

REPORT  
SEPTEMBER 2021

AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON ASYMMETRICAL  
**WARFARE**





**TACTICS INSTITUTE**  
For Security & Counter Terrorism

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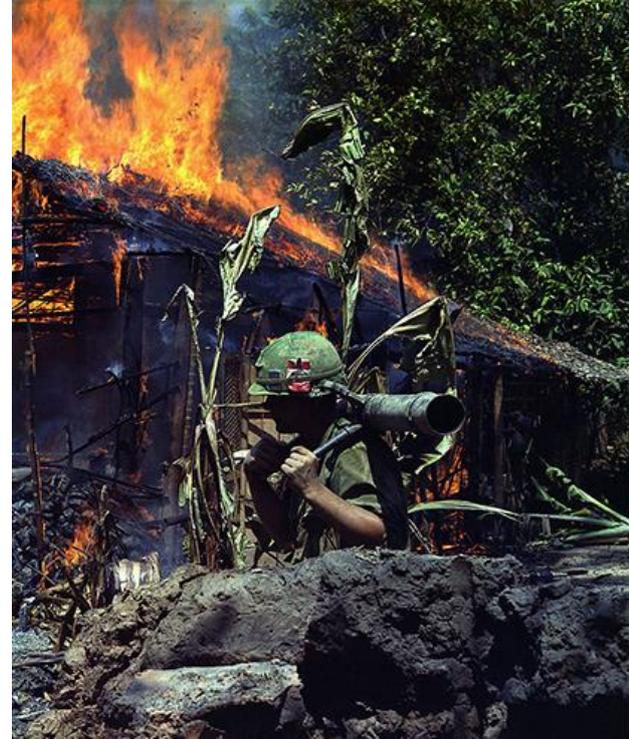
**The Tactics Institute for Security and Counter-Terrorism is an independent think tank that popularises security discourse, bridging the worlds of academia, policymaking, civic advocacy, and security. We focus on the intersection of home affairs and national security, combining practitioners' experience with a policy development perspective. At Tactics Institute, we identify emerging security trends and bring them to the fore for public discussion and reflection, always with a view to discrediting political violence and enhancing the resilience of open and pluralistic democracies.**

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# Introduction

Asymmetrical conflict is an umbrella term used to discuss conflict in which opposing forces differ in military abilities and this discrepancy is made up for with the use of unconventional weapons, and, or tactics. Asymmetry of power can be both dynamic and changeable. Since the turn of the century, asymmetric warfare has come to be associated almost exclusively with the global war on terror, involving particularly the US and its allies against al Qaeda and its affiliates. American understandings of the global war on terrorism often encompass various insurgencies as well. For example, insurgencies against the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan, alongside insurgencies against US and allied forces during a period of military occupation. Strategies involved in battling an al Qaeda type organisation differ in character from strategies appropriate for counter insurgency.



The 20<sup>th</sup> century was called the “American century” and the perception of global security was very much shaped through a Washington lens. With the changing distribution of international power, reflections on collective security still legitimately begin in Washington. To assess the state of play in the American world view and take stock of emerging trends, the TACTICS Institute for Counter-Terrorism engaged in a structured discussion with the School of Policy and International Affairs at the University of Maine, a center that hosts foreign policy practitioners who relay their field and research experiences to future generations of prospective foreign affairs and international security professionals. The questions balance between taking stock of what has happened and exploring perceptions of emerging trends. We focus on American perceptions of how the world has changed and continues to change.

# Contributors

**Professor Kenneth Hillas** served until 2013 as Senior Foreign Service Officer for the US State Department. During his career, he served as the Deputy Chief of Mission and Charge of the U.S. Embassy in Prague and the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw, Poland. He has served as the State Department's Deputy Special Negotiator for Eurasian Conflicts mediating the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. His work on conflict resolution also focused on Abkhazia (Georgia) and Transnistria (Moldova). Prof Hillas teaches at the graduate school of Policy and International Affairs at the University of Maine.

**Professor Seth Singleton** is Adjunct Professor of International Relations at the University of Maine. He has been faculty research associate at Harvard University, and academic dean in universities in the US and overseas. His research has focused on Russia, China, and Africa. He won the American Political Science Association prize for best dissertation in international relations. He has lived and worked at universities in Tanzania, Russia, Ecuador, and Vietnam, and consulted in China, Mongolia, and Bolivia.

**Dr. William B. Farrell** is a counterterrorism policy expert. He has worked in leadership positions in multilateral organizations and for the United States Government for the past twenty-five years. Earlier in his career, Dr Farrell was seconded by the US Department of State to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, where he was engaged in peace negotiations between warring factions in Georgian (in South Ossetia) as well as the civil war in Tajikistan. He has conducted field research in large parts of the Sahel, Caucasus, and Central Asia for concrete ways in which development assistance can be used to counter violent extremist activity, build stability and support national cohesion. Dr Farrell is a Professor at the University of Maine for the School of Policy and International Affairs.

**Dr. Lora Pitman** holds a PhD in International Studies from Old Dominion University and has published multiple peer-reviewed articles with a focus on international security and cybersecurity. Her research interests include human safety and its relevance to national and international security, disinformation and other existing and future cognitive warfare techniques. As a subject matter expert, Dr Pitman worked on different projects on disinformation, sponsored by NATO and by the U.S. Department of State. Dr. Pitman is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the University of Maine, teaching international and cybersecurity classes.

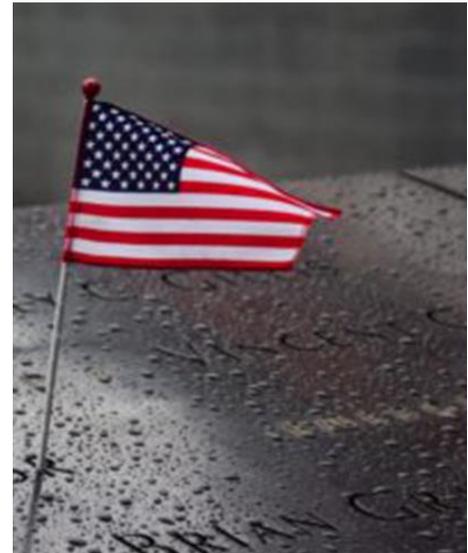
# 01: A Changing World: World Order & Modern Terrorism

By Professor Kenneth Hillas

## The Changing Nature of the American Security World View

Change in world affairs is a constant. What is less certain is the direction it will take. Societies evolve and the pace of technological innovation is an accelerant for the change process, creating new state capabilities, new non-state actors, groups and identities, new means of interacting and novel ways. The biggest error is to project past trends to the future without reflecting on how the underlying forces driving a trend may themselves grow or diminish.

How America perceives and interacts with the world and the role terrorism will play in the future in shaping U.S. foreign policy and national security policies depends on several factors: the role the U.S. envisions for itself; the character of the global order and the kinds of threats the U.S. and its allies face.



Public concern about the threat of international terrorism has declined in the two decades since the 9/11 attacks, although the domestic terrorism threat has risen. Rather, Americans today, and likely going forward, view the challenge posed by a rising China as the critical threat to American security and the global order. An authoritarian China is a “great power” problem, but the continuing globalization of human society -- especially in the areas of technological advances in communications, e-commerce and transportation -- will empower non-state actors to play an increasing role in world affairs. Criminal groups and terrorist movements, in addition to MNCs and NGOs, can move financial assets around the world to fund their activities. The global anti-money laundering (AML) system that has evolved over the last 30 years is not effective and does not pose an insurmountable obstacle for criminal and terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup>

This increasing permeability of the world, accompanied by historically unprecedented flows of migration, will have profound effects on both the challenges to state security and authority -- no less in the U.S. where an upsurge of nationalist populism has redefined its domestic politics. And all foreign policy has its roots in domestic affairs, even as it struggles with geopolitical and international threats.

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<sup>1</sup> *Financial Crime News*, June 6, 2020, “Global Threat Assessment,” by John Cusack. Cusack estimates that the volume of financial crime in 2018 totaled \$5.8 trillion, or 6.7% of global GDP

The sense of “American exceptionalism” that was a hallmark of the U.S. approach to foreign affairs is also attenuating as the effects of globalization and immigration remove the perceived differences between the U.S. and the rest of the world, even as it remains a force in shaping the perceptions of its citizenry and political leaders. President Trump’s transactional approach to world affairs and his America First rhetoric may in time prove to be an inflexion point in the country's national narrative.

