The Dark Art of Political Warfare: A Primer

By Hal Brands

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Key Points

- The United States can apply lessons from Cold War political warfare—the employment of all means short of war to achieve national objectives—to modern competition with China and Russia.

- Political warfare offers diverse policy options that can either supplement or replace military action and can be applied to minimalist and maximalist and offensive and defensive strategies.

- Political warfare’s relatively low cost makes it an attractive option for policymakers and states operating under budget constraints.

- An understanding of political warfare is essential to succeed in the intellectual, as well as geopolitical, aspects of modern great-power competition.

Political warfare is the next big thing in US foreign policy. For years, America’s authoritarian rivals have waged aggressive political warfare campaigns against the United States and its allies. China and Russia are using cyberattacks, economic coercion, disinformation, election meddling, and other tactics to disrupt and destabilize the political systems of America and other guardians of the international order. As a result, warnings about the need to defend more vigorously against authoritarian political warfare have grown louder. Calls have also emerged for the United States to go on the offensive, waging political warfare against China and Russia just as they wage political warfare against the US.

The possibility of actively waging political warfare against China and Russia is a high-stakes issue. It demands as much analytical clarity as the national security community can muster. Yet if political warfare is an idea whose time has come, it is also an idea that remains vague and unspecified. Analysts often use the term without adequately defining it.

Frequently lost in discussions of political warfare is just how many forms it can take and how many crucial dimensions there are along which it can vary. This is problematic because it leads to incomplete or superficial policy debates. But differently, if the idea of waging political warfare against China and Russia is on the table, American strategists must fully grasp what that entails.

Here history can be useful. During the Cold War, political warfare was a way of life for the United States. At two key moments during the Cold War, the United States undertook concerted political warfare campaigns meant to sow instability, division, and weakness in the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe—and even in the Soviet Union itself. One such campaign came during the first decade of the superpower struggle, between 1947 and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956; the other
came in the last decade of that conflict, during the presidencies of Jimmy Carter and especially Ronald Reagan.

During these periods, Washington employed an array of measures—radio broadcasts into the Soviet bloc, covert and paramilitary actions, economic denial policies, human rights campaigns, and many others—to undermine Communist rule and impose competitive costs on the Kremlin and its satellites. Throughout the Cold War, moreover, the United States used political warfare to harass, weaken, and overthrow Soviet-aligned governments in the Third World. (All this was in addition to US and allied efforts to resist Moscow’s offensive political warfare campaigns.) The history of US political warfare programs during the Cold War offers illustrations of what political warfare is and what forms it can take; it points to possibilities for waging political warfare today.3

Drawing on this history, this brief report seeks to advance the debate about political warfare in two ways. First, it clears away some conceptual confusion by briefly addressing how political warfare should be defined. Second, it offers a typology that allows us to classify political warfare initiatives according to nine key variables and distinctions. As this typology shows, political warfare is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Political warfare can be offensive or defensive, overt or covert, hard or soft, catalytic or corrosive, direct or indirect, unilateral or multilateral, governmental or nongovernmental, meant to restrain or provoke, and part of minimalist or maximalist strategies of competition.

Understanding the many flavors of political warfare can bring greater clarity to a crucial policy debate. More importantly, it can help policymakers wage political warfare better by showing them how diverse their options are.

**What Is Political Warfare?**

The most commonly used definition of political warfare remains one of the oldest. In 1948, George Kennan, director of policy planning at the State Department, wrote a memo calling for the “inauguration of organized political warfare” as part of the dawning competition against Moscow. According to Kennan:

Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP), and “white” propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements, “black” psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.4

The Cold War, Kennan believed, was a profound struggle in which combatants would use all “measures short of war” to “exert pressure on one another for the attainment of their ends.”5

Kennan was an early architect of America’s political warfare campaign against the Soviet Union, and his ideas remain so influential because they captured several central characteristics of that undertaking: that it represents a primarily non-kinetic approach to achieving important strategic ends; that it cuts across the tools of national power and the foreign policy bureaucracy; that it can be used to influence friends, neutrals, and adversaries; that it can be highly coercive in nature, even though it does not involve the overt use of force; and that it takes place in the no-man’s-land between outright conflict and tranquility. For Kennan, political warfare represented the totality of measures America should take to protect itself in a cold war every bit as dangerous as a hot war.

If anything, Kennan’s definition was too inclusive because read literally—“the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives”—it is indistinguishable from peacetime foreign policy as a whole. It is therefore helpful to refine Kennan’s definition slightly. Political warfare is the use, as part of a broader strategy of competition, of measures short of war to enhance one’s influence and disadvantage, destabilize, or defang an adversary.

