



BLURRING BOUNDARIES: WAR AND VIOLENCE IN A NEW ERA

Date: November 13, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 13, 2023, Professor Candyce Kelshall presented *Blurring Boundaries: War and Violence in a New Era* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the drift into the realm of focusing on noncombatants as human infrastructure targets outside of liberal norms.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

It could be argued that there is a shift at the global level from kinetic warfare to a new era which includes soft war and hybrid war, extending beyond a physical battlefield to information distribution and non-violent measures. Misinformation and disinformation are increasingly of use in this new conflict environment, with the former spread uncritically to promote an individually entrenched view to a larger group and the latter as a deliberate tool to sow division within a society and foster distrust in its institutions. There are increasing challenges to the liberal order internationally via illiberal actors and an evolution in violence, and democratic states must not remain in the same mental paradigm when addressing these threats.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Professor Kelshall posited that the international system is in a state of flux, pointing to the creation of a new era of warfare and violence that operates outside and beyond the traditional means and norms of liberalism. In spite of this shift, the current military apparatus, its weapons, and strategy proceeds within the boundaries of traditional kinetic warfare, fought on a physical battlefield and in

a defined domain, assuming that democracy and the rule of law are constant and to engage with violence is a choice. Prof. Kelshall suggested that agreements, institutions, and alliances that were originally designed to uphold peace and prosperity are weakening and suggested that the world is already at war, albeit a war that is largely unrecognized at present.

Prof. Kelshall stated that there are many ways to define war and highlighted three potential categories through which to understand it—Hard War, Soft War, and Hybrid War—with Hard War representing conventional kinetic conflict for which the current structure is fluent, drilled, and funded for. She argues that contemporary warfare is not conventional, however, and that human infrastructure—including hospitals, schools, etc.—is now the principal target, with the objective of breaking, dividing, and polarizing societies. Hybrid Warfare is increasingly prevalent and demands a redefinition of war to include soft attacks that may be ambiguous or non-attributable and seek to exploit vulnerabilities within populations while military posturing and maneuvering occur. Soft War, explained Prof. Kelshall, uses non-kinetic weapons and non-lethal impacts to achieve the intentions of war, stressing that there is a lack of understanding surrounding these tactics that carries serious repercussions within civil society. These tactics are difficult to recognize and seek to sow division between society and the state, eroding the fabric of the targeted population and moving warfare into the civic conflict space.

Professor Kelshall outlined the role of information in contemporary warfare, noting that misinformation and disinformation have become prominent weapons when deployed in a deliberate manner to elicit emotion from a target audience—information is intended to aid in decision making and, therefore, emotionally-driven content masked as such should be scrutinized. She pointed to the example of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, stating that the precursor to the physical dimension of the war was a cyber campaign that targeted human and critical infrastructure. Prof. Kelshall noted the presence of Russian Soft War tactics in international events such as the Freedom Convoy in Canada, during which there was an 82% increase in misinformation in Canada and the deployment of 300 Russian state-sponsored websites which garnered 60-80 million page views per month.

Professor Kelshall explained the different categories of misinformation and disinformation, arguing that the former is uncritically posted with the intention to unify a group of people based on a particular view, whereas the latter could be seen as a deliberate tool to sow division and foster distrust within a society via State-based (SBD), Hate-based (HBD), or Economic-based (EBD) narratives.

SBD is intended to erode confidence, cohesion, and trust of a community or state; HBD is designed to denigrate an ‘other’ through deliberately hateful targeting; and EBD is for the benefit or deliberate harm to economic activity. She stated that Hybrid disinformation could be seen as the combination of all three methods and is used as a weapon to destroy public trust and confidence in its governments and institutions and is, therefore, classified as soft violence.

Prof. Kelshall argues that this points to an additional category of warfare: Total War, referencing the concept put forth by Keith D. Willett (2022), in which the threat is to the very nature of the liberal system, the target is the international regime, and there are no non-combatants. She explained that with the emergence of Total War, the world is arguably now in a post-liberal era; meaning that war is removed from a physical battlefield, international laws of war and rules of engagement no longer apply, there are no defined combatants, and no war crimes—the driving force for Total War is a change in the hegemonic order away from the liberal space.