On whether there are common threats that can lead to great power cooperation among Russia, China, the EU and the U.S., the likelihood seems low, with the limited exception of climate change. Russia and China have essentially defined themselves against the U.S. and its interests and values, even if China has benefited economically from the liberal international order the U.S. and Europe created at the end of WWII. For its part, the U.S. must pursue two goals -- that can diverge -- of successfully competing with China to maintain global leadership while avoiding falling



into the Thucydides Trap.<sup>2</sup> Its ability to manage its relations with China and Russia, unfortunately, is handicapped in the conduct of foreign policy, with the notable exception of trade. Moreover, Russia and China have divergent views from the U.S. and Europe on what constitutes terrorism and extremism. For domestic political reasons, neither Beijing nor Moscow have reason to change their outlook.

It would be wrong, however, to make the mistake of thinking that the relationship is not changeable for historic, geographic, cultural and economic reasons. That said, there are limits on the ability of any country to shape the course of events and relationships. Terrorism is unlikely to bring the U.S. and Russia together in a cooperative enterprise. There will be limited forms of cooperation, for instance, sharing of threat information, but not a coordinated joint approach. It was actually under President Medvedev that U.S.-Russian cooperation had its last, albeit small, apex -- in the UN, and with regard to the Northern Distribution Network, by which logistical supplies and, at times, arms transited the Russian Federation and other East European and Central Asian states en route to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

If the question is what could catalyze U.S.-Russian cooperation. there are two key factors: the perception of a common threat, which, at present, does not exist with regard to terrorism. Secondly, and at present just as improbable, is a fundamental change in the nature of the Russian political system to a democratic form. Today’s political opposition led by Alexei Navalny, for all its effort in uncovering graft and corruption at the top levels of the Russian

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<sup>2</sup>For an analysis of the challenge of the Thucydides Trap for the U.S. and China, see *Destined for War*, by Graham Allison (2017) Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Government, is nationalist with a strong current of Slavic nationalism. Navalny himself has spoken critically in the past about the problem of Central Asians living and working in Russia.

A change in the regime would not necessarily bring about a pro-Western government prepared to work constructively with the West, and specifically the U.S. Suspicions about the threat posed by NATO and even the EU have deep roots among the populace and the intelligentsia.

A more likely source of cooperation is the emergence of a common strategic threat. Just as American dominance in global affairs in the post-Cold War world was the driver in increasingly close Russo-Chinese relations, which both sides now believe would be unthinkable in the next 25 years, there would be implications for Russia's perception of China as a "strategic partnership," so too could the rise of China fuel a Russian desire to balance off a dominant China.

The latter after all has historic claims on Russia's sparsely populated Far East. It would in some ways bring the world full circle in the triangular balancing dynamic that started in the 1970s with the Sino-US rapprochement to counterbalance what both countries then viewed as the greater threat of the Soviet Union. Much depends on whether China, which faces serious internal challenges, continues and how Russia in turn responds.

For the fight against terrorists to serve as the anvil on which to forge U.S.-Russian cooperation would require a shared view on the character of the threat and the means for dealing with it. One of the lessons the U.S. has learned is that you can't just kill your way to eliminating the threat of terrorism, even if you can in good measure disrupt the capabilities of a terrorist organization to conduct international operations. The Russian approach is one of brutal repression or outsourcing/cooptation, as in the example of Chechnya.

Of course, it is important from an analytical and policy perspective not to conflate struggles for independence that can employ violence with terrorism. By today's standards, the Minutemen of Concord, Massachusetts, who exchanged fire with British troops in 1775, could be considered terrorists. The British Government at the time certainly thought they had committed a crime!

It is not, however, the U.S.-Russian relationship that will have the greatest effect on the international order but rather the Sino-American relationship. Russia remains a major power, but not on the order of China. Economically, technologically and demographically, Russia under Putin will continue to fall further behind.

While it still has large numbers of nuclear weapons and the systems to deliver them and has improved its conventional combat capability over the last decade after letting it fall far from where it stood in 1990, it has no real allies. Even Belarus is a thorn in Russia's side. Its ability to project power globally is limited. The deployment of Russian forces to Syria is an exception, not the rule. It had a naval and an airbase in Syria before the civil war there that provided it with the means for supporting military operations.

In Eastern Europe, of course, it poses a threat to several NATO states, especially the Balts and other East European countries. Russian activities in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, have worked against its strategic interests of binding European states economically more today than at any time since the end of the Cold War to stand up to Russian intimidation and impose sanctions. Successive U.S. Administrations from Clinton through Bush to Obama and even Trump, started out determined to improve bilateral relations with Moscow only to have them deteriorate instead. Trump in some ways tried hardest of all, asserting at his first summit that he believed Putin's denials of Russian election interference, contradicting the U.S. intelligence community's findings.

In essence, the U.S. administrations, including Trump's and now Biden's have been unwilling to acquiesce in a Russian zone of privileged relations with the FSU states -- what would constitute a zone of influence. Given Russia's historic desire/need for defense in-depth and the U.S. policy goal of an enlarged and vibrant NATO, these two conflicting interests cannot be reconciled, although in the few years after the end of communism there was brief hope for an open, democratic and secure Russia in the European family of nations.

On the question of Afghanistan and terrorism, there is some basis not to be pessimistic. A Kabul regime dominated by the Taliban, or even one in which the Taliban shares in power, would have an incentive not to have its territory used to organize and launch terrorist attacks on the West. ISIS, in fact, is in conflict with the Taliban as much as it is with today's government in Kabul.

If the Taliban were to become ensconced in Kabul, its leaders would indeed be much easier to target. That said, the Taliban to date has not broken its ties with Al-Qaeda, which has supported its fight against the democratic government in Kabul. Large parts of Afghanistan in the future are likely to remain beyond the writ of any central government. That traditional lack of state authority, of course, makes Afghanistan attractive to Al-Qaeda and ISIS as a refuge. If there is a major power in the region, or close to Afghanistan, that fears an Islamist Afghan government more than Americans, it would be China, and to a lesser degree Russia.

The takeaway for the U.S. on the Afghanistan War is that there is no clear definition of victory or even success. President Biden has acknowledged this reality. Foreign affairs, after all, is often about managing problems, not solving them; solutions are often beyond the capabilities of any one state. National political engineering, or nation-building, is not something in which the U.S. has had much success over the last six decades -- from Vietnam to Iraq -- and Afghanistan has not proven an exception.

## 02: Warfare & Plausible Deniability



**TACTICS:** During the Cold War we saw the proliferation of proxy warfare through the supply of arsenal and military advisors. Do you feel history is likely to repeat itself?

**Professor Seth Singleton (PSS):** Proxies and proxy conflicts have always been with us. They never stopped. “Proxy” just means a foreign country or force abets and arms someone in another country for its own interests and purposes. Ancient Greeks mobilized political parties, mobs, in rival cities. Spain mobilized Catholics in England against Queen Elizabeth. The Soviets used communist parties in every country. China in Mao’s time sent weapons to all sorts of liberation movements, including some, like Unita in Angola, also supported by the US.

Two points about “proxies”. Proxy implies dependence. Dependence is a matter of degree. Most “proxy” relationships are more like alliances. Consider Cuba-Russia: Cuba was fully dependent on Soviet aid, receiving cheap oil and sending its sugar crop to Russia, but Castro also made decisions and took risks on his own, within the Cuba-Soviet alliance – he sent troops to Angola before the Soviets decided to intervene. Was Cuba a Soviet “proxy”. The tail can and often does wag the dog. Is Hezbollah an Iranian proxy? Hezbollah is a strong organization with a capable leader, which is at once an army, a political party, and part of the Lebanese government. Hezbollah depends on Iran for money and weapons and shares anti-Israel and Shiite ideology, but leader Hassan Nasrallah is a valued ally of Iran, not a puppet.

Proxy relationships can be ideological - Cuba-Russia or Hezbollah-Iran - or more purely transactional. A pure proxy is one that would collapse or disappear if the outside support were withdrawn. Few, even the most dependent, are like that. The other point is that proxies are not just armed groups. They can be political parties, religious organizations, or governments. Russia considers international NGOs as Western proxies.

The cold war pattern was not what most people think. Most people think the US and the Soviets went out and created proxy movements and governments. Usually, however, it was bottom-up, not top-down. The dispute was local, not international. One local side called in its Soviet or American ally. This led the other to call in the opposing superpower. For example, in southern Africa: the African National Congress got Soviet help and some arms because its enemy, the white government, had US and British backing. To fight Soviet occupation and the Afghan government in Kabul, the Afghan mujahideen took aid from the Saudis – ideological brothers – and neighbouring Pakistan but also from American Unbelievers.

