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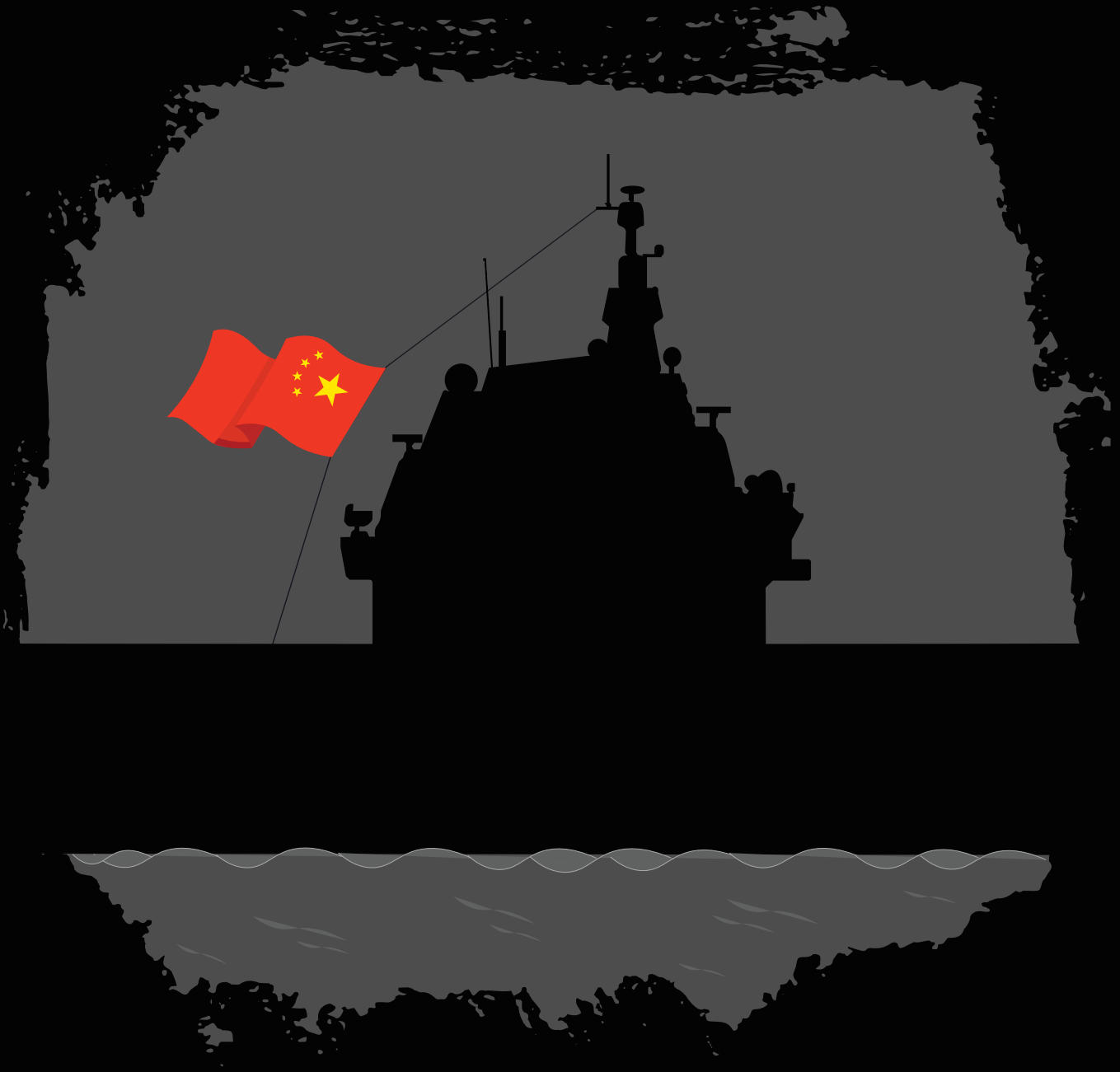
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PLA Views on New U.S. Military Concepts to Defend Taiwan



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CMSI NOTE #24 /// 26 AUGUST 2026

Crossing a Hellscape: PLA Views on New U.S. Military Concepts to Defend Taiwan

Ian Easton¹

Key Takeaways:

- In August 2023, the United States Pacific Command (PACOM) first used the term “Hellscape” to describe a future Taiwan Strait battlefield. That same month the Pentagon unveiled the Replicator Initiative, which reportedly aims to rapidly field thousands of expendable uncrewed systems.
- Official People’s Liberation Army (PLA) sources have reacted to the U.S. military’s public remarks about Hellscape in a strident fashion. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) defense ministry spokesman said Americans advocating for the Hellscape concept “should prepare to burn in hell” and called such individuals “extremely psychotic.”
- China’s flagship military media outlet claimed the United States was a “paper tiger” that was unable and unwilling to defend Taiwan, and suggested Hellscape would fail, in part, because all Taiwanese defense forces would be dead before U.S. assistance could reach the island.
- Yet contrary to the PLA’s dismissive political rhetoric and claims that the U.S. is a “paper tiger,” many military experts in China take Hellscape and Replicator seriously and respect the core premise of employing large numbers of cheap drones, seeing it as one of the keys to the future of war.
- In the view of some PRC observers, Hellscape is not only a warfighting plan, but also a strategic ploy. They believe the U.S. wants to erode China’s determination to conduct military operations against Taiwan and aims to develop a cost imposition strategy, forcing the PRC into a reactive position.
- Defense experts in China assert that Beijing should consider several options for responding to Replicator and Hellscape. These include developing shipborne laser weapons, improving intelligence and electronic warfare capabilities, and targeting American logistics lines.
- If the PRC’s vociferous words tell us anything, it is that the Communist Party authorities find the ideas behind Hellscape and Replicator disquieting, but they are probably not convinced these efforts have succeeded.

