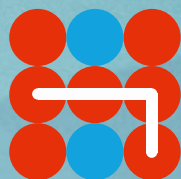


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Ambiguity in hybrid warfare

ANDREW MUMFORD



Hybrid CoE

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Ambiguity in hybrid warfare

“Ambiguity is an integral component of hybrid warfare, yet it remains an elusive concept. Understanding it allows us to explain why the tactical application of ambiguous force has been superseded by strategic-level hybrid warfare. The key aim of ambiguity is not necessarily to hide the true actor behind the activity, but ultimately to stymie a legitimate response.” – writes Andrew Mumford from the University of Nottingham.

This analysis represents an attempt to redirect the discussion on *ambiguity* in modern hybrid warfare, and to stake out its own independent conceptual space, through an assessment of its role in the prosecution of hybrid warfare. **The term hybrid warfare is used in this paper to denote a particular sub-set of activities that can come under the umbrella term ‘hybrid threats’, which includes the strategic application of the use of (ambiguous) force to gain territory or attain another strategic goal.** Hybrid warfare, unlike other types of hybrid activities such as interference and influence operations, is constitutive of visible acts of coercion that combine overt and covert military force in conjunction with political disruption. Actors responsible for hybrid warfare do not require deniability for their actions precisely because responsibility for the use of force is disconnected from the ambiguous way in which it is applied. **The key aim of ambiguity is not necessarily to hide the true actor behind the activity, but ultimately to stymie a legitimate response.**

For example, a little thought experiment could proceed from the contention that the Russian annexation of Crimea did not take place. This is not to say that the Russian military intervention in Ukraine did not occur in 2014. Nor should it be regarded, in academic jargon, as a post-modernist claim (such as that made by Jean Baudrillard, who argued that the Gulf War did not happen nearly thirty years ago because its outcome had, he claimed, been pre-ordained before the war even began). Instead, it is an acknowledgment of the centrality of ambiguity to the conduct of hybrid warfare and the deliberate cloud of uncertainty, in regard to the actors and actions involved, that hung over the Crimea conflict – not to mention

the ability of Russia to act just below the threshold of legitimate retaliation. The Kremlin acted as if the annexation had not occurred on its orders, and the West was unable to respond with force of its own.

This analysis argues that the tactical application of ambiguous force has been superseded by strategic-level hybrid warfare, given the heightened acknowledgement of risk in modern warfare and a shift in the global power balance. Although acknowledging that hybrid warfare as a Western concept is not new, it has now attained a level of strategic usage never before seen amongst a set of actors – namely regional ‘revisionist powers’ – aiming to turn modest military capabilities into regional change whilst remaining below a threshold of conventional response.

Ambiguity is an integral component of hybrid warfare – and therefore also of the strategic landscape of contemporary conflict – yet it remains an elusive concept that has received little systematic scholarly attention. There are large or growing pools of Western literature on related concepts, such as deterrence, secrecy, and covert action. But there is surprisingly little on the attendant concept of ambiguity, which has yet to be adequately separated from descriptions of those activities just listed.

The concept of ambiguity in Western strategic studies has historically been located in the literature on nuclear strategy, where it has been associated with the notion of deterrence. In his study of British nuclear strategy in the decades after the Second World War, John Baylis identified two distinct schools of thought on the issue. He differentiated between those strategists advocating ‘deliberate ambiguity’, whereby nuclear deterrence is

enhanced by the ‘certainty of uncertainty’ regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons, and ‘unintentional ambiguity’ in which uncertainty is created inadvertently through strategic discord arising from bureaucratic politics or the restraints of the international system. **Hybrid warfare rests firmly on what Baylis labelled as ‘deliberate ambiguity’, because its adoption as a strategic tool by states such as Russia and China is evidence that ambiguous uses of force are no longer the product of uncertainties about how to attain objectives, but the result of calculated decision-making.** To this extent, the making of a hybrid war strategy explicitly creates the conditions for ambiguity because of the way in which such a strategy is tasked with harnessing ambiguous ways to use force below the threshold of legitimate response, embedding it within a combination of overt and covert military means, and applying it to the political ends of the strategy. As later sections of this paper go on to discuss, hybrid warfare creates ambiguity not necessarily to mask the identity of the actors involved, but to deter the possibility of conventional retaliatory action.

