Strategic Communication For Influence Operations: Emerging Challenges for National Security Intelligence

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Abstract

Nation states shape their strategic environment to gain ascendancy over rivals with minimal human and material cost. The contemporary arena of communication has significantly enhanced the prospects of influence campaigns against selected targets for favourable responses. The pervasive information revolution has made identification, forewarning countering influence operations an uphill task for national security. Various instruments of strategic communication offer every actor an opportunity to manipulate information and mold the public opinion, accordingly. Influence campaigns thrive in an unabated accessibility environment, which infuses a tendency of reliance on personal judgments or peculiar narratives. Consequently, an official narrative becomes irrelevant, and a propensity for waning respect towards the institutions increases. The state's intelligence apparatus has to get out of conventional mode and realign itself for dealing with the impending challenges.

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Introduction

The conventional modes of warfare, with an overwhelming reliance on the kinetic instruments of combat, seek an ascendancy over the adversaries to shape the strategic environments favourably. The ultimate objective of these conflicts is to subdue the enemy, crush the resistance, overwhelm the opposing forces, and attain compliance of the target. The military conflicts have historically been persistently aimed at affecting the opponent's morale and strategies to undermine the motivation of resistance, intoxicate the target's knowledge base, and ultimately manipulate their decisions.[1] When all or most of these goals are accomplished without getting into a physical contest, and the enemy's submission is ensured, the triumph is reckoned to be near absolute.

National security in the contemporary world is confronted with multidimensional transnational challenges. They are hard to contain, despite apparent geographical barriers. With the dawn of the information age, war-fighting is no longer limited to the traditionally classified five domains of land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace warfare. The threat dimensions, modes of conflict, and security dynamics have undergone decisive transformation, especially after the Cold War. Several high-profile developments, commencing with the fall of the Soviet Empire, played an instrumental role in shaping the contemporary global environment. Some of the major developments included: the beginning of democratisation, the eruption of the information revolution, the escalating process of globalisation, revolution in military affairs, continual challenges of weapon

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[1] Aurelian Stoica, "From Social Influence to Cyber Influence. The role of new technologies in the influence operations conducted in the digital environment," *International Journal of Cyber Diplomacy* 1, no. 1 (2020): 28, https://ijcd.ici.ro/documents/24/2020_article_4.pdf.

proliferation, and the upsurge in transnational terrorism.[2] Each of these developments implied the introduction of several new challenges, warranting attention on potentially numerous drivers of instability rather than a focal point.

Strategic communication has emerged as a new realm of connectivity that evolved with the transformation of media technology towards the end of the 20th century, introducing a paradigm shift in developing interconnection with various stakeholders or audiences.[3] It is a broad-based concept, where communicating or conveying of some general or specific message, is intended deliberately for a desired outcome. Influencing campaigns cannot be termed as a new phenomenon, since the strategy has been in use from ancient times for shaping the security environments favourably. Influence operations tend to exploit various societal as well as individual vulnerabilities in opinion formulation, and the epistemic connection with the media systems, thus managing the public opinions and cognitive dimensions.[4] Given the declining appetite towards conventional war fighting, influencing the policy making of selected targets for favourable decisions has been a preferable option.

This modern-day proclivity towards subduing the adversary by exploiting the cognitive dimension alone, or in conjunction with a limited kinetic involvement, has added a new challenge for the national security institutions, especially the intelligence. According to the conventional paradigm, intelligence is expected to provide the early warning of an enemy's intentions and deliberate activity. This evolved fusion of several means, including non-traditional features, the forewarning of the orchestrators and their methodologies become much more complicated.

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[2] William J. Lahneman, Keeping US intelligence effective: the need for a revolution in intelligence affairs, Vol. 13, (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 3-4.

[3] Derina Holtzhausen et al., *Principles of strategic communication* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 4.

[4] Sean Cordey, *Cyber influence operations: An overview and comparative analysis*, Cyber Defense Project, (Zürich: Center for Security Studies, October 2019), 10, https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000382358.

