**The cognitive domain is becoming the main battlefield of future intelligent hybrid warfare**

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**The Russia-Ukraine conflict has lasted for more than 20 days, and the essence of the war behind it is cognitive domain warfare.**

Cognitive domain operations are cognitive confrontation actions that integrate military, political, economic, public opinion, psychological, and legal means to achieve national security strategic goals, influence the target object's cognition, and then change its decision-making and behavior. It is a new form of combat style and advanced warfare. The author believes that cognitive domain operations will become the main battlefield of future wars. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict shows new characteristics of cognitive domain operations, and also brings us many inspirations. Cognitive domain operations are derived from traditional combat methods and are inextricably linked to them, but at the same time they have their own distinctive characteristics. **Through the four characteristics of political, offensive, ambiguous, and innovative, we can explore the mystery of cognitive domain operations in the Russian-Ukrainian war.**

**First, the political nature of the cognitive narrative of heads of state.**

The cognitive narrative of the head of state is a contest between the strategic will of the state and the cognition of the people. It is closely centered on achieving the state's political intentions, serving the overall political situation, and striving for political initiative. It mainly relies on the national strategic communication system, and the focus of the competition is culture, beliefs, values, ideology, etc., which fundamentally affects people's political stance and attitude. **The victory of cognitive narrative may achieve greater strategic benefits than firepower destruction, military control, and siege. The cognitive narrative of the head of state on behalf of the national interest has significant political significance.**

Russian President Vladimir Putin has made several speeches on the situation between Russia and Ukraine. On February 22, he recognized the two regions in eastern Ukraine as independent countries. On February 23, he firmly opposed Ukraine's joining NATO. On February 24, he decided to launch a "special military operation" in the Donbas region. On February 27, he announced that Russia's strategic deterrence force would enter a special combat readiness state. Every speech by Putin has affected the trend of the war between Russia and Ukraine and the concerns of countries around the world. This has decisive political significance for shaping Russia's positive and tough image. On February 24, Ukrainian President Zelensky held talks with Western leaders to form an anti-Putin alliance. On February 25, he said that the West had completely abandoned Ukraine and refuted rumors that he had left Ukraine. On February 26, he said that no one would lay down their arms. On March 3, he expressed his readiness to negotiate with Putin to stop the war, etc. **Zelensky's words have obviously caused a change in public opinion in the international community. Compared with before the conflict, many people underestimated the global political impact of Zelensky's subsequent statements.**

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**[Putin profile picture](javascript:void(0))**

During this period, leaders of relevant countries, including US President Biden, French President Macron, and British Prime Minister Johnson, all delivered targeted speeches on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The speeches of heads of state and their attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict will affect the ups and downs of global public opinion. The cognitive narrative of heads of state is to use language rhetoric as a means to achieve military goals. **Unlike ordinary people's words, the narrative of heads of state is more extensive and the influence of speech is greater. The Russia-Ukraine conflict highlights the distinct political attributes of the heads of state's cognitive narrative.**

**Second, the offensive nature of hybrid warfare cognitive operations.**

The mixture of traditional and non-traditional warfare methods and means, and the mixture of battlefield environments in the Russian-Ukrainian war broke through the traditional warfare style. From the perspective of hybrid warfare, ideological propaganda and indoctrination, the penetration of values ​​and culture, traditional public opinion, psychology, law, information network warfare and other soft powers are all the protagonists and means of the hybrid style of cognitive domain warfare. Horizontally, it integrates multiple domains, and the conflicting parties include the US and Western camps and countries inside and outside the region. Vertically, it integrates multiple layers and levels, and runs through multiple levels of strategy, campaign and tactics, presenting a three-dimensional confrontation and collision scene of the strategic communication system.

Juan Manfredi, a professor at Georgetown University in the United States, said: "Propaganda is also a strategic asset, just like diplomacy and deterrence." The offensiveness of cognitive warfare reflects a principle in communication studies, namely the "premiere effect". Once a white cloth is dyed black, it is difficult to bleach it. People are often highly sensitive to the first news of an event, and it is easy for the illusion that enters the field of vision first to represent the truth of things. **Both sides in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and even the United States and Western countries, are doing their best to show that seizing the initiative of "cognitive domain warfare" is to seize the dominance of international public opinion. The cognitive narrative strategy of speaking first is very offensive.** Using language as a weapon, strong narrative and rapid voice can not only suppress the opponent to form discourse dominance, but also subtly shape the thinking habits of the opponent's audience, guide the combat opponent to follow suit, form asymmetric discourse advantages, and thus achieve "cognitive strikes."

