

# *Academia and the armed forces: formal colleagues or passing acquaintances?*

Article

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## **Academia and the Armed Forces: Formal Colleagues or Passing Acquaintances?**

“Quite frequently an uncomprehending gap has developed between academics writing within universities and serving officers within their staff colleges.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Understanding and using strategic theory is not a superficial enterprise. It is based on the examination of complex relationships and the interactions between states, their allies, neutrals and enemies—and this understanding has practical consequences for policies a government or the armed forces pursue. Strategic theory is not always capable of accurately predicting future events, even in cases where the political and military situation is clear. This article critiques the disconnect between academic research and military practice in the field of strategy, war, and warfare. It argues that academic trends often prioritize the creation of new terminology and theoretical frameworks over practical utility, which diminishes their relevance and brings into question the ethics of such activities. To address this, it advocates for a more constructive relationship between academia and military practitioners, emphasizing the need for research that provides useful insights while accommodating the complexity and ambiguity inherent in military operations.

This piece examines and analyzes some of the current “fads” and new descriptions of war, warfare and strategy by the application of different terminology. The problem is addressed in

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Holden Reid, ed., *Military Power: Land Warfare in Theory and Practice* (London ; Portland, OR: F. Cass, 1997), 2.

two parts. First, are academics rewarded for work which is useful to practitioners? Second, does academic work enhance, reflect or complement the true state of practitioners' understanding and practice? Lastly, the analysis proposes steps the strategic studies field can take to enhance the practitioners' understanding of war in a manner that would increase the chances of formulating policies that advance the West's objectives, mainly maintenance of the status quo in the face of increasingly belligerent, cooperating, and capable adversaries.

## **Strategic Thinking and Its Practical Application**

The choice of words one uses carries significance; they shape one's comprehension of a subject and influence the perception of its mechanisms and impacts. In analyses of conflict in Ukraine or Syria the types of warfare are often entitled "hybrid" or "asymmetric."<sup>2</sup>

In 2015, graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and the U.S. Army War College, Professor Antulio Echevarria wrote,

While the original aim of such labeling or relabeling may have been to draw the attention of busy policymakers to emerging security issues, it has evolved into something of a culture of replication in which the labels are repeated more out of habit than reflection. As a result, we have an increase in claims about what contemporary wars are (or are not), but little in the way of strategic analysis to support those claims.<sup>3</sup>

What are the descriptions for? The intention is to allow practitioners and students of strategy to compare one event with another. Well-established descriptions should help one understand what is happening, and how he can overcome our opponents utilizing this knowledge. They

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<sup>2</sup> Janne Jokinen, Magnus Normark, and Michael Fredholm, 'Hybrid Threats from Non-State Actors: A Taxonomy', n.d.

<sup>3</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria, 'How Should We Think about "Gray-Zone" Wars?', *Infinity Journal* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 16.

provide an understanding of differences between events, and the ability to distinguish between dissimilar occurrences. But for what purpose? The purpose should be to inform policy and strategy makers, to inform those whose job it is to create policy and to implement it. Just as importantly it should allow the armed forces a better understanding of the threats they are facing, and the opportunity to develop counters and new doctrines.

The article argues that the current trend of dividing the theory and practice of the use of military force into smaller sub-categories, or “salami-slicing,” is not only counterproductive, but also risks stifling originality and inventiveness in the field of strategy. Presenting a more holistic and simplified framework for understanding strategy would encourage greater creativity and innovation. As part of the process of strategy creation, one must also take account of the context in which he expects to use military force. Assessing the threat posed by a potential enemy and analyzing his capabilities enables one to shape the response. The trend to “salami-slicing” can in part be explained by the stagnation of strategic thinking in the West since the end of the Cold War. Has the West learned from its mistakes and, if so, how that has been implemented in the latest North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) *Strategic Concept*?

## **What Is the Problem?**

The intention of this article is to examine whether academic activity around the use and theory of military force helps the practitioners do their job. This will be assessed from a broad perspective. However, it has direct relevance given the changing global circumstances. With NATO having completed its new *Strategic Concept*, what has (has not) the West learned about how the thinking around strategy, war, and warfare is developed, particularly in NATO countries? If the West does not learn, why not? If the West does learn, how does it

retain the capacity throughout peaceful periods? The latter is probably the most difficult part of sustaining a credible military force.

As demonstrated by Professor Echevarria, the narrowing definitions, applied to war and warfare as part of the process of strategy, have occurred in increasing numbers since the end of the Cold War. The categories that are proliferating now all describe styles of war and warfare which were present and understood *during* the Cold War, and before, summed up by de Wijk as “Old Wine in New Casks.”<sup>4</sup>

The aspects of war and warfare that are named and defined by academics have been previously recognized by many in military forces around the world, but without the necessity to name and catalogue them so closely.<sup>5</sup> Some academics fulfil their role by producing research which adds very little to the general understanding of strategy, war and warfare, but scores well in official rankings and improves their standing in academia. Academic success is measured, certainly in the United Kingdom (UK), by the “impact” research has. This “impact” is measured by the status of the journals in which the research is published, and how frequently it is read. It is far more difficult to measure how much “impact” the type of research under consideration here has on the practice of the military function. This problem is not confined to the Strategic Studies field. In the review of political theory, Dr Maeve McKeown argues that, “... these conditions [of impact rating] are stifling intellectual creativity ... and dissent ...”<sup>6</sup> Goodhart’s Law states, “When a measure becomes a target, it

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<sup>4</sup> Rob De Wijk, ‘Hybrid Conflict and the Changing Nature of Actors’, in *The Oxford Handbook of War*, ed. Julian Lindley-French and Yves Boyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 359.