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Consequently, identifying an adversary's area of actual interest is often problematic. The enemy's objective is also seldom well-defined since it can be the outcome of a spontaneous social or political process, like popular uprisings.[5]

The question is regarding the nature, methodology, and structure of national security intelligence when influence operations emerge as a potential threat. Would the intelligence crafts continue to be conventional, whereby the features of the 'traditional intelligence cycle' are followed? Or more adaptability is expected from the intelligence community to better align themselves with the new modes, mediums, and facets of national security challenges. Does that mean the traditional intelligence crafts are losing relevance, efficacy and utility? Do we need to devise an altogether new methodology? Or instead, the existing intelligence mechanism would only require few alterations to deal with the emerging threats. Would it be appropriate to expect conventionally trained intelligence officials to anticipate, comprehend, and strategise the response against rapidly transforming environments, or human resource with requisite academic background is inevitable for these tasks? The author dilates upon the evolving challenges linked with the employment of strategic communication for influence campaigns, and discusses prospective responses by the national security intelligence.

The Concept of Strategic Communication

The United States has played a key role in developing the existing strategy of influence and persuasion through various instruments of strategic communication. It has successfully reaped its benefits. According to Dwayne Winseck (2008), American policymakers exploited strategic communication during both the Great Wars. Since 1953, the permanent instruments of influence operations were initiated constructively dispensing

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[5] Avner Barnea, *We Never Expected That: A Comparative Study of Failures in National and Business Intelligence*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), xiii.

the world's opinion towards the US.[6] Henceforth, the persuasive and influential initiatives via information management have been a hallmark of the US-led Western strategies against global challenges, ranging from Marxism to Islamism and, more recently, Confucianism. Hence, shaping the opinions, transforming or managing attitudes, and influencing the intended target's behaviours towards certain issues are considered the desired outcomes of strategic communication initiatives.[7]

The introduction of the term 'strategic communication' is also credited to the American policymakers. Since post-9/11, the persuasive or influencing strategies have become complicated. Vincent Vitto, the chair of a Defense Science Board (DSB) task force, made use of the term 'strategic communication' for the first time in 2001, to collectively refer to all dimensions of a state's public affairs, public diplomacy, and propaganda activities.[8] At the time of its conception, strategic communication was merely envisaged to offer a common platform to the officials of Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, Information Operations, etc., while maintaining the independence and coordination of each department simultaneously. [9] In essence, strategic communication was not envisioned as an art of denying information to the adversary, but primarily, a superiority of idea or narrative to constructively persuade the cognitions.

The academic debate on strategic communication commenced in 2007, when Kirk Hallahan and four other scholars wrote a landmark seminal

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[6] Dwayne Winseck, "Information Operations Blowback' Communication, Propaganda and Surveillance in the Global War on Terrorism," *International Communication Gazette* 70, no. 6 (2008): 421, https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048508096141.

[7] Derina Holtzhausen, and Ansgar Zerfass, "Strategic Communication: Opportunities and Challenges of the Research Area," in *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication*, ed. Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4.

[8] Christopher Paul, Getting better at strategic communication: Testimony presented Before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, 112th Congress, First Session H.A.S.C. No. 112-49 (July 2011), 49, https://armedservices.house.gov/.

[9] James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and power: The art of strategic communication*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), xviii.

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article in the inaugural issue of the International Journal of Strategic Communication.[10] Although, no formal definition of the term was introduced by the authors at that time, however, the work has been acknowledged for laying its conceptual foundations. Contrary to what was postulated of strategic communication by Vitto in 2001, Hallahan et.al, did not link it with either the foreign policy, or national security aspects. They categorised communication activities related to national security with the concept of 'political communication' that implied "communications in support of public diplomacy and military stabilisation."[11]

At present, strategic communication has expanded into one of the most commonly used umbrella concepts, embracing several dimensions of objective-oriented communication activities. They include public relations, financial marketing, public diplomacy, political campaigning, and so forth.[12] Strategic Communication's ultimate objective is to promote the national interests of the state, both at national and international level. The cognitive initiative is one of the pertinent features of a broader national strategy, often used to complement the efforts in the physical domain. Hence, strategic communication cannot be an impulsive activity -- it is, rather, a meticulous thought, innovatively constructed and deliberately contemplated plan of action for specific goals. Strategic communication is largely a persuasive mechanism that induces the audiences and conveys messages, opinions or narratives. Furthermore, the initiative is assumed as an activity of promoting national agenda, disassociated with any publically despised manipulative posture. It is persuasive in its outlook, and seeks to convince the targets for a favourable response.

