical services needed to operate them. A restriction at a bottleneck can cascade through an entire innovation system. [33]

The strategic mirror image is substitution. A target subjected to technology denial will invest in domestic alternatives, redesign systems around available components, route trade through third countries and build political coalitions against the restriction. Therefore the effectiveness of export controls depends on allied participation, enforcement, the pace of indigenous innovation, the availability of substitutes and the target's tolerance for higher cost.

8.5 Russia After 2022: A Demonstration of Integrated Economic Coercion

The coalition response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine combined asset freezes, central-bank restrictions, SWIFT exclusions for designated banks, export controls, technology denial, capital-market restrictions, aviation measures, energy restrictions, oligarch sanctions and private-sector de-risking. No single measure explains the total effect. The case therefore resembles the book's combination logic more than it resembles a single "financial weapon." [31]

At the same time, Russia adapted through trade diversion, alternative payment arrangements, capital controls, domestic substitution, greater reliance on China and other non-Western partners, and sanctions-evasion networks. This demonstrates the central limitation of financial warfare: it can impose high costs without necessarily compelling the political outcome sought. Coercive effect and political success are different variables.

Mechanism	Strategic effect	Limits / counter-effects
Dollar / correspondent banking	Can deny efficient access to the world's deepest financial network.	Overuse may encourage diversification and sanctions evasion.
SWIFT restrictions	Raise transaction friction and complicate cross-border settlement.	Alternatives exist; messaging exclusion is not the same as asset seizure.
Asset freezes / reserve immobilization	Immediately reduces usable external liquidity.	Raises legal, credibility and reserve-diversification questions.
Capital-market restrictions	Raise cost of capital and reduce investor access.	Leakage through third countries and non-Western markets.
Export controls	Slow access to bottleneck technologies and production equipment.	Can accelerate substitution, indigenous development and alternate supply chains.
Trade / tariff coercion	Imposes sectoral costs and creates bargaining leverage.	Costs are reciprocal; targets can diversify.
Critical-mineral controls	Exploit concentration in upstream or processing chokepoints.	Creates incentives for stockpiling, recycling, and new mines/refining.

[ANALYSIS] The 1999 book was directionally prescient: financial and technological networks can produce effects with strategic significance. But calling every sanction or export control "warfare" risks collapsing important differences among peacetime statecraft, coercion, counterproliferation, law enforcement, and armed conflict. [29]

8.6 Network Centrality: Why Finance Can Resemble Strategic Infrastructure

Modern financial power is best understood through network centrality. Cross-border payments frequently require correspondent relationships because most banks do not maintain direct accounts with every foreign institution or in every currency. A bank that provides access to a highly connected dollar or euro hub can therefore matter far beyond its balance sheet. Matvos and Neiman's 2026 empirical study finds that the dollar and euro networks provide especially broad connectivity and that sanctions imposed during 2021–2025 severed targeted institutions' direct correspondent relationships, often forcing them into longer and more fragile chains of intermediaries. [35]

This is strategically important because a network can generate leverage without a monopoly. The United States does not need to control every bank in the world if many institutions voluntarily maintain U.S.-linked relationships because those relationships provide liquidity, clearing, investment, and access to customers. Jurisdiction and market attractiveness reinforce one another. The resulting leverage is substantial but not absolute: intermediaries can reroute transactions, new payment corridors can form, and sustained coercion creates incentives to build alternatives.

8.7 Dollar Power: Structural Advantage, Not a Magic Switch

The dollar remains the largest reserve currency and a dominant currency in international finance, while the euro and other currencies also play major roles. IMF COFER data are useful because they show that reserve-currency power is a matter of portfolio choice and market depth, not merely decree. Central banks hold dollar assets because of liquidity, scale, legal and institutional expectations, and the breadth of U.S. markets. Those same holdings can become exposed to geopolitical restrictions when assets fall within participating jurisdictions. [36]

Three distinctions are essential. First, currency denomination is not the same as payment messaging: SWIFT transmits messages, while settlement and clearing occur through separate systems and institutions. Second, asset immobilization is not the same as confiscation: legal title, control, and use can be treated differently. Third, sanctioning a bank is not identical to isolating an economy: effects vary with trade structure, alternative currencies, informal finance, third-country banks, and domestic controls.

8.8 Sovereign Bonds and the Politics of Refinancing

Sovereign debt markets create a subtler channel of power. Governments rarely "pay off" all debt at maturity; they refinance. Market access therefore affects the marginal cost of funding, the maturity profile of debt, and the credibility of fiscal policy. Sanctions or investment restrictions can narrow the investor base, but the effect depends on domestic savings, central-bank capacity, currency denomination, capital controls, and access to alternative markets. In highly interdependent relationships, coercive liquidation can also impose valuation losses on the holder.

For this reason, popular claims that a major creditor could simply "weaponize" its holdings of another state's government bonds are often too linear. Selling assets can move prices and exchange rates, but the seller must then decide where to place the proceeds and may reduce the value of its remaining portfolio. Financial interdependence is simultaneously leverage and vulnerability—a point more consistent with the book's systemic logic than with simplistic metaphors of a one-way weapon.

8.9 Foreign Exchange, Liquidity, and Confidence

Foreign-exchange pressure can operate through multiple channels: official intervention, capital controls, market expectations, limits on convertibility, sanctions on reserves, restrictions on bank funding, and changes in trade settlement. The strategic effect may be less about forcing a specific exchange rate than about increasing the cost of stabilization. If defending a currency requires reserve use, interest-rate increases, import compression, or tighter capital controls, the domestic political burden can become part of the coercive mechanism.

Yet currency pressure is difficult to calibrate. Markets incorporate many variables unrelated to strategic coercion, and intervention can produce unintended contagion. A financial-warfare framework therefore requires unusually careful causal analysis. A currency decline that coincides with political conflict is not evidence by itself of deliberate "currency warfare."

8.10 Payment Networks and Sanctions Coalitions

Payment-system leverage becomes strongest when legal authority, alliance coordination, and private compliance converge. A unilateral designation may have limited effect if major counterparties continue to transact. A multilateral designation can be amplified when banks, insurers, securities custodians, and shipping firms all revise risk models at the same time. This is why sanctions design increasingly resembles systems engineering: policymakers seek the nodes where a legal rule changes the behavior of many private intermediaries. [37]

The same mechanism produces over-compliance. Private institutions may avoid lawful transactions because the expected penalty, reputational risk, or compliance cost is too high. Over-compliance can magnify coercion but also damage humanitarian channels, alienate third countries, and undermine trust in the financial system. Treasury's sanctions review accordingly emphasized multilateralism, calibration, clear objectives, and mitigation of unintended effects. [30]

8.11 Supply Chains, Semiconductors, and Industrial Time

Export controls matter strategically when they target bottlenecks with long substitution times. Leading-edge semiconductor production illustrates the pattern: design software, lithography, deposition and etching equipment, high-bandwidth memory, advanced packaging, process know-how, and specialized materials are distributed across a small set of highly capable firms and jurisdictions. Controls imposed at one or more nodes can slow an entire technological trajectory, especially when allies coordinate. [38]

But denial creates adaptation incentives. A targeted state can subsidize indigenous capacity, redesign systems around older nodes, acquire equipment through intermediaries, stockpile inputs, or retaliate against materials and markets where it has leverage. China's 2025 rare-earth-related export controls show the reciprocal logic: a state that is vulnerable at one technological chokepoint may possess leverage at another. [39]

8.12 When Does Economic Coercion Become "Warfare"?

For strategic analysis, the answer should not depend on rhetoric. Tariffs, sanctions, export controls, reserve restrictions, industrial subsidies, and investment rules can be instruments of state competition without becoming armed conflict. The Unrestricted Warfare lens is valuable when it highlights their potential interaction with military and political objectives. It becomes misleading when it erases the legal and institutional differences among commercial policy, law enforcement, national-security controls, economic coercion, and acts that may qualify as uses of force.

Financial-warfare assessment. The 1999 authors were early in treating financial networks as strategic terrain. Their intuition aged well. Their terminology aged less well. Twenty-first-century analysis benefits from replacing the single metaphor "financial weapon" with a mechanism-based vocabulary: network centrality, jurisdiction, liquidity, substitution time, alliance coordination, expectations, and feedback.

9. Information Warfare, Cyber Warfare, and Cognitive Warfare

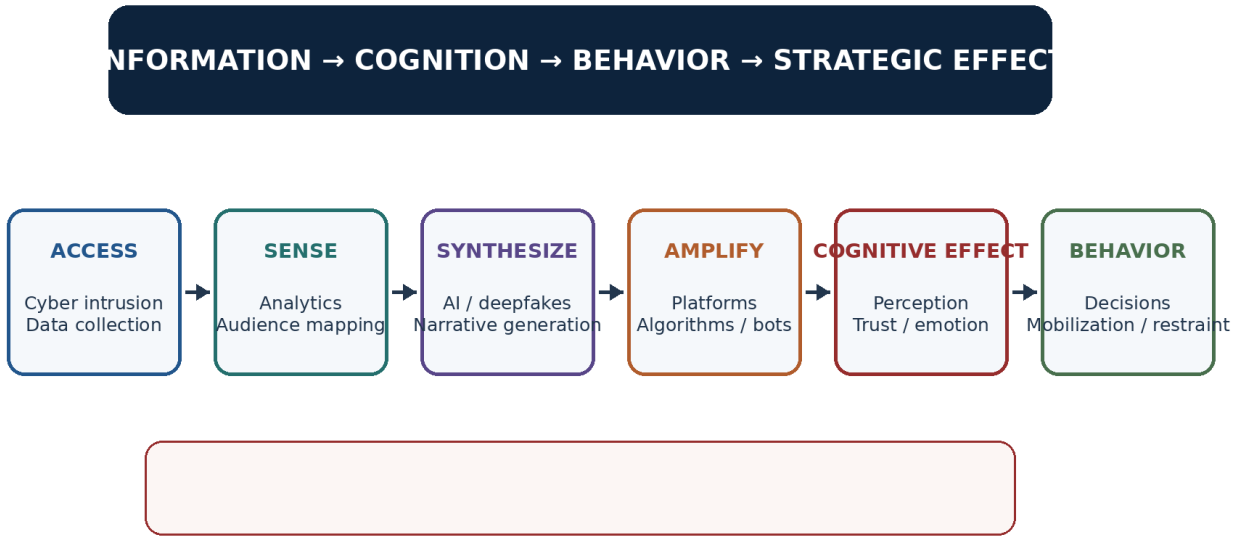


Figure 6. Modern conflict increasingly targets not only networks and data but also perception, trust, and decision-making.

