

America is Being Out-Gunned in Cognitive Warfare

May 2025



→ Offensive Cognitive Warfare: An Essential Warfighting Opportunity

The United States military stands as the world's most formidable force, commanding supremacy across land, sea, air, and space. Yet, in the critical arena of cognitive and information warfare to foreign-facing audiences, we find ourselves outspent, out-gunned and out-maneuvered by our adversaries who are actively and aggressively using propaganda and information manipulation to further their objectives and undermine American global influence without legal or ethical boundaries.

The first Trump Administration made significant strides in bolstering America's offensive cyber warfare capabilities, setting a precedent for success. Now, we face a pivotal prospect to outcompete our adversaries in the foreign information space through offensive cognitive warfare as a critical piece of American warfighting readiness. With the current Administration's unwavering commitment to warfighting, lethality, precision, and innovation, we have the opportunity to forge an offensive cognitive warfare strategy, policy, and implementation plan that will accelerate transformation and advance America's national interests.

→ **"Our job is to deter conflict and, if necessary, defeat and completely destroy, demoralize and defeat our enemies. That's what we do. We do warfighting here at the Department of Defense, and we want to restore that through a laser focus on readiness, lethality and warfighting across the spectrum."**¹

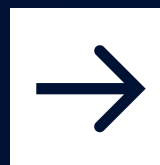
- SECDEF Hegseth

→ Context: The Battlefield

Cognitive and information warfare is a sophisticated battlefield described by the Department of Defense as operations aimed at influencing, disrupting, corrupting, or undermining enemy decision-making processes while safeguarding our own. It demands the strategic exploitation of narratives and perceptions to undermine enemy resolve. To secure our national interests, we must elevate our capabilities in this critical area, integrating advanced strategies and technologies that harness the power of information to shape the warfare of tomorrow.

→ **"Foreign information manipulation and interference is prevalent as China exploits their relationships in Africa for economic gain and to secure critical minerals and resources. Unfortunately, CCP information manipulation is significantly outpacing our effort to counter their campaigns. Unchecked, China's efforts could reshape the information landscape in Africa, creating biases and gaps that could lead African nations to make decisions to subordinate their economic and security interests to China's own interests."**

- General Michael E. Langley
Commander U.S. Africa Command



Our adversaries are not inhibited by democratic or legal principles. As such, they exploit state-controlled media and disseminate unchecked information manipulation without the limits faced by the U.S. military, driving operational disparities. While it is essential we safeguard America's fundamental democratic national values, proactive action and resource overmatch are required to effectively counter and outmaneuver our adversaries in the foreign information space.²

Today, there is a substantial resource disparity in the wrong direction. Those operating in this space believe the U.S. is being outspent by its adversaries in cognitive and information warfare; as a result, we are losing access and influence abroad in ways we can quantitatively measure. Despite having significantly smaller GDPs, Iran and Russia³ are estimated to invest twice as much as the U.S. in cognitive warfare, while China⁴ is believed to spend ten times more. These figures

are conservative estimates, based on publicly available data for attributable media activities, such as Chinese Global Television News, and do not account for the extensive clandestine messaging operations conducted by these nations. Additionally, those estimates exclude the capabilities of companies that function as extensions of the Chinese Communist Party, such as ByteDance's TikTok.

With significantly lower operating costs, our adversaries are leveraging their greater investments to gain cognitive effects that undermine America's national interests abroad, frequently portraying the U.S. as an unreliable partner, a villain or weaker partner of choice. This is affecting American influence and global status, in some cases costing the U.S. partner relationships with negative economic consequences, with access rights to mining, oil, and gas resources and militarily causing the loss of military access, basing and overflight.



