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The Blurring of War and Peace

Elie Perot

A recurring debate in international politics centres on the distinction between peace and war. In recent years, this debate has resurfaced as a result of several developments, such as the Ukraine crisis and Chinese maritime activities in the South China Sea, which seem to blur the distinction. The Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union made it clear that international relations could not be seen only through the lens of clearly separable cycles of peace and war. But the growing attention to the post-Cold War phenomenon of 'hybrid warfare' suggests that the line between peace and war simply cannot be drawn. This means that what constitutes war is destined to remain a contentious political matter. Yet it may be salutary that the contemporary strategic impulse to exploit this indeterminacy comes from the persistent fear of a general war, as it did during the Cold War. How this fear will evolve is key to envisioning the future of world politics and, in particular, its central uncertainty: whether the United States and China will go to war.

The present debate

Is a new cold war unfolding?[1] Many events have prompted this question: Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula with the help of 'little green men' (that is, troops without regular uniforms) and its support for armed insurgents in eastern Ukraine; Beijing's construction of artificial islands in

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the South China Sea; acts of political subversion such as the alleged Russian interference in the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election; and waves of cyber attacks. The terms encompassing these phenomena include hybrid warfare, 'grey-zone conflict' and 'measures short of war'.[2]

The general idea also pervades major Western policy documents. The most recent NATO summit declaration notes that 'Our nations have come under increasing challenge from both state and non-state actors who use hybrid activities that aim to create ambiguity and blur the lines between peace, crisis, and conflict.'[3] The latest US National Security Strategy asserts that on the global stage, 'China, Russia and other state and non-state actors recognize that the United States often views the world in binary terms, with states being either "at peace" or "at war" when it is actually an arena of continuous competition.'[4] In the same vein, the French Strategic Review ordered at the beginning of President Emmanuel Macron's term recognises that 'The new domains of confrontation (cyberspace and outer space) and the vastly expanded scope for action in the information field (internet, social media and digital propaganda) enable remote action, unconstrained by boundaries between states' "inside" and "outside" or by the usual distinction between peace, crisis, and war times.'[5] Germany's 2016 White Paper on security more specifically points to the role of Moscow in the perceived dissolution of the boundaries between war and peace: 'By increasingly using hybrid instruments to purposefully blur the borders between war and peace, Russia is creating uncertainty about the nature of its intentions.'[6]

The German White Paper hints at the strategic consequences flowing from this situation: 'The distinguishing feature of hybrid warfare, namely a blurring of the lines between war and peace, presents particular challenges when it comes to invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.'[7] Under Article V, allies have a duty to help each other when one or several of them come under armed attack – that is, when an adversary crosses the threshold of war against one of them. Such an adversary may deliberately mount an ambiguous challenge in order to blur this red line and thus hinder collective decision-making in the Alliance – an eventuality that has generated considerable anxiety among NATO countries since the Ukraine crisis. Rising concerns about the development of cyber warfare, the increasing role

of non-state actors and the aggressive use of political subversion revolves around the obscuring of the distinction between peace and war in a time of intensifying geopolitical rivalries and manoeuvres that have not yet resulted in large-scale violence.

Cold War redux?

The challenge of demarcating peace and war preoccupied strategic thinkers and policymakers at the beginning of the Cold War. Indeed, it gave birth to the expression 'Cold War' in the first place. George Orwell originally used the expression in his famous essay 'You and the Atomic Bomb', published in October 1945, as a way to describe the prospect that among great powers there may be 'a peace that is no peace'.[8] Great powers would remain deeply hostile to each other but would no longer give expression to their hostility through the exercise of large-scale violence in light of the enormous destructive power of nuclear weapons. But if engaging in global wars like those in the first half of the twentieth century was now prohibited, geopolitical rivalries could still plague international relations. Indeed, a 'bellicose peace' between the United States and the Soviet Union took shape that made 'peace impossible' but 'war improbable', as Raymond Aron observed in 1948.[9]

