

Summary on BIPSS Security Lab entitled “Influence Operations”

Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) conducted the second installment of the “BIPSS Security Lab”, on June 6th, within the BIPSS premises, on the very new yet prominent issue of “Influence Operations”. The hybrid event was moderated by Major General A N M Muniruzzaman, president of BIPSS. The participants were among the most prominent security experts, scholars, journalists and high ranking government officials in Bangladesh. The security lab started with a brief introduction from the president.

The next session commenced with the presentation by Mr. Simen A. Nielsen, an Erasmus Scholar, currently working as a research intern at BIPSS. Mr. Nielsen delivered his well-articulated and informative presentation, while taking a deep dive into the various facets, Operational modes, techniques and attributes of the new phenomena that is the “Influence Operation” and it’s almost significantly alarming expansion in the digital sphere. He also showcased the motivations that make a state or states inclined towards conducting such operations, which can span from being geared towards the welfare of the general populous, to having some far more sinister intentions as well. The most predominant theme of his presentation was focused on how the spread of information can spread far beyond borders, the speed at which it can spread and how effectively the information can strike a chord with anyone from the general populous. These operations are mostly effective against impressionable minds and uninformed individuals. Moreover, Mr. Simen also showcased the overall effectiveness and lethality of these operations and the fact that these operations can influence and even alter the decision making process both in a native and a foreign context. Mr. Simen laid out a few case studies such as the Russian interference in the U.S election; China’s sophisticated narratives and even the U.S’s indulgence concerning these practices through intelligence to reinstate its positive image. This showcases that state driven operations such as these are conducted by absolutely everyone, further complicating the scenario of geo-political competition and ushering in an era of “grey zone” hostility through influence operations.

After the completion of the presentation, the experts in attendance engaged in a discussion and a Q/A session with Mr. Nielsen, talking about the intriguing facets of this new phenomenon. During the Q/A session, there were discussions regarding what actions various governments can take towards “battling” influence operations. The role of social media companies and whether they are our saviors or perpetrators also came across, alongside the fact that whether the technical designs of these platforms make them inherently prone to these operations. These were further queries concerning the challenges towards building social media resilience amidst existing polarization, how to safeguard the “naïve and uninformed”, the structure of state and it’s relation to influence operations and most crucially the role of religious sentiments in regards to these operations. The experts and the presenter both suggested measures towards further understanding and maneuvering around this modern practice. The Security Lab came to an end with a summary and overview by the President and with the vigor and aptitude to cope up with this new world phenomenon.