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UPORABA KOGNITIVNEGA VOJSKOVANJA V GEOEKONOMIKI

THE USE OF COGNITIVE WARFARE IN GEOECONOMICS

Povzetek Študija analizira naraščajočo vlogo kognitivnega vojskovanja v sodobnih geoekonomskih odnosih. V razmerah prehoda globalnega gospodarstva od prostotržnega kapitalizma k strateškemu državnemu kapitalizmu države vse pogosteje uporabljajo gospodarske soodvisnosti, dobavne verige, finančne mehanizme in pravne okvire kot instrumente geopolitičnega delovanja. Raziskava ugotavlja, da so netržni dejavniki, kot so pravno vojskovanje, psihološke in informacijske operacije, reputacijski pritiski ter instrumentalizacija organizacij civilne družbe, postali strukturni elementi sodobnih oblik gospodarske vojne. Študija obravnava povezave med kognitivno vojno, geoekonomijo in gospodarsko obveščevalno dejavnostjo ter vlogo nedržavnih akterjev pri oblikovanju normativnih narativov.

Ključne besede *Kognitivno vojskovanje, geoeconomika, informacijske operacije, vpliv, gospodarska obveščevalna dejavnost, gospodarsko vojskovanje.*

Abstract This study explores the growing role of Cognitive Warfare (CW) in contemporary geoeconomic competition. As the global economy shifts from free-market capitalism to strategic capitalism, states are increasingly weaponizing economic interdependencies, supply chains, financial systems, and legal frameworks to achieve geopolitical and geoeconomic objectives. The research highlights how non-market factors – including lawfare, psychological operations, reputational attacks, and the manipulation of civil society organizations – have become central tools in contemporary economic warfare. The study examines the interactions between CW, geoeconomics, and economic intelligence, illustrating how Non-Governmental Organizations and other actors can be leveraged to weaken adversaries through narratives grounded in ethical, environmental, or legal claims.

Key words *Cognitive warfare, geoeconomics, information operations, influence, economic intelligence, economic warfare.*

Introduction Contemporary economic relations increasingly impact the security and geopolitical interests of states. The global economy is gradually drifting from free market capitalism to strategic capitalism (Moraes, Wigell, 2020). The re-organization of supply chains along the geopolitical interests of states, the strategic use of interdependencies such as the application of the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) – an international transaction network – in economic warfare, trade fragmentation processes, bloc formations, and increasing security measures and legislation adopted by states to block perceived foreign hostile takeovers in strategic sectors of the domestic economy are all relevant illustrations of this process.

As early as 1990, Luttwak stated that Cold War ideological rivalries had been replaced by a worldwide economic competition in which trade and finance overshadow military power, and he popularized the term *geo-economics* to describe the combination of the logic of conflict with the methods of commerce.

Different “non-market” factors can influence international economic relations, such as the use of open or hidden protectionist measures, information strategies, strategies of influence, state support to private corporations, and economic diplomacy (Csurgai, 2021). The mainstream university curriculum in economics and management in the Western world has focused primarily on market fundamentalism in recent decades. This ideological orientation, dominated by mainstream liberal ideas, has neglected the study of economic warfare methods based on indirect strategies and Soft War tools which have been increasingly applied in *geo-economic* rivalries (Harbulot, 2024).

Economic warfare can take place not only in wars but also in periods of peace. At the same time, the separation between peace and war has become blurred. Gray zones have emerged in which hybrid and 5th generation warfare methods such as disinformation, cyberattacks, lobbying, and the manipulation of civil society organizations have become essential tools in subversion and destabilization strategies seeking to achieve *geo-economic* objectives (Conway et al., 2022). Moreover, economic warfare can take place between countries forming a political and/or military alliance. The dominant part of the European elites began to grasp this reality rather late, and consequently did not anticipate the imposition of tariffs and other protectionist measures on the European Union (EU) by the current U.S. administration.

The ideological domination of market fundamentalism, reinforced by the ideology of neo-liberalism and financial capitalism since the beginning of the 1980s, has resulted in a failure to provide effective analytical tools for Western political and economic elites. This shortcoming has negatively impacted decision-making in matters related to *geo-economics*. This phenomenon can be described as cognitive hacking. The cognitive capture of people in leading positions has also contributed to the narrowing of academic and political debates about economic warfare and economic intelligence (EI) (Harbulot, 2024, p 27).

