

“Inevitable” and “Imminent” Invasions: The Logic Behind Western Media War Stories

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, great power geopolitics is back as the Western-centric U.S. unipolar order is facing relative decline due to the challenges posed by the non-Western-centric multipolar order, specifically by China and Russia. In political and practical terms, geopolitics is about being able to manage and represent the nature of international relations in terms of actor relations and power dynamics. It concerns the ability of actors to make representations and interpretations of actors, events, and processes taking place in the physical realm. Informational geopolitics as an indirect and non-kinetic form of competition and conflict has gained increasing prominence in the 21st century, where information and knowledge form the fifth dimension of strategy. This leads to increasingly unstable international relations as the U.S. seeks to prevent other powers from growing at its expense. Hence, the critical role played by Western mainstream mass media outlets as a means of obstructive foreign policy in preserving the unipolar order through specific discursive practices employed in international news. Critical discourse analysis is used to analyse and interpret Western news stories on “inevitable” and “imminent” Chinese and Russian invasions. Informational geopolitics is used as a means of limiting opponent’s operational choices and opportunities in their pursuit of foreign policy objectives.

KEYWORDS:

*geopolitics, information war, Russia, China, United States, media narratives,
imminent/inevitable invasion, military conflict*

Introduction

Mass media form an integral part of any society in terms of setting social and political agenda of what is considered important, what is considered just or legitimate and what is not, where the divergence between war and its representation has changed the way wars are fought and interpreted.¹ Mass media and public records influence the perceived physical, moral, and psychological features of antagonists, victims, and observers.² Mass media coverage can alter the cognitive and strategic environment of international actors and the politics of a conflict, which changes the nature of interaction, assumptions and the way warfare is perceived by various individuals and groups.³ This includes the role of mass media in “selling” intervention and wars to public audiences by governments. The outcome depends on informational and propaganda advantages, mass media support, degree of cohesion of actors within and between governments, and the duration of a crisis.⁴ There are numerous political and communicational factors to consider when answering the question whether a war can be successfully lobbied by the government that desires to conduct a war of choice.

This article seeks to analyse geopolitical defence of the U.S. of its global hegemony against two key actors (China and Russia) of an emerging geopolitical order with the war-like strategic messaging used during a period of nominal peace to constrain and contain their foreign policy options. There is a new and rather perplexing transformation of the role of mass media messaging, which is turning into preparing and psychologically conditioning audiences for what is narrated as being an “inevitable” or “imminent” invasion of a country (other than the country communicating the message) by another country. Thus, the intention is not to ensure public support and legitimacy for a government to begin a military operation, but to form expectations that an invasion will take place, thus affecting the moral and psychological features of a war that has not begun at the time of mass media reporting. In the year 2021 and the early 2022, there were two such prominent cases: Russia’s imminent invasion of Ukraine (which eventually occurred) and China’s imminent invasion of Taiwan. This leads to the following research question: what are the desired informational and cognitive outcomes for the communicator who is creating a media narrative of imminent war from conceptual and pragmatic perspectives?

This article consists of three main sections. The first section seeks to understand the context of the impact of the transforming global order on international relations, especially given the instability and increased competition such transformations can bring about. The second section outlines the theoretical basis of geopolitics, especially informational geopolitics, for interpreting and analysing the empirical data collected for the case studies. The third and final section is divided into two subsections, the first exploring and analysing China case study, and the second examining Russia case study focusing on the period before the actual outbreak of hostilities.

1 Andersen 2007; Carruthers 2011.

2 Calhoun 2013.

3 De Franco 2012.

4 Western 2005.

International Relations and the Changing Global Order

Europe and, later, the United States put an end to the multipolar order that existed in the 16th century due to a significant increase in their military superiority that strengthened their political, economic, and cultural influence. In the 21st century, the global balance of power is once again shifting: away from the U.S. and the West to China and Asia, with Russia increasingly associating itself with the emerging global order.¹ Transformations of the global order lead to increasing levels of chaos, uncertainty, competition, and conflict between the outgoing hegemon and the rising power(s). Tangible (hard power) and intangible (soft power) resources can alter the trajectory of transformation, which is also influenced by the level of political will used to fight for or retain power and influence in the global system of international relations.

Although U.S. scholars increasingly agree on the geopolitical nature of the changing global order that is shifting from a Western-centric U.S. unipolar order to a non-Western-centric and multipolar configuration,² there is a disagreement on how best to manage and regulate the situation practically and pragmatically. A simplistic overview of this disagreement focuses on whether the U.S. is able to recover from its current decline in hegemony or not. One group of scholars believes that the U.S. is currently past the point of no return, which means that its energy and efforts should be focused on managing this decline in the best way possible.³ At the same time, there is another group of scholars that argues that the U.S. should reform and focus on how to regain its position of an undisputed world leader.⁴ The emerging multipolar order has paved the way for increased competition and conflict with the unipolar order.