Opportunity: American Influence

In the face of this disparity, effective cognitive warfare is crucial to U.S. military warfighting and strategy and greater investment is consistently requested by combatant commanders. Information transcends physical borders and cultural boundaries instantaneously, reinforcing and amplifying the effects of U.S. power. Skillfully executed information operations act as a force multiplier, enhancing the effects of cognitive deterrence of US military power and significantly boosting the effectiveness of kinetic military actions by setting the theater, assessing the environment, preparing the battlefield, undermining adversary activities, and enabling the U.S. to strengthen its global influence.

When U.S. information operations are unleashed with appropriate oversight and legal and ethical boundaries, America has the advantage. The power of these operations is exemplified by the global influence of the current Administration, including decisive non-kinetic actions in Ukraine, Gaza, and other regions worldwide.

Our national security decision-makers must weigh information options to achieve desired national outcomes within the DIME framework – Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic power. By employing cognitive warfare as a key national security tool, the information element can maximize the effects

of diplomatic, military, and economic measures. If the Administration at large, including the U.S. military, channels this skill effectively, it can present a unique opportunity for strengthening American national security interests.

Diplomatically, militarily and economically, this Administration has indicated the willingness to engage and invest to maintain American supremacy. The information element of power must be bolstered to cognitively create the conditions advantageous to U.S. negotiations or use of military power, and also to mitigate the cognitive warfare efforts of our adversaries.



The DIME is a highly effective framework for the U.S. to achieve its national security and foreign policy objectives:


- **Diplomacy:** The current Administration has maximized the impact of diplomacy. In his first six weeks in office, Secretary Rubio has been personally involved in driving diplomatic solutions in Gaza, Ukraine, and Panama; while conducting diplomatic missions across 11 other countries in Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America.
- **Military:** The U.S. possesses the world's most powerful military, distinguished by its substantial budget, advanced technology, and global reach. The U.S. Defense Budget accounts for 37% of global military spending and surpasses the combined budgets of the 10 next most spending countries. Secretary Hegseth argues, "peace through strength works, but the flip side is war invited by weakness"; America's military strength is underpinned by competent and efficient resourcing, and this is critical to maintaining our national security.
- **Economic:** As of 2025, the U.S. maintains its position as the world's largest economy, with a nominal GDP of approximately \$30.3 trillion. This figure represents approximately 26% of the global economy, underscoring the Nation's economic strength and influence. The Trump Administration has demonstrated the Nation's ability to actively wield its economic power to protect domestic industries, influence international behavior, and promote U.S. interests.

- **Information:** Information is a critical enabler of Diplomatic, Military, and Economic power; however, it is currently being grossly under-utilized. Effective cognitive warfare supports all warfare domains and diplomatic activities by shaping perceptions, influencing decision-making, and driving strategic effects aligned with national security objectives. As the Commander of USINDOPACOM recently emphasized, "Deterrence is an enemy's knowledge that you possess the capability and the will to impose those costs."⁶ His statement underscores that deterrence is not solely a function of military might, but a cognitive effect achieved through deliberate communication. Unfortunately, to date the U.S. has been consistently outspent, outmaneuvered and outgunned in the information environment.

MALIGN ACTORS

Iran-backed hackers interrupt UAE TV streaming services with deepfake news

Microsoft analysts cite reports saying disruption by group known as Cotton Sandstorm also reached audiences in UK and Canada



08 Oct 2023
The killed 180
The wounded 347

The fake news anchor introduced unverified images that claimed to show Palestinians injured and killed from Israeli military operations in Gaza. Photograph: Microsoft/Microsoft Threat Analysis Center

Iranian state-backed hackers interrupted TV streaming services in the **United Arab Emirates** to broadcast a deepfake newsreader delivering a report on the war in Gaza, according to analysts at Microsoft.

The tech company said a hacking operation run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, a key branch of the Iranian armed forces, had disrupted streaming platforms in the UAE with an AI-generated news broadcast branded "For Humanity".



