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Hybrid Warfare and Strategic Surprise

There is no single definition of what act or acts constitutes a strategic surprise in warfare but certainly any unpredicted move, which results in a significant and perhaps decisive dislocation of the adversary at the time of that act, would not be too far away from our common understanding. In the literature of security studies, it is a well-recognised area of particular research, arguably because military history is replete with examples of strategic surprise. Are there serious students of Strategic Studies or War Studies who have not heard of Pearl Harbor? The question, however, is less about the general history of strategic surprise and more of its applicability to what we currently label as 'Hybrid Warfare'. Does the latter form of conflict particularly lend itself to 'surprise' as a favoured tool of military engagement, especially beyond the operational level and if so, what might it look like? That strategic surprise is important in any serious engagement is not in question but how should we go about determining if it has a particular resonance with Hybrid Warfare or does it really follow the patterns of other military activities – albeit in different times and places – that encounter surprise only and if particular circumstances allow it?

A historical overview

In recent times, strategic surprise has become a familiar feature of modern warfare. It has come in many shapes and sizes but generally it seems to follow an acceptable pattern.² The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 has often been the case study benchmark when considering strategic surprise. Despite fragments of indicators and warnings, the attack achieved surprise at various operational levels and certainly impacted on the future conduct of the war itself. The key features of surprise were present for all to see, including the target, the timing, the concealment and the strategic objective. Following on from

¹ Centre for the Study of New Security Challenges.

² BETTS 1981.

the German offensives in Europe between 1939 and 1941, which demonstrated the strategic and operational surprise attainable from the utilisation of new forms of strategic doctrine allied to new forms of technology – for example the nexus of ‘Blitzkrieg’ and improved tanks – there was an undoubted gain to be had through the extensive use of surprise.³ The Cold War and especially the development of significant early warning systems on both sides in one sense made the attainment of strategic surprise more problematic but on another, showcased the potential for surprise through the development and deployment of new technologies. The deployment of the ‘Sputnik’ satellite was clearly a force multiplier in terms of shock and the complication associated with then traditional concepts of nuclear war fighting. One might arguably claim that the spread of so-called ‘proxy’ conflicts during this period also benefitted from various forms of surprise, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, the ‘Six Day’ 1967 and Yom Kippur 1973 Wars in the Middle East and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 as more traditional advantage could not be had in the European theatre. Proxy forces in South East Asia and the Middle East – often using asymmetrical forms of conflict as a platform for surprise – were adept at shifting the central calculations of dominant forces in their region.⁴ The period up to the end of the Cold War also created a situation where strategic surprise was becoming more difficult to reconcile alongside strategic unwillingness to use force for any length of time. The Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 demonstrated a willingness to use force, which was a shock to the system of the ‘West’ in so far as it highlighted their lack of willingness to respond. Under these conditions of wilful blindness, strategic surprise does not have to be overly sophisticated.⁵ The Falklands War of 1982 followed a similar pattern; strategic surprise – if one may call it that – was attained in part through a combination of loose U.K. strategic thinking and assessment and the pruning of what little resources were available that perhaps might have mitigated the effects of the Argentine moves.⁶ Of course the more modern examples of strategic surprise – one thinks of 9/11 or the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014 – deviate little from traditional concepts of surprise. The nature, timing and form of surprise completely dislocate

³ WOHLSTETTER 1966.

⁴ BRUNNSTROM 2022.

⁵ HANDEL 1989.

⁶ A post-war review of Falklands policy clearly demonstrated the effects of budgetary restrictions reflecting policy and operational options.

traditional forms of calculation, whether in terms of the form of the response or the possibility of a significant retaliation. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the post '9/11' strategic environment demonstrated at times tactical and operational surprise, but the predominant strategic impact was undoubtedly the recent fall of Kabul and the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the lack of Western willingness to resist. That was a fundamental strategic surprise.

