

## COGNITIVE WARFARE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY GREAT POWER COMPETITION – FRAMING OF MILITARY ACTIVITY IN THE BLACK SEA –

Olga R. CHIRIAC

Centre for Strategic Studies,  
National University of Political Science and Public Administration

*The Pivot to Asia first signaled and then the December 2017 US National Security Strategy ushered in the era of renewed great power competition, a global strategic environment in which great powers compete for influence and in which the leveraging of new and disruptive technologies, globalization, climate change and a global pandemic have added to the complexity and fluidity of strategic imperatives of nation states and alliances. The nature of war has remained the same, nevertheless, the character has evolved, perspectives on what constitutes war in its entire spectrum have taken on different meaning for different actors. One particularly complex dimension of great power conflict is cognitive warfare in all its manifestations.*

*The article is looking to analyze the way the framing effect, a cognitive bias, has been leveraged as a means of perpetrating cognitive warfare in the Black Sea by reframing historical events of the last century in order to influence both individual and group beliefs and behaviors to favor or legitimize tactical as well as strategic objectives in great power competition.*

*Keywords: Black Sea; cognitive biases; cognitive warfare; framing effect; heuristics; irregular warfare;*

### INTRODUCTION

Warfare, “an activity undertaken by a political unit (such as a nation) to weaken or destroy another” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2021), has metamorphosed over the past several decades. The lines are becoming more blurred between the physical threats of conventional military confrontation and a more ambiguous sort of conflict. There is something essentially Clausewitzian about reality on the ground: physical force and morale are both means of fighting, yet, morale seems more fragile, more vulnerable. Morale can be fought without firing a single shot. One way to fight an enemy in this manner is in the *human domain*. The present article is proposing a framework to analyse cognitive warfare and operations in the human domain and to illustrate the proposition by means of a specific geopolitical theater, the Black Sea.

The article is structured as follows: first, the framework for analysis is established, second, there is a brief discussion about what cognitive warfare actually means and finally, the analysis is applied to the military activity in the Black Sea. The article sets out to discuss the way the framing effect, a cognitive bias, has been leveraged as a means on perpetrating *cognitive warfare* in the Black Sea by reframing historical events of the last century in order to influence both individual and group beliefs and behaviors to favor or legitimise tactical as well as strategic objectives in great power competition.

### A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS: PROSPECT THEORY, HEURISTICS AND COGNITIVE BIASES

Partitioners and theoreticians of security alike are increasingly bringing cognitive warfare to the forefront of security studies debates. In Western doctrinal output, the *human domain* (cognition) and cyber(technology) are for the most part falling under the same umbrella. Cognitive operations are often equated to disinformation, misinformation and information campaigns. The central point of the present paper is that twenty-first century great power conflict is in progress as we speak and that it will be fought in large part by means of operations in the human domain.

The framework for analysis employed for examining cognitive warfare is rooted in psychology and draws on theories put forth by Nobel prize winning psychologists Daniel Kahneman and cognitive and mathematical psychologist Amos Tversky. The article purposely addresses cognitive warfare from a neuropsychology perspective, presenting an alternate explanation to how to frame cognitive warfare versus the one of mainstream Western security and defense practitioners.

*What makes cognitive warfare a challenging and at the same time a most effective way of combat today?* The answer is actually quite simple: new and disruptive technologies have led to the affirmation of new domains: cyber as well as space have been added to air, land and sea. Armed forces and civilian research & development are focused on developing drones, unmanned systems, more improved satellite systems, progress in computing, telecommunications, and internet working technologies. All things considered, the most complex and hard to predict domain remains the human one. Social media networks, smart mobile device technologies, the ease with which information is collected, stored and transported, all add to the said level of complexity. In the context of the article, references to cognitive warfare are not synonym to hybrid warfare, psychological warfare, grey zone activity, information warfare, or whatever other concept the West has used to describe activities in the *human domain* (Giles, 2016; Jackson, 2017; Reisinger, H., & Golts, 2014). Cognitive warfare is about cognition and how the human brain works. In order to understand cognitive warfare, one needs to understand cognition.

