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Chiara Libiseller & Lukas Milevski

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# War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction

**Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milevski**

In recent years, the idea that the boundaries between war and peace are blurring has gained favour in the field of strategic studies. Concepts such as ‘hybrid warfare’ and the ‘grey zone’ have captured the perceived ambiguity. According to their champions, Western strategic thought has been constrained by a flawed binary distinction between war and peace, while other actors – mainly Russia and China – have become more flexible in their strategic thinking and intentionally exploit the limitations of the Western conception. These commentators contend that the West needs to replace the artificial dichotomy of war and peace with a continuum of war and peace to meet new challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, concepts and categories are arbitrary. Reality does not dictate them; they are intellectual constructs of our choice.<sup>2</sup> They cannot be definitively true or false but only more or less useful.<sup>3</sup> After reviewing the criticism of the traditional distinction between war and peace that these two recent concepts have prompted, we argue that they have blurred the boundaries between the two. In fact, the traditional understanding of war and peace based on Carl von Clausewitz’s theory – in particular, its emphasis on the role of agency and intentions – leads to a clear and policy-relevant understanding of war and its boundaries, and offers a more useful approach to confronting the myriad means and effects that are currently subsumed

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**Chiara Libiseller** is a PhD candidate in the War Studies Department of King’s College London. **Lukas Milevski** is an assistant professor at the Institute for History at Leiden University, and author of *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

under the concepts of hybrid war and grey-zone conflict, as well as a more systematic approach to understanding war.

### **Unsettling war**

There is a tendency in Western strategic thought to over-classify. Every novel form of war seems to give rise to a new classification. Conventional war, which tends to be seen as the prototype of war, has been joined by unconventional or irregular war, hybrid war and many smaller-scope categories such as asymmetric warfare, grey-zone warfare, information warfare, cyber warfare and ambiguous warfare.<sup>4</sup> Two weaknesses are inherent in this proliferation of new conceptions of war and warfare. Firstly, the emphasis on form is unhelpful, not least because current Western understanding is often fatalistic about the present and future character of war, as if the West were a passive actor that can only accept and try to adapt to whatever version of warfare the enemy conjures. This disposition ignores the fact that wars take shape as a result of the interaction of adversaries.<sup>5</sup> If the West consistently finds itself stymied by the character of any particular war, it is simply not practising strategy well enough to control the interaction and succeed. Secondly, the ad hoc introduction of new concepts can ill serve strategic theory itself by blithely overriding it.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of hybrid warfare incorporates a number of diverse, and to some extent logically unrelated, elements of both war and peacetime competition into a single concept, thus blurring the line between the two situations. In its original conception, proposed by Frank Hoffman in 2007, the term referred primarily to the domain of war.<sup>7</sup> Generalising from an analysis of Hizbullah's approach in its 2006 war against Israel, Hoffman maintained that 'hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder'. He expected future adversaries to use a mixture of conventional and irregular means that were 'operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects'.<sup>8</sup>

As the concept was more widely adopted, the relatively tight focus on battlefield integration was increasingly ignored, such that most scholars

today understand hybrid warfare to be simply the mixture of conventional and irregular means used by an actor in its overall war effort. Murat Caliskan has described the concept as the rediscovery of grand strategy.<sup>9</sup> The primary stimulus for this mutation of the hybrid-warfare concept is Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent instigation of civil war in eastern Ukraine. Some commentators consider both campaigns to be of the same nature, representative of Russia's new way of war, but only one of them actually turned into a war. Yet the term hybrid warfare is applied to both campaigns to capture non-violent as well as violent means, spanning both times of peace (but not friendly cooperation) and war.

This redefinition paved the way for a further mutation of the concept: after 2014, hybrid warfare increasingly turned into *Russian* hybrid warfare, tightly connecting the term and the particular case. The term is now commonly applied to Russian foreign policy in general.<sup>10</sup> Russia's use of disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks increasingly shifted the focus of scholars investigating hybrid warfare to these non-military means, sidelining the crucial role that the Russian threat of and actual use of force played in both Crimea and Donbas.<sup>11</sup> As part of this discursive shift, the object of the hybrid-warfare concept changed: while Russia has been engaged in actual war in Ukraine, some Western commentators interpret this war simply as an element of hybrid war directed against the West. While Russia's actions might indeed be intended as a hostile signal to the West, to suggest that Russia is engaged in war against the West 'is a dangerous misuse of the word "war"'.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it is mainly Russia's non-military campaigns that have extended to countries beyond Ukraine. Thus, over the years, hybrid warfare has changed from an operational concept to, as Ofer Fridman puts it, a 'catch-all description for the new Russian threat to European security'.<sup>13</sup>

