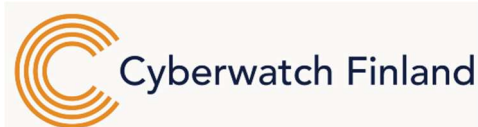


The West's Cognitive Warfare Maginot Line



By Michael Miklaucic

There is more than one way to win a war. The ancient Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu teaches us that “the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.” The war in Ukraine is merely the visible, kinetic front of a global war raging today that the enemies of the West are winning without fighting. It is the



fierce but largely invisible global war in the cognitive domain where main actors, particularly Russia and China, have gained the upper hand. And let us be crystal clear; despite the Trump administration's recent flip-flops, Russia is a sworn enemy of the United States and the West. The ultimate winner of this new war will dominate the future competition for power and influence throughout the world.

The cognitive domain is the source and the homeland for understanding the global threat environment, the values worth defending, the reason and the will to fight. Put simply, cognitive warfare is the manipulation of perception and information for the purpose of waging war and achieving strategic goals. Russia and China each dedicate substantial resources to cognitive warfare. Russia's budget allocation for cognitive warfare is estimated to be as high as \$2 billion distributed through what America's recently dismantled Global Engagement Center described as an extensive “Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem.” Estimates of China's budget for cognitive warfare reach as high as \$10 billion, with between 100,000 and 200,000 individuals in their so-called “hacker army” alone. China's United Front Works Department, responsible for collecting intelligence, managing relations, and exerting influence on elite individuals and organizations overseas employs up to 40,000 with a budget of roughly \$2.5 billion per year. Although these numbers are impossible to confirm, it is widely acknowledged that, by comparison, the collective West invests significantly less in the various aspects

of cognitive warfare, aside from techno-centric cyber operations such as cybersecurity and cyber resilience.

Cognitive warfare is a vast and nebulous category that encompasses all operations that directly (and sometimes indirectly) impact the way conflict is perceived by

governments as well as by combatants and non-combatant populations. The key underlying premise is that wars are ultimately won or lost in the human mind. Populations will endure hardship and deprivation when they perceive mass injustice. Inferior forces will fight against impossible odds in support of a belief that has taken root firmly enough. People and armies can undergo 180-degree changes in opinion when their perceptions change. Cognitive warfare includes information operations – both misinformation and disinformation – influence operations, and narrative operations, and can be deployed at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. At the operational level, for example, Russian operatives have exerted strenuous efforts to persuade Ukrainian defenders that their efforts are futile and encouraging them to surrender or retreat. In Beijing, since assuming power, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has been spearheading a global strategic information campaign proclaiming the decline of the West and the inevitable rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Russia and China wage cognitive warfare relentlessly and with ever-greater skill and effectiveness, united in their “no-limits” hatred of the West and particularly of U.S. dominance, while flooding the zone with strategic narratives that position them as the “good guys.” Note China's success at claiming the higher moral ground with its narrative proclaiming a “common destiny for all mankind,” and the win/win benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative and Russia's claim to be the protector of

traditional, conservative values while insisting on its rightful place in a multi-polar world and justified and historical dominance over its rimlands.

The common thread of our enemies' efforts in the cognitive domain is the enduring injustice of Western colonialism and the need for a diminished West in a multipolar world. These meretricious narratives play well throughout the global south. If there were any question regarding the success of these Russian and Chinese efforts, one need only note the widening acceptance of the absurd lie that Ukraine is at fault for the unprovoked Russian invasion of their country or that NATO has been the historical aggressor, narratives that had extremely few adherents within the West at the outset of the Russian invasion in 2022. Today they are increasingly common with verbatim Kremlin talking points now occasionally heard even in the White House and the halls of the U.S. Congress. Another Kremlin favourite is that NATO is dead or broken. Beijing boasts that BRICS, originally consisting of five countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) but now with ten members and more than twenty more applying for membership, will rebalance world power to the benefit of the global south. These are precisely the themes that Moscow and Beijing wish to promote, and hope will come to dominate the global infosphere.

With near complete dominance of their respective infospheres, authoritarian states have a distinct advantage over their open, democratic competitors in the cognitive warfare domain. Their control over content within their infosystems enables them to carefully monitor and censor what their populations can see and hear. Moreover, cognitive warfare is most successful when all elements of national power are synchronized in a whole-of-society tsunami. Such synchrony is much more easily accomplished in authoritarian states that can mobilize all internal constituencies either through coercion or calls to patriotism.

The West has potentially powerful weapons and indeed won the great cognitive war of the 20th century – when all the DIME elements of national strength – Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic – were aligned in pursuit of the victory of democracy and capitalism. The triumph of democracy and market economics was the greatest cognitive victory of our lifetimes; it brought down the Soviet empire, its satellite communist states, and the Marxist ideology.

