

INTEGRATED REVIEW/CHINA/
SNAKE CHARMING/RUSSIA/
DISINFORMATION/INFLUENCE/
DRAGON SLAYING:
**MEETING THE/COLD WAR/
CHALLENGE OF/VALUES/
GREY ZONE/PROPAGANDA/
COMPETITION FOR/HUMAN
GLOBAL BRITAIN./COGNITION/
INFORMATION OPERATIONS/
SUBVERSION/NARRATIVE
WARFARE/LIBERAL
DEMOCRACY/GLOBAL BRITAIN**

Preface

Sir Robert Fry

Chairman of Albany Associates

Albany Associates uses communications to solve complex problems in challenging environments; competition in what has become known as the Grey Zone is our stock in trade. It was therefore only natural for us to commission Alex Woolfson to look at the recent Integrated Review with the broadest canvas in order to draw out the implications for an independent company operating in the private sector. Alex has done that, and much more. His paper goes a long way to clarifying the nature of global competition, the differing approaches of our major protagonists and, above all, the centrality of narrative warfare. Grand Narratives define what political and social systems stand for and so shape the identity, sense of purpose and values of civilizations, nations and individuals. Victory in 1945, the creation of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods architecture, decades of rising living standards and the collapse of the Soviet Union made a compelling Grand Narrative for Liberal Democracy. But the certainty of 1989 is now a distant memory as the maturing narratives of Russian and Chinese Purposive Autocracy compete in the cognitive domain, culture wars threaten any liberal consensus and the West's profligacy with its power in the Wars of 9/11 compromises old verities. We cannot simply lament the passing of a rules based order; rather, we must find the intellectual vitality to define and narrate a replacement which will become a major weapon in the wars we fight now. Alex's paper does us the great service of defining these new terms of engagement and I commend it to you.

Dr Alexander Woolfson

Alex's main research areas include the politics of NATO and European security and US strategic policy. His recent engagements have involved a multi-year lecture series in Latin America to senior command audiences in Argentina, Colombia and Uruguay. He has a research interest in third power political interference in Latin America. He is a visiting professor at the National Defence University in Argentina.

Alex writes and comments regularly for the press. He is currently the defence and security editor for the comment website 'TheArticle' He previously served as senior strategic communications adviser at the BBC, where he later served as a producer on the 'World at One' and 'PM' and defence analyst for BBC News.

He holds his MA from the University of Cambridge, his MSc from the London School of Economics where he also completed his PhD examining the development of U.S. grand strategy during and immediately after the Cold War. Alex has held fellowships at Harvard University and the American Political Science Association and is a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He is an associate fellow at RUSI.

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Executive summary

The two major outputs of Britain's Integrated Review, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age" and "Defence in a Competitive Age", paint a now familiar picture of the international landscape. The geo-strategic threats identified as facing the UK are well established. They are primarily a combination of Russia's increasing encroachment on Europe and a more systemic global competition with China, alongside the continuing threat posed by non-state actors – both the "dragons" and the "snakes". This paper focuses on the two most important "dragons", Russia and China, but the basic conclusion that Britain should adopt a "whole of government" approach with narratives constructed at the heart of government applies equally to the "snakes".

This paper identifies the twin challenges from Russia and China but seeks to disaggregate the threats they pose from the analytic catchall of the Grey Zone. Russia and China are involved in superficially similar strategies, but the differences between them matter much more in effectively devising what persistent engagement against both should look like. In other words, much like the government's response, this paper makes a distinction

between the challenges posed by Russia and China. The nature of this distinction matters a great deal as the UK moves from the "Global Britain" paper towards constructing more clearly delineated strategic goals and doctrine for tackling both China and Russia.

The intellectual heart of "Global Britain" is the suggestion that a reset is required in Britain's grand strategy. Anyone expecting "Global Britain" to be purely mercantilist is very much mistaken. The reset demanded places a values-based approach to international affairs, especially the defence of liberal democracy, at the very core of everything Britain does.

The most significant point in the Integrated Review is the observation that the time for preserving the post-Cold War international order has long ended. In its place, "the international order is more fragmented, characterised by intensifying *competition between states over interests, norms and values* [emphasis added]. A defence of the status quo is no longer sufficient for the decade ahead."¹

[1] HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age, The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationary Office, March 2021). p. 11.

Crucially, what the Integrated Review has done is recognise the centrality of cognitive domains in the new scramble for power. This paper suggests that the key to persistent, sub-threshold competition with Russia and China is a carefully calibrated mix of minimal conventional forces with a strong emphasis on narrative warfare.

This paper asserts that the most important form of sub-threshold operations directed against the West is a form of political war that relies heavily on narrative.

Narratives are fundamental to human cognition and in that sense shape human identity. Weaponised narratives of the sort we now face are a serious threat to national security. So if the battle we are waging is over interests, norms and values, it is to be fought in narrative space. Our fear of Russia's unbadged "Little Green Men" largely misses the point.

It is crucial that Britain starts to see narrative as distinct from information operations. This is not war over information, this is war over meaning.

Where information consists of facts (true or otherwise), narratives give meaning and structure to those facts. Our adversaries have already grasped this distinction.

The type of operations envisaged by both government papers – forward based, persistent engagement and stability operations – should not be purely kinetic, nor purely military, and will not succeed if they simply rely on military information operations.

Part of the solution is military, but a new type of narrative warrior, supported by civilian expertise, is required for these types of operations. Narrative, not information, is the real force multiplier. These narratives cannot and should not be generated by the military establishment. Neither Russia nor China sees political warfare as solely a military responsibility.

The answer for the UK requires a truly joined up approach, along the lines of so-called "Fusion Doctrine". In reality, after the launch of "Global Britain", a "whole of government" approach remains an aspiration that is yet to be translated into operational reality. "Global Britain" perseveres in placing much of the burden on the military, which this paper suggests is a fundamental error, and one that is not made by our principal adversaries.

The West tends to view Grey Zone operations in terms of a binary choice between information and disinformation. We need a cognitive shift in order to prosecute a fight over meaning and identity.

Giving clarity to what type of Grey Zone operations Britain will be fighting over the next twenty years is essential. The unspoken parts of the two Integrated Review papers suggest much lower intensity kinetic action – perhaps engaged in targeted stability operations or similar. But, simultaneously, “protect[ing] open societies and democratic values where they are being undermined” will require more than the precise application of force.

We need to tell our own story to get ahead of our adversaries and frame events to our advantage, both away and at home, by military and civilian agencies alike.

Ideas are not enough. By themselves they do not invite action alone, not until they are given structure and meaning through narration. The Western obsession with truth and disinformation is besides the point. Ideas may be true or false, but narratives do not rely on truth value for their impact.

The success of the idea of “Global Britain” is built upon narrative dominance of this emergent battlespace. The challenge for “Global Britain” is to create narratives to give meaning to events and circumstances. There is little doubt that both Russia and China are already successful in doing this. Ladislav Bittman, one of the key Soviet-era defectors and former head of the KGB’s disinformation unit, understood all too well the power of narrative, setting a precedent for Russia’s political warfare to this day. He learnt how to mix accurate detail with false ones, because successful narrative campaigns must “at least partially respond to reality, or at least accepted views.”

In politics, language is the crucial medium – it is power politics. Events do not speak for themselves.

Much of the politics of national security revolves around a competition over their meaning, a competition in which we are not yet meaningfully engaged.

Introduction

“Here be dragons to be slain, here be rich rewards to gain”

“Democracy has survived the twentieth century by the skin of its teeth...It will not enjoy a free ride through the century to come.”² Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s observation at the end of the 1990s was ahead of its time. As a warning, it seemed a misplaced pronouncement at the zenith of Western military power and political cohesion. Yet, even if no one realised it, a little over thirty years ago the world was faced with two competing visions of the future. The first of these was the triumphant fall of the Iron Curtain, the second was the brutal subjugation of the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square. Most commentators envisaged this as the birth of what George H.W. Bush called a “New World Order”.³ The wave of optimism about the triumph of liberal democracy as an ideological end point was famously encapsulated by Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History”⁴. Such optimism seemed hard to fault.