Traditional factors

Initiating a military engagement when your opponent least expects it is a hallmark of strategic surprise. It is a hallmark at any military level. This is particularly so if a wider spectrum of your friends and allies are equally caught unaware. Very often, ensuring strategic surprise can largely depend on a level of operational preparedness that even allies remain unfamiliar with. Timing, often positioned alongside the choice of location – the operational environment where this surprise might be achieved in order to generate the greatest military benefit – can significantly impact on one's chances of success. This becomes particularly critical if your choice is being influenced by other critical military factors such as force disposition, the balance of power, an adversary's preparedness or lack of it and very often, considerations of weather or geography. This factor of timing is also important in the wider strategic spectrum including perhaps the geopolitical context, global economics or internal or domestic politics. In a close reading of some classic strategic surprise, one can easily see that timing can be crucial and can have an impact beyond the immediate possibility of victory on the ground. For example, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sought to inflict a crippling blow not only when the U.S. Navy was most likely to be concentrated in Hawaii but in a more regional and global context, as the U.S. authorities had yet to build up military strength in the Pacific region commensurate to the acknowledged Japanese threat and the likelihood of further success for Germany in the European Theatre.⁷ Similarly, the North Vietnamese 'Tet Offensive' in early 1968, which in a sense unhinged U.S. military perceptions of the course of the ongoing struggle in Vietnam, from eventual victory to eventual defeat, clearly signified genuine strategic surprise on the back of

⁷ BETTS 1981.

localised tactical but networked attacks.⁸ Of course, it is essential to remember that strategic surprise very often is still achievable despite being observed in part through traditional forms of indicators and warnings. Again, in reference to Pearl Harbor, the post-event investigation clearly highlighted numerous forms of early warning but which were either inadequately assessed, or not acted upon, by the analysis and decision-making chain. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that timing has and is likely to remain a key factor in strategic surprise. Another major consideration in attaining strategic surprise is concealment and deception. These two factors are generally ‘joined at the hip’ in terms of military planning and alongside timing, are major contributory factors to taking one’s adversary by surprise. Deception is also a twin-edged weapon. How often do we see that a defender’s response to an unanticipated attack is complicated or diluted due to one’s own self-deception? Without exploring too deeply into the issue of cognitive dissonance, it is fair to claim that this form of self-deception can and often does aid strategic surprise. The case for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is frequently cited as evidence of various forms of self-deception as far as analysis of intelligence was concerned. This is arguably unfair on the analytic communities who genuinely believed that a WMD threat clearly existed and in fact such a posture was only maintained in large part through Iraq’s own actions which lent credence to the view that they had in fact some WMD to hide.⁹ Military studies are replete with examples of deception and concealment that has contributed to strategic surprise. In the build-up to the D-Day operations in France in 1944, forms of deception included the construction of ‘Potemkin-style’ airfields, military formations and HQs, large tank parks and the use of exercise all indicating future intent but far from the intended target. Such deception was accompanied by the concealment of real formations and troops and the extensive use of false signal communications. Another form of deception and concealment in order to achieve strategic surprise was attempted by Argentina during the Falklands War, with early deployment of maritime forces around the island of South Georgia, was conducted in such a way in order to confuse the U.K. authorities. That such behaviour on the part of Argentina had been seen before contributed to the uncertainty about identifying intent. Therefore, deception and intent are often successful when it seems no different from the routine.

⁸ BOWDEN 2018.

⁹ This conviction of Iraqi duplicity was behind much of the sentiment in the UN Security Council, as much as belief in Iraqi deception on the part of the U.S. and U.K.

