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# Information at War: From China's Three Warfares to NATO's Narratives

Introduction by Peter Pomerantsev

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## INTRODUCTION



By Peter Pomerantsev

In the twenty-first century, observes Joseph Nye, Harvard professor and coiner of the term “soft power”, conflicts will be less about whose army wins than whose story wins. Ambitious powers such as China and Russia—powers keen to challenge the global status quo without directly confronting NATO and the US in a military head-to-head—are taking this idea seriously, asking questions about the nature of war and whether winning without fighting is possible. “Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting,” argued Sun Tzu back in the fourth century BC. Have the technological advancements of the information age made that ideal possible?

Take China’s “Three Warfares” doctrine, adopted in 2003 and described by Laura Jackson as “reinventing our understanding of war” by aiming to “undermine international institutions, change borders, and subvert global media, all without firing a shot”.

The Three Warfares concept combines legal, psychological, and media warfare to help achieve a multitude of Chinese ambitions, most notably the expansion of its claims over the geostrategically crucial South China Sea, home to \$5 trillion worth of shipping and massive energy reserves. China’s claims here, which include a range of disputed islands, overlap and compete with those of its smaller neighbours, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam—and contradict the boundaries enforced by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) since 1994.

More recently, China has been dredging the seabed and using the sand to transform submerged rocks and reefs into artificial islands; here, argues Jackson, it has used “lawfare” to claim that, as these ‘islands’ are “lawful and justified”, Beijing has the right to claim 12 nautical miles of territorial waters around them and a further 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zones. This is then backed up with psychological warfare, which seeks to demoralise and break the will of China’s rivals through measures such as the threat of sanctions, import restrictions, and harassing the fishing and coastguard vessels of China’s neighbours in disputed waters. Media warfare is pursued through China’s multilingual broadcasters, repeating key themes about how China’s neighbours are “to blame for the multitude of incidents and incursions that occur on China’s periphery”.

As Jackson admits, many such tactics, taken individually, are nothing new, and China has been at least partly inspired by the US’s use of sanctions and media in the lead up to both Iraq wars. The uniqueness of the Chinese approach, however, is to combine various elements holistically, all under direct Communist Party control.

A recurring theme of the Three Warfares doctrine is the claim that the US is limiting China’s sphere of influence—including blaming the recent Chinese stock market crashes on America. In the words of Lin Zuoming, a Central Committee member and one of the most powerful figures in state-owned industries, the crash was “without any doubt ... an economic war” waged by the US on China, following other US attacks on Asia such as the 1997 financial crisis.

The idea of domestic failings being the fault of the US is also a mainstay of Russia’s “information-psychological war” theory. As Tim Thomas has doggedly explored, back in the 1990s some Russian

analysts were already arguing that the US had won the Cold War by launching an information attack on the USSR after the Kremlin opened up to the world during the period of *glasnost*. Authors such as Sergey Rastorguev and Igor Panarin, former dean of the Russian Foreign Ministry's School for Foreign Diplomats, developed mathematical formulas describing the effect of "psycho viruses" and argued for the need to develop a "strategy of psychological defense to prevent or neutralize attempts to control the psyche of Russian society".

For many years such authors were largely marginal, but today similar concepts are mainstream. Current Russian doctrine describes the country as under information-psychological attack from a West that is looking to infect the population with the virus of colour revolutions—attempting, in the words of an article in the *Journal of the Academy of Military Sciences*, to "change citizens' traditional moral values and manipulate the consciousness of social groups by implementing so-called democratic transformation".

Much like in China, senior Russian military figures have been thinking about the role of non-physical conflicts. Shortly after the 2008 war with Georgia, Colonel-General Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, a deputy chief of the General Staff, argued that in the wars of the future the primary mission for Russian military forces would be disorganisation of "the functioning ... of military-political leadership, troops and population with the use of modern information technologies and means". Nogovitsyn stated that "information weapons provide states with a method of gaining advantages without a declaration of war".

"We are reminded here", argues Thomas, "of Russia's quiet take-over of Crimea."

These approaches have left Western analysts wondering how to respond. "For the West," argues Ben Nimmo, "war is the opposite of peace, and information warfare is seen as part of a response to a conflict situation, specific in time and defined in goals. In Russia and China, information warfare is seen as a permanent activity which is to be practised regardless of the absence of immediate conflicts, open-ended and widely applicable."

The Crimean operation raises other new questions.

"The Kremlin's disinformation campaign during the seizure of Crimea is unique," writes Nimmo, "in that it was deliberately exposed as a lie by the Kremlin itself." Prior to the annexation, as unmarked "little green men" took over the peninsula, Putin publicly denied the presence of Russian troops and claimed the soldiers were "local self-defence units".

Soon after the annexation, Putin openly admitted that he had ordered the annexation himself.

"Why did he admit that he had lied?" asks Nimmo. "His willingness to expose his own dishonesty shows one of the key features in modern disinformation campaigns: they are not intended to last forever, but for long enough to achieve a specific effect."

Back in the Cold War, US "black ops", such as Edward Bernays' recasting of a democratically elected government in Guatemala as communist to enable a US-backed coup, or the USSR's "active measures" claiming that the CIA had invented AIDS, were meant to be persuasive in the long term—and those looking to establish the truth would score major victories if they could prove their opponent was lying. Today, argues Nimmo, this is no longer the case: "You can't out-debate an opponent who doesn't even take his own argument seriously ... a responsive campaign is a losing campaign." There are at least

two elements to information war: “weaponised information”, the use of information to divide and conquer, distract and dismay, and “a war on information”.

To combat the latter, Nimmo introduces the concept of “information defence”, a pre-emptive approach that allows a lie to be stopped before it has time to spread too far. This would involve governments sponsoring exchanges between journalists, academics, and experts in sensitive areas: between journalists in London and Russian-populated parts of the Baltics, for example, or between analysts in the Middle East and parts of Western Europe where ISIL messages are penetrating. When disinformation started to spread, an international network would be in place to debunk it instantly, with credible voices who already spoke the language of local audiences. “Governments and elected officials are not viewed as reliable sources of information,” writes Nimmo, “so it is important that trusted NGOs and commentators can communicate the truth.” But without state help journalists and NGOs struggle to support in-depth, international research. Nimmo’s concept would ensure that bodies such as the EU would provide “hands-off funding” for exchanges but without having any editorial say.

In his paper Mark Laity moves from ‘defence’ to a more proactive assertion of ‘narrative’. “Strategic communications”—or StratCom—is a much debated term, derided by some as a more palatable substitute for ‘propaganda’, dismissed by others as glamorised public relations. But as Russia and China develop their information-war approaches, suddenly StratCom is coming into focus. “For half a century NATO had focused on traditional military power,” writes Laity, “with the information component regarded as secondary. StratCom is not just a new term for public affairs or media relations, but a recognition of the need to make communications more than an afterthought to our planning.”

Key to this is an understanding of the term ‘narrative’—a term that Laity believes has become grossly and often inaccurately overused, so that any justification or briefing paper is described as such. “Narrative is more than merely a ‘story’ but an explanation of events in line with an ideology, theory, or belief, and one that points the way to future actions.”

Kremlin disinformation is not random, argues Laity. Rather, it fits into a larger mosaic which goes from rejecting Kiev’s right to self-rule up through a global vision where Moscow throws off US unipolar rule to dominate its region and unite with other large powers, such as China, who want to dominate theirs.

It is hard for coalitions of democracies such as NATO to find a common narrative, but, believes Laity, “the narrative is there to be seized”. It means recovering the ideals of 1989, when the idea of “might is right” was rejected in favour of supporting the rights of small nations vis-à-vis their larger neighbours. “The big picture is the course we set in 1989, in tune with our values and reflecting the best of us.”

We can only hope that this is still possible ideologically, but the issue of how to organise such strategic communication remains. In the Cold War governments were, for good or ill, behind efforts as diverse as publishing the magazine *Encounter*, helping publish the translation of *Doctor Zhivago*, funding the BBC World Service, and setting up the myth-busting Active Measures Working Group. Many such activities would be deemed unacceptable today. How does one coordinate the work of the private, public, and non-commercial sectors so that the phrase “our strength is in diversity” actually means something?

## REVISIONS OF REALITY

### The Three Warfares—China’s New Way of War



By Laura Jackson

Today’s statesmen and militaries are faced with a new set of criteria for determining ‘success’. As Harvard professor Joseph Nye has succinctly observed, twenty-first-century conflicts are less about whose army wins and more about whose story wins. China’s doctrine of Three Warfares, approved in 2003,<sup>1</sup> recognises how war is changing in the information age. While kinetic force still remains necessary as a potent deterrent, the doctrine argues that it may no longer be sufficient.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Three Warfares aims to undermine international institutions, change borders, and subvert global media, all without firing a shot. The Western, and especially American, concept of war emphasises the kinetic and the tangible<sup>3</sup>—infrastructure, arms, and personnel—whereas China is asking fundamental questions: “What is war?”<sup>4</sup> And, in today’s world: “Is winning without fighting possible?”

China’s Three Warfares has the following key components:

**Psychological warfare** seeks to influence and disrupt the decision-making capabilities of an opponent, to foster doubts about an opponent’s ability, to demoralise both military personnel and civilian populations, and thus, over time, to diminish their will to act.<sup>5</sup> Psychological warfare recognises that the true aim in war is the mind of hostile rulers, rather than any physical entity such as troop numbers or armament supplies. In its application, China targets the thinking of both foreign leaders and their domestic audiences.<sup>6</sup>

Psychological warfare can be fought in various ways: diplomatic pressure; the threat of sanctions; import tariffs, such as China’s import restrictions on bananas in the aftermath of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with the Philippines;<sup>7</sup> economic impositions such as the threat to sell US debt holdings; rumours and false narratives;<sup>8</sup> and, more recently, the harassment of the fishing and coastguard vessels of China’s neighbours in disputed waters.

