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Research article

Conceptual Quality in Security and Defence Practice: The Case of Hybrid Warfare

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Abstract
It has become a norm to bemoan the unending stream of new concepts in defence policy, many of which sparked a lively debate on their actual novelty, utility and, more generally, added value. Those discussions often lack a shared language or benchmarks. The paper argues that the analytical utility of concepts for practical policy in areas of defence and security is fundamentally based on the same qualities that make concepts suitable for academic research, and that scholarly criteria for conceptual quality can therefore serve as a basis for evaluating and discussing the utility of concepts in practice. The article introduces one such set of scholarly criteria, discusses its applicability for practice and illustrates it through a case study of the concepts of hybrid warfare.

Keywords: *concepts, hybrid warfare, defence policy, security policy*

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Introduction
Conceptual vocabulary in the area of security, defence and political violence has recently become an increasingly hotly debated subject, with the quality and utility

of many of the quite popular and possibly fashionable concepts being contested with varying degrees of success (Biegon, Rauta & Watts 2021a; Libiseller 2023; Libiseller & Milevski 2021; Milevski 2022, 2023; Rauta 2021). While the debates are a welcome sign of vibrant academic and expert debate, they are often also difficult and frustrating. Much of the difficulty arguably stems from implicit disagreements about the purpose of the particular concept and what makes a particular concept good at fulfilling this purpose.

While some of the difficulties might stem from the fact that the concept generally can't be empirically tested (as will be argued below), much can also be ascribed to the relative lack of attention paid to systematic thinking on the concepts and their quality. As vigorous debates on the merits of concepts such as 'hybrid warfare' highlight, this lack of a more explicit and systematic approach to conceptual quality did not stop the community from challenging concepts deemed of dubious value. However, the lack of shared criteria for judging concepts and the lack of shared language arguably hindered the discussion.

Not only do proponents and opponents of this particular novel concept, as noted by Lukas Milevski, 'usually talk past each other, each more effectively addressing his own rather than the other side' (2023: 718), but it is often unclear whether the fact that the concepts were found of dubious value by academia does (or should) damn the concept in the realm of security and defence practice. In other words, whether the same criteria apply to the theoretical and practical application of the concept.

Luckily, the question of quality and utility of concepts has received much-needed attention in recent years, with important contributions on what uses concepts have in strategic studies and what differentiates good (useful) concepts from the rest (Milevski 2022, 2023). This study builds on this literature to contribute to a more systematic approach to thinking about evaluating concepts in the realm of security and defence.

Specifically, I argue that formal frameworks for evaluating conceptual quality within the broader social sciences are applicable and useful for practice within the realm of security, strategy and defence. I further argue that using such a framework as a point of reference for concepts in these domains, including their (re)formulation and use, and debating their quality and utility, can contribute to better analysis and better policy.

This proposal is empirically anchored and illustrated by the concept of hybrid warfare, which has become a poster child for those concerned about the quality of concepts in the realm of security, defence and strategy (Libiseller 2023; Libiseller & Milevski 2021; Milevski 2022, 2023). The prominent position of the concepts of hybrid warfare in this scholarship is well earned. While dating back to the 2000s, the term experienced a meteoric rise in popularity after the Russian annexation of Crimea. Importantly for our context, the term has been adopted in defence, security, politics and popular consciousness (Eberle & Daniel 2023). Many trans-

formations and reinventions of hybrid warfare and vibrant discussion of its merits (Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Gray 2012; see, for example, Kofman 2016; Stoker & Whiteside 2020) make it a logical choice for improving the conceptual toolkit in security and defence.

The paper proceeds in three steps. The first chapter introduces the literature on concepts and examines their quality and utility, comparing their use in academic and practical settings. The second chapter introduces a scholarly framework for concept formation (Gerring & Christenson 2017) as one of the possible approaches to explicit thinking about the quality of concepts and discusses how it can be useful for the evaluation of concepts in practical policy-making. The third chapter then proceeds to show how this framework could be applied to a variety of concepts around the terms 'hybrid warfare' and 'hybrid threat'. The conclusion summarises the main findings and discusses their possible implications for practice.

Concepts between scholars and professionals

Discussion of concepts can be a frustrating exercise, since they are so foundational to the way we understand the world and communicate about it. Concepts are inescapable even in everyday communication, and much more so in any analytical endeavour. As Gerring notes, 'language is the toolkit with which we conduct our work, as well as the substance upon which we work' (Gerring 1999: 359). While the meaning of words in common language is determined by their usage and context, with the convention being codified in a dictionary based on this in a lexicographic approach to definition (Gerring 1999: 362; Sartori 2009a: 66–67; 88–89), the systematic analytical work generally requires a different approach. Words in the common language are rarely precise, and multiple meanings are often acceptable. A specialised field, therefore, generally needs to go beyond the common understanding of words and be conscious in elucidating and establishing meanings of words (Gerring 1999: 362–363; Sartori 2009a). To distinguish this from the common language understanding, we generally use 'term' rather than 'word' and 'definition' rather than 'meaning' (Gerring 1999: 358; Sartori 2009a: 67).

While logical and methodological aspects of 'fiddling with words and definitions' (Gerring 1999: 363) have received considerable attention throughout history (Gerring 1999: 358), they have received relatively limited explicit treatment in the social sciences, especially compared to questions such as theorising and data analysis. A foundational work with respect to the question of conceptual quality is Giovanni Sartori's article on *concept misformation* (1970), followed up by further research by Sartori (2009a, 2009b), John Gerring (Gerring 1999, 2012; Gerring & Christenson 2017) and Gary Goerz (2006).

It is necessary at this point to at least briefly outline how concepts are understood in the social sciences before addressing the question of the applicability of this scholarship for practice in the area of security and defence. There are three

basic components of concept: (i) the term, denoting the word or label used; (ii) the definition, or meaning, describing elements or attributes delimiting the content of the concept; and (iii) the real-world phenomena that are being defined (Gerring 1999: 357–358; Sartori 2009a: 66).

