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The Strategy of Subversion: National Security between Warfare and Diplomacy

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As world politics has shifted towards strategic competition, states increasingly navigate an international terrain marked by intensified, protracted political conflict. Here, subversion appears as a central, but not fully understood form of statecraft. Great powers find themselves interlocked in a subversive-countersubversive dynamic characterized by the employment of a mixture of military and non-military means with an intensity above the level of peaceful relations, but below the level of war. This dynamic highlights the role and character of subversion relatively to diplomacy and warfare. Accordingly, this paper examines subversion as a critical and distinctive form of statecraft. First, we situate subversion in relation to concepts that tend to shape, but also constrain, thinking on the link between subversion, diplomacy and warfare: coercive diplomacy, irregular, hybrid and political warfare, and gray zone conflict. Second, we argue that subversion is best understood in juxtaposition to warfare (as the statecraft of war) and diplomacy (as the statecraft of peace). Mirroring these more overt and well-defined forms of statecraft, subversion has distinct purposes, it has its own measures and tools, it is organized in a particular way and involves certain actors, and it is based on a unique set of justifications. Third, using illustrative examples from the conflict between the West and Russia and China, we analyze how the use of subversive and countersubversive strategies have significant consequences for the practice and logic of warfare and diplomacy. In a sense, subversion subverts other essential forms of statecraft. Fourth, we highlight the core challenges that subversion presents for the United States and Europe, respectively, especially as it pertains to the changing character and organization of defence and warfare. In conclusion, we discuss the implications of our theoretical exploration for emerging research on subversion, on conflictual statecraft, and on strategy in Western states.

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