

Notes by Tim Foxley

## Notes from RUSI International Military Influence Conference 2015

*On 29 October 2015, in London, the Royal United Services Institute hosted a one day conference on the subject of "Military Influence" with a selection of speakers addressing different aspects. This is a summary from the on the record part of the day's presentations.*

### **Opening address - Lord Howell "Power and Persuasion - The New Military Role"**

At the heart of Lord Powell's opening comments, he stressed the interwoven nature of elements commonly seen as independent disciplines. Military capability, diplomacy, capacity building and intelligence gathering are now very "blurred at the edges". The UK government has not fully recognised this yet and has no strategy for it. But none of this is new - for over three decades it has been clear that power has been shifting and that there is a need to reconfigure defence and diplomacy. Lord Powell highlighted a House of Lords "Soft Power" Report.

Small organisations - thinking of terrorist cells - can cause destruction, including through the use of drones and technology. Look at the sheer lack of success of US foreign policy despite US military might. The battle is no longer on the battlefield - trust becomes a winning weapon.

### **Christopher Paul - RAND "Assessing and Evaluating Influence Activities"**

Assessing IIP (Inform, Influence and Persuade) activities is a significant challenge - much ambiguity over causation, multiple stakeholders, long timeframes. So-

cial marketing gives good insight and benchmarks - and not just on profit as the measure of success. Assessment starts in the planning - needs to be Smart (Specific, Measurable, Achievable...). Behavioural objectives are preferable to attitudinal objectives. Need a sense of what success and failure looks like. A pilot effort first is good.

### **Neville Bolt - "Propaganda of the Deed"**

Propaganda of the Deed is an aesthetic/symbolic form of violence with a political marketing message: "violence blends kinetic action with communicative intent". The violent act is the main tool of the terrorist groups now - pictures can be captured, copied and repeated millions of times. The intention is to energise and mobilise - the more it can be reduced to a single icon, the more flexible it becomes.

In the 19th century it was about using the weight of the state against itself, in the 21st century it is about using the weight of the media against the state. Rupert Smith (British former general, author of *The Utility of Force*) said that media is an inevitable feature in the battlespace. There are significant advantages to the modern image - it is unmediated, instantaneous, is faster than the response, it can seize the initiative and can multiply

exponentially. The image does not exist in a vacuum - the viewer brings constructed meaning to it - a discourse environment is necessary to set the context.

Milton Friedman observe that:

*“only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.”*

Revolutionaries legitimise the past to justify what they are doing in the present. Landmarks in the historical narrative are used - eg rise of ISIS and its “Caliphate” or Russia’s historic relationship with the Crimea to justify its annexation.

The Russian General Gerasimov addressed “hybrid” or “non-linear” warfare. He saw strategic communication as a prime tool of war - it offers non-military means to achieve military objectives. In example of Russian media - for example Russia Today - there is no objectivity, only approximations of the truth with many voices - the media is flooded with thousands of conflicting ideas.

### **Thomas Nissen - “The Weaponisation of Social Media”**

The strategic context of the 21st century is of a global operations environment - an “overflow” of social media use. Citizen journalists “netizens” and 24/7 news. This presents a challenge for all actors. Remote warfare and social media warfare are causing multiple state and non-state actors are being empowered in a redistribution of power in the international system, challenging traditional notions of “battlespace”. This will increase in future conflicts. The three “Rs” of terrorism - revenge, renown and reaction - shock appeal (“Shockvertising”).

### **Stefan Halper - “Chinese Information Warfare”**

The Chinese government still very much adhere to Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War”...

*“to subdue the enemy without fighting is the very acme of skill”.*

From a Chinese perspective, kinetic weapons “are proving essentially unusable”, leaving three preferred types of warfare:

- o Intimidation/psychological
- o Media
- o “Lawfare”

Warfare in the 21st century is shaped by the idea that whose story wins may be more important than whose army wins. This may involve longer timeframes and different criteria.

- **Psychological warfare** - To influence and disrupt the enemy’s decision-making process. This makes extensive use of diplomacy, the press, false narratives, economic pressure, use of the markets and business companies.

- **Media (public opinion)** - Use of films, TV, books, internet, etc. The Chinese media is used by the PLA against home opinion and targeted nations.

- **Legal/lawfare** - A prominent role - conjuring up false laws to bolster claims to territory - bogus maps, distortion of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, domestic legislation, legal pronouncements that are made ad hoc without real validity.

The South China Sea dispute is an example - manipulation of UNCLOS, freedom of navigation is being challenged.

