

The Evolution of Regime Change and Information Warfare in the 21st Century

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<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-4-72-90>

ABSTRACT

Although information is nothing new to war or conflict, the speed at which it reaches a much wider target audience, and thus its potential impact and consequences, is changing due to the rapid development of information and communications technology. Regime change and information warfare have been around for a very long time in the history of organised human societies. An undertaken review of academic literature demonstrates a great interest today to these concepts in academic, policymaking and practical terms. The present article attempts to track the evolution of the Western conceptual and theoretical thinking on the use of regime change and information warfare, seeking to understand the factors that precipitate it. In the paper I address the following, what is the relationship between information warfare and regime change? The high level of information and communications technology development and persisting leadership globally have allowed the United States to engage in regime change and information warfare more effectively, although not without risks. The author considers the most illustrative examples of such engagement and, based on them, concludes that we have seen a shift in motivation from an offensive stance (the desire to spread influence) to a defensive one (the desire to prevent other international actors from gaining influence and power) on the global level. The theoretical method chosen for the analysis is phenomenology, as a means of the reading and analysis of a lived experience as well as a qualitative method will be used to analyse the data, where the goal is to capture the complexity of the object of study.

KEYWORDS

hybrid warfare, information warfare, political warfare, regime change, evolving global order, information operations

Introduction

The role of information warfare and regime change has become as topical as it is controversial in the 20th and 21st centuries.¹ The current approach to regime change and information warfare has evolved from its origins in the Cold War.² A number of different academic assessments as to the evolution of aspects of regime change and information warfare already exist.³ However, the focus can be rather narrow for such assessments, meaning that the bigger picture is often missed in terms of the historical and contemporary variables that shape the approach and understanding of information warfare and regime change for various stakeholders, and the evolution of the conceptualisation, practice and perception of information warfare and regime change can thus be overlooked.

This article seeks to track and analyse the contemporary nature of regime change and its relationship to information warfare in the 21st century during the relative decline of the U.S. unipolar global order. As the sole remaining superpower, the United States has far greater opportunity and motivation, as well the capability and capacity, to attempt regime change than other actors. The various examples of individual, as well as cascading regime change are seen in terms of how they function at the theoretical, conceptual, political and practical levels to establish if there is a noticeable evolution. This is done in conjunction with identifying the possible causes of a given evolution.

The article consists of several sections that aim to introduce the reader to the topics and discussions on them. The first two sections deal with a literature review to set the scene as to how to interpret the empirical cases that come later, firstly examining the elements and processes of the information realm. Then the following section examines the most recent reviews on the conceptual and theoretical basis of regime change. The third section provides a review of the methodology used in the paper. This is followed by a number of brief overviews of different attempted and successful regime changes in the 21st century.

Shaping and Influencing the Information Realm

The actor that is able to shape and define information flows in the information realm is better placed to control the content that determines the audience's perception and understanding of reality, and therefore shapes meaning in the physical realm and subsequent assessments in the cognitive realm.⁴ Intangible factors within the context of this paper refer to non-physical elements found in the informational and cognitive realms of the human experience (information and communication tools, opinions, perceptions, values, world views, identity and so forth). These aspects can shape and influence the level of effectiveness of the various stakeholders and their tangible elements of power (security, military resources, infrastructure and personnel) for better or worse. This makes understanding the role of information and how it

1 Zollmann 2017; Sakwa 2016.

2 Carne, Barnett 1989.

3 Ofer et al. 2019; Manoylo et al. 2020.

4 Arquilla, Borer 2007.

is communicated crucial to our awareness of the relationship it has with power and influence.

P. Robinson contends that in order to comprehend the contemporary socio-political world around us, we first need to understand how power is exercised through communication.¹ He also suggests that the research agenda should be broadened from its focus on the mass media to include governments, researchers, NGOs, think tanks and popular culture, as these are all additional forms of manipulative and non-consensual modes of persuasive communication. The priming and mobilisation of crowds to support or oppose a planned or proposed regime change depends on the quality and quantity of information received for or against the idea. This requires a deal of coordination and signalling of key stakeholders at the right moment and in the right (resonating) tone, where the role of the manipulation of information to shape the target audience's emotions and consciousness is key.² Hence, in the warfare of the 21st century, technology and information play a critical and parallel role to the associated and embedded political considerations and military operations.³ Information warfare and its influence on conflict does not remain static.

Although information is nothing new to warfare or conflict, the speed with which it reaches a much larger target audience, and thus its potential influence and effects, is changing owing to the rapid development of information and communications technology. Shallcross notes as much: "information used as an element of warfare and national power is as old as civilisation itself; however, the advent of the information age has resulted in an exponential propagation of tactics, technologies, and threats as they relate to the relatively new art and science called Information Operations."⁴ Furthermore, the growth and development of new media and digital technologies means that state-based actors have lost their monopoly on globally projecting influence and power (including soft power) via means of mass communication, which is evidenced by the rise of such terrorist groups as Al Qaeda and ISIS (terrorist organization banned in Russia).⁵ An understanding of the theoretical and conceptual approach to regime change and its various parts forms the basis of the following section.

Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings of Regime Change

In relation to the disastrous Iraq War and current conflict (2003 – present), the social construction of public policy plays a significant role. As noted by R. Burgos, "foreign policy strategies are social choices, embedded in particular discourses about what constitutes a problem and what constitutes a solution."⁶ This creates the context of ideational interpretations of problems and solutions that influences the cognitive realm in terms of the perceptions and opinions of policymakers, practitioners and academics. Academic research in such sensitive subject areas as terrorism and

1 Robinson 2019.

2 Edmond 2013

3 Ofer et al. 2019; Karpovich et al. 2020; Manoylo et al. 2020; Walzer 2006.

4 Shallcross 2017, 2.

5 Manoylo 2016.

6 Burgos 2008, 255.

extremism has witnessed collaborations between the academic community and the state, which can create ethical issues and conflicts of interest.

[...] social scientific research can be compromised: (1) interference with the evidence base (through a lack of transparency on data and conflicts of interest); (2) collaboration on research supporting deception by the state which undermines the ability of citizens to participate in democratic processes; and (3) collaboration on research legitimating human rights abuses, and other coercive state practices.¹

There are similar risks evident in research on political and information warfare owing to the need for the façade of political legitimacy of actors seeking to subvert a target country or government, for those acts may be legally, ethically or morally flawed. Therefore, contentious politics requires this façade of legitimacy and needs to appear desirable, proper and appropriate within the context of the specific normative, value, definitional and belief framework in which it is situated. The political actor is constrained by the type of legitimacy, network balance and structural dependence.² The same can be drawn from contentious policymaking by political actors, such as the act of engaging in warfare.

Waging a war against another actor in the international system can include indirect and covert military operations that are intended to destabilise and target country and its government. This may involve attempting to incite an insurrection through supporting radical politics in a country as a form of political action that supports a foreign policy line of the 'sponsoring' power. This is where insurrection is a destitution of political power seeking to suspend the power of the incumbent authorities and established politics via forms of post-sovereign political activism and mobilisation.³ Warfare involves the role and influence of relationships and structures on the direction and outcome of a conflict. For example, the dynamics of a proxy war can be visualised through the overlapping dyads between a beneficiary, a proxy and the target by conducting a structural-relational analysis of the interactions among these actors based upon strategic cooperation.⁴ These interactions can be direct or indirect, but with a specific policy outcome in mind.

Warfare is a political act, which should involve political goals using coercion and/or force, such as the policy of regime change or an act of revolution. However, the social and political environment needs to be prepared in advance for an act against a target government to increase the likelihood of success by the attacker. L. Beilenson identified three 'traditional' strategic characteristics of subversion: "(1) It was mainly auxiliary to war being waged or expected to come. (2) Decisive external subversion was always geographically spotty. (3) In a particular country to be subverted, decisive external subversion was normally conducted in an opportunist manner."⁵

1 Massoumi et al. 2019, 1.

2 Schoon et al. 2020.

3 Newman 2017, 297.

4 Rauta 2018.

5 Beilenson 1972, 90.

During the latter part of the Cold War (the 1970s–1980s), conservative thinkers in the United States believed that the West was losing the geopolitical contest, mostly due to the supposed effectiveness of Marxist Revolutionary Warfare. They looked to the Soviet model to create an American version (and escalation of the violence inherent in Marxist Revolutionary Warfare) as a way to counter and roll back Soviet influence.¹ The result was the creation and support of the Contras against the governing leftist Sandinistas in the bloody Nicaraguan Revolution. The distinction between war and peace was consequently blurred.

A. Codevilla, for example (in the above context), defined political warfare as “the marshalling of human support, or opposition, in order to achieve victory in war or in unbloody conflicts as serious as war.”² He understood the need to prepare for success by bringing together a number of environmental circumstances to subvert the target country: the presence of widespread public discontent, for example from a long-term economic recession; the lack of open communication channels between a target government and its population; an iconic event to prime and mobilise a mass public to action, such as projecting a contested election or a government’s alleged disproportionate use of force; and a committed foreign power to support (materially and financially) and organise the so-called opposition.³ These aspects and conditions are seen in the current approach of the United States to vicarious warfare.⁴ Once the informational and cognitive environment is prepared, then the operational elements in the physical environment can commence.

The idea and practice of revolution is not new. A basic working understanding and definition of revolution is “the downfall of an old regime through non-legal means and its replacement by a new regime that attempts to establish a new political, and perhaps also socioeconomic, order.”⁵ As a fundamentally competitive activity, revolutions (seeking regime change) need to be aggressively marketed by the revolutionaries and their backers to various stakeholders to gain publicity and attention so as to create an advantage in social and political capital, together with a perceived sense of legitimacy.⁶

The concept of revolution has gradually developed with physical realm examples and informational realm interpretations in revolutionary theory. One of the strands of this theory involves the categorisation of different generations of revolution that tracks the academic and operational aspects of the act of revolution. G. Lawson understands so-called fourth generation “revolutions as conjunctural amalgams of systematic crisis, structural opening, and collective action, which arise from the intersection of international, economic, political, and symbolic factors.”⁷ This generational understanding of revolutions considers the increasingly complex number of different factors and circumstances that influence the outbreak of revolution.

1 Beilenson 1972; Carne, Barnett 1989.

2 Codevilla 1989, 77.

3 Ibid.

4 Waldman 2021; Zollmann 2017.

5 Katz 2001, 5.

6 Clifford 2005; Schock 2005.

7 Lawson 2016, 106.

In the wake of recent “revolutionary waves” (such as the Arab Spring) there has been a reassessment of the current fourth generation of revolutionary theory. One of these assessments is that the fourth generation is “imperilled” because it attempts to cover too many variables and move away from pure theorising, becoming stale and being partially displaced by other fields. B. Abrams argues that we need to consider the rise of a fifth generation of revolutionary theory to mitigate these shortcomings.¹ As with the notion and practice of revolution, the idea and practice of regime change has also evolved with time and experience.