Analytically, concepts primarily serve as basic descriptive arguments. If we, for example, describe an event as a war, we communicate that this event (phenomenon) has the properties (attributes) that fit the definition of war, justifying the use of the term 'war'. At the same time, they also allow us to generalise beyond a single case. A range of events, based on their shared properties, can be categorised as war. In this sense, concepts (especially more abstract ones) allow us to 'carve nature at its joints'. This generalisation, in turn, allows general theorising about those general phenomena, such as war. We can expect phenomena, sharing critical properties, to behave in a similar manner in comparable situations. In this sense, while being primarily descriptive, concepts also have an implicit causal dimension (Goertz 2006). This range of purposes, serving also as the benchmark for scholarly discussions of conceptual quality, is further referred to as 'analytical use' or 'analytical utility'.[1]

This can be contrasted with what Milevski (2022) describes as the social utility of a concept,[2] lying in its ability to attract elite or public attention and/or funding, or focus bureaucratic efforts. This social utility is logically independent from analytical utility (Milevski 2022: 67), and it might indeed lie more in the realm of use of the term rather than concept. It should also be noted that the social utility of concepts is an issue shared by academics and practitioners alike (Libiseller 2023; Milevski 2022; Wicker 2023a), as scholars are by no means immune to efforts to attract attention or funding. Giovanni Sartori's complaints about 'novotism' in academia would fall well within the concept of social utility.

Before returning to the discussion of analytical utility, it is important to address a possible argument that some concepts in practice should be judged only on their social utility, as the social utility might, in the realm of practice, achieve collectively desirable outcomes in line with the primary collective purpose of security-provision.[3] This argument would have to rest on the possibility of keeping a concept used for its social utility separate from its analytical use. This might prove difficult, as the socially useful concept is likely to penetrate the practice through its use and

1 It could be argued that a communicative role could be treated as a separate form of utility or role cutting across both analytical and social utility (see below). As it is here understood as clearly and unambiguously signalling the intendent content (meaning), it is for simplicity folded under the umbrella of analytical utility.

2 The distinction between analytical and social utility can also be loosely mapped onto Elena Wicker's distinction between functional and performative use of terms (Wicker 2022).

3 As opposed to academia, where we would see the social utility of the concepts as furthering individual goals to the detriment of collective goals of knowledge production.

adoption by the audience rather than their users, as well as through the need of the users to maintain some level of consistency. If politicians speak about a threat conceptualised as hybrid, they are then expected to express this threat in official documents, such as strategies, and publicly demonstrate an effort to counter it (see, for example, Eberle & Daniel 2023). It therefore still seems prudent to discuss the analytical utility of concepts even if they are judged to be used primarily for their social utility.

Coming back to analytical utility, I argue that it is just as applicable in security practice as in the realm of scholarly work, as analysis and communication are practically impossible without it. Most direct evidence of the importance of concepts for analysis and communication are dictionaries establishing shared definitions of key terms within the military, as in the case of the DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2021) or even between militaries and their languages as in the case of the AAP-6 NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (NATO Standardisation Office 2021).

While the military terminology and dictionaries are fascinating topics in and of themselves (see: Wicker 2022), it is unlikely that anyone is losing sleep over the quality of concepts such as 'direct fire' (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2021: 64) or how 'unwanted cargo' is defined (NATO Standardisation Office 2021: 134). The debates about conceptual quality and utility are instead centred on more abstract and multifaceted concepts, often capturing forms of war or warfare (e.g. Rauta 2021). This is logical, as the question of whether some definitions fit the reality and whether they excise the logical part of reality 'at the seams' is much more open to debate the further we move from the concrete concepts (Villani et al. 2022). While the question of conceptual quality can be theoretically applied to concrete concepts as well, this paper will focus on abstract concepts, as there is generally much less contestation of the concrete ones. This paper, therefore, focuses on abstract and contested concepts.

Even with this caveat, there are still arguments in favour of a different approach to concepts in theory and practice that need to be addressed. The first comes from Canestaro, who argues that 'a lack of common purpose between practitioners and academics on how to conceptualise and define civil war is the product of differences between the two groups in culture, process, and most importantly, purpose' (2016). While the culture and process differences are indisputably very important in explaining the differences between the academic and practitioner concepts,[4] those are not as important as the question of purpose. Canestaro further elaborates on the policy purpose of the civil war definition, stating that 'practitioners want to define the term to serve as a trigger for policy changes' (2016).

4 The fact that definitions of hybrid warfare in NATO are necessarily influenced by the differing priorities of various member countries can serve as an example of this.

While it is true that an academic attempting to detect civil wars within quantitative data over long period of time will create a different definition than a policy analyst formulating policy, as nobody would likely argue, for example, that the difference in 999 and 1001 death in a year (Small & Singer 1982) should trigger fundamental shifts in governmental policy, there are also reasons to not see this as a barrier for the applicability of the conceptual quality criteria from social sciences.

First, it is arguably less a question of conceptualisation and more of operationalisation. As literature on concepts in the social sciences recognises, there are different levels of definitions (Sartori 2009b), and as the need to precisely locate the concept in the empirical reality increases, the elements of the definition will shift, not least to reflect the observable aspects of the concept and the availability of data.

Secondly, it is recognised that while it is desirable to have reasonably similar definitions of the same term across the field to enable both communication and cumulation, this does not mean that the definitions have to be the same. It is understood that, for example, when defining democracy as an independent variable, scholars should focus the definition on those shared properties of democracies that they expect to be critical for the presumed causal chain leading to the dependent variable (outcome) (Goertz 2006). If civil war is to be defined as a trigger for policy, it is just as reasonable to focus the definition on those aspects of civil war that are seen as critical for the policy shift.

The other concern about using scholarly criteria for practice in strategic studies was voiced by Lukas Milevski (Milevski 2022, 2023), who focused on 'strategic concepts'. In the two papers, he differentiates between ad hoc concepts (and theories) and systemic or general concepts (fitting within systemic theories). Where systemic theories (and concepts) are general and universal, ad hoc counterparts are to be devised on the basis of those theories to fit the specific context and immediate needs (Milevski 2023: 722–724). He concluded that:

> Strategic concepts are judged by two measures of quality, scholarly and practical. Scholarly expectations are narrowly academic but result in rigorously developed concepts, according to mainstream schools of thought on what to expect from concepts and theory in the social sciences. . . . Yet the degree to which strategic concepts adhere to any particular type of measure, scholarly or practical, depends on where it resides in the transference process from systemic theory to tactical orders. (Milevski 2023: 726)

I would agree with most of Milevski's arguments, which might be unsurprising as he departs from the same starting point of scholarly criteria for conceptual quality. However, this agreement comes with some qualifications, especially with regard to the contrast between systemic and practical dimensions.