China and Russia are the two leading powers of the emerging multipolar order, which have been integrated into the geopolitical construct of the New Cold War and have been presented as the main threats that need to be contained in order to prolong the unipolar hegemony.⁵ However, it has been noted that the “success in long-term strategic competition requires getting the details right.”⁶ While the U.S. does have common interests with China and Russia, other factors of power and influence prevent this from happening on a genuine or sustainable level. “But great powers are simply unwilling to let other great powers grow stronger at their expense. [...] And so a dangerous security competition is all but unavoidable.”⁷ An increase in geopolitical competition and conflict has significant implications for international relations, especially in terms of their discursive regulation and management. Therefore, from the perspective of a waning hegemonic power, what strategy should the U.S. employ in order to constrain and contain China and Russia’s rise while minimising the risk of a direct armed conflict with either of the countries? The above-mentioned geopolitical transformation creates a pretext and a *motivation* for the U.S. to defend its global hegemony.

1 Karaganov 2020.

2 Brooks, Wohlforth 2016; Cooley, Nexon 2020.

3 Ibid.; Massie, Paquin 2019.

4 Brooks, Wohlforth 2016; Biden 2020.

5 Sarotte 2021; Mearsheimer 2021.

6 Sarotte 2021, 35.

7 Mearsheimer 2021, 58.

Informational Geopolitics and the Fifth Dimension of Power Projection

As information and knowledge society is developing more and more, the roles and uses of information and communication gradually become more intrusive and influence all aspects of modern organised society. There is a mutual and reinforcing effect of combining technological development and institutional organisation to achieve the desired goals of an information strategy. The information strategy, especially in the context of changing global orders, consists of many complex and interdependent parts, actors, and tasks.

“Information strategy, on the other hand, is a still-forming phenomenon that has both technological and non-technological components and encompasses both what one intends to do to the enemy and what one intends to do for oneself. The information strategist must be the master of a whole host of skills: understanding the kind of knowledge that needs to be created; messaging and properly distributing one’s own information flows while disrupting the enemy’s; crafting persuasive messages that shore up the will of one’s own people and allies while demoralizing one’s opponents; and, of course, deceiving the enemy at the right time, in the right way.”¹

The information realm is crucial in helping to shape different audiences’ perceptions and opinions in the cognitive realm of the people, processes, and events occurring in the physical realm, through the use of representations and interpretations. These aspects are related to the concept and practice of geopolitics where representations intersect with foreign policy interests and practice. Geopolitics is not only an academic lens for understanding international relations, it is also a policymaking and practical mechanism for managing and regulating events, trends, and processes in international relations through the use of iconic representations.² In the 21st century, information has become the fifth dimension of power projection strategy (the other four dimensions being land, sea, air, and space) where information serves as a medium or a channel for strategic power.³ Unlike the previous four dimensions, the fifth dimension’s power and influence are of a non-kinetic nature. The information sphere has numerous working parts and is assumed to have a lot of potential to influence the audiences, however, various factors need to be understood and taken into account.

Large-scale efforts that are intended to influence the sub-conscious habits and conscious decisions of the public are wide-spread and relatively effective in influencing and convincing the audiences. “Typically, these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness; so that the appeals which move us are often, in a sense, ‘hidden.’ The result is that many of us are being influenced and manipulated, far more than we realise, in

1 Arquilla, Borer 2007, 1.

2 Flint 2017.

3 Lonsdale 1999.

the patterns of our everyday lives.”¹ S. Cottle argued for the need “to reconsider the relative power of the media in relation to other organised interests, as well as the nature of the mechanisms that link them and through which they interact.”² Mainstream mass media provide informational support for the agenda of powerful individuals and groups: using a propaganda model, they divide the news into a dichotomous world of “worthy” and “unworthy” victims, of “legitimized” and “meaningless” events and processes in order to ensure public consent.³ Although the context of the passage quoted below is related to terrorism and the way it is framed for the mass media and public consumption, the lessons apply equally to the geopolitical dimensions of international relations.

“The idea is this: that it’s not the acts of terrorism that most matter in the post-9/11 world, it’s what we are told to think about the acts of terrorism. Politicians tell us what to think. The media tell us what to think. Even the terrorists tell us what to think. They all want to attract our attention. They all have reasons for wanting us to think in a certain way. They all want to tell us why an act of terrorism matters. They all have agendas. They are all packaging terrorism for our consumption. We are the audience for all those disparate actors.”⁴

There is a growing number of international actors who are interested either in preserving the current U.S. unipolar order or in creating an alternative multipolar order. Their interests and geopolitical agenda in international relations are revealed through the way they communicate to and through mass media framing information and implications so that some “realities” are highlighted and some are downplayed. Framing geopolitical representations of international relations requires the creation and communication of an iconic event to mass audiences in order to cause the desired cognitive effects. An iconic event is defined as having “undergone hyper-representation, been appropriated into on-going political agendas, transformed into commodities, and adapted into popular entertainment.”⁵ It is a matter of choosing an appropriate information tool to achieve organisational goals. This may include Information Operations (IO), which is an interdisciplinary and crosscutting communication approach.⁶

