

Marketing Authoritarianism

How Putin and Xi Cultivate Isolationism

Kyle Morgan

As I headed to the office, I sipped my first coffee and attempted to break through the groggy cloud that seemed to hang over my head. My commute was a unique, seven-minute walk from where I was living. The morning was cool and calm. The cool air forced a small ribbon of smoke low to the ground. As I walked, I watched this ribbon of smoke drift from a local home over a large concrete blast wall commonly called a “T” wall. I watched the ribbon of smoke disappear behind a set of Afghan barracks. I gave a small group of Afghan soldiers a friendly wave, and they reciprocated with cordial nods and waves. I was a U.S. Army psychological operations officer nearly halfway through a deployment to Afghanistan.

When I arrived at the office, the night shift was still busy. They recounted how a Tweet surfaced the previous night claiming that a U.S. unit had rampaged through an Afghan village and set a car ablaze. It even claimed to provide a photo of the burning vehicle. I gave them a slight grin. I had explained on countless occasions that Afghans living in Afghanistan rarely Tweet. At that moment, I was confident the Tweet was just another ruse: an addition to the growing list of deceptive media encountered during that deployment.

It was determined that the Tweet’s claim was unsubstantiated. The image of the burning car originated from a Russian online periodical. It became evident to my team that most Afghan-related Twitter content

originated outside of Afghanistan. Often, the content was created by adversaries to the United States who were attempting to delegitimize U.S. efforts to support the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Our teams regularly collected propaganda that originated from various violent extremist organizations like the Taliban, al-Qaida, and the so-called Islamic State. Interestingly, we uncovered a steady stream of anti-West content of a style different than typical violent extremist organization propaganda. Foreign meddling was evident, and the global implications of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan became very real to me. I became aware of the extent to which adversaries were willing to go to oppose Western influence.

On 6 April 2023, comedian and social commentator Russell Brand tweeted, “Join the conversation as we discuss Finland joining NATO & escalating tensions with Russia,” in preparation for his *Stay Free* podcast in which he regularly lambasts Western foreign policy as unnecessarily inflammatory against an unstable Vladimir Putin.¹ What is particularly disturbing about this growing sentiment is that it aligns with authoritarian objectives. Isolationists like Brand, who—despite his recent scandal—maintains a following of 6.71 million subscribers on YouTube alone, are peddling an idea that empowers authoritarians.² Such avoidance is naïve. Isolationists ignore the fact that authoritarians can behave within the geopolitical space in ways of their choosing, regardless of Western

policy. Russia's foreign policy created an environment in which Finland was able to join NATO, a change that was much less likely before Russia invaded Georgia.³ As I discovered in Afghanistan, the authoritarian regimes of the world are leveraging every means available to influence Western policy. Modern isolationism is the latest weapon in the arsenals of authoritarians. If the international community and policymakers turn a blind eye toward authoritarian expansionism, the oversight will be to the detriment of international security.

Imagine how much propaganda is directed at Western citizens when significant effort is directed at a remote village in Afghanistan. How can these malign efforts be opposed in a cost-effective manner while preserving democratic values? In short, the answers are

education and irregular warfare. Citizens of Western governments must be made aware of these malign efforts. This can be accomplished by studying the nature of our new information environment. Finally, Western responses to authoritarian military activity are unavoidable, but appropriately scaled military responses are required for their efficacy and lower impact on Western citizens. Domestically, authoritarian influence can be combated via active civil dialogue and academic research; internationally, it can be combated via small-scale military operations.

Kukolniks and Kuileishis

The Russian and Chinese governments propagate their authoritarianism styles through distinct and shared methods. Understanding these methods is an important first step toward understanding the role that authoritarian propaganda has in spreading isolationist narratives. The Russian government leverages socially charged content to instigate conflict within Western communities.⁴ These socially charged narratives inject

deliberate bigotry into every aspect of Western life, from popular political conversations to niche fan discussions about science fiction films.⁵ In his social media analysis of commentary on the film *The Last Jedi*, Dr. Morten Bay found, "Overall, 50.9% of those tweeting negatively [were] likely politically motivated or not even human."⁶ He found that a



Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping (AI image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

portion of the negative online commentary related to the film, including rants from apparent bigots, was in fact orchestrated.⁷ Russian agents manufacture sexist and racist dialogue to portray Western society negatively. These narratives give the Russian government the opportunity to encourage foreign governments and populations to form closer ties to Russian society and its government instead of Western governments. The objective is to highlight the perceived fall of Western society and to make Putin's Russia more attractive to some audiences.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) takes a more nuanced approach. Instead of the overwhelming negativity of Russian propaganda, the PRC leverages Confucius's teachings and promises of economic development to make PRC policies more palatable to international audiences.⁸ PRC-influenced Confucianism, taught in China and Western countries, provides the Chinese government the ability to influence strategically beneficial behaviors. Communities living simple lifestyles, encouraged to find harmony with the world around them, are ideal for an authoritarian who does not want to be challenged.⁹ Prior to their forced closures on 21 June 2022, 118 PRC-backed Confucius Institutes existed within the United States alone. Now they are attempting to exist under other names.¹⁰ For instance, one day after its closure, the Confucius Institute at the College of William and Mary was renamed the W&M-BNU Collaborative Partnership with Beijing Normal University.¹¹ Chinese economic propaganda, most famously its Belt and Road Initiative, attempts to influence foreign audiences, even foreign children, to accept Chinese economic expansion as mutually beneficial.¹² Belt and Road propaganda includes music videos for children hosted by popular social media platforms.¹³ The music video "The Belt and Road Is How" is sung by "children from participating nations" and states that "the future is coming now" and "the Belt and Road is how." Since its 2017 release on YouTube, the video has been viewed 195,000 times.¹⁴ These narratives enable the Communist Party to conceal its social and economic failings. Behind this seemingly innocent propaganda, the PRC can conceal the fact that the party enslaves ethnic minorities and maintains complete control of every aspect of its sponsored economic programs.¹⁵

Along with the tactics previously mentioned, both countries propagate anti-West conspiracies domestically and internationally to delegitimize Western governments and their allies. These conspiracies generally support both Russian and Chinese objectives by discrediting Western activities. The Russian government has done this in a frightening way. It is covertly supporting the spread of modern neo-Nazi groups throughout the Western world to demonize Western society.¹⁶ Putin overtly paints the Russian military as liberators fighting against the spread of modern Nazism. Covertly, he has cozied up to these extremist

groups. Before their fall, Russia's Wagner mercenary organization took its name from a popular Russian special operations officer known as "Wagner" due to his neo-Nazi ties and the name's significance within neo-Nazi lore.¹⁷ Putin's managed nationalism policy enables his regime to provide shadowy support to extremist groups. Pro-Russian propaganda often features and is featured by white nationalist propaganda. The extremist groups also receive direct political support from pro-Putin political figures throughout Russia and Putin-friendly states. In return, those groups bully, attack, and even kill individuals who threaten Putin's power.¹⁸ The "Russia versus Nazism" narrative has been played out throughout Putin's invasion of Ukraine. In reality, the Kremlin propagates modern Nazism internationally while hypocritically claiming in the public eye that it is engaged in a conflict against European-backed Nazis in Ukraine.

A common anti-West conspiracy formulated by the Chinese government hinges on the idea of Chinese exceptionalism. According to the PRC, the Chinese government provides economic stability and security unparalleled by Western governments.¹⁹ For example, PRC propaganda champions Chinese military superiority over that of its adversaries. Xi Jinping famously stated, "The Chinese people will never allow any foreign forces to bully, oppress or enslave us. Anyone who dares try to do that will have their heads bashed bloody against a Great Wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people."²⁰ Chinese military superiority is a false narrative designed for the PRC's benefit. In comparison, the U.S. military is superior or reaches levels of "approximate parity" in most military aspects.²¹ Only when considering military capability in regions immediately surrounding Mainland China does the Chinese military gain some advantage.²²

Unopposed, authoritarian tactics and narratives spread distaste for Western society and bolster authoritarian activities. Victims of authoritarian influence become puppets for larger schemes. At relatively low cost, authoritarian governments can weaponize specific target audiences. From the creation of zealous soldiers to the creation of a less competitive economic environment, Putin and Xi benefit immensely from their propaganda machines and Western society is negatively affected by the first- and second-order effects. To avoid opposition, the Putin and Xi regimes are leveraging

these propaganda tactics and social media platforms to encourage the international community to turn a blind eye toward their aggressive activities.

