

The Battle for Decision Autonomy

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To understand modern cognitive warfare, we first have to look at the extreme ends of human history where decision-making was targeted.

Hitler and Germany



In the years leading up to and during World War II, Hitler and the Nazi regime systematically shaped the decision environment of both the German population and foreign leaders, leading millions to make decisions that ultimately served Hitler's ambitions rather than their own interests or survival. The result was catastrophic: tens of millions suffered or died because of those decisions. It was a stark demonstration of

deception, manipulation, and coercion—and of the near-total compromise of decision autonomy across much of Europe.

Yet, the struggle to control human decisions is not confined to nations or battlefields.

Jonestown

In 1978, in Jonestown, Guyana, more than 900 members of the Peoples Temple—a group led by Jim Jones—died in a mass murder-suicide following the killing of Congressman Leo Ryan and several journalists at the end of Ryan's visit. Jones used psychological manipulation, social isolation, and armed coercion to control members' decisions to the point that escape or dissent became virtually impossible.



But attempts to influence decisions are not inherently malign.

Operation Mincemeat

In 1943, a body washed up on a beach in Huelva, Spain. It was the body of a Royal Marine officer, Major William Martin.



Martin was carrying papers, cuffed to his wrist in a briefcase, suggesting that the Allies would invade Greece and Sardinia, not Sicily.

In reality, Major William Martin never existed.

Operation Mincemeat was an extraordinary ruse by British intelligence to influence Hitler's decision-making.

The Germans took the bait, and Hitler diverted significant forces away from Sicily, saving countless lives and accelerating the collapse of Axis defenses in southern Europe.

It was a master class in storytelling, deception, and exploiting the pressure of high-stakes wartime decisions to steer an adversary toward choices that advanced Allied interests.

Sometimes our ability to make decisions holds fast despite an adversary's best efforts.

Zelensky and Ukraine. In 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine failed to achieve its initial objectives. Despite pervasive disinformation, subversion, and efforts to decapitate the Ukrainian government and persuade Russian speaking Ukrainians to support Russia—an approach that was successful against Crimea in 2014—Ukraine resisted.



President Zelensky's refusal to flee, combined with unified military and civilian resistance—critical decisions in the moment despite the pressures—enabled Ukraine to hold in those critical early hours and days.

No single human capacity is more powerful—or more vulnerable—than the ability to make decisions. Throughout history and continuing today, human decision-making has remained a target of those who seek to control the choices of others.

The ability—and the autonomy—to make decisions, from the ordinary choices of everyday life to the most consequential decisions of war and peace, makes us uniquely human.

We instinctively resist—and, if necessary, fight—as individuals, groups, and nations when others seek to control our choices, think for us, or suppress this core human capacity.



At first glance, these four examples seem like completely unrelated stories —a dictator, a cult, a brilliant wartime deception, and a nation's successful defense of an invasion.

They aren't.

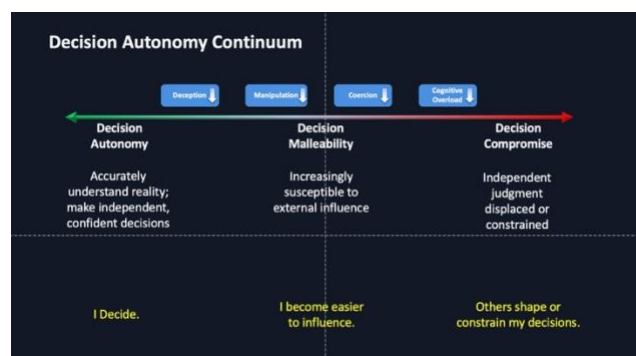
They're four stories about the same thing:
Decision autonomy.

What is **Decision Autonomy**?

Decision Autonomy is our individual and collective ability to accurately see the world around us, to trust the knowledge we have and the information we receive, and to make independent, confident decisions.

If we accept that *the ultimate objective of cognitive warfare is to undermine, degrade, and compromise decision autonomy*, then understanding what our adversaries are doing to achieve that goal is important.

Decision Autonomy Continuum



Let's look at what I am calling the Decision Autonomy Continuum. Each of the opening examples represent a different point along the decision autonomy continuum.

The continuum is anchored on Decision Autonomy, but decision autonomy is hardly a perfect state and it's not binary. It exists on a continuum which includes:

Decision Malleability—a state in which decision autonomy becomes increasingly susceptible to external influences.

Decision Compromise—a state in which external influences have displaced or constrained independent judgment, resulting in the loss of decision autonomy.

