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HYBRID WARFARE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

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HYBRID WARFARE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION**Major Philip Wong**

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HYBRID WARFARE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

Introduction:

Over the last fifteen years, hybrid warfare as a modality of conflict has become recognised as an increasingly prevalent approach for both state and non-state actors to advance geopolitical objectives.¹ In spite of having no agreed definition, hybrid warfare is generally accepted to refer to the co-ordinated conduct of warfare across more than one dimension (*e.g.* political, military, economic, social, infrastructural, informational), combining multiple military and non-military means to achieve targeted political outcomes, in large part, without open hostilities and seeking to remain beneath the threshold of traditional armed conflict.² Such conduct has been demonstrated to avoid the costs and penalties that might have been incurred from any response, thereby providing a relatively cost-effective tool for change or subversive statecraft.³ Unsurprisingly, hybrid warfare can be seen in geopolitical friction points in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific region.⁴

The economic growth of the Indo-Pacific region over the last thirty years has been paralleled by the re-emergence of China as a regional power and on track to become the

¹Bob Seeley and Alya Shandra, “Countering Hybrid Warfare: Conceptual Foundations and Implications for Defence Forces,” *MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project* (London, U.K., 2019), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840513/20190401-MCDC_CHW_Information_note_-_Conceptual_Foundations.pdf.

²Elizabeth Buchanan, “Hybrid Warfare: Australia’s (Not so) New Normal,” *The Strategist*, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hybrid-warfare-australias-not-so-new-normal/>; Andrew Dowse and Sascha-Dominik Bachmann, “Explainer: What Is ‘hybrid Warfare’ and What Is Meant by the ‘Grey Zone’?,” *The Conversation*, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-hybrid-warfare-and-what-is-meant-by-the-grey-zone-118841>; Ian Li, “Hybrid Warfare’s Assault on ASEAN Regionalism,” *East Asia Forum*, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/14/hybrid-warfares-assault-on-asean-regionalism/>.

³James Goldrick, “Grey Zone Operations and the Maritime Domain,” *The Strategist*, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/grey-zone-operations-and-the-maritime-domain/>.

⁴Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/sirius-2017-0042>.

largest single economy in the world by 2030.⁵ In spite of its considerable national power relative to its neighbours, China has recognised that it remains constrained by the international system from which it has benefited so greatly from in acting in multiple long-standing, unresolved matters relating to territory or sovereignty.⁶ With the political costs of major aggression becoming so high and the globalisation-induced economic and social interdependencies of the region being so powerful, China has sought to apply a more calibrated form of belligerence to achieve its objectives through the application of its “Three Warfares” and “Unrestricted Warfare” strategic concepts.⁷ This in turn, has brought China into direct competition with the long-term security partner to many in the region – the United States, seeking to retain the status quo.⁸

The strategic re-balancing within the region has not gone unnoticed by Australia, subjected to the political awkwardness brought about by its largest trading partner coming into robust strategic competition against its primary security partner – one that has become increasingly erratic and transactional in its dealings with allies, completely regressed from long-standing behavioural patterns in its own foreign policy, and who is facing declining

⁵Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 56-57.

⁶Notable examples include Taiwan, Hong Kong, the South China Sea and the Sino-Indian border. Pooja Bhatt, “What China’s Defence Paper Tells Us about Beijing’s Regional Ambition,” *The Interpreter*, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-china-s-defence-white-tells-us-about-beijing-s-regional-ambition>; Patricia Kim, “Understanding China’s Military Expansion,” *Pacific Council on International Policy*, 2019, <https://www.pacificcouncil.org/newsroom/understanding-china’s-military-expansion>; Steven Stashwick, “China’s South China Sea Militarization Has Peaked - Artificial Islands Are Becoming More Trouble than They’re Worth,” *Foreign Policy*, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/19/chinas-south-china-sea-militarization-has-peaked/>; Ameya Pratap Singh, “What to Make of India and China’s Latest Border Clash,” *The Diplomat*, 2020.

⁷Sergio Miracola, “Chinese Hybrid Warfare,” *ISPI*, 2018, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/chinese-hybrid-warfare-21853>; Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015), 3, 46, 86; Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), 12.

⁸Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 3; Donald J. Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington, D.C., 2017), 45.

margins of superiority in its military capabilities.⁹ Australia has moved to increase its self-reliance by re-evaluating and strengthening its defence and security apparatus.¹⁰ In spite of increased investment in defence, Australia has recognised that vulnerabilities remain in its ability to counter hybrid threats in the contemporary environment.¹¹

This paper will argue that Australia needs to develop a comprehensive response to contemporary and future hybrid threats in the Indo-Pacific region. It will highlight critical elements of the mechanics of hybrid threats with reference to China's perspectives of hybrid warfare as an illustrative example before demonstrating how Australia's vulnerabilities can be traced back to deficiencies against key principles of an effective comprehensive response. It will then offer a perspective of how such principles could be applied in an Australian context with respect to the Indo-Pacific region.

