

Strategic Responses to Ambiguity

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Ambiguity has been a hallmark of several major conflicts over the past two decades, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Crimea and Donbas. It has been manifested in two forms. First has been tactical ambiguity, which is practiced as insurgency and is familiar in Western military experience since 2002/3. The second form is more recent, emerging out of Russia and practiced in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014. In the former, the problem is fundamentally tactical, literally a question of how to identify as individuals the enemy. Counterinsurgency is a conflict for actionable information which can be used to identify and then neutralize the enemy.¹ In the latter form of ambiguity, this is not the problem as the enemy does not hide; rather, the ambiguity is political. To which state do these forces actually belong? This paper focuses primarily on the second form of ambiguity.

These two forms of ambiguity are different and interact differently with strategy, which can be understood only by first analyzing the salient features of the logic of strategy. First, strategy is adversarial: there is an enemy whose actions must be controlled. Second, strategy is instrumental: military power in its various forms is used to control the enemy's freedom of action. Third, the choice to resort to military force and to practice strategy is foremost a political choice, a reflection of and a judgment about a political relationship.

The first form of ambiguity interferes with internal strategic logic, where its instrumental and adversarial logics meet, by denying the opposing side consistent and reliable adversarial contact. Without reliable adversarial contact—that is, without being able actually to find the enemy to engage him—strategy is 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.”² The second form of ambiguity does not actually hinder strategic logic at all, for this is not its purpose. Rather, its purpose is to cast doubt upon strategy as a viable policy option in the overall ambiguous circumstances.

How does the second form of ambiguity accomplish this? The Latvian analyst Jānis Bērziņš distinguished eight stages of Russian hybrid warfare.³ The first four constitute subversion. Such subversion occurs both in the target and among the international audience, with the purpose of establishing an ostensibly plausible, legitimate narrative to weaken any response made by either target or audience. By contrast, the latter four stages transition into the use of armed force, but this armed force is ‘ambiguous.’ The established subversive narrative supports the use of armed force by

¹ 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 UP 2018).

² J.C. Wylie. *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1989), 44.

³ Jānis Bērziņš. “Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy”, National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategy Research *Policy Paper* 2, April 2014, 6.

framing it as a spontaneous revolt of self-defense militia forces, etc, rather than an invasion by a foreign power. A major purpose throughout all eight stages is to make the political choice in favor of strategy as unlikely as possible—both from the target and the audience. Such a strategy for generating ambiguity is meant to dupe and in principle should only work once, because the second time the audience knows what to expect. But politics is not always linear and sometimes being duped again is preferable to facing the potential specter of great power war.

What does this political ambiguity mean for strategy and the applicability of the logic of strategy, if the choice to practice strategy is made? The answer is: none! Political ambiguity does not imply or necessitate tactical ambiguity. Given Russia's political objectives in Crimea and the Donbas, it has been the primary employer of political ambiguity since 2014, which actually cannot be combined with tactical ambiguity. To effect territorial change on the ground requires an active presence and the control derived from it. Insurgency and the denial of control are insufficient for that purpose. Military power and strategy may therefore be applied and practiced as normal, as Ukraine itself demonstrated in the Donbas. It works. (As long as one's tactical and strategic performance is superior to that of the enemy.)

Nonetheless, the political danger of potential great power war is perhaps a compelling reason not to practice strategy through resort to armed force. Although the exact context matters, the Ukrainian example demonstrates that a military response to ambiguous warfare, albeit intra-national, not international, does not necessarily lead to political escalation. Politically speaking, the fact that Russia continuously denied that it had forces in Crimea (and continues to deny that it has forces in the Donbas) until after a successful annexation suggests that those forces were considered disposable. If there *had* been a military response, Russia had given itself an avenue of escape by already denying any involvement. It may of course be imprudent to rely on such signals when the alternative Russian reaction may lead to a new great power war. Yet even if political escalation were to be a serious concern, Russia does not hold the monopoly on ambiguity. The West has its own deniable forces, most clearly special operations forces, which are maintained specifically for deniable strategic action.

In conclusion, the ambiguity which has come to caricature Russian strategy since 2014 is not a conceptual or practical problem for the practice of strategy. It cannot be combined with tactical ambiguity and it seems unlikely that an armed response would result in major escalation. Rather, political ambiguity is a challenge for the conduct of domestic and international politics. Politics and policy can and does affect and even send awry strategy in practice, but such a result is fundamentally different from a strategic interaction which inherently challenges the very practicability of strategy itself. The appropriate strategic response to ambiguity, if the goal is to prevent a geopolitical change from being engineered by another power, is ironically clear.