<sup>5</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional*, Strategic Studies Institute Monograph (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Maeve McKeown, ‘The View from Below: How the Neoliberal Academy Is Shaping Contemporary Political Theory’, *Society*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-022-00705-z>.

ceases to be a good measure.”<sup>7</sup> As applied to measuring academic output, the targets have unwittingly made it necessary for scholars to “produce” work, fulfilling Goodhart’s Law. Scholarly work is now regarded as any other type of product, manufactured as a means to an end, rather than to add to collective understanding of a particular problem or its solution. This is a waste of effort and time and expense which could be better employed providing the practitioners with the support they actually need, rather than what academia believes they need.

The expert community should remove the academic dogma associated with theory and methodology in the study of strategy, war, and warfare. The activities are “fuzzy” in practice. As Professor Beatrice Heuser, ex of NATO and *Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr*, says in the conclusion to her most recent book, “... it is very difficult to draw the line between the state of war and the state of peace, but that we need to factor in these fuzzy boundaries and the spillage in both directions ...”<sup>8</sup> This problem of fuzziness needs to be reflected in theory and methodological approach. As Dr Michaela Dodge observed, “The issue is that some policy-makers are happy to take flawed analysis, or analysis from people who were ... repeatedly wrong on an issue in the past, and use that to justify their wrong-headed policies on that very same issue.”<sup>9</sup> This author realizes, as an academic, that this will send shivers through many colleagues.

In academic circles more time seems to be spent arguing the finer technical points of the use of terminology, or defining that terminology more closely, than is spent thinking whether the

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<sup>7</sup> Alec Chrystal, ‘Goodhart’s Law: Its Origins, Meaning and Implications for Monetary Policy’, in *Central Banking, Monetary Theory and Practice*, ed. Paul Mizen (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781950777.00022>.

<sup>8</sup> Beatrice Heuser, *War: A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 398.

<sup>9</sup> Dr Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at National Institute for Public Policy. E-mail to author, 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2024

terminology is useful.<sup>10</sup> The increasing use of inappropriate business jargon and ideas to justify budget cuts within the armed forces has already been noted by this researcher.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Ukraine, the current theoretical approach has complicated the situation by offering too many competing and ultimately flawed interpretations of events taking place in Ukraine, even prior to February 2022.<sup>12</sup> Before then, the West was collectively reluctant to respond to Russian expansionism and aggression. This was partly a function of its hope of a new relationship with Russia, a “new world order,”<sup>13</sup> partly an uncertainty over the workability or suitability of deterrence. Academic interpretations and its many theories offered to politicians and practitioners may have muddied the waters, contributing to NATO’s inability or unwillingness to act decisively, regardless of its military ability to respond. The invasion of Ukraine changed the perception of what had been happening in that country since 2014, but NATO members still have trouble agreeing on the severity of Russia’s threat and the best response to it. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine illustrates the difference between peace-time thinking and the practical employment of military force in a conventional, large-scale war. How can NATO continue to develop its thinking around strategy, war, and warfare in a period between peace and war?

The predictive and advisory position of academic debate has been called into question following the reaction of some to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Political scientist John Mearsheimer has declared that NATO is responsible for the current war, but

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see Alessio Patalano, ‘When Strategy Is “Hybrid” and Not “Grey”: Reviewing Chinese Military and Constabulary Coercion at Sea’, *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 6 (2 November 2018): 811–39; Rob Johnson, Martijn Kitzen, and Tim Sweijs, eds., *The Conduct of War in the 21st Century: Kinetic, Connected and Synthetic*, Routledge Advances in Defence Studies (London New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Kenton White, “‘Effing” the Military: A Political Misunderstanding of Management’, *Defence Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2017.1351879>.

<sup>12</sup> Eliot A. Cohen and Phillips O’Brien, “The Russia-Ukraine War A Study in Analytic Failure,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2024, available at [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-09/240924\\_Cohen\\_Russia\\_Ukraine.pdf?VersionId=1YNnRnwS.6DkrwNcAkdb5DBsfjclg0JR](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-09/240924_Cohen_Russia_Ukraine.pdf?VersionId=1YNnRnwS.6DkrwNcAkdb5DBsfjclg0JR).

<sup>13</sup> George H W Bush, ‘State of the Union Address’ (Washington, DC, 1991).

this conclusion shuns the rules-based international order and Westphalian system with sovereignty at its core so beloved of academic theory. Expectations are that other countries will operate by the “Rule of Law” in international relations when reality is that some nations have never accepted this decidedly Western interpretation. There must be an acknowledgement of this problem, and a willingness to see the world for what it is rather than how one wishes it to be. Whether NATO expansion or U.S. policy prompted the Russian invasion placed the debate over the reality of the situation.

