Introduction

The Covert War for American Minds written by David Shedd and Ivana Stradner is an account of coordinated efforts by Russia, China and Iran to interfere with the Western political process by disseminating disinformation, manipulating social-media and cyber-spying. Such states unleash state-sponsored trolls, bot armies and front media platforms to divide, amplify extremist speech to undermine trust in democratic institutions. The article outlines how Russia has long embraced the use of active measures, China capitalizes on supremacy over information flows and influence of some diaspora populations and Iran capitalizes on political tensions all with a goal of trying to break the U.S. unity and strategy.

Such operations bring questions of whether such activities intrude into information warfare since such operations are directed at the informational backgrounds and autonomy of decision depths of the U.S citizens. The ethical question brings in the aspect of reciprocity, in the event that the U.S should have done the same to the elections in Russia, China, or Iran, would the same constitute the information warfare, and would it be morally appropriate?

In this Case Analysis, I will also posit that Kantian ethics makes these operations exhibit the presence of information warfare and that the foreign interference in the U.S. elections and vice versa and the vice versa of foreign intervening in elections of another country are both unethical as they involve deception and manipulation of people as means to accomplish an end.

Part I -Prier

(a) Some of the key ideas of Prier

In analyzing information warfare, Prier puts an importance on the transition of traditional propaganda to narrative warfare, which seeks to control the environment of information to alter perceptions, beliefs, and consequently behaviors. In contrast to overt persuasion, narrative warfare not only mixes truth and lies but plays into emotional hotspots and uses the existing societal divisions to undermine trustworthiness in said institutions.

Prier singles out a number of useful strategies:

Disinformation- the deliberate spread of false or misleading information in order to mislead the audiences.

Amplification Amplification is the process of spreading some narratives louder than they would otherwise appear by way of bots networks or coordinated accounts.

Exploitation of social divisions --- taking advantage of the divisions that always exist these days in terms of political, cultural or racial along lines there in order to manipulate it as much as possible to promote discord.

Hybrid approach - the use of cyber tools, secret media, and psychological manipulation in the complex that appeared as a common action.

In the case of Prier, danger does not only exist in lying but, rather, in manipulating the environment, through which one perceives reality. This weakens the independence of democratic decision making.

(b) Using Prier to the case

The description given by Shedd & Stradner fits the model of Prier well. The Internet Research Agency of Russia has taken a systematic approach to delivering incompatible messages to the various audience groups and this means that the degree of political polarization will keep increasing. China works on creating the perception in the world with the help of various media framing and coercion against voices of the diaspora, in a soft combination of disharmony and propaganda. The opportunistic disinformation of Iran gives more emphasis to contents that undermine U.S. leadership.

The three of them use the algorithms of the social media to promote the use of the divisive ideas to make it look like they are naturally popular. They are focused on voter confidence, suppressing the voting turnout and disrupting the candidate perception and the legitimacy of the election results.

It is made explicit by Prier that such actions can be considered information warfare since they are those that weaponize the information environment itself rather than particular messages. By integrating manipulations and lies within the public discourse, they conduct long-term campaigns to erode cognitive security of a population, which is an absolute affront on democratic sovereignty.

(c) Kantian moral evaluation according to Prier

Kantian ethics believes that moral actions should include the subjects as rational agents in exercising freedom of choice. With disinformation, deception, which is its core feature, breaches this since the choice of beliefs based on lies does not allow one to make an informative decision. By interfering in elections, foreign protagonists do not view voters as the goal, but rather, as the means to a geopolitical end.

According to Kant:

Universality test: Were all states to be involved in the manipulation of its election process then there would be no trust in any democratic process. This kind of maxim is self-defeating in a sense that elections would have no meaning at all.

Respect for the persons: The voters are entitled to make decisions based on the properly articulated information. They are deprived of this right through disinformation campaigns which regard them as tools of foreign policy.

Although certain political benefits may be gained, the use of such tactics cannot be justified since they necessarily presuppose the act of being untruthful and disrespecting the autonomy of people.