There are various forms of information technologies that can be used to influence and direct an audience in a cognitive direction that is beneficial for the communicator’s organisational goals. This is done by presenting selected information and signifiers to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, reasoning, and, in the end, the behaviour of governments, organisations, groups, and individuals. This can be achieved through psychological operations, the purpose of which is “to induce or reinforce attitudes

1 Packard 2007, 31.

2 Cottle 2003, 3.

3 Herman, Chomsky 2002.

4 Moeller 2009, 1.

5 Leavy 2007, 5.

6 Arquilla, Borer 2007, 2.

or behaviour favourable to the originator's objectives."¹ However, the substantive content and approach of different disciplines using the communication tool can be rather similar in definition and approach. There is a very complex set of interrelations and outcomes in the relations and effects of traditional media and social media when information technologies, such as public relations, seek to shape the content. In addition, there are sets of pragmatic and moral problems to address. This concerns not only the legitimacy of the means of communications, but also the legitimacy of the message, and the impact of various ideas and specific cultural signifiers on different audiences.² There is an interdependence in the relationship between the interests of the powerful, media outlets, technical and conceptual means of communication.

The above-mentioned strategy and approaches are intended to serve as information support programmes that complement and assist in implementing the objectives of foreign policy programmes. These effects intend to exert influence in both information and cognitive realms. In the information realm, there is a need to frame the message in such a way that it responds to the changing historical context, various ethical, normative, and value aspects that are present, and takes into account public opinion and sentiment if the information strategy is to achieve the intended and desired effects.³ There are also clear conceptual and pragmatic implications for the effects of the information strategy in the cognitive realm as well. W. Trotter⁴ discussed and analysed what he termed "instincts of the herd" in times of peace and war. This concept is about the role of instinct in human psychology in terms of basic impulses and reflexes in response to basic biological needs, such as self-preservation and social life. The herd (collective) instinct differs from the critical reasoning and logic of an individual in that it is an emotional collective that reacts to the stimuli provided by the communicator without taking into account their personal interests and the outcome of the actions suggested by the communicator. The fifth dimension of strategy provides the U.S. with a possible *means* of defending their global hegemony with fewer risks than the use of hard power.

Method

The methodology employed in this paper to analyse mass media news in the case studies is critical discourse analysis (CDA). There is a clear degree of analytical difference between discourse analysis and CDA. "Discourse analysis can reveal what texts leave out, and how texts transform and evaluate social realities they represent but critical discourse analysis must also evaluate the findings of discourse analysis."⁵ CDA differs from other forms of discourse analysis as "they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large."⁶ Furthermore, CDA is highly political in its nature and text analysis. In addition, "critical discourse analysis can only make a significant and specific contribution to

1 Farwell 2012, 3–4.

2 Motion et al. 2019, 208.

3 Entman 2004.

4 Trotter 2015.

5 Van Leeuwen 2018, 140.

6 Van Dijk 1993, 252.

critical social and political analyses if it is able to provide an account of the role of language, language use, discourse or communicative events in the (re)production of dominance and inequality.”¹ N. Fairclough notes that “CDA has these three basic properties: it is relational, it is dialectical, and it is transdisciplinary.”² This means that the emphasis is on the observation and study of social relations, including interpersonal communication, where power relations between people are partly discursive.

“A primary focus of CDA is on the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs, and in particular on discursive aspects of power relations and inequalities: on dialectical relations between discourse and power, and their effects on other relations within the social process and their elements.”³

This also applies to the role and effect of discourse in terms of its influence and power in politics and geopolitics in international relations. As in geopolitics, communication in the language of interpretation and representation of the physical realm is a means of operationalising cognitive effects on audiences as a means to shape perception and ensure consent to linguistically constructed events in international relations. It has been observed that “all social practices are tied to specific historical contexts and are the means by which existing social relations are reproduced or contested and different interests are served.”⁴ For these reasons, it has been argued that power and hegemony are essential for being able to critically examine and explain a range of policymaking practices, where power is produced through the elaboration of ideology and the construction of “reality.”⁵ N. Fairclough argues that practical reasoning is a key and necessary feature of the politics of policy formation and acceptance.⁶

Due to their reputation and reach, mainstream mass media are a highly significant and somewhat effective institution and channel of influence and persuasion in the process of ensuring public consent.⁷ Mass media are an essential link in the chain between the aims and goals of the communicator and their ability to shape the cognitive realm of audiences. Western mainstream media encompasses all of the various forms of mass communication (printed press, radio, TV, and digital), however, they tend to form a symbiotic relationship with mainstream establishment politics by acting as a gatekeeper and amplifier of key political narratives (regardless of the nominal editorial position of the media outlet, “liberal” or “conservative”).⁸ For the purposes of this study, a selection of digital media articles was collected.