### **What Do Academics Say? Buzzwords and Conforming to the Expectations of Academia**

If, as will be demonstrated, many, if not all, of definitions and words are attempts by academics to present “old wine in new casks,” what do they offer to practitioners? If, as is argued here, they offer very little to the benefit of practitioners, then academia needs to assess what can be done to provide useful support to the armed forces by way of research and novel ideas. The process of self-sustaining argument within academia may be very good for the careers of some academics, but without providing real value to wider users of that information.

An alternative to the iterations of refinement and more tightly defined buzzwords, Thomas Huber, research fellow at the Combat Studies Institute, proposed the use of “Compound Warfare” as an idea that was not claimed as a new phenomenon, but of a simple framework for analyzing a broad spectrum of warfare styles.<sup>14</sup> There is no single, all-encompassing definition of “Compound Warfare,” but Huber’s framework is based on the idea that warfare is a complex, systemic phenomenon that can be analyzed in terms of a variety of warfare

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<sup>14</sup> Ofer Fridman, *Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Resurgence and Politicisation* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022), 24–25.



styles: it has been, "... kept simple in hopes that it will serve as a convenient framework for analysis, readers should remember that enormous variety exists in the historical cases of compound warfare. As in most other realms of military thought, the theory is simple, but the reality is complex."<sup>15</sup>

### **A Rose by Any Other Name**

It is now possible to turn to those aspects of strategy that fall into the "ways" and "means" of strategy: How does one achieve this goal? In relation to post-Napoleonic wars, General Sir Rupert Smith suggests, "Time and distance, two of the factors in planning for war, had become much shorter."<sup>16</sup> This, in essence, explains much of what the academic world is trying to wrestle with. Time relates to the fundamental differences between combatants in asymmetric warfare, as originally conceived by Professor Andrew Mack.<sup>17</sup> Time and distance are essential to hybrid warfare's central concept of the mixing of "styles" of warfare and improvements in communications technology.

### **Keep It Simple**

In 1951, The Ministry of Defence Chiefs of Staff (COS) Committee issued a report ahead of a Commonwealth Defence Ministers' Conference. This report, and its predecessors, summarized the strategy of the British Government as being an alliance effort to contain and, if necessary, combat the spread of Communism. In this document, the threat is assessed as, "... subversive and military action not amounting to total war, against a background of a threat of total war ..."<sup>18</sup> This description is concise, yet flexible. It contains no jargon.

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Huber, *Compound Warfare, That Fatal Knot* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, USA: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London ; New York: Allen Lane, 2005), 69.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Mack, 'Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict', *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975): 175–200.

<sup>18</sup> COS(51)353, 'Defence Policy and Global Strategy', 8 June 1951, DEFE 5/31, The National Archives.

As the use of “buzzwords” has gained traction, moving from business to the military, there is an accompanying expansion of the jargon, or complex writing style, which makes clear understanding quite difficult. Professor Kenneth Payne has employed artificial intelligence to process British military doctrine publications into simpler English.<sup>19</sup> The first is the original text:

Operational art seeks to clarify the situation, assess opportunities and risks, foster actions that continually gain advantage, and deliver logical solutions to complex problems. It enables detailed planning to take place and for the staff to write practical orders (plans). Operational art integrates ends, ways and means: it determines which forces conduct what actions in time and space to create effects and achieve objectives.<sup>20</sup>

And this is the AI simplified version:

Operational art is a way to figure out what to do in a complicated situation, how to take advantage of opportunities and avoid risks, and how to find solutions to complex problems. Operational art helps people figure out what forces to use and when and where to use them to achieve objectives.

The result is a stark demonstration of the pseudo-complexity introduced into what should be clear and concise.

An explanation for the use of some of the definitions commented on below is academic “groupthink.” Described as, “‘... excessive concurrence-seeking,’ a behavior that explains ‘flaws in the operation of small, high-level groups ...’”<sup>21</sup> this is a self-reinforcing process for

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<sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/kennethpayne01/status/1571071386696974336>

<sup>20</sup> ‘Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations’ (NATO Standardization Office, May 2019), AJP-5.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Klein and Charlotte Stern, ‘Groupthink in Academia: Majoritarian Departmental Politics and the Professional Pyramid’, *The Independent Review* 13, no. 4 (Spring 2009): 587.

academics publishing in academic journals for academics. Does the introduction of “new and improved” definitions and descriptions of warfare help us when developing strategy? Phrases such as Asymmetric Warfare, “Effects Based Operations,” Hybrid, and Grey Zone warfare are the vocabulary of academic work, sometimes used by politicians, but less so by military planners and commanders. Is there utility in coining new names and phrases to describe existing or historical military and/or political phenomena?

In a Tweet the Chief of the General Staff of the British Army General Mark Carleton-Smith wrote, “In this data-driven age strategy is increasingly the art of creating and leveraging networks to achieve a position of relative advantage and dominance.”<sup>22</sup> Strategy has always been about achieving dominance, whether the age is driven by data or not.

A humorous take on the academic argument over the effectiveness of the deterrent effect of Alliances was put onto Twitter by Professor Paul Poast.<sup>23</sup> It demonstrates delightfully the way in which the data can be interpreted in different ways, ultimately proving almost worthless as an indicator for policy makers, strategist or other practitioners. It does, however, keep various academics employed.

