

# DEMOCRATIC DETERRENCE

HOW TO DISSUADE HYBRID INTERFERENCE

**Mikael Wigell**

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For all the rhetorical rage surrounding ‘hybrid warfare’, Western democracy is being threatened more acutely by *hybrid interference*. Using liberal democratic values and infrastructure for cover, authoritarian actors use a panoply of covert, non-military means to subtly drive wedges between democratic societies and undermine their internal cohesion.

This paper outlines the strategic logic of hybrid interference and shows how it puts Western democratic governability in jeopardy. It argues that deterrence policies need to be revamped in the face of this new challenge and suggests a new strategic concept – *democratic deterrence* – as a framework for dissuading hybrid interference. The concept of democratic deterrence shows how liberal democratic values need not be security vulnerabilities, as often presented in the current debate, but how they can be turned into strengths and tools for a credible deterrence response against hybrid aggressors, all the while making our Western democracies more robust and resilient.



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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
THE STRATEGIC PRACTICE OF HYBRID INTERFERENCE	4
TARGETING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY	7
THE NEED FOR DEMOCRATIC DETERRENCE	9
A TWO-PRONGED DEMOCRATIC DETERRENCE STRATEGY	11
CONCLUSION	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	16

# DEMOCRATIC DETERRENCE

## HOW TO DISSUADE HYBRID INTERFERENCE

### INTRODUCTION

Western democracy is being attacked like never before. These attacks are often subtle, manipulating the very same liberal democratic values for cover that the attack is designed to subvert. The four cornerstones of Western democracy – state restraint, pluralism, free media and economic openness – provide openings for hostile external actors to interfere in democratic society through a host of covert, non-military means calibrated to undermine their internal cohesion and accelerate political polarization.

Democracies urgently need to find means to defend against such hybrid interference, without jeopardizing the values that they are meant to defend. Extending state control over civil society is not a viable liberal democratic strategy. Neither should Western democracies mirror the use of weaponized corruption, disinformation, election meddling and other means of hybrid interference, as this would only further erode liberal democratic values.

For all their amassed military might, a particular advantage of Western democracies lies in their soft power and inclusive politics. Western democracy still commands widespread attraction and political legitimacy, and open societies are agile in responding to strategic challenges. Beyond the rigidity of state-based solutions, Western democracy harnesses market- and society-based approaches to dealing with risks and threats. These can readily be used to strengthen deterrence against hybrid interference.

Deterrence refers to a defensive strategy intended to dissuade an adversary from hostile actions. Deterrence theory and practice are often coupled with military punishment, but countering hybrid interference calls for a more comprehensive security perspective. Cold-War era deterrence toolkits need to be updated to the current era of hybrid activities. To this end, it is crucial to recognize the deterrent value of democracy itself, namely how it can provide means for deterrence by both denial and punishment.

This paper analyses the strategic practice of hybrid interference and how it targets Western democracy. It shows how authoritarian states attempt to penetrate democratic societies through clandestine diplomacy,

geoeconomics and disinformation, with the deliberate goal of provoking political polarization and undermining democratic governability. The paper argues that this new subversive politics calls for the rethinking of deterrence policies, with a view to better dissuading hybrid interference. In this vein, the paper suggests making a conceptual distinction between traditional military deterrence and new *democratic deterrence*. The second half of this paper is devoted to developing this new strategic concept. It asks what deterrent value democracy itself has, and envisages a host of non-military means by which to adapt deterrence to the current challenges.

### THE STRATEGIC PRACTICE OF HYBRID INTERFERENCE

While much of the debate on hybridity has revolved around ‘little green men’ and other grey zone military tactics, the more pressing challenges from a Western perspective are the more subtle, non-military activities deployed by authoritarian regimes to penetrate democratic society. *Hybrid interference* is a concept developed to capture non-military practices for the mostly covert manipulation of other states’ strategic interests.<sup>1</sup> As such, it should be distinguished from hybrid warfare, which is essentially a military approach to conducting ‘indirect war’ under special circumstances. Western defence cooperation makes hybrid warfare offensives an unlikely prospect in the European Union, as it would allow ample time for the EU and its member states to deploy high-end Western capabilities, and thus not make strategic sense from an aggressor’s perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Hybrid interference, on the other hand, is a strategic practice that draws on a panoply of non-military capabilities and reflexive control techniques with the aim of manipulating targets by dividing them. These instruments are more or less concealed in order to provide the hybrid aggressor with official deniability, and to enable it to manipulate targets without raising

1 Wigell 2019.

2 Charap 2015.

their threat perceptions. The idea is not to confront the target head-on, but to weaken its resolve by more subtle means of interference calibrated to undermine its internal cohesion. By helping to provoke divisions or aggravate existing tensions among target populations, hybrid interference thus functions as a ‘wedge strategy’. When the strategy is successful, it will have a corruptive impact on the target’s cohesion, aggravating divisions and conflicts within it, and thereby weakening its potential to take counter-actions.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, hybrid interference is designed as a flexible approach, in which the tools and tactics can vary; but they will always be tailored to manipulating existing cleavages, and sow internal dissension in target countries and alliances. Hybrid interference does not therefore adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, but tries to exploit specific vulnerabilities depending on the context in the target country. Three bundles of instruments are central to hybrid interference: (1) clandestine diplomacy, (2) geoeconomics and (3) disinformation.

