Iran and Russia as Objects and Subjects of Western Psychological Operations and Information Warfare

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Abstract

Western centers of economic, political and military power such as selected European countries and the United States have been the dominant geopolitical and geoeconomic forces in international relations for some centuries now. They have built an institutional and network system that supports and projects their power and influence. The United States has sought to expand its hegemony and influence that stems from the Western-centric unipolar global order. However, political and geopolitical mistakes and miscalculations threaten its position in the 21st century and signs of an emerging non-Western-centric multipolar global order. However, the US seeks to retain its privileged status as a global hegemon, not in terms of absolute dominance of all other powers, but rather in terms of a relative dominance advantage over emerging actors at the strategic and operational levels in international affairs as China, Iran or Russia. This is done through the informational component of geopolitics that shapes opinions and perceptions of the physical realm. In particular the use of orthodoxy of knowledge and obstructive foreign policy as a means of limiting the strengths and opportunities of actors as Iran and Russia. The information realm is intended to engineer the appearance of cognitive threats and weaknesses as a means of imposing constraints and restraints on decision makers and the results of their foreign policy.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Manipulation, Obstructive Foreign Policy, Orthodoxy of Knowledge, Perception Management, Western Information Warfare.

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Introduction
Countries in the international relations system can be divided between objects and subjects of the prevailing system of power relations and interactions. Object actors are manipulated and controlled by other actors for their own benefit or at least to prevent any benefit that contradicts the perceived interests of the manipulator. Subject actors, to lesser and greater degrees of independence, follow their own interests and objectives, although at different levels of power intensity (superpower or great power or lesser power) and geographical impact (local, regional and global levels). Currently, the system of transformation of the global geopolitical hegemony is creating increased imbalance and increased conflict in the system. The imbalance comes from the effects of the declining unipolar US-led Western global order towards a multipolar non-Western configuration (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). The increased conflict is created as a reaction by the declining global towards their loss of power and influence, and their attempts to prevent the relative rise of competitors and challengers to their system of power and privilege. These processes and trends can be analyzed and predicted through a systematic informational and cognitive approach, which first involves an appreciation of the realms of the human environment and existence.

It has been noted that forms of geopolitical competition, which include various types of warfare, are increasingly being waged in the informational and cognitive realm rather than the physical realm (Khoroshko et al., 2021). This does not, however, make them potentially any less disruptive or destructive. The US uses a number of different mechanisms of often indirect, covert and irregular kinetic and non-kinetic operations to stymie and subvert a target country and government. This form of warfare in its different forms is intended to be less expensive in terms of treasure, resources, risk and blood than overt and regular forms of warfare, which Waldman (2021) refers to as being vicarious warfare. This concerns the information and perception preparation of the battlefield (both physical and cognitive battle zones), which includes the use of orthodoxy of knowledge and

obstructive foreign policy as a means to restrain and constrain the strengths and opportunities of a challenger in the market of international relations postures (Simons, 2021). This paper intends to illustrate how these tactics work with examples from recent events in international relations where the US seeks to further constrain and restrain the potential and possible rise of Iran and Russia. What are the information strategies applied? Is there a blueprint for the US approach to obstructive foreign policy?

There are three main sections to this paper. The first section concerns laying the theoretical foundations by applying geopolitics, and especially the geopolitics of information as a means to try and project 'realities' of the physical realm. In the second section, the concepts of orthodoxy of knowledge and obstructive foreign policy are introduced and defined for the reader. Then in the third section, the case studies involving Iran and then Russia are introduced, where the preceding theory and concepts are applied to operational examples.

