



Paradiplomacy and hybrid warfare: the role of media and territory in contemporary conflicts

Paradiplomacia y guerra híbrida: el papel de los medios y los territorios en los conflictos contemporáneos

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of paradiplomacy and the media in contemporary hybrid warfare contexts. Focusing on the cases of Ukraine, Syria, and Korea, it examines how sub-state actors, cities, and local networks deploy strategies of internationalization and symbolic resistance through paradiplomatic and media actions. It argues that in 21st-century hybrid warfare, paradiplomacy becomes a crucial instrument for symbolic reconstruction, territorial resilience, and narrative contestation, redefining the boundaries of traditional diplomacy. A transdisciplinary theoretical approach is proposed, articulating the notions of framing, public diplomacy, propaganda, and paradiplomacy, supported by a qualitative methodology of comparative discourse analysis. This article also offers a critical analysis of the role of international media in the symbolic shaping of contemporary conflicts within the framework of hybrid warfare. Through the comparative study of the cases of Ukraine, Syria, and North Korea/South Korea, it examines how platforms such as CNN, Russia Today (RT), Al Jazeera, and KCNA act as strategic players competing for narrative hegemony. The study concludes that global media are no longer mere observers but active instruments of narrative warfare in polarized geopolitical contexts.

Keywords: Hybrid warfare; paradiplomacy; international media; propaganda; framing; public diplomacy; symbolic conflict.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el papel de la paradiplomacia y los medios de comunicación en los contextos de guerra híbrida contemporáneos. Partiendo de los casos de Ucrania, Siria y Corea, se examina cómo actores subestatales, ciudades y redes locales despliegan estrategias de internacionalización y de resistencia simbólica mediante acciones paradiplomáticas y mediáticas. Se argumenta que, en la guerra híbrida del siglo XXI, la paradiplomacia se convierte en un instrumento crucial de reconstrucción simbólica, de resiliencia territorial y de disputa narrativa, redefiniendo los límites de la diplomacia tradicional. Se propone un enfoque teórico transdisciplinario que articula las nociones de framing, diplomacia pública, propaganda y paradiplomacia, apoyado en metodología cualitativa de análisis discursivo comparativo. Este artículo también propone un análisis crítico del papel de los medios de comunicación internacionales en la configuración simbólica de los conflictos contemporáneos en el marco de la guerra híbrida. A través del estudio comparativo de los casos de Ucrania, Siria y Corea del Norte/Corea del Sur, se examina cómo plataformas como CNN, Russia Today (RT), Al Jazeera o KCNA funcionan como actores estratégicos que disputan la hegemonía del relato. El estudio concluye que los medios globales ya no son meros observadores, sino instrumentos activos de guerra narrativa en contextos geopolíticos polarizados.

Palabras clave: guerra híbrida; paradiplomacia; medios internacionales; propaganda; framing; diplomacia pública; conflicto simbólico.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conflicts are no longer fought exclusively between states or limited to the military sphere. The hybrid warfare of the 21st century has expanded the battlefield into the symbolic, media, and territorial spheres, giving rise to new forms of international action that go beyond traditional diplomatic structures. Among these forms, paradiplomacy stands out as the ability of sub-state actors—regions, cities, transnational movements—to exert influence beyond state borders.

This article proposes that, in contexts of hybrid warfare, such as those in Ukraine, Syria, and Korea, media and cultural paradiplomacy has emerged as a tool for resistance, symbolic reconstruction, and the international projection of territorial identities. By articulating public diplomacy, propaganda, and media framing, local actors contest the hegemony of the global narrative and redefine the processes of territorial internationalization.

Paradiplomacy has traditionally been understood as the international action of subnational governments to promote economic, cultural, or political interests. However, in hybrid warfare scenarios, this definition must be broadened: local actors also become agents of symbolic resistance, using media, digital networks, and cultural diplomacy to influence international opinion. In this new framework, paradiplomacy no longer seeks only to attract investment or tourism, but also to build legitimacy, denounce aggression, mobilize transnational solidarity, and strengthen territorial resilience.

About hybrid warfare, authors such as Frank Hoffman and Mary Kaldor have developed the concept to account for forms of confrontation that combine conventional and irregular, physical and digital, armed and symbolic elements. In this type of warfare, the media dimension is not complementary, but structural. The occupation of the narrative accompanies the occupation of territories. Missiles coexist with hashtags; soldiers with influencers; official speeches with viral memes. As Carl von Clausewitz stated, war is the continuation of politics by other means.

In the 21st century, those “other means” increasingly include television cameras, algorithms, digital platforms, and narratives constructed with semiotic precision.

This article offers a critical and comparative reading of three emblematic cases where hybrid warfare is strongly evident: Ukraine, Syria, and North Korea/South Korea. In each of these scenarios, international media outlets such as CNN, RT, Al Jazeera, KCNA, and The Guardian have played roles that go far beyond journalistic coverage. They have acted as diplomatic spokespersons, ideological emissaries, and narrative operators. Analyzing their role is not just a matter of communication: it is an epistemological and geopolitical necessity.

The central objective of this study is to demonstrate that international media have become narrative weapons within the hybrid warfare apparatus. To this end, theoretical tools from discourse analysis, critical communication theory, political science, and propaganda studies will be used. The notions of framing, agenda setting, structural propaganda, and public diplomacy will allow us to establish a robust conceptual framework for interpreting media actions in contexts of symbolic confrontation.

The methodology used is qualitative and comparative. Through a discourse analysis of media content in the three selected cases, narrative patterns, ideological frames, semiotic operations, and emotional construction strategies are identified. The approach does not seek to evaluate the factual veracity of the content, but rather to unravel the rhetorical and political devices that shape the field of what is visible and sayable in war.

Cultural paradiplomacy and territorial resilience in hybrid conflicts

Since the Russian invasion in 2022, Ukrainian cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol have deployed strategies of symbolic paradiplomacy. Through agreements with sister cities in Europe, social media campaigns, and alliances with international media, these cities have internationalized their narratives of resistance.

Volodymyr Zelensky's media diplomacy—with speeches in parliaments and a constant presence in global media—has been reinforced from below by local territories demanding direct support. Initiatives such as “Cities4Ukraine” have enabled local governments around the world to take symbolic and material positions in support of Ukraine, lighting monuments, sending aid, and running awareness campaigns.

This media paradiplomacy operates through emotional framing strategies (displaced children, destroyed cities) that mobilize international public opinion and place the conflict on the global

media agenda.

In Syria, despite political and territorial fragmentation, some cities and local communities have articulated forms of cultural paradiplomacy. Through reconstruction initiatives, heritage projects, film festivals, and transnational artistic projects, networks have been created that challenge the narrative of total devastation and project territorial resilience.

In South Korea, the “Korean Wave” (Hallyu) represents a paradigmatic case of cultural paradiplomacy in a context of hybrid tension. Through K-pop, cinema, and technology, South Korea not only expands its soft power but also builds an international image of modernity and cultural resistance in the face of the North Korean threat. These cases show that paradiplomacy operates not only in the formal political sphere but also in the symbolic-cultural field, becoming a central axis of reconstruction and territorial projection in contexts of hybrid warfare.

