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# Hybrid Warfare, International Negotiation, and an Experiment in “Remote Convening”

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*The authors are leading a multinational effort to understand the effects of “hybrid” warfare on international commercial negotiation. The start-up process is itself essentially a negotiation, among about forty individual practitioners and scholars with very diverse backgrounds, over whether and how they will work together. In a pandemic, a key risk is that the necessary cooperation and trust will be harder to build, particularly among professionals who are dealing with security-sensitive issues and who have never met each other. This article discusses the current necessity of replacing the in-person*

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*model for eliciting such cooperation which the authors had developed previously for large collaborative projects, and describes a “remote convening” replacement process.*

**Keywords:** international commercial negotiation, hybrid warfare, collaboration, convening

## Introduction

We are forming a working, interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to investigate the relationship between “hybrid” warfare and international negotiation. In an era of hybrid warfare, international negotiations are becoming more challenging, particularly in the private sector, which is our main focus. We look forward to writing more about the substance of these challenges (including in these pages) in the future. For this COVID-19 special section on the research challenges posed by the pandemic, however, we will focus on the immediate procedural problem we are facing: how even to start on this project during a global pandemic.

Addressing the impact of hybrid warfare on international negotiation involves a complex and sensitive set of security issues; therefore a high level of trust among contributors is essential. A specific type of “convening” meeting has become the key tool we have developed over the years for working with groups of people who are so varied in background, discipline, and orientation that they normally never encounter each other, much less sign up for months or years of sustained work together.<sup>1</sup> Since we cannot hold such a meeting in person because of the pandemic, we must find an alternate way to proceed if we are not to defer the project entirely until international travel is once again routine. Yet postponement seems unwise given the pressing nature of the underlying issues.

## Background: The Emergence of Hybrid Warfare

The concept most often called “hybrid warfare”—also called “asymmetric,” “gray zone,” and “unrestricted” warfare—dates back at least twenty years, yet only in recent months has it started to enter the general lexicon in the United States, even within scholarly circles that are concerned with conflict. However, the U.S. has lagged behind Canada, Australia, and some other Western nations in open discussion of hybrid warfare. The reasons for this lack of attention, and a full discussion of why the topic is significant to negotiation, are beyond the scope of this

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brief article. We only note here that public concern in the U.S. about hybrid warfare is on the rise, and that just as the Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously described war as “merely the continuation of policy by other means,”<sup>2</sup> the converse also applies.

In brief, hybrid warfare encapsulates a wide range of tactics in the pursuit of extreme international competition, but outside of traditional military means (Tait 2019). Some of its elements are by now relatively widely known, such as the hacking of critical infrastructure computer systems, or the arrival of “little green men,” who are heavily armed but unidentified, on a disputed border. But other types of attack are much more subtle, including some that have arisen as opportunities only in the wake of the pandemic. For example, on June 16, 2020 CNN reported that the Pentagon had issued warnings that China was engaging in “economic warfare” by targeted purchases of stakes in systemically important U.S. companies that were urgently in need of fresh capital as a result of the pandemic. The warning included the note that some of the companies were so small and so far down a key supply chain that the Pentagon itself might be unaware of their strategic role (Gaouette, Starr, and Salama 2020). For the theory behind hybrid warfare, see Qiao and Wang (1999).<sup>3</sup>

Concern about hybrid warfare in the U.S. Congress has focused on Russian interference with elections, espionage through Chinese technology, and the potential dependence on China for critical supply chains. Since the spread of COVID-19, this last concern has centered on medical supplies such as active ingredients in drugs, protective gear, and vaccines. In other parts of the U.S. government, security professionals are also concerned with Iranian attacks and increasing evidence of collaboration between Iran, Russia, and China.