One possible definition of regime change exists that has conceptual and operational aspects and consequences. “Regime change is [...] an operation to replace another state’s effective political leadership by significantly altering the composition of that state’s ruling elite, its administrative apparatus, or its institutional structure.”² By their very nature, regime changes violate the *de facto* sovereignty of the intended target, but not necessarily its *de jure* sovereignty if the target is not directly occupied or annexed.³ Regime change has been observed in acts against single targets (such as Bolivia or Venezuela) or in constructed waves of regime change (such as the Colour Revolutions or the Arab Spring).

Regime change cascades can occur through demonstration effects and active mediation, although common external causes and contemporaneous domestic triggers can cause events outwardly resembling them. Regime change cascades tend to occur where (a) there exists a common frame of political reference, (b) unpopular leaderships are becoming lame ducks; (c) elites lack of other focal points for coordinated defection, and (d) structural conditions supporting a new regime type are in place.⁴

This attempt to define the ideal conditions for regime change cascades includes a number of different variables, but seemingly omits others. There are several embedded ideas or perhaps hopes among the academic community (and also among sections of the policymaker communities) that engage in ideological utopianism, such as regime change spreading democracy and peace.⁵ There is a tendency to try and create generic blueprints of different cases of regime change and revolution to make the explanations of the physical realm seemingly clearer and more comprehensible. However, this tendency in social science defies the reality of the physical realm by its interpretations in the information realm. C. Beck observes that an “analysis of the changing structure of comparison over time reveals that comparison precedes the development of an epistemology. The results suggest that conclusions about the possibility, or lack thereof, of generalisation may be an artefact of the comparative

1 Abrams 2019, 383–385.

2 O’Rourke 2020, 95.

3 *Ibid.*, 95–96.

4 Hale 2013, 331.

5 Bermeo 1990; Cederman, Gleditsch 2004; Lawson 1993; Way 2008.

method.”¹ This does not discourage the pursuit of knowledge and an evaluation of effectiveness (or lack thereof) in the concept and practice of regime change.

This has prompted research to find and explain the correlation between regime change and regime types.² Whenever the United States and its allies complete a successful regime change operation, the target country is typically labelled a ‘democracy.’³ In spite of the relative enthusiasm for employing the strategy of regime change to attain foreign policy goals, some observers nevertheless point out its limitations. R. Haas argues that regime change needs to be a complimentary, rather than a stand-alone tool, especially owing to the unpredictable nature and results of its application.⁴ It is for these reasons, in addition to the reputational and financial costs of the aggressor invoking regime change that, according to W. Reisman,⁵ make regime change a mostly bad policy idea.⁶ Regime change as an operational policy is supported by intangible environmental factors, such as the control of selective and symbolic information to create a convenient perception of events to project a sense of legitimacy.

Methodology

The theoretical method chosen for the analysis is phenomenology, as a means that seeks an “understanding of how appearances affect consciousness prior to the attempt to conceptualise objects and events.”⁷ In other words, phenomenology is the reading and analysis of a lived experience.⁸ As such, a qualitative method will be used to analyse the data, where the goal is to capture the complexity of the object of study.⁹ These combined set out the ontology and epistemology of the evolution of the definition and practice of academic concepts with operational implications.

The theory of science deals with ontology, i.e. the issue of what is real and what exists, and epistemology, issues regarding knowledge and how we know things. [...] According to critical realism it is possible to obtain knowledge about the real domain of social mechanisms by studying the phenomena in the empirical domain.¹⁰

1 Beck 2018, 134.

2 Björnshov, Rode 2020; Mahoney, Snyder 1999.

3 Sussman 2010.

4 Haas 2005.

5 Reisman 2004.

6 Melissa Willard-Foster, “Three Lessons From the History of Foreign-Imposed Regime Change,” *Political Violence at a Glance*, February 1, 2019, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2019/02/01/three-lessons-from-the-history-of-foreign-imposed-regime-change/>; Henry Butterfield Ryan, “Regime Change: New Name, Dangerous Old Policy,” *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, October 21, 2002, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://origins.osu.edu/history-news/regime-change-new-name-dangerous-old-policy/>; Benjamin Denison, “Stay Out of the Regime Change Business,” *War on the Rocks*, June 16, 2020, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/stay-out-of-the-regime-change-business/>; Benjamin Denison, “The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: the Failure of Regime-Change Operations,” *Policy Analysis* no. 883, January 6, 2020, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/more-things-change-more-they-stay-same>; Stephen M. Walt, “Regime Change for Dummies,” *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2018, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/14/regime-change-for-dummies/>.

7 Szeman, Kaposy 2011, 535.

8 Simons 2020, 55.

9 Hyett et al. 2014, 2; Simons 2020, 21–23.

10 Boréus, Bergström 2017, 9.

The above-mentioned quote gives a hint at the link that exists between academic concepts and theories and the more pragmatic nature of operational practice that seeks to implement the goals and objectives of policymakers. This link between relevance and importance is expressed by S. Gelman, who notes that “concepts are fundamental to all of human experience. Naming objects, recognizing novel instances, generalizing from the known to the unknown, making inferences, and learning new information all make use of concepts.”¹ She also states that concepts should not be treated and analysed in isolation from theories, stating “both are mental representations that give order to experience.”² This needs to be understood and articulated in order to capture the essence of this academic nature and practical experience, and a literature review is employed to achieve this goal.

