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Abstract*: Two different forms of ambiguity have been hallmarks of several major conflicts over the past two decades: tactical and political. These two forms of ambiguity interact differently with strategy. The first interferes with the internal logic of strategy itself, whereas the second inhibits the political choice in favor of practicing strategy, but does not inhibit strategy itself. The strategic response to political ambiguity is military force, which still works in such contexts. Any inhibitions against strategy in a politically ambiguous context are political, rather than strategic. Yet, even political objections can be minimized by relying on the West's own ambiguous forces to respond to a Russian ambiguous invasion.*

Ambiguity has been a hallmark of several major conflicts over the past two decades, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Crimea and the Donbas. This ambiguity has taken two distinct forms. The first, familiar in Western military experience since 2002-2003, is tactical ambiguity, or the inability to identify the enemy clearly and easily on the battlefield. This is insurgency. The second form of ambiguity is more recent, primarily emerging out of Russia and practiced in Crimea in early 2014 and thereafter in the Donbas. In this latter type of ambiguity, the challenge is not a hidden enemy. Instead, the ambiguity is political: to which state (if any) do the attacking forces actually belong? Both forms of ambiguity, each in its own distinct way, seek to attain the pinnacle of strategic performance as enunciated by Edward Luttwak: "*the suspension, if only brief, if only partial, of the entire predicament of strategy,*" that predicament being the reciprocal, adversarial application of military force.[1]

Since early 2014, and the annexation of Crimea, Western strategists have discussed hotly Russia's actions and variously labeled them non-linear, new generation, full-spectrum, gray zone, etc.—but mostly hybrid. Much of the commentary has focused on the details, often with an overriding emphasis on the non-military aspects. Thus, the NATO Defence College has published on civilian resilience as a vital aspect

[1] Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University 2001), p. 4.

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of the answer to hybrid warfare, not just in support of military operations, but as a key element in the deterrence of Russia in and of itself.[2] The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) similarly has published two major volumes on Russian influence in Europe; their focus was naturally on the non-military and especially the financial elements, with policy recommendations specifically for inoculating the West against this sort of malign influence.[3] Broadly speaking,

> "The literature confirms that hybrid warfare is the synchronized application of political, economic, informational, cyber electromagnetic activities (CEMA) and military effort, for strategic objectives, that minimizes the risks that accompany conventional war. It follows that countering these techniques must also either embrace a full-spectrum set of responses or be so effective and overwhelming in one particular sphere that hybrid methods are abandoned by an enemy as ineffective or inefficient.[4]

The working assumption is that the West needs to be able to counter Russia along that full spectrum.

This idea is fed by the West's misunderstanding of Russian strategic thought, that the Russians conduct hybrid warfare, sometimes known as new generation warfare, as if those two concepts are synonymous. In actuality, they are wholly distinct concepts in Russia.

> New-generation warfare is not necessarily about non-military means and methods, but rather about the complex employment of armed forces, which is supported by indirect, non-military actions that 'create chaos and uncontrollability, demoralizing people and the personnel of the defending military,' thereby offering the aggressor an opportunity 'to achieve the desired military-political and economic aims of a military campaign in a very short period of time and without significant casualties.'[5]

The standard Western interpretation of Russian new generation warfare, which tends to emphasize Russia's non-military means rather than the basic importance of military force, would not be recognizable to the Russians themselves. By contrast, the Russian concept of *gibridnaya voyna* (which is not the Western concept of hybrid warfare) "is solely based on non-military means and is intended to undermine and subvert an

[2] Guillaume Lasconjarias, "Deterrence through Resilience: NATO, the Nations and the Challenges of Being Prepared," NATO Defence College Eisenhower Paper 7 (May 2017); see, also, Uwe Hartmann, "The Evolution of the Hybrid Threat, and Resilience as a Countermeasure," NATO Defence College Research Paper 139 (Sept. 2017).
[3] Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS 2016); and Heather A. Conley, Donatienne Ruy, Ruslav Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS 2019).
[4] Robert Johnston, "Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature," *Small Wars & Insurgencies,* vol. 29, no. 1 (2018), p. 158.
[5] Ofer Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicisation* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), pp. 141-142.

adversary without recourse to military force."[6] It was new generation warfare, not *gibridnaya voyna*, which Russia practiced in Crimea and the Donbas. Important though it is to be able to mitigate the threat of *gibridnaya voyna* through comparably civilian measures, it is similarly vital to recognize how the introduction of military force changes everything, including what the appropriate response is, even in the context of the continued adversarial use of other, non-military instruments.