Our project was sparked by the concerns of one of the authors, Calvin Chrustie, who led a unit of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police charged with combating transnational organized crime and state-facilitated criminal networks, including a broad range of illicit activities such as money laundering and cyber-related crimes. Chrustie was also charged with monitoring the strategic use of political corruption. His work brought him in close contact with the security and intelligence services of the U.S., Canada, Australia, the UK, and New Zealand. All of these services seemed increasingly alarmed about—but not increasingly effective at combating—the rapidly rising series of attacks on Western entities. These security and intelligence services lacked systematic responses to attacks against political and government entities. To an even greater extent, they were unable to respond systematically to attacks against business corporations. At least some of these attacks pervade what are apparently ordinary commercial negotiations.

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China's alleged exploitation of the coronavirus pandemic to wage economic warfare on the U.S. is particularly illustrative of the need for our project. Such economic warfare represents, or at least heavily incorporates, instances where Western firms, often unknowingly, are negotiating not with the purported corporate entity on the other side of the table, but with a hostile government that secretly controls it. This is "asymmetric" negotiation with a vengeance.

It is a general characteristic of these actions that the real players and goals on the attacking side are carefully disguised, as in the supply chain example noted above. But other forms of hybrid warfare in the private sector abound. Theft of intellectual property, for instance, may involve outright hacking, or negotiated transfers of technology to partner or supplier enterprises, or other methods used by supposedly friendly commercial partners. Relationship-building with Western industrywide groups, think tanks, or cultural organizations may come with hidden strings that lead to those groups becoming enmeshed in the agendas of foreign state actors.

We believe that Western companies and other entities of many kinds may now be so integrated into the commerce of China, Russia, and other countries that they feel powerless to disengage from dealings with them. The motivation in some quarters to deny the problem instead of dealing with it may be strong. Moreover, the specific nature of many of the attacks as well as their overall scope, variety, and frequency are at present obscure. This not only facilitates denial but obstructs the formation of any coherent strategy.

Thus, one of the core purposes of our interdisciplinary project is to try to understand hybrid warfare in as many of its dimensions, and from as many angles within each dimension, as possible. Though ultimately the key questions will revolve around how to prevent or mitigate harm, we see the search for a reasonably comprehensive overall picture as an essential first step. For both private commercial firms and nonprofit entities that operate internationally and engage routinely in negotiation of one kind or another, hybrid warfare raises fundamental challenges that begin with the very recognition of instances of its occurrence and include vigilant engagement with agents when principals may be concealed.

Before tackling these challenges, however, a process is needed that allows the inquiry to proceed, the COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding.

## **Our Response**

We<sup>4</sup> can confidently say two things at present. First, our basic framing of the substantive problem is fuzzy, at least in part, because of the challenge of even defining it. Almost half a century's study in multiple fields

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has consistently concluded that resistance to definition is a core characteristic of a “wicked” problem. The only known alternative to striking out with a best guess, and accepting the consequences, is not to address the problem at all.<sup>5</sup> Second, our procedural approach is itself very much a work in progress, at least in part, because of the pandemic.

To address the underlying “wicked” problem, we will need to learn from multiple kinds of experts, including but not limited to those in business and law—both practitioners and scholars; the military and policing; intelligence work; cultural studies; sociology; technology; and even the arts. And the kinds of discussions we need are not well served by people developing individual papers and the like. From the outset, our endeavor requires a particular type of “transactional” negotiation, among about forty parties—individual practitioners and scholars from very different fields, cultures, and work backgrounds.

Within many fields as well as across allied fields, scholarly collaborations are common. But such teams share a basic understanding of each respective field’s concerns and methodologies; moreover, their members tend to work within similar reward structures. Across very disparate fields such as those involved in our project, and with a mix of academics and practitioners, collaborations tend to lack these facilitating elements and are much more difficult to start or maintain.

We have a tried-and-true method for successful cross-disciplinary writing. Essentially, the method involves an extensive convening process culminating in a relatively large meeting designed to provide substantial time in frequently remixed small groups. First there are investigative discussions, which lead to trust-building. Then writing teams are organized, which leave the first meeting committed to joint writing projects intended to result in publishable material. This method simply is not possible at the present time. As we adjust to the new normal during this pandemic, how do we adapt complicated processes, developed over years of practice among conflict management experts, to our current circumstances?