**Media warfare** (also known as ‘public opinion warfare’) can be defined as a constant ongoing activity aimed at influencing and conditioning perceptions.<sup>9</sup> It is conducted through television programmes, newspaper articles (particularly in *China Daily* and the *Global Times*), books, films, and the Internet, as well as through monitoring and censorship of social media networks and blogs such as Sina Weibo (China’s equivalent of Twitter) by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s 2 million official ‘public opinion analysts’.<sup>10</sup> China’s extensive global media network, most notably the Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television (CCTV), also plays a key role, broadcasting in foreign languages and providing programming to stations throughout Africa, Central Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Chinese media warfare operations reflect familiar themes, including the claims that:<sup>11</sup>

- » The West (most notably the US) and certain regional players (Japan) do not respect Chinese domestic law.
- » The US, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan are to blame for the multitude of incidents and incursions that occur on China’s periphery, particularly in the East and South China Seas and the airspace above.

Any such incidents are firmly *domestic* matters and within the remit of China's domestic law enforcement agencies; they are not for consideration in international fora, nor subject to any attendant dispute resolution mechanisms.

Legal warfare (or 'lawfare') involves the exploitation of legal systems, customs, and conventions, both international and domestic, in order to drive towards political and/or commercial gains. The fact that this *exploitation* of the law has been approved at the highest political echelons in China stems from a distinct difference between the conventional understanding of law in the West (that the law exists as a "distinct autonomous entity" and applies to both the ruler and the ruled<sup>12</sup>) and in China (where the law is viewed as a means by which those in authority can enforce control over the population). As such, China has experienced rule by law, not rule of law, with the Communist Party viewing the law simply as one of the many tools at its disposal, to be harnessed, shaped, and moulded as it sees fit (or as far as international public opinion will allow) given the particular legal challenge China needs to overcome. For instance, China continuously takes aim at the law of the sea, as codified in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—manipulating it to its advantage in order to establish a greater footing in the South and East China Seas. China aims to both undermine its opponent's legal cases, which are based upon existing treaty law as embodied in UNCLOS, and also to establish arguments in customary international law<sup>13</sup> for China's position on an issue by setting precedents.<sup>14</sup>

## SO WHAT'S NEW? STRATEGIC TRADITIONS REPACKAGED

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Manipulation and deception have been a part of China's strategic culture for more than 5,000 years, remaining "fundamental to the Chinese way of politics and war".<sup>15</sup> The principle that it is better to subdue the enemy by manipulating the cognitive process without engaging militarily in a kinetic conflict is widely accepted among China's military elite. But although Three Warfares remains firmly embedded in Chinese strategic culture, its modern-day format constitutes something more than a simple continuation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s long-established ways of working. Crucially, China has learned from the US's engagement in the two Gulf Wars and Afghanistan. China noted the success in securing a legal basis for operations in Kuwait in 1991, and the US's application of a potent lawfare tool in the form of sanctions.<sup>16</sup> In 2003 Beijing watched closely as the US leveraged Resolution 1441, under which the UN determined that Iraq remained in material breach of its obligations to co-operate with the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors and their procedures to search for weapons of mass destruction. Here, China determined that, despite a lack of formal UN authorisation for armed force or NATO backing, the US was able to exploit these Iraqi violations as the legal basis on which to launch its military invasion of Iraq: an astute application of legal warfare in Beijing's eyes.<sup>17</sup> In both these instances, an important lesson for China was the critical importance of combining lawfare efforts with media warfare.

Though elements of Three Warfares are familiar, it is their holistic combination under CCP control and direction that is unique, constituting a dynamic tripartite war-fighting process, operative in both civilian and military dimensions. In order to see the real threat that Three Warfares poses—a threat that goes beyond the institutions and norms that currently govern global affairs—to the institutions and norms that currently govern global affairs, we must consider the doctrine as a coherent whole—a "comprehensive information operations doctrine" reinventing our understanding of war.<sup>18</sup>





## TARGET AUDIENCES

Given that China has embarked on a new way of war, it is vital to consider who China sees itself at war with. To this end, Three Warfares has three key target audiences. First, China's own domestic public is targeted in order to consolidate the Party's legitimacy to rule, to deflect criticism of many of the nation's ailments (particularly slowing economic growth rates) away from the CCP's policy choices and onto external forces, and to shore up support for broader national goals.

For instance, in order to support China's nationalist stance on the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (to which Japan also lays claim) and to condition public opinion for policy manoeuvre should the Party decide that a more forceful approach is necessary, Chinese schools, museums, and TV programmes constantly warn of Japan's "spirit of aggression",<sup>19</sup> its intention to "return to the battlefield", and its lavish spending on "war machines".<sup>20</sup> The media stir up nationalist fervour against an allegedly

China Post newsstand, Beijing, 2013.  
China Post is the official postal service of China.

aggressive Japan, despite the latter's formal pacifism since 1945. As Yifu Dong wrote in *Foreign Policy Magazine*, the Party uses "modern Internet media tactics ... [to] slice, dice and repackage stories in the name of national pride... at each step in this process, the truth recedes further from view".<sup>21</sup>

Such agitation conditions public opinion and provides the pretext needed for subsequent actions. In November 2013, for example, Beijing declared an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, with the objective of extending its airspace and thus the time frame for response to any hostile aircraft.<sup>22</sup> China exploits international principles for its own domestic purposes by "stretching International Civil Aviation Organisation regulations to reinforce its territorial claims over the Senkaku Islands"<sup>23</sup> and signalling its strategic intent to Japan and other regional players.

Secondly, global publics are targeted in order to consolidate support for China worldwide, by promoting the Chinese story and the nation's image. China often inserts paid advertisements into international newspapers,<sup>24</sup> with emphasis on familiar themes such as the benefits of China for the US economy and the Chinese army's contribution to international peace and stability.<sup>25</sup> China's international network of Confucius Institutes also helps to manage perceptions and shape China's international image.

A recurring message in Three Warfares is the malign role of the US. Here, the doctrine supports China's broader military strategy of 'Anti-Access/Area Denial' (A2AD) designed to push the US out of China's immediate vicinity, to set the terms for its access to the region, and to cast doubt on US alliances and treaty commitments, thereby raising questions about the legitimacy and proclaimed benefits of the US presence in East Asia.

For instance, Chinese news articles continuously emphasise China's firm commitment to the bilateral relationship, despite what it characterises as US determination to interfere in China's domestic affairs in order to limit its sphere of influence and to diminish its regional standing. Media exchanges following the two stock market crashes in China that happened in quick succession in June 2015 are prime examples of both psychological and media warfare against the US.<sup>26</sup>

After these events an influential and powerful figure within one of China's largest state-owned enterprises (SOEs), Lin Zuoming,<sup>27</sup> insisted that this was "without any doubt ... an economic war" waged by the United States. China's stock market crisis was, he explained, the third economic war the US had waged against an Asian country, along with the 1985 Plaza Agreement supposedly targeting Japan and the 1997 Asian financial crisis in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia.<sup>28</sup> Lin concluded that those within China's own domestic population who argued against this American conspiracy theory were traitors. These remarks, made in an interview with *China Aviation News*, were picked up and further propagated by Chinese media, including the *Global Times*, as were his further attacks on those who questioned the validity of his argument.

This incident reveals CCP-directed psychological and media warfare elements at play. Lin's remarks were designed to divert attention from the multitude of domestic reasons for such a crash, including China's "risky trading practices" and the state-run propaganda campaigns that short-sightedly encouraged heavy investment.<sup>29</sup> Instead, he shifted responsibility for China's financial woes away from the Party and onto a foreign aggressor allegedly bent on terminating China's rightful role as leader in its own region.

## THREE WARFARES AT SEA

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Three Warfares is perhaps most evident today in China's targeting of the third key audience: rival claimants within the South China Sea. This audience is now so important for the Party and its official media that it merits separate analysis.

The South China Sea is a critical commercial gateway<sup>30</sup> through which over \$5 trillion dollars' worth of shipping trade passes each year.<sup>31</sup> It has particular geostrategic significance given its location: it is an important fishing area, and, according to the World Bank, it holds "proven oil reserves of at least seven billion barrels and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas".<sup>32</sup> The sea's islands and features are subject to overlapping and competing claims—most notably, the Spratly Islands (claimed partly or in total by Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, and Malaysia) and the Paracel Islands (with competing claims from China, Vietnam, and Taiwan).

China's claims are the most expansive, with its U-shaped "nine-dashed line" encompassing 1.35 million square miles.<sup>33</sup> China claims that these waters, and specifically the Paracel and Spratly islands, have been an integral part of Chinese territory for the last 2,000 years, having played host to "survey expeditions, fishing activities, and naval patrols dating as far back as the fifteenth century".<sup>34</sup> The U-shaped line itself originates from a map prepared as part of an internal government report in 1935, when many areas marked as within China's boundary were under foreign control.<sup>35</sup> This map went on to be published in 1947 by the nationalist government at the time, and more recently was submitted to the UN in 2009.<sup>36</sup> Although the exact coordinates of China's expansive claim are unknown, its expansive nature directly contradicts the boundaries UNCLOS has enforced in the region since 1994.

Much of the Party's domestic legitimacy and authority is now staked on this sea claim, which provokes intense nationalist fervour. To support the enforcement of the 'new reality' that underlies the claim, the Party continuously alters facts on the ground in its own favour; it thereby aims to buffer the domestic population from any international censure and to safeguard its own image through a sophisticated and subtle propaganda campaign.