More recent interpretations of the term imply an overlapping of war and peace in which non-military action by itself is interpreted as an act of war. In a world of hybrid wars, there is less and less space for a concept of peace. And if hybrid warfare is understood to be simply the mixture of conventional and unconventional means in war, it would be difficult to find a war that was not hybrid. In its broadest definition – referring to Russia's disinformation campaigns in the West, with no threat or use of force – the

term completely redefines both war and peace: it suggests that war can exist not only with no use of force, but even with no threat of it. The concept thus erodes the traditional analytical separation between war and peace that turns on the distinction between mass military violence and non-military forms of power without providing a clear alternative delineation. It lumps together elements found in both situations into a single category, highlighting means while ignoring context or aims. For these reasons, the concept of hybrid war limits our ability to understand the dynamics of conflict.

The related idea of grey-zone challenges blurs the distinction between peace and war by creating an undefined middle ground ‘that is neither fully war nor fully peace’, ‘a landscape churning with political, economic, and security competitions that require constant attention’ or competition ‘primarily below the threshold of armed conflict’.<sup>14</sup> The concept is usually employed to analyse recent Russian and Chinese actions, or the behaviour of revisionist states more generally.<sup>15</sup> Ambiguity is central to this approach: David Barno and Nora Bensahel argue that grey-zone conflicts ‘involve some aggression or use of force, but in many ways their defining characteristic is ambiguity – about the ultimate objectives, the participants, whether international treaties and norms have been violated, and the role that military forces should play in response’.<sup>16</sup> As with hybrid warfare, the assumption is that while it does not quite look like war, it certainly cannot be peace either.

The concept itself may create more ambiguity than the phenomenon it aims to describe. As with the hybrid-warfare concept, its promoters remain vague about how it can actually be differentiated from war and peace, or how the two concepts should be redefined to make room for an in-between category. If the grey zone is merely defined as competition, the difference between it and the regular conduct of international politics is unclear. Moreover, definitions of the concept seem mainly to stem from flawed perceptions of war and peace rather than changes in reality: Hal Brands says grey-zone activity is ‘deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war’, Michael Mazarr that it moves ‘gradually toward its objectives rather than seeking conclusive results in a specific period of time’.<sup>17</sup> Conflict in the grey zone is thus contrasted not with the Clausewitzian characterisation of war, but with an ideal

version of war as conventional war – battles between state militaries – that has dominated Western strategic thought for decades.<sup>18</sup> Formulations of the grey-zone concept also rely on a positive notion of peace, defined as ‘the integration of human society’.<sup>19</sup> In strategic studies, however, the understanding of war has usually relied on a negative notion of peace, namely ‘the absence of violence’.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, promoters of the grey-zone idea have opened conceptual space that they are unable to fill. By claiming that grey-zone challenges are neither fully peace nor fully war, they redefine those concepts without clarifying how they are to be understood. One response is that because reality is murky and ambiguous, the concepts used to capture it must be too. But concepts can never fully capture reality. The question is whether these particular ones are more helpful in guiding analysis and action than traditional concepts of war and peace.

### **Resettling war**

As the idea of conventional war has come to dominate our understanding of war in general, even good Clausewitzians sometimes struggle with the concept of war. Hew Strachan notes that it ‘involves the use of force’, but acknowledges that a ‘state of war can exist between opponents without there being any active fighting’. He identifies contention as a key element of war and suggests that ‘war assumes a degree of intensity and duration to the fighting’, although this runs counter to his earlier observation that states of war may exist without fighting. He proposes that those involved in waging war do so in a public rather than a private capacity, but feels stymied by the phenomenon of mercenaries participating in war. Finally, he recognises that war always has a political aim, but acknowledges that often wars are waged beyond political sense.<sup>21</sup> Strachan’s critical elements of war stem from Clausewitzian considerations, but are mixed with other elements. Clausewitz’s foundational definition of war is ‘*an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will*’.<sup>22</sup> This has encouraged others to focus exclusively on the use of violence. The level of violence, for instance, is the defining factor in the Correlates of War dataset project, which sets the baseline for war as the occurrence of 1,000 battle deaths in a year.<sup>23</sup>

By focusing almost exclusively on violence, Western thinking on war misses the nuance of Clausewitz's definition, which specifies not only (1) violence (an act of force) but also (2) the imposition of will (3) by an adversary for war to arise. Unless all three criteria are satisfied, the phenomenon in question is not war, even if it breaks peace. Accordingly, peace and war are not strict opposites; mass violence can take different forms, of which war is only one.

