

# Political Warfare

17 Sep 2019

## Summary

Modern Political Warfare is the employment of all overt and covert means by a nation state to achieve its objectives and consists of the intentional use of one or more forms of power -diplomatic/political, information/cyber, military/intelligence, and economic- to affect the political composition or decision-making in another state. This is ranging from psychological measures up to short of war-activities.

The concept was developed in the United States, but similar approaches are also used by other countries.

The renaissance of political warfare coincides with increasing difficulties to use large-scale military power and the decreasing efficacy of soft power in times of increasing global tensions.

The paper presents the definition, historical background, the methods and objectives. Special attention is paid to the theory and practice of Special Operation Forces and to the modern Support-to-Resistance (STR) concept. Finally, the relations between US and Russia and China are presented as case studies.

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# 1. Fundamentals

## 1.1 Introduction

Modern Political Warfare is the employment of all overt and covert means by a nation state to achieve its objectives and consists of the intentional use of one or more forms of power -diplomatic/political, information/cyber, military/intelligence, and economic- to affect the political composition or decision-making in another state. This is ranging from psychological measures up to short of war-activities.

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Finally, the relations between US and Russia and China are presented as case studies.

## 1.2 Theory

### 1.2.1 Definitions and Concepts

Since the first definition of political warfare from 1948, no further official or formal definition of modern political warfare was agreed. The following definition is thus a working definition that includes those aspects that are typically presented and used:

**Modern Political Warfare** is the employment of all overt and covert means to achieve its national objectives and consists of the intentional use of one or more forms of power - diplomatic/political, information/cyber, military/intelligence, and economic- to affect the political composition or decision-making in another state. This is ranging from psychological measures up to short of war-activities<sup>1</sup>.

The difference to conventional policy making is the **focus on enforcement**, e.g. use sanctions instead of trade, active support of regime changes instead of criticizing other states etc., targeted use of information and actions as psychological warfare and so on. The difference to conventional politics and to soft power will be presented in more detail in the methods section.

### 1.2.2 History

In 1948, the concept was defined in a memorandum of the State Department's policy planning staff under the US diplomat George Kennan as follows: "*Political warfare is*

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<sup>1</sup> Note that there is a discussion whether the use of kinetic force (military or paramilitary force) should be separated from political warfare as hybrid warfare (Babbage 2019, p.1). However, both from the history of this concept (Kennan 1948) and practice of the Support-to-resistance operations (Irwin 2019, p.x), this approach may be a bit too narrow.

*the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (such as ERP - the Marshall Plan), and 'white' propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, 'black' psychological warfare<sup>2</sup> and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.”<sup>3</sup>*

This concept was further elaborated and forms the basis of the current methods and practice of Political Warfare.

## 2. Methods and Practice

### 2.1 Tools

Political Warfare ranges from overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (aid, sanctions, sabotage), and “white” propaganda to covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements (parties, persons, NGOs), “black” **psychological warfare** (also known as **PSYOPs**), and **unconventional warfare (UW)** as support of a foreign insurgency or resistance movement against its government or an occupying power. In practice, these aspects are typically handled as a matter of **Special Operation Forces (SOF)** and as **Support-to-Resistance (STR)**<sup>4</sup>.

Friendly states can be supported and defended by **Nation Assistance**: programs include **security assistance (SA)**, **humanitarian civic assistance (HCA)**, and **foreign internal defense (FID)**, i.e. **counterinsurgency (COIN)**.

Modern Political warfare has certain characteristics<sup>5</sup>:

- It extends conventional forms of political conflicts instead of replacing them.
- It is outside traditional warfare, the aim is “*winning without fighting*”<sup>6</sup>, but can be done in parallel to traditional warfare.
- Typically, it is a combination of activities which require intelligence support to ensure precision and to prevent detection and attribution by the target state.
- In open conflicts, economic pressure as the preferred tool of the strong can be exerted.
- At each stage, information warfare can be used as targeted amplification or obfuscation of information in combination with cyber activities.
- The use or targeting of non-state actors and organizations is included.

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<sup>2</sup> White or overt propaganda comes from a known source. Gray propaganda is the semiofficial amplification of a government's position while Black propaganda comes from an unknown source.

<sup>3</sup> Kennan 1948

<sup>4</sup> For terminology which is used in US military, refer to Searle 2017, in particular to chapter 4. Implications of the Theory for Conventional and Special Operations.

<sup>5</sup> RAND 2018 and 2019

<sup>6</sup> Babbage 2019

- Religious, ethnical and other societal divisions of the target states may be used to improve effectiveness.

## 2.2 Examples

### 2.2.1 Overview

The following table provides an overview:

Level	Examples
Diplomacy/Political	Aid to democratic political parties Recognition and public support of pro-democracy movements and leaders Diplomatic recognition of democracy supporters as legitimate governments: a strong, but risky tool, if the newly recognized leaders are not able to gain power (Syria)
Information/Cyber	Propaganda, psychological warfare, amplification of protests by social media and internet
Military	Training of resistance movements Coups d'états Aid to foreign allies/proxies, Intelligence support Special Operation Forces, Black Ops
Economy	Marshall Plan, combining economic aid with promotion of Good Governance and democracy (developmental aid), Sanctions, Blockade ( <i>CoCom list</i> cut off the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact States from high-tech products which significantly impacted their capabilities)

Source: modified and expanded presentation from Figure 1.1 Defining the Contours of Political Warfare, see RAND 2018, p.7

The cyber sector as potential field of political warfare has undergone a rapid evolution in this decade. **Cyberwar** (Cyber war, Cyber Warfare) is the military confrontation with the means of information technology.

