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Media Warfare: A Global Challenge In The 21st Century

Assoc. Prof. Mohd Rajib Ghani

We all know that the rise of Islamic fundamentalists and radicals has provided the world with tremendous challenges in the field of international terrorism. Yet, especially after the downfall of the Shah in 1979, the long-established international state system has also faced a challenge in the form of the Iranian Islamic Republic, which created a governing system that challenged the western concept of government.

Since then, especially because of the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War, traditional nation states and non-state actors have combined to form a rivalry between the West and Islam. Organisations such as Al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah of Indonesia, Abu Sayaf, Abu Hafs Al-Masri Brigade, Abu Al-Abbas, Abu Nidal and more than a hundred other terrorist organisations have appeared. 9/11 and not the end of the Cold War was the catalyst for this. The aim of these terrorist non-state organisations was to exploit Muslim suspicion of the West, which has now escalated into a global war of words – an information war. The situation has become worse with the decision of the United States administration to go to war against Islamic states that were deemed to support and nourish these non-state actors. This began on October 7, 2001 when the US decided to attack Afghanistan in retaliation for 9/11. It was made worse when the US decided in March 2003 to attack Iraq.

Since then, many have come to realise that using kinetic means of resolving the problem of international terrorism through military attacks on the Islamic states of Afghanistan and Iraq has proved disastrous. Nor does it promise victory from the American point of view. The US is now reconsidering a non-military approach, which includes searching for support from the world population through various means of propaganda. This is shifting the balance of world politics. Evidence of this can be seen in trade and diplomatic shifts amongst many Muslim and non-Muslim states in the Asia Pacific region, which is perceived as a major threat to the influence of the western powers. If the US fails to resolve this situation, it will possibly diminish western power in the Asia

Pacific region and this, in turn, will enable China to become a global superpower in the coming millennium. This might happen anyway. But to arrest or slow down this possibility, the US Government has been spending billions of dollars on propaganda to win the hearts and minds of the world population to prevent Islamic support for an Asian-made Chinese superpower.

War experts have postulated that any future war would largely be a war of the mind. They argue this because the mass media and digital communications technology have now become more important to the future as “weapons of mass persuasion” than “weapons of mass destruction” have been to the past. Propaganda, persuasion, information operations, strategic communication and Public Diplomacy are now seen as much more useful tools to achieve a nation-state’s objectives than the traditional use of force, which merely generates further conflict. In the past, mankind believed that kinetic means was the most effective way to defend its territory or conquer that of the enemy. Now, with the advent of communication and information technology, there is a growing viewpoint amongst nation-states that communications and persuasion can create better human understanding and more effective attempts to resolve international disputes. This is what non-state terrorist organisations fear most.

The irony is that because this new communications technology belongs to anyone who can afford to access it and cannot be controlled by nation-states, non-state actors can exploit it to undermine the very concept of the nation-state. Wars were traditionally fought between states but warfare, especially information warfare, can now be waged by an individual, especially in cyberspace. These “info-warriors” can disseminate viruses, which can cause tremendous damage to the world economy. They also wage war on the mind. Their allegiance is to themselves, or to some cause – terrorist or otherwise. Any dissatisfied individual with a grievance against those in powers, for example bloggers, can use information, misinformation or disinformation as a weapon against those they disagree with. We have seen this trend recently in countries like Malaysia, Singapore and China. Bloggers are so daring in criticising governments regardless of whether their information and opinions may be inaccurate or ill-informed. Once upon a time, only journalists and ex-journalists conveyed their messages to the public through the mass media, reporting on the doings of the few to the many. But today, any individual can be a “blogger” and broadcast to not only a national but also an international audience via the world

wide web.¹ Individuals can also form virtual networks on websites like MySpace and networks, including terrorist networks, can exploit the global international communications environment on YouTube. This is a perfect battlefield for a war on the mind. Or rather it is a battle “space” not only for non-state actors such as the loosely non-aligned movements like Al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah and other religious radical movements but also for Christians, Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus or anyone who might want to express their ideas about something disagreeable to their thoughts and value system.

If we generally accept that information is not just a tool but also a weapon to undermine an adversary, is it not excessive to say that “information is lethal by itself”? For this reason, might we postulate the question of what war might look like in the future? Will it be a war of informational attrition in cyberspace, fought on a virtual battlefield or battlespace? This type of war will not require uniformed soldiers to carry a machine-gun or use heavy artillery to defeat his enemy. The mass media and information can do the job for you.

