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**Strategic Communications and
Disinformation in the Early 21st Century**

Neville Bolt

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Abstract

Disinformation campaigns in recent times have encouraged a less than critical understanding of what many have come to believe is the currency of contemporary geopolitics. A tendency to view disinformation as a unique phenomenon, however, clouds the way it sits within broader dichotomies of truth- versus untruth-telling. And it disguises more nuanced, associated concepts of strategic ambiguity and strategic opportunism practiced by nation states such as China and Russia. Failure to recognise such distinctions further undermines our understanding of the complexities of Strategic Communications in the 21st century.

Keywords

Disinformation, strategic communications, strategic communication, Russia, China, dissimulation, deception, distraction, disruption.

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Summary

1. The problem: Disinformation is understood too narrowly as an operational tactic of hostile states. It forms part of a concept with greater reach.
2. The truth ecology: Disinformation sits within a broader ecology of truth- versus untruth-telling; it is misunderstood as a campaign or operational tactic, yet is woven into the very fabric of how we perceive dissimulation, deception, distraction and ultimately disruption.
3. The conceptual context: Strategic Communications is a holistic and overarching concept in which disinformation can, but need not, play a subsidiary role.
4. Strategic Communications is rooted in values and interests; it seeks to shape and shift long-term discourses at the political and geopolitical levels. It sits in a truth versus untruth discourse.
5. States are not uniform: All state- and non-state actors project Strategic Communications but in different ways – regardless of whether or how the term features in their national lexicons.
6. Three threats: Russia, China and Islamic fundamentalists employ different conceptualisations of disinformation. A (mis)perception by outsiders merges them into a common understanding. Each actor does not necessarily see itself as engaged in ideological deception.
7. Three approaches – strategic opportunism, ambiguity, certainty: in their foreign and security policies, Russia employs strategic opportunism, China projects strategic ambiguity and Islamic fundamentalists are characterised by strategic certainty.
8. Failure to recognise such distinctions and nuances undermines our understanding of the complexities of Strategic Communications in the 21st century.

1 The Aim

The premise of this policy-framing brief is that countries vary significantly in the way they use Strategic Communications. To assume a single modus operandi is to constrain our understanding. Equally, to view disinformation – a subsidiary form of political engagement – as a single dimensional mode of disruption is to obscure a more complex discussion. Disinformation and the umbrella concept of Strategic Communications used in the world of politics and geopolitics should be framed within the dichotomy of truth versus untruth.

Consequently, disinformation should be viewed at a higher strategic level than simply the operational tactical level. At the latter level – the local – tactics may comprise erroneous information or lies, and raise the question of attributing or verifying the source of erroneous output. But at the strategic level, disinformation plays into intent – at best elusive – and the desire for producers to cloud the waters of global politics while nevertheless seeking to achieve an effect on the perceptions of external observers. Hence, disinformation quickly blurs into dissimulation and ambiguity.

This brief suggests how disinformation and Strategic Communications are connected, and how they offer a more nuanced picture of the threats democratic states face today. In so doing, it frees disinformation from the straitjacket of covert techniques of dirty tricks. Instead, it sees disinformation as one of many parts in a bigger concept employed at multiple levels of politics and geopolitics by different state and non-state actors. This invites a more nuanced approach to countering the many guises of disinformation. Key to this is cutting the umbilical cord that attaches disinformation to information in a binary relationship. It is better to frame it within the literature on regimes of truth and the relationship between knowledge-creation, truth-telling and power relations.¹

This discussion addresses three concepts: Russia's strategic opportunism; China's strategic ambiguity; and briefly the strategic certainty (or clarity) of al-Qaeda and ISIS/Daesh. Both Russia and China will be the focus here. Passing reference, however, should be made to Islamic fundamentalist communications, which are extensively covered elsewhere. Save to reiterate that in contrast to theological debates between salafi jihadi groups around the world, the projection of the political struggle has remained a coherent and continuous discourse over many years. Albeit not necessarily in any co-ordinated fashion at either the strategic or tactical levels, it proposes that Muslim and Arab peoples have been – particularly since the demise of the Ottoman empire following World War I – and continue to be oppressed by Western and particularly American imperial force, characterised by a Christian missionary zeal and willingness to occupy and wage war on Muslim peoples. Only by striking back through the use of force against non-Muslims and appealing to fellow Muslims through persuasive means can such injustice be requited. Indeed, only by evicting the Western presence from Muslim and Arab lands can a Western hegemony – the statist system enshrined in the international community of sovereign states – be overturned.² This consensus among fundamentalist exponents may be considered to be strategic certainty.

1.1 The Problem

Disinformation is poorly understood although it is increasingly written about and widely discussed. The lens through which it is increasingly perceived in academic and policy

¹ Michel Foucault (2020) *Power*, London: Penguin; Steven Shapin (1995) *A Social History of Truth*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² Gilles Kepel (2004) *The War for Muslim Minds*, Cambridge MA & London: Belknap Press; Olivier Roy (2004) *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, New York: Columbia University Press.

literatures risks confining it to an overly narrow view – one which emphasises the tactical rather than strategic dimension of Strategic Communications. To use Russian or Soviet active measures as the benchmark – as has become the norm – is to exclude a more nuanced and complex appreciation of truth- and untruth-telling in the modern age.³ This could adversely affect our understanding of China's Strategic Communications and that of Islamic fundamentalist non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and ISIS/Daesh.

1.2 The Threat

Disinformation is seen as a threat to democratic stability at a time when Western liberal democracies are experiencing a crisis of self-confidence. Some observers go further, claiming democracy itself to be in retreat in the face of rising authoritarian governance. "Democracies across the globe, including our own, are increasingly under siege", warns President Joe Biden's recent security review. "Anti-democratic forces use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance."⁴ This concern is echoed in other state capitals and by the European Commission.

2 Definitions

2.1 Strategic Communications – what is it?

Strategic Communications means more than communicating strategically. After all, every human being communicates both tactically and strategically. This emergent discipline speaks to political and geopolitical influence. According to the Terminology Working Group at NATO StratCom COE, Latvia, it is "a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment".⁵

Strategic Communications is strategic because it focuses on discourse change in the long term. It is strategic because it navigates a dynamic and contested information environment. It is strategic because tactics should be coherent and consistent within a strategy that evolves once the planners' best intentions encounter the friction of real events. The key dimensions are captured by the American political strategist James Farwell: it is "the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives".⁶ Thus Strategic Communications entails the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies. States project foreign and security policies to achieve strategic effects by changing

³ Mark Galeotti, *Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations*, June 2019, <<https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/active-measures-russias-covert-geopolitical-operations-0>> Galeotti defines Aktivnye meropriyatiya (active measures) as "a term used by the Soviet Union (USSR) from the 1950s onward to describe a gamut of covert and deniable political influence and subversion operations, including (but not limited to) the establishment of front organisations, the backing of friendly political movements, the orchestration of domestic unrest and the spread of disinformation".

