DEFENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

**The official journal of the
NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence**

Special Issue: Strategic Ambiguity

Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Neville Bolt

Production Team
Jānis Karlsbergs (project management)
Merle Anne Read (copy edit)
Una Grants (design)

Defence Strategic Communications is an international peer-reviewed academic journal. The journal is a project of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE). It is produced for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners around the world.

NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence
Riga, Kalnciema iela 11b, Latvia, LV1048, www.stratcomcoe.org

SPECIAL ISSUE: STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

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Foreword

Why Strategic Ambiguity Is So Ambiguous

Ambiguity sits at the heart of politics whether we like it or not. In a sense, it goes further still. Ambiguity finds itself innate in human nature. We appear to seek clarity and specificity in trying to understand what we see. Yet we are equally happy to blur the edges of that understanding as we yearn for something greater than is offered us. You might call this aspect wishful thinking.

Perhaps it is even woven into the very fabric of belief systems and religions too. In politics the promise of the political manifesto in its appeal to the largest audience must inevitably intimate and tease beyond the point where precision might otherwise undermine the politician's appeal. Such cognitive dissonance—holding two conflicting ideas in our minds simultaneously—only becomes an actual dilemma if we choose to see the world divided into dichotomous readings or black-and-white opposites rather than shades of grey.

Ambiguity is a rich concept. It invites curiosity and engagement where ambivalence meets only with a shrug of the shoulders. It resonates in conversation with uncertainty, metaphor, simile, allegory, perspective, and other ways of seeing that undermine certitude. Simile suggests only likeness, similarity; metaphor offers a one-for-one substitution, a surprising way of translating something complex into an unexpected way of presenting a new simplicity. Yet over time the surprise wears off and yesterday's live metaphors become tomorrow's dead metaphors. Some might go further to say that all language inherently lacks certainty of meaning, however clear the intent.

This volume of *Defence Strategic Communications* is devoted to the theme of strategic ambiguity, understood here as the different ways the same events or acts can be projected or interpreted in the world of politics and geopolitics, thus creating uncertainty whether by accident or design. It is the first time that we have devoted a single volume to one topic. Following the 'settled state' of the Cold War and turbulence of the 1990s, the world is living through an era characterised by the re-emergence of great power ambitions which are competing for global recognition if not, more menacingly, dominance. When nation states disguise their true intentions or simply miscommunicate them, either way the consequences can be dramatic. In a new world of instantaneous connectivity, geopolitical outcomes should depend on more than a guessing game if international security and prosperity are not to be undermined by dynamic but ill-informed decision-making. Yet in the world of perceptions inhabited by strategic communicators, these are unsettling times. As one prominent observer pointedly remarked a generation ago:

> What is new about the emerging world order is
> that, for the first time, the United States can neither
> withdraw from the world nor dominate it. America
> cannot change the way it has perceived its role
> throughout its history, nor should it want to.[1]

Therein lies a dilemma. In the early twenty-first century, an emergent authoritarian alliance is attempting to win over the Global South in pursuit of undermining the international rules-based order of sovereign states that has held sway since Bretton Woods. For its critics, this order is Western dominated—more a euphemism for American hegemony—and intent on exporting a liberal democratic model of governance that at least China publicly holds to have outlived its time. Such is the growing disaffection between great powers over how the world should be organised that the journal feels it timely to address the conundrum of how states employ ambiguity. A confrontation between ideological

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1   Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 19.

formations, however, hides what has been at the centre of thought since long before the end of World War II. Indeed, ambiguity is to be found in Aristotelian as well as sophist discourses some two and a half thousand years ago. Lawyers and rhetoricians of the day reflected on its tensions in Rome's classical period too. And their reflections echo in our public debates today.

In November 2022 an international working group hosted by SCERU (Strategic Communications Unit for Education and Research) at the University of Tokyo, supported by ESIWA,[2] broke fresh ground in an attempt to interrogate the concept of strategic ambiguity in the world of strategic communications. The sessions were attended by authors and editorial board members of the *Defence Strategic Communications* journal and the King's Centre for Strategic Communications, London (KCSC), alongside a number of international academics and policy thinkers. The group's intention was to enrich the discussion around ambiguity while extending its reach from the purely academic sphere into policy and public intellectual spaces. Against a background of war in Ukraine and rising temperatures around Taiwan, this special volume of the journal features a collection of articles and review essays in an offering consequent to the working group's discussions, co-convened by Professor Chiyuki Aoi, director of SCERU at the University of Tokyo; Dr Philip Shetler-Jones, representing ESIWA; and Dr Neville Bolt, editor-in-chief of *Defence Strategic Communications* journal (NATO StratCom COE) and director of the KCSC.

The volume sets out to illuminate many problems of our times by applying the concept of ambiguity to Harold Mackinder's lens of geopolitics, originally explored in a 1904 issue of the *Geographical Journal* under the title of 'The Geographical Pivot of History'.[3] This expansive way of viewing global space—at once cartographic and discursive, and admittedly seen from a distinctly American perspective

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2   The project for 'Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia' (ESIWA) is commissioned by the European Union and the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, with in-kind support from the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

3   Harold Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', *Geographical Journal* 23 Nº 4 (April 1904): 421–37.

at the time—was to be advanced by Isaiah Bowman, 'Wilson's [and later Roosevelt's] geographer'; indeed 'a geographer whose entire life and work were dedicated to the unapologetic application of geographical ideas to global politics'.[4] Today many would view this as synonymous with an understanding of strategic communications.

In this foreword I would like to consider how ambiguity is innate in the human experience, rooted in the way we perceive the world around us. But more than that, it moves beyond a passive presence to being instrumentalised in the way we construct meanings to benefit ourselves, while also wishing to influence others frequently in a deliberate act of obfuscation. The vectors to communicate such uncertainty or doubt may be the music we make, the art we create, or indeed the truthful and not so truthful politics we shape and celebrate. Rather than a linear argument, this foreword chooses to open up a plethora of lines of inquiry: it is a reflection on the many faces of ambiguity.

The Many Faces of Ambiguity

All of which prompts the question: what is strategic ambiguity, a term which has been employed too often in nothing short of an ambiguous way?

Readers of this journal over the last eight years will have noted the aphorism 'Perception becomes Reality' emblazoned on its covers. A grander claim than the more prosaic 'seeing is believing', it is perhaps still too glib in its concision. It sloganises a conviction rather than invites the question of what perception actually is; indeed, whose perception are we talking about that becomes reality, and is there only one perception? Do we all think alike? Do we read the same information that passes into our consciousness in the same way as the person standing next to us at the same moment?

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4   Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. xx.

Perception is closely associated with ambiguity. Theories of perception have historically followed distinct lines of inquiry. The *indirect*, a constructivist understanding of how we process the 'world out there' through all our senses, entails enriching and adding to information drawn into our brains using pre-existing knowledge that helps make sense of what we smell, taste, hear, touch, or see.[5] According to this approach, we create hypotheses. 'Insufficiency of information', Brian Rogers reminds us, 'is the essence of constructivist theory'. Perception reaches beyond what is actually received as we try to fill in the gaps of incomplete information.[6]

The *direct* approach, by contrast, suggests that enough information already enters into our cognitive processes. Consequently, a mechanistic view of processes of the brain is favoured here. The point, therefore, is not whether too little information reaches our brains and needs to be enhanced; rather, that we already receive enough. Which in turn encourages a machine or computational view of processing experience, hence denying the need for subjective interpretation contained in the indirect approach. If we liken this process to that exhibited by lower evolutionary forms than humans, sensory information becomes direct insofar as any need to introduce subjective supposition or hypothesis, consciously or otherwise, is removed.[7]

Perception has intrigued thinkers who wish to view international relations through a psychological lens. A problem arises from the fact that perception struggles against misperception in decision-making processes of leaders. But such a perspective can risk creating an imbalance, favouring the emotional over the cognitive. Robert Jervis is perhaps most closely associated with introducing psychology into theorising perception and misperception in international relations. At the same time, he was wary of 'over-psychologizing' how states and their leaders engage with one another. He summed up his reservations in four ways: (i) there is a

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5   See discussion of Hermann von Helmholtz: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermann-helmholtz/#HelSigTheNatDeb.

6   Brian Rogers, *Perception: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 10.

7   Ibid., p. 9.

tendency to lend undue weight to the emotional at the expense of the cognitive, and grant too much freedom to wishful thinking—hence to exclude the possibility of how 'even a perfectly unemotional and careful person would go about drawing inferences from highly ambiguous evidence in a confused and confusing world'; (ii) the powerful variables of political communications cannot be accurately transferred to investigation under laboratory conditions; (iii) policy bias and conflict of interests are regularly understated in practice; and (iv) the peculiarities of the international system contain inherent dangers and problems.[8]

It is instructive to look to other fields to inform an understanding of politics. In his masterpiece *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, the French nineteenth-century painter Eugène Delacroix explored the path of his predecessors where subsequently other artists would follow. So too have exponents of different faiths and viewpoints attempted to resolve an enduring question: who was the angel with whom Jacob wrestled until the break of day? The biblical Genesis keeps us guessing.[9] 'Why do you ask my name?' replied the angel, without satisfying the mortal's curiosity. What was the purpose of this exchange? The painter is unforthcoming: the question continues to hang over the picture. Like painting and literature, music knows no end of ambiguous modes of expression. We might see music as an inherent exercise in ambiguity, teasing our feelings while toying with our minds. Is this the essence of popular music? From the insistent denial of love in 10cc's 'I'm Not in Love',[10] whose 4/4 time signature haunts one of the most ardent love songs from the 1970s, to the infectious rhythm of 'I Don't Feel Like Dancin'' by Scissor Sisters[11] where lyric and beat compete in mutual denial. But we the audience can see through it all. Can't we?

Compare these musical contributions: 'I'm just a soul whose intentions are good / Oh, Lord, please, don't let me be misunderstood.' Nina Simone's

8   Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 3–4.

9   Genesis 32:22–32.

10   10cc, 'I'm Not in Love', written by Eric Stewart and Graham Gouldman, Mercury/Phonogram, 1975.

11   Scissor Sisters, 'I Don't Feel Like Dancin'', written by Elton John, Babydaddy, and Jake Shears, released 2006.

vocal timbre and brooding sentiment invite various interpretations of the underlying meaning of the song.[12] What was she singing about?

Or try Aretha Franklin: 'The moment I wake up / Before I put on my makeup (Makeup) / I say a little (Prayer for you)'.[13] What was the song about? (Answers in the footnotes.)

Or even Dmitri Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony, composed in 1945 to celebrate the anticipated Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. Predicting that 'musicians will like to play it, and critics will delight in blasting it', he already foresaw its fate, and his own: to be blacklisted by Soviet censors between 1949 and 1955 for its apparent lack of patriotic commitment.[14] What was he thinking? What was his intention?

Ambiguity can be seen to flourish where subjective evaluation of incoming information resides. Various ways of seeing the same thing follow from the difference in past experiences that each viewer or listener invests in the new act of seeing or hearing. Choices amplify as each new context interacts differently with that pre-knowledge which is introduced. Ambiguity resides in both intention and reception; by accident and design. It intrudes in the carefully considered plans of any person projecting an idea. At the same time, how that idea is processed depends on the clarity of the communicator's expression (so often a struggle between conscience and competence), the eventual outcome of which in turn hangs on how the language in which it is expressed resonates with the cultural surrounds into which it is being transmitted. So the best-laid plans can go amiss.

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12 Nina Simone, 'Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood', written by Bennie Benjamin, Horace Ott, and Sol Marcus, 1964, is said to speak to the struggles of the civil rights movement in 1960s America.

13 Aretha Franklin recorded 'I Say a Little Prayer' in 1968; originally recorded in 1966 by Dionne Warwick, music Burt Bacharach, lyrics Hal David. The song is said to describe a woman thinking of her beloved serving in the Vietnam War.

14 Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 147.

Accident and Design

Equally, to what extent the recipient processes or interprets the intention of the transmission as originally intended is both an act of will and a stroke of fortune. Simply to listen is not necessarily to want to hear—'I'm listening but I don't hear you'. And simply to hear is not necessarily to understand intended meaning—'I hear you but it's not making sense'. At all levels of political conversation, communicators must navigate and negotiate their way through such fields of friction to reach their desired outcome. Unsurprisingly, audiences can prove stubbornly uncooperative, even stone deaf. Indeed in an era of social media platforms they now have the ever more confusing ability to cloud any meaning from the way it was first conceived.

Ambiguity remains relatively under-theorised in the academic literature, albeit with notable exceptions. Drawing on philosophy, rhetoric, and aesthetics, authors have explored ambiguity with all its rich implications. Aristotle for one was greatly troubled by sophists' use of ambiguity embedded in oratory that might mislead and distort logic: it was to be avoided, according to his *Rhetoric*. 'The upshot of Aristotle's statements is that ambiguity is a fault for the writer or speaker to avoid, and a problem for the reader or hearer to solve.'[15] Accidental or unintentional ambiguity—loose speech, sloppy thought—forms only part of the story, however. While intentional ambiguity continues to exercise scholars who question whether it was even present in the pre-modern world, it raises the question of whether uncertainty, and thus ambiguity, is the preserve of modernity.

William Empson famously wrote *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, in which he explored the effect of ambiguity on English verse. In the preface to the second edition in 1949, he asks the question: 'is all good poetry supposed to be ambiguous?' He continues, 'there is always in great poetry a feeling of generalisation from a case which has been presented definitely; there is always an appeal to a background of human experience which is all

15   Anthony Ossa-Richardson, *A History of Ambiguity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 34.

the more present when it cannot be named'.[16] He subsequently states his intention with greater clarity: 'An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.'[17]

Lawyers are less familiar with wit, perhaps. But not deceit. In a legal context, ambiguity takes on a new salience. Cicero's and Quintilian's influence resonated for a thousand years into the courts of the Middle Ages. An attempt was made to inject clarity into process in *De ratione dicendi ad C. Herennium lib. IV*:

> If a text is ambiguous because it can be given two
> or more interpretations, we ought to deal with it as
> follows. First we should ask if it is truly ambiguous.
> Then we should show how it would have been written
> if the writer had wanted it to be interpreted as our
> opponents do; and then, that our own interpretation
> is possible, and moreover in accordance with the
> honourable, with the just, with the law, with custom,
> with nature, with the good and the fair, and that
> our opponents' interpretation is not so; and finally
> that the text is not after all ambiguous, since it is
> understood which interpretation is correct.[18]

Surfaces

Ossa-Richardson suggests 'if there could be a language without words, perhaps it would be unambiguous'.[19] Do pictures, then, really offer such an unambiguous way out? Apparently not. Whether ambiguity

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16   William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, rev. edn (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), p. xv.

17   Ibid., p. 1.

18   Ossa-Richardson, *A History of Ambiguity*, p. 36.

19   Ibid., p. 50.

is confined to speech or extends to visual and aural texts raises an important point. The image as a generator of ambiguity, rather than sight as the medium of clear transmission, merits consideration. When W.J.T. Mitchell provocatively posed the question in his landmark text *What Do Pictures Want?*, granting agency to images was another way of highlighting an effect—a 'double consciousness'—that images exert on people. 'The question of desire is ideally suited for this inquiry,' he proposed, 'because it builds in at the outset a crucial ambiguity. To ask, what do pictures want? is not just to attribute to them life and power and desire, but also to raise the question of what it is they *lack*, what they do not possess, what cannot be attributed to them.' In short, he is pursuing the image's power and powerlessness: the image is a paradox, as he puts it, alive but dead, meaningful but meaningless.[20]

At which point, film director Quentin Tarantino steps into the spotlight. Frida Beckman explores his cinematographic world. In *Ambivalent Screens: Quentin Tarantino and the Power of Vision* she examines how he invests intent and meaning into his movie *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) to illustrate 'the relations between perceptions of the image and conceptions of the real'. She highlights the visual culture of today where so-called 'video store film-makers' cycle and recycle images and ideas onto newly created surfaces in an iterative and participatory process. Tarantino, a self-reflexive director celebrated for *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and other successes, acts out his love of film history on screen, freely mixing fact and fiction, tropes and motifs, seemingly extemporising like a jazz musician but within a framework of recognisable, popular understandings. He clearly invites critique from those who view history and particular moments as sacrosanct and not to be toyed with for pure entertainment.

A particular sensitivity emerges in the way *Inglorious Basterds* treats the subject of war and Nazi persecution of Jews. The film opens with the arrival of a Nazi unit in rural France hunting down Jews in hiding— resembling the look and feel of conventional styles of war thrillers and adventure film-making. Nazi leaders Hermann Göring and Joseph

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20   W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 10.

Goebbels appear in later scenes, but their names are scribbled rough-hand on the screen with arrows pointing to the characters in the manner of a cartoon-strip cliché. Tarantino 'is a master of the powers of the false. Drawing on realistic conventions at the same time as he denies the classic distance between reality and fiction and even between reality and metafiction, he will not let us forget reality but also will not let us take it for granted'.[21] For Tarantino, film becomes a way of both questioning and representing the world; it is a political statement in an entertainment medium. Understandably, it provokes a fear of ambivalent morality and factual ambiguity: dual meaning and multiple interpretations.

Much time is invested in analysing ambiguity linguistically or even visually. Language is in itself unclear. Images are innately open to different ways of being read. The semiologist Umberto Eco extends this 'openness' to all artistic objects, arguing that 'every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself'. Eco emphasises the importance of multiple perspectives: 'the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. These give it a wealth of different resonances and echoes without impairing its original essence'. And pushing this idea of openness even further, he asks why composers like Berio and Stockhausen leave their works so open; in this context meaning unfinished, uncertain, thus inviting the audience to complete the experience for itself.[22]

Does openness threaten the integrity of the creative statement? In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the American critic Susan Sontag studies a black-and-white photograph shot by David 'Chim' Seymour. The year is 1936. A mother is breastfeeding her baby at a political meeting in Spain. Her face is seemingly old before her time, gaunt as she scans the skies. Those around her in the crowd follow her gaze. We too are drawn to recall the history of Guernica and German Blitzkrieg bombing

21   Frida Beckman, '<u>Ambivalent Screens: Quentin Tarantino and the Power of Vision</u>',
      Film-Philosophy 19 (2015): 89, citing Pisters.

22   Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 4–5.

of civilians during the Spanish Civil War. But there's a problem. Sontag reveals that 'memory has altered the image, according to memory's needs'. Why? Because Seymour's image was actually taken at a public gathering over land rights four months before the official outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. That day there were no bombers overhead. Sontag concludes, 'The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.'[23] Not necessarily, argues the philosopher Judith Butler, struggling against what might be read as fatalism while embracing at the very least the idea of ambiguity. 'Although the images of war are meant to recruit us to the waging of war, they also solicit us in other ways. Even when the precarious condition of targeted lives is precisely what we are not supposed to see, we can nevertheless apprehend that precarity at the limit of the frame.'[24]

Spaces

At this point, I shall move from ambiguity to strategic ambiguity, that is, to locate ambiguity at the level of what might be thought of as grand strategy or the intersection between national and geopolitics. Suggesting a wilful use of ambiguity speaks to how spaces too can be shaped to favour multiple readings. Can we think of ambiguity spatially? And even as situational ambiguity, more consistent with how Henri Lefebvre shaped his ideas on the production of space? Conceptual space for him was shaped by elites, professional, scientific, artistic, and ideological—'all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived'.[25]

Cartographic imaginaries go some way to answering the question. In *Unmapping the 21st Century,* maps of the world are seen as capturing a permanent tension, more accurately a symbiosis between motion and stasis, between networks and hierarchies in the state system, while

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23   Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin, 2004).

24   Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), p. xvi.

25   Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991), p. 38.

recognising that the very maps of the world we use can at best be snapshots, momentary audits of contested power projection.[26] What they aren't is the truth.

Situational ambiguity, then, speaks to the accidental or intentional engineering of a space into which meaning can be read, without definitive prescription. Space may be institutional, perhaps inside government, or territorial, between national governments. Germany's Nazi government in the 1930s and 1940s is most frequently portrayed from the perspective of ideology, military affairs, or aesthetics. By studying not its architectural buildings but the architecture of its governance structures, ambiguity takes on a different perspective. As Reichskanzler, Adolf Hitler pursued a policy of a hierarchy of dictators where government was divided between four power blocks of party, army, bureaucracy, and industry. Each had its own autonomy and empowered head.[27] In the early 1940s, Franz Neumann set out to capture the dynamics and structure of this space, providing evidential foundation for the retribution and reconstruction that would follow the fall of the Nazi state.

Significantly, what Neumann observed was the way a cognitive space was constructed where decision-making flowed downwards through institutions from these same power magnates, while for approval and sanction they looked up to the supreme Führer.[28] At the same time, as the war progressed the original hierarchy of government would gradually mutate into more of a networked structure. Just as Umberto Eco identifies the reading of artistic output as akin to the reader or recipient finding themselves at the centre of a network of resonances and associations, so here too resonances that inform improvised intent move the Nazi regime's sub-dictators to imagine and fill the space created by the chief. Ian Kershaw calls this 'working towards the Führer', casting Hitler as a

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26 Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State* (Bristol University Press, 2022).

27 Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, *Marketing the Third Reich* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 27.

28 Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009).

'non-interventionist dictator'.[29] The effect was for overarching ideals and direction to be set out at the top, but the detailed policy of how to bring these about was devolved downwards through these four power blocks. Consequently, 'as *enabler* Hitler's authority gave implicit backing and sanction to those whose actions, however inhumane, however radical, fell within the general and vague ideological remit of furthering the aims of the Führer'.[30] Ambiguity was woven into the DNA of decision-making and bureaucratic process.

Nicholas O'Shaughnessy describes this polycratic state not as a business model or matrix but as 'an ecology, a complex and ever fluctuating congeries [*sic*] of powers, paladins and bureaucracies'. Such a Social Darwinist school of governance, grounded in Hitler's own ideological persuasion, required there be no single communicating agency, no one propaganda ministry. Hence competing versions of a single discourse were pursued into potential chaos while still currying favour at the highest level.[31]

Cartographic imaginaries set the frameworks for strategic communicators to draw the parameters of discussion and through which to tell their stories. They are mental maps, ways of picturing the world in space but also time. The fundamental tool of strategic communications is imagined space. Spatial frameworks are innately ambiguous; they don't exist until they are brought into this world. From the imagined community of the nation state to even more ambiguous concepts such as the Global South, developing world, Third World, these are devices engineered to achieve a particular set of understandings at a particular turn in history. Over time they change.

Nations are mythical constructs, imagined into existence through a mystical nostalgia for a primordial time, then attached emotionally to a physical space by right, often through a sense of justice or injustice.

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29   Ian Kershaw, 'Working towards the Führer': Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship', *Contemporary European History* 2 Nº 2 (1993): 103–18.

30   Ibid., p. 114.

31   O'Shaughnessy, *Marketing the Third Reich*.

They are commanded into life. Nostalgia is not historiographic but an infusion of emotional imprecision.[32] Alternatively, the nation can be seen as a device constructed by elites to serve their vested political and economic agendas. Patiently engineered, an official history is shaped to legitimise the role of a particular group within the story of the nation. It is infiltrated, if not secreted, into existence, adding the fuzzy *-ness* to national character—Englishness, Germanness. One type of ambiguity is vested in indistinct emotions; the other is an ambiguity that emerges from an attempt to rationalise recorded events, rituals, and traditions—of which there is an infinite source and variety—into a coherent trajectory.[33] But the line between fact and fiction, the emotional past and rational past, remains porous. Nostalgia becomes the sugar coating of ambiguity. At the same time it struggles to be straitjacketed inside a single story.

Nostalgia, the handmaid of nationalism, we're told is a bad word in the former Yugoslavia. Hiding 'memory confiscation', it confuses what it means or meant to be the (former) Yugoslavia. The Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić searches for clarity in the constructed memory of the nation state. Once removed from the official record to which the mutually reinforcing architecture of sovereign states bears witness, the imprint it leaves forms a cataract over citizens' perspectives on both past and present. Ugrešić warrants quoting at length:

> The ordinary fearful citizen of former Yugoslavia, when trying to explain the simplest things, gets entangled in a net of humiliating footnotes. 'Yes, Yugoslavia, but the former Yugoslavia, not this Yugoslavia of Milosević's …' 'Yes, nostalgia, perhaps you could call it that, but you see not for Milosević, but for that former Yugoslavia …' 'For the former communist Yugoslavia?!' 'No, not for the state, not for communism…' 'For what then?' 'It's hard to explain, you see …' 'Do you mean nostalgia for that

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32 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 52.

33 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

singer, Djordje Balasevic, then?' 'Yes, for the singer …'
'But that Balsevic of yours is a Serb, isn't he!?'[34]

Svetlana Boym aptly titles her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, capturing the dual intent that nostalgia offers—not simply as a longing for a distant and irretrievable past that never really existed, but as an activist project that can be readily mobilised to seize control of the future. Such exchanges help us appreciate how ambiguity and disambiguity are symbiotically woven into the continuities and discontinuities of history. Metaphors are the door through which to pass into this space.

Where Nation States (Mis)communicate

At the state-to-state and state-to-nonstate-challenger levels, I have written of different characteristics that distinguish between the strategic opportunism of Russia, strategic certitude of Islamic State, and the strategic ambiguity (waning by the day) of China. The last derives from a confusion in how to interpret the intentions of Chinese foreign and security policy witnessed in its policy statements, trade deals, and kinetic actions. Between the widely publicised good intentions of the Belt and Road Initiative—lauded as the greatest public diplomacy programme since the Marshall Plan—and consistent aggressions in the South China and East China Seas, second-guessing Beijing's true character has been a test.[35]

However the effect of Beijing's military blockade in April 2023, 'simulating the joint sealing off' of Taiwan and, as Chinese television portrayed it, forming 'a multi-directional island-encompassing blockade situation', has been to stretch ambiguity to the limits of credulity.[36] And noting that ambiguity cuts both ways, *The Times* of London leader writers commented,

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34   Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, p. 52.

35   Neville Bolt, *Strategic Communications and Disinformation in the Early 21st Century*, EUI Robert Schuman Centre, Policy Paper, RSC PP 2021/12.

36   Richard Lloyd Parry, 'China Flexes Muscles with Drill of Taiwan Blockade', *The Times*, 11 April 2023, p. 24.

'Officially the United States maintains a policy of "strategic ambiguity" on Taiwan, but there is not much ambiguity left'. Elaborating on the theme of ambiguity, they observed, 'Biden obviously means what he says, and it is no secret that the US is preparing for military confrontation in the region, with a view to deterring China'.[37] And if deterrence is the thwarting of a rival's ambitions through a (second-)guessing game, then ambiguity is ever-present. And here too it cuts both ways.

This conundrum has for some time fuelled much speculation leading to a conclusion that China's leadership pursues policies that are deliberately ambiguous to the outside world. Recent diplomatic engagements between Beijing and Moscow, conducted with an eye to the watching world, have perhaps made China's intentions less opaque. That said, China appears to be entering a new phase of projecting itself as a global peacemaker in helping to bring about a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while at the same time presenting itself as a potential interlocutor between Russia and Ukraine. What are we to think? Unsurprisingly, ambiguity has established itself as a keyword of our times.

Where nation states choose to engage with one another, the Global South acts as a metaphor. Yet it's more than a metaphor understood as a means to simplify something which is complex. Its genome carries within it a set of understandings past and present. Resonance and association are key to its success. Increasingly, it finds itself in competition with other global imaginaries. Certainly when seen from the perspective of the Indo-Pacific as it attempts to layer a more recent discourse map of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific onto an already extant ASEAN model, with its ten members but seeming inability to formulate a unified policy towards China.[38] The Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade bloc[39]

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37   'Pacific Protection', *The Times*, 11 April 2023.

38   The Indo-Pacific comprises forty countries and economies: Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, the Pacific Island Countries (14), Pakistan, People's Republic of China (PRC), the Philippines, Republic of Korea (ROK), Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

39   CPTPP: Australia, Brunei, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and Canada, plus the UK since March 2023. https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique/.

draws a further skein across the region, wrapping a desire for security in numbers in the mantel of trade as public diplomacy. More recently, AUKUS, a new association between Five Eyes members Australia, the UK, and the US, suggests a security blanket, albeit still imprecisely woven with detail.

Each association carries a set of assumptions which, when projected daily at all levels of political engagement, acquire the status of a common sense, not only discouraging further challenge, but reinvesting in an orthodoxy resistant to questioning. That said, the Global South has undergone a series of revisions over time which have tried to capture various discourses—North–South, core–periphery, modern–traditional, Global North–Global South, intersectionality and neocolonialism, globalisation/anti-globalisation—all of which highlight economic, developmental, and power dimensions in global politics.[40] The presence of China through what is perhaps a miscast place in BRICS[41] is reinforced by a discursive trope which Beijing is keen to project, repeatedly presenting itself as the moral leader of developing nations throughout Africa, South America, and the Pacific, ranged against the imbalance perpetuated by more powerful players.[42] One Washington think tank identifies seven interlocking tropes that permeate Chinese discourse: China as leader of the developing world; China the champion of plurality; and China the protector of the global commons are but three of these.[43] Nevertheless, the Global South remains a relatively ambiguous space into which can be read both membership and identity, merging collective convenience and individual need.

At the same time, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific has emerged conceptually since 2016 when it was announced by prime ministers Shinzo Abe of Japan and Narendra Modi of India. The very fact that it can now count so many participants into a geopolitical and geo-economic construct tells us something about its ability to cohere when its *raison*

40   Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell, 'The Global South', *Contexts* 11 Nº 1 (2012): 12–13.

41   Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

42   Neville Bolt, *Strategic Communications and Disinformation*.

43   David Kelly, *Seven Chinas: A Policy Framework*, Nº 3, Washington, DC, CSIS, February 2018.

d'être is to hem in the expansionist ambitions of China.[44] Harmony from diversity is only achievable through ambiguity. Particularly when there is a reluctance to attach the word 'containment' to the conversation, it being preferred still to 'engage' rather than 'contain' the perceived regional hegemon, then the overarching task is to find a common denominator metaphor. What confounds this ambition is a tension: strategic communications has consistently laid claim to the maxim 'say what you mean and do what you say'. If the Global South offers China discursive room to project and garner support for its public diplomacy, then the Free and Open Indo-Pacific requires that China address the fundamental notions of 'free and open' to win acceptance into the group. To be the hero of one group of developing nations yet the supplicant at another economically better-endowed collective may offer a dilemma capable of flushing China out from its ambiguity of convenience.

Mental maps matter in people's minds, not just those of politicians but those of general publics too. Multilateral frameworks represent networks of relationships that, in turn, create cooperative and contested spaces where the most persuasive story eventually hopes to win out. They become theatres of discourse performance, invested with the props of values and principles, but different ones for different actors. A cyclorama of bilateral and multilateral relationships promises the blue sky of discourses by virtue of a number of ill-defined objectives and motivations, even hiding conflicting values. However, such ambiguity can be key to forming networks but ultimately weak for mobilising targeted actions. Given the right cause or grievance, networks—with their low entry cost and adaptable forms—can coalesce rapidly. Short of any organising hierarchy or overarching adjudicator, however, agreed action can be slow, fragmented, and often ineffective. How they will fare against an ambitious China is the burning question for an emergent network that shuns the word 'containment' and even 'constraint', preferring a more conciliatory, liberal 'engagement'.

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44 See too the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF), which comprises Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United States.

When all is said and done, ambiguity gives and ambiguity takes away.

This special volume of *Defence Strategic Communications* is dedicated to the theme of strategic ambiguity. Ten authors have contributed, adopting a variety of approaches. With this issue we aim to open up a fresh area of inquiry, prompting a series of debates to enrich the rapidly growing scholarship around strategic communications.

Launching our set of essays, Paul Bell talks of the 'Clarity Trap'. He explores the effects of cloudy politics on Northern Ireland's post-Brexit dawn with its EU neighbour to the south and the UK on both sides of the water. Here a lack of clarity holds together an uneasy acceptance of a new status quo. But too much clarity can be bad for your health too, he argues. Particularly in Georgia where the high-wire act of its politicians risks biting the very EU and US hands that would like to feed the country's future.

Professor Chiyuki Aoi explores stability through the ambiguity and flexibility of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific project. It's a mapping exercise in geopolitics where the sheer diversity of its participants, she argues, opens up a number of discursive possibilities in the region. At the heart of it lies a process of memory construction and storytelling central to the projection of strategic communications.

Dr Philip Shetler-Jones focuses his lens on Taiwan, and particularly China's hegemonic ambitions and America's regional interests. And as the two great powers square up to one another, US statecraft is weighed from different perspectives and contextualised to mitigate an all too frequent insensitivity to the region. Poignantly, he asks: what happens when the mask of ambiguity slips to reveal uncertainty and indecision to a watching opponent? What then?

Alastair Morgan draws on his career experience as a diplomat in North Korea to question the utility of ambiguity in strategic communications surrounding sanctions, where he can see the clear risks but with only limited benefits. For him the gap between economic pain inflicted and

normative policy change sought represents a critical credibility gap that may not be bridged.

Dr Leonie Haiden may have one answer: metaphors. Renewed attention to metaphors, she writes, could be the start of bridging the gap between policy pragmatism and strategic vision. However, we live in a time where a number of global threats demand fresh conceptual frameworks through which to make sense of the world. How might the strategic ambiguity of new metaphors reinvigorate the great storytelling project of democracy that appears recently to have lost its self-confidence?

Professor Madoka Futamura has been following the growing clamour for war crimes tribunals in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent atrocities committed. But this is no open-and-shut debate. As she points out, the plurality in war crimes discourse and a number of diverse messages create an ambiguity which makes it incumbent on strategic communicators to resolve.

Western observers struggle to make sense of China's ambiguous behaviour. Dr Aurelio Insisa attempts to solve the conundrum surrounding Chinese sovereignty-affirming operations on land and at sea in the Indo-Pacific region. In so doing he contrasts two lenses, hybrid warfare and grey-zone operations, and draws on quasi-authoritative 'military strategy' documents. His conclusions are revealing.

Dr Ofer Fridman explores strategic ambiguity through the medium of Russia's information operations. His focus is on the strategy component of strategic ambiguity. And he contrasts Russia's actions in Syria and Ukraine—which he sees as akin to navigation—with their approach to 'information war', more an exercise in wayfinding. A synthesis of the two approaches might offer practitioners of strategic communications something to reflect on.

It almost seems like a forgotten time. But Pablo Moral Martin returns to the dark days of COVID-19 to see how the European Union managed

its own reputational damage while attempting to project a unified health policy to its member states. His research concludes that ambiguous tweets using vague metaphors characterised the worst moments of the crisis for Brussels. The greater the external criticism, the greater the internal discord, and the more the EU resorted to ambiguous communications.

This special volume of *Defence Strategic Communications* aims to provoke fresh thinking in this emergent field of theory and praxis, and to stimulate new debates. We thank our authors for their invaluable contributions, and our anonymous peer reviewers who always give their time and expertise with selfless generosity.

Dr Neville Bolt,
Editor-in-Chief

The Clarity Trap

An essay by Paul Bell

About the Author
Paul Bell is an independent strategic communications consultant who first focused on its application in conflict while a director of the South African commission overseeing the elections which brought Nelson Mandela to power. Since 2004 he has worked across the Middle East and North Africa, notably in Iraq following the US invasion. He resides in Tbilisi, Georgia. The views expressed here are his own.

Whatever strategic ambiguity is, it's been around for an awfully long time.

We were strolling through Trastevere in Rome of an evening last September when I spotted an English bookshop, something I can never resist in a foreign city. We went in and after a few minutes of idle browsing, my fingers fell on *First Man in Rome*, the first of Australian author Colleen McCullough's *Masters of Rome*, a seven-volume series of historical novels of the last seventy years of the Republic. I had not heard of the series and had no great expectations; the cover looked a little Jackie Collins, but I applied my standard test. Flip to page 69 and if it holds the attention, buy it. I bought it. And have lived, utterly gripped, in ancient Rome, enthralled by McCullough's portraits of power, for eight months.

The period is incredibly volatile; until reading McCullough, I had no idea how much so. Rome's aristocratic senatorial class is struggling to retain its grip on Rome in the face of a series of populist challenges to the power of the Senate that originate within the elite, as aristo demagogues exploit the grievances of the knightly merchant and plebeian classes in order to wrest power for themselves. It starts with the Gracchi brothers and proceeds through the likes of Saturninus and Catilina, whose conspiracy is famously blown by Cicero in the Senate. All meet violent deaths.

By 52 BC Rome has passed through the First Triumvirate of Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Crassus. Pompey is in Rome, and fancies himself the empire's new First Man. Caesar is in the west with his legions, halfway through his decade of subduing Further Gaul. And Crassus is dead, his eastern armies annihilated in Mesopotamia by the Parthians. Now it is the turn of Publius Clodius, an upstart and sybarite whose chequered career has already landed him in hot water at least twice—once when taken hostage by Bedouins he offended and who circumcised him, a shame to a true Roman man, and again when, during the festival of Bona Dea, which only women might attend, he entered the House of the Vestals dressed as a woman and was unmasked. A rigged jury acquitted him of sacrilege and now he is back, playing the populist, running a Roman mob-for-hire, and campaigning for election as urban praetor. The post will enable him to expand the voting power of the plebeian electorate, and overturn senatorial power for good.

The Senate's traditionalists are in a ferment over this threat: Clodius must be stopped. Caesar is watching from Gaul. Himself a child of the Suburra, the teeming rough-and-ready plebeian neighbourhood where his mother had owned a large apartment block, Caesar is possessed of his own plebeian sympathies—the Romans love him—and he has been quietly cultivating Clodius. But he retains the governing instincts of a high-born aristocrat, and this is a bridge too far. He writes to Pompey, urging him to prevent Clodius pushing ahead with his plan.

Pompey is being courted by the traditionalists. One of their number is Milo, whose ambition to be consul may be stalled if Clodius succeeds. Milo calls on Pompey to sound him out: would his chances for the consulship improve if Clodius were out of the way? McCullough imagines the exchange:[1]

> Milo: What if he didn't stand for election as praetor?
>
> Pompey: Better for Rome, definitely.
>
> Milo: A pestilence on Rome! Would it be better for me?
>
> Pompey: It couldn't help but be a great deal better for you, Milo, now could it?
>
> Milo: Could that be construed as a promise, Magnus?
>
> Pompey: You might be pardoned for thinking so.

Pompey's response is shrewdly fashioned. Of the various definitions of strategic ambiguity, it meets at least one—that of Scott Adams, creator of the dystopian workplace cartoon satire *Dilbert* (cancelled earlier this year after he was accused of racism). Adams is also author of *Win Bigly*, on Donald Trump's presidential victory in 2016. He calls strategic ambiguity 'a choice of words that allows people to read into them whatever they would prefer'—and in Trump's case, enjoining those who turned up at the Capitol on 6 January 2021 to 'fight like hell', it seemed to work. But what *did* that mean? What *did* Trump expect of them? To shout outside, or storm inside and trash the joint? Or are we left to infer, and pronounce on, his intent from the consequences? We'll never know what Trump intended. Might he have become sufficiently maddened by defeat to imagine insurrection might actually succeed? If so, it is something he can never admit.

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1   Dialogue extracted from *Caesar* by Colleen McCullough, 1998.

Pompey's ambiguity is at least more *strategic*, more deliberate, more thought through. He wants Clodius eliminated; he just doesn't want his own hand in it. Instead, he employs an ambiguity that enables Milo to infer his support; he avoids specifically promising it, but he means Milo to think he has it. And if the thing goes pear-shaped, he has plausible deniability. This being literature, *we* know what Pompey means and what he wants. But Milo hears what he *wants* to hear; the inference is psychological—we might call it confirmation bias.

Charlie Munger, deputy chairman of the US investment behemoth Berkshire Hathaway, has a different construct for strategic ambiguity: he calls it a lever for influence, best used 'when you want someone to more easily imagine your favored outcome'.[2] Milo imagines what Pompey prefers, hears a promise of cover, and two days later he and his men kill Clodius on the road to Capua. Pompey is out of the city at the time.

The Rand Corporation's Raymond Kuo, writing on US policy on China and Taiwan, offers up this rather more engineered definition:

> Political science considers strategic ambiguity a form of pivotal deterrence, where one state prevents two others from going to war against each other. […] The pivot can swing its decisive power against whichever country is upsetting the status quo. Because it doesn't commit to any particular course of action, both adversaries are unsure about the U.S. reaction and therefore avoid escalation.[3]

As definitions go, Kuo's two powers and a pivot are doubtless closer to the preoccupations of a journal focused on military and security-related strategic communications, but the very term *strategic ambiguity* is itself ambiguous, with different meanings in different contexts, geopolitical, organisational, sociological, or otherwise.

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2   Levers of Persuasion, 26 March 2019.

3   Raymond Kuo, '"Strategic Ambiguity" Has the U.S. and Taiwan Trapped', *Foreign Policy*, 18 January 2023.

I tend to think of it simply as 'how not to get trapped in clarity'—specifics and details, promises that commit, choices that exclude other options. All politics involves competing interests, and often the need to keep those in balance, or harmonise them for the sake of unity, demands strategic ambiguity. It's a game of broad churches, big tents, playing both ends off against the middle, leaving all options on the table, keeping things open-ended and your rivals guessing, and not making promises you might be held to. This is how politicians survive against each other, and how the public loses trust in politicians. And yet it's how we've designed—and rigged—the systems we govern by. In which clarity is just storing up trouble for the future.

Two small countries come to mind in which too much clarity might be extremely dangerous.

First to Northern Ireland, for which trade across its new post-Brexit border with the Republic of Ireland, a member of the European Union, has been the most vexatious of the many issues the British government has had to deal with since leaving the EU. For the British and Irish governments, the EU, and the parties at Stormont (Northern Ireland's devolved assembly), complex, vital, and divergent interests have been at play.

Technical negotiations having recommenced in late 2022, all the meta-issues, though not on the table, are in the room. Preserving the peace achieved by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement between Northern Ireland's Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists after thirty years of sectarian violence in the province. The unification of Ireland, and all the ebb and flow of public sentiment in the province as sectarian demographics and allegiances shift. The fate of unionism within the United Kingdom, with Scottish nationalists closely monitoring any outcome's implications for their own ambitions (now in a shambles for other reasons). The UK's future relations with the EU.

On the one hand, the open borders established by the Good Friday Agreement must remain open. On the other hand, the ruling Conservative Party's more fanatical Brexiteers and the Democratic Unionist Party, Northern Ireland's leading Protestant party, are both insisting Northern Ireland not be treated differently from the rest of the UK, and that European law not continue to prevail in any form in any part of the UK; they have to be either satisfied or cornered.

Since 2021 the issue has been bogged down in deeper agendas on all sides. At Stormont, for more than a year, the DUP, newly a minority in the assembly, has been unwilling to serve under a Catholic Sinn Féin premiership. Using their dissatisfaction with the political implications of the then-existing border arrangements as a pretext for boycotting Stormont, they disabled the legislative assembly and forced Ulster to be ruled directly from London. At Westminster, the Tories remain locked in internal strife over Brexit, which a majority of British voters has already come to regret as a hugely damaging mistake. The buccaneering hard Brexiteers in the Tory parliamentary caucus, dismayed by the resignation of Boris Johnson, their disgraced standard-bearer, as prime minister, hope to restore him to office by destabilising his successor-but-one (we scuttle past the unedifying Truss episode), Rishi Sunak. Their chosen weapon is to threaten rebellion against Sunak's plan to resolve the deadlock over Northern Ireland on the grounds that it will compromise UK sovereignty.

On becoming prime minister, Sunak immediately changed the tone of the UK's discussions with Brussels. These improved atmospherics meet the Munger definition of strategic ambiguity; it becomes easier for the EU to imagine Sunak's preferred outcome—not something Johnson's ministers, who routinely sneer at the phrase 'our European friends', could either hope or wish to accomplish. Smoke signals from Downing Street and Brussels suggest progress. The detail is under wraps—Sunak will not be trapped by clarity, at least not before the deal takes on the appearance of a fait accompli—but a deal will be done.

For the DUP the game is up. They are now in a delicate position. They cannot afford a U-turn for fear of alienating their diehard unionist base. They know, too, that their historic mission as the naysayers of Ulster is wearing thin among the wider electorate as government in the province slows to a crawl. They may want to say no, but nor do they wish to be the spoilers—or even worse the deciders if the Tory rebellion is big enough. Instead, they opt to 'study' Sunak's bill—giving them time to watch the Tories, keep their base on side, and avoid wider public opprobrium. And when it becomes clear the rebellion would be insignificant, they can safely vote no because it will make no difference to the outcome. The bill makes safe passage through the Commons, the DUP vote no, and they have maintained their opposition to the bitter end. Win-win. For the moment …

The deal itself, the so-called Windsor Framework, is riddled with ambiguity. Its dispute resolution mechanism is complex, reflecting the delicacy of Northern Ireland's sectarian politics and of not upending the Good Friday Agreement. Tucked into the small print is an ultimate recourse to the European Court of Justice, a remote possibility, itself dependent on cross-party consensus at Stormont, but nonetheless present—but nonetheless a red line for the Brexit crusaders. But when push comes to shove, the histrionics of sovereignty are smothered by technicalities, a veil drawn across the face of the dark god, and Northern Ireland, of whose voters only 16.9 per cent oppose the deal[4] while the rest are heartily sick of the whole business, moves on.

For the Unionists now, unfortunately, Rishi Sunak has shot their fox, robbing them of their pretext for disabling devolved government in the province. They can no longer escape the choice of whether to return to Stormont as juniors to Sinn Féin in the executive, or to continue to immobilise government out of minority pique. They'd prefer the whole thing had fallen apart in Westminster.

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4   Rory Carroll, 'Northern Ireland Voters Back Windsor Framework—Poll', *Guardian*, 22 March 2023.

Brexit itself was deliberately shrouded in ambiguity. It was all about 'taking back control', but of what kind? In what way? With what consequences? To what end? For its fanatics and fixers, it was a means to power. Its politicians had either failed to win power in the past, or had lost it and wanted it back. Its moneymen were wealthy financiers and manufacturing entrepreneurs who believed a buccaneering Britain would prosper once unshackled from the interferences of EU membership. Control was about deregulation and rerouting the economy towards a less bridled capitalism. To their dupes, it was simply a chance to strike back at a distant elitist government overly preoccupied with minorities, stifled by 'experts', and out of touch with the 'real' England. For that (older) part of the public which felt 'left behind' by modern Britain, it was about more money for healthcare, not being 'swamped' by 'Turkish immigrants', and poking 'those London types' in the eye with a sharp stick. For them all, Britain would become as it had been when its imperium, its navy, its trade had made their kind, and their small, crowded island, masters of the universe.

Meaning such different things to such very different people, Brexit had to be sold with complete confidence in the face of massive uncertainty, through a choice of words—*take back control*—that enabled people, per Scott Adams, to read into them what they wanted to believe: immigration would go down, the economy would boom with all that extra cash it was saving, Britain would be led by that charming rogue, Boris, and it would wash that busybody Brussels right out of its hair.

Now at last, two years after leaving the EU, there is certainty. The veil of ambiguity has been torn aside. The meaning is clear: immigration is *up*, the economy is *down*, those who led Brexit are *out*, and the only question is whether Britain will ever get back *in*. Strategic ambiguity, it seems, can also be catastrophically misleading. Clarity, in this instance, would have served Britain better.

And so, inevitably, to Georgia.

Some months ago I was at dinner at Verico, the Wine Factory, a cluster of posh bars and terraced restaurants in what was once a grand old Tbilisi residence above the main road through Vera. To my left was a government official I soon learned worked in the Ministry of Finance. His English was embarrassingly excellent relative to my hundred words of Georgian—hello, thank you, how much? oh my God, goodbye—so we could converse. And though his country's politics and democratic misadventures have become a fascination to me, I thought better than to venture into that territory with a public servant of whose allegiances and sensibilities I knew nothing. Even so, he got there on his own.

In March 2022, a month after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU had sped up the application process for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Ukraine and Moldova were awarded it three months later. Georgia failed: the EU said it recognised its 'European perspective' but further reforms were needed, especially to the justice system and the role of oligarchic power in the machinery of the state, and promised to review progress.

My dinner companion and his colleagues were baffled and disappointed, he told me. They'd been slaving away for more than a year to provide information that shows Georgia meets the EU's requirements for candidate status. It's arduous stuff, detailed, painstaking work. Yet every week their work was being sabotaged by yet another verbal barrage aimed by their political masters, the ruling Georgian Dream party's ministers and senior spokesmen, at the EU's diplomats or the US ambassador. They feared it would all go for nothing because the government was surely going to say something that finally so offended the EU that all prospect of Georgia winning candidacy status would be obliterated.

And indeed, in late March, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili might have thought he'd put that ball in the back of the net. Commenting on Norway's award of a human rights prize to former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili (confined to a clinic 10 km north of Tbilisi's city centre and literally wasting away), Garibashvili compared it to some other country awarding a prize to Anders Breivik, the Norwegian mass

killer.[5] A more grotesque and grossly offensive comparison, from a high official to a friendly foreign state which annually spends $ 15–20m on aid to his country, is hard to imagine.

Europe has accustomed itself to such slurs. Since March 2022, in any given week since the candidacy process began, the Georgian government has both declared its commitment to the candidacy process and accused the EU of, *inter alia*, presiding over a culture of moral corruption, not understanding Georgia's culture, trying to stuff 'European values' (a phrase dipped in venom) down its throat, offending its national dignity, impugning its sovereignty, and—a particular favourite—conniving with the 'radical opposition' to open up a second front against Russia by dragging Georgia into the war. In any other country, someone hearing the same people juxtapose such completely opposing notions in consecutive breaths, and with such studied indifference to perceptions of themselves, would be forgiven for thinking they had been sucked into a parallel universe. But in the closed shop of Georgian politics and media, there are no consequences for such behaviour—which, inside the ruling Georgian Dream, is doubtless also what passes for strategic ambiguity.