Propaganda by the Numbers

Propaganda has reached the zenith of its spread thanks to social media. A dive into isolationist social media content highlights a correlation between accounts that host isolationist content and content consistent with other authoritarian narratives. Modern isolationists use the term “warmonger” as their rallying cry to delegitimize Western involvement in international conflicts. Authoritarian propagandists use the same term.

To illustrate this fact, I collected a random sample of ninety-six Twitter posts from unique accounts using the term “warmonger” on 4 March 2023, before the rebranding of Twitter to X.²³ The sample highlighted how accounts with authoritarian propensities also attempted to influence their audiences to adopt isolationist ideology. This is not surprising considering the threat Western policy poses to authoritarianism. If Putin and Xi can popularize Western isolationism, they could achieve a huge strategic success.

Authoritarians leverage automated “bots” and even personnel who manage multiple accounts, like Russia’s famed “troll factory,” to increase their influential impact.²⁴ To identify bots within the sample, each Twitter account was evaluated using Indiana University’s Botometer.²⁵ The accounts were assigned a Botometer score of zero to five to indicate the likelihood that each account was a bot. A score of zero indicated that an individual likely maintained the account, and a score of five indicated that it was likely automated (see figure 1). According to the Botometer’s most conservative assessment, a quarter of the sampled accounts had a higher than 70 percent chance of being bots. This is important as it indicates that covert actors have the deliberate intent to encourage isolationist narratives.

The presence of political actors in this sample was not limited to bots. Accounts were also likely managed by political agents. Two of the sampled accounts claimed to be owned by an Afghan and an Afghan human rights organization.²⁶ The account pages appeared different, but upon further inspection, the imagery associated with each account was almost identical. The posts themselves were the same and even occurred within minutes of each other. This is a

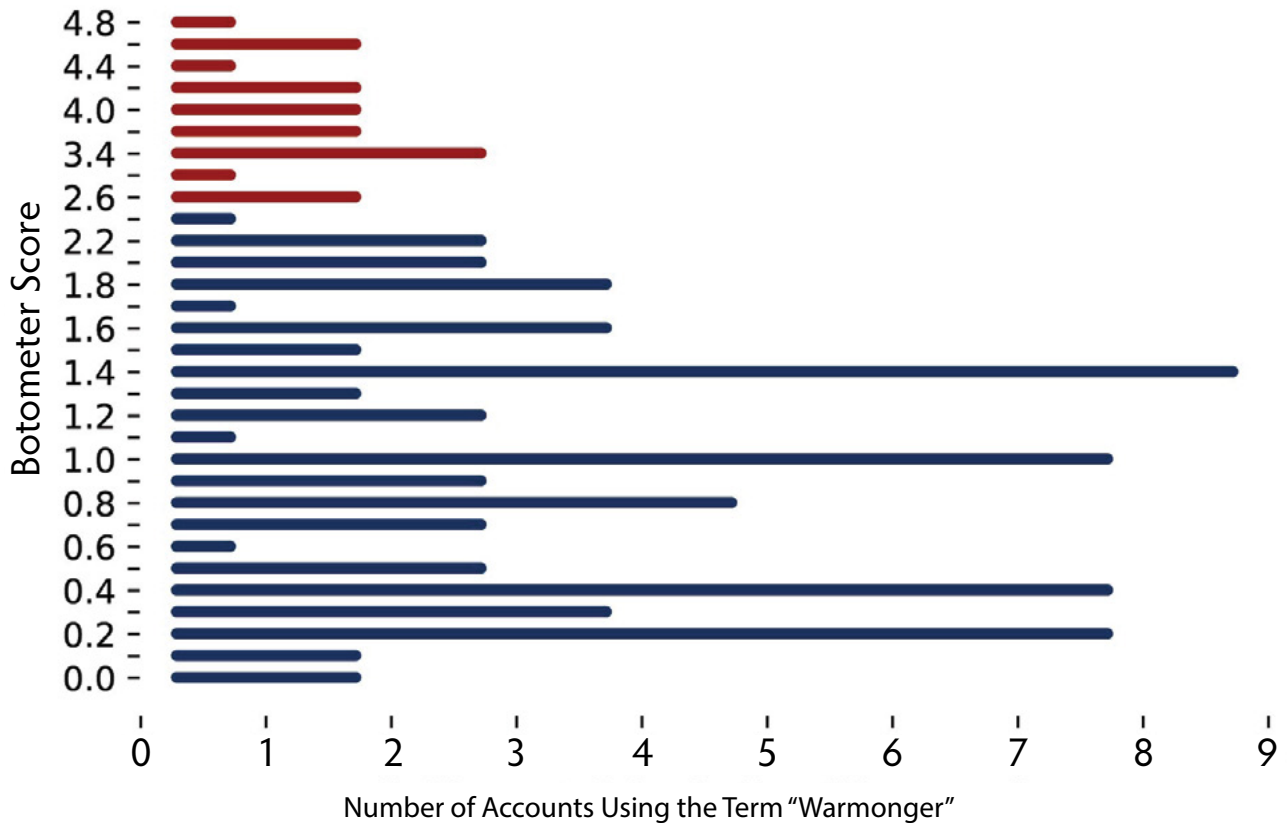
social media agent’s smoking gun. The red flags were indicative of an actor who intends to spread a narrative to as many readers as possible via fictitious personas. Despite their poor quality, the accounts did not receive high Botometer scores, 0.7 and 1.4, respectively. This suggests that of the roughly 25 percent of sampled accounts that were likely bots, additional accounts were also likely operated by political or governmental actors.