Of the two threats to Western interests, the rapidly crumbling Soviet Union dwarfed China.

Just three decades later, continued US hegemony can no longer be taken for granted. China has replaced Russia as the foremost global challenger whilst Russian resurgence threatens the norms of the Western security architecture.

For the US, China has risen to become the most significant of the “near peer” threats, and Russia remains a somewhat distant second.

China’s rise and her complex campaign of espionage and political warfare undoubtedly threaten the norms of the UK and the international system.

Yet, the most pressing conventional military threat to both the UK and her European allies is Russia, both in terms of military activity that directly challenges territorial integrity but also revanchism that threatens continental European peace.

[2] Arthur Schlesinger Jr. ‘Has Democracy A Future?’, *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 76, No. 5, September/October 1997), p. 11.

[3] George H.W. Bush, ‘Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union’, Speech given at the United States House of Representative, Washington, D.C., January 29 1991, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-1>, Accessed: 6 December 2020.

[4] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

Today both the “dragons and the snakes”⁵ remain as threats, but their relative importance has changed. The US 2017 Quadrennial Review effectively ended the period in which non-state actors were seen as the primary threat to the US and entered us into a new period of great power competition. As David Kilcullen and others have noted, both the challenger state “dragons” and non-state “snakes” spent their time wisely during the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns, devising new tactical and strategic approaches in order to exploit Western military and political weaknesses.⁶

This paper explores how the two most prominent “dragons” have undergone a cognitive shift that allows them to conceive of conflict with the West far beyond the limitations of just military engagement.

The Western powers have only partially realised the implications of such a change. As 2018’s US National Defense Strategy put it “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition by...revisionist powers.

It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”⁷

The changing global distribution of power matters a great deal in the shaping of Britain’s grand strategy as articulated in the Integrated Review. China is certain to persist as “National Security Threat No.1”⁸ for the US and her Indo-Pacific neighbours. Nonetheless, China’s threat to the UK needs to be carefully evaluated. The UK is undoubtedly a subject of Chinese intelligence and political operations. The UK also has an interest in maintaining a rules-led international order and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific, not least because the nature of post-Brexit life is intended to increase trade links to the region and safeguard vital access to raw materials intrinsic to our defence and other industries.

[5] A term used in David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (London, Hurst & Company, 2020). The term has a longer pedigree, Kilcullen took the term from James Woolsey’s Congressional testimony during his confirmation hearing as head of the CIA in the early 1990s.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] United States Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, D.C., 2018) <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, Accessed: 2 October 2020.

[8] John Ratcliffe, ‘China is National Security Threat No. 1’, *The Wall Street Journal* (December 3, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-national-security-threat-no-1-11607019599>, Accessed: 3 December 2020).

Yet, there is a fundamental strategic dilemma about how the UK deploys her limited forces and the extent to which she commits to a return “East of Suez”. The Integrated Review made clear that Russia also remains a serious and geographically proximate threat. The continual struggle for both the UK and US will be maintaining a strategy that is flexible enough to rapidly shift between the demands of more conventional great power military deterrence or warfighting and selective Grey Zone engagement. Military planners cannot afford to assume that Grey Zone, asymmetric campaigns will become the *de facto* standard for competitive engagement despite their increasing importance. Both Russian and Chinese military modernisation programmes suggest a more blended mix of legacy military capabilities, aided by new technology and nimble strategy, freed from the Western cognitive constraint of domain-based approaches.

President Biden has placed domestic renewal of democracy at the heart of his agenda.⁹

In truth, the health of American democracy has always been central to her foreign policy, but Biden faces a significant challenge in rebuilding any sort of political consensus which can support an ambitious grand strategy.

Biden may have intended to simply pick up the mantle of global leadership, ignoring the past four years, but the narrative of American exceptionalism is in sore need of renewal both at home and abroad.

His public justification for “Why America must lead again” was short on logic. His first point was an implicit sort of hereditary principle, that 70 years of past leadership should imply continuity.¹⁰ His second point, made in 2017 was moral: “other nations follow our lead because they know that America does not simply protect its own interests, but tries to advance the aspirations of all.”¹¹ After the Trump years, this claim, never universally or uncritically accepted, needs to be demonstrated rather than simply asserted. Both Russia and China are exploiting this weakness within the American narrative.

[9] John Ratcliffe, ‘China is National Security Threat No. 1’, *The Wall Street Journal* (December 3, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-national-security-threat-no-1-11607019599>, Accessed: 3 December 2020).

[10] Biden, ‘Why America Must Lead Again’.

[11] Joe Biden, ‘Reclaiming America’s Values’, *The New York Times* (September 14, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/opinion/joe-biden-more-perfect-union.html>, Accessed: 2 December 2020.

A number of Biden's team, including National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, have cited G. John Ikenberry's book "A World Safe for Democracy"¹² as a key influence. In very simple terms, Ikenberry writes that liberal democracies face a crunch decision between pursuing a universalist conception of international order whose results can no longer be taken for granted or establishing an effective "club" of democracies and defending the ground they hold both from within and from without. In other words the attempt to shore up a stable, democratic consensus in much of what we call "The West" is intimately related to the shape of the democratic world.

In practice, events are already moving in that direction. Boris Johnson's mooted organisation of democracies, the so-called "D-10" is exactly the sort of bounded community Ikenberry is really talking about. Biden too has called for a "Summit for Democracy",¹³ and the Atlantic Council has made repeated calls for an "Alliance of Free Nations".¹⁴

The challenge for this community of democracies is then to decide how to deal with illiberal challengers, principally China and Russia, by choosing a relative mix of accommodation, confrontation and selective engagement.

In terms of strategic priorities, this reordering of liberal internationalism matters a great deal for several reasons. Firstly, the defence of a geographically bounded community of democracies will become paramount for the first time since the Cold War. Secondly, the values of that community can no longer claim validity based on assumed universality.

Instead, Western values will require vigorous, narrative based defence of the kind that would have been familiar to George Kennan during the early Cold War. The Integrated Review was correct to assert that the status quo cannot continue. But in its place needs to be a coherent and appealing narrative about the sort of world order the West is now creating and why the values which it espouses are superior to those of its competitors.

[12] G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe For Democracy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020).

[13] Biden, 'Why America Must Lead Again'.

[14] The Atlantic Council, *Declaration of Principles for Freedom, Prosperity, and Peace* (March 2018), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/declaration/>, Accessed: 18 September 2020.

Thirdly, because the universality of liberal internationalism has been reduced to a bounded community, that leaves a large number of states in a position of liminality, neither within the D-10 (or whatever similar grouping emerges) nor within the direct ambit of Russia and China. These states will be acutely vulnerable to Grey Zone campaigns. The defence of these states or at least keeping them neutral will become a major point of competition and potentially confrontation with China and Russia and their fate will matter a great deal for the preservation of international stability.

Identity, dignity and the decline of Western narratives

Barak Obama's speech writer, Ben Rhodes, opened his memoir "The World as It Is"¹⁵, with the outgoing President asking, on his final day in office "What if we were wrong?". The immediate source of Obama's anxiety was the election of Donald Trump. Trump's election represented a full-frontal assault on what had appeared to be the durable, bipartisan narrative of liberal values that had underpinned the US political system during the Cold War and beyond. Obama was right to ask the question. What indeed if Western politicians had misjudged the post-Cold War period?

Obama's question found its answer in Trump's tumultuous four years in the White House and more importantly in what they revealed about the link between America's self-image and its exercise of power rather than any individual policy decisions he made.

The US faces simultaneous, interlinked upheavals; a crisis of liberalism at home and overseas and a relative decline in global power.

