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Michael Hatherell, Katherine Mansted and Jade Guan



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ADC Publications
Centre for Defence Research
Australian Defence College
PO Box 7917
CANBERRA BC ACT 2610
P: + 61 02 6266 0352
E: cdr.publications@defence.gov.au
W: defence.gov.au/ADC/publications/AJDSS

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National security, information and ideas: Time to think about ideational power

*Michael Hatherell, Katherine
Mansted and Jade Guan*

Introduction

In the fictional world of Christopher Nolan's epic 2010 film, *Inception*, technology exists that allows one human to enter the dreams of another. Specialists in entering dreams are hired to conduct various forms of espionage, using the dream world to access the secret information of their targets. Yet the team assembled in the film is asked to do something that some of them believe to be impossible—to place an idea within the mind of a target. This notion of 'inception' not only gives the film its title but also a key source of dramatic tension. The main character, Cobb and his team must work out how to introduce a compelling idea without the target being conscious of the intrusion. To achieve the mission, the team must make the target believe that the idea came to them organically. The team's expert in forgery, Eames, captures the difficulty of doing so: 'You need the simplest version of the idea in order for it to grow naturally in your subject's mind. It's a very subtle art'.

Inception provides a powerful metaphor for thinking about the difference between information and ideas in a fast-changing strategic environment. While access to and control over information has been a priority for militaries and defence departments for some time¹, there is a need to better understand the cognitive dimension of conflict and competition. For this reason, contemporary analysis of concepts like political warfare, information warfare and strategic narrative has begun to focus more on the role of cognition, ideas and narrative. Australia's head of information warfare division, Major General Marcus Thompson, divides

1 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, eds., *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1997), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR880.html.

his concept of information warfare into technical and cognitive elements.² And, studies of changing technology, like Sanger's *Perfect Weapon* and Singer and Brooking's *LikeWar*, have heightened attention on ways in which digital systems might be weaponised to impact not only flows of information but also the beliefs that we hold.³

While specialists have a good sense of the challenges faced in the ideational realm, the role of ideational power is yet to feature in broader discussions about how to defend Australia and advance its security interests. In War College curriculums and strategic discussions, analysis of the 'I' component of the 'DIME' framework (shorthand for the diplomatic, informational, military and economic aspects of national power) frequently focuses on protecting the confidentiality, integrity and availability of information—often in reference to a specific operational theatre or political event such as an election. Much less attention is paid to the nature of the ideational realm, how ideas form and influence beliefs and behaviours through time, and what it means to protect or influence ideas.

We argue in this commentary that defence and national security professionals must combine concern for the role of information with an appreciation of the impact of ideas. Humans do not have a simple relationship with information. Instead, the contemporary scientific literature on human cognition demonstrates that we extensively filter information through our own beliefs. The dream-infiltrating specialists of *Inception* understand that their objective cannot be achieved just by sharing deceptive information. Instead, they need to construct a powerful idea that will be processed by the emotions of their target and change the target's behaviour. Cobb's team are not practicing 'informational power' in the way that we typically understand it: they are employing something that could be better thought of as the power to influence behaviour through ideas, or ideational power. After exploring this concept, we sketch some strategic and ethical questions that can inform our study of the ideational realm.

Information and ideas

Concepts like political warfare, societal warfare and information warfare have increasingly focused on the methods employed by strategic actors to influence

2 Marcus Thompson, 'Information Warfare—A New Age?' (speech transcript) *iWar Five Eyes Principals Forum* (Joint Capabilities Group, Department of Defence, Canberra, 31 October, 2018), https://www.defence.gov.au/JCG/docs/Head_Information_Warfare-iWar_Five_Eyes_Principals_Forum_Speech-Canberra.pdf.

