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Cross-Domain Coercion: Contours of East Asia's Future Conflicts

By Michael Raska

Synopsis

Great powers in East Asia are combining both military and non-military methods of deterrence and compellence in new ways to achieve their political and strategic objectives. What are the implications for regional countries, especially small states like Singapore?

Commentary

THE RESURGENCE of great power rivalries in East Asia coupled with the diffusion of advanced military technologies suggests that while wars and conflicts in the region are not inevitable, neither are they inconceivable.

The confluence of China's rise and its emerging power projection capabilities raise the spectre of a major accidental or planned naval clash in the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean Region, in addition to the geopolitical hotspots around the Taiwan Straits and the Korean Peninsula. However, regional strategic competition between adversaries armed with nuclear weapons and precision strike systems places a premium on coercive diplomacy - persuading an adversary to change a particular course of action by integrating both military and non-military instruments of power short of conventional war.

Struggle For Influence

The key aim of coercive diplomacy is to minimise retaliatory escalation by narrowing the strategic options that shape or constrain the adversary's perceptions and decision-making. While the history of warfare is replete with examples of such strategies, what is new is the selective convergence of military and non-military capabilities across different domains of warfare.

To begin with, strategic competition in East Asia is reflected in how great powers use non-military methods of thought to ‘win’ wars by means of intense political, economic, information, and military pressure during peacetime. These “indirect” actions include the use of information operations and political warfare, cyber-attacks, electronic warfare, paramilitary operations, and potentially, limited strikes in targeted areas without escalating to a major conflict.

An important feature of new types of conflicts is in the varying struggles for influence – skilfully merging strategies of denial, deception, disruption, and subversion. They are designed to misinform and manipulate the adversary’s picture of reality; to interfere with the decision-making processes of individuals, organisations, governments and societies; and to influence it in order to produce favourable conditions for promoting strategic goals without actual fighting.

In many ways, the confluence of advanced cyber and information warfare strategies creates new weapons of mass effectiveness. The weaponisation of social media, for example, provides new tools for both state and non-state actors to seed ideas, deliver “tailored” information campaigns, and in doing so, influence perceptions of events or environment in real time.

As a result the effective use of social media can shape strategic outcomes of conflicts before they actually happen. Meanwhile, the continually evolving cyber-attacks coupled with the use of disinformation, concealment, and deception instigate strategic uncertainty on the magnitude and scope of potential cyberwars.

Cross-Domain Coercion

At the same time, regional militaries pursue cross-domain coercion strategies. These involve deterring a military action in one domain with a threat of using force in another domain; the domains merge traditional physical environments - land, sea, air, and space; with digital and information spheres in cyberspace domain.

The strategic significance of cross-domain coercion is that both Russia and China have moved beyond the conceptual phase and are actively implementing such strategies to achieve their political objectives.

In a recent analysis of the Russian strategic thought, for example, Dima Adamsky argues that Russian multi-dimensional coercive campaigns can be viewed in a holistic information (cyber) operation context. They are waged simultaneously on the digital-technological and on the cognitive-psychological fronts, which skilfully merge military and non-military capabilities across nuclear, conventional, and sub-conventional domains.

In particular, Russian information struggle identifies the main battlespace as the mind of the enemy, which means “influence operations” are of strategic importance, including elaborate internal communications, well-defined external strategic communications, deception operations, and psychological operations.

The key aim is to manipulate the adversary’s perceptions, shape its decision-making

process, and strategic choices, while minimising the scale of kinetic force. Most importantly, they are waged during peacetime and wartime, simultaneously in domestic and external information spheres.

Political Warfare

Similarly, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) aims to achieve "integrated strategic deterrence" through a holistic approach that includes simultaneous and coordinated use of offensive and defensive electronic warfare, cyber and space operations. This approach also encompasses cyber reconnaissance and cyber-attack and defence operations in varying security conditions - peacetime, crisis, and war.

At the same time, China uses economic leverage and "sharp power" diplomacy as primary means of power projection. Beijing has also been actively exploiting concepts associated with strategic information operations to direct influence on the process and outcome in areas of strategic competition.

The guiding conceptual umbrella for Chinese information and influence operations is embedded in the idea of "Three Warfares". This is the coordinated use of strategic psychological operations; overt and covert media manipulation; and legal warfare designed to manipulate strategies, defence policies, and perceptions of target audiences abroad favourable to the Chinese Communist Party.

Implications for Singapore

Cyber-enabled information conflicts in the broader context of cross-domain strategic interactions has also significant ramifications for small states, including Singapore. While competition is not synonymous with conflict, and does not necessarily lead to conflict, there is an increasing possibility that Singapore's strategic environment will be increasingly shaped by the outer circles of contending great power rivalries.

Consequently, regional strategic competition may increase operational requirements, while raising new set of strategic challenges for the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). The SAF will have to ensure its future strategic edge to be able to exercise sufficient freedom of action to gain and maintain localised air superiority, maritime superiority, space and cyberspace superiority and security.

At the same time, however, Singapore's increasing dependencies on digital technologies and cyberspace amplify its vulnerabilities, from securing critical national infrastructure to the moral-psychological suppression and manipulation of Singaporean national identity and social consciousness.

Notwithstanding the direction of Singapore's strategic choices, a key requirement will be in the capacity of the government and the SAF to educate its officer corps and the rank-and-file to devise counter-strategies and options to secure Singapore's strategic interests in the contending international relations of East Asia.

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