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What Is “Political Warfare”?

Background

Military theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote in his seminal book *On War* that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Historically, in Congress as well as in the broader policy community, the term *political warfare* described the synchronized use of any aspect of national power short of overt conventional warfare— such as intelligence assets, alliance building, financial tools, diplomatic relations, technology, and information dominance— to achieve state objectives. It was coined in the late 1940s by George F. Kennan, a key architect of U.S. strategy during the Cold War, as the United States began to come to grips with the challenge presented by the Soviet Union (USSR). As he wrote in his 1948 State Department memorandum *Organizing Political Warfare*:

We have been handicapped ... by a popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between peace and war ... and by a reluctance to recognize the realities of international relations—the perpetual rhythm of struggle, in and out of war.... Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. **In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.** Such operations ... range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures, and ‘white’ propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of ‘friendly’ foreign elements, ‘black’ psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.

Popular terms used to describe this phenomenon in the current international security environment include *strategic competition* and *gray zone* competition or conflict. Yet political warfare, according to some scholars, is not mere rivalry or competition but is also a form of war: its objective, like that of every other form of war, is to impose one’s own will on the opponent in order to achieve strategic objectives, to conquer and destroy the opponent’s will to resist.

In the United States, the military dimensions of this competition garner significant attention and resources. Yet if political warfare is an adequate lens through which to view this strategic competition, the nonmilitary aspects of the competition might prove equally if not more important, particularly as competitors deploy robust political warfare strategies.

Present Day Challenges

Most observers of contemporary international security trends contend that the United States and its allies are entering an era of unprecedented—and dangerous—

strategic complexity. In particular, the 2014 Russian invasion of the Crimean peninsula and subsequent proxy war in eastern Ukraine was arguably a watershed moment in international security, as it awakened dormant concerns about an aggressive and revanchist Russia. Months before Russia’s Crimea intervention, China began a territorial expansion as well, building artificial islands on disputed features in the South China Sea that it later turned into military outposts.

Complicating matters some states are collaborating with non-state proxies (including, but not limited to, militias, criminal networks, corporations, and hackers) and deliberately blurring the lines between “conventional” and irregular conflict. Some states are also sowing confusion as to what constitutes “civilian” versus “military” activities. Recent events involving China and Russia have raised a number of questions that highlight this complexity:

- Are sales of Chinese multinational Huawei’s 5G networks around the world— including to key U.S. allies—an element of international development or a national security challenge? Similarly, is the Chinese-owned online platform TikTok an innocuous video hosting service or a national security threat? Or do these actions fall somewhere on a continuum?
- Are infrastructure investments underwritten by China as part of its “Belt and Road” Initiative (BRI) about improving Chinese access to foreign markets, or is it a de facto way to establish a global presence that could be used for security and defense purposes—or both?
- Is Russian production and dissemination of media with pro-Moscow narratives to Russian minority groups in neighboring countries routine messaging, or is it designed to destabilize NATO countries? Likewise, is Russian interference in U.S. and European elections in 2016, as described by the intelligence community, an act of hostility?
- Some European and Commonwealth countries that have maintained strong economic and political relationship with the United States are becoming increasingly economically dependent on China. At what point does this interdependence, potentially underpinned by greater reliance on China-led economic institutions, alter the security calculus of U.S. Allies and partners?

Altogether, these events underscore to many observers that the United States must be prepared to compete with other powers— powers that are willing to employ both military and nonmilitary means to accomplish their objectives and potentially reshape the world order.

Geopolitical Competition and the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy

The Biden Administration’s 2022 National Security Strategy makes frequent mention of geopolitical competition and competitors, describing the end of the post-Cold War era and a competition between major powers to shape world order. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) notes:

The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy. It is their behavior that poses a challenge to international peace and stability—especially waging or preparing for wars of aggression, actively undermining the democratic political processes of other countries, leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression, and exporting an illiberal model of international order. Many non-democracies join the world’s democracies in forswearing these behaviors. Unfortunately, Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) do not.

The NSS goes on to say that both Russia and the PRC pose different challenges to geopolitical competition. Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its war of aggression against Ukraine has shown. The PRC, by contrast, is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective.

Both China and Russia, for example, according to *Understanding the Current International Order* (a 2016 RAND report), “resent key elements of the U.S. conception of postwar order, such as promotion of liberal values ... viewing them as tools used by the United States to sustain its hegemony.” China appears to be using its wealth to assert security interests in the Pacific, deepen and formalize the region’s economic integration through efforts such as BRI, and assert larger influence at international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. These institutions, however, are rooted in a shared sets of values and norms, and it remains uncertain if China’s efforts align with these common values or whether China is instead seeking to create a new international consensus.

Further, U.S. competitors are not just challenging American promulgation of values; they are challenging the arguments for continued United States leadership of the global system itself. Critics contend that the United States has overly militarized its foreign policy; that it has unnecessarily used force in the pursuit of often-unachievable strategic objectives; and that its economic policies have led to global financial crises. In Munich in 2007, for example, coming on the heels of the U.S. “surge” in Iraq and shortly before the 2008 global financial crisis, Russian President Vladimir Putin essentially argued that U.S. “unipolar” management of the global system has been both immoral and incompetent. Subsequent Russian activities in the Ukraine have led some to view Putin’s critique with skepticism. Still, U.S. leadership of the extant world order is being

challenged on moral, geopolitical, and competency grounds, suggesting to some observers that the United States should account for, and better synchronize, these dimensions of statecraft and strategy into the future.

Economic Statecraft

A complex web of institutions, routinized behaviors (“norms”), legal agreements, commercial ties, interpersonal relations, and power structures have served as mechanisms to manage economic relations between countries. This web of formal and informal relationships is often referred to as “world order” or the “international system.” The web of relations that has been largely shaped by the interests and values of the United States and its allies for the past 70 years is often called the post-World War II liberal world order, although some scholars question whether this liberal world order is more a myth than historic reality.

At the same time, policymakers generally consider national security and the requirement for trade and investment relations as interrelated strategic priorities. The United States has traditionally used its leadership position to pursue increased economic engagement to bring emerging powers into the post-World War II liberal world order. Yet concerns over growing economic challenges, including the unequal distribution of gains from globalization, have led some countries to embrace populist political views and economic nationalism, and to pursue mercantilist policies. This has led to a reevaluation of the so-called liberal economic order and as such, a number of countries, including the United Kingdom, Italy, and the United States, appear to be pursuing increasingly protectionist trade and financial policies as they face a more competitive and multipolar global economy. The Biden Administration’s NSS leans in this direction by advocating a “Modern Industrial and Innovation Strategy” that will identify and invest in private sector companies to protect core economic and national security interests.

Diplomatic Tools

The Biden Administration appears to be increasing funding of at least one element of political warfare. Its FY2023 International Affairs budget, which supports U.S. embassies and diplomatic activities as well as foreign assistance, requested \$66 billion—17% above the FY2022-enacted level—with increases across a wide range of programs and accounts, from global health security to climate change to development finance.

CRS Products

CRS Report R45142, *Information Warfare: Issues for Congress*, by Catherine A. Theohary

CRS Report R43838, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke

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