*Clandestine diplomacy* is a form of covert action that involves fostering counter-elites and cultivating local subversive organizations to create disarray in the targeted country. It can take the form of backing radical or secessionist political parties, supporting proxies and other agents of influence, as well as nurturing protest movements. The aim is to both weaken support for central government and to create a more polarized political environment. Pressure points – whether religious or ethnic divisions, anti-government and anti-establishment sentiments, or contentious political issues – are utilized as a means of sowing disarray and eroding trust in and the legitimacy of the target government. The US-backed ‘Contra’ rebels in Nicaragua and Iran’s support of Hezbollah in Lebanon provide hard-nosed examples of clandestine diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> More recently, observers note how Turkey’s AKP regime is leveraging the Turkish diaspora and, more broadly, European Muslim communities to further its political agenda in Europe, which involves stoking ethnic tensions and urging Turks and other Muslims to reject Western values.<sup>5</sup> Allegedly, China is also attempting to exploit ethnic tensions between Chinese Australians and the wider Australian community for wedging purposes.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the migrant crisis in Europe has not only exposed rifts between ‘liberals’ and

‘anti-liberals’, it has also allowed neighbouring external powers to leverage refugees as a disruptive force.<sup>7</sup> Forcing more migrants across borders is thus used as a tactic to fan already simmering political tensions in the target country.

Although clandestine diplomacy is usually linked to the use of secret intelligence services, it can also harness criminal organizations as proxies, providing both additional capacity and deniability. There is growing evidence of collaboration between organized criminals in Europe and Russia’s intelligence services.<sup>8</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also has a history of using criminals for political purposes in Taiwan.<sup>9</sup> Manufactured street violence by hired thugs and gangs may be used to incite ethnic and political tensions. Another pertinent arena where the lines between intelligence services and criminal groups become hazy is cyberspace, where cyber activists and hacker groups engage in activities that add a further layer of obfuscation.

*Geoeconomics* involves the use of economic instruments to interfere strategically in target countries. Economic coercion, such as the use of sanctions, is a classic and overt example of geoeconomics, but in the toolbox of hybrid interference, geoeconomics takes more subtle forms, designed not to directly challenge the target, but to diminish its resolve by sowing internal division. A prominent example is Russia’s use of its energy resources as a means of driving political wedges within EU-member states, as well as between them at the European level.<sup>10</sup> The Kremlin has also been channelling money to populist and anti-EU parties and movements to accelerate centrifugal forces within the Union.<sup>11</sup> Capturing strategic sectors of the economy, such as critical infrastructure, finance and media, by which the Kremlin can attempt to destabilize the target country and manipulate local economic conditions, generate unfair profits for some local stakeholders while punishing others, and in that way achieve greater political influence, has formed part of this toolbox.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, there are a number of other economic levers available for resourceful external powers. One option is to foster links with industry leaders and politicians by offering them business opportunities. This facilitates a web of local affiliates in positions of power,

3 On the logic of wedge strategies, see Crawford 2011.

4 E.g. Kornbluh 2019; Feltman 2019.

5 Vidino 2019.

6 Lo 2019.

7 Pynnöniemi and Saari 2017.

8 See Galeotti 2017.

9 To 2014; Garnaut 2014.

10 Wigell and Vihma 2016.

11 Polyakova et al. 2016.

12 Conley et al. 2016.

who possess an incentive to advocate on the external power's behalf and to downplay any threats connected to it. As scholars and journalists have documented, China has been adept at utilizing this approach in its near-abroad, especially when it comes to US allies Australia and New Zealand. Through the deliberate policy of Qiaowu, Beijing has used local interlocutors to establish business networks and channel money to major political parties. The ultimate aim is to create cracks in US alliances in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>13</sup>

The purposeful use of corruption and cronyism can also be used to reinforce geoeconomics as a facet of hybrid interference. Corruption networks across borders enable the formation of fifth columns and their use as middlemen in interfering with economic and political processes. Two reports by the CSIS show how large economic players in the European Union, such as financial and corporate service providers, having been entangled in Russian illicit finance schemes, function as 'enablers' of Russian interference, with direct consequences for democratic structures.<sup>14</sup> Geoeconomics through corruption can also amplify means of clandestine diplomacy and vice versa, resulting in a self-reinforcing circle of corruption in which the institutional fabric of the target country starts to erode. Such institutional disruption provides fertile ground for radical forces to exploit, further accelerating political polarization.

*Disinformation* pertains to the intentional distribution of false or inaccurate information into the communication system of a target country or group.<sup>15</sup> It is an encompassing category, covering various forms of information influence operations, whose vast reach and penetration are enhanced by the use of modern media technology. The hyper-connected nature of cyberspace works as a force multiplier – it allows external powers to plant, disseminate and lend credibility to disinformation. This has been critical in the recent success of Russian disinformation campaigns.<sup>16</sup> Similar practices are being used by China and Iran as well. President Xi, for instance, has embarked on a campaign of information control by targeting niche foreign media with mergers, acquisitions and partnership agreements.<sup>17</sup> For its part, the Islamic Republic has a long history of using disinformation and fake news for subversive purposes, dating back to its revolutionary

fight to topple the US-backed Shah.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Tehran has discovered social media technology and the way it can be used to sow division as part of a broader hybrid interference operation.<sup>19</sup>

Disinformation is central to the overall strategic objective of wedging in manifold ways. First and foremost, disinformation campaigns are designed to provoke public discontent and create an aura of distrust. Russian disinformation campaigns have, for instance, played on the anxieties of target populations with trumped up (or actual) misdeeds by refugees, and then represented Western governments as either reluctant or powerless to manage the influx.<sup>20</sup> This has sometimes been carried out concurrently with an intentional campaign of migrant dumping to amplify the effect.<sup>21</sup> With Western public opinion already divided, such offensives have led to heightened polarization over the issue.

