Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Future of Defense: Big Data and Cyber Warfare

featuring
Colonel Liam Collins (Ret.), Executive Director, Madison Policy Forum, and Executive Director, Viola Foundation

interviewed by
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Full Transcript

Mwangi Thuita: This is Mwangi Thuita and you're listening to University of Chicago Public Policy Podcast.

Aishwarya Raje and Mwangi Thuita: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. You'll hear from experts and practitioners can conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Sonnet Frisbie: Hey, this is Sonnet Frisbie.

Haz Yano: And I'm Haz Yano.

Sonnet Frisbie: We're both currently master's students at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy. And today we are joined by Colonel Liam Collins. Colonel Collins is the Executive Director of the Madison Policy Forum and the Viola foundation. He's a retired Army, Special Forces Colonel and former Director of the Combating Terrorism Center and Modern War Institute at West Point. We covered two main topics with him 1) the measurement revolution in national defense and 2) cyber warfare in the Russia-Ukraine context.

Haz Yano: Americans are the baby boomer generation who remembered the nightly enemy kill counts from the Vietnam war and that ominous feeling during the period that this was not how to measure success. Indeed, someone claimed that we didn't even know what success in Vietnam should even look like. Moving forward and looking at the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, Colonel Collins talks about how U.S. forces continue to have challenges in trying to identify measures of effectiveness and what should constitute so-called significant actions. He is on a mission to train military and civilian defense leaders to ask better questions. The surprising solution: train them to think like statisticians.

Sonnet Frisbie: We discussed cooperation between practitioners and academics and how that relationship works in an ideal world to further the study of conflict. Who should study, what, how does data get shared and analyzed? Then in the second half of the show, we take advantage of Colonel Colin's expertise on Russian

aggression against Ukraine and others, to ask about the present and future of hybrid warfare. We'll talk about how this interlaces with information operations and the limitations of cyberwarfare.

Haz Yano: So, starting off, you recently penned an article for the online journal, War on the Rocks, with UChicago's very own Ethan Bueno de Mesquita along with Kristen DeCaires and Jake Shapiro. So, the article offered some thoughtful insights on how the defense community is failing to take full advantage of the measurement revolution in thinking about modern conflict. Can you offer some specific examples, maybe some personal ones where you saw defense leaders making erroneous decisions based on the misuse or misinterpretation of data?

Colonel Liam Collins: Yeah, I mean, if you go back, this has been a problem for a long time. I mean, during the Vietnam War, we're kind of aware the dominant metric that they use with the body count, which clearly didn't work. But I would argue, even in Iraq when we're looking at counterinsurgency, I think we got a little better, we had a lot more metrics to go with there. But the one that really kind of aggravated me was the one we call SIGACTS, right? Which was significant activity. And what it measured in terms of significant activity was basically hostile fire incidents. And so, just by calling it, giving it that name, significant activities kind of meant that everything else was devalued and gave it extra weight than it probably shouldn't have. And so, even then we were biasing one set of data over the others. It probably wasn't the best indicator in terms of what we were trying to accomplish there. And so, it's repeatedly problematic in the defense industry or defense community for a variety of reasons.

Haz Yano: In particular, the article notes how senior defense leaders are like woefully under-trained in statistics and data analysis causing them to misinterpret the conflict data and in turn develop counterproductive strategies. But the way you're talking about it also seems to be just a complete misunderstanding of not just like the data statistics or just the conceptual pieces, but also just a misunderstanding of what should be considered significant in conflict.

Colonel Liam Collins: Right. So, part of it is that, and then part of it is they just really haven't had the training and education on that. So, most of that's kind of at the tactical operational level, but not really understanding those aspects once they get out of the conditional fight, right? It's real easy, think of like a World War II, right? It's really easy to measure success, right? You just look at where the line is on the map, where's the line of control. Are you moving closer to Berlin or are you not moving closer to Berlin? It's a lot easier to determine how your performance is, but in most of our modern conflicts, it's not that simple to figure out where you're at. It's not for lack of trying, right? I mean, so organizations are constantly trying to assess their effectiveness.