A Counterintelligence Agent for The Federalist Patriot has written an intriguing paper on the future nature of war. His paper describes, in the present day and perhaps in this millennium, the tremendous changes in the character of war, which might occur due to the changing pattern of human communication. The coming of so-called “Fourth Generation Warfare” gives war-fighting capabilities to paramilitary, terrorists or individuals to wage war against nation-states. This type of war can be seen in Iraq and Afghanistan where even after the actual combat phase of military operations, the killing of American military officers, military officers of the country and civilians has never been stopped until the countries are rectified as non-fighting zones or the achievement of peace.

The convergence of those factors of course will never match exactly with the conventional pattern of war, but if we think in terms of war of influence or battles to subjugate the mind of the public, the above factors may be enough to destroy society. They certainly provide threats to society, which we need to deliberate in depth. Do we really think that the mass media, communication technology or the portable digital devices that we own are the equivalent of possessing a gun or planting a bomb? Yet, in information war, that is precisely what they are. “Info-bombs” can destroy government’s business networking; collapse the whole states’ economic system, sabotage diplomatic systems and distort the public mind.

It is surely obvious from this that mass media and digital devices can be used as channels or transmitters of value-laden messages? Messages are coming at us in the form of propaganda, persuasion, misinformation, manipulation of information and disinformation and this must be enough to make nation-states realise an enormous threat to their existence. Values and ideas that inculcate hatred and abhorrence are being transmitted through this new communication technology by, for example, radical Islamic information warriors who teach follow Muslims to hate the West. On the other hand, western stereotypes disseminated through the mass media propagate that they are confronting a “faceless enemy” (i.e. Islam) that personifies “evil”. What would happen to the world if these extremist messages go unchallenged? Misinterpretations about both Islam and western intentions are spreading all over the world not only through the mass media but through new communication devices like the Internet, web-pages and cellular phones generating a new battle between Islam and the West. The West, of course, maintains in its defense that its policy is merely to promote democracy throughout the world, which is not wanted in some Islamic states. It is a potential war between democracy and authoritarianism, the individual against the collective, freedom versus the “ummah”, the secular against the religious and within these polarisations comes a tug-of-war of information which forces world society into a chasm.

Whatever scholars say about our future world, we must be aware that the conduct of warfare has always changed over time. But current trends are different thanks to the unprecedented nature of digital communication technology. Wars of the future will be fought not just by armies representing nation-states. They will be fought by individuals or groups or non-state actors as well. Being aware of this now generates the kind of scholarly debates, which we look forward to in this conference. Hopefully, it will help us realise what future war might look like. The promulgator of 5th [or 4th?] Generation Warfare, perhaps might see that the advancement of the mass media and information technology causes a shift from conventional war to the non-conventional such as information war. Thus 5th [or 4th?] Generation Warfare might produce the most devastating war of all – or what Samuel P. Huntington called “the Clash of Civilisation” that might prove to be the most devastating war of all time because it involves values and beliefs that will annihilate world civilisation.

Without realising, the involvement of non-state players in wars is

obvious. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11 showed what damage a dedicated group of fanatics could do to a nation-state. It was classic asymmetric warfare. Small states, tribes, clans, networks, religious groups and individuals challenging established concepts have never relinquished their ability to wage war of this kind. Of course they are incapable of launching a large-scale military war as the US but they do have capabilities of waging war against the human mind through the mass media and information technology. And the damage they can cause could be devastating.

The world in chaos was described by two prominent and penetrating works published in 1993. These were *Out of Control* by Zbigniew Brzezinski and *Pandemonium* by Patrick Moynihan. They stated that there were an estimated 48 ethnic wars occurring throughout the world at that time. One hundred and sixty four territorial ethnic claims and conflicts were occurring in the Soviet Union.³ However, the 21st century has witnessed another kind of war by movements like Al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiah and many other people-groups that carry a specific mission to destabilise the status quo. 9/11, the Bali bombings, 7/7 in London and so on might well have been terrorist attacks but equally the western response, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, has fuelled fears that nation-states like the US are engaged in state-terrorism against Islamic states. This very polarisation, turning the world into “good vs evil”, black vs white, Islam vs the West - when in fact the issues are so much more complex than this - perfectly illustrates the power of communication, information technology and the mass media.

