Tweets and tanks

Rory Medcalf

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What does social media mean for the big issues of war and peace? Is the endless conversation of Twitter and the blogosphere going to break down barriers of misperception or reinforce the worst kinds of misunderstanding between nations? And when war occurs, how will the new information realm shape its nature and outcome? These have been core questions for this column from its inception. With each passing month, as the popularity of social media booms, the answers get more important — and more confusing.

Indo-Pacific Asia is becoming the global centre of strategic gravity, the region most likely to witness armed tensions between major states in the years and decades ahead. It is a region of power shifts and competing nationalisms. It is also a region experiencing massive take-up of social media among increasingly middle class populations.

So what happens when strategic competition and the embrace of social media collide? Consider some staggering statistics. Half of the world's social media users are in Asia — most of them in China, Japan, Indonesia, and India. Internet usage across the region went up something like 14 per cent in 2012; in India the figure was closer to 40 per cent. More than 80 per cent of the region's billion-plus internet users also make use of social media.

Jakarta is the world's most active "Twitter city". Japanese is Twitter's most popular language after English. And as for China — well, Weibo's 300 million users speak for themselves, increasingly to the discomfort of the Communist Party.

Now combine this with what is happening in Indo-Pacific Asia as the tectonic plates of strategic competition begin to shift unsettlingly. Late 2012 saw a new low point in China–Japan relations since, well, probably the 1940s. In a previous column, I noted the mixed role that social media was playing in the dangerous maritime jousting over the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Thankfully, it has been a force for mutual understanding as well as hostility — though signs are that the latter has the upper hand.

Academic and media research shows that Chinese internet chatter throughout the year was dominated by strife with Japan. The election of conservative Shinzo Abe as Japanese Prime

Minister in December 2012 brought an outpouring of angry and scornful sentiment from many of China's netizens. A survey of Weibo posts by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that no fewer than 177.4 million posts referred to the Diaoyu Islands dispute and subsequent anti-Japan protests. Another big topic was the South China Sea dispute with the Philippines.

Of course, on many occasions the Chinese leadership has found it useful to tolerate or even encourage jingoistic sentiment — not least as a way to deflect attention from problems in China's own economic or governance story. But it is fair to assume that even a more assertive Beijing still does not want war, and nor does it want the Chinese people to genuinely want war. The hard-to-control proliferation of nationalist outrage on Weibo is becoming a real problem in that regard.

So even normally hard-line instruments of official information like the *Global Times* newspaper are now being enlisted to cool things down, with editorials in early 2013 reminding readers that ultimately war would be bad for China.

In South Asia, meanwhile, the dynamic has been almost the very opposite, with sensible individuals turning to social media to encourage reflection and restraint in the face of mainstream media outrage over a recent instance of India–Pakistan bloodshed.

In January, two Indian soldiers were killed in fighting along the Line of Control. One was reportedly beheaded. India's newspapers and especially its hyper-sensationalist 24-hour news channels were quick to accentuate and stoke public anger over this mutilation. Curiously, India's Twittersphere did not see quite the same shade of red.

Indeed, a range of journalists and ordinary citizens took to twitter and blogs to try to convey nuance and context — for instance, the history of violence on both sides — and to play down talk of wholesale national revenge.

If only in a small way, these voices may have helped cool the atmosphere as political and military leaders on both sides moved to de-escalate tensions. We are thankfully yet to see how social media might influence the course of actual war between India and Pakistan.

In the Middle East, on the other hand, the social media dimension of warfare has already been revealed. In the late 2012 conflict between Israel and Hamas, the world caught a

glimpse of the sophisticated and relentless propaganda and information role that social media will play in the wars of the future.

This was an armed clash in which both soldiers and citizens were live-tweeting rocket strikes and troop movements; not so much the fog of war as a blizzard of images and information. In theory, this could undercut either side's advantage of surprise and stealth. Certainly the Israeli authorities were quick to urge citizens to restrain their enthusiasm for publishing details of troop movements.

But in practice, the emerging operational picture may almost have been one of too much information, especially for the side with less capacity to make rapid sense of it all. What a blessing the new world of social media may provide for the ancient strategic art of deception.

Either way, the bar has been raised for war journalism. It has been said that the first casualty of war is truth. In future, the first casualty may simply be the war correspondent's craft.