¹ Ian Easton is an associate professor at CMSI. This article benefitted from the generous help of his colleagues Chris Sharman, Ryan Martinson, Andrew Erickson, Dan Caldwell, and an anonymous external reviewer. Any remaining errors or omissions are the author’s sole responsibility. The views expressed or implied in this CMSI Note are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, the Department of War, or any other U.S. Government entity.

Background:

In August 2023, Admiral John Aquilino, then Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), used the term “Hellscape” to describe a future Taiwan Strait battlefield. “Operational concepts that we are working through are going to help amplify our advantages in this theater. And at some point, there’s a term, hellscape, that we use,” he said.² That same month the Pentagon unveiled the Replicator Initiative, which reportedly aims to rapidly field thousands of expendable uncrewed systems that could facilitate the Hellscape concept.³

On 10 June 2024, Admiral Samuel Paparo, the current PACOM Commander, spoke to the press about the Hellscape concept. He described a vision of massive swarms of unmanned weapons descending on a PLA invasion force. “I want to turn the Taiwan Strait into an unmanned hellscape using a number of classified capabilities so I can make their lives utterly miserable for a month, which buys me the time for the rest of everything.”⁴

How have Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sources reacted to the Hellscape concept and other American efforts to enhance Taiwan’s defense, such as the Replicator Initiative?⁵ To what extent have they expressed concern? Does the PLA have an answer to Hellscape and Replicator? If so, what is it?

The PLA’s Strident Official Reaction:

In June 2024, the PRC defense ministry spokesman, Senior Colonel Wu Qian, said that U.S. military leaders should prepare to go to hell.⁶ “Those who call for turning another’s homeland into hell should first prepare themselves to burn in hell.”⁷ The PLA spokesman asserted that “some Americans” wanted to use Taiwan to contain China and turn the Taiwan Strait into an unmanned hellscape, and they were “extremely psychotic.” He claimed America would ultimately abandon Taiwan, which was being used as a tool.⁸

² See “U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander on Emerging Defense Technologies,” *C-SPAN*, 28 August 2023, 21:30, <https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/us-indo-pacific-commander-on-emerging-defense-technologies/631517>.

³ Kelley M. Saylor, “DOD Replicator Initiative: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, 21 January 2026, at <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12611>.

⁴ Carter Johnston, “Breaking Down the U.S. Navy’s ‘Hellscape’ in Detail,” *Naval News*, 16 June 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/06/breaking-down-the-u-s-navys-hellscape-in-detail/>; and Josh Rogin, “The U.S. military plans a ‘Hellscape’ to Deter China from attacking Taiwan,” *Washington Post*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/06/10/taiwan-china-hellscape-military-plan/>. For a more recent discussion on Hellscape, see Stacie Pettyjohn and Molly Campbell, “Hellscape for Taiwan: Rethinking Asymmetric Defense,” *Center for a New American Security*, 26 February 2026, at <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/hellscape-for-taiwan>.

⁵ The PRC sources reviewed for this research translated Hellscape as 地狱景观. They refer to Hellscape variably as the “Hellscape Operational Concept” (地狱景观作战概), the “Hellscape Strategy” (地狱景观战略), and the “Hellscape Plan” (地狱景观计划). PRC sources translate “Replicator” as either 复制器, or 复制者. They refer to it as either the “Replicator Plan” (复制器计划), or the “Replicator Project” (复制器项目).

⁶ 国防部回应美方威胁恫吓：从来不吃这一套 [“Defense Ministry Responds to American Threats and Intimidation: We Will Never Eat That”], *PRC Ministry of National Defense*, 27 June 2024, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/xwfy/lxjzhzt/2024njzh_247047/2024n6y/16319256.html.

⁷ The full quote in Chinese is: “要把别人的家园变成地狱的人,首先要做好自己先下地狱的准备.” Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



Figure 1: PLA spokesman comments on the “Hellscape” concept.⁹

Wu concluded his remarks with the following lines: “Taiwan belongs to China. China brooks no separatism. When it comes to protecting our national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and counterattacking foreign forces who interfere, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army has always dared to fight a hard war. And it can fight and win,” he said. “As for some people’s threats and intimidation, we will never eat that.”¹⁰

PLA Media Calls America “Paper Tiger”:

In June 2024, the *China Military Network* (中国军网), an officially sanctioned, Central Military Commission (CMC) approved media outlet, released an editorial that said Hellscape was “a psychotic plan,” but the United States was a “paper tiger.” The article panned the American plan to turn the Western Pacific into an asymmetric battlefield, claiming that while Hellscape was “not a bad idea” and made for good power point slides, American drone swarms simply did not exist. The op-ed mocked, “But where are those many thousands of unmanned aerial vehicles going to come from?”¹¹

The *China Military Network* article said the United States had failed to provide Ukraine with adequate numbers of effective unmanned systems and asserted the American defense industry would be unable to support the enormous needs inherent in the Hellscape concept. It further opined that the Pentagon’s

⁹ 海涵 [Hai Han], 美鼓噪将台海变“地狱” 国防部：不吃这套 [“America Loudly Threatens to Turn Taiwan Strait into ‘Hell’, Defense Ministry Says: We Won’t Eat That”], 中评社 [China Review News], 28 June 2024, <https://bj.crntt.com/doc/1069/4/7/5/106947556.html?coluid=196&kindid=8779&docid=106947556&mdate=0628005014>.

¹⁰ The quote in Chinese is: “台湾属于中国，中国不容分裂。在捍卫国家主权和领土完整、反击外部势力干涉方面，中国人民解放军一向是敢打硬仗、能打胜仗。对于一些人的威胁与恫吓，我们从来就不吃这一套。” Ibid.

