

# PRISM Perspectives

## War of Position and Irregular Warfare: How Information Shapes Strategic Advantage Before Combat

By Douglas Wilbur, Ph.D., Maj (USA, RET)

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*Dr. Douglas Wilbur earned his Ph.D. in strategic communication from the University of Missouri School of Journalism. He is a scholar and expert in human side of information warfare, propaganda, disinformation/misinformation, conspiracy theories, rumors and other forms of information operations. He is a retired U.S. Army IO officer with four deployments.*



Chinese information warfare strategists often describe the United Front Work Department (UFWD) as a “magic weapon” for advancing national objectives without direct coercion. In 2015, [Xi Jinping](#) described UFWD as an “important instrument” for achieving the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” The [United Front](#) as an organization is dedicated to irregular warfare activities, both legal and illegal, to build Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence in foreign nations. For instance, one of their information warfare strategies called, ‘borrowed mouth’s’ embraces covertly [recruiting](#) influential people within a foreign nation to deliver pro CCP messages. This enhances the believability and credibility of these messages. [Information](#) warfare is the principal mechanism through which many irregular warfare campaigns pursue political objectives.

By shaping how populations and elites construct meaning, assign legitimacy, and interpret events, information warfare [influences](#) the decisions that ultimately determine political and strategic outcomes. These efforts operate over long periods of time. The purpose is usually not to compel immediate action, but to [shape](#) the information environment in which future political, economic and security decisions are made. The result is a form of competition that focuses less on defeating opponents and more on shaping the context in which opponents make decisions.

The UFWD’s specific brand of irregular warfare often fits within a Marxist philosophy of war, called [War of Position](#), which places information warfare at the center of their activities instead of giving

primacy to physical violence. It was originally developed by Marxists from western Europe who were unable to seize power through revolutionary violence, like the Bolshevik’s did to form the Soviet Union. This was because cultural institutions, like religion and national identity, formed a [defensive](#) bulwark against the communist revolution by creating what Antonio Gramsci called cultural hegemony, a condition in which a society’s dominant beliefs, values, and institutions become widely accepted as natural and legitimate. Thus, the [war of position](#) sought to destroy this cultural hegemony by infiltrating cultural and political institutions with goal of subverting them from the inside.

It is a long-term [struggle](#) to determine what things mean within a particular society. Thus, war of position’s effects are cumulative, and gains are [incremental](#) and asymmetrical. Setbacks are often invisible, and decisive effects may only become apparent when conflict manifests. If a decisive point in the revolution is reached, a societies culture may have already changed in a way that favors revolutionary narratives. Even when [military force](#) has not yet determined the outcome, the political and informational environment has already shaped how decision makers understand the conflict and which responses appear legitimate.

Although War of Position emerged from Western European Marxist thought, its underlying strategic logic is compatible with [Chinese](#) approaches to political warfare and irregular warfare. Like Chinese [strategic](#) thought, War of Position emphasizes creating favorable conditions that make future suc-

cess more likely before a crisis or conflict reaches its decisive stage. Both emphasize the [gradual](#) accumulation of strategic advantage by shaping the political, social, and information environment rather than relying solely on military force. For these reasons, War of Position provides a useful analytical framework for understanding how the CCP employs information warfare to support broader irregular warfare objectives.

## The Mechanics of War of Position

[War of Position](#) can assume the form of irregular warfare where coercion of groups through indirect and non-attributable activities occurs. Information warfare occupies a [central](#) role because many of these activities depend on shaping how individuals and societies interpret political and social reality. By influencing the meanings attached to events, institutions, and competing ideas, information warfare affects the legitimacy of political actors, the behavior of populations, and the decisions of leaders. One of the primary mechanisms of War of Position is the cultivation of influential institutional actors whom Gramsci referred to as “[organic intellectuals](#).” These individuals occupy positions of trust and authority within key institutions and help shape how political, social, and economic realities are to be understood. Rather than attempting to [persuade](#) entire populations directly, they influence which ideas become accepted as credible, legitimate, and socially acceptable.