The EU has thickened its skin. It knows Georgia's people are overwhelmingly in favour of membership. Poll after poll echoes that ringing declaration by then prime minister Zurab Zhvania to the Council of Europe in 1999: 'I am Georgian, therefore I am European.' Increasingly the EU draws a pointed distinction between the Georgian people and their government. MEP Viola von Cramon, a doughty champion for Georgia's aspirations, told the European Parliament on 14 March: 'The people of Georgia deserve to be in the EU, even if their current government does not.'[6] Von Cramon is not the Commission, but …

Less than a fortnight later, sources in Brussels were suggesting to Radio Free Europe that the EU was inclined to grant candidate status to Georgia

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5   Civil.ge, 'PM Garibashvili Compares Mikheil Saakashvili to Anders Breivik', 27 March 2023.

6   Caucasus Plus, 'MEP Viola von Cramon: Georgian People Deserve to Be in EU', 15 March 2023.

'if Tbilisi does not take further steps in the coming months that will distance the country from the European Union'.[7]

The Georgian government had already taken a hard run at that too.

In early March, three weeks before the 'Breivik' slur, it rammed through parliament new legislation it claimed was based on US law, requiring organisations that received more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad to register as 'foreign agents', a.k.a. spies and traitors in the service of Georgia's 'radical, extremist opposition' and their foreign backers. The public and civil society were incensed. The law, they said, was straight out of the Russia playbook. After vigorous protest from the EU and Western embassies, and two days of demonstrations outside parliament which riot police ended each night with teargas and batons, the law was withdrawn. Monday in committee, Tuesday in the assembly, enactment on Wednesday, reversal on Thursday, repeal on Friday. Five days from flash to bang. The government spun this film-stunt U-turn as the public's failure to properly understand the law and blamed 'propaganda' by the 'radical opposition'.

Georgia's entire history has been the struggle between identity and geography in the shaping of its destiny. After centuries of fending off the Persians and the Ottomans, Georgia's last king, Erekle, put his realm under Russian protection in 1783 and that, barring a plucky bid for independence in 1918–21, was the end of Georgian sovereignty for ten generations. In 1991 Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union, nine months before the latter was formally dissolved. Since independence, the orientation of Georgia's governments has veered between what might be called its 'true north', its Europeanness and related sense of destiny, and its 'magnetic north', its historical relationship with Russia's economy, culture, politics, and power. The needle has moved four times: away from Russia under its first post-independence leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991–92); then, after a turbulent interregnum, back towards Russia under former Soviet foreign minister Eduard

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7   Interpress News, 'RFE/RL: European Commission Is Inclined towards a Decision related to Granting Georgia EU Candidate Status', 31 March 2023.

Shevardnadze (1995–2003); decidedly towards the United States and Europe under Mikheil Saakashvili (2003–12); and, since then, back towards Russia under Georgian Dream and its Oz-like oligarch and founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili. With the advent of Kartuli Otsneba, a.k.a. Georgian Dream, and with the resurgence of Russia's imperialist imperative under 'Tsar Vladimir', the Georgian people have experienced just how hard Russia, and its own government, intend to make it for them to break from Russia's orbit, confirm their identity as Europeans, and formally achieve admission to the community of Europe.

A complex dance is now in progress involving four (and arguably five) actors, each with its own agenda and peculiar capabilities, each aware that the limits of action are soft and uncertain, each with its own history of failures and sense of risk.

Actor no. 1 is the people of Georgia: its citizens, voters, ethnic and civic minorities, shop assistants, hardscrabble farmers, intelligentsia, teachers and trashmen, entrepreneurs, professionals. Georgians are freedom-loving individualists, stronger on rights than responsibilities, strong in opinion and weaker on tolerance, less trusting of authority yet in search of strong leadership, for whom law and the state are more restrictive in nature than protective. They have cherished the European ideal ever since Georgian nationalism began its revival under the legendary Ilia Chavchavadze in the 1860s, but not because they are natural liberal democrats. Europe rather, means access, progress, material economic support, escape. Georgia's citizens are political rather than institutional players, and it remains an open question whether their European aspirations can be sufficiently mobilised to force the issue with actor no. 2, their government.

Georgian Dream is that part of the political elite that is in power. It includes demagogues and hacks, carpetbaggers and timeservers, the monied and the connected. Like its predecessors, it is constitutionally mandated to 'take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization'.[8] On the other hand, joining the EU means signing up to a degree of democracy that is plainly incompatible with what it takes for Georgian Dream to retain power. It means undoing the executive's capture of the judiciary and removing the hand of Bidzina Ivanishvili from other instruments of state and economic control. Ivanishvili's links to Russia are well documented; he made his fortune there and maintains close and confidential ties with Moscow. He is a client of Moscow, and Georgian Dream is his client in turn. Moreover—and in all fairness—any Georgian government would be well aware of the extent to which the country is exposed to Russian economic and military pressure. To protect its power, Georgian Dream must protect its patron and bend to Russia. As my dinner companion remarked, 'Tbilisi receives directives from Moscow.'

Only strategic ambiguity, or what passes for it in the ruling party, could sustain this high-wire act. Georgian Dream must assure the Georgian people that it is doing everything it can to progress Georgia's case for EU candidacy, and simultaneously try to stall the process and make any failure look like Brussels's fault.

This has been going on since 2021 when the EU and US (actors no. 3 and 4 respectively) tried and failed to resolve an impasse between the government and opposition parties over claimed electoral fraud. It got worse after the EU, seeking to provide an additional geopolitical counterweight to Russia's adventurism, put Georgian Dream on the spot over accession.

Ambiguity appears to be a more recent strategic evolution for the EU and US. For years, they have been trying to nudge Georgia away from its authoritarian drift and back towards the liberal democratic path. At first, they relied on material support, praise and encouragement, good faith, and, from time to time, robust but benign criticism. With Georgian Dream's backsliding, that morphed to exasperated exhortations, forthright condemnations, and angry denials of the government's increasingly

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8   Article 78, Constitution of Georgia, 1995.

extravagant accusations. Then came this past March's debacle over the Foreign Agents Registration Act—and it felt like a tipping point. Georgia's passive-aggressive government could no longer be allowed to assume it could control the pace and direction of accession in defiance of national sentiment.

Thus the Brussels leak in March that the EU might offer candidate status to Georgia—over the head of its government! That whispered ambiguity begins to cut the ground from beneath the government's feet: if candidacy is granted, it must be able to credibly claim to voters that this is *its* achievement; that it secured terms more favourable to, and respectful of, Georgia than might otherwise have been the case. This may put pressure on Georgian Dream now, to tone down its anti-Western rhetoric and negotiate in better faith.

Shortly after Brussels moved, the US State Department, after enduring months of abuse directed against its ambassador, began talking about 'tools' at its disposal. Such an interesting word, tools. So open-ended, and so striking; one saw it coming. In April the State Department imposed visa bans on four senior judges (and their immediate families), claiming it had evidence against them of corruption. The prime minister was unusually silent; it was left to the party's leading chest-beaters to respond. They were indignant. They protested their innocence. They accused the US of impugning the dignity of Georgia's high court and failing to respect Georgia as a state. They demanded the US produce the evidence. They suggested Secretary Antony Blinken had been misled. One went so far as to suggest the US might go as far as murder.

Nonetheless, the measure will have been salutary, sending a shiver through the establishment, many of whom enjoy the luxuries of foreign travel and educating their children in the US and Europe. Who might be next? Was there suddenly to be a price for this diplomatic frottage with Russia? Unless 'the Dream' responds more positively to its citizens' European aspirations, it can no longer be sure its cabinet and parliamentarians won't suffer the same fate as its house-trained judges.

Russia—actor no. 5, the bogeyman, the butcher, the night terror—glowers in the background, fulminating. Its version of strategic ambiguity is not unlike that employed by Nixon during Vietnam, when he encouraged his officials to quietly foster the notion that he was unpredictable and possibly crazy enough to order a nuclear strike. Russia has already invaded Georgia once, in 2008, and many Georgians have been spooked by the possibility that Putin, with 'nothing left to lose', might do it again if provoked. Unlikely as this seems, with Russia's hands terribly tied in Ukraine, Georgian Dream has done all it can to encourage that fear among the Georgian people, accusing the EU and the US in typically hyperbolic language of trying to push Georgia into opening 'a second front' against Russia's war, and congratulating itself on keeping the country out of it. The capital's mayor ostentatiously designated Tbilisi the 'City of Peace', a notion its inhabitants, crowded out by Russian immigrants, quietly scoffed at.

Meanwhile, Georgian Dream has refused to support Western sanctions against Russia and turned Georgia into a postal address and a highway for sanctions-busting goods destined for Russia (the value of Georgian imports almost doubled from just more than a billion dollars in January 2023 to almost 2 billion in February[9]). And naturally the government takes credit for an economic boom driven by the influx of Russian goods, capital, and skills, and has only made the country more expensive for its own people.

All told, the Russian and Georgian Dream have managed a fairly cosy understanding. It allows Dream to say what it needs to say about Russia either to placate Georgians and the West, or to keep Georgians fearful. It allows Moscow to use Georgia as a bolthole for Russian business and an escape hatch for sanctions-busting. Each avoids the trap of either–or. The problem for both governments is that such 'ambiguities' rely heavily on either information blackouts or disinformation to keep them buoyant, and in Georgia, at least, with the West at last beginning to push back, it may get harder to keep the truth from puncturing them.

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9   Tradingeconomics.com/National Statistics Office of Georgia.

In sum, these are all the clarities: the Georgian people, the EU, and the US all want Georgia in the EU; the government wants to stay out, it prefers to be more Russia-like, and Russia will be as happy about Georgia joining the EU as it is about Finland joining NATO. This year could deliver more clarity than anyone is comfortable with.

In the end, clarity can be a massive inconvenience, and positively dangerous. Ambiguity has unpredictability built in; this buys time, holds dynamics in suspense, and keeps interests in check. Britain thought it was buying clarity with Brexit but has merely consigned itself to decades of new complexity and uncertainty; it would have done better to continue its arguments inside the tent.

Northern Ireland isn't a country but is divided about which of two other countries it should belong to. And Georgia has a history of having to survive among empires that surround it and covet it. Within these two polities, power and peace seem to revolve around strategic ambiguity. Perhaps the difference between them is that in Northern Ireland there seems to be an underlying acceptance within the moderate middle of society that strategic ambiguity, a lack of clarity, is a precondition for keeping the peace—for the next twenty years at least. In Georgia there is no middle to speak of; the different contending parties all want clarity and are all pushing for it now, but their *ideas* of clarity, a solution, a national destiny, are diametrically opposed. The thing about clarity is, you have to be careful what you wish for.

Unmapping the Indo-Pacific: A Strategic Communications Perspective

A Review Essay by Chiyuki Aoi

Keywords— *strategic communications, strategic communication, Indo-Pacific, ambiguity, networks, Japan, Australia*

About the Author
Professor Chiyuki Aoi is Director of the Strategic Communications Education and Research Unit (SCERU) and Professor of International Security at the Graduate School of Public Policy, the University of Tokyo.

The Indo-Pacific captures the imagination of the strategic communicator. Although the concept of the Indo-Pacific remains vague and difficult for many policymakers and practitioners to grasp, particularly those from outside the area, it may be because the idea of the Indo-Pacific is at heart founded on ambiguity. The Indo-Pacific is a work in progress, as multiple actors and stakeholders try to define their own diplomatic, geopolitical/economic, and security parameters. And that process is inherently ambiguous. That process, too, is strategic communications.

The two books reviewed here explain why the Indo-Pacific should merit the attention of the strategic communicator and of policymakers and practitioners. Medcalf's *Indo-Pacific Empire* is not specifically presented as dealing with strategic communications, and Michelsen and Bolt's *Unmapping the 21st Century* is not confined to the Indo-Pacific. Both, however, focus on the notion of 'maps' or cartography, which I argue to be the key to understanding the Indo-Pacific as an emerging geopolitical space. Michelsen and Bolt, further, focus on two types of 'maps'—a hierarchical one ('the state map') and a horizontal one ('the network map')—and reveal the tension and symbiosis between the two. It is, then, critical to understand the Indo-Pacific by recognising its essential characteristics as a map, as well as a network in the making, with the network's principal attributes manifest, centring on ambiguity.

Here, by 'unmapping' the Indo-Pacific in the cartographic sense, we can see how the region is instead a networked 'space'—a map in the making. The makers of the map are multiple. Its primary stakeholders are the middle powers of the Indo-Pacific or outside, not the usual suspects, China and the United States, the two superpowers. The central political and strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific are set in motion by these middle-power strategic agencies and the 'nodes' created among them, such as the new and old Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and AUKUS groupings, even if the driving force behind those dynamics is the rise of China and the intensifying US–China rivalry played out in the region.

The Indo-Pacific network map critically relies on collective memory-making, looking back into the past, while projecting, at the same time, an imagined path towards the future through storytelling. This, in essence, is strategic communications. The stories are plural, as the agencies and stakeholders multiply. Unmapping the logic of the Indo-Pacific this way is essential to clarifying what policy priority will emerge when policymakers—particularly those from the West—face this region.

The Books

Medcalf's book, *Indo-Pacific Empire,* is rich with country- or region-specific diplomatic history and with insights informed by the author's experience as a diplomat. What makes it unique, however, is that Medcalf innovatively captures the essence of the Indo-Pacific not so much as a physical or geographical area, but rather as an imagined 'map'. He shows that there are temporal, physical, and imagined spaces across this vast area stretching between the east coast of Africa and the Pacific Ocean.

The temporal space is the historical nature of the Indo-Pacific with different views on its history as perceived by the various actors in the region. The idea of the Indo-Pacific resonates with Australians, for instance, as the name evokes its historical experience as an emerging, 'ambitious and pragmatic new society' about to take root in a new region, 'a home that is neither entirely Asia nor the West' (p. 32), while the Chinese historically held ambitions towards it as their maritime backyard. What former Japanese premier Shinzo Abe described in his speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007 as the 'confluence of the two seas' was a metaphor for the shared history of Indians and Japanese. He looked back into the past, noting the achievements of the great philosophical and religious leaders of India whom the Japanese respected and admired, before tracing the more recent history of the two nations as democracies. He then projected into the future a vision of India and Japan as free, democratic, and becoming more prosperous together.

The physical space is the differing views on the geography of the Indo-Pacific, as understood and promoted by key actors in the region. Medcalf presents old maps of the region, as viewed historically by the Chinese, Italian, and British. These maps, distorted due to technical difficulties, depict a vast maritime area where trade and movement of people historically were irresistible across both sides of the Indo-Pacific. These maps show actual geographic shapes. Yet they also reflect how people projected onto them their interests, values, and world views. These maps indicate, rather, lines of transactions connecting various parts of

the world, through activities, be they maritime trade or movement of people and goods on the Eurasian landmass.

The imagined space is the ever-changing vision of the 'map' of the Indo-Pacific by those involved in the region. Imagined space, too, evolved and changed through history. The agencies in this cartography are middle powers, visualising in their minds how their growing associations might alter the diminishing space of their own as China expands out of its previously physically occupied space into a newly imagined one.

As Medcalf shows, the key to understanding the Indo-Pacific is that the region is both old and new, as the temporal, physical, and imagined are always in flux. The reader is reminded that all borders as such are imagined.

Michelsen and Bolt's *Unmapping the 21st Century* also tackles cartography and goes further conceptually to examine the 'state map' and 'network map', revealing the characteristics of each, as well as the dynamics between the two. The authors provide an ambitious theoretical explanation of the tensions, synergies, and interactions between the two maps, never presenting them as opposites but as in a symbiosis, citing plentiful empirical examples drawn from insurgencies and revolutions of the past and present. The differences in examples (the book is not about the Indo-Pacific) do not matter here. What is highly relevant here is the key notion of the network, which is the focus of the Michelsen–Bolt book. The actual functioning of networks, and their relation to the rules and norms of those that govern the international domain (hierarchy), is highly illuminating in the context of the Indo-Pacific as well. Here (paraphrasing Galloway's *Protocol*[1]) even the Internet is depicted as a 'governed' space, albeit compromised by its horizontal and fluid structure.

Michelsen and Bolt also capture the temporal, physical, and imagined dimensions of networks. The temporal dimension is covered by the inclusion of a history of networks—be they of the Mongols, Maoists, or

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1   Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

Islamic movements and global protests of numerous types today. Both authors understand deeply, as experts, irregular fighting, knowledge that they translate into post-structuralist/Deleuzian language.

The physical dimension of networks is analysed in layers, ranging from characteristics of structure (horizontal and hierarchy) to tactics (swarming). Here, the authors are at pains to explain how horizontal networks are not the conceptual opposite of hierarchy; nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, the horizontal structure always coexisted with hierarchy, with both trying to outmanoeuvre the other. At times, they complement each other; as no networks are without some form of governance, informality does not preclude ordering structure. Nor can hierarchy do without horizontal networks, particularly as contemporary society is deeply influenced by and embedded in rapidly digitalising communications technology. The political economy, indeed, provides the undertone to this sophisticated reading of the nature of twenty-first-century capitalist societies and how cartography provides the key for understanding them.

The imagined dimension of networks is captured as the 'attraction' of networks—the 'romance' of networks, or the imagined power of networks. It may only be imagination. Yet, from Cuba to Brazil to Russia, revolutionaries pursued romance with the (imagined) promise of networks as their guiding maps to reach success (in their revolutions). Indeed, nothing succeeds like a success story (of romance). The greatest success story of networks might have been the Maoist insurgency in the mid twentieth century, which provided a (pre-existing) template for later generations of revolutionaries to follow. Here, maps not only define physical areas for them to capture, but also indicate paths to reach an imagined place. Here, too, one is reminded of how horizontal logic meshed with vertical governance. The Maoist movement, which started out as networked bands of guerrillas, then very quickly developed into one of the world's most centralised hierarchies (the state governed by the Chinese Communist Party), perhaps unsurprisingly, as networks

require some sort of governing hierarchy in order for them to capture power, as this book reminds us.

The value of this book lies in a much-enhanced understanding of the promise, and the limitations, of networks. What is also gained is the insight into the evolution in the communicative environment in which our societies operate. Linear 'sending' and 'receiving' of 'data' and 'information', resulting in stratified knowledge, are no longer to be expected in our networked twenty-first-century society. Instead, we have a much more complex situation where 'the more technologies […] came on stream, the more difficult it became to control thought and dissent' (p. 93). In an age of digital technologies that rapidly transmit ideas and images, it is the technologies that 'determine the means by which information becomes knowledge' (p. 96). Ideas and images are further structured by individuals' maps (or world views), and these are now formed 'not through a harmonizing diffusion but paradoxically, through disjuncture, through flows of images that simultaneously support and challenge state hegemony' (ibid.). This evolution, then, is to be expected in the Indo-Pacific in the coming months and years as well.

Cartography as Strategic Communications

While neither *Indo-Pacific Empire* nor *Unmapping the 21st Century* specifically discusses 'strategic communications' per se, read together they reveal the essence of strategic communications and its relevance to mapping, and further, to the Indo-Pacific.[2] The books elaborate on the interlinkages between mapping (and unmapping) storytelling to create both memories of the past and images of the future, while giving meaning based upon the actors' values and identities to the emerging or imagined map. This process is the essence of strategic communications.

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2   For an earlier, albeit preliminary, work on the centrality of strategic communications to the Indo-Pacific, see Chiyuki Aoi, *The Significance of Strategic Communications: Implications for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative*, Robert Schuman Centre, Global Governance Programme, Policy Brief (European University Institute, July 2021).

Michelsen and Bolt's book, especially, presents a convincing argument for strategic communications as cartography/mapping. They discuss how actors' strategies are framed by a 'state map' or a 'network map', each corresponding to a hierarchical world view and a horizontal world view (bearing in mind that both reinforce each other through the tensions between them). Each actor tries to create discourses and behave in ways to realise their vision of these maps. And the spaces concerned are coloured by the actor's corresponding identities and by how their boundaries are defined or imagined. These boundaries are not necessarily physical, but could be solely perceptive or normative. Strategic communications entails the long-term shaping of dominant discourses in societies from which certain behaviours emanate to affect and shape the future world order according to their visions. Hence strategic communications is constructive and becomes a form of cartography. Strategic communicators in world politics are, by necessity, cartographers of the world map.

Strategic communications is inevitably linked to ambiguity. As Michelsen and Bolt have shown, ambiguity is inherent in all 'relationships'—be they within or between multiple individuals or communities trying to communicate. As the number of entities communicating increases, complexities increase, with corresponding augmentation in ambiguity and uncertainty. In international relations, ambiguity arises as either intended or unintended consequences of agencies' strategic choices, made in bilateral or in more complex interactions. And ambiguity may arise out of certain contexts, particularly those enabled by twenty-first-century technologies. Any threat or promises expressed need to be interpreted in the light of given circumstances, which involve odds for or against their implementation. Intensions may be deliberately shrouded in ambiguity as agencies try to hide their motives or keep information private in order to preserve the advantage. Further, actors increasingly engage in untruth telling, which augments doubts and confusion, and subverts decision-making.

Ambiguity in relation to networks can be critical. Networks or horizontal structures are by nature flexible, creating opportunities for connectivity,

participation, and inclusion. (The Indo-Pacific is emphatically about creating 'connectivity' and 'inclusion'.) Yet networks also create ambiguity and uncertainty, because those very attributes that belong to networks such as connectivity, participation, and collectivity normally have built into them opposite processes[3] which are a source of speculation and ambiguous situations. Networks imply disconnection (on the Internet providers can cut off certain users) as much as connectivity. The flexibility of networks is not necessarily a guarantee of participation, or inclusion, as there are stratifications in networks ('codes' of conduct, for example, or the requirement to be invited or tacitly accepted before entry, in addition to a willingness to accept/agree to these invitations). Networks, further, allow for flexibility at the level of engagement, whether one takes part in decision-making or collective action, or is simply aligned at an informal level. Hence networks are not synonymous with 'collectivity', either. All these dimensions create uncertainty and ambiguity.

None of the above implies, however, that ambiguity is intrinsically bad; nor that its opposite (certainty of rules and rule following; clarity of duties and responsibilities) is automatically a good thing, as the latter may be too demanding and binding on state sovereignty in international relations. In other words, ambiguity makes one avoid the commitment trap of a collectivity or formal association. Ambiguity is a logic of networks. It extends the lives of horizontally aligned networks and allows them to gain/expand loosely knit associations, in the process creating possibilities and space (temporal, physical, or imaginary) in which some forms of action and further association will occur, albeit with limitations to achieving 'hard goals' such as those belonging to formal alliances (collective defence).

The Indo-Pacific Map

All these attributes of cartography and networks mirror the characteristics of the Indo-Pacific. As vividly portrayed in Medcalf's book, the

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3   Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, 'Foreword: Protocol Is as Protocol Does', in Galloway, *Protocol*, p. xvi.

Indo-Pacific is mapping in progress and therefore strategic communications is at work. The Indo-Pacific map, also, is best understood as a network, not a hierarchy whose key attribute is not so much flexibility as ambiguity.

Japan has been an unlikely—some would say—promoter of the Indo-Pacific network; it has long been categorised as possessing a strong state (hierarchy), with a reputation for passive foreign-security policy. Under the banner of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)—as vague as it may sound—Japan has been trying to construct a space in the vast maritime areas connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans but also covering adjacent land regions stretching from the east coast of Africa to the western Pacific. 'Like-minded countries', though not limited to liberal democracies in the strict sense of the term, were to cohabit in the space to support a rules-based international order.

When then prime minister Abe gave a speech in the Indian Parliament in 2007, he first unveiled his ambition to create a 'confluence of the two seas'—the Indian and Pacific Oceans—with India and Japan as the key players in what he envisaged as the emerging region of the Indo-Pacific, although the term itself is older in its usage. After a hiatus of several years, upon his return to power in 2012, he swiftly moved to upgrade Japan's security architecture, including a focus on global diplomacy and a foreign policy focus on the Indo-Pacific. In 2016 he announced at the occasion of TICAD in Kenya his strategy for FOIP, which promised that Japan would pursue the rule of law and connectivity through development assistance and security cooperation to promote a rules-based international order in the region.

The narrative that Abe provided to promote FOIP was an 'identity narrative'.[4] Japan told stories of itself as a nation that overcame past militarism and rebuilt from the ashes of war to establish itself as a mature democracy, just as India too had been an established democracy. Stories of the past were, in the case of Japan, linked to its future-oriented mantra of a 'proactive contribution to peace'—an identity narrative that was

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4   Aoi, Significance of Strategic Communications.

enshrined in its first National Security Strategy adopted in 2013 by the Abe administration. Japan was to pursue the goal of creating FOIP by engaging proactively with partners in the region and beyond, based upon a peace-oriented posture in global diplomacy and multilayered policies. These would uphold the rule of law in the maritime domain, most notably the South China Sea, establishing connectivity and quality infrastructure assistance on land, especially in Southeast Asia. One should note that Japan's Overseas Development Aid (ODA), which began in the 1950s as war reparations and grew into one of the largest aid programmes in the world—Japan was the world's leading aid donor between 1991 and 2000—concentrated on large states in Asia (China and India) as well as Southeast Asia. In hindsight one might conceive Japan's ODA, with a focus on key economic and social infrastructure-building such as transport, electricity, and communications, as an effort to engage with what would later become the Global South.

Another dimension in Abe's legacy was the short-lived attempt to establish the Democratic Security Diamond in 2012. Having connected with India in 2007, Abe soon promoted the idea of creating a loose association among four maritime democracies—Japan, India, Australia, and the United States—within the larger scheme of connecting, just as with FOIP, the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific. This was instrumental in the revival of the then dormant Quad of 2007. Japan then started to expand the horizons of its diplomacy and security cooperation to include 'like-minded countries' in Europe, trying to draw them into engagement in Indo-Pacific affairs.

For Japan FOIP was not a mere naming of a geographical area. Nor was it a formal institution-making exercise to simply add to existing international institutions in the older Asia-Pacific construct. It was an 'Indo-Pacific strategy', based upon a network map, a key attribute of which is ambiguity. Japan moved away from the initial term 'FOIP strategy' to what is now termed 'FOIP vision', rendering the concept more ambiguous. This language is intended to make cautious states (now comprising middle-ground states in the Global South, especially

in Southeast Asia) more comfortable with the idea. Ambiguity helped bring others to at least tacitly accept what was now the pillar of Japanese foreign policy, opening the way for further collaboration on specific projects involving development assistance and security cooperation.

As Medcalf vividly portrays, however, the Indo-Pacific space historically had been a shared space, with different meanings attached to it depending upon the dominant actors, age/time, and values of the day. By choosing the nomenclature of FOIP, it projected into a twenty-first-century context a concern for liberal values that seemed to be coming under increasing threat. The focus would be freedom of navigation and openness of the seas, even if their contours were vague. Imbuing a space with meaning is strategic communications in action.

In security discourse, especially surrounding the South China Sea where freedom of navigation and openness of trade and transactions were increasingly under threat, support for the concept grew. The rest is a familiar story. Once the United States (then under President Donald Trump) expressed support, Europe followed suit with constituent states and European Union institutions adopting their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. ASEAN published its own *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*.

What makes the story of the Indo-Pacific in the twenty-first century interesting is that each of these Indo-Pacific strategies had different yet overlapping meanings, establishing a range of different emphases and priorities as dictated by the agency's foreign policy. The term 'Indo-Pacific' has now emerged as a common reference point that denotes for the next generation the geopolitical centre of gravity affecting global security. The term is ambiguous enough to allow for sufficient flexibility, so that different agencies can use it in the way that suits their foreign policy. Yet, it also provides for a contour (or some might say a minimum common denominator) of interests and values that apply to this region, such as rule of law, connectivity, and freedom of navigation, as well as stability of the rules-based international order.

What is critical to understand, moreover, is that none of the Indo-Pacific actors seems intent on creating the rules, norms, and procedures that usually accompany formal international organisations. There is no attempt to create a process leading to the duplication of regional organisations (as some fear, such as NATO), or even institutions of the likes of ASEAN or associated regional forums—twentieth-century inventions in the Asia-Pacific. The foundational institution underlying the spontaneous idea of the Indo-Pacific is, in fact, the network. This is significant in the contemporary environment where technology, communications, information, and data analytics create a tapestry on which to design a regional order that is essentially different from any of the last century.

The Indo-Pacific Network

The Indo-Pacific, therefore, is a network with all the essential characteristics. The politics in the Indo-Pacific clearly do not follow what Michelsen and Bolt categorically call 'the state map'. If a state map is about a vertical, hierarchically stratified chain of command, the Indo-Pacific has no equivalent of such centralised authority. And yet, as Michelsen and Bolt explain, 'networks and hierarchies are false opposites' (p. 59). Stratifying authorities of a state map do not necessarily preclude horizontal systems that distribute information, people, and knowledge. Moreover, networks are normally embedded in a control system, if one follows Galloway's reasoning. And the Indo-Pacific's interstate networks may not be an exception. Indeed, basic control procedures may be loosely set by some state authorities that share common interests, for example, by (tacit) agreement among the engaged middle powers and the US (often their common ally). These states may tacitly yet collectively decide who will be invited into 'the club' or to the nodes, as explained below. The latter practice is akin to vertical control over horizontal distribution systems through a collective/social control, albeit sporadic and loosely organised.

Indeed, such a mix of horizontal and vertical maps in the Indo-Pacific has meant that ambiguity has served as a vehicle for regional political dynamism. Observers, practitioners, and academics have found it difficult to understand the governing logic of such a networked system. FOIP has been branded America's tool for 'containing', 'balancing', or even 'deterring' China. Alternatively, there has been a tendency to interpret middle-power associations in the Indo-Pacific as 'hedging' against the (relative) decline of US power or commitment. However, associations in the Indo-Pacific do not represent 'hedging', as the region has practically no vested hard capabilities sufficient to replace US power (nor is allegiance to China a real option for most democracies). None of the established strategic concepts rings true in the region, which fundamentally relies on the logic of connectivity (with embedded dysconnectivity).

Such misapprehensions are political discourses, and may reflect what Michelsen and Bolt describe as the danger of confusing 'maps for the territory'. Another area of confusion might be that FOIP for some is (correctly perceived as) an inclusive network, where any state that subscribes to its basic principles of maintaining free and open seas would be welcomed as a partner. Yet for others FOIP is just a name denoting a geographic continuity, or meetings or talking shop, devoid of actual content or meaning. The latter is far removed from the reality.

Another key network characteristic of the Indo-Pacific is its inclusion of an ever-growing number of hubs, or what we might call nodes (again following Michelsen/Bolt and Galloway), within the Indo-Pacific network. As noted, the makers of the Indo-Pacific map are middle powers and key stakeholders in the stability of the region, who often respond to the growing influences of China and the ensuing G2 rivalry.

Starting from 'like-minded countries', the oldest and perhaps foremost of these nodes within the Indo-Pacific construct is the Quad, which refers to the group of Japan, Australia, India, and the United States. It has a practical origin in the collective humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) mission launched following the Indian

Ocean tsunami that occurred after the 2004 earthquake off the coast of Sumatra. At that time, these four countries formed a Core Group to lead international support for the affected regions.

This was followed by a series of more practical diplomatic-level meetings in May 2007, when senior officials met for the first time (Quadrilateral Dialogue of 2007). However, strong Chinese opposition, the sudden departure of Abe due to illness, and changes in the administrations in Australia and the US resulted in a hiatus that lasted until 2017. The Quad was viewed in Australia especially, then under Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, as more provocative than stabilising.[5] Since 2017, regular meetings have been held at the level of senior officials and biannually at the foreign minister level. The latter met for the first time in 2019 in New York on the occasion of the UN General Assembly. In March 2021 the Quad Leaders Summit brought together its countries' heads of state. Through these meetings, the Quad has discussed practical cooperation in areas such as quality infrastructure, maritime security, counterterrorism, cyber security, and HADR, all for the purpose of realising FOIP.

The Quad's importance lies in the fact that it is a grouping that keeps India tied to multilateral groupings made up otherwise of Western democracies, as it does in the more general FOIP framework. India's traditional non-aligned policy, which during the Cold War meant a pro-USSR stance and in the post-Cold War world often a pro-Russia stance, remains officially unchanging, even as India pursues more pragmatic approaches (under Modi's *Act East* policy) to engage with Japan and East Asia. One of the core achievements, then, of the Indo-Pacific construct is securing India's place in Indo-Pacific multilateral groupings involving Western democracies.

The Quad has more recently initiated a series of more practically oriented working groups, often referred to as Quad Plus, clustered around various subjects such as COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution, critical

5   Lavina Lee, 'Abe's Democratic Security Diamond and New Quadrilateral Initiative: An Australian Perspective', Journal of East Asian Affairs (Seoul) 30 № 2 (Fall 2016): 1–41, p. 8.

and emerging technologies, and climate change. This indicates a further expansion of the Quad hub into issues of mutual concern, creating more points of connectivity.

AUKUS is unique among nodes in the Indo-Pacific in comprising only English-speaking countries—two from the British Commonwealth (Australia and the United Kingdom) and the United States. These countries of course have a history of intelligence sharing (Five Eyes) and other military-security cooperation. The abrupt announcement of the launch of this grouping at the cancellation of a submarine acquisition agreement between Australia and France was received with much surprise globally. The cancellation of Australia's acquisition of conventional French-made submarines was followed by the announcement of three-party collaboration to equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, first by purchasing ex-US Navy Virginia-class submarines from the US, while Australia, jointly with the UK, would develop a new design of submarine, the SSN-AUKUS class. Equipment would be acquired from both countries—a reactor from the UK and a combat system from the US. Australian capabilities are contributing to security and stability of the Indo-Pacific, where the country is building new bases that would supplant the forward deployment of US forces in Guam, which are increasingly vulnerable to potential Chinese attack. The AUKUS narrative on this matter is also pronounced among these nodes. Theirs is a technical story and its aims are framed largely in terms of a security/military balance.

Turning to the so-called middle-ground group, ASEAN, established in 1967, is the oldest of the Indo-Pacific nodes. Given the historic centrality of ASEAN in Asian international relations, and given its location near the South China Sea, it retains significant influence on the Indo-Pacific construct. It is important also in the sense that the association comprises middle-ground countries belonging to the Global South, with the exception of the Philippines, due to its alliance and close association with the United States. The central principle therefore is the sacrosanct nature of sovereign equality as well as ASEAN centrality. ASEAN asserts its right to make decisions without external interference. According to

its own account, it has long resisted the language of values, especially any emphasis on governance systems such as democracy and human rights. It is indicative that different approaches to such governance-related values comprise a fundamental disjuncture or disconnect in the Indo-Pacific network. This then becomes a major source of ambiguity in the discursive practice of the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN adopted a common stance towards the expanding Indo-Pacific network. The *Outlook* document enunciates the main assertion that ASEAN centrality is the fundamental principle in its dealings with the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, it refuses to be put in the position of having to choose between China and the United States.[6] Diplomatically, however, ASEAN has accepted working with the Indo-Pacific countries, and where possible it would cooperate with them on specific projects, such as maritime cooperation and connectivity, including infrastructure and people-to-people connectivity.

If these are nodes in the broader Indo-Pacific network, recently there has also been increasing engagement from Europe, both via the European Union institution and individual European states. In general, European narratives centre on the notion of multilateralism. Europe essentially shares concerns with ASEAN that the region is becoming a battleground between China and the US. And amid that tension, Europe argues that Europe will work to prevent the region from being dominated by G2 rivalry. Much like ASEAN, Europe calls for 'strategic autonomy'; multilateralism can create the space in which such autonomy is enabled.

Spontaneity and Ambiguity

The Indo-Pacific is a cartography in progress. It is a new geopolitical space where each participant's and stakeholder's memory and vision for the future is told and co-exists. As a result, spontaneous groupings have emerged, leading to a largely uncoordinated growth of horizontally

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6   ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 2021.

connected nodes. Signs of a hierarchical 'code' of conduct (control) do exist, primarily in the form of coordinated decisions among key stakeholders, mainly proactive middle powers but notably including the United States, which belongs to most of the existing nodes (except for ASEAN). Japan in the meantime is the key initiator of the FOIP idea and one of the most proactive diplomatic drivers of the evolution of the network, together with Australia.

Medcalf argues that 'Japan is seeking to *limit* Chinese power—or North Korean belligerence—by building a web of partnerships with many others' (p. 154, emphasis added). He goes on to observe that FOIP's predominant rationale is a strategy to 'hedge and buttress by making the most of multipolarity' (p. 155). Japan has a pragmatic policy towards China economically, under the banner of 'cooperate and compete', with its businesses engaged in joint infrastructure projects with China under 'Belt and Road' initiatives in third countries. At the same time, Japan has a keen interest in checking the occasional volatility of US foreign policy—Trump-era disruption of the free-trade agreement (p. 154). To uphold a rules-based international order, thus, means shaping the attitudes and behaviour not only of China but of the United States too.

It is clearly indicated in these passages that Japan is engaged in an exercise of creating ambiguity, signalling to both China and the United States that alignment of middle-ranked powers would open up necessary space to protect and maintain or create order and rules, while allowing space for spontaneous invention and further policy coordination. This flexibility is a form of *influence.* Hence ambiguity is a strategic asset.

So too is the idea of influence, as opposed to a mechanical, linear conception of power associated with 'limit', 'balance', and a formula designed to 'contain'. Influence suggests ambiguity of purpose and process, as well as the shaping of the strategic discursive environment. Influence like strategy is, further, affiliated to the notion of manoeuvre implying spontaneity and adaptability as the need arises.

Interestingly for Japan, whose 'military' policy has been limited under the current pacifist constitution, the FOIP concept provides a strategic umbrella under which some of the newer activities of the Japanese Self-Defence Force can be bureaucratically justified as well, such as its increasing focus on defence cooperation and joint exercises. This can be so precisely because FOIP's ambiguity—not a formal military alliance like the Japan–US alliance, but more than a forum for multilateral dialogue—creates a space where the JSDF can perform its ongoing operations in a flexible manner.

A similar tendency is reported with regard to another middle-ranked power and key ally of the United States in the Indo-Pacific, Australia. It maintains a similar multipolar policy and as a middle power is invested heavily in the rules-based international order (Medcalf, p. 157). Just as with Japan, Australia has in its 2020 Defence Strategic Update the 'shaping' of the international environment as a strategic objective.[7] It takes a layered approach, creating new 'small groups' for alignment ('minilaterals') and holding onto bilateral relations with its key partner, the US (p. 157).

Together, these middle-power states' spontaneous policies create an effect that is similar to swarming tactics, as explained by Michelsen and Bolt. Flexible and adoptive, swarming tactics allow longevity for smaller/middle-ranking powers in the face of a stronger hostile agency, where effective communication is essential (p. 76). Swarming, in other words, creates new maps.

Conclusion

These two groundbreaking books on cartography in international relations reveal essential aspects of strategic communications relevant to the Indo-Pacific. As Bolt argues, strategic communications 'entail

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7   www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update; see also Aoi, *Significance of Strategic Communications*.

long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies',[8] from which certain behaviours emanate to shape the visions of the future world order. Strategic communications is also about constructing a shared identity, giving meanings to the shared experience of the past, present, and future through storytelling. As *NATO Terminology* stresses, strategic communications entails both interests and values, when defined as a 'holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.[9] These two books make clear that mapping is tantamount to this exact process—a map being a momentary snapshot in the projection of power and aspirations that merges the past, present, and future into a cartographic imaginary.[10] In this cartographic process, as both books so richly demonstrate through empirical evidence, storytelling is used to create both memories of the past and images of the future, while providing meaning to the emerging map based upon the actors' values and identities. This is strategic communications at work. Strategic communications is, thus, cartography.

The relevance of such a conceptualisation of mapping/cartography and strategic communications to the Indo-Pacific is clear. The Indo-Pacific is a map in the making that charts an emerging twenty-first-century geopolitical centre of gravity. The Indo-Pacific is also a network map that is premised on connectivity (and thus also dysconnectivity) and collective memory-making, with key agencies of the region—middle powers—looking back into the past and at the same time projecting an (imagined) path towards the future through storytelling. This is strategic communications, whose central values and interests for those agencies at this current stage hinge upon the maintenance of liberal democratic values.

The Indo-Pacific, as a networked 'space', has attributes of both horizontal networks and hierarchy present. In such a structure, ambiguity is both

8   Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (Spring 2019): 4.

9   Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, June 2019), p. 46.

10   I am indebted to Dr Neville Bolt for this conception. The reference to aspiration here is my own.

a necessary outcome and a strategic asset. Spontaneity and ambiguity signify the dynamics of power shifts in the Indo-Pacific, where influence is a more appropriate description than linear conceptions related to power and containment. International relations, under such circumstances, becomes a shaping activity. As power shifts to the Indo-Pacific in the foreseeable future, such a networked approach will increasingly gain prominence.

The Indo-Pacific is an emergent geopolitical area where mapping critically relies on storytelling and collective memory-making—stories are plural, involving multiple agencies. Yet this multiplicity does not hinder stability in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, it creates a necessary flexibility and ambiguity.

Strategic Communications, Ambiguity, and Taiwan

A Review Essay by Philip Shetler-Jones

The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict
Elbridge A. Colby. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.

Pacific Power Paradox: American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace
Van Jackson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023.

Keywords— *Taiwan, strategic ambiguity, strategic communications, strategic communication, uncertainty, narrative, coherence*

About the Author
Dr Philip Shetler-Jones is a fellow of the Strategic Communications Education and Research Unit (SCERU) and is employed by GIZ to implement the Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia (ESIWA) project. The views expressed here are his own.

One of the biggest questions in the field of international security today, perhaps even this century, is whether Sino-US rivalry will metastasise into war. Taiwan is one of the most likely flashpoints. Will the People's Republic of China (PRC) absorb the island state against its will, or will America commit whatever it takes for Taiwan to remain free to determine its own course? Responses to these questions from all sides are rendered in some form of strategic ambiguity. Each of the big players involved—Taipei, Beijing, and Washington, DC—eschews clarity and keeps the others guessing on key elements of its policy. Taipei is ambiguous about the form of independence it claims. Beijing is ambiguous about when it will consummate a unification it calls 'inevitable'. Washington, despite President Biden's May and September 2022 statements that US forces

would defend Taiwan, is ambiguous about what it would be prepared to do to prevent a forceful takeover by the People's Republic. But how much of that ambiguity is truly 'strategic'? Do some benefits of strategic ambiguity come at the expense of good strategic communications?

Europeans, so far from the front lines of a Taiwan conflict, are presently engaged as little more than interested bystanders, if at all. Not that they don't have a stake in the confrontation. Europe is heavily exposed to a deterioration of the international relations order, access to what the Indo-Pacific offers in terms of prosperity, and continued reliability of the transatlantic alliance that underwrites Europe's own security. All these—not to mention the impact on the global economy—are likely results of a conflict over Taiwan coming out of a larger US–China confrontation, competition, or rivalry.

Perhaps, then, Europeans should not just see themselves as mere bystanders, but assume greater ownership of the problem. What, then, would be the wisest choice for a new policy position for European countries and the EU? In spite of some voices insisting on the importance of not following American policy blindly, the current course appears to run parallel to it: upgrade trade relations with Taipei and make gestures to the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, without triggering too strong a reaction from Beijing. But as Europe, too, begins to tip into a more confrontational relationship with the PRC, it is possible Washington's strategic ambiguity approach could be absorbed without pausing to reflect on its suitability. There are a few reasons, explored below, to suspect that from a strategic communications point of view it might already be heading towards obsolescence. The Taiwan question offers a case study through which to explore the question of how ambiguity— whatever its merits as a political or strategic approach—might or might not be compatible with good strategic communications.

When strategic ambiguity was first applied to the Taiwan question, its appeal was readily understandable. In the early 1970s President Nixon had initiated detente with the PRC as a way of closing out America's

tragic engagement in Indo-China, and turning the Sino-Soviet split to the West's advantage. Strategic ambiguity looked like an elegant way of dropping America's defence commitment to Taiwan, without explicitly abandoning the principle that it remained in practical terms a sovereign state with roots to supportive and influential constituencies in American politics.

The Taiwan case also demonstrates how strategic ambiguity works as a means to create deliberate uncertainty, not just in the mind of the adversary (complicating PRC calculations about the risks of invasion) but also to restrain a partner. In the 1950s, America worried about the risk of being sucked into a war if Taiwan's leaders attempted an attack on the newly installed mainland Communist government. As Taiwan's ambition shifted from reconquering China to the possibilities of *de jure* independence, it was believed uncertainty about the risk of US abandonment helped to deter it from making a formal independence declaration, thus lowering the risk for the US of being pulled into war with the PRC.

From the perspective of the post-Mao PRC (the great helmsman passed away in 1976), the shelving of the Taiwan issue gave time for Communist China to reform, develop, and open up. After the USSR disintegrated and the Cold War ended, ambiguity lived on in a zombie-like fashion. It was sustained on one side by the confidence of the Chinese Communist Party that Taiwan would be attracted into the PRC naturally and peacefully. Force was not militarily viable, but nor was it politically necessary. America was optimistic that a more globally integrated China would present less of a threat, and anyway US military primacy would (as shown in the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–96) deter aggressive conquest. Strategic ambiguity over Taiwan remained attractive also because uncertainty about all the alternatives made the status quo seem like the least risky position.

Coming to the present, by 2023 the situation that birthed this policy of ambiguity over Taiwan has turned completely upside down. Beijing and

Moscow are not split; they are aligning. Washington is not welcoming China into the global economic order; it is waging industrial warfare against it (e.g. Huawei, the Inflation Reduction Act, the Chips Act) within a strategy of full-blown rivalry. Taiwan's population observing the fate of Hong Kong since 1997 under 'one country, two systems' feels itself more and more separate from the PRC. Yet the regional balance of military power has shifted in the PRC's favour. So, as peaceful means to achieve unification on Beijing's terms are likely off the menu, it begins to look like force has become not just a viable possibility, but maybe the only one.

Taipei may not be moving towards a declaration of formal independence, but it is working to build stronger people-to-people, trade, and diplomatic relations, including with countries in Europe. Lithuania has been particularly responsive. PRC General Secretary Xi is increasingly intolerant of an open-ended period in which the cross-strait situation does not show progress towards unification, and has reportedly asked his military to be ready to take Taiwan by force by 2027. Beijing's response to the visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022 touched an unprecedented level of violent intimidation. US policy remains one of not encouraging *de jure* independence, but Biden's repeated pledges in 2022 to defend Taiwan against an attack from the PRC suggest a move away from ambiguity.

Whatever value strategic ambiguity may still have for the purposes of political or military strategy, from the point of view of strategic communications this inversion of the 1979 situation raises certain problems, the main one being dissonance with key strategic narratives. The Biden administration framing of 'democracies versus autocracies', for instance, leaves little room for ambiguity about where America should stand on the defence of Taiwan. One of the contrasts American leaders like to draw between the USA and the autocrats is its network of allies, a distinct advantage in a context of reduced relative US power. But how does that fit with strategic ambiguity, a Nixonian manoeuvre that finessed the abandonment of a treaty ally?

As the luxury of distance Europeans have enjoyed with regard to the Taiwan issue seems to be coming to an end, this prompts the question as to whether some version of strategic ambiguity remains an attractive policy choice in Brussels, London, Paris, or Berlin. In some ways Europe is also moving away from ambiguity. The UK and France sailed warships through the Taiwan Strait in 2021 and 2023 respectively. Visits to Taiwan by European leaders have increased. Lithuania upgraded its diplomatic links to Taiwan to an extent that attracted sanctions from Beijing. But these changes are not the product of any discernible deliberative process towards common European policy on Taiwan relations. Are Europeans acting deliberately on the basis of calculated self-interest, balanced against a realistic assessment of the risks involved, or just following in America's footsteps? How do Europeans want to be perceived in the Indo-Pacific, and how well does strategic ambiguity fit with that?

Considering the influence of US policy choices on these questions, Europe's next move may be informed by examining evolutions in current American thinking on the Taiwan question. Two books published recently present divergent approaches to thinking about how America should be involved in the difficult choices of Asian security and the peaceful management of the Taiwan issue. Both address the question from the point of view of American statecraft, but each draws very different conclusions.

The first book, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict,* is by Elbridge A. Colby. The author, whose career took him to high levels in the US Department of Defense, writes from a more subjective point of view, in the sense that it situates the Taiwan question in the context of Asia's shifting power balance, but concentrates principally on the threat that poses to America's national interest. Colby wants his readers to see Taiwan as a US ally and for America to commit unambiguously to its defence.

The second book, published more recently, is by Van Jackson, another former American defence professional but from a fractionally younger

generation. *Pacific Power Paradox: American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace* is, as the title suggests, looking at the same situation from a less subjective standpoint. Jackson is more interested in the effects American statecraft has had and continues to have on the prime object of study, which he terms 'the Asian Peace'. The author seeks to illuminate and protect the sources of that Asian peace—an absence of large-scale, conventional, interstate war in the region since the Sino-US detente in 1979.

Before returning to these books, there are intriguing contrasts and parallels in the authors' profiles that suggest how generational change and differentiated social perspectives might be influencing the trajectory of American and perhaps wider policy debates on Asia.

Colby's background—Harvard College, Yale Law School—is reminiscent of the old-fashioned establishment pedigree. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the International Institute of Strategic Studies. His grandfather was head of the CIA. His writing style is one of conservative foreign-policy formality, heavily loaded with the clunky vocabulary of American international relations schools: a favourable balance of power, anti-hegemonic coalition, and so on. Colby is firmly of the 'realist' school, where states, power, and fear matter most.