A core component of wedging by disinformation is truth distortion, especially when it comes to news dealing with political matters. By barraging internet news sites and social media feeds with 'fake news' and 'alternate' narratives of events, the disseminator of disinformation hampers the ability of target populations to separate fact from fiction. This not only damages dominant media sources, but also instills doubts regarding sources of information writ large.<sup>22</sup> The provision of these alternative narratives is then reinforced and augmented by the echo chamber effect – a phenomenon of increasing relevance in the social-media age.<sup>23</sup> Again, as is the case with other wedging tactics, it is not necessary for everybody to be on board; only some portion of the targeted population needs to buy into the disinformation narrative in order for political divisions to grow. Creating uncertainty about objective truths also makes space for radical political movements to gain more traction for their hitherto marginalized perspectives.

It is vital to acknowledge that these three bundles of tools – clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics and disinformation – can be designed to work in unison and therefore reinforce each other. Disinformation may be used to conceal or strengthen the use of clandestine diplomacy. Geoeconomics may be used to purchase media presence, which can then be harnessed for

13 Brady 2017; Hamilton 2018.

14 Conley et al. 2016 and 2019.

15 Kragh and Åsberg 2017.

16 E.g. Giles 2016; Richey 2017.

17 Hamilton 2018.

18 Tabatabai 2018.

19 Stubbs and Bing 2018.

20 For a compilation of cases, see EU vs Disinfo 2018.

21 E.g. Pynnöniemi and Saari 2017.

22 D'Ancona 2017; Richey 2017.

23 Sunstein 2017.

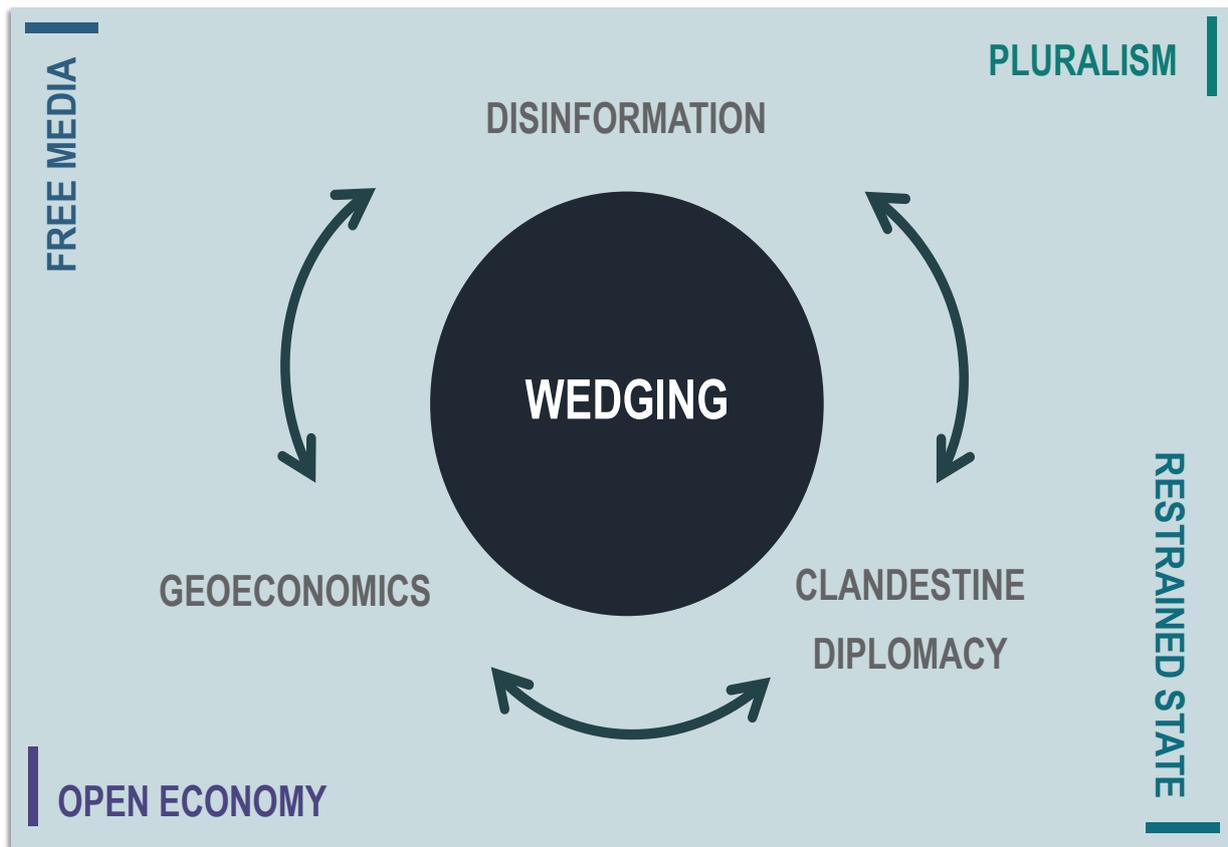


Figure 1: Hybrid Interference as Strategic Practice: Targeting Liberal Democracy

disseminating disinformation. Clandestine diplomacy may be used to create agents of influence that open up novel channels for the use of geoeconomic tools. A tactical combination of these means allows hybrid agents to adapt a broader approach to covert interference, one designed for the contextual intricacies of a specific target country.

