Valdai | Discussion Club

105

Crisis in 21st Century Political Warfare

Greg Simons

About the Author

Greg Simons

Associate Professor at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies (IRES), Uppsala University, Sweden

Introduction

In order to gain a freer hand in exercising foreign policy and pursuing those objectives, which include practices such as regime change, the US and its allies needed to change the manner in which the rules and boundaries of international relations were conceived and applied. To meet this operational objective, the idea of the centuries old practice of the Westphalian system needed to be broken down as it presented an obstacle to the selective application of political, economic, diplomatic, and military power against a selected government that has been designated for regime change. This is far from being a solely US pursuit, and other powers use the tactics described within. However, the capacity and capabilities of other countries are not as developed as those of the United States. In spite of the potent challenges currently being mounted, the US retains its position for now as the only global superpower.

The declaration of a crisis in turn leads to a political mobilisation for an apparent 'resolution' to the situation that quickly and logically follows. Declaring a crisis present in the physical domain permits the projection of the need for extra-ordinary measures in an extra-ordinary time message through the information domain in order to shape audience opinion, perception, and reaction to the media constructed event. This has the effect of 'hijacking' the information flows that surround any crisis, in practical terms this entails restricting the operational options of the victim and increasing the operational choices of the perpetrator of the political warfare.

One of the most recent and useful tools for the purposes of skirting the legal and ethical issues of regime change within the Westphalian system is to invoke the notion of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which is a very fluid concept (bordering upon slogan) that superficially appears to be benevolent. Whereas, in fact, it is so vague that it can be moulded to almost any purpose if the event is 'correctly' narrated and the reality is sufficiently surrounded by the fog of war created by a sustained effort of propaganda and subversion. In doing so, there is the possibility of plausible deniability of the acts of subversion and political warfare, and to the appearance of creating the need for 'humanitarian' intervention that can consolidate the gains made during the period of indirect and covert participation (and quite possibly illegal according to international law).

Manufacturing Public Opinion and Perception

Within the broader realm of information warfare, there are three domains to be considered: the physical domain, the information domain, and the cognitive domain.[1] In terms of the search for political and military influence, the domain that they seek to influence is the cognitive by communicating and influencing through the informational one in order to enable military operations and foreign policy in the physical domain. An understanding of the reality and 'ground truth' translates into combat or policy effectiveness and dominance. On the intangible side, information exists and is created in the information domain. It is shared and can be subjected to manipulation, which means that the information in it may not accurately reflect the ground truth. This domain concerns the communication of information among and between the various vested actors. The information domain is subject to competition and interference from other actors present, which implies the presence of both offensive and defensive dimensions to communication activities.

The objective is to gain information superiority within the information domain over the adversary. The minds of the participants are found in the cognitive domain, which is where perceptions, awareness, understanding, beliefs, and values reside and sense-making decisions are made. This is the domain in which physical battles are actually won or lost as it involves such crucial intangibles as leadership, morale, unit cohesion, level of training and experience, situational awareness, and public opinion. All content in this domain passes through the filtering process of human perception.

Foreign policy and armed conflict are among the most heavily manipulated political pursuits in the human realm. These are often lobbied in terms of radical opposite sets of binary norms and values. One of them represents a 'good' side and the other 'bad'. This is done owing to the basic matter of fact that specific national interests or objectives are much harder to 'sell' to an increasingly sceptical public than the apparent national interest-

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[1] *For more details on these domains, please refer to Chapter 2 in Alberts, DS, Garstka, JJ., Hayes, RE & Signori, DA, 2001, 'Understanding Information Age Warfare', Washington DC:, CCRP Publication Series.*

free path of 'humanitarian' norms and values. Within the context of this and the contemporary informational and political environment, mass media serve the roles of an engineer of public opinion and perception, and as an instrument of war through interpretive journalism. Mainstream liberal media are not an independent check and balance of the branches of government as envisaged by Edmund Burke, rather they act as an echo chamber and force multiplier of the global liberal agenda through a messianic-like desire to spread 'democracy'.

Opinion and perception are intangible elements that are virtually present, i.e. psychologically insofar as they cannot be physically touched, yet they exert an influence on the tangible elements that are present in the physical world. The mechanisms that link the intangible with the tangible are information and knowledge. The tangible realm includes such aspects and elements as geography (human and natural), climate, people, machinery, and other physical objects that can be seen, touched, and physically experienced. When it comes to politics, and especially intense political activities such as foreign policy and armed conflict, intangibles relate to belief in the political leadership, belief in the military leadership, and the level of commitment to a call or cause from that leadership.