Whether or not his background would put him into a different class, Jackson already puts himself there. That word 'class' can be discomforting in American society, but Jackson embraces it. He writes on his website bio, 'My career has required me to spend a lot of time with elites of various sorts, and I've basically figured out how to be among them. But I'm very…shaped…by my working class beginnings.'[1] He recalls early jobs mopping floors at the fast-food chain Wendy's. Education was not Ivy League but community college and degrees earned studying at night school. He writes more in the style of the social sciences academic (he is currently senior lecturer in international relations at Victoria University of Wellington). But he entered the world of defence policy through the

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1   Van Jackson, '<u>Biography</u>'.

ranks, getting his start as an enlisted intelligence specialist in the US Air Force. Jackson moved up fast in the policy world, but his style is self-consciously irreverent. Since 2019 he has hosted *The Un-Diplomatic Podcast*. In earlier episodes he swears a lot, practising what he calls the 'philosophy behind being undiplomatic'.

These two writers might have passed each other in the revolving door separating presidential administrations. Colby went from positions at the US Departments of Defense and State and in the intelligence community to serve during the George W. Bush administration with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq in 2003. Jackson's work on the Asia-Pacific and Korea in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) coincided with the beginning of the Obama era in 2009, up to 2014. Colby passed the Obama years as a staffer and consultant for government commissions, moving back into the OSD during the Trump administration, in which he served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy. In an April 2023 tweet, Jackson commented he worked alongside Colby, whom he called a 'deep state darling' in every sense of its meaning, but left Washington 'partly because it was clear the entire system was setup to promote people like him'.[2]

One might be tempted to match these social backgrounds and career chronologies then simply pigeonhole Jackson as Democrat, Colby as Republican, and from that draw conclusions about the differences in their policy proposals. The reality is more interesting. Jackson was stimulated to begin his book by a sense of alarm at the Trump administration, in which Colby was then serving. What surprised him when he got into the early chapters charting the course of American policy on Asia over the last half-century was that—style aside—very little of substance actually changed in the transitions from Bush to Obama, Obama to Trump, and Trump to Biden.

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2   Van Jackson (@WonkVJ), '<u>Won't waste much breath on Politico …</u>', Twitter, 11 April 2023, 11:12
     p.m.: 'Bridge is precisely a "deep state darling" in every sense of its meaning. I left Washington
     (while working beside Bridge) partly because it was clear the entire system was setup to promote
     people like him.'

Colby and Jackson are both dissidents in relation to the Washington foreign policy 'blob', and despite different origins and party affiliations, there are other points of convergence in their careers. Colby is a member of the CFR, where from 2014 to 2015 Jackson was an International Affairs Fellow in residence at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS)—the Washington think tank where Colby held the post of Robert M. Gates Senior Fellow from 2014 to 2017.

One important difference informing the approach of these two books is that only one of the authors is an Asia specialist. When Jackson served in the OSD as a strategist and policy advisor focused on the Asia-Pacific from 2009 to 2014, he was senior country director for Korea and working group chair of the US–Republic of Korea Extended Deterrence Policy Committee. From 2015 to April 2017 he was an associate professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Honolulu. There is nothing in Colby's career path to suggest experience in Asia or specific knowledge of the region. That said, for the strict 'realist', the particularities of local history and political economy might not be so important for foreign policy analysis.

Neither author is content with current US statecraft and Asia policy, but each attacks different elements of it. Colby is most frustrated by America's lack of focus on the China threat. He regularly tweets and gives interviews critical of the extent to which the Biden administration is supporting Ukraine, particularly because of the way it drains attention and resources from the need to prevent Chinese regional hegemony in Asia and, by extension, world domination. Colby is not alone in this view. Rush Doshi's book *The Long Game* also sees Beijing's ultimate objective as being to displace the US order globally in order to emerge as the world's dominant state by 2049.[3] Jackson on the other hand sees the current bipartisan support for US global 'primacy', with the emphasis on the military dimensions of competition with China, as part of the problem with US Asia policy. The 'paradox' in the title of Jackson's book

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3   Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

is that America's role in 'the Asian Peace' since 1979 has been as much arsonist as firefighter.

While both books are about the same thing (America's Asia policy), they are talking at cross purposes. Colby is thinking of US policy towards Asia principally in terms of preserving what is good for America against the risk China might take it away. His conception of defence is not limited to US territory; it extends to American interests in Asia. Jackson, however, is thinking mainly about what is good or bad for Asia itself, and how awakening Americans to their paradoxical role can help them turn their statecraft into something that does more to support 'the Asian Peace' than menace it.

Before reading these, you might be able to predict how you will feel about them by asking yourself how you already feel about Taiwan. If Taiwan is an object within the arena of a larger struggle, it will lead you to different choices than if you see it as a subject in its own right. For Colby, Taiwan is such an object: a tool, almost, that serves a strategy designed to keep the world running in a way that produces outcomes that are good for Americans. In an exchange on Twitter, when someone suggested, 'If we have to coerce Taiwan into properly defending itself maybe we shouldn't defend it', Colby responded, 'I also support targeted sanctions to induce Taiwan to move toward asymmetric defense. Taiwan is important. Americans would die in its defense. Ergo we should do everything needed to get them to build a strong defense.' He added, 'Taiwan is important to Americans for geopolitical, military, and economic reasons, not as a favor to Taiwan or because we love Taiwan. That means we'll defend it. It's up to Taiwan how favorable that defense is for those actually on Taiwan. Think West Germany.'[4]

If you are turned off by competing national interests, spheres of influence, and balance of power politics, and take a progressive attitude to the preservation and promotion of broader human values, then what is good for Taiwan is mostly a question for Taiwan. It may also be related in

4   Elbridge Colby (@ElbridgeColby), 'Taiwan is important to Americans for geopolitical, military, and economic reasons …', Twitter, 4 March 2023, 2:14 a.m.

principle to what is good for the rest of the world, but not particularly in terms of what is good for the American national interest.

Colby argues that preventing Chinese hegemony in Asia is the overriding priority for protecting American interests, because Asia is the place where economic access for America is most important, and China is the only country with the potential and the will to deny that access. This justifies an open-ended continuation of a reinforced American forward-deployed military presence in the region, as well as an unambiguous commitment to defend Taiwan. Whatever you think about Colby's reasoning, his policy prescriptions are focused like a laser on Taiwan. He is not a hawk arguing for huge increases in defence spending. Rather, his argument is to concentrate the force of his country at the head of a coalition and bring it to bear on the strategic centre of gravity of the main threat to America.

Jackson's book offers a rich and more engaging picture of the region because of the fresh and compelling analytical picture he paints of the 'Pacific Power Paradox'. The paradox here is the way the US presents three faces to the region: the aloof hegemon (things happen in Asia over which the US has little influence), the vital bulwark (sometimes America has kept Asia out of war), and the imperious superpower. The last of these maintains a less than benign hegemony over Asia by conducting policies that undermine the sources of 'the Asian Peace', with negative side effects for the region that sometimes directly risk war.

Whatever you make of his larger argument about US policy, Jackson's exploration of the sources of 'the Asian Peace' is rewarding as a framework for thinking about the region as more than a battleground for bipolar competition. He argues that other sources of 'the Asian Peace'—such as Sino-US detente, Asian economic interdependence, regionalism and the norms and institutions that accompany it, and democratisation—are underweighted in a mainstream narrative that is too selective and overestimates America's positive role in the region. Overall, Jackson judges that US statecraft has been less important than supposed, but more

threatening to 'the Asian Peace' than Washington policymakers allow themselves to recognise. As for the idea of leading an anti-hegemonic coalition, he proposes that US military primacy is not only bad for its security, given the scale of Chinese power and America's competing domestic needs, it is no longer even possible.

Considering the emphasis on Asia's growing economic heft to explain its strategic importance, the interplay of economic, political, and military issues would be expected to feature strongly in any treatment of US statecraft in Asia. In fact, this is a point of stark contrast between these two books. Colby's strategic imperative is rooted in the assumption that America's national security depends on economic access to Asia. But then he goes on to explain that his book concentrates on military defence strategy, because if Americans don't have that right then issues like how to compete with China economically 'will be forced to take a back seat'.

Jackson deploys his knowledge about Asia to argue engagingly that a more just and equitable political economy in the region is more important for peace than it is given credit for. He lists peacebuilding, treaty making, arms control, regional institutions beyond the US, and especially 'economic statecraft that is more judicious about coercion and combats upstream causes of war like kleptocracy, oligarchy, widespread worker precarity, and climate maladaptation' as more deserving of attention in Washington's toolkit. Jackson finds it significant that over the period of his professional career in the defence establishment, America chose to put itself on the periphery of Asia's structures of political economy. He sees US culpability in pushing economic reforms that created conditions of vulnerability leading to the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Specifically, the 'Washington Consensus' (deregulation and minimal capital interference) encouraged speculative capital flows and currency appreciation that exacerbated the crisis. 'Shock therapy' treatments coordinated at the IMF by the US Treasury subsequently destabilised economies and politics (e.g. in Malaysia). The resulting legacy of distrust encouraged Asians to use solutions not reliant on the USA, such as regional arrangements and making the PRC their main economic partner. This economic alienation

was therefore established even before the American Congress turned against multilateral trade agreements and President Trump pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Jackson's central prescription for American statecraft towards Asia is to switch from military primacy to investing in steps to stabilise what he sees as a glaringly underestimated source of the Asian peace: a more socially sustainable regional (including Chinese) political economy. The threat of PRC hegemony he sees as overblown by failure to adequately weigh the factors that naturally work against it. These are the sheer size and diversity of the region, and the agency of Asian states that produces a higher than estimated level of organic balancing. Taken together, these effectively render the region 'unconquerable'. So rather than rely on military primacy to recapture a lost hegemony for itself, the aim of US statecraft should be to support states nearest to and most affected by PRC revisionism to assume prime responsibility for maintaining an effective balance against Beijing's attempts at hegemony. On Taiwan specifically, Jackson argues Beijing is anyway already deterred from unification by force, and America has military predominance over the PRC in every part of the world except for the Taiwan Strait. There geography dictates it cannot hope to achieve local superiority over China at a cost proportionate to the reward.

The bare-boned realist reasoning and lack of Asia-specific texture in *Strategy of Denial* throws Colby's analysis into contrast with that of the 'Pacific Power Paradox'. But what the former lacks in local colour, it makes up for with clarity of policy prescription. Colby's central argument is that China seeks hegemony over Asia. And success in that aim is antithetical to US core interests—maintaining a level of national prosperity that sustains internal social stability and provides the means for America's international security. The US should therefore act as the cornerstone balancing power at the head of an anti-hegemonic coalition, maintaining and strengthening its forward military presence to prevent the PRC from dominating Asia, and gaining the power to shut America out of the region.

The certainty of Colby's reasoning is questionable on some points. For instance, the notion that a large part of the justification for defending what he calls 'quasi ally' Taiwan is that preserving the credibility of the US could also be turned into the counterargument: that the better protection for US credibility would be to avoid making any commitments to its defence. Colby also assumes a Sino-US war would be containable and limited to conventional battle. He deals with the cross-strait security dilemma by asserting that so long as the leaders in Beijing know America only intends to prevent China achieving hegemony (not aiming to change its regime, or occupying it or breaking it up), they will come to accept Taiwan being kept within the US defensive line. Jackson specifies the link between the oligarchic political economy of Communist China and the rise of aggressive nationalism, arguing that the latter is what is driving aggression by Beijing. As a realist, Colby assumes this is the natural behaviour of a rising power, so only influenced by a countervailing fear of military defeat.

The big question about Colby's strategy is how many Asian partners want to join his anti-hegemonic coalition? In the end, the definition he offers of hegemony—'a state exercises authority over other states and extracts benefits from them, but without the responsibilities or risks of direct control'—comes to sound not too different from his prescription for American statecraft.

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Jackson's and Colby's remedies may appear as fully divergent alternatives, but they are not. Jackson argues against primacy, but he doesn't suggest America abandon Taiwan, which brings us back to ambiguity.

Strategic ambiguity is generally seen as harbouring two kinds of disadvantage. It can mask genuine uncertainty, which is a problem for the policymakers themselves. But an even bigger problem is when the mask slips and opponents glimpse indecision. When that happens and the bluff is called, you have to make a quick decision, most likely with

little time for planning and preparation. This incentivises the enemy to make a quick strike to achieve a fait accompli. Failure of strategic ambiguity throws the paralysis that it was supposed to create in the mind of the enemy back at you.

Ambiguity only deserves the qualifier 'strategic' when it covers a policy where we know what we would actually be willing to do. But when it comes to cases like Taiwan, when the national interest conflicts with broader principles or loftier humanitarian values, it is rare for leaders to openly justify the rejection of one for the other. Ambiguity—not so much the kind we signal to an adversary, as the kind we need for ourselves—lets us feel like we can keep both, and softens the contradictions that might arise from trying to do so. How often is ambiguity a mechanism for resolving a necessary harmony between things that can otherwise be a source of internal division and weakness, rather than a deliberate policy designed to keep the other side guessing?

There is another problem that weighs more or less heavily, depending on the political system. Strategic ambiguity erodes the democratic accountability that is such an important source for legitimising the use of force. The costs for a democratic system that tries to make use of strategic ambiguity may in some ways be higher than for an authoritarian system. In both cases, the public may not know if this ambiguity is strategically purposeful or simply a veil for indecision, but open societies have more chance of finding out.

When the domestic audience is kept in a state of ignorance and uncertainty about the commitment its government makes about war and peace, that might matter less in an unfree society where the popular will is expected to respond to top-down guidance, rather than the other way around. When it comes to the American demos, strategic ambiguity offers a tempting alibi for avoiding a democratic conversation weighing America's national interests against the costs of war with the PRC. This may store up problems for the day when deterrence fails or the bluff is called. All

kinds of enabling actions that support mobilisation (legal frameworks, logistics, morale) can be in a state of unreadiness.

President Biden can say America will come to Taiwan's defence, just not from entirely firm constitutional ground. America's separation of powers extends to war powers, which are divided between the executive and the legislative branches. Congress has a say. And presidents sometimes face a hard task to convince it; witness the case of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that President Lyndon B. Johnson needed to bring the country into the Vietnam War. By the time that war ended, Congress had further empowered itself through the 1973 War Powers Resolution, which further limited the authority of the president to wage war independent of congressional approval.

If the PRC invades Taiwan without attacking US forces, the crisis will not rise to the level of 'a national emergency created by attack upon the United States, its territories or possessions, or its armed forces'.[5] Theoretically, a president would have to notify Congress within forty-eight hours of committing armed forces to military action, and gain congressional authorisation for their use within sixty days. The Kosovo case is an example of a president coming under pressure to comply with a withdrawal time limit, even during a hot conflict. In the case of Libya, Obama used the argument that campaign leadership had passed to NATO, against the charge that he had exceeded his powers. In the case of a war with China, no such cover would be available. With his repeated pledges to come to Taiwan's defence, President Biden has stoked public expectations about what he would order the military to do in advance of congressional approval.

Leaving aside international law, what is the basis in domestic constitutional law for an American president to engage in armed conflict against the PRC in defence of Taiwan, in a scenario where American forces have not been attacked? One could conclude from the ways presidents have worked through this process over the last fifty years (including wars

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5   War Powers Resolution, 7 November 1973.

in Kuwait, Kosovo, and Libya) that it simply doesn't matter. Congress will come along after the president's decision, and the Supreme Court will side with the executive. However, there are reasons to question this assurance that presidential authority provides the control needed to handle the risks of strategic ambiguity. First, these uses of military force over the last half-century were small affairs in comparison to war against the vast conventional and strategic nuclear power of the PRC. Second, Congress has been roused to action by the way successive administrations have stretched the authorisation given over to use force after 9/11 (now removed after twenty years). Representative Michael McCaul (Senate Foreign Affairs Committee chairman) has said if China invaded Taiwan, sending US forces into the fight 'would be discussed by Congress and with the American people'.[6] Third, lawmakers can erode ambiguity from another direction, by removing legal barriers to presidential action. A bill 'to authorise the President to use military force for the purpose of security and defending Taiwan against armed attack, and for other purposes', also known as the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act, has been drafted by Senator Rick Scott of Florida and sponsored by Congressman Guy Reschenthaler in the US House of Representatives.[7]

Logistics and military planning is another area where strategic ambiguity can be risky when answerable to an open society and accountable institutions. If America had an unambiguous commitment to defend Taiwan, it would already have deployed a lot more force to the region than it has. Ukraine's resistance to Russian invasion has offered a reminder of how much material and munitions must be stockpiled ready for use in a conventional conflict with a large military like that of the PRC. As Colby points out, America is simply not ready for war over Taiwan.

Finally, strategic ambiguity may make for a good strategy at an abstract level, but create risks for planning and mobilisation—and liabilities for strategic communications. The problem with Colby's advice is that attachment to ambiguity will remain strong among Americans who are

6   Bing West, 'Taiwan: No Way Out', *National Review*, 15 April 2023.

7   Congress.gov, 'Text - S.332 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act',
     22 February 2021.

uncertain about the need for clear commitment to risk all-out war over a state that is not even a treaty ally. A US Congress that cannot agree to ban TikTok might not be ready to vote to wage World War III.[8] The problem with Jackson's advice is it requires a consensus about the hierarchy of objectives in US statecraft towards Asia that is equally elusive.

When choosing a policy of strategic ambiguity, it pays to be attentive about what audiences judge us to be ambiguous about. The risk with Washington's policy here is that it sends all the wrong signals. On one level, it tells the PRC that you have hostile intentions. It tells the Taiwanese that you see them as an object or an instrument of competition. It makes allies wonder about how reliable you are. But on the broadest level it tells everyone that you have not really figured out what you represent.

The problem is that strategic ambiguity signals the characteristics of a subjective, unprincipled, self-interested role in international security that is in conflict with the kind of profile any outside power would want in order to win over support in the Indo-Pacific today. In the late Cold War, the prize of abandoning Taiwan was a grand coalition with the PRC against the USSR. Even if it looked Machiavellian, at least it looked smart. Today, however, ambiguity about Taiwan may suggest America or Europe are both unsure of their own military power, and yet willing to equivocate on the principles of international order when that serves their self-interest. These signals inform judgements of whether a power is attempting to offer leadership or hegemony.

It is hard to reconcile strategic ambiguity, which is designed to cloud intentions, with a clear narrative about the purpose of one's statecraft in the region. In the case of Japan, for instance, the narrative device of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' has been successful partly because it describes what Japan stands for in simple, clear words, but also in terms of a common good. It has coherence because it fits with the actions of the Japanese government and civilian actors. Compare this with strategic ambiguity, which risks signalling something about your purpose that

8   West, 'Taiwan'.

is the opposite of clear, simple, and benign. It is hard to correlate with conduct, because it is precisely designed to separate discernible actions from likely intentions, and to resist proofs as much as disproofs. Its defenders might argue that it is benign because it produces stability, which is generally welcomed. But to this must be added the danger that it signals a callous Machiavellian orientation towards the region, where something like the Taiwan question is made into an object or an instrument of policy, rather than treated with a standard of respect and decency set by espoused principles.

The case of Taiwan, then, suggests strategic ambiguity may be something of a liability, at least in terms of strategic communications.

Reconciling the role of strategic ambiguity with successful strategic communications probably requires a well-developed vision of aims and a hierarchy of objectives in the approach to statecraft. Kissinger's formulation of simple questions a US president must answer are among the most practical guides available from theorists: 'What are we trying to achieve, even if we must pursue it alone?' and 'What are we trying to prevent, even if we must combat it alone?' That is perhaps more applicable to a superpower than to European states or institutions like the EU. Musings voiced now about Taiwan (following visits by European leaders to Beijing) tend to be more rhetorical and negative: 'What we must avoid is …; the worst thing would be …' This suggests how far we are from formulating questions that perform the desired focusing function. When these questions have been not just asked but answered, the differentiated effects of ambiguity on audiences at home, in the public and private sphere, and abroad, both in allied and adversary communities, would need to be weighed in the balance to decide on its use. Rather than formally revoking the position of ambiguity, or communicating an intention to fight the PRC on the beaches and landing grounds of Taiwan by reorganising the US military around that scenario, consideration should be given to a more broadly strategic framing of what Taiwan signifies in the context of American, but also

European, relationships with China, and the objectives and framing of statecraft towards the Indo-Pacific at large.

Strategic ambiguity was a policy approach born out of a tactical compromise with China in service of a larger strategy of rivalry with the Soviet Union. As that strategic arrangement has been turned upside down by the alignment of Beijing and Moscow, the Taiwan question is coming off the shelf. More broadly, strategic ambiguity looks like bad strategic communications because, by camouflaging motivation and commitment, it obscures the values of the speaker (i.e. their hierarchy of interests), depriving the audience of a sense of who they are listening to, and sabotaging the potential for trust. That does not mean that strategic ambiguity is entirely redundant. It does suggest, however, that the potential for it to damage other interests should be taken into account, and its application adjusted accordingly.

Sanctions, Communication, and Ambiguity

A Review Essay by Alastair Morgan

The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War
Nicholas Mulder. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022.

Backfire: How Sanctions Reshape the World against U.S. Interests
Agathe Demarais. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

Sanctions: What Everyone Needs to Know
Bruce W. Jentleson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

The Political Economy of Sanctions: Resilience and Transformation in Russia and Iran
Ksenia Kirkham. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022.

About the Author
Alastair Morgan is a Tokyo College Ushioda Fellow of the University of Tokyo and a Visiting Senior Research Fellow of King's College London. He was British Ambassador in Pyongyang from 2015 to 2018 and Coordinator of the UN 1874 Panel of Experts on DPRK sanctions from 2019 to 2021. The views expressed in this article are those of the author.

I am writing this on the anniversary of Russia's 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which the threat of sanctions had failed to deter. Following the invasion, the widest ever multilateral grouping of nations (if we leave to one side the obligation that exists for all UN Member States to implement UN Security Council sanctions), acting jointly and severally, have imposed on Russia economic and non-economic sanctions of exceptional scope and severity, including embargoes and

energy boycotts, systemic financial sanctions, and sanctions targeted against numerous entities and individuals. (Even so, as has frequently been pointed out, although the countries imposing sanctions account for well over 50 per cent of global GDP, countries which have not imposed sanctions account for considerably more than half the world's population.) The imposition of sanctions, in the face of countersanctions from Russia and high economic and social costs for the sanctioning states, has been an unprecedented demonstration of unity and resolve by Western nations, with some others, in response to Russia's escalation of a brutal war, its existential threat to the sovereignty of a neighbouring state, and its disregard for the fundamental principles of the UN Charter. The sanctions have undoubtedly imposed significant economic and material costs on Russia, affecting its ability to deploy military equipment and to finance the costs of its war. As Russia continues its war, so sending states continue to impose new sanctions, in a strategy designed to counteract loopholes and to ratchet up pressure.

But despite all that, none of the four authors whose works are featured in this review essay has, to my knowledge, suggested that sanctions alone could coerce Russia (convince Putin) to end the war. Nicholas Mulder, for instance, seeking in November 2022 to temper some unrealistic expectations, applies historical experience to suggest that sanctions against an economy as large as Russia's are not likely on their own either to deter war or to bring about its swift end. Rather, he regards the current sanctions as a complement to fierce Ukrainian military resistance, equipped by growing quantities of NATO materiel. Bruce Jentleson and Agathe Demarais have made similar observations, while (to simplify) Ksenia Kirkham has shown how earlier rounds of sanctions against Russia have had the contrary effect of hardening resistance.

What these authors' works help to provide is perspective. Their books give mostly complementary accounts of the development and deployment of sanctions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They use case studies that go beyond recording the intended economic effects and the effectiveness (or otherwise) of sanctions, to include consideration

of significant unintended effects of sanctions and longer-term systemic consequences, together with assessments of how sanctions work (or how and why they may fail to do so). They offer reflections and sometimes prescriptions for policymakers, in an era of rapidly increasing recourse to sanctions as a coercive instrument between declaratory diplomacy and military action, but also of a correspondingly rapid decline in the successful achievement of their policy objectives.

While it is only rarely the case, if at all, that the authors refer to the deliberate use of ambiguity in strategic communications praxis concerning sanctions, time and again they point to the necessity when threatening or imposing sanctions of effective communication and engagement: internally, between senders, with third parties, and above all with targets. Reflecting on the failure of sanctions threats to deter Putin's 2022 invasion, Jentleson writes that:

> This experience reinforces other cases on the importance whenever sanctions are used for signaling to get past declaratory face value and assess prospects for success as a matter of strategic interaction. While policy makers may not know for sure how others perceive American signaling at that policy moment, it cannot be assumed that message sent is message received. (p. 194)

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In *The Economic Weapon,* Nicholas Mulder provides a meticulous and lucid history of the development of blockade as an economic weapon in World War I and, based on that experience and by the same administrators, the adoption of sanctions as a peacekeeping tool at the League of Nations in the interwar period. He chronicles the successful use of the threat of sanctions as a deterrent against Yugoslavia in 1921 and Greece in 1925, as well as the successful use of an oil embargo by the UK and US in 1940 to deter Franco's Spain from joining the Axis

powers. He sets out how, by contrast, in the 1930s sanctions failed to deter or prevent either the conquest of Ethiopia by Mussolini's Italy or Japan's military aggression in Northeast Asia. Indeed, he records how, instead of leading to the achievement of political goals, the application of sanctions at a time of economic depression resulted in a 'spiral of autarky' and military expansion. Although Mulder ends his history in 1945, he looks forward in his conclusion to the post-World War II period and the normalisation of sanctions as part of the everyday reality of international politics, including in particular 'the rising incidence and widening aims of sanctions under U.S. hegemony'.

In his conclusion, Mulder comments on the particular economic potency and the political limitations of US financial sanctions. Elsewhere, drawing on the experience of the 1930s, he has warned of the possible negative consequences, for all, of commodity sanctions and attempts to constrain China's technological and economic growth. Throughout *The Economic Weapon* he distinguishes between the *effects* of sanctions through the infliction of economic pain and their uncertain *efficacy* in achieving political ends. This dichotomy, and analysis of the mechanisms that either assist or thwart the transmission of effects into effectiveness, is central to all the books under review.

In *The Political Economy of Sanctions*, Ksenia Kirkham approaches the issue through a comparative analysis of Russia and Iran. She suggests that 'the effects of sanctions have been paradoxical: the target states have managed to adjust to external pressures, to develop external self-protection mechanisms and to mobilise domestic resources and remodel income and wealth distribution'. She positions her book as 'the first attempt to integrate welfare state research with structural analyses of counter-hegemonic evolution in the international system and with global power dynamics' (p. 3). It is a widely accepted (though less widely applied) conception that to evaluate the potential efficacy of sanctions over time it is necessary to conduct dynamic analysis of the target. For sanctions practitioners, this will almost invariably be from the perspective of the sender. Assessment from the perspective of the target, as in Kirkham's

study, is more often encountered in the field among aid agencies and human rights activists, concerned at the negative effects of sanctions on the civilian population. It is, I believe, other political economists who are likely to be best equipped to assess and critique the neo-Gramscian approach that Kirkham applies. For a general reader coming from a different tradition in the social sciences, or from none, the analytical framework and vocabulary of her approach might be forbidding. My own reading of Kirkham's book was painfully slow, as I faced frequent challenges to my assumptions, and paused to question the author's. For a more accessible introduction to Kirkham's thinking on sanctions, containing pertinent observations on the relationship between sanctions and communication, I would recommend starting with her article 'Sanctions—Strategic Miscommunication? The Case of Iran' (*Defence Strategic Communications*, vol. 7, Autumn 2019).

Bruce Jentleson sets out 'to blend a scholarly perspective and policy strategizing' in *Sanctions,* in the Oxford University Press 'What Everyone Needs to Know' series. Jentleson is exceptionally systematic and orderly in marshalling the material for his succinct text. He has produced a book that is at the same time approachable and a reliable work of reference. The text is relatively short but the notes (there is no bibliography) point to compendious research, directing the reader to academic studies, to government and to research institute reports, and less frequently to press reports. Jentleson starts his book by introducing 'scholarly debates and challenges' concerning sanctions, including how to measure the success of sanctions and how to explain their success or failure. He then applies questions posed in this first section (namely, what are the different types of sanctions, who are the key actors, why are sanctions imposed in terms of the policy objectives pursued, how are sanctions supposed to achieve their objectives) to numerous case studies of the use of sanctions by the United States, China, the Soviet Union and Russia, the United Nations, and the European Union, as well as historical cases involving other senders.

I took a particular interest in three sets of case studies. One is the treatment of friction (and now, over Nord Stream 2, cooperation) between the US and Europe over sanctions against oil and gas pipelines from Russia to Western Europe, a subject on which Jentleson has written at greater length elsewhere. Among my own earliest responsibilities as a British official was administration of the Protection of Trading Interests Act 1980, the blocking statute that the Thatcher government introduced as a countermeasure to the extraterritorial application of US sanctions against the Siberian natural gas pipeline. Although there were no comparable disputes in my time, my experience still left me with an abiding wariness concerning the reach of US autonomous sanctions. The second is Jentleson's examination of why it was possible to achieve an agreement with Iran in 2015 during the Obama Administration, and why, after US withdrawal from the agreement, the Trump Administration's application of even harsher economic sanctions failed to achieve its more far-reaching political objectives. The third is China's evolving and expanding use of sanctions and economic coercion, of which I have had some direct experience at the receiving end.

I think it is instructive to read Agathe Demarais's *Backfire* and Jentleson's *Sanctions* together. Demarais traverses much of the same terrain, though travelling in a different style. Jentleson sets out how sanctions may 'backfire', leading target regimes to crack down; 'misfire', where they hit the wrong people in the target country; 'cross-fire', where they raise disputes with allies; and 'shoot in the foot', where the sender state itself ends up bearing economic and sometimes political costs. Demarais covers all the above in *Backfire*. Jentleson does not offer 'a single parsimonious theory or off-the-shelf action plan' for the transmission of economic impact into political change. He does, though, assess factors that bear on this, and indeed contributed to the Biden Administration's US Treasury 2021 Sanctions Review, which sought to apply them. Demarais writes that 'experience shows that four factors may help to determine whether sanctions might work or not' (though really her enumeration includes at least five factors, and she varies the list as she repeats it). She suggests that sanctions work fast or never, are more likely to be effective when

they have a narrow purpose, target partners with trade or security ties to the United States (the presumed sender), and have multilateral support. Under her third factor she introduces a fifth: the existence of a degree of democracy in the target and, not necessarily exactly the same thing, the possibility of expressing dissent and influencing the leadership and its decision-making. Most of these factors chime with Jentleson's more heavily caveated assessments and case studies.

An exception is the first, where some long-running cases, such as anti-apartheid sanctions against South Africa, have eventually succeeded. Demarais expounds at greater length, and in more colourful detail, many of the cases that are included by Jentleson, as well as some that are not. Her treatment of friction between the US and the EU is particularly vivid. She deals at greater length than Jentleson with US financial sanctions and with developments in the international financial sector, in part precipitated by US sanctions, that might in the long run undermine the US primacy on which its ability to impose financial sanctions rests. (Jentleson refers to US Treasury consideration of these issues and concerns.) Demarais concludes with an extensive and forward-looking consideration of US controls over high-technology exports to China, and of the dangers for the US of 'decoupling'. This foray extends beyond Jentleson's limited treatment of sanctions against Huawei, venturing closer to the domain of Chris Miller's *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology.*

Demarais writes with verve and panache. Her exposition is fluid and vivid and can be read at pace for pleasure and instruction. She can, though, appear slightly cavalier with facts, which sometimes appear to be stylised for increased impact or narrative flow. To give an example, in her treatment of the US Treasury's 2005 action against Banco Delta Asia, she describes the bank as the sole conduit for North Korea's international banking transactions. This has been disputed, though it is true that the action against Banco Delta Asia impeded the DPRK's access to other banks. She states that 'The United States had no intention of freezing the accounts that North Korea held in Banco Delta Asia. At

any rate, the United States had not jurisdiction to do so.' That may be so, but the Macanese authorities froze $25m dollars in the North Korean accounts, allegedly at the instigation of the US Treasury, and North Korean attempts to recover the funds then became a major issue between themselves and the United States. Demarais states that with the action taken against Banco Delta Asia 'the concept of financial sanctions, which target banking ties, was born'. The concept of financial sanctions was not new. Nicolas Mulder records the development of banking surveillance and intervention as part of the Anglo-French blockade in World War I. US financial sanctions of a different kind (refusal and blocking of debt finance) was central to the pressure the US applied on the British government to lead it to abandon its special military operation to seize the Suez Canal in 1956. Demarais is not alone, however, in seeing the action against Banco Delta Asia as pivotal, both in the evolution of US financial sanctions and in potential negative systemic consequences of their deployment.

A more serious example, perhaps, is Demarais's broad-brush depiction of the objective of US sanctions against North Korea:

> US Sanctions against North Korea, which initially took the form of a trade embargo, date back to the Korean War in the early 1950s. Since then, the objective of these penalties—fostering regime change in Pyongyang—has never changed. (p. 8)

Kim Jong Un would very likely agree with this assessment, with the consequence that he could never achieve the lifting of US sanctions, and he is probably not alone in that. Nevertheless, the actual or ostensible objectives of subsequent sets of US sanctions, including the UN Security Council sanctions implemented by the US, are not to secure regime change. President Trump, in his summitry with Kim Jong Un, made clear that he was not seeking regime change. The Biden Administration has been explicit that it does not hold a hostile policy towards North Korea. When the US Special Representative for the DPRK was asked

recently whether the administration believed that it was possible to secure North Korean denuclearisation without regime change, he replied that it did.[1] Others might demur.

* * *

What then of sanctions and ambiguity in strategic communications praxis? The word sanction can have opposite meanings (official approval and permission for an action; a penalty threatened or imposed in respect of a transgressive action), making it a potential basis for William Empson's seventh type of ambiguity, 'the most ambiguous that can be conceived, … when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind'. The existence of these opposite meanings is a reflection of the historical development of the concept of sanctions, as carefully articulated by Nicholas Mulder. While the prevalent current use of economic sanctions, practically as well as lexically, is negative, the founders of the League of Nations originally conceived of sanctions as a negative and positive pairing, where a potential aggressor would face negative sanctions and the potential victim of aggression would be supported by positive sanctions (as now with Russia and Ukraine). Although they may not amount precisely to ambiguities, there are areas of contradiction and ambivalence in the use of sanctions which are in part a legacy of their history: a tool conceived as a weapon of war used as a peacetime, peacekeeping instrument; a wartime instrument initially intended for the achievement of political ends by inflicting pain on a civilian population, now generally aimed elsewhere and containing humanitarian exemptions (though often, and in many case inevitably even if not intentionally, causing wider harm).

Regardless of these inherent contradictions, the constructive uses of ambiguity in strategic communications concerning sanctions are limited, while the risks of ambiguity are considerable.

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1   Ambassador Sung Kim, US Special Representative for the DPRK, interviewed on Voice of America, February 2023.

Those imposing sanctions may do so, wholly though more likely in part, to be seen to respond to a transgression, and perhaps to send a signal to deter others, even when they harbour doubts about the probable effectiveness of the sanctions they impose. Their communication concerning these sanctions, directed domestically and at third parties as well as the target, may be correspondingly ambiguous. One could say of this that the gestural use of sanctions without anticipated effectiveness is likely to weaken the tool for future use, while claims that are subsequently discounted degrade communication and trust.

Leaders may have recourse to strategic ambiguity when seeking to deter with a threat of sanctions, as some claim was the case in respect of the EU (though not the US) in advance of Russia's 2022 invasion. This may be unavoidable when there is at the time no consensus on what sanctions should be imposed, or there are legal processes that cannot yet be completed. It may also be required when there is something ambiguous about the actions of the sanctions target, so that the precise nature of the threat is unclear and may manifest in different forms. There is, however, the considerable risk that the potential target will interpret the sender's ambiguity as evidence instead of confusion, disagreement, indecision, or lack of resolve. If so, the potential target will most likely discount the threat, eliminating its effectiveness as a deterrent.

Those drafting sanctions may deliberately (as well as sometimes inadvertently) avoid precisely clarifying their exact scope, thereby creating ambiguity. This might be done to safeguard the potential for legal enforcement in different circumstances, including some which may at the time be unforeseen. It might be done to prevent gaming of sanctions by the target (or third parties). It might also be done—and in some cases I believe has been done—deliberately to increase uncertainty among third parties, to magnify the effect of sanctions by securing over-compliance by financial and other institutions that are not prepared to face the regulatory risk of possible under-compliance. The potential negative consequences of this approach, first for targets and third parties but ultimately for senders, are well captured by Jentleson and Demarais.

A further use of ambiguity is what Jentleson, in his substantial treatment of China's use of sanctions and economic coercion, calls '(non)plausible deniability'. China has frequently applied or cued economic sanctions as the means towards foreign policy ends. This allows Chinese officials on the one hand to claim that China opposes US and other unilateral sanctions, while applying sanctions itself. The practice is somewhat peculiar in that Chinese officials often seem unconcerned by the implausibility of the denials, content to be seen asserting that black is white so long as they can catch their mouse.

Although ambiguity may have some limited utility in strategic communications concerning sanctions (indeed for the target as well as the sender, for example to conceal the negative impact of sanctions or to heighten the sender's perception of itself facing retaliatory risks or failure), in every case there is a downside. A key risk relates to the critical gap between effect and the effectiveness of sanctions, between the imposition of economic pain and achievement of the policy change that it is intended to induce. Failures in strategic communications may be a contributing factor. If the sender does not clearly, convincingly, and unambiguously articulate the objectives of sanctions, and in particular what action it is that the target must take or refrain from to avoid the imposition of sanctions or to have them lifted, then the target is less likely to comply. Indeed, as the authors show, the target may in some cases conclude that there is nothing that it can do that would get the sanctions lifted, so it might as well persist in its course of action in pursuit of its own objectives. Jentleson, bringing in also other important factors, puts the issue this way:

> Closing that economic impact-policy compliance gap
> depends heavily on the sanctions having reciprocity
> and proportionality. Given that sanctions, like
> other forms of coercive diplomacy, are a strategy for
> influencing not denying the target's choices, there
> must be terms of exchange based on a shared belief
> that if you do x, I will do y. The diplomatic crafting

> must be both firm enough that the target does
> not think it can get the benefits without having to
> reciprocate, and assured enough that the target can
> be confident that the reciprocal measures will follow.
> (p. 192)

* * *

I was in Pyongyang on 8 May 2018 when President Trump withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. I was asked by British Foreign Office officials for my views on the implications for US negotiations with Pyongyang. My assessment was that this would make little difference. Certainly, the US withdrawal demonstrated that partners to an international agreement with the US could not rely on a successor administration to honour what was agreed by a previous administration. This was, however, already the unshakable view of North Korean officials from their own past negotiating experience, just as based on *their* experience there was little trust by US officials that North Korea would honour any agreement it reached. I had already found North Korean officials dismissive of the JCPOA, refusing to accept that the approach could have any application on the Korean Peninsula. Early in 2016 I had passed over a copy of the text to a senior Workers' Party official, commending it. He had brusquely handed it straight back. It was around this time that the Iranian ambassador in Pyongyang gave a speech citing the JCPOA as a demonstration that no problem was too difficult for resolution by diplomacy. The immediate response by a North Korean minister was defiant, restating emphatically North Korea's own commitment to developing and maintaining nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, for all that, Kim Jong Un instigated a diplomatic change of tack in 2018. On 27 April the leaders of South and North Korea signed a declaration in which the two sides confirmed 'the common goal of realising, through complete denuclearisation, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula'. This was followed in June 2018 by the US–North Korea Summit in Singapore where, referring to this April declaration,

Kim Jong Un committed to 'work towards complete denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula'.

On 19 September 2018 I found myself seated next to the Iranian ambassador in the Pyongyang May Day stadium. It was in the middle of the day, during a pause between events marking the visit to Pyongyang of South Korean President Moon Jae-In. That evening I would be back in the stadium, seated slightly behind and above Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-In, for a celebratory display of mass athletics, with children performing as human pixels to create a giant image of the two leaders shaking hands, as well as other images of reconciliation. That same day, North and South Korea had issued a joint declaration in which they agreed to cooperate in the process of pursuing complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. This was encouraging, but I remember two other things from the middle of that day.

The first was that the Iranian ambassador, in our conversation, stressed that it was not enough for European governments to stick with the JCPOA. For the agreement to have any meaning, European companies needed to return to do business in Iran. The second was that, as we were speaking, North Korean officials circulated the text of a lengthy statement issued following a meeting of, I think, the Praesidium of the Politburo of the Workers' Party. The document was meant to be read abroad—it would not otherwise have been circulated in English—but it appeared to be directed primarily at Workers' Party cadres. It contained a reference to the achievement under Kim Jong Un of 'the treasured sword', a term often used by North Korea to refer obliquely to its nuclear weapons capability. I read it as implying that, whatever might have been said elsewhere that day, North Korea did not intend to denuclearise. It turned out to be just five months later, in February 2019, that negotiations between the US and North Korea broke down in Hanoi over Kim Jong Un's demand for the lifting of all the UN Security Council sanctions agreed in 2016 and 2017 in return for eliminating the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.

There is strategic ambiguity in the non-committal commitment to denuclearisation (quoted above) which Kim Jong Un gave at the Singapore Summit. The wording is open-ended in a way that previous agreements reached with North Korea had not been (though they were subsequently breached and abandoned).[2] President Trump, President Moon Jae-in, and possibly President Xi Jinping nevertheless chose to take Kim Jong Un at more than his word. Their confidence in the meaning of Kim's commitment might perhaps have been tested further had there been no breakdown at Hanoi. But in the wake of that breakdown Kim Jong Un has eliminated most of the ambiguity. He has committed North Korea to retaining its nuclear weapons capability indefinitely, stating that there will be no change to this stance unless the world changes. He has also said that there will be no further negotiations, stating that in his view no US President will agree to lift sanctions.

The failure to reach agreement at the Hanoi Summit was pivotal. That failure was in part a consequence of a prior failure of strategic communications, largely of North Korea's making. Kim Jong Un agreed to negotiate with the US, while at the same time North Korea made genuine negotiations below the summit level impossible. Admittedly, President Trump's own messaging also on occasions undermined his officials. However, it was a strategic failure by Kim Jong Un to go to Hanoi believing that he could secure from President Trump the sanctions relief package that he sought, for the offer on the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon that he was prepared to make, and this was precipitated by the self-inflicted failure of communication.

Kim's misconception was clear to others at the time. My counterpart the Russian ambassador in Pyongyang commented that Kim Jong Un should know that the lifting of all economic sanctions was not something he could secure at Hanoi. If there was a strategic failure on the US side, it was not in the rejection of Kim Jong Un's proposal (despite the dire

2   For example, the 'Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks, Beijing, September 19, 2005' contains the following much less ambiguous wording: 'The DPRK committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards.'

consequences), but rather in allowing the Hanoi Summit to proceed in the first place, when essential prior communication and exchange had been blocked by North Korea.

My own role in the sanctions process and communication was circumscribed. As British ambassador in Pyongyang I was asked by the Foreign Office in London, as well as on visits to Washington and other capitals, to report on the evidence in-country of the economic impact of sanctions and of sanctions evasion. I was also expected to report on the likely political consequences. (It seemed to me that while much consideration was given in Washington and other capitals as to how sanctions might influence the behaviour of North Korean elites and the leadership, much of the thinking was highly speculative.) I was also invited by Foreign Office officials to comment internally on draft texts of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly from the perspective of potential impact on the operations of the embassy in Pyongyang, though in the event it was usually Russian not British officials in New York who secured any diplomatic exemptions. It was a key part of my role to use every opportunity I could obtain to press North Korean officials on denuclearisation and on human rights. Despite North Korean rhetoric in 2016 and 2017 about the alleged existential threat it faced from a hostile US, I had been told by a senior Workers' Party official that they believed the US would never dare to attack. My repeated point to North Korean officials was that even if they were correct that the US would not take pre-emptive military action, they could never achieve the dual-track policy goals of developing in parallel their nuclear weapons programme and, under sanctions, their economy.

UN sanctions were among the factors that led Kim Jong Un to change tack in 2018: certainly, at Hanoi he was seeking relief from sanctions. But there is nothing to suggest that sanctions will again bring Kim Jong Un to the negotiating table—just as there is little or nothing to indicate that they remain an effective constraint on the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile programmes they were designed to eliminate. Dialogue, ambiguous or otherwise, is at an end, though communication of a kind

continues through declarations and escalating displays of capability. Even the Security Council has ceased any collective external communication, with Russia and China blocking agreement to statements as they are blocking designations and resolutions. There is no obvious solution.

Geopolitics by Metaphor: The Sweet Spot between Specificity and Ambiguity

Leonie Haiden

About the Author

Dr Leonie Haiden works on the Policy Planning Staff of the Austrian Foreign Ministry and is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the King's Centre for Strategic Communications at King's College London. The views expressed in this article are the author's and do not represent those of the Austrian government.

Abstract

With ongoing war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis, looming climate emergency, breakthroughs in AI technology, and the return of great-power politics, the present and coming years will be a time of conceptual realignment, of finding new language to describe, understand, and operate in a 'new world order'. I propose this process begins with metaphor. In a time of uncertainty, it may seem counterintuitive to focus on a linguistic device as inherently ambiguous as metaphor. But it is this ambiguity that allows metaphors to bridge policy pragmatism and strategic vision. Foregrounding the tension between the pull of old, familiar metaphors ('new Cold War') and the desire for new conceptual frameworks ('polycrisis'), this article takes stock of the 'state' of geopolitical metaphors today. It interrogates the appeal of Cold War language in a time of geo-metaphorical vacuum. It also highlights simultaneous

attempts to inject complexity theory into current discourse on geopolitics and asks what we may learn from the first 'post-Cold War president', Jimmy Carter. How can we formulate new geopolitical metaphors that harness the strategic ambiguity of metaphor and become storytellers of democracy once more?

In October 2022 High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, Josep Borrell, gave a speech to the New European Diplomatic Academy in Bruges. It was brimming with metaphors:

> Europe is a *garden*. The rest of the world […] is not exactly a *garden*. Most of the rest of the world is a *jungle*, and the *jungle* could invade the garden.[1]

In the days following these remarks, Borrell was accused of colonialism and racism inherent in his metaphorical juxtaposition of a non-European 'jungle' and a civilised, European 'garden'.[2] The United Arab Emirates even summoned the acting head of the mission at the EU delegation to the UAE, condemning Borrell's remarks as 'inappropriate and discriminatory' and demanding an explanation.[3] In response, Borrell published a blogpost on the EEAS website—striking a tone halfway between a defence and an apology—where he reflected on the metaphor and explained his intentions in using it. What he had meant to express by 'jungle', Borrell explained, was an increasingly 'lawless world and disorder'. More explicitly he meant the use of 'force, intimidation and blackmail' by countries to achieve their aims, nowhere expressed more viscerally than in Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine.[4]

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1   Josep Borrell, 'European Diplomatic Academy: Opening Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the Inauguration of the Pilot Programme', Bruges, European External Action Service, 13 October 2022. Emphasis added.

2   Suzanne Lynch, 'Sorry, Not Sorry: EU's Top Diplomat Stands Firm amid Racism Backlash', *Politico*, 19 October 2022.

3   'Borrell Denies "Jungle" Comments Were Racist', *Euractiv*, 18 October 2022.

4   Josep Borrell, 'On Metaphors and Geo-politics', *EU External Action Service*, 18 October 2022.

This episode perfectly captures the potentially far-reaching consequences of a carelessly used metaphor—a case of ambiguity being neither persuasive nor strategic, but leading to misunderstanding and resistance. Ideally, the use of metaphor supports the argument of the speaker without the audience even consciously noticing it. But in this case metaphor distracted from and even undermined what its speaker sought to express in the first place. With his horticultural metaphor, Borrell wanted to give a colourful framing to the dangers the Russian invasion of Ukraine posed to the future of the European Union. But even besides the neocolonialist flavour of his metaphor, the juxtaposition between garden and jungle created an us-vs-them dichotomy that did not seem like an accurate reflection of reality, given that not all countries can (or want to) be divided into a pro-Western or pro-Putin camp. Moreover, the metaphor seems inappropriate in the context of the climate crisis. Are we not striving to leave more of nature *untouched*, rather than a garden cultivated by humans? Does 'garden' not suggest a domination of nature that goes against values of sustainability and conservation towards which environmental debates (including those of the EU) are trying to move?

This incident demonstrates the delicate—if not ambiguous—art involved in using metaphors. Borrell and his team probably intended to add colour and force to his statement by including the metaphor. They must have believed in the power of metaphor, otherwise Borrell could have simply expressed what he meant with more direct and literal language. They were perhaps trying to make sense of an international order in transition. But whereas the metaphorical comparison might have made sense within the confines of the speech, its ambiguity miscommunicated when released into the current zeitgeist.

Metaphors are always ambiguous; that is what makes them strategic and allows them to bridge the gap between the general and the specific, the present and the future. And despite their reception never being wholly predictable, if treated as elements of strategy and considered as part of a holistic view, they can be very influential.[5]

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5   Francis A. Beer and Christ'l De Landtsheer, *Metaphorical World Politics* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), p. 10.

Strategic communications is unique in merging the fields of geopolitics, influence, and communications. It is therefore the most suitable lens through which to study metaphors in geopolitics. Here strategic communications is defined as a *holistic approach* to communication based on *values and interests*, that seeks to achieve *overall objectives* by shaping *key discourses* in a *contested environment*.[6] Metaphors are crucial to the shaping of geopolitical discourses and are therefore an indispensable part of strategic communications.[7] This paper argues that, today, political elites are over-reliant on outdated metaphors of geopolitics. And that there is a pressing need for new metaphors to adequately reflect the complexities of the contemporary world.