Information operations and psychological warfare methods have been used in geoeconomic rivalries for several decades. These strategies were applied, for instance, by Coca Cola in the early 1990s with the objective of negatively impacting the reputation of Perrier, a rival soft drink producer. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have also been influenced on different occasions to manipulate domestic and or international public opinion against an economic adversary (François, 2004). These operations were part of indirect strategies seeking to weaken or destabilize an economic adversary in the logic of Sun Tzu: “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting” (Sun Tzu, 2006, p 18).

The strategy of influencing the perceptions of domestic and international public opinion and/or political and economic decision-makers has illustrated the importance of cognitive dimensions in geoeconomic power rivalries. In the contemporary international system, cognitive space is becoming one of the most important battlefields in political, diplomatic, cultural, military, geopolitical, and geoeconomic rivalries. The rapid advances of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, cognitive sciences, and artificial intelligence (AI) play an important role in this process. Consequently, Cognitive Warfare (CW) has gained even more significance than before.

Social media networks, for instance, can rapidly disseminate graphic images and ideas to shape the public narrative, transforming these networks into strategic weapons. AI-generated fake videos, speeches, and discussion groups can be effective tools in propaganda and disinformation operations, not only in the political and military spheres but also in geoeconomic rivalries. Civil society organizations can also be manipulated in CW strategies seeking to weaken and/or destabilize an economic adversary (Harbulot, 2024, p21).

This inquiry will discuss the use of CW in geoeconomics. It will answer the following questions: What are interactions between CW, EI and geoeconomics? How can NGOs be used in CW operations seeking to weaken an economic adversary? This study has potential limitations due to its limited length and the limited available literature on and the complexity of the subject.

1 EXPLANATION OF THE TERMS AND CONCEPTS

In this section the crucial terms and concepts used in this paper will be briefly explained. It is important to note that these terms and concepts can overlap. For instance, Soft War, Hybrid Warfare, Gray Zone operations, and 5th Generation Warfare can all refer to common elements of indirect strategies applied by both state and non-state actors seeking the weakening or destabilization of an adversary. These operations in which CW plays an important role can also take place in geoeconomic rivalries. The practice of geoeconomics can also be considered as a contemporary form of economic warfare relying mainly on indirect strategies. Moreover, a considerable number of explanations exist in the current literature on the terms and concepts used in this study without a generally agreed definition. Therefore, this

paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive list of all existing definitions or pretend to give an in-depth explanation of the concepts and terms used in the study.

1.1 Cognitive Warfare

The objective of CW is to influence the cognition of different target audiences, or to prevent influence on them (Kuperwasser, Siman-Tov, 2019). The target audiences may include domestic and/or international public opinion; political, military and economic elites; senior corporate management; students; and ethnic or religious communities. Cognitive campaigns aim to shape thinking and reasoning processes, mental representations and schemas, emotions, perceptions and sense-making in order to modify the behavior of target groups in line with the interests of the campaign's "emitter" (du Cluzel, 2020). CW may pursue objectives across military, political, economic and cultural domains; it can seek to impose desired behaviors on selected audiences, influence decision-making, or undermine trust in institutions, the political system, and the education and economic systems.

CW is not new. Psychological methods such as propaganda, disinformation and deception have been used in major conflicts and rivalries throughout modern history. What has changed is its scale and reach; rapid advances in information and communication technologies, cognitive science and AI have turned the cognitive domain into a central battlefield in geopolitical and geoeconomic competition.

In CW the aim is often not primarily to change what people believe, but how they think; consequently, influencing cognitive processes is essential. CW operations may therefore try to penetrate education systems by promoting particular ideologies, reasoning schemes or analytical frameworks, and to shape influential social institutions such as trade unions, political parties, civil society organizations and mass media. Such interventions affect social learning processes and can alter belief systems and mental representations, preparing target groups to respond predictably to a narrative, theme or piece of storytelling advanced by an emitting power. Independent and critical thinking can be eroded when prior beliefs dominate individuals' interpretive frameworks; in effect, people react to CW stimuli as if pre-programmed – a dynamic analogous to classical conditioning (see Pavlov's experiments on stimulus-response pairing¹).