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[10] Holtzhausen et al., *strategic communication*, 4.

[11] Hamilton Bean, "Strategic communication and US national security affairs: Critical-cultural and rhetorical perspectives," in *Strategic communication: New agendas in communication,* ed. Dudo Anthony and LeeAnn Kahlor (New York: Routledge, 2016), 105.

[12] Holtzhausen and Zerfass, "Strategic Communication," 3.

According to one of the most accepted definitions, strategic communication is stated to be the "*coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives.*"[13] Strategic communication is also deeply linked with the public domain influencing their opinions as an essential ingredient. It is the purposeful and a deliberate application of persuasive communication to engage in any contemporary discourse, aimed at influencing the public debate. In addition, numerous actors, including political players, executive institutions, and groups of social movements, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisation, terrorists and security setups, use strategic communications for influencing.[14] Generally, the motives and real objectives of these players may vary, but the mutually shared goal with strategic communication initiatives is always intended to manage the perceptions of the targeted audiences.

The contemporary world seems well cognisant of the significance of offensive and defensive use of information campaigns. They play a vital role in the statecraft, and necessitates an exclusive strategy for this purpose. Information strategy, therefore, aims at framing issues, defining the incentives, and curating, shaping, and influencing the orientations and beliefs of target audiences, by favourably molding their behaviour.[15] Strategic communication now takes place in the public sphere**,** implying that it is accessible by the masses and brings into the limelight the social concerns, or builds a narrative on any issue for public support.[16] Influence operations are, thus, contemplated by identifying and employing strategic communication themes, which are relevant, purposeful, and can exploit certain events that are not only real, but likely to incite target's emotions also.

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[13] Christopher Paul, *Strategic communication: Origins, concepts, and current debates*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 3.

[14] Marc Jungblut, *Strategic Communication and its Role in Conflict News*, (Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer, 2020), 2.

[15] Farwell, Persuasion and power, 143.

[16] Holtzhausen et al., *strategic communication*, 5.

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The current Strategic Communication doctrine is inspired by the politico-strategic perspectives, the changing discourse over the evolving nature of conflict, the rising impact of digital communications, the effect of formative experiences, and finally the organisational as well as institutional interests.[17] Moreover, with the continuous technological progression and introduction of innovative communication means, traditional sway of state over information domain is eroding fast. There are now various non-state actors proactively engaged in the influence campaigns, by exploiting abundantly available information space. Among them are the social media campaigns by non-state actors who have displayed far reaching access to the masses. Their outreach has devastating effects on targeted domains. These divisive social media campaigns instigate ethnic tensions, revitalise nationalistic agendas, and exacerbate political dissections, while simultaneously eroding public trust in state's institutions.[18] Most significantly, several information campaigns even if launched individually with diverse instruments of strategic communication, are designed to ultimately converge at some stage.

Influence Operations: Origin, Objectives, and Methodology

The potential of a state in mobilising proxies, activating and even radicalising identities, and the capacity of instigating confusion in adversaries, is categorised among the vital maneuvers of contemporary warfare.[19] In essence, all these maneuvers of modern warfare may not necessarily entail the employment of kinetic instrument, are indicative of the growing significance of strategic influence or power. According to Dahl, each global actor acquires 'power' for forcing its rivals into a state of compliance. The opponent is made to do something that it would not have

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[17] David Welch, ed, *Propaganda, power and persuasion: From World War I to WikiLeaks*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 203.

[18] Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, Challenging truth and trust: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation, (Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2018), 4.