Thus, foreign interference in elections can be regarded as such information warfare and can be deemed as unethical under the framework of Prier and under Kantian ethics as well.

Part II -- Morkevičius

Key ideas by Morkevičius

Morkevičius is the author who considers the ethics of hybrid and information warfare based on the Just War Theory (JWT). Even in this cyber/psychological information operations, they must still pass the dispensations or standards of morality that are:

Jus ad bellum-Just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, and proportionality prior to the declaration of conflict.

Jus in bello - Distinguishing between militants and non-militants, reasonable use of force, as well as need in the execution of operations.

She carries these to the information world:

Targeting: Civilian population cannot be the target of attacks which should be aimed at legitimate military, or governmental targets.

Proportionality: No collateral damages on civilian faith and solidarity should be more than the strategic goal.

Necessity: When there is a choice other than corrupting the civilian information environments and still achieve the goal, that should be the route to take.

To Morkevičius, civilian morale and access to truth is a preserved commodity just like the civilian bodily protection.

Using Morkevičius on the case

Russian, Chinese and Iranian interference in elections would not pass a jus ad bellum and jus in bello test. No honest just cause exists, which would justify morally the breach of the sovereignty of another nation in times of peace with the help of covert information operations. Although these countries may consider their acts as defensive measures against what they perceive to affect them (U.S. influence), their selected method, which involves attacking the civilian voters with manipulative content, does not pass the discrimination test.

The test of proportionality is not passed as well. The damage to democratic stability, cohesion between the villages of the people, and individual independence of the people is severe and long-standing. Regardless of whether an act of strategic importance, such as opposition to U.S. policy, is acknowledged, there is vastly disproportional to its valid reward the resulting civilian harm.

The same would have been the case in case the U.S. had employed similar interference in elections of another country. Regardless of whether devised through the lens of democracy, foreign covert efforts to manipulate the electorate in a nation, especially those civilians living in other countries, would violate discrimination and proportionality issues. The ethical equation is plain: and that it is, by shewing it to be unfair of them, it is unfair of us.

(c) Kantian judgement of morchells under the perspective of Morkevičius

Kant ethics supports an analysis of JWT by Morkevičius. Influencing elections also entails the element of deception, which is incapable of being universalized without contradiction. Moreover, it is directly detrimental to the power of rational self-determination of the individuals, which is one of the central Kantian values.

In practice, even when the implied motive may be described as altruistic (e.g. reform abroad), the means (i.e. behind-the-scenes manipulation) is demeaning persons as a means to an end, and devalues anyone who uses this kind of a means to achieve a political end. The correctness of action does not depend on the result of action but rather on its ability to be willed as a universal moral law as according to Kantian terms. Interventions into elections do not pass this test at all.

Therefore, falls these operations within morally inadmissible under axiology of JWT (through Morkevičius) and Kantian ethics? In fact, it does not matter who is carried out operation and what are the strategic interests, the matter is only by whom it is forbidden to perform such an operation.

Conclusion

Recent activities by Russia, China, and Iran to interfere in U.S. elections can be considered as information warfare in which the country targets the information space to affect democratic results according to Prier. Just actions as adapted by Morkevičius based on the Just War Theory do not qualify ethically under the provisions of discrimination, proportionality and necessity. The Kantian ethics also criticizes them on their deceptive nature, and disrespect of voter will.

Reverse ethical logic works as well: the U.S. meddling in other countries elections, even in the authoritarian ones, would amount to information warfare and would equally be unethical. Although policymakers can justify those operations as necessary due to national interest or as a way to support a particular political system, the means used to achieve the objective undermine the moral value of the end because it contravenes the principle of respect of persons.

An argument against it can involve the fact that these tactics are merely new age diplomacy or psychological operations. But in the case of the civilian population as the intended audience, the distinction into wrong is crossed. The permanent effect of legitimization of such interference is the delegitimization of democracy practices across the globe.

The issue that is facing the future is how to counter such assault without feeling tempted to retaliate in-kind, hence maintaining both the moral and ethical highground and the democratic right to rule.