## ALTERING THE FACTS ON THE GROUND: A NEW REALITY

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A prime example of China's manipulation of facts on the ground is land reclamation, which involves dredging the seabed and using the sand to transform submerged rocks and reefs into artificial islands. China has invested heavily in infrastructure, including airstrips,<sup>37</sup> on four of the five reclaimed reefs, which are now artificial islands, currently under its control. These facilities will give China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) "enhanced capability to exercise its sovereignty claims" and potentially set the terms of access to the region.<sup>38</sup>

To support the physical alteration and transformation of the facts on the ground, Three Warfares also alters the institutional barriers in place that are obstructing China's claims. For example, by asserting that this activity is "lawful and justified",<sup>39</sup> Beijing is attempting to alter two important aspects of international law. First, China is challenging the nature of land features at sea by establishing artificial islands that supposedly project both territorial waters (with a limit of 12 nautical miles) and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) extending 200 nautical miles.<sup>40</sup> Second, China is challenging the principle of freedom of navigation in the maritime commons by attempting to

shift the established definition of an EEZ under UNCLOS, which provides coastal states the “right to regulate economic activities (such as fishing and oil exploration)”.<sup>41</sup> The EEZ legal definition does not, however, “give coastal states the right to regulate foreign military activities in the parts of their EEZs beyond their 12-nautical mile territorial waters”<sup>42</sup>—it is the latter point that China contests and is actively challenging.

As such, there is more at play in the South China Sea than mere disputes among regional actors over ownership of reefs and islands. What is at stake, crucially, is the “necessity to ensure all modern nation-states adhere to their treaty commitments under prevailing legal principles”.<sup>43</sup>

The extent of China’s lawfare efforts are detailed in the Philippines’ request for the Arbitral Tribunal at The Hague to consider the nature of the disputed South China Sea features under Article 121 of UNCLOS. As an UNCLOS signatory, China is expected to make claims within the convention’s confines. Instead, Beijing remains unwilling to specify the exact coordinates of its claims or to state definitively whether it claims (a) the entire South China Sea basin, (b) the features and their surrounding waters, or (c) only the fisheries and hydrocarbon resources beneath the seabed.<sup>44</sup> China has continuously sought to blur legal distinctions, rejecting UNCLOS jurisdiction and due legal process. Such behaviour is not consistent with that of a responsible international legal player. It is, however, consistent with the Three Warfares concept.

A similar approach to legal norms was also evident in China’s dealings with Vietnam and the UN in the aftermath of the May 2014 confrontation over China’s placement of the oil rig HYSY 981 in waters some 120 miles from Vietnam’s coast, well within Vietnam’s EEZ as set by international law.<sup>45</sup> The purpose of this stationing extended beyond the simple discovery of oil and gas: it represented a strategic choice on Beijing’s part to use Vietnam as a testing point in which to probe the US’s resolve and willingness to become engaged in a dispute involving a country with which it had no defence treaty.<sup>46</sup> During this incident Wang Min, China’s deputy ambassador to the UN, submitted a formal position paper for all UN members to consider—knowing that many of the organisation’s members have little or no direct interest in the South China Sea disputes. Despite China’s efforts to engage with the UN members (to proactively condition opinion in its favour), it then refused to participate in the UN’s formal mechanisms, rejecting arbitration of the dispute. This is an example of China using international organisations to its own advantage, without ever seeing itself as bound by their conventions and norms. The position paper also provides distinct clarity on China’s view of UNCLOS, stating that “these waters will never become Vietnam’s EEZ and continental shelf *no matter which principle [of international law] is applied*” (emphasis added).<sup>47</sup> Beijing again used media channels to reinforce this position, with an op-ed article by the Chinese ambassador to Australia echoing this statement. Furthermore, the chairman of the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), Wang Yilin, referred to the oil rigs as “mobile national territory and a strategic weapon”—even though UNCLOS does not recognise these platforms as sovereign territory.<sup>48</sup>

Beijing’s efforts vis-à-vis Vietnam also have an added psychological edge. Over the course of 2014 China intensified its intimidation, securing the rig with “fighter jets and more than 100 ships, including naval vessels”,<sup>49</sup> and intentionally rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat.<sup>50</sup> China went on to move the oil rig into Chinese territory in 2014, only to move it back into a contested area in June 2015<sup>51</sup>—just weeks before the historic visit of Vietnam’s top leader, Nguyen Phu Trong, to the US with a view to “seeking stronger ties” between Washington and Hanoi.<sup>52</sup>



China's psychological warfare efforts are also evident in its dispute with the Philippines in The Hague. China has attempted to take the moral high ground, insisting that the Philippines has been too hasty in seeking compulsory arbitration<sup>53</sup>—that it has ignored regional bilateral negotiation channels and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, such bilateral negotiation would not be possible given China's refusal to clarify its claims. Furthermore, China has transmitted its psychological effects via diplomatic channels by refusing to host—essentially disinviting—the Philippine president Benigno Aquino during the China-ASEAN Expo; and it has imposed a “de facto investment siege”<sup>54</sup> on the Philippines as an instrument of coercion.<sup>55</sup>

Media warfare has also targeted international audiences, with daily articles and op-eds denouncing the Philippines in many outlets, including the *Global Times* (“Manila’s appeal to international arbitration will only stir up South China Sea”, July 9, 2015), *China Daily* (“Time for Manila to end farce of arbitration on South China Sea”, July 18, 2015), and the Xinhua News Agency (“Manila’s South China Sea arbitration request to hit nowhere: European experts”, August 17, 2015).

## ENFORCING CHINA'S NEW REALITY

China uses its Coast Guard as an enforcer of its maritime claims.<sup>56</sup> The use of the Coast Guard, instead of the navy, is important because it allows Beijing to claim the moral high ground and pretend that it is using peaceful, not military force. Yet China's Coast Guard is expanding at an accelerated pace: by the next decade it will boast more tonnage than the coastguards of the US, Japan, and all of its South-East Asian neighbours combined.<sup>57</sup> Although these are ‘civilian’ vessels, China's new generation of Coast Guard cutters will be armed with “76mm naval cannons, secondary gun turrets, anti-aircraft mounts and be able to carry at least two multi-role helicopters”.<sup>58</sup> The magnitude and advanced capability of China's non-military branch is promoted via multiple state media outlets, with headlines designed to intimidate regional counterparts. Hence, for example, the *Global Times* strap-line of June 15, 2015: “China Coast Guard’s Wenzhou Station Home to Ten Thousand Ton ‘Monster’; Japan Shocked”.<sup>59</sup> The sheer size and advanced functionality of these vessels blur the lines that have traditionally distinguished military from civilian services.<sup>60</sup>

Alongside the Coast Guard, China also operates a network of 200,000 fishing vessels<sup>61</sup> which have been organised into a de facto ‘maritime militia’. The state provides fishermen with military training and with vessels fitted with advanced communication systems compatible with those of the Coast Guard. As Dr James Kraska of the US Naval War College writes: “using fishing vessels as naval auxiliaries violates the principle of distinction—a key tenet of international humanitarian law ... which prescribes that civilians and civilian objects should be protected from armed attack.”<sup>62</sup> The deployment of this maritime militia to waters that contain an array of disputed islands as well as military vessels belonging both to China's neighbours and to the US could create multiple opportunities for conflict and confusion.

The blurring of previously established legal distinctions raises the “operational, legal and political challenges for any opponent ... complicates the battlespace, degrades any opponent's decision-making process and exposes adversaries to political dilemmas that will make them more cautious to act against China during a maritime crisis”.<sup>63</sup> In the event of a maritime crisis, the mixed presence of both civilian and military Chinese vessels may condition the operational environment to Beijing's advantage. Such a presence will cloud the judgement of Beijing's opponents and complicate existing

decision-making procedures, at the very least delaying responses. China's opponents also know that any interference with a civilian fishing vessel would quickly be picked up by the Chinese media and served up as propaganda for domestic and international consumption alike.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

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The Three Warfares concept is a potential game-changer—a significant shift away from current understandings of war as defined primarily by the kinetic and tangible, and towards one focused more on thought processes, mental impressions, and the will to act. The doctrine will remain an essential component of China's information war strategy for decades to come and will continue to evolve. China is playing the long game and seeking to further refine each element in the trilogy, operating with increasing sophistication in the crucial testing ground of the South China Sea. The army and its propaganda departments are setting out arguments and establishing positions now that can be exploited in the future with the goal of redefining norms beyond East Asia, into the Arctic and even in space.<sup>64</sup> China's military and legal thinkers deem the "control of portions of outer space [to be] a natural extension of other forms of territorial [i.e. sea or air] control".<sup>65</sup> Over the next decade or so, we can expect Beijing's media outlets to broadcast the intentions behind China's rapidly maturing space programme<sup>66</sup> and to expound the legal justification for any planned operations as grounded in Chinese domestic space legislation, which is expected around 2020.<sup>67</sup> The CCP is watching closely to see how the international community responds to its efforts of manipulation and information dominance and whether 'success' can be achieved by these purely non-kinetic means.

Faced with such a challenge, there are a number of practical steps the international community can take to guard against China's Three Warfares, to protect other South China Sea claimants from the full impact of Beijing's psychological warfare, and to provide much-needed reassurance regarding the region's security and prosperity.

