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by Jean-Christophe Boucher

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POLICY UPDATE

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In recent years, hybrid warfare has acquired significant attention in military, academic and security circles. Israel's experience in Lebanon in 2006, Russian incursions into Georgia in 2008, and also in Ukraine and the Baltic states since 2014 have demonstrated that hybrid warfare represents a significant security challenge, even for well-trained and equipped armed forces. Across the globe, military institutions are rapidly adjusting to this trend. The United States has adopted hybrid warfare in its service manuals and doctrine documents, as well as in broader strategic policy documents such as its quadrennial defence reviews since 2006. At the 2014 summit in Wales, NATO members agreed on the necessity to adapt and modernize the Alliance's doctrine with respect to hybrid warfare. In Canada, hybrid warfare was identified as a needed capability and has been part of the Canadian Armed Forces' joint level force development scenario since 2012. Interestingly, there are clear indications that our military contingent deployed in Latvia, as part of Operation REASSURANCE, has been the target of Russian propaganda, fake-news activities and cyber-incursions.

Sometimes referred to as grey zone, new wars, small wars or unconventional warfare, hybrid warfare has stimulated noteworthy conceptual discussion. As many authors have rightly noted, hybrid warfare blurs the line between war and peace. Although definitions abound, hybrid warfare is broadly characterized by "a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures employed in a highly integrated design" (NATO, 2014). Thus, the hybridization process happens at two levels. First, as Murray and Mansoor (2012) argued, hybrid warfare is a warring activity where both conventional and unconventional efforts are integrated in order to achieve political goals. Second, hybrid warfare weaves both violent means (through regular and irregular elements) and non-violent means such as information operations (propaganda, fake news), cyber, economic influence and political measures.

Despite the extensive debate on the nature and challenges of hybrid warfare, much of that analysis has focused on its military dimension. However, we argue that hybrid warfare is not a military problem per se. As most scholars have acknowledged, the use of hybrid warfare is a historical trend and modern military institutions have the technological and doctrinal means to counter it. Rather, the danger of hybrid warfare lies in the strain it causes on civil-military relations. In this light, hybrid warfare is not a tactical or strategic challenge; it is a political issue. Hybrid warfare is particularly problematic for Western democracies because it exploits our civil-military governance tradition.

Civil-military relations in the context of principal-agent model

The relationship between civilians and the military is demanding in any society. In Western democracies, this takes the form of a principal-agent model (Feaver, 2003; Avant, 1994). As Feaver noted: "The principal-agent approach, then, analyzes how the principal can shape the relationship so as to ensure that his employees are carrying out his wishes in the face of the adverse selection and moral hazard problems that attend any agency situation" (2003, 55).

Extensively studied in the literature on civil-military relations, principal-agent problems have two features. First, Western democracies have established a hierarchical structure in order to ensure that the military will respect civilian authority. Indeed, in most Western democracies, military officers serve under civilian control and elected officials are ultimately responsible for making decisions on matters of defence policy.

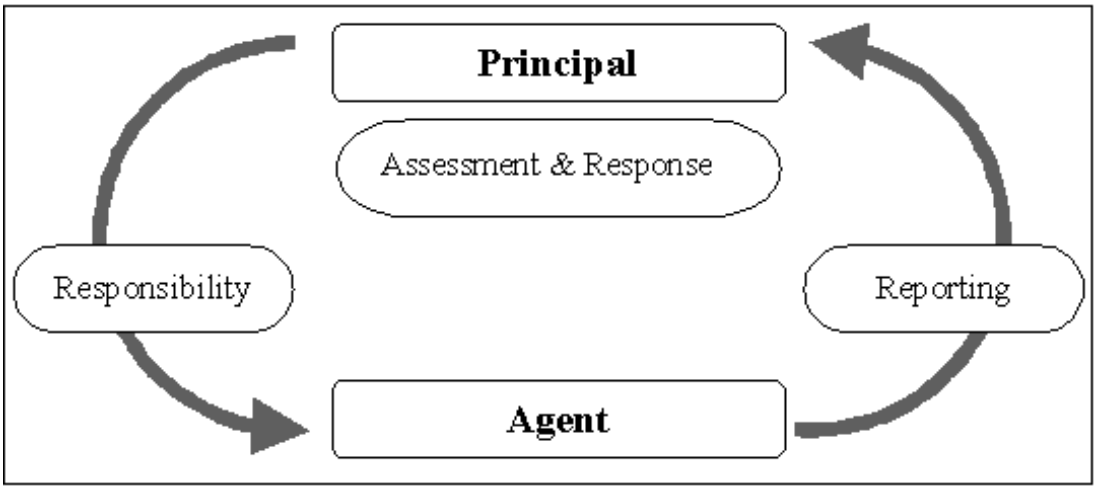

Figure 1: A visual outline of the principal-agent model of civil-military relations (Credit: New Zealand State Services Commission)

The second feature of the principal-agent model recognizes that civilian and military institutions are conjoined in a strategic interaction where both attempt to maximize their interests. On the one hand, societies trust the military to protect them from their enemies. Nevertheless, by devolving the means of violence to the military, civilian authorities become particularly vulnerable to the usurpation of state power. On the other hand, the military has an incentive to shrink from civilian authority and maximize its independence. This creates a particular tension between the interest of civilians to remain the foci of political authority in the land and devolving significant powers to the military. In theory, civil-military relations in democratic regimes are in equilibrium when military institutions work under the intrusive scrutiny of civilian authorities. In other words, civilian officials delegate power so that the military has enough autonomy to effectively defend the country while still monitoring its activity. Under this theoretical framework, civil-military relations in Western democracies are a thermostatic process between a vigilant civilian authority and an independent military based on trust and monitoring. Principal-agent relations are in equilibrium when the cost associated with monitoring the military is relatively low and when the military estimates the probability of penalty to be relatively high.