[19] W. A. Rivera, Iranian Strategic Influence: Information and the Culture of Resistance, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 53.

done otherwise.[20] However, in the present-day world, compliance through coercive power has generally been dissented and instead, a strategy of seeking amenability through persuasion-oriented influence campaigns is preferred. Furthermore, the contemporary digital revolution brings a paradigm shift in information dissemination. It decisively transforms social exchanges, and in the process, underlines new opportunities as well as vulnerabilities.[21]

The US has been among the pioneers of influence operations, and perception management drives for shaping public opinion, both at home and abroad. World War I was the first theatre where the initiative to mold the domestic and international opinion was sought with the establishment of the Committee of Public Information under George Creel, commonly known as the Creel Committee.[22] Since the initiative of the Creel Committee, the significance of managing and favourably shaping the public perceptions has never been lost to the American policymakers. While the US did organise propaganda warfare in World War I, it was during World War II, the initial groundwork of present-day strategic influence operations was laid.[23] The US has continued to maintain cognisance of influence campaigns since then. The most recent challenge for the US has been throughout the War on Terror, when the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) was established for countering hostile propaganda, misinformation, as well as disinformation campaigns.[24]

Influence campaigns, whether initiated for a selected audience or larger segments of society, do not rely on some preconceived and fixated content.

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[20] Robert A. Dahl, "The concept of power," *Behavioral science* 2, no. 3 (July 1957): 203, https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830020303.

[21] Björn Palmertz, "Influence operations and the modern information environment," in *Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations,* ed. M. Weissman et al., (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 113.

[22] Brad M. Ward, *Strategic Influence Operations: The Information Connection*, (Pennsylvania: US Army War College, 2003), 3.

[23] Susan L. Gough, *The evolution of strategic influence*, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2003), 3, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA420183.pdf.

[24] Ward, Strategic Influence Operations, 12.

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They keep evolving. The process continuously evaluates the status of transmitted content, impacts the targeted audience, and keeps reinforcing it favourably. The influencer seeks to condition the audience in such a way that information communicated turns into a set of perceptions. Thus the attainment of intended goals are enabled.[25] It can also be achieved with multifaceted disinformation campaigns, indoctrinations, manipulative intrigues, media spins (fake-news), fabricated scripts, fictitious narratives (concocted assertions), use of proxy outlets like think-tanks and any other available agents of influence.[26]

Cohen and Bar'el (2017) of Tel Aviv University, describe influence operations as an umbrella term. It encompasses all actions which include mainly soft power activities for galvanising a target audience to be receptive to such endeavour, and adopt favourable policies.[27] Influence operations are sought by employing persuasive means consciously embracing a favourable outlook towards an idea, proposition or disposition. Thus, according to Christopher Paul, for influence campaigns, "strategic communication should be unashamedly about virtuous persuasion, but should be completely devoid of falsehood, partial truths and spin."[28] "By influence we mean the ability to persuade others to do what one wants, or refrain from doing what one does not want."[29]

According to a simple description, the information as well as influence campaigns are efforts undertaken by one party, with a combination of communication and action, for altering the behaviour of a targeted party to

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[25] Welch, ed, *Propaganda, power*, 203.

[26] Stoica, "Social Influence to Cyber Influence," 29.

[27] Cordey, Cyber influence operations, 10.

[28] Christopher Paul, Ten years on: The evolution of strategic communication and information operations since 9/11: Testimony presented Before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, 112th Congress, First Session H.A.S.C. No. 112-49 (July 2011), 5, https://armedservices. house.gov/.

[29] Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, *Good-bye hegemony! Power and influence in the global system*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 6.

its advantage.[30] The entire campaign may appear benign in its construction with minimum of physical impact but in reality, influence operations can decisively shape the cognitions of the targeted entities. The impact of these influencing endeavours is not only far-reaching and enduring but often undetected, relentless and lacking any perceptible hostile intent.

Securing influence over the adversaries, potential rivals and even the friends and allies, is now deemed an inevitable component of the strategic policies of every nation state. Influence campaigns can, therefore, be defined as the coordinated efforts by an external power, involving numerous influence activities where every activity strives for one or several objectives to facilitate the eventual goal.[31] This strategic influence enables an actor to advance its policy objectives, without getting involved in largely violent and detrimental contests. Influence is strategic in its connotation, when it seeks deliberate objectives, attracts larger audiences, achieves ingress among policymaking elites, and perceptively employs all available resources of the state for the intended goal. Hence, strategic influence can be defined as "the use of the elements of national power, diplomatic, military, and economic-with and through information to erode the will of the enemy by shaping the information and operational environment to generate desired strategic effects."[32]

In a broader implication, influencing can be the capacity of persuading others in a way that not only they subscribe to what is being conveyed to them, but also willfully desist from promoting any opposing or alternate narrative. These influence campaigns are mostly cost beneficial, largely non-attributable and hard to forecast or anticipate by the intelligence organisation at the initial stages. The post-Cold War national security domain is, therefore, facing continuously evolving influence operations

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[30] Jarol B. Mannheim, *Strategy in Information and Influence Campaigns*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

[31] James Pamment, Howard Nothhaft, and Alicia Fjällhed, *Countering information influence activities: The state of the art*, (Lund, Sweden: Lund University, 2018), 14.