To identify additional fabricated accounts, I categorized the sentiment of each Tweet. Eleven different sentiment categories were identified. Out of these categories, five contained authoritarian sentiments. These five categories excluded the “anti-War” and “anti-Democratic Party” categories to avoid subjective analysis, though these categories also likely included fabricated users. I found that 37.5 percent of the sample contained narratives consistent with authoritarian propaganda (see figure 2). If these results are extrapolated over multiple months across multiple social media platforms, it becomes easier to see how authoritarians can popularize isolationism.

A machine learning algorithm was used to identify additional evidence within the sample.²⁷ It used the number of Russian government narratives identified in each of the accounts to predict whether an authoritarian regime wrote each post. Chinese government narratives were omitted for simplification. If a correlation existed between the number of Russian narratives and posts with authoritarian sentiment, this would have suggested with more likelihood that Russian propaganda was focused on bolstering isolationist ideology (see figure 3). Conversely, a lack of correlation would have suggested

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Distribution of Botometer Scores



(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Distribution of Botometer Scores

that the posts using the term “warmonger” were in fact organic. Unsurprisingly, the latter was not the case.

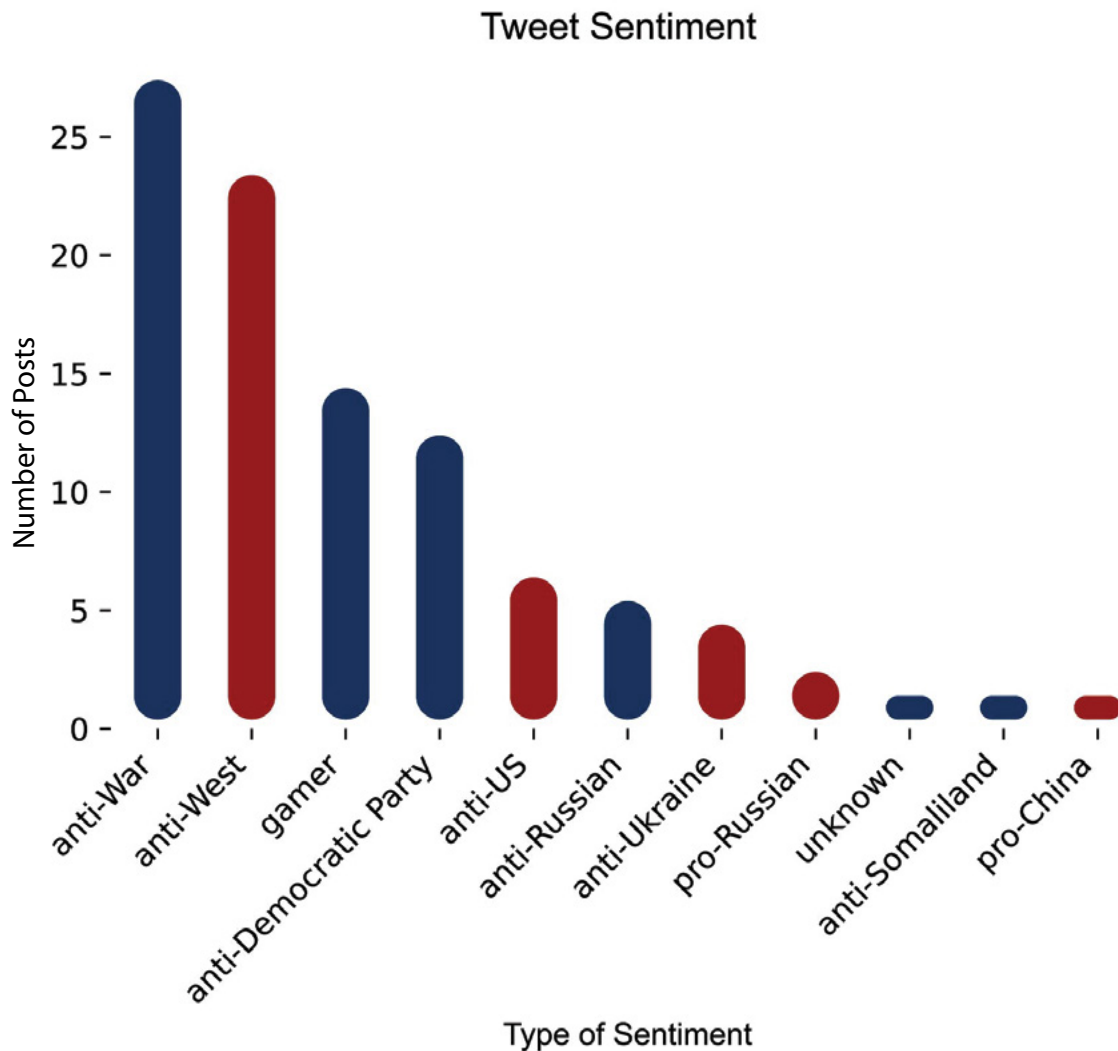