An ability to disrupt this relationship between the tangible and intangible can form the basis of political warfare, which involves the forceful political expression of policy. Therefore, subversion can be seen as being a constituent part of political warfare, it is a very coordinated and calculated pursuit that seeks to gain political power through the use of coercion and force that is applied at the right place and point in time. Furthermore, political warfare is a very broad concept and operational tool involving acts both overt and covert, often involving the use of a communicational façade that is intended to mask the operational intent. This could be the expression of 'humanitarian' concerns that are used as a springboard for regime change.

There are also tactics used to defend the narrative against any disruption or weakening by competing narratives and frames. Often supposedly 'independent' organisations (to give the impression of being independent from the government and authorities and, therefore, more 'credible') are created to perpetuate the narrative and to attack any sources of opposition through, quite often, the use of character assassination.

Examples of this kind include PropOrNot (a website that seeks to expose Russian propaganda), Bellingcat (an investigative journalism website that specializes in fact-checking and open-source intelligence, founded by a British journalist), and Integrity Initiative (a project of the Scotland based Institute for Statecraft with a stated mission of defending democracy from disinformation, in particular from Russia) as a few of the many examples. They are in effect front groups that at times do self-identify themselves as 'fighting Russian propaganda' but engaging heavily in propaganda themselves by silencing pluralism in public debate on certain key issues.

In order to achieve subversive foreign policy goals through political warfare, it is necessary to break the bonds between the elite and masses of a target country and to disrupt the cohesion of the country's elite in order to compromise the decision-making ability and capacity of the target to respond effectively. One of the most commonly used means of achieving this in contemporary international relations is to create a perceived context of crisis, which implies and permits extra-ordinary measures through the projection of an extra-ordinary circumstance that can permit the breaking of the rules of diplomatic convention and political orthodoxy.

Crises in International Relations

It is necessary to ask, what is a crisis? Because a crisis can mean and represent different things to different individuals and groups, whose perceptions and interests tend to diverge. In addition, there is the false perception that a crisis only represents a threat, whereas in fact, a crisis can provide an opportunity to select groups and interests. A crisis is generally considered as being an extra-ordinary event, a situation, and condition that breaks the normal routine and functioning of society. During the period of a named and accepted crisis, the society affected is expected to 'rally around the flag' and to do their 'patriotic' duty and not to question the wisdom or the intent of what is being proposed to rhetorically meet the challenges of the projected circumstances. The term 'crisis' is often invoked in the public sphere, often it is not clearly defined what exactly is meant and what is entailed, which provides the opportunity for the actor invoking the crisis to cultivate the psychological environment in order to meet their goals and objectives.

When the physical crisis strikes, there is a parallel crisis of information (in terms of the quantity and quality of information and communication). As noted by Joseph Scanlon in 1975, 'every crisis is also a crisis of information [...]. Failure to control this crisis of information results in a failure to control the crisis, including its directly operational aspects.' The nature and scale of crisis communication is determined by the type of a break-out event that marks the beginning of a particular crisis. The presentation of the projected physical crisis is a distraction from the intangible political intentions of the initiator, which can include the eventual overthrow of a foreign government, either via proxy forces or direct military intervention.

To operationalise foreign policy goals within the context of a projected and assumed crisis, a norm-based approach has been used where the notion of R2P is being represented as a global norm. The basic premise and assumptions of R2P is that the age of sovereignty was gradually passing and that there was an urgent need to enforce and demonstrate that states could no longer act with impunity and treat their citizens in any manner that they saw fit. It has been noted that there were significant shifts in the way in which powerful states and institutions comprehended sovereignty and acted. In addition, the timing this debate began is highly significant, beginning almost immediately after the end of the Cold War. This marked the end of the bipolar world and the emergence of the US as the world's sole superpower. As such, a lack of check and balance in the conduct of international affairs removed many previously existing constraints and restraints on foreign policy behaviour and approach.

There were immediate implications for how wars and military interventions were narrated. Owing to public concerns and post-September 2001, it is not viable for a country to declare geopolitical or geo-economic motivations for pursuing a certain line of foreign policy or engagement in a war, an alternative communicated approach has been developed. Western states when approaching the issue of potentially contentious foreign policy actions, such as major military interventions, tend to justify these in highly moral and altruistic terms, and of being fought on behalf of others. R2P is, at a rhetorical level, aimed at addressing a crisis where the loss of life is the primary value at stake. It is a political call that is designed to prime and mobilise publics. And at a practical level, R2P is intended to gain political consensus in order to engage in possibly contentious foreign policy practices.