The surprise attack on Israel in 1973 across the Suez Canal by Egyptian forces is also often cited as an example of the concealment of intent. Yet as much as the deception was about timing and no small amount of tactical and operational surprise, especially through the use of man-portable anti-tank missiles, a salient feature of the surprise aspect of the invasion was the use of more or less commercial applications – high pressure pumps and hoses – to soften up Israeli defensive sand barriers along the Canal in order to breach the defensive walls and facilitate easier passage through the breaches.¹⁰ Students of military conflict quickly acknowledge that the deployment of new military technologies or weapon platforms can impact surprise and deception. The Cold War, given its duration, provided numerous examples, including the Soviet Union's development of an atomic bomb, the so-called 'Sputnik' moment and of course the positioning of missiles in Cuba. All of these examples demonstrate that the development or covert deployment of weapons can contribute to some form of strategic surprise, even if the aim is not to initiate war but simply be better positioned for it should one arise. Deception and concealment under these conditions can certainly impact on calculations of the balance of power. Of course, it will be argued that achieving complete military surprise today is virtually impossible given the vast array of technical surveillance means available to states or military blocs. Sophisticated indicator and warning systems serve to provide early warning of impending moves, which either individually or in tandem with other actions might suggest the prelude to war. Admittedly, such systems can be overcome, although it is undoubtedly likely that in order to do so will require either some form of surprise or in recognition that surprise is not a factor if you possess overwhelming force. Another factor in achieving strategic surprise is the generation of situational complexity in the circumstances in which an adversary has to respond, particularly in terms of decision-making and strategic and operational communication. In late 1944, the German High Command launched an audacious surprise offensive against the Allies at the Battle of the Bulge. Apart from the fact that the offensive was unexpected, in part because the Germans were considered to be incapable of generating such a move, the surprise was attained due to faulty intelligence and clear forms of deception at the operational and tactical level. As a case study, this operation demonstrated how important to strategic surprise was the confusion of higher echelons of command and how difficult it

¹⁰ DUNSTAN 2007.

can be during the ‘fog of war’ to make decisions.¹¹ If brought up to date, in a situation saturated by electronic warfare, cyber operations, attaining surprise might still be achievable. The difficult question is how to integrate these various actions that contribute to masking transparency in situational awareness or disrupts the ability to communicate effectively. Add to the mix the problem of active deception measures and a lack of political will and then strategic surprise is quite feasible even today. Proponents of Hybrid Warfare point to the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 as a prime example of strategic surprise allied to a reluctance by adversaries – either for political or military reasons – to leave the deception unchallenged. Similarly, the failure to appreciate the consequences of policy can also create a situation that hinders one’s ability to react to an unexpected strategic shock. The recent withdrawal of the U.S. and allied military forces from Afghanistan will be subject to forensic autopsy for years to come but in essence, no amount of solid intelligence can help if incorrect conclusions are drawn by policy makers as to the consequences of their policy actions.¹² Strategic surprise comes in many shapes and sizes. It certainly does make sense to place your adversary in a situation whereby they cannot identify your intent (until it is too late to do anything about it), fail to take effective countermeasures and then find himself in a situation, where effective command and control has been removed. Today, technology in part does seem to offer such a capability. Added to an ability to hide in plain sight and the willingness to engage in strategic miscommunication or plausible deniability as it used to be called, the battlefield of today and tomorrow might be a strategic space where complexity and confusion reigns irrespective of how well prepared you are or how sophisticated is your ability to direct and control numerous small sub-strategic unexpected operations in order to achieve a larger strategic element of surprise.

Technological advancement and emergent technology

When the enemy is able to deploy military technologies in such a way or on such a scale that it makes effective response either futile or too costly, then in

¹¹ CADDICK-ADAMS 2015.

¹² So soon after the event, it is difficult to gain a complete or even partial insight into the intelligence picture which governed allied responses, although anecdotal speculation would suggest some form of intelligence failure, but more certainly a policy failure.