Literature reviews play an important role as a foundation for all types of research, where they can serve as the basis for the development of knowledge. As such, they can form the basis of future research and theory.³ A literature review potentially enables a synthesis of the latest knowledge, which in turn allows the quality and relevance of the current research evidence to be appraised.⁴ There are a variety of ways of carrying out a literature review. For example, a structured or a semi-structured literature review or a scoping study. A structured literature review that offers a summary of a number of different studies and may draw some conclusions.⁵ Meanwhile, a systematic review is “a specific, carefully defined approach to the literature review,” and it is argued that this method should only be applied when they can provide valid means to summarise the literature.⁶ The favoured approach of this paper is the semi-structured literature review.⁷ The literature review seeks to track the evolving academic definition and operational practice in academic and popular revolutionary and information warfare texts. Theory and practice invariably evolve along with, and because of changes in the society in which it exists and operates through being tested and contested in the arena of academic definition and practical operationalisation.

The research question based upon the literature review and the resulting methodology: What is the relationship between information warfare and regime change? A second follow up question: Has this operational and theoretical relationship changed or remained constant?

Contemporary Developments of the Practice of Regime Change

The end of the Cold War in 1991 saw the collapse of the bipolar world order and the emergence of a unipolar global order with the uncontested supremacy of the U.S. military, whose political and economic might no actor was able to challenge. In practical terms, this meant that the United States could do what it wanted without any checks and balances in the international system, which is precisely what it did. However, the excessive operational (mis)use of regime change and information warfare

1 Gelman 1996, 117.

2 Ibid.

3 Snyder 2019, 339.

4 Gough 2007; Snyder 2019.

5 Armitage, Keeble-Ramsay 2009.

6 Bearman et al. 2012, 638.

7 Mullins, Spence 2003; Pawar, Spence 2003.

has contributed to the relative decline of U.S. power and the gradual emergence of a multipolar global order.¹ Therefore, the following examples of contemporary information warfare and regime change are taking place in a different qualitative environment of international relations.

The Colour Revolutions represent a regime change cascade that occurred in the post-Soviet space from 2000 (in Serbia) until 2005 (in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan). These regime changes had different outcomes and were viewed in different value-normative perspectives. There were debates as to the “real” causes of the Colour Revolutions, such as Lucan Way’s argument that structural factors (a single category of casual factors) and not electoral and diffusion dynamics were responsible for the successful regime changes.² Meanwhile, V. Bunce and S. Wolchik state that structure, agency and process, such as the effort and role of transnational coalitions of activists, where ideas are diffused to destabilise the incumbent political power, are all important.³ This idea goes against Way, as it states that electoral breakthroughs come about via practical questions or concerns rather than abstract structural influences. The importance of how stakeholders perceive reality, as opposed to how reality actually is, can be overlooked when over-theorising events and processes in the physical realm.

Therefore, Western scholars and observers tended to see the Colour Revolutions as a political phenomenon, where success depended on a united and organised political opposition and an alternative ideological and political agenda to the targeted government.⁴ This is often viewed within the cover narrative of “promoting democracy” in the targeted country and government,⁵ where there is often no tangible or meaningful change in the wake of a successful regime change with the exception of a more pro-Western government.⁶

The elites in the target countries also learnt from the successes and failures of regime change in the Colour Revolutions cascade how to counter the subversion tactics employed against their governments.⁷ Astute Western observers understood why the Colour Revolutions ultimately failed, as, despite the narrative of promoting democracy, none of the successful regime changes produced a successful consolidated democratic government. The underlying reason for this failure is that “too often, the Colour Revolution governments acted above or with little regard to the democratic standard to which they held their predecessors.”⁸ In other words, there was no or limited application of the rule of law and no foreign Western government supporting the regime change held them to account.

Other, primarily non-Western interpretations of the goals and purposes of the Colour Revolutions did not see the supposed benevolence of the interfering state. Various Russian observers noted the role and importance of social media and new media (supporting the “opposition”) in the political trends and processes involved

1 Simons 2020.

2 Way 2008.

3 Bunce, Wolchik 2009.

4 Lane 2009.

5 Kudlenko 2015; Virkovskiy et al. 2019.

6 Lane 2009.

7 Beacháin, Polese, 2010.

8 Melinda Haring, and Michael Cecire, “Why the Colour Revolutions Failed,” *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2013, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/18/why-the-color-revolutions-failed/>.

in the Colour Revolutions, coupled with the diminishing role and influence of traditional media (supporting the government).¹ In contrast to the projected Western view of the Colour Revolutions, China and Russia tended to view and understand them within a geopolitical context. Although domestic factors (such as corruption, poverty and rising levels of inequality) were seen as contributing to the attempts at regime change, the role and actions of Western powers (and the United States in particular), as well as their covert manipulation tactics, were understood and viewed with greater concern, as they posed a potential risk to the foreign and domestic policies of the Chinese and Russian political systems.

In other words, the Colour Revolutions were viewed as an attempt on the part of the United States to preserve its geopolitical hegemony. The tactics were seen as an evolution from the hard power of mass violence and military conquest employed during the Cold War to less violent tactics that employed soft power tactics to try and disarm the target government.² Colour Revolutions tended to threaten the leader of the political system, but not the political elites, with the system itself remaining almost exactly the same. In this sense, the Colour Revolutions differed greatly from the next regime change cascade, the Arab Spring.