See also Thomas Rid (2020) *Active Measures*, London: Profile.

⁴ President Joe Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, p. 7, Washington DC.

⁵ *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, June 2019, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga.

⁶ James Farwell, (2009) pp. xviii-xix, *The Art of Strategic Communications*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

the way targeted audiences think and behave, using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community.⁷

Conceptually Strategic Communications forms the crossroads between two axes:

1) persuasion and coercion, and 2) authority and legitimacy. Persuasion, as captured by Joseph Nye's notion of soft power⁸ – the ability to attract and appeal through one's values – stretches along a spectrum to hard power – coercion, seen as threatening pre-emptive or applying punitive force, and described by thinkers such as Thomas Schelling.⁹ Persuasion characterises familiar aspects of public diplomacy. At best it includes mutual reciprocity practised through educational, scientific, sporting, touristic, cultural or trading exchange. Coercion, meanwhile, can involve economic sanctions, embargos and boycotts, diplomatic isolation and exclusion, symbolic threats of military force and actual use of punitive force.

Consequently, this is no simple binary. Strategic Communications represents the constant calibration between the ends of the persuasion-coercion spectrum. Political actors draw on all these dimensions in their daily interactions with other actors. In the most benign engagements, using force is always an option – even if it represents the so-called elephant in the room. This axis is further intersected by a second axis. Authority – understood as holding power which may have been granted or acquired – and legitimacy, where an actor – whether state or individual – has the right, granted or earned, to hold and use that power.

And disinformation plays its part in this set of tensions.

Strategic Communications is often thought of as possessing one or more aspects of mindset, process and technique. Mindset is a way of seeing the world dominated by media outlets and information flows. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, this instantaneously interconnected world is set to 'on' and can never be switched off. We live inside it. All politics plays out in this landscape. Process interprets Strategic Communications as a set of operations that must be harmonised efficiently around a common purpose so that an organisation speaks with a single institutional voice, consistently and coherently. While technique represents a bag of tools – detractors would suggest tricks – which can be scaled up or down depending on demand and budget. It is a tactical approach, far from a vision.

Disinformation speaks to these three interpretations.

2.2 Disinformation – what is it?

Disinformation is associated with malevolence and disruption; it is not a force for good. It risks, however, rapidly eliding into a new disinformationism – an excessively rigid definition of a threat to security – divorced from thousands of years of rhetorical production. This brief proposes that it is better understood under the umbrella of nuanced truth-telling and untruth-telling – truth and lies – which are part and parcel of human nature, no less of politics and geopolitics. In so doing it is differentiated from misinformation, a concept that derives from work by cognitive psychologists on memory formation in the young, but later adopted by political scientists and communications scholars since the 1970s.¹⁰

⁷ Neville Bolt, *Defence Strategic Communications, Foreword* pp. 4-5, Issue 6, Spring 2019.

⁸ Joseph S. Nye (2009) *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs.

⁹ Thomas Schelling (1966) *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, CONN: Yale University Press.

¹⁰ Deen Freelon & Chris Wells (2020), p. 149 *Disinformation as Political Communication*, *Political Communication*, 37:2, 145-156 DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755.

To separate out malevolent information in the political world, four ways of prefixing information may be identified in a taxonomy of aberration:¹¹

- Disinformation – the deliberate attempt to subvert the political status quo using erroneous information.
- Misinformation – the accidental or unwitting passing on of erroneous information.
- Mal-information – the ‘outing’ of personal information meant to harm the victim.
- Non-information – the failure to supply evidential information in a political contest.

Consequently, NATO identifies Strategic Communications as a “critical tool of defence and deterrence” in the face of “adversaries and challengers who see information as a contested domain”, arguing that “The information environment is contorted by misinformation, disinformation, and deception from these actors ... with the intent of undermining trust in democratic institutions”.¹² This chimes with the scholars Bennett and Livingstone, for whom disinformation is a fundamental threat to political stability, noting “The intentional spread of falsehoods and related attacks on the rights of minorities, press freedoms, and the rule of law all challenge the basic norms and values on which institutional legitimacy and political stability depend”.¹³ Legitimacy here is seen to be endangered: “A crisis of legitimacy of authoritative institutions lies at the heart of our current disinformation disorder.”¹⁴ For the British Government, the very idea of trust – an associated but distinct concept – between government and people is now threatened: “Governments may struggle to satisfy popular demands for security and prosperity, with trust further undermined through disinformation from malign actors.”¹⁵

Disinformation is readily presented as a set of techniques, some opportunistic, some deliberate and perhaps more long-term. Aggregated over a period of time, they are read as a systematic process co-ordinated by malign actors, usually governments, sometimes non-state. Such conclusions are drawn not just from attribution efforts undertaken by open source (OSINT) researchers and more covert investigators, but from analysis by state agencies, particularly where they suspect hostile actors of undermining national elections.

Robert Mueller’s report on Russian Interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election eventually concluded that the IRA (Internet Research Agency) in St Petersburg had

“used social media accounts and interest groups to sow discord in the U.S. political system through what it termed ‘information warfare.’ The campaign evolved from a generalised program designed in 2014 and 2015 to undermine the U.S. electoral system, to a targeted operation that by early 2016 favored candidate Trump and disparaged candidate Clinton.”

It continued,

“At the same time that the IRA operation began to focus on supporting candidate Trump in early 2016, the Russian government employed a second form of interference: cyber intrusions (hacking) and releases of hacked materials damaging to the Clinton Campaign. The Russian

¹¹ Althuis, Jente & Haiden, Leonie (eds) (2018) *Fake News: A Roadmap*, Riga & London: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence/King’s Centre for Strategic Communications.

¹² *NATO 2030: United for a New Era*, p. 48, 25 November 2020.

¹³ Bennett, Lance & Livingstone, Steve (eds) (2020), p. xv, *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p4

¹⁵ *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, p. 27, March 2021.

intelligence service known as the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Army (GRU) carried out these operations.”¹⁶

Here disinformation blurs into mal-information and consequent misinformation as reporting enters and circulates through social and legacy media platforms – partly organically and partly under the influence of digital algorithms.