- » China relies heavily on the West's free press to transmit the effects of its propaganda campaign to a broader international audience, with international newspapers affording the same legitimacy to state-directed propaganda as to factual, non-partisan reporting. As senior China expert Larry Wortzel argues, "the PLA seems to believe that by constantly repeating its message in the Western press and in other forms of contact, it will be accepted."<sup>68</sup> To counter this false equivalency, public education regarding the nature of China's challenge is essential. Regular briefings on the South China Sea, China's tactics, and the stakes at play are needed to provide informative, reliable, and unbiased commentaries to counter the China narrative and offer the crucial context needed by journalists.<sup>69</sup> Continuous publication of satellite imagery (such as the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative's "Island Tracker"<sup>70</sup>) will help increase awareness of China's land reclamation activities.
- » Western media news outlets should broadcast directly from the military vessels of the United States and regional claimants operating in the South China Sea area.<sup>71</sup> In the case of China's maritime militias of fishing vessels or the China Coast Guard performing dangerous manoeuvres that potentially result in a maritime fracas, video footage will prevent China from acquiring 'victim status' and help stop the global public from being subjected to a false version of events.<sup>72</sup>

- » Global attention should be focused on China's challenge to international laws. Public education is required regarding the existing provisions and limitations as codified in UNCLOS—particularly the four key definitions of coastal waters, territorial sea, contiguous zones, and Exclusive Economic Zones that China is attempting to put into play via its use of bogus maps and domestic legislation. The international community should also promote a global and regional discussion of sovereignty and pertinent historical facts by referencing legal experts in the media.
- » China's attempts to change the facts on the ground (and in the air) by establishing proclaimed Exclusive Economic Zones and Air Defence Identification Zones must be challenged; freedom-of-navigation exercises by the United States must be continued, with the support of air and sea patrols by littoral states in the South China Sea. The rights of foreign navies in EEZs must be upheld. China's own practice of conducting military activities in the EEZs of foreign states and its challenge to UNCLOS should be seen as part of a broader challenge to the legal governing institutions in place and an attempt to change internationally accepted and agreed rules.<sup>73</sup>

To ensure that China does not fundamentally alter the nature of key institutions and laws that govern global affairs, Western powers must send a clear message: no one nation can unilaterally rewrite international or customary laws. Increasing awareness of China's efforts to influence and condition the thought processes and perceptions of audiences around the globe is essential if we are to guard against unilateral, yet subtle, revisions of reality.

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## PSYCHO VIRUSES AND REFLEXIVE CONTROL

### Russian Theories of Information-Psychological War



By Timothy Thomas

On today's battlefield the fog of war is being supplemented by the mist of digital influence.

Russian military theorists today view the twenty-first century as a place where international information flows cause pro-democracy, 'colour' revolutions, create chaos in nations, and influence the minds of citizens. Russia has sought to challenge these perceived threats by, *inter alia*, drafting new laws limiting freedom of speech, expanding its own international news broadcaster RT (Russia Today), and further refining the SORM programme (System for Operative Investigative Activities) for enhanced surveillance of the Internet and telecommunications.

Such measures supplement Russia's information warfare (IW) programme. Russian doctrine sees information war as permanent "peaceful war", not necessarily related to military activity. Information war is described as having two aspects: information-technical and information-psychological. The former includes the hardware and software that convert digital input into useful data. The latter includes the effect that this data has on the subconscious and behaviour of the population. Just as there are computer viruses that cause laptops to malfunction, so there are psycho viruses, according to some Russian theorists, that cause the brain to orientate itself in improper directions.

Russian concepts of information war did not appear overnight: they have been brewing for decades.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION WAR THEORY

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Some Russian theorists see information war as the reason for the fall of the USSR.

During the period of *glasnost* the USSR changed its closed media model and opened up to the outside world. Russian analysts claim that these moves enabled international media to successfully fire the opening salvo of the information war. In the 1990s books began to appear describing this development.

In 1998–9 Sergey Rastorguev, a Russian IW specialist, wrote *Informatsionnaya Voyna* (Information War). In the preface to the book, he thanked, among others, the Administration of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and the Centre for Public Communications of the Federal Security Agency (FSB) for their assistance in putting the book together: it appears that Rastorguev had the support of some very high-level government organisations for his work. His book examined how to manipulate the mind with real and latent threats, and how to model algorithms that define human behaviour. Humans, the author noted, like computers, can have a 'virus' inserted in their information system (reasoning process). According to mathematical formulas developed by the author, a human information virus (dubbed a "psycho virus") may be inserted as a suggestive influence to alter or mask objective reasoning.

Other books were written along similar lines in the late 1990s and early 2000s. V. F. Prokof'ev's *Taynoe Oruzhie Informatsionnoy Voyny* (The Secret Weapon of Information War), published in 2003,<sup>1</sup> suggested that the greatest threat to Russia in the twenty-first century was to the psycho-physical security of the nation. Dr Igor Panarin, a former dean of the Russian Foreign Ministry's

School for Foreign Diplomats, called his 1998 doctoral thesis "Information-Psychological Support of the National Security of Russia". He argued that Russia must develop a "strategy of psychological defence" to prevent or neutralise attempts to control the psyche of Russian society.<sup>2</sup> Panarin wrote extensively on information-psychological issues after the Russia–Georgia conflict of August 2008, calling for the creation of information troops, the establishment of an official presidential adviser on information and propaganda activities, and the development of an information crisis action centre.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, Russian Colonel-General Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, at the time a deputy chief of the General Staff, discussed threats to Russia's information security.<sup>4</sup> He added that, in the wars of the future, the primary missions for Russia's armed forces would be "the disorganization of the functioning of key military, industrial, and administrative facilities and systems of the enemy and also the information-psychological effect on his military-political leadership, troops, and population with the use of modern information technologies and means".<sup>5</sup> Nogovitsyn stated that information weapons gave states a method of gaining advantages without a declaration of war. We are reminded here, of course, of Russia's quiet takeover of Crimea.<sup>6</sup>

In 2014 three authors from the Republic of Belarus, writing for Russia's journal *Vestnik Akademii Voenykh Nauk* (Journal of the Academy of Military Sciences), wrote that the military must train specialists who were prepared not only for armed conflict but also for information-psychological and other new-generation warfare, including psychological warfare.<sup>7</sup> The authors added that "information effects distort facts or anticipate the imposition of an emotional perception on the subject that is advantageous to the side delivering the effects".<sup>8</sup> Principal targets of the information-psychological confrontation are:

- » communication and computer networks used by the state for administrative functions;
- » the military information infrastructure that deals with command-and-control tasks;
- » administrative structures of transportation and industrial enterprises;
- » mass media (first and foremost, electronic).<sup>9</sup>

The authors continued: "research on developments in information-psychological confrontation show that its principal goal is regime change in the enemy country (through the destruction of state organs)."<sup>10</sup> They concluded that the West wanted to work against the "consciousness of the population, to control people, forcing the population of the victim country to support the aggressor, acting against their own interests and not mobilising existing socio-psychological protective mechanisms".<sup>11</sup> To win an information-psychological confrontation, a belligerent must:

- » change citizens' traditional moral values and 'landmarks', create a lack of spirituality, and cultivate a negative attitude towards one's cultural legacy;
- » manipulate the consciousness of social groups by implementing so-called 'democratic transformations';
- » disorganise state administrative systems;
- » destabilise political relations among parties and coalitions to provoke conflicts and distrust; exacerbate political struggles and provoke repression against the opposition;
- » reduce the level of information support for organs of authority;

- » misinform the population about the work of state organs;
- » provoke social, political, national, and religious conflicts;
- » mobilise protests and incendiary strikes, mass disorder, and other economic protests;
- » undermine the international authority of a state; and
- » damage important interests of a state in the political, economic, defence, and other spheres.<sup>12</sup>

The authors isolate trends that will appear over the next decade:

- » a shift of aggression from the military-geographic domain to the information-psychological field, with a key role for social media links carrying emotive photos or video clips;
- » a sharp increase in the role of TV in fostering conflict, where the flames of mass psychosis will be fanned by reports, filmed on 'location' and retouched in special laboratories, about the misdeeds of government forces, victims among the peaceful population, and shifts to the rebel side;
- » an enemy skilfully gaining support of the country against which effects are directed;
- » irreversibility of the consequences for the victim country.<sup>13</sup>

Mass-media methods to manipulate information include the following:

- » lying to misinform one's own population;
- » concealing critically important information;
- » immersing valuable information in information garbage;
- » replacing terminology and concepts so that a true picture of events is hard to construct.<sup>14</sup>

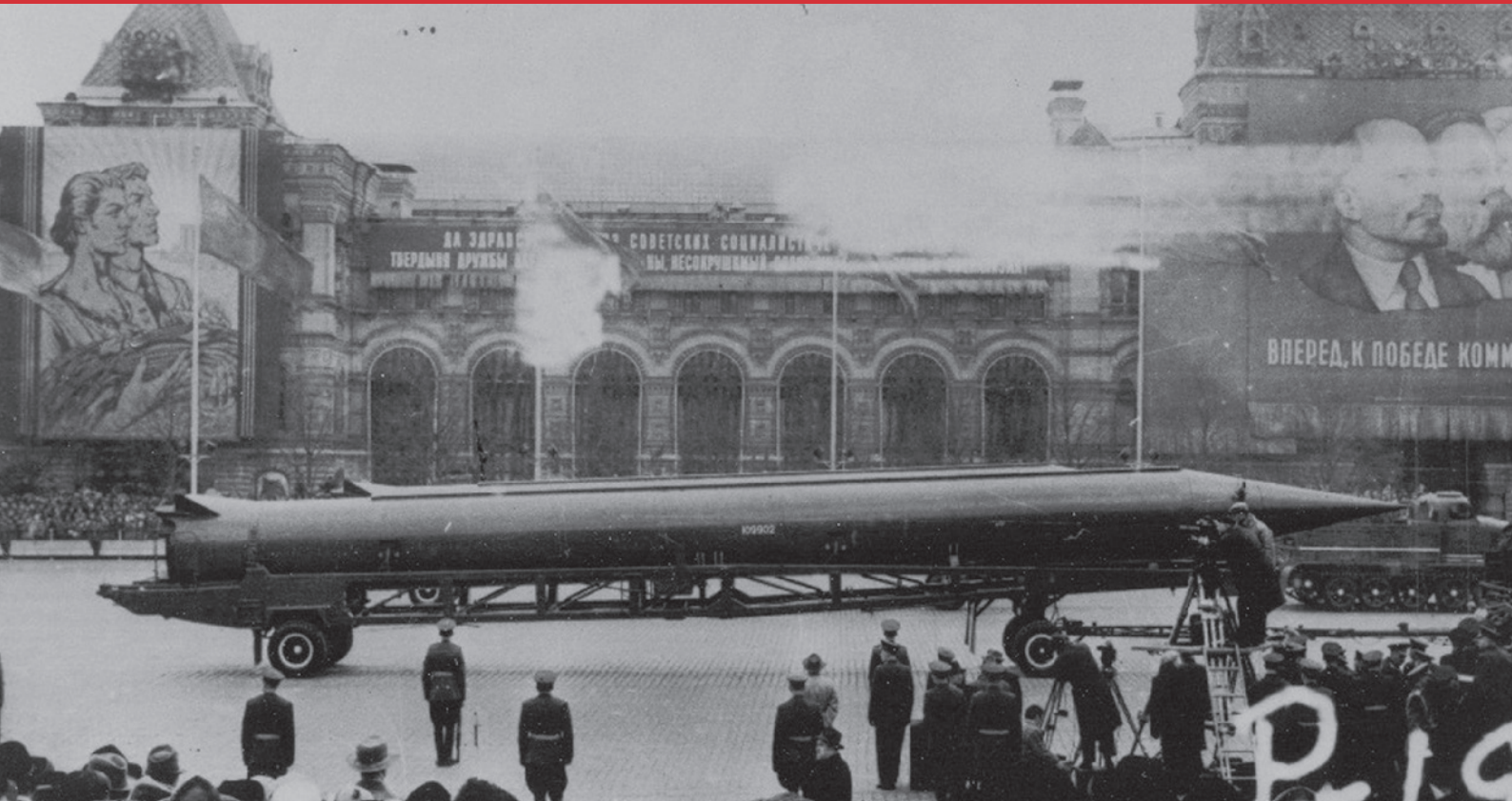
Many of these points relate to how Russian media operations have affected their domestic audience during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Also in 2014, a Russian analyst writing in the same journal discussed "cognitive weapons", defined as "the introduction into an enemy country's intellectual environment of false scientific theories, paradigms, concepts, and strategies that influence its state administration in the direction of weakening significant national defense potentials".<sup>15</sup> An information weapon, the author noted, is designed to have an information-psychological effect on one's own society first, with the aim of ensuring that mass consciousness turns to patriotism. After this, attention moves to elites and their decision-making in other countries. The goal is to weaken the administrative and defensive potential of a country. Targets can include material objects, financial-economic systems, and other areas of potential power.