Whatever his many failings, Trump highlighted a certain imperial hubris that meant the US had allowed itself to become overburdened and over stretched. It had

spent much of the past twenty years, along with its Atlantic allies engaged in two Middle Eastern wars of dwindling strategic significance with the "snakes". In failing to identify or address more strategic threats from the "dragons" during that period, the world has changed and American hegemony has been hollowed out. For example, why had the US allowed China such easy entry to the World Trade Organisation? Why was the US still bearing an unequal share of the NATO burden? Most fundamentally, how had America lost sight of the link between its domestic narrative as the beacon of liberal democracy and its international power?

This is partially answered by Francis Fukuyama, in his corrective to the "End of History" hypothesis, that charts the emergence of what he calls "the Politics of Dignity"¹⁶. In it, he suggests that "Twentieth-century politics had been organized along a left-right spectrum defined by economic issues...In the second decade of the twenty-first century, that spectrum appears to be giving way in many regions to one defined by identity... In a wide variety of cases, a political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that the group's dignity had been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded."¹⁷

[15] Ben Rhodes, *The World as It is* (New York: Random House, 2018), pp. 18-19.

[16] Francis Fukuyama, *Identity* (London: Profile Books, 2018) p. 26.

[17] *Ibid*, pp. 32-33.

Not only does this apply to the identity politics of the Alt-Right and Progressive Left but also some of the narratives present in Russian and Chinese political warfare.

In other words, the rise of identity politics in the West not only poses a challenge domestically but also animates her enemies and the potential to destroy a hitherto cohesive narrative about liberal democracy and capitalism.

The adoption of domestic critiques of the West by Russia and China is perhaps unsurprising but notable. One prominent example occurred during the March 2021 bilateral summit in Alaska, when US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, expressed his concerns over Chinese human rights abuses. The response was a tirade from his Chinese counterpart intended to establish moral equivalence with the US. Its intended audience was perhaps both American and further afield. "There are many problems within the United States regarding human rights, which is admitted by the US itself as well... The challenges facing the United States in human rights are deep-seated. They did not just emerge over the past four years, such as Black Lives Matter...it's important that we

manage our respective affairs well instead of deflecting the blame on somebody else in this world."¹⁸

The politics of identity matters when considering the nature of the challenge from both Russia and China.

The West is locked in a competition of norms, narratives and legitimacy.

The narrative stakes for both Russia and China are existential in a way, which is hard for Western leaders to understand. Both are concerned with reinforcing domestic legitimacy and a concomitant battle for normative supremacy.

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), many of the threats it considers central are ideational rather than material and therefore cannot be defeated solely by kinetic means. At its core, "The CCP's driving objective is to remain in power, but as obstacles to ensuring this objective inevitably become more complex so does the need to self-regulate. The CCP is constantly engaged in a process of ensuring its own legitimacy, which, having never truly outgrown its revolutionary past, the CCP perhaps fears it never fully possessed.

[18] Antony J. Blinken, *Press Release - Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang And State Councilor Wang At the Top of Their Meeting* (March 18, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-chinese-director-of-the-office-of-the-central-commission-for-foreign-affairs-yang-jiechi-and-chinese-state-councilor-wang-yi-at-th/>, Accessed: 20 March 2021.

While ensuring legitimacy includes objectives like maintaining economic growth and preserving stability, it also includes wielding the party's power to administer the country effectively and prevent the emergence of a Chinese future without the CCP at the helm."¹⁹ Both the destruction of the Uighur Muslim community and the pro-Democracy movement in Hong Kong fully exemplify the CCP's desire to extinguish competing narratives.

The Western democracies share a fundamental confusion in understanding how China and Russia approach political warfare. Both the UK and US persist in their conception of distinct cyber operations and information operations.

Russia and China differ from the West in that they both seem to have realised that neither the domain of cyber nor the currency of information matter as much as the narrative.

The narrative gives meaning to information. Indeed, as Fukuyama commented, the stakes are nothing less than a fight over who controls meaning and identity.

[19] Samantha Hoffman and Peter Mattis, 'Managing The Power Within: China's State Security Commission', *War on the Rocks* (July 18, 2016), <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/managing-the-power-within-chinas-state-security-commission/>, Accessed: 3 September 2020.

Understanding Chinese and Russian operations in the Grey Zone

Given that Russia and China have vastly different histories, zones of influence and religious experiences, it is unsurprising that they have differing strategic objectives which inform the shape and narrative of their operations in the Grey Zone. Russian thinking distinguishes between two distinct but overlapping concepts *gibridnaya voyna*²⁰ and "New Generation Warfare".²¹ Whereas the former implies a mix of political, diplomatic, economic, information and other non-military means intended to subvert and undermine an adversary, the latter describes a full-scale military operation, preceded and accompanied by different non-military actions intended to weaken the adversary's military power and political resilience."²² In other words "the main purpose of *gibridnaya voyna* is to avoid the traditional battlefield with the aim of destroying the adversary via a mixture of ideological, informational, financial, political and economic methods, ultimately leading to socio-cultural disintegration and, eventually, social collapse."²³

New Generation Warfare is an attempt to modernise the tactical-operational environment as seen in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. Although *gibridnaya voyna* is a direct translation of the English "hybrid warfare", the concept underlying it "more closely resembles the theory of subversion war than it does the Western understanding of hybrid war."²⁴

It is a strategic notion, much more akin to George Kennan's suggestion that "political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.

Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as E[conomic] R[ecovery] P[rogram]), and 'white' propaganda, to such covert operations as clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, 'black' psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states."²⁵

[20] Loosely translated as "Hybrid Warfare".

[21] Jānis Bērziņš, 'The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (Vol. 33, No. 3), pp. 355-380.

[22] Ofer Fridman, Russian "*Hybrid Warfare*" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.163.

[23] Ibid, p.7.

[24] Ofer Fridman, 'Hybrid Warfare or *Gibridnaya Voyna*?', *The RUSI Journal* (Vol. 162 No.1, February/March 2017), p.45.

[25] Policy Planning Staff Memo, 'The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare' (April 30, 1948). This version contains handwritten alterations that are incorporated in a subsequent version of May 4, 1948. As quoted in Scott Lucas and Kaeten Mistry, 'Illusions of Coherence: George F. Kennan, U.S. Strategy and Political Warfare in the early Cold War, 1946-1950', *Diplomatic History* (Vol. 33 No, 1, January 2009), p.1.

What we see are two different concepts, used in very different contexts. The first *New Generation warfare* is the type of tactical campaign we see in non-aligned states such as Ukraine. The second *gibridnaya voyna* is the type of political warfare that is directly targeted at NATO members.

In that sense, much of the contemporary debate in the West about Grey Zone activity lacks clarity and full comprehension, making policy responses extremely challenging.

Whilst both types of Russian activity are a threat, *New Generation Warfare* primarily affects NATO's periphery, non-members who are not subject to Article V protection, whereas most NATO members are currently subject to *gibridnaya voyna* or political warfare.

What persistent competition really looks like is a combination of both of these types of campaign. For example, *New Generation Warfare* campaigns in countries on the periphery of political alliances, combined with a persistent political assault on liberal democratic values in established democracies.

The targets are the so-called "lands in between":²⁶ vulnerable countries on the front line between Russia and NATO, but also those further afield in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.

In addition, NATO must face a direct and continuous challenge to its own political cohesion in the form of political, economic, espionage and cyber attacks, all the while maintaining a strong enough conventional defence posture to deter an opportunistic *coup de main*.²⁷

NATO's weak point is the political unity which facilitates an agile response threshold.

For the time being, Russia would be taking an extremely unlikely gamble in assuming that either the response threshold would be slow enough to allow a *coup de main*, or that NATO would not reverse such seizure of territory with overwhelming force. Nevertheless this does not stop Russia from undermining NATO by exploiting the fracturing of shared political narratives amongst members.

