

Introduction

Sun Tzu asserted that “the supreme art of war lies in subduing the enemy without fighting.”¹ Today, this dictum is embodied in hybrid warfare, where the blend of strategic deception, cyber-operations, and disinformation campaigns enables states to pursue geopolitical objectives without resorting to open conflict.

The March 2014 Crimea episode illustrates Russia’s doctrine of Maskirovka: unmarked special-operations troops (the so-called “little green men”) took control of key sites on the peninsula while a coordinated disinformation drive and a series of cyber-operations spread confusion among international audiences.² Likewise, in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, Beijing has deployed grey-zone tactics (ranging from the construction of artificial islands to undeclared military exercises) framed under narratives of “scientific research” and “legitimate self-defence.”³

Strategic deception has long been regarded as an essential tool for shaping an adversary’s perceptions and decisions, blending tactical deceit and operational surprise to secure a decisive advantage. According to *Military Review*, this practice relies not only on manipulating information but also on exploiting an opponent’s cognitive and operational vulnerabilities, thereby creating an atmosphere of uncertainty. The goal is to induce the enemy to underestimate the true purpose or direction of military movements, hindering its ability to react at the critical moment.

Moreover, the article stresses the importance of integrating deception methods into planning from the strategic down to the tactical level, ensuring that intelligence and counter-intelligence efforts remain aligned with the campaign’s overarching objectives. This holistic approach demands a deep understanding of both the adversary’s mindset and the operational context in order to preserve the credibility of manipulated information and maintain coherence among the various deception actions employed. Thus, strategic deception has not only evolved with technological and doctrinal advances; it continues to stand as a decisive tool for achieving superiority on today’s battlefield.

This article draws lessons from these two scenarios to propose practical steps that the

¹ Sun Tzu, *El arte de la guerra*, trad. José Ramón Ayllón (Madrid: Ediciones Planeta, 2015), 20.

² Mark Galeotti, “‘Hybrid War’ and ‘Little Green Men’: How It Works, and How It Doesn’t,” *E-International Relations*, 16 de abril de 2015, <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/16/hybrid-war-and-little-green-men-how-it-works-and-how-it-doesnt/>.

³ Qiao Liang y Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), 199.

European Union and its allies can take to move from a reactive to an anticipatory logic in the face of modern hybrid threats.

Concept of Strategic Deception

The concept of deception in military thought has been developed and applied throughout history from ancient Egypt to contemporary strategic doctrine. For example, the U.S. Joint Publication 3-13, Information Operations, states that “to succeed, U.S. forces must gain and maintain information superiority.” Information operations are defined as “the integrated employment of electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC), and operations security (OPSEC), together with supporting capabilities and related activities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision-making while protecting our own.”⁴

Chinese military texts that expound Sun Tzu’s teachings underline the radical (and effective) nature of deception in Chinese warfare. Ren Li, editor of Lectures on Sun Tzu’s Art of War, argues that the notion that “war is a form of deception” is the most striking idea in Sun Tzu because it encourages an asymmetric, unscripted approach to conflict while rejecting any notion of constancy in war. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) uses these treatises to urge commanders to do whatever is necessary to deceive their adversaries, while employing agile, flexible, and adaptive responses to the real conditions encountered on the battlefield.⁵

To grasp the concept of Strategic Deception more fully, we can pause at Maskirovka, which, according to Galeotti (2019), is a holistic doctrine that goes beyond simple deception. It incorporates camouflage, covert manoeuvres, and disinformation in order to shape the enemy’s perception on multiple levels.

In his book *Armies of Russia’s War in Ukraine* (2019), Galeotti shows how Maskirovka permeates Russian strategy at multiple levels. He explains that Maskirovka is not limited to inducing isolated errors in the enemy through discrete techniques; instead, it operates

⁴ Rittenberg, Jonathan, Michael Barry, David Hickey, Byung Rhee, y Hunter Cross. “Integrating Information Warfare: Lessons Learned from Warfighter Exercise 18-2.” *Military Review*, U.S. Army Press, 2019.

⁵ Qiao Liang y Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*

as a comprehensive system for manipulating the adversary's perception, taking advantage of the complexity and uncertainty inherent in the operational environment.