And so, what they're doing is often relying on quantitative indicators, right? Some quantitative metrics that tell them if they're succeeding or not, but because of the complex world, right? Too much information, overwhelming complexity, they're trying to take cognitive shortcut. And so, some kind of indicator or a dominant indicator in terms of a strategy, is a strategy succeeding or failing, and then understanding different cognitive biases that you have, right? If you have four or five different metrics you can choose, right, the bias to choose the one that actually tells you your story, that you're succeeding. So it's not, there's all these cognitive and psychological aspects that also explain why we're not good at it.

Haz Yano: So how prevalent would you say this problem is currently within the higher echelons of the defense community? Not just military, but also like the civilian defense leaders? I mean, are there any like enlightened leaders or thinkers or like a shift in the way people are thinking about the problem?

Colonel Liam Collins: I mean, I'm not going to name names, but they want to do better. There's the psychological aspects, the lack of education and understanding how to actually get better at it. I'll give you another example. If we look at Ukraine, right? And what, if we go back to earlier on in the conflict with Ukraine, should we provide more aid to the Ukrainians? Right. And so, Susan Rice is a national security advisor and coined this term lethal aid, right? We wouldn't provide lethal aid to the Ukrainian, just non-lethal aid. First, I don't understand lethal and non-lethal aid, after 25 years in the military, it's defensive aid. But second of all, it's understanding what is your theory of the world, and then looking for the evidence that will support.

You got to identify what evidence would support the theory or contradict the theory. So, if you're thinking of Ukraine, some argue it's international relations theory of realism, right? So, it's a response. The more we push and NATO's expanded, it's a natural reaction for Russia to push back. So, if we give Ukrainians more aid, well, what are the Russians going to do? Right? If we give them javelin weapons, a really state-of-the-art anti-tank weapon, the Russian response should be to be more aggressive. That's what we'd expect. But if in turn, the theory that explains why the Russians are being aggressive is more of a cultural explanation, it's Russian imperialism, or maybe it's a domestic explanation? They want to have an enemy, well, then providing this aid is not going to warrant a more drastic response from the Russians.

Cause you don't want to trip into a World War III scenario with the Russians. But if you just kind of assume this is a response without actually testing it, then you're conceding politically your policy options to them. In this case, we ultimately gave them javelin missiles. And the rhetoric at the beginning of in 2016 was like, if you do this, then the Russian rhetoric was, we're going to ramp up our response and we're going to get more aggressive. And then by the summer of 2017, it was clear we were going to give them the missiles, their rhetoric changed and was kind of like, "Hey, this won't change anything," we're still going to continue support for Ukraine. So, it kind of supported the second theory. But if you haven't identified that evidence, what will support which theory, and it's not always that quantitative evidence, right? It's qualitative as well. That helps support a theory.

Sonnet Frisbie: It sounds to me like you see some drawbacks as well as benefits to the measurement revolution and maybe you're advocating for a smarter measurement revolution. So, making sure that we measure what, what actually matters,

Colonel Liam Collins: Correct. it's understanding, right? What if it's a causal relationship and understanding what relationship matters? We run a course and everybody there hears the terms, correlation and causation. And they're not the same. And in the first 10 minutes, we pretty much everybody that they don't understand it as well as they think they did. And it depends on what you're doing, right? If you're a firefighter, then as long as correlation is all that matters, right? If you see smoke, there's probably fire. That doesn't mean the smoke causes a fire, but you can go there, right? If you want to inspect restaurants, then you might look at low Yelp ratings, right? Because those are ones typically have more health problems. They're correlated. It doesn't mean the one causes the other necessarily, if you have limited resources in the city of Chicago, then that's where you're going to apply those limited resources, inspect restaurants. And so, it's the same kind of in the defense community. It's trying to figure out what is the relevant metric or metrics that will help you determine that?

Sonnet Frisbie: How do you inculcate that kind of thinking, not just amongst military professionals, but in general? And then how do you make sure that that kind of thinking is pushed all the way to the top, where you have people making the strategic decisions about what to measure?