In 1999, the authors treated network warfare, media warfare, intelligence warfare, psychological warfare, and ideological warfare as separate but combinable forms. In the 2020s these categories increasingly converge. A cyber operation can steal data; leaked data can be selectively edited; generative AI can turn the material into persuasive narratives; recommendation algorithms can amplify it; and coordinated accounts can target specific communities. The ultimate objective may be cognitive rather than technical. [40]

Social media. Platforms compress the time between information production and mass distribution. They enable microtargeting, automated coordination, and rapid feedback about audience reaction. This changes the scale and tempo of psychological and public-opinion operations.

Algorithms and search engines. Recommendation systems allocate attention. Search ranking, feed ordering, trending systems, and content moderation can therefore become part of the information environment in which strategic competition occurs—even when platforms are not acting on behalf of states.

Generative AI and deepfakes. AI lowers the cost of producing plausible text, images, audio and video, increasing the volume of influence content and creating a "liar's dividend" in which authentic material can also be dismissed as synthetic. The strategic problem is not merely false content; it is erosion of shared standards for authentication.

Cyber espionage vs cyberattack. Espionage seeks access and information; attack seeks disruption, degradation or destruction. Both may support broader campaigns, but their legal and escalatory meanings differ sharply. Treating all intrusions as "warfare" obscures that distinction.

Data and private platforms. Data brokers, cloud providers, satellite companies, cybersecurity firms and social platforms increasingly control capabilities once monopolized by states. The Ukraine war demonstrates how commercial satellite communications, cloud infrastructure, cyber threat intelligence and commercial imagery can become operationally significant. [41]

9.1 Cyber Operations: Access, Persistence, Disruption, and Strategic Signaling

Cyber operations create strategic ambiguity because the same access can serve multiple purposes. A foothold in a network may support espionage today, contingency planning tomorrow, and disruption during crisis. This creates an attribution and signaling problem: the defender may see malicious access without knowing whether the intent is intelligence collection, prepositioning, coercion, or preparation for attack.

The "unrestricted" lens is useful here because cyber effects rarely remain purely technical. A network disruption can affect logistics, banking, emergency services, military command, news distribution and public confidence simultaneously. But the analyst should separate capability, access, intent, and attribution. Inferring state strategy from the existence of malware alone is methodologically weak.

9.2 Cognitive Warfare and the Contest for Decision Advantage

Cognitive warfare shifts attention from information as content to information as a means of altering judgment. The relevant chain is: data → narrative → distribution → perception → emotion → social behavior → elite decision. An operation can succeed even when its factual claims are partly true, because the objective may be to change salience, trust, timing, or confidence rather than to make an audience believe a single false proposition. [42]

Modern platform architecture changes the economics of this process. Recommendation algorithms allow content to be targeted and amplified based on engagement. Bots and coordinated accounts can simulate popularity. Generative AI can create many language variants, synthetic personas, audio clips, images and videos. Translation systems can localize narratives instantly. The result is not perfect mind control; it is a dramatic reduction in the cost of experimentation and scale.

9.3 Generative AI, Deepfakes, and the "Liar's Dividend"

Deepfakes matter in two directions. First, synthetic audio or video can create false evidence. Second, the existence of high-quality synthesis allows genuine evidence to be dismissed as fake. This second effect—the "liar's dividend"—can weaken accountability even when detection tools improve. In a crisis, uncertainty over authenticity can consume decision time and complicate alliance coordination.

Generative AI also enables automated persuasion at scale: rapid drafting, style adaptation, audience segmentation and multilingual production. The strategic constraint is distribution. Content that no one sees has little effect. Consequently, the decisive infrastructure may be the platform, recommendation engine, influencer network, botnet, advertising market, search system or trusted media outlet that allocates attention.

9.4 Defensive Resilience

Resilience cannot be reduced to fact-checking. A robust system combines network security, rapid incident response, provenance and authentication standards, independent journalism, transparent public communication, platform cooperation, institutional trust, media literacy, continuity of government, and preplanned decision procedures for operating under uncertainty. The defensive analogue of "combination of all means" is therefore a whole-of-society resilience architecture rather than a single counter-propaganda office.

[OFFICIAL DOCTRINE] China's 2019 defense white paper described war as evolving toward informationized warfare and intelligent warfare as "on the horizon." In April 2024 the PLA established the Information Support Force as a strategic arm supporting network information systems, while the Aerospace Force and Cyberspace Force were placed directly under the CMC. [43]

[ANALYSIS] The conceptual bridge from the 1999 book to today is strongest at the level of systems thinking: information, networks, private infrastructure, perception, and military operations interact. The evidence is weaker for claims that today's specific cognitive or cyber doctrine is simply an implementation of the book. [44]

9.5 The Cyber → Information → Cognitive Chain

A useful way to modernize the 1999 categories is to separate three layers. Cyber operations act on networks, software, devices, credentials, and data. Information operations act on the content, availability, provenance, and distribution of information. Cognitive operations seek changes in perception, belief, emotion, trust, judgment, or decision. One campaign can move through all three layers, but the mechanisms and evidence differ.

For example, stolen material can supply authentic data; selective release can reframe context; synthetic media can add false corroboration; automated accounts can increase apparent popularity; recommendation systems can accelerate reach; and political actors can then exploit the controversy. The initial cyber intrusion is not itself the cognitive effect. The chain matters because analysts who collapse the layers may overstate what a technical breach can accomplish.

9.6 Contemporary PLA Concepts: Evidence Without Equating Them to the Book

The 2025 U.S. annual report on China assesses that Beijing considers cognitive-domain operations an important component of pressure against Taiwan and describes the combination of official and proxy accounts with military exercises and disinformation narratives. The same report describes the 2024 reorganization that dissolved the Strategic Support Force and placed the Information Support Force, Cyberspace Force, and Aerospace Force directly under the Central Military Commission. It also states that the Cyberspace Force retains responsibilities including cyberspace warfare, electronic warfare, technical reconnaissance, psychological operations, and influence operations. [45]

These are important facts about contemporary PLA organization and observed activity. They do not establish that the PLA adopted Unrestricted Warfare as doctrine. The stronger conclusion is conceptual convergence: modern PLA thinking about information dominance, cognitive effects, and cross-domain integration occupies terrain that Qiao and Wang anticipated, but it developed through separate doctrinal, institutional, and technological pathways. [46]

9.7 Generative AI as an Influence Multiplier

Generative AI changes influence operations in at least six ways. It lowers production cost; enables rapid multilingual localization; supports synthetic personas; generates text, audio, image, and video variants; assists audience segmentation; and accelerates testing of narratives against real-time feedback. These capabilities make scale cheaper, but they do not guarantee persuasion. Trust, source credibility, platform distribution, cultural fit, and the target's prior beliefs remain decisive.

The most strategically significant AI effect may therefore be volume plus uncertainty. An adversary does not need every item to be believed if the information environment becomes sufficiently noisy that verification consumes time and institutional attention. In crises, delayed authentication can change decisions even when falsehoods are later corrected.

9.8 Search, Recommendation, and the Politics of Attention

Search engines and recommendation systems are strategic because they mediate discoverability. Their algorithms determine which content is surfaced, suppressed, clustered, or repeatedly shown. States may seek to influence this environment through content production, advertising, covert networks, regulation, pressure on platforms, or manipulation of engagement signals. Platforms themselves remain independent actors with commercial and governance incentives that may align with, resist, or inadvertently amplify state objectives.

This is a major extension of the state/non-state boundary problem. A government can be militarily sovereign while relying on private companies for cloud compute, cyber threat intelligence, satellite imagery, undersea cables, app stores, digital identity, advertising, and social distribution. The resulting "battlefield" is partly privately owned.

9.9 Commercial Space and Communications Networks

Ukraine offers the clearest contemporary demonstration. Commercial satellite imagery increased battlefield transparency; Starlink provided resilient connectivity; private cloud and data platforms supported continuity and intelligence processing. CSIS describes the war as a turning point in which space became central to day-to-day operations and notes that commercial broadband allowed a militarily outmatched state to preserve communications under cyber and jamming pressure. [47]

The case also reveals a new vulnerability: a state can become dependent on privately governed infrastructure whose owner controls access, software updates, geographic service, or commercial terms. Academic research on Starlink accordingly treats private infrastructure firms as actors with their own preferences rather than as simple extensions of government. [48]

9.10 Defensive Resilience: Winning by Denying Cognitive and Network Effects

The defensive implication is not to label every message or network failure as warfare. It is to reduce the strategic value of manipulation and disruption. Technical resilience requires redundancy, segmentation, backups, rapid restoration, authentication, and diversified providers. Cognitive resilience requires trusted institutions, media literacy, transparent crisis communication, provenance tools, rapid fact verification, and norms for handling uncertain information. Organizational resilience requires authorities and processes that function under ambiguity.

A system that can absorb a cyber incident, authenticate contested media, preserve communications, and make decisions despite uncertainty deprives an adversary of the multiplicative effect at the center of the book's logic. In that sense, resilience is the defensive mirror image of "combination of all means": it prevents separate pressures from cascading into systemic failure.

10. Lawfare, Public-Opinion Warfare, and Psychological Warfare

The relationship between Unrestricted Warfare and the PLA's "Three Warfares" is one of the most frequently misunderstood points. The 1999 book discusses legal, media, psychological and ideological instruments. Separately, PLA Political Work Regulations amended in 2003 identified public-opinion warfare (舆论战), psychological warfare (心理战), and legal warfare (法律战) as political-work tasks. Later PLA materials elaborated those concepts. [49]

Three Warfares component	Primary objective	Relationship to the 1999 book
Public-opinion warfare (舆论战)	Shape domestic, adversary and third-party perceptions; contest legitimacy and narrative.	Strong thematic overlap with media/ideological warfare, but official institutionalization occurred separately.
Psychological warfare (心理战)	Affect morale, perception, emotion, decision and behavior.	Explicitly present in the book and much older than it.
Legal warfare (法律战)	Use law and legal argument to gain legitimacy, constrain opponents, and create favorable operational conditions.	Strong overlap with "regulatory" and international-law discussion in the book; later formalized in PLA political work.

Lawfare. Law can be used defensively, offensively, or competitively: to define jurisdiction, create administrative procedures, frame an opponent as unlawful, build coalition support, constrain access, or establish precedents. The term does not imply that the legal argument is necessarily false; legal competition often involves genuine disputes over interpretation.

Public opinion. The relevant "battlefield" is not just propaganda output. It includes agenda-setting, framing, attribution, timing, source credibility, platform distribution and audience segmentation.

Psychological warfare. The target is decision quality and will. Military demonstrations, selective disclosures, rumors, credible threats, and reassuring messages can all have psychological effects.