All of us—citizens, industry leaders, military commanders, and policy makers—react differently to the pressures of decision-making and the often-considerable external influences of those who want us to make decisions that favor them.

Deception, Manipulation, Coercion, and Cognitive Overload are the primary mechanisms that move us. Let's take a close look at these pathways.

Four Pathways of Influence

Deception distorts our understanding of the world around us—reality itself—by persuading us that false realities are real, to doubt the truth we actually see, or simply misperceive the environment in which we are making decisions.

"Ukraine is run by Nazis."

"Ukraine attacked us first."

"NATO provoked the war."



Manipulation influences our judgment by exploiting our emotions, identities, biases, and motivations, steering how we evaluate information and the decisions we make. Fear, anger, exhaustion, or hope can override deliberate reasoning.

"America should take care of America first—not Ukraine."

"Supporting Taiwan means risking war with China."

"Why should Americans pay for Europe's security?"

"Peace is more important than victory."

Coercion constrains our freedom to choose by threatening or imposing unacceptable consequences if we do not make the decision our adversaries desire. The logic is simple, “you do X and we’ll respond forcefully”.

"Continue supporting Ukraine and we will raise the risk of nuclear escalation."

"Challenge us and we'll close the Strait of Hormuz."

"Recognize Taiwan and we'll restrict trade."

Cognitive Overload overwhelms our ability to think clearly and rationally by exceeding our capacity to process information, evaluate competing narratives, and anticipate the consequences of our decisions.

“An endless stream of conflicting narratives.”

“Too much information.”

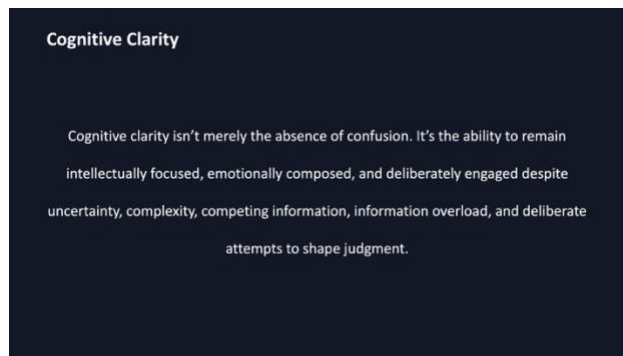
“Too little certainty.”

“Too little time.”

“Too many decisions.”

Our adversaries seek to create cognitive overload; our objective is to preserve cognitive clarity.

Cognitive Clarity



For our purposes today, this is my definition of cognitive clarity.

The key point is that we can retain cognitive clarity despite the best efforts to deliberately shape our judgment.

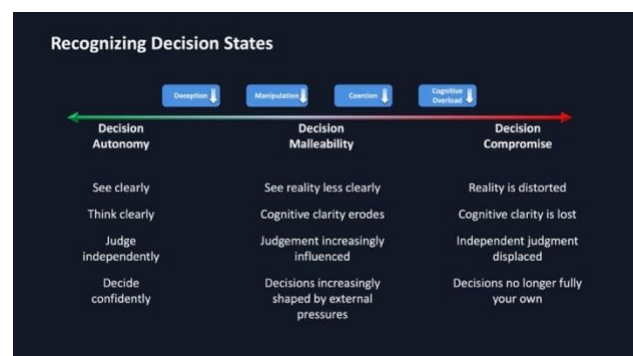
That is the goal.

Recognizing Decision States

There are attributes or indicators about where we or others are on this continuum.

Decision autonomy can be strengthened, weakened, degraded, or compromised depending on how we perceive reality, process information, exercise judgment, and respond to external pressures.

In terms of recognizing decision states, let's test this framework against the four examples we started with.



Where would you place each of them on the continuum?



In Ukraine, President Zelensky and Ukraine maintained decision autonomy.

They held firmly to reality, resisted deception, manipulation, and coercion, and made independent decisions despite extraordinary pressure.

In Operation Mincemeat, German leaders made consequential decisions based on a

carefully constructed false reality. Their decision autonomy was temporarily displaced by deception.

In Nazi Germany, independent judgment gave way to a manufactured reality. For millions, decision autonomy became progressively compromised.

In Jonestown, decision autonomy was almost completely destroyed. Those who attempted to reclaim it were overwhelmed by the manipulated decisions and coercive control of others.

Different actors. Different circumstances. Different outcomes. One framework.

Properties of the Continuum

One of the biggest misconceptions is that decision autonomy is something we either have or we don't. I don't think that's how it works.

Decision autonomy exists on a continuum. Individuals, organizations, and nations are constantly moving along it.

Sometimes we strengthen our decision autonomy. At other times, we become more vulnerable to external influence.