The Mechanics of Hybrid Warfare: Disrupting State Cohesion

At its core, hybrid warfare seeks to disrupt the cohesion of a state or its ability to act by undermining component constructs, without provoking resistance.¹² In this regard, one definition by Singaporean Defence Minister, Dr Ng Eng Hen, is insightful, describing it as “an orchestrated campaign to fracture the solidarity of the target nation through

⁹Andrew Carr, “Triangulating Australia's China Debate,” *The Strategist*, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/triangulating-australias-china-debate/>; Huong Le Thu, “Alliances in the Time of Hybrid Warfare,” *The Strategist*, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/alliances-in-the-time-of-hybrid-warfare/>.

¹⁰Brabin-Smith, “Cracks in Australian Defence Policy Can't Be Papered over”; Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 46.

¹¹Buchanan, “Hybrid Warfare: Australia's (Not so) New Normal”; Stephanie Borys, “Senior Defence Figure Raises Concerns about Future Cyber Attacks — and the Scenario Costing Him Sleep,” ABC News, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-19/australian-army-under-cyber-attack-major-general-marcus-thompson/10822966>; Dowse and Bachmann, “Explainer: What Is ‘hybrid Warfare’ and What Is Meant by the ‘Grey Zone’?”

¹²Seeley and Shandra, “Countering Hybrid Warfare: Conceptual Foundations and Implications for Defence Forces.”, 3.

undermining its defences in civil, economic, social, psychological and military spheres.”¹³ When viewed in this light, component conceptual methods such as disinformation, propaganda, deception and influence become evident, as does the asymmetry underlying the context for application.¹⁴ While these concepts in warfare are age-old, technological developments have enabled tools such as cyber weapons and social media to allow more advanced and elaborate information campaigns to be delivered with unprecedented speed and impact by an increasing cast of actors – both state and non-state.¹⁵

Concurrently, social developments like globalisation have enabled greater complexity in relationships to develop, along with more connected but fragmented social dynamics.¹⁶ Geopolitically, over the last seventy-odd years, the broader international system backed by the will and might of the United States, has been largely effective in shaping norms and customs of state behaviours.¹⁷ This has resulted in a decline in the value of aggression as state actors are able to obtain what they need through trade - risking punishment and being outcast from the economic, technological and social networks needed for prosperity, should order be grossly violated.¹⁸ All of these factors have

¹³Ian Li, “Sound the Clarion! Hybrid Warfare Has Arrived in the Asia-Pacific,” Small Wars Journal, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/sound-clarion-hybrid-warfare-has-arrived-asia-pacific>.

¹⁴Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, 57.

¹⁵Buchanan, “Hybrid Warfare: Australia’s (Not so) New Normal”; Anne-Marie Balbi, “The Influence of Non-State Actors on Global Politics,” Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2016, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-influence-of-non-state-actors-on-global-politics/>; Alasdair Donaldson and Isabelle Younane, “A Diplomatic Deficit? The Rise of Non-State Actors,” British Council, 2018, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/diplomatic-deficit-actors>; Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, 3.

¹⁶*ibid.*; Anamitra Deb, Stacy Donohue, and Tom Galisyer, “Is Social Media a Threat to Democracy?,” *The Omidyar Group*, 2017, 1–21, <https://www.omidyargroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Social-Media-and-Democracy-October-5-2017.pdf>.

¹⁷Damien Cave and Isabella Kwai, “China Is Defensive. The U.S. Is Absent. Can the Rest of the World Fill the Void?,” *The New York Times*, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/11/world/australia/coronavirus-china-inquiry.html>.

¹⁸An example would be “breaches of the peace” under the United Nations Charter. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*; Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 56.

contributed to the increasing ease and attractiveness of hybrid warfare approaches as a means of political change and subversive statecraft by revisionist actors.¹⁹ Even in aggressive hybrid approaches, the most critical determinant of success is the collective narrative that contextualises the pattern of activity, rather than pure military strength.²⁰ Action often aims to capitalise on the restraint of the target (or their allies) and raise legal confusion on available remedies.²¹ To explore these mechanics, China's perspectives on conflict serve as a useful contemporary example.

China's Perspective on Conflict: "Unrestricted Warfare" and the "Three Warfares"

In 1999, two People's Liberation Army (PLA) Colonels published a book proposing tactics for developing countries (like China) to mitigate military inferiority when dealing with a high-tech adversary (like the United States). The book records observations of "the blurring of war" in an age of technological integration and globalisation and poses somewhat telling philosophical questions such as "Does a single 'hacker' attack count as a hostile act or not?", "Can using financial instruments to destroy a country's economy be seen as a battle?" and "all friendships are in flux; self-interest is the only constant" before positing a "future of war" concept labelled "Unrestricted Warfare" where:

. . . all the boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally destroyed, and it also means that many of the current principles of combat will be modified, and even that the rules of war may need to be rewritten.²²

¹⁹*ibid.*, 38-40.

