

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hybrid warfare: The continuation of ambiguity by other means

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Abstract

This article presents the study of ambiguity as the essence of hybrid warfare to reconcile it with the international political context. It addresses the gaps in the literature in an effort to elucidate the essence of hybrid warfare not as a separate concept, but rather as the symptom of a changing political environment. The analysis of the literature is reinforced by two case studies: the war in eastern Ukraine of 2014 and the South China Sea dispute. Both these case studies express ambiguity in the combination of kinetic and non-kinetic means used to achieve political objectives. The article rests on three pillars that constitute the architecture of the central argument. The first pillar will address the gap in the current literature on hybrid warfare and how the current debate is too concerned with conflict dynamics rather than its political nature. The second pillar will delineate the essence, characteristics, and value of ambiguity in hybrid warfare. The third pillar will address the practice of hybrid warfare as the conduct of war by great powers.

Keywords: Hybrid Warfare; Ambiguity; Ukraine; South China Sea; Strategy

Introduction

The start of the Ukrainian war in 2014 sparked a resurgence of the study of hybrid warfare and, in particular, its employment by great powers in achieving their ultimate political end.¹ The events that unfolded during that conflict displayed a careful operational design by the Russian Federation, which combined kinetic and non-kinetic elements in a temporal sequence and in pivotal spaces aimed at inhibiting defences and deactivating threshold countermeasures. This article was largely written before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and focuses on events before this conflict, although our findings remain pertinent to understanding ways in which great power competition since that invasion has played out. At the same time China has used a similar operational design to gain territorial advances in the South China Sea without facing the politico-military challenge of forcing a threshold. These two approaches have led us to study the nature of this operational design and why it has been employed in that historical context.

This article presents the study of ambiguity as the essence of hybrid warfare as a result of the current international system. We have conducted an extensive study of the academic debate on hybrid warfare, grey zone warfare, and other forms of irregular warfare. We begin our study by proposing a history of hybrid warfare theory that pre-dates its drastic increase since 2014. By building on the history of the term we delineate the characteristics recognised by fellow scholars in the field and we propose the concept of ambiguity in hybrid warfare. We then apply the concept to the conflicts in Ukraine since 2007 and in the South China Sea since 2012.

¹Andrew Mumford, 'Understanding hybrid warfare', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:6 (2020), pp. 824–7.

The authors acknowledge criticism of the concept of hybrid warfare. Colin Gray, for example, warned against creating ‘categorical confusion’,² while Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside have gone as far as to call for the phrase to be ‘eliminated from the strategic lexicon’.³ Our study on ambiguity has been inspired more by the critics of hybrid warfare rather than by its proponents. We recognise some criticalities that are common to other debates in strategic studies. However, hybrid warfare and hybrid threats have been both used by both the academic community and policymakers. The US,⁴ UK,⁵ Australian,⁶ French,⁷ and German⁸ governments, NATO, and the European Union⁹ have used the concept abundantly. Therefore, this article will not defend the validity of ‘hybrid warfare’ from the sceptics who question its ontology – a different paper for a different time – but will instead further enhance practical understanding of this widely used strategic concept.

There is no excitement over ‘new terms’, but rather we recognise the challenge of providing and enriching concepts which adhere to the strategic, operational, and tactical reality faced by governments today. The scope of this research is to identify the reason why hybrid warfare has been the preferred method to fight the war in Ukraine and as a way to advance gains in the South China Sea. We do not consider hybrid warfare as a ‘new war’ or the ‘next phase’ of armed conflict, but rather an option at the disposal of great powers to achieve their political objectives in an era characterised by a high degree of competition and mistrust. We have therefore identified ambiguity as the defining characteristics of this type of warfare. We do not consider hybrid warfare a strategy, but rather a concept belonging to the ‘operational art’. Strategy, as defined by Lawrence Freedman as ‘the art of creating power’,¹⁰ does not have attributes, it only relates to the supremacy of politics. Hybrid warfare therefore is employed only if it answers the political objectives of those waging it and those who have to defend themselves from it. Ambiguity connects this operational concept by providing a conceptual link with the strategy above and its tactical dimension below.

The study of the relationship between the international system and the conduct of war requires an interdisciplinary approach that is frequently sought in the field of strategic studies. It requires the establishment of a logical link between grand strategy and tactics. Therefore, given the current state of literature in the field of hybrid warfare, too often preoccupied with doctrinal outcome, this approach appears to be a valid starting point to provide an original contribution to a field that is fundamentally intertwined with the state of world affairs. As a result we push for the

²Colin S. Gray, ‘Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional’, Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, US Army War College, available at: {<https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2171.pdf>}.

³Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, ‘Blurred lines: Gray-zone conflict and hybrid war – two failures of American strategic thinking’, *Naval War College Review*, 73:1 (2020), pp. 1–37.

⁴White House, Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (3 March 2021), available at: {<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>}.

⁵Prime Minister’s Office, National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 (23 November 2015), available at: {<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-andstrategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>} accessed 10 May 2020.

⁶Australian Department of Defence, ‘Defence Strategic Update (2020)’, available at: {https://www1.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/2020_Defence_Strategic_Update.pdf}.

⁷Ministère des Armées, Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017 (2017), available at: {<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/popup/content/download/520198/8733095/version/2/file/DEFENCE+AND+NATIONAL+SECURITY+STRATEGIC+REVIEW+2017.pdf>}.

⁸Federal Government of Germany, ‘White Paper 2016: On German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr’ (2016), available at: {<https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/111704/2027268/2016%20White%20Paper.pdf>}.

⁹NATO, ‘Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Inauguration of the Helsinki Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats’, with EU High Representative Federica Mogherini (2 October 2017), available at: {https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_147499.htm}.

¹⁰Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

discontinuation of the trend by which types of warfare only relate to strategic and tactical imperatives confined to certain conflicts.

The objective of this article is to argue that strategic competition among great powers breeds ambiguity, which is epitomised by the conduct of hybrid warfare. The resurgence of Russia and the rise of China as strategic competitors of the United States has contributed to innovation in the conduct of war. Shifts in the nature of international order have historically brought about minor or major changes in the character of warfare.¹¹ This research analyses how the yet uncompleted shift from unipolarity to great power competition could not generate a transparent and overt military confrontation, or simply an evolution of interventionism. Hybrid warfare is the result of time and space, rather than an abstract behavioural depiction.