That same year, American diplomat George F. Kennan grappled with the more practical consequences of such a complex situation. He admonished his superiors in the US government to think beyond the outmoded categories of peace and war in order to cope with the looming Soviet challenge. 'We have been handicapped', he noted, 'by a popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between peace and war, by a tendency to view war as a sort of sporting context outside of all political context, by a national tendency to seek for a political cure-all, and by a reluctance to recognise the realities of international relations.' There was a 'perpetual rhythm' of struggle, in and out of war.[10] To beat the Soviets without resorting to open warfare, Kennan asserted that the United States had to understand the existing continuum between war and peace, and refrain from trying to maintain a watertight separation between the two. Confrontation had to continue even in peacetime, and this required a strategy that did not rigidly adhere to the strict categories of peace and war.

From this perspective, the challenges to collective defence posed by hybrid warfare or grey-zone tactics appear more familiar and less puzzling. Fear of the use of 'salami tactics' by adversaries, making gains bit by bit and creating faits accomplis while circumventing NATO's collective-defence commitment, pre-dates the present international situation. In 1957, NATO's Strategic Concept did not discard altogether the possibility of an all-out nuclear war or a large-scale conventional conflict. The document did, however, identify a more likely threat from the Soviets in the form of 'operations with limited objectives, such as infiltrations, incursions or hostile local actions in the NATO area, covertly or overtly supported by themselves, trusting that the Allies in their collective desire to prevent a general conflict would either limit their reactions accordingly or not react at all'.[11] Slightly more than a decade later, in 1968, NATO's new Strategic Concept similarly assessed one of the forms of hostile action available to the Soviets to be covert action below the threshold of war. 'However,' the document adds, 'they would be wary of employing any measures which would involve a direct confrontation with Allied forces and a consequent widening of hostilities.'[12] Responding to an adversary that carries out harmful actions short of war, then, is not an unprecedented challenge in the West.

An old quandary

The challenge is rooted in a fundamental logical problem that finds expression in the ancient 'sorites paradox', which refers to the Greek word *soros*, meaning 'heap'. One grain of wheat certainly does not make a heap of wheat; two grains of wheat still do not make a heap; neither do three grains, nor four, and so on. But we know that a heap of wheat can exist, and thus that there is a moment where there would be enough grains of wheat to constitute a heap. We just can't be sure exactly when. More generally, it is unclear how a difference in degree can become a difference in kind, and the problem is resolvable only by the imposition of an arbitrary boundary. The same logical tension applies to the distinction between peace and war.[13] To distinguish between the two, you can ask questions such as, 'How many victims do you need to create a state of war between two countries?' One victim does not create a state of war, and likely two or three don't either.

However, we know that certain events or situations in international relations can reasonably be characterised as war or peace. France and Germany have clearly been at war several times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and are just as clearly at peace today.

By one convention, the threshold of war is 1,000 casualties. But not all wars start with a massive, 'out of the blue' attack like Pearl Harbor, causing thousands of victims from day one. The worsening of hostilities is likely to be much more gradual, so that the final scale of a conflict is something knowable only in retrospect. In real time, there will often be a period of incertitude, before things get better or worse, during which nations may not know whether they are engaged in a war or not. Intuitively, casualties must also be confined to a certain finite period to qualify as war. They might also result not from direct physical destruction but from the sabotage of critical infrastructure like water or electricity supplies, or a blockade of a country's food or drug imports. The perpetrators of violence on behalf of a state also could be pro-state private actors over which the state had only tenuous control. These are just a few of a multitude of factors that could complicate the application of the term 'war'. The bottom line: what constitutes war is in the eye of the beholder, which can be very sharp or very jaundiced.

