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The Blurring Lines of Sovereignty in Cyber Warfare

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Abstract: Traditionally, sovereignty is defined as the ability to control ones' own territory or political independence without interference from foreign nations. This definition defines the basis of the current international political system. However, in the past ten years, the introduction of cyberwarfare has significantly altered the way we define sovereignty, as it has introduced a new type of conflict that doesn't have the traditional aspects of physical location, tangible objects, and/or known participants. For example, in traditional warfare, physical intervention can often cause significant damage to an adversary, but in cyberwarfare, it is possible to cause similar strategic damage to an adversary without being physically present, without there being any clear way to identify who is responsible for the attack, and without having to provide any formal declaration of war. This article analyses how the introduction of cyberwarfare is blurring and changing the meaning of sovereignty as it relates to the distinction between war and peace, the distinction between military and civilian targets, and the distinction between state and non-state actors. It examines the distinct characteristics of cyberspace, the ambiguous legal status associated with committing acts of sovereignty violations or use of force, the challenges related to establishing a clear language of attribution and accountability, the increasing influence of non-state actors, the emergence of grey zone conflict, and the growing prevalence of information warfare targeting cognitive and political processes. This is illustrated through case studies of Estonian cyber collective action (2007) and Stuxnet, *among others*. The case study examples demonstrate how cyber operations can achieve traditionally coercive ends while remaining below the threshold for armed conflict. The authors conclude that sovereignty is evolving as opposed to disappearing—changing from a geographically bounded concept to a layered and networked continuum of authority. Continued international stability would depend.

Keywords: Cyber Warfare; Sovereignty, Cyberspace, International Law, Non-State Actors, Gray Zone Conflict, Attribution, Information Warfare, Digital Sovereignty, International Security

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