Proving intent is always problematic in relations between states. Verifying process is much easier. Causation becomes a convenient euphemism for correlation. Hence, evidence of intent – not simply of the act – is at best circumstantial or assumed on the balance of probabilities. UNESCO/ITU develop this point, cautioning against a “‘Manichean assumption’ of who is a malign actor, a tendency which can only over-simplify any assessment and risk introducing an overly subjective element to evidence gathering.”¹⁷ This is not to underestimate the intent or effect of malign practices; merely to resist unsuspecting path dependency.

UNESCO/ITU broadly categorises the key processes and techniques of online disinformation as:

- false and misleading narratives
- emotional narratives
- fraudulently altered, fabricated or decontextualised images and videos and synthetic audio
- staged videos
- tampered images and videos
- computer-generated imagery (CGI)
- fabricated websites and polluted datasets.¹⁸

At this point, scholars of active measures join the debate only to map cross-border intrusive and subversive methods onto an excessively operational reading of disinformation. Thomas Rid is mindful of nuance yet compounds this tendency by equating active measures with the amorphous and diverse field of disinformation. Confining it to organised lying and deception undertaken by foreign political actors is to view disinformation unduly through a Cold War lens – one reinforced by tracing its genealogy to the Soviet Union of the 1920s and successive transgressions that occurred systematically throughout the 20th Century.¹⁹

Not being trapped in either technique (an operational campaign tactic) or process (a systematic bureaucratic delivery) requires a move from the tactical level to the strategic and looking at mindset (an ontological way of seeing the world). In other words, shifting the emphasis to a nation state’s disposition born of its particular history. After all, what should be the baseline or starting point for charting any genealogy of disinformation? How do disinformation campaigns or tactics fit into a more holistic appreciation of an offending state’s repertoire of foreign policy options and security resources?

¹⁶ *Report on the Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election*, Vols 1 & 2, Robert S. Mueller, Washington DC, March 2019, p. 4.

¹⁷ Bontcheva, Kalina & Posetti, Julie (2020), p. 25 *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation while respecting Freedom of Expression*, Broadband Commission Report, ITU & UNESCO.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 22-23

¹⁹ Rid, Op. Cit.

3 Why Now?

Conversations around ‘information wars’, ‘competing narratives’, ‘counter-narratives’, and ‘alternative narratives’ have become commonplace this century. Soft Power, as one author entitles his book, is the New Great Game.²⁰ The proximate and underlying causes are numerous. A confluence of mutually reinforcing events and processes since 1945 has contributed to explaining why Strategic Communications, and subsequently disinformation as an undermining technique (not a strategy), have come to the fore in what has been called the Long Decade of Disinformation.²¹

3.1 Underlying Causes

What complicates this discussion is the question of why Western societies are experiencing this threat at this point in the 21st century. Correlation is more appropriate than cause and effect as a framework of analysis:

- The postmodern/post-structuralist turn in 1960s French continental philosophy has fed into growing uncertainties in the West.
- A growth in social movements and identity politics has led to a relativist moral equivalence in the minds of Western publics, suggesting everyone’s opinions are equally valid.
- Paradoxically, these elicit a backlash of partisan constituencies in so-called echo chamber politics. Self-doubt emerges alongside self-righteous polarising around points of view. Consequent fragmentation lays societies open to external, sometimes internal, malevolent actors who wish to exploit internal divisions and dissent.
- A questioning of class and institutional authority after two world wars, and ambivalence toward elites and experts.
- Demands for a greater voice among the young.
- A growing and sustained gap between the super-rich and structural poor. A sense of economic reversal among the middle classes for the first time in generations. Its urgency derives from the 2008-9 global financial collapse.
- The growth of a universalist human rights agenda emanating from liberal democracies.

3.2 Proximate Causes

Perception is key. The following thematic assumptions contribute to how Strategic Communications is understood. Disinformation feeds into this confluence of assumptions in different ways depending on context.

3.2.1

Perceived ‘mission creep’ and ‘message creep’ – in other words the view that ISAF/NATO’s use of military force failed to achieve lasting change following ill-prepared interventions in Afghanistan in 2002²² and Iraq in 2003 – have renewed the focus on how Strategic Communications might secure victory by using co-ordinated, coherent and continuous

²⁰ Robert Winder (2020) *Soft Power: The New Great Game*, London: Little, Brown.

²¹ Vera Michlin-Shapir, *The Long Decade of Disinformation*, Defence Strategic Communications, Vol. 9, Autumn 2020.

²² UN Security Council Resolutions 1383 (05/12/2001) and 1386 (20/12/2001).

persuasion rather than military coercion.²³ Meanwhile, signalling around Russia's invasion of Georgia in the South Caucasus before occupying two of its provinces in 2008, and more dramatically the preparation of the discursive space around Russia's open annexation of Crimea before entering eastern Ukraine semi-covertly in 2014 have only served to sharpen the focus.²⁴

3.2.2

Historic events have been accompanied by a growing, albeit contested, discourse around hybrid warfare. Proposed by some as a new development in the nature of waging war, it is rejected by others who see only a variation on the age-old theme of belligerents mixing and matching the most appropriate tools at their disposal – whether military, economic or psychologically persuasive. Consequently, pinning down a precise definition remains elusive.²⁵ On a practitioner level, hybrid threats:

- (i) are co-ordinated and synchronised;
- (ii) deliberately target democratic states' and institutions' vulnerabilities;
- (iii) use a wide range of means;
- (iv) exploit the thresholds of detection and attribution, and the border between war and peace;
- (v) aim to influence different forms of decision-making at the local (regional), state or institutional level;
- (vi) favour and/or reach the agent's strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target.²⁶

Gray Zone engagement – a subject of debate among strategic theorists – informs this discussion but keeps conflict at a level short of armed conflict.²⁷ The Hybrid COE in Finland attempts to encapsulate it as:

“an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level. Such actions are coordinated and synchronised and deliberately target democratic states' and institutions' vulnerabilities. Activities can take place, for example, in the political, economic, military, civil or information domains. They are conducted using a wide range of means and designed to remain below the threshold of detection and attribution.”²⁸

²³ Brett Boudreau (2016) *We have Met the Enemy and He Is Us*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, Latvia.

²⁴ Timothy Snyder (2018), *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, Tim Duggan Books; Lawrence Freedman (2019) *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁵ Ben Heap (2020) *Hybrid Threats: A Strategic Communications Perspective*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, Latvia.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lyle J. Morris et al. (2019) *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*, Santa Monica: RAND; Michael O'Hanlon (2019) *China, the Gray Zone, and Contingency Planning at the Department of Defense and Beyond*, Washington DC: Brookings.