This article addresses military force as the strategically appropriate, yet politically contingent, response to political ambiguity, the second form of ambiguity and the one that the West has been focusing on since 2014 through its discussions of hybrid, gray zone, etc. warfare. *First,* the article examines the core logics of strategy—adversarial and instrumental—and how both types of ambiguity relate to both logics. *Second*, it considers how political ambiguity is created, i.e., by what means and against which targets; and *third*, it delves into the specific relationship between political ambiguity and the practice of strategy as such. It then concludes with the political aspects of the strategic response, as it is in policy and politics rather than in strategy that the most important questions lie.

The Two Logics of Strategy: Distinguishing Two Types of Ambiguity

The West has faced two forms of ambiguity in war: the first is tactical and the second is political. Each relates to and interacts differently with the logic of strategy as classically understood. To determine how these interactions differ, one must first understand strategy's salient points.

First, strategy is adversarial: there is an independent and proactive enemy whose actions must be controlled, upon whom the strategist must impose his will. The enemy himself is seeking to do the same against his opposite party. This relationship is mutual. Without an adversary, strategy fundamentally does not exist (although its practice could be planned for or built upon pre-war preparation and subversion). Any political relationship is inherently malleable and may range from alliance ties, to unremarkable co-existence, to rivalry, competition, and perhaps even conflict. Adversariality represents—and is comprised of—outright hostility and belligerency, political attitudes which can only be conveyed effectively through the reciprocal use of military force, however well-supported by other instruments that force may be. The most obvious and often the most important manifestation of this adversariality is through engagement between the armed forces of the opposing sides—i.e., combat. Military means employed through combat are the primary means in war because only they offer the opportunity to break the adversarial will of the enemy. Adversarial emphasis on success in battle potentially may lead to an escalatory dynamic in war as each adversary seeks to outfight the other.

Second, strategy is instrumental, as are all forms of political activity. Military power in its various forms is used to limit the enemy's freedom of action with the aim of imposing control on the mutual interaction between adversaries. Military power

[6] Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare,'* p. 155.

differs from non-military power as an instrument because it is the definitive model of hard power, even though within generic military power the various forms of power—land, sea, air, etc.—vary in their strategic utility given specific contexts. The introduction of military power into a political relationship previously defined by non-military power drastically alters the relationship, primarily because the main interaction now becomes combat. This is not to say that non-military means are then useless, only that their utility is conditioned substantially by the new adversarial environment. Instrumentality and adversariality are mutually reinforcing: a relationship turns adversarial when reciprocal decisions are made to employ military force, and those decisions typically are made as the relationship grows increasingly adversarial.

The two logics of instrumentality and adversariality interact to produce a non-linear environment. The strategist may predict certain broad effects, but only if the strategy works and military operations succeed—if not, then those anticipated effects are unlikely to occur. Yet, even these expected effects are limited to the basic ebb and flow of adversarial interaction and fall short of the true political consequence for which armed force is employed and which rarely can be a certain outcome.

The choice to resort to military force (and thereby to practice strategy) is not in itself a strategic choice. The strategist cannot make this decision. It is first and foremost a political choice, albeit one informed by strategy and strategists. This choice is both a reflection of, and a judgment about, a political relationship among the involved actors, perhaps soon to be belligerents. This initial decision is the key which either engages the first two features of strategy or does not. Although a defining element of strategy, it is related less to the function and functioning of strategy than to its limits as a concept and as practice. Having understood these three logics of strategy—adversariality, instrumentality, and strategy's existential dependence upon politics—one may then begin to understand how the two types of ambiguity affect strategy.