My favourite case of this is Somalia and Ethiopia in 1979. Somalia was in the 1970s a “socialist-oriented” country with Soviet aid, advisers, military officers and weapons, and party-building consultants from the CPSU. In late 1978, Somalia attacked Ethiopia to recover the Ogaden, a region of Somali herders. The revolutionaries ruling in Ethiopia called on the Soviets, who on a few days’ notice shifted their military advisers from one side of the war to the other. Cuba sent soldiers to Ethiopia. Somali forces were expelled from Ogaden, Ethiopia then proclaimed itself communist, and Somalia proceeded to call in the Americans. When I visited in 1983, Somalia was still an almost perfect replica of the Soviet system – except their international affiliation had shifted 180 degrees.

Generally, proxy relationships evolve. The sponsor gives all sorts of aid – political, organisation-building, military training along with weapons – to make over the dependent actor in its own image. Often this doesn’t work. The Soviet efforts to make communist states out of African proxy allies – Angola, Ethiopia – failed. The only part of communism that took root was the dictatorship part. Similarly, the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, and previously in South Vietnam and other places, could not implant democracy in a body politic that had different customs, rules and norms.

Today we no longer have a superpower that wants to be in the proxy business. The Chinese have a very different strategy, of stability and economic expansion, not an ideological alliance. They seek to create economic dependencies and interdependencies regardless of politics. The Americans, the other superpower, are retreating from intervention. There is no domestic constituency in the United States for “forever wars” or for military defense of a nebulous empire, which is why Biden’s foreign policy looks in some ways like Trump’s.

Iran, Turkey and UAE are in the armed proxy business. So is Russia. The Middle East is the main arena. The Middle East is in the later stage of a 70-year upheaval and is still an ungovernable mess. Iran has relations with Hezbollah, the Shiite militias in Iraq, and the

Houthis in Yemen. Each of these relationships is different, although Iran supplies all with weapons and uses all for its interests. Turkey armed and sent Syrian Islamists to Libya, while on the other side General Hiftar got weapons and money from UAE and Egypt and got a contingent of Russian mercenaries – the Wagner group, also active in Syria. The Saudis are also active – they are accused of funding the Baluchi insurgency against Iran, and the forces of the Hadi government in Yemen.

Labelling a group a “proxy” is a way to delegitimize it.

Example: labeling of Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy; Cubans as Soviet proxies; Iran’s foreign minister Zarif calling Israel US “stooges”; and on and on.

In the future, wars between armed militaries may be infrequent. We just had Azerbaijan, aided by Turkey, against Armenia; that was an exception. Some predict a US-China great power war. Israel and Iran are now engaged in low-intensity naval warfare, and Israel is blowing up centrifuges in Natanz and continues to bomb Iranians in Syria and Iraq.

More common may be conflicts like Donbass, where Russia created arms and supplies and guides the local secession regime against Ukraine, or like Ethiopia, which is a jumble of regional and ethnic conflicts. The forms of conflict are much in flux. What will not change is that locals in any conflict will seek military and political help from outside and will probably find it.

**TACTICS. There is a blurred line between sponsoring critical but legitimate political content – as the Voice of America in Eastern Europe – and investment in misinformation and political polarization. When does a media message become a security concern?**

**PSS.** Truth can be more destabilizing, more a security concern than falsehood. This is particularly the case when outside truth contradicts internal, domestic lies, in a way obvious to everyone.

BBC and VOA and RFE/RL during the Cold War had a seriously destabilizing effect on Soviet Union. Destabilization and subversion was their purpose. Truthful information was the weapon. Western radio was a huge security problem for the Soviets. In fall 1991, as the Soviet Union came apart, I lived in Ekaterinburg, former Sverdlovsk, a centre of Soviet military research. Everyone in town listened to VOA and BBC. Towers built to jam these broadcasts stood on a ridge overlooking the city. Jamming efforts became a joke.

The destabilizing effect depended on the information being true. If it were false, people would find out and would reject the source. Putin and the 2016 election disinformation are an example. We now believe that anything the Russians say must be false, some sort of disinformation – even if what the Russians are saying is true. Peddling false information can destroy credibility – ask the boy who cried wolf.

The line between “critical but legitimate political content” and “misinformation” or “disinformation” is indeed blurred. It’s like the distinction between terrorists and freedom fighters – it depends on whether you favour the group or the cause. I find it more useful just to think about propaganda and its techniques. Propaganda is simply any message – true, false, or, usually, truth with a spin – that is designed to persuade.

The most effective propaganda is selective truth. Selective is the key. It is true that we have a serious problem with racism in America, and you can provide all sorts of evidence, true evidence, for that. It is not *dis*-information. But if you leave out everything that is done to counter racism, the propaganda against racism, the success of anti-racist protests and political candidates, and the strong and increasing influence of Black celebrities and political leaders, you can leave a very distorted impression. The selection of facts and evidence, part but not all of the truth, becomes deliberate *mis*-information or bias or distortion. That’s how effective propaganda works.

But it’s complicated, because every message is a selection of information, and the selection depends on one’s learned and often unconscious bias. There is no such thing as unbiased information.

As a historical note, Soviet propaganda for many years targeted racism in America as a way to recruit Blacks to the communist cause and also to show up the American rhetoric of “freedom” as hypocritical. Putin’s use of fake racist and anti-racist organizations and trolled messages in the 2016 US presidential campaign, targeting and inflaming race prejudice, continued an old Russian propaganda tradition.

Effective propaganda distorts to play on the bias of the target. It uses *confirmation bias* – we all want to learn “truth” which reinforces our previous beliefs and prejudices. Propaganda is now moving into images and YouTube videos. Visuals can be just as biased or distorted as print messages, often with more impact.

My favourite was the Willie Horton commercial in the Presidential campaign of 1988. Americans were worried about crime, which was rising. Willie Horton, who was Black, was a convicted criminal in Massachusetts, let out on parole, who then committed murder. The commercial showed his mug shot and associated his parole and his second crime with Presidential candidate Mike Dukakis, who was governor. Black = criminal = Democrats/Dukakis. It worked – Dukakis lost. Trump tried exactly the same messaging in 2020, with footage of rioting during the Black Lives Matter protests, trying to show falsely that violence was the main content of the anti-racist movement. This time the political effect wasn’t strong enough; it failed. But in both cases, the actual images were “true” – selected to create a distorted view amplified by playing to prejudice.

An immigrant student and friend from Somalia, now a US citizen with a successful career, told me that when he came to America as a teenager, he expected to find violence and crime everywhere, in the streets and in communities – shootings, car chases, explosions. This was the

image from Hollywood action movies and TV crime shows. Entertainment media are a very effective form of misinformation. They are commercially determined – the purpose is to make money – but they have political effects.

Let me mention two techniques of real *dis*-information – deliberate use of falsehood.

***The Big Lie:*** A Big Lie is a repeated claim that is a wild exaggeration of the truth, or completely false. It is promoted by constant loud repetition and by statements that “everyone believes this” and therefore you should too and since others believe it, it must be true. The source of a Big Lie is a charismatic leader – Hitler or Stalin or Trump. The key is that a Big Lie depends on prior Belief in the Leader and the Cause. The only way to deny the Big Lie is to repudiate your belief in the Leader or the cause, and that is very, very psychologically painful and difficult. Here are three examples: Hitler’s Big Lie about the Jewish conspiracy destroying Christian culture and civilization and taking over the world; Stalin’s Big Lie about how those he purged, his fellow communist leaders and Soviet military officers and economists and engineers, were spies and saboteurs, agents of foreign intelligence services. Now we have Trump’s Big Lie about election fraud in the 2020 election.

Hiding the true source of a message – the message itself can be true or false – is a form of *dis*information. This used to be called “black propaganda”. It is really easy on the internet, where you can insert propaganda to be amplified by the unwitting people who pass it on. But like everything else, this isn’t new. In the Cold War, newspaper writers and editors and broadcasters were recruited by the CIA and by the Soviets, and doubtless by others too, to print pro-US or pro-Soviet content, which then was passed on by readers and listeners.

Add another Big Lie, which never quite went viral. The Soviets in 1983 claimed that AIDS was a scourge invented by US bio-war labs as a form of warfare against Africans and Blacks. This claim was planted in a reputable Soviet journal, then picked up and amplified by pro-Soviet journalists and spread by unwitting readers.

There is not so much difference between democracies and authoritarian states in international, trans-border, dis- and misinformation. Everyone plays the international game. The difference is in the domestic use of information warfare. The authoritarians, most of them, want to propagandize and control their own populations. Democracies have defenses against that, in law and in free media trained to be critical of governments and by allowing multiple sources of information. Yes, it’s a matter of degree – all governments try to persuade their population to like them – but the difference is fundamental.

China is the primary example. China is in my view totalitarian, not just authoritarian. Authoritarians repress overt dissent – public criticism and opposition. Try advocating Islamism in Egypt or bashing Putin in Russia. Totalitarians actively try to shape and control what people think and believe – they are in the “brainwashing” business. All sources of information have to conform to the campaign to shape minds and feelings. Xi Jinping recently used Stalin’s phrase, “engineers of the human soul” to describe China’s domestic information efforts.