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Carleton-Smith, ‘The Chief of the General Staff’, *Twitter*, 13 September 2019, <https://twitter.com/ArmyCGS/status/1172544393615761411>.

<sup>23</sup> Professor Paul Poast, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. <https://twitter.com/ProfPaulPoast/status/1556968668856303616?s=20&t=pe2lA21BaaSgmQDbN777xg>

## Deterrence & Alliances: The Quantitative Lit.

- [Russett & Huth](#) (1984): "Alliances don't deter"
- [Huth](#) (1988): "Alliances still don't deter"

### [Fearon enters the chat]

- Fearon (1994): "What about selection? You need to look at entering crises."
- [Huth](#) (1999): "That's true, but hard to do."
- Fearon (2002): "I don't care. Do it."

### [Leeds enters the chat]

- Leeds (2003): "Guys, guys. I got this. And, by the way, alliances deter."

### [Vasquez enters the chat]

- Vasquez and [Senese](#) (2008): "Actually, alliances make crises worse."
- Johnson and Leeds (2011): "No, alliances promote peace."
- Vasquez, Kenwick, and Powers (2015): "Wrong! Alliances don't do much at all."
- Johnson and Leeds (2017): "Yes, they do. They promote peace!"
- [Vasequez](#) and Kenwick (2017): "No, they don't!"

## Hybrid

In his executive summary, defense expert Frank Hoffman describes hybrid warfare in the following manner:

There are a broadening number of challenges facing the United States, as the National Defense Strategy (NDS) noted in 2005. These include traditional, irregular, terrorist and disruptive threats or challengers. This has created a unique planning dilemma for today's military planners, raising a choice between preparing for states with conventional capabilities or the more likely scenario of non-state actors employing asymmetric or irregular tactics. However, these may no longer be separate threats or modes of war. Several strategists have identified an increased merging or blurring of conflict and war forms. The potential for types of conflict that blur the distinction between war and peace, and combatants and non-combatants, appear to be on the rise.

Indeed, the NDS itself suggested that the most complex challengers of the future may seek synergies and greater impact by combining multiple modes of war.<sup>24</sup>

What Hoffman describes as “... a unique planning dilemma ...” where strategists have, “... identified an increased merging or blurring of conflict and war forms ...” could not be further from reality. The COS Committee report mentioned above summarized the same type of situation using simple words. The styles of warfare described by Hoffman have been understood for decades, if not centuries. The character of war has changed; time, demonstrated in the speed of operations, and their extent, as mentioned above; communications technology has expanded exponentially; but the nature of war and its components have not changed, regardless of what one calls them.

In a 2015 NATO Defense College publication, the problem with defining hybrid warfare in NATO was that “... there is no common understanding on the use, relevance, or practical benefit of the hybrid warfare concept ...”<sup>25</sup> The Multinational Capability Development Campaign project “Understanding Hybrid Warfare” described hybrid warfare as “... asymmetric and uses multiple instruments of power along a horizontal and vertical axis, and to varying degrees shares an increased emphasis on creativity, ambiguity, and the cognitive elements of war.”<sup>26</sup> However, the report goes on,

The international consensus on “hybrid warfare” is clear: no one understands it, but everyone, including NATO and the European Union, agrees it is a problem. Our

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<sup>24</sup> Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey Arthur Larsen, eds., *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats* (Rome: NATO Defense College, Research Division, 2015), 258.

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Patrick J. Cullen and Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, ‘Understanding Hybrid Warfare’ (Multinational Capability Development Campaign Countering Hybrid Warfare Project, 2017), 8.

common understanding of hybrid warfare is underdeveloped and therefore hampers our ability to deter, mitigate and counter this threat.

However, the overall view has been summed up thus: “Hybrid warfare remains a contested concept and there is no universally agreed definition of it.”<sup>27</sup> If an organization such as NATO is unable to clearly express what Hybrid Warfare is, then the term is useless.

De Wijk points out that, “Mao Zedong ... provided the first coherent theory of revolutionary struggle using a mix of warfare techniques ... Mao argued the struggle is primarily a political one and not military ... thus without coining the term, hybrid warfare as a concept was born.”<sup>28</sup> In this one section de Wijk unwittingly illustrates the drawback with the definition of hybrid warfare. First, all wars must have a political purpose, otherwise it is meaningless violence. The two cannot be separated. Second, the style of warfare that Mao expounded was a development of *centuries* of war, rather than a new theory. Indeed, it can be traced back at least to the French radical and revolutionary Auguste Blanqui.<sup>29</sup>

In an article published in 2016, Captain John Chambers of the Modern War Institute wrote that, “The gray zone is the ‘space’ between peace and war on the spectrum of conflict.”<sup>30</sup> He goes on to say that “gray -zone hybrid threats” pose challenges to the United States because of its acceptance of particular laws, norms and processes. The combination of two distinct buzzwords confuses the situation more than necessary. One officer commented that the language used to describe and analyze military problems must be clear, unambiguous and

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<sup>27</sup> ‘NATO Review - Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and “Trust” as the Antidote’, NATO Review, 30 November 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html>.

<sup>28</sup> De Wijk, ‘Hybrid Conflict and the Changing Nature of Actors’, 360.

<sup>29</sup> Dan La Botz, ‘Understanding the Paris Commune on Its 150th Anniversary’, *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 9, no. 2 (2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48645499>.

