

Political, Psychological, and Cognitive Warfare in an Asymmetric Conflict Environment

Four years into Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the conflict has reached a condition of strategic deadlock defined by clear military limits. Russia cannot achieve its maximalist objective of occupying and controlling all of Ukraine through military force, nor can it credibly secure even a minimum threshold for decisive military victory, defined as full control and consolidation of the five regions it claims as its own. At the same time, Ukraine is unable to attain its ultimate objective of expelling all Russian forces from its internationally recognized borders, or even the more limited outcome that would qualify as victory from Kyiv's perspective: Russia's return to its pre-2020 positions. The war has therefore entered a phase of political warfare in which outcomes will be decided primarily outside the battlefield.

The Politics of Asymmetric Equilibrium

The strategic deadlock that defines the war in Ukraine is a characteristic feature of contemporary warfare between adversaries, even when capabilities and constraints are clearly, but not decisively asymmetric. In such conflicts, the absence of decisive military superiority shifts the center of gravity toward nonmilitary instruments of power. Technological adaptation, precision strike capabilities, drones, cyber domain, and information operations allow opposing sides to compensate for conventional disadvantages and redefine battlefield outcomes. As a result, military force increasingly serves to shape bargaining positions rather than to deliver conclusive outcomes.



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This environment elevates political warfare from a supporting function to the primary arena in which victory and defeat are determined. Theoretically, political warfare [constitutes](#) the coordinated use of diplomatic, informational, economic, legal, and alliance-based instruments to influence strategic outcomes in the absence of decisive military victory. Its purpose is to generate leverage, legitimacy, and endurance over time, both domestically and internationally. In the context of Ukraine, these factors increasingly condition what is militarily sustainable and politically acceptable for both sides.

Within this framework, psychological and cognitive warfare operate as distinct but interconnected mechanisms. Psychological warfare [targets](#) morale, perceptions, and risk tolerance among political elites, military forces, and societies, shaping short-term behavior and crisis responses. Cognitive warfare [reaches](#) deeper, aiming to disrupt how

societies interpret information, assess credibility, and sustain collective action. By eroding trust in institutions, alliances, and shared narratives, cognitive warfare seeks to paralyze decision-making and fragment political cohesion, especially within open and pluralistic systems.

Diplomacy, alliances, and the information domain sit at the intersection of these forms of warfare. Diplomacy functions not only as a channel for negotiation but as a tool for signaling resolve, managing escalation, and structuring the political environment in which military force is employed. Alliances and partnerships convert political alignment into strategic endurance by pooling legitimacy, resources, and risk, while also becoming prime targets of cognitive and psychological pressure. The information domain acts as the connective tissue, shaping how actions are interpreted, justified, and contested across domestic and international audiences.

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Russia's hybrid warfare approach integrates these dimensions into a single operational logic. Moscow's modern hybrid [kill chain](#) weaponizes vulnerabilities, manufactures crises, escalates under ambiguity, and seeks concessions through pressure rather than battlefield resolution. Cognitive and psychological effects are employed to disrupt decision-making and alliance cohesion, enabling political warfare to compensate for military limitations and prolong the conflict on terms favorable to the Kremlin.

Diplomacy and the informational domain function as decisive instruments in this phase of the war. Analyzing their use and effectiveness in the Ukrainian case is crucial for understanding how political tools shape leverage, legitimacy, endurance, and ultimately influence outcomes in contemporary conflicts where military victory alone is unattainable.

Snapshot of Davos 2026

Davos 2026 [distilled](#) a defining feature of the current strategic competition: power shifts to the instruments that can reframe legitimacy, constrain choices, and mobilize coalitions. The most consequential Davos signals sidestepped military aspects of the war in Ukraine, and centered on whether international law is treated as a binding constraint or negotiable language, whether alliances still function as discipline and guaranteed solidarity, and whether strategic endurance can be manufactured through partnerships that survive domestic politics, economic strain, and informational pressure.

The Greenland dispute [captured](#) this shift with unusual clarity. President Donald Trump reiterated at Davos that the United States needs Greenland for strategic national security and pressed for immediate negotiations while stating he would not use force. Denmark and NATO [responded](#) by moving the issue into Alliance management and Arctic security coordination, with Danish leadership and NATO emphasizing the need for collective security engagement in the region and rejecting any discussion of sovereignty. The diplomatic lesson was uncomfortable and simultaneously operationally decisive: legitimacy is no longer assumed to flow from existing rules alone. It is increasingly produced and defended through coalition tradeoffs, security narratives, and credible reassurance mechanisms. In this setting, international law still matters, but its practical force depends more than before on whether allies enforce norms through unity, costs, and strategic messaging.