Our adversaries understand this. They don't have to completely compromise our decision-making to succeed. They simply have to move us toward greater decision malleability—just enough to delay a decision, divide an organization, increase uncertainty, or influence a critical choice.

Movement along this continuum is rarely dramatic. It is usually gradual, often difficult to recognize while it is happening, and frequently visible only in hindsight.

If we cannot recognize movement along the continuum, it's hard to stop it.



The Continuum in Practice



Imagine you're a US Military Commander during the early hours of an emerging regional crisis.

Intelligence reports are arriving continuously. Some reports are accurate, some are conflicting, and there are gaps.

Your adversary is conducting a coordinated cognitive campaign—flooding the information

environment with disinformation, false reports, deepfakes, and social media narratives designed to create confusion about what is actually happening.

At the same time, allies are calling for reassurance and support. Washington wants immediate assessments and recommendations. Military forces are maneuvering.

Decisions now have to be made in minutes.

The challenge isn't simply gathering more information. It is preserving the cognitive clarity necessary to separate signal from noise, recognize what matters, resist being drawn into an adversary's narrative, and make sound decisions despite uncertainty, pressure, and deliberate attempts to shape your judgment.

Now imagine you're the CEO of a company considering a billion-dollar acquisition. Your board wants growth. Investors expect results. Analysts are offering conflicting recommendations.

Competitors are driving up the price and seek to derail your acquisition. There are rumors that a new buyer has emerged. Advisors warn that if you don't act now, you'll lose the opportunity. Every new meeting brings another opinion, another forecast, another reason to act—or not act. The stakes could not be higher.



No single piece of information determines the decision. Instead, the cumulative weight of competing pressures begins to shape your judgment. Decision autonomy isn't lost all at once. It gradually becomes more malleable.

Many of you know these pressures from a professional vantage point – government, industry, academia. During my career, I sat in rooms where leaders had incomplete information, conflicting assessments, intense time pressure, and enormous consequences. The greatest challenge wasn't simply getting more information. It was recognizing external pressures and preserving the cognitive clarity necessary to make a sound decision. In places like Iraq and Afghanistan, I had to make those same decisions every day, working at the speed of operations, and trying to maintain decision autonomy at a high level.

Decision Autonomy in Everyday Life

But this all plays out in everyday life as well.



Every day, someone wants us to buy, invest, vote, support, oppose, join, donate, or simply believe—at times they go to great lengths to move us toward their favored decision.

Commercial AI, sophisticated marketing, and persuasive—often aggressive—tactics make it easier to find us, profile us, and move us toward decisions that support their interests.

Businesses market their products, charities seek support, political campaigns advocate for candidates, and AI systems and algorithms increasingly shape the information we see and the choices we consider.

None of us are immune. Researchers at the University of Central Florida found that roughly 85% of timeshare owners regret their purchase. The Federal Trade Commission has repeatedly warned consumers about aggressive, high-pressure sales tactics, misleading financial claims, and lengthy presentations designed to wear down resistance.

When I hear that, I don't just hear a consumer protection issue. I hear deception, manipulation, coercion, and cognitive overload working together to influence decision-making. Do all these warnings work? Data from the American Resort Development Association indicate that 461,000 new timeshare transactions are sold each year in the United States, generating a total annual sales volume of about \$10.5 billion. It's clear these combined tactics are still persuasive.

Timeshares may seem like an easy example, but market research on car buyers, homeowners, boat and RV owners, and investors suggests that many of us later question decisions we believed were entirely our own. In our lives, many of us are making decisions that favors the objectives over our own.

The question isn't whether others are trying to influence our decisions. They always will. The question is whether we recognize deception, manipulation, cognitive overload, and coercion when they're being used against us—and whether the decisions we ultimately make remain our own.

Is this discussion relevant to the great power competition we find ourselves in today? Let's take a look.

Decision Autonomy in Strategic Competition

Great power competition is intensifying. The United States faces more peer, near-peer, and asymmetric threats than at any time since WWII.

The global order that we and much of the world have enjoyed for over 80 years is now contested by global authoritarians—China and Russia, supported by Iran, North Korea, and an ambiguous array of surrogates, ghost fleets, shadow companies, and other actors.

These threats are evolving rapidly.

Second, great powers will go to great lengths to avoid direct superpower conflict. The risks and consequences are simply too high.

