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# The Potential for the Study of "Lessons of History" in Responding to Cognitive Warfare

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This article discusses the potential for "lessons of history" to be shared by the public in considering responses to cognitive warfare.

## Introduction: Russia's Medium- to Long-term Cognitive Warfare

In the war in Ukraine, Western nations reportedly launched a swift response to Russia's cognitive warfare, including denying disinformation.[1] For Russia, this stands in stark contrast to its surprise success against a largely defenseless opponent in the 2014 Crimea crisis. That said, what the West takes seriously and is studying extensively is not short-term responses to these types of rapidly escalating crisis situation but medium- to long-term responses to cognitive warfare. Russia has interfered in elections in former Eastern European countries since shortly after the Cold War ended[2] and allegedly interfered in several Western elections, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election.[3]

The purpose of Russian cognitive warfare is to increase public distrust of democracy and of certain candidates through electoral interference and weaken the political system. Whether or not the interference actually affected the election outcome is insignificant. In other words, regardless of who won, cognitive warfare can cast doubt on Russian influence in the victory of the candidate and undermine their legitimacy. President Trump was one such candidate who struggled with Russiagate allegations following the 2016 U.S. presidential election.[4]

In 2022, a Russian entrepreneur stated publicly that he had interfered and is still interfering in U.S. elections.[5] However, by the nature of Russia's interference described earlier, this disclosure will not reduce its effectiveness. Rather, the more that electoral interference is brought to light, the more a democratic state's legitimacy is called into question every time an election is held.

While the above has been about Russia's cognitive warfare, cognitive warfare is likewise a threat to authoritarian states. After the color revolutions, authoritarian states strengthened censorship of domestic social media in efforts to prevent dissent spreading in the digital space. Observers have suggested nonetheless that advances in digital

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[1] Ellen Nakashima and Ashley Parker, "Inside the White House preparations for a Russian invasion," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2022.
[2] Oliver Backes and Andrew Swab, "Cognitive Warfare: The Russian Threat to Election Integrity in the Baltic States," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 2019.
[3] Kawaguchi Takahisa and Tsuchiya Motohiro, "Dejitaru jidai no senkyo kainyu to seiji fushin: Roshia ni yoru 2016-nen beidaitoryo senkyo kainyu wo rei ni [Election interference in the digital age and political distrust: Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election]," *Kokyo Seisaku Kenkyu* [*Journal of Public Policy Studies*], Vol. 19, pp. 40-48.
[4] Ibid.
[5] "Roshia, kibishii kankei keizoku wo kakugo 'beisenkyo kainyu' mitomeru: chukan senkyo [Mid-term elections: Russia prepared for continuation of severe relations, admits interference in U.S. elections,]," Jiji, November 10, 2022.

technology could still undermine authoritarian regimes.[6]

In short, for the offensive side, be it a democratic or authoritarian state, cognitive warfare is a low risk, highly advantageous strategic means for weakening the political system of the opponent country at low cost. Conversely, cognitive warfare makes it difficult for the defensive side to find means to escape its influence.

## Responses to Cognitive Warfare

As of writing this article, Japan's strategy documents are currently being drafted, and it is not known what they will entail. Some reference to the cognitive domain is anticipated, as it was discussed at a meeting of experts which has significant influence on the content.[7] A Japanese think tank has recommended disseminating information to counter foreign disinformation.[8] Such a measure mirrors the Western response in the war in Ukraine mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Disseminating information to combat disinformation, however, may be insufficient against medium- to long-term election interference, the reason being that interference has not drawn adequate attention. Experience of the Crimea crisis in 2014 and the Russian Armed Forces' frequent military exercises along the border bring the Russia threat close to home and encourage the Ukrainian people to pay attention to information disseminated by the government and the West. If such an environment does not exist, government information, even if correct, may be relativized among other online information and treated as "one aspect of the event." Furthermore, such information may not reach the people who really need it—the people influenced by foreign disinformation.

While information reaches many people through the internet, individuals are receptive only to information with specific tendencies. Even before the internet became widespread, individuals clearly had bias in the media they read, watched, and listened to (e.g., newspapers, magazines, television programs) based on their beliefs and ideological tendencies. These tendencies have become more pronounced with the advent of the internet. People now access only the information sources which are most compatible with their beliefs and ideological tendencies, and therefore, which they find most reliable.