Colonel Liam Collins: I think on that, it comes from education and examples of where you've had successes, because I think fundamentally, most people want to do smart policy options. A lot of these aren't necessarily

Republican or Democrat, they're kind of bipartisan, or even if they're partisan, you want to make a good one that's informed on decision. And so, I think a good chunk of it is education and getting it inculcated from the start. I mean, another example is when I was at the Modern War Institute at West Point, we would do with some of our cadets, they would do projects. And so, one of them was for a civil affairs unit and they were trying to evaluate measures of effectiveness for their civil affairs units. And too often, what we measure is measures of performance, right?

How much money, how much are we pushing in here? And when I talked to the unit, I said, well, how do you actually measure if you're effective? And they said they have no idea, right? So, if it's a shorter-term project, it's harder to do, right? But if it's going to be a multi-year project, it's thinking from the onset, how do we actually measure if we're effective. How do we actually know if we're being effective? And then, how do we actually measure that? And so, you're thinking of it, you're actually doing it, somewhat of a controlled experiment. You have limited civil affairs assets, look for two identical towns that have some similar characteristics, you apply the treatment in one, you don't apply the treatment in the other, ideally more than just one, because there could be other things at play. But you do this and kind of over a year cycle or whatever, you might do public opinion polls or whatever, but have that as part of the project from the onset, thinking about actually true assessments to measure how you're going to be effective before you go and spend that assets. And a lot of that's in the developmental world as well for the State Department, how do we actually measure. If we're doing that, we can base it historically. We know some things are going to be more successful than others, but maybe this country you're applying it to is unique in some way that it's not going to be effective.

Sonnet Frisbie: The military is going to be conducting large-scale randomized controlled trials with its strategy and tactics.

Colonel Liam Collins: Well, what you want is you want this strategy, but you want to be able to test it like an experiment.

Sonnet Frisbie: Gotcha.

Haz Yano: So, you mentioned this in the article as well, but the need for increased education and training for people in the defense community to better understand what good metrics are to use of big data, et cetera. Specifically, you and your colleagues suggest incorporating classes on evidence-based, decision-making into different levels of professional military education. And I think the example that you provide with the Civil Affairs Unit and other things that we've seen recently, like in Vietnam, indicate that this kind of thinking is really valuable at all levels of leadership in the military, whether it be at the tactical platoon level or higher up with generals at the strategic level. But what exactly would this kind of training and education look like? I mean, are we talking collegiate level of classrooms, statistics classes? Are we looking at in-depth case studies? Are we looking at like incorporating these kinds of metrics, or is this kind of thinking into simulations, war games, joint exercises?

Colonel Liam Collins: No. I mean, to be a leader, understanding the data, you just have to be able to ask the questions of the analysts to make sure that they're not overlooking something. So, you don't have to go to college or take a graduate level statistics course. It's great if you have, but you don't need to have that. We've found pretty good success just with a two-and-a-half-day executive education course. So, really you're just talking a handful of hours incorporating at the right level within the professional military education, in the military or the State Department or others, in a lot of these organizations, the CIA as well, they all have different kinds of professional schooling opportunities outside of the formal civilian education and just giving them the tools to understand, "Okay, what is correlation? What is causation?"

I measuring my mission? What are the unintended consequences? An example we like to use is okay, you're probably a little too young to remember, but the original Miami Vice back in the eighties, right? It was trying to stop the drug routes in the Caribbean. And it was very effective at stopping the drug routes into the Caribbean. Did it stop drugs coming to the U.S.? Not at all, all they did was move to another area and basically created the landline or the land routes through Mexico. And so, did we really accomplish what we want? If you said, "Hey, we just want to stop transiting of drugs to the Caribbean," it was very successful. We want to stop transit of drugs into the U.S., completely unsuccessful. You could argue it helped probably create the drug cartels that you have there now. And so thinking about those things in not just your narrow mission, what are you ultimately trying to accomplish, and are you being effective? So, kind of providing those kinds of examples for them to think about.

Haz Yano: Would you say there's like a big demand or an appetite for this kind of education or training within the defense community right now? Or is it still kind of completely, like, people don't even realize that this is what is needed?

Colonel Liam Collins: I'd say probably a mix. I think they don't realize it's needed, or if some do, I think they're still overly focused on the, "Let's just focus purely on kind of conventional military operations. Let's get really, really good at that," but it's a balance of, okay, maybe we spend a few less hours doing that, but a few more hours doing other things that are also important outside of that one mission. So, it's balancing the hours they have, where they spend it, and I think the balance is too much on kind of conventional military operations. And by doing that, we're assuming risk in all the other kinds of operations that we have to do.