²⁸ Hybrid COE, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>, accessed 29/04/2021.

3.2.3

Seismic shifts are afoot in the West. The ‘democratisation’ of access to media and audiences enabled by the invention of the internet and the proliferation of low-cost, high volume mobile telephony and personal computer devices has connected populations around the world instantaneously. Only time will offer the appropriate distance to evaluate social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too and various LGBTQ alliances, and the way they will mutate into organised political influence. Understanding social justice movements, often confusingly represented as single issue groups, and gauging their networked spread as they disseminate from the United States across the world requires evaluating how like-minded sympathetic groups are attracted. But it is critical to identify how local grievances and ambitions, expressed in divergent contexts, reinterpret the proposition on the ground. All networked organic movements with low-cost entry are vulnerable to disinformation and penetration.²⁹

3.2.4

At the same time, Western states have suffered economic austerity measures following the global financial crisis of 2008-9. Popular perceptions are less forgiving of the decline in living standards which business and political elites are believed to have escaped. For the first time in living memory, a younger generation can no longer expect its standard of living to improve automatically compared to that enjoyed by its parents or grandparents.³⁰ But this goes further. It speaks to a growing disparity between haves, have-nots and have nothings. And it highlights those left behind in a world where a majority remain tied to a place while a minority enjoy the freedom of cultural and professional mobility.³¹ The net effect is that increased dissatisfaction in the political economy of nation states is contributing to unease and uncertainty in their populations, presenting malign external (and domestic) actors with a landscape of vulnerabilities which disinformation campaigns can exploit through repeated and relatively low-cost trial and error.

3.2.5

Informed by a growing conversation in Western media outlets around Easternisation³² – a shift of the world’s economic centre of gravity from the US and Europe to the Asia-Pacific – an unease can be felt in employment markets and voting trends.³³ Growing nationalism spurred by the emotive rhetoric of populist leaders has fed on such fears and left its mark on the political landscape. Charismatic leadership is back in vogue, as are populist appeals to national identity. Journalist Robert Winder frames it more broadly: “The more determined the effort to create supranational institutions (the United Nations, the European Union, the G7, the IMF, and all the others), the more fervent grew the national itch. All over the world, angry populations demanded their old identities back.”³⁴

²⁹ Neville Bolt (2012, 2020) *The Violent Image*, New York: Columbia University Press.

³⁰ Adam Tooze (2019), p. 27 *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, London: Penguin, quoting Barack Obama’s keynote speech at the Brookings Institute, 5 April 2006.

³¹ David Goodhart (2017) *The Road to Somewhere*, London: Hurst & Company.

³² Gideon Rachman (2016) *Easternisation: War and Peace in the Asian Century*, London: Bodley Head; Peter Frankopan, (2015) *The Silk Roads*, London: Bloomsbury.

³³ Amy Goldstein (2017) *Janesville: An American Story*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

³⁴ Robert Winder (2020), p. 9 *Soft Power: The New Great Game*, London: Little, Brown.

3.2.6

Recently, the resurgence of great power politics has drawn attention to how Western democracies are challenged by information campaigns by authoritarian states. Tempting as it might be to highlight solely the activities of Russia and its Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg or its state outlets for systematic disinformation such as RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik, adopting too narrow a perspective can also be misleading. Diverse actors have different strategic approaches to using information for their strategic ends. Outside the political and geopolitical communications of Western democracies – both liberal and illiberal – autocratic Russia, China and al-Qaeda and ISIS/Daesh offer variations on a theme of information and disinformation.

3.2.7

Digital interconnectivity has transformed the way consumers of mobile telephony and users of the internet engage with each other in what has been called many-to-many communications – consumers are both audiences and producers; they receive and originate. Information moves instantaneously, connecting individuals, communities and diasporas across the world, adding a meaningful substance to ‘imagined communities’ in an age of increasing identity politics. Emotional surges spread through global networks of networks where social media platforms connect to historical outlets in seamless feedback loops. For state bureaucracies with ponderous bureaucratic hierarchies, the sheer dynamics of information flows circumvent and outpace state decision-making processes, only to reinforce the first-mover principle – namely, the first to market defines the terms of engagement in shaping a new discourse.³⁵

3.2.8

These are the underlying and proximate causes behind the rise of Strategic Communications in the early 21st century. Disinformation is one facet of an intent to distort Strategic Communications – understood as rooted in values and interests – but it is no less complex for that. What it is not is a simplistic notion of active measures or tactics of destabilisation.

4 Political Islam: Strategic Clarity

This section is deliberately brief and defers to an extensive literature that has been accumulated over the last two decades. However, it makes the point that multiple groups with different approaches function at a local level but speak to global conversations in geopolitical communications. The shift in attention by Western powers to prioritise the communications of Russia and China has temporarily side-lined salafi jihadi groups’ messaging, although without ignoring the continuing threat to the security of both democratic and autocratic states. Mali and the Sahel continue to suck in United Nations members’ troops to protect citizens from a complex insurgency spanning several neighbouring countries. And the future of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Western armed forces remains unclear.

4.1

The salafi jihadi trope has remained remarkably stable in recent decades, namely that Muslim and Arab peoples have been – particularly since the demise of the Ottoman empire following World War 1 – and continue to be oppressed by Western and particularly American imperial

³⁵ Neville Bolt (2011) *Strategic Communications in Crisis*, RUSI, Aug/Sept 2011, Vol. 156, No.4, pp. 44-53.

force, characterised by Judaeo-Christian missionary zeal and willingness to occupy Muslim lands and wage war on its peoples. Only by striking back through the use of force against non-Muslims and appealing to fellow Muslims through persuasive means can such injustice be requited. Indeed, only by evicting the Western presence from Muslim and Arab lands can a Western hegemony – the statist system enshrined in the international community of sovereign states – be overturned.³⁶ Frequent reference to the scriptures of Islam inform this worldview. However discordant they might sound to Western liberal ears, however open they may be to accusations of distorting religious teaching and practice, any notion of disinformation resides in the eye of the beholder not the broadcaster. Disinformation attaches to perception. It is not unreasonable to assume that its exponents see themselves as truth-tellers, not as liars.