Underlying Clausewitz's three criteria is an appreciation of political and strategic agency and intent. He also famously stated that 'war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means'.<sup>24</sup>

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## *Peace and war are not strict opposites*

A mutual acknowledgement emerges that violence has become the primary means of achieving political goals. Mutual recourse to violence reflects shared recognition of the inadequacy of regular non-violent political means to achieve desired outcomes. This state of affairs is likely to change over time, in response to strategic successes or failures; indeed, the very point of strategy is to force the enemy to change its mind.<sup>25</sup> But it reflects the particular intentions and agency of parties involved in a war at its outset.

Forms of war are a conceptual dead end because intentions may endure even as forms change. Intensity of warfare lacks definitional relevance because, even though new conditions set in, reciprocal political and strategic intentions, which give instrumental primacy to military force over all other political means, endure. Thomas Hobbes understood this in discussing war in his *Leviathan*: 'the nature of war, consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known *disposition* thereto'.<sup>26</sup> Jan Almäng, writing about the vagueness of war, emphasised the strategic actors' representations of their mutual interaction by citing the phony war between the Allies and Germany in late 1939 and early 1940 as an example of a situation in which war existed although warfare hardly occurred.<sup>27</sup> Yet what is representation, if not a direct enunciation of agency and intention? The phony war is considered war because the adversarial intentions of the Allies on one side and Germany on the other elevated military force to instrumental primacy. The lack of intense fighting during the phony war does not change the basic mutual recognition

of the importance of violence to gain the desired political goals at that time. During the interregnum in which warfare did not arise, it was just because no side was ready to act on its intentions until campaigning season began.

Maintaining the instrumental primacy of military force reflects a political decision and underlying attitude. During the Cold War, after Michael Howard and Peter Paret's 1976 translation of *On War* increased Clausewitz's popularity and currency, the liberal West interpreted his characterisation of war as politics by other means predominantly as a normative statement about civil–military relations and war's instrumental nature, firmly subordinated to policy direction. This raises the question of whether the Cold War would fit the Clausewitzian definition of war. It would not. Despite intense and extensive concern about nuclear weapons and strategy, neither side ever seriously intended to settle the rivalry directly with nuclear (or conventional) weapons unless the other side crossed certain very fundamental red lines. Instead, they relied on deterrence. But deterrence is not war, because the intention to use force is conditional for the former but not the latter.

As Strachan notes, 'today we too often use [Clausewitz's] normative statement about war's relationship to policy as though it applied to the causes of war, and so fail to recognize how often states go to war not to continue policy but to change it. The declaration of war, and more immediately the use of violence, alters everything.'<sup>28</sup> Strachan thus suggests that Clausewitz focused on the relationship between policy and the conduct of war, rather than the causes of war. Even this eminently reasonable interpretation may be reading too much into Clausewitz's words. Like strategy, politics is fundamentally concerned with shaping the future, albeit a much broader future than that with which strategy is concerned. Intentions therefore underlie policy, and are hostile when they involve harming the opposite party for whatever political purpose. Hostile intention must exist in a political relationship between future belligerents before manifesting itself as violence in war; otherwise, recourse to war would be unnecessary. The failure to appreciate that hostile intentions are part of politics but not yet necessarily war has given rise to the concepts hybrid warfare and the grey zone.

Clausewitzian definitions provide a simple and clear-cut categorisation of war and peace that is useful for making policy. Naturally, aggressors do



conduct attacks cognisant of the possibility of resistance. But unless violence is reciprocated, there is no state of war. If there is reciprocal violence and an intention to continue relying on it to achieve political goals, then war exists. If not, it doesn't. Only if one of the political agents involved has not yet made up its mind about whether to resort to force does the distinction become blurry. Thus, war begins in earnest with defence. Attack alone is not sufficient, as the Germans demonstrated with their invasion of Austria in 1938; the Soviets with their invasions of the Baltic states in 1939–40, Hungary (which resisted to a degree) in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968; and the Russians with their invasion of Crimea in 2014.

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The claim that concepts such as hybrid warfare or the grey zone better reflect the real world, and therefore provide a stronger basis for policy and strategy in practice than the old distinction between war and peace, does not easily survive scrutiny.