Engineering of souls is what totalitarians try to do. It's not clear that Xi knew where that phrase came from or understood its historical notoriety.

China, by the way, does not rely on mis- or disinformation in controlling the thoughts of its citizens. China simply suppresses all information or interpretation that contradicts the Party line while massively promoting Correct Thought. It is a strategy of denial of information more than manipulation of it.

Then the Chinese add assertion, assumptions, based on presumed moral righteousness. The South China Sea *belongs to us*. Uyghurs are *terrorists* and what we are doing in Xinjiang is bringing them into Chinese society for their own good. No Chinese can be a citizen in good standing and believe in a foreign religion – Islam, say, or Catholicism managed by the Pope or a Dalai Lama in India. All religious leaders must be Chinese and loyal to the Party. And then the authorities unleash “patriotic netizens” – internet shamers – on anyone who raises any doubts.

China tries to do this worldwide, in a way that goes well beyond normal information warfare. The Chinese now try to silence all criticism of China by anyone anywhere in the world. Say bad things about us and we will cut off your business access, or refuse to give you a visa, or go after you online (on media banned in China such as Facebook and Twitter). If you are Chinese by family origin, don't criticize or your family will suffer and you will not see them again. China sees overseas Chinese as its own, not as independent citizens of foreign countries. If you are a business importing Chinese products, or investing or doing business in China, do not criticize, or your business will dry up. Ask the NBA and note that Tesla electric cars are now manufactured in Shanghai. Zoom, by the way, has its R&D in Shanghai: can everything on zoom be accessed by the CCP? Zara and Nike must take down any reference to not using Xinjiang cotton, or their sales in China will end. A professor who criticizes China will not get a visa to visit or do research. This interview is going to end up somewhere on a Chinese server, and if I ever apply for a visa, my name may trigger it. Professors and journalists and businessmen are expected to practice self-censorship. Whatever they say will be collected electronically and used if and when the Chinese authorities wish to use it.

China has tried to control business and media outside China indirectly, using Chinese influence with other countries. Turkish businessmen critical of Xinjiang may be denied contracts by the *Turkish* government after China tells Erdogan he must either crackdown on Turkish critics of China or forfeit Chinese help building his Istanbul canal.



You can't have a democracy without open access to information – including misinformation. Democracy rests on the idea that people will come to understand the difference, by testing information against reality and testing arguments against each other. It's not clear that this idea is correct.

We now understand that people are not rational, that they can be fooled and manipulated, and that many people want an Authority that tells them what and how to think. (Dostoevsky, in his parable of *The Grand Inquisitor*, argued that what we want is Miracle, Mystery, and Authority.) Democracies are susceptible to myths and falsehoods and prejudices spread by demagogues claiming “free speech” to protect disinformation. Q-Anon spreads that Democrats are paedophiles and Jews are a conspiracy controlling finance and the Federal Reserve. The only defense is to yell back with better and truer information. In a democracy, you can do that. The other defense, censorship – and who will the censors be? – is a cure worse than the disease.

**TACTICS. With the advent of sophisticated information gathering and surveillance technologies, there seems to be a renegotiation between private and public spheres. Is innovation favouring autarchies [sic] or democracies? Are we more afraid of non-state actors or supercharged state infrastructure?**

**PSS.** Asking which is worse, use of information by commercial companies or by state authorities is like asking whether you prefer a hungry bear or a hungry tiger in your house. I don't want either.

They also tend to merge. The state can't keep its hands off the huge personal data files collected by Facebook and Google – efforts to prevent it will fail. In the United States, the NSA and the FBI are expected to not access personal data, but I don't really believe it. In what is presented by the authorities as an emergency of “national security,” these laws tend to evaporate, as they did in the early years of the “war on terror.”

This is an old pattern: some people or organizations collect stuff that makes them wealthy, then the state muscles in and takes part of it and forces collaboration. Separation of political and commercial authorities and power seldom lasts. They merge, at the expense of ordinary people and political dissenters.

The internet has gone through two transitions:

First, from a voluntary bottom-up system of free connections and information exchange to monopolies scarfing up information on users, for sale to advertisers. Google Search pioneered this; Facebook followed and expanded. Data is money, so the collection of data is maximized and legally protected by opaque privacy and terms of use agreements. Your use, and thus the data you provide, is maximized by feeding back to you whatever keeps you glued to the website and the service – fear and scare and conspiracy, and entertainment. Facebook is very, very good

at keeping your attention by manipulating content that is emotionally compelling and tied to reinforcing your bias and prejudice – confirmation bias.

This affects everyone. In my family, there is concern about covid-19. So, what pops up on Facebook? – information and links to articles touting the uncontrolled spread of the virus and saying that where we live is “high risk” or “increasing risk.” You are alarmed and scared and you read on.

In the second internet transition, the state muscles in and gets access to all this data to use it for control of you and me. State interest and temptation:

- Spread propaganda
- Eliminate unfavourable information
- Eliminate uncontrolled or unmonitored contact among citizens
- Identify dissenters and malingerers
- Know your location – where you have been informed about who you have seen and what you have done
- Organize punishment by trolls and “netizens”: organized online hatred and harassment

Technology for all this is widely available and becoming more so. Efforts to restrict technology generally and eventually fail – it proliferates. Israeli firms sell hacking software and various companies sell facial recognition. Like many other things, it was developed in the US and then China took over the business.

### ***China and technology for social control***

China’s use of technology has totalitarian potential, although it is not yet fully rolled out. The Chinese have experimented with giving everyone a “social credit score” determined by surveillance technology. Under Chinese law, all data collected by companies, including foreign companies in China, must be shared with police if and when requested. Companies must collect and keep it and must provide access.

It is worth underlining that when it comes to data requested by the state, or indeed any other state interest, there is no “private sector”. Jack Ma is perhaps the most famous tech entrepreneur in China. Ma owns Ant Financial and the Alibaba platform. Ma was about to sell shares through an IPO. Days before, the IPO – a purely commercial matter – was scuttled without explanation by the Chinese authorities. Ma disappeared for some days and is now apparently under some form of house arrest. This has echoes of the Khodorkovsky case in Russia: you make an example of an economic superstar who tries to become independent. Like Khodorkovsky (oil, in Russia), Ma (technology, in China) was the most prominent businessman of the most important economic sector. Even the most powerful companies, particularly tech companies, and their owners answer to the Chinese Party-state.

Various kinds of data – who and when called, location, facial recognition, public statements like this interview, along with all sorts of personal data, - can be collected and stored

automatically. The authorities can then plug in a name, or a face, and all the data is connected. Everything is known about you. The Chinese hacked US government personnel office data a few years ago. That data includes financial and personal information and information on foreign contacts. My colleague Professor Hillas is probably in there. This discussion may be flagged and stored because the words China and Uyghur are used, connected to my face from photos, and to my c.v. from many possible sources, and if I apply to visit China.

In Xinjiang, China is trying out the full panoply of control technology on the Uyghur population. “Relatives” are inserted into Uyghur homes to report any sign of Islamic loyalty or political independence. They are instructed to say, we know where you have been, and who you have talked to here and abroad. If you have used any closed or encrypted communication, why? You must have something to hide. If you confess its content, you will be reeducated. If you refuse, you are presumed to be a terrorist and will be imprisoned. Then, perhaps, you will be sent to forced labour. If you go to a mosque or have any Islamic symbols in your home, you are presumed loyal to a foreign religion and will be reeducated. Millions of cameras are deployed in Xinjiang cities and towns. All phones include location tracking, always on. All calls are monitored. DNA samples are taken from every Uyghur. Children are sent to boarding schools, to learn Mandarin and be assimilated to Han culture. This is just like the old American and Canadian and Australian practice of sending Native kids to boarding schools to “civilize” them, which we now consider an attempt at cultural genocide.

We can see this as a campaign to eradicate Uyghur identity but also as a test for campaigns to control a broader population. The technology is available and is being tested.

In China, control, loyalty, conformity and homogeneity are seen as part of China’s cultural heritage – the nice words are harmony and stability. Like much else, behaviour control is not new; only the technology is more advanced. In 1681 Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty issued specific instructions for moral behaviour and ordered up a nationwide system of local monitors (baojia) responsible for the correct personal and political behaviour of everyone.



### *Coming here too?*

Can the same happen elsewhere, in other countries?

Of course: the restraints are not technical but moral and political. There are many tech-capable countries, including some small ones like Israel or Estonia or Singapore. Certainly, the United States and most of Europe could have very high levels of surveillance if law and politics permitted. The UK has few legal restraints, but strong moral and political ones.

