

NATO's Hybrid Flanks Handling Unconventional Warfare in the South and the East

by Andreas Jacobs and Guillaume Lasconjarias¹



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Introduction

Since the start of the Ukrainian conflict, a new buzzword has dominated the international security debate: “hybrid warfare.” But in spite of the recent hype about this topic, the idea of using unconventional means and actors in conflict is not new. In fact, it is in many ways as old as warfare itself. In a recent speech, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated that “... the first hybrid warfare we know of might be the Trojan Horse, so we have seen it before.”² But what we may not have seen before in warfare is the scale of use and exploitation of old tools in new ways. According to NATO's Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR) Philip M. Breedlove, “... new things are how these tools that we have recognized from before are now put together and used in new ways to bring new kinds of pressure”³

Not only has NATO recognized these new ways of applying pressure, but the Alliance has already taken up the gauntlet and started the process of adapting its strategy and structures to the new security environment. However, this strategic adjustment still faces a lot of difficulties and shows substantial shortcomings. So far, there have only been a few ideas and some initial operational considerations within NATO that systematically address hybrid threats.⁴ Moreover, there is

¹ Andreas Jacobs and Guillaume Lasconjarias are both Research Advisors at the NATO Defense College in Rome. The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the NATO Defense College, or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

² NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, “Zero-sum? Russia, Power Politics, and the Post-Cold War Era,” *Brussels Forum*, 20 March 2015.

³ Phillip M. Breedlove, quoted by http://www.dedefensa.org/article-le_g_n_ral_breedlove_et_the_hybrid_war_24_03_2015.html (accessed 30 March 2015).

⁴ Nadia Schadlow “The Problem with Hybrid Warfare,” *War on the Rocks*, April 2015, quoted from <http://warontherocks.com/2015/04/the-problem-with-hybrid-warfare/> (accessed 10 April 2015).



no common understanding on the use, relevance, or practical benefit of the hybrid warfare concept for the Alliance, particularly when considering NATO's eastern and southern flanks at the same time.

This paper argues that the concept of hybrid warfare provides a useful, holistic understanding of the security challenges from both the East and the South, helping NATO to remain "... a strong, ready, robust, and responsive Alliance capable of meeting current and future challenges from wherever they may arise."⁵ It therefore conceptualizes the different understandings and perspectives of hybrid warfare and suggests a comprehensive working definition. Based on this, several case studies of hybrid warfare on NATO's eastern and southern flanks are analysed. Finally, the paper examines NATO's responses to new hybrid threats coming from the East and the South, and identifies further needs for collective action. It argues that the concept of hybrid warfare has the potential to help NATO's strategic planners and decision-makers to draft a strategy against hybrid threats, enabling NATO to deal comprehensively with such challenges.

Conceptualizing hybrid warfare

Defining hybrid warfare is more difficult than it appears. The very term 'hybrid' refers to something heterogeneous in origin or composition (a mixture or a blend), or something that has "two different types of components performing the same function."⁶

The concept of hybrid warfare itself dates back to the early 2000s, and was popularized by Frank G. Hoffmann in a series of articles and books. Hoffmann defines a 'hybrid threat' as any "... adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviors in a battle space to obtain their political objectives."⁷

Despite this definition, the term hybrid warfare is used arbitrarily and without any clear conceptualization. In current usage, the term usually implies a blurring of the distinction between military and civilian.⁸ Consequently, when discussing hybrid warfare, most analysts refer primarily to a mix of diverse instruments across a broad spectrum – e.g., use of military force, technology, criminality, terrorism, economic pressure, humanitarian and religious means, intelligence, sabotage, disinformation. All "traditional, irregular or catastrophic forms of warfare"⁹ are "melted into"¹⁰ an unholy combination with disruptive capacity, and are "invariably executed in concert as part of a flexible strategy"¹¹ that can take the form of a "stealth invasion."¹²

The second main element of the hybrid warfare concept relates to the type of actors or warring parties. There seems to be a common understanding that hybrid warfare most often involves non-state actors such as militias, transnational criminal groups, or terrorist networks. These non-state actors are in many cases backed by one or several states, in a kind of sponsor-client or proxy relationship. In other cases, states can also intentionally "play

⁵ NATO, Wales Summit Declaration, 5 September 2014, paragraph 5.