Haz Yano: So, it sounds like this is part of a large discussion about whether to focus our military resources on conventional warfare or on irregular warfare. I mean, a lot of analysis on Iraq and Afghanistan seems to indicate that the importance of distinguishing between measures of performance and measures of effectiveness is especially crucial in counterinsurgency. I mean, would you say this is an element of that dichotomy?

Colonel Liam Collins: Yeah. I mean, that's an element and there's always a challenge when you're out there actually in it, it is trying to get balance. Getting the perfect information or getting certainty and you're trading off certainty for time. Right? And so, in that environment, like developmental projects, you can take more time, kind of get a good assessment, figure out how you're doing and redo it. In a fight, it's a little bit harder to figure that out. And that's kind of in all things, I mean, early on when we were looking for former regime element leaders, Alcaide in Iraq, it's the same challenge, right? Do you go after the target that you find, kind of this low-level guy, or do you try to build the network? For us, it was learning how to build it, like a organized crime ring in the U.S., dismantling that. Well, if you go after every little person and try to get them, you never really get anywhere eventually. Right? You got to figure out how to get to take down the entire network and it takes patience on that.

Sonnet Frisbie: So I want to go back to what you were mentioning earlier about the military needing to investigate its own actions and use that data to then generate better decision-making. How would you characterize the balance between military practitioners and researchers cooperating and sharing information? Because, of course, the military has and will of course in the future generate a lot of data on its operations. Researchers would love access to that, but then they also, of course, want to publish their results, whereas the military might have some very understandable feelings and restrictions on the dissemination of that data.

Colonel Liam Collins: Yeah. It's kind of a complicated story, but I think most times, most people in the military want it to be public because it's useful to them. And our advantages really are our leadership or our mission

command as we call it. So, if, to me, if you put it behind a closed-door system where you need your ID card to get on there, nobody's going to get that data. It's great if you have it, but none of your own people are reading it. And so, I think if it's out there, then anybody can get it, but we can leverage it better than anybody else. But in terms of the data, I had a colleague write an article about how you would think we have all this data, cause back in the day, it was write letters and do all this kind of thing in paper copies, but a lot of times that data just gets purged when units change over, just kind of erased and gone.

And so, the data isn't always there as you would think. I think usually, I mean, General Patraeus would bring academics out there and have them kind of study it, whatever he could learn from them that would be helpful. I think there's just more of a desire to do that, and it's just kind of pairing up the right people. I mean, we had great success in the Combating Terrorism Center getting documents, declassified, right? Cause that's typically the challenge, depending on who owns the classification, but anytime we can show Al-Qaeda for who they are, it kind of undermines who they are. They're hypocritical in what they preach and practice in a lot of cases. So, anything to undermine the organizations a win.

Sonnet Frisbie: This podcast is in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict. So, there are a number of faculty members here doing really interesting research in conflict zones and in sometimes indirectly defense related topics. In which areas specifically, do you see the most potential for academics and researchers to make a concrete contribution to the defense literature? Is it in doing the statistical analysis on the large data sets or perhaps in behavioral research, things like mediation and conflict?

Colonel Liam Collins: I think probably the area that the most help is probably conflict resolution. I mean, I always would jokingly tell people it's real easy to take down a government, but really hard to kind of start one up and get it running. And so, I think that's probably it, and it's hard because the total number in the data is pretty small, but trying to get a better understanding of how you can transition into conflict resolution and maintain a lasting peace, and the things that go into that, counterinsurgency figures into that. That's kind of where I see why there needs to be more help. Where does development fit into that? Where does economic aid fit into that? Are we just fueling the insurgency? Are we actually helping the counterinsurgency? And I think there's a lot of uncertainty on that. Drones, right? A lot of work's been done on this in recent years, but do they create more insurgents or terrorists than we're killing or is it being effective? And I think more work needs to be done on that.

Sonnet Frisbie: You bridge that gap in many ways, you are an academic and also a retired military professional. If you were building that pipeline, the academia and defense pipeline, how would you construct it? How would you improve identifying information gaps where academic research might be beneficial and then providing that access in a concrete way?