Even the brand name, Arab Spring, is a symbolic informational mechanism that is intended to manage the expectations of the target audience, where spring is association with a season of growth in temperate climates. The Arab Spring is another example of a regime change cascade that was heavily supported by information and revolutionary warfare to induce regime change across selected countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It employed soft and hard power, at times in parallel, in to achieve the desired regime change, while maintaining a façade of ethical and moral legitimacy for foreign policy actions that would not be acceptable if placed under critical scrutiny. Some of the general causes for the Arab Spring revolutions included: the protracted stay in power by some of the region's political leaders; the religious factor of an Islamic awakening; poor governance and corruption; human rights abuses; a weak constitutional framework; and foreign interference.³

When a targeted government succumbs quickly to regime change, the process is mostly covert and only the public information warfare façade is noticed. However, when a targeted government resists the attempts at subversion, the tactics are rapidly escalated to include a large-scale propaganda campaign through the mainstream media in the information realm to shape the cognitive realm of the audience;⁴ or the increased use of covert actions supporting proxy forces, such as arming

1 Voronova, Trushin 2021.

2 Karpovich et al. 2015; Zollmann 2017.

3 Muftau 2016.

4 Robert Fisk, "The Syrian Conflict is Awash With Propaganda – Chemical Warfare Bodies Should not be Caught up in it," *The Independent*, February 27, 2020, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-war-chemical-weapons-watchdog-opcw-assad-damascus-russia-a9262336.html>; Ian Cobain, and Alice Ross, "Revealed: the British Government's Covert Propaganda Campaign in Syria," *Middle East Eye*, February 19, 2020, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-british-government-covert-propaganda-campaign-syria>; Matthew Alford, Florian Zollman, Alan MacLeod, Jeffrey Klaehn and Daniel Broudy, "How Western Media Support State Terror – Millions Die," *Peace News*, August 1, 2019, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://peacenews.info/node/9433/how-western-media-support-state-terror--while-millions-die>; Jeremy Salt, "The End of Truth as We Know it – or Knew it," *BS News*, March 9, 2019, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://bsnews.info/the-end-of-truth-as-we-know-it-or-knew-it/>.

the jihadist forces in Syria,¹ in order to shift the balance of power in the physical realm; or direct and overt military intervention, as in the case of Libya (for ‘humanitarian’ reasons) or Syria (under the pretext of the branded Global War on Terror). Successful regime change during the Arab Spring in terms of international values and norms (human rights, democracy, etc.) would typically be followed by a noticeable drop-off in media coverage and political opinion.

However, the objective result and the projected and interpreted subjective result are two very different things. The case of Libya illustrates this point perfectly. Many thousands in the country have died following their ‘liberation’ and many tens of thousands more have been displaced. The country is evolving into a geopolitical shatter belt in the form of a protracted civil war after the regime change.² As with the Colour Revolutions, the Russian view was that this regime change cascade was aligned more with geopolitical games than human liberation.³ The results of the Arab Spring have been rebranded the Arab Winter, having ultimately failed to deliver on their promises (according to the Western narrative) of liberation and democracy.

There are also various examples of non-cascade regime changes taking place around the world in the 21st century that are selectively waged in the name of such values and norms as human rights, democracy, freedom of choice and other projected ‘universal values’ for geopolitical gain. Some of these revolutions and regime changes exhibited similarities with the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring. One such example is Euromaidan (also known as the Revolution of Dignity), where new information and communications technologies and social media played a critical role in the rapid priming and mobilisation of mass crowds onto the streets against the targeted government led by President V. Yanukovich, as well as in the internal and external communication, coordination and organisation of the events.⁴

The international dimension of the ensuing competition for influence in determining Ukraine’s future among foreign actors did not simply start in 2014. Rather, it was evident much earlier. These aspects of geopolitical self-interest tend to be wrapped in less obtrusive and more appealing value and norm-based narratives.⁵ The U.S.-led West was able to control the flows of information in the mainstream Western media in order to give a sense of legitimacy to the regime change agenda and thus de-legitimise the regime defenders. This led to the operational success of the regime change, but has left the country in a protracted state of war ever since.

The events in Belarus starting in early 2020 also hint at an attempt at regime change using the Colour Revolution technologies as a way to oust incumbent President A. Lukashenko and make way for the ‘leader of the opposition’ S. Tikhanovskaya (in a similar vein to what was attempted in Venezuela). There have been attempts

1 Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, “Islamic State Weapons in Yemen Traced Back to U.S. Government: Serbia Files (part one),” Arms Watch, September 1, 2019, accessed September 14, 2019, www.armswatch.com/islamic-state-weapons-in-yemen-traced-back-to-us-government-serbia-files-part-1/; Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, “U.S. Task Force Smoking Gun Smuggles Weapons to Syria: Serbia Files (part two),” Arms Watch, September 2, 2019, accessed September 14, 2019, <https://armswatch.com/us-task-force-smoking-gun-smuggles-weapons-to-syria-serbia-files-part-2/>.

2 Doug Bandow, “Ten Years After Regime Change: Libyans are Dying Because of American Arrogance,” CATO Institute, May 11, 2020, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/ten-years-after-regime-change-libyans-are-dying-because-american-arrogance>.

3 Karpovich et al. 2015; Korotaev et al. 2012.

4 Bohdanova 2014.

5 Schoon et al. 2020.

to use popular economic grievances, the presumed lack of direct communication between the government and the people, a contested election and foreign support for regime change (notably from Poland and Lithuania) to mobilise the public.¹ Belarus is the target country, but the object appears to be to weaken Russia's military and economic potential by removing its allies and partners. However, the power of this form of subversion is negligible when all of the pieces are not aligned, and the leadership is not instantly cognitively overwhelmed.