[32] Rivera, Iranian Strategic Influence, 56.

with the intensified and well-synchronised disinformation campaigns, which seek to polarise and manipulate public perceptions. Challenge becomes even more formidable, when digital technologies provide a wider outreach through a mass online disinformation campaign that may be collaboratively launched by domestic and foreign actors, for spreading distrust and instigating societal polarisation.[33]

Role of Intelligence against Influence Operations

International political dynamics have always been unpredictable. The intelligence work becomes increasingly harder. Forecasting about impending events are equal to dealing with mysteries. On the other hand, employment of strategic communication for exacerbating the uncertainties, and causing complexities in the decision-making process of the targeted state, is becoming a new norm of the present day conflicts. It is envisaged that greater complexity amplifies the level of ambiguity; resultantly, the identity, objectives of potential adversaries and the timeline by which threats are expected to evolve are marked by uncertainty.[34] Furthermore, the enormity and complexity of the intelligence craft can be gauged from the opinion that the 'risk and uncertainty are the hallmark of world politics at the dawn of the twenty-first century.'[35]

The advent of information era has decisively transformed the modes of favourably shaping the strategic environments. Neglecting this aspect during policy formulation may have grave consequences. Similarities can be drawn between the information revolution of 21st century and the 19th century industrial revolution, with transformation sweeping across various

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[33] Cristina Ivan, Irena Chiru and Rubén Arcos, "A whole of society intelligence approach: critical reassessment of the tools and means used to counter information warfare in the digital age," Intelligence and National Security 36, no. 4 (March 2021): 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2021.1893072.

[34] Emily O. Goldman, "New Threats, New Identities and New Ways of War: The Sources of Change in National Security Doctrine," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 2008): 45, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390108565554.

[35] Michael J. Williams, "(In) Security Studies, Reflexive Modernization and the Risk Society," *Cooperation and Conflict* 43(1), (March 2008): 58. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45084567.

sectors of human life; compelling the masses to adjust to different facets of technological sway.[36] Besides affecting the public perceptions in general, the information era technologies can immensely facilitate any deliberately initiated influence operation, intended against a selected audience or target. Consequently, the endeavour aimed at shaping public consciousness through the dissemination of disinformation is perhaps, among the most complicated challenges of modern day intelligence setups all over the world.[37]

The growing reliance on non-traditional means of conflict in the contemporary arena has blurred the distinction between war and peace, resulting in the highly complicated and demanding security environments. According to the post-Cold War Western strategic thinking, the demise of Soviet threat may have exacerbated the internal disorder, or revived old conflicts existent within the society.[38] It has prompted the fear that the influence operations undertaken through strategic communication, can judiciously exploit these innate vulnerabilities with anti-state narrative building. This external interference in public discourse can be achieved with disinformation campaigns for instigating rifts and tensions, mainly through social media; acquisition and subsequent leakage of sensitive information for generating public scandals; manipulating traditional media for communicating sensitive or false information, and colluding with selected domestic entity for some kind of recompense.[39] All these evolving challenges have complicated the responsibilities of national security intelligence manifold, necessitating the realignment of the conventionally inspired approach.

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[36] Jennifer E. Sims, Decision advantage: Intelligence in international politics from the Spanish Armada to cyberwar, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 535.

[37] Shay Hershkovitz, The Future of National Intelligence: How Emerging Technologies Reshape Intelligence Communities, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 21.

[38] Bruce D. Berkowitz and Allan E. Goodman, *Best truth: Intelligence in the information age*, (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 2000), 10.

[39] Hershkovitz, *National Intelligence*, 22-23.