<sup>30</sup> John Chambers, ‘Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats: An MWI Report’ (West Point: The Modern War Institute, 18 October 2016), 4.

simple. This is most important in a multinational environment where confusion and misunderstanding can reign.

The “grey zone” or “hybrid war” classification is a recent separation of limited use and employment. The term has been (inappropriately) applied especially to Russian strategy promoted by General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, although he was describing the Russian understanding of events in the Middle East and around Russia’s borders, especially Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Continual refinement leads to the term being misused from the original intention, very much like the term “strategy.” Ofer Fridman, Director of Operations at the King's Centre for Strategic Communications, wrote, “... Russian and Western military professionals now recognize that the term [hybrid] is next to useless for describing the real nature of contemporary conflicts ...”<sup>32</sup>

All military planning is unique. The distinction between war and peace is apparent in some contexts, much less so in others. However, this is not new. One only need look at history to see the existence of the style of warfare described by Hoffman as “hybrid.” All the challenges listed existed long before Hoffman “revealed” the rise of this type of warfare. We can look to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and before to see the employment of conventional and unconventional means, of terror attacks, propaganda, and the use of misleading information. Despite Hoffman overlooking historical examples, the evidence stands that “hybrid” warfare as he describes it is certainly nothing new. Rather, Hoffman’s view comes from a U.S.-centric interpretation of events. Dodge suggests,

... on one hand, we have picking over definitions, because it is much easier to pick over definitions rather than actually do something about a problem, and on the other, a

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<sup>31</sup> Molly McKew, ‘The Gerasimov Doctrine’, Politico Magazine, October 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538/>.

<sup>32</sup> Fridman, *Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’*, 157.

culture of unaccountability regarding failures that might get us all killed eventually.

“Hybrid warfare” is sinister because it makes us think we are not at war yet, and therefore are safer than we truly are, and off guard regarding the true nature of our adversaries.<sup>33</sup>

Other nations have seen the same problem and accepted it as a function of the calculus of war and warfare.

### **Asymmetric Warfare**

In its original form, “asymmetric conflict” looked at war in a “post-colonial” framework, examining the simple asymmetry of “conventional” military power, focusing on Algeria and Vietnam.<sup>34</sup> Industrialized colonial powers with a superiority in conventional military capability were being forced to withdraw from a conflict by “inferior” nationalist forces. The idea of asymmetric warfare as presented by the conceptual descendants of Mack’s original work assumes that “symmetrical” war occurs between like units – in other words state against state. Yet, Mack himself warned of the limitations of examining conflicts, “... either temporally or spatially ...”<sup>35</sup> to provide an answer to current problems. He continued, “Finally, it should be obvious that my aim in this paper has not been to provide a ‘model’ which may then be ‘tested’ by applying it mechanically and ahistorically to a wide range of conflicts.”<sup>36</sup> This warning needs to be considered carefully.

General Sir Rupert Smith wrote that the title “asymmetric warfare” is,

... a phrase I dislike ... The practice of war, indeed its “art,” is to achieve asymmetry over the opponent. Labelling wars as asymmetric is to me something of a euphemism

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<sup>33</sup> Dr Michaela Dodge, e-mail to author, 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Mack, ‘Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars’.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Mack, ‘Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict’, *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 196, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009880>.

<sup>36</sup> Mack, 199.



to avoid acknowledging that my opponent is not playing to my strengths and I am not winning.<sup>37</sup>

This use of asymmetry describes how a difference in capabilities can lead to an unexpected victory. However, this is not new. To call a war “asymmetric” is stating the obvious. All war is to some degree or another asymmetric. One only needs to look back to the Napoleonic Wars, especially that conducted in Spain and Portugal, to see a parallel. One can go back further to the Roman Empire to see strikingly similar circumstances of a difference in capability which led to the decimation of Varus’ legions in the Teutoburg Forest in 9AD, or the destruction of the IX Legion during the Battle of Camulodunum in 61AD.<sup>38</sup>

The asymmetry may be very small. At some point there may be an increase in the asymmetry. The strategy adopted by one side may be significantly superior to the opponents’. Even wars that are reduced to stalemate have their asymmetries. In World War I, German defenses and doctrine were generally superior to those of the Allies, even though Germany was ultimately defeated. The asymmetry is what Colin Gray referred to as the “Tactical Crisis.”<sup>39</sup> This crisis occurs in war when one combatant cannot achieve its goal with the forces and doctrines available, either through technological disparity or tactical and operational superiority of the opponent. In World War I, the stuttering development of mobile armor and wireless communications, and the subsequent development of combined-arms combat, provided the breakthrough both literally and figuratively. A similar “tactical crisis” is developing in stalemate in Ukraine with the use of drones and similar devices for passive and active roles.

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, *The Utility of Force*, 3–4.

<sup>38</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, vol. 14, n.d., chap. 29.

<sup>39</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History*, Cass Series--Strategy and History 2 (London : Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 123.

## Effects Based Operations (EBO)

Published by RAND in 2001, *Effects Based Operations* describes the subject of the study as:

... operations conceived and planned in a systems framework that considers the full range of direct, indirect, and cascading effects—effects that may, with different degrees of probability, be achieved by the application of military, diplomatic, psychological, and economic instruments.