## War of Position and the CCP

The CCP’s use of [UFWD](#) networks reflect this logic. According to [congressional investigations](#), the CCP cultivates influential institutional actors who perform a role similar to Gramsci’s organic intellectuals. These agents have successfully [shaped](#) the public debate and policy discussions in ways that benefit the CCP. For instance, the CCP has worked to entrench the idea that Taiwan’s sovereignty is a domestic and internal Chinese political matter that foreign nations have no business to interfere with. They frame Taiwanese [reunification](#) with China as both legitimate and inevitable. They have gained the cooperation of government official in several countries, who have lead their nations to [switch](#) diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. These countries have also subsequently adopted official language consistent with the CCP’s position that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. This shift extended beyond foreign policy and influenced how government agencies, public officials, and state institutions discussed Taiwan in official communications.

The CCP’s use of UFWD networks illustrates how information warfare can support broader irregular warfare objectives. Rather than relying on a single technique, Wars of Position combine multiple information warfare strategies that [reinforce](#) one another. One strategy may shape political language, another build institutional support, while others strengthen legitimacy or constrain an opponent’s response. Working [together](#), these strategies create cumulative effects that are often greater than the sum of their individual parts. For irregular warfare practitioners, recognizing how these strategies interact is just as important as identifying each one individually because their [combined](#) effect can gradually reshape the environment in which future competition, coercion, and conflict occur. The sections that follow examine several of the most common strategies associated with Wars of Position and explain how they function in contemporary irregular warfare.

## Information Warfare Strategies in Wars of Position

There is no definitive field manual per se that spells out how to specifically execute a war of position. However, a set of recurring [information warfare](#) strategies emerge from case studies and as well as war of position scholarship. Although they differ in execution, they share a common purpose: to reshape the environment so that one worldview becomes accepted as common sense and alternative worldviews become increasingly difficult to sustain. Some strategies seek to influence institutions. Others [shape](#) language, norms, or perceptions of legitimacy. Together, they gradually create ideological dominance and alter the environment in which future political and strategic decisions are made. While much of the literature on these strategies are in a domestic political context, they are also found in foreign political contexts as well. Table 1 identifies nine of the most common strategies observed in Wars of Position. It is not intended as an exhaustive list but rather a practical framework for recognizing how information warfare supports irregular warfare objectives by shaping the environment in which future competition, coercion, and conflict occur.

## - Strategies in Detail -

### Institutional Influence

Institutional Influence is the cultivation of influence within organizations that serve a [gatekeeping](#)

function by determining which issues receive public attention, which voices are treated as authoritative, and which ideas become accepted as credible and legitimate. Essentially, they seek to achieve an [agenda setting](#) effect by manipulating the salience of certain issues in way that influences people to think about specific things. From a [War of Position](#) perspective, institutions serve as more than centers of authority. They function as gatekeepers that shape public understanding by determining which ideas become accepted as credible, legitimate, and ultimately common sense. These efforts are especially valuable in irregular warfare because they shape the information environment that influences the decisions of political leaders, institutions, and populations without directly targeting them.

A prominent example is the CCP's effort to [influence](#) international telecommunications standards through the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Chinese companies, particularly Huawei, worked through the ITU to promote the "[New IP](#)" [proposal](#), which would have fundamentally changed the technical architecture of the internet. Although the proposal was ultimately rejected, it demonstrated Beijing's broader strategy of using international standards organizations to influence the rules governing future communications technologies rather than simply competing in existing markets. From a War of Position perspective, the objective is not simply to promote Chinese technology. Its goal would give the CCP enhanced gatekeeping capabilities that could eventually be used for cyber-warfare.

## Normative Pre-Commitment

Normative pre-commitment occurs when an actor encourages others to publicly endorse principles that later [constrain](#) their freedom of action. Once these commitments are accepted, future behavior can be judged against them. For instance, [rhetorical entrapment](#) is where actors who previously made comments or commitments to principles like free trade are then attacked in a future incident where they may need to limit free trade. This could cause them to alter or abandon the desired course of to stave off reputational attacks. Furthermore, they may [self-censor](#) because they believe their new actions might contradict previous statements. If they do have to take an approach that contradicts these commitments, they will be immediately placed into a defensive posture. In irregular warfare, this strategy narrows an opponent's political freedom of action by increasing the reputational costs of changing course during a crisis.