Informational Geopolitics: Interpretation, Projection and Motivation
Understanding the three realms of the human environment is essential to understanding how and why certain trends and processes occur in politics and information, especially in the context of psychological operations and information warfare more broadly. There are three realms – physical, informational and cognitive. The physical realm is the environment where objects and subjects physical act and interact in an objective tangible sense. Whereas the information realm is where actors, actions, events, trends and processes are subjectively interpreted and projected by various stakeholders. In the cognitive realms, the various stakeholders make sense of the interplay between the physical realm and information realm, together with existing experience and knowledge to consolidate or challenge their worldview, opinions and actions. This can be seen in the result of interaction between factors that create an environment that permits a geopolitical actor to use hard power and coercion in international relations. Two factors are very significant in determining the use of force, *opportunity* and *willingness*. Opportunity relates to those elements in the physical and tangible realm, where geographical

proximity, the level and type of military capability and capacity for direct conflict. Willingness on the other hand refers to cognitive and intangible elements, especially the desire of the actor's elite policy and decision makers to initiate and engage in warfare (Walker, 2019). There is a tendency in international relations literature to consider the likelihood of warfare to increase during unstable periods.

Flint (2017: 36) defines geopolitics as "the struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage." Furthermore, Flint elaborates that geopolitics is both a practical pursuit and an informational representation (see also Lonsdale, 1999). The pragmatic practice refers to tangible actions and deeds undertaken by an actor in an operational setting, the implementation of policy. Representation refers to the intangible representations and words used to describe and justify the legitimacy of one's own actions whilst undermining the legitimacy of an opponent. The interaction of practice and representation of geopolitics produces a specific cognitive environment and can affect how the audience understand and interpret the world and the actions of actors in it. Three types of information operations, according to intensity, scale and means have been identified: information expansion; information aggression; and information warfare (Khoroshko, et al., 2021: 61). These are linked to actor capability, capacity, geopolitical intention and motivation. Lonsdale (1999) noted the division of spaces into dimensions of strategy, where the development of technology has enabled the exploitation of those spaces. The first and second dimensions referring to land and sea, in the 20th century technological development enabled exploitation and the opening of air and space as the third and fourth dimensions. In the 21st century the development and exploitation of information technology as the fifth dimension of strategy is rapidly gaining pace at the expense of traditional tangible and kinetic military capabilities.

As noted by Klieman (2015: 253), the operationalization and goals of the exercise of statecraft, policymaking and geopolitics is to strike a desired set balance in the international system. However, tangible and intangible assets and capabilities of the various actors can create disparities, upends the balance in the system, and hence creates

disorder and instability. "How the metaphorical pieces on the multiple chessboards of the 21st century world politics position themselves and fall into place in the unending endgame of war or peace, sustainable or unsustainable regional and global order, balance or imbalance" (Klieman, 2015: 263). Increasing constraints and restraints on an international actor, both of a tangible and/or an intangible nature, can force a change in how an actor seeks to subvert their opponent(s), by altering the warfare strategy of choice. This can mean avoiding an immediate and prolonged drawn-out direct regular (state versus state actors) or irregular warfare (state versus state and/or non-state actors) to more indirect and less costly forms (in terms of resources used) of slow-burn subversive warfare. This can include vicarious warfare, which Waldman (2021: 199) defines as being as "descriptive of an approach to waging war that seeks to distance its means from its ends. In simple terms, it refers to the prospect of war on the cheap, fought at a reduced price in blood, treasure or political capital relative to ambition." However, as Waldman notes, the situation creates diminished transparency and accountability on the part of the aggressor waging war (rather than accepting balance or compromise in the short term with their counterpart) in the name of benevolent and ethical reasons. It also creates a culture of impunity, where policy makers and practitioners do not learn lessons. Narrative traps and deeper hidden costs can further burden such attempts at shaping the cognitive realm perceptions and interpretations of the physical realm.

As the 21st century is developing, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a massive and fundamental shift to the post-Cold War era global order of the Western centric United States unipolar global order is relatively and gradually weakening and sinking deeper into crisis. Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) argue that the US has advanced its interests with three core objectives: reducing threats by managing the international system of security for risks and challengers; promoting a liberal global political and economic order to expand influence and power through creating 'like-minded' vassal states; creating and maintaining a global network of institutions that are favorable to US interests. In the current global context, the authors recommend that the US, to uphold its core interests through reducing great power rivalry and security competition in key regional zones

(such as Europe, Asia and Middle East). Although over extension and exhaustion (political, economic, social and military) through the Never-Ending Wars of the Global War on Terrorism.

Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) and Cooley and Nexon (2020) argue that the international system is experiencing geopolitical instability and chaos, the assessments differ as Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) argue the US can and should retain its hegemonic global position. Cooley and Nexon (2020) note three ways in which the US-led international order is undergoing a fundamental transformation: China and Russia have positioned themselves as challenges to this order, offering alternative institutions, narratives and values; new client-patron relationships are being established by weaker states that weakens the political and economic system which is the source of US global power and influence; alternative transnational networks of counter-liberal politics and counter liberal values. Unlike Brooks and Wohlforth, Cooley and Nexon believe it would be very difficult to try and maintain complete global dominance (unipolar order), therefore there should be a focus on managing the gradual decline of US global power and influence. The global system is being assessed increasingly often as transforming from a Western centric US unipolar order towards a non-Western centric multipolar configuration (Simons, 2019a). In order to try and stave or slow the process, the US and its allies have been making increasing use of information operations and influence activity to prop up the degradation of the tangible capabilities and capacities in order to maintain the current declining global order.

Orthodoxy of Knowledge and Obstructive Foreign Policy
One of the concepts applied, in psychological operations and information warfare settings is that of the *Orthodoxy of Knowledge*. This is intended to create cognitive consensus through the informational realm, where a singular explanation (interpretation) of the physical realm becomes 'common sense' and other explanations (even if they are true) are excluded. Actors in international relations are presented with cognitively based perceptions of opportunities and obstacles, which can influence policy makers and practitioners

thinking and behavior. It can be applied to political and geopolitical actors, actions as well as topics of policy and discussion, the intention being to control the flow of information around an object or subject so as to limit their operational choices and to free the hand of the possessor of the *Orthodoxy of Knowledge* owing to presumed and projected political legitimacy and ethical righteousness in what they do, for example, the attempts to force a renegotiation of the JCPOA that greatly disadvantaged Iran or Russian sanctions.

The Orthodoxy of Knowledge is used as informational and cognitive support for the US and its allies *Obstructive Foreign Policy* agenda, the intention of this agenda is an attempt to obstruct potential foreign policy strengths and opportunities among rising powers at the local, regional and global level (Simons, 2021). This is most clearly seen in the current trade war and economic war against China, the primary economic competition. However, it can also be seen in the economic war against both Iran and Russia as a means of attempting to reduce economic and other opportunities to expand their power and influence through trade and diplomacy. The ultimate goal is to limit their individual rise in power and influence and therefore, contextual logic would indicate the US would retain an overall advantage over individual subjects of the international system. However, this logic is likely to be a false one owing to the significant self-inflicted damage and destruction on their own military, political, economic and social system as liberalism takes an increasingly radical ideological turn where short term foreign and security policy tactics destroy the basis of the West's strategic power and influence.

Therefore, the ability and effectiveness of being able to manipulate or control how information flows are shaped, timed and toned around significant and important events, issues and trends in international relations can potentially serve as an effective tool in narrative control. However, it is even more as it can also serve as a lever on an actor's freedom of operational choice and the level of success or failure in a government's foreign policy aims and objectives. This is seen in the documents stressing NATO's latest thinking (as an illustration of US-led geopolitical thinking on the issue) on how to regain and retain dominance in the information realm in order to create an environment more conducive to their operational aims and objectives. There is a

tendency of binary interpretation and projection of geopolitical realities in the informational realm, where challengers to the US-led global order, such as China and Russia (and other members of the non-Western centric global order), are labelled as being the sources of global disinformation and misinformation (no Western sources of such) as a means and cover for nefarious political and geopolitical aims (Marechal, 2017; Rosenbach & Manstead, 2019). There is an intention to engage in a storytelling approach in digital information space, "to informalize and contextualize messages to ensure they resonate with target audiences." This is to not only include non-fiction media products, but also more fiction-based products (films, books, TV and video games) and to partner with "more creative and unconventional surrogates (read proxies) to deliver NATO's story" (GLOBSEC, 2021: 3). This is a question of attempting to win hearts and minds of an audience for attempting geopolitics aims and goals.