Current methods of analysis and modeling are inadequate for representing EBO, and this reality should be considered by the analytical community to pose a grand challenge. Addressing the challenge will require changes of mindset, new theories and methods, and a new empirical base.<sup>40</sup>

In a similar vein to “hybrid” warfare, the paper is published from an exclusively U.S. standpoint as part of a “force transformation” project. General Mattis wrote,

I am convinced that the various interpretations of EBO have caused confusion throughout the joint force and among our multinational partners that we must correct. It is my view that EBO has been misapplied and overextended to the point that it actually hinders rather than helps joint operations.<sup>41</sup>

He went on to write, “The use of ‘effects’ has confused what previously was a well-designed and straightforward process for determining ‘ends’.”<sup>42</sup>

The advantage of the simpler “Ends, Ways and Means” approaches, such as the Lykke Model,<sup>43</sup> is precisely that they allow for straightforward development of strategy without

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<sup>40</sup> Paul K. Davis, *Effects-Based Operations: A Grand Challenge for the Analytical Community* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), xiii.

<sup>41</sup> James Mattis, ‘USJFCOM Commander’s Guidance for Effects-Based Operations’, *Parameters*, Autumn 2008, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Mattis, 22.

<sup>43</sup> The Lykke model conceptualizes strategy as a three-legged stool, where the legs represent ends (objectives), ways (methods), and means (resources), emphasizing that balance among these elements is essential for

limiting its flexibility through using confining definitions. The components of ends, ways, means and risks allows the strategist to employ the understanding of the contemporary context to enable thinking. This enabling benefits not only the strategist but the military forces that are employed.

## **Grey Zone**

As one strategic commentator noted, “The current fad in terminology is *gray zone wars*.”<sup>44</sup>

What is described as “grey zone” is simply activity that occurs below the threshold for war, or the invocation of Article 5 in NATO, or a United Nations Security Council resolution. In this way it mirrors the description from COS of “... action not amounting to total war ...”<sup>45</sup>

“Grey Zone” is often used, especially regarding Russia, as being a new form of warfare. The concept relies on keeping the level of a confrontation below the threshold at which state-level open warfare takes place. However, the level at which open warfare begins is context dependent and cannot be universally defined. Therefore, the concept of “Grey Zone” warfare is untenable. While there is no universal understanding of the transition from “peace” to “war” in any situation given that each one is unique, one can recognize a difference between war and peace. Thus, one cannot apply a universal definition to this highly context-dependent condition. Rather, the existing words describe what has existed, certainly for the last 100 years, in all sorts of confrontations and conflicts. It does not benefit the field to rename the phenomenon yet again.

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strategic stability and success. A.F. Lykke, *Military Strategy: Theory and Application* (U.S. Army War College, 1983).

<sup>44</sup> Lukas Milevski, ‘Respecting Strategic Agency: On the Categorization of War in Strategy’, *Joint Forces Quarterly* 86 (June 2017): 35.

<sup>45</sup> COS(51)353, ‘Defence Policy and Global Strategy’.

## Time and Technology

The reaction to new technology tends to extremes within the expert community. Some assume that a new technology will change the face of warfare, and others credit the same new technology with no effect on the battlefield at all. In many academic works, the anticipated effects of technology run ahead of theory or, most importantly, practice, for example the concept of “drone warfare.”<sup>46</sup> There is an assumption that technology makes the difference to the outcome of a battle, or ultimately a war. In 1962 Arthur C. Clarke wrote, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”<sup>47</sup> As the capability of technology outstrips our ability to use its full potential, it appears as a magical solution to any given problem.

Today, the problem is not in the function of information gathering and dissemination, but the speed of those processes, aided by technology. Relatively speaking, there is little difference between the use of the Montgolfier balloon *l’Entreprenant* at the Battle of Fleurus in 1794 and that of drones for reconnaissance in Ukraine in 2022. This is captured well by the BBC journalist Quentin Somerville. He reported from a village near Izyum in Eastern Ukraine. “It could have been a scene from earlier wars, except it was pimped by technology. A widescreen TV showed live feeds from powerful spy cameras trained on Russian positions.”<sup>48</sup> The information gathered by *l’Entreprenant* would provide the French army with a comparable advantage, given that the enemy did not possess the technology at all.

Regarding the relationship between time in war and the use of technology, it is apparent that as technology develops, the speed with which data is accumulated increases almost

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<sup>46</sup> Dominika Kunertova, ‘Drones Have Boots: Learning from Russia’s War in Ukraine’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2 October 2023): 576–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2262792>.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (California, CA: Popular Library, 1977), 39.