## REFLEXIVE CONTROL

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An important aspect of Russian information-psychological operations is known as reflexive control (RC), which is closely related to the Chinese concept of "stratagems" and the US concept of "perception management". In 1995 Colonel S. Leonenko defined RC as "transmitting motives and grounds from the controlling entity to the controlled system that stimulate the desired decision. The goal of Reflexive Control is to prompt the enemy to make a decision unfavourable to himself. Naturally, one must have an idea about how he thinks."<sup>16</sup>



An excellent example of Soviet use of RC theory occurred during the Cold War when the Soviet Union attempted to alter US perceptions of the nuclear balance. The aim of this RC operation was to convince the West that Soviet missile capabilities were far more formidable than they actually were. To do so, Soviet military authorities paraded fake intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to deceive the West. The Soviets developed the fake missiles so as to make the warheads appear huge and to suggest that the missile carried multiple warheads. Soviet authorities realised that foreign attachés regularly attended these shows, since they presented one of the few opportunities to obtain military information legally. Moreover, since the Soviet Union did not even participate in arms-control fairs, the parade held special significance for intelligence officers. After observing the parades, the Soviets knew that the attachés would report their findings in great detail to Western intelligence organs.

However, the deception did not end there. The Soviets prepared other disinformation measures so that when Western intelligence services began to investigate the fake ICBMs, they would find collateral proof of

CIA reference photograph of Soviet medium-range ballistic missile (SS-4 in US documents, R-12 in Soviet documents) in Red Square, Moscow. c.1959-1962

Source: [www.gwu.edu](http://www.gwu.edu)



their existence and would be led further astray. Ultimately, the aim was to prompt foreign scientists, who desired to copy the advanced technology, down a dead-end street, thereby wasting precious time and money.<sup>17</sup>

A former instructor at the General Staff Academy of the Russian Federation underscored RC's importance, noting that "the most dangerous manifestation of the tendency to rely on military power relates not so much to the direct use of the means of armed combat, as to the possible results of the use of reflexive control by the opposing side via developments in the theory and practice of information war".<sup>18</sup>

A 2013 article on the concept of reflexive control, published in the journal *Voennaya mysl'* (Military Thought), discussed several RC methods that appear to be used in Ukraine today. Author V. L. Makhnin noted that going from the appearance of co-operation to that of conflict can break the will of an adversary's military and political leaders. This is known as strangling the enemy in a "friendly" embrace.<sup>19</sup> We are reminded of the Putin–Poroshenko truce agreed in Minsk in September 2014, which was followed by a Russian military invasion of Ukraine that resulted in the seizure of an additional 200 square miles of territory. Was Ukrainian president Poroshenko strangled in a friendly embrace? Not surprisingly, only hours after the February 2015 Minsk agreement separatist forces took Debaltseve: the same friendly embrace had repeated itself.

Makhnin states that simulacra (representations of reality), analogies, and other forms of influence are introduced into the reflexive process to control perceptions. We are reminded of the use of fascist and Nazi analogies in Russia's media in reference to people fighting in Maidan Square against Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. The analogy was drawn to gain support from the Russian population: Russians well remember the Nazi onslaught in the Second World War, so among them the analogy touches a raw nerve. Putin often uses analogies against the international community as well. He stated on several occasions that Russia's incursion into Crimea was little different from NATO's incursion into Kosovo—he forgot to add, of course, that Russia absorbed Crimea, while NATO left Kosovo as an independent entity.

## CONCLUSION

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Today, many pro-Kremlin public-opinion theorists are encouraging further use of information-psychological warfare: they believe that, in order to prevent a *glasnost* type effect from reoccurring, the transnational media must be effectively countered and that a focused information-psychological campaign is a way to achieve such an outcome. This kind of approach was most obvious in the recent Russian conquest of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, where Russian propagandists completely dominated TV and the media. Russia fears that, under the guise of protecting human rights, the transnational media will again successfully disseminate anti-Russian propaganda, which will lead to chaos and disintegration in Russia. The strong propaganda method sets out to convince the population of the correctness of Putin's approach to territorial reclamation, even if it uses lies, fake newscasts, and manipulated images to do so.

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## NATO AND THE POWER OF NARRATIVE



By Mark Laity

“The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness ... The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures ... All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict.”

The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2010<sup>1</sup>

As the quote above shows, the Kremlin has been thinking about what is now popularly called ‘hybrid warfare’ for some time, but in 2014 it put the theory into effect. It took the West by surprise, sweeping aside supposed certainties about the European space and security order that had been put in place at the end of the Cold War.

There is, of course, nothing very original in using information and other non-kinetic levers in war. Sun Tzu put it somewhat more elegantly when he stated: “Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.”<sup>2</sup> Still, I would argue that changes in society and technology mean that such enduring principles and practices are now being utilised in fresh ways to increasingly dramatic effect.

Technology transforms conflict. Early aircraft, for instance, were seen purely as supplementing the role of cavalry in reconnaissance but ultimately reshaped warfare. This time the major driver for change is the information age and its associated technology: the Internet, wireless technologies, smart phones, and the many other new screens and gadgets that surround us. As Russia’s Chief of Defence, General Valery Gerasimov, stated in 2013: “The information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy.”<sup>3</sup>

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine, NATO has been thinking hard about the right response. “We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats,” stated the Wales NATO Summit Declaration in September 2014.<sup>4</sup> “This will also include enhancing strategic communications.” NATO first formally addressed Strategic Communications (StratCom) in 2007, when it created a StratCom cell at its operational military headquarters at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe). It was a response to being brought face to face with the limitations of traditional military power in Afghanistan.

For half a century NATO had focused on traditional military power, with the information component regarded as secondary. However, in Afghan counter-insurgency operations the information battle became integral to the overall effort as NATO forces engaged in conflicts where the support of local populations could not be taken for granted. StratCom is not just a new term for public affairs or media relations, but a recognition of the need to make communications more than an afterthought to our planning. At SHAPE the stated aim of StratCom is “ensuring information and communication



aspects are placed at the heart of all levels of policy, planning and implementation, and are a fully integrated part of the overall effort”.<sup>5</sup>

But however important Afghanistan was, it was still half a world away. It was the Kremlin’s aggression in the European heartland that brought StratCom to centre-stage in supporting the protection of our fundamental values. StratCom’s motto is “Perception becomes Reality”: this is no encouragement to lie—quite the reverse—but a recognition that the interpretation of the same event can vary hugely, and critically influence follow-on actions and events.

Increasingly the West is waking up to the fact that it cannot take for granted that its perceptions and its narratives are shared, and therefore neither can its interests be assured of prevailing. In this essay I take a deeper look at how Russia uses perception in information war, and in particular how it has ‘operationalised’ the use of information, integrating it into its overall strategy; and, even more importantly, I consider its understanding of the central role of narrative.

## THE KREMLIN’S USE OF STRATEGY AND NARRATIVE

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Before moving on to narrative, it is important to understand how the Kremlin has operationalised its information effort. The Western instinct is to try to win the day by winning the argument, so we see the public discourse as one where the facts and differing points of view are laid out for debate. However, the Kremlin is not necessarily trying to win the argument, but instrumentalising information in order to achieve a desired effect.

Take Russia’s initial military intervention in Crimea. Kremlin denials of their military presence on the peninsula were not aimed at making us believe they were not there, but to create doubt and confusion so that the Ukrainian and international response was slow and hesitant. Having achieved its operational aim, the Kremlin casually admitted the lies.

Today, the Russian intervention in Eastern Ukraine continues to be denied, though the evidence is overwhelming. The denials have become almost *pro forma*, but they remain a necessary fiction because to admit to it would undermine the Kremlin’s overall aim of controlling Ukraine and ending sanctions.