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President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Davos intervention [placed](#) Europe's political performance at the center of the war's next phase. His argument was that European resilience depends on an autonomous capacity to decide and act quickly, including stronger collective defense capabilities, tighter enforcement of pressure tools against Russia, and institutional readiness to sustain long-war politics rather than episodic crisis response. The operational implication of his stance was that diplomacy functions as a force multiplier only when backed by robust decision-making and credible coalition

commitments. Without that, diplomacy becomes rhetoric, and stalemate becomes an opportunity for the best able to manipulate time, fatigue, and escalation anxiety.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz's critique of Europe as a champion of overregulation and underachievement, delivered against the backdrop of great power politics, [linked](#) domestic governance to strategic leverage. His point was rather strategic: economic capacity, regulatory speed, industrial scaling, and political willingness to accept tradeoffs now directly shape diplomatic credibility. In a prolonged conflict, every promise is discounted by the adversary unless it is anchored in demonstrable output, meaning defense production and the political ability to sustain support through electoral cycles. This is where legitimacy and endurance intersect. States retain legitimacy when they can translate values into policy continuity and material capacity, not when they merely repeat declaratory positions.

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President Alexander Stubb sharpened the same logic from another angle, arguing that Russia's war has been a strategic failure in its intended outcomes, but that failure does not automatically become a Western win unless the West turns it into coordinated action. In Davos remarks [reported](#) by multiple outlets, he pointed to Moscow's failure indicators, such as NATO enlargement, Ukraine's growing integration into Europe, and the surge in European defense investment and in debates about self-reliance that the Kremlin sought to prevent. The analytic takeaway is that advantage in a deadlocked war is rarely created by the adversary's setbacks alone. It is created when alliances

exploit those setbacks through robust responses, sustained aid architectures, and the management of escalation signaling in ways that deny the opponent political exits framed as victory.

Adding to all those concerns, Trump's Board of Peace initiative, advanced further in Davos, offered the clearest example of the decline of traditional diplomatic forums and the substitution of practices reflecting new multipolarity, rather than multilateralism based on Western institutions and principles. The [design](#) is explicitly hierarchical and inherently transactional, with decision authority concentrated in the chair and membership structured around loyalty, money, and access rather than universal rules or values. The new Board of Peace was not welcomed unanimously; however, France and Spain decided not to join on grounds tied to multilateralism, international law, and the United Nations system, and there was limited participation within the European Union, while controversy arose over the revocation of Canada's invitation after a petty political disagreement.

The core implication for the Ukraine context lies in how peace initiatives themselves are being reconceptualized as instruments of influence rather than neutral frameworks for conflict resolution. President Trump was explicit that participation in the Board of Peace would be determined by influence, effective control, and the ability to shape outcomes, not by formal adherence to international rules or institutional standing. In this model, legitimacy is no longer primarily derived from international law, multilateral norms, or universal procedures, but from power relationships and access to decision-making authority. Peace, in this framing, becomes a managed outcome produced by those who control the process, rather than a rule-governed settlement grounded in established legal principles.

This approach directly tests alliance cohesion and the resilience of the rules-based order. By forcing

states to choose between transactional inclusion and normative alignment, such initiatives expose fault lines within alliances and reframe legitimacy as something granted by power holders rather than conferred by institutions. For Ukraine, this shift reshapes the diplomatic battlefield on which its future will be negotiated, determining who has a voice, who sets the agenda, and whether outcomes are anchored in law or in the cards each side holds.

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These Davos signals point to a diplomatic domain in which outcomes are shaped less by formal legal claims and more by the operational use of partnerships, institutional capacity, and narrative control. Diplomacy becomes decisive when it builds coalitions that can enforce constraints, absorb costs, and deny the adversary an informational path to normalize aggression. This same logic also explains why the informational domain is inseparable from diplomacy in the Ukraine war: diplomatic choices only hold when publics and partners interpret them as legitimate, sustainable, and strategically coherent, and when adversarial narratives fail to fracture that perception.

The Informational Domain as a Battleground of Legitimacy

When legitimacy is no longer grounded primarily in international law and shared norms but increasingly vested in power, access, and control, it cannot endure without narrative construction and cognitive reinforcement. Power-based legit-

imacy is inherently unstable unless it is made to appear normal, inevitable, and acceptable to key audiences. This is where the informational domain becomes decisive. Diplomatic leverage achieved through power asymmetries must be translated into stories of necessity, responsibility, realism, or inevitability if it is to hold over time. Without such narration, power-driven arrangements remain exposed to contestation, resistance, and reversal.

This logic sits at the core of political warfare theory. Classical literature on political warfare [emphasizes](#) that the influence is sustained not just by coercion or material advantage but by shaping how political realities are understood and internalized. Political outcomes become durable only when they are cognitively embedded within societies and alliances as reasonable, unavoidable, or even desirable. Contemporary cognitive and information warfare literature extends this insight by showing how modern conflicts target opinions and wider frameworks through which legitimacy, risk, and responsibility are interpreted. The objective is normalization, that is, making power-based decisions appear as common sense responses to complex realities rather than as departures from established rules.