<sup>48</sup> Quentin Somerville, ‘Pinned down by Russian Fire in Key Frontline Village’, News, BBC, 16 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61460790>.

exponentially. Moore's law applies to data as much as it does to processing power.<sup>49</sup> The development of technology amplifies the speed at which some military operations can be carried out, and the accuracy with which kinetic weapons can be used. It allows drones to loiter for hours, providing high resolution images. At the tactical level, the use of cheap, commercially available technology makes a difference in Ukraine. Drones, with makeshift explosive devices, are deployed to great effect. Geo-location prompted a sudden explosion of image analysis in the early part of the war. Readily available and easy to use civilian technology has increased the effectiveness of small-unit operations.<sup>50</sup>

But the amount of data new technologies provide can be overwhelming. For example, even as far back as 1982,

... the flow of signal traffic during the Falklands War exceeded the capacity to handle all the data. Important signals were filtered out and acted upon, but less important signals were left, some unread to the end of the campaign.<sup>51</sup>

By making information instantly available, its overload has now found its way to the lower levels of command. The capacity for humans to absorb and interpret data is limited in war, especially when one factors in fear and fatigue. Further, the enemy will provide false data, mock targets and will take other deception measures in an attempt to overwhelm the analysts and available weapons systems. The reliance on digital systems and the data held within makes some military organizations especially vulnerable to attacks on the data itself. As in previous wars, the method of fighting will quickly fall to the lower common denominators of

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<sup>49</sup> John Shalf, 'The Future of Computing Beyond Moore's Law', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 378, no. 2166 (6 March 2020): 20190061, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2019.0061>.

<sup>50</sup> 'Geoconfirmed', accessed 20 November 2024, <https://geoconfirmed.org/>.

<sup>51</sup> Kenton White, *Never Ready: Britain and NATO's Flexible Response Strategy, 1968-1989.*, Europe@War 16 (S.I.: Helion and Company, 2021), 72.

combat; firepower; mass; and a willingness to continue the fight. However, the reliance on digital systems does not change the nature of war.

Whilst all dimensions of war have a place in strategy, despite warnings about drone- and cyber-warfare, they can never become strategy itself. In the same way that air-power, initially thought to be a war winner on its own, has been integrated into the strategic panoply, so will cyber and space.

A brief comparison with the current trend of overstating methods and the approach to the advent of aerial bombing in the first half of the Twentieth Century is useful. In the early part of the century, theorists wrote of aerial bombing of the enemy as being war winning.<sup>52</sup> This prompted Prime Minister Baldwin's famous quote that "... the bomber will always get through ..."<sup>53</sup>

The theoretical effects of strategic bombing meant that a large part of Britain's defense expenditure before and during World War II was concentrated on bomber aircraft. Royal Air Force aircraft production before and during the war was split 50/50 between single-engined fighters, and twin and four-engined aircraft. Britain invested perhaps as much as a third of its overall war production on the bomber offensive.<sup>54</sup>

However, in something of a paradox, Britain also developed a defensive system designed specifically to defeat enemy bombing attacks. The theoretical problem here is clear: an offensive arm designed to accurately strike the enemy; and a defensive arm designed specifically to defeat such an attack. In theory, the RAF Air Staff knew that defending against bombing was to some extent possible, but how successful defense would be was unknown.

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<sup>52</sup> For example, see Alexander de Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942); Giulio Douhet, *Command of the Air*, Translation of 1927 Edition, Fire Ant Books (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> Baldwin Stanley, *Speech to Parliament*, Volume 270, Column 632 (House of Commons: Hansard, 1932).

<sup>54</sup> Max Hastings, *Bomber Command*, 3. impr (London: Joseph, 1987).

Casualties from aerial bombing were expected to be overwhelming in a very short period and some attempts were made to evaluate the potential injuries and other effects of bombing.<sup>55</sup>

Harold Macmillan wrote in 1966 of the thinking in the Cabinet before World War II;

... expert advice had indicated that bombing of London and the great cities would lead to casualties of the order of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, within a few weeks. We thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of nuclear warfare today.<sup>56</sup>

Strategic bombing failed to achieve the promise of the theorists. Technology did not allow bombers to hit their targets accurately at night, and enemy fighters inflicted unsustainable losses on daylight raids. It took the advent of rapidly developed radar and radio targeting to begin to enable bombers to successfully find and hit their targets, but the same technology also enabled a better response by the defenders. Thus, a balance was found which was only broken by the economics of war. The same is true of the current round of new technologies – for drones there is anti-drone technology; for cyber-attacks there are firewalls and other, more secret, methods.

## **What Do the Practitioners Say?**

Echevarria stated,

Analysts, practitioners, and scholars alike have struggled to come to terms with [the different uses of military force], assigning labels such as “hybrid wars,” “new generation wars,” and “gray-zone” conflicts, among others, to distinguish contemporary practices from those of so-called traditional wars.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *War Wounds and Air Raid Casualties: Articles Republished from the British Medical Journal* (London: H K Lewis & Co Ltd, 1939).

<sup>56</sup> Macmillan Harold, *Winds of Change, 1914-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 575.

<sup>57</sup> Echevarria, ‘How Should We Think about “Gray-Zone” Wars?’, 16.

Several eminent theorists and practitioners have criticized the use of titles such as ‘grey-zone’, ‘asymmetric’ and ‘effects-based’ warfare. On a broader level, the practitioners, those who will put their lives at risk when the Government decides their deployment is necessary, have questioned the relevance of the academic discussion around military force and its application. International Relations and Strategic Studies have, in the opinion of some serving and retired personnel, lost their direct connection with those whose job it is to apply force at the behest of their respective Governments. Thus, the relevance of these fields of study diminishes in relation to the utility it provides.