### TARGETING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The key Western democratic cornerstones – state restraint, pluralism, free media, and open economy – provide loopholes for covert interference that can be exploited through the tactical combination of clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics and disinformation. Indeed, as a strategic practice, hybrid interference is deliberately tailored to exploit the ‘open platform’ inherent in Western democracy. Figure 1 illustrates the logic of hybrid interference when targeting Western democracy.

*Restrained state.* State restraint is an integral part of Western democracy. By definition, democratic

constitutionalism necessitates that the state agrees to a set of ‘self-binding’ mechanisms and juridical constraints, which set the requisite limits on the powers and functions of the state.<sup>24</sup> In Western democracies, the rule of law governs the relationship between the state and society, and basic civil rights and liberties provide the necessary ingredients for an autonomous and functioning civil society. When it comes to hybrid interference, however, such a restrained state makes Western democracies potentially vulnerable. When the state has been functionally restrained from ‘policing’ society, it has limited means to detect and protect against hybrid interference. A hostile actor, then, will be relatively unencumbered in their use of clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics and disinformation. The use of these instruments is somewhat paradoxically enabled by the same liberal values that they seek to subvert. For instance, exercising the fundamental rights of religious freedom and freedom of speech, Swedish Salafi networks, preaching radical jihadi narratives and seeking out Muslims to decouple them from

24 Diamond, Plattner, and Schedler 1998.

democratic processes, have expanded rapidly. Such activities are fully legal and protected by the Swedish constitution and therefore difficult for the national authorities to scrutinize and restrict. These networks have clear international links and enjoy the support of foreign states such as Saudi Arabia.<sup>25</sup>

*Pluralism.* Pluralistic competition lies at the heart of Western democracy. In non-democratic regimes, the state often endeavours to stifle sources of pluralism. Western democratic regimes, in contrast, have sought to institutionalize political conflict around such pluralism and a degree of pluralist conflict is thus always present in democratic politics.<sup>26</sup> However, for an external hostile actor, this constitutes a key vulnerability of Western democracy. Open pluralism means that rifts inevitably exist that can be exploited to drive wedges, ideally acuminating conflicts to the point where democratic governability is threatened. Precisely because democracy is a system of institutionalized conflict, it requires a measure of social solidarity, tolerance and cohesion to function properly, balancing cleavage and conflict with bargaining and cooperation. The maintenance of such a 'civic culture' that tempers the intensity of conflicts and bridges the cleavages of politics has been identified as a key feature of democratic governance.<sup>27</sup> It is when the competition between competing interests in society becomes intensely polarized that this civic culture starts to fracture, and the political struggle tends to approach a zero-sum game with negative consequences for democratic governability.<sup>28</sup> Current examples of accelerating polarization abound in Western democracies, with signs of democratic deconsolidation having become unmistakable.<sup>29</sup> Brexit is a case in point, with strong indications of external interference deliberately designed to deepen the underlying rifts.<sup>30</sup>

*Free media.* Liberal theorists have long argued that free media is essential for the functioning of democracy.<sup>31</sup> It provides a pluralist platform for public debate, functions as an unfettered and independent facilitator of the freedom of expression, and facilitates government responsiveness and accountability. At the same time, the open news and information environment provides fertile ground for hybrid interference. In

particular, coordinated disinformation campaigns that seek to strengthen internal division and delegitimize the existing democratic system rely on an open information environment. The liberal principle of an unrestricted media renders it difficult for democratic governments to defend against disinformation campaigns. By utilizing a mixture of media outlets as vehicles for disinformation offensives, a resourceful hostile actor has the opportunity to exploit this open, deregulated media environment. Such a campaign may deepen polarization and, at worst, may even start to corrode the legitimacy of democratic governance per se.

*Open economy.* While not strictly speaking a feature of liberal democracy, the open market economy has become closely coupled with Western democratic systems.<sup>32</sup> In open, market-based systems, the use of state controls and regulations in the economy remains limited. As a result, private ownership, including foreign ownership, of the means of production is relatively large. Liberal economic theory regards such open-market conditions favourably, because they are seen to raise economic productivity.<sup>33</sup> However, an open economy also opens doors to hostile foreign actors, who will encounter little resistance should they wish to interfere in such a marketplace. At the most basic level, trade and investment deals can be utilized to nurture loyalty and create dependency relationships. For example, Russia has been offering lucrative joint ventures, loans and asset swaps to European companies, making them dependent on sustained ties with the Kremlin. Through mergers and acquisitions, Russian companies have also gained a strong foothold in many European markets.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, China has been able to capture political and business elites in Australia and New Zealand, for instance, by offering trade opportunities and investment projects.<sup>35</sup> Weak regulatory environments or lack of robust oversight mechanisms also allow for coordinated use of quasi-private and state-owned companies to flexibly penetrate the target economy. If ownership disclosure requirements are lenient, such activities can even be hidden behind a network of shell companies and offshore accounts, making it difficult to assess the true level of penetration in the target economy. Russia, in particular, has been using the open, but at times opaque business and legal environments with regard to company law, taxation

25 European Commission, forthcoming.

26 Linz and Stepan 1996.

27 Diamond 1999.

28 Slater 2013.

29 E.g. Foa and Mounk 2017.

30 E.g. McGaughey 2018.

31 For a discussion, see Norris 2008.

32 Fukuyama 1992; Mandelbaum 2002.

33 E.g. Krugman, Obstfeld and Melitz 2015.

34 Conley et al. 2019.

35 E.g. Hamilton 2018.

	<b>Traditional Deterrence</b>	<b>Democratic Deterrence</b>
<b>AGENCY</b>	State-based	Whole-of-society
<b>POWER BASE</b>	Hard	Soft
<b>MEANS</b>	Military	Non-military
<b>RESPONSE</b>	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical
<b>SECURITY AIM</b>	Absolute	Restricted