### **Dina Matar - “ISIS”**

Islamic State and Hezbollah are using communications to reach out and it is important to pay careful attention to what is being said - not just when and how, but also the historical, social and political context. IS have a political communications strategy. ISIS and Hezbollah both represent themselves as an oppressed group, but Hezbollah is using traditional media and IS is using social media. IS actively use women for propaganda as they know it attracts the attention of the West. The same principle applies with on-line executions.

IS is very specific about what it promotes and how - each district under its control has its own twitter account and is used to promote the stories regarding the number of schools it is completing, advertising the services it is providing for Muslims, etc. The language IS uses contains elements of truth. It declares journalists as the enemy and controls the flow of information, including through its own professional propaganda techniques. It has a media centre “Life”, with a similar logo to Al Jazeera.

IS desires to control the narrative, through information centres and its magazine which produces a romanticised image of IS life.

## **Igor Sutyagin - "Russian Information Warfare"**

Russian information operations (IO) are "not ambiguous and not that new...". There are three core principles:

- o Voice one opinion - ignore or minimise alternative opinions
- o Do not be afraid of losing connection with reality
- o Subject the audience to a massive volume of information

The Russian approach is close to George Orwell's "1984" - the meanings of words are changed - in Ukraine, "fascists" are those who fight against a kleptocratic government. The population loses the ability to critically confront information. MH-17 disinformation created a "complete mess in the brains".

In Russia, pension funds are being confiscated by the government: the Russian propaganda system responds by equipping protest rallies with banners that declare "Obama, hands off our pensions" as a means of subverting and distorting. Key tactics are to ridicule the opponent (eg the Syrian opposition).

A propaganda attempt in eastern Ukraine was to plant a Polish rocket launcher in the battle area as "proof" of Western involvement. The West needs to take this Russian approach seriously - if it is a war, take it seriously - and regain its knowledge of Russia.

How do you confront Russia IO? The West should not reply in kind, this is dangerous, as Russia hopes to pull the West down to their level. Although Russia learns from its mistakes and adapts it is still making errors - over MH-17, Russia still insists a Ukrainian aircraft shot down MH-17 and presents faked satellite images. In some areas this does not matter for Russia - the "uncontested area" is the home media environment, where the Russian population do not challenge information.

## **Richard Dobbs - "Future Opportunities"**

There is a problem relying on intuition when assessing the world's future - it can often be wrong. There are four major disruptive forces at work globally requiring us to

reset our intuition and reconsider:

- o Technology: speed and scale is accelerating
  - o Emerging markets/urbanisation: the UK double its GDP in the 150 years following the industrial revolution. China doubled its GDP in 10 years
  - o Aging population: China will have 150m fewer workers, Russia will have 38m fewer. This will lead to much lower growth rates
  - o The connectivity of things: trade, money, urbanisation, migration. The recent shocks in the Middle East have a much greater impact - 1m migrants into Europe, Greek debt defaults...

Inequality has so far been not too much of a problem - 95% of the world's population are growing up richer than their parents. But soon we will see a group of people who are not advancing. The comfort of the old systems will disappear - there will be a rise of new political parties - they will be non-traditional, not necessarily of the left or right but "different". Can they appeal to the "non-advancers"? This applies, eg, to ISIS - they are offering a new system.

The role of the company/corporation is also changing - more from emerging markets and small to medium organisations becoming more competitive.

There are implications for leadership: the change is coming, need to spend more time looking beyond your own national issues and be more externally focused, learning new ways of responding and how to view the world. The change cannot be stopped or denied...

## **Vaughan Smith (journalist) - "Future Opportunities"**

West also does "smear campaigns" - it is not just the Russians. As a journalist it is also distressing to hear about the vulnerabilities of the press and how it can be subverted. Not much money is spent on critical journalism. VS has created a Frontline Freelance Register for freelance journalists who "fill the gap". The quality of freelancers is very variable. It is dangerous to lie: "the truth builds trust, little else does". There is a dilemma in fooling the public.

Journalism is changing - it is becoming more diverse, harder to control. Many new journalists are not very

good. There is an inevitability that truth has to suffer - but if you get it wrong it will catch up on you and erode trust. It is hard to deal with a “firehose” of information - the West should not use the same tactics as Russia - Russia Today is good at explaining Western flaws - need more journalism based on truth and trust.

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**About the author:**

**Tim FOXLEY**, MBE MA, is an independent political and military analyst. He worked for the British government in security, political, analytical and international relations fields; and worked for four years as a researcher at the globally acclaimed think-tank, SIPRI. He is specialised in Afghanistan, the surrounding region and related political, social and economic themes; he also looks at Eastern European security issues, including information warfare and hybrid warfare. Mr. Foxley runs his own analytical blog (<http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/>), covering a range of peace and conflict themes, but with a focus on Afghanistan.

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