⁶ Merriam Webster Online Dictionary quoted by <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hybrid> (accessed 12 April 2015).

⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid vs. compound war. The Janus choice: Defining today's multifaceted conflict," *Armed Forces Journal*, October 2009, p. 15.

⁸ Rob de Wijk, "Hybrid Conflict and the Changing Nature of Actors," in Julian Lindley-French and Yves Boyer (eds.), "The Oxford Handbook of War," Cambridge 2012, p. 358.

⁹ The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Washington DC, March 2005, p. 4.

¹⁰ Peter R. Mansoor, "Hybrid Warfare in History," in Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor (eds.), "Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present," Cambridge 2012.

¹¹ Sam Jones, "Ukraine: Russia's New Art of War," *The Financial Times*, 29 August 2014.

¹² Andrew Kramer and Michael Gordon, "Ukraine Reports Russian Invasion on a New Front," *The New York Times*, 27 August 2014.



hybrid” when they want to blur the lines between covert and overt operations. Of particular interest in this context are irregular forces in uniforms with no national identification tags. These irregular actors, “hybrid actors” or “techno-guerillas,”¹³ often possess hardware and technologies usually reserved for the militaries of nation-states, allowing them to resist organized military assaults in force-on-force engagements.¹⁴

A third aspect often mentioned in definitions or conceptualizations of hybrid warfare is space. Unlike most forms of conventional warfare, hybrid warfare is not limited to the physical battlefield. Hybrid actors seize every opportunity to use both traditional and modern media instruments so as to develop new narratives based on their interests, means and aims. The main intention in the strategy for political subversion is to isolate and weaken an opponent, by eroding his legitimacy in multiple fields. “Under this model, war takes place in a variety of operating environments, has synchronous effects across multiple battlefields, and is marked by asymmetric tactics and techniques.”¹⁵

With respect to the three dimensions of the discussion regarding hybrid warfare, the following – very generic – definition seems plausible: the term “hybrid war” describes a form of violent conflict that simultaneously involves state and non-state actors, with the use of conventional and unconventional means of warfare that are not limited to the battlefield or a particular physical territory.

Case studies

The concept of hybrid war does not describe or foresee a theoretical scenario. It is based on empirical observations of the evolution of warfare – in particular since the end of the Cold War. In order to better understand the analytical relevance of the concept, it is beneficial to have a closer look at recent empirical examples of hybrid warfare. The most prominent of these examples are the war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, the conflict in Iraq and Syria since 2013, the current situation in Libya, and – most importantly – the Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014.

The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War

The war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 is usually referred to as one of recent history’s prototypes of hybrid warfare. In the 34-day military conflict during the summer of 2006, the Shiite militia shocked the Israeli public and surprised the international community with the effectiveness of its fight against the Israeli Defense Force.¹⁶ In this conflict, Hezbollah displayed all the elements of hybrid warfare: “... the simultaneous use of a conventional arsenal, irregular forces and guerrilla tactics, psychological warfare, terrorism and even criminal activities, with support from a multi-dimensional organization and capable of integrating very different sub-units, groups or cells into one united, large force.”¹⁷ Additionally, Hezbollah had the direct support of Iran, particularly the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. This “full coordination”¹⁸

¹³ Joseph Henrotin, “Techno-Guérilla et Guerre Hybride. Le pire des deux mondes,” Paris 2014.