For damage of a computer or a system, it is necessary to access it via hacking and other intrusion methods. There are a lot of cyber espionage activities and little cyberwar, but technically, cyberwar often requires just an extra mouse click. From this perspective, it is reasonable that security experts consider the danger of cyberwar to be high and demand appropriate measures, while others find the matter exaggerated because one could not yet observe a large-scale cyberwar.

Thus, some cyber espionage activities are sometimes short or even very short of war, e.g. intrusion of satellites, of nuclear plants (*Wolf Creek* attack) or intrusion of safety instrumented systems (*Triton* attacks) where a manipulation can cause the total destruction of the production plants, for details refer to Cyberwar-methods-and-practice in Section 5.2 of this paper.

### 2.2.2 A practical case: Serbia 1999-2000

The United States played an active role in overthrowing the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic in 2000 after completion of NATO's Operation **Allied Force**, a bombing campaign against Serbia during the Kosovo War in 1999<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Irwin 2019, pp.175

Activities were<sup>8</sup>:

- Strong **sanctions** against Milosevic
- **Ring around Serbia**: A NATO psychological operations initiative which consisted of strong radio FM transmitters in Bosnia to oppose Serbian media and to encourage the political opposition to unite for democratic transformation.
- **Operation MATRIX**: US government initiative aimed at influencing Milosevic's closest supporters and advisors resulting in splits within Milosevic's inner circle, and many supporters fled the country within a month.
- **Aid to democracy promoters**: US was providing nearly 12 million dollars in assistance to Serbian democratic opposition parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, student groups, civic groups, and independent media.
- **Support to Otpor (resistance)** from 2000 on with funding and computers, after this emerged since its foundation in 1998 to be the most effective and resilient opposition group. An *Otpor* member was invited to Washington and as part of support by other NGOs, the retired US Army Colonel Helvey ran a weekend workshop for *Otpor* leaders in Budapest with a focus on nonviolent discipline and the importance of applying the principles of war to the nonviolent campaign. The nonviolent discipline of *Otpor* made it impossible for the security forces to use excessive force against the opposition.
- Finally, Milosevic was defeated by protesters after lost elections and diplomatic pressure of various states.

## **2.3 Special Operations and Support to Resistance**

### **2.3.1 History**

The **Special Operations** and the **Support to Resistance (STR)** were originally invented by the World War II military intelligence OSS which was later on replaced by the modern intelligence community.

The intelligence branch of special operations is the *Central Intelligence Agency (1947)* which is organized as follows: The *Special Activities Center (SAC)* is a division of the CIA responsible for covert operations, since 2015 known as *Special Activities Division*. Within SAC there are two separate groups: *Special Operations Group (SOG) for tactical paramilitary operations* and *Political Action Group (PAG) for covert political action related to political influence, psychological operations, and economic warfare*.

The military branch is the *US Army Special Forces (1952)*, other agencies have limited capacities as well, i.e. the drug enforcement agency DEA.

### **2.3.2 Special Operations and Special Forces**

The *Joint Special Operations University (JSOU)* researcher Tom Searle proposed a general theory of Special Operations to overcome common misunderstandings and to clarify the

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<sup>8</sup> Irwin 2019, pp.175-178

terminology<sup>9</sup>. While this was developed for US purposes, it is also useful for the understanding of Special Operations in general and summarized below.

The **combined arms theory** holds that real military power comes from the synergy of different types of assets (arms) rather than the strength of a single type of arms (e.g. strong Air Force, Strong Navy etc.). In this framework, special operations are not elite operations and not specialized operations, but just operations which are different from the conventional operations that are normally done to achieve a task<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, **Special Operation Forces (SOF)** are doing different, unusual things: e.g. in contrast to normal seamen, *Navy SEALs* come out of submarines or of planes, leave large ships, operate mini-submarines, swim to meet the enemy, and often fight the enemy on land<sup>11</sup>. Special Operations are e.g. applied in unusual situations such as covert operations and may thus require direct cooperation with members of intelligence, police or justice authorities<sup>12</sup>.

### 2.3.3 Support to Resistance (STR) analysis

The **Support to Resistance (STR)** concept involves the synchronized planning and execution of a series of activities that require close collaboration across US Government departments and agencies, e.g. between the *Department of Defense*, the *State Department* or the *Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)*, and there may be a shift in the lead responsibility over the course of the operation<sup>13</sup>. This may include the use of Special Operations and Special Operation Forces.

STR can serve as a tool of disruption, of coercion and to enable regime change and can be done during wars or in peacetime.