Table 1. Contrasting traditional deterrence with democratic deterrence

and incorporation of countries such as Austria and the Netherlands, to economically penetrate the European Union and obscure the Russian origin of funds.<sup>36</sup> Through clandestine diplomacy, disinformation and, particularly, geoeconomics hostile external actors may duly try to exploit the competition that naturally occurs between representatives of diverse economic interests in open, market-based economic systems. It is evident that such divergence of interests between local economic forces in market-based systems exposes rifts that can potentially undermine foreign-policy unity. External actors can then use such cleavages to manipulate target countries through a combination of economic ‘carrots and sticks’.

### THE NEED FOR DEMOCRATIC DETERRENCE

Western democracies urgently need to find counter-measures against the hybrid influencing toolbox of clandestine diplomacy, geo-economics and disinformation. It needs to be recognized that traditional military deterrence only works against certain types of threats. Hybrid interference calls for new tools of non-military deterrence, which would also help ensure that hybrid interference does not escalate uncontrollably into the military realm. Importantly, any new

deterrence posture needs to maintain the open platform of Western democracy, being sure not to sacrifice any of the Western democratic cornerstones in the name of security. A central goal of hybrid aggressors is to force Western democracies to close off their open platforms and forsake their liberal values, regarded as threats to these authoritarian actors.

By reducing clarity about who is doing what, or whether somebody is actually doing anything, hybrid interference complicates deterrence.<sup>37</sup> Yet the ‘attribution problem’ is not insurmountable. The responsibility for interfering in US elections, for example, was traced and attributed. As stated in a recent report on countering hybrid warfare, ‘the attribution challenge is often primarily a political one, rather than a technical one’.<sup>38</sup> It does, however, call for a prudent deterrence posture that seeks to avoid unnecessary escalation.

The new strategic concept of democratic deterrence suggests a new framework for hybrid defence. Table 1 summarizes the differences between traditional deterrence and democratic deterrence.

First, in contrast to traditional deterrence that is state-based, democratic deterrence rests on a whole-of-society approach, albeit one in which the state retains a coordinating role. It harnesses market- and society-based actors in an effort to pull together

36 Conley et al. 2019.

37 Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC) 2018.

38 MCDC 2019a.

resources and take full advantage of democracy's societal strengths and cultural capital. This is important because in this new era of subversive politics, in which the classical Westphalian dichotomy between internal and external has been blurred, deterrence is harder to achieve by state action alone. Deterring hybrid interference requires a whole-of-society response whereby various societal actors build resilience capacities, support the state in maintaining preparedness and ensure the continuity of vital societal functions and supply lines. The whole-of-society approach is thus an inclusive model of cooperation that aims to bring all relevant actors together into a comprehensive system of deterrence. It involves an effort to diversify and devolve responsibilities for security production to market- and societal-based actors, while maintaining a strong coordinating role for the state.

Second, while traditional deterrence relies on hard power, democratic deterrence uses the soft power base of Western democratic societies.<sup>39</sup> Soft power rests on the ability to attract, and liberal democratic values and norms continue to exercise a strong international pull, not least among autocratic subjects. Democratic norms and values are thus strategic assets that can be used to deter authoritarian regimes. Western democracy promotion efforts have helped catalyze regime change in many parts of the world. By signalling strong and concerted preparedness to vigorously engage in democracy promotion, Western democracies can help deter authoritarian leaders. Crucially, in an information age, when power is less hierarchical and social networks have become more important, projecting soft power is not only a matter for states. Nonstate actors such as NGOs, research institutes and corporations are also important for generating soft power. While not fully under the control of Western democratic governments, the flexibility of nonstate actors in building relationships and networks across borders provides a crucial gateway for strengthening the normative legitimacy, and for mobilizing in the cause of advancing democracy.

Third, and related to the above, democratic deterrence crucially relies on non-military, democratic means. Democratic values and instruments such as transparency, the rule of law and citizen activism provide tools for non-kinetic deterrence. Functioning under the threshold of war, they are well calibrated to avoid escalation, while helping deter grey zone

activities such as hybrid interference. Hybrid agents thrive on being covert, and hence transparency is a key means of deterring hybrid interference. Similarly, a strong rule of law is essential in denying efforts to drive wedges between democratic societies by means such as weaponized corruption. Citizen activism provides a force multiplier in efforts to both deny as well as punish hybrid interference, by harnessing civil society's capabilities and agility.

Fourth, while traditional deterrence relies on 'in kind' measures, namely a symmetrical response, democratic deterrence takes the response outside the domain in which the action occurs. In fact, asymmetry is a necessary feature of democratic deterrence. Responding in kind to hybrid interference, and thus mirroring the use of election meddling, corruption operations, disinformation campaigning and other means of 'sharp power', will only contribute to the further erosion of liberal democratic values and undermine the normative legitimacy of Western democracy.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, because outright attribution is a troublesome process with regard to hybrid interference, with the hybrid agent using proxies and AI for obfuscation purposes, symmetry can seldom be the optimal response. Instead, by relying on the 'democratic playbook' of response options that draw on Western democracy's soft power base, hybrid interference can be deterred without compromising normative legitimacy.