New Language for a 'New World Order'

Overshadowed by Borrell's metaphor of 'gardens' and 'jungles' was his mention of Dean Acheson's memoir *Present at the Creation* and George F. Kennan. Borrell draws a comparison between the immediate post-war period, when US Cold War policy was taking shape, and the present geopolitical moment: 'we are definitely out of the Cold War and the post-Cold War' and living through 'a "moment of creation" of a new world'.[8] Recognising the present as a time between geopolitical 'orders', it is also no coincidence that Borrell highlights George Kennan in his speech. The US diplomat was the author of one of the most influential and order-defining metaphors of the twentieth century: containment. It is the transition from the post-Cold War order to a 'new world order' and the metaphors accompanying this shift that will be the centre of gravity of this paper.

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6   This definition builds on a NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group project, where this author is a contributor. Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 46.

7   Peter Faber, '<u>Competing Visions of Geopolitics? Follow the Metaphors!</u>', ETH Zurich, 5 December 2011 [accessed 20 January 2023].

8   Borrell, 'European Diplomatic Academy'. Borrell falsely attributes Dean Acheson's memoir *Present at the Creation* to George Kennan.

The present and coming years will be a time of conceptual realignment, of finding new language to describe, understand, and operate in a 'new world order'. As Børge Brende writes in *Foreign Affairs*: 'In this new and unsettled era, world leaders must adapt their understanding and practice of geopolitics'.[9] I propose this process begins with metaphor. Metaphors are the abstractions through which theories about geopolitics and international relations that underlie policy are understood.[10] In the words of Francis A. Beer and Christ'l De Landtsheer, 'Metaphors stand at the strategic intersection of language, ideas, and politics.'[11] They not only shape how 'we speak and hear, write and read about politics' but also how 'we think and feel about politics'.[12]

This article first elaborates why metaphor's inherent ambiguity makes it a central element of strategic communications and geopolitics. It continues by spotlighting the current revival of Cold War metaphors in attempts to give name to an international order in transition, the superpower struggle between Russia and the West, and the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China. It then highlights attempts to inject ideas from complexity theory into current discourse on geopolitics. Examining both developments against the history of dominant metaphors since the beginning of the Cold War, it takes stock of the 'state' of metaphor in geopolitics today. How can the West formulate new geopolitical metaphors in a climate of 'permacrisis'?

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9   Børge Brende, 'The Dawn of Stakeholder Geopolitics: National Interests, Global Ambitions', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 January 2023.

10   Beer and De Landtsheer, *Metaphorical World Politics*.

11   Ibid., p. 10.

12   Ibid.

Geopolitical Metaphors

Geopolitics is replete with metaphors. 'Hard' power and 'soft' power are each a metaphor. As is 'balance of power',[13] 'power vacuum',[14] 'domino effect',[15] and 'entanglement'.[16] Yet these terms are so commonly used and deeply rooted in geopolitical discourse among policymakers, commentators, and academics that they rarely register as metaphors, but rather as descriptions of the world 'out there'.[17] So, what is a metaphor and why do we not always see it, even when it is right in front of us?

At its simplest, a metaphor is a rhetorical device that describes one thing in terms of another. The etymology of 'metaphor' goes back to the Greek *metapherein* meaning 'to carry over'.[18] And what are being 'carried over' are characteristics from one domain to another. In William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Jaques speaks the lines 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players', comparing a human life to a theatre production.[19] In metaphor theory the theatre would be called the source domain (where language is taken from) and human life the target domain (where language is applied). As the speech continues, it draws on even more elements of a theatrical production:

> All the world's a *stage*,
> And all the men and women merely *players*;
> They have their *exits* and their *entrances*;
> And one man in his time *plays many parts*,
> His *acts* being seven ages.[20]

13   Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

14   Jakub Grygiel, 'Russia's War Has Created a Power Vacuum in Europe', *Foreign Policy*, 5 May 2022.

15   Think Tank European Parliament, *Domino Effects of the War*, Briefing, 3 June 2022.

16   Bruno Tertrais, 'Entangling Alliances? Europe, the United States, Asia, and the Risk of a New 1914', *Atlantic Council*, 27 June 2022.

17   Keith L. Shimko, 'The Power of Metaphors and the Metaphors of Power', in Beer and De Landtsheer, *Metaphorical World Politics*, p. 200.

18   Pradeep Sopory and James Price Dillard, 'The Persuasive Effects of Metaphor: A Meta-Analysis', *Human Communication Research* 28 Nº 3 (July 2002): 382.

19   William Shakespeare, 'Speech: "All the World's a Stage"', from *As You Like It*, spoken by Jaques, *The Poetry Foundation*.

20   Ibid. Emphasis added.

With each consecutive line Shakespeare extends the metaphor. He compares life and death to 'exits' and 'entrances' on a stage, and the stages of life to 'acts' in a play. The colourful and evocative world of the theatre becomes a model for human life, in itself a much more abstract and less graspable concept.

To find a more contemporary example of metaphor we need only look at a statement by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in which he warned that US politicians who 'play with fire' in relation to Taiwan will 'come to no good end'.[21] In 'playing with fire', the source domain is the act of playing and fire; the target domain is the relationship between the US and China. The US is presented as a reckless, immature, and potentially destructive actor in 'playing' with something it should not be playing with. Moreover, the metaphor carries an implicit warning that the US will get burned. But it is not quite so simple. What is China in this metaphor—the 'adult in the room' or the 'fire' itself? How do we know which characteristics to 'carry over' and where to stop drawing these comparisons? The answer is context.[22]

Because metaphors can have multiple meanings and resonances, creating ambiguity and even ambivalence, literary scholars devote attention to analysing and debating the meaning of metaphors. But for those engaged in strategic communications, the inherent ambiguity of metaphor can be an advantage. It means narrative can be encapsulated in just a single phrase, but still leave room for manoeuvre to adapt to new contexts. In other words, metaphor helps give shape to strategy without committing the speaker to a set plan. Take 'containment'. This was not only a guiding strategy but also a guiding metaphor during the Cold War, and had a different expression and emphasis with every Cold War US president. Hence 'containment' became the reason the Cold War is remembered and envied for having a coherent strategy that endured across decades, despite each successive president giving it his own 'twist' and foregrounding different aspects of the metaphor.

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21 'China Says U.S. Politicians Who "Play with Fire" on Taiwan Will Pay', *Reuters*, 2 August 2022 [accessed 4 February 2023].

22 Beer and De Landtsheer, *Metaphorical World Politics*, p. 7.

Metaphors have strategic potential, but they must be handled with care. Good use of metaphor depends on knowing one's audience well enough to anticipate how a metaphor might resonate with sub-audiences. But it also requires a deep understanding of existing metaphors and sensitivity to the nuances of language, which is especially challenging when metaphors are translated, or one is communicating with non-native speakers. In fact, the metaphor of 'containment' itself did not translate easily into Chinese. When the Johnson administration was formulating a policy of 'containment without isolation' in the mid 1960s, this phrase confused Chinese audiences in the ROC since news reporting translated 'containment' with a word that meant something closer to 'isolation'.[23]

The Power of Metaphor

The field of metaphor research outside literary studies is relatively young. When the linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, it was the first book devoted in its entirety to how metaphors influence the way people think. The authors suggested that 'metaphors can have the power to define reality. They […] highlight some features of reality and hide others.'[24]

Studies conducted by linguists have added empirical evidence to support these claims about the power of metaphors to shape how people think. The linguist Frank Boers conducted an experiment where he presented two groups of students with an economic problem-solving exercise involving two texts, each written using different metaphors. One problem-statement drew on metaphors of health, fitness, and racing, while the other text presented economic competition in terms of conflict and war. The results were revealing: students answered differently depending on the metaphor they had been exposed to and tended to suggest policies that could fit more easily into each of these metaphorical frameworks.

23 Arthur W. Hummel to national security advisor McGeorge Bundy, '183. Telegram from the Embassy in the Republic of China to the Department of State', Taipei, 6 April 1966, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 30, *China*.

24 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 157.

The first group was more likely to suggest policies to 'slim down' the economy, while the other group was more likely to consider starting a 'price war'.[25]

In a study by cognitive psychologist Paul Thibodeau and cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky, participants in the US were given short texts describing crime in the hypothetical city of Addison. One group was given a passage representing crime as a 'beast preying' on the city. In the other, crime was a 'virus' that had 'infected' the city. The results suggested that exposure to either of the two metaphors influenced views on crime, even more than participants' pre-existing Republican and Democratic leanings. Those who had been given the 'beast' metaphor were more likely to suggest punitive measures (prosecution of criminals and harsher enforcement laws) as a response, while those exposed to the 'virus' metaphor thought that reformative measures (investigating the causes of the issue, 'enacting social reform to inoculate the community with emphasis on eradicating poverty and improving education') were more adequate. But when asked for reasons that had influenced their answers, none of them mentioned the effect of metaphor.[26]

Good political metaphors feel instinctively right; they have an everyday, common-sense logic built into them and can thus convey a complex or abstract issue in familiar, everyday terms such as a sport competitions or infectious disease. But because these metaphors draw on fields of knowledge and experience outside the immediate topic at hand (the target domain), one must be careful to consider the resonances of the field from which one is 'importing' the metaphor (source domain). Were the same experiment about metaphorical framings of crime to be conducted today, the use of disease metaphors would likely remind people of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing restrictions to movement and public health regulations. In other words, how a certain metaphor resonates changes over time and will depend on the context

25   Frank Boers, ' "No Pain, No Gain' in a Free Market Rhetoric: A Test for Cognitive Semantics?', *Metaphor and Symbol* 12 № 4 (1997).

26   Paul H. Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky, 'Measuring Effects of Metaphor in a Dynamic Opinion Landscape', *PLoS ONE* 10 № 7 (2015).

and lived experience of the people hearing or reading it. In that sense, understanding audiences and thinking about how a communication will be received is essential when crafting effective metaphors.

Following this discussion of the power and pitfalls of metaphor's ambiguity, this article will now consider which metaphors dominate geopolitics today. As we find ourselves at a geopolitical inflection point, can metaphors inherited from the Cold War past adequately capture this new era of strategic rivalry?

'Never Really Over': From Post-Cold War Era to New Cold War?[27]

The year 2022 was one of the most turbulent and transformative since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and, according to academics and policymakers, marked the end of what had been termed the 'post-Cold War era'.[28]

It is not the first time that the end of the post-Cold War era has been declared. One such 'end' was already proclaimed in 1998 by NATO secretary general Javier Solana at the Munich Security Conference.[29] In his view the 'post-Cold War era' had come to an end and been replaced by 'a strategic consensus on the main pillars of our security in the next century', which consisted of 'a new transatlantic bargain between Europe and North America' and 'the need for a strong Russian involvement'.[30] A promising, hopeful vision. And yet this was only the beginning of the many end(ings) of the post-Cold War era.

27 Katy Perry, 'Never Really Over', *Smile*, Capitol Record, 2019.

28 Jo Inge Bekkevold, '5 Ways the U.S.-China Cold War Will Be Different from the Last One', *Foreign Policy*, 29 December 2022. Emma Ashford, 'It's Official: The Post-Cold War Era Is Over', *New York Times*, 24 February 2022.

29 'Speech by the Secretary General: "The End of the Post-Cold War Era"', XXXIV Munich Conference on Security Policy, Munich, 7–8 February 1998, NATO Publications.

30 Ibid.

Another end was declared following the 9/11 attacks. President Bush's speech to Congress on 20 September 2001 was even compared to President Truman's Greece and Turkey speech on 12 March 1947.[31] To many the 1990s were already simply a short intermission between 'eras of struggle' and a decade of economic prosperity and 'naïve liberal optimism'.[32] But despite another post-Cold War 'end' having been declared, the concept of a 'post-Cold War era' simply would not die—so much so that in 2008, following the global financial crisis and the Russian invasion of Georgia, it was declared again,[33] and yet again with the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.[34]

So, when Emma Ashford from Georgetown University announced the end of the post-Cold War era shortly after 24 February 2022, she emphasised that, despite its having been declared before, now it was *definitely* here:

> The world has witnessed several potential turning points signalling the end of the post-Cold War period: the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, with competition between the great powers triggering a major war on the European continent, we have it.[35]

Another reason to believe that this is indeed the end of the post-Cold War era is the US government's decision to place this assertion right at the top of the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS): 'We face two strategic challenges. The first is that the post-Cold War era is definitively over'.[36] But not unlike experts writing in *Foreign Affairs* or *Foreign Policy*, or for major thinktanks, the Security Strategy does not propose a term for this new era of geopolitics beyond describing the rise of 'strategic

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31   John G. Ikenberry, 'American Grand Strategy in the Age of Terror', *Survival* 43 Nº 4 (2001): 19.

32   Ibid.

33   Adam Tooze, 'The Turning Point of 2008', *Project Syndicate*, 8 August 2018.

34   Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen et al., 'The Ukraine Crisis and the End of the Post-Cold War European Order: Options for NATO and the EU', Centre for Military Studies, University of Copenhagen, June 2014. Seth G. Jones et al., 'World Order after Covid-19', *CSIS*, 28 May 2020.

35   Ashford, 'It's Official'.

36   The White House, 'National Security Strategy', 12 October 2022, p. 6.

competition', a 'more divided and unstable' world, and revisionist ambitions of Russia and China.[37]

What follows the 'end' of a 'post'? US diplomat Richard Haass has suggested 'the post-post-Cold War era'. This seems neither practical nor inspiring.[38] Others have suggested that it signals the revival of a new Cold War and a renewed need for 'containment'. Why this return to familiar metaphors?

To answer this question, one must go back to when the concepts and metaphors of the Cold War were only just taking root. When the Cold War took shape in the aftermath of World War II, the general sentiment or mood was not dissimilar to the present geopolitical moment. Following the Allied victory in 1945, US policymakers were unsure how to interpret, assess, and respond to Russian expansionary behaviour. It was as much an uncertainty about policy as it was about language. So, when the diplomat George F. Kennan wrote his 'Long Telegram' in 1946, his suggested narrative and metaphors about US–Russia relations acted like a lightning rod. Crucially, Kennan's 'containment' not only gave a name to a grand strategy but inspired a whole family of metaphors ('bulwarks', 'falling dominoes', 'red wave', to mention but a few). Throughout the Cold War, 'containment' would act as guiding metaphor in US strategic communications.

In 2023 we look back at almost eighty years of international relations being shaped by a 'Cold War' logic: forty-five years of superpower competition between the United States and the Soviet Union (and later China), followed by more than thirty years of the so-called 'post-Cold War era', defined by the *absence* of bipolar competition and the victory of democracy and market capitalism over communism, but nevertheless seen through the lens of what had come before. Now, with heightened competition between the US and China, and the rupture in international relations caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the 'Cold War' metaphor

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37   Ibid., pp. 3, 7.

38   Richard Haass, 'How Has U.S. Foreign Policy Changed Over the Years? The Answer May Surprise You', interview with Steve Inskeep, *Morning Edition*, NPR, 29 September 2021.

is experiencing a revival. 'New Cold War' as a term to describe this new era of superpower competition has featured in think-tank reports, academic journals, and key publications in international relations.[39]

'Containment', too, has been invoked with increasing frequency. Edward Luce in the *Financial Times* spoke of 'America's conversion to China containment' and 'national security [being] once again the lens through which Washington sees the world'.[40] Following this shift, metaphors that guided US policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as 'the world is flat' and the 'end of history', are out of date, according to Luce. Similarly, Jeff Moon, writing for *The Hill*, describes Biden's semiconductor export control policy as 'unabashed containment'.[41] Even President Xi Jinping, at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference which met alongside the National People's Congress in early March 2023, invoked Cold War language when he accused the West, and especially the US, of 'implement[ing] comprehensive *containment*, *encirclement* and suppression against us, bringing unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development'.[42] But how appropriate is it to speak of a new Cold War and containment today?

Classifying the present as a Cold War is a convenient way to make sense of the present. But it is not necessarily a fitting reflection of the geopolitical shifts currently taking place or conducive to engaging with the crises at hand. The problem lies not necessarily with the term 'Cold War' itself. Rather, it is the terms and concepts associated so intimately with the historical era of the Cold War, namely 'containment' and 'bipolarity'.

Underlying both these concepts is a mechanical and structural view of nation states and relationships between them. States are imagined as containers, and connections between them are selective and controlled.

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39   Anna Diamantopoulou, 'The Three Challenges for the West in the New Cold War', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 September 2022. Christian Breuer, 'The New Cold War and the Return of History', *Intereconomics* 57 Nº 4 (2022): 202–03.

40   Edward Luce, 'Containing China is Biden's explicit goal', *Financial Times*, 19 October 2022.

41   Jeff Moon, 'China's Containment Conspiracy Theories Finally Come True', *The Hill*, 10 October 2022.

42   John Ruwitch, 'China Accuses U.S. of Containment and Warns of Potential Conflict', *All Things Considered*, NPR, 7 March 2023. Emphasis added.

This understanding is captured by Paul Tucker, former deputy governor of the Bank of England, when he explains that today 'we touch each other everywhere in everything', whereas during the Cold War there were 'two self-contained blocks with a tube between them' which had 'two little bits: oil went in one direction and dollars in another'.[43]

More explicitly, two big thinkers in geopolitics, international relations theorist Fredrik Longevall and historian Arne Westad, do not believe the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be read as the start of a new Cold War.[44] Both see the invasion as a war of conquest and irredentism—as Putin attempting to take over a foreign state and deny Ukrainian culture and statehood. Westad emphasises that Putin's rhetoric and rationale for the invasion have more in common with racial and colonial arguments of imperial powers of the nineteenth and twentieth century than with the Cold War ideological struggle.[45] Moreover, in contrast to the Cold War, the geopolitical order is no longer bipolar, but more unstable and multipolar. Westad is even tempted to compare the current geopolitical situation to the world prior to World War I.[46]

The power of Cold War discourse—from the term 'Cold War' itself to 'containment'—is underlined by the seeming inability of Western policymakers, foreign policy experts, and journalists not to be tempted by the familiar language of the Cold War. Even now that the actual/final/definitive end of the post-Cold War era has been declared, this has not provoked a turning away from these concepts, but rather an even fuller embrace of the models, assumptions, and terms of the Cold War. Reporting on the Chinese spy balloon which derailed a planned visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken to China, Reuters news agency spoke of 'deflate[d] hopes for diplomatic thaw'.[47] The geographer John

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43   Paul Tucker, 'The Era of Geoeconomics Has Arrived', interview by Stephanie Flanders, *Stephonomics Podcast*, Bloomberg, 22 December 2022.

44   James F. Smith, 'Are We Entering Another Cold War? Probably Not—but It Could Be Even Worse', *Harvard Kennedy School*, 8 March 2022.

45   Ibid.

46   Ibid.

47   Michael Martina, Humeyra Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, 'China Balloon over U.S. Deflates Hopes for Diplomatic Thaw', *Reuters*, 4 February 2023.

Agnew views the continued use of these types of metaphor as 'recycled historical-geographical analogies' that perpetuate a 'story of historical continuity or repetition'.[48]

Moreover, Cold War metaphors were based on a model of states as 'containers' with solid borders around them. Such a conceptualisation is outdated in a world where 'technological innovation diffuses readily across national borders, and global production chains transcend nation states, producing a world in which national territories and economies are increasingly disjointed'.[49] The increased movement of money, people, goods, and ideas across borders was already changing the geopolitical context in the 1970s. As the following section reveals, the early administration of US president Jimmy Carter can be described as the first post-Cold War presidency: it recognised and tried to articulate an interconnected and interdependent global order based on cooperation.

However, as the Cold War heated up in the Middle East at the end of the 1970s, earlier conceptual frameworks returned to the White House. The next opportunity for metaphorical innovation came in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell, and the 'container' of the Soviet Union broke apart. Fresh hope emerged that new language and concepts would appear as the walls of the Cold War came down. In the words of President George H.W. Bush:

> 40 years of perseverance have brought us a precious opportunity, and now it is time to move *beyond containment* to a new policy for the 1990s—one that recognizes the full scope of change taking place around the world and in the Soviet Union itself.[50]

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48 John Agnew, 'Putting China in the World: From Universalizing Theory to Contextual Theorizing', in *China's Rise and Rethinking International Relations Theory*, Chengxin Pan and Emilian Kavalski (eds) (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), p. 26.

49 Ibid., p. 26.

50 George H.W. Bush, 'Remarks at the Texas A&M University Commencement Ceremony in College Station', 12 May 1989, *American Presidency Project*. Emphasis added.

The Limits of 'Containment'—
Why This Era Deserves Its Own Name

It is not as though policymakers haven't tried to cut the cord with containment. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, they've been on a search for new metaphors. Phrases have come and gone almost as often as declared ends of the post-Cold War era. There was President Bush's call to move 'beyond containment' and build a 'new world order', President Clinton's 'constructive engagement' policy toward China, President George W. Bush's declaration of an 'axis of evil' and 'War on Terror', President Obama's 'Russian reset' and 'pivot to Asia',[51] President Trump's 'America First' policy,[52] and President Biden's 'America is back'.[53] But these phrases ran out of rhetorical steam almost the moment they were articulated.

Why is that the case? Perhaps an underlying tension is that since the end of the Cold War two metaphorical paradigms have coexisted. On the one hand are structural, solid, spatial ways of thinking about geopolitics: states as *containers* of capital, goods, ideas, and people; the international order as a *structure* with a *foundation* that can *fracture*; the world divided into *blocs*. A sentence such as 'today, the *pillars* of the international economic order *crack* as the *tectonic plates* of global geopolitics *shift* beneath them' is exemplary of this language and accompanying logic.[54] And on the other hand, we have witnessed the rise of more organic, fluid, relational ways of thinking about the world, spurred by globalisation, many-to-many communication, and a growing environmental consciousness: *ecosystems*; *interconnection* and *interdependence*; *flows* of capital, goods, ideas, and people across borders; *global community*. The important difference between these two paradigms is that the former way of thinking implies linearity, the ability to control, and clear distinctions between in- and

51   Office of the Press Secretary, 'U.S.-Russia Relations: "Reset" Fact Sheet', *The White House*, 24 June 2010. Kenneth G. Lieberthal, 'The American Pivot to Asia', *Brookings*, 21 December 2011.

52   Aaron Ettinger, 'Trump's National Security Strategy', *International Journal* 73 Nº 3 (2018): 474–83.

53   Joe Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World', *The White House*, 4 February 2021.

54   Varsha Gandikota-Nellutla, David Adler, and Michael Galant, 'The New International Economic Order', *Progressive International*, 16 November 2022. Emphasis added.

outside, whereas the latter model suggests unpredictability, emergence, and constant movement.

At first glance the return to 'containment' and 'Cold War' in contemporary geopolitical discourses appears almost enthusiastic. However, taking a closer look at the Biden administration's rhetoric, one can observe that there is an attempt to nuance and downplay 'Cold War' framings. President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken have repeatedly tried to distance themselves from the term—'we are not looking for conflict or a new Cold War' with China—yet, even if negated, they continue to reinforce these terms in geopolitical discourse.[55]

Moreover, a thread that runs through Biden's NSS is the need to balance competition and cooperation. Prevailing against global, interconnected challenges requires some form of international cooperation (even between the US and China):

> We must *work with other nations to address shared challenges* to improve the lives of the American people and those of people around the world. We recognize that we will undertake such effort within *a competitive environment where major powers will be actively working to advance a different vision. We will use the impulses released by an era of competition to create a race to the top and make progress on shared challenges*, whether it is by making investments at home or by deepening cooperation with other countries that share our vision.[56]

In this paragraph the NSS attempts to turn the 'competitive environment' into an 'impulse' that will make the 'race' not simply one of one power pitted against another but about 'progress on shared challenges' (such as climate change). If we focus on the metaphors used in this paragraph,

55 Antony J. Blinken, 'The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China', *U.S. Department of State*, George Washington University, Washington, DC, 26 May 2022.

56 The White House, 'National Security Strategy'. Emphasis added.

we can see the tension between different metaphorical paradigms discussed above in action. What I would describe as realist-inspired, linear metaphors ('race to the top', 'progress', 'advance') are interwoven with metaphors that express a more interconnected, collaborative world ('shared challenges', 'environment', 'deepening cooperation'). In fact, the metaphor of racing (cars) crops up in different documents of the Biden administration. One of President Biden's most memorable phrases in the context of US–China relations has been the need for 'common-sense guardrails' to guide and regulate superpower competition.[57] Guardrails are usually found alongside a road, so Biden's metaphor is tapping into the larger idea of a race between the two powers. However, the 'race' metaphor misses important aspects of the nature of superpower competition in the twenty-first century. It implies a clear, singular, linear direction, whereas competition between the US and China has many dimensions (economic, military, technological, ideological). Moreover, in a car race the competitors are usually independent of each other, whereas between the US and China, especially economically, there are many dependencies. Finally, who competes in a race does not usually change in mid contest. However, in the case of US–China competition, the EU is an economic power that is increasingly flexing its geoeconomic muscle, as too is India.[58]

The Need for Metaphors That Reflect Global Complexity

The recycling of Cold War metaphors discussed above implies continuity of thinking in geopolitics. At the same time, consistent with almost any time in history, the present moment provokes an impulse to distinguish itself from the past. At the time of writing in early 2023, there is a growing perception that we live in a 'fragmented world',[59] but also a time of

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57 James Crabtree, 'Biden-Xi Meeting Unlikely to Halt U.S.-Chinese Slide', *Foreign Policy*, 25 August 2022 [accessed 30 August 2022].

58 Clara Weinhardt, Karsten Mau, and Jens Hillebrand Pohl, 'The EU as a Geoeconomic Actor? A Review of Recent European Trade and Investment Policies', in *The Political Economy of Geoeconomics: Europe in a Changing World*, Milan Babić, Adam D. Dixon, and Imogen T. Liu (eds), (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 107–36. Paul Tucker, 'Era of Geoeconomics'.

59 World Economic Forum, 'Cooperation in a Fragmented World', *World Economic Forum Annual Meeting* [accessed 22 January 2023].

'permacrisis',[60] or 'polycrisis'.[61] The *Collins Dictionary* made 'permacrisis' its word of the year, and 'polycrisis'—a term rooted in complexity theory—even became a central concept at the World Economic Forum in January 2023. Several experts and academics see the confluence of mutually reinforcing and interweaving crises—think war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, supply-chain issues, and growing US–China strategic competition—as a defining characteristic of the present geopolitical moment.[62] However, as global governance scholar Michael Lawrence has rightly pointed out, there are many other examples of 'multiple causes combined to produce interlinked crises that defied straightforward solutions', such as the collapse of ancient empires and the oil price shocks of the 1970s.[63] The resonance that terms such as 'polycrisis' and 'permacrisis' find in current discourses point to a desire—among politicians as well as the public—to capture the complexity of political, economic, social, and cultural relations in twenty-first century geopolitics.

I contend that it is the unresolved conceptual tension between the familiar binary clarity of the Cold War struggle and the simultaneous recognition of the interconnection and complexity of economic, political, and social networks in the twenty-first century that has prevented the formulation of new strategic metaphors. It was during the 1970s that this tension between traditional geopolitics and growing global complexity first emerged. And it is no coincidence that this era is now being invoked with renewed frequency as politicians, academics, and commentators debate and consider what the 'new world order' will look like.[64]

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60   Collins Dictionary, 'The Collins Word of the Year is … Permacrisis' [accessed 22 January 2023].

61   Michael Lawrence, 'Polycrisis: Why We Must Turn This Meme into a Big Idea', *Cascade Institute*, 12 December 2022.

62   Neil Turnbull, 'Permacrisis: What It Means and Why It's Word of the Year for 2022', *The Conversation*, 11 November 2022. Michael Lawrence, Scott Janzwood, and Thomas Homer-Dixon, 'What Is a Global Polycrisis?', *Cascade Institute*, 16 September 2022.

63   Lawrence, 'Polycrisis'. Gandikota-Nellutla et al., 'New International Economic Order'.

64   Gandikota-Nellutla et al., 'New International Economic Order'. Adam Tooze, 'This Is Why 'Polycrisis' Is a Useful Way of Looking at the World Right Now', interview by Kate Whiting, *World Economic Forum*, 7 March 2023. Matt Carmichael et al., 'What the Future: Purpose', Ipsos, 2023.

A more acute awareness of 'the global' took shape alongside the development of complexity theory in the second half of the twentieth century. And, to this day, there was only one (short-lived) attempt by a US president—namely Jimmy Carter—to place complexity at the centre of his conceptual understanding of geopolitics. However, before delving into Carter's discourse, the following section briefly reviews how ideas of 'the global' and 'global complexity' developed.

The Global

Since the early twentieth century, images and logos of the globe had been proliferating. But it was only in the late 1950s that the concept of a global society and 'globalisation' emerged. Scholars of culture and politics Paul James and Manfred Steger trace the term's first appearance in news media back to the mid 1980s, in academia a little earlier, to the late 1960s and early 1970s.[65]

While a full genealogy of 'the global' would require its own dedicated study, the thinking of a philosopher, an activist, and a polymath mid century are emblematic of how notions of 'the global', and what it said about humanity, became increasingly salient. Writing in *The Human Condition* in 1958, the philosopher Hannah Arendt described the launch of the Russian Sputnik satellite into orbit as a reminder of humankind's boundedness to Planet Earth, and that 'through life [on earth] man remains related to all other living organisms'.[66] In the mid 1960s the peace activist and student Stewart Brand similarly believed that a view of the planet from outer space would remind people of their shared humanity. He sold buttons on the University of California campus in Berkeley which read: 'Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole earth yet?'[67] When it was finally released in 1967, it became the cover image of Brand's now iconic *Whole Earth Catalog*, first published in 1968.

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65 Paul James and Manfred Steger, 'A Genealogy of "Globalisation" ', *Globalizations* 11 Nº 4 (2014): 419–21.

66 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 2.

67 Stewart Brand, '"Whole Earth" Origin ...', *Stewart Brand*, May 2013 [1976] [accessed 29 March 2023].

Finally, the term 'Spaceship Earth' popularised in Buckminster Fuller's *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, published in 1969, reinforced the idea that humans' surroundings were not infinitely exploitable but rather 'a limited spherical container sustaining all life on earth'.[68] Or, as Fuller described it: 'Our little Spaceship Earth is only eight thousand miles in diameter, which is almost a negligible dimension in the great vastness of space'.[69] In short, unlike the territorial confidence of nation-state containers, this was a macro-container imposed on the entire planet by nature (no matter east or west, north or south), whose boundaries could not be redrawn or contested, only ignored or accepted. Either way, humanity would have to live with the consequences.

Complexity Theory

Complexity is related to notions of 'the global', dedicated to studying systems in their totality and focusing on interconnection and interaction, rather than trying to 'take it apart' and distinguish individual elements (as a mechanic would). And in spite of the neologism of 'polycrisis', researchers in the natural and social sciences have been dedicated to studying complexity for decades. In these disciplines, complexity is neither good nor bad, but a way of understanding situations where many individual parts interact and create so-called emergent phenomena (exhibiting properties that individual elements could not on their own).[70]

Two novel strands of research in the second half of the twentieth century—nonequilibrium physics and the dynamics of unstable systems[71]—led to the birth of new concepts such as emergence, self-organisation, dissipative structures, and irreversibility.[72] In the late 1980s these concepts and ideas filtered into political and social science as well, especially as a way

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68 Sabine Höhler, *Spaceship Earth in the Environmental Age, 1960–1990* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015), p. 5.

69 Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2020), p. 57.

70 John Urry, *Global Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 39.

71 Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 3.

72 Ibid.

of making sense of globalisation and the advent of the information age. Both developments, at their core, constitute the intensification of flows of money, goods, people, services, and information. The language of complexity, with its emphasis on constant movement and change, helped find a language to capture a new reality that cut across previous national, temporal, physical, and ideological barriers, such as 'flow', 'flux', 'fluid', 'gel', and 'goo'.[73]

But despite embracing these metaphors of fluids and waves, complexity theory should not be misunderstood as denying the existence of stable and material objects. Annemarie Mol and John Law distinguish between the categories of regions, networks, and fluids to describe social life.[74] *Regions* are defined by physical proximity: objects are clustered, and a boundary is drawn around them. The traditional concept of a nation state is a good example of a region. *Networks*, on the other hand, are defined both by a set of relatively stable, indeed symbiotic, relationships between objects that cross boundaries, and fluid movements that undermine them.[75] Transnational companies, such as McDonald's, and flows of mass migration variously illustrate this principle. Different branches of the fast-food chain are not physically close, but connected via a management structure, shared resources, and a shared company brand and 'philosophy'. Finally, *fluids* behave like regions and networks at the same time: 'sometimes boundaries come and go, allow leakage or disappear altogether, while relations transform themselves without fracture'.[76]

Complexity first entered geopolitical discourses in the late 1970s, yet the metaphor of 'regions' continues to dominate conceptual frameworks today. As political scientist Didier Bigo writes, key concepts in international relations such as 'sovereignty, security, and borders always structure our thoughts as if there existed a "body"—an "envelope" or "container"' which in turn 'justifies the "national" identity that the state has achieved

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73   Urry, *Global Complexity*, pp. 59–60.

74   Annemarie Mol and John Law, 'Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Typology', *Social Studies of Science* 24 Nº 4 (1994): 641–71.

75   Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

76   Mol and Law, 'Regions, Networks and Fluids', 643.

through a territorialization of its order'.[77] This way of thinking about nation states entrenched in international relations appears threatened by more fluid, flexible, and 'invasive' networks and fluids. Underlying anxiety about the integrity of territory and identity means that change, movement, and flow are usually negatively valenced, despite the immense wealth and well-being created by globalisation. While political rhetoric has recognised and allowed the existence of networks and fluids, these have not been allowed to pass through, infiltrate, and merge with the physical structure of nation states—at least, not in how we talk about them. One who stands out from his peers by trying to incorporate complexity in geopolitical discourse is US president Jimmy Carter.

Jimmy Carter: The First (Post-)Post-Cold War President?

In the early part of President Carter's term, the idea that the world had entered a new, more complex, and interconnected era was central to the administration's thinking. From 1977 to 1979 there was a prevailing sense in the White House that it was no longer adequate to speak of a bipolar world, that not every conflict was about the ideological struggle between communism and liberal democracy, and that the US should seek cooperation with the Soviet Union. And until today, no American president has spoken as directly about complexity and interdependence as Carter:

> We live in a world that is imperfect and which will always be imperfect—a world that is complex and confused and which will always be complex and confused.[78]

Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had articulated some of these ideas in his book *Between Two Ages*, in which he observed

77 Didier Bigo, 'Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease', *Alternatives* 27 (2002): 67.

78 Jimmy Carter, 'Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame', 22 May 1977, *The American Presidency Project (UC Santa Barbara)*.

that four dimensions of politics (weapons, communications, economics, and ideology) that had been national in scope in the 'classical' age of international relations were becoming increasingly global.[79] The president's response to this 'new world' was captured in the visionary metaphor of a 'global community'.[80] However, these new ways of thinking about geopolitics would soon be overshadowed by a series of geopolitical blows: the overthrow of the shah of Iran in January 1979, the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in July that year, the Iran hostage crisis from early November, and the Soviet airlift into Afghanistan just after Christmas.[81] Following these events, Brzezinski influenced Carter to shift his foreign policy orientation back to a strategy much closer to 'containment'.[82]

Yet, even if Carter's embrace of complexity turned out to be more of a flirtation with the concept, it merits studying texts from that time. In his book *Between Two Ages*, Brzezinski had already reflected on how recognising complexity is very different from successfully conveying it. How can one present complexity as a fact of life, and yet not capitulate to it? Here it bears quoting Brzezinski at length for his view on sense-making in times of transition:

> Any abstract attempt to arrive at a capsule formula is bound to contain a measure of distortion. […] Nonetheless, as long as we are aware that any such formulation inescapably contains a germ of falsehood—and hence must be tentative—the attempt represents an advance toward at least a partial understanding. The alternative is capitulation

79   Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 4.

80   Jerel A. Rosati and Steven J. Campbell, 'Metaphors of U.S. Global Leadership: The Psychological Dynamics of Metaphorical Thinking during the Carter Years', in Beer and De Landtsheer, *Metaphorical World Politics*.

81   Chen Jian, 'China and the Cold War after Mao', in *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 3, *Endings*, Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 181. Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 31.

82   Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 289.

> to complexity: the admission that no sense can be
> extracted from what is happening. The consequent
> triumph of ignorance exacts its own tribute in the
> form of unstable and reactive policies, the substitution
> of slogans for thought, the rigid adherence to
> generalized formulas made in another age and in
> response to circumstances that are different in essence
> from our own, even if superficially similar.[83]

What Brzezinski describes as the 'rigid adherence to generalized formulas
made in another age' happens seemingly imperceptibly through outdated
metaphors. In that sense, it is not so much a 'rigid' adherence which
implies a level of effort on behalf of the speaker, rather a 'common sense'
reliance on familiar and comfortable concepts—which is why paying
close attention to metaphor is so important. There is no denying that
metaphor, to borrow Brzezinski's phrase, will always 'contain a measure
of distortion', if not ambiguity too: the choice of comparison will
highlight certain features of the object at hand while hiding others. But
metaphors also make the unknown or unpredictable more manageable
by supplying language and imagery.

Creating a New Common Sense

This article has argued that declarations of the end of the post-Cold War
era are in fact a shorthand for the disconnect between dominant models
and ways of thinking about geopolitics and the experienced reality of
international relations in the 2020s defined by global interdependence
and interlinked crises. But where will new ways of thinking come from?
How does one inject new metaphors and vocabulary into discourse?

For geopolitical discourse the triangular relationship between
policymakers, journalists, and academics/experts remains an important

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83 Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages*, p. xiv.

nexus of meaning-making and narrative formulation.[84] According to international relations scholar Didier Bigo, political and professional elites play a central role in introducing and reinforcing certain catchwords (he uses the example of 'immigration' and 'security') when it comes to making sense of geopolitical and security concerns. However, Bigo's model of political discourse formation is perhaps already too top-down, especially in the age of many-to-many communication and influencer-culture.[85] Here the idea of 'common sense' as put forward by the early twentieth-century Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci may be helpful. 'Common sense' is reached through negotiation between ideas from the top (political and intellectual elites) and those from the general public. In other words, guiding ideas and metaphors cannot be invented at the 'top' and then simply injected into a supposedly receptive public. Instead, those with the power to frame discourse must blend the new and the familiar, and use concepts already perceived as 'truths' by the wider public.[86]

Moving from the authors of geopolitical discourses to language itself, it is important to note that not all geopolitical metaphors are the same. There are metaphors that help make sense of more specific dynamics in international relations. 'Power vacuum', 'band-wagoning', 'domino effect' would be examples. But there are also metaphors that frame how we conceptualise geopolitics in general. We might refer to these as 'meta-metaphors' or 'mega-metaphors'. Examples of these would be 'Cold War', 'globalisation', 'War on Terror'. These types of metaphor can also be described as 'metaphors of the nature of the world'. These may thus contain assumptions about the relationships between nations, national interests and goals, and the sources of threats.[87]

84   Klaus J. Dodds, 'Geopolitics, Experts and the Making of Foreign Policy', *Area* 25 № 1 (March 1993): 71–72.

85   Magdalena Riedl et al., 'The Rise of Political Influencers—Perspectives on a Trend towards Meaningful Content', *Frontiers in Communication* 6 (2021).

86   Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 145.

87   Rosati and Campbell, 'Metaphors of U.S. Global Leadership', p. 219.

However, these two types of metaphors are not independent of each other. Considering 'containment' and 'Cold War' as 'meta-metaphors' suggests that notions of 'power vacuums' and 'falling dominoes' share a common semantic field of Newtonian physics and mechanics. A metaphor is more likely to be well received and repeated if it shares a common source domain with other metaphors. For example, the metaphor 'time is money' appears so commonsensical that we are usually heedless of its metaphorical quality because we talk of *saving*, *wasting*, *spending*, *(not) having time* as if it were a material object.[88] Metaphors, especially if they are intended to shift discourse, are not single magic bullets. Anyone devising a new metaphor must consider its existing resonances and points of contact with mutually compounding terms and phrases.

Moreover, we can distinguish between dynamic metaphors and relational metaphors. Dynamic metaphors imply a certain causal chain, direction of travel, or sequence of events. The metaphor of 'falling dominoes' suggests that if one domino falls, all of them will topple. Relational metaphors, on the other hand, contain assumptions about the relationships between actors or actors and objects. One such metaphor would be talking about a 'family of nations' or a 'neighbourhood'.[89] Usually, dynamic metaphors (metaphors that convey movement) have more rhetorical force than metaphors that describe relationships or states of being. Comparing the slogans of the Leave and Remain campaigns during the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016, 'Take Back Control' is ranged against 'Stronger Together'. 'Taking back control' expresses movement and direction of momentum, whereas 'Stronger Together' is describing the present state of being without indicating future direction. Similarly, during the 2016 US presidential election, Donald Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again' foregrounded the verb 'make', and depicted a better and brighter future. Hillary Clinton's 'Stronger Together', in contrast, felt immobile and flat.

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88 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, pp. 7–8.

89 Shimko, 'Power of Metaphors', p. 211.

Whereas this article has drawn attention to new metaphors that try to grasp the nature of the 'new world order', none of them imply a path of forward momentum. The terms 'polycrisis' and 'permacrisis' attempt to draw a more accurate picture of the present, but they do not offer direction or movement. In short, they describe the problem more accurately, but fail to suggest new directions or solutions. In fact, change is presented as something inevitable and threatening ('we need to accept the constant presence of crisis') rather than something that humans can (at least partly) inspire and affect.

New geopolitical metaphors should thus express momentum and direction. They should also speak to a network of general and specific, old and new metaphors. Returning to Josep Borrell's unfortunate choice of metaphor introduced at the beginning of this article, a more suitable one could have been that of a European 'ecosystem'. Ecosystems have an internal balance, but they are not independent or closed off from other ecosystems around them. Instead, ecosystem boundaries exhibit 'gradients of change in environmental conditions' and 'flows of organisms, materials and energy across the shared boundary'.[90] Via this metaphor, Borrell would have been able to speak of the many variables that are delicately calibrated by positive and negative feedbacks to maintain 'balance' in the European system. And he might have used the metaphor of 'ecosystem disruption' to explain the danger that Russia's invasion of Ukraine presents to the balance and 'natural' status quo in Europe.[91] Finally, the ecosystem metaphor could have allowed Borrell an opportunity to connect traditional geopolitical concepts such as 'balance of power' or 'status quo' with a concept of nature that reflects recent discourses in the climate movement, thus building on already existing and more recent common-sense understandings familiar to his audience.

90   Cristina Banks-Leite and Robert M. Ewers, 'Ecosystem Boundaries', in *eLS*, Wiley Online Library (15 September 2009).

91   Sally Embrey, Justin V. Remais, and Jeremy Hess, 'Climate Change and Ecosystem Disruption: The Health Impacts of the North American Rocky Mountain Pine Beetle Infestation', *American Journal of Public Health* 102 Nº 5 (2012): 818–27.

Conclusion

In closing this article, I want to leave the reader with two key ideas: one concerning the limitations of metaphors, the other their potential.

First, employing the ambiguity of metaphor is an art rather than a science. And this very ambiguity becomes highly important for any strategy. Metaphors inhabit a sweet spot between specificity and ambiguity. They are specific enough to communicate meaning, but open enough to leave room for manoeuvre in new contexts.

Yet, a metaphor that contains just the right amount of ambiguity in one context can quickly generate unintended ambiguity in another. This may be because surrounding circumstances change, or because the metaphor enters a new linguistic environment. In this article I have spoken almost exclusively about metaphors in the English language. What happens when these metaphors come in contact with a Chinese audience?

While some metaphors are cross-cultural, such as the orientation metaphor *happy is up*, others are more culturally specific. In English the metaphor *anger is hot fluid* is quite common, whereas the Chinese are much more likely to think of anger as a *gas*.[92] Moreover, even when metaphors appear to be shared across different languages and cultures, there may be important differences in how these metaphors are linguistically realised between languages. While the metaphors *difficulty is weight* and *difficulty is solidity* are used by both English and Chinese speakers, different features of the source domain are emphasised, and different narratives are built around these metaphors.[93] The linguist Ning Yu argues that these differences in metaphor emerge from the interplay between body and culture. While humans' universal bodily experience means that there is a shared origin for many conceptual metaphors, 'culture functions as a filter that selects aspects of sensory-motor experience and

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92 Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Ning Yu, 'Metaphorical Expressions of Anger and Happiness in English and Chinese', *Metaphor and Symbol* 10 Nº 2 (1995): 59–92.

93 Ning Yu and Jie Huang, 'Primary Metaphors across Languages: Difficulty as Weight and Solidity', *Metaphors and Symbol* 34 Nº 2 (2019): 120.

connects them with subjective experiences and judgments for metaphorical mapping'.[94] Ambiguity is not only (un)intended by the transmitter but also generated in the mind of the recipient, who brings a personal or collective understanding to metaphors which the transmitter, especially if they come from a different linguistic/cultural background, may be unaware of. Strategic communicators who seek to instrumentalise metaphors and ambiguity should thus not only analyse their target audiences but also have a deep understanding of the nuances of existing metaphors in the target language(s).

Second, given the centrality of metaphor in theorising international relations and practising strategic communications, the language used to describe shifting geopolitical landscapes and relationships between states is likely to have far-reaching consequences. As Michael Schuman writes in the *Atlantic* magazine: 'China is changing, and U.S. policy has to change with it. The debate over Biden's comments reveals that the world is entering an era in which the comfortable assumptions that have kept the peace need reassessment. Clinging to old ideas, even long-successful ones, carries risks of its own.' And I would expand Schuman's observation to argue that the same applies to clinging to old metaphors. Yes, even new metaphors usually draw on older, familiar metaphors, but their recombination will reflect features unique to the present that feel intuitively right.

Current discourses on the 'new world order' are focused on the military and economic shifts required by the US and Western democracies. The Republican diplomat Elliot Abrams writes: 'As we were once and will need again to be the arsenal of democracy, we must also try to be its fuel depot.'[95] What such a reading of the current moment misses is the need for inspiring metaphors that can shape the context of renewed geopolitical competition. One might refer to these as geo-metaphors. During the Cold War the United States was not only the 'arsenal' and 'fuel depot' but also the 'storyteller' of democracy. Only by guiding—ideally shaping—the

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94   Ning Yu, 'Metaphor from Body and Culture', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, Raymond W. Gibbs (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 247.

95   Elliott Abrams, 'The New Cold War', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 March 2022.

discourses and narratives underlying defence and economic policy can Western democracy hope to strategically shape what the next five, ten, or even fifty years might look like. Reverting to 'low-hanging metaphors' that are familiar and comfortable may be an adequate tactical response to present crises. But if policymakers want to project strategic communications rather than simply communicate strategically to find global appeal and public support in times of uncertainty, they will need to identify more imaginative and visionary metaphors to talk not only about the way the world is—to recall Barack Obama's dictum[96]—but, I would suggest, how it could be.

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96   'I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people':Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize', Oslo, Norway, *The White House*, 10 December 2009.

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Talking about War Crimes: War Crimes Discourse and Strategy

Madoka Futamura

About the Author

Madoka Futamura is a Professor at Hosei University, Japan. She is also a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London. Her works include *War Crimes Tribunals and Transitional Justice: The Tokyo Trial and the Nuremberg Legacy* and *The Politics of the Death Penalty in Countries in Transition* (co-edited with Nadia Belnatz).

Abstract

One of the characteristics of the current war in Ukraine is the intensity of talks and practices regarding war crimes and accountability. Since Russia's invasion in February 2022, both Ukraine and Russia have consistently claimed that the other side has been conducting inhumane war crimes while seeking accountability, domestically and internationally. Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has opened investigations into the situation in Ukraine. Various international and civil society actors have been actively investigating alleged war crimes, pursuing accountability mechanisms. At the same time, concerns that war crimes prosecution during conflicts may hinder the peace are persistent. And the prospect of prosecution and actual trial of Russia's 'big fish' is full of uncertainty.

Yet, the level of intensity of war crimes discourse in the current situation is worth highlighting. What do people expect from war crimes accusations? Why and in what ways does talk of war crimes matter?

Introduction

This article explores the role and impact of war crimes discourse and its strategic implications. It first looks into war crimes discourse and attempted prosecution in the ongoing war in Ukraine, and argues that war crimes accusations may not directly lead to actual trial but that their significance is importantly normative, as well as strategic. It then examines the background of the proliferation of war crimes discourse by exploring the historical development of international humanitarian and human rights norms and laws. It also highlights the intricate relationship between law, war, and legitimacy, proposing that in contemporary armed conflicts war crimes discourse does shape the landscape of war politically and morally. This has serious implications for fighting and winning. Because of its strategic importance, war crimes discourse has come to be promoted by various stakeholders; each pursues its own ends. Accordingly, the discourse carries different and sometimes conflicting messages—justice, peace, and pragmatic strategy. Here I examine diverse messages and argue that plurality in war crimes discourse creates ambiguity. That in turn produces opportunities for strategic communications to prevail. The paper will then analyse the utility of war crimes discourse.

1. War Crimes Discourse and the Situation in Ukraine since 2022

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the situation in Ukraine has been accompanied by a war crimes discourse. It alleges that war crimes are being committed by combatants. Such discourse is promoted not only by the belligerent states which accuse their opponents but also by third parties such as the United Nations and NGOs which

aspire to restrict violence on the ground. War crimes here are broadly understood as wartime conducts which are prohibited under international humanitarian law. But a continuing discourse accompanies terms such as 'genocide' or 'crimes against humanity', which, together with war crimes, are regarded as the 'core crimes of international criminal law'. Many accusations of war crimes are accompanied by investigations of these allegations with future prosecution in mind. However, whether war crimes are actually prosecuted and war criminals eventually appear in court remains uncertain.