¹¹ 康宏伟 [Kang Hongwei], “地狱景观”计划丧心病狂，但“纸老虎”不过是“纸老虎” [“‘Hellscape’ Plan is Psychotic, But a ‘Paper Tiger’ Is Just a ‘Paper Tiger’”], 中国军网 [China Military Network], 18 June 2024, http://www.81.cn/pl_208541/16322572.html.

Replicator Initiative—and Taiwan’s own efforts to acquire large numbers of drones—would only benefit American arms dealers and political operatives. The editorial claimed Washington’s focus on unmanned systems signaled that the U.S. was unwilling to put its own troops at risk in defense of Taiwan. According to the article, it would be the Taiwanese people who would suffer a hellscape, because the American people did not care about Taiwan’s security or prosperity. The article concluded by suggesting all Taiwanese defense forces would be dead before the first month of combat was over and U.S. assistance could finally arrive.¹²

PLA Specialist Suspects Cognitive Warfare:

In July 2024, Ren Guozheng (任国政), a researcher at the PLA Academy of Military Science who specializes in Taiwan affairs, wrote that Hellscape was an example of American cognitive warfare and the United States was trying to terrify China with its new plans, programs, and operations.¹³ The increasing American military support to Taiwan’s defense would turn the island into a “powder keg” (火药桶), according to Ren. “The Taiwan authorities appear to be blindly pushed along by the American side’s strategic interests. Not only will this empty out the wallets of Taiwan’s people, it will make them mindless tools of America. In the end, the island of Taiwan will find itself trapped in a perilous military crisis.”¹⁴

State Media Asserts U.S. Military Will Lose Against PLA:

The CCP propaganda services ran a Taiwan affairs program on CCTV-4 (the Chinese International Channel of China Central Television) focused on the Hellscape concept and Replicator Initiative. The host of the program, Li Hong (李红), characterized the United States as militarily inferior and called Admiral Paparo’s remarks “full of provocative intent” (充满了挑衅的意味). She suggested America was a declining power that could not compete with the PLA. “Just looking at military power in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. is admitting it has no way of taking on the PLA. Because the PLA’s overall power is extremely comprehensive and multi-dimensional.”¹⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 任国政 [Ren Guozheng], 美台军事勾连制造台海恐怖 [“U.S.-Taiwan Military Ties Produce Taiwan Strait Terror”], 台湾工作通讯 [Taiwan Work Broadcast], July 2024, p. 24.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The full quote in Chinese is: “仅从在印太的军事力量来看,美国是承认它没有办法应对解放军,因为解放军的整体力量是非常综合立体的。” See 台海变地狱 美军恶毒新战法 [“Turning Taiwan Strait into Hell, U.S. Military’s Malicious New Way of War”], CCTV-4, 12 June 2024, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bznWq88_Eyo.



Figure 2: PRC media commentators dismiss American military's "Hellscape" concept.¹⁶

One of the invited commentators on the program was Cui Yiliang (崔轶亮), a military magazine editor and frequent commentator on CCTV and other CCP-controlled media outlets. He said that the American arsenal was far too small and lacked the range and logistical capacity to achieve the threatened outcomes. "We don't even need to go and worry about how to take on this thing. It is very likely that they just won't be able to get this thing, their Hellscape, to even appear."¹⁷

Cui's remarks were echoed by Hu Yong (胡勇) an assistant professor at the Shanghai University of International Business and Economics (上海对外经贸大学), who specializes in Taiwan issues and is frequently cited by CCP-controlled media outlets. Professor Hu said the U.S. military "actually has no hope of victory" (其实没有胜算的) when it comes to a conventional fight with the PLA over Taiwan and is searching for alternative approaches, while "covering up the fact that American hegemony is declining" (想掩饰美国霸权正在走向衰退的这样一个事实). Hu asserted that in a potential future conflict over Taiwan, the U.S. will face a China that has advanced weapons technology and a powerful industrial production capacity. Moreover, the PLA will be operating on its home field. The U.S. military lacks the military forces it needs to match China, he said.¹⁸

A third commentator on the CCTV-4 program was Lai Yue-chien (赖岳谦), a media personality in Taiwan who works for the pro-CCP media outlet CTi News (中天新闻). A former colonel in Taiwan's Army specializing in political warfare, Lai previously served as a spokesman for the People's First Party and was the editor-in-chief of the China Times. He claimed that there is no way the U.S. military could defeat the PLA's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble around Taiwan and execute its plan to turn the Taiwan Strait into a hellscape.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The quote in Chinese is: "我们根本不就用去考虑怎么应对的事 他这番‘地狱景象’很可能根本不可能出现." Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

“You think our eyes cannot see where you position and stockpile [your drones]? You think our intelligence systems have no way of detecting that?”¹⁹ He further stated that the U.S. was preparing to conduct its related operations from islands in the Ryukyus that had civilian populations, and he asserted that this would result in PRC attacks on those locations. “As soon as the conflict erupts, as soon as America and China are at war, then mainland China will certainly carry out strikes on their [U.S. military] points of origin.”²⁰

Famous PLA Propagandist Calls Hellscape “Fake”:

In August 2024, the CCP’s propaganda services ran another military affairs program focused on Hellscape and Replicator.²¹ Commentators on the CCTV-7 program said that U.S. military efforts to defend Taiwan with large numbers of unmanned systems could be easily countered. They suggested that electronic jamming and cyber attacks could be employed to disrupt communications links, causing aerial drones to crash or even turn against their own side. They further suggested that PLA air defense units could shoot down U.S. drone swarms without difficulty.



Figure 3: PRC media commentators dismiss American military’s “Hellscape” concept.²²

One of the commentators, Du Wenlong (杜文龙), a retired PLA senior colonel and famous army propagandist, asserted that the U.S. was trying to comfort Taiwan with an unrealizable hope. “The so-called ‘Hellscape’ is probably meant to be soothing medicine for Taiwan. But the plan is fake, and

¹⁹ The quote in Chinese is: “你堆放在哪里存放在哪里，我们眼睛看不见吗？我们情报系统没办法侦测到吗？” Ibid.