[ANALYSIS] The Three Warfares should be treated as documented official PLA concepts. Their existence does not prove that they were adopted because of Unrestricted Warfare. Similar ideas have deeper roots in Chinese and global strategic traditions, and the documentary chain of causation is incomplete. [50]

11. Comparison with Existing Theories of Warfare

Theory / concept	Similarity to Unrestricted Warfare	Key difference
Sun Tzu — The Art of War	Indirect approach, deception, intelligence, attack plans/alliances, victory without battle.	Sun Tzu is a classical philosophy of strategy, not a globalization-era taxonomy of finance, cyber, media and technology.
Clausewitz — On War	War is political and strategic effects matter beyond tactics.	Clausewitz preserves war as organized violence; Qiao/Wang stretch "war" into many nonviolent instruments.
Mao — People's War	Inferior-vs-superior logic, asymmetry, political mobilization, "you fight your way, I fight mine."	Mao emphasizes protracted revolutionary war and mass mobilization; UW emphasizes globalization, technology and cross-domain combination.
Soviet/Russian political & information warfare	Political struggle, deception, influence, subversion, information operations, whole-of-state tools.	Different historical/intellectual lineage; Russian "hybrid" practice is not evidence of Chinese doctrinal borrowing.
U.S. Revolution in Military Affairs	Systems, information, technology, precision, integration.	RMA is primarily military-technological; UW argues that the deeper revolution crosses the military/non-military boundary.
Network-Centric Warfare	Networked information, shared awareness, systems integration.	NCW connects military units and sensors; UW also links finance, law, diplomacy, media and non-state actors.
Hybrid Warfare	Simultaneous conventional, irregular, informational and other modes.	Hybrid warfare usually remains centered on armed conflict; UW's concept is broader and includes purely non-military competition.
Gray-Zone Conflict	Persistent coercion below open-war threshold; ambiguity and deniability.	Gray-zone theory emphasizes threshold management; UW also addresses wartime cross-domain combination.
Political Warfare	Use of political, informational, economic and covert means short of war.	Political warfare is often explicitly non-kinetic/peacetime; UW merges it with military operations.
Asymmetric Warfare	Avoid strengths and exploit vulnerabilities.	Asymmetry is one principle inside UW, not the whole concept.
Full-Spectrum Operations	Integration across offense, defense, stability and civil support / broad operational tasks.	Remains military doctrine; UW extends beyond military command and domains.
Multi-Domain Operations	Convergence across land, sea, air, space, cyber/electromagnetic domains.	MDO is military operational doctrine; UW includes economic, financial, legal, cultural and social arenas.

Sources: Comparative synthesis based on [51] and U.S./PLA doctrine. Similarity does not imply lineage.

The closest conceptual cousins are hybrid warfare, gray-zone conflict, political warfare, and asymmetric warfare. But none is identical. The broadest distinction is that Unrestricted Warfare treats category boundaries themselves as the problem to be overcome.

11.1 Sun Tzu and the Indirect Tradition

The strongest continuity with Sun Tzu is not a specific weapon or tactic but a preference for shaping the opponent's choices before decisive battle. Intelligence, deception, alliance manipulation, attacking plans, and winning without prolonged fighting all resonate with the book's effort to move strategic effect outside the conventional battlefield. The difference is historical scale: Sun Tzu does not theorize global finance, digital networks, transnational corporations, cyber systems, or modern legal institutions. Unrestricted Warfare can therefore be read as a globalization-era attempt to extend an indirect strategic sensibility into new infrastructures. [52]

11.2 Clausewitz: Continuity in Politics, Break in the Definition of War

Clausewitz and Qiao/Wang agree that military action must be understood in relation to political purpose. The break concerns the category of war itself. Clausewitz's famous formulation places war within politics but still treats organized violence as constitutive of war. Qiao and Wang deliberately expand "warfare" to include instruments that may be nonviolent. This conceptual move gives the book breadth but also creates its central analytical problem: if every coercive political instrument can become warfare, the category may cease to discriminate.

11.3 Mao: Asymmetry, Political Mobilization, and "You Fight Your Way"

Maoist strategy supplies an important Chinese precedent for refusing the stronger opponent's preferred form of conflict. Protracted war, guerrilla operations, mobilization, base areas, and the principle commonly summarized as "you fight your way, I fight mine" all seek to transform asymmetry into strategic advantage. Unrestricted Warfare retains that competitive logic but shifts the sources of asymmetry from population, geography, and revolutionary politics toward information, globalization, technology, finance, and systems dependence.

11.4 Soviet/Russian Political Warfare and Information Confrontation

Soviet traditions of active measures, deception, subversion, propaganda, intelligence operations, and political influence demonstrate that blurred military/non-military competition long predates the Chinese book. Post-Soviet Russian discussion of information confrontation and Western discussion of Russian hybrid activity likewise emphasize integration across political, informational, cyber, proxy, and military tools. The similarity is real, but direct lineage should not be inferred merely from resemblance. The broader lesson is that multiple strategic traditions converged on cross-domain competition as globalization and information technology intensified.

11.5 RMA and Network-Centric Warfare

The U.S. RMA and Network-Centric Warfare focus on creating military advantage by linking sensors, shooters, commanders, and information. Unrestricted Warfare accepts the importance of networks but asks a different question: why should the network stop at the edge of the military organization? Finance, diplomacy, law, media, transportation, and private infrastructure also form networks. The authors' radical step is to treat these systems as part of the strategic design space.

11.6 Hybrid Warfare and Gray-Zone Conflict

Hybrid warfare is probably the closest Western label in popular usage because it combines conventional force with irregular, informational, proxy, and political instruments. Gray-zone conflict is closer to the book's erosion of the peace/war boundary because it emphasizes coercion below the threshold of conventional armed conflict. Yet gray-zone theory is primarily about thresholds and ambiguity; unrestricted warfare is primarily about boundaries and combination. A campaign can be cross-domain without being gray-zone, and gray-zone coercion can occur without the expansive "all means" theory of the 1999 book.

11.7 Political Warfare and Asymmetric Warfare

Political warfare captures many of the book's non-military tools—diplomacy, economic pressure, propaganda, covert action, and influence—but usually preserves a distinction between those activities and armed conflict. Asymmetric warfare supplies the method of avoiding an opponent's strength, but it does not require the specific boundary-transcending architecture described by Qiao and Wang. In this sense, asymmetry is the logic while unrestricted combination is the design principle.

11.8 Full-Spectrum Operations and Multi-Domain Operations

Full-Spectrum Operations and modern Multi-Domain Operations broaden military integration across missions and domains, but they remain formal military concepts with defined command relationships. The 2025 U.S. report describes the PLA's Multi-Domain Precision Warfare as a core operational concept focused on using integrated C4ISR, big data, AI, and joint forces to identify and exploit weaknesses in an adversary's operational system. This is conceptually closer to military system-destruction theory than to the book's open-ended finance-law-media-economic combination. [45]

Comparative conclusion. Unrestricted Warfare is not best understood as the ancestor of every later "hybrid" or "multi-domain" concept. It belongs to a broader historical movement in strategic thought toward systems, networks, cross-domain effects, and persistent competition. Its distinctive move is to treat the boundary itself—between domains, actors, means, and phases—as an obstacle to be transcended.

12. Relationship with Contemporary Chinese Military Strategy

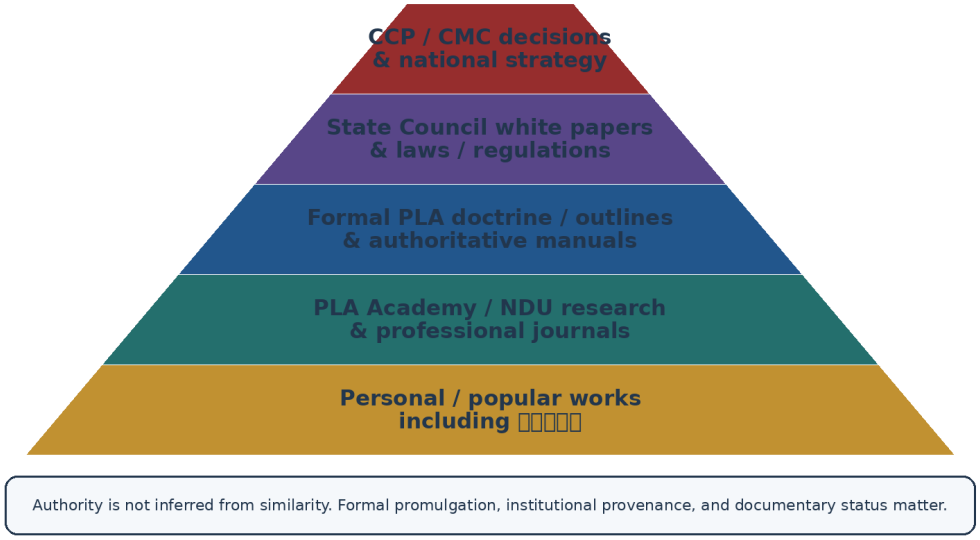


Figure 7. The book and official Chinese doctrine overlap conceptually but must be kept evidentially separate.

Contemporary Chinese concept / practice	Documented official basis?	Analytical relationship to the book
Three Warfares	Yes — PLA political work regulations and subsequent authoritative teaching materials.	High thematic overlap; direct doctrinal lineage from the book is not proven.
Military–Civil Fusion	Yes — national strategy and State Council/Party mechanisms.	Shares boundary-crossing logic between civilian and military sectors; purpose is modernization and resource integration, not necessarily "UW."
Informatized warfare	Yes — defense white papers, strategic guidelines, PLA texts.	Book recognizes information centrality, but official concept developed through a broader PLA modernization process.
Intelligentized warfare	Yes as an emerging/officially discussed direction.	Modern extension into AI, autonomy, data and cognitive effects; postdates the book.
Cognitive-domain operations	Documented in PLA professional literature; level of formal doctrinal status varies by source.	Strong conceptual resonance with psychological/media/information themes.
Cyber / electronic warfare	Yes — organizational and doctrinal basis.	Explicitly anticipated by network and electronic warfare categories.
Economic statecraft	Yes as observable state policy; not a single PLA doctrine.	High conceptual similarity to trade, finance, resource and sanctions warfare.
Belt and Road Initiative	Yes as state policy, but officially framed as development/connectivity.	Can create strategic leverage, but treating BRI as direct UW implementation is an inference unless case-specific evidence exists.
Technology / industrial policy	Yes — plans, subsidies, controls, standards policy.	Strong structural similarity to technology/industrial competition; not proof of wartime intent.
Critical-minerals strategy	Yes — industrial/trade controls and national planning.	Illustrates resource leverage and supply-chain power.
Maritime gray-zone activity	Yes — coast guard/maritime militia structures and operations documented.	Strong resemblance to blurred actor/status boundaries and coercion below war.
United Front work	Yes — longstanding CCP political practice.	Influence and co-optation can resemble political warfare; equating all United Front activity with UW is analytically excessive.
Taiwan pressure strategy	Yes — military, diplomatic, economic, legal and information pressure documented.	One of the strongest real-world cases of cross-domain strategic combination; direct reliance on the 1999 book remains unproven.

