

INTEGRATED EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

Implications of Contemporary Emotion Regulation Science

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Military and strategic theorists tend to overestimate the practical capacity of kinetic and information operations to manipulate the emotions of the intended audience. A new theoretical perspective rooted in contemporary literature on emotion regulation explains this gap between theory and practice. Kinetic and information operations each influence emotions through different emotion regulation mechanisms. This difference makes it hard to create synergistic effects through the integration of these operations. The emotion regulation perspective challenges existing strategic thought on kinetic and information operations, particularly effects-based operational planning that depends on the elicitation of a single emotion. It also informs the practice of integrating these operations by highlighting the nuances of their proper timing and risk-management.

Can military actors effectively manipulate the emotions of their target audiences when integrating kinetic operations, or operations employing physical force, and information operations, or those involving communication? Some strategic and military thought posits such emotional manipulation is not only possible but also sufficient for overall success. For instance, certain strategic and military theorists have observed that kinetic operations can be employed to scare or generate awe within the target audience and therefore achieve one's objectives.¹ Similarly, deterrence theorists argue it is possible to frighten the adversary's political leadership by the crafty employment of military power alongside diplomatic signaling.² This expectation also holds for information operations. For example, Joint Publication 3-13, *Information Operations*, defines military information support operations as "operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign

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1. Michael L. R. Smith and David M. Jones, "What Carl Might Have Said about Terrorism: How Strategic Theory Can Enlighten an Essentially Contested Debate," *Infinity Journal* 6, no. 2 (2018); and Harlan Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2006).

2. Austin Long, *Deterrence: From Cold War to Long War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.”³ Counterinsurgency theorists assume kinetic and information operations can be combined to create synergistic emotional effects, namely to win the “hearts and minds” of the local population and, therefore, to prevail in a protracted conflict.⁴ Clearly, across the spectrum of theorists dealing with kinetic and information operations, the expectations of effective emotional manipulation conducted for instrumental purposes run high.

Yet the practice of emotional manipulation itself provides reasons for skepticism. Kinetic operations do inspire emotions, but many of them are detrimental rather than instrumental to the overall effort.⁵ Perhaps the most famous example is Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, which inspired anger rather than terror among Americans and subsequently increased rather than decreased American willingness to fight.⁶ Additionally, and in contrast to conventional wisdom, evidence that information operations reliably inspire the desired emotions is insufficient, though this stems partly from the difficulty of studying the psychological effects of these operations.⁷

Recent empirical studies have shown information operations can inspire some emotions, though only in specific conditions. One such study, for example, explored emotional reactions by analyzing comments on YouTube videos. Yet in this particular study it was unclear whether the videos themselves inspired or merely intensified the resulting emotions, since individual commenters may have already felt “invested” in the videos’ subject matter.⁸

Another study on the effects of Russian state-sponsored media on international audiences relied on experimental methods and found information operations may inspire some emotions such as anger and/or fear but may have difficulty generating others, such as trust.⁹ Other studies have shown information operations often fail to alter people’s cognitive processes and behavior, implying that even if such operations

3. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), *Information Operations*, Joint Publication 3-13 (Washington, DC: CJCS, November 27, 2012), II-9–II-10.

4. David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103.

5. Samuel Zilincik, “Awe for Strategic Effect: Hardly Worth the Trouble,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, advanced online publication, 2022, <https://doi.org/>.

6. John Mueller, “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster,” *International Security* 16, no. 3 (1991).

7. Aiden Hoyle et al., “Grey Matters: Advancing a Psychological Effects-Based Approach to Countering Malign Information Influence,” *New Perspectives* 29, no. 2 (2021); and Matthew H. Goldberg and Abel Gustavson, “A Framework for Understanding the Effects of Strategic Communication Campaigns,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, advanced online publication, 2022, <https://doi.org/>.

8. Rhys Crilly and Precious N. Chatterje-Doody, “Emotions and War on YouTube: Affective Investments in RT’s Visual Narratives of the Conflict in Syria,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 5 (2020).

9. Aiden Hoyle et al., “Cognitive and Emotional Responses to Russian State-Sponsored Media Narratives in International Audiences,” *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications* 35, no. 6 (2023).

do bring about the desired emotions, these emotions do not effectively serve the instrumental purpose.¹⁰

The integration of kinetic and information operations does not necessarily alleviate the problem. As historical case studies show, in war, the target audience generally feels a variety of unintended emotions in response to kinetic operations, all the while ignoring or being little influenced by information operations.¹¹ Therefore, strategic practice indicates actors struggle to manipulate the target's emotions effectively with either or both kinetic and information operations.