Milevski distinguishes between the theoretical utility of concepts as seen by Sartori, Gerring and Goerz and the theoretical utility of 'strategic concept' based

on the distinction between predictive theories in the social sciences and descriptive theories of strategic studies, which allow anticipation but not prediction. Where prediction is seen as a mechanistic output of theory once inputs are known, anticipation is seen as active engagement of the user (Milevski 2023: 723–724). This understanding of prediction, as clear from Milevski's reference to Winton (2011: 856), derives from the physical sciences rather than the social sciences. Social science theories are generally predictive in a probabilistic, not deterministic sense, for precisely the reason Winton himself names – 'action and reaction in the human arena are much less certain, and here we must be content with a less definitive standard' (Winton 2011: 856). There is, therefore, no reason to see this as a reason for academic conceptual criteria referencing theoretical (predictive) utility that does not apply in the realm of strategic studies (and associated practice).

Milevski's second reason for different criteria for ad hoc concepts (closer to practice) and systemic concepts is that the practical considerations of developing ad hoc concepts for devising operational orders tend to overshadow academic considerations (Milevski 2023: 726). First, even orders will refer to basic concepts that are generally established within the field as terminology. This is precisely why doctrinal terms are established in professional dictionaries to make sure that there is a shared understanding and the concepts can then serve their communicative role as a part of the order. While giving orders, no commander is conceptualising suppressive fire anew, as those concepts are established both through agreed professional lexicography and their quality is generally a result of what Sartori would describe as 'survival of the fittest' or 'test of time' (Sartori 1970).

Second, the issue of ad hoc concepts raises an important question of how the word 'concept' is used within military practice. NATO Allied Command Transformation, in its handbook on conceptual development, defines the concept as:

> An agreed notion or idea normally set out in a document that provides guidance for different working domains and which may lead to the development of a policy. With a focus on capability development, a concept is a solution-oriented transformational idea that addresses a capability shortfall or gap. (NATO 2010: 3–4)

In this sense, a military professional's concept of 'concept' is usually different in some nontrivial ways from the social science understanding.[5] Most importantly, it is much broader, especially when, for example, speaking of a NATO Strategic Concept, which contains considerably more than a label and a definition. While it

5 It should be noted that, while not common, 'concept' is also used in a military context in the same way as in social science. AAP-77 defines 'concept' as 'a mental representation of something that can be considered a unit of knowledge' (NATO Standardization Office 2018: 3).

might be tempting to brush this away as a different meaning of the word 'concept', this would arguably be incorrect.

Military concepts in the sense outlined above, as well as in parts of Milevski's argument, such as in the case of the 'Airland battle' concept (Milevski 2023: 725), are also concepts within the scientific understanding. They are descriptions of a particular operation or other 'ways' to achieve the goals. However, they have some specific qualities that need to be addressed.

First, they are not necessarily 'empirical concepts' in the sense outlined by Sartori (2009b: 106). At the time they are formulated, there might be no empirical phenomenon that can be described by them. They are to serve as a blueprint for the operation and, if implemented successfully, can be retrospectively applied to that operation as a concept with one empirical case.

Second, they will generally be very detailed. As they do not aim to generalise but to fit the one specific circumstances – which will possibly never be repeated – they can be on the extreme of the spectrum of 'thickness' in the sense of the many properties that the concept's referents (possibly only one) share.

Finally, they are used in a prescriptive rather than a descriptive role, meaning that they are formulated to be followed through in their application. But this does not preclude their descriptive role – indeed, they can be used descriptively in response to a question of how the given commander planned to or did operate. And, significantly, it does not change the importance of the analytical utility as outlined above. Because they are elements of a possibly implicit but nonetheless fundamentally causal theory of victory, they are formulated so that with input of such a concept of operation and other independent variables (disposition of friendly and enemy forces, weather, etc.), they will produce the desired outcome (dependent variable).

For such ad hoc concepts which do not aim to be general and are possibly used to fit only one specific case, some of the scholarly conceptual criteria may indeed become much less important than others. But that does not make them irrelevant, as they were never intended to be mechanistically applied.

To summarise, the analytical application of concepts both in the realm of scholarship and practice boils down to their descriptive and implicit causal utility. In scholarly work, there is often more emphasis on general theory – and consequently general concepts – able to 'travel' across time and space, whereas in the realm of practice, there is more emphasis on specific theory and concepts. Yet in both settings, their role as descriptive building blocks that enable causal theorisation remains the same.

If a new way of waging warfare is identified and conceptualised, its analytical importance stems from the fact that its application *causes* or is presumed to *cause* different outcomes than other previously known options. If it describes the adversary's possible course of action, it implies a need for a different approach to counter it in order to *cause* the desired outcome. If the concept prescribes its

own possible course of action, its value comes from its promise to *cause* different and presumably better outcomes than other alternatives.

Of course, those causal implications of the concepts are treated implicitly in policy-making and war-making, rather than explicitly, as they would be in scholarly work. However, that does not change the fact that there is a greater degree of shared purpose in the concepts between academia and practitioners than is often acknowledged.

Conceptual quality for theory and practice

If the analytical purpose of concepts in scholarly work and practice is fundamentally the same, as was argued above, then scholarly criteria for conceptual quality should also be applicable in practice. Before discussing how they can apply, it should be noted that there is no single definitive approach to conceptual quality in the social sciences. Even if we leave aside the interpretivist approach (see Schaffer 2015), there are still approaches of Sartori (2009b), Goertz (2006) and Gerring and Christenson (Gerring 1999, 2012; Gerring & Christenson 2017) introduced in the previous chapter which build upon each other but nonetheless do have idiosyncrasies. Even if broad concerns over quality are similar, specific formalisation into distinct criteria may differ.[6] While all of the approaches could contribute something to judging conceptual quality for practice, the one selected here for closer introduction and discussion is Gerring and Christenson's approach (2017: 31–35).

This approach was selected mostly because of its pragmatism and approachability, which should be deemed a boon for the approach suggested to practitioners.[7] However, it should nonetheless be noted that it is an approach, not the scholarly approach, to judging conceptual quality. Before introducing Gerring and Christensen's criteria and discussing their relevance for practice, it is important to make a few notes on the application of any criteria of conceptual quality.

First, it has to be stressed that the conceptual criteria cannot be taken for a simple scorecard, facilitating a grading exercise. Concepts with different specific purposes may emphasise different criteria; the evaluation of the criteria is contestable. The criteria can highlight specific concerns and give an organising structure to the contestation of the utility and quality of a concept, offering a shared language to proponents and critics of the particular concept to debate its specific qualities.