This highlights another key lesson in how we handle the challenge, which is not to get obsessed with rebuttal and countering the myriad of accusations that come our way. For they are in part intended to distract us and get us lost in the detail, rather than focus on the bigger picture and contest—the information equivalent of the more military deception tactics (*maskirovka*) the Russian army and secret services have always prided themselves on. In this sense the West’s constant search for ‘proof’ of Russian involvement is of limited value in terms of influencing the Kremlin. Regardless of the strength of the evidence, the facts will still be denied because they are part of a larger information strategy—individual pieces that fit into their larger narrative jigsaw.

Sadly, the term ‘narrative’ is one that has become grossly and often inaccurately overused. Any justification, argument, or briefing paper tends to be described as a narrative—but they are not. So what is a narrative? It is certainly in part a story, and must follow a story-like structure. Stories are powerful things. They are how our ancestors sitting around the fire explained things, how they made events memorable and passed them on, how in the telling and retelling they created a common history and identity. The fireside may have gone and the storyteller may now be a film-maker, but the importance and influence of storytelling have not changed.

Yet a narrative is more than just a story. Rather, a narrative contains many stories, and—more importantly—it is an explanation of events in line with an ideology, theory, or belief, and one that points the way to future actions. Narratives make sense of the world, put things in their place according to our experience, and then tell us what to do.

A strategic narrative aligns the strategy and the narrative so they become mutually supportive and integrated. In Ukraine the Kremlin's strategy could be described thus:

In order to put pressure on, and regain influence over, the Kiev government and prevent its westward orientation, we will use covert action and, if necessary, further military means to increase and exploit pro-Russian sympathies, regain Crimea, and support a pro-Russian enclave in Ukraine.

However, expressed in Russian media narratives, this can sound like:

The fascist junta in Kiev illegally toppled the elected government and is viciously oppressing our Russian compatriots in Ukraine, who desperately needed and called for our help to protect their culture and rights.

Essentially these two statements are saying the same thing, even if the first couches it in operational-style language and the second in emotional terms. In effect, this is a strategy expressed in narrative form.

Where there is a factual or credibility problem with the emotional narrative—such as the Kiev government inconveniently failing to viciously oppress Ukraine's ethnic Russian population—the Kremlin fills the gap with fabricated stories about Ukrainian nationalist militias advancing on Crimea or ethnic Russian children being crucified by Ukrainian nationalists. Not just random lies, but lies that support the strategic narrative.

A successful strategic narrative is based on understanding your target audience. To press the right buttons requires a deep knowledge of local culture and history. In this way we see how Russia's Second World War experience was used to justify and give emotional resonance to current policies. Government media referred to the annexation of Crimea as "the third defence of Sevastopol". In March 2015 the Second World War was the second most covered story on Russia's Channel One news.<sup>6</sup>

Putin, in one of his major speeches, went back to the early Middle Ages for his references: "Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other."<sup>7</sup> This narrative line, with its emotional nod to the separatist vision of a "Novorossiya", supports the strategic aim to produce a con-federal Ukraine that is part of their Eurasian Union rather than the EU.

Such targeting is not just restricted to Slavic audiences. Russian generals talk about the alleged desire of the United States to maintain a unipolar world where it dominates and prevents the growth of a multipolar world—something that will appeal to rising economic powers who may feel their time to dominate geopolitics has arrived.

The broad spectrum of targets means specifically tailoring sub-narratives to resonate with differing audiences. The key, though, is that each sub-narrative must be consistent with the core narrative. The Kremlin's global strategic narrative is a challenge to the existing European security order, reflected in Putin's regular complaints in his speeches about Russia being unfairly treated over the last decades—and his desire for a new world order. Events in Ukraine are one part of that bigger picture.

This use of narrative, analysis, and understanding of audiences can range from individually targeting countries whose support for Ukraine is perhaps weaker, through to using Russian state-funded media to play upon current Western mindsets. Thus the Kremlin's international news broadcaster Russia Today (now renamed 'RT') mimics the visual style and ideals of Western media with its slogan "Question More". In an era when trust in institutions has never been lower, this message resonates—though of course the relentless and calculated focus on perceived Western and Ukrainian flaws is not applied to Russian institutions.

This stark contrast between how Russia positions itself in the Western media space and the deliberate closing of its own space is no accident. For the Kremlin, its own public space is a bastion that must be guarded, the aim being to maintain cohesion at home while encouraging discord elsewhere. As General Gerasimov noted, "it is necessary to perfect activities in the information space, including the defence of our own objects."<sup>8</sup>

The money spent on RT, Sputnik, and the many Russian state-funded websites shows the Kremlin is in this for the long haul. Moreover, the Kremlin's doctrine of "information confrontation" sees no line between peace and war. In his 2013 speech General Gerasimov had an accompanying diagram showing the "information line of effort" straddling the military and non-military areas, used in every phase of conflict from "hidden origin" through the start of conflict to its resolution.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, much of the West's military information doctrine and strategy, and associated resources, rest on a clear division between peace and war. Reconciling this with Russia's declared strategy is a challenge.

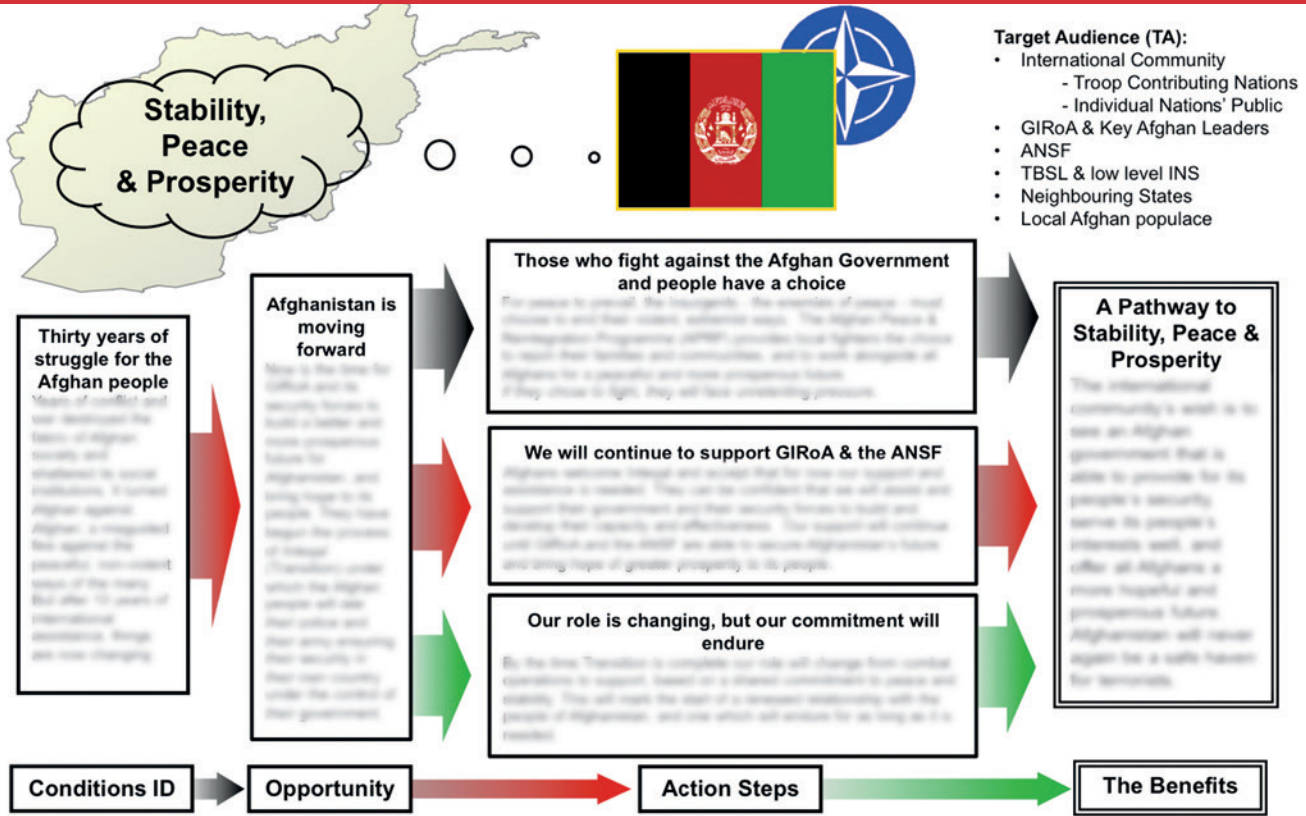
## NATO, THE WEST, AND THE SEARCH FOR A COALITION NARRATIVE

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We have to recognise that having our own narrative is a strategic necessity. But while this narrative has to be resonant, emotional, and appealing to core values, we also have to be able to operationalise it: a successful strategic narrative is both inspirational and practical.

The current SHAPE Strategic Directive on StratCom has a section dedicated to narrative, while a new NATO military handbook on StratCom has a portion on generating and integrating narratives into operations. One popular model, the "Narrative Arc",<sup>10</sup> breaks down the building blocks of narrative into four parts: (1) the problem/conflict, which leads to (2) the desire to solve it, which leads to (3) a series of actions, which ultimately leads to (4) a resolution/happy ending. Interestingly, this classic story arc usefully aligns with the building blocks of a basic strategy where problem, desire, events, and outcome can be seen, in military terms, as (1) situation, (2) objectives, (3) execution, and (4) end state. As has been argued, "to draw a sharp distinction between strategy and strategic narrative is misguided: as the explanation of actions, strategic narrative is simply strategy expressed in narrative form".<sup>11</sup>

However, as a multinational military White Paper on "Narrative Development in Coalition Operations" states,<sup>12</sup> strategic narratives cannot be simply foisted from above but depend on a deep understanding of the local attitudes, traditions, folklore, and myths that make up the "narrative landscape". The paper advises analysing the landscape through a template which includes, for instance: desires and motivations; individual satisfactory outcomes; identifying cultural myths, legends, and stories; appropriate tone and language. Each of these is aligned to the various actors and parties to the conflict. Of course, that is just the start, a catalyst for a whole series of actions and products that follow.