This definition more explicitly emphasizes activities against a specific opponent or opponents as part of an ongoing rivalry. It also excludes those activities, such as humanitarian intervention,
climate change diplomacy, or run-of-the-mill foreign policy initiatives, that are essential to achieving a nation’s objectives but cannot be called political warfare in the sense Kennan intended.

This framing makes clear why discussions of political warfare are so ubiquitous: because revisionist countries that see themselves locked in competition against America are using tactics short of military confrontation to strengthen their positions and weaken their rivals. Yet political warfare is complex and varied, and even this refined version of Kennan’s definition remains remarkably broad. A better understanding of political warfare should thus include a more systematic effort to break that concept down, along nine key dimensions. The remainder of this report does so by using examples from America’s experience with political warfare during the Cold War and some illustrative ideas about how political warfare might look in current competitions against China and Russia.

**Offensive vs. Defensive**

The first and most basic distinction is between offense and defense. Defensive efforts are meant to frustrate an adversary’s political warfare initiatives and protect one’s society (or allies) from malign influence. In 1948, for instance, the United States hurriedly assembled a defensive political warfare campaign—involving economic assistance, support for friendly politicians, public diplomacy, and other measures—to reduce the possibility of Communist political takeovers in Italy and France. As the Cold War progressed, Washington deployed counterintelligence measures and coordinating mechanisms, such as the Reagan-era Active Measures Working Group, to identify and combat Soviet disinformation. Today, an example of defensive political warfare is efforts to identify and counter Russian electoral meddling.

Offensive political warfare, by contrast, means taking the fight to the adversary by destabilizing an enemy regime, raising its costs of doing business, or otherwise undermining its ability to compete. As Kennan argued in 1949, the twin goals of political warfare were “holding our own world together as well as increasing the disruptive strains in the Soviet world.” During the Cold War, Washington used a wide array of techniques—covert support for violent and nonviolent resistance to Communist rule, information warfare and economic denial policies, human rights diplomacy, and other ideological pressures—to increase those strains.

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Analysts have suggested various possibilities for waging offensive political warfare in today’s competitions: sanctioning corrupt or repressive officials, introducing (or amplifying) unbiased information into the Chinese and Russian systems, supporting advocates of internal liberalization, and even pursuing covert measures to foment instability. Critically, the goal of an offensive strategy need not be to overthrow the Chinese or Russian governments (although that could be an objective). It could simply aim to divert their attention and energy, increased domestic and diplomatic difficulties, and disadvantage them in strategic competition.

With assertiveness comes risk, of course: Offensive political warfare initiatives that strike at authoritarian regimes’ weaknesses may provoke a sharp response. The Kremlin showed that it was willing to violently repress unrest in its sphere of influence by putting down upheaval in East Germany in 1953 and a full-on rebellion in Hungary in 1956. Even at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s, American officials had to worry about “how much we should poke at the animal through the bars of the cage.”

The competitive benefits of any offensive political warfare strategy thus have to be weighed against the risks of triggering unwanted escalation—whether by provoking counterattacks against the American political system, disrupting
the larger diplomatic relationship, or even triggering a bloodbath against US-supported actors. And as was the case during the Cold War, any strategy for offensive political warfare requires considering several other key variables and distinctions.

**Overt vs. Covert**

We often think of political warfare as something that happens in the shadows, and previous campaigns have indeed had a vital covert component. In the late 1940s, the Harry S. Truman administration’s defensive efforts in Italy and France involved covert support to friendly trade unions and political parties. On the offensive side, the CIA and Office of Policy Coordination ran clandestine campaigns to infiltrate armed émigrés back into Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in hopes of destabilizing Communist regimes; decades later, US support for the Solidarity movement in Poland was also carried out covertly. In the Third World, covert operations against regimes such as Fidel Castro’s Cuba and Sandinista Nicaragua were mainstays of Cold War strategy.

Political warfare involves sharp competition short of outright war. Covert methods are valuable because they enable one to act more aggressively or in more sensitive areas than would otherwise be possible.

Yet political warfare can take place in the sunshine, not just in the shadows. Ronald Reagan’s rhetorical offensive against the Soviet Union in the 1980s was political warfare in that it was intended to increase the ideological pressure on Moscow and its satellites, and it was carried out entirely in public. Meanwhile, the National Endowment for Democracy supported trade unions and civil society in Poland, financed opposition newspapers in Nicaragua, and otherwise worked to promote liberalization in the Communist bloc. Its programs, too, were conducted more or less overtly. The calculation was that, in a global ideological contest with Moscow, unembarrassed support for democratic values was itself a form of pressure. The United States could throw the competition off-balance simply by standing up for its own best traditions and values.