APA Dictionary of Psychology defines cognition as *“all forms of knowing and awareness, such as perceiving, conceiving, remembering, reasoning, judging, imagining, and problem solving. Along with affect and conation<sup>1</sup>, it is one of the three traditionally identified components of mind”* (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2021). Dhakal and Bobrin present a simpler definition: *“the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.”* (Dhakal & Bobrin 2021, p. 1). We can say that cognitive warfare takes psychological warfare to the next level: in cognitive warfare, the human mind itself becomes the battlefield. The ultimate goal in cognitive warfare, victory so to speak, is to change not only what the target population thinks, but how the target population behaves. The complex and largely still unknown nature of cognition allows for a vast array of possible reference points and variables.

<sup>1</sup> The proactive part (unlike the usual one) of motivation, which connects pieces of knowledge, inclination (such as an instinct, a drive) to act purposefully, in *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conation>).

Heuristics, one element of cognition are instrumental in cognitive warfare. In cognition, heuristics, are: *“an experience-based strategy for solving a problem or making a decision that often provides an efficient means of finding an answer but cannot guarantee a correct outcome.”* (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2021) Another key element in cognitive warfare is the cognitive bias. Cognitive biases play the role of a catalyst in a way and if leveraged effectively, can accelerate victory. Notably, a biases and heuristics are not interchangeable concepts. A bias is essentially a *“systematic error arising during sampling, data collection, or data analysis”* (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2021). Cognitive biases, heuristics, or mental shortcuts are sprinkled around our day-to-day decision making while unaware we have them. People are in fact applying a variety of information *“shortcuts”* to *“make reasonable decisions with minimal cognitive effort in all aspects of their lives”* (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, p. 2).

Research has demonstrated that people’s perceptions and cognitions are affected by both genetic and environmental factors: such as motivations, context, cultural background, personal experience, social experience or individual expectations. If the genetic side is predetermined at conception, the environmental side can indeed be leveraged in cognitive warfare in order to maximise the utility of campaigns. Psychological literature on *“cognitive heuristics”* (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) is predicated on the view of humans as *“limited information processors”* or *“cognitive misers”* (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Lau & Sears, 1986; Simon, 1957, 1985) *“who have become quite adept at applying a variety of information “shortcuts” to make reasonable decisions with minimal cognitive effort in all aspects of their lives”* (Lau & Redlawsk 2001, p. 2). According to the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology, cognitive misers are *“an interpretation of stereotypes as psychological mechanisms that economise on the time and effort spent on information processing by simplifying social reality, which would otherwise overwhelm our cognitive capacities with its complexity”* (Oxford Dictionary of Psychology, 2021).

The analytical framework of the paper starts from prospect theory. Prospect theory, first developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, was formulated as an alternative to expected utility theory in order to understand/explain human decision-making under conditions of risk (Kahneman & Tversky, 1977). In essence, prospect theory *“posits that individuals evaluate outcomes with respect to deviations from a reference point rather than with respect to net asset levels,*

*that their identification of this reference point is a critical variable, that they give more weight to losses than to comparable gains, and that they are generally risk averse with respect to gains and risk acceptant with respect to losses” (Levy, 1992, 171).*

In cognitive warfare, key is accurately isolating the said reference point in order to distract the target population from the net asset levels, in our case historically documented, factual events. Because individuals are risk adverse, hence give more consideration to preventing losses, it is critical to frame the object in a way that underscores potential losses rather than gains. As previously stated, Tversky and Kahneman’s work on the framing effect and how consideration of benefits or losses can influence the choices that people make and their willingness to take risk significantly contributed to understanding heuristic and cognitive biases, with applications well beyond behavioral economics, in numerous other domains as well. The explanation for this is also very simple: no matter which domain we operate in, the epicenter of decision-making remains the individual, the human brain. This assertion leads to other foundational idea of the article: one of the big changes in how war is waged at present is that the targets are no longer the armed forces, but also the civilian population. Again, this is nothing new, however, the way that this is employed is differed from before. There are no internationally agreed upon rules of war for this situation. Conventional forces remain critical and conventional capabilities, especially nuclear arsenals are still leverage, but to this we need to add the vulnerability of the civilian population, democratic decision-making processes and democratic systems of governance. We are witnessing how historical memory is being turned into an instrument of force. In cognitive warfare, efficiency is far more pronounced when campaigns are targeting population with certain affinities, historical experiences, religious sensitivities and so forth. Cultural factors do influence decision-making and can be a power variable. (Savani et al, 2015). As already outlined, there is a genetic factor and an environmental factor. The latter one can be influenced and eventually altered. This type of strategy does not produce instant results, hence, there is a need for patience.