In his article “‘Hybrid War’ and ‘Little Green Men’: How It Works, and How It Doesn’t,” Galeotti explicitly examines how Maskirovka is employed in the context of Russian hybrid warfare. He argues that Maskirovka is not merely an ad-hoc deception device, but rather an integrated strategy that combines deception operations, camouflage, covert manoeuvres, and disinformation campaigns to manipulate the adversary's perception in a comprehensive manner.

British historian Sir Michael Howard, an Oxford professor and leading authority on strategy, analyses in his book *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* how deception played a crucial role during World War II. He emphasises that such operations were not merely isolated tactical manoeuvres but integral components of Allied military planning. Operation Fortitude, designed to divert German attention from the true Normandy landing site, exemplifies how strategic deception generated intense uncertainty within enemy ranks, weakened their response capacity, and altered their strategic calculations. According to Howard, these ruses were indispensable for creating a fog of confusion that allowed the Allies to seize decisive advantages at critical moments of the conflict without them, history might well have taken a different course.

Classical Principles and Doctrinal Evolution: Sun Tzu's Fundamentals

Delving deeper into the figure of Sun Tzu, he was a Chinese general, strategist, and military philosopher who is thought to have lived between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). This era was one of the most turbulent in China's history, characterised by unrelenting conflict among rival kingdoms vying for territorial supremacy. The phrase “is thought” is used because scholars have been unable to determine conclusively whether Sun Tzu was an actual historical person or the collective expression of a Chinese school of strategic thought.

In this climate of war and turmoil, a sophisticated body of strategic thought emerged, fostering new military tactics and elevating the role of intelligence and planning in conflict. It was within this milieu that Sun Tzu composed *The Art of War*, a treatise that addresses not only military tactics and strategy but also the psychology of conflict, diplomacy, and

war as extensions of governance and statecraft.⁶

The qualitative leap that Sun Tzu's treatise represented for the evolution of strategy can be likened to the impact of Machiavelli's *The Prince* on political science an intellectual watershed that reshaped an entire field of thought.

Key principles distilled from *The Art of War*

- War as a last resort Sun Tzu warns that armed conflict should be avoided whenever possible and that the highest achievement is to win without fighting—through manipulation, diplomacy, and subversion.
- The primacy of information and deception Strategic deception is essential for confusing the enemy and gaining the upper hand. Sun Tzu advises inducing the adversary to misperceive reality in order to provoke error.
- Adaptability and awareness of the environment A successful commander adapts to circumstances and understands both his own forces and those of the enemy. In fact, an entire chapter is devoted to analysing terrain.
- Morale and discipline An army must be well-organised and morally cohesive to avoid collapse in combat; training and the motivation provided by senior leadership are therefore vital.

Sun Tzu emphasises in *The Art of War* that strategic deception (although presented implicitly) is fundamental for securing victory without direct confrontation. His teachings on deceit aim to exploit the enemy's vulnerabilities, sow confusion, and manipulate the adversary's perception of reality.

A real-world illustration is provided by Christopher Bodeen's AP News article,⁷ which documents China's use of disinformation to weaken Taiwan's democracy. Rather than resorting to direct military confrontation, Beijing strives to achieve victory without casualties or the destructive costs of open conflict.

In this context, three information-manipulation tactics employed by China stand out:

- Mass disinformation campaigns. Beijing has increased the dissemination of false or

⁶ Mark Galeotti, *Todo es un arma: Una guía de campo para las nuevas guerras* (Madrid: Desperta Ferro Ediciones, 2023), p.2

⁷ Christopher Bodeen, "Taiwan Says China Is Redoubling Efforts to Undermine Democracy with Disinformation," AP News, 4 de enero de 2025.

biased content on platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok by an estimated 60 per cent. The objective is to reshape public perceptions, sway electoral opinion, and foment internal divisions within Taiwan.

- Deployment of ambiguous, hard-to-verify narratives. Echoing the Russian doctrine of Maskirovka (discussed below), China goes beyond simple propaganda, cultivating an atmosphere of uncertainty in which truth is difficult to distinguish from manipulation.
- Challenges to the legitimacy of Taiwan's democracy. The strategy seeks not only to erode domestic morale but also to project internationally the notion that Taiwan is a failed (or at least an ungovernable) state, thereby reinforcing Beijing's narrative of inevitable reunification.