One can imagine possibilities for waging both covert and overt political warfare today. Shadowy efforts might include initiatives to hamper Chinese web censorship and encourage the freer flow of ideas in that society. Washington could also pressure authoritarian regimes through overt initiatives, such as supporting human rights activists, demanding that Russian officials permit free and fair elections, and denouncing authoritarian abuses when they occur.

If a key goal of political warfare is to exploit the weaknesses of a competitor’s regime, then initiatives that openly and forthrightly target an autocracy’s worst tendencies can be particularly powerful. They can also help avoid a constant danger of covert initiatives—that they will be exposed and publicized, with all the blowback that follows.

**Hard vs. Soft**

Political warfare can be a bluntly coercive form of statecraft. In the early Cold War, US officials used harsh economic denial policies to create strains in the Soviet bloc by limiting access to key commodities. They strongly condemned the human rights violations of Eastern European governments, and they supported partisan forces in places from Albania to Ukraine. Such initiatives represent “hard” political warfare: They undermine an opponent by exerting pressure and inflicting pain. In today’s competitions, equivalent initiatives might include punitive tariffs meant to weaken Chinese economic growth or aggressive public diplomacy campaigns meant to delegitimize the Russian and Chinese regimes at home and abroad.

Yet political warfare can also be “soft.” It can weaken opponents not by directly confronting or pressuring them but by using more creative approaches—including inducements—to expose and exacerbate weaknesses.

The Marshall Plan, for instance, was soft political warfare. It was intended, in part, to subvert the Soviet empire through the profoundly unorthodox approach of offering to include Moscow and its satellites in the reconstruction of Europe. As Kennan understood, this offer would confront Stalin with a Hobson’s choice: Accept Marshall Plan aid, thereby opening up Eastern Europe to Western influence, or reject it, thereby earning the enmity of populations that desperately needed reconstruction assistance. The Kremlin took the latter approach, showing the brutal, exploitive face of its
hegemony in Eastern Europe, and creating a legitimacy deficit that plagued it for decades.

How might soft political warfare look today? Consider one relatively recent initiative: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Although the Barack Obama administration often described TPP as a means of preventing China from dominating the Asia-Pacific, it was originally conceived in the George W. Bush years as something more subtly subversive.

The idea was to create a thriving community that China would feel forced to join lest its own competitiveness erode and its neighbors reorient their economies away from Beijing. Joining TPP, in turn, would require Beijing to make deep economic reforms, which would undermine the regime’s control of the economy and, perhaps, the political system.9 TPP never came into being, so it is hard to say how this would have worked out. Nonetheless, it is an example of an initiative that seeks to subtly subvert an authoritarian regime.

**Catalytic vs. Corrosive**

The most spectacular forms of political warfare are catalytic: They are meant to trigger some dramatic near-term change. Cold War-era operations designed to bring down hostile regimes in Guatemala, Iran, and other countries fit this mold. So did some prominent US propaganda initiatives.

In 1953, US-sponsored radio broadcasts spread awareness of severe unrest in East Germany in hopes of encouraging other East German citizens to protest Soviet domination. The CIA-sponsored publication of Nikita Khrushchev’s secret de-Stalinization speech in 1956 had a similar motive, and it indeed intensified the upheaval that convulsed the Soviet bloc that year. The idea, CIA Director Allen Dulles commented, was “to keep the pot boiling.”10

Catalyzing dramatic near-term change in authoritarian societies is difficult, however, and efforts to do so can bring down harsh repression on those societies’ populations. After all, the Soviets successfully repressed the East German riots in 1953 and the Hungarian uprising three years later. Some of America’s most successful political warfare initiatives were thus more “corrosive” than catalytic.

These initiatives focused on cost imposition rather than transformation. Their goal was simply to keep discontent in the Soviet bloc simmering, air the failings of the Communist regimes before a larger domestic and global audience, and increase the strain on those governments over time.

The classic example of this approach was broadcasting by Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. By providing accurate information on the abuses and failures of Soviet bloc regimes, one CIA official later observed, the broadcasts would not “quickly bring the walls of the dictatorships tumbling down like those of Jericho.” But they might “over time improve the chances for gradual change toward more open societies.”11

The catalytic versus corrosive distinction can help frame debates about how to wage political warfare against China and Russia today. Washington probably could not incite significant near-term upheaval in either country; trying might be quite dangerous. But America could take steps, such as creating greater awareness in Russia of Putin’s corruption and the human toll of his war in Ukraine or dredging up reminders of Tiananmen Square and other crimes of the Chinese Communist Party, that could potentially challenge these regimes’ legitimacy over time.