Hybrid warfare in theory and practice

The concept of hybrid warfare is the result of the challenges created by the current strategic environment. It seeks to encapsulate a new combination of features in warfighting that were not as strategically prevalent in previous wars. The changing character of war implies that any theoretical advancement in this field must be coherent with the lines of continuity that have endured throughout the centuries. The essence of hybrid warfare must therefore capture the changes occurring during a particular moment in history. However, its abstraction, based on historical elements, can identify past (albeit muted) trends and future continuity. In this section we address the different approaches to hybrid warfare, its multifaceted aspects and the global debate on the subject. This analysis will set the foundations for the deeper discussion on ambiguity later on in the article.

First of all, it is important to frame the discussion on hybrid warfare and understand the contours and limitations of the term. Hybrid warfare is a form of war, and therefore the general principles laid out by Carl Von Clausewitz apply. Hybrid warfare is therefore ‘a serious mean for a serious end’, which is a well-defined political objective.¹² Its conduct is defined by the simultaneous use of kinetic and non-kinetic means all carefully designed for an ultimate political end. Our globalised society has both securitised social and economic issues and eroded national prerogatives in the application of the use of force. The existence of complex global security threats does not mean they are part of hybrid wars. The study of hybrid warfare therefore requires the identification of the warring parties, the means to fight it, and its political goal. The confusion between global security threats and hybrid warfare can degrade the quality of the academic debate in this field.

A paper published by the Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC) programme of the UK Ministry of Defence differentiates hybrid threats from hybrid warfare by defining threats as ‘a wide range of non-violent means to target vulnerabilities across the whole of society to undermine the functioning, unity, or will of their targets, while degrading and subverting the status quo ...’.¹³ Conversely, it defines hybrid warfare as ‘the challenge presented by the increasing complexity of armed conflict, where adversaries may combine types of warfare plus non-military means to neutralise conventional military power.’ The key difference between the two terms is on the use of non-violent means, which can achieve a political effect without being embedded in an armed conflict. Hybrid warfare stresses instead the combination of military and non-military means in an armed conflict. The importance of this distinction lays in the fact that military force can be used in a non-violent way, which means that armed forces

¹¹See Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds), *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹²Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York, NY: Everyman Library, 1993), p. 98.

¹³Patrick Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, ‘Understanding Hybrid Warfare’, Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC) (2017), available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/647776/dar_mcdc_hybrid_warfare.pdf.

(even paramilitaries or militias) can generate hybrid threats.¹⁴ Vladimir Rauta and Sean Monaghan have contributed to the distinction of between hybrid warfare and hybrid threats by carving out a role for defence in hybrid threats by defining tolerance, deterrence, and defence against hybrid threats.¹⁵

The term hybrid warfare in its current connotation was coined by Frank G. Hoffman who defined it as ‘a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder’.¹⁶ This definition stressed the importance of the combination of conventional and irregular tactics widening the scope of warfare to include criminal acts. What Frank Hoffman wrote in 2007 was the result of the strategic and operational context of the United States, especially in the Middle East. It was clear that Hoffman still considered non-state actors, in particular terrorist organisations, as the main opponent of US forces. The definition therefore has the merit of having grasped that one actor could conduct hostilities using regular and irregular means simultaneously, yet the study does not provide the essence of hybrid warfare and the political dynamics that led to its rise. Moreover, Hoffman does not clarify why non-state actors should be better positioned than nation states to wage hybrid wars. Recent conflicts have demonstrated the opposite, as we show in the third section of this article. Another important aspect to consider is whether violent non-state actors act as proxies of nation states, therefore being a subset rather than an alternative to hybrid warfare.¹⁷

The debate on hybrid warfare did not take off significantly until the war in Ukraine in 2014. Between 2007 and 2014 the attention of the international security and academic community was largely focused on the problems originating from counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and the exit strategy from that conflict. This context was not favourable to an academic debate on hybrid warfare since the Taliban and other armed groups were treated as irregular opponents rather than hybrid ones. While this was happening, in 2008, Russia fought a short war against Georgia, which was treated as the first sign of Russian resurgence in international security, yet it did not translate into a careful analysis of its military difficulties and how President Vladimir Putin sought to fix these problems through defence reform.¹⁸ This process, which went generally unnoticed, led to the military innovation displayed by Russian forces in Ukraine in 2014. The counterinsurgency debate in the West overshadowed analysis of the parallel evolution of Russian military developments and its use of hybrid warfare.

Few pieces scholarship in the period between 2007–14 provided valuable insights on hybrid warfare and which would guide its later understanding. Christopher Coker has argued that the language and methods of risk analysis are applicable to the way that modern war is understood and conducted, and that war has fundamentally ‘become risk management in all but name’.¹⁹ Recourse to hybrid warfare is, logically, an act of risk reduction because of the

¹⁴Mikael Wigell has gone further by advocating the concept of ‘hybrid interference’ (to stand in contrast to ‘hybrid warfare’), which he defines as ‘the synchronised use of multiple non-military means of interference to heighten divisions within target societies.’ This, he argues, is a ‘wedge strategy’ designed to utilise a combination of clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics, and disinformation to sow the seeds of division in a target country. By separating the kinetic from the non-kinetic elements of hybridity as a strategic practice, Wigell seeks to highlight how such interference offers ‘covert manipulation of other states’ strategic interests’. See Mikael Wigell, ‘Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: A theory of external interference in liberal democracy’, *International Affairs*, 95:2 (2019), pp. 255–75.

¹⁵Vladimir Rauta and Sean Monaghan, ‘Global Britain in the grey zone: Between stagecraft and statecraft’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 42:4 (2021), pp. 475–97.

¹⁶Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

¹⁷See Vladimir Rauta, ‘Towards a typology of non-state actors in “hybrid warfare”: Proxy, auxiliary, surrogate and affiliated forces’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:6 (2020), pp. 868–87.