## Lessons of History

Russia's cognitive warfare uses disinformation to exploit and magnify divisions in the target country. Divisions in a country have formed in the course of its history, and in some cases, stem from events that people have actually experienced. The beliefs shaped by such history and experiences are reinforced by subsequent experiences and serve as a filter through which information is understood. Some contend that only certain individuals or groups find truth

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[6] Osawa Suguru, "Kenishugi ni totte no 'haiburiddo senso': dejitaru gijutsu no kozai [Hybrid warfare's implications for authoritarianism: the advantages and disadvantages of digital technology]," Japan Society for Defense Studies (JSDS) FY2022 Fall Conference, Yokosuka, November 27, 2022.

[7] "Aratana kokka anzen hosho senryakuto no sakutei ni kansuru yushikisha to no iken kokan (giron no yoshi) [Discussion with experts on formulating a new national security strategy and other documents (summary)]," 2022, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/pdf/yousi.pdf.

[8] Maritime Security Study Group, "Roshia ni yoru Ukuraina shinryaku senso no kyokun ni manabu 'gureezoon ni okeru haiburiddosen ni yuko ni taisho shi honkakuteki gunji shinko kara kokumin wo mamoru 13 no kinkyu teigen' [Lessons from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine '13 urgent recommendations for effectively dealing with hybrid warfare in gray-zone situations and protecting the people from full-fledged military invasion']," Nakasone Peace Institute, September 2022, https://www.npi.or.jp/research/data/npi_policy_maritimesecurity_220930.pdf.

in disinformation because it has aspects consistent with their particular beliefs.[9]

Cognitive bias is the process in which beliefs and/or other cognitive frameworks affect the way people make interpretations. Among other things, the "lessons of history" generate strong cognitive bias. Vietnam Syndrome in the United States is an example. The United States became involved in the Vietnam War, the necessity of which had been doubted, and was defeated, causing severe divisions in the country. The lesson of the Vietnam War, "No more Vietnam," resonated deeply with the public and became known as Vietnam Syndrome.

Due to Vietnam Syndrome, politicians, who directly influence policy decisions, coupled with the public and media, who indirectly influence policy decisions, attempt to apply the lesson of Vietnam to an array of overseas conflicts. Consequently, the United States established rigorous restrictions on its involvement in overseas conflicts which could forfeit national interests, and they came to be known as the Powell Doctrine. This can be explained by the tendency to maintain cognitive consistency, i.e., to lower the perceived threat of an event in order to avoid making decisions that are inconsistent with one's beliefs.[10]

The "lessons of history" concern major military events, such as wars and changes in political regime, and may thus be suited for filtering disinformation in cognitive warfare. The lesson of Vietnam is one example from the United States. Other "lessons of history" which people can associate with and which can serve as information filters are the Russo-German War and Nazism in Russia, Munich in Europe, and the Pacific War in Japan.

## Conclusion

Cognitive warfare is a strategic means that overwhelmingly favors the offensive side, making it difficult for the defensive side to respond. In this context, a further study of the "lessons of history" that bias individual and group perceptions of reality, as well as their judgment of information, may bring new insights to responding to cognitive warfare.

Due to the limits of the author's present observations, this article discusses only possible responses to cognitive warfare and does not delve further. This article was written nevertheless, considering the significance of sharing the perception of threat from cognitive warfare and proposing a direction for future responses.

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[9] Mimizuka Kayo, "'Feiku nyuusu' jidai ni okeru media riterashii kyoiku no arikata [Rethinking Media Literacy in the Age of Online Disinformation: A Review of Global Discourse and Challenges]," *Shakai Johogaku* [*Journal of Socio-Informatics*], Vol. 8, No. 3, 2020, p. 39.

[10] The effect of Vietnam Syndrome on threat perception is observed in situations where the adversary is ambiguous or novel to policymakers, rather than where the adversary is explicit, such as by declaration of war. Moronaga Masaru, "Reisengo tonan ajia ni okeru funso to Beikoku no shokyokuteki kanyo: Betonamu shindoroomu no eikyo [Conflicts and passive U.S. involvement in post-Cold War Southeast Asia: the effects of Vietnam Syndrome]," *Guroobaru Sekyuriti Kenkyu Sosho* [*Global Security Study Series*], to be published in March 2023.