²⁰ The quote in Chinese is: “如果一旦爆发了冲突，中美一旦开战，那中国大陆一定会进行源头打击。” Ibid.

²¹ 用海量无人装备对抗解放军？美军曝“地狱景观”计划：欲把台海变成“无人地狱”！[“Use an Enormous Number of Unmanned Systems to Counter the PLA? U.S. Military Reveals ‘Hellscape’ Plan: Wants to Turn Taiwan Strait into ‘Unmanned Hell’”], CCTV-7, 24 August 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7SHdlxPmfg>. CCTV-7 is the PRC’s main military news channel.

²² Ibid.

there's no way it could be realized.”²³ Du said that the PLA's unmanned weapons capabilities were far ahead of those deployed by the U.S. military, and China manufactured 75 percent of the world's drone components. “So, Americans, don't overestimate yourselves,” he concluded.²⁴ The other commentator Wei Dongxu (魏东旭) said that he believed the U.S. military was “hoodwinking” (忽悠) Congress to increase defense spending.²⁵



Figure 4: PLA Senior Colonel Du Wenlong (Ret.) derides America's "Hellcape" concept.²⁶

Hellscape at Less Than 40 Percent Strength, Magazine Alleges:

In September 2025, a PRC government-run defense publication, *Modern Ships*, critically evaluated both Hellscape and Replicator, asserting that Chinese observers had not seen any real changes in the U.S. military.²⁷ While Washington had claimed it would rapidly acquire thousands of unmanned combat systems for multi-domain operations, it had only taken the delivery of several hundred, according to the author.²⁸ Another *Modern Ships* article alleged without citing evidence that actual deployment numbers in support of Hellscape had not reached even 40 percent of planned levels and were behind schedule.²⁹ “There's no doubt the White House and Pentagon see unmanned systems and its underwater advantage and “lifeline” (救命稻草) for maintaining its military power,” the article opined. “But when it comes to

²³ The quote in Chinese is: “所谓的地狱景观大概是对台湾的安慰剂.这个虚假计划,并不可能形成现实.” Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 崔轶亮 [Cui Yiliang], “地狱景观”和“复制者”该交作业了 [“Time for ‘Hellcape’ and ‘Replicator’ to Hand in Their Homework”], 现代舰船 [Modern Ships], September 2025, p. 15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 胡波 [Hu Bo], 无人, 水下: 美军的救命稻草? [“Unmanned, Underwater: The U.S. Military's Lifeline?”], 现代舰船 [Modern Ships], November 2025, p. 21.

unmanned systems, the U.S. military advantage is not obvious. Add to that the drag of America's manufacturing sector, and the result is that many plans are still at the PPT [Power Point] stage.”³⁰

Beijing Claims Replicator Disrupted by Sanctions:

PRC sources express confidence that they can use sanctions to influence and disrupt the U.S. drone industry. In November 2024, a government-run defense publication, *Weapons Magazine*, reported that Beijing had sanctioned American drone-maker Skydio, cutting the company off from its suppliers in China and delaying the U.S. military's Hellscape plan.³¹ In September 2025, the CCP's official government mouthpiece, Xinhua News, posted an article that depicted Replicator as suffering a string of setbacks.³² The article said that the sanctions on Skydio prevented the company from delivering weapons to the Pentagon that could be used in the Taiwan Strait and portrayed Replicator as a debacle, citing significant and pervasive cost overruns, test mishaps, technology gaps, and production delays.³³ “The U.S. military thought low-cost, expendable unmanned aerial vehicles could overcome China's numerical advantages in traditional equipment and personnel,” the article stated. “But China's is very close behind the U.S. in the domain of unmanned equipment [technology], and its mass production capacity is far stronger. This move by the U.S. military is an ‘enormous gamble.’”³⁴

On 26 December 2025, the PRC sanctioned 10 American executives, including the founder of Anduril Industries, Palmer Luckey, who has been a strong proponent of arming Taiwan with unmanned weapons systems, labeling him a “dangerous actor.”³⁵ The sanctions were announced after the U.S. State Department approved a \$1.1 billion sale to Taiwan of Anduril's ALTIUS-700M loitering munitions and ALTIUS-600 intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and strike drones.³⁶ Taiwan has reportedly acquired 685 Switchblade 300 loitering munitions drones from AeroVironment and 291 ALTIUS 600M-V drones from Anduril to enhance coastal defense.”³⁷

PLA Worried America May Get Drone Warfare Advantage:

Contrary to the PLA's dismissive political rhetoric and claims that the U.S. is a “paper tiger,” many military experts in China take Hellscape and Replicator seriously and respect the core premise of

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 中国出手反制，美国“无人地狱计划”被延迟，转头就出卖当局 [“China Counterattacks, U.S. ‘Unmanned Hellscape Plan’ Delayed, Taiwan Gets Sold Out”], *Sohu News*, 4 November 2024, https://news.sohu.com/a/823625089_121752862.

³² 产能明显不足，性能难以达标，美军无人装备计划接连遇挫 [“Insufficient Production Capacities, Unmet Performance Standards, the U.S. Military's Unmanned Equipment Plan Suffers Repeated Setbacks”], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], 29 September 2025, <https://www.news.cn/milpro/20250929/f73963f5d48e4a978c40172b969afb4b/c.html>. Note that this article was first published by *Global Times* and then further disseminated by Xinhua, suggesting it represents the official CCP position.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “China hits US defence firms with sanctions over arms sales to Taiwan,” *Australian Broadcasting Service*, 26 December 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-12-27/china-sanctions-us-defence-firms-over-arms-sales-taiwan/106181220>.