4.2

In this respect, one of the most prescient writers to identify what he calls the metaphysical struggle between political Islam and its enemies and the way it is projected is Faisal Devji. Writing of al-Qaeda in 2005, he observed:

“Islamic history and authority [have] been completely disaggregated and [are] no longer clustered within more or less distinct lineages of doctrine or ideology that can be identified with particular groups ... This is what gives Al-Qaeda its flexibility both religiously and politically, allowing Zawahiri, for instance, to assign Shia Iran and secular Turkey prominent roles in his vision of Islam’s geo-political freedom.”³⁷

Consequently, an umbrella-perception of common grievance echoes other global movements, which he claims “are also unable either to predict or control the effects of their own actions on a global scale. These are movements whose practices are ethical rather than political in nature because they have been transformed into gestures of risk and duty rather than acts of instrumentality.”³⁸

What emerges then is an approach familiar to militaries as mission command – devolved decision-making in an overarching framework of understanding and purpose – before they apply it to their Strategic Communications.³⁹ Groups such as state-centric Islamic State (Daesh), for so long bureaucratically centralised in their communications output, yet following the loss of territory in Syria, continue to adhere to a vision characterised by simplicity and directness. Clarity and certainty of cause survive. Their message remains unequivocal.

5 Russia: Disinformation, Strategic Communications and Strategic Opportunism

5.1

A consensus has gradually emerged around Russia’s use of disinformation in its foreign and security policies. It reads as projecting confusion through subversion – the release of multiple conflicting stories and explanations of events to sow confusion, weaken and undermine the

³⁶ Gilles Kepel (2004) *The War for Muslim Minds*, Cambridge MA & London: Belknap Press; Olivier Roy (2004) *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* New York: Columbia University Press.

³⁷ Faisal Devji (2005), pp. 50-51 *Landscapes of the Jihad*, London: Hurst & Company.

³⁸ Ibid, p11.

³⁹ Eitan Shamir (2011) *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British, and Israeli Armies*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

political status quo of targeted nation-states. Many stories are absurd; some are mildly conceivable. The aim is to sow doubt and dissent, to fragment consensus and drive apart identified communities with their competing opinions, not to create an alternative, collective, cohesive viewpoint. This is a form of strategic opportunism.

A recent Chatham House report observed that “Misinformation and disinformation play a crucial role in maintaining the power of Russia in the world, and that of its political elite at home. Myths about Russia, its history and above all its relations with the West are therefore carefully protected and nurtured by the Russian authorities.”⁴⁰ The authors identify sixteen 'myths' which they see as all too readily absorbed into Western discourse by an uninformed public. And “whether deliberately promoted or promulgated by Russia or not, they sit comfortably with audiences not attuned to Russia’s understanding of history and its current leaders’ definition of national interests.”⁴¹ Hence, Russia is not in Conflict with the West; Russia and the West want the same thing; the West’s relations with China must be normalised in order to counter the rise of China are but three tropes in a system of fabricated untruth-telling. Importantly, these discourses play out at a higher level of perception than local campaign-driven initiatives, forming a more complex disinformation hybrid.

5.2

Russian strategy is widely discussed in NATO countries. Moscow’s subversion through disruption plays into existing fissures in Western democracies. It exploits differences in opinion to drive apart communities into entrenched positions, reinforcing trends in the West which are already in motion in the early 21st century. The putative objective is destabilisation, not collapse.

Judgements diverge when interpreting Russia’s overarching strategic framework.

One body of thought identifies an aim to destabilise states important to Western (NATO and European Union) democratic ambitions by exploiting internal social and ethnic divisions. The Baltics, Balkans and South Caucasus are prime targets. Meanwhile, Russia weakens and encourages self-censorship inside these former Soviet states, which may lead to renewed friendship or compliance between those states and Moscow. A visible shift to illiberal democratic governance, particularly in the V4 countries – Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – reinforces this notion.

Others argue that using disinformation and destabilisation campaigns in the former Soviet space is simply an operational steppingstone to the true, and primary, strategic objective. Which is to promote a Russian orthodox, Eurasian nationalism surrounded by weakened or compliant states. This may be seen as a defensive strategy. At the same time, pursuit of this domestic agenda does not exclude projecting its national interest abroad while undermining NATO’s Euro-Atlantic stability and the troubled cohesion of the European Union. This more popular notion may be seen as an offensive strategy.

5.3

In March 2018, two officers of Russia’s GRU attempted to poison Russian former double agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England. What accompanied the failed attempt was a flood of over 40 different explanations. These were disseminated by Moscow via social media platforms before crossing into mainstream media while receiving generous airtime on Russia Today TV

⁴⁰ James Nixey (2021), p15 *Myths and Misconceptions in the debate on Russia*, London: Chatham House.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 4.

(RT). When UK and Western governments named the guilty men caught on camera, Russia's Foreign Ministry issued denials and rebuttals – standard tools of diplomacy – but also numerous conflicting accounts were spread, diverting onlookers' attention elsewhere. Sometimes absurd, sometimes mildly feasible, the aim appeared to confuse, not to be truthful or untruthful. Rebuttal too was not an absolute between right and wrong but a way of adding to the repertoire. Security journalist Mark Urban notes: "Early on the Russian method seemed to be one of releasing as many counter-theories as possible." And, recalling Moscow's response to the shooting down of flight MH17 over Ukraine, he observes: "it is a hallmark of Kremlin messaging in these situations that consistency is far less important than generating numerous alternative theories."⁴² Such an approach sits within a larger framework in which security scholar Dimitry Adamsky sees a more nuanced mechanism at play: one that goes beyond superficial readings of hybrid warfare. "Cross-domain coercion", he argues, "expands the continuum of options on the escalation ladder while minimising the scale of kinetic operating."⁴³

Recent research by the UK's Foreign Office revealed systematic trolling to create pro-Russian support at a time when Moscow had amassed some 100,000 troops on Ukraine's eastern border. The Sunday Times then reported:

"pro-Russian trolls are posting provocative statements in the online comment sections of The Times, the Daily Mail, The Sun and the Daily Express to give the false impression that the public supports Russian aggression towards Ukraine. These are then picked up by Russian state media as evidence that the UK public back Moscow. The same attacks are being carried out against leading media outlets in 14 other countries – including the G7 members France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the US."⁴⁴

To confine disinformation to the world of the spoken or printed word is misleading. So too is an unduly narrow focus on photographic or visual media. Strategic Communications draws on two schools of critical thought: social constructivism – proposing that society and politics are driven by contested conversations or discourses and that actors need to dominate a particular discourse to succeed⁴⁵ – and symbolic interactionism – arguing that human beings attach meaning to everything they see around them, in other words meaning is not intrinsic to any object but constructed. Consequently, words, images, actions and non-actions all communicate meaning to observers. With that in mind, Media Ajir and Bethany Vaillant describe a magpie's nest of shiny trinkets amid Russia's repertoire which superficially bear little relationship to each other:

"incidents such as the release of the Panama Papers, the annexation of Crimea, the passing of the Magnitsky Act, and the Olympic doping scandal have all inflamed the tension between Russia and the US."⁴⁶

By this analysis any potential point of fracture or division lends itself to disinformation understood in a holistic fashion. The common mistake made by academics and practitioners is to focus on the message, or to respond in a tit-for-tat attempt to verify and rectify any dubious

⁴² Mark Urban (2018), p. 283 *The Skripal Files*, London: Pan Macmillan.