The CCP has repeatedly employed this [strategy](#)

through its emphasis on setting apparently virtuous principles such as peaceful development, mutual respect, non-interference and win-win cooperation. These themes frequently appear in diplomatic statements, joint communiqués and regional forums. Once governments publicly [endorse](#) these principles, Beijing can use them to criticize actions that challenge Chinese interests. For example, training partnerships with or weapons sales to [Taiwan](#) are portrayed as inconsistent with previously stated commitments to stability and peaceful development; now matter how vague these original statements were. The objective is not necessarily to prevent these actions. It could also be to increase their [political cost](#) by framing them as violations of accepted norms. This allows the CCP to place competitors in a position where they must either justify their behavior or risk appearing inconsistent with their own stated principles.

## Concept Capture

[Concept capture](#) occurs when an actor changes the meaning of an existing political concept or introduces a new one so that future debate occurs using that actor's preferred definitions. Over time, language itself becomes a source of influence. The debate shifts away from [competing](#) ideas and toward assumptions that are increasingly taken for granted. In irregular warfare, concept capture can shape how political and security issues are understood before specific policies are even discussed.

The CCP has employed concept capture through its promotion of the concept of "[cyber sovereignty](#)." Rather than simply advocating greater government control of the internet, Beijing has sought to redefine how cyberspace itself is understood by framing it as an extension of national sovereignty. This would serve to gradually [relocate](#) regulatory power over the world wide web from international institutions towards domestic governments. Instead of the CCP having to justify censorship, surveillance, or internet controls to other countries in these international institutions, other countries must [justify](#) why China should not be allowed to exercise the same sovereign authority that they have already acknowledged belongs to states.

## Moral Inversion

[Moral inversion](#) shifts responsibility for tension or conflict onto an opponent. It reverses conventional judgments about right and wrong by portraying an actor's own coercive behavior as justified while framing an opponent's defensive actions as the real

source of instability. Actions taken in support of the status quo are portrayed as [provocative](#), while actions that alter the status quo are framed as defensive or stabilizing. In irregular warfare, this strategy helps preserve legitimacy while increasing the political costs faced by competitors. The objective is not to deny events, but to shape how those events are interpreted.

The CCP has frequently employed moral inversion in conflicts involving territorial disputes between China, the Philippines, Vietnam and other Asian nations over the [South China Sea](#). Chinese officials routinely describe perfectly legal actions like routine coast guard patrols, naval freedom of navigation operations and regional security cooperation as sources of instability. At the same time, Chinese island-building activities, maritime militia operations, and highly organized intrusive fishing fleets are presented as defensive measures intended to preserve peace and regional order. This [framing reverses](#) the burden of justification. Rather than explaining its own activities, Beijing places pressure on other states to justify actions taken in response. Over time, this can make deterrence appear [escalatory](#) while portraying coercive behavior as restraint. For irregular warfare practitioners, the strategic effect is clear. Competitors are forced to defend their responses instead of focusing attention on the actions that triggered them.

### ***Institutional Echo Amplification***

[Institutional echo amplification](#) occurs when respected third-party organizations repeat a preferred narrative, giving it credibility independent of its original source. Rather than persuading audiences directly, actors rely on trusted people and institutions to reinforce key messages. Repetition across multiple organizations creates the [impression](#) that an idea is widely accepted and politically legitimate. In irregular warfare, this strategy allows actors to increase the credibility of preferred narratives while obscuring their original source.

The CCP has employed this strategy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese officials routinely describe the [initiative](#) as a platform for economic cooperation, connectivity and shared development. Over time, similar language has appeared in statements issued by partner governments, international forums, development organizations and regional institutions. As these organizations repeat the narrative, the [BRI](#) increasingly appears as a broadly accepted development framework rather than a policy closely associated with Chinese strategic interests. The strategic effect is cumulative.

