

Sneaky War: How to Win the World Without Fighting

Description

China. Russia. Iran. Everywhere you look, there's talk of war. Some call it the [Thucydides Trap](#), while others worry bellicose hotheads will drag us into World War III. People are nervous. Concern over China's growing belligerence is the one issue that still unites Democrats and Republicans, as [hearings](#) over TikTok show. Congress overwhelmingly passed a [\\$858 billion defense budget](#), the largest in history. It's one of two major bills last year that received substantial bipartisan support. The other was the [CHIPS and Science Act](#), aimed squarely at China.

But will all that money and concern actually protect us? Everything depends on what we think future wars will look like. Putin got it badly wrong in 2022 and is still paying for it. He assumed Russia could swallow Ukraine in a few days, as did [Western pundits](#). The only thing Russia accomplished was uniting the world against it. We can chuckle at Putin, but are we much better? The last time the US won a big war was 1945 — nearly 80 years ago — despite maintaining the best military in the world. Houston, we have a problem.

The West, and especially the US, must change how we think about contemporary warfare. We may already be at war with China and Russia and do not know it; this could be by their design. You cannot win if do not even know you are at war, and that's the strategic logic of sneaky war.

Get your sneak on

War is getting sneakier because we live in a hyper-information era, in which information has become more important than firepower. Who cares about the sword if you can manipulate the mind that wields it? Certainly, political warfare is not new, but what's changed is its power. In the pre-information age, political warfare was ancillary and kinetic power was everything. Now the reverse is true. Back in WWII, you won by *blitzkrieging* into another country from the outside in with a huge military. That no longer works — remember [2003's infamous "Mission Accomplished" moment](#). Today you win by covertly rupturing a society from the inside out, using the dark arts of sneaky war. Modern communication technology makes that possible. Ubiquitous information has transformed global politics, daily life, and warfare, just as the industrial age did two centuries ago. It has made war sneakier, moving us from the Clausewitzian paradigm of *schwerpunkt* brute force to a Sun Tzuian one of subterfuge. There are many ways it succeeds; here are three.

First, you can win by waging war but disguising it as peace to your adversaries. How can you mount a defense if you do not even know you are under attack? You cannot, and that's why China, Russia, and others favor non-military instruments that Americans do not associate with war. Consequently, the US does not react, yet these "non-war" strategies achieve traditional war objectives all the same. Cyberattacks are a favorite, but the arsenal is huge. Russia likes to weaponize refugees, manipulate energy supply, and use mercenaries like the Wagner Group to wage wars in secret. China wages "lawfare" to undermine the US's rules-based order and has captured Hollywood to make everyone a Manchurian Candidate. (When was the last time you saw a [Chinese villain](#)? Answer: Never). Beijing wields the [One Belt, One Road](#) initiative like a mob boss to extort countries out of prize possessions. In 2015, Sri Lanka could not pay its debts and surrendered Hambantota, its prize port. That's like the US forking over Los Angeles port to China. However, American traditionalists do not see the threat here. For them, war only occurs when bullets fly. They may be patriots, but sneaky war exploits their ignorance.

Second, sneaky war is epistemological. In philosophy, epistemology is concerned with truth, and it can be easily weaponized in a hyper-information age. Why invade a country if you can trick them into orchestrating their own downfall? What once was achieved on physical battlefields is now accomplished by diverting attention, casting doubts and mutual suspicions, and sowing disharmony — then letting society eat itself alive.

Here's how sneaky epistemological warfare works: 1) Find an existing schism in an adversary's society, such as America's Red-versus-Blue culture war. 2) Covertly fuel it with inflammatory disinformation, whipping up both sides. 3) Get the popcorn and watch your adversary crumble from within. Stoke civil war, if possible. In 2022, a NBC poll shows [80% of Republicans and Democrats believe the political opposition poses a threat that, if not stopped, will destroy America](#). More than [40% of Americans think civil war likely within a decade](#), according to an Economist and YouGov poll. We should expect these numbers to climb as we approach the 2024 presidential election. Partisanship is not new in democracy. But today, unlike in the 1860s, foreign powers exert their own covert influence to widen existing social rifts.