Warfare using intangible and non-kinetic means are used through the fifth dimension of power (IT) on an opponent. The goals of Strategic Information Warfare are relatively simple in theory – facilitate an effective information power campaign for oneself while denying the same to the opponent. Degrading the capability and capacity of an opponent's information power projection in the fifth dimension can involve various insidious acts as cultural warfare, semantic attacks (degrade integrity of enemy information), deception and intelligence gathering. The aim is greater influence and control of the infosphere, which is defined as "the ability to use the infosphere for the furtherance of strategic objectives, and the ability to prevent the enemy from doing the same (in an effective manner) (Lonsdale, 1999: 143). The US unipolar global order is attempting to use the fifth dimension of strategy though the application of orthodoxy of knowledge and obstructive foreign policy as a means to disrupt and subvert the rise of key international actors among the rising multipolar order, such as Iran and Russia, to retain a relative advantage (not total dominance) in Western Asia and Post-Soviet space as a defensive reaction to its relative decline.

Case Studies: Iran and Russia as Objects of Western Information Operations

Two specific issues in contemporary international relations have been chosen for analysis to illustrate the use of orthodoxy of knowledge and obstructive foreign policy, which is revealed in the tone and timing of online mass media reports. The first issue in international relations to be identified and analyzed is the attempted US renegotiation of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal), with the attempts to coerce a new agreement that is very asymmetrical and disadvantageous to Iran. A second case to be examined is the repeated assertions and assumptions that Russia is about to invade Ukraine at any moment (false logic) and how this attempted orthodoxy of knowledge is used as a basis to try and impose international pressure on and weaken Russia (such as Nord Stream 2 pipeline) that are intended as the real target of the US-led aggression. In both cases, Iran and Russia are projected as the villains in Western mainstream media, which lacks context and often uses the tactic of lying by omission in order to try and mobilize perception of audiences to accept deeply flawed logic and defensive US aggression as a means to try and preserve its global hegemony as being beneficial to stability through the current declining global order. In effect, the storytelling of Western mainstream media logic attempts to tell its readers that this is war for peace and the betterment of humanity.

Iran

Ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 overthrew the client government of the Sha, the US has taken a consistently hostile stance towards covert subversion of the country's national critical infrastructure and the Iranian government's ability and capacity to govern. This was normally conducted in a covert and/or indirect manner and obscured from public view. Although a number of admissions appear in mainstream media on the issue, such as the revelation of President Donald Trump's efforts – "In the final month of his presidency, Donald Trump signed off on key parts of an extensive secret Pentagon campaign to conduct sabotage, propaganda and other psychological and information operations in Iran, according

to former senior officials who served in his administration."[1] The intention being to subvert the Iranian state, but without provoking an open kinetic military response to the aggression.

The JCPOA deal was ratified in 2015, which was led by President Obama with Iran and six other partner signatories that granted sanctions relief to Iran in exchange for curbs on the development of a nuclear arsenal. Three years later, with pressure from Israel, President Trump withdrew from the treaty without notice or consultation with any of the other signatories. Currently, in the context of attempts to revive the treaty under President Biden, Israel (a non-signatory to the agreement) has been attempting to influence and pressure the US to 'punish' Iran as a means of forcing a Iran to accept the lesser deal being offered (such as additional sanctions and military strikes against Iranian interests across West Asia).[2]These threats on the use of military force during periods of negotiation underway in Vienna were echoed by General Frank McKenzie (US Commander Middle East)stating that "he has a "very robust range of military options" to deter Iran, which has expanded its nuclear programme and ballistic missile arsenal."[3] Rhetorically these threats were 'justified' as being a legitimate expression of frustration of Iran defending its interests and position at the talks. Iran is characterised as being unreasonable and a 'threat' to the international community.