The present article attempted to collect mass media articles in the English language from digital mainstream news media. The news media were selected from major countries of the liberal democracy block that maintain good relations with the

1 Van Dijk 1993, 279.

2 Fairclough 2010, 3.

3 Ibid., 8.

4 Janks 1997, 329.

5 Howarth 2010.

6 Fairclough 2013, 194.

7 Herman, Chomsky 2002.

8 Boyd-Barrett 2017; Zollmann 2017.

U.S. These articles were retrieved during the period from autumn 2021 to the early 2022 with the help of Google search using the following key words: China + imminent/inevitable invasion of Taiwan; Russia + imminent/inevitable invasion of Ukraine. No data was retrieved on or after 24 February 2022, the date of the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine War. An indicative sample was collected through a general open-source internet search of mainstream Western news media (in English), which included taking articles from the first 10 pages of each search (not all of them were cited or referenced). This search and the collation of collected materials were undertaken by the author manually and included comparing the content of the articles with the aims and the purpose of this paper. The aim was to illustrate the predominant news discourse on these topics at the time.

Case Study: Western Media War Narratives

First of all, it must be noted and highlighted that the research period began in the autumn of 2021 when the “inevitable” and “imminent” Chinese invasion of Taiwan and Russian invasion of Ukraine began to be frequently mentioned. However, the study does not go beyond the actual date of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The primary academic reasons are that a completely different set of factors and conditions prevail in the physical, information, and cognitive realms starting from that point. There is a different set of psychological dynamics in perceptions, emotions, assessments, and understandings of interests, threats, reactions, and consequences. The focus of this study is on the nature and role of mass media reporting before the start of hostilities. A different academic study, with a different approach and set of assumptions is required to examine the subject in the period following the outbreak of the war. The advantage of simultaneously examining two globally covered geopolitical discourses is that it offers an opportunity to identify their similarities and differences, and, therefore, answer the question whether a standardised “cookie cutter” approach can be found in strategic communication, especially taking into account the opposition, with Taiwan and Ukraine being narrated as “Us” and China and Russia being narrated as “Them”, which may be intended to arouse and mobilise public emotions in favour of “Us” and against “Them.”

The two case studies of the “inevitable” and “imminent” invasions, – China and Taiwan, Russia and Ukraine – have been selected for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the proximity, sometimes even synchronicity with which these news stories appear in the Western mainstream media. Another reason for selecting China and Russia is that both of them represent the “Other” to the U.S.-led Western-centric order in the Western academic representation and popular interpretation of the New Cold War. Even though Western MSM are understood to be separate from the state, there are numerous studies demonstrating their loyalty to the state on key and strategic issues, especially in terms of geopolitics and armed conflicts.¹ There is also a clear transdisciplinary aspect in the geopolitical and communicative dimensions associated with the study. Both of these cases also point to the central role played by information

¹ Wilcox 2005; DiMaggio 2009; Zollmann 2017.

as the fifth dimension of the U.S. strategy to thwart the rise of China and Russia by regulating and curbing their ability to continue to challenge the unipolar hegemony. This is achieved through obstructive foreign policy,¹ where the U.S. seeks to retain a relative regional advantage over its rivals by forcing them to take a defensive and reactive stance in foreign policy with the agenda being set for them rather than by them. By creating iconic mediated events in international relations, the U.S. stands to create an opportunity to prevent the emergence of a global multipolar order.

China's Inevitable and Imminent Invasion of Taiwan

A sample of different discursive arguments of Western mainstream press is presented here, outlining the underlying logic and arguments, together with an assessment of the reflected and interpreted power relations between different actors. Therefore, this is intended to be a brief sample and representation of the discursive arguments used in media news and analytical reports. Different degrees of certainty are expressed in Western mainstream media news articles in terms of the assertion that China is going to invade Taiwan and force it to join China. Some articles use hedging language, such as "could", while others use language means expressing a greater degree of certainty and immediateness of an alleged military operation. A *Guardian* article argued that "China could mount a full scale invasion [of Taiwan] by 2025."² The statement is marked with a significant degree of uncertainty, due to the choice of the word "could", although the content of the article has a more alarmist tone to it when it comes to the potential consequences of such invasion. In its approach to storytelling, this article illustrates a coming battle between David and Goliath – a battle between good and bad – encouraging the audience to root for the "underdog" in this constructed contest.

