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**SUSTAINING RELEVANCE - PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND
INFORMATION OPERATIONS
IN AN ERA OF
GREAT POWER COMPETITION**

by

Greg Hignite, Lt Col, USAF

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Dr. Susan Steen

24 March 2020

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Greg Hignite is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Lieutenant Colonel Hignite is a career Public Affairs officer having served most recently as the Director of Public Affairs for U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command. He has also served as a Combat Camera squadron commander, a United Nations Peacekeeper, and began his military career in the U.S. Navy culminating his enlistment as a personal photographer/documentary historian for the Office of the President of the United States.

Abstract

In an address to Air War College students and faculty, Gen. David L. Goldfein, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, challenged the assembled body to reimagine the nature of warfare, proclaiming that future wars will be one of cognition, not attrition.¹ All warfare first begins in the mind; with thoughts influenced by political, economic, and military perceptions of both friend and foe. How those perceptions are formed is the focus of this monograph, which seeks to explore how inter- and cross-cultural communication scholarship can shape, inform, and ultimately influence allies and adversaries to perceive, act, or behave in a manner that either supports or rejects U.S. strategic objectives. Done well, a potential adversary's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors are more likely to comport with U.S. policy aims. If done poorly, the resulting actions may unspool the tightly wound national security enterprise, possibly putting Americans, and the homeland, at greater risk.

Introduction

With the publication of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), a sea change is under way as the national security enterprise reimagines its strategic focus to compete and win in an era of Great Power Competition. For nearly 20 years the preponderance of national security professionals have been primarily concentrated on counter-insurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorism (CT) operations, with the nation's strategic gaze narrowly focused on the Middle East. All the while, a rising China, a bellicose Russia, and an unpredictable Iran now aim to roil the global national security architecture largely nurtured by North American leadership.

As the U.S. military reframes its means and methods of hard-power warfare to focus on near- and rising-nation challenges, it is just as important that soft—or smart—power do the same. Most great power adversaries enjoy high levels of education and critical thinking capacities, which require that the U.S. replace its largely ethnocentric messaging paradigm with one more aligned with an ethnorelative frame of reference—one that not only values, but also appreciates the unique nuances of a given audience and tailors messages to achieve its targeted goals. To merely Google translate a given U.S.-authored press release or social media post, for example, and attempt to “fire for effect”—hoping the message will find purchase in a foreign, culturally contrasting, audience—is hopeful at best and negligent at worst.

As the Department of Defense (DOD) returns to great power competition, it is essential for those charged with the craft of communicating on behalf of the enterprise—primarily public affairs (PA) and information operations (IO) professionals—that overlapping communication domains be considered for consolidation, regional allies and partners be empowered to serve as message surrogates, and cross-cultural communication scholarship guide the teachings, practices, and products to better inform and ultimately influence near-peer adversaries, namely China. By

folding in cross- and inter-cultural communication research and scholarship into PA and IO doctrine, it will compel practitioners to more thoughtfully appreciate a given audience and, subsequently, allow messages a better opportunity of being culturally relevant, and thus, more meaningful. To do otherwise is not only a wasted opportunity, but it also degrades military operations and puts troops at greater risk as miscalculation could compel an adversary to misinterpret intent.

To explore these risks and provide recommendations for future research, this monograph employs a communication-centered frame of reference to first examine the threats and vulnerabilities resident in a rising China—specifically, how cultural implications shape perceptions of U.S. intent in the region. Next, a brief discovery of how PA and IO professionals currently operate is studied, with special attention given to the doctrine, policy, and laws that govern their actions both at home station and while working abroad. Going deeper, a summation of what the communication environment may look like and how it may operate in the near future (10 to 20 years) is envisioned. The rapid adoption and proliferation of communication technology is a whipsaw of activity, and the DOD must be postured to adapt and evolve or be left on the outside looking in. Finally, recommendations are provided for future research along with suggestions for immediate implementation into the business practices of PA and IO professionals.

Thesis

As the DOD returns to great power competition, it is essential for those charged with the craft of communicating on behalf of the enterprise that overlapping communication domains be considered for consolidation, regional allies and partners be empowered to serve as message surrogates, and cross-cultural communication scholarship guide the enterprise to better inform and ultimately influence near-peer adversaries such as China.

(Part 1) Wars of Cognition ... Implications for U.S. & China Relations

A handwritten letter archived at the Library of Congress recounts the personal affection of Sidney Morse, brother of Samuel Morse, on the occasion of his work developing the telegraph. Sidney exclaimed that the telegraph is bound to be “not only the greatest invention of this age, but the greatest invention of any age.”² He went further: “The surface of the earth will be networked with wire, and every wire will be a nerve ... The earth will become a huge animal with ten million hands, and in every hand a pen to record whatever the directing soul may dictate!”³

Sidney likely could not have appreciated that more than 180 years later his words would vividly foreshadow today’s complex, interconnected web of global communications—a digital network with the awesome power of sparking joy or fueling rage around the globe in the time it takes to read this paragraph. There has never been more power tightly spooled within communications, and that is precisely why the craft of communications must be carefully studied, practitioners trained, and messages appropriately curated to ensure that awesome power has the intended effects prescribed by the author.