²⁰Bob Moyse, "Plan C: Winning below the Threshold of War | The Strategist," The Strategist, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/plan-c-winning-below-the-threshold-of-war/>.

²¹For example - does an action meet the standard for "armed attack" and allow retaliatory "self-defence" action under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, or would a response itself risk being classified as an "armed attack" and trigger sanction? Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*; Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 50.

²²Liang and Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 12.

In 2003, the “Political Work Guidelines of the People’s Liberation Army” was published, detailing the application of “Three Warfares” to generate political power during both peace and war – ‘Psychological’, ‘Opinion’ and ‘Legal’ warfare.²³ These two texts provide insight and support to accusations of China employing grey-zone and hybrid strategies to advance its interests in the South China Sea.²⁴ Such actions have included expansion and progressive militarisation of artificial islands, the provision of military training to civilian fishermen to conduct coordinated unconventional actions against sailors and fishermen from other nations in the region, and the deployment of state-owned enterprises to conduct dredging, land reclamation and construction projects, thereby justifying a build-up of military personnel and equipment.²⁵ Over a nine-year period, by applying “tactics of erosion” and repeated brinkmanship with each “salami slice” deliberately calibrated to fall below any threshold of response and setting precedent for further progression, China has taken possession of multiple disputed territories from the Philippines without triggering decisive conflict.²⁶ In doing so, China has progressively

²³‘Psychological’ warfare aimed at disrupting the will of adversaries to oppose Chinese interests; ‘Opinion’ warfare to overtly or covertly shape foreign and domestic audiences to hold positive views on Chinese foreign policy conduct; and ‘Legal’ warfare to shape the legal context and build the legal justification for any Chinese actions. Miracola, “Chinese Hybrid Warfare”; Peter Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective,” War on the Rocks, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

²⁴Zhenhua Lu, “China Accused of Entering ‘Grey Zone’ between War and Peace to Assert Control in Disputed Waters,” South China Morning Post, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3016532/china-accused-entering-grey-zone-between-war-and-peace-assert>; Bhatt, “What China’s Defence Paper Tells Us about Beijing’s Regional Ambition.”

²⁵Timothy Bonds et al., *What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area Denial Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression?*, *What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area Denial Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression?*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.7249/rr1820>; Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 46; Miracola, “Chinese Hybrid Warfare”; Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, 43, 86-87.

²⁶Mischief Reef in 1995 and 1998, Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and Second Thomas Shoal in 2014. Koh Swee Lean Collin, “Beijing’s Fait Accompli in the South China Sea,” The Diplomat, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/beijings-fait-accomplish-in-the-south-china-sea/>; Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, 34-36.

degraded the credibility of any deterrence-by-punishment threat, undermining solidarity of multiple regional alliance structures where the United States acts as security guarantor.²⁷

In broader international relations, China has been accused of applying political interference, intellectual property theft, politically-motivated economic sanctions, and cyber sabotage and attack - all measures consistent with approaches detailed in these two texts.²⁸

From this contemporary example, all the hallmarks and principles of hybrid warfare can be seen: asymmetry in the foundational context for application; ambiguity in the blurring of war and peace; the “weaponisation” of non-military means; the application of brinkmanship and graduated strategies across multiple dimensions to test thresholds of response; exploitation of divisions between or within states and alliances – all underpinned by the use of information and tailored narratives to confuse or influence in support of

²⁷Michael Petersen, “The Perils of Conventional Deterrence by Punishment,” War on the Rocks, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/the-perils-of-conventional-deterrence-by-punishment/>; Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 3.

²⁸*ibid.*; CSIS, “Significant Cyber Incidents,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/programs/technology-policy-program/significant-cyber-incidents>; Colin Packham, “Exclusive: Australia Concluded China Was behind Hack on Parliament, Political Parties,” Reuters, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-china-cyber-exclusive/exclusive-australia-concluded-china-was-behind-hack-on-parliament-political-parties-sources-idUSKBN1W00VF>; Steven Chase, “Beijing’s Economic Boycott Should Spur Canada to Reduce Trade Reliance on China: Report,” The Globe and Mail, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-chinas-use-of-economic-punishment-should-prompt-canada-to-reduce/>; Georgia Hitch and Jordan Hayne, “Federal Government Calls Chinese Ambassador about Comments on Trade Boycott over Coronavirus Inquiry,” ABC News, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-28/government-calls-chinese-ambassador-boycott-coronavirus-inquiry/12191984>; James Palmer, “Why China Is Punishing Australia By Suspending Meat Imports,” Foreign Policy, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/13/china-punishing-australia-coronavirus-pandemic-meat-imports-trade-diplomacy/>; Keith Johnson and Robbie Gramer, “The Great China-U.S. Economic Decoupling,” Foreign Policy, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/14/china-us-pandemic-economy-tensions-trump-coronavirus-covid-new-cold-war-economics-the-great-decoupling/>; Jack Deoliveira, “SWJ Primer: Chinese Cyber Espionage and Information Warfare,” Small Wars Journal, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/swj-primer-chinese-cyber-espionage-and-information-warfare>; Buchanan, “Hybrid Warfare: Australia’s (Not so) New Normal”; Max Walton Briggs, “Australia and China: Does Our Policy Allow Us to Be Allies to the World’s Greatest Superpowers?,” 2018, https://government.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2881284/Australia-and-China.pdf.