Successful political warfare does not necessarily involve stimulating outright revolt. It can simply entail pursuing policies that, gradually and cumulatively, erode the foundations and sap the competitive potential of a hostile regime.

**Direct vs. Indirect**

Some political warfare takes dead aim at one’s rival. Covert destabilization activities, support for antigovernment dissidents, and other such measures seek to weaken or impose costs on authoritarian regimes by directly targeting their weaknesses. But political warfare can also be indirect: It can attack authoritarian regimes by shaping the broader global milieu.

The late Cold War provides a good example. During the late 1970s and 1980s, the Carter and Reagan administrations undertook an array of initiatives—promoting human rights and democracy in countries worldwide and sponsoring covert action programs against Communist regimes in
Afghanistan and Nicaragua—that did not directly challenge the stability of the Soviet political system. Yet they nonetheless undermined that system by reversing the sense of ideological momentum Moscow had built during the 1970s, demonstrating—to observers in the Soviet Union and worldwide—that democracy, not Communism, was globally ascendant and thereby weakening the ideological narrative on which the Soviet system was based.

The relevant contemporary parallel might be efforts to strengthen democracy in the Russian and Chinese “near abroad.” By supporting the consolidation and protection of democratic institutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, the United States can challenge Putinism in Russia by providing an unflattering contrast to the Kremlin’s “managed democracy.” By helping Taiwan maintain its sovereignty and protect its domestic institutions from Chinese meddling, the United States can challenge Beijing’s narrative that political democracy and traditional Chinese values cannot successfully coexist. In political warfare as in strategy, something can be said for the indirect approach.

**Unilateral vs. Multilateral**

The United States undertakes some political warfare initiatives alone. Many (but not all) covert operations against Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe and the Third World were carried out unilaterally, as were many covert and overt propaganda activities. The advantages of this approach are obvious: Unilateral action protects against a watered-down, least-common-denominator strategy for political warfare, and it preserves greater secrecy and operational security. This latter point was made painfully clear when the notorious British spy, Kim Philby, betrayed a number of joint US-British operations in the Soviet bloc in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The downside of unilateral approaches is that they may not have as much effect as a more broadly coordinated campaign. They may also unnerve or even alienate allies that see US policy as excessively provocative. As a result, Cold War-era administrations often attempted a multilateral approach.

Throughout the Cold War, NATO members worked—more or less effectively—to coordinate their approaches to trading with the enemy. During the early Cold War and again in the 1980s, for instance, the United States pushed its allies to undertake multilateral economic warfare campaigns against Moscow in hopes of weakening the Kremlin’s economic potential and straining its relationships with Eastern European satellites. In both cases, those efforts resulted in greater multilateral pressure—but only after bitter debates in NATO led the United States to moderate its initial hard-line position. Likewise, during the 1980s American diplomats such as Max Kampelman worked closely with European allies to develop a coordinated Western critique of Soviet-bloc human rights abuses, on grounds that this “counter-ideological attack” would be stronger if it represented a common NATO position.

US officials will confront similar trade-offs in the coming years. The more Washington perceives a need to pursue forward-leaning, covert political warfare initiatives against Beijing and Moscow, the greater the temptation to pursue them unilaterally. But the broader and more multilateral those initiatives are, the sharper the effect they are likely to have.

**Governmental vs. Nongovernmental**

Like most aspects of US foreign policy, political warfare is normally conducted by official or quasi-official state organs, including the CIA, State Department, and National Endowment for Democracy. Political warfare, however, can also be a nongovernmental affair.

In the last decade of the Cold War, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) subverted the Soviet bloc by supporting organized labor and civil disobedience in Poland. It did so in parallel with a covert CIA program. But the AFL-CIO conducted this campaign for its own reasons, and its president, Lane Kirkland, had a famously poisonous relationship with Ronald Reagan.

Nongovernmental actors have also played prominent roles in defensive political warfare. In recent years, cybersecurity firms and independent experts in the United States and other Western countries have exposed malign Russian internet activity.

For US rivals, in fact, nongovernmental actors can be dangerous and implacable enemies. Beijing
complained furiously in 2012 when the New York Times revealed massive corruption by the Chinese elite, fearing—with good reason—that the exposé would trigger public anger at the regime. The Kremlin has long accused US and Western nongovernmental organizations that support human rights and civil society of seeking to destroy Putin’s sovereign democracy.

To be clear, Russian and Chinese officials seem to believe the US government is really pulling the strings in these cases—far more so than is actually the case. But this belief simply reinforces that authoritarian regimes take the nongovernmental aspects of political warfare quite seriously. Indeed, some of the most nettlesome tools of American political warfare—in the eyes of Washington’s competitors, at least—may be those that the US government does not actually control.