The second clarification is that it is crucial to recognise both the importance and difficulty of distinguishing between a concept, its individual use and its collective use. If we come back to the triangle introduced by Sartori (Sartori 2009a,

6 Indeed, Gerring authored and coauthored three slightly different sets of criteria for conceptual quality over the years (Gerring 1999, 2012; Gerring & Christenson 2017).

7 As the selected approach is very parsimonious, a more extensive discussion of each criteria can be referenced to Gerring's earlier works (Gerring 1999, 2012).

2009b), with three elements of concept being the term, the definition and the phenomena, it brings out the question of when we can speak about a single concept. When the same term and definition are used to describe a different phenomenon, it would technically change one of the three points of the triangle. More importantly, if the same term is used with different definitions and phenomena, can we talk about it as a variation of the concept even if they just share the term? These are important questions, as we tend to discuss the concepts as they are used in the broader community, even if, upon closer inspection, they are hardly the same concepts based on differences in their definitions and the phenomena they capture. It is not the ambition of this paper to answer this question, but it is mentioned because it stresses the need to judge each (re)conceptualisation of a concept on its own merits, even if the context still plays a role.

With that, we can turn to five criteria formulated by Gerring and Christenson (Gerring & Christenson 2017: 31–35) to aid with the creation of better concepts, which are *resonance*, *consistency*, *internal coherence*, *external differentiation* and *theoretical utility*.

The first of the five criteria for concept formation is its *resonance*, which pertains to the relationship between the concept's definition and the established use or understanding of the term used as a label for the concept (Gerring & Christenson 2017: 32). The question asking about the resonance of the particular concept would be: Does the image evoked by the term among the concept's audience match the definition of the concept? If not, it means that the use of the concept might be prone to confusing the audience, especially when the concept is encountered without the definition provided. This, in turn, would mean that the concept is failing in its communicative utility – that is, functioning as a shorthand for its meaning.

Resonance is arguably the one criterion most tightly linking one conceptualisation to the context of its use. Authors need to take into account the common language understanding of the term used, as well as the already existing concepts using the same or a similar label.

There are a few noteworthy differences between practice and scholarly work when it comes to the question of resonance. Firstly, while there is no binding scholarly authority with the power to force a unified understanding of the term (thereby ensuring its resonance), in the area of practice, official documents and lexicons can, to a degree, force a uniform understanding of the term (NATO Standardisation Office 2021; e.g. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2021). This, however, also implies a greater need for careful attention to resonance while establishing those binding formulations of concepts.

Secondly, while the scholarly audience may well be expected to pay close attention to the provided definition rather than rely on the intuitive understanding of the label, concepts in practice may have diverse audiences, including various distinct communities within the security-provision business, from military and defence

professionals, diplomats, policymakers and politicians all the way to journalists and the public. The latter groups in particular can be expected to suffer the most from the confusion and distorted understandings caused by the poor resonance of a concept. Therefore, the more the concept is to be abstract and strategic and therefore travel beyond a limited homogeneous community where careful attention to definition or respect for the binding established meaning is expected, the more the selected term and definition should be in sync with both existing concepts under a similar term and the common understanding of the used term (word).

The second criterion is consistency (Gerring 2012: 121–124; Gerring & Christenson 2017: 34–35). Once again, closely linked to the use of the concept. Simply put, it captures the consistency of the meaning of the concept across its use, typically within a single work. Importantly, the use of the same term with different meanings and empirical phenomena referred to by different authors or institutions is not a question of consistency, but a previously discussed question of resonance.

An issue with consistency arises if there are different (implicit) definitions of a single term used in one work, or if there are empirical phenomena included under the term which, in fact, do not fit the definition. In that sense, the lack of consistency is an issue of use rather than an inherent quality of a concept, but vague formulation of a concept or its poor operationalisation can go a long way in facilitating a lack of consistency in its use.

In defence and security practice, the most concerning issue of consistency should be expected within an organisation rather than with a single author – though inconsistent use of a concept by an author can be just as problematic as in the scholarly world. As was discussed above, compared to academia, there are formal authorities with the power to establish a shared meaning for a term. This may happen not only through the formal process of adding an entry to an official dictionary, but also through the less formal process of defining a term in official documents. Those institutions should be expected to maintain the established meaning and apply it consistently to cases fitting the established definition. Lack of consistency in use throughout an institution may not only remove any benefits that the existence of an authoritative source of definition might have, but also provide fertile ground for confusion and a variety of new conceptualisations.

The third criterion is internal coherence, which denotes the thickness or richness of a concept (Gerring 2012: 124–126; Gerring & Christenson 2017: 32–33). The question to ask regarding the internal coherence of a concept would be: How much do the phenomena covered by the definition share with one another, and to what extent are those shared attributes logically connected? In this, the question of internal coherence addresses the definition aspect of the concept (and, by implication, the phenomena aspect).

The internal coherence is crucial for the descriptive and causal power of a concept. This, as was argued in the previous section, translates well from the scholarly

environment to the policy sphere. If the stated purpose of a concept is to describe a new threat – one presumably requiring a new measure to counter it – then the more the concept can say about the threat, and the more its definition can identify the critical attributes in their relation to each other that make it distinct, the more useful the concept becomes for both communication and formulation of countermeasures. The internal coherence of the concept is arguably even more crucial if it aims to prescribe a course of action. The attributes of the given concept of operation are specified because of the effects they produce in their combination.

Importantly, the natural preference both in academic and professional communities should be for the concepts whose various defining attributes are in a mutual logical relationship, which, in its coherent combination, produce the specific causal effects. While a concept can be conceivably defined by attributes without a clear mutual relationship, some of its parts might be superfluous, and the unique combination of arbitrary attributes is unlikely to produce specific outcomes that would make such a concept very useful.

The fourth criterion is (external) differentiation, which captures how well a concept is distinguishable from other concepts or simply from everything the concept is not. (Gerring 2012: 127; Gerring & Christenson 2017: 33–34). Differentiation is closely related to internal coherence, where one can expect that an internally coherent concept will also be well differentiated. Like internal coherence, differentiation also relates primarily to the definition element of a concept (and phenomena described by extension).

A well-differentiated concept means that cases falling under the given concept are clearly distinct from the cases which do not fall within its definition and, relatedly, that the concept is distinct from other neighbouring concepts that presumably cover those cases outside the purview of the concept in question. Importantly, this should be true horizontally between concepts at the same level of abstraction, but also vertically for the differentiation of a concept from a more general or more specific concept.