Colonel Liam Collins: Yeah. I mean, it's just figuring out how to have better collaboration. I mean, one is investing in intellectual capital. It's more and more important as that complexity of the world increases. So, increasing the number of officers and possibly senior noncommissioned officers that go to graduate programs so that they have the right intellectual tools. They need to understand it. That's part of it. But also, while they're in schools, they're meeting academics, they have connections they can reach back to. A lot of stuff's built on relationships versus organizational construct. And so, they can reach back to peers or at least understand, "Hey, I need some help. I can just call up our friend to come out here instead of not knowing where to start." But a lot of it is just kind of going out and seeing it.

And that was the success we had with the Combating Terrorism Center. We would go overseas and then we would see a problem that they wouldn't necessarily see, or they wouldn't know how to address. Early on, it was

the Haqqani network. Who are they? Are they somebody that we can engage in dialogue with? And so, what we did was look back, okay, who did the Haqqani say in their own documents, going back for a decade? And it gives you a pretty good picture of what the organization is. And so, you look in and you understand the organization better, and you can make an informed decision about how likely it is that they are going to be partners you can work with. But you don't see those problems until you're down there collaborating with one another. So, it takes kind of that collaboration throughout.

Haz Yano: So, we're going to take a really quick break here and we'll be right back.

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Haz Yano: So, welcome back. let's go and pivot to a different topic now. So, that's another one that you've written about quite a bit, just shift towards the topic of cyber warfare, particularly as it pertains to Russian aggression in Ukraine. You highlight some of the developments in this field and the number of articles you wrote for the Marvin Warren Institute back in 2018. Can you expand on this a little bit?

Colonel Liam Collins: So, I spent a couple of years from 2016 to 2018, going back and forth with General Abizaid as a Senior Defense Advisor to Ukraine for Defense Reform. So, got to kind of research and see kind of what they're doing over there. And they've basically been using since 2014, that area really is a test bed to test their equipment, test cyber capabilities, test their information operations against a real enemy and seeing some pretty significant effects coming out of that. And so, in terms of cyber, so the first time we saw a cyber used with a conditional military operation was in 2008 by the Russians when they went into Georgia. And then they kind of perfected that over the next few years. While they were focusing on improving what they learned from their incursion into Georgia, we were focused on Iraq and not really paying attention.

And so, really what you see now, or what we've seen in Ukraine is the ability to kind of combine cyber information operations and lethal operations all together to have an effect. And so, that's kind of unique. And so, the one thing, I guess you could thank the Russians for, because before Ukraine, everybody kind of understood cyber as a threat, kind of at the strategic level, are you going to get our banking systems? Are you going to get some kind of a infrastructure, command and control thing, but they've shown how cyber can actually have lethal effects at the tactical level. So, I guess we can thank them for that. So, we can understand that the cyber person isn't just off on an island now, they are more valuable.

Haz Yano: I feel like it wasn't that long ago when you had defense experts or people in the establishment saying that cyber threats are really limited in their military applicability due to the low or the unreliable rate of success. I remember reading back in like 2010, 2011 the likelihood of successfully hacking and manipulating an adversary's network for military applications was too low to be reliably employed. And that's clearly no longer the case as we see in Ukraine. So, all that said, you said we took our eye off the ball in 2008 because the U.S. has focused so much in the Middle East. Are western militaries now, such as the U.S. and NATO adequately prepared to deal with these evolving cyber threats? I think there's an understanding that the threat is real, as we saw by the elevation of U.S. cyber command to a full, independent unified combatant-command just a couple of years ago, but I mean, where are we in this?

Colonel Liam Collins: Yeah. I mean, cyber is a little more challenging to get at because you use a weapon once, the coding or whatever, you only get to use it once, and then it's out of the bag. People can copy it, or whatever else. Cyber is a little trickier, but I think if you look at collectively at what the Russians are doing across the board and understanding the democratization of technology in the states that lost our monopoly of violence. And so, I prefer to look at, okay, let's look at the capabilities the Russian have and whether you face them or someone else as this technology diffuses. That's what the concern is. So, you've got the cyber, you got the information operations, but also their electronic warfare capability. And I would say our defense establishment, by and large, has not and is not capable or not responding adequately to what we're seeing done. There's a lot of rhetoric to it. But what we always want to do is defer to a technological solution, a technical solution. And oftentimes it might just be changing how we operate. But if that's inconvenient, then we don't want to do it.