Civil-military relations are in disequilibrium when civilians fail to delegate enough decision-making authority and thus micromanage military units. This often produces a risk-averse culture where military officers lack the authority to lead their troops on the field and thus to react correctly to evolving circumstances. For example, some nations participating in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2011 imposed excessively restrictive caveats on their troops, such as forbidding night operations or refusing to deploy helicopters. Under such conditions, military units were a lot less effective in carrying out their missions. Conversely, civil-military

relations are sub-optimal when military officers have too much autonomy and disproportionately shape defence policy. For example, we can think of the mismanagement of military procurement in Canada, such as the shipbuilding project or the selection of the F-35 under the Harper government, where military officials skewed the evaluation processes in order to force the government's hand in selecting specific platforms.

Hybrid warfare and principal-agent relations

Many commentators fail to recognize that hybrid warfare destabilizes the principal-agent equilibrium of the civil-military relations nexus in democratic regimes. Indeed, one of the main features of hybrid warfare is blurring the line between overt and covert military engagement in two ways. First, by using irregular forces such as local insurgents or criminal organizations, nations can successfully denounce or at least plausibly deny any involvements in violent events. Russia mastered such a method with the 2014 "little green man" episode in Crimea and with its support of Eastern Ukrainian rebels in the Donbass region. Second, by employing tactics such as hacking, false news and propaganda, nations engaging in hybrid warfare are able to sustain covert activities in a way that does not cross the threshold or some arbitrary red line.

Figure 2: Russia's 'Little Green Men' in Crimea (Shutterstock)

From the principal's perspective – that of civilian officials – this grey zone makes it difficult for political leaders to determine exactly the nature and extent of an enemy's involvement. Especially in the context of a democratic society where governments need to sell a military intervention to the public, the fuzziness of hybrid warfare activates and nourishes endless public debate and

ultimately hinders effective decision-making by civilian authorities. In this context, hybrid warfare takes advantage of the hierarchical structure of the principal-agent approach to civil-military relations in democratic countries. Faced with the ambivalence of hybrid actions, democratic governments become indecisive. We can observe such a phenomenon in Europe where some countries, notably France or Germany, are reluctant to push back against Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. Without proper civilian decision-making, military institutions remain aimless and unable to respond to hybrid tactics.

From the agents' point of view, hybrid tactics directly target military commanders on the ground and thus they are better informed than their civilian leaders as to the nature of events. Within any strategic games, asymmetry of information among players often creates sub-optimal results. On the one hand, without explicit instructions from civilian leaders, military commanders are unable to respond effectively to enemy incursions. On the other hand, this asymmetry increases the duration of the decision-making process and, as we have seen in Crimea, often allows enemies to force a fait accompli. Indeed, the strategic interaction inherent to principal-agent models – in which civilians and the military with different interests and preferences need to co-operate in order to develop and implement a policy – calcifies the decision-making process on defence policy, especially in situations where the quality and quantity of the information available to players is scarce. Furthermore, as many commentators have suggested, to successfully counter hybrid tactics, armed forces need to deploy smaller units in theatres of operations and provide them with a greater level of autonomy. In October 2017, the U.S. army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) published a concept document highlighting how U.S. forces need to adapt to hybrid war (TRADOC, 2017). Nevertheless, such independence impedes the capacity of, or at least increases the cost for, civilian authorities to monitor their military and offer proper political leadership. In hindsight, by increasing the autonomy of military commanders in theatres of operation, the effective response destabilizes the principal-agent logic of civil-military relations in democratic regimes.

As Western democracies develop military doctrines to respond to the expansion and sophistication of unconventional methods, they should also consider analyzing how the structure of civil-military relations exposes them to hybrid warfare. Research has demonstrated that democracies' particular civil-military tradition has increased their effectiveness on the battlefield in conventional warfare and the quality of strategic assessment (Biddle and Long, 2004; Brooks, 2008; Pilster and Böhmelt, 2011; Talmadge, 2015). It is unclear whether these same outcomes also apply to hybrid warfare. In fact, Western countries have been unsuccessful when facing insurgent groups in the battlefield. Maybe the key to military success in hybrid warfare will lie in restructuring the nature of civil-military relations in democracies.

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Jean-Christophe Boucher is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, MacEwan University. His is currently a Research Fellow at the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies at Dalhousie University; Senior Fellow at the Centre interuniversitaire de recherché sur les relations internationales du Canada et du Québec; and book review editor for the Canadian Foreign Policy Journal. He holds a BA in History from the University of Ottawa, a MA in Philosophy from the Université de Montréal and a PhD in Political Science from Université Laval. He specializes in international relations, with an emphasis on peace and security issues, Canadian foreign and defence policies, and methodology.

His current research interests focus on Canadian foreign and defence policy. First, his research looks into the domestic political ramifications of Canada's mission in Afghanistan since 2001. Second, his interest concentrates on identifying and empirically measuring the influence of cultural variables in the formulation and implementation Canada's international policy. Finally, his research project examines the relationship between media, public opinion, and Canadian foreign policy. His second research path concentrates on the causes of conflict management in international crises since the end of the Second World War. He is particularly interested in understanding, conceptualizing, and measuring non-events in international relations.

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