Having concepts which can be solidly differentiated from the contrast space is just as important for practice in defence and security as it is in academia. Firstly, having concepts clearly differentiated from other neighbouring concepts is critical for maintaining navigable conceptual space within the field, without a number of superfluous concepts with major overlaps. Secondly, as was argued above, the practical analytical use of a concept lies in formulating implicit or explicit causal theories for those concepts. When, for example, the concept describes some specific approach of the adversary (threat) which needs to be countered in a specific manner, one needs to be able to discern this threat from the contrast space of other possible approaches to employ the countermeasure. While it has to be recognised that this is not a deterministic process, as discussed in the previous chapter, having clearly differentiated concepts is nonetheless better than not having them.

External differentiation is also linked to the issue of the operationalisation of concepts, as poorly differentiated concepts are also likely to be difficult to operationalise. While in a scholarly environment, especially in quantitative research, operationalisation is a common and inevitable, if possibly challenging, operation; it is, in fact, just as significant in the practical employment of defence and security concepts. Just as the scholar needs to be able to operationalise the concept to be able to reliably identify its cases, the practitioner needs to be able to operationalise the concept to make practical use of it. The specific concept of threat is of little use if it cannot be operationalised so that it can be detected and identified in order to initiate the proper response. When speaking of prescriptive concepts as they are generally understood by military professionals, the operationalisation is seen as an inherent part of the concept – who needs to do what in order to fulfil more general features of the concept?

The fifth criterion is theoretical (causal) utility (Gerring & Christenson 2017: 34). Causal utility judges the value of the concept in a specific proposed role within the causal framework. As such, it is somewhat debatable whether it can be considered a quality in its own right, as it does not address one of the points of the term-definition-phenomenon triangle, but rather fits between the concept as a whole and its intended theoretical role. For that reason, it depends upon the use of the concept rather than its intrinsic qualities.

Concepts in practice need to address the practical needs of a security or military establishment. One might plausibly create concepts that have no problems in resonance, internal coherence, external differentiation and consistency, but nonetheless do not capture any real-world phenomena or solve any existing or incoming problem. Such a concept could hardly be described as 'analytically useful'. Concepts of threat should therefore describe real or at least plausible opponents' courses of action, especially if those courses of action cannot be adequately met by existing capabilities and approaches.

The case of hybrid warfare concepts

The preceding sections argued, firstly, that a concept in policy-making has, analytically, fundamentally the same purposes as in research, and secondly, that a scholarly framework for concept formation can be applied to policy-oriented concepts both for the purpose of their formulation, and also for their evaluation and discussion of their utility. The purpose of this section is to support those claims and illustrate the potential utility of the approach with an illustrative case study.

As the paper is concerned with the question of evaluating concepts, the case concerns the mutually related concepts of hybrid warfare. The choice of the case is based on both methodological and pragmatic grounds. Hybrid warfare is arguably among the most prominent concepts in policy-making debates in security and defence of the last decade (Libiseller 2023). Additionally, its utility was almost

constantly challenged from the moment of its conception (Charap 2015; see, for example, Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Gray 2012; Kofman 2016; Stoker & Whiteside 2020), providing ample material for reflection on the debate and arguments of both proponents and critics.

Four additional notes regarding the delimitations of the case are in order. Firstly, it is a choice of grouping together various concepts as a single case. Arguably, the most proper approach would be to pick only one iteration of 'hybrid' concept or include multiple as multiple case studies. Such an approach would, however, make discussion of contextual criteria such as resonance more difficult. The case is therefore delimited more broadly as the debate about hybrid warfare and includes a wide variety of proponents and opponents, as well as individual and institutional authors.

Secondly, the scope is delimited on the basis of the label used. As discussed briefly below, the concepts behind the label of hybrid warfare underwent many changes over the two decades of their use, sometimes sharing relatively little in common with each other in terms of their definition. The label nonetheless ties those concepts together, and they are generally seen as iterations of conceptualisation rather than substantially different concepts hidden under a single label. The scope of the case study is, therefore, limited on the basis of the 'hybrid' label rather than on similarity of definitions or phenomena described, both of which could be comparably valid exercises.

The third note concerns various iterations of the hybrid label. It should be noted that various forms of the label exist, including, among others, hybrid warfare (Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Eberle & Daniel 2022; see, for example, Hoffman 2009a; Murray & Mansoor 2012), hybrid war (Hoffman 2006a, 2007), hybrid threats (Bachmann & Kemp 2012; European Commission 2016a; Freier 2010; Gunneriusson 2012; Lindley-French 2015; NATO 2010; Rühle 2019) and hybrid interference (Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués 2022; Mareš, Kraus & Drmola 2022; Wigell 2019). While some headway was made recently into distinguishing the differences implied by the different labels (Giannopoulos et al. 2021; Monaghan 2019), they were generally all used with the same debate and often interchangeably (Bahenský 2016; Glenn 2009; Monaghan 2019) and are therefore all considered part of the case.

Finally, the last note concerns the selection of sources. Given the limitation of space and the fact that a decade and a half of development and redefinition of hybrid warfare spawned numerous different iterations, definitions and uses, the discussion of conceptual qualities is inevitably incomplete and possibly anecdotal, despite the effort to capture the variety of existing conceptualisations. As there are already more systematic reviews of hybrid warfare literature, and as the purpose of the case study is illustrative and explorative, the sources were selected based on their suitability to illustrate some aspects of the applicability of conceptual criteria.

The story of the rise of hybrid warfare is by now well documented (see, for example, Bahenský 2016; Fridman 2018; Libiseller 2023; Solmaz 2022), but a brief review is still in order so that the reader can situate individual examples discussed below in their broader context. The first uses of the term 'hybrid warfare' came from master's theses on combining special forces with conventional forces (Walker 1998), and later warfare in Chechnya, focusing on hybrid societies combining traditional and modern forms of societal organisation and warfare (Nemeth 2002). The first truly influential iteration of the concept, however, came from the military-intellectual milieu of the Marine Corps in the United States, where it evolved from experiences of war in Iraq and later Israeli intervention in Lebanon. Formulated primarily[8] by Frank Hoffman (2006a, 2007; Mattis & Hoffman 2005), it is arguably an evolution of his earlier concept of complex irregular warfare (2006b) in response to experiences in Iraq at first and then to the perceived failures of Israel during its fighting against Hezbollah in 2006, which became the first poster-child of hybrid warfare.[9] It entered the debate at a time of heated discussion between proponents of focusing US armed forces on COIN scenarios on the one hand and proponents of focusing on the conventional warfare on the other hand, arguably as a kind of compromise (Hoffman 2009b).