The practice of integrating kinetic and information operations for synergic effects, hereafter referred to as integrated emotional manipulation, has thus proved more difficult than some existing theories indicate. Contemporary emotion regulation literature offers reasons for this gap between theory and practice.

Background

Emotion regulation, as understood in psychology, refers to “attempts to influence which emotions one has, when one has them, and how one experiences or expresses these emotions.”¹² The so-called “process model of emotion regulation” demonstrates the challenge of synchronizing the emotional component of kinetic and information operations, because they regulate emotions through different mechanisms.¹³ Based on this model, kinetic operations regulate emotions in a bottom-up and indirect manner. That is, the conduct of these operations first transforms the outside world, and that transformation may then inspire emotions on the adversary's side. This scenario captures what Stanford psychologist James J. Gross terms situation selection and situation modification mechanisms.¹⁴

In contrast, information operations regulate emotions in a top-down and direct manner. Here, political or military practitioners share information with their targets, and based on this information, the targets may or may not feel emotions. This scenario reflects what Gross refers to as attentional deployment and cognitive change

10. Alexander Lanoszka, “Disinformation in International Politics,” *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 2 (2019); Hugo Mercier, *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Claes Wallenius, “Do Hostile Information Operations Really Have the Intended Effects? A Literature Review,” *Journal of Information Warfare* 21, no. 2 (2022); and Claes Wallenius and Sofia Nilsson, “A Lack of Effect Studies and of Effects: The Use of Strategic Communication in the Military Domain,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13, no. 5 (2019).

11. Gordon McKelvie, “Fear, Hatred and Strategy during the Wars of the Roses,” *History* 107, no. 374 (2022); and Jonathan Shimshoni, “Swords and Emotions: The American Civil War and Society-Centric Strategy,” *Survival* 64, no. 2 (2022).

12. James J. Gross, “Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects,” *Psychological Inquiry: International Journal for the Advancement of Psychological Theory* 26, no. 1 (2015): 5.

13. See Gross.

14. Gross, 7–8.

mechanisms.¹⁵ Since contemporary emotion regulation literature indicates this difference in mechanisms translates into a divergence in emotional outcomes, it is reasonable to expect that kinetic and information operations do not synergize well in terms of their emotional manipulation.¹⁶

This employment of the emotion regulation perspective builds upon and contributes to two ongoing academic debates. The first debate concerns the utility of applying an emotion regulation perspective to understand and navigate social conflicts. Although the literature on emotion regulation originated in psychology, the idea has grown increasingly popular in various social sciences dealing with politics and especially war. Accordingly, scholars from conflict studies, international relations, and even strategic studies have employed this lens to explore their respective subjects of inquiry.¹⁷ This article contributes to that debate by showing how the incorporation of the emotion regulation lens can shed light on the comparative potential of kinetic and information operations to manipulate the emotions of the target audiences in war.

The second debate, positioned at the intersection of strategic studies and military studies, concerns the possibility of integrating kinetic and information operations for synergic effects. In strategic studies, the debate focuses on higher levels of analyses, namely how to effectively use military power alongside other tools, such as propaganda. This so-called grand strategy debate has already yielded some interesting results. For example, combining different instruments of power effectively is inherently difficult because each instrument operates through its unique logic.¹⁸

Meanwhile, military studies scholarship focuses on lower levels of analyses, especially on the opportunities and limitations of integrating kinetic and information operations within specific military operations.¹⁹ The current discussion is equally relevant to both

15. Gross, 8–9.

16. See Gross, 7, 17; Steffen Hartmann, Luise Pruessner, and Sven Barnow, “Contextual Variations in Emotion Polyregulation: How Do Regulatory Goals Shape the Use and Success of Emotion Regulation Strategies in Everyday Life?,” *Emotion*, advanced online publication, September 7, 2023, <https://psycnet.apa.org/>; and Thomas L. Webb, Eleanor Miles, and Paschal Sheeran, “Dealing with Feeling: A Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Strategies Derived from the Process Model of Emotion Regulation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no. 4 (2012): 797.

17. Eran Halperin, *Emotions in Conflict: Inhibitors and Facilitators of Peace Making* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Max Nurnus, “Bringing Emotions Back In: A Study on the Relationship between Power and Emotions in International Relations” (PhD diss., Seoul National University, 2019); and Samuel Zilincik and Ivo Pikner, “Toward the Concept of Psychological Control: Understanding Strategy as an Exercise in Emotion Regulation,” *Strategiein* 3 (2021).