³⁶ “Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States – ALTIUS-700M and ALTIUS-600 Systems,” *Defense Security and Cooperation Agency*, 17 December 2025, <https://www.dsca.mil/Press-Media/Major-Arms-Sales/Article-Display/Article/4363162/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-in-the-united-states-altius>; and Stephanie Samsel, “Defense tech company head calls for turning Taiwan into a ‘prickly porcupine that nobody wants to step on’,” *Fox Business*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/media/defense-tech-head-calls-turning-taiwan-prickly-porcupine-nobody-wants-step-on-eat>. See also “US attack drones delivered to military, defense minister says,” *Taipei Times*, 6 August 2025, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/08/06/2003841565>.

³⁷ Lo Tien-pin and William Hetherington, “MND to buy up to 1,200 more US drones: source,” *Taipei Times*, 8 September 2025, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/09/08/2003843422>.

employing large numbers of cheap drones, seeing it as one of the keys to the future of high-end warfare.³⁸ In August 2025, the PLA Navy’s flagship magazine, *Navy Today*, published an article linking Hellscape to numerous U.S. Navy breakthroughs across a wide range of unmanned surface vessels. “Its current state of equipment development is comprehensive, focused on actual warfighting, and cutting edge.”³⁹ The authors concluded that the U.S. Navy’s unmanned vessel developments have “deeply changed the U.S. Navy’s own strategic position and operational model... This is worth our continued attention and deep research.”⁴⁰

In December 2024, two PLA strategists at the Academy of Military Sciences wrote an article that said Replicator was aimed at the development of an unmanned system encompassing the land, air, sea, underwater, and space domains. “As soon as the construction of this [system] is completed, it will produce a defensive advantage in a selected region. It could even change the overall battlefield situation.”⁴¹

That same month the *PLA Daily* published an article arguing that the Replicator Initiative had transformed the U.S. military’s development of unmanned weapons, taking it “from fits and starts to racing ahead.” The authors said that unmanned surface vessels were being developed at low unit cost while delivering high value capabilities optimized for mass production. “As such, unmanned surface vessels could emerge on battlefields at sea in large numbers and play an even larger role.”⁴² In June 2025, the *PLA Daily* released an article that mentioned Replicator and said unmanned warfare was becoming “a war shaper, a critical factor influencing victory and defeat, which produces victory.”⁴³

Hellscape Has “Many Bad Intentions,” AVIC Report Says:

PRC publications portray U.S. efforts to enhance Taiwan’s defense as hostile and dangerous.⁴⁴ According to a detailed report in *Unmanned Vehicles* (无人机), a magazine published by the Aviation Industries Corporation of China (AVIC), a state-owned defense conglomerate, America’s political and

³⁸ 赵辉 [Zhao Hui] and 郑昌兴 [Zheng Changxing], 浅析智能化战争特点规律 [“Brief Analysis of Characteristics and Patterns of AI-Empowered Warfare”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 30 September 2025, p. 7. See also 钟晓东 [Zhong Xiaodong] and 张晓雪 [Zhang Xiaoxue], “低成本化”不等于“去高端化” [“‘Low Cost’ Does Not Equal ‘Retreat from High-End’”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 30 December 2025, p. 7. Notably, this is the only *PLA Daily* article we could find that mentions Hellscape, and no currently available *PLA Daily* article focuses on it. The author would like to acknowledge and thank Ryan Martinson for this insight.

³⁹ 李光 [Li Guang] and 梁帅 [Liang Shuai], 美军无人艇发展的有些事 [“That Thing About the U.S. Military’s Unmanned Vessel Development”], 当代海军 [*Navy Today*], August 2025, p. 71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴¹ The full quote in Chinese is “[体系]一旦构建完成将在特定区域形成对抗优势，甚至改变战场局势。” See 王凯 [Wang Kai] and 赵由页 [Zhao Youye], 无人作战制胜路径的发展演进 [“The Development and Evolution of Unmanned Operation Pathways to Victory”], 中国军事科学 [*China Military Science*], Vol. 6, No. 198 (20 December 2024), p. 108. The authors are “professional technical” (专业技术) officers affiliated with the PLA Academy of Military Sciences’ War Studies Institute (军事科学院战争研究院). Wang Kai is an Army Lt. Colonel., and Zhao is an Army Colonel.

⁴² 包宇鹤 [Bao Yuhe] and 李学峰 [Li Xuefeng], 无人水面艇加速驶向战场 [“Unmanned Surface Vessels Accelerate toward the Battlefield”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 13 December 2024, p. 9.

⁴³ 黎松 [Li Song], 唐艺武 [Tang Yiwu], and 刘飞 [Liu Fei], 透视无人作战力量发展新变化 [“Perspectives on New Developments in Unmanned Combat Forces”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 10 June 2025, p. 7.

⁴⁴ 许芳铭 [Xu Fangming], 美军推进无人舰队建设冲击地区安全 [“U.S. Military Buildup of Unmanned Surface Vessel Fleets Assaults Regional Security”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 20 November 2025, p. 11; and 许芳铭 [Xu Fangming], 美加速布局亚太地区无人作战力量 [“America Accelerates Asia-Pacific Deployment of Unmanned Forces”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 28 August 2025, p. 11. The author is affiliated with the PLA Academy of Military Sciences.

strategic aim is to use Taiwan to undermine the growth of PRC power.⁴⁵ The report asserted that the U.S. was being driven by the continued growth of PRC military strength, especially China's advantages in ships, missiles, and manpower. Facing challenges in its defense industry and inspired by the war in Ukraine, the U.S. was relentlessly adjusting its military strategy and updating operational concepts.⁴⁶ Replicator and Hellscape are asymmetric warfare plans, and they should be seen in this context, according to the article. The authors said that in the event of a war around Taiwan, the U.S. intended to use large numbers of low cost, expendable, unmanned platforms and weapons to "undertake large-scale attacks, disrupting our nation's military operations by slowing and blunting them."⁴⁷