¹⁸Jim Nichol, ‘Russian Military Reform and Defense Policy’ (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42006.pdf>.

¹⁹Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), p. xiii.

ambiguity built into its prosecution (as we will show in the next section). The desire by a state to avoid solely using overt, conventional force with obvious lines of responsibility denotes a decision influenced by the appeal of waging an indirect and unconventional war in order to lever as much gain out of a pre-existing or newly manufactured conflict without having a large stake in the risks of being an outright combatant in a conventional war (which would be subject to normal channels of international legal scrutiny) and reduces the chances of direct retaliation by the victim state and/or its allies. The risk of waging hybrid war is compacted because of the conflation of conventional and unconventional methods of war-waging. Coker's study of modern warfare formulates the principle that hybrid warfare is more a means at the service of state's interests rather than a chaotic tactical option carried out by irregular opponents.

Lawrence Freedman has profoundly influenced the debate on strategy in 2013 with his work *Strategy*, at a moment of great confusion on its meaning and purpose. His contribution set the foundation on further discussion on hybrid warfare. All strategy, he states, is 'fluid and flexible'.²⁰ Hybrid warfare adds ambiguity to these characteristics. It is also strategically creative. Freedman also reminds us that 'underdog strategies, in situations where the starting balance of power would predict defeat, provide the real test of creativity.'²¹ By taking the immediate belligerency out of war, via the conduct of operations on multiple levels, and indeed the obfuscation of responsibility for what could be construed as an act of war, the recourse to hybrid warfare is strategically creative because of the way in which it makes strategic strengths (such as surprise and deniability) out of weaknesses (such as economic constraints and a poor conventional military capacity). In later years, after the Ukraine war, Freedman, argued that the label 'hybrid warfare' gives 'coherence to what was often no more than a set of ad hoc and improvised arrangements'.²² This may implicitly mean that the focus on hybrid warfare should be on who is waging it and why rather than how.

Overshadowed by the drawdown of military troops in Afghanistan in 2013 and the end of US counterinsurgency in Iraq in 2011, the academic debate on irregular warfare turned its attention to the way Russian forces waged a stealthy, yet militarily concrete, war in Ukraine in 2014. The concept of hybrid warfare, seven years after Hoffman's important early paper, earned a central position in security and strategic studies debates. It is important to question whether without the war in Ukraine hybrid warfare would have become so important. It is also important to note that the pre-2014 concept of hybrid warfare was mostly related to non-state actors, while post-2014 hybrid warfare became state-centric and irregular actors were relegated to the tactical dimension, rather than defining its essence.

In a conference report by the NATO Defence College (NDC) in 2015, hybrid warfare was defined as 'The denial of – and defection from – standard norms and principles of international relations in pursuit of narrow interests.'²³ A research paper produced by the NDC a month earlier produced a three-dimensional definition of hybrid war that encapsulated actor, means, and territory: '[Hybrid warfare is] a form of violent conflict that simultaneously involves state and non-state actors, with the use of conventional and unconventional means of warfare that are not limited to the battlefield or a particular physical territory.'²⁴ In the middle of the crisis in Ukraine, NATO provided a definition of hybrid warfare that was both political and tactical. NATO stressed the fact that one country may wish to exploit kinetic and non-kinetic means in the effort to carve out a favourable political position in spite of international standards and norms. Through these definitions one can see a departure from the strategic preoccupation of

²⁰Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xi.

²¹Ibid., p. xii.

²²Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History* (London, UK: Allen Lane, 2017), p. 225.

²³NATO Defence College, Conference Report, 'NATO and New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid Threats' (19 May 2015), available at: {<https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=814>}.

²⁴Andreas Jacobs and Guillaume Lasconjarias, 'NATOs Hybrid Flanks: Handing Unconventional Warfare in the South and East' (Rome: NATO Defence College, 2015), p. 3, available at: {https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/190786/rp_112.pdf}.

winning against the Taliban in Afghanistan to understanding why and how the Russians were fighting in Ukraine.

For Bettina Renz hybrid warfare is designed to prolong belligerency, perpetually frustrate an opponent, and leverage protracted political pressure.²⁵ By tackling and engaging in hybrid warfare states are both perpetually avoiding and committing to a continuous conflict – even if the prosecution and countering of hybrid warfare looks like neither war nor peace. Renz’s approach suggests that hybrid warfare does not want to look like a conflict while continuing to violently pursue its objective in a very dilated time frame. The war in Ukraine, however, has shown otherwise. Russians were able to secure meaningful political results in a relatively short amount of time.

Doug Ollivant has labelled ‘hybrid warriors’ a new breed of non-state actor (possibly state-sponsored) who have replaced our traditional conception of terrorist or insurgent. They have, in Ollivant’s words, ‘adopted significant capabilities of an industrial or post-industrial nation-state army ... retaining their ties to the population and a devotion to the “propaganda of the deed”’.²⁶ As a result of this new reality, counter-hybrid warfare strategies need to ensure that the disruption of ‘hybrid warriors’ in these quasi-militarised grey zones is a key priority given the capacity for regional destabilisation. The core of Ollivant’s claim is further reinforced by militia men used in Ukraine and the rise of paramilitaries worldwide.

Unfortunately, in public debate hybrid warfare and grey zone are often, and improperly used as synonyms and by the academic community as competing terms. However, the literature so far consulted suggests that the two concepts are not synonyms. Grey zone defines the space of competition short of war, therefore it is a strategic term. Hybrid warfare can be an operational solution to achieve political objectives in the grey zone, but not limited to it. Therefore hybrid warfare and grey zone cannot be competing terms because they relate to two different levels of war.

The debate on hybrid warfare was profoundly based on Western definitions and did not entirely take into consideration the way other countries intended it. The Russian conceptualisation of hybrid warfare (or *gibridnaya voyna*) differs from that in the West. As Ofer Fridman has noted, whereas NATO countries tend to place an emphasis on operational issues surrounding its prosecution, the Russian’s see the primary purpose of hybrid warfare as being ‘to avoid the traditional battlefield with the aim of destroying the adversary via a mixture of ideological, informational, financial, political and economic methods, ultimately leading to socio-cultural disintegration and, eventually, social collapse’.²⁷ In short, the West clings to a kinetic interpretation resting on the combined application of regular and irregular forces, yet Russia emphasises non-kinetic priorities that fall short of outright war.