Finally, how victory is defined is also very important in the cognitive domain. Given the overarching context of renewed great power competition, victory means preserving the peace or successfully challenging the status quo, the rules based

order. Understanding an adversary, the way they see the world and us, understanding their ultimate strategic goals but also the motivations behind those, that is the only way stability and peace can be preserved.

### CONCEPTUALISING COGNITIVE WARFARE

It is in the presented analytical framework that we proceed to transitioning to the warfare realm. The most appropriate start is Carl von Clausewitz himself, who famously declared *“War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will”* (Clausewitz 1976, p. 75). Advancements in technology gave way to electronic warfare and, subsequently, cyber warfare, however, they are not separate from other types of warfare or from one another. Just like the international system is interconnected and interdependent due to globalization, the way to wage war at present is equally interconnected. Cyber warfare, cognitive warfare, psychological operations, electronic warfare, they work together to achieve an end. Continued, long-term psychological campaigns either by disruption, perception management or deception most likely succeed in sowing doubt and confusion. Cognitive warfare utilizes social media networks in a completely different way than cyber operations. Instead of spreading malicious software, agents of cognitive warfare spread information meant to influence and change behaviors. The key however is to target the correct population, to maximise the utility of heuristics and biases. Effective cognitive attacks essentially turn the biases of a population against itself. For example, in Germany the AfD (Alternative for Germany) has in a very short amount of time gained significant representation in the Bundestag. Strategic competitors of NATO leveraged the bias against foreigners and immigrants in order to promote division and to give credibility to the notion that the EU does not have a credible, sustainable future. The effective use of cognitive biases basically stirs a person’s/target population’s decision making to be guided by emotions rather than rationality, meaning rather by how information is presented instead of the true substance (Plous, 1993). The heuristic decision-making process/cognitive heuristics developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky is one in which humans use *mental shortcuts* to arrive at decisions. It basically enables the influencer to take advantage of built in biases. The influencer does not create the bias, but effectively identifies vulnerable population segments and uses cyber tools or other channels of information distribution in order to advance the intended message. This creates

a sense of cognitive insecurity and distrust. Eventually, a prolonged state of insecurity and confusion may lead to a shift in values and behaviors. There is no guarantee the ultimate goal will be reached, but, and this is very important, it does not even really matter, because at the very least, there will be a state of uncertainty, distrust. Cognitive warfare tactics tend to target but are not exclusive to civilian populations, civilian social infrastructures and governments. Finally, it is also important to underscore that cognitive warfare does not create biases, those already exist in our cognition, either by ways of genetics or socialization. The efficiency in the *human domain* comes from properly identifying the target population and maximising already existing biases.

One major shortcoming of Western conceptualisation of cognitive warfare is their own subjective assessment of strategic competitors. Former US Navy Commander Stuart Green described cognitive warfare and alluded to this difference *“Information operations, the closest existing American doctrinal concept for cognitive warfare, consists of five ‘corps capabilities’, or elements. These include electronic warfare, computer network operations, PsyOps, military deception, and operational security.”* (Green, 2008).

By mentioning a doctrinal concept closest to the American, Western, one, we can agree that there is a fundamental difference in conceptualization. The present article focuses on the Black Sea region, therefore, we will assert that Western conceptualisation differs significantly from the Russian one. It is beyond the scope of the paper to discuss why there are differences, the focus is to show how cognitive warfare is conducted in a specific geographical region. To elaborate: cognitive warfare in the Black Sea is perpetrated with the aim to propagate cognitive emotional conflicts and changes in behavior in target populations. Cognitive emotional conflict is: *“A struggle to affect the thoughts and values of people at all levels of an opponent’s organization and society, using technical and other informational means, while preserving the resilience of one’s own organisations and society, and attracting the uncommitted.”* (Wells II, 2017). Decision-making can be rational or emotional and if decision making is driven to the emotional level or if the environment is fertile for heuristics to kick in, then the probability on an irrational choice increases. In a state of cognitive insecurity, it is easier to make a wrong choice or to wrongly evaluate facts that are presented. Biases can take over and lead to more tension or conflict. Every situation depends on context.