⁴³ Lawrence Fridman (2019), p. 177 *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ The Sunday Times, p. 12, Raab: Putin's trolls are targeting national newspapers, 2nd May 2021.

⁴⁵ Richard Ned Lebow (2014) *Constructing Cause in International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Herbert Blumer (1998) *Symbolic Interactionism*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁴⁶ Media Ajir & Bethany Vaillant (2018) *Russian Information Warfare and Deterrence Theory*, Strategic Studies Quarterly, Vol.12, No.3, Autumn 2018, pp. 70-89.

line of influencing – ultimately a thankless task. The key is to identify the emotional grievance that any message is playing into.

Hence, in the case of Ukraine during and after the 2014 Maidan, the most consistent tropes employed to destabilise the country were:

- (i) Ukraine was not a state – its citizens had neither indigenous culture nor language;
- (ii) The country was awash with Nazi sympathisers – the only hope was Russia;⁴⁷
- (iii) The Maidan revolt was driven by “a spectre [that] is haunting the Maidan, the spectre of homosexuality”;⁴⁸
- (iv) The West was responsible for fomenting revolution.

These were the politics of sentiment. The point was to tell neither a true nor false story but to play into deeply held suspicions and emotional vulnerabilities of diverse communities, employing what Gulnaz Sharafutdinova calls ‘hot buttons’. Vladimir Putin had already pressed similar buttons to exploit feelings of post-Soviet victimhood and influence the Russian psyche.⁴⁹ Only this time it would sway public opinion away from anti-Russian sentiment towards the core values of Putin’s proposition that connected these discursive threads into an alternative worldview. According to Yale scholar Timothy Snyder, three disinformation strategies were employed by Moscow to cover Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: first, demanding that Ukraine federalise to protect a Russian minority; second, defining opponents of Russia’s invasion as fascists; and third, painting the invasion as a civil war that had been stoked by the West.⁵⁰ Scatter-gun or anything-goes might best capture the essence of this approach. However, a discernible thread connects these tropes in a Eurasian or New Russian framework that attempts to redraw the rules of engagement with Western discourse. Pragmatism is perhaps closer to the mark – in effect, strategic opportunism.

6 China: Disinformation, Strategic Communications and Strategic Ambiguity

If Russia’s approach is characterised by strategic opportunism, then China’s best fits strategic ambiguity. This latter concept has been associated with Washington’s response to Beijing’s territorial ambitions towards Taiwan, creating a guessing game over whether US forces would come to the defence of the island were it to be invaded by Chinese troops. Taiwan too has been circumspect about Washington’s true intentions and so has resisted declaring independence and provoking a crisis.⁵¹ Now the mantle of strategic ambiguity has been adopted by China, in turn creating a guessing game between its soft and hard power projection. How should disinformation be understood in this context?

Disinformation aims to undermine discourses – to intensify partisanship and so fracture consensus or historical norms, thus reifying uncertainty where doubt is present. In this sense it does not target physical infrastructure with the intention of bringing economic and social activity to a standstill. That aspect of cyber-penetration forms part of an adjacent concept which sits at a level below that of open conflict. Disinformation merely uses that infrastructure to reach targeted populations.

⁴⁷ Timothy Snyder (2018), p. 141 *The Road to Unfreedom*, London: Bodley Head.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 132. Viktor Shestakov writing in Odná Rodina.

⁴⁹ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2021) *The Red Mirror: Putin’s Leadership and Russia’s Insecure Identity*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁰ Snyder, Op. Cit., p. 132.

⁵¹ Richard Haas & David Sacks, *American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous*, Foreign Affairs, September 2020.

Disinformation should not be considered bound by the use of data: it comes in diverse forms and packages of measures. All too often actions are viewed as active measures. However, disinformation can be gross deception found at the level of grand strategy or in the cumulative effects of small and quite distinct transgressions at the tactical local level. The latter may be systematic or opportunistic. It is better viewed as deception aimed at disruption. The content of disinformation flows may or may not be erroneous. What matters goes beyond the context but depends on how that context is framed. As frameworks shift over time with changing attitudes and an evolving moral climate, what comes to fill the frame may move from what was formerly benign only to count now as a malign act.

6.1

Consequently, China-watchers are confused not only by what is deduced from policy shifts at home but also from Beijing's policies projected abroad. Second-guessing derives from the paucity of information that seeps from the senior ranks of the Chinese Communist Party, together with mixed signals embedded in the state's long-term tropes, which subsequently map onto both short- and long-term discourses. Rhetorical frames at the national government level sit within broader and enduring discursive mindsets at the level of the state project. Hawks and doves circulate over China's intentions. Witness the Foreign Affairs journal: "What really drives China's economic statecraft is not grand strategic designs or autocratic impulses but something more practical and immediate: stability and survival".⁵² This is a far cry from The Economist, which claims "Not since Mao Zedong has a Chinese leader wielded so much power openly. This is not just a big change for China ... but also strong evidence that the West's 25-year bet on China has failed".⁵³ Hegemonic ambitions are inferred from such a concentration of powers. And from empirical actions that appear to speak louder than words.

China's strategy suggests a different approach to information which invites a new conversation around disinformation. Deng Xiaoping's opening up of China to the West and global markets was frequently labelled 'ambiguity on all fronts'.⁵⁴ To what extent that has survived as a way of framing today's security and foreign policy discourses invites the question of whether Beijing deliberately disseminates erroneous information to destabilise Western security. Or does it cultivate a less tangible strategic ambiguity?