War Crimes Accusations and Legal Movements

On 24 February 2022, justifying its 'special military operation' against Ukraine on that same day, Russian president Vladimir Putin claimed that the Ukraine government was committing genocide in Luhansk and Donetsk, and that 'it was necessary to immediately stop this nightmare: the genocide against the millions of people living there, who rely only on Russia, hope only on us'.[1] Observers were caught by surprise when President Putin used the term 'genocide' to justify the invasion. Ukraine was quick to respond. On 26 February it turned to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and instituted proceedings against Russia, claiming that Russia is misinterpreting and misapplying the 1948 Genocide Convention, and accused Russia of planning acts of genocide in Ukraine.[2] Ukraine's legal battle did not end there. It requested the European Court of Human Rights on 28 February to grant urgent interim measures 'in relation to "massive human rights violations being committed by the Russian troops in the course of the military aggression"'.[3]

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1   'Full Text: Putin's Declaration of War on Ukraine', *The Spectator*, 24 February 2022 [accessed 5 January 2023].

2   International Court of Justice, *Press Release*, № 2022/4, 27 February 2022 [accessed 5 January 2023]. The ICJ responded with provisional measures on 16 March ordering Russia to immediately suspend its military operations in Ukraine.

3   The Court responded immediately on 1 March with its indication to the government of Russia 'to refrain from military attacks against civilians and civilian objects'. European Court of Human Rights, 'The European Court Grants Urgent Interim Measures in Application concerning Russian Military Operations on Ukrainian Territory', press release, ECHR 068 (2022), 1 March 2022.

It was also on 28 February that the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Karim Khan, issued a statement saying that he would proceed with opening an investigation of 'alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity [which] have been committed in Ukraine', building on a preliminary examination of events in Ukraine since 2014.[4] Responding to his statement, initially thirty-nine—which later increased to forty-one—state parties promptly referred the situation in Ukraine to the ICC, which allowed the prosecutor to open an investigation immediately.[5] On 5 March the UN Human Rights Council also decided to establish an independent international commission of inquiry mandated to 'investigate all alleged violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law and related crimes in the context of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation' and 'to make recommendations with a view to ending impunity and ensuring criminal responsibility, and access to justice for victims'.[6]

Ukraine was also quick to launch its own investigation of alleged war crimes. On 23 May it conducted the first war crimes trial since the invasion and sentenced a Russian tank commander to life in prison for killing a civilian. As some expected this to be the start of 'a legal tit-for-tat while the conflict rages on',[7] Russia also opened a war crimes trial at a court in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) before sentencing three foreign servicemen to death, guilty of 'mercenary activities and committing actions aimed at seizing power and overthrowing the constitutional order of the DPR'. This court was criticised by the UN Human Rights Office, concerned that 'such trials against prisoners of war [with the death sentence] amount to a war crime'.[8]

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4   International Criminal Court, 'Statement of ICC Prosecutor, Karim A.A. Khan QC, on the Situation in Ukraine', 28 February 2022 [accessed 5 January 2023].

5   International Criminal Court, 'Statement of ICC Prosecutor, Karim A.A. Khan QC, on the Situation in Ukraine, 2 March 2022 [accessed 5 January 2023].

6   United Nations, 'Norwegian Judge Appointed Chair of the Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine', 31 March 2022 [accessed 1 May 2022].

7   'Ukraine War: Russian Soldier Vadim Shishimarin Jailed for Life over War Crime', BBC News, 23 May 2022 [accessed 11 February 2023].

8   'Death Sentence for Ukraine Foreign Fighters Is a War Crime: UN Rights Office', *UN News*, 10 June 2022 [accessed 15 June 2022].

Individual states have pursued a criminal accountability process through their domestic legal processes. As early as 3 March, the prosecutor general of Ukraine appealed to the international community to consider the possibility of commencing investigations into alleged war crimes 'to the extent possible under national legal frameworks'.[9] Lithuania was quick to respond; so, too, Poland. On 25 March, Ukraine, together with the two countries, set up a joint investigation team, which was supported by the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust). Germany and France have also begun their own investigations.[10]

War crimes discourse and global movement of investigation intensified along with the widely reported atrocities committed by Russian forces in Bucha, north-west of Ukraine's capital, Kyiv. Human Rights Watch first published a graphic article on 30 March, reporting the devastating situation of civilians in Bucha who had suffered terribly under Russian occupation from 4 March.[11] In April the NGO investigated the situation on the ground and 'found extensive evidence of summary executions, other unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, and torture'. A Human Rights Watch researcher reported: 'The evidence indicates that Russian forces occupying Bucha showed contempt and disregard for civilian life and the most fundamental principles of the laws of war.' He claimed: 'The victims of apparent war crimes in Bucha deserve justice.'[12] The situation in Bucha shocked the world and intensified investigations on the ground conducted by state and non-state actors. It was symbolic that ICC chief prosecutor Karim Khan visited Bucha in April and stated: 'Ukraine is a crime scene. We're here because we have reasonable grounds to believe that crimes within the jurisdiction of the ICC are being committed.

9   Ofis Heneral'noho prokurora, 'Prosecutor General of Ukraine: Inaction or Delayed Action Today Equals Being an Accomplice to Aggressor's Actions' [accessed 11 February 2023].

10   Kristen E. Eichensehr (ed.), 'Contemporary Practice of the United States Relating to International Law: International Organizations, International Institutions Mobilize to Impose Accountability on Russia and Individual Perpetrators of War Crimes and Other Abuses', *American Journal of International Law* 116 Nº 3 (2022): 637–38.

11   Yulia Gorbunova, 'Devastation and Loss in Bucha, Ukraine: Life for Civilians in a Town Encircled by Russian Forces', Human Rights Watch, 30 March 2022 [accessed 10 November 2022].

12   'Ukraine: Russian Forces' Trail of Death in Bucha; Preserving Evidence Critical for War Crimes Prosecutions', Human Rights Watch, 21 April 2022 [accessed 14 February 2023].

We have to pierce the fog of war to get to the truth.'[13] Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have reported the forcible transfer and deportation of civilians, including unaccompanied children, from Ukraine, which constitute war crimes and potential crimes against humanity.[14]

The role of NGOs has been important, reporting situations on the ground in detail and appealing to the international community to pursue justice. What is even more striking is the 'relatively new practice of open-source investigations by civil society actors'.[15] Publicly available digital information and new technological tools allow anyone to investigate war crimes and independently check and verify the accuracy and authenticity of claims of the belligerents. Organisations such as Bellingcat checked Russia's dubious justification and provided counter-narratives. According to Henning Lahmann, these civil society actors 'became part of the wider public discourse on the war in Ukraine'.[16] As he argues, this is 'potentially transformative for international legal discourse'.[17]

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been actively engaging in war crimes discourse. On 5 April 2022, during a meeting of the UN Security Council, he called for Russia's leaders to be 'brought to justice' for committing 'the most terrible war crimes' since the Second World War.[18] From time to time he has expressed his determination to prosecute Russian war crimes, and he has appealed to the international community to create a special tribunal.[19] On 22 November he announced that more than 400 war crimes had been uncovered in Kherson, which had been abandoned by Russian forces, and stated: 'We will find and

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13   Niamh Forgie, 'ICC Chief Prosecutor Visits Bucha as Court Investigates Alleged War Crimes in Ukraine', JURIST, 15 April 2022 [accessed 14 February 2023].

14   Amnesty International, '"Like a Prison Convoy": Russia's Unlawful Transfer and Abuse of Civilians in Ukraine during "Filtration"', 10 November 2022.

15   Henning Lahmann, 'Ukraine, Open-Source Investigations, and the Future of International Legal Discourse', *American Journal of International Law* 116 Nº 4 (2022): 810.

16   Ibid., p. 817.

17   Ibid., p. 816.

18   'Zelensky Tells UN that Russia Must Be 'Brought to Justice' over Atrocities', *Financial Times*, 6 April 2022.

19   See 'Ukrainian President Outlines Peace Formula That Punishes Aggression, Restores Security', *UN News*, 21 September 2022 [accessed 23 February 2023].

bring to justice every murderer.'[20] Interestingly, it was on the same day that Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of Russia's State Duma and ally of Putin, called for Zelenskyy to face a trial for war crimes.[21]

Meanwhile, the discourse of war crimes and accountability started to expand into the 'crime of aggression', that is, 'the planning, preparation, initiation or execution, by a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State, of an act of aggression'.[22] However, as the ICC's jurisdiction for this specific crime is very narrowly set, and neither Russia nor Ukraine is a state party, the ICC cannot deal with the crime of aggression. Accordingly, there have been various moves to seek accountability mechanisms for this specific crime. Along the way, the term 'Nuremberg' has been used symbolically. For example, Zelenskyy demanded proceedings akin to the Nuremberg trials under which Nazi leaders were tried.[23] Former British prime minister Gordon Brown, together with a group of experts and former international court officers, also put forward the idea of a special tribunal modelled on Nuremberg to punish 'Putin's heinous attempts to destroy peace in Europe'.[24] On facing an intensive process of documenting alleged war crimes committed by Russian forces, Beth Van Schaack, the US ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, stated: 'This is a Nuremberg moment in terms of just the sheer scale of the breach of the rules-based international order that has been perpetrated by Russia in this invasion.'[25]

And one year on from Russia's invasion, international organisations took further steps on war crimes issues. On 16 February 2023 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution which, for the first time since the

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20 'Ukraine War: Russia Guilty of War Crimes in Kherson, Says Zelensky', BBC News, 14 November 2022.

21 Ben Zion Gad, '"Nazi" Zelensky Should Be Tried for War Crimes, Says Putin Ally', *Jerusalem Post*, 22 November 2022 [accessed 21 February 2023].

22 Article 8 bis of the Rome Statute of the ICC.

23 'Zelensky Tells UN', *Financial Times*.

24 Gordon Brown et al., 'Statement: Calling for the Creation of a Special Tribunal for the Punishment of the Crimes of Aggression against Ukraine', March 2022 [accessed 22 February 2023].

25 Quoted in Robbie Gramer and Amy MacKinnon, 'Ukraine's "Nuremberg Moment" amid Flood of Alleged Russian War Crimes', *Foreign Policy*, 10 June 2022 [accessed 22 February 2023].

invasion, referred to the necessity of accountability for war crimes 'through appropriate, fair and independent investigations and prosecutions at the national or international level, and [to] ensure justice for all victims and the prevention of future crimes'.[26] The resolution was supported by 141 states.

On 16 March the UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine released its first report, concluding 'that Russian authorities have committed numerous violations of international humanitarian law and violations of international human rights law, in addition to a wide range of war crimes'. The report also concluded that, in a limited number of cases, 'Ukrainian armed forces were likely responsible for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, and for some incidents which qualify as war crimes'.[27] And, on 17 March, the ICC issued arrest warrants against President Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, commissioner for children's rights in the Office of the President of Russia, 'responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation'.[28]

Uncertainty in the Actual Prosecution Process

Accusations of war crimes and moves to seek accountability emerged almost simultaneously with the Russian invasion and have been spread by the media with an intensity and speed that had not been seen in previous armed conflicts. However, the prospect of actually prosecuting individuals, let alone bringing them to court, especially those in leadership positions, remains uncertain. This is partly because war crimes, while strictly defined by existing international law, are subject to the interpretation of law based on the context.

26   UN GA Resolution, A/ES-11/L.7, 16 February 2023.

27   Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, A/HRC/52/62, 15 March 2023, paras 109–10.

28   International Criminal Court, 'Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova', press release, 17 March 2023.

The ICC statute provides comprehensive definitions of core crimes. While the term 'war crimes' is often used rather casually, it points to specific crimes, that is, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and other serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict, including wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, unlawful deportation, and taking hostages.[29] Yet, to decide whether appalling conducts are crimes or tragic 'collateral damage' depends on context, which requires experts' assessment of military necessity and proportionality.[30] As to crimes against humanity—which include murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation or forcible transfer of population, and rape—these must have been committed 'as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against civilian populations with knowledge of the attack'.[31] Even stricter is the definition of genocide, whose most vital feature is intention: that is, killing and causing serious bodily and mental harms 'committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group'.[32] It is because of the existence of intention of annihilation that genocide is perceived as 'the crime of crimes' and shoulders a strong symbolic power. Yet, proof of intent is normally not easy to secure. In addition, identifying specific individuals responsible for those crimes, especially those at a leadership level, is a complicated process of documenting and establishing the chain of command—which is necessary to prove accountability of leaders in the Russian government.

Even if we can legally prove the existence of war crimes and responsible individuals, there is another issue: the availability of an effective accountability mechanism. International criminal prosecution is not at all straightforward under the 'anarchical society' of states, because there is no centralised authority beyond states, and prosecution of any national is primarily a function of state sovereignty. This becomes a problem when it comes to targeting high-ranking official figures, such

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29   Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the ICC.

30   James Gow, *War and War Crimes: The Military, Legitimacy and Success in Armed Conflict* (Hurst, 2013), p. 90.

31   Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the ICC.

32   Article 6 of the Rome Statute of the ICC.

as Russian political and military leaders, including President Putin, who are normally protected under state sovereignty. Ukraine and Russia not being state parties to the Rome Statute, in principle the ICC has no jurisdiction for crimes committed by Russian nationals within the territory of Ukraine. In the ongoing case, however, the ICC could open an investigation because Ukraine consented to the Court's jurisdiction. Yet, Russia has no obligation to cooperate with the ICC, which means that prosecuted individuals are unlikely to be sent to The Hague and face trial. On the ICC's arrest warrants against President Putin, a Kremlin spokesperson immediately responded by claiming that they 'do not recognize the jurisdiction of this court and, accordingly, any decisions of this kind are null and void for Russia in terms of law'.[33]

Because of the limitation of the ICC's jurisdiction and function, setting up a special tribunal with a stronger jurisdiction has been debated. In addition to Gordon Brown's proposal seen above, some have proposed the Council of Europe establish the Extraordinary Ukrainian Chamber for Aggression.[34] However, unless it is established by the UN Security Council with its enforcement measures, no tribunal may have sufficient power to force states to cooperate with it—and with Russia being a permanent member of the Security Council, it is very unlikely that such a tribunal would be set up in the near future. Even if it were to be established by the Council, it could not guarantee the arrest of war criminals. Antonio Cassese, former president of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), famously indicated the limitation of international courts:

> the ICTY remains very much like a giant without arms and legs—it needs artificial limbs to walk and work. And these artificial limbs are state authorities. If the cooperation of states is not forthcoming, the ICTY cannot fulfil its functions. It has no means

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33   'Russia Slams ICC's Warrant for Putin's Arrest "Null and Void"—Kremlin', Russian News Agency TASS, 18 March 2023 [accessed 20 March 2023].

34   See Oona A. Hathaway, 'Russia's Crime and Punishment: How to Prosecute the Illegal War in Ukraine', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 January 2023 [accessed 3 February 2023].

at its disposal to force states to cooperate with it.
This is to be contrasted with the International
Military Tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo, which
investigated and prosecuted war crimes committed
in states held under military occupation by the
Allied forces.[35]

Therefore, despite the intensity of war crimes accusations and accompanying active investigations on the ground, the prospect of prosecuting and punishing criminal individuals, especially at the level of leadership, is full of uncertainty. At the least, it is going to be a complex and time-consuming process. The history of international criminal justice shows that some prosecuted leaders, such as Serbia's Slobodan Milošević or Liberian leader Charles Taylor, were caught and put on trial *eventually*. However, this was not a speedy process: many of them were caught by their own people during gradual political and social changes within society. Thus, at this stage, no immediate trials of Russian leaders would be expected.

Still, the very fact that war crimes discourse and investigations are carried out by various actors with such intensity, in parallel with military operations on the ground, is intriguing. If the prospect for actual trials remains uncertain, why are war crimes talked about so intensely? It is worth examining whether and in what ways war crimes discourse matters.

2. Contemporary Warfare and Implications of War Crimes Discourse

War is not mere wild violence; it is subject to rules regulating what can and cannot be done even in wartime. Such rules have been compiled and amount to what is known as the law of war, or international humanitarian law. This body of law allows us talk about war crimes. But it is a relatively

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35 Antonio Cassese, 'On the Current Trends towards Criminal Prosecution and Punishment of Breaches of International Humanitarian Law', *European Journal of International Law* 9 Nº 1 (1998), p. 13.

new phenomenon that war crimes are talked about not only by military and legal professionals but also by the wider public. This section briefly explains the background to the current intense discourse around war crimes and explains why and in what ways war crimes discourse matters to fighting and winning war.

The Development of Norms and Practice of International War Crimes Trials

Although the law of war has a long history and the concept of war crimes had been widely shared among states, the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials after the Second World War were the first public international war crimes trials, having prosecuted and punished wartime German and Japanese leaders for conducting 'crimes against peace' (the crime of aggression), war crimes, and 'crimes against humanity'. From the viewpoint of the history of international criminal justice, both trials are exceptional as they were conducted under the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan, which made the whole legal process relatively easy, as Cassese's statement implies. But this in turn led to their own shortcomings, that is, victor's justice. They were *ex post facto* trials imposed only on the side of the vanquished, which left ambiguous legacies.[36] In that sense, it is unlikely that a Nuremberg trial will be repeated.

Still, the Nuremberg trial contributed immensely to the development of international humanitarian law thereafter. Principles set out in the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal were unanimously affirmed on 11 December 1946 through the UN General Assembly Resolution 95 (I), and they, together with the judgement of Nuremberg, were formulated into several principles by the International Law Commission, setting out individual criminal responsibility under international law.[37] The concept of individual criminal responsibility was reflected in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their two protocols of 1977. The

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36   Madoka Futamura, *War Crimes Tribunals and Transitional Justice: The Tokyo Trial and the Nuremberg Legacy* (Routledge, 2008).

37   *Yearbook of the International Law Commission*, vol. 2 (1950), pp. 374–78.

contribution of the concept of 'crimes against humanity'—one of the crimes tried at Nuremberg and Tokyo—to the post-Second World War international human rights regime is crucial. It was developed into various international laws regarding genocide, the crime of apartheid, and torture. It also endorsed the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which was followed by the two covenants on economic, social, and cultural rights and on civil and political rights, which entered into force in 1976.

By the 1980s, war crimes came to be codified; the concept of individual criminal responsibility penetrated international law, and the set of international human rights laws was ready to be referred to. In other words, Nuremberg had set out 'a common vocabulary' to speak morally about war crimes and human rights issues,[38] which cultivated a field for discourse of war crimes and gross violations of human rights. Such vocabulary had come to be used by peace and human rights activists in the 1970s. In the context of the Vietnam War, anti-war activists referred to Nuremberg and criticised the US for being guilty of war crimes, crimes against peace, and crimes against humanity.[39] In the context of the democratisation process in Latin America, human rights activists were trying to resort to the 'Nuremberg model of justice' to seek accountability for gross violations of human rights conducted under previous authoritarian regimes.[40] The impact of these discourses, however, was still partial and local at the time. Moreover, the contexts of the Vietnam War and, especially, the democratisation process in Latin America in domestic human rights settings were different from those in which German leaders were prosecuted and punished. Nevertheless, the discourse of war crimes and human rights abuses was promoted with heavy use of the term 'Nuremberg', which became a powerful keyword in war crimes discourse, instantly conveying the scale of atrocities and pressing needs for punishment.

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38   Barrie Paskins, 'Prohibitions, Restraints and Scientists', in *Explorations in Ethics and International Relations: Essays in Honour of Sydney D. Bailey*, N.A. Sims (ed.), (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 76.

39   See Telford Taylor, *Nuremberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 96.

40   Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 31.

The impact of war crimes discourse increased in the 1990s when laws and norms of war crimes and human rights abuses had further permeated the international community through a series of atrocities that challenged the international conscience. As a result of the war in the former Yugoslavia, and the associated immense scale of war crimes and mass killings, taking action for war crimes and gross violations of human rights became a pressing issue. On 22 February 1993 the UN Security Council specifically determined 'widespread violations of international humanitarian law occurring within the territory' as constituting a threat to international peace and security.[41] It is for such a 'threat' that the Security Council established the ICTY, as an enforcement measure to prosecute individuals responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law.[42] The establishment of the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda (ICTR) followed in 1994 in order to prosecute and punish those responsible for genocide in Rwanda.[43] These tribunals did create a momentum for the creation of the ICC, as well as several hybrid courts for the armed conflicts in Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Timor Leste, and Kosovo. They also heightened international interest in seeking justice for victims of war crimes, and stimulated the search for various non-legal mechanisms, cultivating the field of so-called transitional justice. In sum, humanising armed conflicts by minimising the damage to non-combatants while seeking justice for victims of war crimes came to attract international interest.[44]

There are several important elements behind this trend which also play a crucial role in war crimes discourse. First is the role of human rights NGOs which have been actively investigating and reporting atrocities and alleged war crimes. In the case of the Yugoslav Wars, it was the Helsinki Watch Committee of Human Rights Watch that first called on the UN to establish a tribunal and to prosecute and punish those

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41   UN Doc. S/RES/808 (1993), 22 February 1993.

42   UN Doc. S/RES/827 (1993), 25 May 1993.

43   UN Doc. S/RES/955 (1994), 8 November 1994.

44   See *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies: Report of the Secretary-General*, 23 August 2004, UN Doc. S/2004/616.

responsible for war crimes.[45] This call gradually paved the way to the creation of the ICTY. It is worth noting that NGOs and media reports again effectively used the term Nuremberg and the Holocaust analogy to illustrate war crimes atrocities committed.[46]

The impact of NGO activities is fostered by the second element, the increasing influence of various media platforms: from twenty-four-hour news broadcasting in the 1990s, the so-called CNN effect, to the social media of the twenty-first century through which individuals can send and receive information anytime and anywhere within a second. People around the world are now highly sensitive to war crimes and damage inflicted on civilians, while being able to observe events on the battlefield through the flow of information. Such information with appalling images of atrocities makes the public even more concerned about war crimes.

With these political, social, and moral changes as the backdrop, international law and norms have further permeated the international community as a 'common vocabulary' with which to talk about war and peace. And the more widely this vocabulary is shared, the greater its power to influence becomes, because it further expands a discursive space in which people around the world can actively and casually judge the legality and legitimacy of ongoing armed conflicts. Unlike in the 1970s when talk of war crimes emerged within an interested, limited circle, war crimes discourse is now heard and used by a much wider audience to discuss the rights and wrongs of war. This is an emerging trend in contemporary armed conflicts. Accordingly, the vocabulary has ceased to be merely legal and technical but has become highly political. Discourse of war crimes not only raises moral questions but also directly connects to the issue of legitimacy.

45   Human Rights Watch, *War Crimes in Bosnia-Hercegovina*, Helsinki Watch Report (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992), p. 5.

46   See Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide: The 1993 Pulitzer Prize-Winning Dispatches on the 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Bosnia* (Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1993).

Strategic Implications and Ambiguity
in War Crimes Discourse

Contemporary armed conflicts have come to depend on legitimacy. War needs to be seen as right both in means and ends in order to receive public support. This is especially important for democratic countries where public opinion matters to state policy. It is here that war crimes discourse has crucial importance in contemporary armed conflicts, because 'it shapes narrative of legitimacy'.[47] War crimes discourse acquires significant political, normative, and strategic implications for contemporary warfare.

What is interesting here is that the vocabulary, although highly political, has come to be used not only by NGOs and international organisations criticising the war and violence, but also by belligerents to stigmatise their opponents and justify their own conducts. As David Kennedy argues, it is the vocabulary of international humanitarian law that enhanced 'the dramatic ability of all participants in modern combat to speak about their means and ends to the same global audience'.[48] Such participants include illiberal states, authoritarian regimes, and terrorist groups that may not necessarily share the same normative and moral basis of the vocabulary. Diversity of participants means accusations of war crimes carry different messages and implications depending on who is promoting the discourse, and for what purposes. Kennedy agrees:

> Once the law in war becomes a strategic asset, able
> to be spoken in multiple voices … we can anticipate
> that it will be used differently by those with divergent
> strategic objectives.[49]

All this means that war crimes are talked about more intensively but in different ways by diverse actors. What is more, the discourse is heard by wider global audiences consisting not only of military and legal

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47 Gow, *War and War Crimes*, p. 42.

48 David Kennedy, *Of War and Law* (Princeton University, 2007), p. 25.

49 Ibid., p. 116.

professionals but also of the general public. And such global audiences are not a monolithic collective either, as they involve both the liberal and the illiberal. What are the implications of such plurality in war crimes discourses? According to Kennedy, 'The resulting legal pluralism itself offers new strategic challenges and opportunities.'[50]

The following section examines divergent strategic objectives and analyses accompanying strategic challenges and opportunities, with some reference to the ongoing war crimes discourse in Ukraine.

3. War Crimes Discourse and Different Strategic Opportunities

Diverse actors participate on platforms of war crimes discourse with plural claims and messages in mind. Some of the messages are normative, supporting war crimes prosecution, but others are critical to such attempts. These plural and conflicting views on war crimes prosecution create ambiguity in the prospect of cases coming to court but, in turn, yield a strategic space for belligerents to use war crimes discourse opportunistically and pragmatically. From the point of view of strategic communications, war crimes discourse becomes a crucial battlefield.

Implications for Justice

Common and normative messages accompanied by accusations of war crimes represent a strong desire to prevent crimes and pursue criminal accountability. As the ICC delineates its mission as 'ending a culture of impunity', the clear message here is that those responsible for war crimes should be tried and punished.

Prosecuting war crimes has been justified in different ways. First is the consolidation of the rule of law which is the foundation of the

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50 Ibid.

contemporary international order. The UN Charter, international humanitarian law, and the international human rights regime clearly set out the rules of the international society of states. Russia's invasion of Ukraine challenged this order. Reflecting on the crime of aggression, Oona Hathaway observes:

> Creating a court that has jurisdiction to try this crime is an essential step in the global effort to reject Russia's blatantly illegal war and, with it, Putin's willingness to destroy the modern international legal order in pursuit of a new Russian empire.[51]

Related to this, deterrence is an important, anticipated outcome of criminal justice, deterring not necessarily current crimes but those in future.

Second, criminal accountability is claimed to be necessary to meet victims' demands for justice. As in the Yugoslav Wars and Rwandan genocide, where the scale and gravity of war crimes were immense, impunity ceases to be an option. Even when the fighting stops, peace without (or seen to be without) justice leaves the possibility for future violence and private revenge. Richard Goldstone, the first chief prosecutor of the ICTY and ICTR, claimed:

> If you have peace without justice in countries where millions of people have suffered, where hundreds of thousands of people have been murdered and tens of thousands of women have been raped, do you really expect that by brushing the atrocities committed under the carpet and allowing collective guilt to take hold one will achieve lasting peace? I do not believe so.[52]

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51   Hathaway, 'Russia's Crime and Punishment'.

52   Richard J. Goldstone, *Prosecuting War Criminals*, Occasional Paper № 10 (London: David Davies Memorial Institute of International Studies, 1996), p. 19.

Thirst for justice for victimisation perpetrated by Russia is a clear message sent out from Ukraine. On 15 November 2022 Zelenskyy published a statement requiring justice to be one of the key conditions for peace, and called for 'the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the crime of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the creation of an international mechanism to compensate for all the damages caused by this war'. Justice, Zelenskyy suggests, 'is what stokes the greatest emotions'.[53]

The power of accusations of war crimes is consolidated through the record of actually carrying out investigations and prosecutions built up since the 1990s, including those in Ukraine today. On analysing the first war crimes trial at a Ukrainian court, Sergey Vasiliev ventured: 'They set the tone and chart the way for future prosecutions of atrocity crimes in Ukraine, giving a sense of what to expect and watch out for in the wartime and postwar accountability processes.'[54] The fact that several accountability mechanisms exist, that some political and military leaders were actually indicted through those mechanisms and brought to court in the past, and that several investigations are in progress strengthens the credibility and possibility that future war crimes will come to trial, which forces stakeholders to take accusations of war crimes into account.

Some actors believe that even without criminal accountability, war crimes accusation itself can achieve the aim. Human Rights Watch claims that 'naming and shaming' is one of the tools 'by which we seek to expose wrongdoers to the opprobrium their crimes deserve, and ensure accountability'.[55] Indeed, mere accusation would still damage the belligerents and provide them an incentive to restrict their use of violence.

Whether it is for the international justice-based order or victim's justice, the message that criminal accountability needs to be sought will receive

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53   'Ukraine Has Always Been a Leader in Peacemaking Efforts; If Russia Wants to End This War, Let It Prove It with Actions: Speech by the President of Ukraine at the G20 Summit', 15 November 2022 [accessed 25 February 2023].

54   Sergey Vasiliev, 'The Reckoning for War Crimes in Ukraine Has Begun', *Foreign Policy*, 17 June 2022 [accessed 5 January 2023].

55   Bill Frelick, 'Why ISIS Immune to "Naming and Shaming"', *Human Rights Watch*, 28 August 2014 [accessed 5 January 2023].

great sympathy within the international community, which is becoming increasingly sensitive to inhumane conduct in armed conflicts.

Implications for Peace

In contrast to the voice for justice emphasising criminal accountability, there are persistent views expressed against or sceptical of war crimes prosecution, especially when the idea is raised while fighting is still going on and a peace agreement is yet to be sought. The 'peace versus justice' conundrum has been a topic of fierce debate and conveys ambiguous messages for the prospect of war crimes prosecution.

The negative impact on peace of a war crimes trial was intensively discussed in the case of the Yugoslav Wars. The ICTY was established in the midst of the conflict. It was seen as unrealistic to pursue prosecution and peace negotiations at the same time. The former might prolong the war by making alleged war criminals unwilling to stop fighting. Consequently, the ICTY was criticised as harmful to the peace.[56] The same kind of arguments persisted in cases that followed. When in 2009 the ICC indicted the then Sudanese president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, for alleged war crimes and genocide in Darfur, the overriding concern raised was that the peace process would be hindered and peacekeeping operations on the ground would be distracted.[57] In the case of Libya's civil war in 2011, some thought the ICC's issue of an arrest warrant for President Gaddafi would hinder a ceasefire since negotiating his exile was considered key to securing the peace.

Concern was also raised in the case of Ukraine in March 2022, when US president Joe Biden condemned Russian leader Vladimir Putin by labelling him a 'war criminal'. Such a label was seen to have made it harder

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56   Anthony D'Amato, 'Peace vs. Accountability in Bosnia', *American Journal of International Law* 88 (1994): 500; Anonymous, 'Human Rights in Peace Negotiations', *Human Rights Quarterly* 18 (1996): 258.

57   See Allard Duursma and Tanja Müller, 'The ICC Indictment against Al-Bashir and Its Repercussions for Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Operations in Darfur', *Third World Quarterly* 40 Nº 5 (2019): 890–907.

for the Biden administration to work with Russia towards a ceasefire. The BBC's Anthony Zurcher reported: 'Every concession or negotiated agreement, on whatever topic, will invite the rejoinder: How can you associate with a criminal?'[58] Indeed, moral talks do risk a 'boomerang effect': the moral standard used against the opponent will always come back to you and check your own deeds.

These concerns are valid as peace negotiations are traditionally promoted or accompanied by some kind of amnesty for past wrongdoings. Impunity is seen to be necessary to guarantee a stable and peaceful transition from war to peace.[59] What is more, those most responsible for war and war crimes tend to be those who are also in charge of negotiating the ceasefire. All in all, objections, especially from those who are involved in a peace process, together with difficult and complex processes of war crimes trials, make war crimes accusation rather ambiguous.

Implications for War Strategy

The pros and cons of war crimes trials, or peace versus justice debates, are a classic and crucial element when talking about war crimes. However, since the 1990s the war crimes discourse has become even more normative as it has come to centre on public disgust at war crimes, voices for justice, and thus strong accusations of impunity. 'War crimes give war a bad name.' This is much more so than in the past, and it strongly damages the legitimacy of war. In contemporary armed conflict placed under intense public scrutiny and attention, war crimes discourse, as James Gow argues, shapes people's perception and judgement of war: framing the legality and legitimacy of war.[60] It does so surprisingly effectively because images of war crimes are almost always very disturbing and stir up people's emotions. In the twenty-first century such images have come to be more easily, quickly, and globally shared due to the technological

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58   'Ukraine Conflict: Biden Brands Putin a "War Criminal"', BBC News, 16 March 2022 [accessed 5 January 2022].

59   See Jack Snyder and Leslie Vinjamuri, 'Trials and Errors: Principle and Pragmatism in Strategies of International Justice', *International Security* 28 Nº 3 (2003/04): 18.

60   See Gow, *War and War Crimes*, pp. 40–41.

revolutions, especially the role of social media. This has strategic connotations. Gow argues: 'the perception of wrongdoing can fatally undermine a mission and result in failure' because it crucially damages legitimacy.[61] That is why the means as well as ends of war need to be seen to be right. It is here that talk of war crimes becomes a tool of war strategy, strongly influencing success and failure of military operations. From the strategic point of view, talk of war crimes has the potential to manoeuvre the situation in war in various ways. In other words, there is a strong relevance to strategic communications, defined as 'the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives'.[62] Resorting to the vocabulary of law and justice, direct target audiences here are inevitably the 'liberal' community; however, as shown below, illiberal actors do acknowledge the power of norms and thus can be impacted some way or other.

(1) Legitimation and Delegitimation

First, the strategic utility of war crimes discourse is legitimation and delegitimation. States can either legitimise their own conduct by claiming legality in their means and ends, or by delegitimising that of their opponents by accusing them of fighting the wrong war, and/ or in the wrong manner. This can be seen in Ukraine but has been a common phenomenon since the Gulf War in 1991. Here, mechanisms of international criminal justice are seen as a powerful tool to delegitimise one's enemy. Controversial self-referrals by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and the Central African Republic in the early years of the ICC were based on such strategic calculations on the part of governments. All three of these governments were fighting civil wars, and expected the ICC to prosecute anti-government groups and label them war criminals. Their expectations were shattered when the ICC started

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61   Ibid.

62   James Farwell, quoted in Chiyuki Aoi, 'The Significance of Strategic Communications: Implications for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative', *EU-Asia Project Policy Brief*, № 2021/31 July 2021, p. 2.

to investigate war crimes allegedly conducted also by the government side. In Ukraine, too, war crimes prosecution is seen as a powerful tool 'to label Putin's war not just wrong but also criminal'.[63] Such a label in turn legitimises Ukraine's fightback as well as European support for it. Here, legitimation and delegitimation both embrace the same strategic goal. Furthermore, they frame the war itself. Oona Hathaway points out:

> Zelensky and his team understood that to win the public support at home and abroad that Ukraine needs to win the war, … [they] needed to show that the war was not just an assault on Ukraine but also an assault on every country's right to sovereignty … that Ukraine is not fighting only for its own survival but for the survival of the rules-based international order.[64]

In addition, delegitimising the other side is a strategy to directly reduce public support for opponents. However, loss of public support is less damaging for autocratic and illiberal regimes and non-state actors like terrorist groups that care less about public support. This leads to asymmetry in complying with the law of war, regarded as a worrying aspect of contemporary warfare.[65] In the Balkans war the Serbs intentionally broke international laws and captured and used peacekeepers as human shields or conducted attacks from civilian areas, in order not only to deter NATO strikes but also to induce their unintended war crimes. Observing such phenomena, Charles Dunlap warned that what the American military experienced there, and will experience in future, is 'lawfare'—'the use of law as a weapon of war'. Dunlap argues:

> There are many dimensions to lawfare, but the one
> ever more frequently embraced by U.S. opponents

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63   Hathaway, 'Russia's Crime and Punishment'.

64   Ibid.

65   See International Committee of the Red Cross, 'International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts', Document prepared by the International Committee of the Red Cross for the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva, Switzerland, 26–30 November 2007.

> is a cynical manipulation of the rule of law and the humanitarian values it represents. Rather [than] seeking battlefield victories, *per se*, challengers try to destroy the *will* to fight by undermining the public support that is indispensable when democracies like the U.S. conduct military interventions. A principle [*sic*] way of bringing about that end is to make it appear that the U.S. is waging war in violation of the letter or spirit of LOAC [the law of armed conflicts].[66]

Dunlap's 2001 paper highlighted the concept of lawfare which was widely spread afterwards and heavily used within the context of the American war on terror. Indeed, al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and ISIS in Iraq resorted to the same kind of 'lawfare'.

Although highly controversial because of the way it has been used and abused,[67] 'lawfare' describes well why talk around war crimes is an important component of contemporary warfighting. In parallel with the battlefield fight, belligerents also face a battle with legal discourse. As Gow argues: 'The competition for legitimacy is a competition for a dominant narrative,' because 'it is issues of lawfulness and ethics—right and wrong—that shape narratives of legitimacy'.[68]

Legitimation and delegitimation through war crimes discourse have become the norm in contemporary armed conflicts. However, this may carry the risk of a backlash. Maltreating inmates in Abu Ghraib prison hurt the fragile legitimacy of the Iraq War because the US and the UK had been trying to legitimise the war on humanitarian and ethical grounds. Because of its moral and ethical message, war crimes discourse

66 Charles J. Dunlap, 'Law and Military Interventions: Preserving Humanitarian Values in 21st Conflicts Prepared for the Humanitarian Challenges', at Military Intervention Conference, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 29 November 2001, p. 4.

67 See David Luban, 'Lawfare and Legal Ethics in Guantánamo', *Stanford Law Review* 60 Nº 6 (April 2008): 1981–2026.

68 Gow, *War and War Crimes*, p. 42.

does expect of those who resort to it the same level of ethical behaviour that they impose on opponents.

(2) Bargaining Chip for Peace Negotiations

The persistence of views opposing prosecuting war crimes during war can give the impression that war crimes accusation does not necessarily lead to actual prosecutions and trials. This creates some ambiguity in the discourse, which brings about opportunities to use war crimes prosecutions as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations. An example is to use a threat of indictment to pressure the opponent to accept the peace. In the Yugoslav Wars, bringing the tribunal into play as an explicit bargaining chip in the peace negotiations was suggested by some as a way to solve theoretically the dilemma of peace versus justice.[69]

The fine balance between peace negotiations and war crimes prosecutions, or peace and justice, is a recurring theme and has prompted various speculations whenever the Security Council has referred situations to the ICC. Article 16 of the Rome Statute of the ICC is key, as it allows the Council to defer cases, in other words to suspend an investigation or prosecution by the Court for a renewable one-year period if the Court's work is deemed to be a threat to international peace and security. On referring the situation in Libya to the ICC in 2011, Security Council Resolution 1970 included a reference to Article 16.[70] Indeed, this was necessary for such a resolution to be adopted, to 'assuage the concerns of states that the ICC could complicate attempts to negotiate a political settlement to the conflict'.[71] However, a reference to Article 16 led to speculation that the Security Council was using the ICC and 'the threat of punishment' as a tool for putting pressure on Gaddafi and

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69   See D'Amato, 'Peace vs. Accountability in Bosnia', pp. 503–04.

70   UN Doc. S/RES/1970 (2011), 26 February 2011.

71   Mark Kersten, 'Between Justice and Politics: The ICC's Intervention in Libya', in *Contested Justice: The Politics and Practice of International Criminal Court Interventions*, Christian De Vos, Sara Kendall, and Carsten Stahn (eds.) (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 461.

thus promoting negotiation on the ground.[72] Mark Kersten points out that there was significant doublespeak by NATO countries, which were also intervening militarily in Libya: 'They invoked and supported the ICC while exploring possible states for Gaddafi to permanently or temporarily evade prosecution.'[73] Indeed, it was pointed out that Western states were seeking out non-ICC member states as possible destinations for Gaddafi's exile.

Whether prosecuting war crimes can be an effective negotiating tool has not been proven. However, at the least using justice as a tool for political negotiation is legally problematic once an arrest warrant has been issued. Above all, it is morally controversial and thus may not be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the global audience. It runs directly counter to the ICC's role to fight against impunity, and may fuel the concern that the Security Council manipulates the ICC in the interests of great powers. In that sense, it may run the risk of delegitimising one's own causes.

(3) A Cheaper Alternative to Military Intervention

When the ICTY and ICTR were established, prosecuting war crimes was seen as a cheaper alternative to costly military commitment. Many diplomats and international political theorists viewed the tribunals cynically as no more than a 'fig leaf' to cover up failure to take immediate and decisive action for atrocities in both regions.[74] The United States was especially reluctant to intervene militarily in the situations in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. According to Aryeh Neier, the ICTY was built in the vacuum between public pressure to intervene and state leaders' reluctance.[75] On the establishment of the ICC, some raised concerns

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72   David Bosco, 'The Libya Resolution: Prosecution as Bargaining Chip?', *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2011.

73   Mark Kersten, 'Between Justice and Politics', p. 467.

74   David P. Forsythe, 'International Criminal Courts: A Political View', *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 15 (1997): 5–19.

75   Aryeh Neier, *War Crimes: Brutality, Genocide, Terror, and the Struggle for Justice* (New York: Times Books, 1998), p. 112.

that states might resort to the ICC as a substitute for much-needed humanitarian intervention. Thomas Smith pointed out: 'By viably and visibly punishing the worst human rights criminals, the ICC may become a virtuous excuse for states to turn a blind eye to atrocities, a moral free ride on the coattails of humanitarian law.'[76] In the case of Darfur, the Security Council's referral was widely seen as 'a fig leaf for inaction' because the Council neither took vigorous action nor supported the actual work of the ICC.[77]

As this article has pointed out, the level of intensity and speed of discourse and movement regarding war crimes prosecution in Ukraine are noteworthy. This reflects the development of humanitarian and human rights norms in the international community. At the same time, bearing in mind that US and European intervention in Ukraine is associated with the high risk of a Third World War, engaging in war crimes discourse and supporting war crimes prosecution are far cheaper and more viable options. What is more, they would rarely be criticised because of their strong normative stance which is shared by the international community.

From this perspective, US talk around war crimes and its stance towards war crimes prosecution require a nuanced analysis. The US is not an ICC member state and has adopted a confrontational stance to the ICC. However, in December 2022 Congress modified legal restrictions so that the US could assist the ICC's investigation related to the war in Ukraine. In February 2023 the US Department of State announced that 'Justice and human rights accountability are central pillars of the United States' policy on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the United States is focused on supporting those efforts most likely to bring perpetrators to justice.'[78] The Biden administration has actively engaged in talks and movement towards war crimes prosecution. Still, the administration itself is not monolithic. It was reported just before

76   Thomas W. Smith, 'Moral Hazard and Humanitarian Law: The International Criminal Court and the Limits of Legalism', *International Politics*, 39 (2002): 178.

77   Benjamin N. Schiff, *Building the International Criminal Court* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 232.

78   US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Supporting Justice and Accountability in Ukraine*, 18 February 2023 [accessed 1 March 2023].

the ICC issued arrest warrants against President Putin that the US Department of Defense is blocking the government from sharing evidence with the ICC 'because [it] fear[s] setting a precedent that might help pave the way for it to prosecute Americans'.[79] This has been the long-standing US stance towards the ICC, and to what extent the US will actually collaborate with the ICC to prosecute Russian war criminals remains uncertain. Meanwhile, the US will surely continue to engage in war crimes discourse, showing both domestic audiences and the international community that it is committed to supporting Ukraine, morally, politically, and financially.

Conclusion

Along with fierce fighting on the ground, the war in Ukraine has been fought also on the platform of a war crimes discourse which is followed often by investigations and occasionally by actual prosecution. This phenomenon is a result of the gradual development of international humanitarian and human rights laws and norms which provided the international community with a common vocabulary to talk about war morality. There is also the increasing role of the media and NGOs which have used and further spread such language. War crimes discourse does reflect an evolving trend of contemporary armed conflicts which are now put under intense public scrutiny and consistently judged legally, morally, and politically. It is here that war crimes discourse directly connects to the issue of legitimacy, which is key for success in war. Accordingly, war crimes discourse has come to be used by various actors with different strategic objectives in mind. On the one hand, there are voices that war crimes have to be investigated and those responsible should be prosecuted and punished. On the other, there are honest concerns that prosecuting war crimes while fighting is going on may hinder a ceasefire, and thus peace. These plural and conflicting voices make the prospect of actual prosecutions and trials uncertain. However, such uncertainty creates a space for war crimes discourse to be used in order to pursue one's own

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79   Charlie Savage, 'Pentagon Blocks Sharing Evidence of Possible Russian War Crimes with Hague Court', *New York Times*, 8 March 2023 [accessed 24 March 2023].

strategic interest. War crimes discourse is a powerful tool to legitimise one's own means and ends, as well as to delegitimise one's opponent's. Uncertainty in war crimes prosecution can be used as a bargaining chip for negotiating peace. And support for prosecution can be a cheaper and viable substitute for much costly military intervention.

The tone of war crimes discourse is now even more normative than in the past, centred on public interest in humanising war and pursuing justice. Accordingly, it may not always be a good idea to use discourse in pragmatic and strategic ways. Indeed, using the prosecution of war crimes as a bargaining chip will surely raise legal as well as moral questions and risk a backlash. Yet, international criminal justice by its nature is accompanied by ambiguity brought about by the dynamism between politics and law, peace and justice. This allows each actor to use, abuse, and manipulate the talk of war crimes in order to win not only the war but also the peace. The ongoing war in Ukraine shows that stakeholders are all too aware of the crucial role war crimes discourse plays.

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Hybrid after All: The 'Grey Zone', the 'Hybrid Warfare' Debate, and the PLA's *Science of Military Strategy*

Aurelio Insisa

About the Author

Aurelio Insisa is Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of History of the University of Hong Kong.

Abstract

Are China's operations in the context of the many maritime and territorial contestations of the Asia-Pacific aptly described by the 'grey zone' paradigm that first emerged in Japanese and American policy and academic environments? Or is the Euro-Atlantic 'hybrid warfare' paradigm a more effective tool to understand how China operates below the threshold of war? This study provides a new perspective on the debate between grey zone and hybrid warfare literature by examining how short-of-war military operations are discussed in two quasi-authoritative sources, both titled *Science of Military Strategy*, published within the People's Liberation Army ecosystem: the 2013 edition published by the Academy of Military Science and the 2020 edition published by the National Defense University. Ultimately, the two texts suggest that PLA strategists' understanding of the use of military forces to support Beijing's expansive sovereignty claims and 'maritime rights and interests'

closely resembles Western conceptions of hybrid warfare, rather than grey zone scenarios. Nevertheless, in partial contrast with recent scholarship on Chinese hybrid warfare, the sources examined suggest that Beijing's short-of-war operations are not conceived to produce a 'cognitive impasse' over the objectives, geographical scope, and modus operandi among its counterparts in the Asia-Pacific. Rather, they are conceived as an explicit form of deterrence.

Introduction

The assertive turn of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the protection of its 'national interests' that occurred between the late 2000s and early 2010s[1] has decisively contributed to the (re-)emergence of multiple maritime and territorial contestations across the Asia-Pacific, from the East China Sea to the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. In the midst of these contestations, Beijing has displayed a vast repertoire of operations involving military and constabulary actors to defend and advance its interests in the region. Such operations include changes in troop deployments, basing, military exercises, attempted enforcements of Air Defence Identification Zones, challenges to US freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in international waters, and blunt engagements with both coast guards and fishing crews from states engaged in competing claims. In detail, the bureaucratic actors tasked with the conduct of such operations covered virtually all the different branches of the country's armed forces, all under the command of the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): its military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA); its constabulary force, the China Coast Guard (CCG), which since 2018 has been an organ of the paramilitary wing of the CCP, the People's Armed Police (PAP);[2]

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1   Nien-Chung Chang Liao, 'The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?', *International Affairs* 92 № 4 (2016): 817–33.

2   Between 2013 and 2018 the CGG was under the civilian control of the State Oceanic Administration. See Lyle J. Morris, 'Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty: The Rise of Coast Guards in East and Southeast Asia', *Naval War College Review* 70 № 2 (2017): 75–112; Joel Wuthnow, *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reforms*, China Strategic Perspectives 14 (Washington, DC: INSS, 2019), p. 15.

and the maritime arm of the militia (*minbing*) forces, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).[3]

Against this backdrop, this study tests assumptions from the grey zone and hybrid warfare literatures on Beijing's sovereignty-affirming operations. It does so by examining Chinese sources on those operations that in PLA terminology are defined as 'non-war military operations' (NWMO, *fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong*).[4] As stated in the 'Trial Outline on Non-War Military Operations' announced on 14 June 2022 by state media, Chinese NWMO cover not only emergency response, protection of the lives and properties of Chinese people, but also the prevention and neutralisation of risks and challenges to Chinese interests, the protection of national sovereignty, security, and development interests, innovations in the employment of military force, and the maintenance of 'global peace and regional stability'.[5] In addition, the Outline also defines the parameters for standardising the organisation and conduct of NWMO and, crucially, provides a 'legal basis' for their implementation. Consisting of six chapters and fifty-nine articles, the Outline is an authoritative overview of how the Chinese party-state conceives operations routinely discussed in the grey zone and hybrid warfare literature.[6] However, as is generally the case with such official guidelines from the party-centre, the Outline's text has never been released to the public.

This study partially makes up for the fact that it is impossible to access doctrinal documents by examining two quasi-authoritative PLA documents concerned with NWMO, both titled *Science of Military Strategy* (*Zhanlüe Xue*, SMS). While the first SMS (henceforth SMS 13) was published under the supervision of the PLA's Academy of Military

3   On the command and control of the PAFMM and its relationship with the PLA, see Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, *China's Third Sea Force, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA*, CMSI China Maritime Report 1 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, Naval War College, 2017), pp. 2–5.

