

Congress told U.S. ill-prepared for China's 'unrestricted warfare'

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The Chinese Communist Party operates a web of organizations engaged in irregular warfare — conflict below the level of kinetic warfare — targeting the U.S. which is not ready to counter the activities, an expert told the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Seth G. Jones, president of the defense and security arm of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, testified Tuesday that the federal government and local authorities are ill-equipped to confront growing “gray zone” warfare threats from China, as well as those from Russia and Iran.

“I don’t believe we do have a comprehensive strategy, either at the federal level, or just talking last week to members of some of our joint terrorism task forces and fusion centers, where there is little activity at the state and local level to understand and operationalize the threat from unrestricted warfare happening, particularly by the Chinese but also the Russians and Iranians inside of our borders,” Mr. Jones said.

Unrestricted warfare is a Chinese military term outlined in a book by two People’s Liberation Army colonels more than two decades ago. It offers a path for the weaker Chinese military to defeat stronger U.S. forces using various non-military means, including financial, trade, cyber, media, law, ecological warfare and even terrorism.

The U.S. military refers to this as “gray zone” warfare, a Chinese military specialty seen in the South China Sea, around Taiwan and against Japan in Northeast Asia.

Mr. Jones said China’s unrestricted military actions include large-scale influence operations, such as its role in triggering public opposition to building large U.S. data centers.

Other methods include covert operations to seize opponents of the CCP overseas, conducting large-scale espionage, including at American universities, and aggressive and offensive cyberattacks.

To counter unrestricted warfare, U.S. national security agencies need to broaden the focus of law enforcement and intelligence units across the country to address the threats, Mr. Jones said.

The Foreign Agents Registration Act law could be strengthened to better defeat Chinese influence actors, and the Section 702 electronic surveillance law could be more fully

reauthorized to counter the Chinese activities, Mr. Jones said. Removing Chinese communists from access to American financial markets also should be considered, he said.

In prepared testimony, Mr. Jones listed multiple irregular Chinese warfare organizations. They include the coast guard and maritime militia that coerce nations in disputed waters; use of People's Armed Police forces against dissent; and the use of all PLA forces to engage in low-level warfare.

The CCP United Front Work Department, which congressional investigators say is funded with some \$11 billion annually, also serves as Beijing's major foreign influence tool.

The Ministry of State Security intelligence service and Ministry of Public Security, a political policy agency, also are engaged in unrestricted warfare.

The activities include information and influence operations, including psychological operations and propaganda; electronic and cyber warfare; support for guerrillas and proxy forces; and covert and clandestine intelligence and special military operations, including sabotage and subversion, Mr. Jones stated.

Economic coercion is another tool as seen in Chinese restrictions on the export of rare earth minerals.

China is using "a wide range of tools below the threshold of armed conflict to expand the influence of the CCP and weaken the United States," Mr. Jones said.

"Chinese intelligence operations are not just pervasive, but they are used to plan and execute all of China's other irregular warfare activities," he said.

Influence operations in the U.S. by China have included pressure against the National Basketball Association and Hollywood studios, he said.

"These tools are not mutually exclusive but are overlapping, reinforcing and occasionally even duplicative and competitive," Mr. Jones said.

"China has several strategic goals in conducting irregular and gray zone activities. The most important is preservation of the CCP's rule. Another is expanding Chinese influence and weakening the United States as part of balance-of-power competition," he said.

Rep. Rick Crawford, chairman of the intelligence panel, said asymmetric and irregular warfare, foreign maligned influence, economic warfare, espionage, and gray zone aggression are increasingly common new threat streams.

“We’ve seen China and Russia exploit domestic security gaps and take advantage of our counterintelligence vulnerabilities,” the Arkansas Republican said in opening remarks.

To counter the threats, U.S. intelligence agencies need to be better integrated, adaptive, and capable of detecting threats across foreign and domestic, public and private, physical and digital, and military and economic domains, he said.