The First-Mover Disadvantage:

Nonlinear Stratagems & the Future of the Liberal International Order

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THE BIG IDEA: FIRST MOVER BEWARE

Following the Second World War, transformative projects like the Marshall Plan offered a more peaceable and cooperative vision of the future. They envisioned a world adjudicated by institutionalized norms devoted to the promotion of democratic rule, free enterprise, and global interconnection. The end of the Cold War appeared to bring the world a step closer to this objective. Recent events, however, mark a deviation from the ideal. Instead of directly challenging the existing international order, revisionist states employ non−linear stratagems to manipulate and creatively misuse existing rules and norms in order to reap strategic advantages. As the boundaries between internal politics and foreign affairs blur, emerging technologies, domestic political weaknesses, and global trade can all be used as geopolitical tools.

In this report, we argue that the propagation of non−linear stratagems is not merely a function of emerging technologies and globalization. Rather, these approaches propagate after revisionist states perceive the establishment of a precedent, usually by a great power. For example, offensive cyber tactics rose to prominence in Iranian strategic planning following the Stuxnet attack, which removed a perceived taboo against their use. States should therefore be wary of employing unconventional or asymmetric tactics, lest their use serve as an example for future infringements of global norms.

As a transformative vision of the emerging post-war global landscape, the Marshall Plan set an unrivaled standard for large-scale structural readjustment, fueling the reconstruction of a ravaged Europe whilst simultaneously establishing the framework for a liberal economic and social order. The Plan's positive-sum approach to international politics sought to overcome old and emerging rivalries, offering economic assistance to allies, vanquished adversaries, and even the Soviet Union. Its influence was not limited to economics: rather, the Marshall Plan succeeded where few others did, in encouraging the adoption of a series of cooperative norms and humanistic ideals. Few endeavors have served so prominent a role in bolstering interstate development, political integration, and ideological solidarity.

The Marshall Plan formed one of the basic pillars of the new liberal international order. Revanchism and a retaliatory mindset helped to set the stage for a second large-scale conflict in as many decades on the European continent. Seeking to avoid the mistakes of the past, this vision offered a propagation of peace and security through a virtuous cycle of self-interested cooperation. Drawing upon the considerable economic might of the United States to help build a more interconnected and pacific world, the resulting community of like-minded actors persists to this day. These bonds have since been strengthened thanks to a greater degree of interconnection brought about via advancements in information technology. The cooperative global village has shortened distances, opened new markets, and aided in the creation of a new cosmopolitan cultural community. Such were the basic transformative elements that sought to replace the old system of tit-for-tat transactionalism with more enduring loyalties.

Like any other overarching global vision, the Marshall Plan and its legacy are not without detractors. Challenges to this system partially defined the half-century of geopolitical and doctrinal conflicts that are today broadly aggregated under the epithet of "cold" war. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the termination of this conflict signaled a victory for this world view But the challenges persisted. Any transformative vision requires an element of hierarchy: one need only look at the legacy of Yalta in order to contextualize the victories brought about by the grand vision of George C. Marshall. And where hierarchies persist, challenges are to be expected. In our recent report (co-sponsored by the Iran Media Program and the Center for Global Communication Studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications), Peyman Majidzadeh and I explore the emergence of a host of "non-linear" stratagems aimed at exploiting pre-existing structural vulnerabilities in the liberal world order. Following the end of the Cold War, it was hoped that a more peaceable international system would emerge under the benevolent purview of American unipolarity. The legacy of the Marshall Plan contributed significantly to this aspiration. The envisioned order would seek to gradually transform acts of self-interested transactional cooperation into more enduring loyalties.

Non-linear stratagems represent a variation of this theme, albeit without the anticipated positive externalities. Operating on similar lines as realist international relations theories, such ploys seek to further the dual objectives of self-interest and state survival in an anarchic global system. Their use offers a new system of interstate balancing, one that does not have to rely on traditional forms of "hard" power (a contest in which most revisionist states would be at a disadvantage). We specifically use the term *stratagem* as opposed to *strategy* to emphasize the use of unconventional methods and artful schemes for the sake of achieving domestic and international political objectives.

Our report provides a general theoretical examination of such emerging stratagems, using recent Iranian and Russian behavior to shed light on the emerging risks and associated implications. Non-linear stratagems could offer an attractive way through which revisionist states such as China, Russia, and Iran can leverage unconventional tactics, emerging technologies, and the new realities of an increasingly interconnected world in order to simultaneously achieve domestic and foreign policy goals. The blurring of territorial lines, economic interdependence, and the information revolution have created new avenues through which self-interested states can hedge against one another. Instead of directly challenging the rules of international engagement, non-linear stratagems seek to bend and creatively interpret existing rules and norms in order to attain strategic advantages and benefits. Recent developments in Russian politics can serve as a guiding case study for this point. Consider, for instance, the "Gerasimov Doctrine," which played a central role in Russia's campaigns in the Donbas region during the 2014 Crimean conflict.

Instead of viewing the doctrine as a fundamentally new approach to the conduct of warfare (the so-called "hybrid" model, a concept rife with ambiguity and overlapping definitions), the operations in Crimea should be viewed within the larger context of Russian military strategy. As noted in Roger McDermott's insightful analysis[1] of the doctrine in his eponymous monograph, "Moscow shaped its operations in Ukraine not on the basis of any presumed *model*, but upon careful analysis of the operational environment. The operations reflected political constraints and restraints from the leadership in Moscow." Similarly, the adoption of non-linear stratagems and cyber operations represents a response to the restrictions faced by revisionist regimes in the context of their respective operational environments. Non-linear stratagems policies can best be understood as an evolutionary adaptation to pre-existing parametric constraints and the fear of indirect intervention by Western regimes.