4   The Mandarin locution *fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong* is the translation of the term officially adopted by the US Department of Defense between 1995 and 2006. See James Siebens and Ryan Lucas, *Military Operations Other Than War in China's Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2022), p. 4.

5   'Fabu "Jundui fei zhanzheng junshi xingdong gangyao (shixing)"' [Release of the Trial Outline on Non-War Military Operations], *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], 14 June 2022.

6   Ibid.

Science and was last updated in 2013,[7] the second SMS (henceforth SMS 20) was published under the supervision of the PLA National Defense University, and it was last updated in 2020.[8] SMS publications have been described as 'an essential source for understanding how China's thinking about military strategy is changing'.[9] Their relevance can be further appreciated when considering that 'the PLA has no tradition of published doctrine where any officer (or soldier) can read strategic-level documents'.[10]

The rest of this study consists of four sections. The first section provides a concise outline of the grey zone and hybrid warfare literatures on China, identifying points of contacts and major fault lines. The second examines the discussion over NWMO within SMS 13, while the third makes use of SMS 20. The conclusion sums up the findings and compares them with the Western literature on Chinese grey zones, hybrid warfare, and strategic communications, while also framing them within broader discussions over the scope and value of doctrinal documents.

Chinese Behaviour in Maritime and Territorial Contestations: Grey or Hybrid?

Western attempts to make sense of Beijing's operations have relied on two constructs: the 'grey zone' and 'hybrid warfare'. Operations in the grey zone have been authoritatively described as: 'an effort or a series of efforts intended to advance one's security objectives at the expense of a rival using means beyond those associated with routine statecraft and below means associated with direct military conflict between rivals'.[11]

7   Junshi Kexue Yuan junshi zhanlüe yanjiubu, *Zhanlüe Xue (2013 nian ban)* [Science of Military Strategy (2013 Edition)] (Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 2013)—SMS 13.

8   Xiao Tianliang (ed.), *Zhanlüe Xue (2020 nian xiuding)* [Science of Military Strategy (2020 Revised Edition)] (Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 2020)—SMS 20.

9   M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's Changing Approach to Military Strategy: The Science of Military Strategy from 2003 to 2013', in *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, Joe McReynolds (ed.), (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2017), p. 41.

10   M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 29.

11   Kathleen Hicks and Alice Hunt Friend (ed.), *By Other Means: Campaigning in the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019), p. 4.

Consequently, grey zone operations are designed to be conducted below 'a threshold that results in open war'.[12] The definition of hybrid warfare, instead, has been subject to intense debate. Originally, from the mid to late 2000s, the term referred to battlefield-related advances, and thus described 'a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including violence and coercion, and criminal disorder'.[13] However, Russia's operations in Ukraine since 2014, the following politicisation of the term among Western practitioners and academic environments, and increasing Western attention towards Chinese sovereignty-affirming operations at sea, in turn, have led to a more expansive understanding of hybrid warfare.[14] This development, in turn, has shifted the focus from the battlefield to the full spectrum of great power competition, revealing an unresolved 'tension between the idea of hybrid warfare as a form or mode of warfare versus its understanding as part of a strategy'.[15] As a result, the term has been used to define also, in broader terms, 'the blending of conventional and non-conventional methods to achieve political-military objectives by both state and non-state actors'.[16]

Scholars and analysts focusing on China's expansive, sovereignty-affirming operations in the Asia-Pacific have fallen into two categories. A majority has embraced the grey zone construct as the primary conceptual tool to understand Beijing's actions in the region.[17] A minority, instead, has assessed Chinese operations through the conceptual prism of hybrid warfare. Studies and commentaries on the subject have thus compared a Western understanding of hybrid warfare, primarily shaped by the Russian

12   Ibid.

13   Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Warfare* (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), p. 14.

14   Ofer Fridman, *Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 158–59; Chiara Libiseller, '"Hybrid Warfare" as an Academic Fashion', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2023).

15   Chiyuki Aoi, Madoka Futamura, and Alessio Patalano, 'Introduction "Hybrid Warfare in Asia: Its Meaning and Shape"', *Pacific Review* 31 № 6 (2019): 701.

16   Ibid., 707.

17   Michael J. Mazarr, *Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015); Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Grey Zones Deterrence* (Washington, DC: 2017); Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson (eds), *China's Maritime Grey Zone Operations* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

experience in Ukraine since the events of 2014, with Chinese doctrines of non-kinetic warfare—in particular the 'three warfares' (*sanzhan*).[18] Yet, given the dominance of the grey zone paradigm, scholars concerned with hybrid warfare have inevitably addressed the relation between the two, providing a wide range of (at times contradicting) views. Aoi and her co-authors have framed grey zone operations as a type of hybrid strategy.[19] Mumford and Carlucci, instead, have argued that while the grey zone should be understood as a 'strategic term' defining 'the space of competition short of war', 'hybrid warfare' should be framed as a concept belonging to the realm of 'operational art'—the supposed intermediate level connecting strategy to tactics.[20] Finally, a number of analysts have questioned the need to distinguish between the two, effectively using both terms in an interchangeable fashion.[21]

Indicative of the conceptual contiguity between the two constructs, as well as of a fragmented and unsystematic research landscape, is the common use of the term 'ambiguity'. Among those working within the grey zone paradigm, Feng defines ambiguity as one of the 'fundamental characteristics' of grey zones;[22] Wirtz argues that Chinese grey zone operations 'exploit deterrent ambiguities', namely 'a lack of well-defined red lines';[23] Pronk too sees ambiguity 'utilised' in grey zone conflicts 'to

18   Michael Raska, 'Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics', *RSIS Commentary* 262 (2015); Lora Saalman, 'China and Its Hybrid Warfare Spectrum', in *Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations*, Niklas Nilsson et al. (eds), (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021), pp. 95–112. On the 'three warfares', namely psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare, see Lee, Sangkuk, 'China's "Three Warfares": Origins, Applications and Organization', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37 № 2 (2014): 198–221.

19   Aoi et al., 'Introduction "Hybrid Warfare in Asia"'.

20   Andrew Mumford and Pascal Carlucci, '<u>Hybrid Warfare: The Continuation of Ambiguity by Other Means</u>', *European Journal of International Security* (2022). Mumford and Carlucci do not address either Friedman's critique of the standard conceptualisation of operational art, nor his caveat about the application of operational art to the case of China. B.A. Friedman, *On Operations: Operational Arts and Military Disciplines* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021).

21   Anthony H. Cordesman, *Chronology of Possible Chinese Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019); Peter Kouretsos, 'Annex A: Contextualising Chinese Hybrid Warfare', in *Stealing a March. Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific: Issue and Options for Allied Defense Planners*, in Ross Babbage (ed.), vol. 2, *Case Studies* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2019), pp. 1–6.

22   Feng Jin, *The Gray Zone Issue: Implications for US-China Relations*, Issues & Insights 19, WP 14 (Honolulu, HI: Pacific Forum, 2019), p. 1.

23   James J. Wirtz, 'Life in the "Gray Zone": Observations for Contemporary Strategists', *Defense & Security Analysis* 33 № 2 (2017): 109.

weaken deterrence measures';[24] a recent RAND study includes among Chinese grey zone 'tactics' operations that are considered 'ambiguous' because of their 'coercive potential', even though 'Beijing has not explicitly and officially messaged as such'.[25] Similarly, among those working within the hybrid warfare paradigm, Babbage argues that Beijing's 'hybrid campaigns' are 'designed to win advances where the status is unclear or ambiguous,[26] while an authoritative NATO study on hybrid threats defines ambiguity—here understood as a deliberate attempt to obscure responsibility—as one of their 'key aspects'.[27] In short, while for some China exploits ambiguous legal-geopolitical scenarios, for others it is China's own operations that promote 'hazy middle ground' where 'the information we need to make sense of an experience seems to be missing, too complex, or contradictory'.[28]

Only Mumford and Carlucci, who work within the hybrid warfare paradigm, have systematically examined to what extent Chinese operations are ambiguous. For the two authors, who focus specifically on Beijing's conduct in the South China Sea, the ambiguous character of the PRC's hybrid warfare can be traced back to three defining features. First, hybrid warfare leaves opposing parties guessing about all possible plausible scenarios that could emerge from its waging. Second, it constitutes a 'strategy of dispersion' that avoids 'concentration of force and attrition', forcing opposing parties to overstretch their capacities. Third, it relies on a combination of diverse tools ('artillery, constabulary forces, […] propaganda, […] drones, legal claims') and on the blurring of boundaries between domains, while remaining 'below the threshold of legitimate

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24 Danny Pronk, *Fifty Shades of Grey: 21st Century Competition with China and Russia* (Clingendael, 2021), p. 2.

25 Bonny Lin et al., *Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China's Coercion against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), p. 3.

26 Ross Babbage, *Stealing a March. Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific: Issue and Options for Allied Defense Planners*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2019), p. 28.

27 Ben Heap (ed.), *Hybrid Threats: A Strategic Communications Perspective* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).

28 Robert Mandel, *Global Data Shock: Strategic Ambiguity, Deception and Surprise in an Age of Information Overload* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 33. For the definition of ambiguity contained in the cited passage, see Jamie Holmes, *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* (New York: Crown, 2015), p. 15.

response'.[29] As a result, state actors engaged in hybrid warfare aim at leading opponents 'into a state of cognitive impasse regarding its political, strategic and tactical intentions'.[30] Chinese hybrid warfare thus is described as 'an ambiguous policy designed to delay hostile actions from allies and [slow] down the ability to determine Beijing's overall strategy'. Within this scenario, in which Beijing relies on the 'non-violent use of military force in an irregular confrontation', 'state banks and state-owned enterprises', together with 'state media', are 'all used harmoniously to achieve military objectives peacefully'.[31]

Examining the *Science of Military Strategy* (2013)

NWMO are discussed in the eighth chapter of SMS 13. Following PLA official terminology, the text defines them as 'military operations that the armed forces carry out to protect the nation's security and development interests but that do not directly constitute war'.[32] They include operations such as counterterrorism and maintenance of stability, safeguarding national rights and interests, security and guarding, emergency rescue and disaster relief, international peacekeeping, and international rescue.[33] Beyond this standard definition, SMS 13 groups NWMO into four major categories: 'confrontational operations', 'law-enforcement operations', 'aid operations', and 'cooperative operations'.[34] While aid operations and cooperative operations play a critical role in China's global presence and influence,[35] only confrontational operations (*duikang xingdong*) and law-enforcement operations (*zhifa xingdong*) should be considered of critical importance to understand the design of those sovereignty-affirming NWMO that best reflect the perimeter of the grey zone and hybrid warfare constructs.

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29   Mumford and Carlucci, 'Hybrid Warfare', 8.

30   Ibid., 15.

31   Ibid., 14.

32   Quanjun junshi shuyu guanli weiyuanhui, junshi kexueyuan [All-Army Military Terminology Committee], *Zhongguo Renming Jiefang Junyu* [Military Terminology of China's People's Liberation Army] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2011), p. 163, as cited in SMS 13, p. 154.

33   SMS 13, p. 154.

34   Ibid., p. 162.

35   Siebens and Lucas, *Military Operations Other Than War*.

Confrontational operations concern the protection of China's sovereignty, rights and interests, and security against non-traditional security threats. They cover the monitoring, constraint, investigation, control, and ultimately attack of a potential target. While the primary targets are terrorist groups and transnational crime organisations, foreign countries too are included among the potential targets of such operations. Indeed, the alleged geographical scope of these operations, which beyond 'border regions' include also a more generic expression such as 'certain areas within the nation' (*guonei mouyi diqu*), suggests that the island of Taiwan—together with the many smaller islands controlled by authorities in Taipei—may be targeted too.[36] Furthermore, confrontational operations are not conceived to remain below the threshold of a kinetic engagement with the opposite side. Rather, they may escalate to the point of turning into 'low-intensity confrontations' (*di qiangdu de kangdui*) and 'violent conflicts' (*baoli chongtu*)—even to the point of briefly reaching the intensity of war operations.[37]

Conversely, law-enforcement operations are more explicitly designed to target hostile countries or even coalitions within disputed border regions and 'international flashpoints' (*guoji redian diqu*). The rationale presented for these operations is a reactive one. They are conceived as a response to relatively large-scale and organised provocative behaviour by opponents, and they are conducted through border and coastal blockades, 'air policing' (*kongzhong jingjie*) within claimed Air Defence Identification Zones, the defence of 'maritime rights', escorting convoys, the issue of security alerts, and military patrols,[38] a catalogue that perfectly matches Beijing's operations not only in the South and East China Seas, but also in the Taiwan Strait following the collapse of cross-Strait relations with Taipei in 2016. Given the nature of the task and the identity of the targets, law-enforcement operations are considered not only the most frequent type of NWMO, but also the one conducted for the longest span of time. In addition, SMS 13 also highlights that law-enforcement operations must be conducted in a 'rational', 'beneficial', and 'restrained'

36   SMS 13, pp. 162–63.

37   Ibid., p. 163.

38   Ibid., p. 163.

way in order both to reduce the risk of escalation and to eliminate potential challenge to Chinese rights and interests at the earliest stage.[39]

While the passages reported above present sanitised, merely descriptive accounts of NWMO, the rest of the chapter also provides surprisingly explicit insights into the rationale behind them, which, in turn, casts such operations in a different light. At a broader level, the authors describe the full range of NWMO—thus including also aid operations and cooperative operations—as an 'effective avenue' (*youxia tujing*) to advance the achievement of Chinese interests and support their expansion on a global scale, because of their 'relatively peaceful methods', deterrence character, and 'combination of soft power and hard power'.[40] NWMO, as a result, are conceived to 'mentally deter opponents' and 'control the situation'.[41] The strategic calculus behind their design is ultimately summed up, perhaps stereotypically, by citing what is perhaps the most widely known passage from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*: 'to subjugate the enemy's army without fighting' (*bu zhan er qu ren zhi bing*).[42] In addition, the rest of the chapter emphasises how NWMO are but one component of a flux of military, political, diplomatic, and economic operations, thus requiring close and constant coordination with other organs of the party-state.[43] Here, it is possible to appreciate how PLA strategists' conception of sovereignty-affirming NWMO closely resembles the emphasis on combining and coordinating different tools, bureaucratic actors, and domains to achieve strategic objectives that characterise the hybrid warfare paradigm.

The chapter also stresses an acute awareness of the impact of NWMO within the regional and international information environments.

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39   Ibid., p. 163.

40   Ibid., pp. 160–61.

41   Ibid., p. 164.

42   Ibid., p. 160. The translation in this paper is adapted from Sawyer. See Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 161. The locution is more commonly translated in English as 'winning without fighting'. On the use of ancient Chinese strategic thought among contemporary Chinese strategists, see Andrea Ghiselli, 'Revising China's Strategic Culture: Contemporary Cherry-Picking of Ancient Strategic Thought', *China Quarterly* 233 (2018): 166–85.

43   SMS 13, p. 164.

The authors acknowledge that certain types of NWMO, because of their 'political nature' (*zhengzhixing*) and sensitivity, may on the one hand contribute to strengthening the image of the country at a domestic level, while on the other hand exposing Beijing to attacks by foreign countries capable of distorting events for international public opinion. Mistakes in the conduct of such NWMO, as well as an ineffective management of media, could expose Beijing to political attacks of hostile countries.[44]

The description of sovereignty-affirming NWMO available here, however, should be framed within the authors' assessment of the 'strategic space' (*zhanlüe kongjian*) in which China operates. Tellingly, this assessment dramatically diverges from Chinese official discourses tailored to foreign audiences. The authors of SMS 13 conceive 'strategic space' as a contested, dynamic environment that extends well beyond Chinese borders. Furthermore, the authors argue that exercising a degree of control over such space is in fact a necessity in order to sustain the country's continuing security and development. This strategic space is dynamic because it transcends the immutable geographical features that shape geopolitics. 'Since the beginning of warfare' the strategic space in which major power operated consisted of the lands and oceans. Yet, because of scientific and technological development throughout the twentieth century, the strategic space extended first towards the air and space domains and eventually, with the further development of communication technologies, to the 'intangible space' (*wuxing kongjian*). Great powers, as a result, compete for strategic space not only on land, sea, air, and space, but also within the 'information network space' (*xinxi wangluo kongjian*).[45] Reflecting these momentous changes, the authors note how, throughout the *longue durée* of Chinese imperial history, ruling dynasties were primarily concerned with the control of land strategic space in the Asian mainland to guarantee the security of their polities. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the country's ascendency in the twenty-first century, the authors argue that Beijing's security cannot be simply limited to the defence of sovereignty within its 'home territory'

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44   Ibid., p. 165.

45   Ibid., pp. 244–45.

(*bentu*). Rather, it must respond to a different strategic imperative: 'relying on the home territory, stabilising the periphery, controlling the near seas, advancing into space, and focusing on the information space'.[46]

Why is the Chinese 'periphery' (*zhoubian*) in need of stabilisation? According to the authors, the reason traces back to the increasingly hardened position of regional neighbours over maritime boundaries, island ownership, and maritime rights and interests. While the expression 'maritime rights and interests' (*haishang quanyi*) is ubiquitous in Chinese official discourses, the terms are 'never expressly defined [...] and encompass a highly disparate array of goals and operations'.[47] This contraposition between Beijing and its neighbours on these issues, in turn, has left the country exposed to the machinations of 'great powers' (namely the US) aiming at endangering China's security.[48] From this perspective it is possible to appreciate how confrontational and law-enforcement operations are primarily conceived as components of a *tixi*-system of deterrence.[49] Consequently, this specific subset of sovereignty-affirming NWMO is conceived with a clearly communicative intent—in stark contrast to hybrid warfare's emphasis on leading adversaries to a state of cognitive impasse about their opponent's objectives. Sovereignty-affirming NWMO are conceived to deter opponents by making Chinese military presence visible, by 'expressing security concerns' (*biaoda anquan guanqie*), and by 'publicly declaring the strategic bottom-line' (*xuanshi zhanlüe dixian*).[50] By doing so, NWMO can unmistakably communicate Beijing's 'position', 'approach', and 'resolve', thus—at the same time—*helping* other polities to commit 'strategic misjudgements'

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46   Ibid., p. 246. The near seas 'consist of the waters adjacent to China's borders, i.e. the East and South China Seas, and the Yellow Sea'. Tom Guorui Sun and Alex Payette, *China's Two-Oceans Strategy: Controlling Waterways and the New Silk Road*, Asia Focus 31 (Paris: IRIS, 2017), p. 5.

47   Isaac B. Kardon, *China's Maritime Rights and Interests: Organizing to Become a Maritime Power* (CNA, 2015), p. 8.

48   SMS 13, pp. 79–80.

49   A *xitong*-system is 'a discrete system that carries out specific functions'. Conversely, a *tixi*-system is 'a large integrated system that comprises multiple types of *xitong*-systems' which 'carries out numerous and varied functions'; 'Specifically, a *tixi*-system denotes either a system of systems or a system's system'. Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare* (RAND, 2018), pp. 2–3.

50   SMS 13, p. 120.

(*zhanlüe wupan*), and guaranteeing continued control of escalation.[51] In this fashion, NWMO allow the Chinese armed forces to fulfil their mission and obtain greater 'strategic benefits' both 'at lower cost than war' (*bi zhanzheng xiao de daijia*) and through 'a more flexible method than war' (*bi zhanzheng gengjia linghuo de fangshi*).[52]

To conclude this section, it is worth highlighting how SMS 13's designs for the expansion of China's 'strategic space' explicitly articulated not only Beijing's assertive shift in national strategy at a time when international scholarship vigorously debated and even dispelled narratives of Chinese assertiveness,[53] but also its preference for short-of-war measures in undertaking this feat. Causal links between doctrinal (or, in this case, semi-doctrinal documents) and foreign policy outcomes should not be emphasised when it comes to a 'black-box' state such as China. Yet, a new reading of SMS 13 stresses the importance of carefully scrutinising and maintaining access to Chinese sources. Beijing's new push in early 2023 to further limit access to academic and trade databases indirectly confirms this point.[54]

Examining the *Science of Military Strategy* (2020)

While the Academy of Military Science's SMS 13 was published in September 2013, at the dawn of the Xi Jinping era, the latest version of the National Defense University's own version of the SMS was published in a profoundly different geostrategic environment. In 2013 the Chinese militarisation of the geographical features that it controlled in the South China Sea was still well under way. The country was mired deep in a vocal sovereignty dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Cross-strait relations with Taipei—then under the Chinese nationalist

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51   Ibid., p. 120.

52   Ibid., p. 120.

53   Alastair Ian Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', *International Security* 37 № 4 (2013): 7–48; Björn Jerdén, 'The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7 № 1 (2014): 47–88.

54   Diego Mendoza, 'Western Scholars Are Worried China Just Got Harder to Study: Here's Why', *Semafor,* 22 March 2023.

administration of Ma Ying-jeou—were still on an upward trajectory. And relations with the US, while affected by the recent 'pivot to Asia' of the Obama administration, had not spiralled down into an all-encompassing great power competition. By 2020, instead, Xi Jinping had emerged as the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao. The PRC's armed forces had incrementally expanded their capacities and undergone a comprehensive set of reforms.[55] Continuing tensions with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands had morphed into an uneasy modus vivendi between the two sides characterised by regular Chinese patrolling around and at times within Japanese territorial waters. The militarisation of Chinese outposts in the South China Sea had been completed—which greatly enhanced Beijing's presence and projection of power over this 'near sea'. Relations with the US had turned into overt great power competition under the Trump administration. And cross-strait relations had collapsed following the victory of Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party in the 2016 and 2020 Taiwanese presidential and legislative elections, leading to increasing military presence in the waters and airspace surrounding Taiwan, and to mounting speculations of a Chinese attempt to use force to change the status quo on the Taiwan Strait to finally achieve national unification.

Against this profoundly different backdrop, SMS 20 does not provide explicit insights into the role of short-of-war military operations in the expansion of China's strategic space. The text offers instead a new taxonomy to understand the country's military operations short of war. In lieu of the four-category grouping present in SMS 13 (confrontational, law-enforcement, aid, and cooperative operations), SMS 20 identifies nine types: anti-terrorism, stability maintenance (quelling of domestic protests), rescue and disaster relief, security and guarding of major events, international peacekeeping, international rescue, convoy escort, border closure (in response to cases such as infiltration by hostile forces, sabotage, epidemics, refugee crises), and overseas evacuation.[56]

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55   For a comprehensive view of the PLA reforms: Phillip C. Saunders et al. (eds), *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (National Defense University Press, 2019).

56   SMS 20, pp. 290–96.

Sovereignty-affirming operations which are associated to the realm of NWMO in SMS 13, such as 'military deterrence', 'border control', 'establishment of no-fly zones', and 'limited military strikes', have been instead deemed 'quasi-war military operations' (*zhun zhanzheng junshi xingdong*, QWMO).[57]

Comprehensively, QWMO are conceived as a 'mode of military conflict' that is situated between 'war operations' and non-war military operations, to be implemented in those scenarios where 'contradictions and crises' between China and its opponents have severely intensified without, however, crossing the threshold of war. From a Chinese perspective, the aim of QWMO is thus to contain, control, and eliminate threats before the eruption of a conflict,[58] an approach which explains the direct mention of 'military deterrence' (*junshi weishe*) highlighted above. Yet, when one considers the contested theatres in which Chinese QWMO would be conducted, such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, it is possible to appreciate how such operations do not simply constitute a form of conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence.[59] Rather, they also reflect the country's distinctive view of deterrence, one that does not simply aim at 'forestalling an adversary's undesired action', but that also 'includes aspects of compellence, meaning that China often uses its military to coerce other countries to take actions Beijing desires'.[60] This reading is indeed confirmed elsewhere in the text, as the authors state that conventional deterrence is easier to control and less prone to escalation to nuclear war, thus both more convenient to achieve political objectives and more credible as a form of deterrence in itself.[61]

Here, it is necessary to highlight how the SMS 20 outline for the implementation of QWMO is in broad strokes consistent with Beijing's response to the visit by then US House of Representatives speaker Nancy

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57   Ibid., p. 86.

58   Ibid., pp. 85–86.

59   James J. Wirtz, 'How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12 Nº 4 (2018): 58–75.

60   Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signaling in the New Era: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2021), p. viii.

61   SMS 20, p. 129.

Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022.[62] The same caveats previously mentioned in relation to SMS 13 remain valid for SMS 20. In other words, there is no ground to argue that the source provides a script that Beijing would mechanically follow according to the emergence of a specific scenario. Nevertheless, the extent to which Beijing's response was consistent with the outline present in SMS 20 should not be ignored. It is further evidence of the relevance of SMS publications as quasi-doctrinal sources capable of providing a glimpse into the black box of Chinese decision-making processes. Furthermore, the consistency of Beijing's actions with the design outlined in SMS 20 shows once again how short-of-war operations, while conceived in terms closely resembling the hybrid warfare paradigm, leave no space for ambiguities regarding political and strategic intentions, as instead argued by Mumford and Carlucci.[63]

To conclude this section, it should also be mentioned that the tripartite war/quasi-war/non-war taxonomy, beyond being absent from the official statements regarding the 'Trial Outline' issued in 2022, appears only in the fifth chapter of SMS 20, the one exploring 'strategy implementation'. Such taxonomy is not applied throughout the rest of the text. For instance, law-enforcement operations by the CCG—the constabulary force under the command of the PAP since 2018—in waters where Beijing claims jurisdiction are never explicitly designed as QWMO, even though it is necessary to note that they do not fall in the detailed description of NWMO provided in the earlier chapters.[64] Further uncertainty emerges from the text's claim that both the PLA Navy *and* the CCG are tasked with the vaguely defined protection of China's 'maritime rights and interests' in the 'far seas' (*yuan hai*).[65] This statement raises doubts over the scope and jurisdiction of Chinese laws, while at the same time reflecting the expansive definition of the country's 'strategic space' sketched in SMS 13.

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62 Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2022: Cross-Strait Security Spirals Further Down', *Asia Maior* 33 (2023) [forthcoming].

63 Mumford and Carlucci, 'Hybrid Warfare'.

64 SMS 20, p. 426.

65 Ibid., pp. 364, 426.

Conclusion

Any expectations to extrapolate information predicting the course of actions of a state actor from documents possessing 'doctrinal' status must be severely tempered with caution. As Høiback notes, state actors always release doctrinal documents 'with an eye to how it would be comprehended by adversaries and opponents, especially so unclassified doctrines'.[66] Furthermore, a doctrine can gradually turn into something akin to 'a weathercock or a thermometer, only revealing tendencies and policies it is ultimately unable to do anything about'.[67] These warnings are even more relevant when examining quasi-authoritative documents such as the SMS, even though it is still worth highlighting how (1) SMS 13 provided an articulated explanation for Beijing's assertive shift and its reliance on short-of-war measures, and (2) SMS 20 reliably outlined the PLA's response to the Pelosi visit to Taiwan.

Keeping in mind these caveats, this study has offered a new perspective on the debate on grey zone operations and hybrid warfare regarding China. International anglophone scholarship has failed to reach a consensus on Chinese operations in the maritime and territorial contestations of the Asia-Pacific. By examining PLA strategists' conception of a specific subset of operations short of war (dubbed NWMO in SMS 13, and divided between NWMO and QWMO in SMS 20), this study found that the Chinese vision closely resembles the Euro-Atlantic conceptions of hybrid warfare, rather than the grey zone paradigm dominant in the Japanese-American milieu. While such operations are seen as a method to 'win without fighting', nowhere in the Chinese sources examined here is it possible to find prescriptions for the construction and exploitation of 'grey zones' designed to achieve politico-military objectives without risking the eruption of a major military engagement with opposing sides. In fact, especially in SMS 13, the risk that such operations might result in a major military engagement is openly stated. The PLA conceptualisation of short-of-war operations should then be understood both as a form of

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66   Harald Høiback, 'What Is Doctrine?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34 № 6 (2011): 895.

67   Ibid., 892.

conventional deterrence and as a tool to dominate escalation, a point already noted by Patalano before the reorganisation of the CCG as a branch of the PAP.[68]

Yet, at the same time, SMS 13 and SMS 20 qualify Mumford and Carducci's claim that Chinese hybrid warfare is ambiguous because it aims to throw adversaries into a state of 'cognitive impasse'. Chinese sovereignty-affirming NWMO/QWMO, as conceived by PLA strategists, are ambiguous due to their combining and coordinating different tools, bureaucratic actors, and domains to achieve strategic objectives 'at lower cost' and 'through a more flexible method than war'.[69] But there is little ambiguity in the Chinese deterrence playbook when it concerns the protection of the country's expansive sovereignty claims through NWMO/QWMO.[70] These operations are clearly conceived and designed to explicitly communicate threat and the possibility of retaliation. If, as Mandel argues, ambiguity is strategic when an actor promotes a 'hazy middle ground' where 'the information we need to make sense of an experience seems to be missing, too complex, or contradictory',[71] the operations examined here do not meet this standard. Similarly, the claim that Chinese hybrid warfare is ambiguous because it amounts to a 'strategy of dispersion', in other words, that it is designed to leave opponents guessing over the geographical scope of its 'law enforcement', have to be tamped down. Such ambiguity is more the by-product of the ever-growing asymmetry in capabilities between Beijing and its neighbouring polities, rather than the result of a design to enforce Chinese claims through unpredictable patterns. The only area where

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68   Alessio Patalano, 'When Strategy Is "Hybrid" and Not "Grey": Reviewing Chinese Military and Constabulary Coercion at Sea', *Pacific Review Studies* 31 № 6 (2018): 831.

69   SMS 13, p. 120.

70   An awareness of party-state signalling at a rhetorical level further strengthens this point, especially considering SMS 13 and SMS 20 focus on coordinating management of the information environment together with operations short of war. See Paul H.B. Goodwin and Alice L. Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation,* China Strategic Perspectives 6 (Washington, DC: INSS, 2013).

71   Robert Mandel, *Global Data Shock: Strategic Ambiguity, Deception and Surprise in an Age of Information Overload* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 33. For the definition of ambiguity contained in the cited passage, see Jamie Holmes, *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* (New York: Crown, 2015), p. 15.

Chinese strategists appear to wilfully project ambiguity appears to be in the 'protection' of 'maritime rights and interests' in the 'far seas' where Beijing does not claim jurisdiction. On the one hand, the geostrategic rationale outlined in SMS 13 (and more tacitly acknowledged in SMS 20) links homeland security to the ability to conduct short-of-war operations in the many hotspots of global sea lanes of communication. On the other hand, in the absence of the 'legal cover' provided by sovereignty claims, explicit descriptions of Beijing's modus operandi are arguably deemed not 'politically correct' enough to be articulated in the same terms as its actions in the 'near seas'.

To conclude, the findings of this study are also relevant to the emerging scholarship on Chinese strategic communications, which until now has either investigated the construction of strategic communications (*zhanlüe chuanbo*) as a discourse on the effectiveness of the country's external propaganda,[72] or has mapped Beijing's strategic communications in relation to specific scenarios such as the current crisis in cross-Strait relations with Taiwan or the interstate communicative dynamics sparked by the articulation of the Belt and Road Initiative.[73] The connection may appear far-fetched at a surface level. After all, Euro-Atlantic frameworks of strategic communications, as encapsulated in NATO's MC 0628 Military Policy on Strategic Communications, issued in 2017, emphasise its rhetorical dimension.[74] Yet, the NATO Terminology Working Group's own definition of strategic communications as a 'holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'[75] suggests

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72 Aurelio Insisa, 'China's Discourse on Strategic Communications: Insights into PRC External Propaganda', *Defence Strategic Communications* 10 (2022): 111–52.

73 Naoko Eto, 'Japan-China Strategic Communications Dynamics under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of "Third Country Business Cooperation"', *Asian Perspective* 45 № 3 (2021): 533–58; Aurelio Insisa, 'No Consensus across the Strait: Chinese and Taiwanese Strategic Communications in a Contested Regional Order', *Asian Perspective* 45 № 3 (2021): 503–31.

74 MC 0628 states that 'in the context of the NATO military, strategic communications is the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military operations, in order to understand and shape the Information Environment (IE), in support of NATO aims and objectives'. NATO, *MC 0628: NATO Military Policy on Strategic Communications* (2017).

75 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 46.

a more expansive understanding of the term. From this perspective, practitioners such as Fry have in fact stated that militaries can conduct 'kinetic or coercive strategic communications activities'.[76] Similarly, Aoi and her co-authors had previously argued how hybrid warfare can be ultimately understood as 'the subordination of military operations to strategic communication[s]'.[77] Framing the subject of this study as a form of strategic communications, in turn, suggests the desirability further scrutiny of the operations undertaken by the Chinese military to shape the information environment below the threshold of high-end conflict, and whether they occur in coordination or in *apparent* contrast with both legal and propaganda tools targeting foreign audiences.

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76   Elizabeth Fry, 'Persuasion Not Propaganda: Overcoming Controversies of Domestic Influences in NATO's Military Strategic Communications', *Defence Strategic Communications* 11 (2023): 203.

77   Aoi et al., 'Introduction "Hybrid Warfare in Asia"', 701.

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Inherent Strategic Ambiguity between Objectives and Actions: Russia's 'Information War'

Ofer Fridman

About the Author
Dr Ofer Fridman is Director of Operations at King's Centre for Strategic Communications (KCSC) and Senior Lecturer at the Department of War Studies, King's College London.

Abstract

The concept and practice of strategic ambiguity have long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. In an attempt to understand how it can be used in strategic communications (SC), this article explores Russia's conceptualisation and implementation of 'information war' by adopting a dialectic approach. First, it examines the Kremlin's actions in Syria and Ukraine through the traditional approach to strategy as an act of navigation. Second, it takes an opposite framework, approaching the Kremlin's 'information war' as a strategy of wayfinding (strategy without design). Finally, based on the dialectic synthesis of these two approaches, the conclusion offers several recommendations for the practice of SC in general.

Introduction: Strategic Ambiguity in Strategic Communications

The concept and practice of strategic ambiguity (SA) have long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. One of the most fruitful discussions has been in the field of business studies. Introduced by Eric M. Eisenberg in the 1980s,[1] the concept of SA has been approached as a strategy in organisational communications to achieve different goals, such as enabling multiple interests, delegating authority, or resolving conflicts within or between organisations.[2] Another important field that has devoted much attention to the idea of SA is international relations—from game-theory strategists who integrated ambiguity in their models[3] to policy analysts who used the concept of SA to explain foreign policies of different states, such as that between the US and both China and Taiwan, or the policy of Japan towards the Indo-Pacific.[4]

Eisenberg uses the term SA to refer to 'instances where individuals [or organisations] use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals'.[5] While the concept was developed (and is still frequently perceived) as an opposite of clarity, this is not entirely true. 'Clarity exists', argues Eisenberg, when '(1) an individual has an idea; (2) he or she encodes the idea into language; and (3) the receiver understands the message as it was intended by the source'.[6] Therefore, clarity is only a degree of

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1   Winni Johansen, 'Strategic Ambiguity', in *The International Encyclopaedia of Strategic Communications*, Robert L. Heath and Winni Johansen (eds), (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), pp. 1454–57.

2   Eric M. Eisenberg, 'Ambiguity as Strategy in Organisational Communications', *Communications Monographs* 51 (1984): 227–42; Paula Jarzabkowski, John A.A. Sillince, and Duncan Shaw, 'Strategic Ambiguity as a Rhetorical Resource for Enabling Multiple Interests', *Human Relations* 63 Nº 2 (2010): 219–48; Sally Davenport and Shirley Leitch, 'Circuits of Power in Practice: Strategic Ambiguity as Delegation of Authority', *Organisation Studies* 26 Nº 11 (2005): 1603–23.

3   Joel Sobol, 'How (and When) to Communicate with Enemies', in *Equilibrium and Dynamics*, Mukul Majumdar (ed.), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

4   Hoo Tiang Boon and Hannah Elyse Sworn, 'Strategic Ambiguity and the Trumpian Approach to China–Taiwan Relations', *International Affairs* 96 Nº 6 (2020): 1487–1508; Nien-chung Chang-Lia and Chi Fang, 'The Case for Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait', *Washington Quarterly* 44 Nº 2 (2021): 45–60; Kei Koga, 'Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Strategy: Tokyo's Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41 Nº 2 (2019): 268–313.

5   Eisenberg, 'Ambiguity as Strategy in Organisational Communications', p. 230.

6   Ibid.

competence of a communicator who seeks to make his or her idea/goal clear to the receiver. SA, however, exists when: (1) an individual has a clear idea; (2) he or she encodes it into ambiguous language; (3) the receiver fosters multiple interpretations about the message communicated by the source. In pursuit of clarity, a communicator must 'take into account the possible interpretive contexts which may be brought to bear on the message by the receiver and attempt to narrow the possible interpretations'.[7] However, if a communicator seeks to achieve SA, he or she must use the same interpretive context to broaden the scope of potential interpretations by the receiver as much as possible.

According to the most basic (and reductively simple) understanding of strategy, SA comprises three foundational and interdependent elements: ends, ways, and means.[8] Consequently, SA has three basic dimensions: goal ambiguity, ways ambiguity, and means ambiguity.[9] *Strategic goal ambiguity* implies communications that purposefully create plurality of interests and meanings that the target audience attributes to the goal of the communicator. *Strategic ways ambiguity* refers to the intentionally generated interpretations by the target audience in regard to the ways by which the communicator intends to achieve his or her goals. Finally, *strategic means ambiguity* suggests purposefully created plurality of interpretations about the means by which the communicator seeks to achieve his or her goals.

This leads to two important observations about the character and nature of SA. First, SA is not a goal by itself but a purposefully created diversity of inconclusive interpretations by audiences as a means to achieve the communicator's strategic goal. Second, due to the interdependent nature of these three elements of strategy, the three dimensions of SA are interwoven as well. Ambiguity about goals generates ambiguity about means and ways, ambiguity about means creates ambiguity about goals

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7   Ibid.

8   Colin Gray, *Strategy and Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 53.

9   These three loosely correspond with the three dimensions of ambiguity in leadership (goal ambiguity, authority ambiguity, and technology ambiguity) discussed in Michael D. Cohen and James G. March, *Leadership and Ambiguity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).

and ways, and so on. This complex nature of SA is frequently discussed (even if implicitly) in the analysis of different cases studies, such as US Taiwan policy[10] or Russian policies in the post-Soviet space.[11]

In an attempt to understand how SA can be used in strategic communications (SC), it is important to understand what SC entails. On the one hand, neither the term nor the concept of SC has a unified definition. On the other, a review of existing approaches suggests that it entails 'a coordinated/coherent use of all means of communication (words, images, actions) to influence targeted audiences in pursuit of political interests'.[12] SC not only 'encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment', but also does so as 'a holistic approach' that is 'based on values and interests'.[13]

Combining this understanding of SC with the broader concept of SA produces two important observations. First, SA can be used in the practice of SC, as far as it is in the interest of the strategic communicator to generate ambiguity about his or her goals, means, and/or ways among the targeted audiences. In this case, he or she will coherently use all means of communication (encompassing everything he or she does) purposefully generating SA in pursuit of select objectives in a contested environment. Second, since both *strategic* ambiguity and *strategic* communications are rooted in the idea of *strategy*, they both imply the existence of a *strategic* goal, which a strategic communicator seeks to achieve by deliberately using SA in his or her SC. These observations raise one of the most acute questions for the field of SC: what is the role of SA in SC?

To answer this question, this article explores Russia's SC—more precisely, the Russian alternative of SC—'information war' (IW). This exploration consists of four main parts. Since the notion of *strategy* is essential for

10   Boon and Sworn, 'Strategic Ambiguity and the Trumpian Approach'; Chang-Lia and Fang, 'The Case for Maintaining Strategic Ambiguity'.

11   Mark R. Beissinger, 'The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11 № 2 (1995): 149–84.

12   David Siman-Tov and Ofer Fridman, 'A Rose by Any Other Name? Strategic Communications in Israel', *Defence Strategic Communications* 8 (2020): 19.

13   Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, June 2019), p. 46.

both SC and SA, the first part investigates the concept of IW as Russia's approach to SC through the traditional approach to strategy-making as 'a deliberate, planned, and purposeful activity'.[14] The second part examines Russia's intervention in Syria and invasion of Ukraine through this conceptual prism, offering some interpretations of the Kremlin's use of SA in its IW. The third part addresses the same challenge through the opposite approach to strategy-making as a process characterised by a consistency of actions that 'emerge non-deliberately through a profusion of local interventions directed towards dealing with immediate concerns'.[15] Finally, based on the dialectic synthesis of these two approaches, the conclusion not only sheds light on the role of SA in SC, but also offers a deeper understanding of SC in general.

Russia's Information War as a Deliberate Use of Strategic Ambiguity in Strategic Communications

Since the term SC is a fruit of Western thinking, its absence in Russian professional and conceptual discourse is not surprising.[16] While some Russian scholars have been following the Western theoretical developments in the field of SC,[17] the term is neither used in Russia's official documents nor prevalent in the country's wider academic debates. Instead, the closest counterpart to Western SC in Russia is the concept of IW.[18]

One of the first and main advocates of the concept of IW in Russian academic and professional discourse was Professor Igor Panarin. A former KGB officer, educated in political science and psychology, Panarin is a full

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14 Robert C.H. Chia and Robin Holt, *Strategy without Design: The Silent Efficacy of Indirect Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. ix.

15 Ibid., p. 5.

16 Ofer Fridman, '"Information War" as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications', *RUSI Journal* 165 № 1 (2020): 44–53.

17 Viktor Burlakov, 'Strategicheskaya kommunikatsiya kak metod sovremennoy geopolitiki' [Strategic Communication as a Method of Modern Geopolitics], *Oykumena: Regionovedcheskiye issledovaniya* № 2 (2016): 7–15; Sergey Bogdanov, 'Strategicheskiye kommunikatsii: Kontseptual'nyye podkhody i modeli dlya gosudarstvennogo upravleniya' [Strategic Communications: Conceptual Approaches and Models for Public Administration], *Gosudarstvennoye upravleniye* № 61 (April 2017): 132–52.

18 Fridman, '"Information War" as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications'.

member of the Military Academy of Science of the Russian Federation who holds numerous senior advisory and coordinating positions in the Russian political system. Since the mid 1990s he has published extensively on the topic, arguing that information has always been the most important domain in both domestic politics and international relations. In his words:

> Since antiquity, the stability of the political system of any country has relied on how quickly and completely the political elites receive information (e.g., about [possible] danger), and how quickly they respond […] Political activity [by definition] is an informational struggle over the control of the minds of the elites and [other] social groups.[19]

After analysing the history of international relations, Panarin claims that the 'informational struggle' has consistently played the most decisive role in achieving the desired goals of different actors.[20] He calls this struggle information war:

> A type of confrontation between parties, represented by the use of special (political, economic, diplomatic, military and other) methods [based on different] ways and means that influence the informational environment of the opposing party [while] protecting their own [environment], in order to achieve clearly defined goals. [Therefore] the major dimensions for waging informational-psychological confrontations [are] political, diplomatic, financial-economic, [and] military.[21]

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19   Igor Panarin, *Informatsionnaya voyna i geopolitika* [Information War and Geopolitics] (Moscow: Pokoleniye, 2006), p. 165.

20   Igor Panarin, *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: Razval SSSR* [The First World Information War: The Dissolution of the USSR] (Saint-Petersburg: Piter, 2010); Igor Panarin, *Informatsionnyye voyna i kommunikatsii* [Information War and Communications] (Moscow: Goryachaya Liniya-Telekom, 2015); Igor Panarin and Lyubov' Panarina, *Informatsionnaya voyna i mir* [Information War and the World] (Moscow: Olma-press, 2003); Panarin, *Informatsionnaya voyna i geopolitika*.

21   Panarin and Panarina, *Informatsionnaya voyna i mir*, pp. 20–21.

Figure 1. Circle of interests–actions

According to many IW advocates in Russia, the effectiveness of actions (political, diplomatic, financial-economic, and military) in IW 'is measured not by their impact in the real world, but by their influence on the virtual information dimension'.[22] In other words, IW seeks to generate an informational impact from real world activities to influence targeted audiences for political benefits. Therefore, it seems right to argue that while in the West 'the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest' is conceptualised as SC,[23] in Russia the same practice is conceptualised as IW.

In an attempt to understand Russian strategic frameworks in general and the concept of IW in particular, it is important, as Mark Galeotti puts it, 'to think in Russian—in other words, to understand Moscow's

22 Fridman, '"Information War" as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications', p. 48; see also Ofer Fridman, 'The Russian Perspective on Information Warfare: Conceptual Roots and Politicisation in Russian Academic, Political, and Public Discourse', *Defence Strategic Communications* 2 (2017): 61–86.

23 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (Spring 2019): 4.

motivations, and its understanding of the current situation'.[24] Following Galeotti's suggestions, it is important to adopt a traditional Russian approach to strategy that has always been understood as the art of combining different elements to achieve desired goals in the specific context of a given situation.[25] Therefore, Figure 1 offers a suitable strategic framework for a better understanding of the strategy behind Russia's IW.[26]

Russia's Understanding of Its Geopolitical Situation

Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of Russia's understanding of its geopolitical situation is beyond the scope of this article. However, from a review of official documents, doctrines, and strategies published by the Russian government[27] and the existing literature on this topic,[28] it is possible to make several generalised observations.

The Kremlin divides the world into three main clusters of geopolitical actors. The first cluster includes Russia's main geopolitical adversaries— the United States and the European Union (and NATO as a political-military alliance that overlaps the US and the EU, and is used as a tool of power projection). While none of them is considered by the Kremlin to be a direct military threat per se (due to Russia's nuclear arsenal), the general perception in the Kremlin is that 'the United States does not intend to tolerate an independent Russian foreign policy' and 'the EU does not intend to tolerate Russia's domestic political order'.[29] Therefore,

24 Mark Galeotti, *Hybrid War or Gibridnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right* (Prague: Mayak Intelligence, 2016), p. 76.

25 Ofer Fridman, 'Editor's Introduction', in *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy*, Ofer Fridman (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

26 The framework is adapted from Ofer Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicisation*, paperback edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 184.

27 'Russian Strategic Documents', *Russia Matters*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School [accessed 4 April 2023].

28 Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Andrew Monaghan (ed.), *Russian Grand Strategy in the Era of Global Power Competition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022); Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); David Oualaalou, *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics: Remaking Global Order* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

29 Dmitri Trenin, 'It's Time to Rethink Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 April 2019 [accessed 4 April 2023].

Moscow sees both as the main adversaries that obstruct the Kremlin from pursuing Russian national interests (international and domestic).

The second cluster of geopolitical actors includes those perceived by the Kremlin as 'strategic partners' or 'partners of convenience'. While the extent and field of 'partnership' can vary, this cluster usually comprises China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and other regional powers which, driven by their own national interests and convoluted relations with the West, seek a degree of partnership with Russia (and, occasionally, are also interested in weakening the global positions of the US and/or EU).[30]

Finally, there is the rest of the world (RoW). Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia lost partners not only in the West but also in its own neighbourhood. However, as senior Russian strategist Dmitri Trenin argues, 'geopolitically, it is isolated yet free, [as] Russia remains able to think and act globally'[31] in pursuit of its national interests. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reinforced the diplomatic isolation of the Kremlin. However, Moscow understands that it is not entirely alone. Many countries around the world, due to either their own national interests or their grievances against the West, 'do not side with Ukraine and its democratic hopes',[32] and, therefore, are seen by the Kremlin as potential economic, diplomatic, or military partners.

Consequently, the Kremlin's understanding of a geopolitical situation can be summarised in three dimensions: confrontation with the West's main global players (US/EU/NATO), seeking closer cooperation with strategic partners (global and regional), and competing for the RoW in pursuit of Russian national interests. When viewed through the prism of IW (as a holistic framework that shapes the relations between real actions conducted by the Kremlin and information they generate), this understanding of the geopolitical situation predefines three main target

30   Ahmed Charai, 'New World Disorder: What the UN Vote on Russia Really Reveals about Global Politics', *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

31   Trenin, 'It's Time to Rethink Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy'.

32   Charai, 'New World Disorder'.

audiences of Russia's IW: the West (US/EU/NATO), Russia's strategic partners, and the RoW.

Russia's National Interests

While Russia's official national interests are defined in its National Security Strategy,[33] a detailed analysis of their interpretations and how they translate into reality is beyond the scope of this paper. On the basis of the existing analytical literature, however, it seems right to aggregate Russian national interests under a unified conceptual umbrella of 'Making Russia Great Again'.[34] Since this title can be easily scrutinised for its reductive oversimplicity, analysing the way it translates into strategic objectives can provide necessary clarity and intricacy.

Strategic Objectives

The Kremlin's strategic objectives are conveyed in the context of its perception of the geopolitical situation and are shaped by its national interest of 'Making Russia Great Again'. However, 'making' and 'great' do not necessarily imply the Kremlin's desire to turn Russia into an objectively great power. The Kremlin understands that Russia lacks the economic, demographic, societal, scientific, and technological conditions required to join the exclusive club of great powers.[35] Instead, 'making' suggests the Kremlin seeks to establish Russia as a great disrupter that challenges the power of the members of this club (mainly its geopolitical adversaries, the US/EU/NATO), thus bridging the gap between them and Russia. And 'great' suggests convincing these members (as well as Russia's strategic partners and the RoW), that 'a state does not have to be a great power that is at parity in all realms with the United States,

33   Russian Federation, 'Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, "O Strategii natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii"' [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, 'On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation'], № 400, 2 July 2021 [accessed 4 April 2023].

34   Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, p. 5.