political objectives.²⁹ The underlying characteristics and mechanism of action combined with the contemporary geopolitical climate suggests that this form of political contest will remain or increase in prevalence for the foreseeable future, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁰

Countering Hybrid Threats: Australia's vulnerabilities

In spite of dramatically increasing its defence budget over the last decade and having one of the most technologically advanced militaries in the region, Australia remains vulnerable to hybrid warfare, with a growing realisation that such threats cannot be handled by the military alone.³¹ The vulnerability of Australian society to dilemmas across multiple domains has been brought into increasing focus by the concurrency of three circumstances. Firstly, the re-emergence of China as a global power combined with the opacity of its strategic intentions.³² Secondly, increasing challenges from the cyber domain.³³ Finally, more sceptical attitudes towards alliance engagements by the United States, coupled with

²⁹In considering the example, it is important to note that hybrid warfare is neither new nor an approach confined to non-liberal or totalitarian entities. Such techniques are readily identifiable amongst historical activities of multiple actors identifying as liberal democracies that have even applied them against each other. Goldrick, "Grey Zone Operations and the Maritime Domain"; Inderjeet Parmar, "The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 160–162.

³⁰Buchanan, "Hybrid Warfare: Australia's (Not so) New Normal"; Moyse, "Plan C: Winning below the Threshold of War | The Strategist"; Cullen and Reichborn-Kjennerud, "Understanding Hybrid Warfare"; Seeley and Shandra, "Countering Hybrid Warfare: Conceptual Foundations and Implications for Defence Forces, 3."

³¹Marcus Hellyer, *The Cost of Defence ASPI Defence Budget Brief 2019-20*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019, 5, 93; Ben Packham, "Out-of-Date Strategies in Defence White Paper," *The Weekend Australian*, 2019, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/defence/outofdate-strategies-in-defence-white-paper/news-story/3e871d6322765aa33b72123b28b21d70>; Dowse and Bachmann, "Explainer: What Is 'hybrid Warfare' and What Is Meant by the 'Grey Zone'?"

³²Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China Hid Its Ambitions For Hegemony in Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/china-plan-rule-asia>; Lu, "China Accused of Entering 'Grey Zone' between War and Peace to Assert Control in Disputed Waters"; Moyse, "Plan C: Winning below the Threshold of War | The Strategist."

³³Borys, "Senior Defence Figure Raises Concerns about Future Cyber Attacks — and the Scenario Costing Him Sleep"; Packham, "Exclusive: Australia Concluded China Was behind Hack on Parliament, Political Parties"; Debasis Dash, "Facing A Future With Organized Weaponization Of Social Media," *US Army War College War Room*, 2020, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/organized-weaponization-of-social-media/>.

significant changes to its strategic interests and foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region that are diverging from Australia's interests.³⁴ Most recently, the continuing impacts of COVID-19 from a health, economic and political perspective have further highlighted the risk of hybrid threats to Australia.³⁵

There are two principles for countering hybrid threats that directly undermine their “defeat mechanisms” – firstly, to increase the cohesion and resilience of a target state, and secondly, to develop proportionate response mechanisms that can achieve deterrence-by-denial effects.³⁶ Australia's vulnerability to hybrid warfare can be traced back to impediments and deficiencies in these areas, thereby increasing exposure to hybrid defeat mechanisms. The most critical deficiency, is the current absence of any single cohesive and holistic perspective of Australian national security, with elements strewn across no less

³⁴Prashanth Parameswaran, “Assessing US Alliance Management in Asia Under the Trump Administration – The Diplomat,” *The Diplomat*, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/assessing-us-alliance-management-in-asia-under-the-trump-administration/>; Ankit Panda, “How Not to Win Friends and Influence the Indo-Pacific – The Diplomat,” *The Diplomat*, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/how-not-to-win-friends-and-influence-the-indo-pacific/>; Bruce Vaughn, *Australia: Foreign Policy*, In Focus (Washington, D.C., 2019), 2; Peter Jennings, “With Trump at Large, Australia Needs a Plan B for Defence,” *The Strategist*, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/with-trump-at-large-australia-needs-a-plan-b-for-defence/>.