The first section presents the general theoretical framework and state of the art regarding hybrid warfare, propaganda, and the role of the media. The second section examines the Ukrainian case in depth, from the annexation of Crimea to the 2022 invasion. The third compares the cases of Syria and Korea, with an emphasis on their narrative particularities. The fourth part analyzes the role of public diplomacy as a bridge between propaganda and foreign policy. Finally, conclusions are presented that articulate the evidence found and suggest lines for future research.

Hybrid warfare: between the military and the symbolic

Frank Hoffman formalized the concept of hybrid warfare to describe 21st-century conflicts that combine conventional and irregular tactics, involving both state and non-state actors. In this new battlefield, information and public perception become strategic objectives. War is no longer fought exclusively in trenches, but on screens, social media, and global narratives.

Mary Kaldor complements this view by discussing “new wars” in which actors seek to control the population through fear and media manipulation rather than through physical domination of territory.

This transformation of war into a narrative device poses a challenge for the social sciences: how can we think about violence when it becomes semiotic? How can we analyze war when its battlefield is meaning? Judith Butler, drawing on discourse theory, points out that grief, pain, and life itself are mediated by cultural frameworks that determine which lives are mourned and which are disposable. In this sense, the media not only report on war: they produce it, name it, and organize it symbolically.

The power of the media in war contexts

The agenda-setting theory developed by McCombs and Shaw showed that the media does not tell us what to think, but rather what to think about. In times of conflict, this ability to prioritize some issues and silence others becomes a weapon of power. Framing, in turn, allows us to understand how the meaning of events is structured. As Robert Entman points out, framing an event means selecting it, emphasizing certain aspects and omitting others, generating specific interpretations of reality.

This structuring power is particularly relevant in the context of hybrid warfare, where the conflict narrative can shape public perception and the international legitimacy of military actions. The selection of images, testimonies, adjectives, and silences is part of a discursive battle with material effects.

Propaganda and public diplomacy in the digital age

Propaganda is not a new phenomenon, but its capacity for expansion, sophistication, and segmentation has multiplied with digital technologies. Jacques Ellul warned that modern propaganda is not based solely on lies, but on partial truths strategically organized to shape public opinion. In the context of hybrid warfare, this logic is updated through the use of algorithms, artificial intelligence, bots, and social platforms that enable rapid, targeted dissemination of ideological content.

At this point, public diplomacy becomes key. According to Nicholas Cull, it is the ability of states to influence the perceptions and emotions of foreign audiences through discourse, media, culture, and technology. Public diplomacy thus becomes an extension of propaganda, but with an institutional and legitimate guise.

RT (Russia Today) is a prime example: a channel funded by the Russian government with a global strategy of producing an alternative narrative to the dominant Western narratives. On the other side, CNN is not simply a private news company, but an actor that represents and reproduces specific geopolitical values and interests. Both function as media embassies for their respective

states.

In recent years, a wealth of literature has emerged analyzing the media's role in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Research such as Joanna Szostek's on Russian media hegemony, Iuliia Hoban's on the symbolic militarization of childhood in

Donbas and Maxim Alyukov on news reception in authoritarian contexts offer solid evidence of the instrumentalization of discourse in war. Recent studies have also explored the use of bots, memes, fake news, and comparative framing in media outlets such as the BBC, CNN, and RT.

Despite these advances, there is still a need to integrate this research within a critical-comparative framework that articulates the communicative with the political, the discursive with the material. This article aims to respond to this theoretical and methodological gap.

Comparative analysis: Ukraine, Syria, and Korea as scenarios of hybrid media warfare

The analysis of three cases—Ukraine, Syria, and the Korean peninsula—allows us to observe how the international media act as agents of symbolic warfare in contexts of hybrid conflict. Although each scenario has its own historical, geopolitical, and cultural configuration, they share a structural element: the dispute over narrative hegemony in the global media field. In all of them, state actors have instrumentalized the media to project a specific vision of the conflict, legitimize military or diplomatic actions, and construct collective identities based on the friend/enemy opposition.

Ukraine: hybrid warfare, strategic propaganda, and paradiplomacy in dispute

The conflict in Ukraine represents the most paradigmatic case of hybrid warfare in the 21st century, not only because of the combination of regular and irregular military operations, cyberattacks, sabotage, economic warfare, and disinformation, but also because of the scale and sophistication of the media component. From the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the massive invasion of February 2022, Ukrainian territory has been the scene of a profound geopolitical dispute, in which the international media has played a crucial role as a reproducer, generator, and validator of narrative frameworks that seek to legitimize or delegitimize the actors in conflict.

From the outset of the tensions, the Russian media apparatus—especially RT and Sputnik—deployed a discursive strategy based on three pillars: 1) delegitimization of the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, labeled as the result of a “fascist coup”; 2) victimization of the Russian-speaking populations of Donbas, presented as “persecuted” and in need of “protection” from Russia; and 3) systematic criticism of NATO expansionism and Western interventionism as factors triggering the war¹. This framing was reinforced by the intensive use of emotive images, interviews with pro-Russian citizens, reports of “Ukrainian atrocities,” and the instrumentalization of Soviet history and World War II as moral references.

At the same time, media outlets such as CNN, BBC, France 24, DW, and The Guardian constructed a narrative focused on defending the liberal international order, Ukraine's national sovereignty, and Zelensky as a symbol of democratic resistance to Russian authoritarian aggression. Zelensky, a former comedian and actor, became a skilled practitioner of public diplomacy: his speeches to Western parliaments, his presence on social media, and his constant appearances in global media outlets helped construct a powerful media image, carefully designed to mobilize empathy, military aid, and political support.

Ukrainian public diplomacy was also articulated through international social media campaigns, such as “#StandWithUkraine,” and striking visual initiatives, including the illumination of monuments in blue and yellow and the spread of viral videos showing the destruction caused by the Russian invasion. The Ukrainian government also worked actively with Western media agencies, NGOs, and think tanks to position its narratives in key media outlets and establish a discursive siege around Russia as an aggressor state and human rights violator.

Both sides deployed disinformation, emotional manipulation, and dubious data. RT and Sputnik were blocked in several European countries on charges of being

“instruments of Kremlin propaganda,” while Russia expelled numerous Western correspondents and passed laws criminalizing the dissemination of “fake news” about the Russian army with prison sentences. The flow of information became a battlefield, and the international public was bombarded with contradictory discourses that appealed to both emotion and ideology.

Numerous academic studies have shown that Western media coverage favored Ukrainian institutional sources and NATO spokespersons, while downplaying the complexity of the conflict in Donbas and excluding dissenting perspectives. At the same time, the Russian press made the military actions of its troops invisible, omitted documented war crimes, and resorted to denialism

to cover up events such as the Bucha massacre.

This conflict of narratives not only seeks to win over global public opinion: it also has concrete consequences in international politics. The narrative of “Ukraine as a heroic victim” was central to justifying the shipment of weapons, economic sanctions against Russia, and the diplomatic mobilization of organizations such as the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations. The symbolic construction of the conflict thus determined large-scale strategic decisions, turning the hybrid war into a war of legitimacy, mediated by cameras, headlines, and carefully crafted speeches.