3 David E. Sanger, *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018); Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 154.

the political dynamics of other nations.⁴ But while studies of influence often include a recognition of the role of narrative or cognition, they rarely unpack how information is processed by societies. This step is important, as the collection of human minds in a society constitute an ideational realm much more than an informational one. This point has been demonstrated across a substantial field of psychological research. In the *Political Brain*, Westen notes that ‘the ... capacity for rational judgement evolved to augment, not replace, evolutionarily older motivational systems... [T]he neural circuits activated during complex human decision-making do not function independently of these more primitive systems’.⁵ In *The Believing Brain*, Shermer draws on a review of empirical research to argue that the brain is a ‘belief engine’ that searches for patterns, gives those patterns meaning and then, lastly, seeks to rationalise this meaning.⁶ The work of Kahneman and Tversky has perhaps been the most influential in pointing to the impact of bias and beliefs in shaping how humans perceive and interpret the information that reaches us.⁷ Other recent works have demonstrated the extent to which human decision-making is based on a much richer array of inputs—such as values, emotions, cultural beliefs and social identity—than just a point-in-time assessment of information.⁸

Information can be thought of as observable facts about the world around us. These facts tell us about the nature of a thing (its size, state, cost, location etc.) and about occurrences (a movement, an action, a speech act). Information may tell us how many people were at a rally, what the Prime Minister said on Tuesday, or the level of spending a nation commits to defence. Information thought of in this way has significant value, and human history exhibits a trend of empires and states seeking to develop a more commanding grasp of available information.⁹ Information can be falsified and it can be verified, and the ongoing tug of war between these two efforts will increasingly need to deal with new techniques like

4 Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1772.html; Michael J. Mazarr et al., *The Emerging Risk of Virtual Societal Warfare: Social Manipulation in a Changing Information Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2714.html.

5 Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

6 Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies—How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (New York: Times Books, 2011).

7 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar: Straus and Giroux, 2013)

8 Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017); Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason* (Harvard: Harvard Univ Press, 2019); Hugo Mercier, *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020).

9 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

the use of deep fake technology.¹⁰ For militaries, the notion of achieving a winning edge through collecting more and better information, and quickly integrating it into decision-cycles, has animated concepts like America's 'revolution of military affairs'¹¹ and the PLA's drive for 'informatised warfare'.¹² The information environment is important, and our ability to assure its integrity and functionality should remain an ongoing emphasis in national security policy and practice.

Yet we cannot stop there. While information matters to military operations, it is also crucial to understand the potential—and limits—of information to shape the ideas present in societies. This is an important matter because by 'shaping or changing the beliefs and perceptions of opinion leaders or specific political or social groups, adversaries can bend Australia to their will—and achieve their foreign policy goals without firing a shot'.¹³ China's approach to national strategy places a strong emphasis on discourse and ideas, with a focus on influencing public opinion and the beliefs of decision-makers at home and abroad.¹⁴ There is also an emerging recognition that 21st century competition and conflict is 'society-centric'¹⁵—ordinary citizens, businesses and community organisations are targets and agents in security matters—making the full gamut of a nation's ideational realm an important subject of analysis for strategists.

It is essential that we develop a better understanding of how ideas shape the way in which humans behave, including the way in which they process the information around them. Ideas can be defined as the beliefs we possess about our world, be they causal beliefs (x causes y), principled beliefs (x is good, y is immoral) or worldviews (foundational visions about how the world is structured and what is possible for the future).¹⁶ Information and ideas come from very different places: information emerges from the observation of our environment,

10 Hannah Smith and Katherine Mansted, *Weaponised Deep Fakes Policy Brief*, Report No. 28/2020, International Cyber Policy Centre (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/weaponised-deep-fakes>.

11 Norman Davis, 'An Information-Based Revolution in Military Affairs', *Strategic Review* 24, No. 1 (Winter 1996): 43–53.

12 Elsa Kania and John Costello, China's Quest for Informatization Drives PLA Reforms, *The Diplomat*, 4 March 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/chinas-quest-for-informatization-drives-pla-reforms/>.

13 Katherine Mansted, 'The Public Square: The Next Theatre of Conflict in the Digital Age', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 6 August 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-public-square-the-next-theatre-of-conflict-in-the-digital-age/>.