At that time, it was framed primarily as a style of warfare combining aspects of conventional and irregular warfare used by weaker parties on the battlefield with the aim of countering US military advantages and expelling US expeditionary forces from their region. The concept was taken up by the US military (Solmaz 2022; US Army 2010), clearly drawing heavily from Hoffman's formulation, albeit with a definition that shifted is closer to compound warfare.[10] It should be noted that 'hybrid' was also found to be used at that time in the US military, but just as an adjective without any specific definition in mind (United States Government Accountability Office 2010).

The concept of hybrid warfare – though more under the label of hybrid threat – then crossed the Atlantic to enter the lexicon of NATO (Fridman 2018), although in very different contexts and meanings. While maintaining focus on the expeditionary context, the tactical notion of battlefield hybrid warfare transformed

8 It should be noted that there was vigorous discussion about the concept and its usefulness at the time (e.g. Glenn 2009). While mostly forgotten today, there were at the time other US proponents of 'hybridity' in the security environment, who had very different conceptualisations. Most notably Nathan Freier (Freier 2007, 2009, 2010), as well as McCuen (2008) or Murrey and Mansoor (2012).

9 The 2006 war in Lebanon sparked a debate about the suitability of conventional and irregular categories of warfare. Hybrid warfare in this sense had alternatives (Biddle & Friedman 2008; Gray 2012).

10 Whereas Hoffman's original definition focused more on a combination of tools and tactics employed possibly by a single unit (Hoffman 2007: 14), the TC 7-100 definition focuses more on organisation – that is, a combination of regular and irregular forces and criminal elements (US Army 2010: 1–1).

into a strategic concept of new threats posed to NATO, especially from unstable states in its periphery. The new conceptualisation also stressed the civil-military character of threats requiring civil-military cooperation on the side of NATO to counter them (NATO 2010: 2–3). The use of the concept was at the time noted to be broad, flexible and pragmatic (Brynen 2011; Milante 2011) but elicited limited attention.[11]

The true breakthrough for the 'hybrid' concepts came only after Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014. The concept rose to unprecedented prominence both in NATO and the EU, as well as in their member states. It was, however, the success of a term rather than any specific existing concept. After the first use of the hybrid label in the context of the Russian operation against Ukraine, which arguably did not conform to the existing definitions at the time, it led to new concepts informed by the phenomenon and label with new definitions derived inductively with little concern for already existing definitions. With the explosion of popularity, the meaning of the concept got shifted decidedly towards the strategic – and even grand-strategic – level as well as towards a focus on non-military, non-kinetic instruments. At the same time, it was applied to numerous other cases, from the Islamic State (ISIS) (Lindley-French 2015) to China and Iran (Monaghan 2019), and became entrenched in official documents and declarations (European Commission 2016a; NATO 2014).

The utility of the concept was challenged by various and often authoritative voices in the area of security and strategic studies (e.g. Gray 2012; Kofman 2016). Arguably, the definitions of the hybrid warfare concept have somewhat settled in recent years. In the words of Antulio Echevarria, 'Most out-of-the-box ideas, however brilliant, need to return to the box at some point in order to become practical solutions' (2006: 19). Hybrid warfare, facing the requirements of practical implementation into policy, was arguably gradually disciplined (for a good example, see Giannopoulos et al. 2021). However, it should also be noted that new concepts overshadowed but did not fully replace the older concepts. When the discussions in NATO moved away from original battlefield-centric concepts, the debate on it in the US continued (Bowers 2012; Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Hoffman 2014).

With this brief overview of the development of various concepts of hybrid warfare in mind, let us turn to a discussion of how scholarly criteria for conceptual quality can be used to explore various iterations of 'hybrid warfare' with respect to each of the introduced criteria, with the exception of theoretical (causal) utility. Reasons behind the omission are as follows: first, it is to a degree derived from other criteria; second, particularly when discussing the empirical accuracy

11 For examples of reflection on the concept in relation to NATO at the time, see Aaronson et al. (2012), Bachmann (2011), Bachmann & Kemp (2012) or Gunneriusson (2012).

of concept application, it is already well intuitively understood within the field, and the formal framework contribution is therefore somewhat limited; and finally, space is limited.

Looking first at the resonance of the hybrid warfare concepts, the early stages of development of the concept could be seen as doing reasonably well in this regard. While a relative neologism, the common language meaning[12] of the word 'hybrid' matched most of the definitions well.[13] Real issues emerge when it comes to the resonance of new concepts with previous concepts under the same label.

With respect to the resonance question, it is notable that the three phases of the development of hybrid warfare concepts above are not purely chronological and successive. Rather, the earlier iterations of the concept continued to exist alongside new ones (Aaronson et al. 2012; cf. Bowers 2012; Gunneriusson 2012; US Army 2010). While it is now received wisdom that the hybrid warfare concept radically transformed after 2014, this was rarely recognised by authors while citing Hoffman (Bahenský 2016). While the general understanding at the time seems to be that existing concepts capturing a phenomenon of hybrid warfare were just being redefined, what better describes the process from a conceptual standpoint is appropriating the existing label for both new phenomena and corresponding new definitions.

Another aforementioned aspect of a resonance problem relates to the word in the label used after the adjective 'hybrid' – usually threat, war or warfare. While the latter two were resonance-wise perfectly appropriate at the times when they denoted a US military battlefield-centric concept, they were often retained even after the substance of the concept had been civilianised and moved to the level of grand strategy. Given the natural presumption that 'hybrid war' is a special case of the more general concept of 'war', the label led the audiences to see the actions described under the concept as a war with all the consequences attached to such a view (Eberle & Daniel 2023; Stoker & Whiteside 2020).

It should be noted that there were valiant attempts to square the circle of coexisting conflicting concepts of hybrid warfare and threats by associating hybrid warfare with the original US concept (mostly represented by Hoffman's version) and hybrid threats with new definitions derived from Russian conduct (Monaghan 2019). From the perspective of resonance, however, this can be seen as a pyrrhic victory at best. Maintaining the terms 'hybrid threat' and 'hybrid warfare' within the context of security and defence terms – terms which may or may not coincide in terms of actor, time and space – is bound to generate some confusion.[14]

12 Interestingly, Colin Gray, in his brief and critical treatment of the concept, implicitly touched upon the notion of resonance (2012).