Syria: multilevel hybrid war, battle for the narrative, and transnational propaganda

The conflict in Syria, which began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring uprisings, quickly evolved into a civil war with multiple fronts, actors, and levels of intervention. This scenario became not only a laboratory for hybrid warfare in military terms—with the simultaneous presence of insurgent groups, Islamist militias, regular armies, and foreign powers—but also a privileged space for deploying information strategies, multilateral propaganda, and public diplomacy in a geopolitical context. From the beginning of the uprising, international media coverage of Syria was deeply polarized. Western media outlets such as CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, and France 24 framed the crisis as a struggle between an authoritarian regime and a civilian population demanding fundamental rights. In this context, Bashar al-Assad was portrayed as a brutal dictator, responsible for massacres, torture, and indiscriminate bombing of his own people. The figure of the “White Helmets”—a civil defense organization in rebel areas—was promoted globally as an emblem of civilian heroism, supported even by social media campaigns and award-winning documentaries.

However, this narrative was challenged by other sources. Russia Today (RT) and Syrian state television proposed a completely different interpretation: according to this version, the conflict was not a democratic revolution, but a war imposed from outside, led by Western powers and Gulf monarchies that armed and financed “terrorists” to destabilize the Syrian state. This framing was reinforced by Russian diplomacy and spokespersons such as Maria Zakharova, who constantly denounced Western hypocrisy, double standards in the application of international law, and the use of humanitarian discourse as an excuse to promote “regime change.” The war in Syria was not only fought on the ground: it was also played out on screens, social media, and in narratives. Reports of chemical attacks, bombings of hospitals, and summary executions were the subject of multiple versions, each supported by alleged witnesses, NGOs, experts, and recordings. In many cases, the “truth” could not be clearly established, and what prevailed was a logic of strategic plausibility: each side presented evidence, images, and testimonies to reinforce its interpretive framework.

Russian public diplomacy in Syria was particularly effective. Not only did it defend direct military intervention (begun in 2015) as part of the fight against terrorism, but it also succeeded in projecting an image of Russia as a guarantor of regional stability. This discourse was amplified by RT in Arabic, English, and Spanish, and found resonance in sectors of the Global South that saw Moscow as a counterweight to Western hegemonic power.

On the other hand, the United States and the European Union deployed public diplomacy aimed at justifying economic sanctions, diplomatically isolating the Syrian regime, and promoting initiatives such as the “Friends of Syria Group.” The international media played a key role in this strategy by reproducing allegations of human rights violations, amplifying the role of pro-Western NGOs, and silencing sources close to the Syrian government.

The image of the Syrian child was emblematic in this war of images. Photographs such as that of Aylan Kurdi, the refugee child who drowned on the shores of the Mediterranean, or that of Omran Daqneesh, covered in dust and blood in an ambulance, circulated globally as icons of barbarism and suffering. These images, although powerful, were also subject to narrative manipulation: used to mobilize public opinion, legitimize policies, and construct a moral framework for the war.

In terms of propaganda, Syria was the scene of sophisticated operations. Bot networks, disinformation campaigns, hashtag manipulation, and the use of deepfakes were detected in support of one side or the other. Some reports showed that specific images presented as “evidence” of crimes were recorded in different contexts or edited to create an emotional impact. The proliferation of actors and platforms created a chaotic information environment, where the abundance of versions weakened the ability to verify facts and favored polarization.

In short, the Syrian case reveals that in contemporary hybrid wars, control of the narrative is as strategic as control of territory. The struggle for perception becomes central, and the international media—far from acting as impartial observers—function as involved, positioned, and often ideologized actors. Cameras replace cannons, and narrative replaces classical diplomacy. Syria, rather than a country at war, became a node where all the tensions of the international order in

crisis intersected.

North Korea and South Korea: latent hybrid warfare and propaganda as a diplomatic strategy

Unlike the cases of Ukraine and Syria, where hybrid conflict takes the form of direct physical violence, the situation on the Korean peninsula represents a latent, symbolic, and deeply media-driven form of hybrid confrontation. The division between North and South Korea—consolidated after the 1950-1953 war—has generated one of the most prolonged contexts of geopolitical tension, characterized by the persistent threat of armed conflict, the presence of international actors, and a bipolar narrative dominated by propaganda.

Within this framework, North Korea has developed a systematic communication strategy based on information isolation, the glorification of leadership, and the discursive construction of the enemy. The state agency KCNA (Korean Central News Agency) fulfills both informational and ideological functions: it produces content for domestic and international consumption in which the supreme leader is presented as an almost divine figure, and enemies (mainly the United States, South Korea, and Japan) are portrayed as permanent threats.

The North Korean narrative is based on the principle of Juche, an ideology of self-sufficiency that serves as a legitimizing framework for its political system. In official communiqués, missile launches are described as “acts of sovereign defense,” international sanctions as “imperialist aggression,” and joint military maneuvers between South Korea and the United States as “rehearsals for an invasion.” This bellicose language is accompanied by media aesthetics that include martial music, hyper-militarized imagery, and a clear moral separation between the “Korean people” and their “historic enemies.”

In contrast, South Korea has developed sophisticated public diplomacy grounded in soft power. The cultural industry—known as Hallyu or “Korean wave”—has been central to the international projection of South Korea’s image as a modern, democratic, technologically advanced, and culturally influential country. Through productions such as K-pop, television dramas, cinema, and gastronomy, Seoul has built a country brand that acts as a diplomatic tool in both East Asia and the West.

In media terms, the South Korean press, such as Yonhap News and KBS, has tended to portray North Korea in a framework of exoticism, authoritarianism, and threat. This representation, although based on verifiable facts—such as human rights violations and nuclear tests—also operates as a narrative simplification device, where the North Korean regime is reduced to a dystopian caricature. This image has been reproduced by international media outlets such as CNN, NHK, DW, and the BBC, fueling a global perception of North Korea as a “pariah state,” “mad regime,” or “last Stalinist dictatorship.”

Unlike other conflicts where the narrative is contested by multiple voices, in the case of North Korea, there is an apparent communicative asymmetry: access for foreign journalists is severely restricted, alternative internal sources are nonexistent, and news production depends on the state propaganda apparatus. This situation makes North Korea an extreme case of narrative control, where propaganda is not a phenomenon parallel to power, but its very form of existence.

However, North Korean public diplomacy is not limited to its territory. Since Kim Jong-un came to power, the regime has attempted to establish a more calculated discourse toward the international community, including interviews with carefully selected Western media outlets, participation in diplomatic events—such as the summits with Donald Trump in 2018 and 2019—and a moderate digital presence, with websites and social media channels aimed at foreign audiences.

These strategies are not necessarily aimed at persuading Western governments, but rather at building an alternative narrative that reinforces its legitimacy among historical allies and anti-Western sympathizers such as China. At the same time, cyberpropaganda campaigns launched from Pyongyang have included attacks on South Korean media, hacking of digital platforms, and distribution of falsified documents, all as part of a hybrid strategy combining diplomacy, sabotage, and psychological warfare.

On the South Korean side, progressive governments—such as that of Moon Jae-in—have promoted a policy of détente based on dialogue, cultural exchange, and humanitarian cooperation. This line of public diplomacy has had a strong symbolic component, including inter-Korean meetings in the demilitarized zone, media gestures of reconciliation, and the dissemination of messages of peace. However, conservative sectors of South Korean society have criticized this policy as naive or counterproductive, and the media most aligned with this view have reinforced the idea that any rapprochement with the North must be accompanied by military firmness and information control.