¹⁴ Paul Scharre, “Spectrum of What?,” *Military Review*, November-December 2012, p. 76. Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the Hezbollah, when asked, answered: “The resistance withstood the attack and fought back. It did not wage a guerrilla war either (...). It was not a regular army, but it was not a guerrilla in the traditional sense either (...). It was something in between. This is the new model.” in Matt Matthews, “We Were Caught Unprepared. The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War,” US Army War Combined Arms Center, OP 26, 2008, p. 22.

¹⁵ Alex Deep, “Hybrid War: Old Concept, New Techniques,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2 March 2015.

¹⁶ Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, “Hezbollah: The Model of a Hybrid Threat,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 24, March 2015.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ David Siman-Tov and Yoram Schweitzer, “Israel against Hizbollah: Between Overt and Covert Warfare,” *INSS Insight*, no. 668, March 2015.



between Hezbollah and Iran was particularly important with regard to training, equipping and financially supporting Hezbollah (estimated at \$50-100 million USD annually).¹⁹

Backed by Iran, Hezbollah combat groups engaged as a hybrid between a guerrilla force and a regular army. Similar to the Iraqi insurgents in the Battle of Fallujah in 2004, Hezbollah forces exploited urban terrain to create ambushes and evade capture by remaining in close proximity to noncombatants.²⁰ Additionally, the Shiite militia used an impressive conventional arsenal that included light artillery, anti-tank rocket launchers and anti-tank guided missiles. Additionally, they were supported by unmanned aerial vehicles and anti-ship guided missiles. The use of this conventional arsenal forced Israel to mobilize around 30,000 troops, costing the lives of 119 Israeli soldiers and 42 civilians, wounding more than 1200, and damaging around 50 Israeli tanks. Despite the limited military effect of Hezbollah's conventional strikes, the consequences for Israel were substantial. Hezbollah's attacks "...terrorized the north of Israel, paralysed the country's economy and forced over a million civilians to temporarily evacuate. The psychological effect ... was enormous and became the impulse for Israel to build its ... Iron Dome counter-rocket and missile-defence systems ..."²¹

But Hezbollah did not fight only on the physical battlefield. It also challenged Israel with a broad propaganda campaign. With its TV and radio stations, it temporarily managed to depict Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in many Arab and Muslim societies as the new spearhead of resistance against Israel. This led to an overwhelming (and

incorrect) perception within the Arab world, and in parts of the international community, that Israel – the strongest military power in the region – had been defeated at the hands of Hezbollah, a non-state militia.²²

Although Israel did not lose the war on the conventional battlefield, it learned its lesson from the 2006 debacle. Israel diversified its counter-strategy against Hezbollah by combining conventional military measures with counter-terrorist means. This 'hybrid' strategy combined the advantages of covert activities, such as deniability, with the effectiveness and the deterrent effect of the use of military force.²³ Obviously, this has helped to contain the conflict. At least momentarily, it appears that none of the actors (Israel, Hezbollah, or Iran) has an interest in military escalation.²⁴ Iran and Hezbollah are afraid that any direct Israeli involvement in the Syrian civil war could further weaken the Assad regime and therefore undermine Shiite influence in Lebanon. Israel, on the other hand, has no interest in a war against Hezbollah and further destabilization of the region. Consequently, both sides try to keep the conflict 'hybrid' (i.e., below the threshold of conventional war).²⁵ The example of the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel conflict not only exemplifies the characteristics of hybrid warfare in the Middle East, it also underlines the possibility – and need – to develop and implement a counter-hybrid strategy.

ISIL in Iraq and Syria since 2013

The current military campaign by the terrorist militia

¹⁹ Piotrowski, "Hezbollah: The Model of a Hybrid Threat."

²⁰ Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, issue 52, no.1/2009. Ralph Peters, "Lessons from Lebanon: The New Model Terrorist Army," *Armed Forces Journal International*, October 2006.

²¹ Piotrowski, "Hezbollah: The Model of a Hybrid Threat."

²² Deep, "Hybrid War: Old Concept, New Techniques."