³⁵Hitch and Hayne, “Federal Government Calls Chinese Ambassador about Comments on Trade Boycott over Coronavirus Inquiry”; Palmer, “Why China Is Punishing Australia By Suspending Meat Imports”; Daniel Hurst, “Australia-China Trade Tensions Raise Fears over Future of Agricultural Exports,” *The Guardian*, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/13/australia-china-trade-tensions-raise-fears-over-future-of-agricultural-exports>; Robin Brumby, “Tensions between China-Australia Rising Due to COVID-19 Investigation and ‘Economic Coercion,’” *Small Caps*, 2020, <https://smallcaps.com.au/tensions-between-china-australia-rising-covid-19-investigation-economic-coercion/>; Cave and Kwai, “China Is Defensive. The U.S. Is Absent. Can the Rest of the World Fill the Void?”; Robert A. Manning and Patrick M. Cronin, “Under Cover of Coronavirus Pandemic, China Steps Up Brinkmanship in South China Sea,” *Foreign Policy*, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/14/south-china-sea-dispute-accelerated-by-coronavirus/>.

³⁶Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone. Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict.*; Thomas Patterson, “The ‘Grey Zone’: Political Warfare Is Back,” *The Interpreter*, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/grey-zone-political-warfare-back>; Sean (Ed.) Monaghan, Patrick Cullen, and Njord Wegge, “MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project: Countering Hybrid Warfare,” no. March (2019): 92, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/784299/concepts_mcdc_countering_hybrid_warfare.pdf; Lawrence Freedman, “The Meaning of Deterrence,” in *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 37.

than seven separate instruments of policy or strategy.³⁷ This deficiency leads to a cascade of effects with far-reaching impacts at multiple levels that cumulatively weaken the structural integrity of the state.

The lack of a common (and coherent) perspective has led to different parts and levels of government developing conflicting views in defining ‘the national interest’, often resulting in contradictory positions and strategies devoid of national security considerations which, for the most part, are seen as a matter for the military.³⁸ For example, over the last decade, Australia’s Foreign Affairs portfolio has been subject to severe budget cuts, handicapping the diplomatic efforts needed to strengthen relationships and build influence to broaden economic interests and mitigate security risks in the region.³⁹ Funding from these cuts has, in part, gone to supporting the recent increases in military capability emphasising “hard security”, aimed partly at placating the United States who has become increasingly disinterested and erratic as a security partner, and partly to offset risk by attempting to increase Australia’s military self-sufficiency for the future.⁴⁰ At the same time, Australia’s economic strategy encourages deeper engagement with a prospering China and Asia, contrary to U.S. interests and increasing trade and economic dependence

³⁷These documents include the Defence White Paper, Foreign Policy White Paper, Counter-terrorism Strategy, Cyber Security Strategy, Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy, Energy White Paper and the inaugural National Security Strategy released in 2013.

³⁸Jim Molan, “Getting Real about Australia’s Security | The Strategist,” The Strategist, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/getting-real-about-australias-security/>.

³⁹Melissa Conley Tyler and Mitchell Vandewerdt-Holman, “Australia’s Incredible Shrinking Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade,” Pursuit, 2019, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/australia-s-incredible-shrinking-department-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade>.

⁴⁰Jim Molan, “Getting Real about Australia’s Security | The Strategist,” The Strategist, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/getting-real-about-australias-security/>; Jacinta Carroll, “Funding Australia’s Role in the World - AIIA - Australian Institute of International Affairs,” Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2018, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/funding-australias-role-in-the-world/>; Joyobroto Sanyal, “Shaping Australian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Thoughts on a Reflective Framework of Analysis,” *Security Challenges* 15, no. 1 (2019): 5.

on China.⁴¹ Economic rationalism has also driven the closure of domestic fuel infrastructure, resulting in a heavy dependence on imported fuel with minimal domestic fuel reserves and completely undermining investments and other efforts to build resilience and security.⁴²

This strategic incoherency impedes long-term planning and the crafting of an effective and credible narrative to explain Australia's actions and strategic intent to inform domestic constituents and international stakeholders.⁴³ Domestically, this weakens public confidence and trust in government while increasing susceptibility to disinformation, political partisanship and populist movements, which in turn, increases political volatility.⁴⁴ Internationally, limited diplomatic resources face additional pressure as this informational deficiency compromises Australia's influence and standing in foreign policy.⁴⁵ All of these lines of fracture and inconsistency are readily apparent along every dimension and easily targetable for exploitation by a hybrid warfare aggressor. This fundamental fragility inherently undermines state cohesion and resilience.

⁴¹Parameswaran, "Assessing US Alliance Management in Asia Under the Trump Administration – The Diplomat"; Panda, "How Not to Win Friends and Influence the Indo-Pacific – The Diplomat."

⁴²Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia held a domestic fuel reserve of only 20-25 days of supply – the worst of all International Energy Agency (IEA) signatory countries. The IEA minimum requirement is 90 days of supply. Alan Dupont, "Australia Needs Its Own Fuel Reserves," *The Australian*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/australia-needs-its-own-fuel-reserves/news-story/8a5b2bb595a0de268ed270868e6dcdef>; Clare Payne, "Energy Security," in *Agenda for Change 2019: Strategic Choices for the next Government*, ed. Marcus Hellyer (Canberra: The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019), 87; AAP FactCheck, "Oil Claim Accurate but Questions Remain," *The Canberra Times*, 2019, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6395561/oil-claim-accurate-but-questions-remain/?cs=14264>.