So far, the literature has made substantial effort to provide a definition of hybrid warfare. The difficulty of this endeavour lays in its hybrid nature. Hybridity is the combination of different elements that coexist in a single object. Therefore, the study of hybrid warfare should be more focused on how its unique nature can succeed in achieving its ultimate objective. This type of conflict by its own definition can take different forms and use different actors, but in order to achieve conceptual clarity we should focus on why it exists, rather than how. In the literature consulted we have noticed signs of the need to orient the discussion on the causes of hybrid warfare.

Types of warfare do not redefine war – they synthesise its complexity in given circumstances. The trend adjusts the concept of hybrid warfare to a type of opponent. This is why before the war in Ukraine in 2014 definitions on hybrid warfare were profoundly oriented towards irregular opponents, while after 2014 definitions on hybrid warfare were oriented on Russian military capabilities. This trend calls for a different approach that aims to conceptualise the underlining cause of hybrid warfare in a modern historical context that does not preclude its further evolution in the future. As Alex Deep has argued: ‘[D]espite having its roots in history, modern hybrid war has the potential to

²⁵Bettina Renz, ‘Russia and “hybrid warfare”’, *Contemporary Politics*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 283–300.

²⁶Douglas A. Ollivant, ‘The rise of the hybrid warriors: From Ukraine to the Middle East’, *War on the Rocks*, 2016, available at: {<https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/the-rise-of-the-hybrid-warriors-from-ukraine-to-the-middle-east/>}.

²⁷Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicisation* (London, UK: Hurst, 2018), p. 7.

transform the strategic calculations of potential belligerents due to the rise of non-state actors, information technology, and the proliferation of advanced weapons systems.²⁸ In light of these considerations and analysis of the literature, this article has identified the concept of ambiguity as a fundamental thread between a troubled international system and the conduct of hybrid warfare.

Ambiguity in hybrid warfare

Why do actors in the international system fight hybrid wars? This is the main question that motivates this article. We postulate that ambiguity is the defining element of this type of war, and one that makes it unique in warfare. This affords us the opportunity to define ambiguity in hybrid warfare and create a framework that could be used to identify it in the future. Its strategic and tactical dimension is shaped to generate ambiguity and not vice versa. As we noted in the previous section, there is a tendency in the literature to define hybrid warfare by its tactics. Instead, by focusing on its essence, hybrid warfare as a conceptual framework has the chance to survive changing political contexts, technological advances, and social changes. The essence of hybrid warfare and the reason why it is fought is unlikely to change over time. Therefore, this can be understood as a wider contribution to study of continuity in warfare.

We will proceed with a starting point on ambiguity and then we will develop its implications for hybrid warfare. The main limitation of this approach is that, with the only exception to the field of nuclear deterrence, there is a lack of specific literature on ambiguity in warfare. However, this might open the possibility for a wider discussion on the matter.

In common knowledge ambiguity is perceived as the characteristic of a certain idea or situation which is unclear or having multiple meanings. In social psychology attributional ambiguity 'occurs whenever there is more than one plausible reason for why a person was treated in a certain way or received the outcomes that he or she received'.²⁹ In philosophy the word ambiguity is studied in the subfield of semantics and logics. A careful examination of the philosophical dimension of ambiguity clarifies that it is not vagueness, but rather a meaning that can have multiple interpretation. Therefore, if ambiguity is delivered intentionally, it has the power of creating a situation that is perceived to have multiple outcomes. The person or situation that is the object of that ambiguity is left in a state of cognitive impasse. This has a direct impact on the conduct of war.

As we have seen in the previous section, hybrid warfare is 'the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects'. Hybrid warfare is not declared, at the beginning it frequently manifests itself with non-conventional and covert activities. The state or population victim of a hybrid aggression may not be able to evaluate of these 'multiple instruments' might be part of a synchronised action by a state or an actor. Moreover, even the employment of overt means might have multiple meanings in tactical terms if used in a clever combination with covert and clandestine methods.

In the field of nuclear deterrence 'calculated ambiguity' forms part of the array of operational options.³⁰ It is intertwined with the notion of 'red lines' and 'threshold'. The UK deterrence doctrine states 'ambiguity can cause an adversary to pause for thought if they think the UK might have a capability that can punish them'.³¹ It is surprising that ambiguity, while being an important part in this doctrine, even in relation to hybrid operations, is not defined.

²⁸Alex Deep, 'Hybrid war: Old concept, new techniques', *Small Wars Journal* (2015), available at: {<https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/hybrid-war-old-concept-new-techniques>}.

²⁹R. F. Baumeister and K. D. Vohs, 'Attributional ambiguity', in *Encyclopaedia of Social Psychology* (London, UK: SAGE, 2007), pp. 73–4.

³⁰William M. Arkin, 'Calculated ambiguity: Nuclear weapons and the Gulf War', *The Washington Quarterly*, 19:4 (1996), pp. 2–18.

³¹UK Ministry of Defence, Joint Doctrine Note 1/19, *Deterrence: The Defence Contribution* (2019), p. 47, available at: {https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/860499/20190204-dctrine_uk_deterrence_jdn_1_19.pdf}.

Ambiguity is a key characteristic of hybrid warfare given the often unattributable nature of subthreshold activity. It provides the ability to strike an opponent with multiple synchronised elements forcing it into a state of cognitive impasse regarding its political, strategic, and tactical intentions. Without ambiguity, hybrid warfare would be ineffective, or it would simply be another form of irregular warfare that does not require the employment of synchronised multiple means of aggression, like insurgency or terrorism. Ambiguity is the essence of hybrid warfare because it will survive the test of time.³²

Having provided a definition, we ought to consider how this essence is applied into practice. The case studies provided later in the article are an application of the principle we have laid out. In order to test this conceptual principle we will provide the parameters against which ambiguity in hybrid warfare can be identified.