Sources: Official and specialist sources: [53].

Military-Civil Fusion (MCF). MCF is a formal national strategy to integrate civilian and defense innovation, resources, technology and industrial capacity. The 2017 State Council guidance calls for resource sharing and deeper integration in defense science and technology. U.S. government sources interpret the program more broadly as a means of channeling civilian technology into PLA modernization. Recent CSET research documents substantial civilian AI participation in defense procurement. [54]

2024 information-force reorganization. The official PRC Ministry of National Defense announced that the Strategic Support Force designation was canceled; the PLA now has the Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, Information Support Force and Joint Logistics Support Force as arms under CMC leadership, alongside the four services. The Information Support Force is described as a strategic arm underpinning network-information-system development and application. [55]

12.1 Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Infrastructure or Unrestricted Warfare?

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is formally a state development and connectivity initiative encompassing infrastructure, finance, trade, energy and people-to-people links. CSIS and RAND research has emphasized that BRI projects can also create geopolitical influence, access to strategic facilities, economic dependencies and diplomatic leverage. [56] The analytical overlap with Unrestricted Warfare lies in the use of infrastructure and economic networks to shape strategic environments.

[INFERENCE] The claim that BRI as a whole is a direct implementation of Unrestricted Warfare is not supported by a published CMC or State Council document establishing such lineage. Project-level strategic effects should be evaluated individually: financing structure, host-country bargaining power, dual-use access, ownership, data, standards and security relationships. [57]

12.2 Maritime Gray-Zone Activity

The South and East China Seas show how maritime coercion can operate with layered actors. The PLA Navy provides high-end military power; the China Coast Guard conducts law-enforcement operations; maritime militia and civilian vessels can reinforce presence; administrative rules and domestic legislation support legal claims; state media and diplomatic statements shape narratives. U.S. Naval War College research documents the maritime militia' s links to the PLA. [58]

This pattern has strong similarity to the book' s blurred state/non-state and military/non-military boundaries. But the institutional roots of Chinese maritime strategy predate and extend beyond the 1999 text. The correct conclusion is analytical resemblance, not doctrinal identity.

12.3 United Front Work and Political Influence

United Front work is a longstanding CCP political practice aimed at building relationships, co-opting influential individuals and organizations, shaping communities, and isolating opponents. U.S. government research describes overseas United Front activity as an important component of CCP influence. [59] Because the practice is older than Unrestricted Warfare, it cannot logically be treated as a product of the book.

The overlap is functional: both frameworks recognize that political, social and informational relationships can produce strategic effects without military force. The danger is analytical inflation. Ordinary diplomacy, diaspora engagement, commercial lobbying, academic exchange and covert political interference must be distinguished based on evidence rather than grouped automatically under a single label.

12.4 Taiwan: The Strongest Contemporary Cross-Domain Test Case

Pressure on Taiwan is a particularly important case because multiple instruments are visibly used in parallel: PLA air and maritime operations, large-scale exercises, coast-guard activity, diplomatic pressure on Taiwan' s partners, economic restrictions, legal and sovereignty claims, cyber activity, information operations and psychological signaling. The 2025 U.S. DoD report describes intensified PLA operations and coercive activity around Taiwan. [45]

From an Unrestricted Warfare lens, Taiwan illustrates threshold shaping: pressure can be increased or decreased without immediately crossing into full-scale invasion. Military demonstrations reinforce political messages; diplomatic and economic measures can isolate; information activity can target confidence; legal positions can frame the dispute; and gray-zone activity can normalize a higher baseline of pressure. Yet no public source establishes that this integrated pressure is officially commanded under the title "Unrestricted Warfare."

12.5 Formal Doctrine: The 2020 Joint Operations Outline and Multi-Domain Precision Warfare

A critical improvement in the revised edition is to place the 1999 book beside, rather than inside, the PLA's formal doctrinal hierarchy. The 2025 U.S. annual report states that the PLA released the Chinese People's Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial) in November 2020 as the foundational document of a new generation of operational doctrine. The report further describes Multi-Domain Precision Warfare (MDPW) as a "core operational concept" intended to use integrated C4ISR, joint forces, big data, and AI to aggregate power across military domains and exploit weak points in an adversary's operational system. [45]

This is precisely the kind of source that should carry greater doctrinal weight than a popular theoretical monograph. MDPW has a narrower military purpose than Unrestricted Warfare: it concerns joint operations, command networks, data, military-domain convergence, and operational-system vulnerabilities. The conceptual resemblance—systems thinking, asymmetry, integration—is substantial. The institutional status and scope are different.

12.6 Informatized and Intelligentized Warfare

China's official defense white papers document a long transition from mechanization toward informationization and increasingly discuss intelligentization. The 2015 military strategy white paper set winning informationized local wars as a key requirement. The 2019 defense white paper stated that warfare was evolving toward informationized and intelligentized forms. These concepts are rooted in decades of PLA modernization and technological change, not in a single 1999 book. [60]

The overlap is nevertheless analytically meaningful. Informationized warfare emphasizes the military significance of data, networks, command systems, and information dominance. Intelligentized warfare adds AI-enabled sensing, decision support, autonomy, human-machine interaction, and algorithmic competition. Qiao and Wang anticipated the declining usefulness of a single technology label as a complete theory of war; contemporary PLA thinking instead places information and intelligence inside formal military modernization.

12.7 The 2024 Information-Force Reorganization

In April 2024 the PLA dissolved the Strategic Support Force framework and established or elevated the Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, and Information Support Force as CMC-subordinate arms, alongside the Joint Logistics Support Force. Official PRC messaging described the Information Support Force as a strategic arm and a key underpinning for coordinated development and application of network information systems. The 2025 U.S. report assesses that the reorganization was intended to strengthen information-network warfare and joint operational capabilities. [55]

This is strong documentary evidence that information infrastructure is institutionally central to the modern PLA. It is not evidence that the 2024 organization was created to implement Unrestricted Warfare. The causal claim would require sources linking the reorganization to Qiao and Wang's text; none is necessary to explain the reform.

12.8 Three Warfares: Official Concept, Separate Genealogy

Public-opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare were incorporated into PLA political work regulations in the early 2000s and have been studied extensively in U.S., RAND, CNA, and NDU research. The three functions clearly resemble components in the 1999 book. But resemblance is not genealogy. Public opinion, psychological operations, and legal-political contestation have independent histories in Chinese military and party practice. [61]

The safest formulation is therefore: Three Warfares provide stronger evidence of official Chinese institutionalization of political-information-legal operations than Unrestricted Warfare does, but they should not be described as simply "the operationalization of the book" without documentary proof.

12.9 Military-Civil Fusion as National Strategy

Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) is an official national strategy. At the first meeting of the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development in June 2017, Xi Jinping described MCF as having risen to the level of national strategy and called for an "all-element, multi-domain, high-efficiency" pattern. State Council guidance likewise promotes integration of defense and civilian science, technology, industry, and resources. [62]

This language has obvious thematic resonance with crossing civilian-military boundaries. But the policy logic can be explained without reference to the 1999 book: modern military innovation depends on civilian AI, electronics, space,

communications, materials, software, and manufacturing. MCF is therefore better analyzed as an institutional strategy for mobilizing national innovation capacity, with possible strategic-security consequences, rather than automatically labeled "unrestricted warfare."

12.10 Economic Statecraft, BRI, Industry, and Supply Chains

China's economic statecraft includes trade restrictions, market access, industrial subsidies, overseas finance, infrastructure projects, standards policy, critical-mineral controls, and incentives. These tools can create leverage and shape strategic environments. Yet they are administered by institutions with economic, industrial, diplomatic, and domestic political objectives, and the evidence for direct military coordination varies by case.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a good test of analytical discipline. Infrastructure can have dual-use value; port access can matter strategically; debt and financing can affect bargaining; standards and digital systems can create long-lived dependencies. None of those possibilities establishes that every BRI project is a military operation. Project-level evidence—ownership, access agreements, security arrangements, data architecture, refinancing, local bargaining, and actual use—must drive the conclusion. [56]

12.11 Critical Minerals and Reciprocal Chokepoints

China's 2025 export controls on selected medium and heavy rare-earth-related items illustrate a central feature of twenty-first-century competition: chokepoints are reciprocal. The United States and partners possess leverage in advanced semiconductor equipment and design ecosystems; China possesses substantial leverage in parts of rare-earth mining, separation, refining, and magnet supply chains. [63]

This is highly relevant to the book's logic because strategic advantage may come from identifying the opponent's hardest-to-substitute dependency rather than matching its strongest military platform. It still should be described as economic and technology statecraft unless evidence establishes a direct military-operational chain.

12.12 Taiwan as the Best Contemporary Cross-Domain Test Case

The 2025 U.S. annual report describes PRC pressure on Taiwan as a blend of diplomatic isolation, information operations, persistent military pressure, economic coercion, coast-guard activity, and cognitive-domain operations. It notes that Beijing seeks unification through a mix of inducements and targeted pressure short of war and assesses that cognitive-domain operations are intended to weaken Taiwan's will to resist and heighten social divisions. [64]

This makes Taiwan the strongest contemporary case of analytical similarity to the 1999 book. Yet the evidence supports a cross-domain Chinese pressure strategy, not the stronger claim that planners are implementing Qiao and Wang's book as doctrine. The distinction is exactly why this report uses a two-axis rating.

13. U.S.–China Strategic Competition and Unrestricted Warfare

The U.S.–China rivalry is an environment in which the book's analytical lens is especially tempting because the competition spans military deterrence, tariffs, export controls, investment screening, technology standards, cyber operations, industrial subsidies, alliance policy, maritime coercion, finance, supply chains, data and narratives. The risk is turning this empirical breadth into a circular claim: because the competition is multidimensional, it must be Unrestricted Warfare; because it is Unrestricted Warfare, every dimension becomes evidence.

Trade and technology. Tariffs and export controls are explicit state policies on both sides. U.S. controls on advanced semiconductors are publicly justified as national-security measures. China has used licensing and export-control leverage in critical minerals. Both fit the book's strategic logic of using economic and technological networks as instruments, but neither proves doctrinal implementation of the 1999 text. [65]

Supply chains. The strategic significance of semiconductor equipment, advanced-node chips, rare earths, magnets, batteries, pharmaceuticals, shipbuilding and telecommunications arises from concentration. Dependence becomes leverage when a state can credibly restrict access and the target cannot substitute quickly.

Alliance and standards competition. A state can multiply leverage by embedding controls in allied networks, standards bodies, financial rules and procurement regimes. This resembles the authors' "supra-national combination" more closely than isolated bilateral coercion. [4]

[ANALYSIS] The best use of the UW lens in U.S.–China competition is as a question generator: Which domains interact? Where are the dependencies? How do non–military measures alter military options? It is less useful as a totalizing label that assumes a single hidden command plan.