⁴³Sanyal, "Shaping Australian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Thoughts on a Reflective Framework of Analysis.", 3.

⁴⁴Andrew Carr, "I'm Here for an Argument - Why Bipartisanship on Security Makes Australia Less Safe" (Canberra, 2017), 14. <https://www.tai.org.au>.

⁴⁵Sian Troath, "A Muddled Message Makes It Harder for Australia's Friends to Trust Us," *The Interpreter*, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/muddled-message-makes-harder-australias-friends-trust-us>; Jamie Smyth, "Australia's Global Clout Dented by Political Instability," *Financial Times*, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/c25171d2-f76b-11e8-af46-2022a0b02a6c>.

Further fragility is conferred through outdated and siloed perspectives on national defence that have historically been viewed solely through a military lens, almost exclusively oriented towards threat concepts involving violence, and overly-reliant on simplistic concepts of deterrence.⁴⁶ One glaring example is the 2015 decision of the Northern Territory government to lease the commercial port of Darwin harbour to a Chinese-owned company with extensive links to the PLA on a 99-year term.⁴⁷ In spite of passing through all formal channels of review, Federal Cabinet members, senior defence and intelligence officials and the United States (who has troops based in Darwin) were all blindsided when they became aware only hours before the decision was made public. The proposal which was exempt from full review by the Foreign Investment Review Board by rules in place at the time, was nevertheless referred to the Department of Defence three times for review and re-consideration - each time being cleared to proceed by the Defence bureaucracy without triggering ministerial consideration on the basis that Defence had no interest in commercial port ownership provided the Navy had access if needed.⁴⁸ Such unimodal thinking combined with a deference to other arms of government for all perceived non-military matters desensitises the state to more complex and nuanced threat agents, and reflects an inherent handicap that can often arise from liberal democratic ideals

⁴⁶Packham, "Out-of-Date Strategies in Defence White Paper."

⁴⁷Christopher Walsh, "How and Why Did the Northern Territory Lease the Darwin Port to China, and at What Risk?," ABC News, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-12/why-did-northern-territory-sell-darwin-port-to-china-what-risk/10755720>.

⁴⁸Incidentally, the terms of the lease only guaranteed access to the Royal Australian Navy for the first twenty-five years of the agreement. In a gross understatement, the outcome was subsequently described by senior officials as "an oversight" once the final approval (and ensuing public and political outcry) had come to light. Fleur Anderson, "It's on Defence's Head: FIRB Chairman on Darwin Port," Australian Financial Review, 2016, <https://www.afr.com/politics/its-on-defences-head-firb-chairman-on-darwin-port-20160310-gnfrfe>.

and perspectives on civil-military relationships.⁴⁹ In addition to increasing the susceptibility to hybrid threats, such thinking also impedes development of responsive capabilities needed to deter and mitigate any impact of hybrid threats.

While the military possesses information and cyber warfare capabilities, there remains uncertainty on the legal basis for employment of the military capability domestically as well as deficiencies in policy and doctrinal guidance on employment that impact planning and execution activities.⁵⁰ As such policy guidance has implications for domestic and international policy, other government departments as well as allies, these are not deficiencies that can be overcome by the military alone, yet three years on from the formation of a dedicated Information Warfare Division, there remains no visible sign of a comprehensive approach to meeting this need.⁵¹ While part of the lack of visible progress may be attributable to the secrecy of the capabilities of the Division, this itself creates challenges for effective deterrence which requires potential aggressors to have some awareness of the capabilities and their likelihood of success or potential consequences of action.⁵² These shortcomings limit the granularity and precision of how relevant capabilities can be applied for proportionate responses, and impacts deterrence.⁵³

Without a clear articulation of what constitutes “national interest” based on critical and forensic analysis of our needs, strengths and weaknesses across all dimensions and

⁴⁹Buchanan, “Hybrid Warfare: Australia’s (Not so) New Normal”; Clive Williams, “Why Australia Needs to Re-Examine How It Approaches Defence Strategy,” *The Canberra Times*, 2019, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6390900/australia-needs-to-re-examine-how-it-approaches-defence/>; Patterson, “The ‘Grey Zone’: Political Warfare Is Back.”

⁵⁰Stilgherrian, “‘No Such Thing’ as Cyber Warfare: Australia’s Head of Cyber Warfare,” ZDNet, 2019, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/no-such-thing-as-cyber-warfare-australias-head-of-cyber-warfare/>; Christopher Wardrop, “Bridging the Gap between Cyber Strategy and Operations: A Missing Layer of Policy,” *Australian Defence Journal*, no. 204 (2018): 61, 67.

⁵¹Stilgherrian, “‘No Such Thing’ as Cyber Warfare: Australia’s Head of Cyber Warfare.”

