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Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Fighting the Information War ^[1]

Information has always been part of conflict. Thucydides detailed the effects of messages dispatched during the Peloponnesian War, and “narrative” is frequently cited today as an important part of the war against the Islamic State.

Of the nations that practice information warfare, the most persistent is Russia. In a recent article for the Institute for the Study of War, Maria Snegovaya describes Russia’s dexterity at using “reflexive control,” which she defines as shaping an adversary’s perceptions of a situation so that this adversary proceeds to act in the way Russia wants. Snegovaya adds that disinformation campaigns, a Russian specialty, are “designed to confuse the enemy and achieve strategic advantage at minimal cost.”

Truth is irrelevant in such efforts. For months, Russia denied that its troops were present in Crimea, and that the “little green men” were Ukrainians who might have obtained their Russian-looking uniforms from local shops. The Russian military took advantage of this smokescreen to seize important targets. Such tactics are reminiscent of those used by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but they now have been adapted to a media-rich environment in which abundant communication tools are available.

Assuming that Vladimir Putin will rely heavily on information warfare in his efforts to expand Russia’s influence and undermine NATO, how will the United States and its allies respond? Given Putin’s affinity for deception, Crimea may have been just a testing ground for further adventurism. Russia is already using information warfare in the Baltic states, targeting ethnic Russian populations in countries such as Estonia. In such situations, NATO must answer promptly, but it is unclear whether they have the capability and resolve to do so.

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Information warfare requires an infrastructure of broadcasting, social media, and other communication assets that can direct messages to the same audiences the Russians target, but do so more effectively. Indigenous media are best, because they have the most credibility, and NATO should be supporting these efforts with technology, expertise, and money.

This involves expanding the mission of NATO, which was created to counter the Soviets’ conventional military threat. But today, with so many media tools available to so many people, that expansion is essential.

Over the long run, public diplomacy more broadly will be essential in building resistance to Russian messaging. Reaching out to the publics that Russia is likely to target should not wait until a crisis arises, but rather should consist of a steady stream of projects designed to make these publics less susceptible to Russian manipulation. Unfortunately, many of NATO’s public diplomacy efforts suffer from terminal blandness. Russia offers slick and lively products such as RT television, and NATO offers nothing comparable.

Information warfare tactics are used to soften up populations prior to unleashing nastier forms of aggression, and so should not be dismissed as “just a lot of talk.” Whether Russia could achieve another success such as that in Crimea is debatable, but the West should not be caught unaware by further Russian subterfuge.

Disinformation campaigns are not for the ethically fastidious, but truth should not be relegated to collateral damage in the current testing of resolve. NATO should respect its adversary's malign determination while recognizing that truth is a powerful weapon in itself. The truth sometimes needs help, which is what the West should provide as Russia continues to embrace disruption through distortion.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This piece originally appeared at the [Huffington Post](#).*

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