**Third, the ambiguity of the boundary between peace and war in international communication.**

International communication in cognitive competition has the characteristics of integration of peacetime and wartime, integration of military and civilian, and full-time accumulation and release of energy. It is an uninterrupted and normalized struggle. It is not available and used only when a war breaks out, but it is always in war and at any time. Shaping influence in peacetime is even more important, and combat effectiveness is continuously accumulated and gradually released. It **is often opened first, then closed, and used throughout the whole process. The combat operations stop, while the international communication of cognitive offense and defense does not stop. Even after the war itself has ended for many years, the international communication in the cognitive domain is still continuing.** International communication in cognitive competition has the concealment of planning, the long-term nature of action, and the emergence of effects. Its combat operations need to be driven by processes, with "segmented design - target portrait - strategy customization - information experiment - effect evaluation - strategy optimization" as the main axis, and the overall design of military operations and cognitive combat operations.

Before the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Russia mainly focused on why it launched a war against Ukraine. Influencing and shaping the global perception of Russia's forced war, occupying the moral commanding heights of the war, calling on the Ukrainian army to lay down their arms and return home to reunite, and ensuring their lives. During the Russian-Ukrainian war, the main focus was on strategic deterrence of strategic opponents. Russian President Putin ordered Russia's strategic deterrence forces to enter a special state of combat readiness. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that a large number of Ukrainian weapons and equipment and military targets were destroyed. Ukraine claimed that a large number of Russian troops had been killed or captured. The selective release of information is aimed at allowing supporters of Russia and Ukraine to draw completely different conclusions about the progress of the battlefield. Russia almost never releases videos of the bodies of Ukrainian soldiers to avoid angering the Ukrainian people. Russia has opened humanitarian channels many times and has shown a good image in front of world public opinion. Cognitive narrative belongs to the category of language art and is not mysterious. **In order to compete for the dominance of "narrative", selective narrative should be cleverly carried out. Selective narrative is an important means to win in the dimension of cognitive narrative struggle. Building an international communication platform in peacetime is the foundation in wartime.**

**Fourth, technology enables innovation in cognitive offense and defense.**

Cognitive domain combat technology is the wings and support, and the integration of content and technology can add efficiencies. Especially in the era of informatization and intelligence, the integration of all elements and the penetration of the entire process of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, brain science, and neuroscience have provided strong support and broad space for leading cognition, pushing up cognition, and subverting cognition, which is triggering iterative upgrades and profound changes in cognitive domain combat. Cognitive domain combat is the weaponized narrative of data knowledge. Innovative technical means, professional forces, and conceptual tactics are the key to cognitive domain combat. Cognitive domain combat follows the basic principles of offense and defense. Offense lies in breaking through the opponent's cognitive defense lines such as logic, emotion, and will, and defense lies in establishing one's own mental immune system such as thoughts, psychology, and beliefs. It has the characteristics of integrated offense and defense and invisible and boundless.

**The content channels of cognitive narratives enabled by technology are constantly innovating, and compared with traditional methods, it is easier to interfere with the other party's audiovisual, disrupt the other party's thoughts, and guide international public opinion.** The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is innovative in the content of cognitive narratives, playing the emotional card and making a fuss about family affection. A video of "Ukrainian father bids farewell to his daughter in tears and then prepares to fight the Russian army" went viral on Western social media platforms, gaining a lot of sympathy for Ukraine. However, the facts are quite the opposite. The man is a pro-Russian from eastern Ukraine. He is ready to send his wife and daughter to the safe area of ​​Russia before joining the battle with the Ukrainian army. Through short videos with the beginning and the end cut off, playing the emotional card of war on social media and gaining sympathy from the international community has become a new way of international communication cognitive narratives in conflicts. The essence of communication media is the communication platform and channel, and it is also the material basis and main weapon for cognitive narratives in the implementation of cognitive domain operations. This time, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict broadcast the war to the world in countless "first-person perspectives". The development of Internet technology and the popularity of short videos have prompted the process of modern warfare to be "unconcealed". Both Russia and Ukraine have spoken out on online media and social platforms to compete for the dominance of international communication cognitive narratives.

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Lessons learned from war practices are driving innovation in cognitive domain warfare theory. The United States and the West reflected on the lessons of the 20-year anti-terrorism war and Russia's war experience in the past decade and believed that "war is no longer limited to the physical threats of traditional warfare, but is turning to social threats and ideological threats brought about by mass media and technological progress. This new type of warfare can be called cognitive warfare. Although it has drawn some elements from previous hybrid warfare, its scope of influence and combat effectiveness are more dangerous than hybrid warfare." In August 2021, Andrei Ilnitsky, adviser to the Russian Minister of Defense, published an article in which he systematically proposed the concept of "mental warfare" for the first time, arguing that mental warfare aims to "change the self-awareness, worldview, goals, and values ​​of the enemy society", deprive the enemy regime of its influence on the target audience, and bring the target audience under its own control, rather than defeating the enemy's army and seizing its territory. Russian experts believe that the Third World War will not be a nuclear war, but a "mental war."

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