In that paper, he states, “what we are now seeing is the emergence of fifth generation warfare”. Unlike the preceding generations, there is no single or simple demarcation point, no single invention. And though we may see “as though through a glass, darkly,” the following aspects can be discerned:

- A. The technological advances represented by the Internet;
- B. Scalability of impact;
- C. Information as an empowering and leveling force;
- D. The media as an independent organ that is stronger, more pervasive and more independent than ever before; and
- E. Borders no longer impede data.²

Messages in the media – old and new – might not kill people but they can make people suspicious, distrustful and hate other. Because of those feelings, some people might be willing to kill other people. War of feeling and sentiment, if you may call it, has been going on for so long. However, the advancement of communication technology has made war on emotions more pervasive, less controllable and more sophisticated. It no longer takes a large battalion and heavy artillery to combat the enemy. Instead just through a magic word people can turn violent and become brutal. The West has promulgated terms such as “democracy”, “liberalism” and “the new world order” which have lured many people into believing that these terms are a reflection of western incongruent thoughts with others. Liberal western thought has been injecting ideas and influencing other people through the mass media. Islam, on the other hand, teaches people to resist western capitalism, the invaders, exploiters and the hypocrites. As one of the oldest religions of the world, Islam had rejected the western ideas and concepts of democracy, instead believing in the divine law (Law of God) that is governed by Al-Quran and Sunnah (the tradition). Therefore, the power struggle between Islam and the West is the struggle of “messages” to win the hearts and minds of either the devout or of new followers.

The West has been propagating the messages of liberal and democratic way of life and in this course the West has succeeded in winning the hearts and minds of the majority of nation states for its struggle after the Cold War ended. On the contrary, Muslims have never given up by continuously voicing their desire to form an Islamic government, which is ideally against the western concept of government. Both struggles of decanting the desired messages of the Islam struggles and the West will never stop as long as the mass media and the new media allow them to do this.

For Muslim Jihadist, neither the West nor modernist Islam (presently Islamic nation states) can resolve the conflicts. Jihadist, in principle believes that the nation should be governed by the Ummah. To do this, everyone who adheres to Muslim religion must carry the mission, so-called “jihad”. The fundamental principle in jihad is that one must submit his or her life to God only and the establishment of Islamic government is fundamental in the jihadist’s mind and soul since the secular system of the West is unable to resolve Muslim affairs. Jihad Jihad (Arabic) meaning “to strive” or “to struggle” in Arabic, is an Islamic term and

a duty for Muslims. It is sometimes referred to as the sixth pillar of Islam, although it occupies no official status as such in Sunni Islam.[1] In Twelver Shi'a Islam, however, Jihad (Holy Struggle) is one of the 10 Practices of the Religion (from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

It is undeniable that, throughout history, communications has been a process that has been used for both good and evil purposes. Its original Latin meaning is “to share”. To communicate is to be alive. Ants do it just as whales and dolphins do it. We might not understand what such creatures are trying to say to each other because we have yet to decipher the meaning of their language but, as human beings, we are better placed to try and understand what our fellow human beings are trying to tell us regardless of language and religion. We can learn other languages and we can come to understand other people's beliefs and values. Throughout history, certain people have feared this sharing process. They have abused communications to concentrate on what divides us rather than what unites us anthropologically. Today, if we disagree with such people, we call their point of view propaganda – the enemy of “the truth”. But “our truth” - by which I mean our belief systems which are shared by most of our fellow human beings regardless of their religion, nationality, race, creed or color – is under attack by those who would divide us along precisely those lines of difference. It is a war of ideas in which language is the artillery and where symbolism provides the flag of allegiance. The battlefield is global and it is both real and virtual. The warriors can use kinetic or informational weapons. Wars polarise. They force people to take sides. “You are either with us or against us”. In wartime, dissent is interpreted as treachery. While it is natural for all of us to respond to such language and symbolism in emotional terms because we are all products of our own societies, religions and cultures, it is imperative that we do what only human beings can do uniquely amongst the entirety of life on this planet. We must think. We must use our language and our intellects to make up our own minds about the rights and wrongs of any given issue. For those of us who are members of the family of humankind, we must work harder to persuade those who wish to harm us and disrupt this anthropological unity that they are wrong, or misguided or dangerous. While we label their messages as “propaganda” – and by this we mean lies – we must know more about how to use communications for good rather than evil. Call this propaganda for peace, if you like. Or call it a quest for truth – our truth.

If we fail to do this, locally, globally, or “glocally”, the enemies of our truth will prevail.

1. National seminar on Bloggers: The Role and Challenges in the 21st Century organised by Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies, July, 2006
2. William S. Lind, Colonel Keith Nightengale et.all, Changing Face of War (Marine Corps Gazette, 1989)
3. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Out of Control: Global Turmoil on The Eve of 21st Century (Scribner, New York, 1993)

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