Case studies

Strategic deception in Crimea

One of the most prominent modern cases of strategic deception is Russia's use of unmarked troops—popularly known as “little green men”—during the 2014 annexation of Crimea. These forces were, in fact, elite Russian units such as the Spetsnaz, deployed without national insignia or any visible markings that could officially link them to the Kremlin. This tactic allowed Moscow to operate in a grey zone, initially avoiding an armed response from both Ukraine and the international community because the occupation could not be formally attributed to Russia. The method aligns with the doctrine of Maskirovka, the Russian art of military deception, whose purpose, as noted earlier, is to confuse, disorient, and paralyse an adversary's decision-making. As Mark Galeotti explains, credible denial of Russian involvement was key to rapidly consolidating territorial control, shaping media narratives, and preparing the political ground for the annexation referendum. This strategy not only demonstrated the effectiveness of non-linear operations; it also showed how perception management and operational ambiguity have become fundamental weapons in contemporary warfare.⁸

This approach represents a sophisticated form of hybrid warfare, in which conventional means are combined with asymmetric and non-conventional tools—media manipulation,

⁸ Mark Galeotti, *Hybrid War or Gibrinaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015)

disinformation, cyber-attacks, and, in this case, unmarked soldiers. The occupation of Crimea was carried out with such efficiency that hardly any significant armed clashes were recorded, and Ukrainian forces surrendered at minimal human cost. The operation achieved its strategic objectives (effective territorial control and the holding of a referendum that lacked international recognition) without triggering open war, demonstrating the effectiveness of these manoeuvres within contemporary strategic thinking.

In this sense, the Crimea operation stands as a paradigmatic example of how strategic deception and hybrid warfare intertwine in modern conflicts, reflecting an evolution of Sun Tzu's classical notion of "winning without fighting," where victory is attained through deception, manipulation, and confusion rather than direct force.

Taiwan and the South China Sea

One of the most sophisticated forms of strategic deception employed by China in its asymmetric warfare toolkit is the systematic construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea. According to U.S. Army officer and strategic analyst Robert F. Gold, this carefully planned campaign has enabled Beijing to establish a network of militarised forward outposts that reinforce its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, complicating any foreign intervention—particularly by the United States or its regional allies. These islands, initially presented as civilian or scientific facilities, were gradually outfitted with airstrips, radar stations, and surface-to-air missile systems, illustrating a deliberate use of narrative deception to minimise the perceived threat during their consolidation. The tactic fits within a broader approach in which power is projected without direct confrontation but with tangible deterrent effects.⁹

To prevent this kind of deception, military personnel tasked with analysing satellite imagery and delivering reliable intelligence must be trained in IMINT (Imagery Intelligence) because such expertise would have reduced the operation to a minor act of deception.

Within the grey-zone strategies that China employs in East Asia, one finds a

⁹ Robert F. Gold, "El poder disuasivo de China: Creando desafíos de antiacceso en el Indo-Pacífico," *Military Review*, Edición Hispanoamericana, segundo trimestre de 2021, Army University Press.

contemporary application of Sun Tzu's precepts in *The Art of War*—hence the need to study and understand them. According to Inés Arco Escriche of CIDOB, Beijing pursues its interests through actions that blur the line between peace and conflict, thereby avoiding direct confrontation with powers such as the United States. This approach reflects Sun Tzu's maxim that “supreme excellence consists in winning without fighting,” demonstrating that asymmetric tactics and strategic adaptability are vital for neutralising an adversary without resorting to open hostilities.¹⁰

At present, China's activities in the South China Sea (such as building artificial islands and implementing anti-access measures) are a textbook example of grey-zone strategy. These initiatives aim to consolidate territorial control and deter outside powers from intervening, all without triggering armed conflict. The tactic embodies Sun Tzu's practical principles, favouring cunning and indirect strategy over direct confrontation and underscoring the continued influence of his thought on contemporary Chinese security policy.

Areas of interest

The continued relevance of Sun Tzu's thought in contemporary strategy is evident in the way actors such as Russia and China systematically employ strategic deception. For Europe, this reality suggests that a deeper engagement with Sun Tzu's classic writings is warranted. At the same time, growing attention is being directed toward methodologies for anticipating and detecting hybrid threats.