Foreign Policy and Subversion

Subversion is a powerful tool of power, which has been used through the centuries of human history and endeavour, and is a conscious act of intent to overthrow an existing political regime by use of psychological coercion and/or physical force by a 'domestic' actor (even if supported by an external power). Ideological and geopolitical interests are a significant motivating factor for an external act to engage in and support the subversion of a chosen foreign government. One of the shortcomings of the Cold War approach by the US, as Laurence Beilenson, a conservative and friend of Ronald Reagan, observed in 1972 – 'we are carrying on our present political warfare with armed might, diplomacy, treaties, and traditional subversion, three and a half tools against four on the other side'. He went further and noted that 'in terms of general strategy, political warfare is analogous to war, and passive defence wins neither'. Thereby the situation is transformed into advocating for an offensive application of subversion in pursuit of foreign policy and security objectives.

The use of political warfare to subvert an opponent is not new and it has been conducted over the centuries. However, the ability and speed with which it is possible to achieve is much more rapid with the advent of ever more powerful forms of information communication technologies as the mechanical means to implement these forms of political technology, which was seen in the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring when compared with Kosovo and Iraq (2003).[2] The forthcoming monography, Information Warfare and Psychological Operations: A Guide to Action by Andrei Manoilo, provides numerous relevant recent examples of subversion through political warfare that has been used to try and shape politics and policy globally. There are stark contrasts and contradictions seen in how subversive events are depicted and the different sides involved in the conflict. 'In the majority of countries in the internal affairs, which the United States intervenes as "peacemaker", they bet and cooperate with the very political forces and regimes that the world calls "terrorist" and "extremist".' This façade has been exposed on numerous occasions and highlights the difference between an honest (objective) broker and a powerful (subjective) broker of international 'crises'.

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[2] *In addition to the more rapid and remote pace of the political warfare and military operations, there is also the aspect of covert versus overt military operations between these cases. This has implications concerning the ability of the target country's leadership to be able to respond effectively and the opportunity for pleading plausible deniability by the aggressor.*

21st Century Information Warfare: Arab Spring in Practice

The nature of the political warfare and its application is somewhat akin to what could be termed as being a 'theory of political relativity' insofar, as for each and every political action there is an equal yet opposite reaction in the frame of the long-term strategic picture. The objective of political and information warfare is usually to acquire power and/or influence and/or wealth, which comes at the expense of the target country and its foreign backers. Information warfare and crises support the process of subversion and political warfare through their ability to relativize and construct the desired reality to support the words and deeds for what is intended to follow.

A case in point can be found in the so-called Arab Spring. This is a developed form of political and information warfare, which evolved steadily from the earlier Colour Revolutions. The easily communicated story line, which has an inherent element of a humanitarian crisis, not only shapes public perception and opinion of events but manages their very expectations how events will develop and will ultimately end. The name Arab Spring not only denotes the region, but the use of 'spring' implies a period of growth and positivity. It is a clear example of the information domain being used to influence the cognitive domain through a distortion of the physical domain. The intentionally optimistic tone that is intended as an instrument of expectation management (good things to come from the process) has been re-branded by observers and including those from the region as an 'Arab winter' in response to the calamitous results in terms of the resulting state and human security in the region and beyond.

The Arab Spring as a branded form of political warfare is intended to overwhelm the capacity of the targeted country's leadership to respond effectively to the domestic and foreign challenges being used to subvert them. Events in Tunisia and Egypt testify to the potential effectiveness of such strategies. Domestic challenges included a depressed economic environment that created a latent level of discontent that could be exploited (such as corruption or unemployment), a strained level of open communication between the elite and the masses, and an 'iconic' event used to ignite the conflict (such as Benghazi in Libya and Daraa in Syria). Mass media were able to cover these events selectively in order to present

the event as a one-sided humanitarian crisis. In a way of illustration, the US-led Geneva talks on Syria greatly favoured the 'opposition' groups, the recent loss of the US narrative as seen by the Astana talks has witnessed the initiative swing more in favour of the Syrian government, which explains the US objection and desire to return to the Geneva format. This creates the situational context where those seeking subversion can position themselves as powerful brokers in the conflict and a chance to nurse their side to eventual power.