One of the key threats for the intelligence agencies, as suggested above, is the utilisation of information technology for influencing the hearts and minds, or perceptions of selected individuals, groups or communities.[40] It is essentially a mode of combat embodied with the non-kinetic means, lack of a conspicuous trail or the identifiable attributors, and the absence of easily discernable methodologies and actual motives. The competitive application of information has a vital role, especially by the cyber threat that emanates from online conspiracy theories, proliferation of radicalisation, and networked exploitation.[41] With the exploitation of all these provisos, the resultant influence campaigns are designed to induce chaos in the public, by discrediting the leadership, national institutions, and propagating anti-state narrative. Hence, during these times of uncertainties and ambiguities, where threat becomes hard to distinguish as well as forecast, national security intelligence would be required to prepare for the chaotic environments by identifying potential vulnerabilities, exploitable narratives and response options.

The traditional goal of intelligence organisations is to detect early, forewarn and, when required, neutralise threats to national security, which also include disinformation and information operations.[42] Role of intelligence against both conventional and non-conventional threats, especially information campaigns remains similar, albeit with varying dimensions of complexities. Intelligence can be classified good intelligence only, if it successfully prophesies the approaching threats to the national security, by skillfully employing the practically viable methodologies. However, other than some of the most modern intelligence enterprises, the majorities of the setups, especially in the developing world, continue to persist with the decades old and conventionally oriented approaches. Contemporarily, influence operations with the use of strategic communication can be branded among modern day challenges, which may be beyond the comprehension of intelligence, if reliance continues to be solely on the

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[40] Hershkovitz, 21.

[41] E. Sims, Decision advantage, 31.

[42] Ivan, Chiru and Arcos, "whole of society," 6.

traditional crafts. Among the developing states, a cognitive evolution of the officials of the intelligence agencies to prepare them for the modern day challenges is, therefore, inevitable.

National security tasks become harder when influence campaigns are initiated through varied means, that is, either launched directly through financial aids, diplomatic ventures, or with the publicly conveyed messages, and via covert and indirect mediums.[43] These influence drives are least perceptible when communicated with well-crafted and persuasive narratives, especially when the conventionally oriented intelligence setups lack comprehension of information. The challenge of intelligence officials gets further complicated when unprecedented technological progress allows a manipulative synergy between internal digital propaganda, and external information campaigns. Although, every state's intelligence institutions maintain a reasonable sway over strategically vital technologies, however, this presumed superiority is getting invalid with commercial sector assuming better access, and capacity of offering well developed products, services, and delivery mechanism.[44] It is, therefore, imperative for the national security intelligence hierarchies, to reevaluate the rising impact of emerging technologies on national security functions; and formulate viable methodologies for capacity building as well as developing compatibility with the ongoing modernisation.

Information acquisition has long been the core. It is one of the most demanding functions of the intelligence agencies, for developing situational hypothesis and scenario building. Prior to the information revolution, the acquisition process has been a challenging task due to the scarcity of information, and intricacies involved in the agent placements. However, analogous to the past precedencies, information acquisition at present is no more limited to the intelligence agencies alone, with many new actors getting in to the fray. Availability of several information sources and involvement of numerous actors, has essentially blurred the taxonomy of

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[43] Hershkovitz, National Intelligence, 22.

[44] Berkowitz and Goodman, *Best truth*, 23.

covert versus overt, and public versus private debate. The flood of information in the contemporary environments also makes it challenging for the intelligence agencies to prioritise and categorise the information for collection, evaluation and dissemination for analysis.[45] Consequently, the data collection shall be accepted as an analysis process for not only identifying the relevance of information, but also an endeavour to differentiate between disinformation, misinformation and fake, or intentionally spread misleading news.

Intelligence in the non-conventional security context, particularly against influence operation threats, is increasingly contingent upon finding all types of warning signs to distinguish some evolving trends, or hints of potential developments. Warning signs are defined as 'weak signals,' or the possible sources of change, which are barely perceptible initially, but may later constitute a potentially strong trend, or result in dramatic consequences.[46] The evolving security matrix in these situations is symbolised with contextual complexity where, pattern discovery becomes a vital first step for the purpose of identification and management of such challenges.[47] Traditional security threats are a realm that may be classified among 'known unknowns,' or something which entails divulging of further or evolving developments in the existing patterns.

