

Asserting and Countering Malign Influence across the World

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It is necessary to admit that every subject that is derived from the so-called “hybrid war”, it is very difficult to be defined. In both Theory and Methodology of International Relations we need to define concepts and essences because it is essential to conduct a framework. Without a definition (with relative clarity) it is almost impossible to observe, analyze and solve a problem. The great difficulty comes when the restricted clarity of a definition affects negatively the framework or the scheme that we want to conduct. Hybrid War is an excellent paradigm of this kind of difficulty. It is challenging to deal with semantics of essences such are “asymmetric threats” and “malign influence”. There is no doubt that both of the aforementioned definitions are confusing and they should be studied from another view. In other words, it would be wise to study malign influence, asymmetric threats and, hybrid warfare as a strongly correlated triangle. After that, in order to avoid theoretical approaches which do not include the very meaning of these definitions, we should study the only valid instrument that we hold. Their consequences.

Characteristics of Malign Influence

Studied under a wider prism, the notorious malign influence is the antithetical of a normally and legally established diplomatic relationship between two states. The first characteristic of malign influence is that a state (or a group) which exercises malign influence against another organized society, desires to paralyze the victim-state. Being more precise, a hypothetical malicious aggressor has as his primary goal to make the victim-state dysfunctional. It is important to mention that the sophisticated form of malign influence comes when it does not substitute the normal

and legal diplomatic relationship with the victim-state, but when it uses these normal and legal diplomatic relations as a cover up for its malicious purposes. An ideal example would be the following; An X state establishes a cultural center or a think tank (university, college, etc) into the territory of a Z state. Such an activity, would be covered as cultural and educational diplomacy. But the malign influence appears when this hypothetical cultural center is used as a tool of malicious purposes.

The best methodology in order to identify, analyze and, -definitely- to counter malign influence, is the so-called Reductio Ad-Absurdum. In other words, an analyst or a decision maker should study the domestic and external factors with a totally different view. The question he should ask is “What If?”. It is an axiom of the whole strategic thought to pretend that you are like your enemy in order to study your enemy. Cyber-attacks, sabotage against critical infrastructure, psychological warfare by provoking fear and terror, are only a few characteristics-forms of the notorious malign influence. Here is the correlation between malign influence and asymmetric threats. The sum of those definitions is the hybrid warfare itself. In its core, malign influence holds the essence of deception. That’s why it is well-known as 3C’s threat; Covert, Coercive, Corrupt. With the same manner-method, we have to study every local ecosystem. From the functioning of one hypothetical hospital to the money-laundering that takes place in small businesses, e.t.c. Our focus must be on having an inverting eye on how we study a store, a hospital, a school, an institution, a group of people, e.t.c. As it has been mentioned already, the question “What If?” gives the appropriate aid not only to counter but to achieve our ultimate goal against malign influence, which is to prevent it. No doubt that there are many categories when it comes the study and prevention of malign influence. For example, China uses different methods from Iran, and Iran adopts different malicious playbook from Russia. This categorization (by country) will be analyzed in another study.

Countering Malign Influence in the 21st century

If there are so many difficulties to give a cohesive definition of malign influence, the difficulties are multiplied when we desire to counter the malign influence itself. Aristotle used to say that the evil could be achieved with many ways, but if you want to serve something pure and ethical, you have only one way at your disposal. Malign influence uses the openness of democratic states. That’s the reason

why malign influence is exercised by rogue states, dictatorships, and other types of authoritarian regimes against democratic states.

Dealing with such a dangerous challenge, it means that we need a cooperation between state and non- state actors which in good faith should counter malicious and asymmetric threats. The role of society is also very important. People's awareness will be a decisive factor regarding the fight against malign influence. But the critical prerequisite for such an awareness, is education. Security studies should not be taught only to students of IR and Security Studies but also, to the people who has the democratic right to understand crucial details about their own safety. Democracy's power is aligned with knowledge. That means that as Western Civilization we have to stop to hold issues that are so important (e.g. malign influence), as a taboo. Academics, journalists, decision makers, politicians, e.t.c, should open the conversation about the methods that are available in order to counter malign influence which erodes the well-being of our precious civilization.