

→ Cognitive Warfare: An Essential Opportunity The Battlefield for American Influence

The United States military commands supremacy across land, sea, air, and space. Yet, in **cognitive warfare** to foreign audiences, we are **outspent, out-gunned, and out-maneuvered** by adversaries aggressively using propaganda and information manipulation to further their objectives and undermine American global influence without legal or ethical boundaries. With lower operating costs, adversaries gain cognitive advantages that **undermine America's national interests abroad**, portraying the U.S. as a weaker partner of choice. This affects American influence and global status, costing the U.S. economically with restricted access to mining, oil, and gas resources; and inhibiting military access, basing, and overflight in strategic locations around the world.

Effective cognitive warfare is crucial to U.S. military warfighting and strategy, and Combatant Commanders consistently request greater investment. Information transcends borders and cultural boundaries, amplifying the effects of U.S. power. The Administration's strategic communication approach illustrates how the information element of national power can be maximized within the DIME framework of power projection — Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic. **By employing cognitive warfare as a primary tool, the information element can enhance the effects of diplomatic, military, and economic power.**

Adversary propaganda from nations such as **China, Russia, and Iran** presents significant challenges to our efforts to advance American objectives overseas, particularly concerning Administration policy priorities. Examples include:

- **Iranian media** and **BotNets** shape narratives around U.S. actions in Yemen, emphasizing civilian casualties and conducting personal attacks against POTUS. Sources from **Iranian, Russian, Chinese, and Axis of Resistance media** have framed POTUS as responsible for genocide in Gaza.
- **Iranian media** portrays U.S. energy policies as aggressive and destabilizing, particularly in the context of sanctions and military actions in the Middle East.
- Coordinated **Chinese media** campaigns criticize U.S. tariffs, portraying them as harmful to global economic stability, and target 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.

“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

“There’s a sense of you may not win a war with information operations like you could with artillery, [but] you can certainly lose it.”

- General Bryan P Fenton,
Commander of USSOCOM



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→ What To Do About It: Maximizing U.S. Cognitive Warfare Efforts

A successful strategy to maximize U.S. cognitive warfare efforts should include **five reinforcing elements** that enable the U.S. to achieve dominance in the foreign information space and enhance lethality:

- 1 Streamlined approval processes.**
- 2 Disciplined messaging leveraging commercially available cognitive warfare capabilities.**
- 3 Illumination of adversary activity via advanced U.S. technology.**
- 4 National Security Strategy.**
- 5 Resourcing.**

1. Streamlined approval processes: In 2018, the U.S. issued an offensive cyber operations strategy and policy that **reduced decision cycles from months to days** – a similar approach is needed for cognitive warfare operations, including integrated interagency approval mechanisms, coordinated by the NSC, to eliminate delays for time-sensitive operations. A Campaign-Level Authorization Model would develop strategic pre-approvals, **granting tactical flexibility within established guidelines** that are aligned with the White House, OSD, and State Department policy.

2. Disciplined messaging leveraging commercially available capabilities: As part of DoD's reform, we must **reduce costs and promote efficiencies through modern technologies**, integrating **AI-powered analytical tools, data-driven solutions, assessment mechanisms, and multi-platform dissemination**. We must leverage American innovation.

3. Illumination of adversary activity via advanced U.S. technology: Defense Industrial Base (DIB) companies are innovating and integrating technology from world-class partners to **identify, assess, plan, and counter adversary foreign influence** using automated dashboards that display who is saying what, by country, distinguishing between botnet activity and humans, as well as authentic and inauthentic content.

4. National Security Strategy: Integrating information as a key pillar into the National Security Strategy ensures coherence across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power, enabling the U.S. to achieve the President's vision of peace through strength and safeguarding national interests.

5. Resourcing: Funding information activities is essential to achieving defense objectives in an era where strategic competition increasingly plays out in the information domain. It is imperative that the Department of Defense requests and receives adequate resources to enable the U.S. to conduct effective cognitive warfare to proactively shape global narratives that support defense objectives. Failure to request and provide sufficient funding risks ceding this critical space to adversaries and competitors, thereby empowering them to manipulate the information environment and eroding U.S. national interests around the world.

America's Combatant Commanders agree on investment in this warfare area. Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Jr. (USN), Commander of USINDOPACOM, points out that being dominant in the information environment must be one of our first priorities.

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

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.