14. Analysis of Real-World Cases

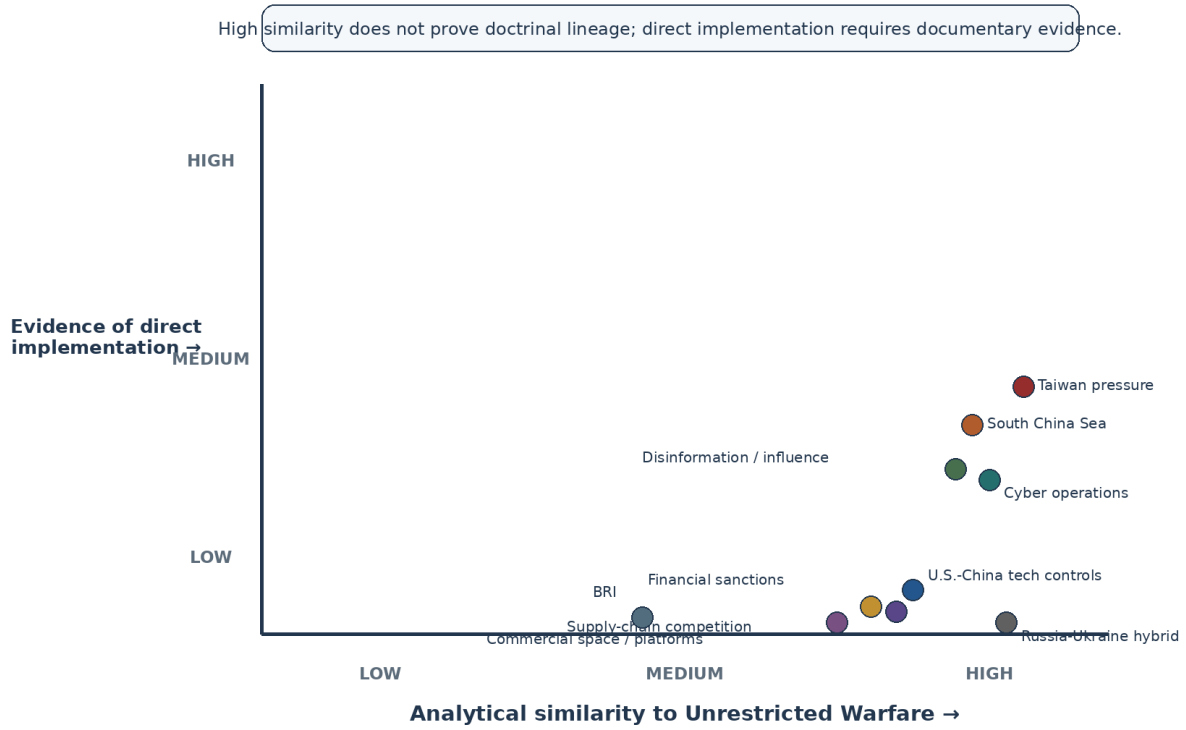


Figure 8. Ratings indicate analytical similarity to the book's logic, not proof of direct doctrinal implementation.

Case	Similarity	Direct implementation evidence	Reason
U.S.–China strategic competition	High	Low / Unproven	Competition spans military posture, technology, trade, finance, cyber, alliances, standards, supply chains, and narratives. The structure fits the book, but no evidence shows the entire rivalry is centrally organized under the 1999 concept.
Taiwan Strait	High	Medium	PRC military, diplomatic, economic, coast-guard, cyber/information, legal, and cognitive pressure is well documented. Direct reliance on the book is not established; the evidence supports cross-domain strategy, not book-based doctrine.
South China Sea	High	Low / Unproven	Coast guard, maritime militia, legal claims, infrastructure, diplomacy, economic relationships, and naval power create layered coercion. Documentary evidence ties actors to PRC policy, not specifically to 《超限战》.
U.S.–China trade war	Medium	Low	Tariffs and trade restrictions fit the book's trade-warfare language, but much of the activity is ordinary economic bargaining, industrial policy, and domestic politics.
Semiconductor / advanced-technology controls	High	Low	Technology chokepoints are used to affect long-term military and economic capability. Structural similarity is high; U.S. controls are publicly grounded in U.S. law and security policy, not in Chinese theory.
Financial sanctions / reserve restrictions	High	Low	Currency, correspondent banking, asset freezes, and market access can impose strategic costs with no direct combat. This closely matches the 1999 category but usually has independent legal and policy origins.
Supply-chain / critical-mineral competition	High	Low	Concentrated processing and manufacturing chokepoints create asymmetric leverage. China's 2025 rare-earth controls are documented; linkage to the book is not.
Cyberattacks and cyber espionage	High	Low to Medium	Network operations were explicitly anticipated in the book. Contemporary PRC cyber organization is official, but attribution to the book requires separate evidence.

Case	Similarity	Direct implementation evidence	Reason
Disinformation / information manipulation	High	Low to Medium	Media, psychological, ideological, and cognitive effects are central to the theory. Contemporary campaigns may resemble it closely, yet operational lineage is rarely public.
Russia–Ukraine war / Russian hybrid strategies	High	None / Not applicable	Kinetic war is integrated with cyber, sanctions, energy, information, proxies, and commercial infrastructure. This validates structural relevance, not Chinese doctrinal influence.
Weaponization of economic sanctions	High	None / Not applicable	Sanctions coalitions demonstrate non-military coercion with strategic effects. The relevant institutions have their own legal and strategic traditions.
Social media / cognitive competition	High	Low to Medium	Platforms, algorithms, synthetic media, and audience targeting transform scale and tempo. Chinese cognitive-domain writings are documented, but not as a simple derivative of the book.
Private companies / satellites / cloud networks	High	None / Not applicable	Ukraine shows private communications, ISR, cyber, cloud, and AI infrastructure becoming strategically decisive, closely matching the state/non-state boundary thesis.
Belt and Road Initiative	Medium	Low / Unproven	Infrastructure and finance can create strategic influence and dual-use options, but treating BRI as a whole as a covert warfare program is unsupported.

Sources: Case-evidence basis: [66].

Interpretive caution. The revised table deliberately separates similarity from implementation evidence. "High similarity" means strong structural resemblance to boundary crossing, integrated means, asymmetric leverage, or non-military strategic effects. It never by itself means that the case was caused by, ordered under, or consciously derived from the 1999 book.

14.1 Taiwan Strait — Relevance: High

The Taiwan case scores high because it contains all four major forms of combination identified by Qiao and Wang: multiple actors (state, military, coast guard, commercial and social), multiple domains (military, diplomatic, economic, cyber, legal and information), multiple means, and multiple levels from tactical intercepts to national political strategy. The greatest analytical value of the lens is to show how an apparently "small" action—an exercise zone, customs restriction, legal announcement or viral narrative—can be designed to alter the strategic baseline when combined with other actions.

14.2 South China Sea — Relevance: High

The South China Sea combines physical presence, artificial-island infrastructure, law-enforcement activity, domestic law, diplomatic engagement, commercial dependence and military deterrence. It is a classic example of cumulative change below the threshold of major war. A pure naval-warfare model misses the importance of law, coast-guard status, fishing fleets, construction, resource access and international opinion. [58]

14.3 U.S.–China Trade and Technology Conflict — Relevance: Medium to High

The trade war alone is rated Medium because tariffs can be explained as ordinary economic bargaining, protectionism and domestic politics. The broader technology conflict is High because export controls, investment screening, industrial subsidies, entity restrictions, alliance coordination, standards, research-security rules and critical-mineral controls interact. The combination, rather than the tariff, is what resembles the 1999 theory.

14.4 Russia–Ukraine War — Relevance: High

Russia's full-scale invasion demonstrates that modern war is simultaneously kinetic and infrastructural. Cyberattacks targeted Ukrainian systems; Western sanctions attacked financial and technological access; commercial satellite networks supported communications; private cybersecurity firms defended networks; social media shaped global narratives; energy flows became coercive instruments; and drones combined civilian technology with battlefield innovation. [41]

This does not show that Russia is "using Chinese doctrine." It shows that the structural conditions Qiao and Wang identified—networked economies, private strategic infrastructure, information dependence and cross-domain interaction—are not uniquely Chinese. This is one reason the book remains relevant as a general theory of modern competition even when its influence on Chinese doctrine is disputed.

14.5 Private Companies and Strategic Infrastructure — Relevance: High

Commercial firms can now control communications, cloud services, satellite imagery, AI models, cybersecurity, payment systems, app stores, semiconductor manufacturing, logistics networks and social platforms. In crisis, government authority and private ownership may diverge. Contracts, export laws, licensing, terms of service, investor interests and corporate leadership can all affect strategic outcomes. [67]

This is one of the book's most durable insights: the actor map of war is no longer limited to uniformed forces and ministries. Yet private firms are not automatically proxies. Their autonomy, profit incentives, legal obligations and multinational exposure must be analyzed separately.

14.6 Financial Sanctions and Reserve Restrictions — Similarity: High / Direct Book Link: Low

Financial sanctions are perhaps the clearest example of the book's intuition becoming normalized outside China. A coalition can restrict access to major currency networks, correspondent banks, reserve assets, securities markets, insurance, and trade finance without launching military strikes. The 2026 NBER evidence that sanctions sever direct correspondent relationships and push targeted banks toward longer, more fragile chains gives empirical support to the idea that network structure itself is a strategic source of power. [35]

Yet the institutional lineage is independent. Modern U.S. and European sanctions arise from domestic statutes, executive authorities, alliance processes, financial regulation, and decades of coercive-statecraft practice. Their resemblance to the 1999 book demonstrates the theory's general relevance, not Chinese influence on Western policy.

14.7 Semiconductor and Advanced-Technology Controls — Similarity: High / Direct Book Link: Low

Advanced-semiconductor controls are a textbook case of asymmetric chokepoint strategy. The objective is not to outproduce an adversary in every category but to control a small number of inputs that are difficult to substitute and that affect AI, supercomputing, advanced weapons, surveillance, and industrial productivity. BIS and CRS documents publicly frame these controls through U.S. national-security authorities, making their policy genealogy clear. [38]

The reciprocal side matters as much. China's controls on selected rare-earth-related items demonstrate that strategic dependencies run in both directions. The result is a competition over systems of substitution: stockpiles, alternative suppliers, allied coordination, recycling, domestic production, and technological redesign. [39]

14.8 Cyber Operations — Similarity: High / Direct Book Link: Low to Medium

Cyber operations closely match the book's network-warfare category because low-visibility access can create information, operational, and psychological effects disproportionate to the physical resources employed. The 2025 U.S. report describes PRC cyber actors conducting espionage and pre-positioning capabilities against critical infrastructure and assesses the PLA's Cyberspace Force as responsible for cyber operations, electronic warfare, technical reconnaissance, psychological operations, and influence operations. [45]

This provides strong evidence of institutionalized PRC cyber and information capabilities. It still does not establish that contemporary campaigns are executed under the 1999 book. The most defensible rating is therefore high similarity with low-to-medium public evidence of direct conceptual lineage.