There is a lot of presumption, interpretation and projection as to Iran's "true" intentions in terms of creating an orthodoxy of knowledge of Iran as an aggressive militaristic power with nuclear ambitions. This is the basis for controlling the information flows that surround the JCPOA talks in Vienna, with the intention of increasing US-led options

1. Dorfman, Z., *Frustrated With CIA, Trump Administration Turned to Pentagon for Shadow War With Iran*, Yahoo News, https://news.yahoo.com/frustrated-with-cia-trump-administration-turned-to-pentagon-for-shadow-war-with-iran-205152958.html, 23 November 2021 (27 November 2021).

2. TOI Staff and AP, *Israel to Urge US to Act Militarily Against Iran Amid Stalled Nuke Talks – Reports*, Times of Israel, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-urge-us-to-act-militarily-against-iran-amid-stalled-nuke-talks-reports/, 6 December 2021 (10 December 2021).

3. Manson, K., England, A. & Bozorgmehr, N., *US Commander Warns 'Robust Range of Military Options' Exist to Deter Iran*, Financial Times, https://www.ft.com/content/9b7d4d2e-ed35-4761-ad20-2f108538da40?segmentId=b0d7e653-3467-12ab-c0f0-77e4424cdb4c, 9 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

that would otherwise seem excessive and unreasonable (for example military aggression that is narrated as being 'defensive'), and Iran's demands legitimate and understandable requests are being narrated as being illegitimate and unrealistic. "The regime is demanding a guarantee that no US administration would be able to unilaterally withdraw from the accord in the future and that all sanctions, not just those imposed by Trump, are lifted before it begins to reverse its nuclear gains. Experts say that while Iran's concerns are understandable, they are unrealistic and it would be impossible for any US administration to make such guarantees."[1]Other news media also referred to Western officials' comments (lacking any interpretation or analysis) on what were referred to as being 'unreasonable' Iranian demands that were outright rejected, and the assertion that Iran's "hard-line" government was not being serious about the negotiations. As well as implying war while nominally negotiating for peace.[2]There is not even an attempt to refer to the Iranian government as being a legitimate and sovereign entity with the use of the term "regime" to signify the lack of legitimacy as opposed to others not having assigned negative labels. Furthermore, Iran is judged as being the obstructive party for not accepting coercive and one-sided demands, while downplaying the fact that it was the US that withdrew from the agreement, breaking the originally agreed upon terms and conditions. Thus, Western mainstream media and proxy media[3] push the narrative that is evident in the news articles, the West being 'pessimistic' about the outcome of the talks while Iran did not give in to the pressure initially.

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1. Manson, K., England, A. & Bozorgmehr, N., *US Commander Warns 'Robust Range of Military Options' Exist to Deter Iran*, Financial Times, https://www.ft.com/content/9b7d4d2e-ed35-4761-ad20-2f108538da40?segmentId=b0d7e653-3467-12ab-c0f0-77e4424cdb4c, 9 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

2. *Iran Nuclear Deal Talks Resume in Vienna Amid Concerns*, DW, https://www.dw.com/en/iran-nuclear-deal-talks-resume-in-vienna-amid-concerns/a-60069584, 9 December 2021 (12 December 2021); Wintour, P., *Iran Nuclear Talks Pulled Back From the Brink as Tehran Shifts Stance*, The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/iran-nuclear-deal-pulled-back-from-brink-of-collapse-as-talks-resume-in-vienna, 9 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

3. Proxy media are mass media assets that are controlled (editorially and/or finally) by an interest that seeks to hide their editorial influence from its target audience and attempts to brand it as being "independent" or non-aligned to increased its perceived informational credibility.

Trump's pro-Israeli and anti-Iranian stance facilitated the process of breaching the agreement, media facilitated projecting Iran as being the party to blame and in the wrong in spite of not being the party that withdrew from the JCPOA and thereby having its obligations terminated as part of the orthodoxy of knowledge. The intention appears to be linked to the obstructive foreign policy objective of forcing a much more restrictive deal on Iran with far fewer constraints and restraints on the US and its partners in West Asia, especially given the setbacks of regime change and instability operations of the West and its proxies in Syria and Yemen. The geopolitics of information reveals that information preparation of the physical realm is used to shape the cognitive realm in order to create an uneven playing field giving the US position an advantage over the Iranian position as a means to contain and constrain their interests and objectives by influencing and manipulating the information flows around the JCPOA talks in Vienna, which also has potential wider implications for Iranian interests and influence in the wider West Asian region.