⁵²Wardrop, “Bridging the Gap between Cyber Strategy and Operations: A Missing Layer of Policy.”, 65.

⁵³Patterson, “The ‘Grey Zone’: Political Warfare Is Back.”

domains, and free of ideological or partisan rhetoric, Australia's ability to wield its various instruments of national power in a manner that is not at cross-purposes but complementary and sufficiently responsive to threats is severely limited and will remain ad hoc at best.⁵⁴ Similarly, constraining responses to military power options alone incurs further risks. On one hand, it may drive continuing focus by the military on the familiar terrain of the narrow band of high-end warfighting, within a much broader spectrum of conflict where aggressor activity on lower ends of the spectrum, beneath military interest can render such military strength irrelevant.⁵⁵ On the other hand, re-orienting the force may risk spreading a small but potent military capability too thinly across an expanding spectrum of conflict. Both outcomes are unhelpful in developing proportionate response options for credible deterrence. In the face of increasing geopolitical instability within the region, Australia cannot maintain its current situation and must quickly take deliberate steps to develop a comprehensive approach to hybrid threats.

Options for Developing a Comprehensive Approach

The creation of an overarching National Security Strategy is an essential first step to allow nested and complementary policy guidance to be issued by component branches of government, as well as states and territories.⁵⁶ An expansion of Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) to integrate representatives – each with sufficient agency

⁵⁴Carr, "Triangulating Australia's China Debate"; Peter Varghese, "A Contested Asia: What Comes after US Strategic Predominance? (Part 1)," *The Strategist*, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/contested-asia-comes-us-strategic-predominance-part-1/>; Peter Varghese, "A Contested Asia: What Comes after US Strategic Predominance? (Part 2)," *The Strategist*, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/contested-asia-comes-us-strategic-predominance-part-2/>.

⁵⁵Buchanan, "Hybrid Warfare: Australia's (Not so) New Normal."

⁵⁶Samuel Bashfield, "Australia Needs a New National Security Strategy – The Diplomat," *The Diplomat*, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/australia-needs-a-new-national-security-strategy/>; Jim Molan, "Australia Needs a Clear National Security Strategy | The Strategist," *The Strategist*, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-needs-a-clear-national-security-strategy/>.

to act rather than merely observe – from a broader range of Commonwealth departments than currently, along with representatives from the states and territories reflective of the dimensions and domains from which threats arise, as well as all instruments of national power would further inculcate greater awareness, critical thinking and analysis, co-ordination and responsiveness to emerging or dynamic conditions. This integration of a broader range of expertise and backgrounds could be enhanced through the adoption of revised planning processes better suited to volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous scenarios, such as those based on Design and Systems Thinking and focused on “Phase 0” and “Phase 1” as core effort, rather than attempting to co-opt further participants into current military planning processes typically focused on “Phase 2” and “Phase 3” operations planning.⁵⁷

Australia should increase its efforts to develop multiple bilateral or “minilateral” security relationships in the region as others have.⁵⁸ While it may seem more diplomatically efficient to focus on multilateral efforts to build large or extensive alliances, the susceptibility of such groupings to paralysis through hybrid aggression that exploits

⁵⁷Stefan J. Banach and Alex Ryan, “The Art of Design - A Design Methodology,” *Military Review*, no. March-April (2009): 109–113; William Mitchell, “Systems of Systems Thinking and Hybrid Warfare: A SOF Approach,” *The Archipelago of Design*, 2018, <http://militaryepistemology.com/systems-of-systems-thinking-and-hybrid-warfare/>; Ben Zweibelson, “Seven Design Theory Considerations: An Approach to Ill-Structured Problems,” *Military Review* 92, no. 6 (2012): 80; Celestino Perez Jr, “A Practical Guide to Design: A Way to Think About It, and a Way to Do It,” *Military Review* 91, no. 2 (2011): 42–44, 50, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/docview/860332388>; Nathan Finney, “Fresh Thinking to Deal with ‘Not Quite Wars’ (Part 1),” *The Strategist*, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/fresh-thinking-deal-not-quite-wars-part-1/>; Nathan Finney, “Fresh Thinking to Deal with ‘Not Quite Wars’ (Part 2) | The Strategist,” *The Strategist*, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/fresh-thinking-deal-not-quite-wars-part-2/>; Imre Porkoláb and Ben Zweibelson, “Designing a NATO That Thinks Differently for 21st Century Complex Challenges,” *Applied Social Sciences* 1, no. September (2018): 197.

