

Swiss Institute for Global Affairs

## Information Warfare and Propaganda 4.0

Recently the “Wochenzeitung” (WOZ) wrote the following in connection with the arising Ukraine conflict: “(...) The Chinese president Xi Jinping may have asked Vladimir Putin in a telephone call to refrain from invading Ukraine during the Winter Olympics in February.” Maria Zakharova, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman concluded: “So we are waiting for provocations on the part of the U.S. and the regime in Kiev which is led by the U.S, both on the informational level and - this cannot be ruled out - of a military nature” <sup>1</sup>. The escalating crisis in Ukraine is a good example of how information is strategically being used for the sake of gaining political leverage and power. The skillful and deliberate use of information nowadays creates new realities in our physical and virtual space. In a highly volatile and interconnected world, information space is often equated with cyberspace and cyber operations. However, information space is a multi-layered concept and should not be reduced to technology and cyberinfrastructure alone. Information-driven warfare - detached from the concept of cyber - creates interesting but often ambiguous entanglements between virtual space and the real world. The operational sphere of information space is not a defined and closed-off space. <sup>2</sup> Rather, it is connected to all possible operational spheres and parts of life. These ramifications create new realities and facts beyond classical propaganda. This is what we at the Swiss Institute for Global Affairs (SIGA) call “spin politics”: “In contrast to spin linguistics, propaganda and rhetoric, which mainly refer to the interpretation of the world by semantic and pictorial means [...], Spin Politics extends the concept of information to the semiotic interpretation of the world. Thus, actions and events which are not only linguistic and symbolic in nature become central and meaningful” <sup>3</sup>.

With this understanding, information-driven warfare, or precisely spin politics, becomes the new superweapon of the information age, primarily being concerned with the goal of establishing the supremacy of a certain interpretation of events and actions. This superweapon is inexpensive and can even, if being cleverly used in conjunction with the classical spheres of operation, be highly effective. With properly “spun” information, realities can be shifted, and new facts created. The boundaries of the legitimate, the thinkable and the acceptable are being transformed. Exemplary for this case is the Crimea Crisis, an extraordinary event which was strategically neutralized and trivialized - the media promoted the designation of the soldiers as “little green men”, thereby downplaying the potential threat posed by the soldiers. This happened by the creation of an image which evokes attributes like “smallness” and “cuteness”. Similarly, in connection with China and its irregular militias in the South China Sea, international media speak of “little blue men. So it is about the struggle for the right

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<sup>1</sup> Weinmann, Ute: «Jetzt zieht Putin den Kürzeren». In WOZ Nr. 04/2022, accessed 27.01.2022 (<https://www.woz.ch/-c222>)

<sup>2</sup> Remo Reginold: Spin Politics – Machtpolitik anders lesen. Military Power Review der Schweizer Armee – Nr. 2/2018.

<sup>3</sup> Remo Reginold: Spin Politics – Machtpolitik anders lesen. Military Power Review der Schweizer Armee – Nr. 2/2018.

interpretation, for the sovereignty and cleverness to influence connotations and associations of terms, actors, and events. The fact that grey areas of the international order are thereby undermined and de-tabooed is an accepted element of spin politics. In this context, China is an extremely interesting example in how diplomatic, economic, but also scientific facts are being created with these information-driven options. It is peculiar to the information space as a sphere that the effect in one operational space can trigger completely different effects in another space. Xi Jinping and his administration have understood this networked understanding of the effect of information very well: "China has understood that actions are information, that their contexts trigger perpetuum mobile-like momentum and thus also contribute specifically to (dis)information. In this sense, spin politics is not a concept, but a flexible system without a real geopolitical canon.

The power of the order of the Chinese spin oscillates between a strategy of consent, intimidation and ignorance and is thus much more challenging than categorizing China under terms such as Han- nationalism, politics of synchronization and global superpower [...]. The game between symbolic politics, open power politics and also economic pacification politics is not a simple strategy behind the grand strategy. It must be read in the momentum of endogenous spin. These spins help China to de-dramatize its dilemmas, internal power interests and opportunity considerations.<sup>4</sup> With a similar observation, the former commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDPACOM) Admiral Davidson comes to the following military strategic conclusion in the context of the South China Sea in 2018: "In short, Beijing is capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war [...]"<sup>5</sup> Thus, the various events in Hong Kong, in the South China Sea as well as events in the connection with Taiwan can be read as "strategic probing." Actions and conditions are being normalized over time, thus normative and sometimes regulatory boundaries are diluted and shifted in the desired direction.

These brief remarks on information-driven wars and spin politics show that images, symbols, but also seemingly simple gestures can have a strong impact on- and offline. This is why information-driven operations are more than just cyber operations whilst they can also have corresponding consequences in cyberspace. Information warfare is about more than short-term election manipulation or fake news. Therefore, in the analysis of geopolitical contexts, as well as in military strategy and intelligence work, the multi-optional target relationships and multi-perspective vectors that information-driven strategies entail are becoming increasingly relevant and decisive. Symbols, interpretations, and facts must be understood and classified in an ambiguous world even beyond propaganda and strategic communication. Dealing with these forms of information warfare requires a holistic and radically interdisciplinary approach: "Events and actions, like facts, are a product of interpretations. Therefore, they require us to constantly calibrate our perspectives and ways of seeing. Access to facts is mediated and guided by different filters. Geopolitical strategies are not simply translatable; they emerge

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<sup>4</sup> Remo Reginold: Spin Politics – Machtpolitik anders lesen. Military Power Review der Schweizer Armee – Nr. 2/2018.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/world/asia/south-china-sea-navy.html>

from contexts. Consistently applied strategic analysis effectively supports security policy as well as military-operational situational assessment" <sup>6</sup>. Especially in Western democracies with an open and transparent "information culture" and a rational-causal understanding of knowledge, it is essential to discuss these issues broadly and interdisciplinarily in order to do justice to their complexity and ambiguity. An open debate is urgently needed in order for Switzerland, which is highly interconnected, to allow for the development of resilient structures and therefore effective defense against information warfare. It should be remembered that China's military doctrine relies on three-dimensional warfare which is constituted by the legal, psychological and mediatic dimension. <sup>7</sup>

In order to initiate a discourse, the Swiss Institute for Global Affairs (SIGA) invites to an interdisciplinary expert talk on May 23, 2022, between 7 and 9 p.m. at the "Zoffice" coworking space in Zofingen.

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Translated from German to English by Nathanael Schabrun

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<sup>6</sup> Remo Reginold: Spin Politics – Machtpolitik anders lesen. Military Power Review der Schweizer Armee – Nr. 2/2018.

<sup>7</sup> Sangkuk, Lee (2014): China's Three Warfares: Origins, Applications, and Organizations. In: Journal of Strategic Studies. Vol 37:2. S. 198–221.