So, to go back to the bear and the tiger in the house – commercial use of my data and manipulation of me via Facebook is a pain in the neck and, in the US, can't be prevented. But state collection and potential use of this data is far worse. Security authorities want to use the tools available and are always convinced of their own righteousness. If it were unrestrained, NSA would know as much about me as the Chinese know about any Chinese citizen or foreign person of interest.

There are other nefarious possibilities. Intelligence services, or private organizations, could sell data about individuals. For \$1,000, I can get you the complete electronic file on Karina Iskandarova . . . And, Karina, if you don't want your complete data sent to . . . I have a small job you could do for me to prevent that.

### *Technology and destabilization*

New communications technologies are destabilizing. They have serious consequences in fostering upheaval.

The printing press in the 16th century enabled the spread of vernacular language and widespread literacy. The masses got access to thought and information. The intellectual monopoly of the Catholic Church was destroyed - and the horrible wars of religion lasted more than a century.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, radio and cinema enabled demagogues and dictators to reach “the masses” directly with their fascist and communist messages. Like Twitter and Facebook, this eliminated the intermediary. You could listen to Hitler on the radio, and see him at the movies, directly.

Now Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Tik Tok videos eliminate “mainstream media” middlemen.

Novelty wears off. New media technologies become “tamed” and “civilized.” We are seeing this now with internet media. The 2016 US election disinformation by Russia was publicized and investigated. The effect was diminished in 2020 – people wised up. Probably, I hope, the same thing is happening with US conspiracy theories spread via Facebook – people realize they are being fooled and used. Q-Anon may be losing its Believers. New kinds of gatekeepers emerge. We are now experimenting with the labelling of posts and tweets and private company censorship.

Official state censorship is a bad idea. In the long term, the cure is worse than the disease. The question is whether democracies will have patience and staying power as the disinformation and misinformation spread on the internet flourishes before it fades.

Your view on censorship depends on whether you have faith in people to tease out the truth and to embed truth as a core value. J.S. Mill and liberals say, yes, this can and will happen. Lies fade and are proven mistaken – IF information can flow. This is the liberal faith and belief.

But if it is wrong, if people will not eventually come round to the truth and to honest information, then the whole idea of democracy is a myth and a mistake. Democracy is based on the assumption that people will in fact choose via elections and legislation what is good for them and their community.

Others say, no, you CAN fool most of the people most of the time and convert them to Believers impervious to truth if you have a catchy emotional message. These psycho-cynics include the “critical theory” establishment in academia who argue that what we think is only a function of who has power over the information we receive. In politics, the psycho-cynics include con man demagogues like Donald Trump.

Then there are the conservative authoritarian ideologists like Alexander Dugin, who argue that people have a deep need to follow tradition and respect and obey authority and reject social nonconformity. The entire liberal project – the idea of “freedom” itself – is unnatural. Russia has a long intellectual and political tradition embracing this viewpoint. Putin leads in actual politics, but it includes Victor Orban and Jaroslaw Kaczinski and the European right more generally.

I personally believe in the goodwill and basic trial-and-error intelligence of people. But exposing disinformation and letting misinformation fade is messy and takes time and requires defending access to information. The temptation is to short-circuit bad ideas with censorship. But once censorship is established, who guards the guardians?

Today the US is ground zero for this debate.

### *How the World has Changed*

**TACTICS. There is a perception that Home Affairs and National Security Challenges are becoming indistinguishable. In such a world, do we double-down on international cooperation or do we cut off the rest of the world in order to “gain back control” of our threats?**

**PPS.** Great question! Try it this way: we have two things going on at once. One is that people resent control of their lives and communities by distant unaccountable power centres that don’t understand them or have their interests in mind. So, the cry is to “take back” control. We see it in Europe and in resistance to economic globalization which destroys jobs and uproots communities and enriches only a faraway few.

But also, the world is increasingly connected by communication and travel and shared information and trade and the flow of money from one place to another. This isn’t going to stop because that would mean undoing the technology that shapes our daily lives. We get up in the morning, take a drink from a plastic cup, swallow our medicines, get dressed, and turn on the

internet to connect with our family and follow the news. Every bit of this depends on international supply chains, transnational scientific research, and global communication networks.

Almost all of our serious problems are at one and the same time “home affairs” and international.

- Climate change, obviously
- Financial flows, including tax evasion and money-laundering
- Human trafficking and drugs and other organized crime
- Spread of false and misleading information to stir up hate and hostility and division
- Hacking and cyber-theft
- Migration
- Terrorism
- All of these can be considered *security* issues. Security is an expansive concept, food security, climate security, job security and cultural security.

Terrorism is just one of the global problems that can't be solved one nation at a time. Terrorist networks are transnational and local, but almost never national. You can't uproot Al Qaeda or ISIS by police work in Britain or the EU or the US or Mali or Mozambique or Afghanistan or Syria each acting separately.

Nation-states today are obsolete, like medieval baronies at the end of the Middle Ages. Then, technology and economy expanded beyond the village-based serf and handicrafts economy, so medieval fiefdoms had to be replaced by something bigger. And they were. We now face a similar transition. Technology and economic exchange are global, beyond the scope of sovereign nations. We have no idea what transnational political forms will emerge, and the process will be messy.

So, what about those stubborn human beings who don't want to be pushed around by distant unaccountable powerful people and institutions they can't control?

The classic solution is some form of federalism – leave to the locals that which is local and empower the centre to cope with what must be regulated for the whole. Federalism is difficult and imperfect. The “unbreakable union” of Soviet Republics disintegrated. The EU bumps and stumbles. Ethiopia breaks down into civil war. But the assumption that national sovereignty with hard borders is still workable – if it ever was - seems mistaken. We need something more local and culturally focused, and *also* more global. We need fluid political units. Consider the UK: Britain may exit the EU, but then



Scotland may separate from England and rejoin Europe. Northern Ireland needs to be linked, somehow, to both Ireland and England.

The most difficult issue will probably be migration. The population is growing rapidly in the world's poorest places – Africa and the Middle East – and declining in rich ones, including Japan, China, and Korea. Climate change will give migration a push, but the main drivers are probably population growth outrunning local food and water supply and above all bad governments enabling violence and rebellion and gender abuse.

Migration directly affects people's perceptions of security. People naturally value their neighbours and cultural compatriots. Foreigners, immigrants, migrants are easily painted as dangerous criminals and terrorists. They will take our jobs and destroy our way of life. Keep them out. This isn't only a white Western attitude. Bahamians try to expel people from Haiti; Ghanaians resent migrants from Burkina Faso. Ask a Burmese Buddhist, a Japanese, a Korean, or a Thai if they want lots of strangers coming to live in their country.

We have no way to manage migration. The compassionate solution – welcome as refugees all those suffering local violence and personal abuse – would open borders to hundreds of millions of migrants, in a continuous flow. Politically impossible. Governments in Asia don't even consider taking in refugees.

Consider terrorism. To prevent terrorism by cooperation among sovereign nations, you have to agree who is a terrorist and who is not and enforce a common set of rules. The national system isn't capable of that. An Interpol Red Notice can be issued by any government and can target rebels and dissidents along with drug traffickers and tax evaders. To the Chinese government, all Uyghurs agitating against China's cultural genocide are terrorists. To the Syrian government, all armed opponents and their sympathizers are terrorists. Turkey says any follower of the Gulen movement is a terrorist. Are the Taliban terrorists? They certainly target Afghan civilians.

We have no agreement on a process to overcome the imbalance between national authority and global problems.

Westerners, by cultural habit, form committees and legislatures – the EU, for example, or the UN – and try to make rules by agreement. They accept imperfect compromises and partial solutions – or else live with no agreement at all. Joint action to solve problems becomes “coalitions of the willing” while others ride free. Often, this Western process just doesn't work, and it is less likely to work in a world where power is dispersed among nations with different cultural traditions.

The Chinese, by contrast, hold that a wise central authority should make and enforce the rules: obedience is required, and disobedience is punished. China champions sovereignty and central control and the power of existing governments under all circumstances. The Chinese response to the problem of global externalities – terrorism or migration or financial destabilization or

unwanted information or transnational religious belief – has been to isolate China from them by building a wall. In the next phase, if all goes as Chinese leaders hope, a walled-off sovereign China will shape general rules for problems such as climate change, drawing on Chinese wisdom and enforced by Chinese dominance in the world economy. The UN and other international institutions will be co-opted. The first rule is that every government must control its citizens, as China does. This will uphold world stability and security and minimize terrorism and migration. We will have global harmony with Chinese characteristics.