In 2019, a series of revolutions and unrest swept through six continents of the globe, affecting various types of political regime across the spectrum in an unprecedented display of public mobilisation.² However, some of these events received more attention from the media and politicians than others. Long-term targets of U.S. regime change in Latin America include the governments of Cuba and Venezuela, with numerous and varied attempts having already taken place. Venezuela has been an ongoing regime change project, where the U.S. administrations (across all lines) have always served as a powerful broker that supports anti-government forces (often wealthy and right-wing) to subvert the N. Maduro government. But the tactics used by this group have tended to split the 'opposition' and unite the Chavistas.³ Several attempts at regime change took place in 2019–2020, such as the U.S.-backed and supported operations in Bolivia and Venezuela.

Once more, the United States used the pretext of an undemocratic election as a means to create a basis for the political subversion of the Venezuelan government by asserting that the 'leader of the opposition' J. Guaidó had 'won' the vote, even though he had boycotted the election. However, as with President of Syria B. al-Assad, the United States decided to meddle in the domestic politics and sovereignty of another country by claiming that the only thing to 'negotiate' was the departure of the sitting (anti-U.S.) president.⁴

Under the D. Trump presidency, and particularly when M. Pompeo was Secretary of State, the regime change agenda was given further priority. The usual political rhetoric was employed, where the narrative of a "free and democratic Venezuela" was projected.⁵ A window into the actual reasons and logic for regime change in Venezuela was given when the D. Trump administration publicly stated that it was willing to use overt military force⁶ (as in the Cold War with the Noriega Panama-scenario) or other forms of violent subversion.⁷ This created concern that the United

1 Simons 2020.

2 Robin Wright, "The Story of 2019: Protests in Every Corner of the Globe," *The New Yorker*, December 30, 2019, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-story-of-2019-protests-in-every-corner-of-the-globe>.

3 Mark Weisbrot, "The Truth About Venezuela: a Revolt of the Well-Off, Not a 'Terror Campaign,'" *The Guardian*, March 20, 2014, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/20/venezuela-revolt-truth-not-terror-campaign>.

4 G. Long, "Venezuela Government and Opposition Resume Oslo Talks," *Financial Times*, May 26, 2019, accessed May 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/f41af220-7fc3-11e9-b592-5fe435b57a3b>; G. Long, "Guaido Tries to Build Momentum for Bid to Oust Maduro," *Financial Times*, May 1, 2019, accessed May 13, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/3d30a5f4-6c28-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>; C. Yilek, "Pompeo Advocates for 'Free and Democratic' Venezuela After U.S. Diplomats Leave," *Washington Examiner*, March 14, 2019, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/pompeo-advocates-for-free-and-democratic-venezuela-after-u-s-diplomats-leave>.

5 C. Yilek, "Pompeo Advocates for 'Free and Democratic' Venezuela After U.S. Diplomats Leave."

6 J. Gehrke, "Pompeo: 'Military Force is Available' to Oust Maduro 'If that's What it Takes,'" *Washington Examiner*, April 30, 2019, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/pompeo-military-force-is-available-to-oust-maduro-if-thats-what-it-takes>.

7 Andrea Lobo, "Leaked Audio of Top Columbian Officials Exposes Failure of U.S. Coup Operation in Venezuela," *World Socialist Website*, November 23, 2019, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/11/23/colo-n23.html>.

States was going to resort once again to military force to effect regime change, this time in Venezuela.¹

D. Trump ultimately complained about being misled with promises of an easy regime change in the country, which that never happened. The biggest culprit was National Security Adviser J. Bolton, whose advice, the President claimed, could have got the United States embroiled in another war.² Deceptive and misleading information has been propagated that is intended to compromise the target government in the eyes of international public opinion, such as the story that claimed N. Maduro was responsible for burning a humanitarian aid convoy attempting to enter the country from Colombia.³ Proxy forces were also used to (unsuccessfully) kidnap President N. Maduro in a very public debacle that saw former U.S. soldiers and citizens captured after entering Venezuela illegally to carry out the operation.⁴

The mainstream media was condemned for not criticizing the increasingly aggressive stance of the D. Trump administration towards regime change in Venezuela and not holding the abuse of power to account. If anything, the media proved to be complicit in and supportive of war and creating a fog of information around the events.⁵ The attempt at regime change was ultimately unsuccessful, although efforts to topple the government there continue. The attempted regime change in Bolivia, on the other hand, was initially successful. However, it highlighted the inherent problems in the attempts at regime changes undertaken by the United States in the 21st century.

In the end, the U.S.-backed coup in Bolivia failed, although the elected leftist leader E. Morales (an irritant to U.S. foreign policy and interests) was violently deposed by a group of right-wing coup leaders backed by the military. The coup and regime change were supported publicly by the United States and its allies. However, they failed to consolidate their power and lost in the democratic election when the people of Bolivia voted overwhelmingly to reject the coup government installed by the United States and re-elected the Movement for Socialism (MAS) party.⁶ The United States employed more Cold War-style hard power regime change tactics and through the use of a brutal military crackdown, as demonstrated in Chile. But in the end, the weaknesses and lack of appeal of the U.S. project was exposed and the attempt ultimately failed.