In this scenario, the narrative conflict on the Korean peninsula is not so much between equal voices. However, there is a regime that monopolizes the voice and another that multiplies its discourses. North Korea represents a model of closed, vertical, and doctrinaire propaganda; South Korea, one of public diplomacy articulated with global cultural strategies. Both compete, from opposing logics, to define which Korea should occupy the legitimate place in the international community.

In short, the Korean peninsula embodies a unique form of hybrid warfare where confrontation is expressed not in bullets but in narratives; where propaganda not only indoctrinates but also represents the state to the world; and where public diplomacy becomes a field of dispute between symbolic legitimacies, in a conflict that continues without firing a shot but never stops.

Case comparison: Ukraine, Syria, and Korea as laboratories of hybrid warfare

The three cases analyzed—Ukraine, Syria, and the Korean Peninsula—offer distinct yet interconnected manifestations of contemporary hybrid warfare. Each represents a specific configuration of conflict in which military, symbolic, media, and diplomatic elements are combined, giving rise to scenarios in which war is no longer exclusively kinetic but also discursive, cognitive, and perceptual. This section proposes a comparison of the cases, highlighting their particularities, similarities, and how they express different modalities of hybrid warfare in the 21st century.

Military hybridization and narrative: total war in Ukraine

Ukraine is the most transparent case of hybrid warfare in the comprehensive sense. The Russian invasion of 2022—preceded by years of irregular warfare in Donbas, territorial annexation in Crimea, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and psychological operations—highlights the articulation of multiple levels of simultaneous aggression. Here, hybrid warfare not only combines regular military means with unconventional tactics but also merges discursive and media devices with diplomatic and economic actions.

In Ukraine, propaganda played a structural role. While Russia crafted a narrative of “liberation” and “denazification,” the West and the Ukrainian government itself constructed frameworks that framed the conflict as democracy versus authoritarianism. This hybridization of the conflict—military, diplomatic, media, technological—exemplifies what

Frank Hoffman describes the new face of 21st-century warfare as one in which “the lines between the political, the civil, and the military are blurred.”

Syria: asymmetric and multisystemic hybrid war

In the Syrian case, hybridization takes on a fragmented and multisystemic form. Unlike Ukraine, this is not a conflict between two states with clearly defined narratives, but rather a battlefield where diverse actors converge: the Syrian regime, multiple insurgent groups, jihadist organizations, regional and extra-regional powers (such as Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the United States), each with its own logic of intervention and communication.

Syria is a case of asymmetric hybrid warfare, where all sides manipulated the narrative of the conflict. The international media oscillated between humanitarian and geopolitical narratives. At the same time, the powers involved—especially Russia and the United States—used public diplomacy and propaganda to influence international perceptions. It was a total war in symbolic terms, where the struggle for media coverage was as intense as the struggle for territory.

What sets Syria apart is the multiplicity of voices and the fragmentation of the narrative. Unlike Ukraine, where there are two clearly defined communication blocs, in Syria, the narrative conflict was more confusing, ambiguous, and fluid, making it difficult to interpret in binary terms. However, the use of bots, digital campaigns, viral images, and emotional manipulation confirms that the information front was decisive.

Korea: latent, narrative, and cyber hybrid warfare

The Korean peninsula represents an atypical case in which hybrid warfare does not manifest itself in open physical violence but in permanent tension mediated by discourse, propaganda, deterrence, and cyber espionage. North Korea and South Korea constitute two antagonistic systems competing in the global narrative arena: one through closed, doctrinaire, and vertical propaganda; the other through sophisticated public diplomacy anchored in cultural soft power.

North Korea operates a silent hybrid war based on threats, strategic isolation, and cyber aggression. Various reports have documented its use of state hackers to attack South Korean

financial and media infrastructure, as well as digital disinformation campaigns against international targets. Although there has been no active physical warfare since 1953, the North Korean regime has maintained a permanent logic of narrative confrontation that reinforces its internal legitimacy and projects external deterrence.

For its part, South Korea uses culture as a diplomatic weapon. The expansion of K-pop, South Korean cinema, and technology not only contributes to its international image but is also part of a state branding strategy in which democratic discourse, consumption, and modernity function as a symbolic shield and sword against its northern neighbor.

Comparative hybrid typologies

Although the three cases share structural elements—the presence of propaganda, active public diplomacy, media disputes, and international intervention—they express different types of hybrid warfare:

Table 1. Classification of hybrid conflicts according to operational approach

Case	Type of dominant hybrid warfare	Key mechanism
Ukraine	Comprehensive, interstate, kinetic, and symbolic	State propaganda + digital diplomacy
Syria	Asymmetric, multisystemic, fragmentary	Humanitarian narrative vs. anti-terrorist
Korea	Latent, cybernetic, cultural	Image war + discursive deterrence

Source: own elaboration.

These hybrid models coexist in contemporary geopolitics. What unifies them is not a specific technique but a logic of war in which control of perception is as important as control of physical space. The “battlefield” now includes media, networks, hashtags, discourse, and mental frameworks. In this sense, hybrid warfare redefines not only the way war is waged but also the way politics is conducted, legitimacy is built, and hegemony is contested.

Moral framing and spectacularization: emotions as a weapon in hybrid warfare

One of the most relevant but least visible aspects of contemporary hybrid warfare is the systematic use of emotions as devices for political and military intervention. Far from being mere side effects of media coverage, emotions—especially fear, empathy, outrage, and hatred—are intentionally activated by narratives designed to generate support, mobilization, or consent. In this sense, hybrid warfare is not only waged with missiles, troops, or classic propaganda, but also with images of wounded children, mothers crying in front of rubble, or lifeless bodies scattered on a highway.

This type of emotional narrative is neither neutral nor spontaneous: it responds to deeply moralized framing logics that guide the interpretation of events. According to Robert Entman, framing consists of selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicative text, so that they promote a particular definition of the problem, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation, and/or a recommendation for its treatment. In contemporary hybrid conflicts, this framing not only cognitively organizes the facts but also activates emotional responses that condition public judgment.

In the case of Ukraine, for example, images of women giving birth in bomb shelters, older adults fleeing with their pets, or children with amputated limbs after a bombing have become emotional icons that encapsulate the injustice of the conflict. These images, which have gone viral on social media and graced the front pages of international media outlets, serve to moralize perception: they position Ukraine as the absolute victim and Russia as the embodiment of evil. The same can be observed in Syria, where photographs such as that of the child Omran Daqneesh, covered in dust and blood in an ambulance after an air strike, produced a wave of global outrage that translated into calls for international intervention.

These emotional operations are made possible by the spectacularization of suffering. The contemporary media industry, governed by the logic of attention, prioritizes visual content that captures the eye, generates clicks, and goes viral quickly. As Zuboff argues, in surveillance capitalism, human emotions—especially negative ones—are exploited as raw material to generate predictive and commercial value. In this context, war becomes spectacle and pain becomes merchandise: suffering is aestheticized, dramatized, and distributed as mass-consumption content.