### *How We Change the World*

**TACTICS. There is talk of a Cold War. Is there a clear line distinguishing covert action from terrorist action?**

**PPS.** No. Covert action means anything done secretly and not acknowledged by the perpetrator. Most covert activity – espionage, sending weapons to proxies, recruiting agents, internet hacking and penetration, is not terrorism. But covert action can and often does include terrorist activities, for example blowing up apartment buildings near Moscow in 1999. We don't know in that case who the perpetrator was. Putin accused Chechens, but others think it was the Russian security services looking for an excuse to start a second Chechen war. It certainly was terrorism.

Terrorism, on the other hand, can be open as well as covert, to achieve maximum publicity and scare people into submission. Islamic State terrorism was very public. Most terrorism is secretly planned, then acknowledged. The 9/11 attacks are an example.

The reference to the Cold War and covert action by states implies that terrorism is the activity only of nonstate actors. I have always thought this was nonsense, an idea promoted by governments – the United States among them – to excuse their own activities. My list-serve of top Middle East experts from many countries recently had a long discussion about how to define “terrorism” and went round and round about whether states could be terrorists, with no conclusion. Iran and Israel were prominently featured. So was Russia. So were US drone attacks. So was the Saudi bombing of Yemen.

I think terrorism is pretty simple – the deliberate use of violence against innocent people to achieve political ends. It works by garnering publicity, instilling fear and passivity and encouraging distrust, and by provoking counterattacks by the evil enemy. States can certainly do this. Lenin organized the Cheka to unleash “red terror” throughout Soviet Russia. In WWII, the Germans bombed London and the British and Americans bombed German cities, to terrorize the population. The US firebomb raids on Japan, a country of wooden houses, were more lethal than the atomic bombs and were openly justified as mass killing to encourage Japanese surrender. The most awful exercise of terrorism recently has been the Syrian government's attacks on Syrian citizens in rebellion – bombing, with Russian participation, schools and hospitals and murdering tens of thousands in government prisons.

In South Vietnam, to terrorize the population, the Viet Cong went around at night knocking on the doors of government supporters and took them outside and shot them. At the same time, South Vietnamese government teams and the CIA went around and killed supporters of the Viet Cong – Operation Phoenix. Is one terrorism but not the other?

Today Islamist terrorism is fading, although it will be with us for some time and may flare up in unexpected places like Mozambique. Jihadis have become local rebels dispersed in places like Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Mozambique, Somalia, Sinai, Syria, or Afghanistan, or lone wolves in Europe, more than organized international criminal networks mobilized from a command centre. There are more of them, particularly in Africa, but with little coordination and, like most revolutionary movements, lots of splits and factions.

State covert activity is not fading. It is increasing or continuing. The Russians and the Israelis are the champions. However, the Turks, Americans, Iranians, Chinese and British and many others are much in the game.

Most of it is online – hacking and espionage and infiltrating networks.

Use of actual violence as a form of covert action – what the Russians call “active measures” – now mostly targets government officials and defectors. Hence the Israeli-linked assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, or the Russian murder of defectors in Britain. Or the US killing by drone of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander Qassim Soleimani.

This raises another conceptual question: is targeting government officials and soldiers and police “terrorism?” Definitions aside, targeting officials but not bystanders is different from setting off bombs on aeroplanes or in crowded markets.

Another activity now on the rise is hostage-taking by governments. Here the Iranians top the league. The Chinese have started to get into the game, detaining Canadians and Australians, and claiming that Meng Wenzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei and daughter of Huawei’s founder, held in Canada facing extradition to the US, is a hostage.

In a US-China cold war, we can expect a great deal of cyber-war: internet infiltration and hacking and online espionage. I don’t think that in present circumstances either the US or China sees “active measures,” using violence, as particularly useful against the other, although this could change. The NSA, not the CIA Directorate of Operations, will be the front line. A new cold war won’t be like the old one.



# 03: Global Conflict & Counter-Terrorist policy

**TACTICS:** There is an emergence of far-right terrorism across the Western World that gets less press than Jihadi terrorism. What kind of coming together would that kind of “war on terror” require?

**Professor William Farrell (WF):** There has been a pendulum swing in western media in the last couple of years, with far-right violent extremism taking a more pronounced share of the headlines and in analytical pieces. Part of the reason for this is that crimes by these groups and lone wolves inspired by their messages are happening in familiar places like Europe, the United States and New Zealand and not necessarily in far-flung Nigeria, Afghanistan, Yemen, or Syria. So, the



relevance of far-right or far-left violence to those living in the western world is much higher than jihadi violence. This is particularly so since the number of jihadi attacks in these western places has been comparatively limited lately. There is a need to be cautious, however, in drawing global conclusions from our perceptions and from headlines. Data on terrorist attacks globally shows that groups like Boko Haram, the Taliban, al Qaeda, Islamic State and their affiliates are still demonstrating their lethality exponentially higher than other current forms of terrorism. At the moment, far-right terrorist attacks pale in comparison to jihadi terrorism globally. That said, being predictive and proactive are the cornerstones of good security policy, requiring the threat of all forms of terrorism to be assessed and understood.

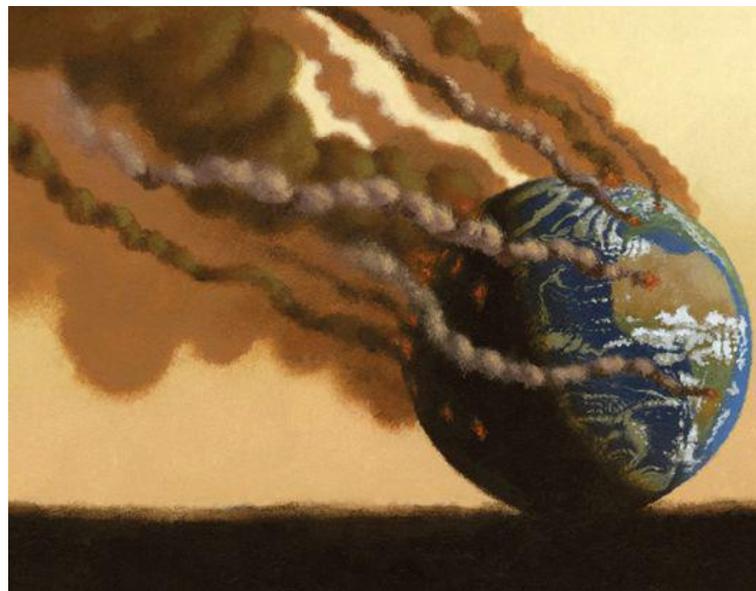
Just like jihadi terrorism, we see confusion on terminology in other forms of extremism. In the example of far-right terrorism, there is a conflating of terms including alt-right terrorism, white supremacy, ultra-nationalist terrorism, and neo-Nazis, among others. In the public and political lexicon, these are poorly defined and therefore poorly understood. It is common to see more than one of these terms used interchangeably in policy and media reports, blurring the distinctions between mobilization factors for groups as well as lone wolves. To what extent are supporters of these groups energized by a distrust of government or a belief that traditional values are threatened? When the United States and its western allies apply a framework of push and pull factors for violent extremist mobilization, they do so principally in fragile states. And there the task seems deceptively easy for a perceived homogenous movement like Salafi jihadism. But when extremist ideologies appear at home, the public and policymakers are confounded by the nuances and what that means for the line between lawful and unlawful

actions. To mount an effective comprehensive response, the outlines of the problem set need to be differentiated and articulated between various ideologies, regardless of where they originate.

**TACTICS: Do you feel “values” and transformational aspirations are still important in American foreign policy or is the emerging world much more “transactional” in nature?**

**WF:** The war on terrorism has often been framed as a war of values, perhaps not dissimilar to the framing of any other war in modern history. And to win this war, it is said, values need to be internalized at the individual level and at the national level among countries on the proverbial front line. Certainly, foreign policy, including American foreign policy, has always been, at one level, transactional. The United States has its stalwart friends and allies like Great Britain or France. And there is an outer ring of places with an historical special relationship, such as Taiwan. But there is also a constellation of friends that are strategic for commerce or for competition with other powers or campaigns like the global war on terrorism. Underlying all of these relationships is the fundamental belief that promoting at home or abroad liberal democratic values such as equality, justice, human rights, and democratic processes makes countries more stable, discouraging challenges to authority. These values are actively promoted through hard and soft power, including the conditionality of foreign assistance. It is understood that where systems are more alike, greater affinity and connections are possible. In this view, friendships can be strengthened or forged anew.