18. Lukas Milevski, *Grand Strategy Is Attrition: The Logic of Integrating Various Forms of Power in Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

19. Harry Kemsley, “Air Power in Counter-Insurgency: A Sophisticated Language or Blunt Expression?,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 28, no. 1 (2007); Jordan Stern, “Civil Military Operations & Military Information Support Operations Coordination: A Non-Kinetic Ballast for Disciplined Counterinsurgency Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, November 1, 2011, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/>; and Larry K. Wentz and Lee W. Wagenhals, *Integration of Information Operations into Effects-Based Operations: Some Observations* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University, 2003).

aspects of the debate because its argument is not bound to a specific level of analysis. It advances the debate by focusing on the specific, emotional aspect of integrated operations rather than analyzing these operations in general, as the majority of the existing literature does.

Emotion Regulation - Process Model

Contemporary emotion regulation literature assumes people can, purposefully or accidentally, regulate their own emotions or those of others, meaning they can influence the intensity, duration, and even quality of all emotions.²⁰ Psychological research on emotion regulation has been flourishing since the late 1990s, focusing mostly on the questions of why and how individuals influence their own emotions.²¹ Gross' process model of emotion regulation has gained significant traction even beyond psychology because it can effectively explain how people modulate their emotions in broader social settings.

As Gross explains, the process model assumes that when an emotion emerges, it goes through four phases. Emotions start forming when people encounter a situation they find relevant. The second phase occurs as the situation grabs their attention. In the third phase, individuals evaluate the situation, focusing on the aspects of the situation that garnered attention. This evaluation process determines which specific emotions emerge, depending on the meaning people derive from the situation. During the final phase, individuals undergo appropriate physiological changes in accordance with the characteristics of the particular emotion.²²

Consequently, Gross distinguishes several distinct emotion regulation mechanisms, based on the phase in which these mechanisms enter the emotion formation process. The mechanisms, mentioned previously, include situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation.²³ All but the last one are relevant to the current article. As Gross explains, situation selection and modification concern the initial phase of emotion emergence, and attentional deployment and cognitive change concern phases two and three, respectively, while response modulation relates to the last phase of emotional emergence.²⁴ As Gross observes, situation selection and modification are mechanisms that rely on the transformation of the environment in order to inspire, or avoid inspiring, specific emotions.²⁵ For example, a person who is feeling anxious may decide to take a day off and go for a hike. Alternatively, when one is feeling lonely they can invite friends to cheer them up.

20. Gross, "Emotion Regulation," 5.

21. See Kateri McRae and James J. Gross, "Emotion Regulation," *Emotion* 20, no. 1 (2020).

22. Gross, "Emotion Regulation," 4.

23. Gross, 7.

24. Gross, 6.

25. Gross, 6, 7–8.

Gross argues that attentional deployment and cognitive change affect the latter stages of the emotion formation process. Instead of manipulating the outside world, these two mechanisms work by transforming people's minds, either by directing attention to the particular aspects of the situation (attentional deployment) or by changing the meaning that one derives from the situation (cognitive change).²⁶ For example, when an individual feels sad because of a loss of a beloved person they may try to focus their attention on work-related activities. Alternatively, people can reinterpret their mistakes as learning opportunities in order to feel less regret and more hope.

Crucially, Gross observes the mechanisms differ not only in their internal logic but also in their emotional effects.²⁷ He argues this variance in emotional effects may be related to the phases in which particular mechanisms occur with the emerging emotion and to their differing interactions with cognitive processes.²⁸ Additionally, Gross has suggested some mechanisms, such as attentional deployment, may be better at regulating more intense emotions than others, such as cognitive change.²⁹

Other studies support the proposition that the difference in mechanisms matters for emotional outcomes. For example, one study has shown that the effectiveness of different emotion regulation approaches may depend on whether one intends to reduce or increase their specific emotions.³⁰ Another study found that a particular mechanism's effects may vary with the specific emotion that is to be regulated.³¹ The following section explores how this difference in emotion regulation mechanisms can explain the difficulty of emotional manipulation in practice.

Influencing Emotions through Kinetic and Information Operations

By viewing kinetic and information operations as working through different emotional regulation mechanisms, the emotion regulation lens can explain why it is difficult to synchronize emotional manipulation across these activities. Kinetic operations manipulate emotions mostly through situation selection and situation modification—in short, environmental transformation. In general, these operations consist of moving troops, seizing and holding ground, destroying objects, and killing people.³² Such conduct usually transforms the environment, intentionally or not.