The first parameter is the utility of ambiguity. Hybrid warfare is a political choice, so if ambiguity is its essence, the stated objective must be to leave the enemy wondering as to the multiple political options of the opponent. This is particularly true for great powers fighting hybrid wars next to their border. The sought-after political result may stretch from long military occupation, to annexation, to interference. The country defending against hybrid warfare may not have the necessary resources to be prepared to defend itself against all these plausible scenarios.

The second parameter is the strategy of dispersion. Ambiguity in hybrid warfare has the effect of forcing the enemy to disperse its resources because the manifestation of the attack suggests multiple goals. If a country does not know what it is fighting for or against it cannot defend effectively or it might not be able to enforce its 'red lines'. The only way to counter such a strategy is to fight back with the same type of war. Ambiguity cannot be, by definition, characterised just by the concentration of force and attrition, but rather by a mastery of space and time and a solid understanding of power. Lawrence Freedman defines strategy as the 'art of creating power'.³³ Ambiguity has the minimum objective denying that power to the adversary because it inhibits the Clausewitzian dialectic of war.

The third parameter is tactical creativity. Hybrid warfare is one of the most creative types of war. Hybrid warriors have few boundaries as the means they can use to strike the enemy – so long as it remains below the threshold of legitimate response. They are, however, bound by the means used to generate ambiguity. Artillery, constabulary forces, separatists, propaganda, special forces, armoured vehicles, drones, legal claims, can all be used with the objective of forcing the enemy into a cognitive impasse. These tactics buy time and space and are frequently met with an inefficient defence (as the case studies will show). It is therefore important to underline the fact that hybrid tactics are not 'blurry' or 'grey' nor 'mysterious', they are cleverly designed to be so. War can generate chaos, but it is never chaotic.

The fourth parameter is de-escalation. The ambiguous use of force used in hybrid conflicts provides some residual recourse to push tensions down the ladder of escalation as quickly as it pushes them up. Hybrid wars can be over as quickly as they start in large part because the degree of ambiguity with which they are conducted can save any potential blushes if any withdrawal must occur. Furthermore, such ambiguity may itself be constructed by both sides so as to purposely avoid major conflict.³⁴

Great power utility of ambiguity in hybrid warfare

The history of hybrid warfare theory is profoundly influenced by the West's main opponents and by the international context. After 9/11 the field of irregular warfare had witnessed a rebirth

³²Andrew Mumford, 'Ambiguity in Hybrid Warfare', EU/NATO Centre of Excellence for Hybrid Threats (September 2020), available at: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/202009_Strategic-Analysis24-1.pdf.

³³Freedman, *Strategy*.

³⁴Geraint Hughes, 'War in the grey zone: Historical reflections and contemporary implications', *Survival*, 62:3 (2020), p. 146.

during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as they had shaped the strategic landscape and the doctrinal debate in the field. In 2014–15 the world witnessed a paradigm shift from a fragile unipolar system into an increasingly fluid competition between the United States, Russia, and China. The war in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 proved how Russia's strategic assets could favourably change political events happening on its doorstep. Signs of Russia's discontent with the unipolar system had already been voiced during the Munich Security Conference in 2007.³⁵ Simultaneously, China's rise moved from being merely economic to being political. The expansion of the Chinese economic role in the world led to political manifestations of national interest in shaping the international order. The ongoing crisis in the South China Sea and the display of Beijing's use of international law and strategic assets have been a test of how different means can be used to achieve an ultimate end without a shock. This section will analyse how these different crises provide evidence that great powers use hybrid warfare because its inherent ambiguity allows them to shape their foreign and security policy at a relatively low cost.

When looking at the status of the international system, the debate on US foreign policy is hugely important as Washington has the power to shape public opinion and influence world events. The debate about the end of the unipolar moment or the threats posed to the liberal international order has profound roots and a diverse composition. In a famous article published by the Hoover Institution, Robert Kagan wrote "The world is still "unipolar", with the United States remaining the only superpower."³⁶ But international competition among great powers has returned, with the United States, Russia, China, Japan, India, Iran, and others vying for regional predominance. His views reflect the part of the debate that rejected the 'end of history' as theorised by Francis Fukuyama in 1992. Christopher Walker, for example, points at a protracted period of competition between democracies and autocracies.³⁷ In an op-ed for the *Financial Times*, John Sawers (former head of MI6, the British Secret Intelligence Service) wrote: 'Putting great power relations first will be unwelcome by many. Some will see it as an accommodation with unacceptable behaviour by undemocratic regimes, but we have to treat the world as it is, not as we would like it to be.'³⁸ These shifts do not happen overnight. We witnessed visible signs during the Obama administration, chiefly in its 2015 National Security Strategy,³⁹ and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States only reinforced this vision. The National Security Strategy of 2017 states: 'Rival powers were aggressively undermining American interests around the globe.'⁴⁰ The 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment written by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence states: 'Threats to US national security will expand and diversify in the coming year, driven in part by China and Russia as they respectively compete more intensely with the United States and its traditional allies and partners.'⁴¹ The outlook portrayed by academia, security professionals, and federal agencies is consistent with the view that the United States has entered a new era where China and Russia will compete with the West across all aspects of global affairs. This has an impact on the way the US,

³⁵Vladimir Putin, 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy' (10 February 2007), available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>}.

³⁶Robert Kagan, 'End of Dreams, Return of History', Hoover Institution (17 July 2007), available at: {<https://www.hoover.org/research/end-dreams-return-history>}.

³⁷Christopher Walker, 'A New Era of Competition: The Growing Threat from Authoritarian Internationalism as a Global Challenge to Democracy', Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (July 2017), available at: {<https://www.kas.de/en/web/auslandsinformationen/artikel/detail/-/content/ein-neues-zeitalter-des-wettbewerbs>}.

³⁸John Sawers, 'We are returning to a world of great-power rivalry', *Financial Times* (16 October 2016), available at: {<https://www.ft.com/content/2291f260-954e-11e6-a1dc-bdf38d484582>}.

³⁹US National Security Strategy (February 2015), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf}.