A conscious attempt to utilise basic narrative was applied successfully in Afghanistan in order to ensure that narrative and communication was fully integrated not just into traditional messaging but into influencing all our actions, violent or non-violent. The varying impact of StratCom, managing perceptions and narrative, was evident in many ways, ranging from changing coalition driving styles, modifying rules of engagement on opening fire, through to the contents of operational plans.

But as the "Narrative Development" White Paper acknowledges, "the security environment of the twenty-first century is very complex. International response to crisis situations involves a variety of actors: NATO, EU, nations and additional partners. Even when forming a common approach in terms of a coalition all these actors still will follow national agendas and own interests."

NATO and the West do not generally all sing the same song, nor can they be forced to, which is itself testament to the hugely attractive freedoms of our societies and governments. Our diversity is of course our strength, and the reason other nations and citizens want to get closer to us. But it

The ISAF Narrative: one narrative to drive all communication efforts

Used by ISAF, but also in *White Paper, Narrative Development in Coalition Operations*. Draft v0.96, 10 January 2014. pp130

is also a challenge to combine efforts, and opponents will do anything possible to play divide and disrupt. In this context the Russian Federation, as a single country, can combine, integrate, and focus all elements of national power—economic, political, cultural, and informational—while the West's response is harder, as these elements are disaggregated among a melange of nations, organisations, NGOs, and pressure groups. It is all too easy to become discordant or to stop seeing the wood for the trees—or (as the Kremlin wants) to lose confidence in our values.

I would argue, though, that the narrative is there to be seized. We have to fully realise what has happened and what is at stake. When the Berlin Wall came down, Europe—including Russia—agreed a new way ahead. A whole variety of agreements and treaties signified acceptance of a new way of doing business where, in Europe at least, great-power competition and spheres of influence were set aside, where the sovereignty of small nations had the same legitimacy as their larger neighbours.

What is happening now is that a large nation believes—because it is large—that it has the right to change all this. Russia is saying that, because it allegedly fears NATO's intentions, for that reason it has the right to create some kind of 'space' around itself on the territory of its neighbours, where its interests hold sway. It argues that this is defensive: it needs this Kremlin-managed zone, it claims, to protect itself against a self-defined threat. The same rationale was used to justify its control of Eastern Europe through the Warsaw Pact in the Cold War. The Kremlin thinks it has the right to do this because it is more powerful: might is right. Apparently, smaller neighbours—because they are small—do not have similar rights. So, even though such countries have previously been annexed, occupied, or controlled by the Soviet Union—giving them cause for understandable concern—they apparently do not have the right to define their own economic and security interests, to be in the EU, or to aspire to join NATO.

Some foreign-policy theorists—advocates of such hard-nosed theories as neo-realism and offensive neo-realism—say this is just the way the international system works and we should just get real. To quote Thucydides on a war long ago: "right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."<sup>13</sup>

Others take a different view; it was certainly not the course chosen for Europe in 1989. That course was basically liberal, perhaps more idealistic than we now appreciate, and based on an agreed set of rules. In Europe it has given small nations more security and choice than perhaps ever before, and—for all our current problems—it gave Europe prosperity. Russia's challenge is to the existing European security order in favour of geopolitical competition. Here we have our two competing strategic narratives. To use our narrative arc/strategic narrative model as laid out above:

- 1 our **problem/situation** is Russia challenging the existing European security order and seeking to re-establish spheres of interest;
- 2 our **desire/objective** is to protect that order;
- 3 our **actions/execution** are what we are doing now and decide to do in the future ...
- 4 in order to reach our **happy ending/end state**, where all Europe's nations (including Russia), large and small, can have secure borders and make their own choices, based on mutual respect and accepted rules.

Here is the basis of a strategic narrative. Over recent years I have visited countries such as Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. Inevitably such visits give only a snapshot, but what I feel is that they are part of our Europe—they have made their choice. The people I have met, the friends I have made, are not (as British prime minister Neville Chamberlain said of Czechoslovakia in 1938) “part of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing”. We do know them and they are part of our Europe. We should not get distracted by the details or blinded by the smokescreen: the big picture is the course we set in 1989, in tune with our values and reflecting the best of us.

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## THE CASE FOR INFORMATION DEFENCE

### A Pre-Emptive Strategy for Dealing with the New Disinformation Wars



By Ben Nimmo

The Kremlin's disinformation campaign during the seizure of Crimea is unique in recent history in that it was deliberately exposed as a lie by the Kremlin itself.

On March 4, 2014, President Vladimir Putin gave a press conference in which he insisted that the "only thing" Russia had done during the seizure of Crimean government buildings by unidentified gunmen was "to enhance the defence of our military facilities". When asked outright whether the forces involved were Russians, he insisted that "those were local self-defence units".<sup>1</sup> But a year later, he openly, indeed proudly, announced in a documentary on the annexation that he had led it himself.<sup>2</sup>

Why did he admit that he had lied?

This author believes that he did so because the lie had served its purpose. Crimea had fallen without a shot being fired, the annexation had been an enormous popular success in Russia, and it was more important for Putin to capitalise on that popularity at a time when Russian losses in Eastern Ukraine were mounting than it was to defend his own credibility in foreign eyes.

Putin's willingness to expose his own dishonesty shows one of the key features of modern disinformation campaigns: they are not intended to last forever, but for *long enough to achieve a specific effect*. The effect of Putin's lie was to help obscure the presence of regular Russian soldiers in Crimea for the critical period during which they prepared the pseudo-referendum on the annexation. Once that purpose was served, the lie could be abandoned.

The Kremlin's approach capitalises on developments in technology. Putin's denial of March 4, 2014 was reported within hours by outlets including the BBC, the *Washington Post*, Al Arabiya, the *New Zealand Herald*, and Australian news website news.com.au. Thus his lie literally went around the world long before there was a chance to establish the truth.

Modern disinformation consists of lying at the speed of light. And it is not only the Kremlin that has picked up on this. ISIL is using the Internet to radicalise Western citizens; China has made disinformation one of the pillars of its Three Warfares; outlets such as Iran's Press TV and Venezuelan-led TeleSur broadcast anti-Western messages to a global audience. Meanwhile in the West itself we see disinformation spreading virally, whether it is tales about President Obama being a secret Muslim or conspiracy theories about 9/11.

Disinformation campaigns have seriously undermined the concept of information as an objective and provable set of facts, eroding public trust in all media and all sources.<sup>3</sup> As Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss describe Russian information warfare, "The Kremlin exploits the idea of freedom of information to inject disinformation into society. The effect is not to persuade (as in classic public diplomacy) or earn credibility but to sow confusion via conspiracy theories and proliferate falsehoods."<sup>4</sup> The Kremlin is not alone.



## DISPELLING THE FOG: INFORMATION DEFENCE

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The chorus of voices demanding a response from democratic governments has grown to a Verdi-esque *fortissimo*. Some insist that we fight fire with fire, demanding a “reawakening of our lost skills for propaganda”.<sup>5</sup> Others argue that liberal democracies should respond “less with a focus on countering Russian propaganda than on building attractive alternatives”.<sup>6</sup>

The US recently added a dedicated counter-ISIL cell to its Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications;<sup>7</sup> while since the start of the Ukraine crisis, NATO has published a series of fact sheets rebutting key Russian myths in detail.<sup>8</sup> But how effective can these initiatives be when the other side is simply trying to muddy the water? After all, you can’t out-debate an opponent who doesn’t even take his own argument seriously, but is simply trying to confuse, distract, and delay.

Responding to disinformation is not enough. Given the speed at which disinformation can spread through the Internet and achieve its desired effect, a responsive campaign is a losing campaign.

In order to deal with the new challenges, I propose the concept of “information defence”, sponsoring the creation of a pool of knowledge and independent experts so that the next time a lie is broadcast, it can be challenged *before it has time to spread too far*. The conceptual approach to adopt is not one of countering propaganda, but defending the ability of accurate information to circulate freely in the same time frame as disinformation. Crucially, this approach would be pre-emptive rather than reactive; it would focus on the defence of information sources rather than ‘messaging’, ‘propaganda’, or ‘information warfare’. In effect, information defence is about enabling credible sources to find out and report what actually happened quickly enough that they can challenge the disinformation as it spreads.

But who should be responsible for creating and upholding information defence? Is it a job for government, as was so often the case in the twentieth century? Can private media take up the slack, or are they too distracted by cutbacks and clickbait to focus on information-gathering? What could be the role of NGOs? I propose combining all three in a new information model that guarantees government support and editorial independence.

## AN INFORMATION DEFENCE MODEL

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In the current public climate, governments and elected officials are not viewed as reliable sources of information. However, other commentators are: according to the 2015 Trust Barometer survey published by PR firm Edelman, academics and NGOs still enjoy strong levels of trust, with faith in academics reaching 70 percent—the most trusted category recorded. Trust in the media has declined, but remains just above 50 percent overall.<sup>9</sup> Governments should therefore focus on supporting the work of such credible commentators, rather than seeking to engage in information conflict themselves. In the words of Jane Harman, president of the Woodrow Wilson Center:

The kind of kids swayed by Dabiq, the Islamic State’s glossy magazine, are not the kind of kids open to the input of the State Department. Recruitment is happening on platforms where the US government has less than zero cultural capital ... The government still has skin in the game—dollars and cents, and, more important, convening power and information-sharing—that can make these public-private partnerships work. But it needs to lead from behind.<sup>10</sup>



In three areas, governmental action should be indirect and limited to providing hands-off funding:

- » supporting journalism;
- » supporting analysts;
- » supporting NGOs.