The increasing prevalence of equivocal types of conflicts and tactics does not appear to be a matter of inexorable martial evolution. Rather, it reflects strategies deliberately adopted by key international actors based on what they want to achieve, and the constraints and opportunities they perceive. Accordingly, the current blurring of peace and war in international politics might be reversed in the future. Although many things have changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall – the world is no longer the bipolar stage of a great ideological contest – great powers still fear military escalation to the ultimate level. What Bernard Brodie observed at the dawn of the nuclear age still rings true today: the purpose of armed forces cannot be to win wars, but essentially to avoid them.[14]

In 1954, the British military historian and theorist Basil H. Liddell Hart explained that the prospect of annihilation brought by the mutual possession of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union and the United States had revived interest in an indirect approach to strategy: 'By carrying destructiveness

to a "suicidal" extreme, atomic power is stimulating and accelerating a reversion to the indirect methods that are the essence of strategy – since they endow warfare with intelligent properties that raise it above the brute application of force.'[15] Put differently: 'the atomic deterrent to direct action on familiar lines is tending to foster a deeper strategic subtlety on the part of aggressors.'[16] Equally, today, as a substitute for a general war, adversarial states pursue their goals with more limited means and in more oblique ways than those a major war would entail, through sabotage, economic pressure, hostile political activism or conflict by proxy.

The future of world politics

In his book *Destined for War*, Graham Allison argues that the dynamics between an established great power and its challenger have resulted more often than not in war.[17] In the wake of the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century BCE, notes Allison, the Greek historian Thucydides explained that 'the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta', had 'made war inevitable'.[18] He adds that the closest parallel to the current confrontation between China and the United States is Germany's challenge to the British Empire before the First World War.[19] In Allison's view, it is imperative to avoid reproducing a fateful chain of events comparable to the one that led to that war.

In crucial ways, however, the current situation looks more like the sequel to the First World War than its prequel. In 1914, political leaders contemplated not so much the prospect of a short or effortless war as that of a conclusive one: they thought the war could be won.[20] From what turned out to be a traumatically devastating war, some interwar leaders concluded that an all-out war would be avoided, as it would yield no clear winners and leave all of its participants in ruins. The Second World War proved them wrong. Today, most policymakers would still assess the costs of a general war among nuclear-armed great powers as clearly outweighing its potential benefits. For the United States, the fear of such a war could override its concerns about China's rise and its desire to contain it. Similar considerations could limit what China would be ready to risk to attain what it sees as its rightful geopolitical status.

Allison recognises this point. He acknowledges, for instance, that mutual assured destruction makes all-out war unpalatable, and that 'hot war between nuclear superpowers is thus no longer a justifiable option'.[21] He adds:

> Because of the inescapable logic of mutual assured destruction, if the US and China were to stumble into a war in which their full nuclear arsenals were launched, both nations would be erased from the map. Thus their most vital interest is to avoid such a war. Moreover, they must find combinations of compromise and constraint that avoid repeated games of chicken that could inadvertently lead to this dreaded outcome.[22]

Having built up powerful dramatic tension around the prospect of a Sino-American conflict, Allison puts forward a 'nuclear peace' position quite late in his discussion, almost as an afterthought.[23] Basically, he says that nothing awful is going to happen in the foreseeable future, but in the most alarming way possible. Even for an apparent doomsayer like Allison, the dread caused by the prospect of an all-out war is key to apprehending the future direction of the US–China relationship. As long as this fear endures, the two superpowers may consciously try to limit the domain and the intensity of their disputes, confronting each other only at their peripheries while avoiding risks to their respective core interests. They may resort to indirect strategies in order to pursue their rival goals, exploiting the ambiguity of the boundary between peace and war, along the lines of the US–Soviet confrontation during the Cold War.[24]

* * *

Should this fear of a general war become attenuated by way of a technical surprise, an all-out war would no longer be an act of certain self-destruction for one or both parties. The confrontation between the United States and China could then take a much more dramatic turn. This prospect, of course, informed the preservation of mutual assured destruction through limitations on anti-ballistic missiles in the 1970s, and resurfaced when the