The 2018 NDS guides national security professionals to retrain their gaze on great power competition. The rise of China, a bellicose Russia, and an unpredictable Iran are now front-and-center for a national security enterprise retooling itself after nearly 20 years largely focused on CT and COIN operations. And while the hard power of the U.S. military reframes its means and methods of war, it is just as important that the soft—or smart—power do the same by examining how best to effectively communicate in an era of great power competition.

China's Information War Advantage

By some accounts the American democratic republic is hobbled by nurturing a free, open, and mostly transparent form of governance.⁴ That transparency puts it at a significant disadvantage when competing against a closed, centralized autocracy, such as China. While the People's Republic of China (PRC) does promote nascent attempts at openness, it is largely an illusion, as party officials quietly, and often privately, maneuver the levers of the State. That discreetness affords China's ruling elites a distinct advantage in international statecraft, and that is especially the case when it comes to the Information Environment (IE). The term IE encapsulates a trove of information-related capabilities (IRCs), to include cyber and electronic warfare competencies, among other faculties.⁵ However, for this discussion, it will rest primarily with China's use of media-related IRC capabilities (electronic and print mediums) to embolden her citizenry and regional allies, while diminishing the influence of global leaders that run counter to the PRC's strategic vision.

The NDS argues that emerging and reemerging nation states are now challenging the global commons by conducting operations on the fringes of war by subverting, denying, and degrading the operational environment through tactics such as information warfare.⁶ "China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage," according to the NDS.⁷ Global communications is a knife that cuts both ways, so to speak, enabling rapid-fire messages and counter messages to propagate and cloud our national decision makers' judgements. China's efforts all point to competition short of armed conflict, but make no mistake: The U.S. and China are already in the early phases of warfare—a new form of warfare grounded in cognition, not attrition.⁸

General David L. Goldfein, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, speaks often to the evolving nature of warfare and how the military must be best postured to sustain its competitive advantage across a broad spectrum of conflict.⁹ That spectrum includes the critical node of communications, as words will nearly always presage physical violence. It is therefore essential that communication professionals have the means to craft timely, meaningful, and culturally relevant messages intended for a given adversary and its people, namely China.

*To Know Your Enemy, You Must Become Your Enemy*¹⁰

It can be argued that China has embraced a well-heelled Sun Tzu strategy of first knowing the enemy so they in time can outthink and outwit a given adversary. Through a thoughtful and deliberate immersion campaign, China has been conducting a masterclass in gathering and absorbing firsthand information about the external world. It is important to note that until approximately 50 years ago, China was mostly a nation unto itself. Post Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, China was a feudal, insular nation shy of external engagement. With the passing of Mao and immersion of more progressive leadership over the years, the country has greatly expanded its outreach. China is now the second largest financial contributor to United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping operations.¹¹ China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is well underway, syncing regional trading partners to global markets via new road and sea lines of communication. The "so what" is that the BRI is drawing skeptical nations into China's sphere of influence. The BRI is estimated to cost China upwards of \$1.3 trillion U.S. dollars by 2027, a staggering figure that harkens back to America's grand commitment to the Marshall Plan in Europe.

Closer to home, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), reports that the EB-5 Visa program has been used

overwhelmingly (85 percent) by Chinese citizens.¹² The EB-5 Visa requires, generally, that immigrants invest a minimum of \$500,000 to start a new business and hire at least 10 employees within two years.¹³ Over the past 10 years politicians have railed against the Chinese for intellectual property theft by retooling American ingenuity to sell as their own. The U.S. Congress attributes some of that theft to America's own immigration policies aimed at spurring business that in fact enabled critical intellectual property (artificial intelligence, for example) to drift beyond its borders. Regarding education, annually more than 360,000 Chinese students are educated in the U.S.—a rate 30 times higher than U.S. students studying in China.¹⁴ And, on at least 81 of those U.S. college campuses, one can find a Chinese Ministry of Education-funded Confucius Institute.¹⁵

The Institutes claim to be “contributing to the development of multiculturalism and the building of a harmonious world,” which runs in stark contrast to how the U.S. Senate reacted to a 93-page report released by DHS in 2019.¹⁶ The report claims the centers are used as a propaganda tool “aimed at attempting to change the impression in the United States and around the world that China is an economic and security threat.”¹⁷ The report details the writings of former Minister of Propaganda Liu Yunshan, when he reportedly claimed that the institutes “create a favorable international environment for us . . . With regard to key issues that influence our sovereignty and safety, we should actively carry out international propaganda battles against issues such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Human Rights, and Falun Gong.”¹⁸ The U.S. Department of State (DOS) attempted a reciprocal arrangement by establishing 28 American Cultural Centers (ACCs) in China, but it ultimately hit too many Chinese bureaucratic roadblocks resulting in the DOS pulling all funding in 2017.¹⁹