CW typically combines multiple instruments – psychological warfare methods, information operations, public diplomacy and influence strategies – tailored to the target's cultural, historical, geographic, psychological, socio-economic and

¹ The researcher presented a neutral stimulus, such as the sound of a bell, to the dogs and simultaneously introduced an unconditioned stimulus – food. Naturally, the dogs responded by salivating in the presence of the food, a response known as the unconditioned response. Through repeated pairings of the bell and the food, the researcher aimed to establish an association between the two stimuli. Over time, the dogs began to associate the bell, initially a neutral stimulus, with the imminent arrival of food. As a result, the sound of the bell alone began to evoke a response like the original salivation triggered by the food. This learned response, known as the conditioned response, demonstrated the formation of an association between the previously neutral stimulus (the bell) and the unconditioned stimulus (the food).

political context. The apprehension of the cognition factors of the target groups is an important element in a CW operation. Thorough knowledge of the target groups' norms, values and "mental models" (frames) is fundamental to emotional manipulation. Symbols, myths, images, cultural and historical references, photographs and videos are used to shape affective rational and reflexive reactions and orient reasoning processes, thereby degrading the capacity to know, produce or protect knowledge. In short, CW is the weaponization of knowledge to achieve strategic objectives (du Cluzel, 2020).

1.2 Economic Warfare

Economic warfare refers to the use of economic means against a country to weaken its economy and thereby reduce its political and military power, or to compel the adversary to change its behavior. Common instruments of economic warfare include trade embargoes, boycotts, sanctions, tariff discrimination, freezing of capital assets, suspension of aid, prohibition of investment and capital flows, expropriation, and blocking access to natural resources (Läidi, 2016).

Economic warfare can be pursued as part of open or covert operations during or preceding wartime. It can be conducted through direct and indirect strategies in both peace and war. Economic objectives which cannot be achieved in peacetime may be pursued through military means: for instance, destroying the critical infrastructure of an economic competitor or occupying resource-rich territories to block access to rivals. Economic warfare can also describe competition between states to expand economic power, or conflicts between corporations competing to dominate markets (Harbulot, 2024).

1.3 Geoeconomics

Geoeconomics can be defined as (Lorot, 1999, p 15):

The analysis of economic strategies – most notably commercial – decided upon by states in a political setting aiming to protect their own economies or certain well-identified sectors of it, to help their national enterprises acquire technology or to capture certain segments of the world market relative to the production or commercialization of a product. The possession or control of such a share confers to the entity – state or national enterprise – an element of power and international influence and helps to reinforce its economic and social potential.

Geoeconomics can also be understood as the projection of economic power to drive foreign policy outcomes. These outcomes extend beyond economy, since economic instruments can serve broader geopolitical goals (Blackwill, Harris, 2016). For instance, geoeconomics can explain how states use economic tools to consolidate control over geographical areas or spheres of influence (Scholvin, and Wigell, 2018). It also analyses how economic actions affect other states' geopolitical interests and how geopolitical actions affect states' economic power (Blackwill, Harris, 2016).

Ultimately, geoeconomics enhances strategic interactions between state agencies and economic sectors to strengthen states' positions in the international system. It can be seen as a contemporary form of economic warfare, based mainly on indirect methods such as information operations, destabilization, and lobbying. Geoeconomics refers both to analysis and practice: an interdisciplinary field combining geopolitical factors, EI, strategic analysis, and foresight, providing tools for states and corporations to enhance power positions.

1.4 Economic Intelligence

EI is a key component of geoeconomic strategy. EI can be defined as the research, analysis and dissemination of information useful to states or business entities in supporting geoeconomic strategies (Csurgai, 2017). It includes gathering intelligence, monitoring competitors, protecting strategic information and capitalizing on knowledge to strengthen geoeconomic capacity (Gaiser, 2016).

EI can also be deployed offensively in indirect strategies such as disinformation, perception management, lobbying and destabilization (Csurgai, 2021). States and corporations therefore build both defensive and offensive EI capacities. Defensive EI focuses on protecting information since enterprises may be targeted for intelligence on finances, market strategies, clients and innovations.

EI is applied at a national level. An important complication is the sharing of intelligence with political and military allies, as these states can become economic rivals. In certain cases, EI can be applied at a bilateral or regional level. For example, European nations can cooperate in EI seeking the elaboration and implementation of successful geoeconomic strategies to promote the interests of the European aviation industry (Airbus).

EI may involve public-private partnerships in which state agencies collect and process intelligence and share it with firms. In addition to state capacity, many enterprises have their own EI units, while private EI agencies also operate internationally.

1.5 Soft War, Hybrid Warfare, Gray Zone Operations, 5th Generation Warfare

Soft war includes all non-kinetic measures, whether persuasive or coercive, using means such as cyber-warfare, economic sanctions, trade wars, media warfare, propaganda, disinformation, nonviolent resistance, civil disobedience, manipulation of NGOs, and lawfare, the use of domestic and international law for strategic purposes (Gross, Meisels, 2017). It also encompasses the use of strategies of influence, financial instruments, diplomatic and political means and weaponized interdependence (Drezner et al., 2021).