Reagan administration in the 1980s tried to develop the Strategic Defense Initiative – known as 'Star Wars' – which, if realised, might have rendered a successful US nuclear first strike on the Soviet Union militarily plausible. With the modernisation of the Chinese nuclear arsenal, however, mutual assured destruction between the United States and China may actually be better guaranteed today than it was a decade ago.[25]

The increasing tendency to dissolve the distinction between peace and war in international politics is a systemic response to the persistent fear of a general war. In the nuclear age, great powers avoided direct collisions with each other and resorted instead to indirect strategies, employing limited and often tortuous means, to achieve their political objectives. Today, hybrid warfare and grey-zone conflicts are the preferred alternative to major wars. But the international configuration that encourages this tendency may not last forever.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Lawrence Freedman, 'Putin's New Cold War', *New Statesman*, 14 March 2018. For a contrary opinion, see Stephen Walt, 'I Knew the Cold War. This Is No Cold War', *Foreign Policy*, 12 March 2018.

2 The seminal study of hybrid warfare is Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007). Good overviews include James K. Wither, 'Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare', *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2, Spring 2016, pp. 73–87; and Robert Johnson, 'Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 29, no. 1, January 2018, pp. 141–63.

3 NATO Brussels Summit Declaration, 11–12 July 2018, para. 21.

4 White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', December 2017, p. 28.

5 République Française, 'Defence and National Security Strategic Review', 2017, p. 47, para. 139.

6 German Federal Government, 'White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr', 2016, p. 32.

7 *Ibid*., p. 65.

8 George Orwell, 'You and the Atomic Bomb', *Tribune*, 10 October 1945.
9 Raymond Aron, *Le Grand Schisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).
10 George Kennan, 'The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare', State Department Policy Planning Staff, National Archives and Records Administration, RG 273, Records of the National Security Council, NSC 10/2, 30 April 1948.
11 NATO Military Committee, 'Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area', MC 14/2 (revised), 23 May 1957, p. 11.
12 NATO Military Committee, 'Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area', MC 14/3 (revised), 16 January 1968, p. 7.
13 See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 66–9, 131–41.
14 See Bernard Brodie et al., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1946), p. 76.
15 Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 2nd edition, p. 17.
16 *Ibid*., p. 18.
17 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Mariner Books, 2018).
18 Robert B. Strassler and Richard Crawley (eds), *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 16.
19 Allison, *Destined for War*, p. xviii. Allison devotes a full chapter to the rivalry between the United Kingdom and Germany before the First World War.
20 See Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 11–12.
21 Allison, *Destined for War*, pp. 206–10.
22 *Ibid*., p. 228.
23 On nuclear peace between the US and China, see Avery Goldstein, 'Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival', *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 3, Winter 1997/98, pp. 70–1.
24 John Lewis Gaddis, 'The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System', *International Security*, vol. 10, no. 4, Spring 1986, pp. 120–3.
25 See Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, 'The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of US Primacy', *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 4, Spring 2006, p. 8. The authors concluded that the Chinese nuclear force was so vulnerable that a US preventive strike could destroy it even if it were alerted in advance. One current view is that China's second-strike capability is now more secure. See, for instance, Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 39–64. This, of course, is only the tip of a much deeper debate about strategic stability in the US–China relationship. See, for example, Thomas J. Christensen, 'The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China's Strategic Modernization and US–China Security Relations', *Journal of Strategic Studies*,

vol. 35, no. 4, August 2012, pp. 447–87; Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, 'Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.–China Strategic Stability', *International Security*, vol. 40, no. 2, Fall 2015, pp. 7–50; and Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter, 'Should the United States Reject MAD? Damage Limitation and U.S. Nuclear Strategy Toward China', *International Security*, vol. 41, no. 1, Summer 2016, pp. 49–98.