Will Irwin conducted for the *JSOU* a large study of STR operations of the past decades and systematically analyzed the outcome<sup>14</sup>: Wartime STR was successful in around 60 percent of the evaluated cases, but only about one third during peacetime. Nearly half of the failures were caused by security breaches, i.e. the adversary became aware of the plans too early. Support to non-violent civil resistance seems to be more likely to succeed than support to armed resistance, which explains why the STR experience is now sometimes suggested to be utilized in non-violent activities to achieve regime changes.

### 2.3.4 Non-violent Resistance

The *Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS)* is a non-profit, non-governmental, educational institution was founded in 2004 by former members of *Otpor*. In contrast to the STR concept above, the focus of *Canvas* is on non-state and non-violent resistance. The teachings were derived from the *Otpor* experience, but also from the

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<sup>9</sup> Searle 2017

<sup>10</sup> Searle 2017, p.11

<sup>11</sup> Searle 2017, p.12

<sup>12</sup> Searle 2017, p.23

<sup>13</sup> Irwin 2019

<sup>14</sup> Irwin 2019

democracy-promoting *Albert Einstein Institute* which published amongst others a book on non-violent resistance<sup>15</sup>.

In 2007, *Canvas* published its *Core Curriculum: A Guide To Effective Nonviolent Struggle* and also offers workshops and trainings. *Canvas* was meanwhile active in a lot of countries all over the global already.

The concept argues that regimes are built on **pillars of support**, i.e. police, army, elites etc. who support and maintain the current structure. Violence against these pillars is counterproductive: if the people are under attack, they tend to unite to defend the regime and the pillars are stabilized. Instead, the pillars need to be eroded by being non-violent and friendly (pulling out instead of pushing in), by showing good intentions (e.g. flowers to policemen instead of beating them).

The opposition movement needs to adhere to the principles of unity, planning and non-violent discipline together with a shared vision and a grand strategy. This includes communication strategies and a long-term planning which can e.g. result in so-called **color revolutions**: here, activists are suddenly present on highly important symbolic places of the target state, wear common colors and/or use common symbols to show unity and amplify the message via internet, social media and journalists. The activists try to act peacefully and disciplined if they are confronted with security forces.

While *Canvas* itself argues to be a peaceful democracy promoter, potential target states have accused them to be revolution exporters. Counterstrategies aim to break the dynamics of the revolution, either by trying to turn it into violence, to disperse the activists to avoid visibility on symbolic places or by talks and negotiations which ever bear the risk of a split of the opposition or exhaustion in case of lengthy discussions.

The STR study above showed that security breaches are the most important reason for failure, i.e. if the intelligence of the target regime gets aware of the activities too early. As the potential target states also learn from the events, the effect of the *Canvas* strategy may be questionable in the future. For this reason, some authors suggest to learn from the STR concept how to resist violence by trainings to evade tear gas attacks, to disperse and reassemble in case of direct attacks etc.

## **2.4 Military Issues**

Since the nuclear weapons were developed in the 1940ies, a direct open war between large powers is increasingly difficult to conduct without risks of total destruction.

However, the following chapter will demonstrate that in reality also a large conventional war is increasingly difficult to conduct, which makes political warfare an increasingly relevant strategic option.

In recent decades, large-scale and well-publicized geo-strategies have been developed, notably the 1997 Zbigniew Brzezinski's *Grand Chessboard*, in which he gave recommendations on how the US can adapt its leading position regionally with an update

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<sup>15</sup> Sharp 2005



in *Strategic Vision* from 2012<sup>16</sup>. However, both supporters and opponents of these concepts, started from the fact that the US, as a leading economic and military power, will be able to shape the global order significantly.

In 2017, the Pentagon, more specifically, the *Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) of the U.S. Army War College*, a study based on the so-called **post-primacy scenario**<sup>17</sup>, in which the US is still the largest economic and military power, but is no longer able to shape world order due to rising competitors such as China. Thus, geostrategy now has to be re-thought for an unstable, multipolar world that is not necessarily dominated by Western values anymore.

An Australian military study on the US capabilities<sup>18</sup> showed that America's capacity to enforce the liberal order has declined, as the US and its allies accounted for 80% of world defense spending in 1995, which is now down to 52%<sup>19</sup>.

The military equipment is overused and overaged with increased accidents due to near-continuous combat in the Near and Middle East region and budget instability caused by debt crisis and parliamentary disputes, training cuts<sup>20</sup>. There is a growing mismatch between strategy and resources.

The conclusion is that this: *“...requires hard strategic choices which the United States may be unwilling or unable to make. In an era of constrained budgets and multiplying geopolitical flashpoints, prioritizing great power competition with China means America's armed forces must scale back other global responsibilities. A growing number of defense planners understand this trade-off. But political leaders and much of the foreign policy establishment remain wedded to a superpower mindset that regards America's role in the world as defending an expansive liberal order.”*<sup>21</sup>

Trade-off means to reduce the burden in dealing with multiple secondary priorities to achieve the primary goal.

The conclusion suggests that the defense of liberal world order may need to be reduced, the Turn to the Pacific Region known as **Pacific Turn** or **Pacific Pivot** that was already done by President Obama indicates that from the regional perspective, Europe is also a secondary priority (which Europe still has not fully realized). A progredient dissolution of the liberal world order and rule-based institutions is likely which will further enhance political warfare activities.