- 1 Barbara Boland, "Is Trump Using the U.S. Military for Regime Change in Venezuela?" *The American Conservative*, April 27, 2020, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/does-trump-want-regime-change-in-venezuela/>; Emma Ashford, and Matthew Kroenig, "Is the U.S. Government Back in the Business of Regime Change?" *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2020, accessed May 19, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/15/is-us-government-back-in-the-business-venezuela-of-regime-change-putin-russia-coronavirus/>.
- 2 A. Gearan, J. Dawsey, J. Hudson, and M. K. Seung, "A Frustrated Trump Questions His Administration's Venezuela Strategy," *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2019 (accessed May 13, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-frustrated-trump-questions-his-administrations-venezuela-strategy/2019/05/08/ad51561a-71a7-11e9-9f06-5fc2ee80027a_story.html.
- 3 Nicholas Casey, Christoph Koetti, and Deborah Acosta, "Footage Contradicts US Claim That Nicolas Maduro Burned Aid Convoy," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2019, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/10/world/americas/venezuela-aid-fire-video.html>.
- 4 G. Long, and K. Manson, "Venezuela Says Two U.S. Citizens Detained in Failed Plot," *Financial Times*, May 6, 2020, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/bb3e07c6-e928-474d-967f-aed987465915>; A. Faiola, K. DeYoung, and A.V. Herrero, "From a Miami Condo to the Venezuelan Coasts, How a Plan to 'Capture' Maduro Went Rogue," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2020, accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/from-a-miami-condo-to-the-venezuelan-coast-how-a-plan-to-capture-maduro-went-rogue/.
- 5 Alan MacLeod, "The 'Venezuelan People' are Whoever Agrees With Donald Trump," *FAIR*, January 31, 2019, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://fair.org/home/the-venezuelan-people-are-whomever-agrees-with-donald-trump/>; Gregory Shupak, "U.S. Media Erase Years of Chavismo's Gains," *FAIR*, February 20, 2019, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://fair.org/home/us-media-erase-years-of-chavismos-gains/>; Teddy Ostrow, "Zero Percent of Elite Commentators Oppose Regime Change in Venezuela," *FAIR*, April 30, 2019, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://fair.org/home/zero-percent-of-elite-commentators-oppose-regime-change-in-venezuela/>.
- 6 M. Benjamin, and N. J. S. Davies, "Ending Regime Change – in Bolivia and the World," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, October 28, 2020, accessed December 18, 2020, <https://fpif.org/ending-regime-change-in-bolivia-and-th-world/>.

China equates the threat of subversion of its political and social system during the Cold War period with the West's current strategy of "peaceful evolution," which is designed and intended to bring about a non-military approach to regime change. The intention is to export the notions of human rights and liberal democracy through the development of trade and economic ties.¹ However, China has observed that the U.S.-led West tends to employ hard power tactics to bring about regime change alongside or instead of the soft power approach, such as witnessed in Libya, Syria and Iraq. In 2019, China experienced a Colour Revolution-type event in Hong Kong that was allegedly triggered by the extradition law and selectively covered in a binary manner of 'good' and 'bad' by the Western mainstream media.

Furthermore, the Western mainstream media gave far more coverage to the events in Hong Kong (with China portrayed as a competitor) than to protests occurring in states considered to be clients of the United States (Chile, Ecuador and Haiti). This illustrates the importance not only of what is covered in the news, but also of what is omitted.² It has been noted that supposedly independent Western media outlets often collude with hegemonic powers for mutually beneficial (political and economic) gains.³

This has been presented as a contest between 'pro-democracy' ('good') and 'pro-China' ('bad') forces, of freedom against repression.⁴ The 'pro-democracy' protesters in Hong Kong wore black clothes to symbolise mourning and sorrow (while counter-protesters wore white clothes to distinguish themselves). This follows a long-standing tradition of sorts to use symbolic colours, as seen in the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring.⁵ Although the United States denied official involvement (plausible deniability to avoid possible military responses), the unrest in Hong Kong suited U.S. interests and was spurred on by them. Although there is evidence available in digital sources that would suggest the opposite, beyond the creation and maintenance of obvious props as key influencers such as J. Wong as the 'public face' of the subversion.⁶

Conclusions

Two research questions have been posed in this article: 1) What is the relationship between information warfare and regime change? 2) Has this operational and theoretical relationship changed or remained constant? In short, the answer is that there is a close observable relationship between information warfare and regime change, as the physical, informational and cognitive realms are all connected and influence the perceptions and reactions of stakeholders. An evolution in the conceptualisation, political use and practical application of information warfare

1 Ong 2007.

2 Alan MacLeod, "With People in the Streets Worldwide, Media Focus Uniquely on Hong Kong," FAIR, December 6, 2019, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://fair.org/home/with-people-in-the-streets-worldwide-media-focus-uniquely-on-hong-kong/>.

3 Shen Yi, "How Western Media Promotes Colour Revolution: a Case Study of Hong Kong," Global Times, September 9, 2019, accessed September 11, 2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1164100.shtml>.

4 E. Bufkin, "Hong Kong Police Threaten Use of Live Ammunition on Pro-Democracy Protesters," Washington Examiner, November 17, 2019, accessed November 21, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/hong-kong-police-threaten-use-of-live-ammunition-on-pro-democracy-protesters>.

5 Heike Mund, "Orange, Green or Black: the Colours of Revolutions," DW, August 16, 2019, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/orange-green-or-black-the-colors-of-revolutions/a-50050659>.