Where the United States or European countries encourage the progression of other countries towards their value system through linkage and leverage, we must be mindful, however, that there are countervailing factors, particularly from competitors like Russia or China. Certainly, efforts like Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union or China’s Belt and Road Initiative create a greater connection to partner countries. And in increasing this connection, there is greater opportunity for influence, not only politically and economically, but also values based. The great power pressures in places like Ukraine or Georgia, readily reveal competitive values-based narratives along a traditional western, liberal and secular fault line, opening the door for potential extremist manifestations.



It has been suggested that some may be questioning America’s commitment to its core values and, in turn, how it projects those values abroad, causing a potential fly in the ointment for curing the ill of terrorism at home and abroad. During this past pandemic year there has been visible and heated public questioning on a number of social issues in America: Where does the

U.S. stand on equality and justice under the law when it comes to minorities? Is there trust and confidence in our electoral processes? Do we respect freedom of speech or simply conformity? While some may see this as a prelude to a fraying of American society and a retreat from values, America's public debate and political jockeying should actually be seen as playing an important role in the refinement of America's democratic experiment. And it is this process and commitment to nonviolent democratic refinement that provides the promise of an example to other countries.

While America's values-based approach to friendships and bulwarks against challenges such as terrorism are likely not eroding, there is still a need for a healthy dose of pragmatism. Societal transformation is a long-term project that can be encouraged but still needs to be desired internally. Sometimes the multi-generational time horizon needed for that societal transformation outstrips the political will, resources and needs of countries.

Globally we have seen that conditions of weak governance present in countries that have not transformed, such as corruption and absence of rule of law, are both symptomatic and contributory to national and subnational fragility. It is this condition that sometimes gives rise to a contesting of power and authority. We see this in contemporary examples of Afghanistan, where the government is the recognized authority of the state, yet the government is not seen as uniformly legitimate across its population. As the government struggles to deliver on good governance promises, a patchwork of legitimacy has created an opening for comparisons with the Taliban's rule and for consideration of other governance structures. And because of Afghanistan's fragility, it has also created opportunities for other armed actors to operate, including not only al Qaeda and ISIS, but also associates like Islamic Jihad Union, Jund al-Khalifah, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Katibat Imam al Bukhari, Jamaat Ansarullah and others.

Dynamics in Afghanistan are changing as a result of recent decisions taken. The February 2020 agreement between the United States and Taliban has already signaled a change in posture on the terrorist label, as the agreement envisions an exchange of promises of a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan for assurances that the Taliban will cut ties with al Qaeda and not target U.S. forces. The United States does not negotiate with terrorists unless they are no longer labelled as terrorists as a result of a change in threat perception. While this is certainly realpolitik, adherence to those conditions in the February agreement remain in question. And with the current U.S. administration announcing a full withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, the leverage on the Taliban is all but eliminated.

Afghanistan will likely see a scenario in which the Taliban makes substantial military progress against the government over the medium term. And if the government of Afghanistan fails to make progress on improvements in governance with a tangible and visible impact across the population, then the battle of hearts and minds will also be in jeopardy. Ultimately, if Afghanistan comes under Taliban control through force, compromise, or electoral processes, then the tables would turn, with the former terrorist becoming the government.

Beyond Afghanistan, we can look at the example of northern Mali for lessons on governance gaps and contesting of authority. In the Kidal region after the jihadi group, Ansar Dine had been pushed out, our research showed that many people expressed that the situation under the jihadis had been harsh but was actually more transparent and predictable than under the government of Mali. Many respondents noted real perceptions of deprivation between the north and the south, further legitimizing a struggle to find an alternate governance structure. Having titular rule is not sufficient for retaining legitimacy and authority. Governments need to be aware that competitors, including terrorist organizations, can be a comparatively appealing alternative.

At the heart of state fragility is the question of whether the social contract between the people and its leaders is intact in which there is social order and security in exchange for authority. This is really an issue of legitimacy of leadership. Does the population, including minority groups, feel that the state is holding up their end of the implicit deal? Is governance equitable? Is there law enforcement and rule of law? Do people have an opportunity to live and thrive? We have repeatedly seen that where legitimacy of leadership is called into question due to weakness, inattentiveness, or willful punitive behaviour, that the erosion of legitimacy can give rise to a contesting of power, particularly in isolated pockets remote from capital cities. And make no mistake, this perception of a broken contract does not need to be only in fragile states. Seemingly robust democracies can also be seen by parts of the population as failing them.

And in many of the examples of localized struggles for power, armed groups need manpower, weapons, financing, and a rear base. Since fragile states often are unable to adequately control their borders, there is a state of porousness. We see this along the contiguous areas of the Sahel, in the mountains of the North Caucasus and the mountains of Central and South Asia. And here we have seen drug and commodity smuggling routes, human trafficking and movements of armed groups. In Burkina Faso, the spillover of conflict from Mali has disrupted life along the border. The Syria conflict has had a profound impact on the refugee crises in Lebanon and Jordan. State failure and deteriorated legitimacy go hand in hand. Where there is a lack of monopoly on force and authority there is a contested struggle for power. And where states have an inability to control borders, illicit transnational activity emerges. It is here that we see a real international security liability.

### *How We Change the World*

**TACTICS. Can there be effective unified action to counter and prevent the scourge of terrorism? And where is America's role in this process?**

**WF.** These are complex questions, made even more difficult by the age-old challenge of agreeing who a terrorist is. In democratic societies, distasteful beliefs are not necessarily illegal. Though distasteful beliefs that incite violence or criminal behaviour are. In other countries, distasteful beliefs can be readily labelled as dangerous extremist behaviour, punishable under

the law. The lists of terrorist organizations designated by countries are thus not homogeneous. Hizb-ut-Tahrir is illegal in Central Asia but is legal in the United States. The Proud Boys have been declared an ideologically motivated violent extremist group in Canada, but not in other countries. Since countries identify terrorists based on threats to their national interest, threats to other countries' national interests are somewhat less critical in the determination of who is a terrorist. Certainly, multilateral organizations like the United Nations have declared transnational groups, such as al Qaeda or ISIS as terrorist organizations, on behalf of their members. But at the national level, there remains some divergence in the designation of locally oriented groups, with each country applying a different measure by which they assess and classify national threats. Certainly, there is an ongoing need in the global community for vigorous public discussion on what constitutes shared threats.

**TACTICS: So, where does this leave us in spurring unified action to counter and prevent terrorism?**

**WF:** Undoubtedly, the massive foreign terrorist fighter flows that emerged in Syria and Iraq after 2014 and the ballooning of networked localized threats were a great impetus for international cooperation on security, diplomacy and development to address jihadi terrorism. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has focused the world on other priorities. There is not the same level of sustained attention needed to have a global focus on terrorism and all its emergent manifestations. As we move beyond the singular focus on the pandemic, scholars, practitioners and policymakers need to continue the conversation on the array of ideologies and shared threats. It is also important to recognize that addressing terrorism in all its forms is indeed a values war; but that not all global powers see those values uniformly. And while good governance is a necessary condition for state stability, terrorists can also capitalize on perceptions that the state is promoting policies and values that are out of step with its population.

# 04: Online Governance & Counter-Terrorist Policy



**TACTICS:** There is a perceived gulf between Euro-Atlantic partners on the balance between security and civic rights. Do you feel that “the West” – in the historical sense of the term – shares the same values when it comes to online governance?

**Dr Lora Pitman (LP):** The issue of online governance in the context of Western counter-terrorism policy should be addressed as a product of the different views by the Euro-Atlantic partners regarding the concepts of security and privacy. Washington interprets security mostly in terms of the security of the state, its ability to conduct surveillance and gather intelligence against potential

threats. As opposed to this, Brussels focuses more on human security, while at the same time employing the same methods as Washington to assure a necessary level of state security as well. In the United States, as some scholars argue, privacy is largely understood as a shield against the state’s interference in one’s personal space, while in Europe, the right of privacy has been viewed as a protection from attacks against one’s dignity.<sup>3</sup> (Segal, 2017, p. 193).

At first, the United States was providing the technical governance of the Internet, because it created it. It was intended and supposed to grow within the government structures, or at worst, within the government and the private-sector structures of the country (Puyvelde & Brantly, 2019). However, while the Internet was an internal product of the United States, the World Wide Web was created in Europe, more specifically in the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) as a way for scientists to share the results of their experiments easily and conveniently. The latter can also serve as an example for the fact that even in the early years of the Internet, the Euro-Atlantic community was divided in their views about the Internet, its use, and its governance. The users, the functions and the applicability of the Internet continued to grow exponentially over the years and most countries started seeing it as a global public service that needs international oversight, thus denying the United States the right of exclusive control over the technical aspects of the governance.