→ Impact of Foreign Propaganda on America's National Interests

Adversary propaganda from nations such as China, Russia, and Iran presents significant challenges to the United States and our efforts to advance our objectives overseas, particularly concerning Trump Administration policy priorities.⁷ Our adversaries employ persistent sophisticated campaigns to undermine vital U.S. security and economic interests in the U.S. and abroad. By targeting U.S. military presence, economic policies, and energy independence, adversary propaganda seeks to weaken U.S. strategic positions and disrupt international alliances. Military Information Support Operations (MISO) and information environment (IE) assessments are essential for the Department of Defense (DoD) to effectively identify, counter, and mitigate these propaganda efforts, ensuring the protection of vital U.S. interests.

Iranian Propaganda Efforts to Undermine U.S. Efforts in Yemen. Iranian media and BotNets work around the clock to shape narratives around U.S. military actions in Yemen, emphasizing civilian casualties and personal attacks against President Trump (Figure 1). These narratives portray U.S. strikes as unjust, fueling anti-American sentiment and complicating relations with Gulf allies. The impact on U.S. economic and security interests is profound. Negative narratives lead to decreased regional stability, affecting

U.S. economic interests, particularly in oil markets and trade relations. Gulf allies may reconsider their partnerships and investments, perceiving U.S. actions as detrimental to regional security and public opinion. Additionally, the portrayal of U.S. military operations as reckless and harmful to civilians can strain diplomatic efforts and reduce cooperation with U.S. initiatives aimed at stabilizing the region and countering Iranian influence.

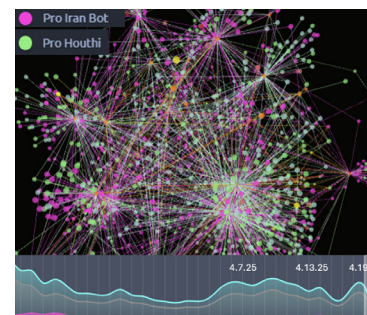


Figure 1.

Iranian BotNet messaging on U.S. strikes in Yemen. This figure depicts the extensive use of Iranian BotNets to disseminate propaganda regarding U.S. military actions in Yemen. The messaging emphasizes civilian casualties and personal attacks against President Trump, portraying U.S. strikes as unjust and fueling anti-American sentiment. Nodes represent Iranian Bots with lines connecting narratives to other online users and a timeline at the bottom demonstrates a steady volume of messaging over time.

Further, sources from *Iranian, Russian, Chinese, and Axis of Resistance media have framed President Trump as responsible for genocide in Gaza*. Hezbollah's Sheikh Naim Qassem described President Trump's plan for Gaza as "genocide," citing over 48,264 Palestinian deaths and 111,688 injuries.⁸ Mahmoud al-Habash labeled Trump's proposals as ethnic cleansing.⁹ These social media narratives are amplified by thousands of Iranian Bots, linking U.S. military actions to the suffering of

children in Gaza, with terms like "Baby Killer" directed at Western leaders.¹⁰ Reports indicated that 85% of Yemeni participants viewed U.S. support for Israel negatively, attributing civilian casualties to the Trump Administration.¹¹

Adversary Propaganda and Its Impact on Tariff and Trade Rebalancing Efforts.

Propaganda from adversaries significantly affects the Trump Administration's tariff and trade policies. **Coordinated Chinese media campaigns** broadcast globally and, particularly in captive markets in the developing world, criticize U.S. tariffs, portraying them as harmful to global economic stability and detrimental to international trade relations. Messaging frames the U.S. as a declining power, emphasizing its failures in global leadership and portraying China as a rising alternative. These narratives suggest that the "America First" policy leads to higher prices for U.S. consumers and reduced economic growth. Russian and Iranian propaganda echo these sentiments, aiming to exacerbate divisions with U.S. partners and allies.

Impact on U.S. Energy Independence and Energy Policy

Adversary propaganda also targets U.S. energy independence, criticizing policies aimed at reducing foreign oil dependence.