Given the clandestine nature of tasks, intelligence organisation stay away from public interactions, maintaining only limited contact with some of the private sector or governmental setups for ensuring confidentiality of operations, resources and personnel.[48] The covert outlook and the

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[45] Hershkovitz, National Intelligence, 36.

[46] Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Victor Mauer, "Postmodern intelligence: Strategic warning in an age of reflexive intelligence," *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 2 (April 2009): 132, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010609103071.

[47] Phil Williams, "21st Century Challenges to Warning: The Rise of Non-State Networked Threats," in *Center for Security Studies, ed., Workshop Report, Global Futures Forum: Emerging Threats in the 21st Century, Seminar*, vol. 1. 2006, 10. http://www.crn.ethz.ch/publications/crn_team/detail.cfm?id=27872.

[48] Hershkovitz, National Intelligence, 71.

functional norm of being a 'closed organisation' have been the well-established features of the intelligence work since the ancient times. Presumably, this deeply engraved culture of intelligence may or may not continue in the future, as the evolving threats can have some kind of transformative impact on it. Many of the modern day scholars on the subject anticipate a paradigm shift in the functional modalities of the intelligence, especially due to the increasing impact of information revolution. Nonetheless, presently most of the intelligence services are hesitant to engage in interactions, which might be construed by some as 'crossing over into the policy sphere.'[49]

Traditionally, intelligence organisation have been known to have a near monopoly on knowledge; however, the introduction of information technology has changed this opinion, needing a review of the conventional modalities.[50] Despite growing cognisance on the necessity of increasing interactions for seeking greater awareness from all available sources of information, intelligence officials prefer staying away from public and private enterprises. Apparently, function and organisational culture of intelligence outfits is covert in nature, involves high levels of compartmentalisation and generally evades overt, direct as well as explicit interactions with public, barring official engagements.[51] Even so, counteracting information campaigns may necessitate increased interactions of intelligence officials with public and private institutions, especially academia, for seeking broader understanding of evolving political, security and strategic dynamics.

As suggested earlier, the application of strategic communication mediums has virtually led to an unabated expansion of once relatively limited war time propaganda, to a much wider audience with far bigger impact. Similarly, influence campaigns by adversaries are adding up even more

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[49] Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: from secrets to policy* (Washington: CQ Press, 2009), 12.

[50] Hershkovitz, National Intelligence, 115.

[51] Ivan, Chiru and Arcos, "whole of society," 7.

intriguing and complicated dimensions of ambiguities. Greater the uncertainties and ambiguities amid endless information campaigns, the task of intelligence looks for a needle in the large haystack. The capability of intelligence in managing the challenges such as anonymity, immediacy, outreach, and mingling of facts and opinions, sentiments and logic, through communication means, remains underdeveloped.[52] Intelligence operations undertaken with conventional and fixated approach, while lacking innovative methodologies, are unlikely to yield desired results. Consequently, even for traditional intelligence functions, especially the information collection and analysis processes, the intellectual upgrade, reliance on specialism and frequent capacity building of the officials is essential.

The realignment of intelligence for effectively meeting challenges of influence campaigns is a difficult transition, amid traditionalist mindset largely trained for conventional threats. While debating some of the intelligence failures of the US, especially in the post-Cold War era, the fixated approach to the rapidly evolving challenges is often cited by the analysts. It is usually referred as the reluctance of the intelligence community to adapt with the changing realties, where national security threat is often multi-dimensional. Staying with in respective comfort zones, intelligence officials are often confronted with the traditional constraints of their organisation. These snags often include conundrums, such as disproportionate compartmentalisation, ills of group thinking, structural complexities as well as intra and inter-agency rivalries.[53] The tendency of resisting the evolutionary change among the intelligence officials is not limited to developing nations alone but, this is a commonly faced dogma world over.

National security in the contemporary era is no more a top-secret issue that has once been well beyond public comprehension. The public's accessibility to all kind of information has further complicated the national

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[52] Ivan, Chiru and Arcos, "whole of society," 3.