14 Nadege Rolland, 'China's Vision for a New World Order', *NBR Special Report* 83, (The National Bureau of Asian Studies, January 2020); Peter Mattis, 'China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective', *War on the Rocks*, 30 January 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

15 Ariel E. Levite & Jonathan (Yoni) Shimshoni, 'The Strategic Challenge of Society-centric Warfare', *Survival* 60, no. 6 (November 2018); Maryanne Kelton, Michael Sullivan, Emily Bienvenue, Zac Rogers, 'Australia, the Utility of Force and the Society-centric Battlespace', *International Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July 2019).

16 Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993)

while ideas originate within our minds or the minds of others. Both underpin human decision-making. As De Bono argues:

there are people who believe that if you get enough information then the information will do your thinking for you...Of course, if information really could make the decisions then we should not need people, because information in a computer would flow along to give the decision output. This may happen in the future. For the moment, the human being is a sort of junction who adds to the information, ideas, values and politics and then passes on to a decision.¹⁷

The below examples highlight the difference between a piece of information and an idea. While the information and idea could be related in each set, the idea presented here is not the only one that could be arrived at upon receiving the information, which is filtered through our judgement, biases, values and interests. The relationship between the information and idea is also not a linear one—the information may be collected or deemed significant in the first place because of ‘selection bias’ shaped by pre-existing ideas.

Information	Idea
North Korea tested a nuclear weapon	North Korea is an irresponsible international actor
China’s economy has demonstrated a sustained period of growth	China’s governance model is superior to liberal democracy
President Trump made critical comments about allies	Australia should become a more independent power and rely less on the US alliance
The Minister was involved in a scandal	The Minister is not fit for office and should resign

A greater focus on ideas in strategic affairs allows students of national security and defence to benefit from literature on the power of narrative, storytelling and identity. In his influential books on the history and future of humanity, Harari has focused consistently on the notion that *homo sapiens* is a ‘storytelling animal, that thinks in stories rather than in numbers or graphs’.¹⁸ Strategic narrative scholars and practitioners from the fields of communications, political science and business management have significantly increased our understanding of the

17 Edward De Bono, *Parallel Thinking* (Penguin Book, 1995), 137.

18 Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (Jonathan Cape, 2018), 269.

way in which narrative can serve strategic ends.¹⁹ The study of culture and identity has provided important answers for why some political movements succeed and others fail, and Fukuyama's work on identity has noted the way in which dignity and resentment shape contemporary political dynamics.²⁰ By engaging directly with the role of ideas, we are in a better position to learn from this valuable literature.²¹

Ideational power

Grasping the role of ideas in strategic affairs means considering the ability to shape ideas as a form of power in itself. Ideas have power because they fundamentally shape the behaviour of humans and affect how we process information. Through history, ideas have bound communities together and allowed them to achieve significant endeavours together.²² Tilly argues that stories 'do essential work in social life, cementing people's commitments to common projects, helping people make sense of what is going on, channelling collective decisions and judgements, spurring people to action they would otherwise be reluctant to pursue'.²³ Some of the more important shifts in history have been because of the power of ideas rather than of information. John Stuart Mill presented a theoretical 'defence' of liberty rather than 'evidence' for liberty. French revolutionaries were animated by the compelling ideas of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité*. We make decisions, we sacrifice, we put ourselves at risk, we shift allegiance and even die for ideas.

Carstensen and Schmidt have provided a foundation for understanding the concept of ideational power and applied it to domestic policymaking.²⁴ The authors define ideational power 'as the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements'. They go on to note that ideational power can work 'directly through persuasion or imposition or indirectly by influencing the ideational context that defines the range of possibilities of others'. Through basing their definition on 'ideational elements', Carstensen and Schmidt separate this

19 Lawrence Freedman, 'Networks, Culture and Narratives', *The Adelphi Papers* 45, no. 379 (2006); Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power' *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (March 2014).

20 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

21 Kathleen J. Micinnis, Strategists have Forgotten the Power of Stories, *Foreign Policy*, 19 May 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/19/national-security-policy-making-mythos-logos-strategy/>

22 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harper, 2015).