The concepts emerged from Russia's conduct in Ukraine and China's in the South China Sea. Impressed with their apparent success, Western commentators have argued that the Western reaction should mirror the threat – that is, that it should take hybrid form or be conducted in the grey zone.<sup>29</sup> This way of thinking presages a tit-for-tat approach: the Chinese build islands, the United States and its partners sail through the South China Sea on freedom-of-navigation voyages; the Russians disseminate fake news, NATO allies try to refute it. Such responses are inherently reactive, and merely delay a full reckoning with China's and Russia's intentions to shape their respective strategic environments. The attractiveness of the tit-for-tat approach lies in its capacity to prevent escalation to outright war: if the West assumes its opponents operate by the rules they themselves have established, their actions too will remain hybrid or in the grey zone.

Yet there is a risk here of a kind of mirror-imaging. If the Russians or Chinese do not view Western activity through the hybrid or grey-zone lens, they may construe Western responses as escalation towards war and react accordingly. And in fact, the concepts of hybrid warfare and the grey

zone are products of a broadly Western, and especially American, strategic culture. The Russians do not think about hybrid war in the same way that the West does. Their term for it is a direct transliteration of the Western term and is only used in referring to the Western concept.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the West's hybrid and grey-zone concepts bolster Russian narratives about insidious Western aggression insofar as they can be used to characterise Western support for pro-democratic revolutions in Russia's sphere of influence and in the Middle East, as well as Russian actions in Ukraine.

The crucial difference between the new concepts and the old war–peace distinction lies in political awareness and determination. If everything is conceived in diluted hybrid or grey terms, then the political costs of inadequate action are presumptively low, and a given political leader can afford to kick the can down the road. Challenges cast as hybrid or grey-zone can also be treated as non-strategic and handled in a merely technocratic manner. This has been a flaw of modern strategic thinking since the early Cold War: concerns about surprise attack and accidental war ignored longer-term historical factors in political relations in favour of technical issues which could presumably be solved without mobilising the political will that would be required to support a fighting war.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, the Clausewitzian war–peace distinction is premised on the importance of understanding what geopolitical outcome an opponent is attempting to achieve and what it would mean. That knowledge can facilitate an honest, thorough and clear strategic assessment of whether a country should seek peace or prepare for war.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Geraint Hughes, 'War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications', *Survival*, vol. 62, no. 3, June–July 2020, p. 133; and Michael C. McCarthy,

Matthew A. Moyer and Brett H. Venable, *Deterring Russia in the Gray Zone* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2019), p. 9, <https://publications>.

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- 2 See Colin S. Gray, *Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2012), p. vii, <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2171.pdf>.
  - 3 See Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 17; and Jeffrey H. Michaels, *The Discourse Trap and the US Military: From the War on Terror to the Surge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
  - 4 See, for example, Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Washington DC: Potomac Institute, 2007); McCarthy, Moyer and Venable, *Deterring Russia in the Gray Zone*; and Lyle J. Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).
  - 5 See Lukas Milevski, 'The Nature of Strategy versus the Character of War', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 35, no. 5, December 2016, pp. 438–46.
  - 6 See John Gerring, 'What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences', *Polity*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1999, pp. 357–93, 382; and Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, 'Blurred Lines: Gray-zone Conflict and Hybrid War – Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking', *Naval War College Review*, vol. 73, no. 1, Winter 2020, pp. 12–48.
  - 7 Hoffman, while not the first, was the most influential definer of 'hybrid warfare'. See Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*.
  - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
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  - 11 See Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 115.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
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  - 14 Quoting, respectively, US Department of Defense, 'Quadrennial Defense Review', February 2010, p. 73, <https://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf>; Nadia Schadlow, 'Peace and War: The Space Between', *War on the Rocks*, 18 August 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/08/peace-and-war-the-space-between/>; and Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*, p. iii.
  - 15 See, for example, Hal Brands, 'Paradoxes of the Gray Zone', *E-Note*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 5 February 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>; Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2015), <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2372.pdf>; Schadlow, 'Peace and War'; and James J. Wirtz, 'Life in

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- 17 Quoting, respectively, Brands, ‘Paradoxes of the Gray Zone’, p. 1; and Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, p. 58.
- 18 See, for example, Hughes, ‘War in the Grey Zone’, p. 133.
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- 22 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 75 (emphasis in original).
- 23 See Meredith Reid Sarkees, ‘The COW Typology of War: Defining and Categorizing Wars (Version 4 of the Data)’, Correlates of War Project, p. 1, [https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/](https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war/the-cow-typology-of-war-defining-and-categorizing-wars/@@download/file/COW%20Website%20-%20Typology%20of%20war.pdf)
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- 27 Jan Almäng, ‘War, Vagueness and Hybrid War’, *Defence Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, April 2019, p. 195.
- 28 Hew Strachan, ‘Strategy in the Twenty-First Century’, in Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds), *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 508.
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