With the significant reliance on the Internet, it becomes crucial who will govern the cyberspace – what rules will be applied to cybersecurity on the Internet, and for surveillance, what rights

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<sup>3</sup> Segal, A. *The hacked world order: How nations fight, trade, maneuver, and manipulate in the digital age* (London: Hachette, 2016), pp. 193.

and freedoms will be given to the private sector – an actor frequently mentioned to have as much influence as state-actors, if not even more. The United States and Europe also differ in the ways in which they interpret the roles of the public and the private sector in these respective societies. In the United States, the private sector, in general, delivers many public goods, while in Europe, mostly the state is trusted with this role. Therefore, it is logical to expect that the freedom of the private sector (including the big tech companies) may be limited by states in Europe, as its role is not as crucial as it is in the United States.

At the same time, this may have the opposite effect on the other side of the Atlantic – the private sector may apply pressure on the government to gain even more freedom in the way it operates, or at least it can apply pressure on it not to limit its current freedoms. Moreover, the significant influence that the United States’ big tech sector has in Europe is perceived as a national success and a symbol of pride. Thus, the US government would be unlikely to restrict the liberties that it currently enjoys. While Europe is wary of the enormous influence of Silicon Valley’s tech giants and their capabilities, its reliance on the United States for intelligence remains unchanged. Therefore, it needs to carefully consider the level of restrictions it adopts against them. Additionally, many Europeans are using the services offered by United States tech companies. They are unlikely to give up on them, regardless of the potential loss of privacy. This could be attributed also to the lack of any meaningful European equivalents to what is offered by the Silicon Valley companies’ online services and platforms.

Establishing successful online governance will largely depend on the aforementioned dynamics between Europe and the United States. It could be speculated that a balance could be found if the influence of the big tech companies in Europe is not too aggressively attacked by European laws, different from GDPR, and at the same time, European leaders will turn their eyes away from news of intrusive surveillance practices (as exemplified by the Snowden revelations) in exchange for intelligence regarding common adversaries, such as China and Russia.

**TACTICS. How “safe” is the libertarian notion of a free and unregulated internet? Can we maintain the libertarian internet structure of the 1990s as our societies move online?**

**LP.** Another important question concerning online governance is whether societies can still live with the “libertarian notion” of free and unregulated internet evident in the 90s. To address this, it needs to be mentioned first that there are multiple dimensions of online governance – on the one hand, technical, and socio-economic and political, on the other hand. In the early days of the Internet, technical governance was provided by the United States and socio-economic and political governance was not needed simply because of the limited number of functions and users in cyberspace. As the Internet started growing more and more, governance became necessary, the field of cyber-diplomacy “emerged from the internationalization and politicization of cyber issues.”<sup>4</sup> Initially, the United States took the lead but was later pressured to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach in the structure of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) in 2016, when the contract of the latter with the United States

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<sup>4</sup> Barrinha, A., & Renard, T. *Cyber-diplomacy: the making of an international society in the digital age. Global Affairs. 2017. 3(4-5), 353-364.*

National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) expired. The decision came, as the Internet proved itself as a global service, and it was clear that only a governance model that includes a variety of state and non-state actors can be successful.

Regardless, there is still an ongoing debate whether a multilateral approach to governance should be preferred (as state actors, being the leading figures in this process) or a multi-stakeholder approach that also incorporates non-state actors (organizations and institutions), along with individuals (cybersecurity and policy experts). The European Union, the United States, Canada, and Japan have been vocal about their preferences for a multi-stakeholder approach, while Russia and China have expressed a strong preference for a multilateral governance of cyberspace.<sup>5</sup> The idea of the libertarian Internet was only possible in its early days when it was not so fundamentally embedded in the life of so many people around the world. Freedom and liberty are still the engines for innovation, and they were both needed for the creation of the Internet in the United States and the World Wide Web in Europe.

However, later with the proliferation of social networks and their penetration into every sphere of social and even political life, the need for governance became just as important as the service itself. With quick access to billions of users, cybercrime and other non-criminalized, but unethical and dangerous activities (such as disinformation) were also on the rise. Cybersecurity in the 21st century is just as significant as security in the physical, as it could ultimately lead to the same consequences. An example of this is the online recruitment of ISIS in cyberspace. The cost for many of their newly recruited fighters after they joined the organization was too high and the outcome, in some cases, lethal.

**TACTICS: We see a changing pattern in the online identity of anti-establishment movements, including terrorist mobilisation. Increasingly, we have legitimate and illegitimate movements that tailor their message to fit a specific psycho-social profile, be it far-right or jihadi. If the medium is the message, how do we redefine editorial responsibility?**

**LP:** Especially in light of the growing role of social media in activities of far-right and jihadi organizations, the question of editorial responsibility becomes inevitable. The problem of online recruitment for extremist and terrorist organizations is not an entirely new one and the solution – forms of censorship and ban of the account - seems easier in theory than in practice. The most serious obstacle standing in the way of strengthening editorial responsibility on social media platforms is freedom of speech, as a leading principle in every democratic country. There are also various practical complications related to this solution.

First, there are issues regarding the two-way communication between the recruiter for a terrorist/extremist organization and the one being recruited. The concern, in this case, becomes

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<sup>5</sup> Renard, T. *EU cyber partnerships: assessing the EU strategic partnerships with third countries in the cyber domain. European Politics and Society*. 2018. 19(3), 321-337.

when to censor a certain communication. Most of these conversations do not start directly with an invitation to join the radical organization, but instead, it is a casual conversation intended to build a relationship and trust. Censoring the messages at this stage of the conversation would represent a violation of the freedom of speech principle because no intent to recruit could be proven to exist at this point. At the same time, to be able to censor the messages at a later point when there is already a demonstrated intent to recruit participants for the terrorist/extremist organization requires the entire communication to be under surveillance from the very beginning. The latter can be difficult and potentially poses other issues related to online privacy of all users on social media.

Second, another direction in which efforts need to be made is the spread of propaganda of terrorist/extremist organizations - the one-way communication with potential members of the terrorist/extremist organization. The issue in this case is even more complicated, because with a click of a button the extremist message reaches a wide range of users, all over the world. An appropriate example is the ISIS activity on Twitter during the World Cup in 2014 when ISIS used trending hashtags to promote their propaganda. Many Twitter users were not interested in the message that they were promoting, but the important lesson was how easy it was for ISIS to reach thousands of people on Twitter, simply by using the social platform's own algorithms. This case also confirmed that terrorist organizations are skillfully using to their advantage the fundamental ways of how social media platforms are built.



Censorship as a measure embedding the ban of an account or simply deleting a particular message needs to be always used with increased caution, as freedom of speech is a core tenet of democracy. However, most countries have terrorism, as a priority, very high on their security agendas and certain measures, if used against efforts of such organizations to recruit new members and spread their messages, would be justified. At the same time, in less democratic countries, such a measure can be used against the political opposition. That said, the key to determining which organizations (and their members) fall into the category of terrorist/extremist organizations will be key to carefully preserving the balance between the right of self-expression and limiting the online activities of terrorist/extremist organizations.

**TACTICS: If the internet is the fourth dimension of warfare, would you say that the Euro-Atlantic Alliance is fragmenting between Euro-Atlantic partners and the “Anglo-Sphere”? And what does that mean for our ability to deal with global terrorist threats?**

**LP** In the future, online governance will have a significant impact on Western counter-terrorism policies even more. As mentioned previously, there is a difference of opinions between the Euro-Atlantic partners regarding how the Internet should be regulated. This could be attributed to the different understanding they have of privacy, security and how they should be best balanced in favour of society’s needs in the age of big data and AI. Another contentious topic between the partners is the role of the Silicon Valley companies and their role in Europe. The controversy about their role is not only an issue between the United States and Europe but also an internal issue for the United States itself. The multitude of court battles about encryption testifies to the clash of interests of the United States’ law enforcement and the big tech companies. Resolving this issue and establishing clearly what rights and responsibilities these companies have, especially, regarding extremism/terrorism will send a signal to the partners in Europe about what they can expect to see in the future and whether their views on Internet governance will overlap more fully with those of Washington. If the latter happens, this will further facilitate the cooperation that the Euro-Atlantic partners have in this area. A carefully crafted balance between the states’ needs for surveillance, the interests of the big tech companies and the protection of users’ data and privacy can lead to an enhanced effort to counter terrorist/extremist threats. The big tech companies may be forced to comply with states’ demands to deliver data of their users, but only to the extent they have already been complying – on a case-by-case basis, sometimes after prolonged court battles. However, it remains unlikely that these companies will provide a backdoor to circumvent the encryption of their devices because if such news becomes publicly available, this can seriously hurt these companies’ reputation and their business. In sum, the Euro-Atlantic community will continue to join forces against extremism and terrorism, but when it comes to cooperation by the big tech companies, there will still be some boundaries regarding encryption that are unlikely to be crossed.

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AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON ASYMMETRICAL

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