The first form of ambiguity, tactical ambiguity or the inability to identify the insurgent opponent within the battlespace itself, directly interferes with the internal character of strategy, i.e., the dual logics of adversariality and instrumentality. Without successful identification, mutual contact between enemies cannot exist. Rather, the contact runs only one way, to the insurgent's advantage and the counterinsurgent's disadvantage. Without reliable adversarial contact—that is, without actually being able to find the enemy to engage him—strategy is altogether a nonstarter. "The soldier makes contact when the war starts, and he makes every effort to maintain contact until the war is over. The soldier who has lost contact with his enemy is in a bad way."[7] Without reliable adversarial contact, military power cannot be applied and in no way can some measure of control be imposed upon the enemy. The logic of instrumentality within strategy collapses because it relies upon engagement with the enemy for the manifestation of adversariality. Thus, counterinsurgency is a conflict for actionable

[7] J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 1989), p. 44.

information to be used to identify and then neutralize the enemy.[8] Actionable information restores the logic of instrumentality by re-enabling the element of adversarial contact upon which so much of strategy rests. The insurgent, by contrast, needs to deny the counterinsurgent that information through military as well as non-military means. Yet, to break the counterinsurgent's will to continue still requires combat. The counterinsurgent is exhausted by continuous disadvantageous combat, not the commitment as such.

The second form of ambiguity, political ambiguity, differs greatly because it does not actually hinder internal strategic logic—adversariality and instrumentality—at all; this is not its purpose. Rather, its purpose is to cast doubt upon strategy as a viable policy option in response to ostensibly ambiguous circumstances. Practicing strategy is a political choice; muddling the situational politics may therefore delay or even prevent making that political choice.

On Political Ambiguity

One must understand the instruments used to create political ambiguity in order to see how it affects the employment of force and the initiation of strategy. These are the issues, the information aspect of so-called hybrid warfare, which have garnered the most attention in the West since early 2014, primarily because they have also played a considerable role in other pivotal political moments in the West, such as the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where among other achievements the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) hacked the Democratic National Committee servers and subsequently leaked damaging information.

As early as April 2014, Latvian defense analyst Jānis Bērziņš had identified eight phases of Russian new-generation warfare, as discussed in 2013 by the Russian strategic theorists Reserve Colonel S.G. Tchekinov and retired Lt. General S.A. Bogdanov. The first four focused on non-military power and the last four on military power. The first four create political ambiguity by

> 1) "non-military asymmetric warfare (encompassing information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic, and economic measures";
> 2) "special operations to mislead political and military leaders by coordinated measures carried out by diplomatic channels, media, and top government and military agencies by leaking false data, orders, directives, and instructions";
> 3) "intimidation, deceiving and bribing government and military officers, with the objective of making them abandon their service duties"; and

[8] For the latest scholarship on this tactical problem, see, Eli Berman, Joseph H. Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro, *Small Wars, Big Data: The Information Revolution in Modern Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

> 4) "destabilizing propaganda to increase discontent among the population, boosted by the arrival of Russian bands of militants, escalating subversion."[9]

The West in general and its media organizations in particular were woefully unprepared for the informational challenge: "The result was an initial startling success for the Russian approach—exemplified in Crimea, where reports from journalists on the scene identifying Russian troops did not reach mainstream audiences because editors in their newsrooms were baffled by the inexplicable Russian denials."[10] This inability to label an occurrence for what it truly was and to identify the actor which was actually conducting it mattered politically. "The fact that the EU continued to find itself unable to refer publicly to the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine for almost a year denoted a broader inability to challenge the Russian version of events—without which a meaningful response was impossible."[11] The impact of these non-military means in Russian strategy is not strategic but political because the choice to practice strategy is not strategic but political.

Such information operations comprise what the Russians call reflexive control, which is "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action."[12] It is a concept that the Russians can apply equally well against tacticians as against strategists and even policymakers. Moreover, it is a concept with which the West is largely unfamiliar, despite having been in development in Russia since the 1970s, even pre-dating notions of information warfare or information operations. Politics- and policy-relevant attempts at reflexive control comprise *gibridnaya voyna* and the elements of new generation warfare upon which the West has been focusing.

This informational subversion was further reinforced by the lack of identifying marks on the soldiers who were occupying governmental buildings or encircling Ukrainian army bases in Crimea, leading to the moniker "little green men." The events which occurred in Crimea were clearly based upon the utility of armed force in combat, even though hardly a bullet was fired during the whole campaign. Without the little green men imposing control on the situation—and especially on the freedom of action of the Ukrainian army, on the government institutions, and on logistical nodes in Crimea—through the threat of real violence, all the disinformation campaigns Russia could possibly produce could not have led to the Russian annexation of Crimea.