[26] Mitchell A. Orenstein, *The Lands In Between Russia vs. the West and the New Politics of Hybrid War* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2019).

[27] RAND modelled just such an opportunistic attack on the Baltic States between 2014 and 2016 in which all scenarios resulted in Russian forces reaching Tallinn and Riga in 60 hours. See, David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank Wargaming the Defence of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2016).

Analysis within NATO members does not seem to distinguish between the two distinct areas of Russian activity. *Hybrid Warfare* has become a shorthand for both *New Generation Warfare* and *gibridnaya voyna* although they should be seen as distinct. This matters because it is not clear that the primary response to *gibridnaya voyna* should be military. It is primarily a form of narrative based political warfare that requires a whole of government response.

The specific narratives that underpin Russian political warfare need to be understood.

Fiona Hill suggests that Russian foreign policy narratives have become almost indistinguishable from the world view of Vladimir Putin. His classically conservative views are rooted in centuries of Russian political thought. As she writes “By the time he returned to the Russian presidency for a third term in May 2012, Putin had forged a conservative political and social agenda that was an amalgam of the traditional ‘Russianness’ (*russkost’*) embodied in the Russian Orthodox Church and Soviet-era nostalgia.

Putin depicted Russia as a unique ‘civilizational pole,’ distinct from the West and standing apart from its European neighbours.”²⁸ Indeed “Putin declared that ‘Russia should not only preserve its geopolitical demand – it should increase the demand, [Russia] should be demanded [or needed] by our neighbours and partners... This concerns our economy, culture, science, education and diplomacy...And, last but not least, this concerns our military might, which guarantees Russia’s security and independence’”.²⁹

Although there are similarities between the Russian and Chinese approaches to Grey Zone campaigns, so far China has shown a far greater preference for non-kinetic activity than Russia, despite her military modernisation. Clearly both countries’ strategic goals differ and this has been expressed in different approaches to political warfare.

[28] Fiona Hill, ‘How Vladimir Putin’s World View Shapes Russian Foreign Policy’, in David Cadier and Margot Light, *Russia’s Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p. 45.

[29] Putin, Vladimir (2012c), Address to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2012. President of Russia, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/4739> in *ibid*.

Russia has used “broadly negative, combative, destabilising, and discordant influence operations because that type of campaign supports Russia’s strategic goals to undermine faith in democratic processes, support pro-Russian policies or preferred outcomes, and sow division within Western societies, Russia’s strategic goals require covert actions and are inherently disruptive...The Chinese state has a starkly different set of strategic goals, and as a result, Chinese state-run...influence operations use different techniques. Xi Jinping has chosen to support China’s goal to exert greater influence on the current international system by portraying the government in a positive light, arguing that China’s rise will be beneficial, cooperative, and constructive for the global community.³⁰

China has a series of interrelated narratives, the most important of which is the dominance of the CCP and the maintenance of its primacy.

Beyond that, China articulates a story of “one hundred years of humiliation” that

recounts being driven from its once central global position by colonial interventions since the 1800s.

As Lauren Speranza has convincingly argued “With another core principle of ‘history as destiny’, China believes it will regain its stature as a powerful, respected actor in the world and benevolent overseer of its broader region...this notion underpins many of the government’s maneuvers to expand its international influence and reach.

At the same time, China has traditionally preserved a culture of peaceful coexistence, indicating it does not seek *aggressive* expansion or view foreign interference in the same way as other powers. Yet Chinese officials have manipulated this narrative to support China ‘defending against threats’ to its perceived regional and global role, which the Chinese government defines at its discretion.”³¹

[30] Insikt Group, ‘Beyond Hybrid War: How China Exploits Social Media to Sway American Opinion’, Recorded Future, 2019. p. 16.

[31] Lauren Speranza, ‘A Strategic Concept for Countering Russian and Chinese Hybrid Threats’, Atlantic Council Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, July 2020. p. 6.

In contrast to Russia's overarching narrative of US decline, China has promoted a more positive narrative regarding their own economic model.

The so-called "Beijing Consensus" model is one in which unbridled economic development can be decoupled from the type of democratic political system promoted by the West.³²

This is clearly an extremely powerful message in much of the unaligned world where the real battle for influence will take place.

In contrast to Russian Grey Zone campaigns which have often consisted of tactical opportunism such as in Syria and Venezuela, China often focuses on long term positional advantage, sustaining their campaigns over a long period of time. Ross Babbage notes that that Chinese Grey Zone operations often "start in spaces that are 'empty,' peripheral, or perceived to be of limited importance by those rivals...

[They] can be described as echeloned offensives. They often begin in a very modest and almost inconsequential manner and gradually expand in nature, scale, and sometimes in pace to adopt a completely different character that is often of greater strategic importance...When a fait accompli is in place, China's political warfare operations are usually refocused to encourage enemy decision-makers and their publics to acquiesce, accept the 'new facts' as normal, turn their attention elsewhere, and move on."³³

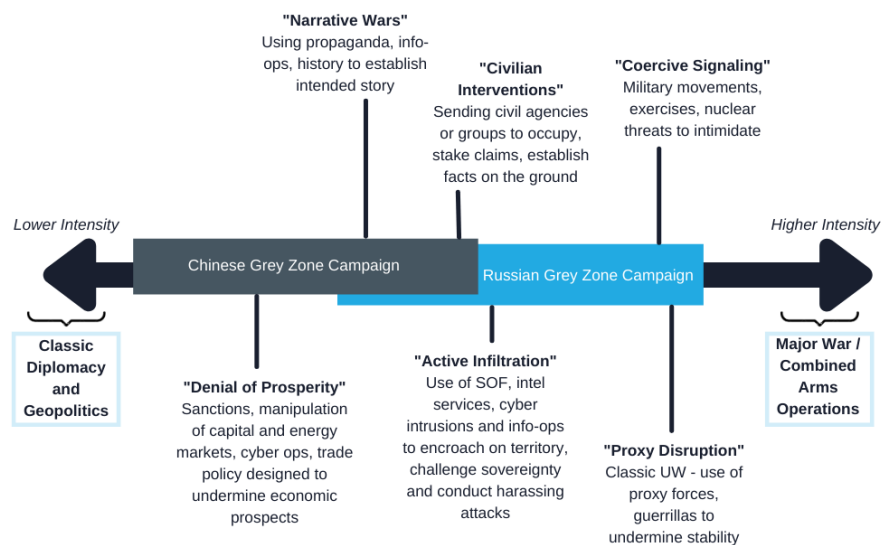


Figure: Adapted from 'Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict' <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Mastering-The-Gray-Zone63A-Understanding-A-Changing-Mazarr/583464a185e0142e522cf0936f349ce50b892f>

[32] Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[33] Ross Babbage, 'Stealing A March – Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific: Issues and Options for Allied Defense Planning', Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019. Pp. ii-iii.

Avoiding conceptual encirclement

Confusion about the nuances that differentiate Russian and Chinese approaches persists in the Ministry of Defence's "Integrated Operating Concept 2025".^[34] The IOC 2025 is one of the most coherent attempts to "set out a new approach to the utility of armed force in an era of persistent competition and a rapidly evolving character of warfare."^[35] The Integrated Operating Concept performs an effective description of the environment of persistent competition and sub-threshold or Grey Zone threats. However, having described a threat environment which is far from being predominantly military, it makes no distinction between the differing types of asymmetric threats that Russia and China pose. Whilst the IOC 2025 acknowledges that the military needs to "move beyond 'Jointery' – integration is now needed at every level",^[36] it falls short of suggesting who should lead on grand strategy or indeed how it should be formulated. The logical conclusion of "Fusion Doctrine" in an environment of persistent competition, requires a rethink of how and where grand strategy is created within government.

It is not the role of the military to decide on the relative mix of economic, political and military levers to be used by the state. The question still persists "Who does UK Grand Strategy?" and to what end?