Haz Yano: So, would you say, instead of coming up with these technical responses to these threats, it's, again, a matter of changing the way we think about the problems, similar to what you mentioned about the measurement revolution?

Colonel Liam Collins: It's both. I mean, technology has a role in it. It's kind of like – think of the improvised, explosive devices or IEDs in Iraq that were killing a lot of American soldiers and Allied soldiers, Coalition soldiers. So, for that, a lot of people's solution was we just need to get jammers. We need to have some kind of technology, build this giant IED task force. That costs millions or billions of dollars and 400 people to look for a solution to this problem. It's a weapon or a technique. Last time I looked, we're not looking for a solution to stop bullets or stop field artillery rounds. It's not possible. The IED taskforce, kind of its original origination kind of split into two, one Joint IED Defeat Organization, JIEDO and then Asymmetric Warfare Group, and others were more like General Cody, who is a Vice Chief of Staff in the Army saying we got to get left of them.

We got to find the placers of this, right? It's all about war fighting. It's a human fight. We have to find the humans that are putting them out there and that's what we have to counter. And so, it's the same thing for this, right? Those technology or tools, but you have to figure out how to, how to fight the humans or what the role the technology plays in there. But we have a bias to look for technology as a solution. If there was talk of a revolution in military affairs during the first Gulf War, this is the way future of combat will be, we'll just have sensors out there. We can identify everything, standoff weapons, engage them. That works well in the desert, but anywhere else, it's not really helpful. It didn't help me in the streets of Ramadi or Fallujah in 2003.

Haz Yano: If I rephrase what you've kind of talked about, instead of a dedicated unit or group of specialists in the realm of cyber, it's more about educating that infantry brigade commander on how cyber is going to affect the battlefield and how they will need to train their personnel to respond to those threats.

Colonel Liam Collins: That's right. Exactly. And it's not to say that you don't need to have a separate cyber command more at the strategic level, but you have to figure out how to integrate them at the tactical level. I mean, an example, like an information operation. So, in the U.S. Army, the functions are diffused across the staff and it's really an afterthought, right? They come up with a plan and then we kind of figure out where does IO maybe fit into this plan that we're doing. And for the Russians, it's completely reversed. IO, information operations, may be their main effort and they're figuring out how their lethal or kinetic operations kind of support that effort. And it's a major consideration when they're doing their planning. And for us, it really is just an afterthought.

Sonnet Frisbie: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit more? I know that Russia and Ukraine has used some information operations tactics, sometimes in conjunction with their other operations tactics like blackmailing military members or man in the middle where they insert a Russian operative in between conversations. Can you talk a

little bit about the information operations piece of this and how we see them even expanding that perhaps beyond Ukraine to non-battlefield situations?

Colonel Liam Collins: So, when in Ukraine I mean, what we saw in some cases during the early part of the conflict where most of the fighting was done, but what someone coined pinpoint propaganda. So, basically soldiers would have their cell phones out there, which you, you really don't want to have in combat, but everybody seems to be dependent on these things. So, they would have them out there. They would get an artillery barrage, would come and hit them. And then right after the artillery barrage, everybody in the area would get a text on their phones that said, "Is your corrupt oligarch president worth dying for? Go home and protect your family." So, it can have real effects if you have – in the U.S., I don't think that would have a major effect on our soldiers, but in Ukraine where you had a president that would have an approval rating at like 15% or something, it would rival our congressional approval rating, then it can have a real effect.

And so, tying those together and to broaden that, where do you see it going beyond that? I mean, to the Russia again, they kind of perfected after 2008 Russian-Georgian War, they were trying to argue that it was a responsibility to protect, and they were protecting the south from the aggressors, which were the Georgians. But both sides were somewhat at fault, but I think more people believe that the Georgians were preempting a Russian aggression that was going to happen no matter what. So, we were just going to do it on favorable terms. It was preemption by the Georgians. And then Russia is kind of like, "Hey, we lost this major IO information operation that was trying to blame the Georgians for the start of it." And we were going in to protect. And so, that's the reinvesting in RT, and this just misinformation, right? Just enough misinformation out there so that it buys some time.