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<sup>16</sup> Brzezinski 1997 and 2012

<sup>17</sup> Lovelace 2017 writes in his foreword: *“The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) faces persistent fundamental change in its strategic and operating environments. This report suggests this reality is the product of the United States entering or being in the midst of a new, more competitive, post-U.S. primacy environment. Post-primacy conditions promise far-reaching impacts on U.S. national security and defense strategy. Consequently, there is an urgent requirement for DoD to examine and adapt how it develops strategy and describes, identifies, assesses, and communicates corporate-level risk”*

<sup>18</sup> United States Studies Centre 2019

<sup>19</sup> United States Studies Centre 2019, p.11

<sup>20</sup> United States Studies Centre 2019, e.g. p.47-48 amongst others

<sup>21</sup> United States Studies Centre 2019, p.9

## 2.5 Soft Power

### 2.5.1 Concept and Issues

Nye<sup>22</sup> introduced the concept of Soft Power in the late 1980s that is working with perception and persuasion instead of coercion and payments as hard power approaches would suggest. Important elements of soft power of a state are the culture (as attractive to others), political values, and foreign policies (as legitimate and having morale).

The United States used its Soft Power quite successfully, this approach was called “*Telling America’s story*”<sup>23</sup> and presented the virtues and advantages of the United States. Popular narratives include e.g. the *American Dream* and the *American Way of Life*.

However, Soft Power is not only about content, but also about communication. In the 1990ies, Western media were globally dominant which made the use of Soft Power much more effective<sup>24</sup>.

But since that times, things have significantly changed. Other large actors tell now their own story, e.g. China emphasizes that it is a rising country that was for a long time under pressure of colonial powers and is thus the right and sensitive partner and role model for other countries with colonial past like in Africa.

Russia presents itself as defender of traditional European values, such as family, religion and patriotism while Western societies are seen to have a lack of orientation.

In addition to the competition on the content level, not only China and Russia are now much more active with their own, but also the Gulf States, i.e. there is much more competition now on the communication level as well.

The communication struggle is aggravated by the rise of the internet with fake news, social bots and cyber trolls.

Finally, the methodology is also an issue: A lot of scientific and professional efforts were made to make the political communication smarter and more perfect, e.g. by PR agencies, Spin Doctors etc.

However, this does not work anymore as expected, because in the last years a new type of politicians has emerged which attracts voters by provocative and harsh statements. While the opponents perceive this as bad behavior, the supporters perceive this as meta-communication: Making such statements shows them that the person is authentic, is not spin-doctored or dependent from hidden sponsors who prefer smart perfectness, and maybe sometimes wrong, but strong, i.e. *what you see is what you get*.

### 2.5.2 The NGO crisis

After the end of the cold war, there was a significant rise of **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**, which are typically representations of the third sector (in

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<sup>22</sup> Nye 1990

<sup>23</sup> Boot and Doran 2013

<sup>24</sup> This past global dominance was e.g. the topic of the movie *James Bond – Tomorrow never dies* from 1997

difference to the other sector state and economy), i.e. the civil society and which can act on the local, national or international level. In this decade, NGOs, their funding and the foundations which support them are increasingly getting into the mills of political warfare for the following reasons:

- Many Southern developing countries are concerned that NGOs typically pursue only their goals in a selective matter, which may result in island solutions and do not really contribute to the overall development. Also, NGOs may intervene into the local politics<sup>25</sup>. The target countries would prefer if the NGOs activities fit more into the overall development framework of the states, and more and more states issued laws called **NGO policies** to control and manage development assistance organizations. However, the NGOs do not want to be gap fillers or the prolonged arm of the respective state.
- Some Eastern states express concerns that NGOs which promote participation of the civil society promote in reality regime changes while some Western states are concerned that funding of Muslim organizations may foster Islamization and Islamism.

It cannot be analyzed in short whether and in which cases these concerns may be justified or not, but there is a clear global trend to tighten supervision and control of foundations, funding and NGOs.