As a Public Administration Select Committee report put it ten years ago, "The answer we received to the question, 'Who does UK Grand Strategy?' is: no-one. This should be a matter of great concern for the Government, Parliament and the country as a whole."^[37]

The Committee's suggested remedy was a precursor of Lord Sedwill's "Fusion Doctrine". As the report put it, "We strongly disagree with the idea that any single department, even FCO, can drive the National Strategy. For intuitive strategic thinking to flourish; for it to be effectively harnessed, and for coherent National Strategy to be made and implemented, requires the establishment of specific mechanisms with the appropriate authority."^[38]

[34] Ministry of Defence, *Introducing the Integrated Operating Concept 2025*, (London: The Stationary Office, September 2020).

[35] *Ibid*, p.1.

[36] *Ibid*, p.9.

[37] Public Administration Select Committee, *Who Does UK National Strategy?*, HC713 (London: The Stationary Office, 25 January 2011) Para. 94.

[38] *Ibid*, Para. 51.

Ten years after that report it is still not clear how much progress the government has made in taking grand strategy seriously, despite showing unexpected financial largesse towards the armed forces. The 2020 four-year financial settlement for the MoD was a budget in search of a strategy and as the Defence Secretary Ben Wallace put it in July 2020 “Only a fool starts the debate on numbers rather than threat.”³⁹

Whilst the Integrated Review was a serious attempt to sketch the threat environment, nevertheless it remains unclear in terms of a strategic roadmap.

Part of the problem for the US and UK in forming grand strategy is one of definition.

Grand strategy is normally a dynamic activity associated with war, focused on the single goal of victory. The one exception is of course the Cold War that encapsulated a liminal state in-between war and peace but which was nonetheless prosecuted by means of grand strategy. The situation today with regard to both Russia and China is similarly slippery. The very notion of

Grey Zone conflicts suggests a liminal state somewhere between peace and war. The language deployed of “sub-threshold” activity show the West’s conceptual reticence to enter into formalised conflict. Both US and UK public strategic documents are careful to talk about a “competitive” environment, rather than a conflictual one.

But serious thought is required about how both China and Russia perceive their relationship with their Western competitors and indeed how they conceive of the notion of warfare.

If competition is to be undertaken meaningfully and systematically, the definition of war being used by the parties involved matters a great deal in order to define new forms of deterrence and escalation. To avoid doing so risks conceptual encirclement – an adversary engaging in actions that they consider war but their adversary does not, or the converse, triggering war inadvertently by engaging in activity that one’s adversary considers warlike but you do not.

[39] House of Commons, *Hansard*, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-07-06/debates/9099CD53-0098-479D-9FC0-8293C96E7A28/TopicalQuestions>, Accessed: 20 September 2020, Column 658.

In 1999, two colonels of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui published *Unrestricted Warfare*⁴⁰ (it is also translated more usefully as "War beyond Rules"), their analysis of the state of warfare at the time. Often seen incorrectly in the West as a contribution to doctrine, the book is best understood as an analysis of the perceived changing character of war after the Gulf conflict. There are two important aspects to the book in terms of how it informed the PLA's development.

Firstly, it observed the US as sole superpower with undoubted military domination but constrained by the same rules-based order it had created, whilst its adversaries, including the PLA, were free of such constraints.

Secondly, the authors broadened the definition of war beyond simply "using armed force to compel the enemy to submit to one's will"⁴¹ instead "using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interest."⁴²

The point was to avoid fighting the US symmetrically by expanding the very definition of war, to include hugely varied forms of conflict, and using the international system that the US built, to constrain them.

The US could be fought by "creating a bandwidth challenge where Washington would struggle even to perceive the entire range of Chinese activity, let alone respond coherently to it."⁴³

The fundamental point they made was about a seemingly infinite combination of these new forms of conflict that an adversary would fail to understand, let alone counter. As they put it "Any of the above types of methods of operation can be combined with another of the above methods of operation to form a completely new method of operation...that go beyond domains and categories."⁴⁴

[40] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999).

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, p. 204.

[44] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, p. 146.

As David Kilcullen notes, it seems that the PLA took inspiration from a section entitled “The Side Principal Rule”⁴⁵ aimed at “Encouraging the United States to double down on conventional capacity while simultaneously developing alternative, asymmetric options...an approach to warfighting that encourages a superior adversary to expend its strength in a series of frontal efforts before responding with a decisive blow that comes from an unexpected direction, takes an unexpected form, or applies elements that an enemy has not considered.”⁴⁶

It is hard to know how influential Unrestricted Warfare was; but in 2003 ideas that seem to have been influenced by it were officially adopted by the PLA in the form of what became known as Three Warfares in which China introduced public opinion warfare, psychological warfare and legal warfare into military writing.

Certainly, *Three Warfares* seems more conceptually similar to Russian *gibridnaya voyna* than it does to Hoffman’s conception of hybrid warfare. In other words *Three Warfares* is primarily concerned with conceptual encirclement of China’s adversaries through political warfare.

Our conception of the PLA strategy should in part be driven by an understanding of its position within the Chinese state. The PLA “is the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The PLA is the party’s army; the party is not an extension of the PLA. Unlike a national army dedicated to the defense of a state and its people, the Chinese military’s purpose is to create political power for the party. When analysts look at the PLA, they are looking at it as a military — at its warfighting capabilities and the resulting security implications. It is a purely military view that lacks a clear concept for appreciating political warfare.”⁴⁷ We should accord more significance to the parallel development of conceptual modernisation by the PLA, an attempt to sidestep US military dominance altogether and with a specific goal in mind, “The party leads, the PLA follows. The purpose of influence operations is political power. Creating political power is precisely what the ‘Three Warfares’ are intended to do.”⁴⁸ The term “political warfare” is deliberately expansive here and close to George Kennan’s inclusive definition that encompasses “lawfare” and economic activity.

[45] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, p. 157.

[46] Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, pp. 208-209.

[47] Peter Mattis, ‘China’s “Three Warfares” in Perspective’, *War on the Rocks* (January 30, 2018), <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>, Accessed: 18 September 2020.

[48] *Ibid.*

The emergence of *Three Warfares* should go some way to answering the persistent public debate between foreign policy practitioners and academics about whether the West is entering into a new Cold War.

*In the case of Russia, a number of commentators have suggested that, unlike Western perceptions of an era of increased "Competition", Russian leaders consider themselves to already be at war with the West; and in their view the West started it.*⁴⁹

Their conception of War in this context is currently below the "threshold" of conventional military power but equates to what we might think of as political warfare or *gibridnaya voyna*, as explored earlier.⁵⁰ In 2017 Stanley McChrystal warned that "A European war is not unthinkable. People who want to believe a war in Europe is not possible might be in for a surprise."⁵¹

McChrystal was referring to the more conventional, kinetic sense of war as armed conflict. He may well have failed to realise that a different type of non-kinetic war had already broken out.

The enduring theme of recent strategy documents in both the UK and US is of a "competitive" environment however, as one writer put it recently "the U.S. should (and indeed did) describe actions such as Chinese cyber theft of intellectual property and Russian cyber-enabled meddling in U.S. elections as neither "agreed" nor "competition" but, rather, as unacceptable hostile acts."⁵² There is still a significant, cognitive disconnect between how threats are conceived and how the US and UK then choose to frame their strategic environment. Charles Bartles has suggested that

*"The important point is that while the West considers these nonmilitary measures as a way of avoiding war, Russia considers these measures as war".*⁵³

[49] See Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (Rome: NATO Defence College, November 2016), p. 11.

[50] Galeotti, *Russian Political War* p. 103.; Thomas E. Ricks, 'Gen. McChrystal is right — in fact, Russian leaders think they already are at war', *Foreign Policy* (January 30, 2017) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/30/gen-mcchrystal-is-right-in-fact-russian-leaders-think-they-already-are-at-war/>, Accessed: 20 November 2020.