We outline here the methods we intend to use. These must be adapted not only to the pandemic, but to the planned addition to our project of eight to ten security experts. Military, police, intelligence, and other security professionals have special concerns about disclosing information to other people. Now we must employ methods for developing trust that do not include the historically all-important one of meeting someone and sizing them up in person. People’s reliance on physical encounters is deeply ingrained, and may not even require conversation to produce an immediate and enduring impression of trustworthiness or lack thereof. For example, Gerd Gigerenzer relates the story of a plainclothes police officer accurately identifying an innocent-looking woman at an airport as a drug courier *before* she did

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something suspicious—which she did only because she spotted him, too (Gigerenzer 2008). When videoconferencing replaces in-person meetings, trust-related issues are many (see Ebner 2017 for a discussion of such issues; see also Zornoza, Orengo, and Peñarroja 2009).

### **Our COVID-19 Approach to an Interdisciplinary Project**

As it happens, our initial approaches to scholars and practitioners for a new interdisciplinary project have always been largely by remote electronic means. And though the initial interactions are necessarily more intensive (typically an hour, sometimes much more, of one-on-one conversation per individual) than the e-mailed group invitation that often suffices for less eclectic groups, the fact that a diverse groups of people have been engaged this way in the past, and preliminary levels of trust and commitment have been established, suggests that replacement of subsequent in-person meetings with virtual meetings may not be impossible. We have approximately thirty highly experienced negotiation scholars and practitioners who have agreed to join the project as of the date of writing. We also expect to recruit about eight to ten people with significant military, intelligence, police, or other security experience.

By our standards, these are not particularly large groups. In fact we have limited the size of the team in deference to concerns raised by the first security professionals we approached, who insisted that a large number of new colleagues would make them more nervous than if a smaller group was to be involved. Although a smaller group improves the prospects for cohesion, there is a risk that some aspect of hybrid warfare will be unrepresented by an expert able to explain it to others. If the project is successful in its early stages, however, it may become possible to expand it.

Between them, our old and new colleagues have proposed some approaches that we might use when we cannot hold an in-person meeting. One such insight came from Dan Druckman, who suggested that we might develop case studies for examination by multidisciplinary teams. In the past, the case studies that we used have been developed in person (see, e.g., Christie et al. 2010). But the essentials seem workable even in the absence of an in-person meeting, and discussing Druckman's notion subsequently with other scholars from a variety of fields has enriched the core idea.<sup>6</sup> Still other colleagues have offered a variety of add-ons. Observing these scholars' and practitioners' remote but immediate application of interdisciplinary work to this project has been heartening. As a result of all of their ideas, our plan now includes the following elements:

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### 1. *Recruit security professionals*

As of this writing, we are recruiting a diversely experienced cohort of security professionals to counterbalance the negotiation expertise we already have “on board” for this project. Pragmatism dictates a focus on recent retirees and others who have substantial knowledge and good networks but are not currently subject to the most stringent nondisclosure rules (e.g., journalists specializing in security issues) rather than currently serving officers. One benefit of the pandemic is that we are not tempted to leave people out solely on the basis of where they live. When everyone is working remotely, location is not a barrier.

### 2. *Develop test scenarios*

We will develop several test scenarios or “cases” involving different forms of hybrid warfare gambits that attack different functions or units of private firms, large or small. To reduce concerns about disclosure of sensitive information, we will accept hypotheticals. Each case will be developed by a team of no more than four or five people, to facilitate their getting to know each other quickly. Each team will be multidisciplinary and will include at least one security expert.

Tech firms and others have argued that the now-widespread “break-out” function in their remote-meeting platforms replicates what occurs in side meetings where small groups assemble privately for an hour or three. We do not know whether people’s comfort with such technology has advanced to the point where they are willing to discuss sensitive matters relating to hybrid warfare in such a setting. In addition, some widely used teleconferencing applications have faced major security breaches. (See, e.g., <https://www.businessinsider.com/zoom-facing-multiple-reported-security-issues-amid-coronavirus-crisis-2020-4>. See also Ebner 2017.) But we are open to the possibility and plan to test it.