Hybrid warfare refers to the simultaneous and adaptive exploitation of political, military, economic, social, psychological, and informational means. Both conventional

and non-conventional methods can be applied by state and non-state actors. Hybrid warfare is designed to exploit vulnerabilities across the Political, Military, Economic, Social, Informational and Infrastructure (PMESII) spectrum (Cullen, Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2017; Dalton et al., 2019). It exploits ambiguity, creativity, and the existence of gray zones to make attacks less visible, often remaining below detection thresholds.

Gray zone operations refer to competition between state and non-state actors that falls between war and peace. Gray zone actions extend beyond routine diplomacy but stop short of open conflict, defined as (Dalton et al., 2019, p 2):

An effort or series of efforts intended to advance one's security objectives at the expense of a rival using means beyond those associated with routine statecraft and below means associated with direct military conflict between rivals. In engaging in a gray zone approach, an actor seeks to avoid crossing a threshold that results in open war.

Hybrid and Soft War methods are often used in Gray Zone operations. The success of these operations can depend on staying below thresholds which would escalate to war. Socio-economic resilience, political cohesion, and vulnerabilities such as societal polarization, ethnic tensions and financial fragilities all affect the outcomes of gray zone operations (Mazarr, 2015).

Fifth-generation warfare (5GW) is the battle of perceptions. 5GW can include the manipulation of cultural, religious or historical factors, and the exploitation of value systems to influence the perceptions of the masses according to the interest of a given state and/or a non-state actor to shape the will of an adversary (Qureshi, 2019). An important aspect of 5GW is the 'silent war' effect. 5GW can accomplish strategic, operational, and tactical objectives while not doing measurable damage which the target can identify. The target may not even realize that it has been attacked; consequently the target has already lost the battle of perceptions.

2 COGNITIVE WARFARE IN GEOECONOMICS

The cognitive space has become an important battlefield in geoeconomic rivalries. Cognitive operations combined with the tools of Soft War – such as lawfare, manipulation of civil society organizations, information operations and strategies of influence – can be used to achieve various geoeconomic objectives. CW can seek to negatively impact the image and reputation of a business or a state. Attacking a rival enterprise on ethical grounds – such as environmental harm, violations of labor standards, or corruption – constitutes a common narrative of offensive CW strategies.

The objectives of CW operations in geoeconomics may include weakening specific economic sectors of a state, destabilizing a rival enterprise to facilitate takeover, reducing market share, coercing a corporation to exit a market, or depressing a business's stock market value.

Lawfare methods which exploit national, EU and international legal frameworks (e.g. on corruption, environmental standards, or labor rights) are commonly used as themes and narratives in CW operations. Extraterritoriality – the application of national laws abroad – has become a key tool to promote and defend U.S. geoeconomic interests; through it, the U.S. authorities can target individuals, entities or companies worldwide with sanctions and legal actions. European firms such as BNP Paribas, HSBC, Commerzbank, Crédit Agricole and Alstom have been subject to U.S. legal and regulatory pressures (Laïdi, 2019).

‘Spin doctors’, public relations and communications agencies, and private EI organizations frequently participate in the design and execution of offensive or defensive CW strategies. In defensive scenarios, firms retain these agencies to respond to reputational attacks. State EI units may also be involved, particularly when CW, Gray Zone operations, or 5th Generation Warfare target strategic sectors such as defense, communications, energy, or critical infrastructure.

Operations of Influence in CW can target think tanks, political parties, minority groups, trade unions, media outlets and educational institutions. In this context, the ability to shape networks has become a decisive instrument of power (Castells, 2000). Social media networks, as low-cost and accessible platforms, serve as force multipliers, boosting networking, organizational capabilities, and information dissemination. Consequently, CW is also a form of Network Centric Warfare (Alberts et al., 2000).

Social media can be employed for rumor propagation, disinformation, and psychological warfare techniques to influence the perceptions of target groups. Confidential corporate document leaks, for example, can undermine reputations. AI has further expanded manipulation capabilities, enabling deepfakes, voice cloning, and AI-generated texts and images – used in 5th Generation Warfare to influence perceptions. Micro-targeting algorithms and social bots can also intensify disinformation campaigns.