The same set of facts presented in a different light can take on different meaning. It matters how you frame a historical event. Reframing an event can disrupt a pattern and the actor conducting the reframing can use that to their advantage and to position everything in their own interest, a positive frame for them.

The framing effect is a form of cognitive bias that has been successfully employed by great power competitors in order to conduct psychological operations. Simply put, the framing effect is when our decisions are influenced by the way information is presented to us instead of the pertinent information itself. The same information can be relayed in a positive or negative narrative. The utility is to reach and influence the mind of the adversary and related populations. The framing effect employed in great power cognitive conflict is not an instant reward game but a long process with multiple channels of propagating the said negative or positive frame: print media, television, social media, academia, political discourse and so forth. The desired result is also not finite: it can range from sowing doubt about society and political systems, to completely destabilizing a target population or society. Another desired outcome is to stir a target population to base choices and behavior on emotion rather than on critical thinking, objective assessments. For example, in a democratic election to choose based on biases rather than what is good for society. Examples are many: campaigns to help nationalist candidates in different EU countries, interference in the US election, Brexit and so forth. This is similar to the cognitive bias modification process. In terms of individual psychology, the term Cognitive Bias Modification (CBM) refers to the *“procedures designed to change particular styles of cognitive processing that are thought to contribute to undesirable emotional reactions or disorders, using systematic practice in an alternative processing style.”* (Hertel & Mathews, 2011). In cognitive warfare, it has the same potential applicability.

To conclude, what exactly is cognitive warfare? Western view is that cognitive warfare represents *“the weaponization of public opinion by an external entity, for the purpose of influencing public and/or governmental policy or for the purpose of destabilizing governmental actions and/or institutions.”* (Bernal et al, 2020, p. 9). In spite of progress being made in neuropsychology as well as at a political/strategic level, NATO and the West delineate clearly between conventional and nonconventional warfare. Strategic competitors are at another point on the spectrum. In the case of the paper, the Russian Federation has a holistic approach

to war in general and cognition is just an element. Furthermore, populations of states led by centralised governments cannot be reached as easily by “enemy” cognitive acts, the written press, social media, conventional media outlets being under the tight control of the state (Roache, 2021). The very core democratic values and norms the West is built on are being challenged because without trust in the government, democracy cannot function. It is commonly agreed upon that the foundation of a democracy is laws and civil order, as well as trust and mutual respect (Weingast, 1997). There is no internationally agreed upon framework for cognitive acts of war, it is an intangible.

The present framework for analysis will be employed to the Black Sea region. The Black Sea is an existential geopolitical space for the Russian Federation and, concurrently a theater for great power competition with the United States. The Kremlin has identified the USA as a strategic competitor and it considers NATO almost synonymous with Washington, therefore as an existential threat to its national security. By applying prospect theory to the activities of the Russian Federation in the Black Sea, we are considering Russian leadership a project theory actor who will be willing to take greater risks to prevent anticipated defeat rather than to pursue potential opportunities. Concretely: Russia would rather run the risk of escalating through cognitive or conventional military operations rather than potentially losing influence in the region while appeasing the West. One strategic goal is to gain and maintain dominance. The following chapter illustrates how the Russian Federation leverages cognitive biases and historical memory in the Black Sea region in order to advance its geopolitical agenda by reframing historical events. Another strategic goal is to advance Russian strategic interests: weaken the rules based order and NATO, present the alliance in a negative frame.

### MILITARY ACTIVITY IN THE BLACK SEA

The shift in regional military balance of power in the Black Sea occurred during the regime of President Putin and it gained substantial international attention following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Western media, academia and political elites have interpreted the subsequent buildup of combat capabilities as well as military and civilian infrastructure in the region as an aggressive, revisionist posture by the Russian Federation. On the other side, Russia has presented an entirely different view. This is nothing new in fact. Colin Gray pointed out back in 1984