The report claimed that Replicator was focused on building unmanned aerial vehicles and unmanned surface vessels and, on this basis, the Pentagon was enacting a series of measure to keep up with the pace of the China's "AI-driven modernization" (智能化).⁴⁸ It said the U.S. wanted to field large numbers of small, affordable, AI-enabled unmanned combat platforms to better compete with China and undercut its advantages in traditional military platforms and manpower numbers. According to the report, Hellscape is the real-world operational manifestation of Replicator's research, development, and acquisition efforts. Hellscape aims to field "a complex defense network at sea" (一个复杂的海上防御网络) comprised of large numbers of unmanned systems that will form "a dense defensive line" (一道密集的防线), serving as "a barrier that can cause as much damage as possible to any invading enemy military, buying sufficient time for the U.S. and its allies in the western Pacific to build up their frontline units and needed logistics support."⁴⁹

The American revelation of Hellscape reportedly signals that it plans to "interfere in China's internal politics" (干涉中国内政) and "stop mainland China from undertaking unification operations against Taiwan" (阻止中国大陆对台采取统一行动), thereby protecting America's hegemonic position in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁰ "At its core, America's 'Hellscape' plan is a radical and dangerous military and strategic move. It has many bad intentions."⁵¹ These intentions were said to include, "using Taiwan as a military tool to control China" (以台制华的军事工具), moving strategically toward asymmetric operations, developing unmanned technologies, promoting new U.S. systems to gain advantages over China, and accelerating its military and industrial production interests.⁵²

The *Unmanned Vehicles* report claimed, "The central idea of the plan is to use unmanned systems on the battlefield as a type of asymmetric tactic to slow down the speed of the opponent's attack, fighting for sufficient time for the U.S. and its allies (mainly Taiwan) to respond."⁵³ Hellscape is based on the "extremely large potential" (非常大的潜力) of unmanned systems and information technologies. "Unmanned systems are relatively low cost. They can be fielded in large numbers. They have the

⁴⁵ 焉家志 [Yan Jiazhi] and 孔红华 [Kong Honghua], 美国“复制器”和“地狱景观”不对称作战计划分析和应对 [“America's 'Replicator' and 'Hellscape' Asymmetric Warfare Plan: Analysis and Response"], 无人机 [*Unmanned Vehicles*], No. 123 (October 2024), p. 19. The authors are affiliated with an unmanned vehicle branch of AVIC, 中航无人机股份有限公司 [AVIC Unmanned Vehicles Inc.], and the publication is produced by the media arm of AVIC.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ The quote in Chinese is: “以阻碍任何企图入侵的敌军，并造成尽可能大的破坏，为美国及其盟友争取足够的时间在西太平洋地区建立必要的后勤支持和前沿部队。” Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵¹ The quote in Chinese is: “本质是一个极端且危险的军事战略手段，具有多方面的不良意图。” Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 20.

advantage of reducing human casualties. The U.S. military sees their potential application for future wars and hopes to change the way wars are fought by employing unmanned systems at scale.”⁵⁴ The U.S. has the “leading global position” (全球领先地位) in AI technology and the technological infrastructure to incorporate AI into unmanned weapons. This “provides a technological guarantee” (提供了技术保障) for Hellscape, the report said.⁵⁵

Naval Magazine Warns of Potential U.S. “Game Changer” in Taiwan Fight:

A report in *Naval & Merchant Ships*, a defense magazine published by the PRC’s China State Shipbuilding Corporation, described Hellscape and characterized the future potential of unmanned surface vessels as unlimited.⁵⁶ According to the report, American unmanned surface vessels could play important roles in various Taiwan Strait scenarios. In peacetime, they could serve as forward deployed early-warning sensors, monitoring the positions and activities of enemy fleets. To counter Taiwan blockade operations, they could carry out anti-submarine warfare and mine countermeasure missions. And, in the event of a large-scale surface action, large numbers of American unmanned vessels could carry out suicide attacks on China’s vulnerable amphibious transport ships, the report asserted.⁵⁷

A subsequent *Naval & Merchant Ships* article said that low-cost munitions and unmanned platforms developed for Hellscape could shift the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait. “While China currently has a significant advantage over the United States in the development of all types of unmanned weapons systems, these [new American] unmanned systems could produce ‘game changing’ effects on the future situation in the Taiwan Strait.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ The quote in Chinese is: “无人装备的成本相对较低，可大量部署，人员伤亡少等优势，让美军方看到了其在未来战争中的应用前景，希望通过大规模使用无人机装备来改变战争模式。” Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵⁶ 成梁 [Cheng Liang], 浅析国产新型无人艇 [“Brief Analysis of State-Manufactured, New Unmanned Surface Vessels”], 舰船知识 [Naval & Merchant Ships], January 2025, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ 李文胜 [Li Wensheng], 开辟廉价武器新赛道: 美国“阿瑞斯”低成本反舰导弹 [“Opening a New Channel of Competition in Low-Cost Munitions: America’s ‘Ares’ Low-Cost Anti-Ship Missile”], 舰船知识 [Naval & Merchant Ships], February 2025, p. 82.