[53] Barnea, Never Expected That, 8.

security challenges, making it vital to enhance societal cognisance sometimes openly debating the potential threats. It has become inevitable for the state to infuse a sense of conviction among the masses by precluding the menace of disinformation -- a task realistically obtainable with the exchange of ideas between intelligence setups and the public.[54] Intelligence institutions may need to develop intimate collaboration with various opinion-makers of the society, for enhancing public awareness about potential threats. The materialisation of the concept in some doable form may require a phenomenal effort by all the stakeholders.

The adversaries also aim at influencing every sphere of a state's affairs beyond politics, and strive for favourably shaping the economic, cultural, media as well as academic policies. Ostensibly, the evolving threat spectrum, including covert state involvement across many diverse communication channels, validates the leading role of intelligence organisation in tackling these complex challenges.[55] The influence operations have developed into security challenges that being non-conventional, are hard to forecast by the intelligence organisation, if dealt with traditional responses. In fact, the transformation of the intelligence for focusing on aspects such as politico-economic dimension, social concerns, globalisation and above all, the repercussions of internal vulnerabilities, have not been adequately envisioned.

In the absence of a well-defined threat, responsibility of intelligence agencies multiplies, entailing the realignment for anticipating, evaluating and forewarning the impending menace from various dimensions. In order to succeed against influence campaigns, intelligence setups may now require developing better acquaintances with the evolving responsibilities, and bring about a paradigm shift in their conventional approach.

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[54] Hershkovitz, National Intelligence, 79.

[55] Hershkovitz, 23.

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Conclusion

Strategic communication has presently, evolved from being one of the instruments of statecraft to a far commonly available instrument of influence for international actors, to involve as well as disrupt a political discourse or practice.[56] Influencing drives may be inconceivable these days without comprehending the intricacies of information campaigns, and formulating a well-deliberated, workable and realistic plan. Gone are the days when state's representatives or those with an access to few available communication outlets, have been managing to influence the large audiences. It cannot be denied that conceiving, planning and launching an information campaign is a highly delicate process. Both timely and proactive initiative in target selection assume vital significance for optimum results. Otherwise, it may become a futile exercise, if the targeted audience has least potential, or influence of affecting the policymaking process. Hence, a successful campaign of strategic communication, either directly targeting a government, a political entity, a conventional or unconventional combat group, or a population, needs to influence the centers of gravity.[57]

Influence operation as a policy option is a rational choice strategy. It may be undertaken prior to getting in an armed conflict for breaking the 'will' of the adversary. In essence, the physical demolition of the opponent with kinetic instrument often relies on violence, may cause collateral damage and thus, unlikely to win over the affected population. The most viable alternate strategy would then be a steady, persistent and continuously accumulating approach that evades the option of armed conflict while preferring nonviolent means. These endeavours usually entail developing successful narratives, which may not only demoralise any of the best armies, but also undermine its vital public support, both in the proximity of operational theatre and domestically.[58] The interested forces try to exploit

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[56] Bryan C. Taylor and Hamilton Bean, eds, *The handbook of communication and security*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 189.

[57] Farwell, Persuasion and power, 144.

[58] Rivera, Iranian Strategic Influence, 55.

any accidental situation purposefully by deciphering the issue in a way that it promotes a peculiar narrative. Strategic communication cannot always be limited to the exploitation of some particular issues or unintended occurrences and be a purposeful and deliberately executed strategy of influence operations.

National security intelligence's tasks against influence campaigns are always challenging as the agencies have to detect, forewarn and neutralise the potential threats in various domains of social spectrum. Influence operations can be highly complex since these are launched in two forms; first being the physical intrusion and other as content intrusion.[59] The influence on cognitions is not only hard to detect but difficult to quantify as well. While intelligence setups are largely well conversant with the dimensions of physical interventions, the content intrusions in the cognitive domain may have far more damaging consequences, without even being perceived. Intelligence's response against influencing efforts with content intrusions entails developing an explicit understanding about exploitable vulnerabilities in the information domain, and the capabilities of the adversaries in launching persuasive communication. Intelligence agencies or operatives dealing with influence operations are required to identify the phenomenon of blind spots for devising a functionally viable counter mechanism.■

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[59] Jan Goldman, "Influence Operations and the Role of Intelligence," *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security*, ed. Arcos Rubén, Irena Chiru and Cristina Ivan (New York: Routledge, 2024), 84.

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