TikTok is another example of epistemological warfare at work. It is the most downloaded app on the planet, with one billion users, 150 million of them in the US — over one-third of Americans. Its parent company, ByteDance, is Chinese and answers to the Communist Party by law. Consequently, the app collects user data like a spy balloon in your phone, and its algorithms [amplify divisive messaging and promote criminality](#), according to the FBI. Few realize there are two [TikToks](#). The Chinese domestic version feeds teens educational videos and patriotic clips, and limits app use to 40 minutes per day. The export version shows anything, and has kids hooked for hours. A recent study found [children in](#)

[the US and UK are three times more likely to choose a social media celebrity over an astronaut as a future career aspiration, while the opposite is true in China.](#) Governments around the world have banned TikTok. The US is considering the same, but faces potential First Amendment challenges.

Third, plausible deniability beats firepower in sneaky war. In a hyper-information age, militaries can no longer kill their way out of problems, because smartphones turn everyone everywhere into witnesses, journalists, videographers, and publishers. You can't hide in the age of media. Massacres and international law violations attract international rubbernecking and unwanted exposure for perpetrators. To avoid accountability, the Putins of the world keep a buffer of plausible deniability between them and their henchmen. If things go badly, they simply disavow everything. Warriors are masked, and black ops are the only type that matter.

To understand the effectiveness of plausible deniability, compare Russia's two invasions of Ukraine. In 2014, Russia took Crimea not by *blitzkrieg* but through sneakiness: *spetsnaz* special forces, "little green men," Wagner Group mercenaries, and [astroturfed](#) separatist militia puppeteered by Moscow. They staged a ghost occupation rather than a traditional military one. Meanwhile, the Internet Research Agency (AKA the "Troll Factory") spewed disinformation and manufactured the fog of war. While the West is still scratching its head about what's going on in eastern Ukraine, Crimea was a *fait accompli*.

In 2022, Russia attempted to *blitzkrieg* Ukraine in open traditional warfare. The unprovoked attack and Ukraine's spirited defense galvanized the world's hearts and minds against Russia. Ukrainian flags became ubiquitous, and memes of sympathy flooded the internet: think of the beatification of the Javelin anti-tank missile and images of soldiers on Snake Island flipping the bird to a Russian warship. Zelenskyy refused a US offer to evacuate, saying "I need ammunition, not a ride." And he got it: F-16s, Patriot Missiles, M1 tanks, cluster munitions, and billions of dollars. NATO resurrected itself over Ukraine, adding two more countries. Putin's mercenaries marched on Moscow. The last people who attempted it were Hitler and Napoleon. Russia floundered, and the war reached a stalemate.

Sneaky victory is, well, sneaky. Democracies are especially vulnerable to sneaky war because they are open societies, and defensive measures like censorship lead to authoritarianism. It's win-win for the enemies of democracy. Sneaky war causes the US to corrode from within, so it eventually becomes a first-world country without first-world power, like Italy. China can win by [2049](#), their self-imposed deadline, and avoid major battle, contrary to Washington's assumptions. The US did it in the Cold War, and China can do it too. Why does Washington forget this?