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the US military ran a covert disinformation campaign in the Philippines to counter Chinese influence and impact the reputation of the Chinese pharmaceutical industry. Using fake social media accounts impersonating Filipinos, it cast doubt on Chinese medical aid and the Sinovac vaccine. A Reuters investigation found at least 300 accounts spreading narratives like “Covid came from China, don’t trust China” (Bing, Schectman, 2023). The campaign expanded into Central Asia and the Middle East, where messages suggested vaccines might be forbidden under Islamic law due to pork gelatin. This illustrates the integration of CW into global geopolitical and geoeconomic competition.

AI-driven CW operations can also target corporations. For instance, a deep-fake video of a CEO announcing financial fraud or crisis could be disseminated to provoke panic among customers and stakeholders, damaging reputation and destabilizing the organization.

2.1 Civil Society and NGO Interference Networks in CW Operations

The expansion of the internet and social media has amplified civil society's influence on debates over food security, technology, public health, environment, and corporate responsibility and responsible investments. This has increased NGOs' potential role in CW operations (Gagliano, 2018).

An illustrative case occurred in April 1995, when Greenpeace launched a campaign against Shell's plan to dump the Brent Spar oil platform into the North Sea. Although Shell and government studies suggested minimal environmental impact, Greenpeace mobilized public opinion by boarding the platform, transmitting images worldwide, and calling for a boycott of Shell service stations. The organization also published a report about the catastrophic ecological consequences of dumping the Brent Star into the sea and denounced the partiality of the experts mandated by the British government to assess the environmental impact of the dumping the Brent Star (Harbulot, 2024). Mounting pressure forced Shell to abandon deepwater disposal in favor of onshore dismantling.

This case shows how NGOs and civil society organizations can act as effective instruments in CW operations, amplifying reputational attacks on corporations or states. The objective is to achieve the cognitive encirclement of the adversary by indirect attacks exploiting noble, moral, and ethical causes such as environmental protection, the fight against corruption, and the defense of sustainability, seeking to conceal strategic aims such as market conquest or the weakening of geoeconomic rivals. Cognitive encirclement is an invisible approach used by attackers to impede the capacity to identify the direct source and the method of the attack (Harbulot, 2024).

Christian Harbulot and Didier Lucas, French experts on economic warfare, described a CW operation procedure involving NGOs (Harbulot, Lucas, 2002, p 21):

Identify the adversary's weak points: These may include paying bribes to officials in a country, environmental damage, human-rights abuses, failure to respect workers' rights, etc. Information gathered about these weaknesses must be verified – the operation's theme or narrative should be based on verifiable facts.

Choose the attack method and prepare the narrative: Using the verified information, the operation's lead transfers funds to a private foundation associated with the target company. A trusted intermediary within the foundation can then direct resources toward an NGO that works on issues related to the company's vulnerabilities. The NGO is made aware of the company's alleged wrongdoing by being provided with verifiable (not manipulated) information – for example, evidence of environmental violations or bribery.

Public dissemination and reputational impact: The NGO publishes and shares the information through its website and social networks, propagating the operation's chosen theme or narrative and negatively affecting the targeted company's reputation.

The strength of this form of CW lies in the use of verifiable facts, which sustain credibility and intensify disputes over a target's activities (Gagliano, 2018). NGOs can further escalate the attack through grassroots protests, press conferences, and publications, increasing reputational damage.

Conclusion This paper explained the main characteristics of CW, underlining its connections with indirect strategies, EI, and geoeconomics. CW combines psychological warfare methods, legal narratives, influence operations, and manipulation of civil society to achieve geoeconomic aims. Social media, AI and deepfakes can massively amplify the impact of CW in these operations.

State actors, private PR firms, economic-intelligence units and NGOs can all be used as instruments in CW. NGOs and civil society organizations may be co-opted or indirectly funded to launch reputational attacks based on verifiable weaknesses or wrongdoings of a business entity. This creates plausible, credible narratives which can be used in CW to undermine geoeconomic rivals. Other different tools of Soft War such as lawfare, economic sanctions, trade wars and media warfare are routine geoeconomic tools used to coerce foreign firms and states. The findings of this study underscore that most of the European elites, constrained by decades of neoliberal market fundamentalism, have been cognitively unprepared to anticipate or counter such methods. Ultimately, the paper argues that CW represents the weaponization of knowledge and perception in geoeconomic rivalries, requiring new analytical frameworks, stronger EI, and greater resilience of societies to protect geoeconomic interests.

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