Russia
Lyukanov (2021) understands and frames the current tensions and geopolitical problems with perceptions and interpretations, together with presumptions and assumptions, of the past by the US-led West, including international institutions for projecting US global power such as NATO. The belief that the Cold War ended in total victory and the apparent vindication of US political and geopolitical ideology in 1991, which enabled unbridled and uncontested messianic expansion. The current round of attempted NATO expansion actually leads to a greater sense of collective insecurity owing to the political and ideological nature of the new prospective members, such as a deeply ideological and anti-Russian Ukrainian elite political and security class. Yet the Russia of 30 years ago is simply not the same Russia that is found today in terms of its sources of power and political purpose, which is not seemingly understood by an increasing decaying and declining Western civilization that is experiencing internal problems in its self-sense of purpose, identity and legitimacy.

Russia is presented in the mainstream Western press as being an aggressive and expansionist state, with different historical parallels presented as an intention to create the orthodoxy of knowledge of present-day Russia as being synonymous with Nazi Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union. The anti-brand intends to put Russia in a passive and defensive posture within the context of international relations and to limit its ability to more effectively function as a challenger to the US's global hegemony and assert its own positions and interests on the international stage. This is very clearly seen in the current Western manufactured tensions over Ukraine, with an attempt to move NATO's formal borders to Russia that is seen as a direct security threat to Russia given NATO and US classify Russia as a hostile (read enemy) state that needs to be counteracted (Connable et al., 2020).All moves or thoughts that take into consideration Russia's position and interests are framed as being another Munich Agreement (understood and projected as a naïve betrayal of 'democracies to appease autocracies that only encourage further aggression).[1]There is also the narrative that Russia cannot have any say in the path of other countries (especially those countries regime changed into client states by the US), and it is the choice of the US supported governments to 'freely' choose as they wish. Although, the reverse does not apply, such as when the US rejected the Iraqi government's demand US troops leave its soil.[2]As in the case of Iran, the US tends to conflate and bundle different issues with Russia as a means of attempting to gain maximum operational choice potential in their obstructive foreign policy approach to containing Russia's strengths and opportunities.

This is clearly seen in the Ukraine issue, ever since the US-led regime change event of Euromaidan in 2014 installed a US controlled government, numerous warnings have been given of actual or

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1. Milne, R., Foy, H. & Manson, K., *Biden Reaffirms US's 'Unwavering Commitment' to Ukrainian Sovereignty*, Financial Times, https://www.ft.com/content/6835ea18-0085-4deb-8ff8-78d185f36beb?segmentId=b0d7e653-3467-12ab-c0f0-77e4424cdb4c, 10 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

2. Kullab, S. & Abdul-Zahra, Q., *US Dismisses Iraq Request to Work on a Troop Withdrawal Plan*, AP News, https://apnews.com/article/religion-mike-pompeo-middle-east-baghdad-iran-182bae76452d7565b0a3d840ff0369cb, 10 January 2020 (12 December 2021).

potential Russian "invasions" of Ukraine.[1] The intention is to prepare the information realm to influence the audiences' cognitive realm in expectation management that Russia is an aggressive revisionist power that seeks to territorially expand and as a consequence needs to be isolated and 'stopped'. It also presents the US a chance to appear as a global broker in a projected contest between good and evil. "Joe Biden reaffirmed America's "unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" in a call with President Volodymyr Zelensky on Thursday amid concerns the US president is open to negotiating with Russia over its demands to curb NATO's expansion."[2] This statement coming from the same person that tried to shutdown an investigation by the Ukrainian Prosecutor General in the activities of Biden's son in the Ukrainian gas company.[3] There have been numerous attempts to present the Russian 'threat' to Ukraine and by extension beyond.

