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The Indirect Strategy Moment

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

At the core of the so-called hybrid warfare that is said to characterise modern conflict today is the older concept of indirect strategy. States employing indirect strategy against other states prioritise non-military elements that are subtle and not always obvious. It is important to note that in indirect strategy, the line between war and peace is unclear.

COMMENTARY

While the world remains transfixed with the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war, it is important to note that the current conflagration is somewhat of an anomaly in the context of what had transpired over the past decade.

Ever since the intervention in eastern Ukraine in March 2014 by Russian troops in unmarked uniforms – the so-called “little green [men](#)” – most analysts have argued that low-key “hybrid conflict” has been the norm in the war. This broadly refers to the methods and tools used by individual state or non-state actors to pursue their objectives, spanning the conflict continuum from disinformation, to cyber war, energy supply disruption and traditional [warfare](#).

It could be suggested that Moscow – which had been engaging in hybrid conflict with Ukraine since the 2014 intervention – perhaps miscalculated in launching its “special military operation” in February [2022](#). Assuming that a ceasefire between Kyiv and Moscow ensues, the latter is likely to revert back to its relatively more cost-effective hybrid warfare playbook as the main means to secure its geopolitical [objectives](#). If it does happen, it would be an affirmation of the importance of indirect strategy in global geostrategic competition.

Indirect Strategy Explained

In his classic *Introduction to Strategy* (1963), the French military strategist Andre Beaufre (1902-1975) argued that in the direct mode of warfare, military strategy plays the decisive role; in the indirect mode, military force plays a secondary role.

The theory and practice of indirect strategy is not new. The fifth-century BCE Chinese strategist Sun Tzu emphasised the importance of avoiding the enemy's strengths and attacking his weaknesses [instead](#). The best strategy, according to Sun Tzu, was to "win without [fighting](#)." In other words, the ability of a state to impose its will on the adversary without relying excessively on military power represented the "acme of [skill](#)."

This basic concept of *avoiding adversary strength and attacking his weakness* represents the essence of indirect strategy. The US military acronym DIME – diplomatic, informational, military, and economic elements of state power – helps illustrate the [point](#). If a state decides upon a direct application of DIME, then the military instrument would be preponderant, with the other instruments in support. Conversely, in an indirect application of DIME, the non-kinetic instruments – diplomatic, economic, and informational – would be preponderant in the total strategic response, with the military instrument playing a calibrated supporting role.

Indirect Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era

Beaufre observed that in the Cold War (1945-1990) environment of mutual nuclear deterrence between the superpowers, indirect strategy was very important and "not the *direct strategy's* adoption of material [force](#)."

In the post-Cold War era, the continuing imperative to avoid outright confrontation between nuclear-capable great powers, and the understandable reluctance of major peer competitors of the US, since the early 1990s, to avoid directly engaging the latter militarily on the conventional front, has resulted in strategic innovation that prioritizes indirect strategy.

Hence, in his book *Battlegrounds* (2020), H. R. McMaster argues that Russia has – since the breakup of the Soviet Union – engaged in so-called hybrid "new-generation warfare" that seeks to avoid direct military confrontation with the West, seeking instead to "disrupt, divide and weaken societies" regarded as competitors. In essence, Russian strategists, declaring that the very "rules of war" have evolved, noted that "nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals" have grown and, in many cases, have exceeded military force in their [effectiveness](#).

Chinese military strategists have similarly argued that modern warfare has evolved and now involves "using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests", and that many "new battlefields" could include "environmental warfare, financial warfare, trade warfare, cultural warfare, and legal warfare", for [example](#). What is common in both Russian and Chinese thinking is the core idea of avoiding Western military strengths and attacking its weaknesses – the essence of indirect strategy.

Indirect Strategy Today

Indirect strategy has already been applied in the cyber, telecommunications and social media domains. John Carlin in *Dawn of the Code War* (2018) observes that the expansion of internet connectivity has rendered national critical infrastructure – “water, electricity, communications, banking,” – and “our most private information more vulnerable.” As a result, hostile state actors could mount devastating cyberattacks on a state’s vulnerable, digitally interconnected homeland and cripple it, while bypassing the massed strength of its conventional armed forces.

Meanwhile, as Jacob Helberg asserts in *The Wires of War* (2021), there are states that seek to sidestep the military might of western states, seeking instead to “access, delete, and manipulate data” crucial to the latter. They seek to do so through greater manufacturing and technical dominance of the backend architecture of the global Internet. By capturing control of the core layer of the Internet, “you control everything” and can therefore exploit other states.

In addition, Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking warn in their book *LikeWar* (2018) that some states, by learning how “to command and manipulate” opinion within other states, have fostered “political and social polarization” in these other states – again without a shot being fired.

In short, indirect strategy has blurred the line between [war](#) and peace in contemporary warfare.

Implications

There are two implications flowing from the foregoing analysis.

First, one should analyse global news headlines “using” indirect strategy lenses. To illustrate, much has been made of US-Chinese strategic competition for control of the manufacturing supply chains for “semiconductors” and “high-performing microchips” that are vital for “everything from artificial intelligence to cell [phones](#)”. Meanwhile, Washington has also been trying to circumvent Beijing’s dominance of the global rare earth metals’ market. These metals are used to “make the magnets in America’s most advanced commercial and military technologies, from electric vehicles to Virginia-class attack [submarines](#)”.

The point is, a state that dominates such strategically critical industries and supply chains while denying them to other states can gradually impose its geopolitical will and undermine its adversaries without the need for direct military confrontation – a classic example of longer-term indirect strategy in action.

Indirect strategy lenses are important if we are to make sense of other global developments as well. For example, experts allege that Chinese maritime vessels have been deliberately cutting underwater internet cables linking Matsu island to the main island of Taiwan, to compromise the latter’s internal communications connectivity – a crucial requirement for the island’s national security, and a shrewd example of a hybrid, indirect [approach](#). And, hypothetically, Russia, the world’s biggest wheat exporter, could well weaponize food exports to undermine its strategic [competitors](#) if it should decide to.

Closer to home, Chinese state-backed hackers have been reported to be “incredibly active” in targeting government and military targets in ASEAN member states, and have “quietly compromised” them by exfiltrating sensitive information – again evincing the indirect strategy of avoiding the adversaries’ strengths and targeting their critical vulnerabilities [instead](#).

Second, Singaporeans should also apply indirect strategy lenses in analysing how potential adversaries could seek to undermine us. It is no secret that militarily the well-trained and well-equipped Singapore Armed Forces, is a potent deterrent against military aggression. Hence, potential adversaries would likely explore more cost-effective, indirect, hybrid approaches to impose their will subtly and gradually upon us even in peacetime. What then could be our potential vulnerabilities in the face of such an indirect strategy?

Observers have noted that Russian state-backed social media manipulation of socio-political fault-lines within neighbouring states have included the exploitation of “ethnic tensions and historical revisionism” in Estonia, “culture and religion” in Georgia, “political polarization” in Poland, and “anti-migrant sentiment” in the Czech [Republic](#). Could such socio-political fault lines be exploited in the case of our globalized, secular and multicultural city-state?

A cursory scan of the content frequently circulated on our social media platforms would suggest that Singaporeans have little room for complacency in this regard. It also suggests that the concept of [Total Defence](#) remains as relevant as ever. It bears reiterating that in this era of indirect strategy and hybrid conflict, there “is no such thing as war or peace – both co-exist, [always](#).” Singaporeans should thus heed the pithy observation of the Soviet communist ideologue Leon Trotsky: “You may not be interested in war, but “war” is certainly “interested in [you](#)”.

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