14.9 Social Media, Disinformation, and Cognitive Operations — Similarity: High / Direct Book Link: Low to Medium

Social media turns public opinion into a high-frequency feedback environment. Actors can measure engagement, alter message variants, target language communities, use synthetic personas, and exploit algorithmic distribution. Generative AI reduces the marginal cost of producing persuasive or deceptive material, while deepfakes and synthetic audio create authentication burdens. These capabilities strongly extend the book's psychological, media, ideological, and network-warfare logic.

The key caution is causal. A viral rumor can emerge organically; a platform algorithm can amplify content without state direction; activists and commercial influencers can pursue their own goals. Attribution therefore requires technical, behavioral, financial, or documentary evidence rather than thematic similarity.

14.10 Commercial Space, Cloud, and Private Infrastructure — Similarity: High / Direct Book Link: Not Applicable

The Russia–Ukraine war demonstrates the book's state/non-state boundary thesis in perhaps its strongest modern form. Commercial satellite broadband, imagery, cloud services, cyber intelligence, AI analytics, and software platforms have become part of operational military capability. CSIS describes commercial space as central to battlefield communications and transparency, while Carnegie argues that private technology firms increasingly mediate sovereign control over military power. [68]

The theoretical significance is wider than Ukraine. Future states may depend on privately owned systems for position-navigation-timing augmentation, AI compute, logistics optimization, app distribution, identity, cloud hosting, undersea cable capacity, and financial messaging. Strategic resilience will therefore depend partly on contracts, competition policy, provider diversity, and corporate governance—not only on force structure.

14.11 Belt and Road Initiative — Similarity: Medium / Direct Book Link: Low

BRI is an instructive negative-control case. It spans infrastructure, finance, standards, diplomacy, ports, energy, and digital connectivity, so it can superficially look like a perfect fit for the book. But broad scope is not evidence of warfare. Development finance and infrastructure can serve commercial, diplomatic, domestic-industrial, and geopolitical objectives simultaneously. The unrestricted-warfare label adds value only where a specific project has evidence of coordinated strategic leverage, security access, or coercive use. [56]

14.12 Overall Case Judgment

Across the cases, the pattern is consistent: analytical relevance is often high because twenty-first-century power is genuinely cross-domain, while public evidence of direct implementation of the 1999 book is usually low. Taiwan is the closest contemporary Chinese case because multiple instruments are demonstrably coordinated toward a clearly defined political objective. Even there, the public record supports cross-domain PRC strategy more strongly than it supports direct doctrinal lineage from Qiao and Wang.

15. Western Interpretations and Misinterpretations

Institution / community	How it has treated the book	Assessment of that treatment
U.S. Department of Defense / Air Force CASI	The broader defense community has cited the book as an example of Chinese asymmetric or irregular thinking; CASI in 2022 explicitly argued it is not China's "master plan."	Most useful when differentiated from official doctrine. Some military commentary has used "doctrine" loosely.
U.S. Congress / committees	Hearings and committee reports have sometimes used "unrestricted warfare" as a broad label for CCP political/economic/information competition.	Reflects policy framing and concern; not equivalent to a formal DoD doctrinal finding.
Congressional Research Service	2018 CRS report described "Unrestricted Warfare" as combining information, cyber, irregular warfare, lawfare and foreign relations in peace and conflict.	Serious analytical use, but the report cited an edition carrying the sensational "Master Plan to Destroy America" subtitle, which illustrates framing risk.
RAND	RAND works cite the book and analyze information-age statecraft, Three Warfares, nonlethal tools and PLA learning.	Generally treats the book as one source among broader Chinese strategic literature, not as sole doctrinal authority.
CSIS	Cites the book in military modernization and cyber literature while usually analyzing contemporary coercion through economic statecraft, gray-zone, maritime and technology frameworks.	Useful institutional separation between the 1999 theory and current empirical policy.
CNA	2005 doctrinal study explicitly raises the problem of "authoritativeness" and places Unrestricted Warfare within the ferment of 1990s PLA writing.	One of the strongest cautions against equating debate literature with doctrine.
National Defense University / JFQ	Articles have treated the book as a precursor to irregular, hybrid, or all-domain competition and as a lens for Chinese strategic behavior.	Insightful but terminology varies by author; "unrestricted warfare doctrine" should not be taken as an official Chinese label without corroboration.

Sources: Representative sources: [69].

15.1 Department of Defense and the Problem of Doctrinal Authority

The most careful U.S. defense analysis distinguishes between an influential military text and authoritative PLA doctrine. CASI's 2022 essay makes the point directly: Unrestricted Warfare is not China's master plan. CNA's earlier research on PLA doctrinal affairs provides the methodological basis for that caution by emphasizing formal promulgation, institutional sponsorship and hierarchy of military publications. [22]

At the same time, DoD and service publications have repeatedly cited the book because it captures recurring Chinese concerns about U.S. technological superiority, information dependence and asymmetric vulnerabilities. The defensible conclusion is "relevant to understanding strategic debate," not "official operating manual."

15.2 Congress and CRS

Congressional hearings and committee reports often use more expansive political language than doctrinal studies. The term "unrestricted warfare" has appeared as a shorthand for economic coercion, influence, technology acquisition, cyber activity and United Front work. Those uses reveal U.S. threat perception, but they should not be confused with a finding that the PRC itself officially labels those policies "Unrestricted Warfare."

The 2018 CRS report on information warfare is more analytically specific. It described the Chinese concept as combining information, cyberspace, irregular warfare, lawfare and foreign relations across peace and conflict. However, its citation to an English edition subtitled "China's Master Plan to Destroy America" illustrates how publishing choices can shape the frame even inside otherwise careful government research. [70]

15.3 RAND, CSIS, CNA, and NDU

RAND's recent work on the Three Warfares, PLA learning and nonlethal competition tends to treat Chinese strategic concepts as an ecosystem rather than reducing them to one 1999 text. CSIS similarly analyzes BRI, technology competition, maritime coercion and economic statecraft through issue-specific frameworks. CNA emphasizes authoritativeness. NDU and Joint Force Quarterly have often used the book more freely as a conceptual lens for irregular, asymmetric or all-domain competition.

These differences are healthy. A think tank examining economic coercion asks a different question from a doctrinal analyst determining what the PLA has formally adopted. "Influential idea," "analytical lens," "official doctrine," and "observed state practice" are separate research categories.

Overestimation. Western analysts may overestimate the book when they treat it as a secret blueprint, read every PRC activity through its categories, or infer direct influence from conceptual similarity. Popular English editions with sensational subtitles intensified this tendency. [71]

Underestimation. The opposite error is to dismiss the book because it was not official doctrine. The text anticipated several features of modern competition—financial coercion, cyber/network operations, private actors, cross-domain effects, and the erosion of the war/peace boundary—that later became central to international security debates.

Translation distortion. "Unrestricted" can imply absence of legal or moral restraint. The authors' later insistence on "beyond limits" does not erase controversial passages, but it matters for conceptual accuracy. Translation is not a peripheral issue here; it directly affects the theory's perceived extremity. [1]

15.4 RAND: Value as a Research Text, Caution on Doctrine

RAND's PLA-research literature provides one of the clearest methodological cautions. In A Poverty of Riches, the discussion of Chinese military publications explicitly notes that works such as Unrestricted Warfare are valuable because they reveal professional debate and conceptual experimentation, but their contents should not be treated as official PLA warfighting doctrine. That distinction is foundational for serious open-source analysis. [72]

RAND's later work on the Three Warfares and Chinese concepts of competition likewise situates specific terms inside a larger ecosystem of party, military, legal, technological, and information practices. This approach reduces the temptation to use a single book as a master key. [73]

15.5 CNA: "Authoritativeness" as the Central Research Problem

CNA's 2005 study of PLA doctrinal affairs places Unrestricted Warfare among the intellectual ferment that followed the Gulf War and information revolution while explicitly asking how much authority should be assigned to such works. CNA distinguishes theoretical writings, professional military science, teaching materials, regulations, and formal operational doctrine. That hierarchy is more informative than the binary question "official or unofficial," because influence can exist at several levels. [74]

15.6 NDU and Joint Force Quarterly: Strategic Lens and the Risk of Loose Terminology

National Defense University and Joint Force Quarterly publications have often treated the book as a revealing Chinese response to U.S. military dominance and as a precursor to irregular or cross-domain competition. This literature helped introduce the book to Western professional military audiences. It also sometimes uses "unrestricted warfare" more as a conceptual family name than as a precise statement of Chinese doctrinal status. [75]

15.7 CSIS: Issue-Specific Empiricism

CSIS research is useful precisely because much of it does not begin with Unrestricted Warfare. Work on BRI, shipbuilding, rare earths, commercial space, and the Ukraine battlefield investigates particular mechanisms—ownership, production capacity, export restrictions, satellite communications, industrial concentration—before drawing strategic conclusions. [76]

This provides a methodological model for using the 1999 book responsibly: start with the empirical mechanism, then ask whether the cross-domain logic clarifies the case. Do not start with the theory and force every event into it.

15.8 CRS and Congress: Policy Framing Versus Doctrinal Analysis

Congressional discourse naturally reflects political threat perception, legislative priorities, and advocacy. CRS products are generally more bounded and source-conscious, but the 2018 information-warfare report is instructive: it presented Unrestricted Warfare as one Chinese framework for combining information, cyber, irregular, legal, and diplomatic means, while also discussing Russian and U.S. concepts. In other words, it treated the term comparatively, not as proof that every PRC policy is an operation under the book. [77]

15.9 How Western Framing Can Distort the Object of Study

Three framing effects recur. First, the English title "Unrestricted Warfare" encourages a moral reading— "no restrictions" —before a conceptual reading— "crossing boundaries." Second, sensational commercial subtitles transformed a theoretical book into an alleged national "master plan," despite the absence of such wording in the Chinese subtitle. Third, post-9/11 readers sometimes reread the book's discussion of terrorism as endorsement rather than as a mixture of analysis, prediction, and provocative strategic argument. [11]

The corrective is not to minimize the book's radicalism. The authors explicitly seek to broaden the means considered strategically relevant and include troubling examples. The corrective is to make claims at the right evidentiary level. A provocative theoretical text can be important without being a secret war plan; a mistranslation can exaggerate implications without making every criticism invalid.