Military movements on Russia's borders are narrated as being 'confidence building' measures for the 'free world' or 'deterrence' against 'Russian aggression'. And Russia's insistence that NATO's expansion to its borders is a threat as being irrational and irrelevant. Whereas movements of Russian troops and equipment in Russia's border were presented as being unusual and a threat to peace and security.[4] Evidence free assumptions do not need to be true, but they need to be at least believable in order to prime and mobilize the audience perception and opinion into the desired direction by the organizer of the information flows. Given the many decades of anti-

1. Parry, R., *Ready for Nuclear War Over Ukraine?* Consortium News, https://consortiumnews.com/2021/12/08/robert-parry-ready-for-nuclear-war-over-ukraine/, 8 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

2. Milne, R., Foy, H. & Manson, K., *Biden Reaffirms US's 'Unwavering Commitment' to Ukrainian Sovereignty*, Financial Times, https://www.ft.com/content/6835ea18-0085-4deb-8ff8-78d185f36beb?segmentId=b0d7e653-3467-12ab-c0f0-77e4424cdb4c, 10 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

3. Subramanian, C., *Explainer: Biden, Allies Pushed Out Ukrainian Prosecutor Because he Didn't Pursue Corruption Cases*, USA Today, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/10/03/what-really-happened-when-biden-forced-out-ukraines-top-prosecutor/3785620002/, 15 November 2019 (12 December 2021).

4. *Putin Says U.S., NATO Moves in Black Sea 'Serious Challenge' for Russia*, RFERL, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-challenge-nato-black-sea/31559632.html, 13 November 2021 (12 December 2021).

Soviet, followed by anti-Russian propaganda and the character assassination of President Putin, where the negative brands of country and leader are conflated and mutually reinforcing imagery (Simons, 2019b). There are evident predictive 'possibilities,' 'inevitabilities' and interpretations in 'news' reporting that are intended to convey a sense of urgency in order to induce cognitive short-cuts that accept potentially hazardous policies made in the name of politicized geopolitics, rather than necessary security measures.

There have been numerous reports in late 2021 that indicate 'large-scale' Russian troop movements "near the Ukrainian border."[1]The tone of the so-called news is that this is tantamount to an almost inevitable invasion that requires a "robust and swift" response, even though actual facts and context have not been established with any certainty. But the goal seems to be cognitive-based influence, through getting audiences to perceive extraordinary circumstances require extraordinary measures without regard to consequences and effects. The apparent importance is attached to political symbolism and value signalling. What these reports fail to mention when quoting unnamed Western intelligence sources, these troop movements are occurring on Russian soil, other context missing are the large-scale Ukrainian troop movements towards the Donbas region, which potentially threatens Russia's interests and security.[2] Interestingly, while there were political assertions of Russia's alleged troop build-up, these reports were actually denied by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense.[3]Western politicians, intelligence and military officials were speaking with more certainty about the Russian troop build-up than the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, which should rouse the level of suspicion concerning the

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1. Harris, S. & Sonne, P., *Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive Against Ukraine Involving 175000 Troops, US Intelligence Warns*, Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html, 3 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

2. *Russia Says Ukraine Has Deployed Half Its Army to Donbas Conflict Zone*, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-ukraine-has-deployed-half-its-army-donbass-conflict-zone-2021-12-01/, 1 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

3. *Ukraine Denies Report of Russian Troop Build-up Near Its Borders*, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-denies-report-russian-troop-buildup-near-its-borders-2021-11-01/, 1 November 2021 (12 December 2021).

following question, what purpose is served by creating this seemingly reckless orthodoxy of knowledge?