⁵⁸Bonds et al., *What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area Denial Forces Play Detering or Defeating Aggress.*, 24; Céline Pajon, “Japan’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Shaping a Hybrid Regional Order,” *War on the Rocks*, December 18, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/japans-indo-pacific-strategy-shaping-a-hybrid-regional-order/>; Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 40.

interfaces and differences between participants, merits an alternate approach.⁵⁹ As COVID-19 has shown, when resilience is needed, redundancy trumps efficiency.⁶⁰ Multiple security relationships would also require greater energy on the part of any aggressor to overcome. Australia should also look to expand the volume of military assistance or training missions – a key mechanism for supporting partners to counter hybrid threats from proxies or non-state groups.⁶¹ Highly trained and capable military forces such as Australia’s (particularly special operations forces) serve as their own form of currency when exporting training and “practical diplomacy”, increasing the attractiveness of Australia as a bilateral security partner, adding depth and range for proportionality of response, whilst adding another factor to any calculus of deterrence by an aggressor.⁶²

Current transformative capabilities under development in the military (*e.g.* Cyber and Information warfare, fifth-generation warfare C2 under Plan Jericho) should be structured to support smaller force packages, enabling such capabilities to be pushed down as far necessary to the ‘tactical’ practitioner for employment to maximum effect.⁶³

⁵⁹Jonathan McClory, “The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power,” 2018, 66, https://keats.kcl.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/3798395/mod_resource/content/1/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2018.pdf; Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 19, 42-43.

⁶⁰Paul Nieuwenhuis, “COVID-19 and the Balance Between Efficiency and Resilience,” Ecosystem Marketplace, 2020, <https://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/articles/covid-19-and-the-balance-between-efficiency-and-resilience/>.

⁶¹Frank Brundtland Steder, “Introduction: The Theory, History, and Current State of Hybrid Warfare,” *CTX* 6, no. 4 (2016): 13–14; Linda Robinson, “The Future of Special Operations,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (2012): 111–112; Stephen Kuper, “Hybrid Warfare and a New Role for Australia’s Special Forces?,” Defence Connect, 2019, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/4355-hybrid-warfare-and-a-new-role-for-australia-s-special-forces>.

⁶²Joseph Wheatley, “Does Australia Face a ‘China Choice’?,” *Australian Defence Force Journal*, no. 199 (2016): 52.

⁶³Kelsea Pyke, “Multi-Domain Integration: Why Does It Matter? - Australian Institute of International Affairs - Australian Institute of International Affairs,” Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2016, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/multi-domain-integration-why-does-it-matter/>; Robin Laird, “The Materialization of Plan Jericho: Building a Wingman for a 5th Generation Air Force,” Second Line of Defense, 2019, <https://sldinfo.com/2019/02/the-materialization-of-plan-jericho-building-a-wingman-for-a-5th-generation-air-force/>; Fergus Hanson and Tom Uren, “Australia’s Offensive Cyber

Nowhere is the fallout from “strategic compression” of the operational layer so apparent than when responding to the inherent asymmetry of hybrid threats.⁶⁴ The corollary of having “strategic corporals” and “tactical generals” means that the labelling of scarce assets as “strategic” to restrict their employment carries less weight (with the possible exception of nuclear weapons).⁶⁵ Careful but pragmatic consideration could also be given to enhanced integration of representatives of domestic law enforcement into the Information Warfare Division and/or possible amendments to the Defence Act 1903 as part of efforts to better facilitate Defence involvement across multiple domains in a domestic context, to support the national interest, as required.

Conclusion

Increasing instability in the Indo-Pacific region driven by competition between China and the United States against a backdrop of increasingly divergent interests between the United States and its regional security partners have highlighted Australia’s vulnerability to hybrid threats. This paper has demonstrated how Australia’s vulnerabilities can be traced back to fundamental deficiencies in state governance impacting state cohesion and resilience, combined with a limited ability to mount proportionate responses and deter aggression by means other than military threats of punishment that are dependent on an alliance partner. Furthermore, it has explained how these deficiencies undermine principles of a comprehensive response to hybrid warfare. Through an exploration of the defeat mechanisms of hybrid approaches and a deconstruction of the Chinese perspective

Capability,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2018, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/australias-offensive-cyber-capability>.

⁶⁴David Dillege, “Thoughts on ‘Strategic Compression,’” Small Wars Journal, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/thoughts-on-strategic-compression>.

⁶⁵Jay W Reist et al., “Strategic Compression and the Military’s Pursuit of Cognitive Readiness,” in *Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation, and Education Conference*, 2016, 2.

of hybrid warfare as a contemporary example, this paper has also explored how the principles of a comprehensive response effectively counter hybrid aggression by confounding the defeat mechanisms of hybrid approaches. It has also offered a perspective of how a comprehensive response to hybrid warfare could be developed for Australia that would have immediate relevance to contemporary regional instability, as well as the wider geopolitical environment based on current trends.

Australia needs to take rapid steps to develop a comprehensive response in order to contest and deter contemporary and future hybrid threats to its national security, in the Indo-Pacific region. The actions outlined in this paper would greatly enhance the effectiveness of all political narratives and instruments of national power, enabling greater sensitivity, clarity on freedom of action, flexibility and responsiveness to threats. They would also reduce Australia's susceptibility to hybrid exploitation along lines of political cleavage, and in doing so, set conditions for a greater range of credible and proportionate response options and ultimately, greater capability to contest hybrid threats and safeguard Australia's interests.

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