To be sure, not every environmental transformation regulates the target audience's emotions. Only those transformations that are appraised as relevant (phase 1) and

26. Gross, 8–9.

27. Gross, 17.

28. Gross, 7.

29. Gross, 17.

30. Hartmann, Pruessner, and Barnow, "Contextual Variations."

31. Webb, Miles, and Sheeran, "Dealing with Feeling," 797.

32. See Robert Rubel, "Antecedents to Strategy: The Use of Force," *Infinity Journal* 6, no. 4 (Summer 2019); and Robert J. Art, "To What Ends Military Power?," *International Security* 4, no. 4 (1980).

grab people's attention (phase 2) do.³³ For example, watching social media videos about armies moving on the other side of the world may not inspire emotions in people who just do not care enough about whatever is happening that far away. Therefore, when kinetic operations do regulate emotions, it is because they meaningfully change the world, at least from the perspective of the target audience.

Information operations are different. They regulate emotions primarily via attentional deployment and cognitive change, hence mind transformation. Information operations consist of communication, usually conducted through speeches, sounds, images, or signals.³⁴ Actors often feed the target audience with incomplete, biased, or false information to direct their attention to the specific aspects of the situation.³⁵

Those employing information operations also strive to change the meaning the target audience derives from the situation, by developing specific narratives and stories.³⁶ Information operations then work with the adversary's attention and interpretation in the context of unfolding situations. For example, during the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russian propagandists have tried to direct the attention of Ukrainian society to some fabricated missteps of Ukrainian political elites, thus casting the latter as incompetent leaders.³⁷

If the target audience encounters both kinetic and information operations, it effectively faces two, possibly four, of the distinct emotion regulation mechanisms. It may be difficult to synchronize these different mechanisms, and thus integrate these two types of operations, to produce the desired emotions. This is because the adversary may feel one set of emotions when they encounter the situation and a different set of emotions when they direct attention elsewhere or understand the evolving situation in a different light. In the case of air strikes, for example, they may initially inspire fear, but if the subsequent assessment shows the attacks inflicted little meaningful damage on one's forces, a sense of relief may emerge. There is no inherent synergy among these mechanisms, but there are significant divergences.

One consequence of this distinction, and a reason why integrated emotional manipulation in practice is difficult, is the diverging capacity of kinetic and information operations to inspire specific emotions at any given moment. As implied by the emotion regulation model and explicitly posited by the mainstream theories of

33. See Tobias Brosch, Gilles Pourtois, and David Sander, "The Perception and Categorisation of Emotional Stimuli: A Review," *Cognition and Emotion* 24, no. 3 (2010).

34. See Leigh Armistead, *Information Operations Matters: Best Practices* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2010).

35. Arild Bergh, "Understanding Influence Operations in Social Media: A Cyber Kill Chain Approach," *Journal of Information Warfare* 19, no. 4 (2020): 115–17.

36. Derek Bolton, "Targeting Ontological Security: Information Warfare in the Modern Age," *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2021); and Lawrence Freedman and Heather Williams, "Understanding Narratives and Information Campaigns," *Adelphi Series* 61, no. 493–95 (2021).

37. Olga Robinson, Adam Robinson, and Shayan Sardarizadeh, "Ukraine War: How TikTok Fakes Pushed Russian Lies to Millions," BBC, December 15, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

emotion, the kind of emotion that people feel depends on their interpretation of the situation.³⁸

Kinetic operations do not affect the target's interpretation. Rather, they transform environments and let the ensuing situations speak for themselves. Consequently, the target audience can derive all sorts of meanings from the situation and therefore feel various and sometimes contrasting emotions.³⁹ Some people may see the ensuing situation as terrifying and consequently feel fear, others may consider the operations a failure and feel contempt or even happiness and relief, and still others may grieve because they lost their loved ones in combat.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, examples of emotional diversity following kinetic operations abound. For example, the 9/11 terrorist attacks elicited widespread anger, fear, and sadness in the United States and sympathy abroad.⁴¹ The 2020 US killing of the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani elicited emotions as diverse as anger, fear, and happiness, depending on the observer's prior beliefs and thoughts.⁴² Soldiers facing combat situations often experience the obvious emotions such as fear but also "a variety of other emotional reactions, ranging from anger, anxiety, and rage, sadness, shame, guilt, and disgust, to pride, awe, elation, exhilaration, and even joy."⁴³ These examples indicate kinetic operations usually inspire many emotional effects.

