

Rethinking our approach to war

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The Western view on war is shaped from our recent past: large battlefields, a known, visible and declared adversary, decisive battles, conventional confrontation, a clear front line, weapons and combat equipment. However, this vision of war, anchored in our societies, is rather restrictive and does not correspond to contemporary conflicts. Even though we wish it and believe it to be, war is not an interlude in History, defined by a declaration of war and an armistice; war is nothing more than the pursuit of competition between two actors who use military means to achieve their political objectives.

This conception of war as a period of highly intense armed violence hinders our ability to deal with the turbulence of the contemporary world in a proactive and efficient manner. As the major powers heavily invest in their militaries to strengthen deterrence and avoid direct confrontation, which is too risky given the world's nuclear arsenals, geopolitical competition has shifted to other areas of engagement. But let there be no misunderstanding: what is happening is a strategic opposition, a dialectic of wills, aimed at defeating the adversary. And what is war, if not precisely that?

This shift from competition to a kind of confrontation free of explosion of violence between the main belligerents leaves us in the dark, so much so that we ignore it. It is true that the West's adversaries have been identified, in particular China, Russia and Iran. It is also true that Western leaders, at national, European and NATO levels, produce 'strategies', studies, reports and concepts, all of which are supposed to guide policies against these adversaries. Yet rhetorical abundance cannot replace a realistic and relevant strategy, worthy of its name.

Understanding the contemporary world means acknowledging that our opponents do not think like we do. The Manichean dichotomy between wartime and peacetime is Western-centered. Our segmented view of society and politics prevents us from understanding the scope of our opponents' strategic action. Thus, while the European media portrays the Polish-Belarusian border situation as a migration crisis, migratory waves are in fact weaponized by Belarus and Russia in their strategic opposition to the EU. Immigration, international law, energy, social networks... everything, for our opponents, can be weaponized. The distinction between peacetime and wartime does not exist, international politics is the stage of a constant geopolitical and geostrategic confrontation. The military instrument, viewed as wartime-specific in the West, is fully integrated in Chinese or Russian daily politics. This holistic vision allows for the full mobilization of resources to achieve the political objective of redefining the international order and its hierarchy. In addition to the importance of technology and material aspects, the opposition extends to the domains of identity, cognition, culture, collective psychology, popular will.

Western countries suffer from strategic atrophy, always fighting the last war, unable to understand the next one. As a consequence, Western strategic culture fails to adapt to hybrid strategic thinking. War is a political enterprise, a competition of wills and, probably even more so today than in the past, a battle for perceptions and worldviews. Subversion is part of the strategic game, despite the West's desire to ignore it.

Among the reasons for this strategic myopia, Western stubbornness in understanding war through the prisms of the 19th and 20th centuries plays a prominent role. This sclerosis of the winner leads us to be complacent and assume that what has worked in the past will continue to work in the future. This false perception blocks our capacity for strategic adaptation. Such a posture, however comforting it may be, cannot force our opponents into behaviors that suit us. On the contrary, it offers them a strategic advantage, since their actions, below the threshold of war, remain invisible to us. The West's extreme socio-political hierarchy and bureaucratic red tape lead to tunnel vision, segmentation of fields of action and resources that can be mobilized, resulting in cumbersome and dysfunctional decision-making processes. Yet societal organization is more horizontal, adaptive, flexible and autonomous. It functions in networks, offering our adversaries numerous entry points. These factors are reinforced by the mirror effect, i.e., the tendency to believe that the person facing us acts according to the same rationality and logic. However, political, cultural, ideological and strategic concepts vary drastically from one country to another. Because Western states have traditionally dominated world politics with their values and Manichean worldview, they have (chosen to) ignore the reality that other states, in particular Russia and China, do not respect the same rules or adopt the same visions of international relations.

As a result, Western liberal democracies are not only ill-prepared for these new forms of warfare, but they seem unwilling to take the necessary measures. In doing so, they leave the door open to (further) destabilization and the risk of further weakening democratic institutions and of internal fragmentation. The rules of war are no longer defined by the West. Our reluctance to identify and respond to hybrid strategies will not make them disappear; on the contrary, it gives these strategies the playing field to themselves, to set the rules and to win. If we are fighting an opponent who uses their own rules, and we ignore those rules, how can we expect to gain the upper hand?

Similar to a board game, each individual element, resource, action, decision is a piece of the overall strategic game, and one cannot understand the movements of each individual piece without considering the entire game. When the country's national interest is the objective of the game, grand strategy is its rule. So, when the West has no rules of the game and no grand strategy, how can it understand the opponent's moves on the chessboard? If war is understood as a parenthesis in time during which force is used intensively and directly between the adversaries, a war in which violence is displaced onto secondary grounds remains under the radar, invisible, imperceptible. Yet the absence of visibility does not mean the absence of movement on the other side. It is high time that the West rewrote its own rules and started playing the same game as its opponents.

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