a sense, they might have achieved a form of strategic surprise. Developments in weapon technology, including enhanced range, velocity, payload, surveillance or kinetic effectiveness are generally a constant in warfare. From the ancient world's 'Greek Fire' to the advent of the 'Dreadnought' through to the atomic and thermonuclear bombs and the satellite, there has been a steady evolution of weapons technology that to some extent has generated at times a form of strategic concern if not complete surprise. However, is the deployment of such novel 'weaponised' technologies sufficient to guarantee success at the strategic level or is the impact they make more suitable at the operational level?¹³ There is a school of thought that sees Hybrid Warfare as the crucible of new thinking and imagination on the exploitation of emergent and dual technologies to attain true strategic surprise and victory. Some years ago, Russia's President Putin highlighted artificial technology as a 'game changer' in terms of military dominance and ultimate victory. Why this should be so was easy to appreciate. Developments in numerous new and emergent technologies ranging from nanotechnologies to quantum computing have the potential to stimulate research and create new battlefield solutions for the major and arguably not so major power. Many commentators who operate in the recent field of 'existential risk' even suggest that the empowered non-state actor is as equal a threat as traditional states, with the malicious use of artificial intelligence and life sciences capable of creating biological weapons suitably genetically modified to pose significant small- or large-scale threats. What technologies might contribute to the acquisition of such transformational capability and how would it contribute to strategic surprise? It seems likely that our traditional acknowledgement of weapons evolution is most likely to engender the conditions in which strategic surprise would be most effective, namely that we might fail to determine what constitutes a significant 'revolution in military affairs'. For example, the deployment of forms of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems is surely not far off. To date, deployment of such systems has been limited but it would not be unreasonable to anticipate a wider deployment in the future. Greater exploitation of robotics will be significant but greater surprise will be achieved through the introduction of augmented humans – soldiers on the battlefield with augmented capabilities ranging from strength and stamina to the exploitation of personnel weapons with greater accuracy and precision. Add to this mix the acquisition of real time data and communication systems capable of operating unmolested

¹³ CRONIN 2020.

in space and if required, with an ability to disable competing space systems and the battlefield space might constantly surprise you. A careful reading of the above demonstrates the importance of attaining superiority of networked systems associated with the national capacity to operate a networked society. Military systems are but one element of an integrated social-supporting data system. As such it is a part of critical network infrastructure that requires protection in peace and war. Would the disabling or confusing of such networks constitute strategic surprise? In one sense, it should not come as a surprise that computer networked data systems might become a target in the sense that the disabling of energy systems in Ukraine or similar attacks in Saudi Arabia are little different from bombing attacks in the Second World War on strategic dams in Germany. The obvious difference is the methodologies of attack and the lethality of the consequences. Cyber operations, if successful, can inflict considerable damage and disruption on a society and it would be unwise to appreciate the potential scale of the loss of human life that might occur, even assuming data operations and communication links can be restored.¹⁴ Yet, surprise might be achieved depending on the arrangement and alignment of cyber operations, the targets and the timing. Should security loopholes be identified in critical operating systems within a system of critical network infrastructure, then the time of cyber penetration can afford an aggressive intruder the opportunity to achieve the unexpected, even against the most outwardly protected systems. It is this control over information and its use that provides another typical factor in achieving a form of strategic surprise, namely disinformation. Indeed, some forms of modern, algorithm-based technologies, can so shape information operations that the concept and products of so-called 'Fake News' often dominate public discourse of events, including those on the battlefield.¹⁵ Advocates of disinformation are surely correct when they stress how important it can be in times of conflict, from sapping the morale of a hostile public to encouraging state policies which run counter to the best interests of your adversary. Propaganda and psychological operations have always been useful tools in times of war but less developed is an understanding of how a concerted disinformation campaign can, over the longer term, help shape a situation, which if developed and exploited properly, can contribute to strategic surprise. One need only look at the aggressive information policies of Ukraine and Russia, as they seek to control the war's narrative to

¹⁴ EVEN – SIMAN-TOV 2012.