In contrast, information operations leave less room for interpretation. This is because, as noted above, information operations usually dictate how events are to be interpreted. Furthermore, actors usually design these operations with the intention of inspiring distinct emotions.⁴⁴ This practice effectively narrows down the repertoire of meanings that the target audience is likely to derive from the situation. As a result, information operations are more likely to elicit a narrower group of emotions in the target audience, if they elicit emotions at all. This would explain why in the 2023 study on the Russian state-sponsored media mentioned above managed to inspire fear and

38. Jennifer Yih et al., "Better Together: A Unified Perspective on Appraisal and Emotion Regulation," *Cognition and Emotion* 33, no. 1 (2019).

39. Lukas Milevski, "Battle and Its Emotional Effect in War Termination," *Comparative Strategy* 39, no. 6 (2020).

40. See Klaus Scherer and Agnes Moors, "The Emotion Process: Event Appraisal and Component Differentiation," *Annual Review of Psychology* 70, no. 1 (2019).

41. Todd H. Hall and Andrew A. G. Ross, "Affective Politics after 9/11," *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (2015).

42. Samuel Zilincik and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "Deterrence: A Continuation of Emotional Life with the Admixture of Violent Means," in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century – Insights from Theory and Practice* (Hague: Springer, 2021), 468–69.

43. Siniša Malešević, "Emotions and Warfare: The Social Dynamics of Close-Range Fighting," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5; and see also Erika Kuipers and Cornelis van der Haven, eds., *Battlefield Emotions 1500–1800: Practices, Experience, Imagination* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

44. Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués and Elena Şimanschi, "Fabricating a War? Russian (Dis)Information on Ukraine," *International Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2023).

anger within the international community but failed to inspire trust.⁴⁵ This divergence demonstrates why kinetic operations often generate emotions detrimental to the overall effort, while this problem is rare in connection to information operations.

Another consequence of this distinction, and a reason why the two kinds of operations are not inherently emotionally synergic in their effects, is the fact that kinetic operations manipulate emotions more easily than information operations. First and foremost, the two kinds of operations diverge in how they impact the survival and well-being of their targets and therefore in how emotionally stimulating they are.⁴⁶ Because kinetic operations can kill and destroy, they can directly affect the survival and well-being of their targets. Subsequently, these targets are likely to interpret kinetic operations as relevant to their concerns and feel some emotions, though not necessarily the intended ones.

In contrast, information operations do not directly impact the survival or well-being of the target audience. They may be designed to convey such a message, but whether the target interprets the message in the intended way is not guaranteed. Therefore, these operations can be more easily regarded as irrelevant to one's well-being and survival and, therefore, fail to elicit emotions in their targets.

Furthermore, as Gross suggests, the effectiveness of distinct emotion regulation mechanisms depends on the phase in which these mechanisms enter the emotion regulation process. The sooner the mechanism occurs, the more likely it is to successfully influence the ensuing emotions. In contrast, the later the mechanism occurs, the harder it is for it to influence emotion formation. Accordingly, mechanisms relying on environmental transformation—a bomb exploding overhead—inspire emotions more easily than do mechanisms relying on mind transformation—disinformation regarding a candidate running for election.⁴⁷

Since kinetic operations start the emotion regulation process with situation selection or modification, they are more effective in eliciting emotions than information operations, which only enter the process later with attentional deployment and cognitive change. Additionally, integrated employment of kinetic and information operations can also hinder the latter's emotional effects. Though the psychological research on this kind of emotion polyregulation—or the use of more than one approach in one emotional episode—is in its infancy, it indicates that emotion regulation mechanisms may hinder each other's potential, especially when eliciting contrasting emotions.⁴⁸ For example, this conflict may occur when kinetic operations incite fear while information operations are tailored to create positive emotions, such as trust. This observa-

45. See Hoyle et al., "Cognitive and Emotional Responses."

46. Brosch, Pourtois, and Sander, "Perception and Categorisation."

47. James J. Gross, "Emotion Regulation in Adulthood: Timing Is Everything," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10, no. 6 (2001).

48. Brett Q. Ford, James J. Gross, and June Gruber, "Broadening Our Field of View: The Role of Emotion Polyregulation," *Emotion Review* 11, no. 3 (2019).

tion would again explain why in the 2023 study, the Russian media failed to inspire trust alongside fear and anger within the international community.⁴⁹

When such conflict occurs, the effects of kinetic operations are likely to prevail and shape the emotional experience at the expense of information operations. Information operations may lose some of their emotion regulation potential when employed alongside kinetic operations, especially when they aim to elicit different emotions.