[51] Michael Miklaucic, 'An Interview with Stanley McChrystal', *Prism* (Vol. 6 No. 3, December 7 2016) <https://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM-6-3/Article/1020271/an-interview-with-stanley-mcchrystal/>, Accessed: 6 December 2020.

[52] James N. Miller and Neal A. Pollard, 'Persistent Engagement, Agreed Competition and Deterrence in Cyberspace', *Lawfare* (April 30, 2019), <https://www.lawfareblog.com/persistent-engagement-agreed-competition-and-deterrence-cyberspace>, Accessed: 15 August 2020.

[53] Charles K. Bartles, 'Getting Gerasimov Right', *Military Review* (January-February 2016), p. 34.

In both the UK and US, this conceptual gap is partially explained by the cognitive constraint of thinking about conflict and strategy through the prism of domain-based structures. Western analysts fundamentally misconceive both the threat they face and potential responses because they overlay this kind of inflexible “stove piping” approach to both. In contrast “The Russians consider information itself, in all its forms, to be a domain of warfare. In other words, they are not thinking only in terms of data held within and transmitted between computers and other electronic systems. Instead, they view information as an all-encompassing whole, of which only part is held in electronic media.

So, for example, Russian planners will consider propaganda and hacking as part of the same domain, one that spans everything from cyber operations and spin, through to diplomacy and intimidation.”⁵⁴

It is possible to interpret UK and US notions of “persistent engagement” and “competition” as cognitive shorthand in both countries. What it seems to refer to is using

domains perceived as sub-threshold in the UK and US as suitable proxies for armed conflict without escalation. Indeed a number of US strategists have tried returning to the logic of nuclear deterrence, specifically Herman Kahn’s model of an “agreed battle”⁵⁵ to cyberspace, suggesting that just such logic is at work. As has already been demonstrated, no such conceptual “agreement” exists on the part of Russia or China in terms of categorising the cyber-information war space. In such an environment where neither the contours of the domains nor the state of war or peace is agreed, the danger of escalation remains extremely high. Indeed “treating cyberspace apart from other dimensions of international competition and conflict (economic, diplomatic, informational, legal and military) would inappropriately focus U.S. policymakers on cyber-only responses to cyber-related actions by adversaries, resulting in artificially constrained and inadequate actions. Plausible responses to cyberattacks include diplomatic demarches, economic sanctions, information campaigns, criminal indictments and civil suits, and where necessary military actions outside of cyberspace.”⁵⁶

[54] Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, pp. 34-35.

[55] Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (Routledge: London, 2017), pp. 4-6.

[56] Miller and Pollard, *Persistent Engagement, Agreed Competition and Deterrence in Cyberspace*.

It should be clear that there appears to be a disconnect in strategic grammar about how the US and UK, as opposed to Russia and China, view these activities. This means that the UK and US treat cyber and information operations as distinct domains, believing they can be used in a non-escalatory fashion, as if there are “rules to the game” in place when in fact there are none. The notion that these areas of action have their own distinct logic, that exists sub-threshold of declaratory war is a significant mistake. The “Global Britain” papers further muddies the water by failing to articulate an escalatory ladder for the Grey Zone. The addition of nuclear retaliation as possible response to cyber activity without a clearly defined escalatory ladder is a very worrying development.⁵⁷

[57] HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 76.

The challenge ahead

The past five years have witnessed a major disruption in both the idea and practice of liberal democracy. The scenario highlighted at the start of the paper, suggesting a more limited and bounded community of democracies is not a forecast but an emergent reality. The maintenance of peace and order in this world will require considerably more effort than we have expended in the past.

The values at the heart of liberal democracy will require active defence in the form of a new narrative. The old narrative, which underpinned the consensus politics of the post-War period, has fractured.

This new narrative about liberal democracy must appeal to domestic and international audiences and overcome the challenges from the “politics of grievance”.

The creation of such a narrative should inform grand strategy by answering the questions of what we are defending, why we are doing so and what sort of world order we aim to produce.

It is unreasonable and inappropriate to lay this task at the feet of the armed forces. In a democracy with civilian rule, it should not be their role. It is debatable whether the Integrated Review has suitably answered these first order questions.

The “Global Britain” paper and the Integrated Operating Concept place great store in Grey Zone operations. The IOR even goes as far as identifying the importance of narrative but is unclear about its meaning, seemingly using it synonymously with information operations. But, neither paper truly defines how to understand the concept of the Grey Zone, nor the real meaning of narrative certainly as played out by Russia and China.

This paper has attempted to shed light on the nature of Grey Zone threats.

The most important point is that all three of the major approaches used by Russia and China are fundamentally political rather than direct kinetic challenges.

Russia’s *New Generation Warfare* (which is closest to Western popular notions of hybrid war), *gibridnaya voyna* which is most obviously related to George Kennan’s classic description of political warfare and China’s *Three Warfares* are all ultimately concerned with normative attacks on Western values and interests. Of these, *New Generation Warfare* is the most conventionally warlike, but it is still animated by a profound asymmetry of force by a comparatively weak aggressor.

The UK and US have persisted in thinking about Grey Zone challenges as an amorphous threat, but Grey Zone threats mean different things depending on where they take place. For example, the type of campaign prosecuted against Ukraine is highly unlikely to be replicated against a NATO member where it would have vastly more conventional escalatory implications, a view reflected in Russian military planning. “Russian military strategists distinguish local from regional conflicts. They expect local conflicts to be fought with limited forces and do not anticipate use of nuclear weapons. Regional conflicts are expected to originate either from an escalating local conflict or from a threatening period of rising tensions. And they expect regional conflicts to be fought by two or several states in a region, with national or coalition forces and with the use of conventional or nuclear means of combat. They also identify a third type of conflict: strategic conflict potentially involving large-scale nuclear exchanges. Their thinking about war with NATO fits squarely in the category of a regional war, though with the potential to escalate to the strategic.”⁵⁸

Narrative remains central because control of the escalatory ladder in a regional conflict remains the key to victory by NATO due to the fact that Russia would be relying in large part on the political passivity and slow ability to muster a response by NATO members. Speed of response, a shared political narrative and conventional deterrence all remain effective countermeasures. *New Generation Warfare* will persist but, whilst NATO maintains conventional capabilities and political unity, it represents a greater challenge for those liminal states somewhere on their journey towards liberal democracy but not yet beneficiaries of security alliances.

The challenge for NATO is ensuring it is not in a position where political division can be translated into military advantage by Russia. With the fracturing of the EU, this is becoming an increasing rather than diminishing problem.

First, Britain’s exit from formalised European politics and then the emergence of populist provocateurs in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere are a reminder of the primacy of political cohesion in all security guarantees.

[58] Dave Johnson, ‘Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Threats’, Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 3; Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Center for Global Security Research, February 2018. p. 15.

Both Russia's *gibridnaya voyna* and China's *Three Warfares* present a political challenge which the West has been slow to recognise. As a result, they have largely outsourced thinking about conflict to the military for entirely understandable reasons of historical continuity. Yet, China and Russia have conceptually gone in the opposite direction. They appear to have spent time reading Clausewitz free from a significant translation error that became entrenched in the English language version of 1976. In that canonical work which influenced generations of Atlanticist strategists, Peter Paret and Michael Howard translated Clausewitz as seeing war as "the continuation of policy *by* [emphasis added] other means". The more accurate translation should have been "*with* [emphasis added] other means"⁵⁹ "Pursuing political objectives 'with' other means connotes adding a new implement – namely armed force – to a mix of diplomatic, economic, and informational implements rather than dropping them to pick up the sword. In other words war operates under a

distinctive martial grammar, but the logic of policy remains in charge even after combat is joined. In this Clausewitzian view, strategic competition falls somewhere along a continuum from peacetime diplomacy to high-end armed conflict. The divide between war and peace can get blurry."⁶⁰

Western strategists have been slow to recognise this conceptual inversion of how they have preferred to think about War and Peace as categories, whereas China and Russia's approach to conflict is aimed at achieving strategic aims without war. "This means a shift with a larger focus to the political goal of war rather than its means (the armed violence).