⁴⁰US National Security Strategy (December 2017), p. 1, available at: {<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>}.

⁴¹Dan Coats, 'Worldwide Threat Assessment' (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 29 January 2019), p. 4, available at: {<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>}.

China, and Russia will use their military power to secure their political objectives. The application of hybrid warfare, because of its ambiguous essence, meets the requirements of today's strategic outlook.

An enquiry into the essence of hybrid warfare requires an analysis of recent conflicts where these traits have emerged. The war in Ukraine in 2014 is a clear example of the conduct of hybrid warfare because of its strategy, conduct, and the variety of kinetic and non-kinetic means displayed. Russia has shown how it reformed its military to better intervene close to its borders and to secure a meaningful political result without dealing with major political consequences. After 1992 Ukraine had always been a geopolitical fault line between Russia and the West. The collapse of the domestic political situation in the country after the contested 2014 presidential election led to a military offensive with a blend of means used. Meanwhile, the strategic competition between the US and China in the South China Sea (SCS) and the East China Sea (ECS) has led to interesting ways of using military and non-military means as well as the use of legal claims to change or preserve the geostrategic situation in the region. Both these case studies bring valuable reflections on hybrid warfare, its ambiguous essence, and show how this interacts with a new era of state-dominated security dynamics. An analysis of the strategic and tactical dimension of these conflicts will show how ambiguity has been the main vehicle to obtaining its political goal.

The war in Ukraine

The relative absence of Russia from the core of the international security architecture is one of the most fascinating issues of the post-Cold War era.⁴² This period has seen different phases, especially characterised by the different policies of Presidents Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev. The country has witnessed great geopolitical change in the past thirty years and this has been epitomised by Vladimir Putin's famous quote from his annual address to the Russian Parliament in 2005: 'The collapse of the Soviet Union has been the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.'⁴³ Russia fought two protracted conflicts in South Ossetia and Chechnya where it struggled to maintain its territorial integrity against centrifugal forces. In 2008 it intervened militarily in Georgia claiming that it was to protect Russian minorities in the country. However, the main pre-occupation of Russian policymakers has been the expansion of NATO in former Soviet republics. The further expansion of NATO eastward in 2004 has been regarded by Moscow as a symbol of Western expansionism.⁴⁴

Despite being militarily active on the periphery of its own country, Russia has been a public defender of UN multilateralism, which can be seen as both giving weight to its veto power in the UN Security Council and accusing the US and NATO of having the tendency to use unilateral interventions like Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003.⁴⁵ Therefore, its national interests are in profound contradiction. On one hand, Russia wants to portray itself as guarantor of the UN system and post-1945 order. On the other, it needs to intervene outside of its borders to favourably change the geostrategic situation. At the global level, given the rise of information and communication technologies, Russia needs to shape the infosphere by generating narratives which can be used as a multiplier to its strategic objectives. Russia's resurgence in international affairs and its authoritarian rule has been tagged by Western countries as a source of concern.⁴⁶ Presidents

⁴² Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy* (London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

⁴³ Putin: Soviet collapse a "genuine tragedy", *NBC* (25 April 2005), available at: {http://www.nbcnews.com/id/7632057/ns/world_news/t/putin-soviet-collapse-genuine-tragedy/}. Putin has continued to assert this point subsequently, including in his 2007 speech to the Munich Security Conference, a 2014 speech at the Valdai Club, and his now infamous 2021 essay on Russian-Ukrainian 'history'.

⁴⁴ See Renz, 'Russia and "hybrid warfare"'.
⁴⁵ Putin, 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy'.

⁴⁶ Coats, 'Worldwide Threat Assessment'.

George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump with different approaches have all been content with the policy of containing Putin's strategic objectives.⁴⁷

The complexities of the West's relations with Russia came to a head in 2014 when the political situation in Ukraine collapsed during the Euromaidan protest in February of that year. The cause of the protest had been the decision by President Yanukovic to abandon talks to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, choosing instead to sign an agreement with the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union.⁴⁸ The clashes in Euromaidan were a symbol of Ukraine's geopolitical fault line which resulted in a political agreement with the opposition leaders which forced Yanukovich to leave the country. Russia had interpreted the Euromaidan protest as a Western move against its geopolitical interests. However, Russia could not have intervened overtly because it would have had immediate and serious repercussions on its foreign policy and it would have harmed the narrative that President Putin had tried to build over the years. The complex policy issue generated by Euromaidan led Russia to conduct a hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea has been multidimensional with blurred lines between kinetic and non-kinetic use of strategic assets. Every aspect of this conflict, on the Russian side, has been studied in detail in order to allow it to succeed in Ukraine without facing a larger confrontation with the US and NATO or facing a hostile diplomatic bloc at the United Nations. Time, space, and means have been carefully mastered to achieve maximum strategic advantage. Moreover, the Russian Federation did not improvise its strategic posture during this conflict, but it was the result of a six-year defence reform building on the weaknesses displayed during the Georgian War in 2008.⁴⁹

Russia has employed the simultaneous use of political, technological, and military measures in the achievement of its policy objectives. This was designed to generate ambiguity about the situation in these territories. A series of protests and political unrest in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea was quickly and covertly exploited by Russia in order to secure consensus for the following political and military actions.⁵⁰ Those actions were infiltrated by special forces 'spetznaz' in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Special forces are generally used to train local militias behind enemy lines in order to generate a favourable situation for a conventional attack. The war conducted by the separatists in Donetsk, Donbass, and Crimea was conducted by a blend of regular and irregular military assets designed to confuse local and international observers regarding the identity of these units, which were both Russian and separatists.

Russia's main innovation has been the creation of Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG), which were independent units made up of Russian military forces and militias recruited specifically for this war.⁵¹ Instead of using conscripts, Russia made extensive use of hybrid warriors. BTGs used combined arms at the tactical level, meaning that they had armour, artillery, and drones assigned permanently to them.⁵² This led to a military campaign, which was conducted by a swarm of small, mobile, and independent units able to use speed and dispersion to their advantage. These units were successful also because they enjoyed air support and logistical backup from the Russian Federation through railways and trucks.⁵³ The military victory over Ukrainian forces enabled the success of the referendum, which offered a veneer of political legitimacy for the annexation of Crimea.