35   Trenin, 'It's Time to Rethink Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy'.

Europe or China—but it can be good enough to dramatically alter the balance of power in a new global order'.[36]

Finally, 'again' implies a restoration of Russia's status and the respect it received in the past from both friends and foes, rather than a restoration (ideological, territorial, economic) of the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can be seen as a manifestation of Vladimir Putin's neo-imperialism in an attempt to resurrect the Russian/Soviet Empire, it can be equally interpreted as another of Putin's ill-conceived and self-serving endeavours. According to Galeotti, a swift invasion of Ukraine could have allowed Putin to write himself into history as a gatherer of Russian lands, 'so he can find a loyal successor […] and be so celebrated […] that he would be bulletproof' in his retirement.[37]

When viewed through the prism of IW, this understanding of 'Making Russia Great Again' translates into the following strategic objective: shifting and shaping (as well as disrupting) global order in pursuit of Russian national interests.

Operational Situation

The Kremlin's interpretation of an operational situation feeds into its understanding of the geopolitical situation, which is characterised by adversarial relations with the US/EU/NATO, selective partnerships with several regional/global powers, and open competition for the RoW. Therefore, Russia's understanding of its operational situation is shaped by three main factors. The first and most important is the state of US/EU/NATO internal cohesion and resilience that generates the ability of the US/EU/NATO to exercise their own SC effectively. The second is the readiness of Russia's strategic partners to navigate their countries in a direction that benefits Russia's national interests at the expense of the

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36   Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, p. 4.

37   Mark Galeotti in 'No Way Out?', *Putin* № 13, BBC podcast, 14 December 2022.

interests of the US/EU/NATO. Finally, the third factor is the ability and the interest of members of the RoW, if not to cooperate with Russia, then at least to challenge the US/EU/NATO and their values and interests.

Operational Objectives

The Kremlin's operational objectives are formulated in the context of its interpretation of the operational situation and are shaped by strategic objectives. Therefore, operational objectives would serve shifting and shaping (as well as disrupting) global order by undermining US/EU/NATO internal cohesion, resilience, and ability to exercise SC, while strengthening Russia's strategic partnerships and its ability to compete for the RoW.

Tactical Situation

The Kremlin is not as isolated as it is assumed by many Western experts. It maintains a very strong presence in Africa,[38] flirts with many different actors in the Middle East,[39] and consolidates alliances in Latin America.[40] The Kremlin understands that every tactical situation in which Russia finds itself in any particular case is different, depending on regional and local political, economic, and security conditions, ethnic and religious compositions, and local history and culture. Therefore, the Kremlin's interpretation of each tactical situation will be shaped by these factors, as well as the state of SC conducted by the US/EU/NATO in the region and the Kremlin's ability to exercise its influence in pursuit of its own interests.

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38 Raphael Parens, 'The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 18 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

39 Andrew S. Weiss and Jasmine Alexander-Greene, 'What's Driving Russia's Opportunistic Inroads with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arabs', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 5 October 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

40 Armando Chaguaceda and Adriana Boersner Herrera, 'Russia in Latin America: The Illiberal Confluence', *LSE Blog*, 28 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

Tactical Objectives

To achieve operational objectives in the context of a given tactical situation, the Kremlin's tactical objectives may include: regime change/ support; deterrence, subversion, or coercion of local political power; persuasion to resist cooperation with the West and/or strengthen cooperation with Russia. The choice of particular tactical objective will be affected by the Kremlin's interpretation of how the tactical (local) situation can be shaped in pursuit of operational and strategic objectives.

Actions

According to Russian experts, action in IW can be grouped into two interconnected clusters. The first consists of so-called 'military means' deployed as a means in IW—actions (as a part of armed conflict or not) conducted by the military for their information-psychological influence on target audiences that are not directly involved in the conflict, rather than for purely military goals on the battlefield.[41] In addition to their traditional purpose of winning wars and conflicts, many Russian experts argue that armed forces can be used as a means to support political-diplomatic, economic, informational, and other goals simply by their presence or by the demonstration of military potential.[42] Moreover, even a deployment of armed forces in an armed conflict in one theatre can be used as a means of IW in another, focusing on a target audience that is not directly involved in the first conflict. As some Russian experts argue, one of the achieved objectives of Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 was 'to replace the Ukrainian crisis in the information domain

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41 Fridman, '"Information War" as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications', p. 50.

42 Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov, 'Strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye i natsional'naya bezopasnost' Rossii na sovremennom etape' [The Strategic Deterrence and National Security of Russia in the Modern Age], *Voennaya mysl'* № 3 (2012): 16.

with the Syrian one, and direct the energy of the active elements [target audiences of this intervention] in another direction'.[43]

The second cluster of possible action in IW includes 'non-military means'—economic, diplomatic, and other non-military actions intended to achieve a certain information-psychological impact on a target audience. According to Vladimir Serebryanikov and Aleksandr Kapko, a retired lieutenant general and a former high-level diplomat who were among the first to write on this topic in the early 2000s, the cluster of 'non-military means' includes eight main dimensions: political-diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological-psychological, informational, humanitarian, intelligence, and public (non-governmental).[44] When examining these activities as a part of IW, it is important to remember that their contribution is valued not necessarily for 'their intended effect in the real world, but also—and more importantly—for their potential to achieve desired goals in the information dimension'.[45] While in the real world the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was an economic project, it was also a 'non-military' economic tool in Russia's IW against the West.[46] Another example is the Kremlin's SPUTNIK-V vaccine diplomacy—using the vaccine as a means of IW to influence target audiences while having neither the capability nor the intent to deliver the promised vaccines.[47]

Consequently, to achieve its tactical objectives, the Kremlin can use either or both 'military' and 'non-military' means to shape and shift the tactical situation that would, in turn, change operational and geopolitical situations by influencing three main target audiences of the Kremlin's

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43   Kostyuk Ruslan and Rushchin Dmitriy, 'Diskussionnyy seminar v SPbGU: Protivostoyaniye v Sirii: Nastupila li novaya "Kholodnaya voyna" mezhdu Rossiyey i Zapadom?' [Discussion seminar at St Petersburg State University: Opposition in Syria: Is there a new 'Cold War' between Russia and the West?], *Obshchestvo. Sreda. Razvitiye* № 2 (2018): 130.

44   Vladimir Serebryanikov and Aleksandr Kapko, 'Nevoyennyye sredstva oboronnoy bezopasnosti Rossii' [The Non-Military Means of the Defence Security of Russia], *Dialog* № 2 (2000): 29–30.

45   Fridman, '"Information War" as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications', p. 48.

46   Vera Michlin-Shapir, 'Pipeline of Influence: Nord Stream 2 and "Informatsionnaya Voyna"', *Defence Strategic Communications* 10 (2021): 241–80.

47   Vera Michlin-Shapir and Olga Khvostunova, *The Rise and Fall of Sputnik-V: How the Kremlin Used the Coronavirus Vaccine as a Tool of Information Warfare*, Institute of Modern Russia, October 2021 [accessed 4 April 2023].

IW: the US/EU/NATO, Russia's strategic partners, and the RoW. These relations between a blend of 'military' and 'non-military' actions and national interests has been best described by two Russian military strategists, Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov:

> Under the conditions of the globalisation of world processes, the enormous economic superiority of leading powers and the heavy financial dependence of the majority of the other countries on them [the leading powers], there is no objective need to conduct large-scale wars. Such wars are not expected because of the threat of catastrophic consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, on the one hand, and on the other—because new ways and means have been found of achieving political and strategic objectives by conducting local wars [and] conflicts; by political, economic [and] informational pressure; and by subversive actions inside the adversary state.[48]

This conceptual framework of Russia's IW (Figure 2) should be considered with one important caveat: it has not been articulated in any official document, manual, or doctrine. Instead, it is conceptualised based on the examination of official documents, extensive literature published both in Russia and the West, and the analysis of Russia's actions in the real world and how they serve the Kremlin's assumed or declared goals. Therefore, it is impossible to claim that the Kremlin's implementation of IW is proactively guided by this framework.

Instead, this framework attempts to make sense of Russian strategy by identifying consistencies between the Kremlin's words and actions, based on theoretical conceptualisations of their place and role in IW. It approaches the Kremlin's IW strategy-making as 'a deliberate, planned,

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48   Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov, 'Evolyutsiya sushchnosti i soderzhaniya ponyatiya "voyna" v XXI stoletii' [The Evolution of the Nature and the Content of the Concept of 'War' in the Twenty-First Century], *Voennaya mysl'* № 1 (2017): 35.
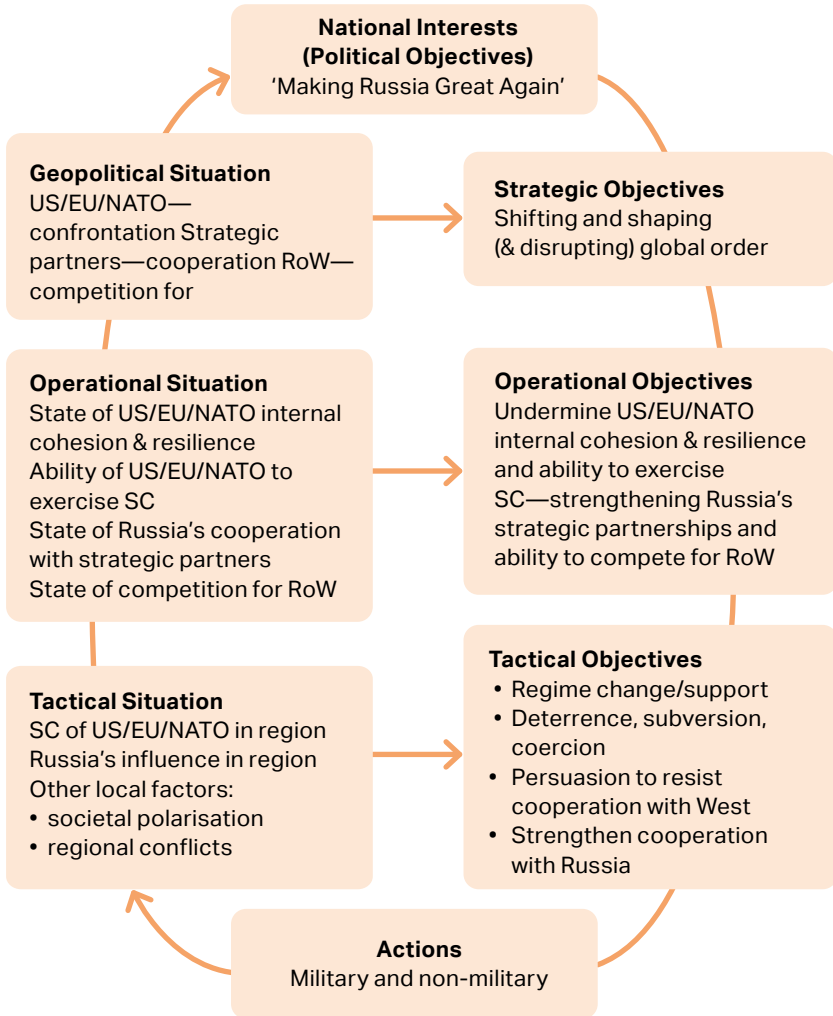
**National Interests
(Political Objectives)**
'Making Russia Great Again'

Geopolitical Situation
US/EU/NATO—
confrontation Strategic
partners—cooperation RoW—
competition for

Strategic Objectives
Shifting and shaping
(& disrupting) global order

Operational Situation
State of US/EU/NATO internal
cohesion & resilience
Ability of US/EU/NATO to
exercise SC
State of Russia's cooperation
with strategic partners
State of competition for RoW

Operational Objectives
Undermine US/EU/NATO
internal cohesion & resilience
and ability to exercise
SC—strengthening Russia's
strategic partnerships and
ability to compete for RoW

Tactical Situation
SC of US/EU/NATO in region
Russia's influence in region
Other local factors:
• societal polarisation
• regional conflicts

Tactical Objectives
• Regime change/support
• Deterrence, subversion,
  coercion
• Persuasion to resist
  cooperation with West
• Strengthen cooperation
  with Russia

Actions
Military and non-military

Figure 2. Circle of interests–actions in Russia's information war

and purposeful activity[49] that pursues the long-term (strategic) goal of
'making Russia great again' by exercising (comprehensive) influence
on three predefined audiences—the US/EU/NATO, Russia's strategic
partners, and the RoW.

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49   Chia and Holt, *Strategy without Design*, p. ix.

Moreover, this conceptualisation of Russia's IW exposes the inherent ambiguity between its objectives and actions, purposefully generated by the Kremlin to maximise the desired impact on target audiences. There are three main conditions that characterise SA in SC.[50] The communicator must have a clear aim, which he or she encodes into ambiguous language (of words and actions in SC), thus broadening the scope of possible interpretations by the receiver (target audience). In other words, the communicator must have a clear strategy of how to achieve a desired influence on the target audience in a way that purposefully generates ambiguity about the communicator's ends, means, and ways. While the concept of IW recreates a clear picture of the Kremlin's strategic goals, it also demonstrates the inherent SA generated by its words and actions. As discussed, both 'military' and 'non-military' means are used in IW not necessarily for their direct impact (political, diplomatic, financial-economic, or military) in the real world, but due to their indirect and less articulated potential to influence different target audiences. This inherent capacity of IW to generate SA manifested itself best in Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria and 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Strategic Ambiguity in Information War: From Syria to Ukraine

The nature of relations between Russia's military and its civilian leader—whether a tsar, a general secretary, or a president—has been widely discussed in the West. By focusing on different characteristics of Russian political-military culture, most existing studies examine the role and place of the military in Russia through the prism of Western models of civil-military relations.[51] This article, however, takes a different approach. According to the conceptualisation of Russia's IW, military actions can be conducted not only for their immediate impact in the real world, but also due to their capacity to influence target audiences, which are not

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50   As discussed in the Introduction.

51   Brian Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Thomas Gomart, *Russia Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008); Robert Brannon, *Russia Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

necessarily involved in the conflict. Therefore, in an attempt to examine the complex contribution of the 'military means' to the Kremlin's IW, it argues that the purpose of the Russian military extends beyond the narrow Western understanding of 'military means' as 'the capacity to create military power'.[52]

The 2015 Intervention in Syria and the Kremlin's Information War

The Kremlin has been involved in the Syrian crisis from the beginning, by supporting the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in two vital dimension—diplomatic and military. In addition to using its position in the UN Security Council to block attempts to impose comprehensive sanctions on Syria,[53] the Kremlin continued to provide military assistance to the troubled Syrian military. From 2011 to 2015 Russia delivered an estimated $ 983 million in weapons and military equipment to Syria.[54] Despite international criticism the Kremlin persisted with its support, claiming that all deliveries had been carried out 'in accordance with international law, in compliance with the procedures and within the framework of existing contracts'.[55]

Putin's decision to deploy forces in September 2015 did not surprise those who closely followed Russian military affairs in the region. Weeks before his official declaration of the intervention, there were reports of the Kremlin's decision to repair the airbase near the port city

52 Risa A. Brooks, 'Introduction: The Impact of Culture, Society, Institutions, and International Forces on Military Effectiveness', in *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness*, Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley (eds), (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 9.

53 Neil MacFarquhar, 'U.N. Resolution on Syria Blocked by Russia and China', *New York Times*, 4 October 2011 [accessed 4 April 2023].

54 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Arms Transfers Database* [accessed 4 April 2023].

55 Mariya Yefimova, Ivan Safronov, and Yelena Chernenko, 'Rossiya ukrepila Bashara Asada granatometami i beteerami' [Russia Reinforced Bashar al-Assad with Grenade Launchers and APCs], *Kommersant*, 9 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

of Latakia,[56] of the transfer of military hardware and equipment from Russia to Syria,[57] of the movement of the Black Sea Fleet warships into the eastern Mediterranean,[58] and even about Russian troops already fighting alongside pro-Assad forces.[59]

Moreover, from the beginning of its intervention in Syria, the Kremlin paid careful attention to integrating this military operation into its IW. From Putin's pretentious call to arms—'we must join efforts […] and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism'—in his speech to the UN General Assembly just days before the deployment of Russian forces in Syria,[60] up to the unexpected announcement of 'mission accomplished' almost six months later,[61] the words and actions of the Russian leadership resembled more a well-staged theatre performance than a military attempt to secure the regime of al-Assad. After all, Russia was involved in the Syrian conflict before September 2015, and it remains deeply involved, as in December 2017 Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu announced that Russia was going to establish a permanent presence at its Syrian naval (Tartus) and air (Hmeimim) bases.[62] While the 2022 invasion of Ukraine forced the Kremlin to withdraw some of its troops from Syria to reinforce its units in Ukraine, this did not end in a complete withdrawal. In 2022, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the Russian Air Force conducted nearly

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56 Aleksey Nikol'skiy, 'Rossiyskiye voyennyye pomogut otremontirovat v Sirii prichal i vzletnuyu polosu' [The Russian Military Will Help to Repair the Wharf and the Runway in Syria], *Vedomosti*, 14 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

57 Alec Luhn, 'Russia Sends Artillery and Tanks to Syria as Part of Continued Military Buildup', *Guardian*, 14 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

58 Sam LaGrone, 'Russian Warships in Eastern Mediterranean to Protect Russian Strike Fighters in Syria', *USNI News*, 5 October 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

59 Telegraph Foreign Staff, 'Russian Troops "Fighting alongside Assad's Army against Syrian Rebels"', *Telegraph*, 2 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

60 Vladimir Putin, in Washington Post Staff, 'Read Putin's U.N. General Assembly Speech', *Washington Post*, 28 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

61 Russian Pool, 'Vladimir Putin Announces Withdrawal of Russian Troops from Syria—Video', *Guardian*, 14 March 2016 [accessed 4 April 2023].

62 Reuters Staff, 'Russia Establishing Permanent Presence at Its Syrian Bases: RIA', *Reuters*, 26 December 2017, [accessed 6 April 2023].

4000 air strikes in Syria, maintaining its presence in the country and the image of a global power fighting the Islamic State.[63]

The official goals of this intervention articulated by Putin were 'establishing a legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise'.[64] On the one hand, there is no doubt that al-Assad's position significantly improved due to the support provided by the Kremlin. On the other, it seems too simplistic to assume that rescuing al-Assad was the main strategic goal of the Kremlin in its first large-scale overt military deployment outside the post-Soviet space since the end of the Cold War.

From the beginning of Russia's intervention in Syria, experts interpreted the Kremlin's true intentions differently. Some argued that Russia's decision to send its troops on a foreign adventure was shaped by the fact that Damascus was 'effectively the only ally which Russia has in the region' and 'it is very important [to Russia] to preserve this *platsdarm* [bridgehead] in the region'.[65] Others argued Putin's decision was 'a way out of the isolation he and Russia have endured since the West imposed sanctions over Ukraine—with the added bonus of wagging an "I told you so" finger at the White House'.[66]

This plethora of interpretations not only suggests the existence of SA around the Kremlin's decision to intervene in Syria, it also perfectly fits into the conceptual framework of Russia's IW, suggesting that this SA was created deliberately. By examining Russia's intervention through the prism of IW, it is possible to claim that all these interpretations

63 The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 'Russian Airstrikes in 2022: Nearly 4,000 Airstrikes Kill and Injure 414 ISIS Members in Syrian Desert', 9 January 2023 [accessed 6 April 2023].

64 Interfax Staff, 'Putin nazval osnovnuyu zadachu rossiyskikh voyennykh v Sirii' [Putin Declared the Main Task of the Russian Military in Syria], *Interfax*, 11 October 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

65 Igor Sutyagin, 'RUSI Experts Igor Sutyagin and Michael Stephens Assess the Reasons and Prospects of Russia's Military Campaign against Daesh/ISIS', Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 1 October 2015, Facebook, video; Payam Mohseni (ed.), *Disrupting the Chessboard Perspectives on the Russian Intervention in Syria* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2015).

66 Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew E. Kramer, 'Putin Sees Path to Diplomacy through Syria', *New York Times*, 17 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

Figure 3. The 2015 intervention in Syria through the circle of interests–actions in Russia's information war

were the Kremlin's objectives. The military objective to save al-Assad's power was only a direct tactical objective in pursuit of indirect larger operational goals—undermining the US/EU/NATO internal cohesion and ability to exercise their SC in the Middle East. Moreover, by shaping

the tactical situation on the ground, the Kremlin was able to influence
the three main target audiences of its IW, trying to shift and shape (as
well as disrupt) the global order to benefit Russia's geopolitical situation.

If the only goal were to maintain al-Assad's regime, Moscow could
have continued to provide diplomatic protection in the UN Security
Council, as well as military hardware. However, in the summer of 2015
the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force,
Qasem Soleimani, convinced Putin 'that if Syria falls, Russia will have
no value in the eyes of the West'.[67] Therefore, it seems right to assume
that the Kremlin's decision to intervene was driven less by its desire to
'provide comprehensive assistance to the legitimate government of Syria',[68]
and more by its understanding of how this particular military action
could shape tactical, operational, and, in turn, geopolitical situations to
favour the Kremlin's direction.

Analysed through the prism of IW, Russia's intervention in Syria was
not only a military operation, but also a well-staged manoeuvre in the
information domain, aimed at three main target audiences (Figure 3).

The first was the US/EU/NATO. One of the main lessons learnt by
Russia during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War was that the concept of
IW should be based on

> a fusion of political public relations, the coordinated
> use of public and traditional diplomacy resources,
> the creation of a robust strategic communications
> structure to support national interests, and the means
> to fulfil them not only at a tactical and strategic level
> but internationally to shape and drive the global
> public opinion.[69]

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67   Raz Zimmt, 'Spotlight on Iran, July 14–July 28, 2019', *Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism
     Information Center*, 14–28 July 2019 [accessed 4 April 2023].

68   Putin, in Washington Post Staff, 'Read Putin's U.N. General Assembly Speech'.

69   Vitaly Kabernik, 'Russian and Georgian Operations in South Ossetia', in *Info Ops: From World War
     I to the Twitter Era*, Ofer Fridman, Vitaly Kabernik, and Francesca Granelli (eds), (Boulder: Lynne
     Rienner, 2022), p. 186.

With the poor record of Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan in the background, and the general political stalemate in the fight against Islamic State, Putin's call for an international coalition was nothing less than a skilfully executed performance: 'similar to the anti-Hitler coalition, it could unite a broad range of forces that are resolutely resisting those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind'.[70] This rhetoric, combined with no less theatrical military actions, was met with overwhelming approval by the Western public. In one YouGov poll, 77 per cent of British people supported forming a common front involving Russia to fight the Islamic State,[71] whereas in another YouGov poll, 54 per cent of American correspondents approved cooperation between the American and Russian forces fighting the Islamic State.[72] It was probably the first time (possibly the last) in modern history that a deployment of Russian armed forces abroad enjoyed such vast public support in the West. Not only did this support last for a significant period (according to another YouGov poll in April 2017, 50 per cent of American correspondents were in favour of US–Russia cooperation in fighting ISIS),[73] it fitted well into the Kremlin's operational objective to undermine US/EU/NATO internal cohesion at a time when the West was still trying to build solidarity against Russia's annexation of Crimea and the crisis in eastern Ukraine.

The second important target audience was Russia's strategic partners in general, and China in particular. From the very beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, China and Russia had expressed joint support for al-Assad's government. On the one hand, China and Russia held different immediate objectives in Syria: as Moscow sought to ensure al-Assad's political survival, Beijing was less invested in it. On the other hand, the overall strategies of both converged in terms of preventing Western-led regime change in the country, while showcasing the unreliability of the US as a security guarantor in the region and satisfying competing

70 Putin, in Washington Post Staff, 'Read Putin's U.N. General Assembly Speech'.

71 Milan Dinic, 'Public: West Should Join with Russia in Fight against ISIS', *YouGov*, 29 September 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

72 Peter Moore, 'Most Americans Support Co-operating with the Russian Military to Fight ISIS', *YouGov America*, 6 October 2015 [accessed 4 April 2023].

73 YouGov, *Economist/YouGov Poll*, 12 April 2017, p. 54 [accessed 4 April 2023].

regional powers by bringing an end to the war. Therefore, the Kremlin's military intervention not only helped to promote these mutual objectives, it also sent an important message to Beijing, as 'from China's perspective, Russian military intervention against IS in Syria and the perceived unreliability of the United States has led to the view that cooperation with Russia offers greater strategic value'.[74]

The final target audience was the RoW. On the regional level, this intervention sent an important message across the Middle East, boosting the Kremlin's relations with all sides of the region's bitter rivalries: Iran and Israel, the Kurds and Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.[75] On the global level, the Kremlin's military intervention was a decisive and carefully staged performance of silver rockets, brave soldiers, shiny hardware, and classic concerts in liberated cities,[76] intended 'to recruit geographically distant nations as partners in constructing a new multipolar, anti-U.S. world order'—something that significantly improved Russia's foothold (at the expense of Western positions) in Venezuela and across different African countries, including Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.[77]

In other words, Russia's military actions in Syria were just as (if not more) successful in serving the objectives of IW by shifting and shaping (and mainly disrupting) global order for its benefit as it was in achieving the direct tactical military goal of the intervention—securing al-Assad's regime. Despite extensive opposition from Germany, the EU, and the US, by 2021 the World Health Organization had appointed Syria to its executive board, Interpol had readmitted Syria to its network, and Algeria and Egypt had pushed to reinvite Syria to Arab League membership, while other Arab nations have since gestured towards a

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74   Yixiang Xu, 'Evolving Sino-Russian Cooperation in Syria', *PeaceBrief* № 236 (2017): 2.

75   Economist Staff, 'Vladimir Putin's Road to Damascus: Russia's Military Gamble in Syria is Paying off Handsomely', *Economist*, 12 May 2009 [accessed 4 April 2023].

76   Fred Pleitgen, 'Russian Orchestra Plays Concert in Ancient Syrian Ruins of Palmyra', *CNN*, 6 May 2016 [accessed 4 April 2023].

77   Vladimir Rouvinsk, 'Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads', *Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Latin American Program*, February 2019, p. 1; Parens, 'Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali'.

rapprochement with President al-Assad.[78] And for Russia, the benefits of this intervention strengthened its cooperation with China and its ability to exercise influence in Africa and the Middle East, not only by reminding everyone concerned that Russia is 'Great Again' but also by undermining the credibility of the West (the US/EU/NATO).

The 2022 War in Ukraine and Information War

Unlike the 2015 intervention in Syria, the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine on 22 February 2022 was forewarned. The US intelligence community had sounded the alert about Russia's plans to invade well in advance.[79] Yet, the invasion still caught many by surprise. The most prominent state was Germany, where 'Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine […] proved to be a painful wake-up call'.[80] While the official goals of the so-called 'special military operation' have been 'to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine', even Putin's address that launched the invasion implied much broader geopolitical objectives for the Kremlin's military activity in Ukraine.[81] While on the tactical level the Kremlin was seeking, as military analyst Michael Kofman put it, 'regime change in Ukraine'[82] to solve the problem of Ukraine's increasing alienation from Russia and alignment with the West on the geopolitical level, he proposed that Moscow had a greater goal in mind, 'the revision of Europe's security order'.[83]

78   Sarah C. Henkel, 'The Difficult Normalisation of Relations between Arab Countries and Bashar al-Assad', *SWP Journal Review* № 1 (November 2020); Marwan Safar Jalani, 'We Syrians Are Not Surprised by This Betrayal', *New York Times*, 28 January 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

79   Nomaan Merchant, 'US Intel Predicted Russia's Invasion Plans: Did It Matter?', *AP News*, 25 February 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

80   Stefan Meister, 'Germany's Role and Putin's Escalation Dominance in Ukraine', *Wilson Center*, 5 April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

81   Vladimir Putin, 'Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii' [Address of the President of the Russian Federation], 24 February 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

82   Michael Kofman, 'Michael Kofman, an Expert on Russia's Armed Forces, Explains Why the Kremlin Will Seek Regime Change in Ukraine', *Economist*, 23 February 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

83   Michael Kofman, 'Putin's Wager in Russia's Standoff with the West', *War on the Rocks*, 24 January 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

Kofman's observation about the Kremlin's goals makes sense, as undermining NATO ('the instrument of the foreign policy of the United States', according to Putin[84]) would ultimately lead to 'a revised European order'.[85] Yet, if undermining NATO were the Kremlin's only strategic goal, then Russia could simply maintain its military build-up on Ukraine's border without further kinetic actions, as doing so 'costs almost nothing and brings enormous political benefits'.[86] Every military exercise, every movement, every new deployment would continue to amplify divisions between Eastern European countries which were fearful of invasion; Germany, France, and some other Western European countries that were inclined towards reconciliation with Russia; and the United States, which was busy with its domestic problems and preoccupied with countering China.[87] In other words, it seems that by deciding on invasion, the Kremlin had in mind a greater set of objectives than just trying to undermine NATO's internal cohesion and resilience.

This plethora of interpretations not only suggests the existence of SA around the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine, it also perfectly fits into the conceptual framework of Russia's IW, indicating that this SA was created deliberately. Despite the fact that the war in Ukraine is still ongoing and it is difficult to offer an accurate analysis, the conceptual framework of IW can help to shed light on the different objectives that the Kremlin has been trying to achieve (Figure 4).

By analysing military developments on the ground, one might assume that the war has not gone according to the Kremlin's plan. Yet, when asked about the setbacks in his 'special military operation', Putin's usual response is 'we are proceeding according to plan'.[88] While his answer can be easily dismissed as a delusion,[89] an examination of Russia's military

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84   Putin, 'Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii'.

85   Kofman, 'Putin's Wager in Russia's Standoff with the West'.

86   Ofer Fridman and Vera Michlin-Shapir, 'Smoke and Mirrors: Western Misperceptions of Russia in Ukraine', *Institute of Modern Russia*, 11 February 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

87   Ibid.

88   Vladimir Putin, 'Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists' Questions', Ashgabat, 29 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

89   Tatiana Stanovaya, 'Putin Thinks He's Winning', *New York Times*, 18 July 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

Figure 4. The 2022 war in Ukraine through the circle of interests–actions in Russia's information war

actions in Ukraine through the prism of IW suggests, as senior Kremlin officials repeat, that Russia might, indeed, be pursuing its objectives 'according to plan'.[90] The concept of IW is based on the idea that military actions are conducted not necessarily in pursuit of direct tactical goals

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90   Dmitri Peskov quoted in '<u>Peskov: Spetsoperatsiya na Ukraine idet po planu</u>' [Peskov: Special Operation in Ukraine Goes According to Plan], *Gazeta.ru*, 4 July 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

on the battlefield, but for their potential to influence target audiences that are not directly involved in the conflict. In other words, from this perspective, insofar as the war produces the Kremlin's desired influence on its target audiences, it achieves its strategic objectives, regardless of the heavy losses in personnel and equipment on the ground.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, much like in the 2015 intervention in Syria, the primary target audience of the Kremlin's IW has been the US/EU/NATO. However, unlike in 2015, the Kremlin did not try to curry favourable opinion with the Western public or justify Russia's military actions. Instead, building on existing political, economic, and cultural discord between different members of the EU and NATO, Russia's strategic objective was to undermine the resilience and cohesion among those members. Hence, undermining NATO was the goal, and invading Ukraine was 'a means to achieve this goal'.[91]

Neither the EU nor NATO reacted as the Kremlin anticipated. Instead, the collective West succeeded in showcasing unity and resolve in the face of Russian military aggression. Alarmed by the rumble of Russian artillery echoing just across Poland's eastern border, NATO not only approved the admission of Sweden and Finland into the alliance, but also dramatically transformed its posture, conducting 'the biggest overhaul of our collective deterrence and defence since the Cold War'.[92] As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg put it: 'President Putin wanted less NATO. He is getting more NATO.'[93]

It is easy to see NATO's reaction in the Kremlin's failure to undermine the alliance. Instead of undermining NATO, it helped the alliance unify itself against Russia. Nevertheless, Russia's consistent decisions to prolong the war and extend its aims in Ukraine[94] demonstrate that the Kremlin believes NATO's unity is temporary, as the economic and

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91   Fridman and Michlin-Shapir, 'Smoke and Mirrors'.

92   Jens Stoltenberg, '<u>Pre-Summit Press Conference</u>', NATO, 27 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

93   Jens Stoltenberg, '<u>Pre-Summit Press Conference</u>', NATO, 1 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

94   Ben Tobias, '<u>Ukraine War: Russia's Lavrov Says Ready to Expand War Aims</u>', *BBC News*, 21 July 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

political consequences of this war will reverse this process in the long run. A policy brief produced by the European Council on Foreign Relations in June 2022 stated that 'as the conflict in Ukraine turns into a long war of attrition, it risks becoming the key dividing line in Europe'.[95] The Kremlin understands this as well, extending the war regardless of the costs and believing that despite short-term setbacks, the long-term economic consequences and internal political divisions around the war will help to achieve the operational objective of undermining the US/EU/NATO.

The second main target audience of the war in Ukraine includes Russia's strategic partners in general, and China in particular. China has already been at odds with the West, especially the US, for several years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine presented a significant strategic challenge to the Chinese leadership, forcing it to take a side. While on the diplomatic level it has been an enormous success for the Kremlin, as China blamed NATO for the war and protested against Western sanctions on Russia, in reality Beijing 'did not match its words with deeds', generally complying with Western sanctions and refusing to provide military support to Russia.[96] However, from the perspective of IW, this does not undermine the Kremlin's success in forging stronger relations with China, even if they are based not on a genuine strategic partnership, but on mutual disregard for the West. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese public has grown even more negative about the US, more positive about Russia, and more confident about China.[97] The success of the Kremlin's IW is not only that Russia is 'the most positively perceived country' in China, but also that the United States is commonly thought of as a 'powerful state, yet hostile to China, untrustworthy, and having a tendency to interfere in other countries' affairs'.[98] These feelings already manifested themselves during the

95 Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, _Peace versus Justice: The Coming Split over the War in Ukraine_, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 22 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

96 Zhuoran Li, 'China's Diplomatic Campaign Following Russia's Ukraine Invasion', _Diplomat_, 17 June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

97 Richard Q. Turcsanyi et al., _Chinese Views of the US and Russia after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine_, European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), May 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

98 Ibid.

visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping to Russia in March 2023, which offered 'a symbolic shot in the arm to his increasingly isolated Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin', and highlighted 'Xi's determination to push back against American power in the world'.[99] The Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine sent an important message that resonates with China's own view of the world, and the Kremlin bets that it is only a matter of time before Beijing becomes more proactive.

The final target audience of the Kremlin's IW is the RoW, where the purpose of the war in Ukraine has been to undermine Western relations with many nonaligned countries, especially in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. While some Western experts believe that, in their reaction to the Russian invasion, 'the US and the EU have, in effect, divided the world up',[100] this is hardly the case. The rest of the world reacted to US president Joe Biden's call for 'a brighter future rooted in democracy and principle, hope and light, of decency and dignity, of freedom and possibilities'[101] with much cynicism, as 'many countries do not side with Ukraine and its democratic hopes'.[102] Chandran Nair, the founder of the Global Institute for Tomorrow in Hong Kong, explained this in the following way:

> Reactions to events in Ukraine have revealed to the wider world a deep-seated Western superiority, particularly with regards to the lesser value of non-Western lives and the right to intervene in other countries. Now, the non-Western world is refusing to accept the West's selective sense of morality, and this is perhaps the biggest shift arising from the tragedy in Ukraine.[103]

99   Andrea Mitchell and Dan De Luce, 'Xi's Trip to Russia Boosts "Dear Friend" Putin as China Pushes Back against U.S. Power', *NBC News*, 21 March 2023 [accessed 4 April 2023].

100 Allan Little, 'Ukraine War: Putin Has Redrawn the World—But Not the Way He Wanted', *BBC News*, 19 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

101 Joe Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine', Warsaw, 26 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

102 Charai, 'New World Disorder'.

103 Chandran Nair, 'Wars Are Only Evil When Westerners Are the Victims', *Nikkei Asia*, 18 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

In Asia many countries, 'including big democracies like India and Indonesia, are reluctant to criticize Russia openly', as their political calculus is 'dictated first by cold calculations of interests, with values coming a distant second'.[104] The same applies to the Middle East countries, including traditional American allies, where 'self-interest and fence-sitting prevail'.[105] In Africa, which has long been a target of Russia's information operations,[106] twenty-six of fifty-four countries did not vote in favour of the UN resolution that condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine in March 2023.[107] The war in Ukraine has not had the same positive effect on Russian relations with these countries as the 2015 intervention in Syria. However, it successfully amplified their mistrust of the West, feeding into African countries' growing resentment at the 'way the US behaved in its unipolar moment',[108] the increasing 'reservations about democracy as a system of governance' among Arab countries,[109] and the difficulty of Asian countries navigating their way in the context of growing rivalry between global powers.[110]

Russia's military actions in Ukraine did not go as planned on the ground. However, it has been quite successful in fulfilling its strategic objective of IW—shifting and shaping (as well as disrupting) global order. In Putin's mind the most geopolitically important strategic goal of this war has been to build a new world order.[111] Regardless of when, where, and how the guns fall silent, the world is not going to be the same,[112] which implies that, despite the tactical military failure, the war in Ukraine

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104 Economist Staff, 'Interests, Not Values, Underpin Asia's Ambivalence about Russia', *Economist*, 23 April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

105 Economist Staff, 'Nostalgia and Kalashnikovs: Why Russia Wins Some Sympathy in Africa and the Middle East', *Economist*, 12 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

106 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Mapping Disinformation in Africa*, 26 April 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

107 Abraham White and Leo Holtz, 'Figure of the Week: African Countries' Votes on the UN Resolution Condemning Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Brookings*, 9 March 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

108 Economist Staff, 'Nostalgia and Kalashnikovs'.

109 Michael Robbins, *Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa: Wave VII*, Arab Barometer, July 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

110 Economist Staff, 'Interests, Not Values'.

111 Stanovaya, 'Putin Thinks He's Winning'.

112 Vera Michlin-Shapir and Ofer Fridman, 'The Seismic Effects of the War in Ukraine', *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, June 2022 [accessed 4 April 2023].

has already achieved the Kremlin's strategic objective. According to the concept of pyrrhic victory, one can win all the battles but still lose the war. In IW, however, the outcome of the battles does not matter, so long as they achieve the desired impact on the targeted audiences (the US/EU/NATO, Russia's strategic partners, and the RoW). Russia may lose all its battles in Ukraine, but its strategic goal of changing the global order has already been achieved (even if, in the end, it will not be to the Kremlin's benefit).

The examination of the 2015 intervention in Syria and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine clearly demonstrate the inherent SA of the Kremlin's IW. Any deployment of military forces requires a declared official goal. In Syria it was 'establishing a legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise';[113] in Ukraine, 'to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine'.[114] However, when examined through the prism of the Kremlin's IW, it seems that both sought to achieve a completely different strategic goal of shaping and shifting global order. Moreover, while the declared tactical goals were pursued by overt military means, the strategic goals were pursued by far less tangible influence on the target audiences (the US/EU/NATO, Russia's strategic partners, and the RoW).

It is important to emphasise that both tactical and strategic goals of these military actions never were a secret. The former were formally articulated with the beginning of the hostilities. The latter can be easily deduced from Russian official documents and speeches by Kremlin officials. Yet, both operations created significant SA about the Kremlin's ends, means, and ways, as the Kremlin has never officially connected the dots between its strategic, operational, and tactical objectives and the means to achieve them, leaving as much ground for diverse interpretation as possible.

While the concept of IW has never been articulated in any official document, manual, or doctrine, it makes sense of Russian strategy by identifying consistencies between the Kremlin's words and deeds,

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113 Interfax Staff, 'Putin nazval osnovnuyu zadachu rossiyskikh voyennykh v Sirii'.

114 Putin, 'Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii'.

assuming a degree of long-term comprehensive planning. This assumption is rooted in a traditional approach to strategy that sees it as a combination of 'calculation and control to effect planned movement over a predictable but fast-moving environment in order to realize well-designed aims'.[115] Taking into consideration the fact that Putin is frequently characterised as 'astrategic' or a 'tactical' player who is 'adept at short-term tactical responses to setbacks, but less talented at long-term strategy',[116] it might well be that the concept of IW is a product of retrospective sense-making, and Russia's strategy is based on a completely different modus operandi.

Strategy without Design and Strategic Ambiguity in the Kremlin Strategic Communications

Modern Westerners, argues cultural psychologist Richard E. Nisbett, 'like the ancient Greeks, see the world in analytic, atomistic terms; they see objects as discrete and separate from their environments; they see events as moving in linear fashion when they move at all; and they feel themselves to be personally in control'.[117] Consequently it is not surprising that the Western approach to strategy is dominated by the notion of linear progression towards long-term objectives defined in advance, as Western 'institutionalized habits focus only upon analytic and linear models'.[118]

Describing the cognitive characteristics of Western society, Nisbett observes that 'the individualistic or independent nature of Western society seems consistent with the Western focus on particular objects in isolation from their context'.[119] In other words, instead of focusing on the system as a situational whole, Western strategists tend to disaggregate

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115 Chia and Holt, *Strategy without Design*, p. 21.

116 Michael A. McFaul, 'The Myth of Putin's Strategic Genius', *New York Times*, 23 October 2015 [accessed 12 November 2022]; see also Joshua Rovner, 'Dealing with Putin's Strategic Incompetence', *War on the Rocks*, 12 August 2015 [accessed 12 November 2022].

117 Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently and Why* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2005), p. 109.

118 Ben Zweibelson, 'Linear and Non-Linear Thinking: Beyond Reverse-Engineering', *Canadian Military Journal* 16 Nº 2 (2016): 28.

119 Nisbett, *Geography of Thought*, p. xvii.

issues into separate boxes/elements, 'in a belief that once they develop a fundamental understanding of the system's "building-blocks," they can then aggregate them and understand the system as a whole'.[120] The above proposed concept of the Kremlin's IW seems to do exactly that—it approaches the systemic whole of the Kremlin's system of communication (the Kremlin's SC) by deconstructing it into 'building-blocks' of ends, means, and ways, and reaggregating them into the concept of IW.

This analytical view of the world that deconstructs complexity into simple and explicit models has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, Western 'simple models', Nisbett argues, 'are the most useful ones […] because they are easier to disprove and consequently to improve upon'.[121] On the other, they 'tend to be limited too sharply to the goal object and its properties, slighting the possible role of context'.[122]

This tendency to disaggregate complex and interconnected reality into clearly identified boxes was best demonstrated by the American strategic approach of compartmentalising four distinctive instruments of power—DIME (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic).[123] When this disaggregation struggled to address the complexity of the twenty-first century,[124] American strategists created 'new acronyms such as MIDFIELD (military, informational, diplomatic, financial, intelligence, economic, law, and development) [which] convey a much broader array of options for the [strategy-] and policymaker to use'.[125] However, even this extended categorisation did not survive the test of reality, as the number of possible instruments of power is defined by those who create and use them, and not by idealised bins of American strategists. For example, neither DIME nor MIDFIELD includes social order or religion, despite the fact that both (tribal system and Islam)

120 Josh Kerbel, 'The Clash of Cognitions: The United States, China, and Strategic Thinking',
      American Diplomacy, February 2009 [accessed 4 April 2023].

121 Nisbett, *Geography of Thought*, p. 134.

122 Ibid, pp. 134–35.

123 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 1–18: Strategy*, Washington, 25 April 2018,
      pp. II-5–II-7.

124 Peter C. Phillips and Charles S. Corcoran, 'Harnessing America's Power: A U.S. National Security
      Structure for the 21st Century', *Joint Force Quarterly* 63 № 4 (2011): 38–46.

125 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 1–18: Strategy*, p. II-8.

were harvested as instruments of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan,[126] and Russia has been employing the latter (the Orthodox Church) as an instrument of power in pursuit of its political objectives.[127]

This leads back to the concept of IW presented above. Its main advantage is that, based on the Western logic of strategy-making as a process driven by clearly defined long-term goals, it identifies a consistent pattern in Russia's actions and, therefore, helps to understand them and counteract them when necessary. Its disadvantage, however, is its failure to take into consideration that the Russian strategic mindset works differently from the Western one.[128]

The Russian traditional approach to strategy differs from the Western one in two interconnected fundamental aspects. The first is that the Western traditional disaggregation of strategy into ends, means, and ways has never found supporters in Russia. Instead, in the Russian mindset, strategy has always remained an art of combining different elements to achieve desired goals in the specific context of a given situation.[129] 'All great commanders', argued General of Artillery Baron Nikolai Medem in 1836, 'were truly great because they based their actions not on pre-drafted rules, but on a skilful combination of all means and circumstances.'[130] Almost a hundred years later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Major General Aleksandr Svechin confirmed this understanding, stating that 'strategy is an art of combining'.[131] A century on, in the early twenty-first century, Major General Aleksandr Vladimirov argues that

126 Anatol Lieven, 'An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtuns, the Taliban and the State', *Survival* 63 № 3 (2021): 7–36.

127 James Sherr and Kaarel Kullamaa, *The Russian Orthodox Church: Faith, Power and Conquest* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2019).

128 Ofer Fridman, 'The Russian Mindset and War: Between Westernizing the East and Easternizing the West', special issue on strategic culture, *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 13 (2022): 24–34.

129 Fridman, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 4.

130 Nikolay Medem, *Obozreniye izvestneyshikh pravil i sistem strategii* [An Overview of the Most Famous Rules and Systems of Strategy] (St Petersburg: Tipografiya II Otdeleniya Sobstvennoy E.I.V. Kantselyarii, 1836), p. 182.

131 Aleksandr Svechin, *Strategiya* [Strategy] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye voyennoe izdaniye, 1926), p. 19.

'national strategy is [a combination of] the theory, practice, and art of governing a state'.[132]

The second fundamental difference between Russia's traditional approach to strategy-making and its Western counterpart is the importance of the prevailing situation. 'There are no laws (rules) that suit every possible occasion,' argued General of Infantry Genrikh Leer in 1869, 'because the number of possible occasions is infinite.'[133] Thirty years later Lieutenant General Yevgeniy Martynov continued in the same vein, arguing that 'the methods of strategic art usually change with the appearance of a new situation'.[134]

From imperial Russia, through the Soviet Union, to contemporary Russia, strategy has always been understood as an art of finding the best way out of the specific context of a given situation.[135] This approach to strategy-making was best articulated by the founding father of the Russian strategic school, Genrikh Leer, according to whom the main goal of strategy is 'to grasp the question of waging war at a given moment in all its aspects and solve it according to the prevailing situation, i.e., to define a reasonable goal and direct all forces and means towards its achievement in the shortest time and with the least sacrifices'.[136] If this is the inspiration behind contemporary Russian strategy, accusing the Kremlin of astrategic behaviour makes no sense, as it is built on an entirely different approach. While the Western traditional approach assumes strategy to be an act of *navigation* (towards long-term predefined goals), the Russian approach seems to see strategy as an act of *wayfinding* (finding the best possible 'reasonable' solution to the current situation).

132 Aleksandr Vladimirov, *Osnovy obshchey teorii voyny. Chast' II: Teoriya natsional'noy strategii* [Fundamentals of the General Theory of War. Part II: The Theory of National Strategy] (Moscow: Moskovskiy Finansovo Promyshlennyy Universitet 'Sinergiya', 2013), p. 51.

133 Genrikh Leer, 'The Experience of Historical-Critical Research into the Laws of Military Art (Positive Strategy)', in *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy*, Ofer Fridman (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 33.

134 Yevgeniy Martynov, *Strategiya v epokhu Napoleona i v nashe vremya* [Strategy in the Age of Napoleon and in Our Times] (St Petersburg: Voyennaya Tipografiya, 1894), p. 1.

135 Fridman, 'Russian Mindset and War'.

136 Leer, 'Experience of Historical-Critical Research', p. 39.

In analysing this disparity between the dominant conceptual approach to strategy, as an act of navigation, and a less acknowledged approach to strategy as an act of wayfinding, Robert C.H. Chia and Robin Holt coined the latter as 'strategy without design'. Namely, 'a latent and retrospectively identifiable consistency in the pattern of actions taken that produces desirable outcomes even though no one had intended or deliberately planned for it to be so'.[137] According to them, in complex environments 'strategy and consistency of actions can emerge non-deliberately through a profusion of local interventions directed towards dealing with immediate concerns', as 'attending to and dealing with the problems, obstacles, and concerns confronted in the here and now may actually serve to clarify and shape the initially vague and inarticulate aspirations behind such coping actions with sufficient consistency that, in retrospect, they may appear to constitute a recognisable "strategy".'[138]

The idea that the Russian traditional approach to strategy-making as an act of wayfinding by dealing with immediate concerns (rather than navigating towards a predefined outcome) offers several important insights into the nature and character of the Kremlin's SC.

First, the concept presented above and case studies of IW that followed are a misleading attempt to rationalise the Kremlin's actions within a linear and confined model of end-means, alien to Russian traditional strategy-making. From that perspective, the main driver behind the Kremlin's decision to intervene in Syria was the context of the particular circumstances in summer 2015, rather than the Kremlin's desire to make Russia great again by shifting and shaping the global order. In the Kremlin's interpretation of the prevailing situation in the summer of 2015, it was decided that the best possible solution was to conduct a military intervention in Syria. The rest (long-term strategic goals of influencing target audiences) were vague and inarticulate aspirations, none of which were deliberately planned. The same applies to the war in Ukraine. From the perspective of strategy without design, the order

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137 Chia and Holt, *Strategy without Design*, p. 24.
138 Ibid., p. 5.

to invade Ukraine was issued because the Kremlin believed that it was the best possible solution for the local, regional, and global situation (as the Kremlin perceived it) on 24 February 2022. Any other goals of this invasion were simple aspirations, none of which were planned for by the Kremlin. The concept of IW might be helpful for the Western strategist by rationalising the Kremlin's actions. However, it is misleading, as it assumes that Russians navigate towards a predefined endgame, while they simply try to find their way out of the situation they are in, again and again. While in the West it might be perceived as pure opportunism, it is simply rooted in a different interpretation of what strategy is. In other words, Russia's strategic communications are rooted not in the Western understanding of strategy as an act of navigation, but in the Russian traditional approach to strategy as an act of wayfinding.