With an accuracy of 75 percent, a trendline showed that as the number of Russian narratives increased per account, so too did the number of posts that contained authoritarian sentiment. This finding suggests that the sampled posts correlated with isolationist themes and accounts controlled by the Russian government. Authoritarian efforts like these must be thrust into the realm of public scrutiny. Voters with the power to influence Western policy must be made aware of the intent to influence indifference among their ranks.

Paving the Road for Authoritarianism

Indifference only serves to provide avenues by which authoritarians can grow their power at the

expense of others. If altruism is not enough motivation for international communities to oppose authoritarian activities, then their negative impact should. Unopposed, authoritarian regimes will expand their influence to the detriment of international security.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine placed undue financial strain on the West. Putin’s desire for military conquest put European politicians in difficult positions. Were they to maintain access to low-cost natural gas, petroleum, food, and metals from Russia, or stop fueling Putin’s military-industrial complex?²⁸ The invasion even exacerbated the humanitarian crisis along the U.S. southern border. Refugees traveling to the United States to escape violence and poverty in Central and South America due to existing economic troubles were forced to also endure war-induced inflation. Russia’s invasion disrupted cheap international trade, including food and petroleum



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Tweet Sentiment

that were once shipped directly from Ukraine to Central and South America.²⁹ These added economic struggles further incentivized northern immigration to the United States.