A Potent Shaped Charge of Activism

China's international and domestic gamesmanship demonstrates its commitment to the long game of political statecraft, but more importantly, to its calculated game of cognition. By combining government, military, business, academics, and her people, those efforts create a potent "shaped charge that penetrates any obstacles that opposes it."²⁰ China's efforts in the information space have influenced global perceptions, which is precisely why the NDS and the most recent National Military Strategy (NMS) specifically flag China's soft power maneuvering as a significant concern for the U.S. government. The Chinese government's efforts are largely facilitated by its global communication paradigm—both words and deeds—that is equal parts awe-inspiring and distressing. Moreover, China's clever use of soft power to expand influence while assuaging political concerns is a masterstroke not reciprocated by the U.S. government as a whole at this time. The NDS and NMS are now guiding the national security enterprise to focus more deliberately on this issue, which is why communication specialists must do their part to prepare. From the U.S. military perspective, this effort to dissect and make sense of this complex, adaptive communication environment is left primarily to PA and IO professionals. However, the operating environment they function within likely needs to be amended to level the playing field.

(Part 2) A Complex, Adaptive Information Environment

Within the DOD there are specific lanes upon which communication professionals must travel. In some cases, those lanes converge, and at other times federal law and/or established military doctrine prohibit their comingling. It is important to first outline the various authorities and limitations so as to frame a discussion on how those issues may impede effective operations within a great power competition construct. For instance, a significant limitation that both PA

and IO professionals currently face is the lack of contemporary military communication scholarship on messaging, persuading, and influencing peer- and near-peer adversaries. What is currently known and taught is bound within a CT- or COIN-centric mindset, which is less likely to be relevant in a high-end competition with audiences capable of critical thinking.

Like Fighting in the Bible

During a CBS News “60 Minutes” broadcast during the early days of the war in Afghanistan, a U.S. Marine platoon sergeant was interviewed after completing an exhausting foot patrol in the summer heat. The reporter asked him what the fighting was like, and with a deadpan delivery, the Marine said fighting in Afghanistan is like fighting in the Bible, as he motioned to the reporter to look around where he saw mud and thatch houses, stone walls to contain livestock, and no plumbing or rudimentary utility services.

For more than 19 years volumes have been written about how best to convince an insurgent, a fragile war-torn population, or a beleaguered Taliban fighter, for example, to not only accept, but also act upon the messages distributed through various mediums in a Middle East-framed conflict zone. Military journals are replete with tales of how military commanders leveraged an active communications program to quell violence and protect his or her troops operating within a given village. The key takeaway, however, is that in Afghanistan, broadly speaking, U.S. communication professionals were not attempting to persuade an educated audience. With Afghanistan’s literacy rate hovering at 43 percent, individuals can more easily be manipulated (for good or ill) because they lack the ability to decipher nuanced concepts and properly weigh the costs versus benefits of various cognitive alternatives.²¹ Moreover, the mediums of communication in these types of environments is rudimentary: leaflet drops, local

newspaper stories touting an achievement (i.e., hospital opened, bridge built), placing messages on billboards, and buying (or encouraging) favorable radio and TV coverage, to name a few.

In a competition with a great power such as China, those known elementary communication modes and mediums are essentially irrelevant. Much of the means leveraged in a COIN or CT conflict are enabled because U.S. troops are operating within the country. Military planners would be hard pressed to develop a plausible future war scenario that envisioned U.S. forces establishing forward operating bases within China, Russia, or Iran, for example, as the U.S. does now in Iraq and Afghanistan. Access and placement enable an ease of communication, in some respects. In virtually any great power scenario, all messaging will be transmitted not from within, but from afar, making the challenge of getting inside an adversary's decision space that much more complicated.

Moreover, China's literacy rate is more than 95 percent, and her people enjoy a high level of secondary education.²² The country has a robust communication infrastructure that is well protected from outside influences, to include its much-hyped Great Firewall. A system of systems constantly scans and seizes and rejects what the PRC deems to be objectionable content.²³ By some accounts there are currently 10,000 websites actively blocked by China's firewall, but that number seesaws as world events guide the Party to either restrict or dilate access.²⁴ The key takeaway is that if PA and IO professionals believe that distributing a press release, tapping out a social media post, or conducting an on-camera interview will influence China's leadership, military, or people, those assumptions must be seriously reconsidered. The State effectively and efficiently knocks down dissenting opinions while perpetuating an echo chamber for Party ideology. This opponent is smart, cunning, and technically sophisticated.

Hence, U.S. efforts will require a new way of thinking about the craft of communication—and as importantly, about culture—to remain relevant in a war of cognition.

Need to Know the Rules before Bending Them

Generally, PA officers are compelled by DOD doctrine to facilitate: “The proactive release of accurate information to domestic and international audiences [that] puts joint operations in context, facilitates informed perceptions about military operations, undermines adversarial propaganda, and helps achieve national, strategic, and operational objectives.”²⁵ The IO community, specifically within the Air Force, is a relatively new career field borne from the intelligence and behavioral science career fields. The DOD defines IO “... as the integrated employment, during military operations, of [Information Related Capabilities] IRCs in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.”²⁶

A key distinction for the IO community is that, per doctrine, it serves primarily as an integrator of disparate communication professionals, including PA, Civil-Military Affairs, Cyber Operations, Psychological Operations, and so forth. An IO officer is not empowered, for example, to serve as a release authority, such as directly distributing a press release on behalf of the U.S. government, which is within the realm of a PA officer’s more broad authorities. Despite that limitation, the new IO community is growing rapidly and earning praise from commanders believing that the career field is more “operationally focused.”