¹⁵ FRIDMAN 2022.

get a sense for how powerful and effective controlled information can be. Yet the fact remains that disinformation is often a dual edged weapon. The sense of disbelief, dislocation and anger experienced should a particular message be found to be untrue can undo years or months of painstaking strategic messaging. Trust is a particularly important concept in people's lives and the general and global generation of 'fake news' is likely to lead to a sceptical public that trusts no sources of information or very few sources. Under those circumstances, using disinformation might become more difficult to manage than hitherto has been the case.¹⁶

Utility and impact of surprise

Should hybrid conflict lend itself more to the exploitation of surprise than any other form of conflict or warfare? Do the factors outlined above suggest a greater expectation of the necessity of surprise, an expectation fuelled in part by the rather more fanciful descriptions of what might constitute hybrid war? Each generation tends to see conflict through the prism of their own experiences and circumstances and for some commentators, highlighting the hybrid nature of war seems a reasonable way of explaining the complexities of modern forms of conflict and the technologies associated with it. It can reinforce stereotypes of war. Is there such a thing as 'Hybrid Warfare' and is it appreciably different from wars fought in the past? It is often said that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and perspectives on this subject are as numerous as the opinions held but it is perhaps fair to say that there is no undisputed conclusion. Strategic surprise, however, is rarely disputed in terms of its aims and therefore assessing its utility might be more straightforward. Let us look at some basic premises. Is strategic surprise a cost-effective tool for use in times of conflict? The answer would seem to be an unequivocal yes. Warfare is extremely costly and is generally reflected in the downsizing of military formations and equipment holdings as technology increases in sophistication and cost, not to mention development time. Any form of strategic surprise that decreases the need for heavy forces or sustained operations or in extremis, the occupation of foreign territory, should at the very least be explored. Even most recognised forms of hybrid conflict would assume the same set of strategic calculations. The same might be argued in terms of

¹⁶ FRIDMAN 2022.

exploiting dual use technologies, either as a way to maintain an economic balance in terms of military power and as a way to reduce research and development costs or simply as a form of attaining a force multiplier effect. Discussion within hybrid warfare circles stress such asymmetric benefits but frankly such calculation is inimical to all professional considerations of war and peace. The only surprise would be if this were not to be considered a factor. Of course, this exploitation of dual use technologies has traditionally been a hallmark of the dedicated terrorist and if future terrorism or proxy warfare on non-state actor – such as organised crime – seek to influence politics and society through violence, then strategic surprise is even more likely. The attacks on the Twin Towers on 9/11 in New York with hijacked civilian aircraft clearly demonstrated that ‘imagination’ is an equally vital quality in attaining strategic surprise and perhaps indicates that hybrid warfare irrespective of scale will find the creation of strategic surprise invaluable, less perhaps as a contributory factor to an immediate victory and more perhaps a form of strategic signalling.¹⁷ Yet if hybrid conflict values the role of non-state actors as a form of, or only means of asymmetrical engagement, it is still unlikely to generate strategic repositioning or attain a shift in the balance of power in the absence of other forms of engagement and we have to ask if such actions would generate strategic surprise? One such area of Hybrid Warfare that might be amenable to the utilisation of surprise is in the exploitations of vulnerability in critical networked systems. As described earlier, the ability to complicate command and control, especially at the outset or at least the early stages of a conflict and influence decision-making is one way to secure strategic surprise and therefore it should be anticipated that most of not all future conflicts, hybrid or otherwise, might seek to exploit this area of activity. The attraction of this form of activity lies not in the sense that it might be classified ‘hybrid’ but rather that it could be particularly effective and create the conditions upon which surprise could be achieved. Networked societies based upon future concepts of the so-called ‘network of things’ have enormous potential for societies but similarly, the potential for great disruption resides within it. By and large, the developers and producers of ‘smart’ applications have a less acute interest in security and place a greater emphasis on safety and efficiency. We can already observe the consequences of dedicated and complex cyber penetrations of protected networks that control energy or logistics for example. The non-attributable

¹⁷ Most strategic analysts believe 9/11 was a classic example of strategic signalling, as much as surprise.

cyberattack on an Iranian nuclear site and the manipulation of the plant's systems control and data acquisition systems not only achieved surprise but also brought the vulnerabilities of such systems into stark relief for the world to see.¹⁸ It is unquestionably true that any future conflict will seek to dominate both the real and virtual spaces in which military operations might flourish. Whether this move into the cyber world and the attainment of 'cyber surprise' justifies the label is a moot point. At which stage does operational surprise translate as a strategic surprise in a cyber context? Does global interconnectivity disruption qualify as a feature only to be associated with hybrid conflict or is it simply how conflict evolves under current conditions?