This spectacularization is not homogeneous: not all victims are represented in the same way, nor do all deaths move us equally. Judith Butler warns that a politics of grievable life mediates the representability of lives: some lives are mourned, others are not; some deaths count, others are

silenced. Thus, coverage of conflicts obeys a moral hierarchy of victims: a white, Christian Ukrainian or Syrian child has more visibility than a Palestinian child, and a hospital bombed by Russia generates more outrage than one bombed by the United States or Israel.

In this sense, the media function as devices for the affective coding of conflict. Through dramatic music, slow-motion images, sensationalist headlines, and emotional testimonies, scenarios are constructed that appeal more to emotion than to analysis. This emotionalization of war discourse generates a volatile opinion environment that is easily manipulated and prone to polarization. Emotions, far from being residual, are strategically designed, framed, and directed.

Spectacularization also implies an ephemeral temporality. As Chouliaraki points out, mediated suffering is quickly consumed and replaced by new images before it can generate structural understanding or sustained commitment. This dynamic promotes intermittent compassion, closer to entertainment than critical solidarity. Moral outrage becomes an aesthetic gesture that does not necessarily translate into informed political action.

In the three cases analyzed—Ukraine, Syria, and Korea—this emotional logic is present with different modulations. In Ukraine, it was used to mobilize solidarity and international legitimacy. In Syria, it was used to justify intervention or non-intervention depending on the dominant media framing. In North Korea, although emotionalization is less visible in the West, the North Korean regime also uses images of “happy children” and “heroic soldiers” in its internal propaganda to reinforce national cohesion and the legitimacy of its leadership.

In short, emotions are strategic resources in the arsenal of contemporary hybrid warfare. Their power lies in their ability to generate immediate adherence, shut down critical thinking, and produce moral meaning in ambiguous scenarios. Understanding how they operate, how they are constructed, and how they are distributed is essential for analyzing the symbolic architecture of current conflicts.

The figure of the hybrid enemy: from Bin Laden to Putin and Kim Jong-un

In the logic of contemporary hybrid warfare, the construction of symbolic enemies is as crucial as the mobilization of military resources. It is not just a matter of identifying the adversary, but of endowing them with attributes that allow them to be inscribed within a narrative framework that makes them understandable, condemnable, and, above all, combatable. This discursive operation is one of the pillars of modern propaganda, in which the enemy is no longer just a military subject but a media figure endowed with moral, psychological, and aesthetic characteristics that justify their persecution or elimination.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the global media system has produced a gallery of “archetypal enemies” who act as condensers of fear, chaos, or moral threat. Bin Laden, for example, was portrayed not only as a terrorist but as the embodiment of absolute evil, endowed with religious, racial, and cultural traits that made him a figure of the “radical other.” This construction was key to legitimizing the so-called “war on terror” and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the context of hybrid warfare, this logic is intensified and multiplied. In the case of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been systematically demonized in the Western media. Front pages portray him with a cold stare, his body distorted by the angle or symbolism associated with Nazism. He is compared to Hitler, described as paranoid, autocratic, murderous, even “crazy.” This emotional and political caricature not only dehumanizes the adversary but also simplifies the conflict, eliminating the structural, historical, or geopolitical causes of the invasion to focus on the figure of the “irrational leader.”

Putin is not portrayed as the head of state of a power with strategic interests. However, it is a “hybrid monster” that manipulates elections, poisons opponents, bombs civilians, and threatens the world with nuclear weapons. This construction—although based on documented real events—takes on a symbolic dimension that feeds the moral narrative of the conflict: NATO and the West represent civilization, while Putin embodies barbarism. This deeply emotional, Manichean logic limits the possibility of understanding the conflict beyond the category of evil.

In Syria, Bashar al-Assad has been portrayed using a similar logic. Since the beginning of the conflict, media outlets such as CNN, Al Jazeera, and France 24 have presented him as a “butcher,” “brutal dictator,” or “genocidal maniac.” Images of gassed children, bombed hospitals, and destroyed cities were directly associated with him, without nuance or contextualization of the complexity of the internal conflict, regional alliances, or the multiplicity of armed actors involved.

Assad, as the figure of the enemy, was used discursively to justify calls for humanitarian intervention, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation. In Western discourse, his figure served to close the debate over the effectiveness of diplomacy, the ethics of interference, and the roles

of powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States in the conflict. Like Putin, Assad is negatively aestheticized, deprived of rational agency, reduced to a figure who can only be confronted with force or elimination.

North Korea is a different but equally illustrative case. Kim Jong-un has been portrayed for years as a caricature: fat, ridiculous, childish, unbalanced, but at the same time dangerously unpredictable. This portrayal serves a dual purpose: to delegitimize his regime in the eyes of the international community and to trivialize it for global audiences. The result is a figure who inspires both fear and ridicule, fueling a distorted perception of the conflict on the peninsula.

Unlike Putin or Assad, Kim does not appear as an enemy who mobilizes moral outrage, but as an exotic subject, a symbol of the irrational. Images of his military parades, nuclear tests, or public executions are broadcast with a mixture of scandal and fascination. In this case, the spectacularization of the enemy takes the form of a “war circus,” in which danger is mediated through the grotesque.

These representations respond to the discursive needs of the dominant media frameworks. As Noam Chomsky argues, the media does not just report facts: it filters, selects, and organizes information according to structural interests that favor certain narratives and deactivate others. The construction of the enemy is one of the key processes in this ideological operation: it allows us to define “us” in relation to “the other”. It enables policies that would otherwise be morally or legally challenged.

The “hybrid enemy” is not simply an external subject with destructive power. It is a narrative construction that mixes empirical data with symbolic, moral, cultural, and visual elements. In hybrid wars, this enemy is presented as ubiquitous (found in networks, the media, and governments), polymorphic (a terrorist, hacker, soldier, or president), and emotionally reactive (provoking fear, hatred, or indignation). Its effectiveness lies in its plasticity: it can adapt to different agendas, audiences, and circumstances.

Comparing the three cases, we can see how each enemy fulfills a particular function:

- Putin acts as a total geopolitical threat, demonized to justify Western rearmament and NATO unity.
- Assad is the moral enemy, symbol of the “axis of evil” in the Arab world, useful for narratives of humanitarian intervention.
- Kim Jong-un is the grotesque enemy, useful for maintaining a state of alert and justifying military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, but also the subject of media trivialization.

In short, the figure of the hybrid enemy synthesizes the logic of narrative warfare in the 21st century. It is not enough to defeat the adversary on the military battlefield: they must be symbolically defeated, dehumanized, negatively aestheticized, turned into a figure of evil or irrationality. In this task, the international media play a strategic role of the first order.

Hybrid warfare and imperial narrative: media, symbolic hierarchies, and global moral order

Beyond its tactical and technological dimensions, hybrid warfare functions as a narrative production device that reaffirms geopolitical and cultural hierarchies. In this sense, it can be understood not only as a form of military-political conflict, but also as an imperial narrative form: a system of meaning that organizes the world into dichotomies of civilization and barbarism, rationality and fanaticism, democracy and authoritarianism. This narrative function—operated mainly by the international media—is central to legitimizing interventions, shaping perceptions, and consolidating a global moral order that presents specific values as universal and others as threats to civilization.

