

Cognitive Warfare Is Cheap—and That's the Problem

Description

Editor's Note: this article is being republished with the permission of [Small Wars Journal](#) as part of a republishing arrangement between IWI and SWJ. The original article was published on 01.30.2026 and is available [here](#).

SWJ Logo Tall

Introduction: The Wrong Question

Much of the debate around cognitive warfare has been largely revolved around definitions. Is it [merely](#) a continuation of information operations? A kind of psychological warfare that [uses](#) digital technologies? Or [is it](#) a completely new domain? These questions have been at the center of policy debates, doctrinal documents, and public discussions. However, by focusing on these questions, an additional issue that is as significant as the starting point of a common definition has been overlooked.

The real question, in addition to *what* cognitive warfare is, is *why* it works so persistently.

The explanation does not only lie in the novelty of the phenomenon or the technological superiority; rather, [it is](#) about the cost. The influence sphere of cognitive warfare [is effective](#) because it is cheap to start, hard [to pinpoint](#) the perpetrator, and a lot more expensive to counter. One single ambiguous action [may](#) it be legal, narrative, administrative, or informational [has](#) the potential to trigger a cascade of reviews, coordination mechanisms, public responses, and internal alignment activities that would overwhelm the initial investment.

The fact that this imbalance is not a mere accident but a structural one is what really causes it to challenge the deeply embedded assumptions of deterrence theory, crisis management, and military planning. Most of the time, the aim of cognitive warfare is not to achieve a decisive victory or escalate the situation. Rather, it is to survive by making the defenders assume a position that is permanently costly.

Cheap Actions, Expensive Consequences

In traditional military logic, effects are expected to scale with investment. Cognitive warfare, however, is disrupting this assumption.

An inexpensive move might set off a whole series of events: internal evaluations, inter-agency coordination, legal opinions, media inquiries, political debate, and public reassurance. Every step is logical and, more often than not, required. If one considers the steps as a whole, they take time, attention, and the unwieldy resource of institutional energy, which is difficult to regain.

What makes this asymmetry so effective is that the costs that result are very rarely visible as “defense”. The time that is spent on clarifying, aligning, or reassuring is not recorded as operational expenditure, yet it directly competes with planning, execution, and strategic foresight. So, cognitive warfare imposes what might be called opportunity costs – what institutions fail to do because they are busy responding.

Additionally, these costs are rather cumulative than decisive. No single response exhausts an organization. Instead, each response slightly lowers tempo and confidence. Gradually, the organization becomes more cautious, more internally focused, and less willing to act without extensive verification. The strategic effect is not paralysis, but hesitation, and hesitation is often enough to change the results in competitive environments. This phenomenon accounts for the reason why cognitive warfare seldom aims at spectacular moments. Its power is in quietly changing the way institutions allocate attention, prioritize risks, and justify action. Thus, the outcome is a gradual move away from initiative to management, from decision to process.

Importantly, none of this necessitates the initiating action to be credible, persuasive, or even successful in a conventional sense. Cognitive warfare does not rely on convincing audiences at first. It only requires that sufficient ambiguity be created so as to delay action, fragment authority, or redirect focus.

In this way, its power is, to a large extent, [exercised](#) not through the change of people’s beliefs, but through the change of their mental processes. Institutions, which are highly efficient in terms of accountability, verification, and coordination, find themselves having to spend resources just to be able to maintain coherence. The initiator, on the other hand, pays very little and is free to either withdraw or repeat the incident somewhere else.

The outcome is a strategic landscape where the defenders are perpetually forced to respond to low-cost provocations, which, however, have high-cost consequences.

Why Deterrence Logic Fails: Cognitive Warfare as a Cost-Exchange Strategy

Military planners are familiar with cost-exchange logic: how much an action costs an enemy versus what it costs to counter that action. In kinetic domains, this logic is clear and quantifiable. In cognitive warfare, it is seldom spoken of but is still just as powerful.

The exchange ratio is heavily weighted towards the perpetrator. It costs very little to produce ambiguity, but a lot more to clarify it. With very little effort, one can [create](#) a plausible claim, a procedural challenge, or a contested narrative. To disprove, contextualize, or neutralize it, an institution has to be mobilized.

Unlike traditional military exchanges, this cost imbalance does not require escalation to remain effective. The truth is, escalation often harms the initiator's advantage by allowing symmetrical responses. Consequently, cognitive warfare is a game of restraint rather than intensity. It depends on situations where actions can still be denied, reversed, and are legally or politically ambiguous. At the strategic level, this changes how success should be gauged.

The goal is not to coerce immediate change of behavior, but to make the opposition feel continuous friction. Even when a claim is dismissed or a narrative collapses, the defender is the one who has borne the cost of the response. Hence, the initiator does not have to "win" the argument in order to get the upper hand in the exchange. Its power lies in the fact that it can stay cheap over time, while the defender has to be constantly investing in upholding coherence and legitimacy.

Over time, this leads to a kind of strategic fatigue. It is not a defeat in the traditional way, but a slow diminishment of the initiative. The resources that were originally intended for the proactive objectives are now diverted towards defensive sensemaking. The process of decision-making becomes slower. Authority gets more careful. The loss of momentum occurs.

That is the reason why cognitive warfare does not have to be large or intense to be effective. The effectiveness of the operation builds up through repeated actions. Every single action may be insignificant. The total cost that the defender has to bear is significant.