In three other areas, governments should play a more direct role:

- » rebuilding foreign-language, public-service broadcasting;
- » monitoring social media and propaganda broadcasting;
- » providing satellite imagery.

## SUPPORTING JOURNALISM

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Governments and intergovernmental organisations or groupings such as the EU, NATO, Visegrád Four, and Nordic-Baltic Six should sponsor exchange programmes between journalists from areas vulnerable to crisis and disinformation and their colleagues in Western mainstream media outlets. Journalists from vulnerable areas should be awarded internships in Western editorial offices, while Western journalists should be funded to conduct study and reporting tours in vulnerable areas.

Such vulnerable areas include areas of North Africa and the Middle East exposed to extremist radicalisation or attack; NATO and EU member states and partners bordering Russia; and the littoral states of the South China Sea. According to Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index 2015,<sup>11</sup> these include some of the most restricted media markets in the world.

The Western outlets should be respected organisations with a track record of reliable reporting: broadcasters such as the BBC, NPR, and Deutsche Welle; newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, and *Le Monde*; and wires such as Reuters, Bloomberg, the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, and Deutsche Presse-Agentur.

The programmes should be established in such a way as to guarantee the safety and editorial independence of Western journalists visiting the vulnerable areas. It is vital to allow them to report what they like, how they like, when they like.

The benefits would be threefold:

- » journalists from vulnerable areas would be exposed to the editorial standards and practices of major Western outlets;
- » journalists from Western outlets would gain a working knowledge of vulnerable areas, the issues facing them, and the personalities involved;
- » editors in the West would build up a contact list of former interns working in potential flashpoint areas.

If a crisis involving the use of disinformation were to break out in a vulnerable area, news editors would be able to call on their former interns on the ground, and their own journalists who had recently been there, from day one of the crisis. This would give them the best chance of obtaining and broadcasting accurate, independent information in real time—breaking attempts by hostile forces to establish a monopoly on information and pre-empting attempts at disinformation.

## SUPPORTING ANALYSTS

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In a similar vein, governments should sponsor exchanges between think-tanks and universities in the liberal democracies and vulnerable areas; they should also fund studies on specific aspects of their vulnerability to external threats. The risks addressed by such studies could include ISIL penetration in the Middle East; hybrid warfare in the Baltic States; and legal and economic pressure around the South China Sea.

The one condition attached to such sponsorship should be that the exchanges and study visits be followed by the publication of a report on the risks analysed. Sponsorship would have to be structured so as to guarantee full editorial independence; however, the sponsoring government could amplify the articles published to maximise their effect.

If a crisis involving the use of disinformation were then to erupt, officials and media would be able to call on experts with personal experience of, and contacts in, the affected area, right from the outset. Ideally, such experts would be able to expose disinformation for what it is as it emerges, based on their own knowledge, experience, and contacts. The effect, once again, would be to minimise the unchallenged spread of disinformation in the earliest and most crucial hours of a crisis.

## SUPPORTING NGOS

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The third component of this hands-off support should be to sponsor exchanges with crisis-response and humanitarian NGOs in vulnerable areas. Health, medicine, disaster relief, and food NGOs could all be considered.<sup>12</sup> This would allow the exchange of best practices and of information about the situation on the ground. It would expose local NGOs to international working standards and allow international NGOs to build up a network of local contacts in vulnerable areas.

In times of crisis, this would give the NGOs direct access to sources on the ground, accelerating their ability to find out the facts and take the necessary decisions. It would also contribute to the early spread of reliable information, because NGOs are regularly called upon by media to give their assessment of the situation. As such, improving their access to information on the ground would also improve the overall pool of information, without compromising their independence.

## REBUILDING BROADCASTING

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In the long term, to challenge the information monopoly of states such as Russia and China over their own populations, democratic governments will have to invest in generating attractive alternative programmes: “innovative content strategies and formats including cutting-edge documentary and satire”.<sup>13</sup> However, creating such ‘content factories’ will inevitably be a long-term effort. In the shorter term, the authorities can and should boost foreign-language public broadcasting in the West, such as the BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Voice of America.

Such broadcasting has been, quite simply, sliced too thin. The BBC World Service broadcasts in 32 languages on an annual budget of just over \$378 million.<sup>14</sup> Voice of America broadcasts programmes in 45 languages for just over \$200 million.<sup>15</sup> RT, by comparison, runs just six language services, but it had a reported budget of 11.87 billion roubles in 2014 (over \$300 million by 2014



rates), and those six languages are English, French, Russian, German, Spanish, and Arabic, with a combined native-speaking population of some 1.5 billion.

There is an urgent and vital need to reverse this situation, focusing on the languages of communities especially targeted by those who practise disinformation, such as Russian-speakers in Europe and Russia, Muslim communities in Europe, Spanish-speakers in parts of Latin America, and the far-right and far-left communities in Europe. However, closing down apparently 'unnecessary' language services and transferring the funding to more 'useful' tongues would be short-sighted—as was shown by the BBC's 2011 decision to stop radio broadcasting in Russian and Ukrainian as a result of budget cuts. Instead, governments should bite the bullet, reach for their wallets, and provide more funding to support extra content and reporting in key target languages.

Boosting existing broadcasters, rather than establishing new ones, would both lower the overall cost of the initiative and make use of their existing

Ostankino television center (First channel). Moscow, Russia, 2015.

brand credibility. The funding should be made available in such a way that there is a clear firewall between government funding and editorial decision-making—the kind of separation that existed between the BBC World Service and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office until FCO funding was ended in 2014.

Such an initiative would give vulnerable communities improved access to independent information sources, eroding the information monopoly of states such as China, Iran, Venezuela, and Russia and of groups such as ISIL. It would also give the broadcasters themselves a greater pool of in-house experts to consult in the event of a disinformation crisis, since anchors in their flagship language would be able to refer to reporters from their foreign-language services to get the latest news and analysis.

## MONITORING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Extremist groups such as ISIL specialise in using social media to radicalise potential recruits. Social-media posts by Russian soldiers have become one of the main sources of evidence for the presence of those troops in Ukraine. Websites such as StopFake<sup>16</sup> and Bellingcat<sup>17</sup> have proved immensely effective in debunking the myth of Russian non-involvement in Ukraine's conflict; they have also sparked compelling follow-up investigative journalism,<sup>18</sup> which has proved the Russian presence beyond any reasonable doubt.

At the same time, the proliferation of web-based media and pseudo-media has led to an unprecedented fragmentation of news. The first challenge facing those concerned with propaganda and radicalisation is simply to track the dizzying number of outlets peddling their version of events to willing or interested viewers. In terms of response, meanwhile, it is simply not enough to focus on the traditional, mainstream media; all available media must be used, and the message must be tailored to the needs of each.

For all these reasons, governments should invest far more substantially in social-media and Internet-based monitoring and engagement. In non-crisis periods, this monitoring could be used to provide early warning of radicalisation efforts and trends, and, potentially, to engage in debate—although as Jane Harman noted on the question of counter-radicalisation, “We need to be very aware that our soft power is limited in these spaces.” In times of crisis, effort could be switched to looking for early evidence of intervention by state or non-state actors in vulnerable areas. This kind of activity could be most effectively organised by governments, as private-sector actors are unlikely to have the funding required to set up a full-scale monitoring organisation.

Such government programmes would inevitably face accusations of bias and distortion from their opponents. The monitoring units should therefore adopt, and make public, a standard working practice to deal with the evidence they encounter, if it is decided to publish it. Such evidence should first be recorded as a screenshot and then released to the media *under embargo*, in the form of the original web-link, a screenshot, and (where needed) a courtesy translation. This would allow editors to verify for themselves that the content exists where the monitors say it does, before it can be taken down by the authorities in the country in question. In effect, the approach would be “they spotted it, we checked it”—a far more credible message than “government monitors say”.



## SUPPORTING THE PROVISION OF SATELLITE IMAGERY

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Satellite imagery from private-sector suppliers has been a critical tool in providing accurate information on events in both Asia and Europe. For example, the Center for Strategic and International Studies has launched an Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative providing satellite imagery of China's island-building in the South China Sea;<sup>19</sup> and the Atlantic Council has used Google Earth satellite imagery to show areas on the Ukrainian border which were fields a year ago and which are now Russian military camps.<sup>20</sup> Such studies are a priceless resource.

However, this resource would be most useful in countering a fast-moving and time-limited disinformation campaign if (a) it was established before the crisis began, and (b) the images were updated regularly and frequently—at least weekly. If these conditions were met, any large troop movements or construction activities on the ground (or water) could be revealed publicly *at the time of their occurrence*, rather than weeks later. This would make it far easier to expose disinformation at an early stage.

The cost of generating sufficiently frequent coverage of at-risk areas is likely to be too great for private concerns. Governments should therefore find a way to support such initiatives. Given their concerns over the release of classified information, the most realistic approach would be to set up a partnership with non-governmental investigative projects and commercial providers of satellite imagery, in which governments could both provide funding and request footage of areas of special concern, without being involved in the dissemination of imagery.

To guarantee credibility and transparency, images should be posted, unedited, in an online archive accessible to the general public at any time. In a crisis, this would allow media and experts to scan back through the archive of photos of a given area and look for any indications of external intervention while the crisis is still unfolding, rather than days or weeks later. While costly, the effect would be to give the public an intelligence capability hitherto reserved for governments, making it easier to identify hybrid attacks while they are developing and thereby making denial much more difficult.

## CONCLUSION

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The information age has made it much easier to spread disinformation, and much harder to counter it fast enough to make a difference on the ground. Reacting to such disinformation will never be enough; what is needed is pre-emptive information, so that false stories can be disproved as soon as they emerge. Governments cannot credibly provide such information themselves, but they should support organisations that can.

The idea is not to counter disinformation but to defend credible sources of information, so that they can do their job faster and more effectively: information defence.

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