Calculated ambiguity

After the Gulf War ended in 1991, the Secretary of State during the conflict, James Baker, acknowledged that the Bush administration’s deliberate refusal to clarify whether it would use nuclear weapons to defeat the regime of Saddam Hussein was an act of what he labelled as ‘calculated ambiguity’. They left the process deliberately vague to keep opponents guessing and forced them to check their own behaviour. **To re-appropriate Baker’s phrase, modern acts of hybrid warfare rest firmly on a strategy of calculated ambiguity – an ambiguity of origin, intent and responsive measures.** The Gulf War that Baker helped win was the same war that Baudrillard provocatively insisted had not happened because it had been ‘won in advance’ by American superiority. Of the Gulf conflict, Baudrillard observed that: ‘No accidents occurred in this war, everything unfolded according to programmatic order... Nothing occurred which would have metamorphosed events into a duel.’ He could very well have been describing events in Crimea in

2014, which included the subversive application of a combination of operations using proxies, conventional military interventions, and cyber-attacks to coercively dissuade retaliation. It is such calculated ambiguity that guarantees the outcome of such ‘non-wars’ (as Baudrillard labelled the Gulf War) that we call hybrid wars today. They are ‘non-wars’ in the sense that conventional force is lacking, traditional modes of retaliation are muted, thresholds of response are blurred, and the kinetic use of force between two opposing military powers is circumvented. In short, hybrid wars often do not look like wars at all. **It is the implausible deniability of protagonists claiming events are not being orchestrated by themselves that lends hybrid warfare such a surrealistic quality.** They treat knowledge about the conflict and accusations of responsibility as fundamentally politically-charged. Interpretations of the conflict are therefore treated as normative – and the ambiguous application of force gives them the political cover to do so.

Ambiguity and ‘plausible deniability’

States often resort to perpetrating hybrid warfare because they feel the seductive strategic pull of wrapping themselves in a cloak of invisibility that the ambiguous use of force alluringly offers. However, if significant legal or forensic evidence emerges linking a state to a particular attack (as happened during revelations about responsibility for the Stuxnet cyber attack on Iran’s main nuclear facility in 2012), then the cloak of invisibility soon reveals itself to be the Emperor’s new clothes.

The waging of hybrid warfare does not guarantee perpetual deniability for the perpetrators.

An appreciation of the implausible deniability surrounding acts of hybrid warfare is important because ambiguous use of force, like that seen in Crimea, is an open secret that appeals to political actors in the international system who want to boost hard power credentials below the threshold of legitimate response. **Hybrid warfare does not, and need not, assume a shroud of secrecy in order to be successful. Implausible deniability is not an unintended consequence. It can be a deliberate powerplay aimed at communicating a message whilst utilizing enough ambiguity of**

action to avoid retaliation or escalation. Although the West did not buy the Russian pretence of no control over events on the ground in Crimea, Moscow's efforts to project an aggressive posture to hinder Western escalation certainly worked.

Implausible deniability is the manifestation of ambiguity in the prosecution of hybrid warfare.

Hybridity and the 'fog of war'

The father of modern strategic thought, Carl von Clausewitz, alludes in his seminal treatise *On War* to what others have subsequently labelled 'the fog of war' to describe the absence of information a commander has across a multitude of levels, from the tactical to the grand strategic. Building an intelligence picture of an enemy's intent, force structure, weapon capabilities and so forth remains a crucial part of any strategy. **Hybrid warfare represents the foggiest form of war given the deliberate obfuscations that occur in hiding the identity of the perpetrator state.** Not knowing exactly who the 'enemy' is, presents the most fundamental of challenges to strategic formulation. To paraphrase General Sherman during the American Civil War, war waged in a hybrid manner puts the opponents on the horns of a dilemma: over-reaction looks

pre-emptive and disproportionate if clear responsibility for an attack has not been established; but the lack of a response leaves a state open to death by a thousand cuts. This is the precarious tightrope that policymakers must tread when determining how to respond to the use of hybrid warfare by other states given the pervasive ambiguity with which hybrid warfare is waged.

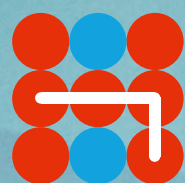
It is also worth considering how the centrality of ambiguity to hybrid warfare circumvents what Thomas Schelling called 'the art of commitment' in military strategy. By Schelling's own admission, most military commitments 'are ultimately ambiguous in detail', either deliberately so or 'because of the plain impossibility of defining them in exact detail'. Such constructed ambiguity leads to what he famously labelled 'salami tactics', whereby rules and norms are gradually sliced away, avoiding any major transgression but shifting the boundaries of expected behaviour on a piecemeal basis to avoid retaliation. **Ambiguity is therefore the curtain to mask the tactics of norm erosion in the international arena.** This is the strategic environment that democratic states or the EU and NATO member states find themselves operating in. The challenge for all is to find more clarity amidst the ambiguity.

Author

Andrew Mumford is, as of August 2020, Professor of War Studies at the University of Nottingham, where he is Deputy Head of the School of Politics and International Relations. He is a member of the Hybrid CoE expert pool on security and has consulted the UK Ministry of Defence and NATO on issues relating to hybrid warfare. His latest book, *The West's War Against ISIS*, will be published in 2021. He is the editor of the new book series 'Studies in Contemporary Warfare' by IB Tauris. His previous books include *Counter-Insurgency Warfare and the Anglo-American Alliance* (2018), *Proxy Warfare* (2013), and *The Counter-Insurgency Myth* (2011).

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