[Repetition](#) by multiple institutions creates legitimacy that no single Chinese government statement could achieve on its own. For irregular warfare practitioners, the lesson is clear. Narratives often gain influence when institutions repeat them rather than when governments promote them directly.

### ***Procedural Moralization***

[Procedural moralization](#) occurs when adherence to a process becomes the primary measure of legitimacy. Rather than debating the merits of an outcome, actors argue that dialogue, consultation, or negotiation are morally superior to alternative courses of action. Actions that bypass these [preferred procedures](#) are portrayed as irresponsible, provocative, or illegitimate. In irregular warfare, this strategy can delay responses, reduce political pressure, and constrain an opponent's freedom of action without requiring direct confrontation.

The CCP has frequently employed [procedural moralization](#) in discussions surrounding the South China Sea territorial disputes. Chinese officials emphasize dialogue, consultation, and negotiations as the proper means for resolving disputes. Actions such as international arbitration, external security involvement, or stronger deterrence measures are often portrayed as harmful to regional stability. Following the [2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration](#), which rejected many of China's maritime claims, Beijing focused on continued dialogue and regional consultation rather than the substance of the decision. This shifted attention from the ruling itself to the process of dispute resolution. The strategic effect was to reduce pressure for compliance while portraying alternative responses as destabilizing.

### ***Incremental Legitimization***

[Incremental legitimization](#) occurs when actors gradually transform a contested policy, claim, or behavior into an accepted and legitimate practice. Rather than relying on a single persuasive campaign, they pursue a series of small political, legal, diplomatic, and informational gains that gradually redefine what is considered normal. Each [incremental](#) success creates a foundation for the next, making additional change appear less controversial over time. In irregular warfare, this allows actors to reshape the status quo while minimizing the resistance that often accompanies rapid change.

The CCP has employed this strategy through the gradual normalization of [People's Liberation Army](#) (PLA) military operations around Taiwan. Air and

naval incursions that once generated significant international attention have become increasingly routine as their frequency and scale have expanded over time. Rather than seeking immediate acceptance, Beijing has gradually reshaped expectations regarding what constitutes [normal military activity](#) in the Taiwan Strait. The strategic effect is cumulative. As these operations become more familiar, they generate less political reaction and make future increases in military pressure appear less exceptional. This allows the CCP to incrementally reshape the regional status quo without a decisive military confrontation.

## ***Legitimacy Layering***

[Legitimacy layering](#) occurs when actors support a policy or action with multiple justifications at the same time. Rather than relying on a single argument, they combine legal, moral, historical, economic and security claims. This makes the position more [resilient](#) because challenging one source of legitimacy does not necessarily undermine the others. In irregular warfare, legitimacy layering can make policies more difficult to oppose and increase the political costs of resistance.

The CCP has employed this strategy in defending its policies of oppression towards its Uyghur population in [Xinjiang](#). Chinese officials rarely justify these extreme policies through a single argument. Instead, they combine claims related to counterterrorism, social stability, economic development, poverty reduction, national sovereignty, and ethnic unity. These arguments target different audiences and reinforce one another. If one [justification](#) is questioned, others remain available to support the broader policy. The strategic effect is to create multiple pathways through which the policy can be viewed as legitimate. This makes criticism more difficult because opponents must challenge several interconnected claims rather than a single narrative.

## ***Asymmetric Norm Exploitation***

[Asymmetric norm exploitation](#) occurs when actors benefit from norms that they do not fully reciprocate. Open societies often value transparency, academic exchange, free expression and access to institutions. These norms can create [opportunities](#) for influence when competitors do not provide the same access in return. In irregular warfare, this strategy can create advantages without violating formal rules or agreements.

The CCP has employed this [strategy](#) through academic and research partnerships with foreign universities. Researchers, students, and institutions from China have benefited from access to universities, laboratories, conferences and collaborative research programs throughout the West. At the same time, foreign researchers often face greater restrictions when conducting research in China, particularly on politically sensitive topics. This creates an [asymmetry](#) in access. One side benefits from openness while limiting comparable access to its own institutions. The strategic effect is not necessarily immediate influence. Rather, it allows actors to leverage the advantages of open systems while reducing their own exposure to similar forms of scrutiny and engagement.