Lastly, whereas traditional deterrence aims at wholly deterring any aggression, democratic deterrence accepts that some actions cannot be deterred. Indeed, absolute deterrence may even induce hostile actors to seek alternative and more dangerous ways to attack Western democracy.<sup>41</sup> Unlike nuclear deterrence, deterrence against hybrid interference is more like crime prevention; not all crimes can be deterred and not all represent significant threats to national security. Conscious of the need to tolerate a certain set of hostile activities, democratic deterrence settles for a more restrictive aim whereby external interference is not wholly deterred, but modified to render it less effective and frequent.

An important remark has to be made at this stage. While the focus in this paper is on developing the new framework of democratic deterrence, this does not mean that traditional deterrence has become obsolete. Military deterrence remains vital for dissuading armed

39 On soft power, see Nye 2011.

40 On sharp power, see Walker 2018.

41 MCDC 2019a.

aggression and various forms of sabotage. It may also contribute to deterring hybrid interference by instilling doubt about the level of response. Traditional deterrence policies therefore need to be maintained and perhaps even strengthened. Yet the argument here is that traditional deterrence measures fall short of effectively dealing with the challenge of hybrid interference, and therefore need to be complemented by new measures. The new deterrence framework proposed here to deal with that specific challenge is what I call democratic deterrence.

## **A TWO-PRONGED DEMOCRATIC DETERRENCE STRATEGY**

Deterrence, be it traditional military deterrence or modern democratic deterrence, is based on increasing the perceived costs of hostile actions to the point of outweighing their potential benefits. In deterrence theory, measures to dissuade hostilities are often divided into two broad categories: denial and punishment.<sup>42</sup> Both categories are also applicable to democratic deterrence. Indeed, much like traditional deterrence, democratic deterrence can also be designed as a two-pronged strategy of deterrence by denial (i.e. resilience) and by punishment (i.e. compellence). Strengthening resilience is a necessary building block of any democratic deterrence posture, but on its own it is unlikely to deter hybrid interference. Russia's meddling in Western democratic elections, for instance, has continued, despite being publicly exposed and despite measures to strengthen resilience against such external interference. Without any credible deterrence by punishment, these attacks are a relatively low-cost endeavour and can thus be expected to continue.

### **Deterrence by denial: improving democratic resilience**

Resilience refers to the ability to absorb, adapt and recover from disruption and duress. It connects to deterrence in that high resilience will make it difficult for an aggressor to achieve its strategic aims, and therefore not worth the costs and effort.<sup>43</sup> Both the EU and

NATO have introduced resilience as a key strategy with which to counter hybrid threats.<sup>44</sup> NATO also directly connects resilience to deterrence, although it is important to keep in mind that resilience is only one aspect of deterrence by denial, alongside territorial defence, for instance.<sup>45</sup>

Improving resilience forms part of modernizing 'total defence' by addressing vulnerabilities across state and society. For instance, Finland's comprehensive security model builds on enhancing preparedness through sustained cooperation between authorities, business operators and civil society organizations in order to secure the vital functions of state and society.<sup>46</sup> Similar whole-of-society approaches include Sweden's 'total defence' model and Norway's 'support and cooperation' model.<sup>47</sup> In a similar way, democratic deterrence involves preventing or making hybrid interference difficult by harnessing liberal democracy's strengths: autonomous civil society, inclusive politics, independent media and transparency.

First, while the open environment of Western democracy presents loopholes for covert interference, it simultaneously provides an enabling environment for citizen activism. Citizen activism can play a major role in identifying interference and building institutional and societal resilience against it.<sup>48</sup> Civil society actors are central in monitoring and exposing hybrid interference. The essential watchdog functions of the open media environment serve the same end. Investigative journalism is a pertinent example, as evinced by novel online sources like Bellingcat, whose investigations helped solve the Skripal poisoning case. Democratic resilience can be strengthened within the confines of the restrained state by supporting these societal mechanisms.

Western democracies should encourage investigative civil society groups and media to monitor and detect hybrid interference. Civil society and the media can perform essential watchdog functions when it comes to exposing clandestine diplomatic links, disinformation, and geoeconomic networks between hybrid aggressors and domestic business and political groups. Civil society groups are often more acutely aware of localized dynamics and more agile in their scrutiny. Through civil society support and media capacity-building, society's cognitive resilience can

42 For the original categorization, see Snyder 1961.

43 MCDC 2018.

44 EU and NATO 2016.

45 Roepke and Thankey 2019.

46 The Security Committee (Finland) 2017.

47 Norwegian Ministry of Defence and Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2018; von Sydow 2018.

48 Boulègue, Lutsevych and Marin 2018.

be strengthened. Specific measures should include developing rapid alert systems, media literacy programmes, as well as training media professionals themselves in recognizing fake news. The anti-fake news initiative launched by the Government of Finland provides one example of such measures.<sup>49</sup> In addition, Finland's Media Pool, an organization sustained by the country's media companies, serves the Finnish National Emergency Supply Organization. It helps enhance preparedness through media capacity-building programmes, anti-fake news education as well as guides to countering disinformation that are freely distributed to all journalists. In the US, the Countering Foreign Influence Task Force of the Department of Homeland Security, in coordination with the FBI, began operations before the 2018 US midterm elections. Its focus has similarly been on public awareness and messaging campaigns, but also on connecting vulnerable parties to law enforcement, intelligence and other relevant partners. Other important measures include the regulation of digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Increased transparency on social media platforms, including political ads, can help reveal the identity of troll accounts, for instance, and thus help counter disinformation by bringing it into the open. Supporting high-quality media and information security is also vital in sustaining a healthy free media environment, while also promoting independent media coverage by local NGOs and civil society groups.