There are two lenses to look at how China projects foreign and security policies: soft and hard. Both operate against a backdrop of a recent Chinese assertiveness that in many ways may be traced to the aftermath of the global economic collapse of 2008-9 – an event seen as a failure by Western states to ensure global stability amid the turbulence of capitalist markets. Meanwhile, President Joe Biden's administration identifies China and Russia as the major security threats to the United States – presenting "strategic challenges from an increasingly assertive China and destabilising Russia".⁵⁵ China is singled out because its "leaders seek unfair advantages, behave aggressively and coercively, and undermine the rules and values at the heart of an open and stable international system".⁵⁶ To what extent this new assertiveness is born of the fall-out from the 2008-9 global financial crash and subsequent desire to secure its domestic economy and population invites reflection when seen in the context of Adam Tooze's assertion that "China's response to the financial crisis it imported from the West was of world historic proportions, dramatically accelerating the shift in the global

⁵² Audrye Wong, *How Not to Win Allies and Influence Geopolitics*, Foreign Affairs This Week, May-June 2021.

⁵³ *How the West got China wrong*, The Economist, 3rd March 2018.

⁵⁴ Daniel Yergin (2020), p. 148 *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations*, London: Allen Lane.

⁵⁵ President Joe Biden Jnr, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, p. 14, Washington DC.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 20.

balance of economic activity toward East Asia”.⁵⁷ Whether the best way to read this new-found confidence is as a story of economics, politico-military strategy or one of short-term crisis resolution versus long-term planning remains to be determined.

In so doing, two constants may endure in how China’s Strategic Communications and associated disinformation are understood. First, China’s foreign policy will continue to define itself in opposition to American hegemony as “an increasingly anti-authoritarian not-America”.⁵⁸ Second, observers in the US and Europe therefore risk misreading and through oversimplification falling into the trap of miscalculating the intended and unintended consequences of Beijing’s discourses, all the while struggling to gain a clearer reading of China’s intent.

6.2

What are these interlocking frames of discourse? Washington’s CSIS think-tank identifies seven tropes that permeate China’s communications.⁵⁹

1. The Chinese ‘system of discourse’
2. Settling a Century of Humiliation
3. China as Leader of the Developing World
4. China the Champion of Plurality
5. China the Survivor as a Communist Power
6. Last Man Standing
7. Protector of Global Commons

Not unlike Russia’s renewed investment in repositioning the historical account of WW2 – known as the Great Patriotic War in Russian literature – so too has China shaped a new discourse around the period. Rana Mitter would extend the seven-trope typology to include the Second World War, a trope that has now entered the official and popular conversation: “The desire to woo Taiwan into reunification, the disappearance of the Cold War motivations for downplaying Japanese war atrocities and stressing Nationalist ones, and the increasing delegitimation of Marxism all contributed to significant change in official boundaries for discussion of the war.”⁶⁰ He goes on to explain that the “Chinese circuit of memory has been highly inward-looking until recently; now the country is seeking to integrate this circuit with other more globally prominent and potent ones”.⁶¹

All speak to the *longue durée* of history and a particular teleology, no less infused with a constructed sense of aggrieved self while attempting to retain the moral high ground. “While there are many problems regarding the accuracy of this historiography, in terms of emotional appeal as an ‘imagined’ history it has proved unifying and almost intoxicating within the country.” Kerry Brown underlines the point: “they do believe their historic moment has finally come, that their ‘resurrection’ through modern times from impoverished victim to enriched geopolitical giant is morally justified, and that the world therefore has no grounds to refuse

⁵⁷ Tooze, Op. Cit., p. 7.

⁵⁸ Rana Mitter (2020), p. 25 *China’s Good War*, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press.

⁵⁹ David Kelly, *Seven Chinas. A Policy Framework*, No. 3, February 2018, Washington DC: CSIS.

⁶⁰ Mitter, pp. 17-18.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 14-15.

them this grand act of restoration.”⁶² These tropes, however, inform or sit within broader frames of strategic conduct – the three warfares, namely psychological warfare, public opinion warfare and legal warfare. As much as they are conceptualised through the lens of warfare, they nevertheless speak to rhetorical devices frequently seen as a staple of Strategic Communications – persuasion and coercion.

6.3

Persuasion

The Belt and Road Initiative is President Xi Jinping’s ‘project of the century.’ It has been tagged his ‘new foreign policy’.⁶³ Although in 2018 European Union diplomat Charles Parton was already describing it in the *Financial Times* as a “domestic policy with geostrategic consequences, rather than a foreign policy”.⁶⁴ Barely two years later, however, talk was of it “unravelling into what could become China’s first overseas debt crisis” as its foreign lending collapsed from the 2016 peak of \$75 billion to \$4 billion in 2019.⁶⁵

China’s New Silk Road comprises a land route across Asia and Europe, another through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, and yet another through the northern Arctic Sea. President Xi announced the \$900 billion project during a visit to Kazakhstan in 2013. The economic belt that it would create comprised “close to 3 billion people and represents the biggest market in the world with unparalleled potential.” Incorporating half the world’s population, it dwarfs US President Truman’s Marshall Plan of the late 1940s and early 1950s. A visionary Strategic Communications commitment with economic and geopolitical dimensions, between 1948 and 1952, \$14.3 billion were paid over to 16 beneficiary countries in Europe. Corrected for today, that would be \$130 billion.⁶⁶

The Marshall Plan or European Recovery Programme (ERP) was intended to rebuild a federal system of sovereign and independent economies able to trade between themselves and the rest of the world. It was never to make Europe an open-ended funnel for US aid and dependency. Xi framed his plan in terms of international outreach too, offering prosperity to the region and the world. “If our region can realise local-currency convertibility and settlement under current and capital accounts, it will significantly lower circulation costs, increase our ability to fend off financial risks and make our region more economically competitive in the world”.⁶⁷ The rhetoric around the project has for some years highlighted its outward reach to regional neighbours and more distant partners, promising to help “set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realise diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries”.⁶⁸

Whether there is ever a free lunch in international affairs is a moot question. Accusations of deception would soon rear their head. President Donald Trump’s administration repeatedly highlighted Sri Lanka’s deep seaport Hambantota as an act of Beijing’s disingenuity and

⁶² Kerry Brown, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, September 9th 2020.

⁶³ Belt and Road Forum for International Co-operation, May 20217.

⁶⁴ Charles Parton, *Belt and Road is globalisation with Chinese characteristics*, *Financial Times*, 3rd October 2018.

⁶⁵ James Kyngé & Jonathan Wheatley, *Rethinking Xi’s Project of the Century*, *Financial Times*, 12-13th December 2020.

⁶⁶ Ben Stiel (2018) *The Marshall Plan*, New York: Simon & Shuster.

⁶⁷ China Daily News, *Xi proposes a new ‘Silk Road’ with Central Asia*, 8th September 2013.