Sonnet Frisbie: Due to various moral and legal considerations, the U.S. often can't, or won't apply similar tactics in its hybrid warfare as perhaps Russia would, for example. Does this mean that we are handicapped in the information operations field? How do we think about defense versus offense and how do we engage?

Colonel Liam Collins: I think it provides them some advantages, I guess you could say. It doesn't handcuff us., It's hard with the internet because you don't know who you're influencing, and you can influence American citizens. So, it's challenging in that regard. But it doesn't mean you have to concede defeat on that. I mean, we have the same problems with countering violent extremism. What's effective against that? How do we go in there and do that? I think it's just more being aware and smarter about it, so, okay, we know they're trying to influence elections. You can try to take down websites and work with that, but part of it is also having a slightly smarter electorate, so they aren't going to fall prey to that.

You're not going to get them all but try to influence the ones that really are trying to make an informed decision. And so, it does give them some advantages, just like the same thing. And a lot of enemies we face aren't going to follow other rules of war. Every mosque I ever went to in Iraq, it was an ammo storage depot, right? Because they think we aren't going to go in there because it's a holy place, a protected site, but you can go in if you need to do. The same thing, they'll put their artillery systems right next to schools, hospitals, those kinds of things making us force our hand and worry about collateral damage.

Sonnet Frisbie: It seems that often we are reactive instead of proactive, especially when it comes to false narratives or fake news stories. So, denying a story rather than pushing out proactive narratives. How do you see particularly the defense community, but the larger administration or the larger U.S. government responding to this? And if you don't, how do you think they should be responding?

Colonel Liam Collins: Yeah. There's examples out of Russia. I mean, we know Russian have been all over the […] to the Eastern part of Ukraine and it just kind of never makes the news, right? It's clear that they're in there and commanding and controlling a lot of those Russian-led separatists, but we don't show what they're doing. Right. You don't have to necessarily counter their fake news story. Let's just show what they're actually doing. Don't even really, to some extent, give credit to their false stuff, just show what they're actually doing in that case. But I mean, it does play into the Russian hands. Early on, most Western leaders didn't want to get involved in Crimea. They knew who the little green men were. But it gives them arguably plausible deniability. I say deniability, because I don't almost nowadays, almost nothing's plausibly deniable. But it allows them not to act until it was a fait accompli and they had Crimea. And then it's, then it's too late. So, yeah, I think it's a challenge.

Sonnet Frisbie: So, maybe one final question, if I could, you mentioned earlier the challenge to the monopoly on violence, that cyber sometimes plays the monopoly on violence by state actors. Do you see us moving towards this dystopian science fiction, novel version of warfare where you have guys in computer-filled rooms fighting remote wars, or do you think that that is a pure fiction, and it's always going to be a hybrid combination?

Colonel Liam Collins: I mean, the monopoly of violence has been eroding for years, right? The information, explosives, right? So, that's been going on for a long time. Will we ever get to the point where – I remember a Star Trek episode with Captain Kirk and he was at some planet and they were fighting a war where he's like, "What are you doing?" They're like, "Well, I'm reporting to the disintegrator because they just bombed us and killed 200 of us." And he's looking around like, what bombs? He's like, "Well, it's all simulated now, but we just take away the violence other than we still get killed." And he's like, "What is this?" So, he violated the prime directive and screwed him up, tried to stop him from fighting wars that way. But fundamentally, war is a human endeavor, right? And it always will be. Technology will play a role in that. You will have some automated systems in doing this but it's not going to be Terminator, machines, fighting wars. It's going to be humans fighting wars and as we constantly forget that, then we're going to be putting ourselves at a disadvantage.

Sonnet Frisbie: Okay well, Colonel Collins, this has been a really fascinating discussion. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today on route of conflict.

Colonel Liam Collins: Thank you.

Sonnet Frisbie: Thanks to all of you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict. Be sure to subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. Also be sure to check out the many podcasts under our umbrella organization, the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts, that website is www.uc3p.org.

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