Secondly, increased transparency will help disrupt and deter alliances between hybrid aggressors and domestic groups, and make it more difficult to advance covert agendas. In order to straddle the gap between illegitimate clandestine diplomacy and legitimate public diplomacy, Western democracies ought to create foreign influence transparency registers. This would require individuals and entities undertaking activities on behalf of foreign principals to register themselves, while criminalizing foreign interference activities. Recent legislation in Australia – namely the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Bill and the Espionage and Foreign Interference Bill – provide an example in this regard.<sup>50</sup> In the European Union, the use of so-called golden passports and visas – granting residence or citizenship in exchange for investments – remains problematic and should end.

Economically, transparency of money flows is important. This requires the updating of regulations regarding ownership disclosure and mechanisms for the screening of foreign investment, as well as legislation invoking national security considerations towards foreign investment permit procedures, particularly with regard to strategic resources and critical infrastructure. The European Union's new foreign investment screening mechanism is a step in the right direction, but will remain toothless without additional regulation at the member state level.<sup>51</sup> Germany introduced new regulation in 2017 and again in 2018, in the wake of Chinese acquisitions of sensitive technology companies.<sup>52</sup> Most member states need new regulation in order to be able to block similar acquisitions on national security grounds, and financial regulators need to be given stronger mandates to investigate financial networks in order to prevent economic interference. Financial intelligence units and cooperation, as well as integrity-building and anti-corruption mechanisms are important tools in building institutional resilience and preventing hostile actors from exporting corruption. Recent years have seen major money laundering schemes in connection with Russia, such as the so-called Russian Laundromat and the scandal at Danske Bank. The European Banking Authority has only a handful of individuals tasked with monitoring money-laundering risks, and it should be strengthened. Counter-economic intelligence can also be enhanced through public-private partnerships, taking advantage of the knowhow of market actors, such as hedge funds, concerning risk scenarios. NGOs, political parties, media, research institutes and think tanks should be required to publicly report their sources of funding.

Thirdly, Western democracies should take advantage of their inherent structures of inclusive politics. To improve resilience, the population needs to be made aware of hybrid threats and involved in resilience-building. A comprehensive perspective on security is required. Preventing a hostile actor from exploiting Western democratic pluralism requires a focus on enhanced social cohesion. The developing concept of societal security fits well with the Western democratic model.<sup>53</sup> It is a holistic notion, and directs attention towards inclusive politics and social welfare as remedies for social cleavages and promoters of social

49 Mackintosh 2019.

50 Hutchens 2018.

51 European Commission 2019.

52 Hansen and Nienaber 2018.

53 See Aaltola et al. 2018.

stability. Any hybrid deterrence effort should, therefore, include policies that enhance education, social cohesion and welfare. In particular, such policies need to be directed towards integrating diasporas and minorities, who otherwise risk being used as proxies for hybrid interference efforts. Elections remain the cornerstone of democratic inclusiveness. Many Western governments need to amend existing electoral laws to take into account meddling tactics; legislation should cover issues like foreign funding of domestic political parties and associations, as well as increased transparency of political advertisements. In this respect, both market- and society-based approaches could also be employed to monitor, detect and counteract meddling.

### **Deterrence by punishment: discovering democratic compellence**

To be effective, democratic deterrence also needs to incorporate a focus on reciprocity and punishment.<sup>54</sup> At present, hybrid interference largely goes unpunished. As long as this situation prevails, it remains a highly tempting and potentially effective strategy.

Compellence refers to a strategy designed to change a target's strategic calculus by way of making a coercive threat.<sup>55</sup> Usually compellence is thought of in terms of military posturing or coercive diplomacy such as economic sanctions, but it should be remembered that democracy itself can be a means of compellence. Since antiquity, many authoritarian powers have been terrified by democracy and the threat it poses to authoritarian control. The Spartans were famously terrified by the culture of democracy that helped sustain the Athenian empire.

Firstly, a strategy of democratic compellence should communicate thresholds of response. This would involve communicating what are deemed unacceptable behaviours that will have consequences. Autocratic adversaries will need to be persuaded of Western democracies' capacity to identify hybrid interference and capabilities to respond by imposing costs for such aggression. The response will not be symmetrical, as hybrid interference clashes with liberal principles such as non-interference, but it should be made clear that punishment measures will be taken. Hybrid aggressors should be reminded of the blowback effect inherent in liberal democracy, in which an autonomous civil

society and independent media perform watchdog and advocacy functions beyond state control. As democracies strengthen their resilience, naming and shaming will become automatic, putting pressure on democratic governments to take counter-measures. Russia's interference in the 2016 US elections was eventually detected and called out, resulting in new sanctions, even as President Trump at first seemed reluctant to take any measures. Calling out hybrid interference is also key for communicating effectively with domestic proxies in spe and for discrediting existing ones. The court ruling in Finland convicting Johan Bäckman, a publicly well-known agent of influence, and Ilja Janitskin, the editor of MV magazine, a Russia-supported far-right fake news website, was important in setting such a precedent.