To be clear, this is not to argue that armed force has lost its relevance for Russia today or that nonmilitary means are making military means obsolete."⁶¹ Both Russia and China have ensured they have modernised their armed forces ready to act if such strategies fail and to exploit opportunities for quick wins.

[59] James R. Holmes, 'Everything you Know About Clausewitz Is Wrong', *The Diplomat* (November 12, 2014) <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/everything-you-know-about-clausewitz-is-wrong/>, Accessed: 10 December 2020.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, p. 201.

Western thinkers are in danger of both overstating and mischaracterising the degree and nature of change in warfare. In the case of the West, this has entrenched a belief that the principal threat facing us is technological change, whereas China and Russia have sought to collapse the distinction between domains in their conception of conflict. The West has simply entrenched their domain-centric view and sought to pursue change through the creation of new domains.

Thomas Rid suggests cyber “war” is really “sophisticated versions of three activities that are as old as human conflict itself: sabotage, espionage, and subversion.”⁶²

For example the orchestrated Russian hack of the US Departments of Commerce, Homeland Security, State, Treasury and the Pentagon in December 2020 should be classed as an act of espionage and sabotage within a larger campaign of political warfare.⁶³ Seeing cyber as a disconnected domain of warfare hinders clarity of strategic thought and proposed action.

It is critical to remember that neither Russia nor China is solely pursuing either an entirely conventional or entirely nonconventional path. Both countries are pursuing both strategies. This matters a great deal in highlighting the difference in how the Western allies and their adversaries persist in conceptualising warfare in fundamentally different ways. To paraphrase *Unrestricted Warfare*, individual resources and methods matter far less than their specific *combinations*. In other words, rather than defining new domains and new forms of warfare, the West’s adversaries have sought to use technology to update existing forms of warfare in nimble and ever changeable constellations of attack that target specific areas of their adversaries’ weakness.

[62] Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, P. XIV.

[63] David E. Sanger, Nicole Perloth and Eric Schmitt, ‘Scope of Russian Hack Becomes Clear: Multiple U.S. Agencies Were Hit’, *The New York Times* (December 14, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/14/us/politics/russia-hack-nsa-homeland-security-pentagon.html>, Accessed: December 15 2020.

In the UK, the issue is not that the UK does not conduct information operations or cyber operations. The development of 77th Brigade and the announcement of a new cyber command are strong indicators to the contrary.

The point of this analysis is that Russia and China conceive of warfare in an entirely different fashion.

Both countries have adopted an approach that synchronises their attack packages from the outset rather than a functionally orientated approach. The British Army has made efforts to try and bridge this divide by adopting the concept of “Information Manoeuvre”. The term suffers from a significant lack of conceptual clarity and reflects the huge organisational challenge in actually bridging the divide in order to deliver joined up information and cyber campaigns.

One explanatory paragraph written by the British Army to describe a recent conference on Information Manoeuvre illustrates some of the conceptual problems with how the term is understood.

“Information Manoeuvre involves the use of information in all its forms to understand the operating environment better than anyone else and subsequently to make the most of that advantage. The aim is simultaneously to shape perceptions to ensure the Army’s activities and intentions are appropriately recognised by allies, populations and adversaries. This approach, combined with the fighting skills of ground manoeuvre and air manoeuvre forces, will pre-empt, dislocate and disrupt our opponent; thus delivering effects both physically and virtually.”⁶⁴ So, information in this conception is being used in every possible form, to both understand and influence, offensively and defensively, by every possible audience, to every possible effect, all done simultaneously. This is conceptually disordered and an analytic and operational impossibility. It is also the exact opposite of what both China and Russia attempt with their forms of political operations.

[64] Ministry of Defence, ‘Manoeuvring into the future of Information Manoeuvre’ (10 March 2020), <https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2020/03/manoeuvring-into-the-future-of-information-manoevvre/>, Accessed: 6 December 2020.

Russian strategies in particular do not rely on simply communicating information.

For Russia and China, "it is the development in the information-psychological sphere that provides the key innovation."⁶⁵

This type of warfare is fundamentally concerned with influence. The threat Britain currently faces is not information warfare but rather warfare over narrative – that is, the meaning of information. Narratives do not convey facts, rather they attempt to push a meaning for the facts to an audience. This is a vital distinction. To simply fight disinformation with alternative information or rebuttal is deeply counter-productive. The only real way to prosecute a war concerned with identity and meaning is to provide robust, alternative narratives. The UK needs to attack her adversaries' attempts to project meaning and provide instead alternative narratives. For example, the sophistication of Russian campaigns in the UK has seen her move from simply spreading disinformation to pursuing contradictory messaging on divisive issues such as Brexit.⁶⁶ The net result amplifies a narrative of British disunity.

The point is not simply to provide better data but rather a weaponised narrative that frames events to our advantage. As Russia and China have realised, "Ideas...have no inherent strategy. Ideas alone do not mobilize action – not until they are narrated. Ideas are almost always true or false. Narratives are successful or not, interesting or not, influential or not, but narratives do not rely upon truth-value for their success."⁶⁷

[65] Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, p.203.

[66] Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Russia*, HC 632 (London: The Stationary Office, 21 July 2020).

[67] Ajit Maan, *Narrative Warfare* (Washington, D.C.; Narrative Strategies INC., 2018), pp.15-16.

Conclusion

The Integrated Review has done little to shift the burden for Grey Zone operations away from being predominantly led by the military. This is problematic. As one recent, forlorn critique from within the British Army suggests there are numerous reasons why the military is the wrong organisation to conduct operations which demand a sophisticated narrative response. Their notion “of being both world leading and innovative is not helped by the Army’s language of change which has become increasingly impenetrable. The impact of this baffling language is compounded by ‘military presentism’ and a culture which appears increasingly faddist in its tone. Everything cannot be adaptive, innovative, transformative and modernised...and that’s before we get on to the game changers, wise pivots and moonshots, or the abstract concepts of information advantage, information manoeuvre and prototype warfare. These platitudes of change have become a drop-down selection in our senior leaderships’ speeches, with almost all internal and external communications sprinkled with this language of meaningless nonsense. Why is this an issue? Because we are losing, and in some cases have lost, the ability to communicate our message.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, a military dominated approach to conflict that is increasingly political in nature is inappropriate.

Government recognised this as far back as 2018 with the launch of “Fusion Doctrine” which was intended to “ensure that in defending our national security we make better use of all of our capabilities: from economic levers, through cutting-edge military resources to our wider diplomatic and cultural influence on the world’s stage.

Every part of our government and every one of our agencies has its part to play.”⁶⁹

This paper has explored the effectiveness of Russian and Chinese integration across the civil-military spectrum although both countries mount differently structured Grey Zone operations. Clearly, one of the great weaknesses of the UK’s position is that there is not a whole of government approach. It cannot be the remit of any one particular agency.

[68] James Burton, ‘A Culture of apathy and dishonesty within the British Army’, Wavell Room (December 9 2020), <https://wavellroom.com/2020/12/09/cultural-apaty-and-dishonesty-within-the-british-army-say-do-gap/>, Accessed: December 10, 2020.

[69] HM Government, ‘National Security and Capability Review’(London: The Stationary Office, March 2018), p. 2.

There must be Cabinet level responsibility and direction for mobilising the total resources of the state in a way that can successfully counter the operations of our adversaries.

But, in order to do so successfully, the first order task is to create narratives that reflect our national story of survival and rearticulate the values and benefits of liberal democracy for a new generation.