In practice, this community is more operationally focused than PA because IO is directly aligned with operational planning functions, often working for the Director of Operations at a given squadron, group, or wing, for example. The IO pulls many of the same levers of influence, or persuasion, as other IRCs, but has an advantage of being narrowly focused on military

operations. A PA officer, on the other hand, does not work directly for the operations community, and tends to be assigned more of a general purpose, public outreach role. For instance, PA tasks are more akin to reputation management, spokesperson, or risk communication efforts during a crisis, such as a force protection matter or local runway encroachment issue. Interestingly, the roles of these two communities vary greatly depending on where the work is being done. While deployed, PA and IO take on a different demeanor and arguably pack a more potent punch of communication capabilities.

Home Station Versus Deployed ... a Role Reversal

While at home station, these two linchpin communication communities are separated not only physically, but also professionally, with neither having any meaningful relevance to the other. The PA community commits itself to working communication challenges on behalf of the base or major command commander, while the IO community remains focused on influencing operations, albeit from afar. That dynamic changes significantly when these two capabilities move forward and deploy. The IO is empowered to fulfill its doctrinally inspired role of being the integrator of disparate IRCs. While the PA, Civil-Military Affairs (CMA) and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) officers do not work for the IO, the IO labors to sync, align, and time-phase implement communication activities to advance the unit's mission. For example, the IO might lead a team of communication professionals seeking to capitalize on a CMA-funded school rebuilding project. The IO ensures PA is there to document with photo and video, and PSYOP is present to talk with locals about the operation and gain valuable insights into the perceptions of allied operations. The IO will then work with the communication team to distribute this information with the goal of influencing the knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors of various non-U.S. audiences. The key ingredient here is that only the PA has the authority to release content to

a U.S. audience, while the IO and PSYOP, for example, are significantly less constrained when operating outside the confines of the U.S. and messaging foreign audiences. However, as explored later, in a contemporary, interconnected global communication context, it is nearly impossible to contain or confine a message intended for a given population.

Above All Else ... Truth

The restrictions levied on military communicators is not ill placed. The DOD labors to assure the public (notably lawmakers and politicians) that its intent is pure. The instrument of PA is doctrinally assigned the role of communicating with external publics, and that is especially the case at home station. “It is [DOD] policy to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, the Congress, and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy,” according to the DOD’s ascribed Principles of Information.²⁷ However, when operating abroad, the IO community classifies audiences from a different lexicon, one much more operationally focused and arguably somewhat dehumanizing, referring to “Target Audiences” (TA) when determining the recipient of a given information operation effort.

The TAs consist of three primary audiences: Key Influencers, Mass Audiences, and Vulnerable Populations.²⁸ As noted, merely reaching these audiences in a great power contest will be a challenge based on several factors, notably technical limitations (Great Firewall) and culture/language gaps of U.S. military communicators. The one modest exception is the “vulnerable population” TA, which would include the more than 60 million ethnic Chinese living abroad as part of China’s fast-growing diaspora community.²⁹ Ultimately, the TA mindset reinforces the theme of IO being primarily doctrinally grounded in a CT- or COIN-like frame of reference. Most importantly, when humans are chiefly flagged as anonymous target sets, rather

than as dynamic, adaptive, and complex thinkers, it should not be surprising that in the 87-page DOD Joint Doctrine on IO, there is only one modest reference to the importance of culture.

Like most large bureaucratic organisms, rules and instructions serve an important role governing actions and keeping the blood pumping to its vital organs. However, peering into the near future, an intellectually aging PA, IO, and IRC cardiovascular system could significantly limit the DOD's capability to compete in a peer- and near-peer scenario. The enterprise can take comfort in knowing that this is not a new phenomenon, and with proper forward vision and a willingness to adapt, the DOD could better posture its communication professionals to renewed vitality in influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of potential adversaries.

(Part 3) Communication Effects for Tomorrow's Joint Force

Each of the DOD services is replete with various "vision plans" that commission blue-ribbon, cross-functional warfighter panels charged to look 15 to 25 years into the future to scope a "what is next" security environment. With the benefit of hindsight, some of those panels foretold the future, such as the proliferation of Remotely Piloted Aircraft at the turn of this century, and most recently, the rise of information as a warfighting domain. The recognition of information and cognitive warfare is primarily attributed to the battle of ideologies that has played out over various mediums since 2001. A classic contest of whack-a-mole includes ISIS, Al Qaeda, or any other malign actors that employ the Internet to raise money, recruit, and spread their ideologies. This is a pivotal moment for the DOD. Joint leaders recognize the importance of the information and cognitive domains, but if they retain a mostly CT- and/or COIN-communication centric approach, momentum will wane and U.S. credibility and influence could suffer. It is critically important that leaders lean into this issue and view it not merely as yet another change in priorities, but embrace this moment as an opportunity to reset capabilities for

the future. One key to help unlock that potential is borrowing sales tools to help streamline—and ultimately professionalize—the craft of external communication within the DOD.