Chinese state media campaigns frame U.S. energy independence efforts as environmentally harmful, while **Russian media** highlights the challenges associated with U.S. energy policies. This propaganda seeks to weaken support for U.S. initiatives and promote adversarial energy agendas. **Iranian media** portrays U.S. energy policies as aggressive and destabilizing, particularly in the context of sanctions and military actions in the Middle East. This narrative seeks to rally regional support against U.S. energy initiatives and promote Iran's own energy exports.

Undermining U.S. Security and Economic Priorities in the INDOPACIFIC. Chinese propaganda efforts in the INDOPACIFIC are designed to weaken U.S. security and economic interests by diminishing support for American military presence in the region. The Chinese

Communist Party (CCP) employs influence campaigns, social media manipulation, and influencer recruitment to promote pro-Beijing narratives while suppressing dissent. For example, Chinese state media frames U.S. military exercises in the Philippines as provocations, which alters regional security perceptions. In the Philippines, 64% of survey respondents disagreed that China spreads propaganda, reflecting a growing skepticism towards U.S. narratives and a preference for Chinese economic partnerships¹². Similarly in Indonesia, 58% of respondents believe that China does not spread propaganda,¹³ indicating a significant level of trust in Chinese narratives compared to U.S. influence.

Adversary propaganda also targets U.S. control over strategic waterways, which are vital for global trade and military operations. Chinese media frequently criticizes U.S. naval activities in the South China Sea, portraying them as threats to regional stability. The top three **PRC-affiliated media outlets produced over**

1,500 reports promoting China's claims in the South China Sea from September to December 2024 alone¹⁴. This narrative seeks to undermine U.S. influence and promote China's territorial claims. Key audiences are in the balance—Survey research indicates that 59% of respondents in the Philippines are concerned about U.S. naval activities and support for US presence is down in Cagayan as well as other key northern regions where U.S. Enhance Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) bases are present (Figure 2)¹⁵.

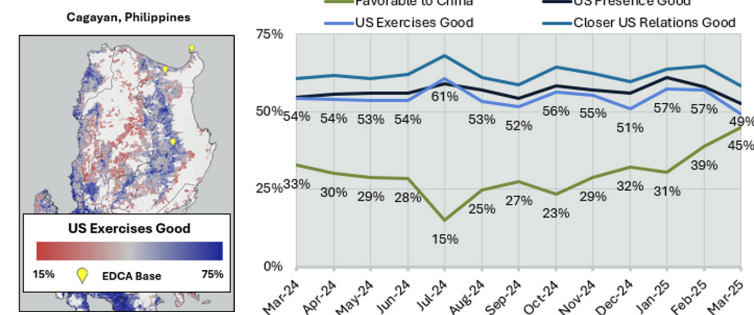
IE Assessments and MISO are crucial for addressing Chinese threats to Taiwan, the Philippines, key ASEAN allies, and critical waterways like the Strait of Malacca. They provide insights into China's strategic intentions, enabling the U.S. to safeguard regional

stability, economic security, and supply chains. MISO efforts counter Chinese propaganda, strengthen alliances, and protect vital maritime routes essential for global trade and energy supplies.

The pervasive and strategic nature of adversary propaganda from China, Russia, and Iran poses a significant threat to U.S. national security and vital economic interests. These propaganda campaigns are designed to erode U.S. policy priorities, destabilize economic relations, undermine energy independence, drive attitudes against the Trump Administration, and challenge military operations. To combat these threats, and safeguard U.S. interests the DoD must invest in MISO and assessments as critical tools for identifying and countering adversaries.

Figure 2

Illustrates the shifting public sentiment in Cagayan, Philippines, regarding U.S. and Chinese influence. It highlights a decline in support for U.S. military presence.