that the USSR, the predecessor of today’s Russian Federation, “frames its defense tasks in ways generally unfamiliar to the United States, and behaves in defense-related matters in a fashion inexplicable in standard American terms.” (Gray, 1984, p. 27). If the annexation in itself is viewed through fundamentally different lenses by the Russian Federation on one hand and the transatlantic community on the other, the Kremlin was very transparent about its intentions to militarize the Crimean peninsula. The why: the motivations and strategic reasoning behind the decision to annex Crimea and to thereafter strengthen it militarily are beyond the scope of the article. What the paper is however looking to do, is to illustrate the way that the Russian leadership has brilliantly framed its military activity in the Black Sea by means of reframing historical events in a newly negative or positive light in order to generate desired outcomes. What constitutes desired outcomes? As it relates to the *human domain*, desired outcomes are gaining influence as well as shaping behaviors.

April 2021 international media was flooded with reports about 150, 000 Russian troops being deployed at the Ukrainian border and in annexed Crimea. At that moment in time, newly sworn in US president Joe Biden had no plans to meet with Russian president Vladimir Putin. Fast forward 25 May 2021, White House’s Press Secretary Jen Psaki announces in a two line statement: “President Biden will meet with President Putin in Geneva, Switzerland on June 16, 2021. The leaders will discuss the full range of pressing issues, as we seek to restore predictability and stability to the U.S.-Russia relationship” (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2021). The Kremlin in turn declared that the two leaders will discuss “the current state and prospects of the Russian-US relations, strategic stability issues and the acute problems on the international agenda, including interaction in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic and settlement of regional conflicts” (Defense News, 2021). Why was the Russian buildup effective? Because the Russian Federation has credibility and because the US is less willing to escalate. As a prospect theory player, the US is less willing to escalate, it focuses on potential losses rather than on gains. Credibility is built in time. Circling back to the fundamental idea of the paper, the discussion focuses on one element of how this credibility was secured: how unconscious biases in target populations have been leveraged in order to further a clear, well defined political goal: promoting and defending Russian national interest.

Historically, the Black Sea has been a dynamic body of water in which empires have disputed dominance, therefore, it is easy to understand why present day regional narratives of power and influence left a lasting mark on historical memory. Probably the most striking attempt to frame Black Sea geopolitics and therein military activity, is the new narrative of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany. In August 1939, two criminal regimes have secretly reached an agreement which translated into dire effects for the peoples and territories in what would later become satellite states in the Soviet spheres of influence. Official document language categorizes the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) as under the “*spheres of influence of Germany and USSR*” in the event of “*a territorial and political rearrangement*” (Protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact, 1939). Poland partitioned along the lines of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San and Romanian Bessarabia abandoned to the Soviets, as Hitler’s Third Reich declared “*its complete political disinterestedness*” in Southeastern Europe. Hitler would later contradict himself by showing exacerbated interest in Romanian oil fields and agrarian output. Little is being said today by Russia about this act, if anything, it is used to positively frame actions in Ukraine and Moldova.

Black Sea security is a segment of the broader transatlantic security architecture. The region is home to Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, NATO allies. Military activity in the Black Sea concerns NATO as much as it concerns riparian states, a standpoint the Kremlin does not agree with. NATO expansion framing, especially in the Black Sea is another example of how cognition is being used in order to advance or legitimize strategic interests. This is not an overnight process, neither is it an event that bears immediate fruit. The narrative of NATO encroachment of the Russian Federation has been present for years now, and it serves both foreign policy legitimisation as much as domestic. “*From what I have seen of our Russian friends and allies during the war, I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness.*” (Churchill, 1946). Declassified American, German, French, Soviet and British documents reveal details about the German reunification process and the inherent negotiations, including Secretary of State James Baker’s famous “*not one inch eastward*” assurance about NATO expansion during his meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on 9 February 1990. These guarantees were part of a myriad of assurances about Soviet security given by Western leaders