In response to the unproven assertions by sources that have deceived and lied their way to war in the past (notably Iraq 2003 and Libya 2011), the response has been political tough talk that is intended for a wider audience that is intended to try and demonstrate unity and strength in face of the farcical constructed threat. But these threats do begin to reveal the true nature of the intentions and targets of the US-led obstructive foreign policy. "The West must send a strong message to Russia to deter it from invading Ukraine, including cutting Russia off from the SWIFT payment system, sanctioning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and strengthening NATO's eastern flank, Latvia said on Tuesday."[1]The US-led obstructive foreign policy agenda intends to increase the level of weakness and threats in Russia's geopolitical and geo-economic interests and objectives, but needs a 'plausible' or at least somewhat believable cover context in order to enact it. These games of informational geopolitics potentially helped the embattled Ukrainian President Zelinsky keep his relevance and demonstrate Ukraine's reliability as a US client state, those traditional enemies of Russia (notably Poland and Baltic States) can use the situation to get 'revenge' on Russia for perceived historical grievances and to disrupt Russia's economic opportunities (even if it means sabotaging their own and other economies in the process), it provides a brief hope of trying to show President Biden as a powerful world leader and that the attempted projection of the US as still the global hegemon. Though this is done in a moment and from a position of weakness and risk.

Conclusion

In the introduction of this paper, two questions were posed. What are the information strategies applied? Is there a blueprint for the US approach to obstructive foreign policy? With the aid of the two case studies presented, analyzed and interpreted these questions have been revealed and answered. Information and knowledge are definitely

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1. Faulconbridge, G., *West Could Cut Russia From SWIFT, Sanction Nord Stream, Latvia Says*, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/west-could-cut-russia-swift-sanction-nord-stream-latvia-says-2021-12-07/, 7 December 2021 (12 December 2021).

used to inform and influence the global geopolitical space and used to create advantages for some and disadvantage others. It is a matter of being able to determine or influence information flows around international relations events. The actor best able to do so has a better chance of influencing and determining how these events evolve and in whose favor. An aggressive form of informational domain dominance is attempted as a means to reduce the informational effects of the target and to increase the informational effects of the attacker. Storytelling approaches are used to weave together various narratives in the information realm to interpret and influence the audience's cognitive realm and their relational effects to the physical realm. Information preparation of the cognitive battlefield can be a process of years or even longer in the making. It is part of the tactic of creating an orthodoxy of knowledge, which is based on cognitive consensus on a certain agreed upon reality, which does not mean it is actually true only that it is accepted and believed as being the reality and this is what audiences respond to in terms of thoughts and actions. And these are intended to benefit the US-led global order and to disadvantage challengers to this order.

Obstructive foreign policy is not a mechanism for the powerful to expand their influence and power further, but rather a means for a declining power to try and retain some power advantage over rivals by attempting to limit their sources and paths to greater power and influence. It is first and foremost a defensive means of attempting disruption in the rise of other international powers that could challenge the hegemon at the tactical, operational or strategic level. As Western military and economic power continues to decline, largely due to self-inflicted reasons for short-term ideological political and geopolitical projects, the hard and tangible bases of power also decline. Hence new soft and intangible means of power are attempting to be articulated and implemented. This is where information technology serves as the fifth dimension of power and influence projection within the operational frame of strategic information warfare. Both of the case studies demonstrate a certain level of operational consistency, a form of blueprint to the use of obstructive foreign policy. This is waged primarily through the informational realm as a means to persuade and influence global audiences – to try

and project US strength and total dominance when it is in fact lacking and getting weaker, to gain geopolitical capital through the scripted publicised spectacle that enable greater operational freedom of choice for the West, to generate cognitive disruption and a sense of helplessness among the target's military and political leaders, state administrations and publics. The court of public opinion generated via the information realm is further used to enable the attacker and its proxies and to disable the victim. When the combined and cumulative effects of orthodoxy of knowledge and obstructive foreign policy converge, they are intended to serve as some form of cognitive 'blitzkrieg' that overwhelms the sensory capability and capacity of the opponent to rationally and logically understand and respond to stimuli from the informational realm to enable them to adapt and respond appropriately in the physical realm. Thereby render them as objects rather than as subjects of international relations. However, as the various Color Revolutions and Arab Spring events have demonstrated, the longer a target holds out against the intended cognitive reflexes imposed upon them, the better the chance of survival against the attack.

Authors' Statement: The author declares that he has fully abided by all ethical requirements regarding issues including plagiarism, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, data fabrication and/or falsification, informed consent, misconduct, etc.

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