Figure 5: CCP media depiction of “Hellscape” concept.⁵⁹

Norinco Report Outlines Expected U.S. War Plan:

In November 2025, a state-run publication described how the U.S. would use unmanned weapons against the PLA in a Taiwan invasion scenario.⁶⁰ According to the detailed report in *Modern Weaponry* (现代兵器), a magazine published by the China Ordnance Industries Group Corporation, a CCP defense conglomerate more commonly known as the Norinco Group, Replicator aims to produce unmanned systems at scale to effectively and rapidly attrite enemy radars and air defense launchers, allowing the U.S. military’s exquisite manned platforms to conduct deep strikes. The report asserted that this combination of cheap unmanned mass and expensive manned capability could allow the U.S. to “smoothly fight and win a future high-end war” (顺利打赢高端战争).⁶¹

The *Modern Weaponry* report claimed that if China tried to invade Taiwan, the U.S. military plan was to deploy fleets of drones to interdict thousands of targets crossing the Taiwan Strait, including PLA warplanes, warships, and unmanned platforms. This interdiction campaign would reportedly give the Pentagon one month to deploy needed forces to the Western Pacific. Specific American units listed in the report include U.S. Army Multi-Domain Task Forces, Navy aircraft carrier strike groups and submarines, Marine Corps Littoral Regiments, Air Force strategic bombers, and the joint logistics support capabilities required to wage a long-term, high-intensity war. Hellscape would see the U.S. launch thousands of drones from submarines, surface vessels, and aircraft, according to the report.⁶²

⁵⁹ “Use an Enormous Number of Unmanned Systems to Counter the PLA? U.S. Military Reveals ‘Hellscape’ Plan: Wants to Turn Taiwan Strait into ‘Unmanned Hell’,” *CCTV-7*.

⁶⁰ 岳松堂 [Yue Songtang] and 王馨苑 [Wang Xinyuan], 复制器计划 – 美军探索低成本无人机系统作战新鲜式 [“The Replicator Plan—The U.S. Military’s Examines Low Cost Unmanned Systems for New-Type Operations”], 现代兵器 [Modern Weaponry], November 2025, pp. 40-49. The authors affiliations are unknown.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 40.

⁶² Ibid.

The report envisioned Hellscape unfolding in three phases. First, U.S. drones would conduct suicide strikes on PLA ship groups crossing the Strait, with a focus on PLA Navy destroyers, amphibious ships, and transport ships. Then, American drones would strike the PLA's invasion forces and amphibious assembly areas along the PRC coast, targeting amphibious assault vehicles, "obstacle breaker vehicles" (破障车), logistics support vehicles, radars, and air defense systems. Finally, American drones would provide electronic warfare support to Taiwan's military, along with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.⁶³

In the view of PRC observers, Hellscape is not only a warfighting plan, but also a strategic ploy.⁶⁴ By depicting the Taiwan Strait as an unmanned hellscape, the U.S. hopes to erode China's determination to conduct military operations against Taiwan, and it aims to send the signal that America will not abandon its allies.⁶⁵ The *Modern Weaponry* report said that Hellscape represents an advancement in the American way of war, and the U.S. military is moving from platform-centric warfare to network-centric warfare.⁶⁶ Moreover, the U.S. is developing a cost imposition strategy, forcing the PRC into a reactive position. "Looking at the overall situation, the 'Replicator' plan to [build] 'large numbers of simple' unmanned systems suitable for mass production has the advantage of being low-cost, making it particularly suitable for attrition warfare and imbuing it with agility," the report said. "This will force the opposition [China] to invest heavily in more expensive military resources to conduct defense."⁶⁷

Lasers on Ships, Better Spy Work Needed, Chinese Reports Claim:

Defense publications in China assert that Beijing should consider several options for responding to Replicator and Hellscape. In January 2025, *Shipborne Weapons*, a military magazine published by the China State Shipbuilding Corporation, called Hellscape a "threat" and argued that shipborne laser weapons are an excellent potential countermeasure to swarms of unmanned vessels and unmanned aerial vehicles.⁶⁸ The article asserted that a single shot of the PLA Navy's *Hongqi-9* (HQ-9) or *Hongqi-16* (HQ-16) air defense missiles would run in the millions of RMB. In contrast, the cost of a single shot of a million-watt, solid-state laser weapon would only run in the thousands of RMB. Ship defense lasers are free of magazine depth limitations and capable of engaging pop-up targets with speed and precision. Moreover, they could destroy new anti-ship missile seekers that are immune to electronic jamming, according to the article.⁶⁹

A detailed report published by *Unmanned Vehicles* enumerated three types of countermeasures to Replicator and Hellscape, suggesting the PLA takes the U.S. military's unmanned warfare capabilities seriously and seeks to defeat them. First, at the tactical level, the authors said China should focus on improving its military capabilities and work hard to develop counter unmanned technologies, increasing investments into weapons research and development for countering unmanned aerial vehicles, unmanned surface vessels, and unmanned submersibles.⁷⁰ The focus should be on detecting, jamming, and destroying unmanned targets, the authors wrote. The *Unmanned Vehicles* report said that laser weapons, microwave weapons, and other types of directed energy weapons could conduct precision

⁶³ Ibid..

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁶⁸ 鸣镝 [Ming Gao], 中国海军实用型舰载硬杀伤激光武器展望 ["Prospects for China's Navy to Develop Useable, Hard-Kill Laser Weapons"], 舰载武器 [*Shipborne Weapons*], January 2025, p. 25.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Yan and Kong, "America's 'Replicator' and 'Hellscape' Asymmetric Warfare Plan: Analysis and Response," p. 21.

strikes on unmanned platforms, or jam their electronic systems, causing them to “lose operational capabilities” (失去作战能力).⁷¹ The report called on the PLA to strengthen its electronic warfare capabilities for electronic jamming attacks on America’s command and control links with its unmanned forces.⁷²



Figure 6: PLA spokesman addresses a question on U.S. “Hellscape” concept.⁷³

Second, at the strategic and operational level, China should reportedly increase its intelligence collection and analysis work against Replicator and Hellscape to better understand America’s unmanned forces, especially their deployments and posture, operational capabilities, and command and control methods.⁷⁴ The *Unmanned Vehicles* report said that big data, AI, and other technologies should be harnessed to collect intelligence, and analyze and process it. The authors claimed AI technologies could be used to improve the accuracy and timeliness of intelligence, allowing the PLA to “agilely employ tactics against the specific characteristics of the U.S. military’s unmanned systems and establish many such agile tactics.”⁷⁵

Third, the *Unmanned Vehicles* report advocated for economic policies that could incentivize drone-related production and said China should focus on improving technologies surrounding unmanned

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid. See also 周振华 [Zhou Zhenhua], 田威 [Tian Wei], 秦剑冬 [Qin Jiandong], 美海军“复仇女神”计划研究 与思考建 [“Research and Suggestions on the U.S. Navy’s NEMESIS Program”], 世界海军研究 [World Navy Research], January 2025, pp. 7-9.