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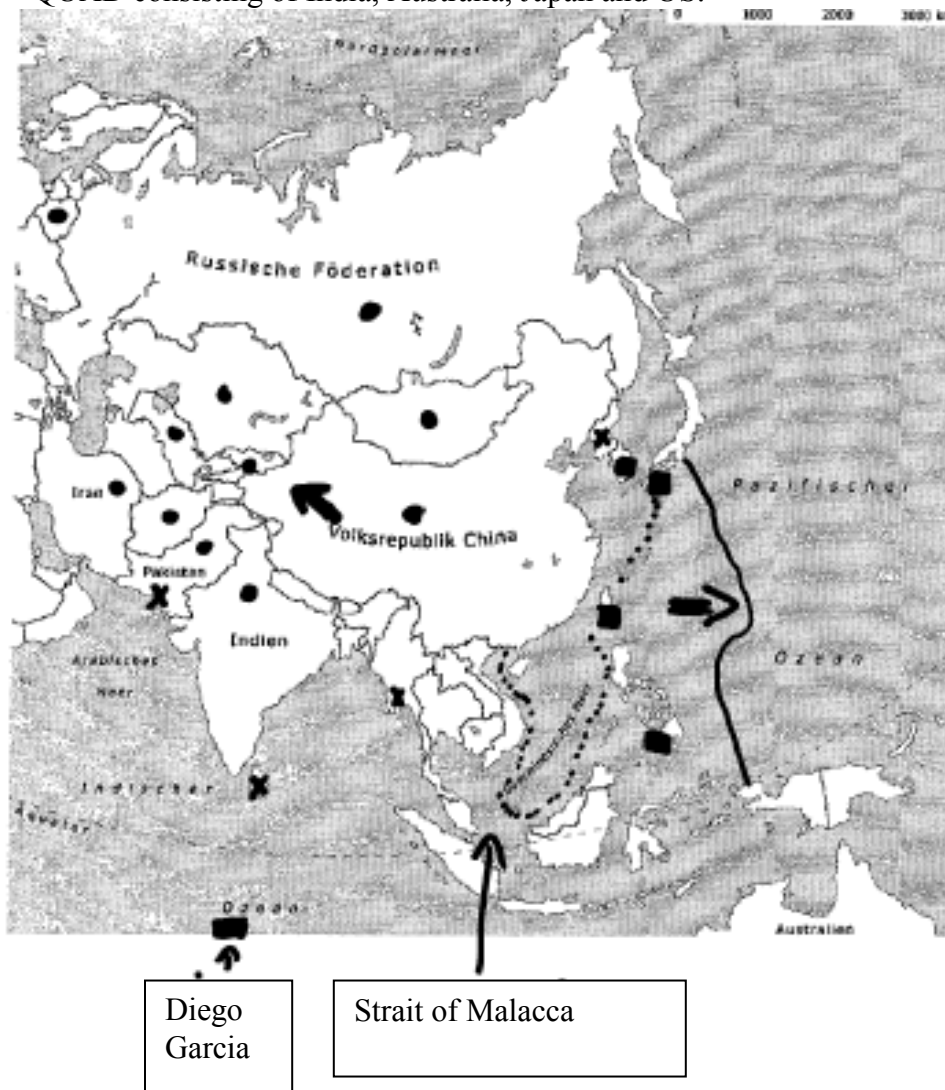
<sup>25</sup> Some authors discussed since 2001 whether there is a **responsibility to protect (R2P)**, i.e. the need and the right for a foreign intervention if the local government is not able or willing to protect their people in critical situations. Some authors argue that such a concept is not covered by the law of nations while others believe that this approach may overstretch military and political capacities of the democratic states, so it remained theoretical.

### 3. Political Warfare: Case Studies

#### 3.1 US-China

##### 3.1.1 The military situation

The US and its Western allies control large parts of the Pacific because the US has many small islands in the Pacific and has alliances with many of the small Pacific states. China faces a wall of US allies, namely Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines (squares on the map). It should not be forgotten that the US is still present with troops in Afghanistan between Russia and China. The US tries to establish a defense ring of large nations, the QUAD consisting of India, Australia, Japan and US.



- Circles: Member States and observers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO
- Squares: US allies with military presence
- Crosses: Allies of China or Chinese ports around India (string of pearls)
- Dashed line: First Island Line (First Island Chain), to Taiwan virtually identical to the South China Sea Area (Nine-Stripe Line), already controlled or targeted control zone

- Solid line with arrow: Second Sea Line (Second Island Chain), up to which the US influence is to be pushed back stepwise
- Arrow to Russia/Asia: direction of China to build a new Silk Road to Europe. There are also trade routes through Burma/Myanmar and Pakistan
- Strait of Malacca: biggest bottleneck and vulnerability of Chinese sea trade.
- Diego Garcia: British-US military base in the center of the Indian Ocean.

Source: created by Author for Modern Geostrategy 2017

China's military priorities are:

1. To push back the US from China's borders and the vulnerable sea trade routes by trying to expand the own influence from the First Sea Line to the Second Sea Line. This is done by coastal military bases, followed by artificial islands, then readiness of various types of ballistic missiles, in particular of the Dongfeng (DF) type, which include specific anti-ship missiles.
2. To dilute and overstretch US power by spreading presence and military activities outside Asia, like the military base in Djibouti and the expanded submarine activities up to the Arctic region. China has declared itself to a Near-Arctic State which means that it claims legitimate concerns in this area. Political warfare is particularly used to erode the dominance of US, Australia and other Western states in the Pacific region (Oceania).

The territorial approach is:

- The so-called **First Sea Line (First Island Chain)**, up to Taiwan virtually identical to the territorial claims on the South China Sea (nine dash-line), corresponds to the already controlled or targeted control zone. China disputes with Japan the ownership of the Senkaku Islands (Chinese Diaoyu). China's takeover of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would break the geographic barrier of US allies between Taiwan and Japan. Likewise, China has expanded its air defense zones. China is trying to secure control of the area in many ways, firstly by building artificial islands with military presence, and secondly through bilateral agreements with neighboring states to clarify territorial claims.
- The **Second Sea Line (Second Island Chain)** from Japan to Guam is the border to which the US influence is planned to be pushed back stepwise. The US Navy's increasing exposure to Chinese activities is one of the reasons for the US's increased focus on the Pacific, also known as the **Pacific Turn** or **Pacific Pivot**.
- China tries to control the sea strip around its shores (**South China Sea**) and to extend the influence on the Indian Ocean. This applies in particular to the Spratly Islands. The Spratly Islands are located in the presumably oil- and resource-rich South China Sea, to which China imposes significant territorial claims that overlap to those of neighboring states. This also applies to the nearby Paracel Islands.