Another article uses the language very similar to the one used when describing the case of Russia and Ukraine. It is titled "*Is a war between U.S. and China over Taiwan inevitable?*"³ The author, a former British diplomat, paints a picture of an almost inevitable "aggressive" Chinese invasion of Taiwan and outlines the "constructive" options the U.S. has to counter it. Other news reports, even with the words "imminent" or "inevitable" in the title, are more open and detailed debates, and they do not conclude that a Chinese invasion is inevitable.⁴ The use of hyperbole can also be observed: for example, the U.S. having "no chance" to stop the Chinese invasion of Taiwan, even though the likelihood of this event is very low.⁵

1 Greg Simons, "International Relations in the Age of U.S. Decline: Orthodoxy of Knowledge and Obstructive Foreign Policy," *Russia in Global Affairs*, August 2, 2021, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/us-orthodoxy-of-knowledge/>.

2 Helen Davidson, and Julian Borger, "China Could Mount Full-Scale Invasion by 2025, Taiwan Defence Minister Says," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/06/biden-says-he-and-chinas-xi-have-agreed-to-abide-by-taiwan-agreement>; see also Michael Pickering, "How Australia Could Be Forced to Go to WAR as Tensions Between China and Taiwan Reach Fever-Pitch and Ex-PM's Visit Adding Fuel to the Fire – with Beijing Warning Armed Conflict is "Only a Matter of Time," *The Daily Mail*, October 9, 2021, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10067067/How-Australia-forced-WAR-tensions-China-Taiwan-reach-fever-pitch.html>.

3 John Dobson, "Is a War Between U.S. and China Over Taiwan Inevitable?" *Sunday Guardian Live*, April 3, 2021, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/world/war-u-s-china-taiwan-inevitable>.

4 Mark Episkopos, "Is War Imminent in the Taiwan Strait?" *National Interest*, October 24, 2021, accessed 20 April 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/war-imminent-taiwan-strait-195484>; "No Name Given. Is a War Between China and Taiwan Inevitable?" *EUI*, June 16, 2021, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.eiu.com/n/is-war-between-china-and-taiwan-inevitable/>.

5 John Feng, "No Chance' U.S. Can Stop a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan, Military Expert Says," *News Week*, July 22, 2021, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/no-chance-us-can-stop-chinese-invasion-taiwan-military-expert-says-1612128>.

Many stories have a similar discursive approach of putting the words into the mouths of Chinese political and military leaders or subjectively “interpreting” the public statements made by these key figures. China remains a riddle and a mystery to many in the leading countries of the Western world. Therefore, such a “liberal” interpretation, projection, or assertion could be considered plausible. One great example to it is the case against the Chinese President, who is assigned a personal responsibility for something that never happened. Within the framework of this discursive logic, it is argued that it is only a matter of time (set by China), that the Chinese invasion of Taiwan is both imminent and inevitable, it is just a “question of time” when it occurs.¹ In some cases, the fear is heightened by the attempts to make this assertion look like it bears a greater significance for other countries and, therefore, is the matter of defence and security not only for Taiwan, but also, more broadly, for the Asia-Pacific region.² This can be used as a basis for ensuring public support for political proposals to adopt a tougher foreign and security policy against China. At the same time, as the references to the inevitable and imminent war become more frequent, the U.S. tries to distance itself from it declaring to be on the path to an imminent war with China.³

Another line of media discursive logic seems to be aimed at influencing the strategic thinking of Chinese policymakers. This is where the Western assertion of the coming Chinese invasion resonates with the article, as its intention seems to be directed at deterring the invasion by suggesting that the military solution to the problem would be a huge gamble for President Xi in terms of significant material, economic, and political costs for China. Specifically, the potential costs mentioned include deaths, economic sanctions, and possible military defeat, which are listed as possible means of deterring an “invasion.”⁴ The article attempts to illustrate the opportunity costs, with China risking the decades of peaceful growth and prosperity for the sake of military adventurism that threatens to disrupt domestic political stability. The idea and logic of this discursive line of thought is to emphasize the potential costs of the invasion to China, notwithstanding its superior military force. President Xi’s decision making is presented as the main threat.

Various discursive comparisons are made between the assumed scenario of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan with historical episodes. The purpose of such “news” or “analytical” stories is not to provide an accurate starting point for exploring or analysing future possibilities in the physical realm, but rather to engineer consent and acceptance in the cognitive realm of various audiences. These comparative discourses are loaded with emotional and value judgements. One comparison used was the amphibious landings of the Western Allies on the Normandy beaches of France on D-Day and the projected idea of a Chinese military invasion of Taiwan. A writer for *The Diplomat* stated that the D-Day operation was about liberation from tyranny, while

1 James Holmes, “Is a Chinese Military Attack on Taiwan Inevitable?” Clingendael, October 6, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/chinese-military-attack-taiwan-inevitable>.

2 Stan Grant, “Taiwan is Preparing for Chinese Invasion, and Whether the U.S. Fights Alongside it Will Determine Australia’s Fate,” ABC News, October 4, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-05/taiwan-foreign-minister-warn-war-china-global-geopolitical-order/100511960>.

3 Paul D. Shinkman, “China ‘Clearly’ Developing Ability to Invade Taiwan, Top General Says,” U.S. News, November 3, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-11-03/china-clearly-developing-ability-to-invade-taiwan-top-general-says>.

