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Attention to Information Warfare and Active Measures Is Long Overdue

Our national security community has systematically neglected a critical dimension of intelligence, counterintelligence, and diplomacy for many decades. This is the entire field of perceptions management, propaganda, strategic deception, information warfare, and strategic influence – activities which take their most dangerous form in the various elements of what the Soviet KGB called "active measures."

Active measures, which a KGB general called "the heart and soul" of Soviet intelligence, constitute disinformation, forgeries, and covert influence operations. These activities include front organizations, black propaganda, strategic deception, discrediting adversaries, supporting political movements and guerrilla organizations, certain commercial operations, psychological operations, and the subversion of governments and organizations. A broader definition adds propaganda, diversion, provocation, penetration and manipulation of domestic groups (which can have foreign policy effects), assassination, terrorism, and support for terrorism. The purpose of these measures is to distort perceptions of reality and induce their targets to take actions in the interest of the perpetrator.

The Russians have been widely recognized as the most intense practitioners of these dark arts. However, other powers, including China, North Korea, Cuba, Iran, and the Islamic State use them as well. These powers use every possible medium: broadcasts, social media, agents of influence, corporations, front groups, etc. Such methods are not new for Chekist-run Russia nor for other communist states which share these techniques. But the skill with which radical Islamist groups, particularly the Islamic State, have used many of these techniques has taken Western governments by surprise.

The problem here is not so much that bad actors use these methods, but rather the failure of Western foreign policy elites to recognize them and mount countermeasures. This failure is the result of either professional malpractice, ignorance of these dimensions of foreign policy and war, bureaucratic cultural bias, organizational weaknesses, misallocation of funds, wishful thinking, or willful blindness.

Russia and China, for example, use these methods first for domestic purposes:

- To brainwash and atomize domestic audiences.
- To rally domestic support for their foreign policies by creating enemies.
- To justify the establishment of centralized authoritarianism.

In foreign strategic influence operations, Russia and China have several objectives:

- They disguise their expansionism, authoritarianism, suppression of independent media, and human rights violations.
- They excuse, exonerate, and distract attention from aggression (Russia) and expansionism (China).
- They undermine support for Western defense.
- Russia, in particular, works to demoralize and confuse foreign publics and sow doubts about their governments, cultures, and Western civilization.
- Russia promotes cynicism so that foreign audiences will not trust any source of information.
- Russia and, to an increasing extent, China seek to undermine unity within NATO and within individual nations.
  - ◊ Russia does this by promoting extremist groups and individuals.
  - ◊ It uses threats to prevent nations from participating fully in Western collective defense.
  - ◊ It demoralizes populations in neighboring nations by instilling doubts about NATO security guarantees.
  - ◊ It incites interethnic and interreligious conflicts and separatism.
- Russia tries to alienate Russian populations abroad from their host countries by portraying them as victims, while China appeals to its nationals abroad to serve Chinese interests.
- Both powers seek to discredit and isolate political figures, parties, and nations that resist aggression, expansionism, subversion, and organized crime.
- Both powers work to define the intellectual framework through which foreigners perceive reality.
- Both powers use cultural diplomacy, diplomatic initiatives, and commerce for psychological disarmament by persuading foreign audiences and leaders that they are not pursuing neo-imperial strategies.
- Their commercial operations seek to influence foreign elites by rewarding pro-Russian and pro-Chinese individuals and companies.
- Russia supports groups in Western nations – like the environmental movement – to protest "fracking" and other energy policies in order to weaken energy independence and other pro-security measures.
- Russia vilifies the pro-EU movement and new government in Ukraine to sow doubts about them in the West, to instill fear among Russians in eastern Ukraine, and to serve as justification and cover for its subversion and invasion of Ukraine.

While there is growing consciousness of the Russian conduct of these tactics – and there is some literature and the occasional op-ed piece about it – there is nary a whisper about the Chinese use of these activities.