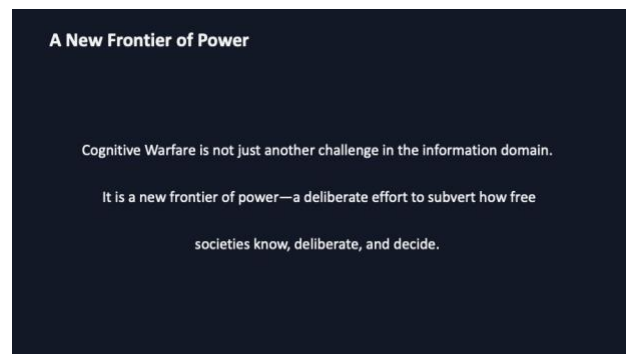
The memories of the destruction of nations, societies, and great armies during WWII brought on by strategic miscalculations are still vivid. Russia's unprecedented loss of national power and resources in its indirect superpower war with Ukraine is a current reminder of those same risks and consequences.

Third, because of these considerations, the **Gray Zone** is becoming the primary arena for great power competition; operations below the threshold of war calculated to gain a strategic advantage and calculated to limit deterrence and discourage a persuasive response.

Most importantly for our discussions today, **Cognitive Warfare** has become the most pervasive and persuasive gray zone activity by our adversaries.



A New Frontier of Power



In the cognitive domain, truth is a strategic asset—precious, powerful, and fragile. Ultimately, cognitive warfare is a contest for that truth and knowledge—a struggle to shape perception, control understanding of how we see and interpret the world, define reality, and influence both decision-making and its outcomes.

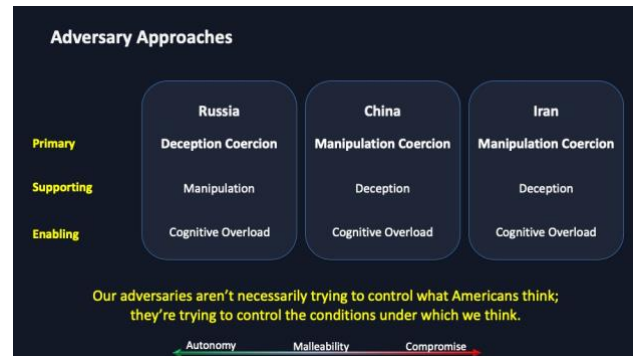
Cognitive power is an emerging decisive source of advantage in the 21st-century, and it may be the defining challenge and mission for this generation. Is it fair to refer to cognitive warfare as a new frontier of power? I think it is.

Adversary Approaches

So, now imagine these same pathways—deception, manipulation, coercion, and cognitive overload—employed deliberately and systematically by our adversaries over years or even decades, supported by intelligence services, state media, proxies, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, economic leverage, and military power. Scale changes everything.

All three countries employ all four pathways, but each has a preferred approach to how they use them.

Russia is a committed global disrupter on a permanent war footing against the West. It recognizes that it cannot match the United States across every dimension of national power, so it competes asymmetrically and, in the Gray Zone, exploiting perceived Western vulnerabilities while avoiding areas of American strength.



Russia seeks advantage by increasing uncertainty, delaying decisions, dividing alliances, employing proxies, and raising the perceived costs of action.

In diplomacy and negotiations, it fights in the cognitive domain—shifting blame, abruptly changing positions, and weaponizing deception, delay, and distraction—not to resolve disputes, but to seize decision autonomy for itself while degrading ours.

Russia understands that it doesn't have to defeat the United States militarily if it can influence our decisions before military force is ever employed. Deception and coercion define its approach.

Deception through disinformation, false narratives, active measures, and reflexive control.

Coercion through nuclear signaling, red lines, energy leverage, sabotage, assassination, and intimidation.

For **China**, patience is a strategic weapon. Rather than seeking to influence a single decision, China seeks to shape the long-term decision environment so that decisions favorable to Beijing gradually become normal, expected, and ultimately viewed as being in the target's own interest.

As Elizabeth Economy observed in *Foreign Affairs*, China is executing a patient, multi-decade campaign to dominate the "new frontiers of power"—a continuous effort to set conditions, rewrite rules, and erode U.S. advantages below the threshold of open conflict.

Manipulation and coercion define this approach.

Manipulation through United Front activities, influence operations, elite capture, and weaponized narratives.

Coercion through economic leverage, market access, technology dependence, sanctions, military expansion, and aggressive maritime tactics.

Iran views its struggle against the United States as enduring and existential. For Iran, this is Endless Warfare. Rather than seeking decisive military victory against stronger powers, it relies on persistent gray-zone competition, asymmetric warfare, and proxies to preserve regime security while constraining the decision of its adversaries.

Iran is trying to narrow the choices of the U.S. and its regional allies—end the war on Tehran’s terms or face an unending and costly regional conflict.