To address challenges associated with Hybrid, Soft, and Total War, Prof. Kelshall suggests an ‘Eyes Wide Open’ strategy to train our eyes to see tactics, strategies, impacts beyond kinetic warfare—Total War domination is not the result of military dominance. She argues that democracy as a leader on the global stage could be seen as a myth, pointing to recent data from Freedom House that shows 80% of the world’s leaders are authoritarian, one-third of the world has become illiberal, and that for 17 years in a row global freedom has been in decline; all of which result from war, coups, and attacks on democratic institutions by illiberal incumbents.

Professor Kelshall contends that the liberal democratic system should be concerned about Soft War, Hybrid War, and Total War as its adversaries are invested and have achieved success, pointing to Russia’s reported use of *Maskirovka*—a warfare strategy centred on the use of misleading and ambiguity increasing activities that disguise true intentions. *Maskirovka* also features ‘Reflexive Control’, which targets the subconscious decision-making process of an adversary to control or predetermine their interpretation of the environment. Professor Kelshall also noted China’s foreign policy of ‘The Three Warfares’ that seeks to influence public opinion through a variety of methods and Iran’s use of digital influence and ‘Guerilla Broadcasting’ campaigns could be seen as further examples of the tactics now prevalent in warfare. In the latter case, Prof. Kelshall pointed to a reportedly targeted campaign encouraging the protests in Israel surrounding the proposed overhaul of the judicial system—an event that lasted 12 weeks and saw members of Israeli Defense Forces Reservists among

other members of Israeli society unite in opposition to the government. It was only six weeks later that Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya ("Islamic Resistance Movement"), an armed wing of a breakaway Muslim brotherhood branch conducted a successful surprise attack on Israel, suggesting that the campaign was potentially part of a larger strategy intent on destabilization and distraction in advance of a kinetic attack.

Professor Kelshall emphasized that if the world continues to operate with the same set of Hard War definitions, assuming that liberalism and democracy are the norm, we will have blinders on which prevent us from seeing the attacks on the critical human infrastructure of liberal nation states.

Question and Answer

In regard to countering destructive narratives, is education a viable path to mitigation? A recent study showed that individuals were more likely to change their negative views if they were shown how they were being deceived versus told they were wrong. Is this legitimate or is 'suffocation' the more important strategy?

We have to be cognizant when we are engaging with individuals who hold extreme positions we are dealing with *perceptions* versus *facts*, and to argue the former with logic is ineffective. Research suggests that education does help, but it must be specific, practical, and centred on critical thinking, which can be as simple as asking people 'why' when they make a statement—this prompts individuals to think through the end result of their claim, the intention of their action, or the belief they hold. These techniques are not high-level or esoteric, but rather use practical exercises designed to deconstruct agendas.

Does misinformation and dis information look different between generations? Both in platform for distribution (i.e. Facebook vs TikTok) and content?

While there are references that are more recognizable to respective generations, research indicates that generational diversity is not present in misinformation and disinformation, rather it speaks to the identity welfare of a group. A noticeable aspect of extremism is that it is multigenerational with the sole focus being the welfare of a particular identity.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Warfare can be categorized as Hard War, Soft War, and Hybrid War, with Hard War representing conventional kinetic conflict in which the current

structure is prepared. Contemporary warfare is not conventional, however, and human infrastructure is now the principal target, with the objective of breaking, dividing, and polarizing societies.

- The role of information in contemporary warfare is increasingly relevant, as misinformation and disinformation become prominent weapons when deployed in a deliberate manner.
- Misinformation is uncritically spread with the intention to unify a group of people based on a particular view, whereas the Disinformation is a deliberate tool to sow division and foster distrust within a society.
- Total War is a threat to the very nature of the liberal system, the target is the international regime, and there are no non-combatants. With the emergence of Total War, the world is now in a post-liberal era.
- The liberal democratic system should be concerned about Soft War, Hybrid War, and Total War as its adversaries are invested and have achieved success. If this is ignored, the world will miss the evolution of violence and the shift from a liberal to an illiberal epoch.

FURTHER READING

Kelshall, C. (2019). Violent Transnational Social Movements and their Impact on Contemporary Social Conflict. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 1(3), 27–42. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v1i3.840>

Kelshall, C., & Archutowski, N. (2021). Concept of Soft Violence in Critical Security Studies. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 4(2), 103–108. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i2.3755>



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