Secondly, democratic compellence involves harnessing democracy's soft power to threaten retaliation for hybrid interference. Democracy is a strong value that exercises considerable international pull, and Western democracies therefore have a soft power advantage that can be used to challenge hybrid aggressors on their own turf. Pushing the truth against internal propaganda and cover-ups in authoritarian regimes will serve as a challenge to them. Going harder on Western values, for instance, by visibly strengthening programmes of democracy and human rights promotion would communicate resolve and threaten to shift the battleground to the authoritarian states' home turf. In this vein, cultivating Western democracies' own influence networks and proxies, using civil society as a middleman, and other means of soft power such as cultural institutions, citizen diplomacy and connectivities, provide the means for democratic compellence. Supporting political dissent, not only in target autocracies, but also among their diasporas residing in Western democracies can be an effective way to break through authoritarian controls. During the Cold War, diasporas often served as effective interlocutors for political dissent. What authoritarian regimes fear most is bottom-up democratizing developments, such as the 'colour revolutions' and the Arab Spring. Planning for a vigorous and concerted democracy and human rights promotion effort could help create a situation in which hybrid aggressors need to weigh benefits against potential risks more carefully. For instance, signalling preparedness to support democracy and human rights in an escalatory manner in places like Belarus and Hong Kong may be used as compellence vis-à-vis Russia and China. Western

54 Sørensen and Nyemann 2018.

55 See Sperandei 2006.

democracies' adversaries will no doubt denounce even this 'soft' retaliation as merely another form of hybrid interference. In reality, there are differences in terms of normative legitimacy. Whereas hybrid interference is covert, and therefore illegitimate, democracy and human rights promotion is overt and transparent, and therefore a form of legitimate public diplomacy, albeit with a sharp edge designed for compellence purposes. In contrast with hybrid interference, democratic compellence is also in line with international law. Western democracies should not be naïve about the effects of such democracy and human rights promotion. Authoritarian regimes are likely to respond to it by going harder on their authoritarianism and cracking down on any internal dissent. However, by publicly exposing their authoritarianism in this way, the struggle for normative legitimacy will tip even more in favour of Western democracies, boosting their soft power.

Thirdly, Western democracies' autocratic adversaries should be made aware of their own asymmetrical vulnerabilities. The world today is more interdependent and interconnected than at any time in history. All states, including authoritarian ones, depend for their security and wealth on being able to connect to the flows of goods, resources, data and capital that are crisscrossing the globe. Importantly, these global flows are still mostly controlled by the Western liberal democracies, although China has rapidly been extending its 'flow power' as well. By banding together, Western liberal democracies can therefore inflict considerable pain on their autocratic adversaries through well-calibrated sanctions and other policies of containment and engagement, including in cyberspace. Despite the early scepticism of some scholars, the sanctions against Russia have led to considerable costs for the Russian economy. They also deprive Russia of important technology needed to uphold Russia's energy and military power.<sup>56</sup> The fact that the Kremlin spends a lot of time and effort on trying to persuade Western democracies to scale back sanctions, demonstrates their deterrent effect. Importantly, Western democracies have come nowhere near to exhausting the sanctions toolbox and should they, for instance, decide to exclude Russia from the SWIFT messaging network, the consequences for the Russian economy would be devastating. By signalling preparedness to harden sanctions in a coordinated manner, Western democracies would strengthen deterrence. Such compellence is naturally

most effective when not having to carry out the threat in the end, and thus hinges on credibility. Threatening forceful and concerted cyber retaliation, while also undertaking some retaliatory measures, should form part of the strategy.

## CONCLUSION

In essence, hybrid interference entails a coordinated attack on liberal democracy, using the very democratic infrastructure for wedging purposes. If successful, it risks deconsolidating Western democracy. Western democracies must therefore take urgent measures to minimize their vulnerabilities to hybrid interference. This involves rediscovering and revamping deterrence policies, freeing ourselves from the analogy to Cold War-era nuclear deterrence, whose aim was total prevention through the threat of massive retaliation. In the hybrid era, deterrence is more like crime prevention: the focus should be on consistency and making attacks less effective, while recognizing that some elements of interference will be hard to deter entirely.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, hybrid interference also paradoxically presents opportunities. By exposing our vulnerabilities, it provides a 'stress test' of our liberal democracies. Crafting effective policy responses involves deepening our democratic infrastructure and values, so as to make them more robust against illiberalism and institutional decay. Authoritarian regimes such as China, Iran, Russia and Turkey did not create the initial conditions of the current polarizing tendencies that make Western democracy vulnerable, they are merely seizing the moment to opportunistically foment these tendencies. It is therefore up to Western democracies themselves to address these underlying problems of social distrust, polarization and weak institutions. If seen as an opportunity, it may catalyze democratic development.

The concept of democratic deterrence shows how our values are not only vulnerabilities, but how they can be turned into strengths and tools for a credible deterrence response to hybrid interference. Democratic deterrence focuses on strengthening our liberal democratic values and infrastructure: transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and civil society. To this end, by deliberately focusing on *democratic* deterrence, we will simultaneously improve democratic

56 Vihma and Wigell 2016.

57 See also MCDC 2019b.

governance, making our Western democracies more robust and resilient. Our adversaries would like us to react to their hybrid interference by closing off our open platforms, in line with their narrative about a supposed trade-off between democracy and security. The concept of democratic deterrence shows how there need not be any such trade-off, and that deepening democracy may go hand-in-hand with strengthening security. Security can be provided, even strengthened, all the while maintaining the open platform inherent in Western democracy.

Democratic deterrence is designed to render hybrid interference less efficient and attractive as a strategy. While any hybrid defence will also need to rely on armed forces, putting the focus on democratic deterrence has the advantage of avoiding outright military escalation. But make no mistake, democracy is also a strategic weapon, much feared by the Spartans of both today and yesterday. As such, it will be particularly effective when wielded collectively by Western democracies.

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