[9] Jānis Bērziņš, "Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy," National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research *Policy Paper* 2 (April 2014), p. 6.
[10] Keir Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power," Royal Institute of International Affairs Report, May 2016, p. 31.
[11] Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West."
[12] Timothy Thomas, "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* vol. 17, no. 2 (2004), p. 237.

With such rhetorical and visual disinformation campaigns, Russia sought to provoke a non-response among Western decision makers. Thus, unable to challenge publicly the Russian narrative, the West could not, and did not, practice the politics of sanctions, let alone strategy—at least until Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down on July 17, 2014. That tragedy opened up the political space for a unified reaction and the imposing of sanctions. The resort to strategy and the use of military force, being a political choice, could not be sustained within the information and media environment which Russia successfully exploited.

Political Ambiguity and Strategy

Yet, the issue of political ambiguity does not actually impede strategy itself once it has been chosen, even when the inability to choose to practice strategy is crippling. As scholar Andrew Monaghan has noted, "Western emphasis from 2014 to 2015 has been on the *hybrid* aspect of warfare, and now that emphasis needs to shift quickly to focus on *warfare*." Further, "the hybrid label serves to draw a veil over the conventional aspects of the war in Eastern Ukraine. While non-military means of power were deployed, they relied on more traditional conventional measures for their success."[13] Once the political ambiguity is stripped away, the actual conduct of Russian and pro-Russian forces in Ukraine is perfectly recognizable to any military professional, although some of its elements may be concerning to reciprocal U.S. military performance and effectiveness, such as Russian skill in electronic warfare.

According to Bērziņš, the last four phases of Russian new generation warfare emphasize the use of force:

> 5) "establishment of no-fly zones over the country to be attacked, imposition of blockades, and extensive use of private military companies in close cooperation with armed opposition units";
> 6) "commencement of military action, preceded by large-scale reconnaissance and subversive missions";
> 7) a "combination of targeted information operation, electronic warfare operation, aerospace operation, continuous air force harassment, combined with the use of high-precision weapons launched from various platforms"; and
> 8) "roll over the remaining points of resistance and destroy surviving enemy units."[14]

The overt Russian presence is minimized in favor of mercenaries, special operations forces, and long-range fire support from artillery, rockets, and air power. The resultant

[13] Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare,'" *Parameters*, vol. 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015-16), pp. 66, 68.
[14] Bērziņš, "Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy," p. 6.

activities comprise military coercion at the very least and outright warfare if the targeted country fights back. Without such coercion, no territorial change is possible, no matter how thoroughly the local government, the police, etc., are subverted. Moreover, these steps are fundamentally military and so can be countered by the reciprocal use of military force and, ultimately, combat as necessary.

This coercion was obscured by the events in Crimea, as during that time the West was focused more on the non-military aspects of Russia's invasion and the fact that it was happening at all, rather than on Russia's use of hard power, which enabled final Russian success on the peninsula. After all, it was the first time that the West as a whole had been subjected to such a coordinated disinformation campaign. Moreover, conditions in Crimea were ideal for Russia: Russia already had forces on the spot in its Black Sea Fleet facilities; Ukrainian soldiers in the area provided technical and logistical support, and were not frontline troops; both the local population and local powerbrokers were sympathetic to Russia, with the latter willing to deliver Crimea to Moscow; and many of the power structures, whether army, police, or government, had already been suborned by the Russians. "They precluded the need to destabilise the target before intervention, allowed Russia to wage a pre-emptive information war to establish grounds for its mission, and allowed it to use its troops to assert and maintain a near-bloodless *fait accompli* with, if not deniability, at least a degree of ambiguity."[15] Compared to the novelty of the disinformation and subversion campaigns, the use of armed force—but ultimately not armed violence—has seemed unimportant by comparison, especially since that time, Russian disinformation has relentlessly continued, in a diffuse manner, to assault Western media and its credibility.