Game-changing CRM Software

The leading business technology sector this decade has been the meteoric rise of Client Relationship Management (CRM) firms providing client-customer interface software. Briefly, CRMs individually curate a digital interface to connect and manage a client and customer relationship. Tech startups have blossomed into Fortune 500 companies that have reimagined the client-customer relationship and have revolutionized the business environment by professionalizing the process of curating the seller-buyer engagement. The CRM industry eclipsed \$48 billion in sales in 2018, and could double in size by 2025.³⁰ It is through CRM efforts that targeted ads, listservs, direct email marketing, computer cookie manipulation, digital purchase tracking software, and much more were exploited by this industry. Much could be learned by the DOD in how commercial marketing is harvesting open-sourced details and personalizing touch points with customers.

In the pre-digital days, salespeople would keep a tidy notebook with the names and contact details of their clients. Clever salespeople would also include salient details to personalize service to their clients, such as the names and ages of their children, where the client attended college, alumni groups he or she belonged to, along with details such as the last sale closed and the all-important future sales prospects. In CRM platforms like Salesforce, the industry leader, those important personalization efforts help overcome blind, culturally irrelevant marketing efforts to bridge a potential connection between sellers and buyers. Salesforce has a specific marketing/public relations platform that claims to “... cut through the clutter and create the chemistry between your brand and your target customer on just about any digital channel.”³¹

More specifically, the platform leverages a digital ecosystem to collect active customer feedback via social media (i.e., Tweets, Facebook likes, Instagram posts) along with other more technically elegant means via open-source web tracking software and ad clicks. This allows the marketing branch of Activision, a top-tier software and gaming company, for example, to fuse real-time customer sentiment into actionable (and personable) engagement.³² Knowing and predicting the needs of a given customer—and just as importantly, moving quickly when negative sentiment about the company percolates on the web—affords CRM clients game-changing decision speed.

In contrast to a CRM-managed and personally curated marketing effort for a large, multinational company, the DOD communication enterprise is mass produced and largely aloof to actual customers, so to speak. Messages are generally ethnocentric, devoid of cultural salience, and lack any true harmony across the larger defense enterprise. If a Fortune 500 company marketed in this manner it would suffer mightily from its diverse audiences (e.g., suppliers, employees, buyers) feeling like its trusted brand, for example, was not speaking to them.

It could be argued that drawing a parallel between for-profit corporations and their personalized marketing efforts and DOD communicators is an uneasy comparison. Yet, the ultimate aim for each is similar: Both are selling a given product and looking to increase market share, albeit in vastly different spheres. As technology further stratifies the communication environment it will be even more difficult for DOD communicators and their messages to find purchase as rogue actors employ nefarious tools to clutter, or worse, seduce, the minds of their audiences.

Deep Fakes, Bots, and Trolls ... Oh My

It would be difficult for any DOD communicator to claim that the enterprise is well postured to counter a peer-adversary's meddling in the communication/cognitive dimension. One only needs to look back to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election to see how a quasi-official, Russian-sponsored shadow force leveraged a powerful narrative (dissension and distrust in democratic norms) to sow discontent among the American electorate.³³ Regardless of the effects it had on the actual election, the apolitical takeaway is the relative ease with which the U.S. population was manipulated by a rising crescendo of disingenuous social media stories that grew branches and sequels to cloud the conversation.

Once a heavily biased story or news source would post, Twitter bots trained to seek key words scooped up the story/site and rapidly shared, hash-tagged, and ultimately enabled the story to go viral. The site *Buzzfeed*, a news aggregator, dissected hundreds of these posts following the election to uncover the "how" behind this phenomenon. By building partisan-sounding websites (e.g., End the Fed) coupled with a snazzy, eye-catching headline (e.g., "Pope endorses Trump for President"), a glowing ember could be fanned by thousands of "likes," re-Tweets, or re-posts fueling the story's deleterious narrative.³⁴ The stories then skyrocketed to viral status when traditional media simply reported and repurposed the stories based on them being widely viewed, shared, and commented on. This became a classic self-licking ice cream cone.

The notable takeaway here is the relative ease with which Russian trolls mastered the U.S. cultural narrative, understood key points of dissension, and engaged the cognitive levers in the targeted audiences to achieve a strategic objective. In another example, in 2015 the University of Missouri fell prey to Russia's tactics when racial/ethnic tensions spawned a panic when it was falsely reported that the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was marching on campus and had

beaten an African American child. The manufactured Tweet and photo touched a raw nerve, sending the social media echo chamber on campus into meltdown.³⁵ There was no KKK march and no beatings. There was also no real-time fact checking. The Russian trolls added a clever dash of antisemitism at just the right time to sow discontent well beyond the confines of the University of Missouri campus. Their relative sophistication and understanding of the U.S. narrative is equal parts remarkable and frightening. If the U.S. is to have any success in the near future combating these types of attacks, it must be better prepared as a U.S. military to defend the home front—and equally be prepared to have the same level of cultural sophistication when combating potential adversaries.