4 Iain Marlow, “Why War with Taiwan Would be a Huge Gamble for China’s Xi,” Bloomberg, December 8, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-07/why-war-with-taiwan-is-a-huge-gamble-for-china-s-xi>.

the alleged (not actual) Chinese invasion of Taiwan is about spreading tyranny.¹ There are various assumptions in the discourse about relations of power and disparities, which CDA intends to uncover. Namely, China is (geopolitically) represented as a force for “bad” in international relations, whereas the U.S. and its allies are represented as a force for “good”, where a binary and polar set of values and assessments exists to promote the goals of a waning unipolar global order.

Interestingly, an analytical news article published in Al Jazeera contained a forecast different from the ones that appeared in various mainstream U.S. and UK news media. Rather than bandwagoning with the narrative conclusion of an “imminent” and “inevitable” Chinese invasion of Taiwan predicted by various U.S. officials, the lesson learnt was that the threat discourse used was an indication and a reflection of worsening relations between the U.S. and China rather than of any change in operational choices made by China.² Thus, there is an obvious parallel with the discourse concerning Russia and Ukraine within the geopolitical context of worsening relations between the U.S. and Russia, the result of which is an increasingly unstable system of international relations that is undergoing transformation.

Russia's Inevitable and Imminent Invasion of Ukraine

The political and mainstream mass media discourse about an imminent and inevitable Russian invasion of Ukraine is not at all new. This assertion has existed since the aftermath of the Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2014³ and the beginning of what Kyiv referred to as the Anti-Terrorist Operation against the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics and later renamed the Russo-Ukrainian War. Another and a more intense round of tensions and worsening of diplomatic relations between the U.S.-led West and Russia began in November of 2021 in the context of security talks, which included a focus on the security of Ukraine. A sample of digital news and analytical stories representing different discursive logics was collected, analysed and interpreted through the use of CDA in order to highlight the geopolitical representations inherent in the fifth dimension of strategy in a turbulent and transforming global order.

In the discursive approach, there are a number of similarities to the imminent and inevitable Chinese invasion of Taiwan: firstly, the responsibility for “aggression” and “instability” is significantly assigned to President V. Putin on a personal level, while Russia is characterised as a country waging a “war of disinformation” to legitimize the military operation. This polar binary representation of the coming conflict as a battle between freedom and sovereignty on the one side and slavery and tyranny on the other side united global community against isolated Russia, and V. Putin who is claimed to have politically (and geopolitically) backed himself into a corner.⁴ The language with a lesser degree of certainty was used concerning the likelihood of the invasion, such as the term “very distinct possibility” in a “reasonably swift time frame”

1 Ian Easton, “Why a Taiwan Invasion Would Look Nothing Like D-Day,” *The Diplomat*, May 26, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/why-a-taiwan-invasion-would-look-nothing-like-d-day/>.

2 Erin Hale, “Is China Really About to Invade Taiwan?” *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2021, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/14/is-there-really-a-risk-that-china-will-go-to-war-with-taiwan>.

3 Boyd-Barrett 2017, 127–151.

4 Alana Calvert, “Russian Invasion of Ukraine ‘Inevitable’ and ‘Imminent’,” *Evening Standard*, January 16, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/tobias-ellwood-ukraine-vladimir-putin-russian-liz-truss-b976944.html>.

in conjunction with “imminent.”¹ As a form of continuity in terms of previous allegations of Russian “invasions” of Ukraine, one headline read: *“Is Another Russian Invasion of Ukraine Inevitable?”*² Furthermore, the build-up of Russian troops in Russia and Belarus was emphasised as a manifestation of an upcoming threat,³ whilst the build-up of half of the Ukrainian Army close to the breakaway areas in Donbas was ignored and not covered.⁴ Attempts to report the possibility of a conflict in a more balanced way were sometimes noted, when the different perceptions of the main global actors – the U.S., Russia, and China – were taken into account.⁵

The language used by Western political and military leaders, which was reflected in mainstream mass media, indeed came at a cost due to subtexts and associations. It resulted in an increased level of social and economic disruption driven by fear and uncertainty. “On February 2, White House press secretary J. Psaki announced that the term “imminent” would no longer be used to describe the threat of a Russian intervention. Not because the objective intelligence assessment had changed in any way, but because the term might inadvertently suggest U.S. certainty about V. Putin’s intentions. The use of the term and the Biden administration’s stark rhetoric had also caused significant friction with the Ukrainian government.”⁶ This is a very brief but revealing glimpse into the inner work of suggestive language, which is used in a deceptive manner. Despite the high level of certainty expressed by the language used in public statements, they did not reflect the fact of holding real knowledge about Russia’s actions combined with the disruptions caused in the Ukrainian society and the resulting tensions with the Ukrainian government.