23 Charles Tilly, *Stories, identities, and political change* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 27.

24 Martin B. Carstensen & Vivien A. Schmidt, Power through, over and in ideas: conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism, *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no. 3 (2016): 318–337.

concept from other forms of power that shape normative and cognitive beliefs. The application of military power in war, for instance, aims ultimately to persuade or compel the population and decision-makers of the adversary to accept a desired political end-state—it is a ‘diplomacy of violence’.²⁵ Ideational power as a way to achieve a change in beliefs is based on the use of non-material (ideational) means.²⁶

For strategists in the 21st century, the concept of ideational power is important because it asks quite directly how a strategic actor can use ideas to change the beliefs (and thus the behaviour) of human beings. As the need to better grasp the role of ideas and narratives has become clearer, the concept of informational power has been stretched to accommodate this challenge.²⁷ The Royal College of Defence Studies Handbook, for instance, groups issues of strategic narrative, media and public opinion under its section on informational power.²⁸ Within broader frameworks of informational power, concepts such as psychological operations and cognitive warfare demonstrate a deep interest in the human mind.²⁹ However, the problem with subsuming the role of ideas within the concept of informational power is that we cannot treat ideas in the way that we treat information. Partly, this is because of the skills needed to understand and wield ideational power. While information flows and technical systems are the main tools of informational power, identity, values, emotion, beliefs, culture, shared history and perceived interests are the tools of ideational power. This reflection dovetails with arguments about the need for students of defence to engage with the arts and humanities with as much of a sense of purpose and mission as ‘STEM’ subjects.³⁰ Secondly, current conceptions of informational power tend to assume that cognition processes follow after the collection and reception of information, but ideas are not simply a dependent variable of information. It may be that the realms of ideas and information are sufficiently different to warrant a ‘conscious uncoupling’ in the way we think about them. To this end, we explore factors

25 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

26 In this way, the concept of ideational power resembles Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power. Yet while soft power focuses on a very specific set of ideas related to the attractiveness of a state and its resulting persuasive potential, ideational power can employ a much broader range of ideas.

27 Donald Bishop, ‘DIME, not DIME: Time to Align the Instruments of U.S. Informational Power’, *Strategy Bridge*, 20 June 2018, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/6/20/dime-not-dime-time-to-align-the-instruments-of-us-informational-power>.

28 Royal College of Defence Studies, *Getting Strategy Right Enough* (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 4 September 2017), https://www.da.mod.uk/Portals/0/Documents/RCDS/20170904-RCDS_Getting_Strategy_Right_Enough_Final.pdf?ver=2017-09-08-090748-807

29 Daniel Ventre, *Information Warfare* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 2016); Emily Bienvenue, Zac Rogers and Sian Troath, ‘Cognitive Warfare’, *The Cove*, 19 September 2018, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/cognitive-warfare>.

30 Kathleen J. Micinnis, ‘Strategists have Forgotten the Power of Stories’, *Foreign Policy*, 19 May 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/19/national-security-policy-making-mythos-logos-strategy/>

impacting the successful use of ideational tools in the next section alongside some related ethical questions.

The strategic and ethical application of ideational power

In *Inception*, Cobb captures the power of ideas: ‘An idea is like a virus, resilient, highly contagious. The smallest seed of an idea can grow. It can grow to define or destroy you’. The potency of ideas and the harm that they can cause should necessitate a careful analysis of the application of ideational power by students of national security and defence. Used effectively, governments and their agencies can employ ideational power to advance security interests and improve the conditions of the society they serve. On the other hand, it is important to understand the impact of the ideational power employed by other actors, be they state or non-state. In this section, we sketch three factors that are valuable for thinking about the effectiveness of ideational power, including *context*, *resonance* and *virality*. The harmful potential of ideas should also remind us that ethics also matter. We propose three lenses for considering the ethical application of ideational power: *intent*, *authenticity* and *consequences*.

