

ACTIVITY REPORT



30 October to 2 November, 2019

The Student Conference on U.S. Affairs 71: Advancing the National Interest – The Intersection of Domestic Politics and American Foreign Policy, West Point, NY

Reflections from the Student Conference on U.S. Affairs 71 (SCUSA)

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The theme of the 74th annual Student Conference on United States Affairs was *Advancing the National Interest: The Intersection of Domestic Politics and American Foreign Policy*. The conference engaged with the erosion of America's domestic postwar consensus by apparent economic and cultural divisions, and how the erosion of America's domestic postwar consensus would shape America's foreign policy. As social, economic and political changes have eroded America's shared sense of national interest, American foreign policy has become increasingly erratic and unpredictable. This has generated a dialogue on not only the future of America's place within the rules-based international order, but the continued existence of the rules-based international order itself.

In the context of this discussion, which focuses on an increasingly unpredictable American foreign policy, the weaponization of information has become an increasingly salient topic. The discussion of the weaponization of information focused primarily on the influence of social media on domestic political polarization and the implications of domestic political polarization for American foreign policy. The implications of domestic political polarization and the weaponization of information were explored through analysis of the 2016 United States election, which saw the Russian government illegitimately interfere with Western democratic institutions through mass social media based mobilization. This effort had three components: hacking political entities, compromising state election systems, and online propaganda.

The Russian government used a novel information based strategy to combat the West. Using social media to foster political polarization among the American public, the Russian government attempted to erode trust in democratic and Western institutions, most prominently free and fair elections. This introduced new challenges to the rules based international order, which has become increasingly vulnerable to coordinated information-based insurgency. The challenge facing America, and the rules-based international community to which its foreign policy is vital, is the regulation of weaponized information.

The regulation of information, especially on social media, presents a quagmire of intellectual and legal problems both domestically and internationally. Issues relating to the ethics of censorship, privacy rights, and constitutional policy are present obstacles to a coherent information based defense strategy. The weaponization of information thus presents an unprecedented challenge to American foreign policy, and an unfamiliar threat to the international community.

The regulation of information and defense against the weaponization of information was regarded as a public service initiative. The focus of the discussion of the weaponization of information was how to make the American public more resilient to foreign misinformation campaigns within the context of social media. This discussion accordingly engaged with issues of information and media literacy.

The consensus on the regulation of information and the inoculation of the American public against misinformation and disinformation points to a public information literacy program. Issues of how to ensure that the American public engages actively and critically with the information presented to them on social media. Practical measures endorsed by participants in the discussion of the weaponization of information were the introduction of public media and information literacy programs, conducted primarily through formal workplace education for professionals in the IT sector, media literacy education programs for primary and secondary students, and a targeted social media public service announcement campaign. Collectively, these initiatives provided a framework for a robust public defense program against the weaponization of information.

It was concluded that, as the domestic and foreign policies of America have become increasingly interdependent, special attention must be paid by foreign policy officials to the role of individual American citizens in the maintenance of the rules-based international order. Further, as illustrated by the Russian interference in the 2016 United States Election, the American government lacks a comprehensive information based public defense strategy. The promotion of information and media literacy within the American public thus acquires an urgency which exacerbates its convoluted and often inarticulate relationship of weaponized information to the American national interest. While the initiatives proposed by participants in the discussion of the weaponization of information illustrated a willingness to engage in an as-yet underdeveloped field of foreign policy scholarship, this initiative has yet to be reflected in the government of the United States. The upcoming United States election will provide further insight into this topic, and will likely present a further development in the interconnected foreign and domestic policies of the United States.