6 Tony Cartalucci, "U.S. is Behind Hong Kong Protests Says U.S. Policymaker," Land Destroyer Report, September 10, 2019, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://landdestroyer.blogspot.com/2019/09/us-is-behind-hong-kong-protests-says-us.html>.

and regime change can also be observed, and there are various reasons for this. But there are also some observable constants too.

Western information warfare has played a critical role in regime change in the 21st century. This concerns the ability of the information realm to impose the interpretation and projection of the physical realm and its 'realities' onto the cognitive realm of its target audience. There are two sides to information warfare and its intended effect: 1) to legitimise military/paramilitary attempts to subvert a target government and thereby increase their offensive operational freedom of choice; and 2) to de-legitimise the target government and therefore limit its operational freedom of choice when it comes to self-defence. This creates an Orwellian double speak, where deception is the truth, regime change is freedom, and the U.S.-supported opposition is democracy.

During the Cold War, the narrative was that the United States and its allies were working to prevent the spread of communism in the 'free' world. This notion has evolved in the post-Cold War period of 'universal' values and norms to the narrative that the West is spreading 'democracy' and 'freedom' to the unfree world. This concerns the ability to prime and mobilise (and, in the case of an opponent demobilise) audiences to fulfil the foreign policy agenda and secure the associated national interests. This is done under increasing strain in the 21st century due to the decline in the global power and influence of Western civilisation, and U.S. hegemony in particular, through attempts to stymie the rise of Chinese and Russian influence and thus retain a relative military and political advantage regionally and globally. So, this has moved from the goal of an offensive push towards absolute global hegemony (the 'end of history') to a defensive attempt to slow thwart the rise of competitors and keep hold of its hegemonic position.

As noted by H. Hale, this "leads to a sobering conclusion that the notion of democratising regime change cascade may be a reflection of our hopes more than of hard reality."¹ The difference in here, of course, lies in the space between the emotional hopes of the general public and the more cynical and pragmatic desires of the private plans and intentions of the political elite. Historically, regime change operations have given actors a strong incentive to use covert acts to reduce the potential material, economic and reputational costs of a direct intervention.² In this respect, little has changed since the Cold War in the contemporary environment of subversion and regime change in the 21st century.

The contemporary approach to regime change and information warfare adopted by the West is to unleash an all-out attack on the cognitive realm of the target through the informational realm, thus preventing policymakers and practitioners from adequately responding to the impending physical threat. This is coupled with priming and energising those actors and elements that are working for regime change. Information and communications technologies are used to help bring about regime change through methods of information warfare. The speed of information warfare is potentially so great, and its reach so massive that it can cognitively overwhelm a defender. However, the longer a defender manages to survive, the less likely

1 Hale 2013, 349.

2 O'Rourke 2020, 94.

the attempted regime change is to work, as the financial, political and reputational costs increase and the chances of sustaining the façade of legitimacy shrink.

Consequently, regime change and information warfare (employing elements of soft power) may take a step backwards in their evolution to earlier iterations that include the militarised variants of the Cold War (the reliance on hard power), which we have seen in the case of Libya, where NATO helped to eventually bring about a 'successful' regime change, as well as in the ongoing Syrian conflict. Previous examples of regime change and information warfare provide lessons for both attackers and defenders. For example, a government that is communicationally isolated from the population is vulnerable to losing the cognitive contest, as it does not or cannot compete in the informational realm with its attackers for the perceptions and opinions of stakeholders. The motivations and reasoning behind regime change and information warfare essentially remain unchanged, which are to serve national interest and pursue foreign policy objectives.

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Received: December 18, 2020. Accepted: March 1, 2021.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

To cite the article

Simons, Greg. "The Evolution of Regime Change and Information Warfare in the 21st Century."

Journal of International Analytics 11, no. 4 (2020): 72–90.

<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-4-72-90>

Эволюция концепции смены режима и информационные войны XXI века

АННОТАЦИЯ

Хотя информация не является новым явлением, сопровождающим вооруженные конфликты, скорость ее распространения и влияния на широкую аудиторию и, следовательно, ее потенциальная опасность растет в связи с быстрым развитием информационно-коммуникационных технологий. Примеры смены режима и информационных войн существуют в истории организованных человеческих обществ с давних времен. Проведенный обзор научной литературы демонстрирует сегодня большой интерес к этим концепциям в академическом, политическом и практическом планах. В настоящей статье предпринята попытка проследить эволюцию концептуального осмысления смены режима и проблематики информационной войны, а также ставится задача выявить факторы, влияющие на связь информационной политики и смены режимов. Высокий уровень развития информационно-коммуникационных технологий и сохраняющееся глобальное лидерство позволили Соединенным Штатам участвовать в смене неудобных правительств и информационных войнах более эффективно, хотя и не без рисков. Автор рассматривает наиболее показательные примеры такого воздействия и на их основе приходит к выводу о том, что мы наблюдаем сдвиг мотивации от наступательной позиции (стремление распространить влияние) к оборонительной (стремление помешать другим международным акторам добиться сходного влияния в мировой политике) на глобальном уровне.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

гибридная война, информационная война, политическая война, смена режима, эволюционирующий мировой порядок, информационные операции

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Дополнительная информация

Поступила в редакцию: 18 декабря 2020. Принята к публикации: 1 марта 2021.

Конфликт интересов

Автор заявляет об отсутствии потенциального конфликта интересов.

Цитирование

Саймонс, Г. Эволюция концепции смены режима и информационные войны XXI века // Международная аналитика. – 2020. – Том 11 (4). – С. 72–90.
<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-4-72-90>