The actual conduct of Russia's military operation in Crimea was exemplary. Prussian General Helmuth von Moltke the Elder would probably have praised vital elements of Russia's operation, notwithstanding the element of political ambiguity which he would not have recognized. Moltke wrote that "the tactical defense is the stronger, the strategic offensive the more effective form—and the only one that leads to the goal."[16] This is exactly how Russia operated in Crimea: it was a strategic offensive, as Russia invaded Ukrainian territory, but once there, their tactics were defensive. Political ambiguity allowed Russian forces, disguised as Crimean militia, to take over unopposed vital points such as the airport and the main television station, as well as government buildings. Military points were mostly besieged rather than occupied outright, excepting certain key locations such as command and control points and air defense units which might have conceivably interfered with Russian reinforcement flights.[17] The political ambiguity allowed the Russians to achieve these gains without bloodshed, after which they sat on the defensive. Therefore, the political

[15] Mark Galeotti, "'Hybrid War' and 'Little Green Men': How It Works and How It Doesn't" in Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, eds, *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015), p. 160.
[16] Daniel Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novata: Presidio Press, 1993), p. 68.
[17] For an overview of Russia's military operation, see, Charles K. Bartles & Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Military Operation in Crimea," *Problems of Post-Communism,* vol. 61, no. 6 (2014), pp. 55-63.

onus of breaking the peace, such as it was, and starting any bloodshed suddenly weighed upon Kiev rather than Moscow. Kiev chose (and was advised) not to make that decision, which ultimately resulted in the Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent focus of scholarly and policy attention on the "'hybrid" aspect of Russia's strategy, rather than the "warfare" part, which was the vital enabler for the final outcome.

The purpose for which one practices strategy then is vital in determining the character of the strategy to be pursued. Russia's goals in Crimea and the Donbas required the public and overt display and employment of power. One cannot create a proxy state through tactical ambiguity and insurgency; that is how a state's power is challenged, not created. Mao Zedong, with his own experience of successfully practicing insurgency, recognized this in his three stages of guerrilla warfare, which culminated in overt military power and warfare. The exercise of the responsibilities of governance must be overt for government to exist, which in turn must be sustained by overt power. In war, where an overt target exists, reliable adversarial contact is possible and so strategy can be practiced in a manner recognizable to even the most conventionally minded observers. As long as the political objective can be defined in terms of territorial change, overt power must ultimately be present as the representation of authority. Unlike the tactically ambiguous, the politically ambiguous require contact with their enemy because that is the only way to take control of the environment. Thus, Russia actively sought out contact in both Crimea and the Donbas, as it was necessary to conquer the former and separate the latter from Ukraine. This is why political ambiguity is so important for Russian hybrid warfare; it is the only shield which forestalls adversarial engagement between belligerents and so gives Russia a temporary tactical and strategic advantage to effect its desired changes in the victim country. It was, as Mark Galeotti, Honorary Professor at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, put it, guerrilla geopolitics.

Thus, an important feature which emerges out of the Crimean (as well as Donbas) experience is that the two ambiguities—tactical and political, at least for the purposes for which Russia has practiced the latter—are apparently incompatible. Russia's geopolitical goals in both Crimea and the Donbas included changing the political authority in those places. In Crimea, it was a forcible transfer of direct authority to Russia and in the Donbas to Russian proxy states, which successfully occurred regardless of whether or not Russian ambitions in eastern Ukraine were fully satisfied.

Political ambiguity succeeded in Crimea because it was the first time this method had been employed on such a scale in the post-Cold War era. Everyone was caught off-guard. The war in the Donbas, by contrast, occurred because Ukraine recognized its fundamental mistake in Crimea and reacted appropriately, with the use of armed force to forestall the Russian military in eastern Ukraine. Political ambiguity failed because it was no longer a surprise. Everyone knew who was behind it, even though Western media still found it difficult to say openly, and everyone knew to what outcome it would lead if successful.

Thus, the story differed between Crimea and the Donbas, where pro-Russian militants and Russian proxies began attacking and overwhelming key locations on April 12, 2014. Ukraine's ultimate response came three days later, when its anti-terrorist operation began and made a difference, for a number of reasons. First, Russia's proxies found that they were not as popular as they had supposed. This mattered for their ability to combat the Ukrainian offensive: "As early as 18 May the leader of the fighters, Igor Girkin, appealed to the 'citizens of the People's Republic' in desperation, complaining of an acute shortage of military manpower and calling on men and women to join his troops."[18] Moreover, the quality of the pro-Russian fighters was not particularly high. Finally, the Ukrainians themselves grew increasingly proficient at military operations and by late May began scoring notable successes, including the recapture of Donetsk airport. Ukrainian tactical and strategic performance appeared increasingly sufficient to defeat the pro-Russian forces. This situation ultimately elicited a nearly overt Russian intervention in August which prompted a series of major Ukrainian defeats—including at Debalt'seve in February 2015. The war eventually settled into a stalemate as neither side appeared willing or able to bear the cost of escalation sufficient to impose its will upon the enemy. An overt Ukrainian offensive nearly defeated Russia's proxies, which were only saved by an infusion of Russian military power into their own overt defense.