Traditional deterrence relies on the idea that costs can be imposed fairly. When one side takes action, the other side responds. Escalation raises stakes for both sides. Cognitive warfare disrupts this logic. To begin with, attribution is in many cases deliberately ambiguous. Actions take place within legal, political, or informational frameworks that are not clearly defined. This makes retaliation difficult to justify and easy to contest. Secondly, it [is difficult](#) to establish proportional responses. To react to a low-cost action with a strong force is to risk an overreaction; if the response is weak, the risk is that the action will be normalized. What is most significant, however, is that in many cases, not only does the response increase the defender's costs more than the initiators, but it also may be the cause of

further escalation. It may be necessary to respond through the public, legal, or institutional channels, but the cost is rarely low. Punishment deterrence loses its effectiveness when the act to be deterred costs almost nothing to repeat. Consequently, cognitive warfare is a game of patience, tolerance of ambiguity, and the ability to operate without institutional consensus for those who come out as winners. Those who depend on deliberation and procedural legitimacy are structurally disadvantaged.

The Trap of Permanent Defense: The Economics of Plausibility

Cognitive warfare operates in the layer that separates truth from falsehood. It depends on plausibility, not on proof.

Plausible claims are cheap to create and hard to definitively get rid of. In fact, even if they are refuted, they still charge the defender, who has to prove that he is right, transparent, and acting in good faith. The initiator, however, does not carry such a burden. This economic asymmetry is particularly visible in democratic societies and large bureaucracies. The systems that are there to secure accountability and legitimacy have to constantly explain themselves. Their silence can be taken as guilt, while their speed can be seen as too hasty. In any case, it is the defender who pays. As a result of this process, strategic fatigue develops slowly.

Institutions are not necessarily misled by misinformation, but are rather exhausted by the constant need [to deal](#) with uncertainty. Administrative friction is what cognitive warfare uses, not deception.

The biggest risk is the failure of a single cognitive operation, but rather that defense becomes the organization's permanent way of functioning. If organizations have to constantly spend resources on verification, coordination, and reassurance, they lose their capacity for initiative. The time taken for decision-making gets longer. The willingness to take risks decreases. It becomes harder to clearly see and understand the strategic priorities. This situation is unsustainable as it turns uncertainty from a challenge that happens occasionally into a structural characteristic of the organization. Cognitive warfare is not looking for a moment of decisiveness. It aims to make normal functioning more and more costly. In such a situation, even decisions that are right seem slow, even responses that are appropriate seem reactive, and even success seems temporary. The one who has the strategic advantage is the actor who can impose costs on others without incurring them himself.

Implications for Military and Policy Planning

If cognitive warfare is relatively inexpensive, it would be strategically unwise to try to defend against it by matching the effort. The goal cannot be to respond to every provocation. The goal should be to

reduce the return on investment of cognitive pressure. Three implications result from this. First, resilience should be an economic concept, not merely an informational one. The most important thing is to lower the cost of response rather than to have perfect attribution. Second, delegated authority through pre-approved decision pathways and simplified coordination can help limit the amount of energy that ambiguity consumes. Third, selectivity is also indispensable. Not every signal warrants a response. Treating all ambiguity as escalation gives the adversary the initiative. Strategic restraint helps to maintain institutional capacity. Finally, initiative is even more important than refutation. Organizations that continue to be operationally proactive deprive adversaries of the attention and delay they need in order to generate their other moves. Thus, action, rather than explanation, becomes the stabilizing force. None of these steps, however, takes away cognitive warfare. They just make it less profitable.

Why Organizational Design Matters More Than Messaging

The success of cognitive warfare depends less on the actual influence of content than on the target organization's design. Complex institutions, especially those functioning across various legal, political, and operational domains, are highly susceptible to inexpensive disruptions due to the interdependence of their internal processes.

When authority is shared, coordination becomes essential. When coordination is essential, delay becomes possible. Cognitive warfare takes advantage of this structure by creating uncertainty at the points where alignment is most needed. The resulting friction is not a failure of leadership or competence. It is a predictable consequence of organizational complexity.

This implies that countering cognitive warfare is not mainly a communications issue. Enhancing narratives or messaging might be necessary, but it is insufficient. What matters more is the speed of an organization's decision, action, and moving forward without requiring full consensus or perfect clarity.

In this sense, organizational design turns into a strategic variable. Organizations that are able to absorb ambiguity without coming to a halt maintain their initiative. Those organizations that are unable to do so, regardless of the accuracy or principled nature of their responses, are forced into a reactive position.

Conclusion: Rethinking Cost as a Strategic Variable

Cognitive warfare undermines the defense and policy sectors, not only because it is beyond understanding or technologically superior, but also because it is very cost-effective. It takes advantage of systems that are aimed at precision, accountability, and thoroughness by making them use their resources constantly in situations that are uncertain.

The main strategic issue is not only the influence, the narratives, or the new technologies. It is the difference in costs between taking action and defending oneself.

If institutions do not reflect on this disparity, by lowering the cost of their reaction and controlling the tendency to respond to every provocation, cognitive warfare will be welcomed as a cheap method, and this is the reason why it will continue. And in today's competition, cheap strategies are the ones that usually last.

***Sara Russo** is a PhD candidate in Defence and Security Studies at the Centre for Higher Defence Studies (CASD) and the University of Turin. Her research focuses on cognitive warfare, social influence, and ambiguity as organizing forces, examining how non-truth, perception management, and emerging technologies shape decision-making, legitimacy, and coordination below the threshold of armed conflict. She works at the intersection of organization theory, strategic studies, and applied research in military and humanitarian contexts.*

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider [supporting our work](#). And for the best gear, check out the [IWI store](#) for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.

Date Created

2026/02/24