From a postcolonial perspective, authors such as Edward Said have shown how the representation of the “other” has historically been used by colonial powers to justify conquest and control through cultural devices such as Orientalism. This logic is updated in contemporary hybrid conflicts, where the international media play a role similar to that once played by missionaries or imperial chroniclers: producing meaning, ordering the world, and assigning differential value to lives, territories, and narratives.

Judith Butler takes up this critical tradition by arguing that not all lives are considered equally grievable in global discourse. In dominant narrative frameworks, specific populations (white, Western, democratic) are represented as legitimate victims. In contrast, others (Arab, Russian, Asian, Muslim) appear as threats, collateral damage, or even “guilty” of their own destruction. This logic is not explicit, but operates through language, image selection, silences, and editorial emphasis.

Hybrid warfare, in this sense, not only hybridizes forms of combat but also forms of narration. The spectacularization of suffering—through images of mutilated bodies, destroyed cities, or crying women—is part of an aesthetic of mediated compassion whose main objective is not unders-

tanding, but the production of rapid emotional effects that are functional to specific interpretive frameworks. As Chouliaraki points out, the media do not merely show suffering: they frame, edit, and hierarchize it.

The conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and North Korea offer clear examples of this imperial narrative. In the Ukrainian case, the victims are presented as part of Western civilization threatened by a barbaric Eastern power (Russia). The visual architecture, the testimonies, the language used (“heroic resistance,” “brutal aggression”) reproduce a moral geography where Europe is the threatened center, and Putin is the foreign invader who breaks the civilizational pact. In this framework, Western intervention (economic, military, communicational) appears not only legitimate but also an ethical duty to defend civilization.

In Syria, the dominant narrative constructed Assad as an archaic, despotic, irrational figure; his allies—Iran and Russia—as dark powers; and the armed opposition as defenseless victims or, in some cases, heroes of freedom. This construction obscured the real fragmentation of the conflict, the participation of non-state actors with extremist agendas, and the complicity of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States. The result was a moral simplification useful for justifying bombings, embargoes, and regime change, even when these aggravated the humanitarian situation.

North Korea, for its part, has been turned into a global symbol of backwardness, repression, and absurdity. In the dominant media frameworks, the country is represented as a dystopia alien to modern history, a geopolitical anomaly whose existence can only be understood in terms of terror or psychopathology. This image turns off any structural reading of the Korean conflict, erases the historical role of the United States in the partition of the peninsula, and justifies the permanent military presence in the Asia-Pacific as an act of rational containment against the “irrational enemy.”

The imperial narrative thus operates as a constituent part of hybrid warfare: it allows complexity to be reduced, support to be mobilized, and violence to be legitimized. It is a war of narratives waged in newsrooms, on screens, on social media, and in international forums, where the media act as active agents of meaning-making.

The danger of this narrative lies not only in its partiality but also in its ability to deactivate critical thinking and close off alternatives. When the world is divided into civilized and barbaric, rational and irrational, absolute victims and executioners, the possibility of strategic analysis, negotiated solutions, or genuine empathy is lost. Hybrid warfare, by appealing to the language of absolute morality, depoliticizes conflict and turns the exercise of power into an ethical crusade.

This symbolic order is neither neutral nor spontaneous: it serves the interests of the great powers, which use it to project their cultural hegemony, justify their foreign policy, and stabilize their international leadership. The international media, as purveyors of this narrative, must be understood as geopolitical actors rather than mere observers. Their coverage involves not only the interpretation of events but also the configuration of a global regime of visibility, in which certain actors gain access to compassion and others remain trapped in suspicion or invisibility.

In short, hybrid warfare is not only waged with weapons, networks, or cyber strategies. It is also waged with stories, images, metaphors, and moral frameworks. Understanding its imperial narrative dimension is essential to deconstructing dominant discourses and constructing a truly critical, pluralistic, and decolonized view of global conflict.

The centrality of narrative on the battlefield

The power of the media in this context is manifested not only in what they say, but also in how and from where they say it. As demonstrated in the cases of Ukraine, Syria, and Korea, the media construct frames of interpretation that shape public perception of the conflict. This construction is not arbitrary: it responds to geopolitical interests, ideological positions, and strategies of symbolic power.

The media does not just report on war: it performs it. It makes it intelligible through moral (good/evil, fair/unfair), emotional (victim/perpetrator), and cultural (civilized/barbaric) categories. In this process, it activates rhetorical devices that directly affect the legitimization of policies, interventions, and international alliances. The construction of the enemy, for example, is not a fact, but a semiotic operation involving adjectives, images, silences, and repetitions.

This dispute over the narrative has material effects. As Judith Butler points out, the way in which a death is framed defines its social and political value: some deaths cause pain, while others are naturalized. This moral distinction is produced, in large part, by the media. In the Ukrainian case, the image of the “national hero” was constructed by Western media to mobilize solidarity, while RT attempted to destabilize that framework by presenting the armed actors as “ultranationalists”

or “Nazis.”

Public diplomacy, propaganda, and the media: an operational triangle

The link between media, propaganda, and public diplomacy is key to understanding the logic of hybrid warfare. In contexts such as Ukraine, foreign policy is also exercised through the screen. CNN and RT are not just news outlets: they are transmitters of cultural, ideological, and strategic diplomacy.

Joseph Nye defined soft power as a state's ability to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion. Public diplomacy, in this framework, is the privileged channel for exercising soft power, using media, culture, education, and networks to shape perceptions among foreign audiences. International media, with their global reach, operate as devices of this covert or symbolic diplomacy.

Nicholas Cull goes further and distinguishes five dimensions of public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, promotion of values, cultural exchange, and media diplomacy. The latter is most strongly activated in contexts of hybrid warfare, where international networks serve as unofficial spokespersons for the state. CNN defends the narrative of liberal democracy, RT that of resistant multipolarism, Al Jazeera that of pan-Arabism, and KCNA that of autarkic nationalism.

The symbolic architecture of contemporary conflicts unfolds in this triangle of propaganda, public diplomacy, and the media. Propaganda, understood not as lies but as the strategic construction of meaning, operates in discursive frameworks, visual and/ framing, thematic selections, and editorial silences. Public diplomacy, for its part, infiltrates media discourse through spokespersons, official sources, state speeches, and specific aesthetics.

Total hybridization: from information to power

Comparative analysis suggests that the current model of hybrid warfare is characterized by total hybridization: not only of military tactics, but also of symbolic, media, psychological, technological, and diplomatic instruments. The boundaries between war and communication, between civil and military, between journalism and propaganda, have become blurred.

This hybridization has consequences on multiple levels. First, it creates an unstable epistemic environment in which the notion of truth is replaced by strategic plausibility. As Peter Pomerantsev argues, in the current context, “nothing is true, and everything is possible.” This informational cynicism generates confusion, cognitive fatigue, and depoliticization, which favors emotional manipulation and the fragmentation of audiences.

Second, hybridization affects states' communicational sovereignty. In the case of Ukraine, both Russian and Western media are vying for control of the narrative from outside the country, reducing the Ukrainian state's ability to manage its own narrative. The same is true in Syria, where national actors are represented by foreign networks with divergent interests.