Today, however, the West is in cognitive paralysis, hobbled by bureaucratic inertia, toxic in-fighting, anachronistic legal and ethical constructions, and a crippling fear of escalation.

With very few exceptions, Western countries have not devised mechanisms, either individually or collectively, to harness and synchronize their respective elements of national power in an effort to counter, let alone wage successful cognitive warfare. Handicapped by outdated binary notions of war and peace, Western policymakers seem naïve in their faith that “the truth” of democratic superiority will prevail in the global marketplace of ideas. This naïve faith that the open marketplace of ideas favours truth and democratic values serves as a sort of cognitive Maginot line. However, recent advances in information and communication technologies allow adversaries to bypass this ideological Maginot line and overwhelm Western media by flooding all media channels using bots, deepfakes, false identities, etc. Social media are used to manipulate information, while accelerating and magnifying Russian and Chinese narratives.

The wilful reluctance of Western policy-makers—in both legislative and executive authority—to recognize the importance of cognitive warfare carries the risk of potentially irreversible losses in power and influence worldwide, as power and influence are the factors that limit the West's ability to influence strategic outcomes and prevail in global competition.

Sadly, the United States, though at the forefront throughout the Cold War, has lost the edge in cognitive warfare. The recent elimination of the Global Engagement Center at the State Department, the reckless dismantling of USAID, dismantling of units within the intelligence community that studied and analysed adversary information operations and the habitual relegation of information warfare to an annex in Department of Defence war planning which offers no military career path all combine to deprive the United States of the most potent tools of cognitive warfare. The alleged suspension of information operations aimed at Russia and growing mistrust between the United States and its European allies open wide the aperture for foreign information and influence warfare. These are self-inflicted wounds. All that remain to exert influence and wield power are military threats and economic sanctions against both enemies, neutrals, and even allies. Russia and China both know that the military threats are hollow. Both have taken steps to insulate

themselves from the effects of Western economic sanctions. Thus, Russia and China have effectively countered the last two measures—military threats and economic sanctions—on which the West has staked its security.

Some Western nations recognize the importance of cognitive warfare and have policies, practices, and even institutions for self-defence in the cognitive space. Sweden recently established a psychological defence agency; France created VIGINUM in the office of the President; Finland and the Baltic countries are keenly aware of the cognitive threat and have embraced the concept of comprehensive security. However, even these are currently limited primarily to defensive operations like detection, exposure, and resilience. The offensive toolbox is empty. Resilience is critical yet not enough.

In the context of permanent struggle, which is the baseline paradigm of both Russia and the Peoples Republic of China, war is not intermittent, but a permanent condition of coexistence in which they both seek constant strategic advantage. The laws of armed conflict which govern western behaviour in warfare are based on principles such as proportionality, discrimination, and military necessity—principles which cannot be easily applied to cognitive warfare. While an appropriate set of laws and norms is struggling to emerge, it is self-defeating to continue to apply the anachronistic laws of armed conflict to cognitive warfare. When attribution for a specific act is indeterminable, and the strategic impact is non-military, how can we rationally determine the appropriate retaliation? For this reason, retaliation is a defeatist justification for deterrent action in cognitive warfare. Demonstration rather than retaliation will be crucial to deterrence in this condition of persistent attack.

In recognition of this dilemma by 2018 the U.S. Cyber Command adopted an operational approach based on persistent engagement and pioneered the Defend Forward strategy to counter cyber-adversaries by “actively disrupting malicious cyber activity before it can affect the U.S. Homeland.” The Hunt Forward variant of the strategy works in tandem with U.S. allies to blunt cyber aggression against their systems. But even more offensive techniques are needed. National Security Council Senior Director for Cyber Alexei Bulazel wants to “destigmatize” offensive cyber operations possibly engaging the private sector.

Only a paradigm shift can disrupt the West’s careless march toward defeat in the cognitive warfare domain. The notion that China and Russia are just “competitors” is quaint but wrong. They intent on overthrowing the liberal, rules-based global order. The credulous faith that these superpowers will voluntarily settle for some form of peaceful coexistence, if only they are sufficiently propitiated with concessions, is naïve and dangerous. An inconvenient and uncomfortable truth is that if the West wishes to protect the values it cherishes, it must fight for them. It must seize the offensive. No war is won by a permanent defensive crouch.

Cognitive warfare is real warfare. Winning or losing matters. Without proper understanding of the threat, of the values that need defending, and of the underlying reason and will to fight, the most advanced artificial intelligence will not save the day. Without a credible capability and demonstrated will to inflict unacceptable pain on our enemies, they will continue to probe our weaknesses and seek strategic advantage. If the West loses the competition for cognitive dominance, neither firepower nor technology will be able to prevent its authoritarian enemies from prevailing in this war.

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