⁶⁸ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, 28th March 2015.

disinformation. Developed with Chinese capital and allegedly under onerous terms that Vice President Mike Pence labelled debt-trap diplomacy, former Attorney General William Barr accused China of “loading poor countries up with debt, refusing to negotiate terms, and then taking control of the infrastructure itself.” Investigators for The Atlantic journal have since rejected the evidence base of this claim.⁶⁹

The launch of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2016 would be seen in Beijing as setting a counterweight to the IMF and World Bank system of economic governance established under the influence of the United States at Bretton Woods in 1944. By the end of 2020, it claimed to represent 79% of the world’s population and 65% of global GDP. Only recently has economic partnership through loan schemes and corporate acquisition begun to be seen through a different lens. The American Enterprise Institute estimates Chinese overseas investment in the corporate sector to be \$2 trillion (2005-2020),⁷⁰ while a Sunday Times newspaper investigation in 2021 reveals a figure close to £135 billion in businesses, infrastructure and property assets.⁷¹ The sheer scale of investment now fuels growing political fears of China’s intent. However, in the security-sensitive area of technology exports and partnering in the development of foreign states’ infrastructure, China’s internal and external stories do not always tally. Witness the Brookings Institute:

“In outward-facing messaging, Chinese government and commercial sources often argue that free markets, rather than politics, should determine the telecommunications landscape ... However, Xi’s domestic-facing statements, as well as those of other figures in the Chinese government and commercial landscape, strike a different tone. They emphasize the importance, if not the primacy, of reducing dependence on foreign sources of core technology (核心技术) and the corresponding limits of free markets.”⁷²

What was only a decade ago a Strategic Communications framework of free enterprise and globalised supply chains is now shifting to one that suggests at best dissimulation and at worst outright deception leading to long-term security threats to the West. Or at least the perception of such. Disinformation is also bound up with the shifting sands of time.

6.4

Coercion

Strategic Communications entails a constant calibration between persuasive and coercive discourses in foreign and security policy. Meanwhile, China lays claim to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. It challenges Japan’s coastguards around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea using 300-strong fishing flotillas and coastguard ships in acts of provocation. It builds military installations on disputed sandbanks, threatening Japan. It refuses to accept international court rulings in favour of the Philippines on the 9-dash line demarcation dispute over sovereign waters. It interrupts free access to international shipping lanes in the South China Sea. And it intends to restore Taiwan and Hong Kong under Beijing’s full control. Meanwhile, human rights violations against the country’s Uighur population and repression of Tibet’s citizens suggest a less than beneficent government.

⁶⁹ Deborah Brautigam & Meg Rithmire, The Chinese ‘Debt Trap’ is a Myth, The Atlantic, February 6th 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/china-debt-trap-diplomacy/617953/>

⁷⁰ American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.aei.org/china-tracker-home/>, accessed 5th May 2021.

⁷¹ *Revealed: how China is buying Britain*, The Sunday Times, 2nd May 2021.

⁷² Brookings Institute, *China as a ‘Cyber Great Power’: Beijing’s Two Voices in Telecommunications*, April 2021, p. 7.

Is this strategic ambiguity? China's Strategic Communicators have created cognitive dissonance in Western minds. There is a way of looking at this through the lens of disinformation, yet it may simply be a parallel concept. Is there an intent to confuse through a seemingly disingenuous act of public diplomacy and a moral claim for sovereignty while pursuing China's 'three warfares doctrine'? Such thinking combines legal, psychological and media forms of threat where "all boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally removed".⁷³ Perhaps the difficulty lies in the way the West perceives the laws of war. "For the West, 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."⁷⁴

7 Conclusion

Disinformation is a troubling concept. But it is talked of as if it were a simple one. And its relationship to Strategic Communications, anchored in truth-telling – at least that is how Western democracies would like to position this emergent field – is equally complex. As the Defence Strategic Communications journal observes,

"Disinformation, however, should not be perceived so narrowly. It is under certain circumstances an external force boosted by useful idiots. It is also a threat that spreads within the state, initiated by fellow members of the same society in pursuit of their political ambitions. A further problem arises from otherwise well-intentioned citizens who abandon the struggle to teach the value of free speech and vacate a space to the benefit of those who wish to undermine and corrupt it. Bad speech should be answered with good speech, not no speech. And good speech must be grounded in evidence-based truth telling."⁷⁵

This brief has sought to reposition our understanding of disinformation. Adherence to determining the truthfulness of the message is an appropriate ambition for Western democracies. But when the messenger cares little for that veracity (content), preferring instead to attack pools of sentiment (perception), then fact-checking in pursuit of evidence-based truth-telling plays a limited, albeit valuable, role. That said, fact-checking is playing catch-up with the devastating consequences wrought on Western media outlets and their out-dated business models no longer able to compete in the contemporary cut-throat marketplace of information and content provision. Formerly, fact-checking was the sine qua non of professional journalists, 'baked into' their values and methods of news gathering and reporting. Not so today.

Meanwhile, to over-instrumentalise disinformation is to assign it a strictly functionalist role. Narrowing it to a set of tools and tricks to be imported into anachronistic frames of understanding makes it a servant of kneejerk geopolitical framing but with little regard for politico-cultural settings.

Repositioning disinformation in particular strategies of dissimulation, deception, distraction and ultimately disruption is a promising avenue for scholars and policymakers, particularly

⁷³ Qiao Liang & Wang Xiangsui (2015) *Unrestricted Warfare*, Brattleboro VT: Echo Point Books & Media; see Rosa Brooks, *War Everywhere: Rights, National Security Law, and the Law of Armed Conflict in the Age of Terror*, University of Pennsylvania Law Review, Dec.2004, Vol.153, No.2 pp. 675-761.

⁷⁴ Ben Nimmo (2015) The Case for Information Defence: A Pre-Emptive Strategy for Dealing with the New Disinformation Wars, in *Information at War: From China's Three Warfares to NATO's Narratives*, Legatum Institute.

⁷⁵ Foreword, Defence Strategic Communications, Autumn 2020, Vol 9, p. 7.

when read against the backdrop of sub-conflict levels of contest. To adopt the popular language of information wars is inaccurate and counter-productive here. Ambiguity casts its shadow across these four Ds as a deliberate stratagem. But without real insight into the messenger's mind, state rebuttals find easy refuge in accusations of conspiracy theory – unless some empirical test can be applied. Equally, identifying disinformation too closely with anachronistic Cold War lenses of analysis such as active measures risks distorting our reading of a new century and a new set of geopolitics, more complex and dynamic than the bipolarity of an earlier era. Today we are experiencing something new. But what it is not is a re-run of the Cold War and its communications.

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