The Rise of Weaponized Narratives

The Russian hacking operation illustrates what Arizona State University's (ASU) Center on the Future of War described as a classic use of "weaponized narratives" to achieve a political objective. Scholars at ASU claim that: a "Weaponized narrative is an attack that seeks to undermine an opponent's civilization, identity, and will."³⁶ It would be difficult to argue that the Russian attack of 2016 did not deliver these consequences. Moreover: "By generating confusion, complexity, and political and social schisms, it confounds response on the part of the defender," according to scholars at ASU's Weaponized Narrative Initiative (WNI), a collaboration hub for research and scholarship on this important topic.³⁷

According to Dr. Joel Garreau, founding co-director of the WNI, information has been weaponized in new and unique ways that "cuts across the entire frontier of a civilization ... and liberal democracies are struggling to respond."³⁸ An important component in this evolution of warfare is weaker states leveraging information to erode internal confidence of more powerful states. Garreau argues that post Iraq, near-peer adversaries accepted they had limited means to

formally counter the U.S. military, but they could compete and potentially eke out micro wins in the information space. Garreau's founding co-director, Dr. Braden Allenby, flags adversaries' successful use of fake news, as it is colloquially termed, to fog the information space, and that this is leading some to claim we are entering a post-Enlightenment era where facts are no longer agreed upon. Allenby argues that when "smart people disregard facts it upends a societal anchor."³⁹

To further complicate this issue, ASU scholars note that merely parroting similarly packaged weaponized narratives to the transmitting nation as a "response" will likely be ineffectual because the narrative would lack cultural salience.⁴⁰ This is an important point for military communicators to explore, because it cannot be assumed that merely "firing" back a similarly constructed message refuting the opponent's arguments will hit the mark. Russia was effective because it dedicated significant research into the cultural schisms that exist in the U.S. and found effective wedge issues to divide the electorate. Russia's research was likely facilitated by their now infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA), a quasi-propaganda outfit that is officially unofficial.

The IRA was given special attention recently by the U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, noting the Russian agency's strategic goal was to "sow discord in the U.S. political system" during the run-up to the 2016 election.⁴¹ The important component for communicators is detailing the IRA's competitive advantage: cultural relevance and message salience to their target audience. They pinpointed deeply emotional and divisive issues that were likely to spark online rage (e.g., racism) and that could potentially fester and grow into real-world activism, as seen in race riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Ferguson, Missouri, among others.

If the U.S. is to level the playing field in a great power contest with China, for example, exploring the cultural touchstones to gain traction will be critically important. Having a deep understanding and appreciation for human rights issues, Hong Kong and Taiwan territorial concerns, and the cleansing of what China deems unsavory populations (Uighurs), for example, will allow U.S. communicators to incorporate cultural relevance into messaging, and as importantly, not inadvertently fan any flames of dissent by being culturally insensitive to important issues that affect the alignments (or misalignments) in the region. Not understanding the nuances of China's general mistrust of Japan, for example—most recently fanned by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45)—will significantly undercut U.S. message salience. Even calling the conflict the “Second Sino-Japanese War” (as codified in most Western-themed texts) in messages intended for a Chinese audience, will taint the narrative and the sender with a Western, ethnocentric lens. Chinese refer to the conflict more ominously as “The War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression.” Not being able to marshal such touchstones in a communication campaign will significantly handicap U.S. credibility.⁴²

(Part 4) Recommendations

Thus far this monograph has sketched a rather bleak outlook for both the contemporary and future communication environment. Unfortunately, the risks are growing according to the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Agency. China, among other countries, is singled out for attempting to expand influence by pushing a carefully curated narrative unmoored from reality, according to the intelligence community.⁴³ Couple that concern with an overly bureaucratic DOD infrastructure and a highly diverse, adaptive, and complex communication landscape, and it does not portend a positive outcome for U.S. communication professionals. It is because of those concerns that steps must be taken immediately to evolve the DOD's

communication infrastructure to counter potential adversaries in a great power competition environment. What follows are three independent proposals to pivot the communication enterprise to one better suited to addressing potential future concerns.

A Unified Team of Communication Professionals

As noted in section two of this essay, PA and IO professionals share similar responsibilities within the Air Force corporate structure. Those doctrinally defined responsibilities help delineate the roles and authorities of each community. While those requirements were suitable for a CT- or COIN-focused fight, it is recommended here that the DOD reexamine the force structure through a lens of great power competition. This argument is not conspiring a hostile takeover of a given career field, but rather, commissioning an interdisciplinary study by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to assess the merits of better aligning communication professionals within the DOD enterprise.