Firstly, **context** matters because power is best considered in a relational sense, meaning that for a ‘sender’ to have power they must have the ability to change behaviour in a specific relationship with a recipient, rather than simply possessing power resources.³¹ This is especially important when it comes to ideational power, given the cross-cutting role of history, identity, culture, values and interests in shaping how successful a sender will be. The temporal context also matters. Ideas can endure over longer periods of time, longer than most pieces of information are relevant for. And as Carr has pointed out, stories often commit a ‘temporal sleight of hand’ by presenting a simplified narrative, bringing to our mind a sense of order in complex circumstances.³² This is most needed for communities experiencing events that are ‘unprecedented,’ in the sense that they are difficult to compare to recent lived experiences. As Bottici argues: ‘complex and vast political phenomena that transcend the individual’s horizon of experience need to be imagined even more in order to be experienced’.³³ Moments that are collectively perceived as periods of crisis or transition, such as the current global COVID-19 pandemic, may provide particularly fertile opportunities

31 Robert A. Dahl, ‘The Concept of Power’, *Behavioral Science* 2, No. 3 (July 1957); Darren J. Lim & Victor A. Ferguson, ‘Power in Australian foreign policy’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72, No. 4 (2018): 306-313.

32 Andrew Carr, ‘It’s About Time: Strategy and Temporal Phenomena’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2018.1529569,

33 Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

for ideational power to be employed. As Ikenberry argues, in the aftermath of large-scale crises,

structures of power and interests matter—just as they always do. But at these turning points, uncertainties about power structures and unhappiness with past or current definitions of interests provide openings for rethinking.³⁴

Just as Cobb's team require a deep understanding of their target, actors in the real world seeking to change beliefs and behaviour through ideas must know the recipient. We can see the extent to which an understanding of the recipient mattered in Russia's use of ideational power during the 2016 US presidential election, where the Russian campaign effectively engaged with deep rooted identity-based cleavages within American society. But there are other examples too. Australia's use of narrative accompanying its actions in the South Pacific, for instance, must consider factors like the role of family and religion. Nunn has noted, for instance, that:

...one reason for the failure of external interventions for climate change adaptation in Pacific Island communities is the wholly secular nature of their messages. Among spiritually engaged communities, these secular messages can be met with indifference or even hostility if they clash with the community's spiritual agenda.³⁵

To be successful in the ideational domain, senders must also understand themselves and how they are perceived. The capacity and resources of the sender matter, as they do in the use of other forms of power.³⁶ But the extent to which the sender is perceived as being authentic and consistent in their use of ideas is likely to shape the effectiveness of their ideas. This is why, for instance, Russia's Internet Research Agency did not tweet in its own name in election-influence campaigns in 2016 and instead used fake accounts to mimic real Americans. It is also why political advertisements seek to use spokespeople that resemble the communities that are the target of the advertisement. Here we can learn from a range of international and domestic actors—from political leaders to Instagram influencers—regarding the power of perceived authenticity.³⁷

34 G. John Ikenberry, 'Creating Yesterday's New World Order: Keynesian "New Thinking" and the Anglo-American Postwar Settlement' in *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions and Political Change*, ed. Judith Goldstein and Robert Owen Keohane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 59.

35 Patrick D Nunn, 'Sidelining God: Why Secular Climate Projects in the Pacific Islands are Failing', *The Conversation*, 17 May 2017, <https://theconversation.com/sidelining-god-why-secular-climate-projects-in-the-pacific-islands-are-failing-77623>.

36 Social media has to some extent lowered the cost of sharing ideas, opening up the ideational realm to more actors.

37 Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*, 154.

Secondly, the **resonance** of the idea itself is an essential factor in its success. In order to influence beliefs, an idea needs to connect with the interests, culture, history, emotions and values of the target audience.³⁸ This is more likely to be the case where the sender adopts an idea that is already influential within the recipient community (as Russia did in 2016), or connects their idea directly to interests and cultural realities already present (as Australian foreign policy seeks to do in the South Pacific). It is useful here to consider the example of Martin Luther, who so fundamentally shifted the history of Europe and the Christian faith. Luther was aided by technology (the printing press) and was a prolific writer and orator. But, he would not have been successful if his ideas did not connect directly with an audience in Europe that had a troubled relationship with its rulers and particularly with the indulgences of the dominant Catholic Church.³⁹