Another similarity to the mainstream media reporting on the Chinese invasion of Taiwan was various projected and alleged costs to be incurred by Russia if it had chosen to invade Ukraine, such as additional economic sanctions or costs associated with such military operation.⁷ This is consistent with the use of news reports as an indirect form of communication between the leaders of countries experiencing diplomatic tensions. As these forms of consequences discourse were communicated, some Ukrainian political leaders sought to downplay the “inevitability” factor in the discourse and urged people

1 Karen DeYoung, Alex Horton, Amy Cheng, and Shane Harris, “Biden, Putin to Speak Saturday as U.S. Warns That Imminent Russian Invasion of Ukraine is ‘Distinct Possibility,’” *Washington Post*, February 11, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/11/ukraine-russia-putin-nato-biden/>; Gordon Lubold, Michael R. Gordon, and Yaroslav Trofimov, “U.S. Warns of Imminent Russian Invasion of Ukraine with Tanks, Jet Fighters, Cyber Attacks,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-troops-told-to-exercise-restraint-to-avoid-provoking-russian-invasion-11645185631>; Shannon Pettypiece, “White House Warns Russian Invasion of Ukraine May be Imminent,” *NBC News*, January 18, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/white-house-warns-russian-invasion-ukraine-may-be-imminent-n1287649>.

2 Jonah Shepp, “Is Another Russian Invasion of Ukraine Inevitable? The Window of Opportunity for Diplomacy is Closing,” *NY Magazine*, January 18, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/01/is-another-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-inevitable.html>.

3 Sebastian Roblin, “12 Reasons Why a Russian Attack on Ukraine Looks Imminent,” *Forbes*, February 13, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastianroblin/2022/02/13/12-reasons-why-a-russian-attack-on-ukraine-looks-imminent/?sh=df8c16326e49>.

4 Foreign Staff, “Russia says Ukraine has Deployed Half Its Army – 125,000 Troops – in the Conflict Zone,” *The Independent*, December 1, 2021, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-ukraine-army-donbass-troops-b1967532.html>; Jacques Baud, “The Military Situation in the Ukraine – An Update,” *The Postil*, April 11, 2022, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.thepostil.com/author/jacques-baud/>.

5 Mark Stone, “Ukraine–Russia Tensions: Is an Invasion Imminent? America Says Yes. Russia Says No. China Watches On,” *Sky News*, February 12, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-russia-tensions-us-language-hardens-as-putin-tests-western-unity-and-resolve-which-seems-shaky-amid-invasion-fears-12539594>.

6 Nick Connelly, “If a War with Russia is not ‘Imminent,’ why is Ukraine Asking for Weapons?” *DW*, February 5, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/if-war-with-russia-is-not-imminent-why-is-ukraine-asking-for-weapons/a-60671476>.

7 Jack Detsch, “White House Warns Russian Invasion of Ukraine Could be Imminent,” *Foreign Policy*, February 11, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/11/russia-invasion-ukraine-imminent-white-house/>.

to stay calm, as the Russian invasion was, in fact, not imminent.¹ Other commentators noted potential problems related to Western credibility that the chosen discursive strategy could cause.

Only 10 days before the outbreak of an open war in Ukraine, some observers noted that the West's singular focus on an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine could actually undermine the credibility of Western political leaders and the intelligence community if another path was to be chosen. Warnings about the risks of this communication strategy came even from analysts who are usually highly critical of Russia. "But the emphasis on near-inevitable war – and the naming of narrow timeframes when it is expected to happen – is also closing down options for the U.S. and its allies, while opening them up for Russia. Moscow still has the initiative, and the risk is growing that its president, V. Putin, is being set up to achieve a diplomatic victory through pulling the rug from under the Western war scare."² K. Giles was not alone in questioning the inevitability of an imminent Russian invasion – other professional observers were also critical of the "fever pitched" level of inevitability in the discourse of mainstream media reporting and assertions from high-ranking members of Western governments. The assessment was that Russia was succeeding in keeping Ukraine unstable, and, therefore, unable to join NATO, and forcing the U.S. to take Russia's security concerns seriously.³ There were very few articles discounting the scenario of a Russian invasion of Ukraine based on an assumed cost-benefit ratio, *Al Jazeera* for example, provided a platform for this narrative.⁴ Messages from the Ukrainian government stating that the Russian invasion was not imminent were also covered in mainstream news.⁵ However, the strategic calculations and perceptions did change from 24 February 2022.

Conclusion

In the article, the following research question was posed: what are the desired informational and cognitive outcomes for the communicator who is creating a media narrative of imminent war, from conceptual and pragmatic perspectives? As noted earlier in this paper, there are different aspects to geopolitics, one of which is a policy practice, and the other is a representation or interpretation of the actors, events, and processes, in international relations. Thus, information is a key aspect of geopolitics in the sense that its geopolitical representations and interpretations, if successful, can create opportunities or obstacles in terms of the operational choices available to the actors in pursuit of their foreign policy interests and goals. Given the current global geopolitical transformations – from a Western-centric U.S. unipolar order to a non-Western-centric multipolar order – all key international actors and great powers are

1 Yuras Karmanau, "Ukrainian Leaders: Stay Calm, Russian Invasion Not Imminent," AP News, January 25, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-russia-diplomacy-europe-baltic-sea-44821c52f54b5e927d86ea28420cb2cf>.