These observations are also in accordance with previous theoretical propositions and empirical findings. As deterrence scholarship has already shown, people tend to ignore threatening messages when distracted by simultaneously changing situations on the ground.⁵⁰ One strategic analysis of the US Civil War, for example, showed that attempts to inspire positive emotions through information operations had little effect when the target audience simultaneously faced kinetic operations and experienced the resulting strong negative emotions.⁵¹

It seems that environmental transformations conveyed in kinetic operations have the tendency to grab people's attention, despite the efforts of others to deploy it elsewhere. This process undermines the capacity of the emotion regulation mechanisms associated with information operations to work effectively. This divergence explains why the emotional effects of integrated operations may not be synergic; those of kinetic operations are likely to prevail.

Emotional Counterregulation

The final implication of the emotion regulation perspective, and the one that explains the inherent difficulty of not only inspiring the desired emotions but especially translating these into long-lasting effects, is the issue of emotional counterregulation. As Clausewitz has argued, efforts in war are directed against people, not objects.⁵² These people are not blank slates waiting to be emotionally manipulated by an adversary.

This emotional counterregulation has two primary sources. The first one is the well-documented tendency of individuals to regulate their own emotions, even unconsciously. Psychological research has shown that humans regularly transform their environments, or change their minds, in order to feel the desired emotions and avoid the undesired ones.⁵³ The second important source of counterregulation resides in the

49. See Hoyle et al., "Cognitive and Emotional Responses."

50. Richard Ned Lebow, "Conclusions," in *Psychology and Deterrence*, ed. Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 205–11, 232.

51. Shimshoni, "Swords and Emotions."

52. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 149.

53. Tammy English et al., "Emotion Regulation Strategy Selection in Daily Life: The Role of Social Context and Goals," *Motivation and Emotion* 41, no. 2 (2017).

efforts of other emotional manipulators. For example, political and military elites may manipulate the emotions of their societies to counter an adversary's efforts.⁵⁴

There are reasons to suspect that counterregulation affects either kind of operation differently. When facing kinetic operations, the targeted regime often counterregulates its society's emotions to decrease a specific emotion. For example, a common practice in relation to terrorism is for political elites to attempt to suppress fear in the targeted society.⁵⁵ Sometimes, political actors use public speeches in the aftermath of violent attacks to actively promote other emotions, such as anger and hatred, in order to garner support for aggressive response.⁵⁶

It is not clear how effective these efforts are. The speech acts themselves are tantamount to information operations in that they rely on emotion regulation mechanisms that target minds. Hence, as discussed before, if the targeted society also faces kinetic operations, this sort of communication is likely to have a small impact on the overall emotional climate. If, however, these efforts follow after kinetic operations, then they could be more impactful in terms of the subsequent emotions the targeted society experiences. In this sense, the attempts to suppress a dominant emotion and promote others may result in a wide spectrum of emotions, including the undesired ones. For example, while the 9/11 attacks inspired intense emotions on their own, political elites soon attempted to manipulate those emotions, such as by converting collective sadness into anger.⁵⁷

Counterregulation of information operations is different. Counterregulation in an information contest consists of what some in the West now call strategic communications.⁵⁸ The interaction of adversarial information operations with strategic communications manifests as a clash of competing narratives. In this scenario, both sides rely on emotional regulation associated with mind transformation. The results depend on psychological biases, such as the anchoring effect—relying on the first information that one receives—rather than on different emotion regulation mechanisms.⁵⁹

In contrast to kinetic operations, one's counterregulation efforts in the course of information operations have a greater chance of having an impact on the outcome.

54. See Maor Moshe and James Gross, "Emotion Regulation: Implication for Politics" (paper presentation, Panel on the Politics of Non-Proportionate Policy Response, ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Warsaw, Poland, March 29–April 4, 2015).

55. Edwin Bakker and Beatrice de Graaf, *Towards a Theory of Fear Management in the Counterterrorism Domain: A Stocktaking Approach* (Hague: International Center for Counter-Terrorism, 2014).

56. Donileen R. Losek, "Examining Emotion as Discourse: Emotion Codes and Presidential Speeches Justifying War," *Sociological Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2009).

57. George W. Bush, "Address to Joint Session of Congress following 9/11 Attacks," speech to the Joint Session of Congress, Washington, DC, September 20, 2001, <https://americanrhretoric.com/>.

58. Ofer Fridman, "Information War' as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications," *RUSI Journal* 165, no. 1 (2020): 44.

59. Adrian Furnham and Hua Chu Boo, "A Literature Review of the Anchoring Effect," *Journal of Socio-Economics* 40, no. 1 (2011).

This dynamic partly explains why information operations often fail to achieve meaningful emotional manipulation in adversarial contexts.