Finally, the effective use of ideational power depends in part on the **virality** of the idea. Where ideas connect with a community, they are likely to be shared and championed by individuals and networks. The ideas underpinning the major monotheistic religions, for instance, are so powerful today not only because of the prophets who apparently shared them but because subsequent generations championed and spread those ideas. Successful political or propaganda campaigns in history are effective not because they are a one-way broadcast from state to society but because they spread through networks. In the digital era, there is further potential for these patterns.⁴⁰ Wanless and Berk's notion of 'participatory propaganda' helps to understand how virality can amplify messages beyond the agency of the author of the idea, drawing on the authenticity of other actors in the community to further reinforce the message.⁴¹

We might also consider how ideas can become embedded within our worldview and institutions to such an extent that they come to define what we consider to be right and wrong, desirable or undesirable. Here, Greer has recently observed how these deeply institutionalised beliefs are an important focus for the Chinese government:

They are not fond of the military machines United States Pacific
Command has arrayed against them, but what spooks them more

38 Olivier Schmitt, 'When are Strategic Narratives Effective? The Shaping of Political Discourse through the Interaction between Political Myths and Strategic Narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1448925>

39 Joan Acocella, 'How Martin Luther Changed the World', *The New Yorker*, 23 October 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/30/how-martin-luther-changed-the-world>

40 Jarred Prior, 'Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, 4 (2017): 50–85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26271634>

41 Alicia Wanless and Michael Berk, 'The Audience is the Amplifier: Participatory Propaganda', in *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, ed. Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy and Nancy Snow (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020), 85–104.

than American weapons and soldiers are ideas—hostile ideas they believe America has embedded in the discourse and institutions of the existing global order.⁴²

In a recent report, Rolland refers to calls by a senior official in China's State Council for Chinese intellectuals to 'build a persuasive, causal, and internally consistent discourse system that can make others understand why China is on the right path' and to shape discussions so as to 'define the criteria for right and wrong, true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly'.⁴³

Embedding ideas is the ultimate potential of ideational power. Here, it is important to recall Carse's observation that 'a finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play'.⁴⁴ Given that national or grand strategy is about continuing to play in a world that is conducive to our interests, ideas that become embedded within the system are the most influential. To this end, we should pay close attention to, and exercise agency in, ideational contests to shape the political, economic, social and technological systems that make up the international order, and work to create a 'shared vision of the good that binds otherwise feuding polities together'.⁴⁵

Despite the importance of ideational power, the concept is liable to face a wary reception in democracies. Democratic political systems possess political traditions based on notions of popular sovereignty and a free 'marketplace of ideas', which mean that appeals to ideational power risk being perceived as illegitimate or Orwellian. To paraphrase Robert Menzies, for a nation to defend its liberty but lose its own in the process would be the greatest tragedy. Grappling with the ethics of ideational power, then, is essential not only for normative reasons but also because it opens up discussion in democracies as to how they can compete in what is an increasingly contested global ideational environment. As a starting point, we think that three ethical issues merit consideration.

Firstly, it is important to focus on the *intent* of the actor seeking to employ ideational power. Are they interested in the pursuit of worthy and ethical outcomes through their use of ideas? This question follows a similar logic to the principle of 'right intent' within the just war standards of *jus ad bellum* in the use of mili-

42 Tanner Greer, 'China's Plans to Win Control of the Global Order', *Tablet*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/china-plans-global-order>.

43 Cited in Nadège Rolland, 'China's Vision for a New World Order', *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, Special Report 83 (January 2020), 13.

