

China's Mosaic Warfare

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A fisherman drives a boat in a harbour on Pingtan island, opposite Taiwan, in Chinas southeast Fujian Province on April 9, 2023. Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images



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Commentary

The potential for conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan has been a central focus of contemporary military strategy. Both nations have developed distinct approaches to modern warfare that emphasize innovation, adaptability, and the exploitation of

technology to gain operational advantages. The United States' Mosaic Warfare, which prioritizes distributed, composable systems and AI-driven decision-making, contrasts sharply with China's System Destruction Warfare, which seeks to paralyze adversary systems through multi-domain disruption (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020; Engstrom, 2018). If such a conflict were to occur, these strategies would inevitably collide, creating a complex and unpredictable battlefield shaped by divergent military philosophies.

Mosaic Warfare is fundamentally about flexibility. It envisions a disaggregated force structure composed of smaller, highly specialized units that can operate independently or as part of a larger system (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020). These units are connected by advanced communication and AI systems, enabling rapid reconfiguration based on battlefield needs. By decentralizing decision-making, Mosaic Warfare aims to accelerate operational tempo, outmaneuver adversaries, and overwhelm traditional command structures. This strategy is designed to exploit technological superiority and ensure the resilience of U.S. forces in the face of concentrated enemy attacks.

China's System Destruction Warfare, as outlined by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is predicated on the belief that modern warfare is a confrontation between operational systems rather than individual forces. The PLA aims to achieve victory not by annihilating enemy forces but by paralyzing their ability to function as a cohesive system (Engstrom, 2018). This involves targeting an adversary's critical information, command and control (C2), and operational systems through a combination of kinetic strikes, cyber-attacks, electronic warfare, and other disruptive methods. System Destruction Warfare is designed to dismantle the interconnected frameworks that enable adversaries to coordinate and execute operations, leaving them unable to respond effectively (Engstrom, 2018).

In a potential conflict over Taiwan, these strategies would intersect on multiple levels. The decentralized nature of Mosaic Warfare could pose a direct challenge to the PLA's focus on targeting centralized systems. By design, Mosaic Warfare minimizes single points of failure, spreading operational capabilities across numerous smaller units (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020). This would make it more difficult for the

PLA to achieve the system-wide paralysis central to its approach. However, the reliance of Mosaic Warfare on advanced communication and information systems creates vulnerabilities that align with the PLA's strengths in cyber and electronic warfare. The PLA's ability to disrupt or degrade these systems could significantly hamper the effectiveness of Mosaic Warfare, potentially forcing U.S. forces to operate in a degraded information environment (Engstrom, 2018).

The integration of AI and machine learning into Mosaic Warfare introduces another critical dynamic. AI systems enable rapid decision-making and force adaptability, but they also represent high-value targets for the PLA (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020). Cyber-attacks designed to manipulate, disable, or deceive these AI systems could neutralize the advantages of Mosaic Warfare. For example, by attacking data networks or injecting false information, the PLA could compromise the situational awareness and operational coherence of U.S. forces. This aligns with the PLA's emphasis on achieving "information dominance," a cornerstone of its System Destruction Warfare doctrine (Engstrom, 2018).

Similarly, the PLA's reliance on tightly integrated operational systems presents opportunities for Mosaic Warfare. The modular and adaptable nature of Mosaic forces could allow the United States to exploit gaps in the PLA's defenses. By deploying small, highly specialized units capable of targeting critical components of the PLA's operational framework, the U.S. could disrupt the PLA's ability to maintain system integrity (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020). This could involve precision strikes on key nodes in the PLA's communication networks, command centers, or logistical hubs, effectively countering the PLA's reliance on centralized coordination.

A key battleground for these strategies would likely be the electromagnetic spectrum. Both Mosaic Warfare and System Destruction Warfare place significant emphasis on controlling this domain. For the U.S., dominance in the electromagnetic spectrum is essential to maintaining the connectivity and functionality of Mosaic forces (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020). For China, disrupting the U.S.'s electromagnetic capabilities is a priority, as it aligns with its broader strategy of system paralysis (Engstrom, 2018). In such a conflict,

electronic warfare operations, such as jamming, spoofing, and anti-radiation attacks, would play a critical role in determining which side gains the upper hand.

Another critical aspect of the confrontation between these strategies would be hybrid warfare. Both Mosaic Warfare and System Destruction Warfare extend beyond traditional battlefields into cyberspace and information domains. The PLA's emphasis on integrating cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns with conventional military operations would challenge Mosaic Warfare's reliance on accurate, real-time information (Engstrom, 2018). Conversely, the distributed nature of Mosaic Warfare could allow U.S. forces to maintain operational effectiveness even in contested or degraded information environments, presenting a significant obstacle to the PLA's hybrid warfare tactics (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020).

The geographic and operational context of a Taiwan conflict would further shape the interaction between these strategies. Taiwan's proximity to China and the PLA's robust anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities give China an inherent advantage in terms of logistics and force projection. Mosaic Warfare, however, could provide the United States with the flexibility needed to penetrate these defenses. By deploying modular forces that can adapt to evolving battlefield conditions, the U.S. could mitigate the PLA's geographic advantages and sustain operations within contested areas (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020).

Ultimately, a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan would test the limits of both Mosaic Warfare and System Destruction Warfare. While Mosaic Warfare's emphasis on adaptability and decentralization provides a counterbalance to the centralized vulnerabilities exploited by System Destruction Warfare, its reliance on advanced technology and information systems presents exploitable weaknesses (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020; Engstrom, 2018). Conversely, while System Destruction Warfare is highly effective against traditional, centralized systems, its success against a distributed and adaptive approach like Mosaic Warfare is far from assured (Engstrom, 2018).

The outcome of such a confrontation would likely hinge on each side's ability to exploit the other's vulnerabilities while mitigating their own. For the U.S., this would involve ensuring the resilience and redundancy of Mosaic forces, as well as countering the PLA's cyber and electronic warfare capabilities (Clark, Patt, & Schram, 2020). For China, it would require overcoming the challenges posed by a distributed and adaptive adversary, while maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of its own operational systems (Engstrom, 2018). In this high-stakes competition, the interplay between Mosaic Warfare and System Destruction Warfare would not only shape the course of the conflict but also provide critical insights into the future of military strategy in the 21st century.

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