Implications and Limitations

The emotion regulation perspective casts new light on several aspects of strategic thought and practice. First and foremost, it challenges the idea of effects-based operations, the concept of planning operations based on what kinds of effects they are supposed to generate.⁶⁰ Previous research has already criticized this approach to operational planning, highlighting the problems of unpredictability in the process of creating consequences.⁶¹ The emotion regulation lens elaborates on the previous critique. As noted, kinetic operations generate emotional effects during their whole conduct, every time they meaningfully transform the environment for the target audience.

Information operations, however, do not suffer from this problem; they seldom generate undesired emotional effects merely through their conduct. Yet the main concern with information operations is that they rarely produce the desired emotional effect at all, especially when they are conducted alongside kinetic operations. Hence, whether alone or integrated, neither kinetic nor information operations are well-suited for an effects-based operational approach.

Second and relatedly, the emotion regulation perspective questions the wisdom of relying on the manipulation of one distinct emotion to achieve political success. Even if the emotional manipulation is successful, the ensuing emotion will only be one of the many that influence the target's thinking and behavior. Adversarial emotional manipulation conducted through kinetic and information operations thus has no inherent primacy when it comes to influence. Instead of relying on a single emotion, strategic theories should acknowledge that emotional manipulation is a constant interactive process rather than a one-time linear effort.⁶² Constant awareness and appropriate adaptation are more important to emotion manipulation than the original intent behind any operation. Accordingly, emerging strategic theories should promote sensitivity to the continual emotional manipulation integral to the conduct of military operations.

Third, if the employment of kinetic and information operations to achieve desired emotional manipulation outcomes is to be in synergy, timing is crucial. Specifically, the reviewed emotion regulation literature suggests it makes sense to conduct these operations sequentially rather than simultaneously. If an actor wants to combine the two kinds of operations to manipulate the emotions of others, they should start by employing information operations and use kinetic operations only once the former generates the intended emotional effects. Since time has already been recognized as a

60. Paul K. Davis, *Effects-Based Operations (EBO): A Grand Challenge for the Analytical Community* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

61. Milan Vego, *Effects-Based Operations: A Critique* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2006).

62. See Zilincik, "Awe for Strategic Effect."

crucial strategic aspect, its relationship with emotional manipulation through either kind of operation should be incorporated into general strategic theory.⁶³

Fourth, the emotion regulation literature confirms that kinetic operations and information operations each present the conducting actor with a different risk of failure. The main risk associated with kinetic operations is they generate emotional effects detrimental to the overall effort. In contrast, the main risk of information operations consists in not inspiring any useful emotions. Risk is already recognized as an inherent part of any strategy, but seeing the difference in the context of emotional manipulation should allow practitioners to prepare for its management better and theorists to incorporate this difference into their thought.⁶⁴

Finally, emotional counterregulation deserves more systemic attention, both in strategic theory and practice. General strategic theory should allow for differentiating defensive measures based on their emotion regulation logic. In practice, counterregulation should prioritize defense against the emotional effects of kinetic rather than information operations. Since kinetic operations are more effective at eliciting emotions, defense against them should take priority over defense against information operations, which may struggle to elicit emotions at all.

Additionally, if kinetic operations can elicit a wide spectrum of emotions, then defense against them should prepare to regulate all those emotions that can be significantly harmful. The fact that information operations tend to inspire a narrower range of emotions means defense against them may also be narrower. In this case, there is a lesser need to consider all the potential emotional effects and rather focus on the ones the adversary seeks to inspire. Appreciating this distinction allows for conserving resources and channeling efforts to where it matters. Moreover, highlighting the emotion regulation potential of particular measures can make for a useful marketing tool, to gain resources for relevant defensive projects.

The emotional regulation perspective has certain limitations as well. The first, and perhaps the least serious one, relates to the pace at which the emotion regulation research has been, and probably will keep, developing. In fact, emotion regulation has been one of the fastest growing areas of psychology in recent years, and there is no sign of this trend slowing down.⁶⁵ While generally useful, it also means some ideas presented here may become outdated soon. While admittedly challenging, military strategy practitioners and scholars should continually monitor this trend and incorporate relevant insights as they emerge. Since this community often relies on historical case studies, it is not necessarily accustomed to keeping updated on the most recent developments in the fields as distant and turbulent as emotion

63. Colin Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 70–73.

64. Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 62–64.

65. See James J. Gross and Brett Q. Ford, eds., *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2023).

sciences or even psychology in general. Fortunately, following the work of leading researchers on the subject, such as that of Gross, may be sufficient. The unique lens the perspective offers is well worth the extra effort.