Meanwhile, radical Islamist movements use a variety of these methods as key instruments of their jihad. Their purpose is to radicalize and recruit new cadres to overthrow "apostate" governments in the Middle East and elsewhere,

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to fight jihad against the West and Israel, and to establish a new Caliphate. Their methods are manifold:

- They use many media, including digital social media, to reach potential recruits, promoting several themes:
  - ◊ They anathematize Western culture as a degraded society of unbelief.
  - ◊ They discredit Western education as contrary to Islam.
  - ◊ They portray the West as being at war with Islam and then declare it an obligation to conduct jihad against those conducting that war.
  - ◊ Their glorification of suicidal "martyrdom" offers the chance of heroism to ordinary youths, ne'er-do-wells, and criminals.
  - ◊ They attract new cadres with various rewards, including women, slaves, (including sex slaves), housing, and other amenities that they will never receive.
  - ◊ They supply meaning to lives that have never found meaning.
  - ◊ Their apocalyptic vision of Armageddon lends urgency to their cause: this is the jihadist's "last chance" for martyrdom.
- They encourage immigration and building separatist Islamic communities in the West.
- They urge these communities to avoid assimilation and to conduct what the Moslem Brotherhood calls "civilizational jihad." This consists of efforts to establish special provisions for Moslems in Western countries, including a parallel track for Shariah law, which is ultimately designed to replace Western legal systems.
- Saudi Arabia and other Moslem nations fund the construction of new mosques and supply Wahhabist imams to lead them. (Of course, there is no reciprocity in such arrangements. It never occurs to Western governments to demand that Saudi Arabia permit the externally-funded establishment of Christian churches on its soil as a condition of Saudi proselytization in the West.)
- Meanwhile, the Saudis offer large sums to established mosques in Western countries on the condition that they replace their politically moderate imams with radical Wahhabists.
- Islamists establish front organizations that present themselves as "mainstream Moslem" groups that publicly deny support for terrorism. A number of these "mainstream" organizations have been exposed – particularly in American courts – as terrorism supporters after all, and some of their leaders have been convicted for terrorist activities.
- Islamist front organization agents in the West seek positions of influence enabling them to approve the appointment of favored imams as chaplains in Western prisons and armed services. These imams then recruit new cadres – particularly in prisons, where criminal elements find in Islamism a justification for criminal acts.
- The Islamists specialize in the "propaganda of the deed." This is one of the key functions of terrorism and its glorification in the gruesome portrayal of beheadings and other crimes on professionally made video recordings for digital media. The goals of such actions are: 1) to provoke a Western reaction against Islam as a whole; 2) to conflate the radical Islam that is motivated by secular political objectives with that Islam that is more spiritually focused, politically moderate, and capable of coexisting with other religions; and 3) ultimately, to hijack all of Islam to the radical agenda of the "Caliphate."

Unfortunately, our national security community has systematically neglected these activities. By 1981, US intelligence had stopped collecting on propaganda and active measures and our public diplomacy and strategic influence capabilities were severely weakened. Although the Reagan administration reversed these trends, collection, analysis, and countermeasures had effectively stopped by 1988. In mid-1990s, newly independent Ukraine accused Moscow of conducting active measures against it – but no one in Washington noticed.

Sound national security policy must recognize that these perennial instruments are much more effective than our policy elites have ever acknowledged, and that they require a robust counterintelligence and strategic communications response. But this necessitates recognition that counterintelligence is not simply counter-espionage: it also includes countering the other activities that foreign intelligence agencies conduct.

What must be done? First, we must collect intelligence on all these activities, analyze it, expose the falsehoods, agents of influence, and psychological maneuvers, and disseminate this information to all concerned. (This was the work of the 1980s Interagency Active Measures Working Group.) Next, we must study foreign and domestic public opinion – a form of "opportunities intelligence," or "cultural intelligence" that has taken the form of audience research by our international broadcasters or "human terrain mapping" by our armed forces. We must revive our public diplomacy, information operations, and political, psychological, and ideological warfare capabilities and begin to reward excellence in these fields. We must create a culture of integrated strategy that includes this entire dimension of statecraft. Finally, we must remind those who are queasy about these activities that their discomfort with non-violent instruments of conflict and strategic influence deprives us of the key tools to address hybrid warfare, and makes it ever more likely that force will have to be used to defend our vital interests.

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These comments are distilled from Dr. Lenczowski's presentation to the NATO Warsaw Summit Experts' Forum, 8 July 2016.