Russia and China enjoy the advantage of all autocracies, at least in terms of centralisation of the total resources of the state. We know that “Russia intends to fight in higher-intensity conflicts with a “whole of nation” approach. The approach unites government, military and people and was first enacted in the 2009 National Security Strategy and supporting strategic documents, including the updated 2014 military strategy.”⁷⁰

*China is pursuing a national strategy of military-civil fusion or junmin ronghe, that has totally shaped the development of the state and private industry.*⁷¹

This level of state-civil interaction is incompatible with the peace time nature of the state in liberal democracies. But nonetheless, there are lessons to be learnt for government not just to explore fusion within the state but to enhance the way in which it operates with expert private capability. It seems for instance that the armed forces are unable, for institutional reasons, to offer a more dynamic approach to electronic warfare that mirrors the integrated approach of Russia and China.

Traditional electronic warfare and cyber and information operations could be augmented by specialist civilian capability in the field of strategic communications, free from the particularities of military structure.

We know that a great deal of cutting-edge expertise in areas of technological capability exists outside the domain of government. Why, for reasons of bureaucracy, should it be duplicated within government or specifically within the military?

[70] Johnson, ‘Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Threats’, pp. 16-17.

[71] Greg Levesque, ‘Military-Civil Fusion: Beijing’s “Guns AND Butter” Strategy to Become a Technological Superpower’, *China Brief* (Vol. 19, Issue. 18, October 8, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/military-civil-fusion-beijings-guns-and-butter-strategy-to-become-a-technological-superpower/>, Accessed: October 20 2020.

In the case of December's wide scale Russian hacking of US Government agency computers, it was a private company, *FireEye* which detected the breach and alerted intelligence agencies. Indeed part of the response by the Department of Homeland Security was to solicit open-source intelligence.⁷² A change of approach to the scope of civil-military cooperation within the national security establishment is clearly starting to happen but within limited domain confines. It needs to be considerably expanded beyond just cyber specialists.

The struggle with rising challenger states is likely to persist for a considerable period of time and it requires the UK to adopt a long term strategy such as that adopted by China.

Graham Allison used the term the "Thucydides Trap" to describe an apparently innate risk of conflict between the US and China. His suggestion was that the Peloponnesian War had been caused by Sparta's fear of growing Athenian power.⁷³ However, if we read Thucydides not as a

source of iron laws of prediction but instead soak up his observations as narrative, we can draw more useful and less rigid conclusions. Most importantly, that great power competition is a long-haul business with an uneven trajectory.

China appears to already be pursuing a strategy more suitable for long term competition with the US and the stakes of competition have been raised significantly.

Whilst the US was preoccupied with the Presidential election, in August 2020 Xi Jinping launched a new economic strategy known as "dual circulation", a radical shift in how China understands globalisation and her role within it. Where China once saw the possibility of advancement through trade, "dual circulation" is far more pessimistic about an increasingly conflictual relationship with the US. The emphasis of the strategy will be on internal development, harking back to Maoist notions of self-reliance, an effective decoupling from the West. As one analyst suggested "Xi quietly unveiled an economic strategy fit for a new Cold War."⁷⁴

[72] Ellen Nakashima and Craig Timberg, 'DHS, State and NIH join list of federal agencies — now five — hacked in major Russian cyberespionage campaign', *The Washington Post* (December 15, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/dhs-is-third-federal-agency-hacked-in-major-russian-cyberespionage-campaign/2020/12/14/41f8fc98-3e3c-11eb-8bc0-ae155bee4aff_story.html, Accessed: December 15 2020.

[73] Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War – Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (London: Scribe, 2017).

[74] James Crabtree, 'China's Radical New Vision of Globalization', *Noemamag* (December 10 2020), <https://www.noemamag.com/chinas-radical-new-vision-of-globalization/>, Accessed: December 12 2020 ; James Kynge and Jonathan Wheatley, 'China pulls back from the world: Rethinking Xi's "Project of the century"', *Financial Times* (December 11, 2020), <https://www.ft.com/content/d9bd8059-d05c-4e6f-968b-1672241ec1f6>, Accessed: December 11 2020).

The response to this emergent world consisting of more tightly bounded liberal democracy, more defensive yet more resolute China and revanchist Russia, has both strategic and tactical components. David Kilcullen advocates a sensible approach that he calls *Going Byzantine*, “I do not mean the perpetuation of US primacy in its current form (which, by definition, this strategy assumes to be impossible). Rather, I mean setting conditions to preserve peace and prosperity, to ‘assure the survival and the success of liberty,’ even in a world that the West no longer dominates militarily...our best bet is to play for time.”⁷⁵

What this means in practical terms is “broadening the conception of successful strategy beyond battlefield dominance; consciously optimizing for long-duration sustainability; focusing on financial and societal resilience; maintaining a selective edge in certain key technologies; keeping enemies distracted with internal challenges; and turning adversaries against each other.”⁷⁶ In other words Kilcullen is

suggesting selectively copying some of the tactics and strategies of the “dragons” in order to target their vulnerabilities.

Persistent engagement would require a conceptual shift for the UK and US, broadening the conception of battlefield dominance. There are already signs that this type of thought is filtering through in the form of the concept of “strategic raiding”.⁷⁷ The point being that rather than deploying maximal forces overseas, the UK should position smaller, forward deployed teams with a tailored civilian-military mix, fully conversant with the methodology of narrative warfare. “This is an argument for including more civilian, and potentially far less military, capability as part of a policy of persistent forward presence in order to head conflicts off at the source, detect threats ahead of time, contain costs, and thus increase long-term civilizational sustainability.”⁷⁸

[75] Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, p. 237.

[76] *Ibid*, p. 238.

[77] Sidharth Kaushal, ‘Persistent Engagement and Strategic Raiding: Leveraging the UK’s Future Carrier Strike Capability to Effect’, Royal United Services Institute, Occasional Paper, November 2020.

[78] Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes*, p. 248.

In terms of grand strategy, this would look very much like a return to the pursuit of détente in the late 1960s and 1970s. To remind ourselves of the strategic picture at that point “the grand strategic flexibility available to the Cold War great powers had narrowed significantly. Leaders in the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, and even China found themselves frustrated in winning support for their ideologies, frightened by the prospect of nuclear war, worried about the solidity of their alliances – and even about the cohesion of their own societies. The Cold War was now not only a stalemate: it seemed to be diminishing the influence of the states that supposedly dominated it. Détente was a cooperative superpower effort to reverse this trend, but also a competitive superpower attempt to regain the advantage in the Cold War. It was, thus, the first grand strategy to reflect common interests in Washington, Moscow, and the capitals of their respective allies – beyond the obvious desirability of avoiding a nuclear holocaust. But détente was never meant to end the Cold War: instead its

designers sought to set rules for what they all understood would continue to be a contest.”⁷⁹

The most important factor here is “setting rules”. The point about détente was that it was mutual and it set some agreed overarching structure for competition. Persistent engagement without any guiding purpose or limit simply raises too many prospects for uncontrolled escalation.⁸⁰

This means a very different type of world to the one that all of the global players have become used to, not least the US and UK. The nascent Biden doctrine looks like it will rely on a network of strong regional partners to ensure international stability; diminishing US power requires no less. The UK will play an important role in this international system.

However the biggest challenge for the US and UK alike will be the successful rearticulation of their values through a robust narrative that finds appeal both at home and abroad.

[79] John Lewis Gaddis, ‘Grand Strategies in the Cold War’, in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II Crises and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 14.

[80] Lucy Fisher, ‘General Sir Nick Carter warns of Third World War danger’, *The Times* (November 08, 2020),

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/general-sir-nick-carter-warns-of-third-world-war-danger-hb0k9fnsx>, Accessed: November 10 2020.

If the liberal democracies are to compete with their illiberal rivals they must do more than simply counter disinformation. Although this is a necessary component, the success of narratives of national security do not simply hinge on truth and rebuttal. The real fight, as this paper has suggested, is over meaning and identity.

The phrase “Global Britain” does not speak for itself. It requires a narrative that expands, elaborates and convinces both us and others of its significance.

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