Upfront it should be noted that this is not an effort to reduce personnel authorizations. What is needed is an honest assessment of what the communication landscape could look like in a great power competition. The synergy of realigning both PA and IO professionals could bring unparalleled symmetry and best align the communication enterprise. Being able to quickly counterpunch in a contested environment against an educated, deft, and nimble opponent is critical. And, that is especially the case when one of the most ominous potential opponents has already initiated sweeping internal reforms to better posture its forces.

In December 2015 the Peoples Liberation Army realigned a handful of communication- and operationally-focused capabilities into a new Strategic Support Force (SSF) derived from a concept known as the Three Warfares. The SSF was assembled to dominate in three domains: psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare.⁴⁴ The professed goal is to

“establish discursive power over an adversary—that is, the power to control perceptions and shape narratives that advance Chinese interests and undermine those of an opponent.”⁴⁵ While the SSF’s goals are not wholly unique or unprecedented, their realignment demonstrates a commitment by PLA leaders to outpace and outthink their adversaries in the information space.

Similar synergies are currently underway in the Headquarters Air Force (HAF) staff when they announced in March 2019 that the Intelligence and Cyber Effects Operations merged staffs to “create greater integration and effectiveness to be more competitive in increasingly contested warfighting domains.”⁴⁶ The move, according to the HAF staff, was to better align requirements and priorities under the current NDS. This same focus and attention should be given to the communication enterprise. All of the ammunition needed to compel potentially entrenched camps to begin a dialogue is available. Not only is a prime, potential opponent already taking steps (China’s SSF), but the intelligence and cyber operations teams within the Air Force are moving out to best meet the intent of the NDS. Regardless of what a potential OSD study could recommend on future organization of the communication enterprise, there is yet another key step that should be considered to elevate the relevancy of DOD communication messages and products.

Offshore Balancing for Communicators

While the aim of DOD communicators—specifically PA professionals—is to provide accurate and timely information to the public, in many cases the leading “customer” is other U.S. military leaders and/or elected (political) leadership and their staffs. Commanders are principally concerned with how a communication campaign will be perceived through a lens of his or her leadership, and by extension, how it would be perceived by elected officials. This is not to say that the public is not important, or that truth is disregarded, but the prime directive of most

communication professionals is to first defend the organization (and his or her leadership). While those practices may be somewhat innocuous in a peacetime environment, it is argued here that such a focus could hamper military capabilities in a great power competition.

To help overcome this communication blind spot and better facilitate meaningful, culturally relevant dialogue in a great power competition environment, DOD communicators should consider the bold move of adopting a political science tactic: Offshore Balancing. In practice, “the United States would encourage other countries to assume the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary.”⁴⁷ The U.S. military policy would rely more heavily on regional partners and allies to convey American-held ideals and policy aims. Regarding communication, it would limit overt, heavy-handed U.S.-led messaging efforts, instead seeking to gently persuade and influence regional partners through ongoing, mil-to-mil dialogues. This would replace the DOD’s blunt communication instrument with something more elegant, persuasive, and culturally relevant.

In Indo-Pacific Command’s 2019 Malabar Exercise, a typical DOD communication approach was pursued. A U.S.-authored press release was distributed throughout the region seeking to influence the unnamed adversary. “Our operations in the Indo-Pacific are focused on maintaining regional stability and security,” said Rear Adm. George Wikoff, commander of Task Force 70.⁴⁸ “Our presence reflects our commitment to the values we share with the many partners and allies in the region ...,” he said.⁴⁹ While this essay is not aimed at being provocative, it is argued that Adm. Wikoff was not messaging the unnamed adversary or partners in the region. Nothing about his remarks was tailored to the intended audience. This was a message to one’s own base of support.

A more compelling and culturally relevant approach would rely on the allies and partners Adm. Wukoff mentioned to carry the message and convey the narrative. Scholars ascribing an offshore balancing perspective argue it is critically important that the U.S. “abstain from crusades to remake the world in its image,” or fall back into the trap of trying to control versus guide policy objectives, along with the associated communication efforts.⁵⁰ This is especially relevant in the Pacific, where “... creating an effective coalition to check China’s ambitions in Asia will be as much a diplomatic task as a military mission, and success would depend on a deep bench of officials who are intimately familiar with the history, languages, cultures, and sensitivities of the region.”⁵¹ Looking ahead, coupling an offshore balancing approach and organizational realignment of the communication enterprise is compelling, but not enough. The final step requires the coalescing of existing cultural knowledge with a tech-centric, mobile-friendly platform that can deliver results for the communication enterprise as a whole.

Communication and Culture Mobile App

The Air Force’s Culture and Language Center received high praise from *The Wall Street Journal* in 2018 when its Air Force Culture Guide earned recognition as one of “six indispensable apps for world travelers.”⁵² The application is a digital companion to the Center’s well-heeled flip books designed to fit neatly in an Airman’s cargo pocket detailing a trove of information related to religion, gender roles, languages, and more, for a specific country and/or region. The guides are intended to culturally acclimate travelers, and in the case of the military, better enable service members to accomplish their given mission.