13 In definitions where a combination of tools is not a necessary attribute, the resonance of the label becomes questionable, as in case of Hybrid CoE definition in FAQ where various tools are not combined always, but only 'often' (Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats n.d.).

14 The Wales Summit Declaration, for example, explicitly combined the two terms into

Many of the issues of confusion around what hybrid warfare is could have arguably been averted if the authors and institutions recognised the degree to which captured phenomena and definitions shifted and how unsuitable that made the extant term of hybrid warfare.[15] Even if the label won anyway, it would make authors more careful in referencing concepts that, while sharing the same label, captured fundamentally different phenomena.

Problems in resonance bring us to the question of consistency. As discussed in the previous chapter, in practice consistency issues may materialise in relation to institutions rather than authors. A clear example of a blatant lack of consistency in use is the European Union, which managed to publish three (admittedly only slightly) different definitions of hybrid threats in a single day between the agreed Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats (European Commission 2016a: 2), the FAQ section of a webpage on the same subject (European Commission 2016b) and an accompanying press release (European Commission 2016c).

The picture is similar in the case of NATO, where there has been an agreed definition of hybrid threats from 2018 (NATO Standardization Office 2025: 308), but references to hybrid threats and related phenomena in the most recent NATO Strategic Concept range from 'coercive use of political, economic, energy, information and other hybrid tactics' (NATO 2022: 7) to 'hybrid operations' and 'hybrid challenges' (NATO 2022: 7) to 'conventional, cyber and hybrid means' (NATO 2022: 4). The EU Strategic Compass offers an even greater variety in terminology (EU 2022).

Another case of a plausible consistency issue is the NATO conference in 2015. Leaving aside the rather peculiar definition of hybrid warfare,[16] the conference report captures an attempt to use a single concept to capture challenges posed to NATO by a resurgent Russia on the one hand and ISIS in the Middle East on the other hand (Lindley-French 2015). Some recommendations, such as the adaptation of nuclear posture and closing the conventional-nuclear gap, were rather clearly relevant only for one of the two cases of presumed 'hybrid warfare' (Lindley-French 2015: 2).

To give credit to the rapporteur, it should be noted that the differences between the Russian and ISIS challenges were highlighted within the report, and both a very original and very broad definition adopted by the report's author could have

'hybrid warfare threat' (NATO 2014).

15 What could be said in their defence is that the definition was already shifting for some time. While the contrast between original US concepts from 2007 and those from 2014 and later is the most glaring, the NATO episode in around 2010 provided what could be seen as a stepping stone in conceptual travel.

16 The rapporteur in his report defined hybrid warfare as 'the denial of – and defection from – standard norms and principles of international relations in pursuit of narrow interests' (Lindley-French 2015: 1), which is a broad definition even by the standards of hybrid warfare. The definition in question may be a product of a time when the new definitions of hybrid warfare only just started to develop and bears some similarity from a period of exploration of hybrid warfare in NATO around the year 2010.

been an attempt to find a definition which could, in fact, be applied consistently to both ISIS and Russia.

Nonetheless, the dubious subsummation of both threats under the concept of hybrid warfare illustrates both problems in the consistency of the use of hybrid warfare and the implications this has for developing meaningful policies to counter the threat of hybrid warfare as such, rather than its more divergent cases. Importantly, a lack of consistency has downstream effects on resonance. Lack of consistency in definition makes it more difficult to decide whether the new definition, in fact, matches the existing ones reasonably well.

The problem of consistency is compounded by the tendency to describe rather than define. Even arguably the most disciplined and extensive concept of hybrid threat produced denies that it provides a 'universal definition' (Giannopoulos et al. 2021: 6–7). One might describe a phenomenon in many ways without defining it,[17] but without defining it, one does not reach a shared and consistent understanding of the phenomenon. Even more puzzling is the claim that 'definitions of hybrid threats vary and need to remain flexible to respond to their evolving nature' (European Commission 2016a: 2). While one might understand that an overly detailed definition might prove too restrictive, there should still be aspects of a phenomenon that are general and enduring enough to allow for minor changes, much like the differentiation between the nature and the character of war. Without a definition, it is virtually impossible to be consistent in marrying the label to appropriate phenomena.

The question of description and definition brings us to the internal coherence of 'hybrid' concepts. Two issues should have been a reason for a pause before implementing those concepts for practical policy-making. The first of those was the somewhat dubious mutual relationship and coherence of attributes defining hybrid warfare in its formulation by Frank Hoffman: 'Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder' (2007: 7). Given the nature of the concept combining varying other conceptual and theoretical inspirations with an inductive attempt to capture the challenge posed by insurgents in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, it is perhaps understandable that the definition was based on attributes including tactics (irregular), organisation (irregular), equipment (conventional weapons) and specific instruments or activities (terrorism and criminality). The concept, defined as the confluence of attributes in so many dimensions, inevitably runs the risk of

17 For describing as fallback option since there is no agreement on definition (see Cullen & Reichborn-Kjennerud 2017: 8). A similar argument was made by Nathan Freier but he viewed 'hybrid' in relation to a single case (environment), where the values of description and definition are arguably more comparable as there is no need to generalise (Freier 2010).

losing logical coherence among its attributes, which is presumed to produce specific causal effects.

The second and rather different problem for policy-making came from definitions conceived after 2014. The implicit strategy of definition shifted from Hoffman's minimal definition, clearly stating what attributes a case of hybrid warfare must have, to something resembling a maximal or ideal type definition. As a result of this implicit rather than explicit shift towards an umbrella concept, there was very little to be deduced from labelling something a hybrid threat since the cases subsumed under the concept could have only very little in common and yet fit the definition to some degree. The best example might be the definition in the EU's Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats, which defines them as:

> the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare. (European Commission 2016a: 2)

The NATO definition of hybrid threats as agreed in 2018 is arguably better in terms of its internal coherence as it postulates hybrid threat as 'a type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space' (NATO Standardization Office 2025: 308). Therefore, it clearly outlines attributes at the same level, clearly linking three different activities which when combined in time and space can cause specific outcomes. As was argued in the previous chapter, good internal coherence of the definition should also translate to external differentiation, but this is not always true, as will be discussed below.