What to do about it: Maximizing DoD's Information Element

Offensive cognitive warfare includes deterring adversary actions, actively shaping perceptions during military operations, and maintaining consistent and disciplined messaging across multiple dimensions while balancing operational agility with proper oversight. America's legal and ethical frameworks should become strategic advantages, not operational impediments. Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Jr. (USN), Commander of USINDOPACOM, points out that being dominant in the information environment must be one of our first priorities¹⁶. General Bryan P. Fenton, Commander of USSOCOM stated the need to counter China and Russia in the information domain through:

- Improved coordination and leadership in information operations across the Department of Defense and other government agencies.
- Increased investment in information operations to match the scale and sophistication of adversaries' efforts.
- Empowering lower-level commanders with the authority to conduct timely and effective information operations.¹⁷

A successful strategy to maximize U.S. cognitive warfare efforts should include four reinforcing elements that will enable the U.S. to achieve dominance in the foreign information space: illumination of all adversary activity as well as their tactics, techniques, and procedures, streamlined operational processes, disciplined messaging leveraging commercially available warfare capabilities, and strategic economic leverage.

Streamline Cognitive Warfare Operational Processes:

In his first term, President Trump introduced an offensive cyber operations strategy and policy that demonstrated how bureaucratic efficiency and operational effectiveness can coexist. This policy successfully streamlined approval processes while maintaining robust oversight, reducing decision cycles from months to days, and enabling American industry to deliver capabilities at the speed of relevance. Building on this successful model, a similar approach for cognitive warfare operations is proposed. Integrated Interagency Approval Mechanisms, coordinated by the NSC, would implement an "approval by default" system, where requests receive automatic authorization after a designated review period if no explicit objections are

raised, thereby eliminating unnecessary delays for time-sensitive operations. A Campaign-Level Authorization Model would develop strategic pre-approvals granting tactical flexibility within established guidelines, allowing for sustained information campaigns that compete with the long-term efforts of authoritarian adversaries through messaging aligned with the State Department, OSD Policy, and White House desired end states.



Prioritize Investment in Cognitive Warfare:

To realize the effects outlined above, the Department of Defense must match its strategic ambitions with operational reform. The Trump Administration is prioritizing efforts to reduce costs and promote efficiencies through the adoption of modern technologies. In this reform, the DoD should continue current efforts through the Department of Defense Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC) but also require investment across the Services to both build the force of practitioners and provide them with the technical capabilities needed to effectively perform

their mission. This requires a comprehensive approach that integrates a range of capabilities and technologies—including AI-powered analytical tools, data-driven solutions, media production, assessment mechanisms, and multi-platform dissemination. This commitment to technological transformation is not only a fiscal necessity but a strategic enabler and we must leverage the best of American companies investing in innovation and help ensure that streamlined, tech-enabled processes can accelerate the delivery of information effects with the speed and precision required for warfighting impact.



Innovative American companies can do this

Unlike our adversaries – who rely on volume, unrestricted dissemination, and state-controlled media – the U.S. can leverage precision, sophistication, and ethical deployment of advanced technologies to achieve superior effects with smaller footprints.

Companies in the American Defense Industrial Base (DIB), are innovating in this environment. For example, there are proven R&D investments on integrating AI workflows into powerful user interfaces that ingest and integrate massive data vendor feeds and answer hard questions with articulate and thoroughly

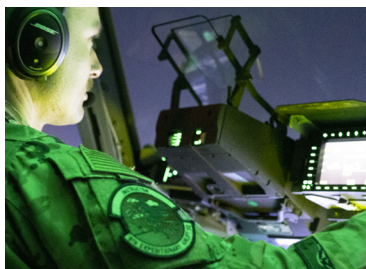
sourced answers. Likewise, AI and ML are revolutionizing the way content is created and disseminated; from accelerated content development and deep-fake production to automated real-time media planning and dissemination optimization, the DOD has an opportunity to weaponize the best of the commercial marketing sector.



By integrating technology from world-class partners it is possible see, assess, plan, and counter adversary foreign influence using automated dashboards that show who is saying what, by country, what is botnet and what is human, what is authentic, and what is not.