44 James Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

45 Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 8.

tary power.⁴⁶ There are some purposes for which the use of ideas are generally accepted in liberal democracies, such as in open political contests between political parties and candidates, in issue advocacy by NGOs and lobby groups, and attempts by religious organisations to spread their faiths. But there are other uses of ideas, such as in the radicalisation of communities towards violence and the silencing of dissent that are generally considered unethical. The means of disseminating ideas is also important—causing ideas to be amplified via covert, coercive or corrupting methods such as blackmail, non-transparent funding or impersonation is widely considered unethical, and in some cases is illegal.⁴⁷

Secondly, there is value in examining the extent to which ideas display **authenticity**, in the sense that they embody genuinely held beliefs of the actor rather than simply being ‘ideational weapons’ used cynically to exploit a target. This is where much of Russia’s use of ideas might be critiqued through an ethical lens. As Shevtsova has observed in Russia’s use of contradictory ideas to sow confusion: ‘ideas are instrumental. If an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it’.⁴⁸ Here measures such as consistency between word and deed through time matter to the ethical question just as much as they do the strategic one. We might also consider the jus ad bellum criterion of ‘legitimate authority’ as especially important in the deliberate shaping of ideas, given that in democracies political ideas are usually deemed legitimate when they have the chance to be broadly judged by the public. If governmental institutions have a role in shaping ideas or narratives, a process of public engagement and deliberation may provide increased legitimacy to these efforts.

Lastly, it is important to consider the **consequences** of the way in which ideational power is employed. Consuming the system to achieve one’s narrow ends may lead to short-term success but will also result in lasting damage for society and its institutions. Playing a finite ideational game in an infinite context could be seen as highly unethical. An actor who creates distrust in the legal system to benefit their own immediate legal fortunes, for instance, should be seen as unethical. Other techniques, such as drowning out the views of others, relying on disinformation, or using deception may lead to gains for a strategic actor but risk damaging the open debate of information in the future and faith in the

46 David Whetham, “Hybrid Warfare” and the Continuing Relevance of the Just War Tradition in the 21st Century’, *Ethics and Armed Forces*, Issue 2015/2 (2015), <http://www.ethikundmilitaer.de/en/full-issues/20152-hybrid-warfare/whetham-hybrid-warfare-and-the-continuing-relevance-of-the-just-war-tradition-in-the-21st-century/>.

47 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, ‘Countering Foreign Interference’ (website), last updated 27 February 2020, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-foreign-interference>.

48 Lilia Shevtsova, ‘The Authoritarian Resurgence: Forward to the Past in Russia’, *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (2015): 22-36, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/578605>.

nation's public square. And while ideas and stories appeal to our emotions rather than our sense of scientific proof, we may imagine an ethical duty for strategic actors to employ narratives that are grounded in available evidence, rather than baseless claims that are calibrated to appeal only to the emotions and prejudices of the audience.

The contemporary ideational environment

Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic heighten demand for ways to help frame non-routine, once-in-a-generation information. In this moment, Australia needs to come to grips with the impact of ideational power. One of the states that matters most to the future of the Indo-Pacific, China, is clearly thinking about ideational power.⁴⁹ If the Australian public and leaders disagree with the aims and method of China's use of ideational power, they will need to decide how we can leverage our own ideational power in a strategic and ethical manner.

But ideational power will matter in so many other ways to our security and national interests. Political leaders during the pandemic have already needed to draw on ideational power to change the daily behaviour of citizens.⁵⁰ The use of ideas by citizens and organisations in society matters because it influences how we organise politically at a national and international level to tackle important issues like climate change. Ideational power matters because it helps to maintain the cohesion of societies, including efforts to strengthen and renew the social contract, or to tackle harmful misinformation and baseless conspiracy theories, such as recent claims about COVID-19 and 5G.⁵¹ Finally, developing and nurturing an effective understanding of ideational power will also be an important aspect of addressing the 'military software gap' as part of broader efforts to develop the Australian Defence Force's 'intellectual edge'.⁵²

49 Rolland, 'China's Vision for a New World Order', 5.

50 Costanza Musu, 'War Metaphors used for COVID-19 are Compelling but also Dangerous', *The Conversation*, 8 April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/war-metaphors-used-for-covid-19-are-compelling-but-also-dangerous-135406>.

51 Fergus Hunter, 'Government Lashes 'Utterly Baseless' 5G-Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/government-lashes-utterly-baseless-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-20200518-p54u06.html>

52 Michael Ryan, 'An Australian Intellectual Edge for Conflict and Competition in the 21st Century', *The Centre of Gravity Series* (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU College of Asia & the Pacific, March 2019).