Looking to the near future when cultural salience in DOD messaging will be even more acute, it is recommended that communication professionals build on the shoulders of the Center’s culture guides and develop an interactive, CRM platform to synergize communication

efforts across the enterprise. As noted in section three of this essay, a CRM platform can be geared toward personalization by assisting clients in cutting through blind, culturally irrelevant marketing efforts to bridge a potential connection among stakeholders. There has been little innovation in DOD communication efforts, and that is especially the case when it involves cultural relevance in messaging.

Companies that curate CRM platforms benefit most from client personalization because this makes the software that much more relevant to the intended audience. Harnessing the information bound within the Center's culture guides and bundling that knowledge with cross-cultural communication scholarship would elevate the DOD communication enterprise to a new level of proficiency and relevance. Much has been written in the tech space regarding the power of "the one" platform. Developing an ecosystem that allows employees to collaborate, capture analytics, share best practices, and archive projects for future reference, is a fever dream for most DOD communicators. There is no existing tool that holistically allows the various stovepipes of communication to meaningfully collaborate, save a Microsoft SharePoint site that is neither mobile friendly nor accessible from non-DOD devices. It is the DOD communication version of "fighting in the Bible."

Companies such as Salesforce and Huddle, two prominent CRM providers, meet the Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP) requirements to operate cloud-based products like a CRM platform on government networks. They are mobile friendly and do not hide behind onerous federally restrictive firewalls, but they do meet commercial encryption protection, much like a commercial banking website. These established, profitable companies are delivering products and services to multinational, Fortune 500 clients today. If the DOD partnered with CRM providers to synthesize both cultural awareness and cross-cultural

communication scholarship it would afford leadership a better opportunity to slice through a cluttered information environment and better guide communication efforts to affect the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of a given audience.

Conclusion

The DOD is slowly pivoting away from a COIN-centric frame of reference back to the admittedly comfortable confines of great power competition (well-defined, state-on-state adversaries). And while a threat to U.S. sovereignty is not yet well defined, a rising China, a bellicose Russia, and an unpredictable Iran may give pause to the national security enterprise due to their foggy intentions and growing military prowess. The DOD, along with other instruments of power, must do their best to prepare for the unknown—an unknown that should not be feared, but rather, embraced. The current security environment is not new nor novel. Linton Wells II, an esteemed policy advisor to both the President Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, noted that about every 10 years there is a sea change in the world security environment that is viewed at the time as being unlikely or wholly unexpected. Wells prophetically surmised in April 2001: “... I’m not sure what 2010 will look like, but I’m sure that it will be very little like we expect, so we should plan accordingly.”⁵³ As the DOD now peers into the 2030s, the same ambiguity exists.

As professional military journals, think tanks, and military leaders spur the national security enterprise to prepare for the unknown, reams have been written about innovation, technology, and most importantly increasing the DOD’s decision speed to outthink, outwit, and outmaneuver future adversaries. The node that is missing in nearly all of these discussions is the criticality of culture. To date the focus of the DOD has been exclusively grounded in the military technological advancement of rising and near-peer competitors. Simply increasing the DOD’s

decision speed without a wholesome understanding of a potential rival's culture is a seductive trap that reinforces notions of ethnocentrism. Purposely acknowledging the well-heelled biases of American exceptionalism is an important first step, because "U.S. forces will continue to find themselves in situations in which an understanding of a country's history, politics, and culture is essential to their effectiveness."⁵⁴

This monograph outlined how some of America's adversaries are already clouding the collective decision space in both the political and public-perception arenas. Russia's masterclass on influence and persuasion during the 2016 election only serves to embolden China, Iran, and any other weak nations looking to sway American public opinion. The bold steps outlined herein can and should be embraced to better position the DOD for future conflicts that will be grounded in cognition, not attrition. Procuring hypersonic weapons, crafting exquisite cyber weapons, and developing six-generation fighters, for example, is important and should continue. At the same time, however, the DOD must take the comparatively small steps to better understand, appreciate, and most importantly, elevate the craft of inter-cultural communications.

While the Department of State will retain the mantle of communicating overarching foreign policy on behalf of the U.S., it will likely be the DOD communication enterprise that will do the daily heavy lifting of engaging allies, partners, and rising competitors seeking to reframe the established world order. It is essential that those charged with the craft of communicating on behalf of the enterprise, primarily PA and IO officers, be considered for potential consolidation to synergize similarly minded communication professionals. Moreover, regional allies and partners should be empowered to serve as message surrogates to increase cultural relevancy and minimize the latency of U.S. ethnocentrism. Finally, cross-cultural communication scholarship

should guide the teachings, practices, and products of the DOD communication enterprise to better inform and ultimately influence potential adversaries through CRM-empowered tools.

The key issue in future conflict is gaining and sustaining an adversary's attention, and that is only possible through an understanding of what is relevant and culturally meaningful to a given audience.⁵⁵ The DOD is now refocusing its tactics, techniques, and procedures to prepare for great power competition. If communication professionals fail to embrace this shift it is more than a wasted opportunity; it will degrade military operational capability and lethality, put troops at risk, and threaten the homeland. Now is the time to embrace culture as a key ingredient in sustaining communication and messaging relevance in great power competition.

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