Consequently, in the Donbas, Russia's "hybrid warfare" was more warfare than hybrid: "Far from the eye of the casual observer or mainstream-media outlets are battlefields more reminiscent to those of World War I than what one would expect to find in the 21st Century."[19] The war has been characterized by artillery barrages, tanks, and both urban and trench warfare. The Donbas became such a battlefield because Ukraine responded to force with force. Defense analyst and President of the Potomac Foundation Phillip Karber, who has visited Ukraine over thirty times since early 2014, agrees that the conflict, especially in its early stages, has recognizably constituted war: "One of the distinguishing characteristics of a major war, as opposed to low-intensity operations, is the phenomenon of major combat where each side concentrates forces and effort in achieving a decisive result. . . . And there have been a number of these in the Russo-Ukrainian War."[20] The Donbas was the theater of real war and warfare in 2014-2015, and is currently scarred by an unquiet stalemate between armed forces capable of fighting.

Ultimately, Ukrainian tactical and strategic performance has not been strong enough to win, especially after Russia seriously involved itself. However, the status quo established since the Minsk protocols has been sufficiently amenable to maintain it rather than to gamble and try to escalate. The result is an uneasy, often broken, stalemate between recognizable armed forces. There is nothing new about Russia's

[18] Nikolay Mitrokhin in Nicki Challinger, tr., "Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2015), p. 232.
[19] Amos C. Fox, "Battle of Debal'tseve: The Conventional Line of Effort in Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine," *Armor,* vol. 128, no. 1 (Winter 2017), p. 45.
[20] Phillip A. Karber, "'Lessons Learned' from the Russo-Ukrainian War [Draft]," Potomac Foundation Report, Sept. 29, 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/_Karber_RUS-UKR_War_Lessons_Learned.

new generation warfare—it is overt warfare. "For example, an analysis of Chekinov and Bogdanov's famous 'The Nature and the Content of the New-Generation War,' clearly shows the author's focus on the importance of military means and methods in contemporary conflicts. Although they do indeed claim that non-military actions will be an integral part of new-generation warfare in 'assisting to weaken and eliminate military threats,' they consistently argue that, without the employment of armed forces, 'the achievement of the new-generation war aims will be impossible.'"[21] The military effort is the center of gravity of new generation warfare.

Other concerned parties also have recognized the appropriateness of Ukraine's armed response, given the desired goal of maintaining territorial integrity. Thus, Latvian President Raimonds Vējonis, in his previous position as Minister of Defense, once starkly enunciated Latvia's attitude toward ambiguous forces, "the little green men, we will shoot them." The most important point is not determining the character of the response as either military or not, but rather its quality—that the response must be military is taken for granted by those on the frontlines.

Political Aspects of Any Strategic Response

Although political ambiguity does not interfere with the internal logic of strategy or the utility of force, to do so is obviously not its purpose. Since the recourse to strategy and military force is a political choice, one must also consider the politics of strategy in the context of political ambiguity, as practiced by Russia. That is, what might be Russia's response to such a choice to resort to force?

From the Donbas experience, it should be clear that a military response does not necessarily result in overt Russian military escalation. In other words, over its opponent's military response alone, Russia has thus far not been willing to commit openly its military forces: "Despite its regular exposure, [non-involvement] is a fiction that the Russian authorities have been desperate to maintain."[22] The reasons for this posture undoubtedly lie less in the international arenas than in the domestic ones, where any mention of Russia's direct involvement, especially regarding casualties, has been frowned upon or even prohibited. As long as Moscow's leadership is more concerned about maintaining its fictive ambiguity than with the complete imposition of its will upon Ukraine, the likelihood of overt military escalation seems slim. This reality would be just as true elsewhere and, in a hypothetical conflict situation with any neighboring NATO country, the prospect of the besieged country invoking Article 5 must weigh heavily on Russian strategists.

