

Ambiguity as a strategic tool

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Ambiguity and deception, have for long, been both operational and strategic tools of statecraft. However, technological advances in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms have made both operational and strategic deception an extremely difficult proposition. Ambiguity of intent and perception management, however, remain highly exploitable tools, limited only by the ingenuity of the human mind and the willingness of the strategic establishment to leverage the existing human capital within government structures along with selective assistance from academia and think-tanks. The strategy of ambiguity has three immediate objectives. First is to induce an element of uncertainty in the minds of adversaries, potential adversaries and competitors regarding own options and courses of action in diverse situations ranging from nuclear deterrence, alliances and partnerships to building expeditionary and coercive capabilities. Second is to plant contrarian viewpoints in quick succession on live issues, thereby creating a 'swarm' effect, both within your own environment and the international space. The ensuing reaction would allow you to game issues from time-to-time. Third and lastly is to gauge domestic and international opinion on various issues; these can then provide reasonably accurate and contemporary benchmarks in policy formulation.

The strategy of ambiguity has a symbiotic relationship with comprehensive national power. More powerful a nation is, greater are the options available to it to achieve a particular strategic objective. Hard power options, diplomatic nimbleness, good governance and adequate soft power can keep an adversary guessing. Even terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda have mastered the art of ambiguity by displaying the ability to keep us guessing on how the global jihad is going to be orchestrated in the years to come. Will it be through franchisee fringe outfits scattered across the globe, or would it be through a central leadership? Would the kind of warfare be terrorist action by individuals and sleeper cells, or would it be hybrid warfare with the support of radical and extremist proxy states and operationally proficient groups like the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT). Ambiguity and deception by non-state actors have always been potent tools of asymmetric warfare. Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Lebanon are testimony to this stark reality that leads us to believe with reasonable certainty that most battles are won or lost in the mind.

The prime justification for re-visiting 'ambiguity operations' is because academic institutions and think-tanks have not been able to adequately contribute, both directly and indirectly, to this strategy for various reasons that are beyond the purview of this article. As a comparative example, in the United States of America, this task is executed by diverse think-tanks and academic institutions that follow neoconservative, realist or liberal lines of political and strategic thought. This strategy allows multiple options for operational exploitation. Chinese strategic ambiguity in recent times is reflected by contrarian view points on key issues like economic liberalisation, democratisation and settlement of boundary disputes. While Prime Minister Wen Jiabao is known to be a liberal and expresses his views fearlessly and when President Hu Jintao has followed the middle road, some Chinese think-tanks have adopted a strikingly hawkish posture in recent times while articulating widely in the public media. The world is not sure whether Deng's period of consolidation is still on, or whether China has decided to change gear and be more assertive on the world stage.

The strategy of ambiguity needs to be introduced incrementally and with due caution. A desired response from an adversary, particularly a strong one, should be an induced complacency; not fearful insecurity. Some of the immediate areas of ambiguity that can be introduced into our strategic discourse could relate to nuclear deterrence and our professed doctrine of No First Use, increasing maritime capability and presence in IOR, employment of air power in full spectrum operations and development of out of area contingency capabilities are themes that can be taken up with divergent viewpoints.

The first step is to identify key players to roll out this strategy. Amongst them would be articulate domain experts from the government. This would include serving bureaucrats, diplomats, armed forces and paramilitary personnel. While it would also be a good idea to include retired officers from both civil and military services along with selected think-tanks, their vulnerability to external influence needs to be factored in. Academic institutions could also form a part of this team, as would selected researchers and domain experts from diverse think-tanks. The next step would be to orchestrate a topic and allow key players to articulate themselves freely in various forums, some voicing the government stand-point, while others could offer contrarian views without any fear of censure from the government. Concurrently, there needs to be a mechanism to track, collate and analyse opinions that follow from both the domestic and international environment. This could then be used as one of the inputs for strategy and policy

formulation.

The main challenges to this strategy could emerge from elements who could point at the dangers of ambiguity vis-à-vis clarity. Calibration and control of this strategy could also be a challenge as it would largely depend on the quality of human resource that has been chosen. On the flip side, the strategy of ambiguity offers immense potential as a low cost option to put pressure on the decision-making establishment of adversaries and competitors.

India is often seen, both by its own people and the international community, as a slow moving democracy with a propensity for delayed strategic decision-making. This is not entirely true as many critical decisions over the last decade have turned out to be the right ones, Iraq, Afghanistan and our quest for strategic autonomy being amongst the success stories. A strategy of ambiguity offers untapped potential that needs to be exploited.

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