### 3. *Form small interdisciplinary teams*

We plan to invite our full roster of participants to form small interdisciplinary teams to investigate a scenario that particularly appeals to each one. There will be several such teams working each case. We will ask for a basic review of the literature relevant to each discipline’s approach to the subject matter, though we recognize that few of those participating will have time for anything extensive in this area. Each team will be asked not to communicate with any of the other teams working the same case until after they have written up their team’s consolidated/



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proposed approach to it. We are hoping this may reveal differences that will enrich the subsequent discussion—and perhaps also spur everyone to think harder, because of the inherent (though mild) competitive element.

One element of “remote convening” that promises to be superior to previous practice is the availability of online text-based processors that enable simultaneous and collaborative document editing, as well as easily retained virtual documents. This seems a clear win over awkward flipcharts and scrawls on whiteboards—both of which, even with the precaution of taking immediate photographs, have a history (in our experience) of becoming incomprehensible or simply lost a few months later.

#### 4. *Convene a discussion*

We will convene a discussion to address not only findings that seem particularly consistent or striking, but also any problems that reveal errors in our conception, framing, basic management, or tactics.

We anticipate that this first overall stage of activity will take us well into 2021; and only when the larger discussion is held will we know how to configure the next overall phase of the project. It is possible that when (or even before) we hold the larger discussion, we will run into inherent limitations of our replacement method. We can find out only empirically whether tentative conclusions on some aspects of security-sensitive matters are more difficult to discuss than others. Perhaps supply chain issues are more sensitive than merger-and-acquisition or intellectual-property-protection issues; perhaps it will prove the other way around; perhaps no such general distinction can be drawn. Similarly, we can only find out by experience whether the group will want the Chatham House Rule adopted for these discussions, and if so, whether physical remoteness creates a barrier to its conscientious implementation.

We can still hope that by the time the first writings are ready for discussion, it will be possible to hold that discussion in person. We already have had tentative offers from four universities (in four countries) to host either the first or a subsequent meeting for this project. But if a reliable COVID-19 vaccine proves more elusive, we can at least anticipate that by that time, our contributors will have formed new relationships with people they would probably never have met without this project. That might allow a large meeting using videoconferencing technology to work better than we would otherwise have any reason to expect.

It is also possible that having started remotely, the group will grow comfortable enough with each other to *maintain* collaborations remotely over a longer period than has been typical in the past, when the



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meetings-followed-by-publication scheme has tended not to incorporate obvious means for continuing close contact. In view of the sheer size of the subject of hybrid warfare, such sustained collaboration seems unusually desirable. It is even possible that a longer-term and larger-scale virtual organization might emerge from this effort.

At the same time, trust is a notoriously perishable thing, vulnerable to misreading of small errors as intentional betrayal, and it has been reported that “face-to-face negotiation encourages greater trust development than negotiating electronically (e.g., on-line)” (Lewicki 2017a: 213). In a companion piece, Lewicki discusses how “the more serious the trust violation, the...more intentional the parties will need to be in repairing it” (Lewicki 2017b: 218). Thus, physical meetings may be called for periodically, even if there proves to be increasing comfort with remote collaboration over long periods.

## Conclusion

Hybrid warfare appears to be here to stay. Yet it is easy to envision public opinion sliding either toward hysteria, or toward an “it’s all too complicated for me” apathy. One of the great strengths of negotiation as a lens, however, is the field’s strong roots in the study of past major conflict—particularly, contemporaneous analyses of how the relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union could be kept within bounds (and was) even at the height of the Cold War. Morton Deutsch and many others have provided good reason for us all to see the new forms of international competition in balanced terms, recognizing that cooperation can and must be maintained on some issues (climate change is an obvious example) even while there is vigorous or even relentless competition on others.