### 3.1.2 Expansion of Infrastructure and Economy

- China is enhancing its relationship with Burma (Myanmar) and is building on its infrastructure, which will also serve as a future trade route to South Asia. Burma is a first 'pearl' of the so-called **String of Pearls** of China, which puts it around India, in order to position itself strategically and economically. The goal of China is to establish trading stations and ports throughout Asia. But Myanmar and Pakistan are important land connections for Chinese goods.

- The **String of Pearls** also includes a harbor in Bangla Desh. In Chittagong there is a container port, in Burmese Sittwe to a deep sea port and a base in the Pakistani Gwadar. In Sri Lanka, China is expanding the port of Hambantota. The idea is to further develop the trade routes on land and sea, the **New Silk Road**, which is planned to reach as far as Western Europe, the sea connections are planned to reach to East Africa, where China built a military base in Djibouti in 2017, and via the Suez Canal to Europe. The attempts of the West to gain control of the **Straits of Malacca**, and thus to control an important bottleneck from Asia to the Indian Ocean, have so far failed.
- Outside the Silk Road Initiative, China is meanwhile the most important trade partner of many African and Latin American States. Also, it is one of the largest infrastructure providers in developing countries with harbors, streets, railways, airports, hospitals and administrative buildings. China is increasingly spending developmental aid. Africa's internet is heavily based on smartphones, Chinas role as one of the leading smartphone and computer providers is also relevant.

### 3.1.3 Political Warfare in Oceania

It is common knowledge that China and US are competing on multiple levels, such as science, technology, economy etc. and that China made substantial progress, e.g. in the race for supercomputers and artificial intelligence research.

However, it is less known that -according to United States analysts- China is intensely using a variety of successful strategies to expand its influence in Oceania to erode US presence and US/Western influence. A retreat of US from any position would prolong the front lines by thousands of kilometers which would significantly aggravate the already existing overstretch.

Targets and tactics are:

- Papua-New Guinea: China offered in 2019 to take over the complete state debts which would make it financially dependent from China. Under Australian pressure, Papua New Guinea is hesitant to sign this agreement.
- Vanuatu: China has built a large harbor which allows stops of large tourist ships, but also a military ship from China visited this<sup>26</sup>.
- Commonwealth of Northern Marianas (CNMI):<sup>27</sup> massive engagement in casinos on Saipan Island with Chinese immigration and infrastructure investment resulting in increased public support for China
- Federated States of Micronesia (FSM): 'visit diplomacy' with regular high-level visits and invitations, scholarships for students, infrastructure investments, financial aid, resulting in increasing support for China
- Palau: tourism offensive with massive hotel construction campaign led to a rapidly growing importance of Chinas economic activities

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<sup>26</sup> Zoll 2018, p.5

<sup>27</sup> Babbage 2019

- Since the early 2000s, large loans from Chinese banks have created debt dependency in the Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, and Vanuatu<sup>28</sup>, Tonga is apparently not able to pay the back the credits.
- China is the second largest aid donor in the Pacific after Australia. Also, an *Oceania Silk Road Network* is underway.
- Activities are accompanied by **multi-platform communication strategies** with free sending of Chinese Government's international television station, CGTV in English throughout the Pacific and by *China Radio International (CRI)*.

In summary, Chinas Oceania strategy includes more political measures such as assertive diplomacy, intense media campaigns and offensive economic activities while Russia tends in certain situations to more strategic measures such as exerting coercive pressure through the deployment of powerful paramilitary and military forces<sup>29</sup>.

### 3.1.4 Trade War or Political Warfare?

Both states are major cyber powers: China is the main producer of physical electronics in computers and smartphones, even US firms outsource their production often to China. This is logic as China is the main owner of computer metals. Digital technologies, such as cell phones and computers, contain rare metals such as niobium, germanium, indium, palladium, cobalt, and tantalum. A shortage would have a huge impact because recycling could not compensate for the losses. China's very large share of rare metals, which are irreplaceable for the IT industry, is therefore strategically significant.

On the other hand, US dominates the level of central servers and of deep-sea cables. In the physical world, the internet is finally bound to a physical network with a significant level of centralization. The US-based company *Equinix* controls according to their website with their own IXPs and co-location of client computers in their data centers roughly 90% (!) of the data volume transfer of the internet.

China has the impression that US dominates the cyberspace (while US feels threatened by Chinas actions in cyberspace, see *Huawei* dispute).