The Russian Federation has therefore employed all three parameters of ambiguity in hybrid warfare as laid out in the previous section. The utility of ambiguity helped to delay the

⁴⁷Cory Welt, 'Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy' (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020).

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Nichol, 'Russian Military Reform and Defense Policy'.

⁵⁰Welt, 'Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy'.

⁵¹Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2019).

⁵²Phillip Karber, 'Lessons Learned from the Russo-Ukrainian War: Personal Observations' (Washington, DC: The Potomac Foundation, 2015), available at: {https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316122469_Karber_RUS-UKR_War_Lessons_Learned}.

⁵³Ibid.

appropriate response by the Ukraine government, which expected anything from a small military operation to a full-scale invasion. The strategy of dispersion was achieved by the use of BTGs in Eastern Ukraine. Their flexibility and speed left Ukrainian forces with little possibility to prevent the military consolidation of separatist forces. This ambiguity was further compounded by Russia's status as a nuclear state. Tactical creativity was achieved by the phases of aggression (from political to conventional) and by the composition of the BTGs and the so-called 'little green men'. Both Ukraine and the international community were left with no option but to fight what was visible and undeniably a threat, unlike other wars where terrorist and insurgents can be found and directly targeted.

The South China Sea

Coupled with Russian resurgence, China's rise has been at the centre of the debate about shifting international order and Great Power politics in the twenty-first century. In particular, the debate questioned whether its rise would be peaceful or not.⁵⁴ The essence of this debate revolves around the notion that such a large economy can grow without political confrontation with other countries, in particular with the United States. The tight economic ties between the two countries created a strand of the debate that posited that antagonism would not be on the horizon because of such interdependence.⁵⁵ However, China's economic rise was not coupled with a more open domestic market or a reduced role for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the economy. Moreover, the nomination of Xi Jinping as lifelong Chairman of the CCP has been an indicator of China's willingness to rise on its own terms.

Hybrid strategies have been evident in China's recent maritime actions in disputed waters in the South and East China Seas. Indeed, the seizure of the contested Scarborough shoal by Chinese vessels in 2012 actually pre-dates the Russian annexation of Crimea and should be seen as a major turning point in the way in which revisionist Great Powers employ hybrid strategies to muddy the waters between war and peace. As Chiyuki Aoi, Madoka Futamura, and Alessio Patalano have put it: 'China has both the ambition and capabilities to develop a sophisticated hybrid strategy, encompassing a highly integrated use of military and non-military capabilities combined with a creative reconfiguration of the legal and communication aspects of security.'⁵⁶

Un-flagged Chinese fishing vessels manned by so-called 'little blue men' have been interpreted by the US as being a de facto state-run militia and force multiplier for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).⁵⁷ These boats have undertaken aggressive manoeuvres on foreign ships around the Spratly Islands, not an area not traditionally known for its high density of fishing vessels,⁵⁸ with some reports acknowledging that maritime militias had taken part in over 250 incidents between 2013 and 2016.⁵⁹ Using civilian ships to help assert Chinese control over the waters is a sign of Beijing's efforts to avoid direct confrontation with the US yet leverage enough ambiguous force to erode the 2016 International Court of Justice ruling that rejected China's territorial claim to

⁵⁴See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018) and David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁵See Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (London, UK: Pearson, 2011).

⁵⁶Chiyuki Aoi, Madoka Futamura, and Alessio Patalano, 'Introduction: Hybrid warfare in Asia – its meaning and shape', *Pacific Affairs*, 31:6 (2018), p. 695.

⁵⁷Simon Tisdall, 'Little blue men: The maritime militias pushing China's claims', *The Guardian* (16 May 2016), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/16/little-blue-men-the-maritime-militias-pushing-chinas-claims-in-south-china-sea>}.

⁵⁸Christopher P. Cavas, 'China's "little blue men" take navy's place in disputes', *Defense One* (3 November 2015), available at: {<https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2015/11/03/chinas-little-blue-men-take-navys-place-in-disputes/>}.

⁵⁹Tisdall, 'Little blue men'.

the South China Sea.⁶⁰ As Abraham Denmark, deputy assistant US defence secretary for East Asia, said after the USS Lassen was ‘buzzed’ by such civilian vessels in 2015: ‘these activities are designed to stay below the threshold of conflict, but gradually demonstrate and assert claims that other countries dispute.’⁶¹ Such actions are complemented by more overt military action, including the building of military facilities on artificial islands constructed in the sea, totalling over three thousand acres.⁶²

Beijing has responded to accusations of its involvement in the above disputes with a mixture of legal nit-picking and political bluster as a means of diverting attention. Regular reactions include arguments to address both external and internal audiences. The rest of the world – mainly competitor states in the region and/or West – are offered explanations on China’s ‘rights’ that rest on highly selective legal definitions, while messages on state-controlled media depict to their population a China perpetually having to stand up and defend its sovereignty against belligerent neighbours.⁶³

The crisis of the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) is symptomatic of the level of growing antagonism between the US and its allies on one side and China on the other. The element of contention in this crisis is the control of the SCS. Whoever controls this geographic area can affect trade routes, fishing, maritime activities, and military operations, which are of strategic importance for both. China sees the SCS as a vital artery for its economic place in the world and its effective control of this space is the definitive sign of its international stature and role in world. The United States sees the SCS crisis as a worrying sign of limitation to its strategic role in the region and its relationship with the network of allies it has built around China. This is another geopolitical fault line which the shift from the unipolar to the multipolar world was inevitably going to expose.

In the past thirty years, China has been a rather silent force in global political issues. Traditionally it has been in favour of impartiality at the United Nations and a believer of the value of multilateralism. This is largely due to its veto power in the UN Security Council, but also because it shares a land border with 14 different countries, including the Russian Federation and India. Beijing has often criticised US and NATO interventions in Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003. Moreover, the recent Belt and Road Initiative, although being seen as a sign of Beijing’s grand strategy for the future, is profoundly reliant on international cooperation rather than power politics. This precludes China from taking overt unilateral actions to secure its national interest. The SCS crisis is an issue in Chinese foreign policy which has no easy solution leverages strategic patience and intelligence. This is what led Beijing to choose an ambiguous course of action.