16. Major Criticisms and Limitations

Criticism	Why it matters	Counterpoint / qualification
1. The concept is too broad.	If finance, media, law, trade, crime, cyber and diplomacy are all "war," the term can lose discriminating power.	As a strategic-effects lens, breadth is useful; as a legal definition of war, it is problematic.
2. It weakens the war/peace distinction.	This may normalize permanent conflict and encourage securitization of ordinary international activity.	Modern gray-zone and sanctions practice genuinely does blur thresholds; the phenomenon exists even if the label is rejected.
3. Many ideas are not new.	Sun Tzu, political warfare, economic coercion, guerrilla strategy, deception and propaganda predate the book.	Novelty lies partly in the explicit globalization-era combination and taxonomy, not invention of every component.
4. Western analysts may exaggerate its influence.	A book by two officers is not the same as a CMC directive or operational outline.	It still reveals an important strand of PLA strategic thought at a pivotal time.

Criticism	Why it matters	Counterpoint / qualification
5. It can become an all-purpose China theory.	Any PRC policy can be retrofitted into one of the book's categories, creating unfalsifiable analysis.	Use documentary evidence and alternative explanations; rate "similarity" separately from "implementation."
6. Ethical/legal ambiguity.	The book discusses criminal and terrorist methods as examples, generating concern that effectiveness overrides normative limits.	Description, analytical interest and endorsement are not always clearly separated in the prose; this ambiguity is itself a legitimate criticism.
7. Coordination assumptions are optimistic.	Whole-of-system integration is bureaucratically difficult; actors have conflicting incentives and information.	Modern digital command, data integration and centralized party-state mechanisms may reduce some frictions but cannot eliminate them.
8. Economic interdependence creates blowback.	Financial or trade warfare can harm the initiator and accelerate decoupling.	The book recognizes combination and minimum cost but underdevelops second-order economic feedback.

16.1 The Legal Problem: What Counts as War?

International law does not treat every hostile or coercive act as "war." The UN Charter framework, the law of armed conflict, sovereignty rules, countermeasures, sanctions law, criminal law and domestic emergency authorities operate with different thresholds. If analysts use "warfare" metaphorically for every sanction, influence campaign or cyber intrusion, they can obscure which legal regime actually applies.

The theoretical benefit of the book is therefore strategic rather than juridical. It asks whether non-military means can produce strategic effects. The answer is clearly yes. It does not provide a satisfactory legal theory for when those means constitute an armed attack, use of force, coercion, intervention or lawful countermeasure.

16.2 The Epistemic Problem: A Theory That Explains Everything Explains Too Little

Because the book includes almost every instrument of national power, any event can be fitted retrospectively into its categories. This creates a falsifiability problem. A useful research design should ask what evidence would show that a policy was not an Unrestricted Warfare operation: independent bureaucratic origins, economic motivations, lack of coordination, public legal mandates, contradictory agency behavior, or absence of any link to military objectives.

The report therefore uses "relevance" ratings rather than "implementation" ratings. A case can resemble the theory closely while having no documented causal connection to the book. This distinction is essential for avoiding conspiratorial interpretation.

[ANALYSIS] The book is strongest as a warning against siloed strategy and weakest when it treats "warfare" as a universal metaphor. A rigorous analyst should preserve distinctions among armed conflict, coercive diplomacy, economic statecraft, law enforcement, strategic competition, and influence operations even when studying their interaction.

16.3 Novelty Problem: Strategic Synthesis or Rebranding?

Many individual components of Unrestricted Warfare are old. Economic blockade, propaganda, espionage, irregular forces, subversion, diplomacy, deception, legal argument, and alliance manipulation have accompanied war for centuries. Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Mao, Cold War political warfare, and Soviet active measures all contain ideas that overlap with the book. The claim of novelty therefore cannot rest on the existence of the instruments themselves.

The stronger originality claim is architectural: the authors place globalization-era networks at the center of strategy and argue that the strategist should deliberately cross boundaries among institutions that normally define separate policy fields. Even here, the book is part of a wider 1990s turn toward systems, information, networks, complexity, and asymmetric effects. It is innovative as synthesis and provocation more than as wholly unprecedented theory.

16.4 Coordination and the "Omnipotent Strategist" Problem

The theory often reads as if a central planner could see the entire strategic system, identify the optimal combination, synchronize actors, and adjust continuously. Real governments rarely possess that information or control. Agencies protect mandates; allies have vetoes; companies have shareholders and legal obligations; markets reprice risk independently; publics react unpredictably; adversaries adapt. The more domains a strategy includes, the more coordination costs rise.

This is not a minor implementation issue. It can reverse the book's logic. A campaign intended to create cumulative pressure may instead generate contradictory signals, expose vulnerabilities, or trigger counter-coalitions. A useful modern extension should therefore include organizational capacity and coalition cohesion as explicit variables.

16.5 Escalation and Feedback

Boundary crossing can increase ambiguity. A cyber intrusion into civilian infrastructure may be interpreted as preparation for military attack; a financial sanction may be treated as existential economic warfare; a legal measure may be paired with coercive physical presence; an influence operation may undermine crisis communications. Because domains have different escalation thresholds, combining them can produce interaction effects that are hard to predict.

The book's "whole-process control" principle recognizes feedback but does not provide a robust theory of escalation. Twenty-first-century analysis must ask whether an action is reversible, attributable, geographically bounded, economically containable, and legible to the adversary. These characteristics may matter more for stability than the simple distinction between kinetic and non-kinetic tools.

16.6 The Conspiracy-Theory Failure Mode

The broadness of the concept makes it attractive to conspiratorial reasoning. If trade, education exchanges, migration, investment, diplomacy, media, litigation, crime, finance, and technology can all be "warfare," then almost any unwanted foreign activity can be reclassified as evidence. This produces a closed explanatory system in which absence of evidence becomes evidence of secrecy.

A rigorous remedy is falsifiability. For each alleged case, specify what evidence would weaken the hypothesis: independent commercial motives, public regulatory origins, lack of coordination, conflicting agency behavior, absence of military linkage, or policy continuity across governments with different strategic orientations. A theory that cannot be disproved should not be used as an attribution tool.

16.7 Ethical Ambiguity

The book's willingness to analyze terrorism, crime, financial manipulation, and other unconventional methods has ethical consequences. Even where a passage is descriptive rather than prescriptive, the rhetoric sometimes collapses moral distinctions into questions of strategic effect. Critics are therefore justified in asking whether the theory gives insufficient weight to law, civilian protection, legitimacy, and the long-term political costs of coercion.

At the same time, analysts should distinguish moral criticism from translation criticism. Saying that Unrestricted Warfare is not literally "war without any limits" does not imply that every method discussed is lawful or acceptable. The two questions are separate.

17. The Evolution of Unrestricted Warfare in the Twenty-First Century

Several concepts that were provocative in 1999 are now commonplace. Cyber operations are an established national-security field; financial sanctions are routinely described as major strategic instruments; supply-chain resilience is a core security concern; private companies operate strategic space, cloud, AI and communications infrastructure; social media is recognized as an arena of influence; and military doctrine increasingly integrates multiple domains.

1999-era proposition	Status by the 2020s
Networks can become a battlefield	Normalized: cyber commands, cyber doctrine, critical-infrastructure defense.
Finance can have warlike strategic effects	Normalized: sanctions, reserve freezes, market-access restrictions, payment-network pressure.
Private actors can become strategically decisive	Normalized: satellite, cloud, cyber, platform, logistics and AI firms in crisis and war.
Military and non-military domains interact	Normalized: whole-of-government, integrated deterrence, economic security, hybrid/gray-zone frameworks.

1999-era proposition	Status by the 2020s
Information can affect strategy as much as firepower	Normalized: influence operations, cognitive security, strategic communications, AI-generated content.
A tactical action can create strategic effects	Normalized in cyber, terrorism, viral information events and attacks on critical nodes.

What has become more important since the 2020s? AI, advanced semiconductors, cloud computing, undersea cables, commercial satellite constellations, digital identity, large language models, data centers, payment rails, critical-mineral processing, battery supply chains, autonomous systems and platform governance. These are not merely "new weapons"; they are infrastructures that connect economic power, information power and military capability.

AI-era evolution. An updated unrestricted-warfare-style framework would likely focus less on naming dozens of separate "warfares" and more on controlling systems of dependency: compute, data, chips, energy, logistics, finance, communications, identity, navigation, standards and attention. The key strategic question becomes: which nodes can alter an adversary's choices across several domains simultaneously?

Semiconductors. Chips illustrate the fusion of economic and military power. Leading-edge fabrication requires specialized lithography, design software, process knowledge, materials, equipment and global supply chains. Control of a small set of chokepoints can produce outsized strategic effects. [33]

Space and commercial infrastructure. The Ukraine war demonstrated that privately operated satellite broadband and imagery can be strategically decisive, while state actors remain dependent on commercial terms of service and corporate governance. [41]

Finance. The 2026 NBER evidence on correspondent-banking networks reinforces a key point the 1999 authors intuited: centrality in a network can itself be a strategic asset. [32]

17.1 From "All Means" to "System Chokepoints"

A twenty-first-century successor to the book would probably place greater emphasis on system chokepoints than on enumerating dozens of "warfares." The most powerful tools are increasingly those that sit at intersections: semiconductor design and manufacturing, cloud compute, satellite navigation and communications, undersea cables, energy grids, payment settlement, identity systems, logistics software, rare-earth processing and AI model ecosystems.

The strategic value of a chokepoint has at least five dimensions: concentration of supply, difficulty of substitution, legal/jurisdictional control, time needed for recovery, and cross-domain spillover. A chip-design tool that affects AI, weapons, telecom and industrial automation has greater systemic leverage than a tool confined to one sector.

17.2 AI-Enabled Strategic Competition

AI changes both the speed and the scale of integrated competition. It can assist intelligence fusion, cyber defense and offense, influence operations, logistics optimization, autonomous systems, target recognition, financial surveillance, sanctions enforcement, scientific discovery and strategic planning. At the same time, AI systems depend on data, compute, electricity, chips, cloud providers and talent—creating new dependencies that can themselves be targeted or denied.

A plausible evolution of unrestricted-warfare-style thinking would therefore be recursive: use AI to integrate instruments across domains while simultaneously attacking or protecting the opponent's AI supply chain. The "battlefield" becomes partly an ecosystem of compute, models, data provenance, standards, energy and trusted communications.

17.3 Escalation and Mutual Dependence

The central strategic paradox is that the same interdependence that creates leverage also creates restraint. Financial networks, semiconductor supply chains, shipping, cloud systems and communications infrastructure are shared. Aggressive weaponization can fragment them, destroy future leverage and impose costs on the initiator. This creates a modern version of escalation control: states must decide not only whether they can exploit a dependency, but whether doing so will accelerate the construction of alternatives.