A practical test and application of R2P came with the so-called Libyan crisis, which was framed as the Libyan government randomly targeting its own civilians and in 'need' of international intervention that would ultimately lay the foundations for spreading the model of a Western-style liberal democracy. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was to bring about a sense of unity in the international community through an emotional call using iconic historical examples that contradict established Western norms and values. 'Out of the terrible massacres of the previous decades in which the international community had been accused of doing nothing – those massacres included the genocide in Srebrenica, Rwanda, and Cambodia – after those terrible incidents, the world said never again. [...] It is imperative that on this measure the international community speak with one voice.'[3]

His emotional rhetoric though is very easily invalidated by the use of logic and facts. Certainly, the world does not want to see a repeat of the genocides that he mentioned, such examples carry with them powerful meanings and images of association based on the common orthodoxy of the historical narratives of these events. But he implies that only intervention by the international community would have seen these dark episodes averted. There are a number of problems with his emotional call – international presence had already been established in both Bosnia and Rwanda at the times these massacres took place, but those peacekeepers stood aside and let it happen. The third case of Cambodia was brought to an end not by the 'selfless' intervention of democratic countries but by the invasion of the Communist Vietnam. To openly challenge this misrepresentation of tragic historical events at the time would be to invite character assassination on the basis of being uncaring for episodes of large-scale human misery and suffering. The conflict was communicated as being a humanitarian crisis in a black and white binary contest of contrasting

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[3] *'UN Chief Defends Libya Air Strikes Against Doubters', 2011, Space War, March 22. Available from: http://www. spacewar.com/reports/UN_chief_defends_Libya_air_strikes_against_doubters_999.html*

hyper-realities of good versus evil, freedom versus oppression, democracy versus authoritarianism, and life versus death.

In some quarters, this event marked a 'coming of age' of the norm R2P. The use of force – no matter how it is narrated or framed by an actor – will bring about significant consequences. It shaped the struggle for power in Libya and helped to determine the outcome of the political contest, which is why it was so inherently controversial. However, the excesses of Libya, and namely the exceeding of the UN Security Council mandate, has made R2P much more difficult to apply to Syria. Libya was intended as a means to create a 'blueprint' for future regime change operations of this nature, which was openly heralded in the New York Times. But in effect, it has come to serve as a benchmark for the dangers of deception in the use of R2P.

As a result, R2P as a norm and an operational tool has been compromised. This has been further confirmed in a British Parliamentary report that stated the Government had gone to war on the grounds of faulty and misleading information flows concerning the crisis in Libya.[4] This demonstrates the significance of the role and power that creating the fog of war has on the decision making process by influencing opinion and perception. In the short term, informational power can be used to offset an unfavourable physical domain environment through timing subjective interpretive news content to the target audience in order to engineer their consent through influencing the perception and opinions on the issue. If the disparity remains, especially in conditions where public trust in mass media and politics is declining, it is ultimately unsustainable and will reap consequences of the deceit and manipulation of the public by the combined forces of mainstream politics and mass media.

However, over time one of the obstacles to sustaining an untrue narrative are the various inconsistencies that begin to accumulate and erode the credibility and effectiveness of information warfare aspects that attempt to shape the physical battlefield through the manipulation of the cognitive domain via the information domain. A problem that was verified in the John Podesta emails that were released, when one of those emails to Hilary Clinton noted that Al Qaeda and the US were in effect allies and working for the same goals in Syria. The email dated 12 February, 2012, from Jacob Sullivan of the State

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[4] *'Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK's Future Policy Options', 2016, HC 119, Third Report of the Session 2016-2017, September, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. Available from: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmfaff/119/119.pdf*

Department to Hillary Clinton stated that 'AQ [Al Qaeda] is on our side in Syria'.[5] Thus, there are contradictory and nonsensical slogans and catch phrases as 'the enforcement of democracy', i.e. that 'democracy' is something that needs to be imposed on a country and its people by a more militarily powerful actor. Not to mention that rhetorically the US was fighting terrorism but working for the same purpose in Syria.

The US and its allies champion themselves as being a broker in the conflicts of the Arab Spring. Yet, it is readily apparent that they are not an honest broker but a powerful one. A political entity is favoured over the others and is assisted to power. In spite of the attempts to try and label the Syrian conflict as a 'civil war', the August 2012 Defence Intelligence Agency report clearly termed it as a proxy war.[6] Interestingly, studies have shown that foreign imposed regime change generally does not improve relations between the states involved.

This form of political and informational warfare relies on the target government and authorities being quickly overwhelmed by what they perceive to be happening, and the mass public to be emotionally primed, and the opinion and perception change can occur (to cause bandwagoning by joining the 'winning' side). This was the case in the Serbian revolution of 2000 and the Rose Revolution in Georgia. However, if there is no collapse of the government and leadership, the stakes and pressure need to be raised. Libya is a good example, the expectations of the Arab Spring were dashed and this saw an attempt to divide the elite by imposing sanctions, paying key people to defect to the 'rebels', and deliberately targeting private homes of these key people as a means to break the unity and therefore the capability and capacity of the elite to resist effectively.