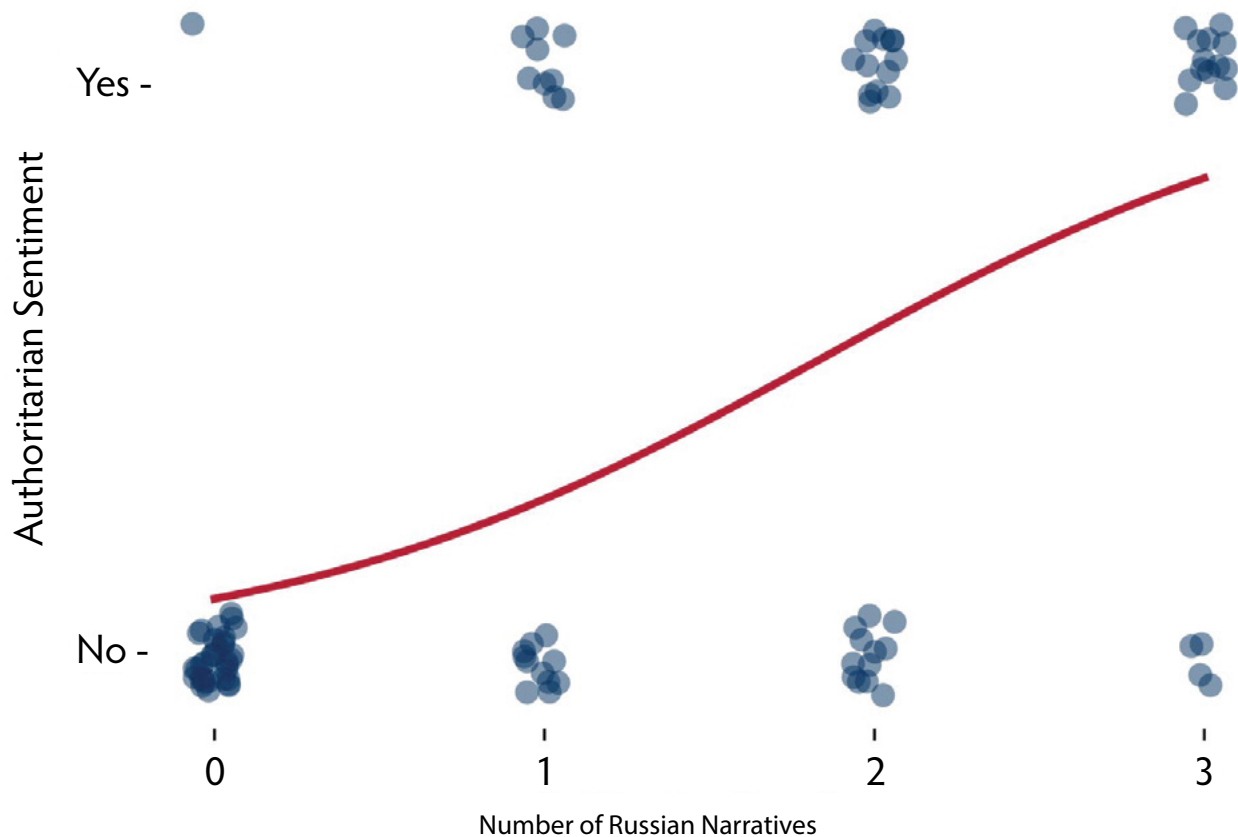
Chinese efforts have had similar impacts. The PRC's unlawful expansion in the South China Sea places the regime in a position to disrupt international trade routes that facilitate over \$5 trillion in annual trade. Of that \$5 trillion, a little over \$1 trillion in goods travel to and from the United States.³⁰ In comparison, about \$76.8 billion in U.S. aid was sent to Ukraine from 2022 to 2023.³¹ These figures illuminate how costly it can be if Russia's invasion of Ukraine becomes protracted or how costly it can be if the PRC is permitted to permanently control the flow of trade

in the South China Sea. Subversive Sino-Russo activities threaten security and sovereign markets worldwide. These types of authoritarian activities must be opposed but in an effective manner.

Napoleonic-Era Strategy to Machine Learning

Critiquing the number of Western resources consumed to oppose authoritarianism is valid. It has become a costly endeavor. The validity of this critique does not justify inaction though. Western society cannot afford inaction. Authoritarian actions create numerous costly implications for the world. The trick for the international community is to oppose authoritarians in a cost-effective way.