17.4 The 2020s Shift: From "Domains" to "Stacks"

The 1999 book thinks in domains—finance, media, networks, technology, resources. The 2020s increasingly require thinking in stacks: layered infrastructures in which one service depends on another. AI depends on chips, advanced packaging, cloud compute, electricity, data centers, models, data, communications, software frameworks, and talent. Financial services depend on identity, telecom networks, cloud infrastructure, correspondent banking, messaging, settlement, and law. Space systems depend on launch, ground stations, spectrum, cyber security, supply chains, and power.

This layered structure changes strategy. A state can target the application layer, the infrastructure layer, the supply layer, or the legal-access layer. The highest leverage may lie far from the visible "battlefield." In this respect, modern systems make the book's boundary-transcending intuition more relevant while making its old list of separate warfares less useful.

17.5 AI and Decision-Tempo Competition

AI can reduce the time required to process intelligence, identify anomalies, draft options, translate information, generate simulations, conduct cyber triage, optimize logistics, and analyze financial networks. The strategic advantage is not simply "having AI." It is embedding AI inside organizations that can validate outputs, protect data, maintain secure compute, and act before information becomes stale.

An unrestricted-warfare-style update would therefore focus on decision tempo. If one actor can force the other to verify thousands of ambiguous cyber, media, financial, and military signals simultaneously, it may slow decision-making even without destroying assets. Conversely, trusted data pipelines, AI-assisted triage, and resilient command structures can prevent informational overload from becoming strategic paralysis.

17.6 Semiconductors and Compute as Strategic Capital

Advanced semiconductors have become a form of strategic capital because they underpin AI, communications, sensing, electronic warfare, scientific computing, and modern weapons. The relevant contest is not simply possession of chips but control over the ecosystem required to design, fabricate, package, power, and program them. This makes industrial policy, export control, talent, standards, and energy policy part of the same strategic system. [38]

17.7 Data as Resource, Target, and Terrain

Data has at least three strategic roles. It is a resource for training models and generating intelligence; a target that can be stolen, corrupted, denied, or manipulated; and terrain because the rules governing storage, cross-border transfer, privacy, localization, and platform access shape who can operate. Data governance therefore connects law, economics, intelligence, technology, and cognitive security in ways the 1999 authors could only partially foresee.

17.8 Space and Orbital Infrastructure

Commercial low-Earth-orbit constellations demonstrate that the military/civilian boundary can be structurally obsolete even when it remains legally important. A privately owned satellite may serve civilian broadband, disaster response, commercial logistics, military communications, and intelligence dissemination within the same network. Conflict can therefore create questions about targeting, neutrality, state responsibility, insurance, licensing, and corporate discretion simultaneously. [78]

17.9 Finance and the Future of Network Fragmentation

Financial coercion contains a strategic paradox. The more central a network is, the more leverage its controllers possess; the more aggressively that leverage is used, the greater the incentive for others to build alternatives. The 2026 NBER evidence already shows targeted institutions shifting toward longer payment chains and, in heavily sanctioned economies, greater use of yuan-linked alternatives. [35]

The long-run question is therefore not whether dollar-based leverage exists—it clearly does—but whether competing payment, custody, settlement, and reserve arrangements can reduce the marginal effect of future sanctions without sacrificing liquidity and trust. This is a competition over institutional quality and network scale, not merely currencies.

17.10 A Future "Boundary-Transcending" Model

1999 focus	2020s–2030s evolution
Finance as a form of warfare	Network centrality, reserve access, digital payments, compliance technology, capital-market infrastructure.
Network warfare	Cyber + cloud + identity + software supply chain + critical infrastructure.
Media / psychological warfare	Algorithmic distribution, synthetic media, generative AI, provenance, attention competition.
Technology warfare	Compute, semiconductors, AI models, standards, industrial ecosystems, scientific supply chains.
Space warfare	Military-commercial constellations, PNT, ISR, launch, spectrum, ground-station cyber security.
Resource warfare	Critical minerals, energy, water, batteries, grid technology, recycling and substitution.
Supra-national combination	States + alliances + platforms + firms + standards bodies + financial institutions + open-source communities.

The future theory is therefore likely to be less dramatic in vocabulary but more pervasive in practice: systems competition across interdependent infrastructures. The key strategic tasks will be to map dependencies, build resilience, coordinate instruments, preserve coalition legitimacy, and deny an opponent the ability to create cascading effects.

18. Comprehensive Assessment and Conclusion

Ten most important propositions / strategic statements	Assessment
1. The battlefield is no longer confined to physical military space.	Largely validated by cyber, space, finance, information and infrastructure competition.
2. Non-military means can generate strategic effects comparable to military action.	Validated in sanctions, export controls, cyber disruption and information operations, though "comparable" depends on context.
3. Strong powers create asymmetric vulnerabilities through complex systems.	Strongly validated: network centrality and technological dependence create both power and exposure.
4. The weaker actor should avoid symmetrical competition.	Classic but enduring strategic logic.
5. Combination matters more than any single instrument.	Highly relevant; modern statecraft increasingly emphasizes cross-domain integration.
6. State and non-state actors are increasingly entangled.	Strongly validated by commercial space, cloud, platforms, cyber firms, militias and proxies.
7. Tactical actions can have strategic-level effects.	Validated in cyber, terrorism, financial contagion and viral information events.
8. War and peace form a continuum rather than a clean binary.	Consistent with gray-zone and persistent-competition literature, but legally and normatively controversial.
9. Information and perception are central to strategic power.	More important today due to social media, AI and algorithmic distribution.
10. Control, adaptation and feedback must continue throughout the campaign.	Consistent with modern systems and data-driven operational thinking.

Strategic innovations. The book's main innovation was not the discovery of economic sanctions, propaganda, terrorism, or irregular warfare. It was the deliberate attempt to dissolve the organizational boundaries separating them and to make combination across boundaries the center of strategy. It also treated globalization itself—the networks of finance, media, technology and transnational organizations—as a new operational environment.

Limitations and errors. The theory overextends the word "war," offers insufficient criteria for distinguishing strategic competition from warfare, underestimates governance and coordination problems, and often treats disruptive methods more as conceptual possibilities than as empirically tested mechanisms. Some examples are speculative or dated.

What was pioneering in 1999 but normalized now? Cyber/network conflict, financial coercion, media/information effects, cross-domain integration, private infrastructure in war, and the strategic importance of technology ecosystems.

What became even more important after 2020? AI, semiconductors, cloud infrastructure, commercial space, digital platforms, supply chains, critical minerals, data governance, sanctions networks and cognitive security.

Usefulness for understanding the twenty-first century. High as a conceptual provocation; medium as a specific explanatory theory of Chinese state behavior; low if used as proof that every Chinese action is part of a hidden war plan. Its best use is comparative and diagnostic: identify cross-domain interactions, asymmetries, dependencies and strategic effects, then test each case with independent evidence.

Future evolution. In an AI-finance-cyber-space-semiconductor era, boundary-transcending strategy will likely become less about "everything as war" and more about systems competition: securing or denying access to compute, data, capital, energy, logistics, communications and trusted information. Strategic advantage will flow from the ability to coordinate those systems without triggering uncontrollable escalation or destroying the networks on which one also depends.

Single-sentence definition: Unrestricted Warfare (超限战) is a theory of achieving strategic objectives by transcending the traditional boundaries of warfare and integrating military and non-military instruments across domains, actors, spaces, and levels to exploit asymmetries against an opponent.

19. Glossary of Key Concepts and Terms

Term	Chinese / abbreviation	Definition
Unrestricted Warfare	超限战 / 超限战 (chāoxiànzhàn)	The 1999 book's concept of boundary-transcending, combinatorial strategic conflict.
Transcending boundaries	超限	Going beyond inherited limits; not identical to being limitless.
Unrestricted combination	超限组合	Combination across national, domain, means and level boundaries.
Supra-national combination	超国家组合	Combination involving states, international/transnational organizations and non-state actors.
Supra-domain combination	超领域组合	Integration across military, political, economic, social and technical domains.
Supra-means combination	超手段组合	Combination of heterogeneous instruments and methods.
Supra-tier combination	超台阶组合	Linking tactical, operational, strategic and political levels in nontraditional ways.
Omnidirectionality	全向度	360-degree consideration of all relevant factors and spaces.
Synchrony	共时性	Coordinated action across spaces within the same time period.
Limited objective	有限目标	Political/strategic aim kept within achievable bounds.
"Unlimited" means	无限手段	Broad potential instrument set, limited by the objective—one of the theory's internal tensions.
Non-equilibrium	非均衡	Seek asymmetric nodes and avoid symmetrical contests.
Minimum consumption	最小耗费	Use the least resources necessary to achieve the goal.
Multidimensional coordination	多维协同	Coordinate military and non-military forces across domains.
Whole-process control	全程调控	Continuous information, adjustment and control from start to finish.
Three Warfares	三战	Official PLA political-work concepts: public-opinion, psychological and legal warfare.
Informationized warfare	信息化战争	PLA concept of warfare shaped by information systems, networks and information dominance.
Intelligentized warfare	智能化战争	Emerging Chinese concept emphasizing AI, autonomy, data and intelligent systems.
Military-Civil Fusion	军民融合	PRC strategy to deepen integration of civilian and military innovation/resources.
Cognitive domain	认知域	The domain of perception, judgment, belief, will and decision.

Term	Chinese / abbreviation	Definition
Gray zone	—	Competitive/coercive activity below the threshold of conventional armed conflict.
Hybrid warfare	—	Combination of conventional, irregular, informational and other instruments in conflict.
Lawfare	法律战 / broader usage	Use of legal rules, claims, institutions and procedures as strategic instruments.

Source Notes (Endnotes)

Numbered source notes correspond to the superscript markers used throughout the report. Repeated combinations of the same sources reuse the same note number. Primary-source citations identify the relevant work or chapter; pagination varies across Chinese and FBIS reproductions, so the bibliography records the edition/source used.

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Appendix A. Evidence Labels and Rating Method

Label	Meaning in this report
FACT	A proposition supported by a primary text, official document, or well-established record.
AUTHORS' ARGUMENT	A claim or concept advanced by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui; not automatically a fact about PRC policy.
OFFICIAL DOCTRINE	A concept or institution grounded in an official PRC/PLA document, regulation, white paper, or CMC/State Council action.
ANALYSIS	This report's synthesis or interpretation of documented evidence.
INFERENCE	A plausible but not directly documented connection; must not be treated as established implementation.

Relevance ratings. "High" means strong structural similarity to the book's core logic (boundary crossing, integrated means, asymmetry, strategic non-military effects). "Medium" means partial similarity or a single-domain match without robust integration. "Low" means weak or incidental resemblance. Ratings are analytical, not attributional.

Key anti-overreach rule: Similarity → hypothesis. Documentary linkage → evidence. Formal promulgation → doctrine. These are three different evidentiary steps.