to President Gorbachev throughout the process. A weakened Soviet Union was eager to maintain the alliance because a reunited Germany was still cause for concern, however they also were not going to accept NATO expansion. This guarantee from the West will resurface in later years and will have a deep impact on the evolution of NATO-Russia relation, and, implicitly be framed in a self serving manner by the Kremlin. Russia expert call this a “*betrayal narrative cultivated by Russia*” (Chatham House, 2021). Did it work? Most likely yes. To what extent, we cannot measure that, however, we can conclude that such perceived betrayal resonates with many people in Eastern Europe, the historical bias is built into human cognition by the environment in which people are socialized from early childhood and it has an effect on heuristics. Eastern Europeans who lived through the Cold War understandably have emotional reactions to photos such as the Percentages Agreement, the secret informal agreement between British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin drawn up during the Fourth Moscow Conference in October 1944. To some this is just a scribble of percentages, to some citizens of those countries it represented a sentence, a collective sentence to live behind the iron curtain. To Russia, that is great power politics: the division of Eastern European countries into spheres of influence under soviet control. Framing something that has happened and changing the frame awakens emotions and the target audience will decide influenced by these emotions rather than on the regional assertion that at present the country is under NATO protection. Again, the goal is to create division and a sense of dissent and insecurity.

The betrayal of the West frame is once again used in the legitimisation of the annexation of Crimea in 2014. March 18, 2014, President Putin addressed members of the Federal Council and the Duma. In his speech, he outlined the fact that during the troubled 1990s, the citizens of the former Soviet Union, including the Crimean population and the residents of the City of Sevastopol were abandoned by the West, “*handed over like a sack of potatoes*” (Kremlin, 2014). The narrative of abandonment and betrayal is meant to unite Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian people. 30 June 2021, during his annual dial-in show, Direct Line with Vladimir Putin, the Russian President declared “*Ukrainians and Russians are a single people*” and in the followup article penned in July 2021 to expand the points made during the call-in, President Putin called Russia and Ukraine “*two parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space*” (President of the Russian Federation

Vladimir Putin, 2021). Physical proximity to Russia, deeply rooted historical ties to Russia (and all its predecessors: Tzarist Imperial Russia as well as USSR), a large Russian ethnic population, make Ukraine very vulnerable to Russian cognitive campaigns. On Russia Today President Putin was quoted as praising “smart” Ukrainians for “opposing any attempts for their country to join the American-controlled bloc.” (Russia Today, 2021). Notable is how NATO is again framed as a US-controlled bloc. A smart reference to the Cold War, when the world was bi-polar, divided in Eastern bloc and Western bloc. Present day is not the Cold War, we all know it, but some segments of the population will emotionally resonate to this reference and historical memory will kick in. In an interview given to NBC Word Wide before the June summit with US president Biden, President Putin declared that NATO is a military alliance with no said purpose since it was meant to exist during the Cold War in order to balance the U.S.S.R. Framing NATO as a US led, aggressive alliance, gives Russia a positive frame and allows for legitimising military buildup in the Black Sea: “*what was the point of expanding NATO to the east and bringing this infrastructure to our borders, and all of this before saying that we are the ones who have been acting aggressively?*” (NBC News, 2021).

In June 2021 Royal Navy destroyer HMS Defender sailed from Odessa in southern Ukraine to Georgia. The British warship ship decided to exercise its right to innocent passage and take a slightly different route on its way to Batumi. This change of course caused a reaction/response from the Russian Federation: according to the BBC, more than 20 Russian aircraft and two coastguard ships have shadowed the Defender while sailing near Crimea. Declarations ensued, the Kremlin as well as high ranking Russian diplomats consider HMS Destroyer’s innocent passage an intrusion into Russia’s territorial waters in Crimea, an insult, “*London’s insult*” (TASS, 2021). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s address on Russia’s International Activities for Russian Regions’ Development, delivered at Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) included a clear message: by not assertively signaling that the Russian Federation is ready at any time to forcefully counter any provocation or intrusion in Crimean space, it would equate to “*swallow the direct insult, and spit on the will of the Crimean people, who have chosen first independence, then reunification with their historical homeland*” (TASS, 2021). At all leadership levels, the message is consistent: NATO and the US are in a negative frame. The Black Sea region is obviously a part of a much larger sum. Keir Giles noted that altering “*world perceptions of the United*

*States under the administration of President Donald Trump were welcomed by Russia because they achieved one of its key objectives of weakening US credibility and alliances without it having to do much at all.*” (Giles, 2021, p. 9) Nevertheless, it would be a strategic mistake on behalf of NATO countries to think that this is all reduced to the previous administration. The Russian Federation is deeply strategic in its posture. This tale of influence is also applicable to the Black Sea region and how NATO and American presence is framed. At first it seems like it does not make a difference, when really, it does.