External differentiation of hybrid warfare was and is generally problematic, both in the sense of their distinctiveness from other neighbouring concepts and in the sense of clear identification of what the concepts do and do not cover. Many iterations of hybrid warfare can be poorly differentiated from other concepts, such as compound warfare (Hoffman 2009c; Murray & Mansoor 2012), grey-zone warfare (Chivvis 2017; Stoker & Whiteside 2020), political warfare (Caliskan & Liégeois 2021; Hoffman 2014), non-linear warfare (Galeotti 2016; Schnaufer 2017) or (arguably) the whole-of-government approach (Glenn 2009). However, it has to be recognised that attempts at reconciling the terms were made, either by making a clear distinction between them (Hoffman 2009c) or seeing them as synonymous (Murray & Mansoor 2012). Poor differentiation can be partially explained by rapid conceptual development in response to the shock of the occupation of Crimea, but also by a peculiar domain-specificity, which exclusively describes hybrid warfare as the adversary's approach. The differentiation from empirical contrast space was then hampered by a complete lack of explicit definition in some cases, or the, extraordinary broadness and lack of clarity of the definitions and descriptions that did exist.

The problem is not only 'horizontal differentiation' from neighbouring concepts at the same level, but also differentiation from more general, superordinate concepts. As described by Caliskan and Liégeois, who summarised that the majority of the interviewed NATO officials think the following:

> The definition of the concept is so broad that it becomes warfare itself. This causes the concept to lose its value as an analytical tool. According to its definition, hybrid warfare is everything. However, it is extremely difficult to develop a strategy against everything or to agree on a definition about everything. (2021: 30)

Differentiation is also closely tied to the ability to unambiguously locate the phenomena matching the definition in the empirical environment. Part of this problem stems from hazy borders, especially of maximal (ideal type) definitions or 'descriptions' where a hybrid threat stops being hybrid. However, the other reason for this problem is the lack of clarity of subordinate concepts, whose mixing merits the 'hybrid' label. The meanings of these concepts are often contested in their own right. To give an example, the EU's definition features a rather ambiguous attribute of the 'threshold of formally declared war' (European Commission 2016a: 2), whereas Hoffman's original definition included attributes of 'conventional weapons', 'criminal activity' and 'terrorism', none of which was defined in turn. Given the fact that those concepts in general, and terrorism in particular, are contested concepts in their own right, a clear operationalisation of Hoffman's concept is challenging to say the least.[18] Similarly, when the EU, within its definition, attributes to hybrid threats 'mixing . . . conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological)' (European Commission 2016a: 2), one is hard-pressed to figure out which of those methods could be considered unconventional in any way.

The official NATO definition fares better, as both irregular and asymmetric activities from the definition are defined within the same document; but the same cannot be said for the third element of 'conventional activity' (NATO Standardization Office 2025). This is somewhat ironic, as the conceptual guidelines of NATO very clearly recognise the importance of external differentiation both from horizontal neighbouring concepts and from superordinate concepts (NATO Standardization Office 2018).

In this sense, hybrid warfare concepts generally compounded the existing definitional issues of various concepts within the field of defence and security by combining them into a rather impenetrable definition.

18 Problem with elements of terrorism can be seen in Hoffman's attempt to apply his framework on conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where he identified the shooting down of MH17 as an act of catastrophic terrorism, something many would dispute (Hoffman 2014).

Conclusion

The fact that both professional and academic discussions are under severe strain due to the proliferation of numerous concepts vying for limited attention is rather unproblematic (Gray 2012; Milevski 2022; Rauta 2021; Stoker & Whiteside 2020). Both the general mechanisms and specific qualities of particular concepts producing buzzwords that take over the discussion, as well as the repercussions of their rise, are coming under increased scholarly scrutiny in recent years (Biegon et al. 2021b; Libiseller 2023; Wicker 2023).

Milevski is correct that there needs to be more thoughtful engagement with concepts in strategic studies (Milevski 2022, 2023), and I would argue that the same is true for the broader field of security.

To contribute to this endeavour, I offer academic scholarships on conceptual quality as a fruitful source of a more explicit and formal framework for a more conscious approach to concepts in the fields of security and defence practice. The contribution is, of course, limited. This article explored in detail only one of the possible scholarly frameworks, and the empirical illustration of its use remained highly limited and exploratory in nature. The lessons for practice are not that any creative conceptual thinking requires lengthy study of conceptual literature from the social sciences and a scorecard on hand – let alone the one introduced above. Instead, I offer three lessons.

First, conceptual quality literature allows us to think more systematically about what a concept is and what makes it good. This is beneficial, as concepts are such a foundational part of how we think and communicate that conscious thinking about them is often rather unnatural.

Second, conceptual criteria offer shared language and a frame of reference to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of proposed concepts and highlight the underappreciated importance of situating new concepts within the existing conceptual and linguistic space.

Third, it reminds institutions such as NATO and the EU of the importance of defining crucial concepts and using them consistently. While it is understandable why agreeing on definitions might be difficult, especially in multilateral organisations, shirking the act of defining invites analytical and communicative confusion and resigns an important role that such institutions can play in stabilising lexicons. Security establishments could arguably learn a thing or two from military efforts to maintain reasonably clear professional lexicons.

Familiarity with and use of such a framework in the course of the contestation of a concept obviously cannot be a panacea. Even with a shared framework, opinions on the quality and utility of concepts will differ. And even concepts of dubious analytical utility will still be tempting on account of their social utility. However, if the empirical case of hybrid warfare and threats should teach us something, it is that it is difficult to maintain two separate sets of concepts, one analytically useful and

one with social utility. And questioning and debating the utility of new and existing concepts is at least as important as proposing new ones to make systems of concepts in the scholarly and practice domain fit for the purpose.

The limitations of this article leave ample space for further fruitful research into the question of the utility of concepts in practice. First, while a simple and straightforward use of one possible scholarly approach to conceptual quality was explored, other approaches might prove just as fruitful, and much can be done to adapt them for use on concepts as used in practice. Second, the various roles that concepts play in practical policy-making, especially in the area of security and defence, should be explored further. Where this paper only touched on the issue superficially, a more systematic and empirically grounded exploration would be warranted. Finally, while this paper opted for the exploration of a broad set of interrelated concepts in order to find the best possible illustration of possible issues, a more systematic investigation of individual concepts would surely prove valuable both in terms of discussing the quality of the concept in question and the usefulness of explicit approaches to conceptual quality.

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