Thirdly, this logic of narrative warfare transforms the viewer's role. It is no longer a passive audience receiving information, but a subject immersed in a semiotic war that constantly challenges them: they must choose whom to believe, which version to adopt, which narrative to share. Hybrid warfare turns each viewer into a node of symbolic reproduction.

Propaganda and public diplomacy in hybrid conflicts: disputes over narrative legitimacy

A fundamental dimension that runs through the three cases analyzed is the strategic use of public diplomacy as a tool of narrative power. Far from being a simple international communication policy, public diplomacy in hybrid warfare contexts becomes a decisive instrument for disputing the legitimacy of the narrative, shaping global perceptions, and eroding the adversary's position. This diplomacy—intensely mediated by news channels—is intertwined with sophisticated forms of contemporary propaganda that operate on affect, culture, language, and emotion.

Public diplomacy as a form of narrative power

Nicholas J. Cull defines public diplomacy as “the process by which an international actor seeks to manage the international environment through direct engagement with foreign audiences.” He identifies five essential components: strategic listening, cultural exchange, promotion of values, media diplomacy, and nation-brand diplomacy. Of these, media diplomacy is the most relevant in conflict situations: it consists of deliberate intervention in international media to influence dominant narratives.

In the case of Russia, the use of media outlets such as RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik repre-

sents an explicit form of media public diplomacy. These channels, funded by the Russian state, not only report the news but also construct alternative frameworks to those of the Western media. Their strategy is to position themselves as “critical” sources that question the West’s hypocrisy, double standards, and unilateral interventions. RT produces content in multiple languages, targets specific audiences (young people, academics, and sectors skeptical of the mainstream), and uses visually appealing formats to gain legitimacy.

The West, for its part, deploys its own public diplomacy through media outlets such as CNN, BBC, and Deutsche Welle. These are not state-run channels, but they often act as discursive extensions of their countries’ foreign policy. CNN, for example, has extensively covered the narrative of “Russian aggression” and has upheld frameworks of “democracy vs. authoritarianism,” which coincides with Biden’s doctrine and the State Department’s discourse.

Ukraine: diplomacy of resistance and transnational propaganda

Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has deployed active public diplomacy that combines elements of institutional communication, digital activism, and alliances with international media. President Volodymyr Zelensky plays a central role in this strategy: his media profile, acting skills, and emotional rhetoric have made him a symbol of democratic resistance. Zelensky has delivered speeches in international parliaments, used social media as a direct communication platform, and promoted campaigns such as “#StandWithUkraine” that mobilize both citizens and governments.

At the same time, Ukrainian media outlets have received support from NGOs and international agencies to professionalize their coverage and counter Russian disinformation. However, they have also been criticized for excluding dissenting voices, amplifying extreme patriotic rhetoric, and adopting propaganda frameworks that minimize violations committed by their own armed forces.

Russian propaganda, for its part, has used images of civilians in Donbas, alleged attacks on the Russian-speaking population, and historical references to Nazism to justify the “special operation” of 2022. This narrative has been replicated in the media, social networks, and official speeches, seeking to construct an alternative legitimacy.

Syria: the narrative as a field of geopolitical intervention

In the Syrian case, both Russia and the United States used public diplomacy as a form of indirect intervention. Russia defended its support for Bashar al-Assad’s regime as a legitimate fight against terrorism, using media outlets such as RT and diplomatic spokespersons such as Maria Zakharova to position its discourse in international forums. Through these tools, it attempted to present Syria as a victim of Western interventionism and the chaos generated by the “Arab Spring.”

The United States, on the other hand, promoted a narrative focused on human rights and the defense of civil society, relying on NGOs, think tanks, and media outlets such as CNN, NPR, and The Guardian. These actors disseminated victim testimonies, reports on the “White Helmets,” and documentaries showing the regime’s atrocities. However, some of these reports were questioned by independent organizations, and certain media outlets have been accused of amplifying covert propaganda under the guise of documentaries and humanitarian efforts.

North Korea: propaganda as institutionalized diplomacy

In North Korea, propaganda is indistinguishable from diplomacy. The state-run KCNA channel functions as a platform for glorifying the regime and systematically attacking international enemies. Unlike other cases, the aim here is not to persuade liberal global audiences but to assert the nationalist narrative in the face of external threats. However, this strategy has resonated with some critical sectors in the West, who see North Korea as a symbol of anti-imperialist resistance.

South Korea, on the other hand, deploys public diplomacy based on cultural soft power: K-pop, dramas, cinema, and education are used as tools of global influence, alongside media coverage that supports pro-Western frameworks. Media outlets such as Yonhap News and the state-run KBS frequently reproduce frameworks aligned with the US-South Korea alliance.

Chomsky and structural propaganda: media and power

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s analysis in *Manufacturing Consent* remains fundamental to understanding the structure of contemporary propaganda. According to the authors, the media do not need to receive orders from the state to behave as ideological instruments: they do so structurally, as a result of their links to economic elites, corporations, advertisers, and the state apparatus.

This model is observable in all the cases analyzed. In Ukraine, Western media tend to re-produce NATO's official discourse. In Syria, much of the coverage ignores human rights violations committed by opposition groups. In Korea, the media project a Manichean image that leaves no room for the complexity of the conflict.

In this sense, propaganda is not simply disinformation. It is a structural filter that determines what events are reported, how they are framed, and who is given a voice. Public diplomacy, when operating through these filters, becomes indistinguishable from propaganda.

Hybrid warfare as a symbolic and communicational conflict

This article has argued that the international media are not mere channels of information in times of war, but strategic actors that actively intervene in the dispute over meaning, legitimacy, and representation. In the contemporary context, hybrid warfare has turned the media space into a veritable battlefield where not only military or territorial interests are at stake, but also global imaginaries, emotions, and perceptions.

The centrality of narrative in hybrid warfare

The comparative cases analyzed—Ukraine, Syria, and Korea—show that the narrative is not incidental to war, but constitutive. Each actor involved constructs a narrative that seeks to legitimize its actions, delegitimize its adversary, and mobilize both domestic and international support. These narratives are produced, circulated, and contested in international media, social networks, diplomatic conferences, and digital platforms.

In all the scenarios examined, there is evidence of systematic framing, agenda setting, and the propagation of targeted content. CNN and RT, in particular, have been paradigmatic examples of media outlets acting as unofficial spokespersons for their respective geopolitical blocs. This logic breaks with the idea of a free and neutral press. It raises the need to critically rethink the media's political role in the symbolic configuration of conflicts.

The fusion of paradiplomacy and propaganda

One of the most relevant findings of this study is the growing fusion between state propaganda, public diplomacy, and media communication. In the three cases studied, we observe how states use information channels to intervene in foreign public opinion, shape the international narrative, and dispute symbolic hegemony. Public diplomacy, as conceptualized by Nicholas J. Cull, is no longer an exercise in soft power and culture but has become a strategic instrument of influence in times of war.

In this context, paradiplomacy—the international action of sub-state actors, social movements, and regions—emerges as a form of symbolic resistance to the state monopoly on narratives. Beyond states, other actors deploy strategies to contest the dominant meanings imposed by structural propaganda (Chomsky and Herman) and to generate their own frames of meaning.