Economically, the trade of US with China has a large trade deficit. President Trump's customs policy did not revert the trend in 2018. The outsourcing of cyber production to China is one of the structural matters that stabilize the trade deficit. Also, supporters of globalization argue that the China imports to US have also advantages for US by offering cheaper products to average consumers which increase life standards. On the other hand, already in the Obama era US claimed that the trade relations would be unfair, e.g. by making the Yuan exchange rate lower as it should be resulting in lower export prices. China argued that they are one of the largest holders of US state credit papers, by this China is the largest credit giver to the United States. Also, US argues that China would steal US technology know-how and intellectual property, while China complains about overstretched US patent rules as a measure to protect US from competition.

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<sup>28</sup> Babbage 2019, p.28

<sup>29</sup> See also Babbage 2019, p.1

However, the analysts are uncertain whether the Trump administration is really looking for fairer trade conditions or if the economic pressure is a measure to contain China powers. In the 1980ies, President Reagan motivated the Soviet Union to join an unnecessary, but quite expensive arms race despite the Soviet Allies were aware of economic overstretch already in the years before. As expected, the economy of Soviet Union collapsed, then the empire and finally the state itself, the Cold War was suddenly over. If Trump follows the Reagan strategy, the idea of the trade war would be to **nudge China into a crisis**. As the banking system of China is stretched by given credits, a deterioration of the trade may e.g. cause the collapse of a shadow bank and subsequently overstretch the banking system leading to financial crisis like in the US 2008. While China would survive this, it would significantly delay and slow down Chinas growth giving US some additional decades to be the primary power. China cannot afford delays as the population is aging. Financial shortage would also block Chinas options to expand military expenses or to modernize armament.

### **3.2 US-Russia**

Russia's political warfare concept has

- a military dimension where Russia tends in certain situations to more strategic measures such as exerting coercive pressure through the deployment or support of powerful paramilitary and military forces, in particular in the **Frozen Conflicts** where armed conflicts cool down with Russian backing to an 'undeclared peace' with a slow transformation of territories to internationally not recognized de-facto states
- a cyber/information dimension with a broad definition of information warfare
- while the hybrid warfare in the Ukraine conflict is a modern combination of both dimension into an integrated approach.

#### **3.2.1 The Military Dimension**

Based on the successful expansion of the NATO close to the borders of Russia and the struggles that Russia had with an overaged and oversized army after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West did not expect the speed of the modernization and revitalization efforts of the Russian military, recent activities are:

A special feature of Russian politics is the **Frozen Conflicts**. In conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the forces allied with Russia have almost always managed to establish a new status quo with de facto control in the long run. These are Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), Transnistria (Moldova), Abkhazia, South Ossetia (both Georgia), now the Republics Donetsk and Luhansk (both Ukraine). The annexation of Crimea was conceptually out of the ordinary and was justified by Russia with historical affiliation, but now also is the biggest point of conflict with the West. The NATO was not able to revert any of these events.

The Syria engagement secures Russia's access to the Mediterranean Sea and its influence in the Near and Middle East. Here, Russia originally focused on the security of its Tartus



base, but when it realized that the Syrian government could collapse which would have resulted in loss of the base and subsequently to an influx of jihadists to the Caucasus region, the strategy was massively changed to open intervention and support of the Syrian Army so that President Assad could stay in power despite significant diplomatic and economic pressure by the West.

In Venezuela, where Russia is economically engaged, the conflict between Maduro and Guaido, who is supported by the US and EU, Russia made the first military moves in 2019 by ramping up Venezuelan air defense with S-300 systems, sending cyber soldiers and helicopters as a try to limit the freedom of action for US which have Special Operation Forces in Colombia.

Russia was able to expand military activities and presence also to Africa, also with support of the *Wagner Group*, a Russian private military company which appeared first time in 2014 and employs several thousands of private military contractors which are typically former soldiers (precise numbers unknown). Russia was able to build a larger presence in the Central African Republic, and at least small units of the *Wagner Group* were reported 2018 to be in ten African countries already<sup>30</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Information Warfare

Between US and allies a massive information warfare with Russia is underway. The concept of information war is well established, e.g. in psychological warfare, targeted information or propaganda was released to adversaries to influence their behavior. The modern information warfare is a bit different, as this is the *combined manipulation of digital technologies and information* to influence adversaries.

In 2012, an article presenting the official Russian position was released based on a preceding presentation at a security conference in Berlin in Nov 2011<sup>31</sup>.

The definition of cyber war is based on the agreements of the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)* from 2008 which provides a wide definition as follows: “*Cyberspace warfare is a contest involving two or more countries in information and other environments to disrupt the opponent’s political, economic, and social systems, mass-scale psychological efforts to influence the population in a way to destabilize society and the state, and to force the opposing state to make decisions favoring the other opponent.*”<sup>32</sup> This definition is consistent with the information security doctrine given by President Putin in the year 2000 and integrates aspects of cyber warfare in a strict sense, information warfare and psychological warfare. Thus, this definition is much broader than e.g. the US definition which is focused on the military aspects. Consequently, the Russian definition of cyber

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<sup>30</sup> Schmidt/Thielke 2019, p.3

<sup>31</sup> Bazylev et al. 2012, p.10

<sup>32</sup> Annex I to the Agreement between the Governments of the Member Countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Cooperation in International Information Security in Yekaterinburg in 2008, cited by Bazylev et al. 2012, p.11.

weapons is also a broad one: “*Cyber weapons are information technologies, capabilities, and methods used in cyberspace warfare operations.*”<sup>33</sup>

Cyberspace warfare in the above defined way is a tool of modern geopolitical strategies<sup>34</sup>. Sometimes also the term “**new generation warfare**” is used<sup>35</sup>. The control of the information flow and the influence on the content to support the own position are now relevant tools of soft power in international relations<sup>36</sup>. Also, lack of control may lead to de-stabilization and destruction<sup>37</sup>.