Sentiment vs. Number of Narratives



(Figure by author)

Figure 3. Sentiment versus Number of Narratives

The machine-learning model used in the previous analysis shows how Putin has achieved an advantage developed during the Napoleonic Wars. Unbound by morals, Putin uses inexpensive social media tactics to influence behaviors internationally. This offers Putin what the famed Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz called “economy of force.”³²

Economy of force is the application of the minimum required resources needed to accomplish a military goal.³³ This is a critically important condition of warfare, especially when considering another Clausewitzian insight. He famously postulated that warfare is inextricably linked to politics. He stated, “War is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means.”³⁴ With this in mind, authoritarian regimes can avoid opposition if the cost of opposition is perceived to be too steep by the international community. Where authoritarian regimes can lie, cheat, and steal to receive

the resources required to achieve military goals, most nonauthoritarian governments must ethically source military might.

This can first be achieved by shedding light on authoritarian propaganda. Public awareness will delegitimize this authoritarian advantage. Public awareness can be achieved via governmental public affairs campaigns aimed at informing audiences about the latest propaganda tactics in their information environment. Also, governmental support of propaganda research and analysis of its social impact will further enhance awareness. Media discourse and academic analysis will increase public awareness while preserving the right to free speech. Where other efforts toe the line of violating this fundamental right, education directly attacks the legitimacy of propaganda while preserving free speech. A second important step can be taken by fully embracing irregular warfare. These steps will help Western

governments push the bulk of military advantage toward Western control.

Despite a little over \$2.3 trillion in resources, U.S. involvement in Afghanistan failed to establish the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan government.³⁵ This failure was due to a lingering Petraeus-era strategy. Gen. David Petraeus famously enacted the failed U.S. counterinsurgency strategy that deployed large numbers of conventional units to regions where they were expected to stabilize highly complex cultural conflicts.³⁶ This strategy fueled insurgent ideology that thrived off the perceived threat of invading forces. Additionally, conventional units did not recruit nor train service members capable of dealing with these complexities. The full might of the West's military-industrial complex was never the proper tool for involvement in Afghanistan.

The use of large units did not incentivize the establishment of a self-sufficient Afghan government. In contrast, modern special operations utilize small, specially trained units to influence, support, and train indigenous forces and governments. With the support of special operations units specialized in irregular warfare, partner governments receive the support they require while maintaining the required incentive to defend their sovereignty. A competent force of psychological operations (PSYOP) soldiers is a key component

of successful irregular warfare. Unfortunately, current PSYOP units lack a few key strengths. Adding collegiate courses in marketing strategy, brand management, and marketing analytics into the PSYOP Qualification Course would mend this issue. All of this can be accomplished at a lower cost than what Western governments spent under the counterinsurgency strategies of Iraq and Afghanistan. Western strategists have forgotten Clausewitz's "economy of force" and its political importance. Large-scale combat operations are not required to effectively control Putin and Xi. A combination of civic dialogue and traditional irregular warfare are the appropriate responses.

Western governments must walk a fine line. They cannot fall into Afghanistan-like quagmires, but they also cannot turn a blind eye to authoritarian activities. Authoritarian regimes actively attempt to influence Western citizens to push their political leaders to do the latter. International peace cannot be built on a foundation of inaction. Understanding authoritarian propaganda and low-resource military options are critical steps Western governments should take to walk that fine line. ■

The views expressed in this article are the author's and not those of his employer, the U.S. Department of Defense, or its subordinate commands.

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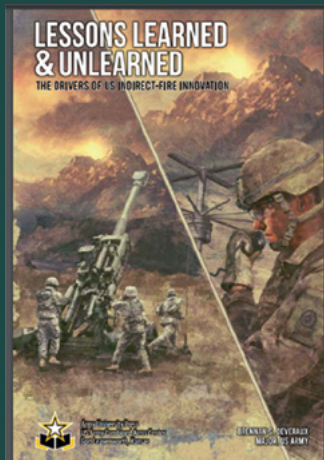
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