## ***Conclusion***

Irregular warfare is often associated with insurgencies, proxy forces, and unconventional military operations. Yet many of today's most consequential competitions are fought through influence rather than force. War of Position provides a useful framework for understanding how adversaries gradually shape the political, social, and information environment long before a military confrontation occurs. The CCP's use of information warfare demonstrates how strategic advantage can be accumulated through multiple, mutually reinforcing strategies. Individually, these activities may appear routine or insignificant. Collectively, however, they can reshape public discourse, constrain policy choices, influence institutional behavior, and reduce an opponent's freedom of action. By the time serious conflict manifests, the strategic environment may already favor the adversary, making resistance more politically difficult, more costly, and potentially less effective.

For irregular warfare practitioners, the value of this framework lies in its ability to identify Wars of Position while they are still developing rather than after their effects have become entrenched. Recognizing these recurring information warfare strategies enables analysts to distinguish isolated influence activities from coordinated campaigns designed to reshape the strategic environment. This, in turn, improves the ability to anticipate an adversary's long-term objectives, identify emerging vulnerabilities, and develop countermeasures before strategic advantage has been lost. Success in irregular warfare depends not only on responding to influence operations, but on recognizing the broader campaign of which they are a part.

## Table 1. Information Warfare Strategies in Wars of Position

| Strategy                         | Operational Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Hypothetical CCP Use                                                                                                                                                       | Irregular Warfare Effect                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Institutional Influence          | Institutional Influence is the cultivation of influence within organizations that serve a gatekeeping function by determining which issues receive public attention, which voices are treated as authoritative, and which ideas become accepted as credible and legitimate. | Building relationships with academics, business leaders, and community organizations through United Front networks.                                                        | Shapes elite opinion and policy discussions before a crisis emerges.                                     |
| Normative Pre-Commitment         | Encouraging adversaries to publicly adopt norms that later constrain their actions.                                                                                                                                                                                         | Promoting 'peaceful development' and portraying balancing behavior as destabilizing.                                                                                       | Narrows policy options available to competitors.                                                         |
| Concept Capture                  | Redefining political concepts through repetition and institutional adoption.                                                                                                                                                                                                | Promoting terms such as 'One China' or 'Community of Shared Future'.                                                                                                       | Shapes how political issues are understood and debated.                                                  |
| Moral Inversion                  | Reframing defensive actions as aggressive while portraying coercive behavior as restraint.                                                                                                                                                                                  | Describing foreign military support for Taiwan as provocation.                                                                                                             | Increases political costs of resistance.                                                                 |
| Institutional Echo Amplification | Using institutions to repeat preferred narratives until they appear authoritative.                                                                                                                                                                                          | Encouraging adoption of preferred language through universities and international organizations.                                                                           | Creates legitimacy through repetition.                                                                   |
| Procedural Moralization          | Elevating process and dialogue above outcomes.                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Framing calls for action as irresponsible while emphasizing consultation and dialogue.                                                                                     | Delays responses and constrains action.                                                                  |
| Incremental Legitimization       | Gradually increasing acceptance of a policy, claim, or behavior through repeated political, legal, diplomatic, and informational reinforcement.                                                                                                                             | Repeatedly presenting Chinese activities in the South China Sea as routine, lawful, and consistent with regional stability while normalizing an expanded Chinese presence. | Reduces resistance to gradual change and makes previously contested actions appear legitimate over time. |
| Legitimacy Layering              | Combining legal, historical, moral, and procedural claims.                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Justifying Taiwan claims through history, law, sovereignty, and stability arguments simultaneously.                                                                        | Makes challenges more difficult and costly.                                                              |
| Asymmetric Norm Exploitation     | Exploiting openness in adversary systems while maintaining tighter control at home.                                                                                                                                                                                         | Leveraging democratic openness abroad while restricting similar activities inside China.                                                                                   | Creates unequal constraints between competitors.                                                         |