The more serious limitations concern the model's explanatory power, specifically, its inability to capture the difference between information operations and those kinetic operations that inspire emotions without meaningfully transforming the audience's situations. This scenario is quite common in the contemporary world, where social media allows people to observe tactical events from a safe distance.⁶⁶

The virality of the footage from the Russian war in Ukraine is perhaps the best example here. Global audiences have been able to watch Ukrainian and Russian operations unfold in real time, and they undoubtedly have experienced strong emotions in the process, even though the operations did not directly impact their lives. From the perspective of these distant observers, the distinction between kinetic and information operations as influencing through different emotion regulation mechanisms blurs significantly. This is because both kinds of operations effectively only regulate emotions by targeting audience's minds. Hence, the explanatory power of the model decreases in proportion to the extent to which the audience remains unaffected by the relevant kinetic operations.

Additionally, while the model effectively differentiates between different mechanisms through which various operations work, it fails to account for some nuances within and across categories. For example, there are likely to be differences in emotional effects between movements of forces from one position to another and large-scale destruction brought by artillery or airpower. While both phenomena are technically kinetic operations, and hence regulate emotions through environmental transformation, they produce widely different physical and therefore emotional effects.

Furthermore, as illustrated by the case of the Stuxnet malware targeted against Iran's nuclear program, cyber operations can also destroy things and thus transform environments.⁶⁷ This should theoretically put them on par with traditional kinetic operations conducted by land, naval, or air forces. Yet previous research indicates the emotional effects of cyber operations are of a different quality than those brought about by the employment of other forms of military power.⁶⁸ The model thus, at least for now, does not explain the different emotional potentials associated with various means of environmental or mind transformation.

Third and relatedly, the model does not explain other emotional issues relevant to strategic practice. Kinetic and information operations may inspire different emotions depending on factors such as the duration of the war or its character. If the targeted

66. Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins, *Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Hurst Publisher, 2022).

67. James P. Farwell and Rafal Rohozinski, "Stuxnet and the Future of Cyber War," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 53, no. 1 (2011).

68. Sarah Kreps and Jacquelyn Schneider, "Escalation Firebreaks in the Cyber, Conventional, and Nuclear Domains: Moving beyond Effects-Based Logics," *Journal of Cybersecurity* 5, no. 1 (2019).

society gets accustomed to a daily occurrence of intense violence, then a shift to sporadic and low-intensity kinetic operations may result in no emotional consequences for that audience. Indeed, the tendency of combat to lose its emotional spark in the context of prolonged warfare is well documented.⁶⁹ Similarly, if people become accustomed to being the constant targets of information operations, they may gradually choose to ignore them and not feel any specific emotions as a consequence of a particular operation.⁷⁰

In short, to fully understand emotion dynamics associated with either kind of operation, it is necessary to go beyond the emotion regulation literature.

Conclusion

Previous research has shown that integrated emotional manipulation, while assumed to work in theory, often fails in practice. Contemporary emotion regulation literature can explain the failure, at least in the context of integrated kinetic and information operations. The popular process model introduced by Gross allows us to understand kinetic and information operations as working through distinct mechanisms of emotion regulation. Kinetic operations transform the environment, and that transformation, in turn, inspires emotions.

In contrast, information operations are designed to transform the target's mind, shaping their attention and interpretation of the world and influencing what emotions they experience. Based on contemporary emotion regulation literature, this difference in mechanisms may translate into a diverging repertoire of resulting emotions, diverging effectiveness of inspiring emotions at all, and diverging responses to the adversary's counterregulation.

Military strategists and planners should abandon the efforts to plan operations based on the effects they are to generate and eschew theories that rely on the inspiration of specific emotions for overall success. Rather, emotional manipulation requires continual awareness, proper timing, and appreciation of the diverse risks associated with each kind of operation. Emotion counterregulation deserves systematic attention in practice and incorporation into strategic thought.

The emotion regulation perspective offers avenues for further research. While the proposed model provides scholars with a useful theoretical framework, there is a lack of empirical data to either support or challenge its theoretical propositions. Hence, the primary line of research effort should consist of data gathering, which could include conducting war games and other kinds of simulations to explore the emotional effects of kinetic and information operations in virtual settings. Historical or contemporary

69. Gerald F. Linderman, *The World within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

70. Aaron M. Hoffman and José Kaire, "Comfortably Numb: Effects of Prolonged Media Coverage," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 9 (2020).

case studies could also provide in-depth explorations of how exactly kinetic and information operations generate their effects in the real world. Whatever the employed method, the new perspective has the potential to enunciate the ways in which we understand the emotional impacts of war. Æ

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