2 Keir Giles, "The West's Focus on Imminent Invasion in Ukraine May Backfire – and Bolster Putin," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/14/the-west-invasion-ukraine-putin-russia>.

3 Sara Meger, "Why Russia isn't About to Invade Ukraine Soon," University of Melbourne, February 15, 2022, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/why-russia-isn-t-about-to-invade-ukraine-soon>.

4 Harun Yilmaz, "No, Russia Will Not Invade Ukraine," *Al Jazeera*, February 9, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/2/9/no-russia-will-not-invade-ukraine>.

5 Associated Press, "Ukraine Urges Calm, Saying Russian Invasion Not Imminent," CBC, January 25, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ukraine-russia-tension-1.6326392>; Yuras Karmanau, "Ukrainian Leaders: Stay Calm Russian Invasion Not Imminent," ABC News, January 25, 2022, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ukraine-urges-clam-russian-invasion-imminent-82457773>.

increasingly motivated to position or re-position themselves in order to defend or attack the outgoing hegemon. As J. Mearsheimer points out, within the framework of realism in geopolitics, a hegemon should not sit idly by as other powers grow stronger. This explains the increasingly turbulent state of international relations in the 21st century in the context of various shades of war and peace in terms of covert and indirect forms of warfare used to weaken one's competitors, together with the noted central role and importance of using information as the fifth element of strategy to achieve this goal.

Information is used to represent the physical realm by managing and developing the information realm, which in turn is used to shape opinions and perceptions of the audiences' cognitive realm. CDA is an effective means of uncovering the underlying and often hidden relations of power and representations/interpretations of the political and geopolitical realities. The collected and analysed news and analytical reports revealed the importance of language, discourse, and context, which were selectively used as a mechanism designed to force China and Russia, as the leading powers of an emerging multipolar order, to take a passive and reactive foreign policy stance in order to create an environment conducive to the unipolar order. Clearly, the discourse of "inevitable" or "imminent" military threat is used to arouse fear in order to make the audience develop a herd mentality, which makes the emotional collective logic much more susceptible to manipulation and deception. There are similarities in the operationalisation and (geo) politicisation of the discourse communicated to the masses, where the political leaders of China and Russia are singled out for vilification for being aggressive, ambitious, and unpredictable, therefore, they are narrated as leaders who cannot be trusted or appeased. This is intended to create disparities in the perceived relations and levels of trust as compared to the Western leaders, whom journalists often quote verbatim, therefore, it is implied that they are trustworthy in power relations. Other disparities are also highlighted in the discourse of representations and interpretations of future scenarios, namely alleged invasions, which are represented in a dialectical manner. This appears to be an act of cognitive preparation for priming and mobilising the public (citizens, allies, neutrals, and foes). N. Fairclough described this process in terms of the politics of policy formation, but in this case, it is applied to "confront" China and Russia as a moral act of humanitarian defence as opposed to pursuing interests and objectives within the framework of geopolitical realism that is rooted in the global geopolitical brand of the New Cold War. The results regarding the success or failure of the U.S. strategy are still rather inconclusive as it has the potential to either hinder or accelerate the rise of the multipolar global order opposed to the current hegemonic unipolar global order.

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«Неизбежные» и «неминуемые» вторжения: логика военных нарративов западных СМИ

АННОТАЦИЯ

В XXI в. геополитическая конкуренция великих держав снова становится актуальной, поскольку западноцентричный мировой порядок под эгидой США сталкивается с относительным упадком из-за проблем, создаваемых Китаем и Россией, выступающими за многополярность. В практическом плане геополитика заключается в способности влиять на характер международных отношений с точки зрения отношений акторов и динамики сил. Это касается и способности акторов представлять и интерпретировать события и процессы. Информационная геополитика как косвенная форма конкуренции и конфликта приобретает все большее значение в XXI в., когда СМИ все чаще называют четвертой властью, а информацию и знание – главным видом ресурсов. Это приводит к более нестабильным и сложно прогнозируемым международным отношениям. Отсюда важнейшая роль ведущих западных масс-медиа как средства обструкционистской внешней политики в сохранении однополярного порядка посредством специфических дискурсивных практик, применяемых в новостях о международной повестке. Критический анализ новостей используется в статье с целью интерпретации западного дискурса о «неизбежных» и «неминуемых» вторжениях со стороны Китая и России. Информационная геополитика используется, таким образом, как средство ограничения оперативного выбора и возможностей противника в достижении своих внешнеполитических целей.

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