Moreover, this perspective could also be influenced by historical experience. Various authors argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist state system was also influenced by information influx from the Western alliance<sup>38</sup>.

Also, Russia argues that the West tries to dominate the public opinion by coordinated press campaigns, the term for this is **information industry**.

A study showed that the modern Russian political warfare in the information sector includes in particular disinformation campaigns, the cultivation of political allies in European democracies, and cyberattacks. In each instance, multiple layers of proxies are used to maintain plausible deniability and strategic ambiguity<sup>39</sup>.

Thus, NATO and the EU are concerned that Russia could influence political process in European countries by fake communication. In particular, a group of so-called **cyber trolls** located in St. Petersburg was suspected to influence Western discussion. Since 2014, in Riga the *Nato Strategic Communication Center of Excellence*, shortly known as *StratCom*, analyses Russian activities and collects evidence for targeted release of fake news and cyber trolls<sup>40</sup>.

In summer 2017, a study about **computational propaganda** was published by the University of Oxford. A team of 12 researchers evaluated the situation in 9 countries<sup>41</sup>. The authors define computational propaganda „*as the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks*“. Currently, *Facebook* and *Twitter* are the main platforms for those activities.

The EU has established a task force which should detect fake news, to correct them and also should support a positive perception of the EU in Eastern States<sup>42</sup>.

In addition to this, Russia has made significant progress with establishing sophisticated cyber espionage units within the last decades. These groups, also known as **Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs)** are under control of the intelligence services. In 2018, the

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<sup>33</sup> Annex I, cited by Bazylev et al. 2012, p.11

<sup>34</sup> Maliukevicius 2006, p.121

<sup>35</sup> RAND 2018, p.xvii

<sup>36</sup> Maliukevicius 2006, p.125ff.

<sup>37</sup> Bazylev et al. 2012, p.12

<sup>38</sup> As an example, leading intelligence officers from the former Communist German Democratic Republic analyzed the collapse and concluded that the measures of part III in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe OSCE treaty of 1975 such as travel, personal contacts, information and opinion exchange contributed to the erosion (German: Aushöhlung) of the socialist Warsaw Treaty states (Grimmer et al. 2003, I/101, also I/189-I/190).

<sup>39</sup> Polyakova and Boyer 2018

<sup>40</sup> Wüllenkemper 2017, p.15

<sup>41</sup> Woolley/Howard 2017

<sup>42</sup> Stabenow 2017, p.3

*Mueller Indictment* showed that US was able to monitor and log computer activities of *APT28/Fancy Bears* members in two Russian military intelligence GRU (now GU) buildings in Moscow<sup>43</sup>. The Industrial Control System (ICS)-focused group *Sandworm/Quedagh* is also attributed to the GRU, the *Waterbug/Turla/Ouroburos/Venomous Bear/Krypton Group* to the civil intelligence FSB while the *APT29/Cozy Bears* may be related to the FSB or the foreign civil intelligence SVR, but anyway Dutch cyber intelligence claimed to have identified the *Cozy Bears* members<sup>44</sup>.

Most importantly, Russia is reported to have three specialized APTs for the smart industry, namely *Triton* at the developmental level, *Dragonfly* for espionage and *Sandworm* for attacks (in Ukraine). It may be possible that all three APTs are only part of a comprehensive cyberproduction process. However, *Sandworm* has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to attack systems in the Ukraine while *Dragonfly* was suspected to be the successful intruder of the *Wolf Creek* nuclear plant in the US, which was considered by many US authors as a *very short of war* cyber activity. *Triton* is a malware with the potential to destroy production plants by manipulation of safety systems, for details refer to Cyberwar-methods-and-practice in Section 5.2 of this paper.

The NATO member states discuss the *hybrid warfare* as new challenge in the Ukraine conflict. Here, physical power by special and proxy forces is combined with full range of cyberspace activities, i.e. including information and psychological warfare via internet and social media on one hand and cyber-attacks on the other hand.

## 4. Concluding Remarks

The paper has shown the theory and practice of modern political warfare and related concepts. The use of gray zone methods is increasing worldwide as it is increasingly difficult to make large-scale war, but also less effective to influence public with Soft Power approaches.

The decision to use political warfare is a political one and no automatism, i.e. politicians can decide to return to negotiations, agreements and cooperation at any point of a conflict and they should at least try this, because the gray zone path can inadvertently lead into an open war.

However, a progredient dissolution of the liberal world order and rule-based institutions is likely which will further enhance political warfare activities.

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<sup>43</sup> Mueller 2018

<sup>44</sup> Paganini 2018

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