In the context of Ukraine, this means that diplomatic initiatives, alliance behavior, and settlement proposals gain traction only if they are accompanied by narratives that redefine what constitutes justice, peace, and security amid prolonged conflict. Informational operations, therefore, do not simply support diplomacy; they condition its effectiveness by shaping how power-based legitimacy is received, debated, and ultimately accepted across domestic publics and international partners. Understanding this dynamic is essential for assessing how political tools influence outcomes in contemporary warfare, where the decisive struggle increasingly unfolds in the cognitive and informational space rather than on the battlefield alone.

Indicators of effectiveness in this domain are observable. They include public tolerance for long-term costs, stability of alliance consensus under pressure, persistence of support despite escalation risks, and the absence of narrative fragmentation that adversaries can exploit. Conversely, informational vulnerability is revealed through fatigue framing, the normalization of aggression, the erosion of responsibility attribution, and the growing acceptance of imposed settlements as pragmatic inevitabilities rather than coerced outcomes.

Russia's [approach](#) to hybrid warfare, which seeks concessions by escalating pressure, exploits precisely these dynamics. By contesting meaning rather than facts alone, it seeks to normalize stalemate, shift blame, amplify divisions, and recast power-based outcomes as reasonable compromises. The informational domain thus becomes the mechanism through which political warfare either succeeds or collapses. If power-based legitimacy is not continuously narrated and reinforced, it decays. If it is successfully internalized, it reshapes the strategic landscape without further military action.

Power, Legitimacy, and the Future of War Beyond the Battlefield

For the Euro-Atlantic community, the implications extend beyond Ukraine in ways that are now impossible to ignore. Recent debates surrounding Greenland (even if an amicable solution is found, as the latest statements suggest) and the framing of U.S. security interests showcase a potentially profound erosion of the foundational assumptions underpinning NATO. When the territorial integrity of an ally is discussed primarily through the lens of great power necessity rather than alliance obligation, the credibility of collective defense is inevitably called into question. A NATO whose guarantees are perceived as conditional, negotiable, or subor-

dinate to alternative power-based arrangements ceases to function as a stabilizing security institution. For Ukraine, this is deeply consequential. For NATO's eastern flank, it is existential. Without a rock-solid alliance commitment, the Baltic states are not strategically insulated from the vulnerabilities Ukraine has faced; they are merely buffered by political expectations instead of enforceable deterrence.

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The broader strategic implication is that legitimacy itself is being reordered. If power increasingly defines outcomes, and if the United States signals a preference for ad hoc structures such as a Board of Peace over treaty-based alliances, the Euro-Atlantic security environment is poised to be fundamentally transformed. NATO, long the anchor of stability and collective defense, risks being displaced by more fluid, hierarchical, and transactional arrangements in which access and influence matter more than membership and legal obligation. This would weaken NATO and accelerate the transition toward a multipolar system in which security is negotiated on a case-by-case basis, norms are selectively applied, and smaller states are forced to navigate between power centers rather than rely on institutional guarantees.

In this context, the war in Ukraine becomes more than a test of resilience or endurance. Despite being a partner rather than a member, it serves as a bellwether for whether coalition-based security can survive in an era of political warfare where legitimacy is no longer assumed but must be continuously defended against power-driven alternatives. A discredited NATO would repre-

sent a strategic failure far exceeding the outcome of the war itself, undermining deterrence across the eastern flank and reshaping the Euro-Atlantic order in ways that favor coercion over commitment. The stakes, therefore, are not confined to Ukraine's sovereignty, but to whether collective security remains a viable organizing principle in a world increasingly defined by power, perception, and political bargaining.

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What follows from this diagnosis is an unavoidable strategic question rather than a policy checklist. It is no longer clear whether President Trump has already settled on a vision of a reordered international system in which Russia, as a nuclear great power, cannot be allowed to lose. Whether this represents a transitional moment or the consolidation of a genuinely multipolar order remains open, but the direction of travel is unmistakable and troubling, including for Georgia. Given Trump's publicly articulated skepticism toward the European Union, reinforced in the recently released U.S. national security concept, the long-standing

European strategy of compensating for fragmentation through rhetorical unity appears increasingly ineffective. Even a hypothetically rearmed and institutionally coherent Europe may no longer align with prevailing U.S. strategic priorities.

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In this context, the center of gravity shifts toward Ukraine itself. The decisive task becomes persuading Washington that a strong, sovereign Ukraine is not a liability to be managed, but a strategic asset to be cultivated. Ukraine, backed decisively by the United States, can function as a durable counterweight to Russian expansion in Europe and as a major European power capable of sharing the strategic burden of transatlantic security. Beyond deterrence, such a partnership offers tangible alignment with American interests through access to critical natural resources, mutually reinforcing defense industrial cooperation, and large-scale investment opportunities tied to postwar reconstruction. If power now defines outcomes, then Ukraine's future will depend on whether it can anchor itself not only in law and principle, but in a compelling strategic proposition that aligns its survival with the interests of the dominant power shaping the emerging order ■