On the Korean peninsula, North Korea and South Korea make intensive use of public diplomacy as a tool of international propaganda. North Korea, through its cultural paradiplomacy (for example, sending artists and athletes and strategically participating in events such as the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang), seeks to soften its international image and project a narrative of legitimacy amid sanctions. South Korea, for its part, promotes the cultural phenomenon of Hallyu, or “Korean Wave” (K-pop, K-dramas), as a form of cultural diplomacy that also serves as symbolic resistance to North Korean militaristic narratives.

In Syria, during the civil war, multiple non-state actors, such as the Kurds in northern Syria (Rojava), have developed forms of paradiplomacy. The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), although not formally recognized, has sent delegations abroad to present its political model based on democratic confederalism. This Kurdish paradiplomacy not only seeks military or financial support but also seeks to impose an alternative narrative to the story of “terrorism” promoted by both Damascus and Ankara. Thus, its action constitutes a clear example of symbolic resistance through parallel diplomacy.

In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, paradiplomacy has been a key tool for both sides. Since 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian regions such as Lviv and Kyiv have intensified their contacts with local European governments, universities, and NGOs, seeking symbolic support and international legitimacy. At the same time, separatist entities in Donetsk and Luhansk, supported by Russia, have attempted to build their own paradiplomatic diplomacy by sending representatives to alternative international forums such as the “Forum of Free Peoples” in Moscow. In addition, civil movements such as Euromaidan are expressions of symbolic resistance, creating international

networks to spread a narrative of democratic struggle in the face of Russian propaganda accusing Ukraine of being a “failed state” or “fascist.”

Relevant data:

- A study by ForeignAffairs (2018) revealed that after 2014, more than 80 European cities signed twinning or direct cooperation agreements with Ukrainian cities as a gesture of solidarity paradiplomacy.
- In Korea, the East Asia Foundation estimates that “Hallyu diplomacy” generates a symbolic value of more than \$10 billion annually, functioning as soft resistance to the North Korean narrative.
- In Syria, reports by the International CrisisGroup (2020) document more than 30 Kurdish paradiplomatic missions in Europe and North America between 2016 and 2019.

Thus, we see that, in the face of growing state propaganda that filters, selects, and frames information to legitimize interventions or dehumanize enemies, a paradiplomatic response of symbolic resistance is emerging that challenges the global narrative. This symbolic battle is redefining contemporary diplomacy, shifting it to multiple levels of action—state and sub-state—on the international stage.

Ethical, communicational, and political implications

The hybridization of war and communication raises profound ethical dilemmas. First, the right to accurate and pluralistic information is eroded when the media operate as propaganda devices. Second, emotional manipulation—through images, testimonies, or selective framing—weakens audiences’ critical capacity and promotes polarization. Third, the instrumentalization of human rights as a discursive weapon—used by both Western powers and authoritarian regimes—empties a notion that should be beyond ideological disputes of its ethical content.

In political terms, this configuration presents a new field of global power in which digital technologies, transnational media, and state agencies intertwine to contest control over the international imagination. Hybrid warfare, in this sense, not only transforms the way war is waged, but also the way politics is conducted, public opinion is shaped, and the limits of truth are defined.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis developed throughout this article allows us to affirm that, in the hybrid conflicts of the 21st century—such as those in Ukraine, Syria, and the Korean Peninsula—paradiplomacy is consolidating itself as a strategic tool of symbolic resistance and territorial reconstruction in a media-hyperconnected world. War is no longer fought only with missiles or armies: it is fought on symbolic, cultural, and communicational terrain, where local territories and sub-state actors dispute narratives of legitimacy, identity, and international power.

Firstly, it is clear that paradiplomacy—traditionally understood as international action by cities and regions in economic or cultural terms—has mutated in contexts of hybrid warfare into an instrument of symbolic survival and territorial resilience-building. Cities such as Kyiv, Mariupol, and Kharkiv, devastated materially by the war, have also resisted on a symbolic level: twinning with European cities, participating in global solidarity networks, and projecting their national identity beyond state borders. Recent data (Foreign Affairs, 2018) show that more than 80 citizen cooperation agreements were signed between 2014 and 2022, demonstrating that territorial internationalization is no longer the monopoly of states, but rather a strategy of resistance by the territories themselves.

In Syria, initiatives such as the paradiplomatic missions of the Syrian Democratic Council (Rojava) have demonstrated that international action from the local level can be a weapon against political and media isolation, projecting alternative narratives of autonomy, direct democracy, and cultural resilience in scenarios dominated by state propaganda.

In Korea, the phenomenon of the “Korean Wave” (Hallyu) functions as a form of mass cultural paradiplomacy, projecting an image of modernity and progress internationally and serving as symbolic resistance to North Korea’s hyper-militarized discourse.

However, to fully understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to integrate the role of propaganda.

Propaganda—understood here in the broad sense of Chomsky and Herman as structural propaganda—is not limited to blatant lies: it consists of the selective and framed production of meanings that normalize specific versions of the conflict, legitimize some actors, and delegitimize others. States, as demonstrated in the cases of Russia (RT, Sputnik), the US (CNN, BBC), and North Korea (KCNA), operate propaganda devices that filter information, impose interpretive frameworks, and configure symbolic hierarchies of victims and culprits.

In this context, local paradiplomacy acts as a strategic response to state propaganda. While propaganda seeks to monopolize the narrative, symbolic paradiplomacy seeks to break through that barrier, internationalize alternative versions, and restore the narrative agency of the territories.

For example:

- In Ukraine, the paradiplomacy of cities and civil networks confronted Russian propaganda that portrayed the Kiev government as “Nazi” or “coup-plotters,” mobilizing global emotional framing campaigns (#StandWithUkraine) that reframed the conflict in terms of “democratic resistance.”
- In Syria, local actors challenge state and transnational propaganda by constructing alternative images of their territory not as a “nest of terrorists,” but as a space for democratic and cultural reconstruction.
- In Korea, the global projection of pop culture functions as indirect counter-propaganda: in contrast to North Korea’s discourse of military resistance, South Korea offers a narrative of prosperity, openness, and cultural appeal.

Thus, propaganda and paradiplomacy are closely intertwined phenomena: the former seeks to control the global meaning of conflicts; the latter attempts to dispute that control by offering other frameworks of meaning and other possibilities for visibility.

Secondly, hybrid warfare demonstrates that territorial reconstruction in conflict scenarios is no longer limited to the physical plane: it also requires symbolic reconstruction. Controlling narratives, protecting cultural identities, and raising the visibility of attacked territories are crucial forms of resistance that enable the maintenance of social cohesion and international legitimacy, even amid material destruction.

Thirdly, the dynamics of hybrid warfare force us to recognize that territorial internationalization no longer operates solely through embassies, treaties, and official forums: it also unfolds through social media campaigns, symbolic city twinning, transnational artistic interventions, and the emotional mobilization of global audiences.

In short, the study of paradiplomacy in the context of hybrid warfare reveals a profound shift in the forms of contemporary international action:

- Power no longer resides solely in military or economic force,
- but also, in the ability to produce and contest narratives,
- to internationalize territories from below,
- and to symbolically resist state propaganda machines.

Cultural and media paradiplomacy is thus confirmed as an essential instrument in the struggle for memory, identity, and territorial legitimacy in 21st-century conflicts.

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