This leads to two roles of SA in Russia's SC. First, the discrepancy between the Western and Russian approaches to strategy creates inherent SA about the Kremlin's goals, means, and ways. In its attempt to communicate (both by words and deeds) the Kremlin is driven by an attempt to grasp the problem of a given moment in all its aspects and solve it according to the prevailing situation, without giving too much consideration to the long-term desired ends. Yet, Western strategists try to interpret Kremlin's communications as something driven by a long-term aspiration, as any Western strategy should. This divergence serves as a fruitful ground for facilitating SA about the Kremlin's SC.

The second role of SA in Russia's SC is more inherent and important. Russia's bottom-up SC, driven by the context of the situation in which it is conducted, rather than Western top-down SC driven by long-term predefined and clearly articulated goals, is inherently ambiguous. Strategic communicators that operate according to strategy without design are freer to make a variety of decisions. Some of these seem contradictory or dispersed. But all help to find a way out of the situation towards a more flexible long-term goal because they are vague and inarticulate. This type of SC might not be to the taste of the Western strategic communicators,

but they might find there useful inspiration, especially when dealing with adversaries who conceptualise strategy differently.

Conclusion: Inherent Strategic Ambiguity between Objectives and Actions in Strategic Communications

On the one hand, the interpretation of Russian SC as IW with its long-term strategic goals and pre-planned and predefined desired effects on the target audiences helps to make sense out of the Kremlin's behaviour, by identifying consistencies between its words and actions. On the other, it is difficult to ignore that this conceptualisation contradicts not only Russia's traditional approach to strategy, but also the practice of strategy-making, which, according to Lawrence Freedman, is 'fluid and flexible, governed by the starting point and not the end point', as it evolves 'through a series of states, each one not quite what was anticipated or hoped for, requiring a reappraisal and modification of the original strategy, including ultimate objectives'.[139] In other words, strategy in practice is rarely an act of navigation towards goals set in advance.

While both of these interpretations offer almost opposite explanations, a dialectic interaction between them offers interesting and complex observations of the inherent SA between objectives and actions in SC. SC based on the idea of navigation towards pre-identified objectives offers a clear sense of direction, but suffers from lacking situational awareness. It struggles to comprehensively and coherently address the way our adversary's SC shapes and shifts our SC—from how we define our objectives to how they are translated into words, images, and actions. After all, SC is an interactive dance between (at least) two strategic communicators (as it occurs in 'a contested environment'[140]), and everyone involved gets a say in how we proceed and towards what goals.

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

140 Bolt and Leonie, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, p. 46.

SC based on the idea of finding a way out of a prevailing situation better suits the reality of strategy-making, but suffers from opportunism and a lack of overall direction. After all, as Neville Bolt argues, 'for strategic communicators, something is strategic when it focuses on the long term; competes in a dynamic environment; and sets out to achieve discernible and pre-identified effects from an actual, not idealised starting-point'.[141]

Strategy, according to Freedman, is turning 'a developing situation into a desirable outcome'.[142] 'Developing' implies not only that one has to have desired outcomes, but also that these might change, depending on the developing situation. Therefore, strategic communicators do not have to choose between the strategy of navigating or the strategy of wayfinding. Instead, they must constantly be aware that their words and actions not only navigate towards a predefined goal, but also find a way through a series of situations that are shaped by all other strategic communicators involved in the process (friends and foes alike). It is important to treat desired outcomes as aspiration, rather than as clearly defined goals to be achieved—an identifiable narrative that offers a sense of direction and retrospectively identifiable consistency, rather than a direct and single-minded pursuit of long-term strategic goals. And this requires a great deal of strategic ambiguity between the objectives and actions in SC.

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141   Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 10 (2021): 12.

142   Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, p. xiv.

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Weathering the Storm:
The European Union's Strategic Ambiguity on Twitter during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pablo Moral

About the Author

Pablo Moral is a PhD candidate in political science at the Pablo de Olavide University of Seville (UPO) and a predoctoral researcher at the Research Group in Natural Language Processing and Information Retrieval of the National University of Distance Education (UNED) (Spain). His main areas of research are computational social sciences, digital diplomacy, propaganda, and disinformation.

Abstract

This study examines how the European Union (EU) employed strategic ambiguity as a discursive resource to manage its reputational crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. For that purpose, this research analyses tweets in English published by six central authorities of the EU in three different phases of the COVID-19 crisis (pre-crisis, acute crisis, and post-crisis). The findings reveal that during the early stages of the pandemic, characterised by higher uncertainty, European authorities often resorted

to ambiguous tweets through vague metaphors, opaque information, and disjointed messages. By the end of the first COVID-19 wave these authorities progressively constructed a solid narrative that rationalised the pandemic as a challenge reaffirming the EU's principles and capacities. This study suggests that when the EU faced more external criticism and inner discord among member states, its authorities resorted to ambiguity to strategically mitigate its reputational damage while navigating through conflicting interests in a high-pressure scenario.

1. Introduction

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic constituted an unprecedented challenge for the reputation of the European Union (EU). As Europe became the epicentre of the pandemic in March 2020, Brussels was criticised for its delayed and chaotic reaction, which failed to coordinate a common response from all member states. On the contrary, individual EU countries initially banned exports of medical equipment and closed their borders unilaterally.[1] In Italy, the first hard-hit country in Europe, members of the government openly questioned where the EU was when their citizens needed it most.[2]

In March 2020 three quarters of the Italian population considered the EU's support as inadequate.[3] Polls conducted in April[4] and June[5] 2020 throughout the EU likewise showed that most Europeans were generally dissatisfied with the EU's crisis management. In a similar survey, more than a third of respondents in nine different member states affirmed

1   Dennis Lichtenstein, 'The EU: "The Story of a Tragic Hero and the 27 Dwarfs"', in *Political Communication and COVID-19: Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*, I.A. Coman, M. Gregor, and E. Novelli (eds), (Routledge & CRC Press, 2021), pp. 79–87.

2   B. Hall, M. Johnson, and M. Arnold, 'Italy Wonders Where Europe's Solidarity Is as Coronavirus Strains Show', *Financial Times*, 19 March 2020 [accessed 25 February 2023].

3   Olimpia Fontana, 'Italian Euroscepticism and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Survey Insights', *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 2020 [accessed 14 March 2023].

4   Kantar, 'Public Opinion in the EU in Time of Coronavirus Crisis', *European Parliament* [April 2020; accessed 12 February 2023].

5   Kantar, 'Public Opinion in the EU in Time of Coronavirus Crisis 2', *European Parliament* [June 2020; accessed 12 February 2023].

that their views on the EU had grown even more negative.[6] That view was held by more than 50 per cent of those polled in Spain and Italy.

Even though these figures improved once the first wave of the pandemic was overcome, in summer 2020 only 40 per cent of all Europeans had a positive perception of the EU, and 48 per cent tended not to trust European institutions.[7] Moreover, their flawed involvement in the early stage of the crisis was seized as an opportunity by Russia and China, which had rapidly sent aid to the most affected countries and launched information campaigns to erode the reputation of European countries.[8]

Crisis can be understood as 'serious threats to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and in highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions'.[9] The expert literature anticipates that uncertainty, lack of information, and unclear locus of responsibility at the early stages of a crisis restrict organisations from communicating openly and in a straightforward manner.[10] The EU's public communication had been labelled a 'failed subject' well before the pandemic began to unfold.[11] Several subsequent analyses have stressed the lack of leadership and failure to provide a political-symbolic response during the most acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis.[12]

6   Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka, 'Together in Trauma: Europeans and the World after Covid-19', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 June 2020 [accessed 14 March 2023].

7   Kantar, 'Standard Eurobarometer 93—Summer 2020: Public Opinion in the European Union', *European Commission* (2020) [accessed 12 February 2023].

8   See Ben Dubow, Edward Lucas and Jake Morris, *Jabbed in the Back: Mapping Russian and Chinese Information Operations during COVID-19* (Center for European Policy Analysis, 2021). See also Pablo Moral, 'La pandemia de la covid-19: ¿Una oportunidad para las potencias revisionistas? Una respuesta desde el realismo neoclásico', in *Transición de poder y transformaciones del orden liberal en tiempos de pandemia*, L. Moure Peñín and M. Pintado Lobato (eds.), (Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2022), pp. 315–28.

9   Uriel Rosenthal, Michael T. Charles, and Paul 't Hart (eds), *Coping with Crises: The Management of Disasters, Riots, and Terrorism* (Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas, 1989), p. 10.

10 YJ Sohn and Heidi Hatfield Edwards, 'Strategic Ambiguity and Crisis Apologia: The Impact of Audiences' Interpretations of Mixed Messages', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 12 Nº 5 (2018): 552–70.

11 Jorge Tuñón, Luis Bouza, and Uxía Carral, *Comunicación europea: ¿A quién doy like para hablar con Europa?* (Madrid: Dykinson, 2019).

12 Cecilia Emma Sottilotta, 'How Not to Manage Crises in the European Union', *International Affairs* 98 Nº 5 (2022): 1595–1614.

During crises, ambiguity may be used strategically to cope with conflicting ways of making sense of events, allowing divergent objectives to coexist and ideologically for diverse groups to cooperate.[13] Considering the conflicting national interests displayed by member states, the circumstances seemed appropriate for the EU to purposely deploy ambiguity in its crisis communications, an assumption that this study seeks to interrogate. To this purpose, this research aims, first, to identify the EU's communication strategies to manage its reputation, and second, to examine to what extent and under what circumstances it resorted to ambiguous language to achieve its goal.

Previous studies have already explored the role of ambiguity in the EU's policies, such as refugee governance,[14] norms and values,[15] and the very idea of Europe,[16] to cope with the multiple perspectives of its different member states. The present research seeks to analyse the EU's communications by focusing on messages diffused by its key authorities on Twitter. As noted by Lichtenstein, EU top officials engaged in extensive online communication during the pandemic.[17] By examining Europe's digital diplomacy, it is therefore anticipated we might discern how Europe's authorities sought to directly communicate and engage with European citizens.

Understood as the use of social media for diplomatic purposes, digital diplomacy provides a direct channel to shape perceptions of international publics, and influence the media agenda and the conversations of digital users.[18] To this aim, Twitter, as stated by former high representative

13 Eric Guthey and Mette Morsing, 'CSR and the Mediated Emergence of Strategic Ambiguity', *Journal of Business Ethics* 120 Nº 4 (2014): 555–69.

14 Beyza Çağatay Tekin, 'Bordering through Othering: On Strategic Ambiguity in the Making of the EU-Turkey Refugee Deal', *Political Geography* 98 (2022).

15 Martijn Mos, 'Ambiguity and Interpretive Politics in the Crisis of European Values: Evidence from Hungary', *East European Politics* 36 Nº 2 (2020): 267–87.

16 Richard Jenkins, 'The Ambiguity of Europe: "Identity Crisis" or "Situation Normal"?', *European Societies* 10 Nº 2 (2008): 153–76.

17 Lichtenstein, 'The EU'.

18 Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes (eds), *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, Routledge New Diplomacy Studies (London; New York: Routledge, 2015); Ilan Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy (Cham: Springer International, 2019).

Federica Mogherini in 2014, is seen as one of the fundamental diplomatic tools online.[19]

Furthermore, the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 proposed that the European Union would 'enhance its strategic communications, investing in and joining up public diplomacy across different fields, in order to connect EU foreign policy with citizens and better communicate it to our partners'.[20] Three years later, a report on the implementation of the EUGS considered that 'public diplomacy and communication are critical', and for this reason the EU should invest more in 'positively communicating who we are and what we seek to achieve in the world'.[21]

The increasing relevance of the EU's digital diplomacy is also noticeable in the academic literature. Several authors have tried to dissect the EU's digital endeavours. Bjola and Jiang analysed the performance of the EU's delegation in Beijing on Weibo,[22] while Wright and Guerrina examined the narratives disseminated by EU authorities on Twitter concerning International Women's Day.[23] Analysts such as Collins and Bekenova,[24] Valera-Ordaz and Sørensen,[25] Tuñón-Navarro and Carral-Vilar,[26] and Drylie-Carey et al.[27] addressed the digital behaviour of some member

19 M. Mann, 'The European External Action Service and Digital Diplomacy: Twiplomacy', *Twiplomacy*, 28 April 2015 [accessed 12 May 2023].

20 European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy* (June 2016) [accessed 10 February 2023].

21 EEAS, *The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward* (2019) [accessed 10 February 2023]

22 C. Corneliu Bjola and L. Jiang, 'Social Media and Public Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of the Digital Diplomatic Strategies of the EU, US and Japan in China', in Bjola and Holmes, *Digital Diplomacy*.

23 Katharine A.M. Wright and Roberta Guerrina, 'Imagining the European Union: Gender and Digital Diplomacy in European External Relations', *Political Studies Review* 18 Nº 3 (2020): 393–409.

24 Neil Collins and Kristina Bekenova, 'Digital Diplomacy: Success at Your Fingertips', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 15 Nº 1 (2019): 1–11.

25 Lidia Valera-Ordaz and Mads P. Sørensen, 'Towards a European Public Sphere? A Comparative Study of the Facebook Activities of Danish and Spanish Members of the European Parliament', *Profesional de la Información* 28 Nº 6 (2019).

26 Jorge Tuñón-Navarro and Uxía Carral-Vilar, 'Has COVID-19 Promoted or Discouraged a European Public Sphere? Comparative Analysis of the Twitter Interactions of German, French, Italian and Spanish MEPS during the Pandemic', *Communication & Society* 34 Nº 3 (2021): 135–51.

27 Lindsay Drylie-Carey, Sebastián Sánchez-Castillo, and Esteban Galán-Cubillo, 'European Leaders Unmasked: Covid-19 Communication Strategy through Twitter', *El Profesional de la Información* 29 Nº 5 (2020).

state authorities. Academic literature on the EU's communications during the COVID-19 pandemic is still scarce. However, valuable analyses have been carried out by Manfredi-Sánchez, who compared the strategic narratives disseminated by the EU and other international actors;[28] Lichtenstein, who used frames to evaluate Brussels discourse;[29] and Panebianco, who focused on the EU's position on migration.[30] The present research seeks to contribute to the literature on the EU's digital diplomacy by analysing whether ambiguity was deliberately transmitted to tame popular discontent on Twitter.

To this end, this article unfolds as follows: the next section examines the concepts of strategic ambiguity, crisis communication, and strategic narratives and the interrelation among them. In section 3 the research design is presented. Section 4 analytically discusses examples of tweets posted by European authorities during the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally section 5 reveals the conclusions of the analysis.

2. Navigating Crises through Strategic Ambiguity

This study rests on theoretical insights of crisis communications and digital diplomacy to shed light on how ambiguity was employed in the EU's strategic communications during the pandemic. Strategic communications is understood as 'a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.[31] Crisis communications is a form of strategic communications that aims to protect an organisation

28   Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez, 'Vaccine (Public) Diplomacy: Legitimacy Narratives in the Pandemic Age', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (2022).

29   Lichtenstein, 'The EU'.

30   Stefania Panebianco, 'Towards a *Human and Humane* Approach? The EU Discourse on Migration amidst the Covid-19 Crisis', *International Spectator* 56 Nº 2 (2021): 19–37.

31   Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga [Latvia]: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).

from the harms of a crisis using a variety of communicative interventions as part of the crisis management process.[32]

There are common types of crisis response strategies: *instructing information*, intended to protect stakeholders physically from harm; *adjusting information,* designed to help people cope with the crisis psychologically; and *reputation management,*[33] most commonly employed and implemented to protect or repair possible reputational damage.[34]

Central to these concepts is the projection of narratives. Manor holds that in digital diplomacy influence can be obtained through narratives and social networks.[35] Similarly, Fridman argues that strategic communications is conducted by building and maintaining strategic narratives,[36] understood as 'a means for political actors to construct a shared understanding of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'.[37] Heath also explains that crisis communications 'entails the telling of a story—the enactment of a crisis narrative'.[38]

Narratives are 'stories that make sense of the social and natural world by identifying the significance of people, places, objects and events in time',[39] or, as Riessman puts it, 'causally connected sequence[s] of events that are selected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular

32   W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, 'Strategic Intent and Crisis Communication: The Emergence of a Field', in *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, Derina Rhoda Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass (eds), (Abingdon, Oxon.; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

33   Reputation is understood as a 'set of beliefs about an organization's capacities, intentions, history, and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences'. Daniel P. Carpenter and George A. Krause, 'Reputation and Public Administration', *Public Administration Review* 72 № 1 (2012): 26–32 [accessed 14 March 2023].

34   Coombs and Holladay, 'Strategic Intent and Crisis Communication'.

35   Manor, *Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, p. 116.

36   Ofer Fridman, 'From "Putin the Saviour" to "Irreplaceable Putin": The Role of the 1990s in the Kremlin's Strategic Communications', *Defence Strategic Communications* 10 (2022).

37   Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

38   R.L. Heath, 'Telling a Story: A Narrative Approach to Communication during Crisis', in *Responding to Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication*, Dan Pyle Millar and Robert L. Heath (eds), LEA's Communication Series (Mahwah, NJ; London: Erlbaum, 2004), p. 175.

39   Elsa Hedling, 'Storytelling in EU Public Diplomacy: Reputation Management and Recognition of Success', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 16 № 2 (2020): 143–52.

audience'.[40] Narratives help the audience connect events that are seemingly unconnected and create expectations about the actors involved and their behaviour.[41]

The EU has traditionally used narratives to bring European states together in a cooperative project and to build a European identity.[42] In 2013 Cristian Nițoiu distinguished five main narratives diffused by the EU: the EU as a security provider, as a democratiser and spreader of 'good' norms, as a good neighbour, as a contributor to global peace, and as a contributor to the well-being of people around the world.[43] Miskimmon also identified that the EU presents itself as a successful collective project that is both a 'force for good' and a model for other regions.[44] In the same vein, in 2002 Manners depicted the EU as a normative power that promotes soft power through its norms and values,[45] whereas Aggestam described an 'ethical power Europe' that works 'to change the world in the direction of its vision of the "global common good"'.[46]

Sellnow et al. hold that crisis narratives evolve according to a series of crisis stages.[47] During the pre-crisis phase, characterised by uncertainty and limited information, narratives are usually more contested and inconsistent. In the acute phase of the crisis, provided that the strategic communications endeavours are successful, these competing narratives tend gradually to converge. Consequently, the post-crisis phase is expected to present a consistent, dominant narrative that rationalises the crisis.

40   Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2008).

41   Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.

42   Alister Miskimmon, 'Finding a Unified Voice? The European Union through a Strategic Narrative Lens', in *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle (eds), (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), pp. 85–109.

43   Cristian Nițoiu, 'The Narrative Construction of the European Union in External Relations', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 14 Nº 2 (2013): 240–55.

44   Miskimmon, 'Finding a Unified Voice?'.

45   Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 Nº 2 (2002): 235–58.

46   Lisbeth Aggestam, 'Introduction: Ethical Power Europe?', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 84 Nº 1 (2008): 1–11 [accessed 14 March 2023].

47   Timothy L. Sellnow, Deanna D. Sellnow, Emily M. Helsel, Jason M. Martin, and Jason S. Parker, 'Risk and Crisis Communication Narratives in Response to Rapidly Emerging Diseases', *Journal of Risk Research* 22 Nº 7 (2019): 897–908.

During the early stages of a crisis, beset by rapid change and unease, organisations may resort to strategic ambiguity, that is, the intentional deployment of ambiguous language in order to accomplish organisational goals.[48] One of the advantages of ambiguity is that it can foster agreements on abstraction without limiting specific interpretations, supporting multiple viewpoints, and thus promoting 'unified diversity'.[49] It may, therefore, be aimed at preserving or restoring the organisation's reputation by allowing multiple views of its performance and responsibility, while highlighting the interpretation that portrays the organisation most favourably.[50]

Strategic ambiguity promotes different ways to make sense of the world which can be used to help preserve diverse options to enable future change.[51] Previous studies have shown how ambiguity can be achieved by, for example, disseminating mixed messages,[52] projecting vaguely formulated goals,[53] using metaphors,[54] or utilising vague keywords.[55] This study anticipates identifying such elements in European digital diplomacy through the three phases of the COVID-19 crisis.

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48 Eric M. Eisenberg, 'Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication', *Communication Monographs* 51 № 3 (1984): 227–42.

49 Ibid.

50 Sohn and Hatfield Edwards, 'Strategic Ambiguity and Crisis Apologia'; Robert R. Ulmer and Timothy L. Sellnow, 'Consistent Questions of Ambiguity in Organizational Crisis Communication: Jack in the Box as a Case Study', *Journal of Business Ethics* 25 № 2 (2000): 143–55.

51 Susan L. Kline, Bethany Simunich, and Heath Weber, 'Understanding the Effects of Nonstraightforward Communication in Organizational Discourse: The Case of Equivocal Messages and Corporate Identity', *Communication Research* 35 № 6 (2008): 770–91.

52 Sohn and Hatfield Edwards, 'Strategic Ambiguity and Crisis Apologia'.

53 Eric M. Eisenberg and Marsha G. Witten, 'Reconsidering Openness in Organizational Communication', *Academy of Management Review* 12 № 3 (1987): 418.

54 Christina Scandelius and Geraldine Cohen, 'Achieving Collaboration with Diverse Stakeholders— The Role of Strategic Ambiguity in CSR Communication', *Journal of Business Research* 69 № 9 (2016): 3487–99.

55 Shirley Leitch and Sally Davenport, 'Strategic Ambiguity as a Discourse Practice: The Role of Keywords in the Discourse on "Sustainable" Biotechnology', *Discourse Studies* 9 № 1 (2007): 43–61.

3. Research Design

The present research seeks to explore how and under what circumstances the EU used strategic ambiguity on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two hypotheses are held. Considering that in the early stages of a crisis, characterised by higher uncertainty, ambiguity may become an effective communicative tool, the first hypothesis (H1) holds that *the European Union employed strategic ambiguity to manage its reputation during the most acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis.* Based on crisis communications literature, the second hypothesis (H2) considers the assumption that narratives progressively become more consistent and coherent, holding that *the deployment of strategic ambiguity decreased as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded.*

To test these hypotheses, the tweets in English published between 1 January and 31 December 2020 by six central authorities were collected through the Twitter API. The selection of authorities was determined by their presumed relevance to the EU's digital diplomacy. The accounts included were the European Commission (@EU_Commission), its president, Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), the European Council and the Council of the EU (@EUCouncil), the institutional account of the president of the European Council, Charles Michel (@eucopresident), the European External Action Service (EEAS, @eu_eeas), and the high representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell (@JosepBorrellF).

These accounts were considered the most influential users in the diffusion of narratives and the most representative of the EU's official position. Through their retweets and comments, they also acted as transmitters of the content of other accounts, such as the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (@EU_Health) and for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (@EU_ECHO). However, these specific accounts were not included in the sample as they were considered institutionally less relevant, and their specialised scope analytically less useful for this research in comparison with the users selected.
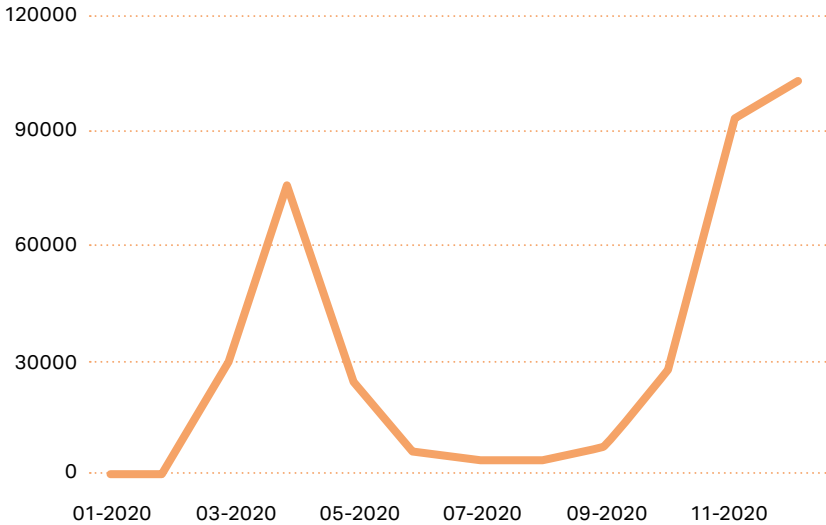
Figure 1. Monthly number of COVID-19-related deaths in the EU during 2020
Source: Our World in Data, COVID-19 Data Explorer: Daily New Confirmed COVID-19 Deaths.

In total, 9517 tweets were initially retrieved. To collect a final sample of tweets related to the pandemic, a filter of keywords was applied. Only the tweets containing any of the different spellings of 'COVID-19', 'coronavirus', 'pandemic', and 'crisis' were considered for qualitative analysis, which reduced the sample to 2975 tweets. These tweets were organised in three different batches that paralleled the three crisis phases, which were determined by the number of COVID-19-related deaths in the EU according to Johns Hopkins University data (Figure 1).[56]

Thus the months of January and February 2020 were considered to be pre-crisis. The acute stage encompassed the time from March to May 2020. And finally, the post-crisis period was considered to cover June to December 2020. For analytical purposes, in this study the second wave of the pandemic, which started in late October 2020 and finished

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56   Our World in Data, *COVID-19 Data Explorer: Daily New Confirmed COVID-19 Deaths* [accessed 14 March 2023].

in February 2021, was not considered to be another acute phase of the crisis, as it was less unpredictable and uncertain than the first one.

To confirm H1 it is expected that recurrent patterns of ambiguity will be observed in selected tweets from the pre-crisis and the acute phase of the crisis. These ambiguous elements, moreover, should suggest plausible positive interpretations of the EU's role, contrary to the criticism it was receiving. To confirm H2, it should be expected as the crisis evolves that ambiguous messages will converge progressively into a more consistent crisis narrative that, unlike in the previous phases, offers a clearer way to rationalise the pandemic. Considering that tweets are interconnected and should not be interpreted in isolation from each other,[57] to assess these hypotheses an intertextual discourse analysis[58] is conducted in the next section.

4. From Ambiguity to Assertiveness

4.1 Pre-crisis

In the pre-crisis phase the information the EU's top officials provided on COVID-19 was scarce and sporadic. Indeed, up to March only 18 of the more than 1200 tweets published by these six accounts in English included the word 'COVID-19' or 'coronavirus'. Tweets mainly gave information about institutional declarations and activity, often merely amplifying the reach of press conferences and announcements.[59] Authors such as Tuñón et al. had already noted this practice in EU communications, considering them inefficient.[60] In January and the first weeks of February a coordinated communication campaign could

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57   Pablo Moral, '<u>A Tale of Heroes and Villains: Russia's Strategic Narratives on Twitter during the COVID-19 Pandemic</u>', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* (2023): 1–20.

58   Teun A. van Dijk, 'The Study of Discourse', in *Discourse as Structure and Process*, T. van Dijk (ed.), (London: SAGE, 1997), pp. 1–34.

59   See, for example: EU Council (@EUCouncil), '#LIVE now: 🎥 EU ministers discuss 👉 #covid19 #Coronavirus outbreak. Follow it now! 🔍 Last updates about the meeting: <u>https://europa. eu/!BJ34vw</u> #EPSCO #Health', <u>Twitter</u>, 13 February 2020, 9:27 AM.

60   Tuñón et al., *Comunicación europea*.

barely be perceived on Twitter. There were no hashtags yet. The first main hashtag on COVID-19, #StrongerTogether was only launched on 18 March, when Italy and Spain had already imposed severe lockdowns.

The focus appeared to be set on policy issues such as sustainability and digitalisation, perceived as priorities for the newly inaugurated Commission which had only begun its mandate in December 2019. The few tweets that referred to the novel coronavirus addressed the assistance provided and the repatriation of EU citizens thanks to the EEAS.[61] Only by the end of February did COVID-19 start to become a prominent issue. Then, when Italy registered its first deaths, the Commission and its president asserted that the EU was 'working on all fronts' to tackle the outbreak, which included 'coordinating information exchanges among EU countries and ensuring a coherent EU wide response'.[62] Even if this tweet suggested that Brussels was helping in many ways, it was paradoxically characterised by the lack of specificity about concrete measures the EU was implementing. Significantly, the metaphor 'on all fronts' was repeated in seventeen tweets between the pre-crisis and acute stages but disappeared in the following months.

Other messages drew different interpretations by failing to specify the degree of involvement of the EU. On 24 February von der Leyen affirmed that the EU 'is here to play a leading role',[63] whereas four days later the European Commission tweeted that it would do all it could to

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61 See, for example: European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'As the #Coronavirus outbreak intensifies, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism has been activated on request from France. Two planes will be mobilised to repatriate EU citizens from the Wuhan area to Europe. https://europa.eu/!Wb98Kp Overview of the outbreak with latest data ↓', Twitter, 28 January 2020, 4:44 PM.

62 European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'We are working on all fronts to tackle the ongoing #COVID19 outbreak. This includes coordinating information exchanges among EU countries and ensuring a coherent EU wide response. The work continues at all levels, from technical to political. More → https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex_20_345#2 [Thread]', Twitter, 27 February 2020, 2:46 PM.

63 Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), '#Coronavirus As cases continue to rise, public health is the number one priority. Whether it be boosting preparedness in Europe, in China or elsewhere, the international community must work together. Europe is here to play a leading role. #COVID19italia', Twitter, 24 February 2020, 9:32 AM.

help.[64] These tweets, while showing the EU's good intentions, also left room for interpretation that its intervention would not entirely depend on the will of Brussels. This underlying message was also perceptible during the acute phase.

4.2 Acute Phase of the Crisis

As the COVID-19 cases started to increase in Italy, the EU's messages sought to diminish the reputational damage it was already suffering. Tweets on COVID-19 became more numerous and thematically diverse. *Instructing* tweets advised how to limit the spread of the virus, whereas *adjusting* tweets expressed condolences to Italy, support to health workers,[65] and sympathies with the victims:[66]

> We stand by Italy during these trying times. 🇮🇹 🇪🇺
> Share your words of support for our Italian friends
> here—we will pass them on to our Italian audience!
> They are our colleagues, friends and EU family. ❤️
> Cari amici, siamo con voi. #COVID19.[67]

The EU's central authorities encouraged solidarity and cooperation among member states, occasionally relying on vague messages. On 10 March the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, argued that:

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64 European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'Italy has activated the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism, requesting protective facemasks. We have relayed the request to all EU countries to mobilise assistance. We are in permanent contact with Italian authorities and will do all we can to help. #COVID19 [Thread]', Twitter, 28 February 2020, 11:42 AM.

65 Charles Michel (@eucopresident), 'Full support to health workers working day & night to fight #COVID19 crisis. It will be difficult & take time but we are united in this fight. Following #G7 video call, we express strong political will to address the crisis together & cooperate. Citizens' health is our priority', Twitter, 16 March 2020, 4:46 PM.

66 Charles Michel (@eucopresident), 'The last days have proven that the #COVID19 virus is spreading in all member states. I express my sympathy for all the citizens affected by this disease and, in particular, for #Italy Today we discuss how to improve coordination and work on common EU response', Twitter, 10 March 2020, 5:25 PM.

67 European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'We stand by Italy during these trying times. 🇮🇹 🇪🇺 Share your words of support for our Italian friends here – we will pass them on to our Italian audience! They are our colleagues, friends and EU family. ❤️ Cari amici, siamo con voi. #COVID19', Twitter, 11 March 2020, 8:45 AM.

> To limit the spread of the #COVID19, we need
> to work together and to act swiftly. Tonight,
> we stressed the need for a joint #EU approach
> & close coordination with @EU_Commission.
> Health & Interior ministers should consult daily for
> proper coordination and aim for common guidance.[68]

Modal verbs can be a source of ambiguity, as they express uncertainty about the validity of the assertion.[69] It can be argued that in Michel's tweet, the use of modal verbs in every sentence potentially cast doubt about the actual concretisation of these aspirations. Tweets from these authorities faced bitter responses from users who demanded the EU take more action. Amid increasing criticism, several messages in March tried to show the utilitarian role of the EU by providing lists of tangible measures that were taken to assist Europeans during the pandemic.[70] The Commission wanted to show a commitment and capacity to fulfil its duties: 'we promised we'll do everything to support Europeans […]. We deliver', as President von der Leyen posted.[71]

On 14 March the Commission even responded to a user who asked what the EU was 'exactly doing'[72] to solve the situation, since, according to

68 Charles Michel (@eucopresident), 'To limit the spread of the #COVID19, we need to work together and to act swiftly. Tonight, we stressed the need for a joint #EU approach & close coordination with @EU_Commission. Health & Interior ministers should consult daily for proper coordination and aim for common guidance', <u>Twitter</u>, 10 March 2020, 7:51 PM.

69 Tatiana Latina, Vladimir Ozyumenko, and Douglas Mark Ponton, '<u>Persuasion Strategies in Media Discourse about Russia: Linguistic Ambiguity and Uncertainty</u>', *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 15 Nº 1 (2019): 3–22.

70 European Commission (@EU_Commission), '"We work around the clock to fight the #COVID19 crisis. We fund research and the development of vaccines. We support companies and people who are at risk of losing their jobs." @vonderleyen More in our thread ↓', <u>Twitter</u>, 17 March 2020, 5:05 PM.

71 Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), 'We promised we'll do everything to support Europeans & 🇪🇺 companies through the crisis. We deliver. Yesterday we put in place the most flexible ever #StateAid rules to help people+companies. Today we trigger the clause to relax budget rules, enabling govs to pump 💰 into the economy', <u>Twitter</u>, 20 March 2020, 4:28 PM.

72 Toni Mestre-Fusco (@toni_mesfosc), 'Right now, what are you exactly doing to solve the situation? [Reply to @EU_Commission]', <u>Twitter</u>, 13 March 2020, 4:43 PM.

Figure 2. @EU_Commission response to member of the public

Source: European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'We are working on all fronts to tackle the coronavirus outbreak and helping the patients. We will use all the tools at our disposal to contain the spread of the coronavirus, help patients and make sure the European economy weathers the storm: https://europa.eu/!Dq37YP More ↓ [Reply to @toni_mesfosc]', Twitter, 14 March 2020, 9:32 AM.

the user, they needed 'facts now, no[t] future actions'.[73] The Commission attached infographics to accompany the EU's response (see Figure 2).

Again, the European Commission employed two unspecified metaphors, the repetitive 'working on all fronts' and 'weathers the storm', that did

73   Toni Mestre-Fusco (@toni_mesfosc), 'Thank you. But we need facts now, no future actions [Reply to @EU_Commission]', Twitter, 14 March 2020, 10:53 AM.

not promote a clear-cut understanding of what they would do. These two metaphors were mostly incorporated in troubled times: 'weather the storm' was used four more times in March (out of 453 COVID-19-related tweets) and only once during the rest of the year. The promise that they would use 'all the tools at our disposal' was more recurrent, appearing in twelve tweets more during the acute phase (out of 1420 COVID-19-related tweets), but was not mentioned afterwards. Even though Brussels played a significant role in the investment, research, trade, and setting of the general guidelines in public health, the states were primarily responsible for health protection and their healthcare systems. The message 'all the tools at our disposal', while seemingly praising the EU's commitment, also served to implicitly elude responsibility for not doing more, thereby subtly transferring the blame to member states, which were ultimately responsible for giving Brussels the necessary competences to intervene.

Criticism towards the states was far more explicit in President von der Leyen's speech at the European Parliament on 26 March:

> When Europe really needed to be there for each other, too many initially looked out for themselves. When Europe really needed an 'all for one' spirit, too many initially gave an 'only for me' response. And when Europe really needed to prove that this is not only a 'fair weather Union', too many initially refused to share their umbrella.[74]

Von der Leyen was referring to export bans on medical goods and the closure of borders, which hindered the distribution of food and healthcare supplies around the EU.[75] However, this open complaint was not transmitted like this on Twitter. Through her account von der Leyen broadcast videos of her speech showing extracts that did not highlight the

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74   European Commission, *Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the European Coordinated Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak*, 26 March 2020 [accessed 14 March 2023].

75   Jennifer Rankin, '<u>EU Leaders Clash over Economic Response to Coronavirus Crisis</u>', *The Guardian*, 26 March 2020 [accessed 4 April 2023].

criticism towards member states, but her call for cooperation. Once more, she used a metaphor that left room for different plausible interpretations: 'History is now looking at us. Let us do the right thing together—with one big heart, rather than 27 small ones.'[76]

At that time there was intense debate in Brussels on how to finance the recovery. Hard-hit countries such as Italy, Spain, and France called for issuing common European debt through 'coronabonds', an approach that was categorically rejected by Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, and Austria. As the pandemic spread to northern countries, EU members progressively found paths for cooperation that were commonly advertised on Twitter with the slogan 'this is European solidarity in action'. This catchphrase, which seemed to address implicitly the criticism of inadequate real action on the ground, was used for the announcement on 1 April of the '€100 billion solidarity instrument' SURE to mitigate unemployment.[77]

Sottilotta noted that although it acknowledged the absence of a centralised institutional framework to facilitate a coordinated response throughout the EU, the EU did not do enough to 'influence a collective definition of the situation'.[78] Consequently, it failed to highlight preferred courses of actions and obscure alternative interpretations. However, in the context of deep divisions among member states, a cautious approach could help the EU preserve its role as a key mediator, preventing further grievances. Advocating for a preferred course of action risked incurring future contradictions if that course of action were not eventually the one taken by member states. This would have deepened the erosion of Brussels' credibility.

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76   Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), 'History is now looking at us. Let us do the right thing together—with one big heart, rather than 27 small ones', Twitter, 26 March 2020, 1:49 PM.

77   Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), 'This is European solidarity in action! @EU_Commission proposes the new short-time work scheme SURE to help the most affected EU countries, including IT & ES. This will save millions of jobs during the crisis & allow us to quickly restart Europe's economic engine afterwards', Twitter, 1 April 2020, 11:30 AM.

78   Sottilotta, 'How Not to Manage Crises'.

As expected by H1, the recurrent resort to ambiguous messages seemed deliberate and goal-oriented. However, once the EU began to play a more relevant role, the EU's top authorities started to project a more coordinated demeanour on Twitter. Throughout April, reputation management strategies shifted towards a hopeful approach. More solid and less ambiguous narratives started to appear, as H2 anticipated. By the end of the month, the second main hashtag on the pandemic, #UnitedAgainstCoronavirus, was deployed. Tweets increasingly highlighted the timely performance of the EU,[79] which had even enlisted 127 concrete measures that were taken to support companies and livelihoods.[80]

On 19 April, for the first time on Twitter, High Representative Borrell admitted that the EU had experienced a 'shaky start'.[81] Besides being deliberately vague, this metaphor contradicted those messages disseminated at the beginning of the pandemic when the EU had failed to acknowledge any flawed conduct and tried to depict a more resolute performance. Nevertheless, tweets were transmitted suggesting the EU had learnt its lesson, rejected discord, and embraced multilateral cooperation because no member state would be capable of 'handling the crisis on their own'.[82]

The EU was portrayed then as a decisive contributor against the virus, being 'at the heart of the crisis response', as President von der Leyen

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79 European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'We have been working tirelessly to coordinate efforts against #coronavirus since the beginning of the outbreak, from our alert notification to EU countries on 9 January to our recent #GlobalResponse effort. Check the EU response timeline ↓', Twitter, 25 April 2020, 8.00 AM.

80 European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'In April we approved 127 State aid measures to support businesses and protect livelihoods across Europe during the #coronavirus outbreak. We continue working closely with EU countries to ensure our economy can bounce back strongly after the crisis. #StateAid', Twitter, 30 April 2020, 3:03 PM.

81 Josep Borrell Fontelles (@JosepBorrellF), 'Handling the corona crisis is a marathon, not a sprint. After a shaky start, the EU is now fully mobilised on all tracks. Our principled choices for multilateralism and partnership are finding echo around the world', Twitter, 19 April 2020, 6:03 PM.

82 European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'Working together makes us all stronger against #coronavirus. None of us can do it alone and certainly no Member State can handle this crisis on their own. Read more about #EUsolidarity action here: https://europa.eu/!qV34hY [Thread]', Twitter, 31 March 2020, 3:44 PM.

metaphorically affirmed.[83] Brussels was also presented as a caring international ally, particularly to its neighbours, such as the Western Balkans or Ukraine.[84] Any measures implemented often came with evocative keywords promoting European values. Instruments such as SURE or the Next Generation EU were presented as indicative of 'solidarity', 'prosperity', and 'peace' that would help face the 'defining moment' for the current generation of Europeans.[85] Similarly, according to High Representative Borrell, 'respect for human rights' had to remain 'at the heart of fighting the pandemic and supporting the global recovery'.[86]

4.3. Post-crisis

During the months that followed the first wave of the pandemic, European authorities showcased a resolute digital diplomacy that promoted a conclusive narrative. If at the beginning of the crisis the EU was ready to play a leading role, according to its officials, by June it was effectively demonstrating it.[87] Tweets began to focus on international aid through

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83   Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), 'The EU is at the heart of coronavirus global response. In 10 days, on 4 May, we will launch a global pledging effort. On that day we will also announce next milestones of a global campaign to kick off an ongoing rolling replenishment. → http://europa.eu/global-response', Twitter, 24 April 2020, 2:59 PM.

84   S&D Group (@TheProgressives), 'The EU remains the biggest & most reliable supporter of our #WesternBalkans partners, providing essential support for immediate needs & long-term recovery over the #COVID19 pandemic. We can only overcome this crisis together & if our neighbours overcome it as well. @JosepBorrellF [Retweet by Josep Borrell Fontelles]', Twitter, 6 May 2020, 1:49 PM.

85   Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), 'Generations before us have built a Union of peace and prosperity, without peer or precedent anywhere in the world. Today we face our own defining moment. With #NextGenerationEU we can build a green, digital and resilient future for our Union. 👉 https://europa.eu/!Ub44dU', Twitter, 27 May 2020, 1:07 PM.

86   Josep Borrell Fontelles (@JosepBorrellF), 'The #coronavirus pandemic impacts every country & region of the world and every aspect of our lives. It has reminded us how interconnected we are. Respect for human rights must remain at the heart of fighting the pandemic & supporting the global recovery. https://europa.eu/!dF86wM', Twitter, 5 May 2020, 3:23 PM.

87   Josep Borrell Fontelles (@JosepBorrellF), 'The EU demonstrates its leading role bringing global solutions to the coronavirus crisis. We are there for our partners. Now Is the moment to deliver on this package swiftly https://europa.eu/!nt66RB', Twitter, 8 June 2020, 5:44 PM.

the initiative #TeamEurope, and by the end of summer 2020 the storyline of the pandemic was displaying a certain triumphalism.[88]

In her State of the Union address, President von der Leyen praised the European response:

> When we felt fragility around us, we seized the moment to breathe new vitality into our Union. […] When we had a choice to go it alone like we have done in the past, we used the combined strength of the 27 to give all 27 a chance for the future. […] We showed that we are in this together and we will get out of this together.[89]

Metaphors did not disappear, but they turned more forceful. The messages of 'unity' and 'hope' seemed to suggest a clearer sequence of events: the EU had overcome its initial adversities to emerge as a transformative actor that had led the recovery from the pandemic.[90] Borrell confidently considered the crisis to have been a 'catalyst' that improved cooperation within the EU, portrayed as an example of multilateralism.[91] The European Comission suggested that the crisis served to acknowledge the importance of European values.[92] Borrell also portrayed the EU as an 'example of multilateralism'.[93]

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88   EEAS (@eu_eeas), '.#TeamEurope has arrived in Ukraine. The €190 million support package has reached the country on a first donation of protective equipment to the civilian security sector, which is among the first-responders to #COVID19 @EUAM_Ukraine #EUSolidarity https://europa.eu/!kK74cV', Twitter, 7 June 2020, 9:30 AM.

89   European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'This is the moment for Europe. The moment for Europe to lead the way from fragility towards a new vitality. President @vonderleyen delivers her first #SOTEU address', Twitter, 16 September 2020, 8:21 AM.

90   Ibid.

91   Josep Borrell Fontelles (@JosepBorrellF), 'European answer to #COVID19 is a good example of multilateralism. We have been able to improve the way we organise solidarity - internally and externally. The pandemic has been a catalyst, improving the way Europe can face the future. https://livestream.com/zivo/bsf2020?t=1598887836959', Twitter, 1 September 2020, 8:12 AM.

92   European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'Today is World #PeaceDay. 🕊 The pandemic showed us just how fragile our community of values really is. Today we need a strong and united world more than ever. Let's shape peace and move out of this corona world and uncertainty together. #StrongerTogether #ThisIsTheEU', Twitter, 21 September 2020, 7:51 AM.

93   Borrell, 'European answer to #COVID19'.

The advent of the second wave in Europe from late October 2020 did not undermine this confident approach. Rather than focusing on the death toll, tweets mostly highlighted the role of the EU as a key coordinator whose actions eventually prevailed over the unilateral initiatives of member states.

By the end of 2020 this cogent narrative incorporated the vaccination campaigns as the completion of a 'European success story'.[94] The same year that began with tumult and discord among member states culminated in a 'touching moment of unity' as vaccines were distributed according to equitable principles, rather than through competitive means.[95] Therefore, over the post-crisis phase and during the second COVID-19 wave, the EU progressively unfolded an unequivocal way to rationalise the pandemic, deploying much more assertive, less ambiguous language than in the acute stage.

5. Conclusion

These results are consistent with the crisis communications literature. During the pre-crisis and beginning of the acute phase there were neither consistent narratives nor a campaign expressly planned for Twitter. Facing dissent among member states, the EU was incapable of assembling rapidly and effectively a convincing storyline, instead mostly dedicating its communicational endeavours to mitigating the reputational impact and coping with criticism. It can be argued that to this purpose ambiguity was deployed actively, for example through metaphors and opaque messages, but also passively, by tweeting not excessively and in a disjointed fashion about the new coronavirus.

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94   Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), '#COVID19 has changed our lives and brought tragedy. But now there's hope. The European Union has invested in the research & development of #COVID19 vaccines. We have secured doses for our entire population. Vaccination will start soon. A European success story', Twitter, 25 December 2020, 3:04 PM.

95   European Commission (@EU_Commission), 'The #EUVaccinationDays are a touching moment of unity. The first vaccine was made available to all EU countries: ✅ at the same time ✅ under the same conditions. Together, we will overcome this pandemic. #StrongerTogether', Twitter, 27 December 2020, 4:08 PM.

In the absence of stable narratives, ambiguous messages provided grounds for plausibly coherent storylines to arise. Ambiguity was used to conserve a range of future narrative options for an unfavourable, uncertain scenario which had not yet revealed how the future might evolve.

Only when member states adopted a more cooperative approach and infections started to slow could the EU confidently send out narratives about solidarity among states, loyalty to European values, and the success of the European project. Until then the EU's approach remained more modest and mostly showed that, contrary to criticism received, the EU was indeed useful to its citizens and capable of fulfilling their aspirations. Ambiguity then helped navigation through sensitive issues by eluding solid stances on, for example, the EU's and member states' responsibilities in the crisis.

It is therefore concluded that the two hypotheses held in this study were validated. As H1 expected, it is possible to identify recurrent patterns of ambiguity in the EU's strategies of reputation management during the acute phase of the crisis. However, as H2 anticipated, the deployment of strategic ambiguity decreased as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. Under less uncertain circumstances, ambiguous messages converged into more robust narratives that presented the pandemic as a hurdle that, despite affecting European concord in the first months, eventually proved the functionality and relevance of the EU.

All in all, it can be inferred that strategic ambiguity may not be the most popular nor most effective shortcut towards restoring a reputation. However, strategic ambiguity may be the reasonable price that organisations must pay to have a good chance of restoring their reputation in the future, once the context becomes more beneficial and clearer expressions can finally be showcased.

Eisenberg claimed that there are situations in which ambiguous communication can be more helpful than clear communication,

particularly during periods of rapid change.[96] Regarding the digital diplomacy deployed by the EU during the pandemic, it is a plausible interpretation that ambiguity may have been ineffective from a communication perspective, but valid from a strategic point of view, as it may have served the interests of the organisation well in a high-pressure scenario. It can be argued that strategic ambiguity allowed the EU to buy some time while circumstances did not favour enacting a more satisfactory storyline. While not conclusive, ambiguous communication may have avoided incurring fundamental contradictions or deepening the grievances among states during the most acute phase of the first wave of the pandemic.

Further research could inspect to what extent these endeavours succeeded in restoring the reputation of the EU. As shown by Figure 1, December was the month with the highest death toll in 2020. However, a survey conducted in this month revealed that 50 per cent of Europeans by then had a positive image of the EU. This was the highest level attained since 2007, and almost three quarters agreed that the EU's recovery plan would allow their country to recover more rapidly.[97] The EU's strategic communications may have contributed to these improved figures, but other factors must be taken into account to complete causal explanations, such as the increasing financial and medical support in the second half of the year.

Future studies can also enrich these conclusions by addressing the approach taken by European governments. It could be beneficial to examine the correlation between messages projected by Brussels and those from member states, and to reflect on the extent to which the diversity of national narratives prompts the deployment of strategic ambiguity by the European Union.

96   Eisenberg, 'Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication'.

97   Kantar, *A Glimpse of Certainty in Uncertain Times: Parlemeter 2020—A European Parliament Eurobarometer Survey*, European Parliament, 2020 [accessed 14 March 2020].

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EVERYTHING COMMUNICATES