In the 1990s the Chinese developed a strategic principle known as ‘Tao Guang Yang Hui’, which pertains to the notion of concealing capability from outward display.⁶⁴ Two decades later it would appear that China has adapted this principle to include concealing not just capability but also intention and (in the cyber realm) responsibility from outward display. It is a maxim well suited to the prosecution of hybrid war and fits in well (albeit covertly) with the overarching Chinese grand strategic aim of ‘peaceful rise/development’ (PRD). The Chinese Communist Party is increasingly assuming that the continuation of China’s peaceful rise can be achieved increasingly by hybrid means because the nation cannot afford a confrontational rise.⁶⁵

⁶⁰Tobias J. Burgers and Scott N. Romaniuk, ‘Hybrid warfare in the South China Sea: The United States’ “little grey (un) men”’, *The Diplomat* (31 December 2016), available at: {<https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/hybrid-warfare-in-the-south-china-sea-the-united-states-little-grey-unmen/>}.

⁶¹Quoted in Tisdall, ‘Little blue men’.

⁶²Quoted in Ibid.

⁶³Aoi, Futamura, and Patalano, ‘Introduction: hybrid warfare in Asia – its meaning and shape’, p. 705.

⁶⁴Feng Zhaung, ‘Rethinking China’s grand strategy: Beijing’s evolving national interests and strategic ideas in the Reform Era’, *International Politics*, 49:3 (2012), p. 324.

⁶⁵Barry Buzan, ‘The logic and contradictions of “peaceful rise/development” as China’s grand strategy’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7:4 (2014), pp. 381–420.

The Chinese approach has been broad with a savvy use of time and space. It has been frequently tagged as ‘salami slicing’, ‘grey zone’, or ‘talk and take’.⁶⁶ They all amount to an ambiguous policy designed to delay hostile actions from allies and slowing down the ability to determine Beijing’s overall strategy. The form of hybrid warfare used by the Chinese has shown another significant feature, which is the non-violent use of military force in an irregular confrontation. The PLA, the China Coast Guard, and Maritime militia (used as a swarming dredging fleet for artificial island construction), the use of state banks and state-owned enterprises, and the state media were all used harmoniously to achieve military objectives peacefully – all guaranteed by the ambiguity generated by its adoption of hybrid warfare.⁶⁷ China creatively used the means at its disposal without triggering a completely hostile international response.

Conclusion

Ambiguity defines hybrid warfare, without which it would not exist. What makes this type of warfare unique, and likely to endure is its adaptability to changing circumstances, technological advancement, and social change. Declaring hybrid warfare as a doctrinal definition of irregular warfare is a mistake. Ambiguity makes hybrid warfare particularly resilient to the strategies adopted to counter it. However, understanding how it works might be the first step towards a strategic evolution.⁶⁸

Hybrid warfare is defined by the simultaneous use of kinetic and non-kinetic means to achieve an ultimate political objective. So far, academia has concentrated its attention on the characteristics of its conduct rather than its essence and why it is fought. This article has argued that by investigating an essential trait of hybrid warfare (ambiguity) the reasons why it is fought become visible and clear. Within the scope of this article, ambiguity is a political connotation that requires coherence from the strategic to the tactical level in order to be effective. This requires strategic clarity, a full spectrum of flexible means, and the savvy use of military and non-military dimension of war.

In Ukraine, the ambiguity of hybrid warfare has allowed Russia to seize the initiative and secure a political and military result that would have been ineffective and costly otherwise. A proxy war would have been lengthy, and it would have degraded Russia’s foreign and security policy. An outright intervention would have led to a counterinsurgency campaign to stabilise areas under its control. Tactical Battalion Groups have been the decisive element that enabled a clear military victory in a short amount of time. This approach showed also a three-dimensional approach to hybrid warfare that never divorced politics, strategy, and tactics. The Western reaction to Russia’s warfare in Ukraine, imposing economic sanctions on an already weak Russian economy, may scale back the political result achieved in 2014 but only to a limited extent. As Bastian Giegerich rightly points out: ‘The point is not that an event like the invasion of Crimea necessarily informs a template for future conflict, but that the principles on which they were based will inform the next challenges and hybridity as an underlying factor in conflict is here to stay.’⁶⁹

China’s approach towards the South China Sea has been determined by the dual policy objectives of expanding its economic reach while at the same time asserting its power in its proximity. Promoting itself as an alternative leader in the global economy while reaffirming its national interests (often in opposition to US interests) has been a contradictory proposition, which needed ambiguity in order to be enacted. It has done so with a savvy use of international maritime law loopholes and a full spectrum of statecraft, military, police, and civilian means. This form of

⁶⁶Ronald O’Rourke, ‘U.S.–China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress’ (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020).

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Mumford, ‘Ambiguity in Hybrid Warfare’.

⁶⁹Bastian Giegerich, ‘Hybrid warfare and the changing character of conflict’, *Connections*, 15:2 (2016), p. 71.

hybrid warfare has been slower and less violent than Russia's war in Ukraine, but it managed to achieve meaningful results without greater direct pressure from Washington. The 'hybridization of major power strategies' is one of the biggest security concerns in Asia at this time.⁷⁰ The strategic balance of the whole region is capable of being shifted by China's application of hybrid strategies, both in terms of the ambiguous use of maritime force in the South and East China Seas and through non-kinetic forms of economic, diplomatic, or information manipulation.

Finally, as stated above, ambiguity in hybrid warfare is the ability to strike the enemy with multiple synchronised elements forcing it into a state of cognitive impasse regarding its political, strategic, and tactical intentions. Both Russia and China have proven to have mastered this war-fighting ability to their advantage. The West has to understand how ambiguity works in hybrid warfare precisely because great power competition breeds hybrid warfare.

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⁷⁰ Aoi, Futamura, and Patalano, 'Introduction: Hybrid warfare in Asia – its meaning and shape', p. 702.