The Russia–Ukraine Conflict 2022: Hybrid or traditional?

The current phase of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, as reflected in the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces in February 2022, is but the latest phase in a conflict that has been ongoing since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Some commentators saw in the strategic surprise achieved by the Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021 some sort of stimulus to Russian calculations for invasion, particularly in relation to likely Western reaction. Other observers noted that Russia, having used various forms of force and diplomacy during the Syrian civil war, would eventually shift its emphasis to strategic issues nearer home and 2022 was as good a time as any.¹⁹ With a shift in emphasis away from Crimea to the Donbas region, which was wracked by instability and ongoing low-level military engagement, Russia clearly envisaged an opportunity to swiftly intervene militarily to affect the balance of power on the ground. Yet it would be difficult to argue that the subsequent Russian intervention – Hybrid War or not – actually exploited any traditional form of strategic surprise. Indeed, the steady build-up of military force in the Russian–Ukraine border regions and a similar build-up in the Belarus–Ukraine region was hard to miss. Of course, one could plausibly argue that the continuation of diplomatic negotiations and the steady stream of Western politicians seeking to dissuade Russian President Putin from using force was a convenient tool for allowing Russia to bring its military forces up to combat readiness. Subsequent conflict since the invasion seems to

¹⁸ ZETTER 2015.

¹⁹ FRIDMAN 2022.

question just what level of combat readiness Russian forces actually acquired and actually what strategic surprise achieved lay in the fact that Ukrainian forces inflicted tremendous punishment on the Russian invaders and which led to a shift in strategic objectives away from conquering Ukraine to hopefully controlling the Donbas region. This was not a strategic surprise that Russia might have anticipated. Of course, the Russian military invasion of Ukraine significantly altered this situation on the ground in Ukraine and globally, in terms of the international legal norms and European and international security. However, does it justify the label of hybrid and more importantly, did this form of conflict lend itself to strategic surprise? Most commentators seem to agree that Russia had been signalling its intent to invade well before the first forces crossed into Ukrainian territory and that this intent – including very public and large-scale military manoeuvres – had been noticed and analysed by western intelligence sources. In short, there was no strategic surprise *per se*.²⁰ Inevitably, the ensuing military operations, by definition, had no aim associated with the achievement of strategic surprise but rather the accomplishment of limited military objectives. However, one might argue that inadvertently, the conduct of those operations and tactics on the part of the Russian military, particularly the failure to achieve their objectives, signalled a strategic surprise to their western counterparts. In short, most commentators were surprised to find the Russian military significantly short of its presumed war fighting capability. Western analysts have been repeatedly surprised by the ineffectiveness of Russian military management and operational art and that no amount of technological capability seems able to make up the shortfall. Another early feature of the campaign to date has been the relatively minor role played by cyber operations as a means either to acquire surprise or to affect an operational difference. One particular and notable cyberattack on Ukrainian internet systems was blocked by a U.S. commercial satellite operator. Under hybrid warfare discussions, cyber operations are frequently cited as an integral hybrid activity but in reality, at least in this conflict, it has not really surfaced. Yet if perceived from another angle, one might plausibly argue that Russia's invasion seemed to reflect several hallmarks of a Hybrid Conflict. Aside from the continuing efforts to exploit traditional military firepower, including the managed use of new technologies, especially hypersonic missiles, what the general public might consider as hybrid features seem to be present. We have just

²⁰ In fact, given the very poor performance of the Russian forces during the initial invasion of Ukraine, suggests that the strategic surprise was actually felt in Moscow more than in Kyiv.