In addition, opening direct communication with the mass public has the effect of reducing the opportunities for those subverting the country to get their message across and to engage in a 'hearts and minds' campaign. This is currently seen in Syria where President Bashar al-Assad is seen to appear in public places in a symbolic expression of empathy and leadership in a period of an extremely risky security situation. The longer these types of conflicts go on, there is the dilemma that becomes very apparent, which is the difficulty in sustaining the façade of non-truths that begin to unravel and make less sense to the wider publics. One of these

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[5] 'US Department of State Case No. F-2014-20439, Doc No. C05789138', 2015, October 30.

[6] 'Information report', August 2012, Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), 14-L-0552/DIA/287

dilemmas in Syria is the presence of foreign troops (such as the US) on Syrian soil in spite of the value and normative claims of respecting national sovereignty and international law. An interesting and telling sign is the reaction of mainstream politics and media's reaction to President Donald Trump's December 2018 publicly stated decision to withdraw illegally deployed US troops from Syria. They expressed strong opinions against such a withdrawal across the old political spectrum from neo-conservative to liberal, demonstrating conclusively, once more, mainstream mass media's role as an instrument of war and its uncritical acceptance of liberal 'values' no matter the cost.

There do exist telling public spaces where we can witness the effects of 'hybrid' warfare's approach to popularising the communicated narrative for easy consumption in order to persuade public opinion and perception of the value-ethical 'righteousness' of the cause of pursuing subversive foreign policy within the context of a crisis in international affairs. One of these is found in the long-term and follow-up reporting on crisis events of global significance. A branded event, such as the Arab Spring (another example could be the 2003 Iraq War), attracts reflection and critique and especially when public expectations from the scripted narrative fail to materialise. Articles can appear on the anniversary of these significant international events – a good example appeared in the Huffington Post in late 2017 that gave an excellent overview of the approach to manufacturing public opinion and perception via the distortion of the physical domain through the content of the information domain. This article then worked backwards by deconstructing the information domain in order to bring it back to the actual – rather than represented event and results that occurred in the physical domain.

The reality is that the Arab Spring was never the popular democratic revolt that Western governments or the media made it out to be. In fact, the Arab Spring had little to do with democracy; although it certainly included some liberal-democratic groups. It was, instead, a reactionary movement led primarily by conservative, religious, and Islamist elements against secular Arab regimes.[7]

As a post-script to this otherwise Arab centric theme of the role of crisis in information warfare and subverting a government, the recent

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[7] *Micallef, JV, 2017, 'The Arab Spring: Six Years Later', Huffington Post, January 29. Available from: https://www. huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/the-arab-spring-six-years_b_14461896.html?guccounter=1*

vivid illustration of events in Venezuela illustrate the above-mentioned points. Economic sanctions were used by the United States and its allies not to specifically punish the Venezuelan government for various alleged transgressions but rather to weaken the economy further and to develop a general public discontent with the government. The resulting economic chaos and dislocation is then narrated by the foreign power developing the physical and psychological environment for regime change as being a 'humanitarian crisis', even though they are contributing to the situation, the blame is singular and focused on the target government, because a crisis situation implies the opportunity to apply extra-ordinary measures. This is done with the naming of Juan Guido as the 'legitimate' president, which in a form of repetitive propaganda is intended to sound truer. Even though the basic legal condition – he never stood for election as president – is an obvious fact that is ignored and/or downplayed.

Thus, there are two conditions currently present to support the regime change agenda, the poor economic performance of the country and the foreign backing of the United States and its allies. However, there are two further necessary environmental conditions that are being cultivated. One of these is to attempt to disrupt direct communication between President Nicolas Maduro and the Venezuelan people. This is attempted by selectively voicing the 'opposition' in mainstream international media, such as Guido, army deserters, and other such anti-Maduro voices, and attempting to represent these voices as mainstream. It is more difficult in Venezuela, where Maduro still enjoys considerable support from the army, government, and the majority of the public. Consequently, it is hard to block his communication and the resulting positive relationship, and therefore the task of isolating the target government from the domestic public is failed. A final point missing is the task of creating an 'iconic moment' that will cause the anger of the public to spill over into physical engagement, such as Tahir Square in Egypt, Daara in Syria, Benghazi in Libya. There is insufficient momentum in the 'opposition', which is domestically quite isolated, but this does not stop the attempt to create mass media moment involving 'spontaneous' protests that are intended to draw a disproportionate response from the security forces.

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valdai@valdaiclub.com