Political ambiguity also suggests another conclusion, specifically about the forces used, whether in Crimea or in the Donbas: that these forces are disposable. Russia has consistently denied that the forces involved are its own, as it did in Crimea until after annexation and continues to do in the Donbas. This pattern of behavior

[21] Fridman, *Russian "Hybrid Warfare,"* p. 141.
[22] Lawrence Freedman, "Ukraine and the Art of Exhaustion," *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 5 (2015), p. 88.

extends also to disavowing Russian prisoners taken by Ukraine. Apparently, Russia has no interest in truly overt—that is, overt even to the domestic Russian public—military action. Thus, if there *had* been a military response in Crimea, as there was in the Donbas, Russia had already provided its avenue of escape from true overt military commitment: previously expressed deniability. When Ukraine retaliated militarily in the Donbas, Russia stood by and only intervened in August 2014 when total defeat of its proxies seemed imminent. Even that intervention was denied by Moscow despite the complete implausibility of the claim.

Another, more recent, example of the disposable nature of ambiguously Russian forces stems from an early February 2018 incident near Deir ez-Zor in Syria. There, Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC), attacked a U.S. military post and suffered at least two hundred casualties. This incident is an important one because the Wagner Group is a special PMC with very close ties to the Russian state.

> Wagner differs from traditional Western PMCs and of [sic] their Russian equivalents in a few factors. First and foremost, the company has very close relationship with the GRU, including frequent exchanges of personnel, a shared training facility in Molkino (Krasnodar Region) and the past of their founder, Dmitry Utkin, who himself served in a GRU unit before he established Wagner. Second, unlike Western PMCs, Wagner has no known normal commercial clients, except for a number of Russian energy companies with strong links to the state and oligarchs. Third, while also Western PMCs are capable of conducting high-intensity operations, in Wagner's case this seems to be the main profile of the company. Moreover, Wagner operatives are known to employ tanks, armored personnel carriers and even heavy artillery, that is highly unusual for other PMCs. Fourth, Wagner apparently enjoys strong state support from Russia, unlike other PMCs. In addition to their GRU-links, another indicator is that after the company suffered severe losses from a U.S. airstrike at Deir ez-Zor in Syria in February 2018, wounded Wagner operatives were transported to Russia on Russian military airplanes and received treatment in military hospitals. Fifth, as the fighting in Syria demonstrated (for example, the battle for Palmyra), Wagner has modern, well-functioning command and control structures, which also permit close cooperation with Russian regular forces.[23]

Yet, despite such close links between the Wagner Group and the Russian government, Moscow's response to the defeat at Deir ez-Zor was tepid at best. In fact, its initial reaction was to deny the involvement—and deaths—of any Russians. The United States' diplomatic restraint regarding this incident also may have played a role in Russia's lack of response. Nonetheless, whereas one might only speculate on the disposability of ambiguous forces from Crimea and, to a lesser extent, the Donbas, the

[23] András Rácz, "The Role of Military Power in Russia's New Generation Warfare Arsenal in Ukraine and Beyond" in Andris Sprūds and Māris Andžāns, eds., *Security of the Baltic Sea Region Revisited amid the Baltic Centenary* (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2018), pp. 142-143.

Deir ez-Zor incident suggests that such forces may indeed be disposable, at least in certain circumstances.

Nonetheless, the choice to employ military force and practice strategy in response to an ambiguous invasion remains a weighty political decision because this possibility of disposability may not necessarily hold in a more apparently urgent context. At best, the decision is bound to result in the deaths of soldiers, from Russia and NATO. At worst, the political calculations about the imperative of Russia's fictions in the specific context and the disposability of its committed unmarked forces may not be accurate and could result in the outbreak of a new great power war in Europe. Regardless of the unique suitability of military force to fight new generation warfare, it is the politics which must rule—and it may be determined that surrendering something is more politically acceptable than a minor war which may risk major escalation.

Yet, the picture is not totally bleak, since it assumes a public, overt response. One notable aspect of the Russian hybrid warfare debate is the unstated assumption that the Russians, and perhaps others who challenge the West, own political ambiguity. It is theirs to employ as a weapon as they desire, and it is a problem only for the West. This is inaccurate. One may rightly question: what on earth are special operations forces *for*, if not to operate in ambiguous and deniable situations? No comprehensive theory of special operations exists, although not for lack of trying. Nonetheless, it is clear that special operations forces are special: they perform special tasks, beyond the bounds of regular military operations.[24] Although specialness may encompass many dimensions, in the context of political ambiguity and Russian "hybrid warfare," specialness primarily relates to the situational politics.