## CONCLUSIONS

The paper set out to illustrate several aspects of cognitive warfare and to correlate them to the geopolitical context of the Black Sea. The first take away, must be that cognitive warfare and the human domain are probably the most provocative operational space for any combatant. The human brain and all its intricacies is still a mystery, even if you ask the most experienced neurologists or neuropsychiatrist. The implications of operating in the cognitive domain are tremendously serious and there is no institutional framework internationally, no protections are built in.

The second conclusion is that while the West considers cognitive warfare a method, the Russian Federation includes this type of operations in a broader spectrum called information warfare. Information is simultaneously a weapon, an intelligence product, a domain. This holistic approach allows for far more nimble decision-making and produces a far more encompassing operational elasticity.

In our particular case study, the Black Sea region, the Russian leadership has brilliantly framed its military activity in the Black Sea by means of reframing historical events in a newly negative or positive light in order to generate desired outcomes as they relate to the human domain: gaining influence as well as shaping behaviors of a target population. In the human domain there is no clear, tangible battle or even victory, there is also no set time or space delineation. The contest for influence is also not an exclusively Russian way of warfare, nor is it new. All great powers do it and have done it for centuries, and will continue to do it. The difference lies in the approach and in the system of governance of each actor. Some states have a centralised leadership where command and control is very different. What makes the Russian approach to cognitive warfare effective is a combination of factors. The assertion that it is effective can be best illustrated by the international

conversation around events such as the HMS Defender freedom of navigation operation. From an international law stand point, the British warship exercised its right to innocent passage in Ukrainian territorial waters and yet, the international community has no way of enforcing anything, all it can do is make statements, impose sanction or not recognise the annexation.

While the US has focused more on technology and military capabilities, Russia has separated the technological from the human. Cognitive warfare can be conducted with microwave technologies and on social media platforms. Furthermore, on social media platforms, influence campaigns are inefficient if they are not well targeted and if the actor conducting them does not know the target audience very well. There is no one size fits all recipe that can be reduced to one single doctrine to define an efficient blueprint to counter a competitor in the cognitive space. Waging cognitive warfare requires cultural, historical, religious, socio-demographic sensitivity, as well as a deep understanding of cognition, psychology and neuropsychology. We could conclude that victory in cognitive warfare is to convince competitors that your foreign policy behavior is explained by means elusive to rational explanations, when in fact, you, the state conducting the cognitive operations, are the poster child for what a rational, realistic, national interest driven state actor is. At the end of the day, you managed to influence beliefs and/or behaviors and that, in the human domain, spells a win.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Churchill, W. (March 1946), *Iron Curtain' Speech: Address prepared for delivery by The Right Honorable Winston Churchill, M.P., at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, Tuesday, March 5, 1946*. British National Archives, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/cold-war-on-file/iron-curtain-speech>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
2. Clausewitz, C. von. (1976). *On War*. M. Howard & P. Paret, Eds. Princeton University Press.
3. Dhakal, A., Bobrin, B.D. (2021). *Cognitive Deficits*. In StatPearls. StatPearls Publishing.
4. Giles, K. (2016). *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*. Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
5. Giles, K. (2021). *What Deters Russia*. Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-deters-russia>, retrieved on 2 October 2021.
6. Givovich, T., Griffin, D., Kahneman, D. (2002). *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Gray, Colin S. (1984). *Comparative Strategic Culture*. The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters 14, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol14/iss1/13>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
8. Green, S.A. (2008). *Cognitive Warfare*. The Augean Stables. Joint Military Intelligence College, [www.theaugeanstable.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Green-Cognitive-Warfare.pdf](http://www.theaugeanstable.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Green-Cognitive-Warfare.pdf), retrieved on 17 September 2021.
9. Hertel, P.T., Mathews, A. (2011). *Cognitive Bias Modification: Past Perspectives, Current Findings, and Future Applications*. Perspectives on psychological science: a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, 6(6), 521-536, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691611421205>, retrieved on 21 September 2021.
10. Jackson, V. (2017). *Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Redlines, and Conflicts before War*. Naval War College Review, 70(3), 39-62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26398040>, retrieved on 21 September 2021.
11. Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. The New Yorker, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/11/14/thinking-fast-and-slow>, retrieved on 2 October 2021.
12. Kahneman, D., Tversky, A. (1977). *Prospect Theory. An Analysis of Decision Making under Risk*. Econometrica, 47(2), 263, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ada045771>, retrieved on 11 September 2021.
13. Koehler, D.J., Harvey, N. (Eds.). (2004). *Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making*. Blackwell Publishing, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470752937>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
14. Lau, R.R., Redlawsk, D.P. (2001). *Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making*. American Journal of Political Science 45 (October): 951- 971.
15. Levy, J.S. (1992). *Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Applications and Analytical Problems*. Political Psychology, 13(2), 171-186, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791682>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
16. Lough, J. (2021). In *Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia*. Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia>, retrieved on 2 October 2021.
17. Madhani, A., Lemire, J., Keaten, J. (25 May 2021). *Biden and Putin to meet in June*. Defense News, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/2021/05/25/biden-and-putin-to-meet-in-june/>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
18. MacDonald, B. (2021). *NATO expansion into Ukraine would 'cross red lines' & force Russia and Belarus to act, Kremlin says after Putin-Lukashenko summit*. Russia Today, <https://www.rt.com/russia/535960-nato-ukraine-red-lines/>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.