This latter is a particularly common theme among the justificatory practices of the three major adopters of non-linear stratagems (Russia, China, and Iran), whose actions are self-identified as defensive countermeasures against perceived impositions on national sovereignty. The fear of subtle influence is a pervasive driving force for the adoption of non-linear actions, especially in situations where states feel that they are unable to match the conventional might of their perceived aggressor. This is noted in Charles Bartles' analysis[2] of the Gerasimov Doctrine:

> "Instead of an overt military invasion, the first volleys of a US attack come from the installment of a political opposition through state propaganda, the Internet and social media, and (NGOs). After successfully instilling political dissent, separatism, and/or social strife, the legitimate government has increasing difficulty maintaining order...Once the legitimate government is forced to use increasingly aggressive methods to maintain order, the United States gains a pretext for the imposition of economic and political sanctions, and sometimes even military sanctions such as no-fly zones, to tie the hands of the besieged governments and promote further dissent."

In the face of such fears, computer network operations provide several clear advantages to states, offering a cost-effective and plausibly deniable weapon that allows users to control escalation in a much more measured and deliberate way than that commonly afforded by conventional forces and tactics. Cyber weapons offer anonymity and tend to have a lower overall impact, which means that

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[1]McDermott, Roger N. "Does Russia have a Gerasimov doctrine?." Parameters 46.1 (2016): 97.
[2]Bartles, Charles K. "Getting Gerasimov Right." Military Review 96.1 (2016): 30.

there are fewer taboos associated with their use. Anonymity lends itself to the implementation of increasingly creative tools for subversion. At the core of this idea lies a reliance on deniability, using opaque means and obfuscation to prevent serious backlash and thwart the formation of a unified response. The Islamic Republic has recently taken steps towards the implementation of such stratagems.

The conservative religious ideology of the Islamic Republic has always been at odds with the presence of illicit content, "cultural imperialism," and subversive speech. Whilst there has been some divergence of opinion with respect to the extent to which content could be blocked or sanitized, the general reaction of regime authorities has tended to be reactive. Certain voices have suggested a pragmatic approach to dealing with the Internet (notably, seminary scholar Sheikh Ali Korani, who referred to the proliferation of access as a "reality Iran must learn to live with"). This would seem to fit well with the country's socio-economic conditions.

According to the World Bank, roughly 39 million Iranians had access to the Internet in 2014. 92% of citizens had access to mobile phones. 44.7% of urban households and 17.5% of rural households currently have access to the Internet, with the majority (61.5%) using mobile devices to connect to the web (45.9% reported using personal computers). Legislation passed in accordance with the Fifth and Sixth Development Plans has called for the connection of 25,000 more villages to the Internet in the near future, with a corresponding increase in national traffic bandwidth to 4000 gbps (a near doubling of the current national traffic bandwidth of 2400 gbps, and more than 19 times higher than the current bandwidth for international traffic, 207 gbps). Indeed, the Ministry of Communications has expressed a desire to increase national bandwidth by 80% for every 20% increase in the international bandwidth. The culmination of this sizable infrastructural investment is the planned expansion of Internet access to all villages with more than 20 households (accounting for some 36,000 villages) by June 2017. As it stands Iran possesses the second-highest bandwidth per capita in the Middle East and North Africa.

Compared to most oil-rich countries in the Middle East, Iran has a diversified economy, with a burgeoning technological and industrial sector that has provided some protection against the symptoms of Dutch disease. A by-product of such diversification can be seen in the need to reconcile security concerns with economic growth. Contradictions between the regime's economic and religious goals have driven often-opposing policies focused simultaneously on infrastructural expansion and content suppression. This duality may be responsible for the development of so-called "soft war" tactics that have sought to seek a middle ground between the at-times opposing motivations within different factions of the Islamic Republic. Following the Stuxnet attack in 2009, Iranian officials called for a concerted national effort to help defend the country against unconventional forms of influence and intervention. Ironically, it appears that part of the motivation for adopting a more aggressive approach to non-linear responses was the sentiment that the global hegemon had removed a practical barrier by setting a precedent for the offensive use of cyber weapons. The Stuxnet attack resolved the first-mover problem, emboldening revisionist minor powers to take similar actions. Since 2009, the Office of the Supreme Leader has made over 30 references to the soft war effort.

The self-described "Cyber Army" has been a key player in such efforts, though the extent to which the group has benefited from explicit government backing and support remains open to debate and interpretation. There remains a considerable degree of uncertainty with respect to the extent

to which the group can be considered a dedicated subsidiary of the armed forces as opposed to a symbolic public relations asset. Indeed, the regime has recently employed a policy of reticence with respect to the existence and mandate of the Cyber Army, leading to questions regarding the organization's role as a tool for influence. The nature and motivation of Cyber Army actors works towards the diffusion of boundaries between domestic and international politics, a frontier that was a key demarcation in classical international relations theory.

What lessons can be learned from the introduction of non-linear stratagems? Perhaps the strongest implication from recent events involves the importance of establishing and maintaining the international norms and customs that offer a disproportionate advantage to the adherents of the liberal international order. The codification of international conduct and the establishment of firm expectations for inter-state behavior can only serve the best interests of the order-setters. When these norms are warped or violated (for instance, by setting precedents that empower the use of relatively inexpensive tools for subversion by revisionist states), the very foundation on which the global order was created is weakened. The legacy of the Marshall Plan is one of large-scale cooperation and peace the likes of which has never been seen. It is imperative that the statutes and edicts that helped establish this order are not weakened by their very architects. As in any other case, adherence to the rule of law provides a firm defense against non-linear treasons, stratagems, and spoils.

For more, on this topic, please see our upcoming report,
"Nonlinear Stratagems in Theory & Practice: Examples from Iranian Cyber Policies."