We cannot know at the time of writing if our novel approach to engendering interdisciplinary work will, in fact, succeed—during the COVID-19 pandemic or at any other time. Yet it seems important to try. At least we know that our design probably *will* prove defective at least in part, and are ready to revise it on the fly. And we cannot help other scholars and practitioners develop their own projects on other wicked problems unless we take the risk of openly stating both our efforts and our errors.

Finally, there are limitations inherent in responding as we now must, but there are also opportunities. Greater difficulty in developing and maintaining the necessary trust across the usual boundaries of practice versus scholarship, and within scholarship across the boundaries of academic disciplines, is a clear risk, but one perhaps counterbalanced by the relative ease of working with the most promising partners without regard to their location, and of starting up without a

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time-consuming search for significant advance funding. This last factor in particular offers the tantalizing prospect of a possible improvement on past practice that might extend beyond this project. Suppose that our new approach works, or at least, works in more ways than not? If so, that might reflect a general rising comfort with remote introductions and meetings, spurred by millions of professionals' enforced daily usage of videoconferencing tools over an extended period. In a field that has always been underfunded but that has reaped great benefit when people of very different stripes work together at a more than transitory level, more numerous and more adventurous discussions could perhaps be mounted in the future if the daunting costs of complex meetings can more often be obviated.

In the meantime, the pressing issues raised by hybrid warfare require that we not wait any longer to engage.

### NOTES

1. For examples, see the Canon of Negotiation Initiative (2003–present) (discussed at <https://www.convenor.com/canon-of-negotiation.html>) and the Rethinking Negotiation Teaching project (2007–2013) (discussed at <https://www.convenor.com/rethinking-negotiation-teaching.html>). Together these projects have involved scholars and practitioners from more than thirty fields, and have produced over 350 published articles and book chapters.

2. Clausewitz's phrasing here is taken from Michael Howard and Peter Paret's translation of *On War* (Clausewitz 1976). Other scholars have rendered "policy" as "politics" or "diplomacy," terms that are more prominent in the field of negotiation. The associated text suggests that Clausewitz used all three concepts interchangeably (see Clausewitz 1976: 84; cf. Clausewitz 1976: 86).

3. For recommendations of English translations of Qiao and Wang, see "Précis: *Unrestricted Warfare*," *Military Review*, Sept.–Oct. 2019, available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/September-October-2019/Precis-Unrestricted-Warfare/>.

4. "We" as used here is not limited to the authors. Our colleagues in the new Institute for Negotiation Innovation have agreed that the project described here will be one of the first projects set up under INI's aegis. INI (which at the time of writing is in the process of updating its formal name) is described at <http://ininegotiation.org/>.

5. Our approach to the substantive issues is grounded primarily in the more practical experiences and writings of two teams with which we have worked in the past. They have used somewhat different vocabularies and concepts for addressing what in our field have been variously described as wicked problems, intractable conflicts, or complex adaptive systems. Cf. Rittel and Webber (1973), Coleman et al. (2006), Lewicki, Kaufman, and Coben (2013), Coleman, Redding, and Fisher (2017a, 2017b), and Coleman and Ricigliano (2017) (written primarily from an academic perspective) with Chrustie et al. (2010), Docherty (2010), Honeyman and Coben (2010), Lira (2010), Docherty and Chrustie (2013), Docherty and Lira (2013), Gadlin, Matz, and Chrustie (2013), Honeyman and Parish (2013), and Lira and Parish (2013) (written more from the authors' practical experiences). We are using the more practice-oriented "wicked problems language" here. A wicked problem, in negotiation or anything else, is one that by its nature will not respond to even highly developed conventional approaches to management of other problems in the same domain (Rittel and Webber 1973).

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6. We wish to thank Leonard Lira (now teaching public policy, after a distinguished military career), Jayne Seminare Docherty (peacebuilding), and Roy Lewicki (business) for their input on this concept.

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