19. Nisbett, R.E., Ross, L. (1980). *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*. Prentice-Hall.
20. Plous, S. (1993). *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making*. McGraw-Hill Book Company
21. Reisinger, H., Golts, A. (2014). *Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence*. NATO Defense College, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10268>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
22. Roache, M. (2021), *How Russia Is Stepping Up Its Campaign to Control the Internet*, Time Magazine, <https://time.com/5951834/russia-control-internet/>, retrieved on 2 October 2021.
23. Robertson, C.T., Kesselheim (2016). *A Primer on the Psychology of Cognitive Bias*. In *Blinding as a Solution to Bias: Strengthening Biomedical Science*, Forensic Science, and Law. Amsterdam: Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier.
24. Savani, K., Cho, J., Baik, S. and Morris, M.W. (2015). *Culture and Judgment and Decision Making*. In *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making* (eds G. Keren, G. Wu), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118468333.ch16>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
25. Tversky, A., Kahneman, D. (2002). *Extensional versus Intuitive Reasoning. Heuristics and Biases*, 19-48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511808098.003>, retrieved on 2 October 2021.
26. Tversky, A., Kahneman, D. (1982). *Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases*. In Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., Tversky, A. (Eds.). *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (pp. 3-20). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511809477.002.
27. Weingast, B. (1997). *The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of the Law*. *American Political Science Review*, 91(2), 245-263. doi:10.2307/2952354/.
28. Wells II, L. (2017). *Cognitive-Emotional Conflict: Adversary Will and Social Resilience*, vol. 7, nr. 2, [https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism\\_7-2/2-Cognitive-Emotional\\_Conflict.pdf?ver=2017-12-21-110638-877](https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_7-2/2-Cognitive-Emotional_Conflict.pdf?ver=2017-12-21-110638-877), retrieved on 17 September 2021.
29. American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. American Psychological Association, [https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4311007?\\_ga=1.123554699.1884793838.1466781287](https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4311007?_ga=1.123554699.1884793838.1466781287), retrieved on 17 September 2021.
30. Interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin (11 June 2021). Interview by Senior International Correspondent Keir Simmons, NBC News Worldwide, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/transcript-nbc-news-exclusive-interview-russia-s-vladimir-putin-n1270649>, retrieved on 12 September 2021.
31. The Kremlin, Office of the Press Secretary. (June 2021). *Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным*. Available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65973>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
32. Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Warfare*. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary, 15 November 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/warfare>, retrieved on 12 September 2021.
33. President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. (2021). *Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев»* (Article by Vladimir Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
34. *Secret Supplementary Protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact*, 13 September 1939, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Published in *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939-1941: Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office*, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110994>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.
35. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2021). *Statement by White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on the Meeting Between President Joe Biden and President Vladimir Putin of Russia* [Press release], <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/25/statement-by-white-house-press-secretary-jen-psaki-on-the-meeting-between-president-joe-biden-and-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/>, retrieved on 17 September 2021.