Below, several areas are highlighted that may be of interest because they represent potential avenues for improving security against these threats going beyond the systems currently in place:

Harmonised Hybrid-Alert System

The EU currently operates multiple surveillance nodes (EU INTCEN, SatCen, CERT-EU, MARSUR and Frontex) yet they often work with isolated protocols and data flows. In the context of hybrid warfare, the efficient exchange of intelligence (especially SIGINT, IMINT

¹⁰ Irene Arco Escriche, *Vencer sin librar batalla: estrategias de zona gris de China en Asia Oriental* (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2022).

and OSINT) takes on strategic importance. Experience shows that even within a single country this exchange can be complex (as in the United States, with its multitude of agencies such as the CIA, NSA, FBI and Homeland Security); at the European scale, that complexity is magnified.

European Centre for Hybrid Threats

Consideration is being given to the need for a permanent structure (independent of NATO) that can operate 24/7 and coordinate measures such as sanctions, joint diplomatic responses, and counter-information actions. Ongoing geopolitical uncertainty surrounding NATO and its strategic priorities has reopened the debate about Europe's autonomy in this domain.

Training and information resilience

Various reports highlight the usefulness of media-literacy programmes not only for journalists but also for the wider public. Because society is increasingly exposed to disinformation campaigns, information education should not be confined to specialists alone. In recent years, special attention has been paid to the impact of these dynamics on social polarisation and on the erosion of democratic trust, with documented cases of interference in highly sensitive electoral processes.

Rapid-response protocols

The existence of automatic mechanisms capable of triggering sanctions or issuing official statements within 48 hours could make a decisive difference against strategic-deception operations, as the Crimea case demonstrated. Several eastern European countries (Latvia, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania and Ukraine) may be particularly vulnerable to such threats. The challenge is the same as for other protocols: coordinating multiple nations that operate in different contexts and pursue differing interests can often prove complicated.

Strategic thinking among European actors

Whereas Russia and China exhibit an advanced internalisation of strategic-deception logic, Europe still has room for improvement. In Spain, for instance, there are already highly qualified professionals, yet it would be worthwhile to see this strategic knowledge diffused more broadly to key decision makers including government officials, parliamentarians and mid-level commanders.

Conclusions

The combination of strategic deception, covert operations, and disinformation campaigns enables powers such as Russia and China to reach their objectives without plunging into a conventional conflict. To counter these threats effectively, the European Union must adopt a forward-looking posture: implement a harmonised hybrid-alert system, consolidate inter-institutional cooperation, and reinforce society's informational resilience. Only by doing so can it preserve stability in its neighbourhood and guarantee credible deterrence against modern hybrid warfare.

The attacks of 11 September, Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea, and Hamas's 7 October 2023 assault on Israeli civilians all highlight the importance of being prepared for strategic surprises that were previously dismissed as "black swan" events high-impact contingencies regarded as improbable. The difference between a swift territorial collapse followed by protracted war and winning without fighting can hinge on having effective preventive measures in place.

Essentially, the proposed courses of action are nothing more than an updated application of three core rules from Sun Tzu: "win without fighting" (anticipatory deterrence through immediate cost-signalling); "know your enemy and know yourself" (fusing SIGINT, IMINT and OSINT to dispel the fog of information); and "speed is the essence of war" (a rapid-response playbook and a real-time EU–NATO chain of command). By integrating hybrid-alert systems, unifying strategic messaging and training society to counter disinformation, the European Union applies the ancient principles of *The Art of War* to the digital, multidimensional battlespace of the twenty-first century. In doing so, the EU aligns with Sun Tzu's most enduring lesson: "Excellence does not lie in winning every battle, but in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."

To conclude, it is worth stressing that the effectiveness of any hybrid-prevention architecture depends on a process of continuous improvement. Just as Sun Tzu implicitly advised that one should "sharpen the sword every day, even in times of peace", the European Union must periodically review its warning indicators, rehearse new joint-response doctrines, and update the legal framework that underpins sanctions and counter-measures. Only through a permanent cycle of feedback, training, and adaptation

can it stay one step ahead of its adversaries, prevent surprise blows in the “grey zone,” and maintain a credible deterrent that makes the use of conventional force unnecessary. In short: during peace we must prepare for war otherwise, when war comes, there will be no time left to prepare.

Moreover, it is worth recalling that the European Union’s true strength lies in something as simple as staying alert and united. Just as a chess player reviews his openings every day, European institutions must regularly reassess their plans, share lessons learned among all partners, and speak with a single voice when the first signs of deception emerge. That blend of constant vigilance and mutual support (more than any technology or new regulation) will ultimately deter those who seek to exploit our many structural fissures.

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