Covert actions, to which special operations can contribute, are traditionally believed to hinge on plausible deniability, a concept developed during the Cold War. Yet even during the Cold War, this notion of plausible deniability never aligned with reality. "[M]any covert actions are an open secret: implausibly deniable." Implausible deniability or ambiguity is not a new aspect of political ambiguity. Rather, it has simply been romanticized by observers and practitioners, both at the time and later, into becoming something more than it was: plausible rather than implausible. The distinction between plausible and implausible deniability has been, at least during the Cold War, less important to real world decision making than it might seem from an academic perspective. "Implausible deniability—or open secrecy—prevented escalation during the Cold War: parties had a shared interest in maintaining the fiction of secrecy in order to avoid pressure to escalate. Such 'tacit collusion' managed risk and offered a way out of tense situations."[25] As long as the veneer of deniability or ambiguity existed, it offered the other party an opportunity to avoid escalation without

[24] Tom Searle, *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations* (MacDill Air Force Base: Joint Special Operations University, 2017), p. 14.
[25] Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, "Grey is the new black: covert action and implausible deniability," *International Affairs,* vol. 94, no. 3 (2018).

losing prestige or honor among allies, neutral observers, or its own public for having backed down from a rival's aggression.

Deniability and ambiguity, even when implausible, are meant to lower the potential costs of, and responses to, an intervention. This is just as true for an ostensibly ambiguous Western intervention by special operations forces as for an ostensibly ambiguous Russian invasion. The Russians have been keen to keep their own activities as far from the public eye, especially the domestic Russian public eye, as possible. An overt Western military challenge, which might demand an overt Russian response, is politically more dangerous than an intervention by special operations forces which is equally as deniable as any Russian action in the theater of war. The West can and may also operate with ambiguity, plausible or otherwise.

What would be the specific purpose of any special operation in such a context? Given the significant number of combatants that the separatists, thugs, and mercenaries were able to mobilize in the Donbas even before August 2014, special operations forces would be unable to defeat the enemy militarily. Indeed, to try to do so would likely lead to a waste of those forces which would engage far larger, if qualitatively far inferior, enemy forces. Special operations must be tailored for each individual circumstance. One might see their role as supporting and increasing the effectiveness of the target country's military, as when special operations forces supported the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in 2001—an option foregone during the height of the war in the Donbas. Most likely limited to the earlier stages of any Russian ambiguous invasion, special forces' scope for independent action could disrupt Russia's proxies by preventing or reversing the occupation of key positions or by eliminating key figures, before Russia's proxies might really get the ball rolling.

Conclusion

The strategic response to political ambiguity may be overt or, convincing or not, covert—but it must be a military one. Without a successful military element, a non-military instrument will be unable to affect the situation because the adversary will be in control of the actual environment, the cities and the people, in dispute. Any military response depends upon politicians being ready to make the decision to employ force and thereby practice strategy against the invader. No response short of military force can possibly work against a real invasion cloaked by political ambiguity, regardless of how implausible the latter appears to an external observer. The most vital aspect of that combination remains the invasion itself, rather than its implausible cover.

This conclusion in favor of force does not minimize the importance of Russian subversion or provocation, whether in the lead up to armed invasion or as a standalone instrument of policy, nor of the need to better defend oneself against foreign subversion through non-military means. One need only consider the recent state of American politics and U.S. foreign policy to recognize that subversion alone can have enormous geopolitical repercussions without needing to introduce military force into the circumstances at all.

Nonetheless, Russia's policy in its near abroad since the collapse of the Soviet Union has repeatedly emphasized the creation of breakaway regions to benefit Russian policy—Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and most

recently the Donbas, along with the outright annexation of Crimea. These are all territorially defined results, which ultimately require the use of overt armed force to effect and to maintain, regardless of the mass subversion campaigns to weaken the victim state which often precede military action. If Russia in the future seeks to repeat the process elsewhere, the appropriate strategic response is to fight back—as long as, and only if, the politics of strategy is aligned with this response.