Furthermore, by applying scientific practices like **Operational Psychology**, industry collaborates with cybersecurity teams to develop psychological profiles of malicious cyber actors which include their motivations, decision-making patterns, biases, and risk tolerance. This information helps to predict potential attack methods and timing, enable preemptive countermeasures, and identify the tendencies of nation-state actors to exploit specific geopolitical tensions or vulnerabilities during critical times.

Other emerging technologies can potentially help the US scale to overmatch the adversaries' outspending trends. **Psychoinformatics** is an interdisciplinary field that



combines psychology and informatics to analyze and understand psychological phenomena using computational methods and data analysis. It involves the application of data science, machine learning, and other computational techniques to psychological data, such as behavioral data, to understand adversary cyber and cognitive warfare actors, get ahead of their messaging, and identify ways to counter their activity.

Lastly, as American technology and understanding of how the adversary is using AI to target audiences and to craft and disseminate their messaging expands, investment is required in using **AI as the Target Audience** – how can US win the cognitive war by confusing and countering the adversary's technology with superior U.S. technology.



The Strategic Imperative

By strengthening our information capabilities, we create a warfighting force multiplier across the entire DIME framework—enhancing diplomatic negotiations through strategic narrative shaping, amplifying military effectiveness through adversary perception management, and increasing economic leverage through information advantage. As Admiral Paparo articulated, “Deterrence is an enemy’s knowledge that you possess the capability and the will to impose those costs.” This cognitive effect applies not only to military deterrence but across all instruments of national power.

With streamlined authorities and innovative American technology, we can transform our information element into a binding force that magnifies our diplomatic, military, and economic strengths. Unlike our adversaries, who must compensate for economic and military disadvantages through volume of messaging, America can achieve superior cognitive effects through precision and integration with our unmatched conventional capabilities.

In an era where strategic competition is increasingly decided in the cognitive domain, these reforms aren't merely supplemental – they are essential to maintaining America's global leadership, warfighting ethos and securing our interests in the 21st century.



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Footnotes

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2. Langley, Michael E. (3 APR 2025), "Open/Closed: Hearing Title to Receive Testimony on the Posture of United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program," Armed-Services.Senate.gov. Available at: https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/general_langley_opening_statements.pdf [Last visited 5 MAY 2025]
3. Michalowska-Kubs, A. (8 AUG 2022), "Coining Lies. Kremlin Spends 1.5 Billion Per Year to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda," DebunkEU.org. Available at: <https://www.debunkeu.org/coining-lies-state-budget-financing-of-russian-propaganda> [Last Visited 20 SEP 2022].
4. Michalowska-Kubs, A. (8 AUG 2022), "Coining Lies. Kremlin Spends 1.5 Billion Per Year to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda," DebunkEU.org. Available at: <https://www.debunkeu.org/coining-lies-state-budget-financing-of-russian-propaganda> [Last Visited 20 SEP 2022].
5. The concept of DIME, which stands for Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic power, originates from the field of national security and strategic studies. It is a framework used to describe the various instruments of national power that a State can employ to achieve its national objectives. The DIME model is often used in military and strategic planning to ensure a comprehensive approach to national security and foreign policy. The origins of the DIME concept can be traced back to the Cold War era, when the United States and its allies sought to develop a holistic approach to counter the influence and actions of the Soviet Union. The idea was to integrate all elements of national power to create a synergistic effect, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of a nation's strategy.
6. <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/COMPACFLT-Speeches/Article/2943046/keynote-address-at-west-2022/>
7. For China in particular, please see: Edwards, L (21 APR 2025), "China's 'soft' war against America," Heritage Foundation, Available Online at: <https://www.heritage.org/china/commentary/chinas-soft-war-against-america> [Last Accessed 21 APR 2025].
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16. Paparo, Samuel J., Jr. (10 APR 2025), "Open/Closed: Hearing Title to Receive Testimony on the Posture of United States Indo-Pacific Command and United States Forces Korea in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program," Armed-Services.Senate.gov. Available at: <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/4102025fulltranscript.pdf> [Last visited 17 APR 2025]
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