Major General Jonathan Shaw wrote,

“Strategy” is only the most obvious of the many misused, abused and confused words in Whitehall. The ... error occurs ... when people have got so used to a set of manifestations of a word that they mistake the manifestations for the meaning.<sup>58</sup>

The acceptance in academic circles that there has been a “traditional” mode of war is flawed, certainly as far as war over at least the last two and a half centuries is concerned. War has involved battle engagements of formed bodies of troops as well as irregular forces and civilian intervention certainly since the American War of Independence (1775 – 1783). To ignore these events in the search for clearer definitions of components of warfare is building castles on sand. Professor Beatrice Heuser wrote,

Such binary concepts may have their limited use for legal and for military training purposes, with classes constructed around themes such as major war and small war, regular war and hybrid war, and so on. But it is unhelpful to see them as mutually exclusive, or compartmentalizable in practice. Non-binary categories exist even in

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<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Shaw, *Britain in a Perilous World: The Strategic Defence and Security Review We Need* (London: Haus Publishing, 2015), 6.



Western thinking (think of air, land, sea, cyber, space), but there again, one might see a particular proclivity in the West to compartmentalize. This stands in contrast with Chinese culture with its more holistic approach, or current Russian thinking.<sup>59</sup>

Because of the insinuation of buzzwords and practice from business and academia, serving personnel are judged on their ability to use the latest buzzwords rather than true understanding and practical application of the concepts. If the academia is promoting, in both senses, impractical thinking, then it is placing the armed forces at risk, and incorrectly informing the politicians in the use of armed force. This last point, in itself, raises questions of the morality of the actions of complacent academics and politicians towards the armed forces.

## **Conclusion**

This piece examines some of the current “fads” of salami-slicing definitions of war, warfare, and strategy. The new definitions are not particularly useful, and it would actually improve the quality of discourse to discard them.

The NATO member states’ strategies, with exceptions of limited conflict between 1945 and 2003, have not been field-tested. The Warsaw Pact did not invade Western Europe, and, thankfully, there have been no nuclear wars to analyze. Despite this, NATO members assumed success, and the process by which strategy is developed and implemented has become a self-supporting, self-reinforcing structure.

Colin Gray questioned whether soldiers or civilians could be taught strategy. He wrote, “Up to a point the answer must be ‘yes’. They can be taught the theory of strategy, so they are, at least, familiar with what the strategic role requires.”<sup>60</sup> The function of defense and strategy

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<sup>59</sup> Heuser, *War*, 399.

<sup>60</sup> Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 61.

has, to a large degree, been lost amongst the cacophony of noise around globalization and the interconnectedness of nations.

Academia must pose a constructive challenge to the thinking of the politicians and the armed forces. If the thoughts of academics have little or no significance or use to the real-world problems faced by armed forces, then they are irrelevant. Academia has become a self-sustaining structure, some parts of which have little bearing on the real world. An officer commented to this author that war is a muddle, and thus our thinking about it must allow for ambiguous problems and solutions. The most significant problem addressed in this article is not that academia is becoming out of touch with the armed forces, but that it has been for some time with little or no attempt to make itself useful.

Therefore, academics should ask themselves: are we beneficial to the armed forces?

In many academic fields there can be a disconnect between academic research and practical application. Academic rewards are often based on criteria like publications in peer-reviewed journals, citation counts, and theoretical contributions rather than the direct impact of their work on practitioners. Incentives in academia prioritize theoretical contributions over utility to practitioners. This results in research that is more about developing new terminology or framework, aligning with academic trends, rather than focusing on pressing practical needs. Academic research on war today predominantly focusses on novel theories, frameworks, or critiques that appeal to other scholars, but do not offer useful insights for those at the sharp end of military action.

Where academic research is deeply integrated with practitioner insights, the relationship can be productive. Historical studies, lessons from past conflicts, and insights into human behavior, logistics, and strategy can help refine today's military thinking about future challenges. Additionally, cross-pollination between military professionals who enter

academia and scholars who work closely with defense institutions can ensure that academic research remains relevant and reflective of current military practices. Military academies or defense universities ought to promote collaboration between scholars and practitioners, fostering a more direct link between theoretical work and real-world impact.

The answers to the problem can be framed thus:

Academia should aim to constructively challenge the thinking of politicians and military forces, offering new perspectives, critical analysis, and strategic insights. When properly engaged, academic work can broaden the understanding of warfare, policy, and strategy, providing depth and innovative approaches to complex issues.

Academic work must be tied to real-world problems faced by the military. If academic research does not address or reflect these challenges, it risks becoming irrelevant. There should be greater efforts to ensure that academic theories, models, and studies offer practical value to military practitioners dealing with ambiguous and rapidly changing situations.

The complexity and “muddle” of war, as noted by one officer, require academic thinking that is flexible and adaptable. War presents ambiguous problems that do not have clear-cut solutions. Therefore, academic contributions must acknowledge this complexity and offer frameworks that can accommodate uncertainty, rather than striving for overly simplified or theoretical answers.

The more significant problem is not of academia becoming out of touch with the armed forces, but rather that this disconnect has existed for some time without sufficient attempts to bridge the gap. To address this, both academia and military institutions need to create opportunities for collaboration, where academic insights can be tested and applied in practical contexts, and military feedback can inform academic research.

For academia to remain relevant it must engage directly with the practical, often ambiguous challenges faced by military practitioners, offering constructive, applicable solutions and fostering stronger connections between theoretical research and real-world military operations.