mentioned Cyber Warfare as being integrated from the beginning of operations but perhaps on a scale somewhat less than had been anticipated. Certainly no cyberattack dislocated Ukraine's ability to respond to the initial invasion. That, however, does not reflect the fact that the continued use of cyber weaponry by Russia or against Russia creates some form of tactical surprise and inconvenience. Both sides have not given up on cyber capabilities and in fact, electronic warfare – perhaps not cyber warfare – if blended with other forms of electronic or data disruption is becoming a new hallmark in war and not strictly at the outset as strategists once thought more likely. Another feature of the conflict is the Russian willingness to not only use Proxy forces from the Russian-controlled Donbas region but to also recruit and deploy a range of irregular or non-state actors including individuals and groups representing private military companies (the Wagner Group), forces from Chechnya, the Caucasus and Syria. Obviously, the use of such proxies or irregular forces complicates the battle space and the laws of war but there seems every likelihood that such deployments might well become a regular feature of modern forms of conflict, hybrid or otherwise.²¹ Similarly, as the war in Ukraine has dragged on, unanticipated actions seem likely again to reinforce the notion of hybrid and in particular, in relation to the use of food supply as a weapon of war. Russian authorities have seized on their control of Ukrainian grain and its necessity for the feeding of numerous populations globally as a tool to influence both Ukrainian and international behaviour, particularly in relation to economic sanctions. Tempting as it might be to see this as a form of Hybrid Warfare and one that might become more prominent in the future, some commentators will simply view this as but another example of 'Total War'. One would be forgiven for having sympathy with this view. Yet equally, the ability to exploit international legal arrangements for the smooth operation of free trade, the ability to use sanctions and other forms of dissuasive influence to curtail trade in specific areas or sectors and particularly on parties not directly involved with the conflict seems to be reaching new heights and which takes it beyond traditional concepts of economic warfare. Some observers will finally highlight the global communication and public information war as another feature of modern hybrid war. They also highlight that public perceptions are influenced by fake news platforms and that in Western societies at least, media transparency is frequently subject to malicious interference and claim and counterclaim over the veracity of sources of information, including video

²¹ The more recent activities of the Wagner Group seem to be proving the point.

and audio ‘eyewitness accounts’. That this is likely to become a significant ‘real time’ feature of modern conflict does place it somewhat in a different league but whether or not this can generate strategic surprise might be a moot point. Undoubtedly, the technology exists to fabricate reality – so-called ‘deepfake’ products – and in any future crisis, anything that places doubt in the mind of the decision-maker has the potential – depending on the deception – to significantly ‘alter reality’ and result in strategic surprise.

Conclusion

There is very little in Hybrid Warfare that differs from traditional forms of warfare and as such, one must anticipate attempts in the future to achieve strategic surprise. However, do less typical forms of Hybrid Warfare make it any more likely that surprise can be attained? One might conclude by saying that the potential for achieving surprise in conflict today is no more or no less favourable than it was before. Certainly, the wider application of various forms of new technology, ranging from cyber weapons to ‘deepfake’ products, does offer those responsible for creating deception or concealment some additional opportunities. The way our societies are developing and the greater reliance on information network and data development equally hold out promise for new and imaginative forms of disruption. However, perhaps the future of hybrid might relies less on the blending and integration of numerous forms of traditional forms of activity repackaged and more on the integration of human and machine applications to create a novel form of battle space where attaining surprise is built into the future algorithms of war.

Questions

1. How would you define the concept of ‘Hybrid Warfare’ and how would you assess the most effective way for strategic surprise to be achieved through this form of conflict?
2. Explain the main differences between traditional modern conflict and the common features most commonly used to describe Hybrid Warfare.

3. In reviewing major global warfare since 1939, identify the most common features of strategic surprise and how these might apply today in terms of hybrid conflict.
4. What activities – if any – led to the Russian attainment of strategic surprise during the invasion of Crimea in 2014?
5. Can forms of terrorism achieve strategic surprise? Discuss.

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