Iran seeks to increase the perceived costs of resistance while maintaining plausible deniability whenever possible. Manipulation and coercion define its approach.

Manipulation through ideological narratives, proxy media, and the exploitation of political divisions, sectarian identities, and regional instability; an environment in which Iran seems to thrive.

Coercion through threats to global energy supplies, proxy violence, direct attacks on neighbors, hostage-taking, and terrorism.

Although their approaches differ, all three share a common objective: to shape how we perceive reality, exercise judgment, and ultimately make decisions that advance their interests over our own.

Of course, our adversaries still try to shape specific beliefs, but the longer-term payoff comes from shaping the conditions under which those beliefs form—to keep us consistently closer to Decision Malleability on issues most important to them.

So, what do we do about it? Let me close with what I believe are the human foundations of cognitive security—protecting cognition and decision autonomy.

In most talks, this is where we start talking about structural fixes—new organizations, whole-of government approaches, media literacy, and technology advantages. Many of those are necessary; some remain aspirational. It is an important conversation, but I'd like to leave those discussions for another day and focus instead on the more human side of cognitive security that Rand Waltzman has emphasized: protecting cognition and decision autonomy.

Protecting Decision Autonomy



In the face of the many threats to our Decision Autonomy, these are the habits that keep us on the left side of the continuum.

Today, a clear view of reality can resemble a wilderness of mirrors, seeing *isn't* believing. If adversaries can replace facts with disinformation and synthetic realities and undermine our ability to clearly see the world around us, they gain an advantage.

Most of us have too many sources of information flooding our professional and private lives—I certainly do. It is easy to rely on so-called experts, Chatbots, social media, comfortable echo chambers, and ubiquitous algorithms to do our thinking for us.

It can become a blissful rut.

When we knowingly or unknowingly cede judgment and decision space to others—we begin to lose decision autonomy.

We are living in a cognitive storm—a chaotic global information environment where a single operator with a laptop can reach millions at the speed of global communications, where countless media sources are almost impossible to vet in real time, and where adversaries deploy AI-enabled networks of surrogates, fake sites, cyber criminals, hacktivists, and bots to target all of us and our institutions. It is easy to feel overwhelmed.

Russia, China, Iran, and even North Korea use redlines, threats and intimidation as tools of persuasion. The fear of escalation can be powerful, and our adversaries will seek to use coercion to move us along the continuum toward malleability and compromise. Coercion changes how we see the cost of our decisions and what we are willing to risk.

Coercion is not just about national security.

We can also experience coercive efforts to undermine decision autonomy much closer to home. Expensive cars and homes, significant investments, sophisticated scammers, ransomware or extortion, or aggressive debt collection tactics can create opportunities for others to increase the perceived cost of choosing another course of action.

Our goal is to recognize coercion for what it is and not allow the fear of consequences—real or manufactured—to become the basis for our decisions.

This is a national security issue for sure, but it is also a personal, human issue.

We cannot eliminate deception.

We cannot eliminate manipulation.

We cannot eliminate coercion.

We cannot eliminate cognitive overload.

Four Key Questions

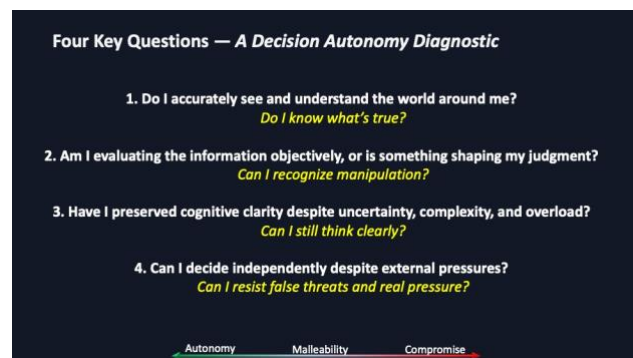
But before making our most consequential decisions—in a military command post, a boardroom, or our personal lives, **we can stop—and ask four questions.**

I call this the **Decision Autonomy Diagnostic**: four questions to instantly evaluate where you stand on the continuum. I don't know about you, but I can think of times in my past—personally, professionally, and operationally—when this would have been very useful.

Finally, decision autonomy is ultimately about sovereignty. For nations, sovereignty is the freedom to determine their own future without external influence or interference—self-determination.

For individuals, decision autonomy is the expression of that same principle—personal sovereignty—the freedom to see reality clearly, exercise independent judgment, and make decisions that remain our own. It is a freedom we often take for granted, but one our adversaries increasingly seek to exploit.

No human capacity is more powerful—or more vulnerable—than our ability to make decisions. We should go to great lengths to protect it.



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