Warfare has moved on, but we have not

The US suffers from low strategic IQ, and many defense leaders have acute [Ludendorff Syndrome](#): assuming firepower alone can solve international problems. When you ask Americans “What is war?” they usually describe something called conventional or traditional warfare: a style of combat where states battle other states for destiny using industrial strength militaries like gladiators. Think of World War II and theorists like Clausewitz. It’s a military-centric vision of war, and superior firepower wins the day. There’s just one problem with traditional warfare: No one fights this way anymore. It’s an antiquated form of armed conflict, like battleships in 1940. Until Russia’s failed invasion, the last big traditional wars were in the 1980s. American wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were untraditional. The US lost to vastly inferior forces with low-tech weaponry – the antithesis of traditional warfare theory. Social science data confirms the trendlines: Only 6% of wars since WWII are traditional (see chart). Nothing is less conventional today than a “conventional war.” Yet America remains hypnotized by the concept, something sneaky war exploits.

image

To show how deeply rooted the conventional war fixation goes, take the Russian war in Ukraine. Most observers believe it’s conventional simply because they see tanks and artillery and associate them with the Battle of the Bulge. Astonishingly, they overlook the conflict’s larger unconventional features: Ukraine’s guerrilla warfare campaign, the Wagner Group mercenary army, Russia’s deliberate bombing of civilians to inflict terror like al-Qaida, and the wily disinformation campaigns waged by both sides. Other than a traditional state-on-state conflict, little about the war is “conventional.”

Then there’s the heart-stopping sticker shock. Budgets are moral documents because they do not lie. Weapon systems built for conventional wars are both obsolete and heinously expensive, yet the US is investing heavily in them. The F-35 fighter jet program, for example, will cost taxpayers [\\$1.7 trillion over its lifespan](#). That’s about the size of Russia’s 2021 [GDP](#), spent on a single-seat airplane. If the F-35 were a country, it would rank [11th in the world](#) in terms of GDP.

The Navy, too, is buying conventional weapons better suited to a type of war that no longer exists. A Ford-class aircraft carrier costs \$13.3 billion *per ship*, and that’s before you add sailors and aircraft. Imagine it as Spain’s defense budget wrapped up in a hunk of steel. Carriers are worthless today. If a shooting war starts in the Straits of Taiwan, sailors – 5,000 per carrier – know they will be smack-dab in the middle of China’s crosshairs. And they are correct, according to multiple Pentagon wargame [simulations](#). Still, the US bought five of the new aircraft carriers.

If you want to know what kind of war Washington thinks we will face, look at what weâ??re buying. The top weapon systems acquisitions are *all* designed for conventional war: fighter jets, submarines, aircraft carriers, armored battle vehicles, and so forth. Washingtonâ??s military industrial complex insists these weapons can also win unconventional wars, and hence are not a total waste of money. However, they did not win in Iraq or Afghanistan, which were unconventional fights like Vietnam.

Itâ??s all expensive, obsolete war junk, with astounding opportunity costs. The US fights in the past, while our adversaries fight in the present. They use Washingtonâ??s low strategic IQ against us, like a martial arts master using their opponentâ??s weight against them. It is why sneaky war succeeds.

What to do? Not everyone is sleepwalking. Outgoing Marine Commandant Gen. David Berger introduced [Force Design 2030](#), an ambitious plan to update the way Marines fight in the 21st century. Agree or not, innovative thinking is sorely needed among the strategic literati, and Berger deserves credit. Unsurprisingly, [traditionalists attacked it](#) like a pillbox on Iwo Jima.

But thereâ??s only one solution â?? the US needs to get sneaky, as it was during the Cold War. Democratic sneaky war exists, and does not look like the autocratic version. While democraciesâ?? open societies make them vulnerable to sneaky war, they are resilient. Autocracies can easily fight sneaky, but they are brittle. Democratic sneaky war targets this weakness, and a plethora of stratagems can be deployed *today*. Yes, the approach is controversial. Some may decry sneaky war as dishonorable. But is it somehow better to lose honorably than win dishonorably? Never.

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Main image: Real-time cyber attacks, including information on the attackâ??s origin, type and target, as well as, the attackerâ??s IP address, geographic location and ports being utilized, are displayed on the Norse attack map on the 275th Cyberspace Squadronâ??s operations floor, known as the Hunterâ??s Den. (U.S. Air Force photo by J.M. Eddins Jr.)

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