⁷³ Hai Han, “America Loudly Threatens to Turn Taiwan Strait into ‘Hell’, Defense Ministry Says: We Won’t Eat That.”

⁷⁴ Yan and Kong, “America’s ‘Replicator’ and ‘Hellscape’ Asymmetric Warfare Plan: Analysis and Response,” p. 21.

⁷⁵ The quote in Chinese is: “灵活运用战术，针对美军无人机装备的特点，制定灵活多样的战术。” Ibid.

platforms, artificial intelligence, and the electronics and information sectors.⁷⁶ According to the authors, this should be done via policy guidance, financial support, and other methods to encourage PRC industry to expand research and development investments, upgrade manufacturing, and reduce foreign reliance.⁷⁷

China Should Target Replicator's Logistics, PRC Magazine Says:

Another proposed PRC response to Replicator and Hellscape is to target American logistics. The *Modern Weaponry* report portrayed Replicator as a potentially vulnerable work in progress, pointing out that the concept has not been battle-tested and remained experimental.⁷⁸ The authors depicted Replicator as “basically still conceptually immature” (基本概念尚不成熟), and they asserted that the U.S. would have to transport large numbers of drones to the Taiwan area, straining limited cross-oceanic logistics capabilities and placing drone motherships within the range of PLA missiles. “This means the ‘Replicator’ plan’s large numbers of unmanned systems could be destroyed before they can even be deployed.”⁷⁹

Conclusion:

American efforts to rapidly enhance Taiwan’s defense via Hellscape and Replicator have elicited a strident response from the authorities in Beijing. Taken at face value, official PLA statements and commentaries seem to suggest that U.S. War Department and PACOM efforts to bolster deterrence are failing. In the words of Chinese military propagandists, the United States is a “paper tiger,” and Washington is bluffing with military capabilities it cannot produce and feigning political strength that it lacks. By relying on unmanned systems, America is signaling a reluctance to put its troops lives at stake to defend Taiwan, thereby revealing weakness, they say.⁸⁰ Beijing’s propaganda suggests some in the PRC may perceive the U.S. military as falling behind, and they feel increasingly confident about their prospects in the event of a war in the Taiwan Strait.

However, it seems clear that PACOM’s statements struck a raw nerve. Military experts in the PLA respect the core premise of Hellscape and Replicator and find increased U.S. military support to Taiwan worrisome. PLA analysts take asymmetric warfare seriously and see the employment of large numbers of cheap drones as one of the keys to the future of high-end warfare. They appear unsettled by American and Taiwanese investments in revolutionary unmanned warfare systems. They have called for developing drone countermeasures, including laser weapons, and have sanctioned American companies and individuals that are supporting the modernization of Taiwan’s military.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Yue and Wang, “The Replicator Plan—The U.S. Military’s Examines Low-Cost Unmanned Systems for New-Type Operations,” p. 48.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 49.

⁸⁰ Kang, “‘Hellscape’ Plan is Psychotic, But a ‘Paper Tiger’ Is Just a ‘Paper Tiger.’”



Figure 7: PRC media depiction of U.S. “Hellscape” concept.⁸¹

For the past three decades, the CCP has built up its military with an unwavering focus on attaining the ability to invade and occupy Taiwan, while concurrently deterring, delaying, or defeating the United States armed forces in that scenario. Regardless of how seriously CCP commentators take Hellscape and Replicator, the PLA can be expected to honor the threat. PLA writings that appear to be indicative of doctrine state that the campaign to invade Taiwan would witness fierce battles from the PRC seaboard to the urban depths of Taiwan.⁸² For decades, PLA textbooks have warned readers that their invasion forces would face lethal air, sea, and subsurface threats as they crossed the Taiwan Strait.⁸³ That vision now has a new name associated with it, along with a growing stockpile of unmanned weapons.

If the PRC’s vociferous words tell us anything, it is that the Communist Party authorities find the ideas behind Hellscape and Replicator disquieting, but they are probably not convinced these efforts have succeeded. Strategists in Washington and Honolulu should consider the extent to which CCP propaganda reflects true perceptions and examine how to credibly communicate to Xi Jinping and his core advisors that the U.S. military is anything but a paper tiger.

⁸¹ 美军“地狱景观”计划解析 [“The U.S. Military’s ‘Hellscape’ Plan Explained”], 搜狐 [Sohu News], 9 July 2024, https://www.sohu.com/a/791844517_120973902.

⁸² 徐立生 [Xu Lisheng] and 王兆勇 [Wang Zhaoyong], 港口登陆作战研究 [Research on Port Landing Operations] (Beijing: National Defense University, 2015); and 曹正荣 [Cao Zhengrong], 孙龙海 [Sun Longhai], and 杨颖 [Yang Ying] (eds.), 信息化陆军作战 [Informatized Army Operations] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014), pp. 111-171.

⁸³ For example, see 孙建军 [Sun Jianjun] (eds.), 信息化联合作战 [Informatized Joint Operations] (Beijing: Liberation Army Press, 2008), pp. 187-190.