**Provoke vs. Restrain**

Political warfare initiatives differ in the reaction they aim to elicit. Political warfare can restrain an adversary—for example, dissuading an authoritarian government from repressing its population by imposing economic sanctions or simply publicizing its crimes. Radio Free Europe broadcasts could not physically prevent Communist regimes from abusing their citizens, writes one analyst.

But if [a government] raised prices by decree, or jailed a dissident writer, or ordered its police to shoot striking workers, it would do so with the knowledge that the action would be covered by a free, uncensored, and widely credible radio station.16

In the same vein, Magnitsky Act sanctions against Russian officials involved in human rights abuses or congressional proposals to sanction Chinese officials involved in repressing that country’s Uighur minority can be seen as efforts to restrain rival regimes by raising the costs of autocratic behavior.

Conversely, political warfare can aim to provoke an adversary into doing something self-defeating. In the 1950s, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Vice President Richard Nixon argued that it could be a good thing if US-backed destabilization programs goaded the Soviets into bloody crackdowns in Eastern Europe because those crackdowns would forever tarnish Moscow’s image within and beyond the bloc. “Every time naked Soviet power, military or otherwise, has to be exercised owing to the failure or unreliability of the puppet authorities,” one secret analysis argued, “we should consider this a major psychological victory.”

Similarly, as US-China competition becomes a struggle for global hearts and minds in the coming decades, America could conceivably benefit from pursuing hypothetical policies—supporting separatists in Tibet or Xinjiang—meant to provoke the Chinese government into a repressive response that would discredit Beijing in the eyes of the world. A clever, if cold-blooded, political warfare strategy can effectively trap an authoritarian competitor. It can present that government with challenges that it must either tolerate, at a cost to internal stability, or brutally repress, at a cost to its moral credibility and global prestige.

The morality of this approach is, of course, incredibly fraught. Policymakers who wage political warfare in hopes of provoking an authoritarian regime need to understand that success may come at a horrible cost for those who live under the autocrat’s boot.

**Minimalist vs. Maximalist**

Finally, political warfare initiatives can vary in how they fit into a country’s larger strategy. Because political warfare is usually relatively low cost—covert action and psychological operations are less expensive than a major military buildup—it can be attractive to policymakers trying to compete on a budget. When the Truman administration was determined to hold military expenditures down in the late 1940s, it waged the Cold War primarily through nonmilitary tools and political warfare methods that were seen as affordable ways of holding the line and selectively exerting pressure on the enemy.

Yet if political warfare can thus be part of a “poor man’s strategy,” it can also be part of a more maximalist “rich man’s strategy.” Following the outbreak of the Korean War, the Truman administration used political warfare initiatives as a complement to an expensive military buildup and part of a strategy of comprehensive pressure against the Soviet Union. During the 1980s, the
Reagan administration’s political warfare campaign was one piece of a multipronged geopolitical offensive that included a major military buildup and enhanced competition in the Third World. The goal was not simply to hold the line but to maximize the strain on the Soviets as a prelude to winding down the Cold War on American terms.

Political warfare initiatives could fit into both minimalist and maximalist strategies today. If the United States resolves to devote the lion’s share of its resources to competing with China, then political warfare could be part of a cost-conscious strategy for imposing costs on Moscow and other rivals, such as Iran. Alternatively, a more ambitious approach might use political warfare methods as part of a multilateral pressure strategy aimed at rolling back Chinese and Russian influence overseas and perhaps even weakening their regimes at home.

**Conclusion**

Political warfare is likely to remain at the center of foreign policy debates in the coming years, as US rivalries with China and Russia deepen and American officials look to gain a competitive edge. Specific proposals for taking the offensive against Moscow and Beijing must be evaluated on their merits, which may well vary according to circumstances.

But a sharper understanding of political warfare—what it is and what its many possibilities are—is essential to framing those debates. Great-power rivalry is an intellectual test, as well as a geopolitical one. Getting political warfare right in our minds is a prerequisite to getting it right in practice.

**About the Author**

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**Notes**


3. The account that follows is based on a longer book project about the Cold War and its lessons regarding long-term competition. That book will contain a more extensive, and more thoroughly footnoted, account of Cold War-era political warfare.


9. An official who served in the State Department at the end of the George W. Bush years publicly explained this logic at a conference in Canberra, Australia, in July 2016.


12. The threat Taiwan poses to China, write Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, is more ideological than geopolitical. It comes largely “from Taiwan’s simply being what it is—a modern Chinese society that is economically prosperous and politically democratic.” Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 213.