²³ Siman-Tov/Schweitzer.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*



known as the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL),²⁶ in Syria, Iraq and – through proxy actors – in other places in the region and in the West, shows many characteristics of the hybrid warfare concept.²⁷ The terminology used by US President Barack Obama reflected this in September 2014, when he referred to the group as a “... sort of a hybrid of not just the terrorist network, but one with territorial ambitions, and some of the strategy and tactics of an army.”²⁸

Founded as a jihadist terrorist organization in early 2000, ISIL was later reinforced by former officers from Saddam Hussain’s dissolved army, local Sunni tribes, Chechen fighters with experience in irregular warfare, and foreign jihadists from all over the world.²⁹ ISIL is estimated to have up to 30,000 core and associated fighters under its command. In its military operations, ISIL employs bombings, artillery and mortar shelling, suicide attacks, aerial reconnaissance, and even chemical attacks. Most operations are conducted by small, highly mobile units on US Humvees or pick-up trucks that are equipped with heavy machine guns. Apart from the well-known “shock and awe tactics,” ISIL shows remarkable combat capabilities and a high level of intelligence and reconnaissance skills, based on a network of local supporters and informants.³⁰ Additionally, it conducts a modern and sophisticated propaganda operation to garner international volunteers and financial support.³¹ This propaganda operation is based on the narrative of the “caliphate,” which is used as a religious source of legitimacy and as a tool to undermine the Muslim identity of its

opponents.³² To finance its activities, ISIL does not rely on donations alone. It has generated significant income through criminal activities such as smuggling, the sale of oil, the looting of antiquities, kidnapping for ransom, blackmailing, and the “taxation” of local populations living under ISIL control. Taking all of this into account, it is apparent that ISIL is mixing conventional military operations with terrorism, organized crime, social media campaigning and elements of cyber warfare.³³

ISIL has also shown itself to be highly adaptable, reacting to both opportunities and pressures. It started as a terrorist organization in the early 2000s, gradually becoming a hybrid actor involved in the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars. In capturing and holding more Iraqi and Syrian territory in 2013, ISIL has increasingly taken on characteristics similar to those of a conventional state. However, since it is under attack from both international coalition airstrikes and Iraqi ground forces, ISIL is currently regressing back into its status as a hybrid actor.

It should be noted, though, that ISIL’s different opponents also use elements of hybrid warfare. Iran, just as it did during the conflict in Lebanon in 2006, is again contributing to the practice of hybrid war in Syria and Iraq, supporting the Assad regime and Iraqi government troops with logistics, supplies and military planning. In addition, the international coalition against ISIL is implementing flexible and unconventional instruments against the terrorist organization through a combination of traditional air power, weapons supplies to Kurdish Peshmergas,

²⁶ In this paper the acronym ISIL is used to identify the so called “Islamic State (in Syria and the Levant),” Alternative acronyms are IS, ISIS or the Arabic “daee’sh.”

²⁷ See Scott Jasper and Scott Moreland, “The Islamic State is a Hybrid Threat: Why Does that Matter?,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2 December 2014.

²⁸ “President Obama. What makes us America,” script of a CBS interview with US President Barack Obama, aired on Sept. 24, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obama-60-minutes/> (accessed 12 April 2015).

²⁹ For hybrid warfare in Chechnya see Bill Nemeth, “Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare,” Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, 2002.

³⁰ Jasper/Moreland, “*The Islamic State is a Hybrid Threat: Why Does that Matter?*.”

³¹ *The Military Balance 2015*, London 2015, p. 305.

³² This finds its (secular) equivalent in the Russian narrative of “Novorossiia.” See Heidi Reisinger and Aleksandr Golts, “Russia’s Hybrid Warfare - Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defense,” *Research Paper* no. 105, NATO Defense College, November 2014, p. 7.

³³ The most recent example was the cyber-attack on the French media station *TV5Monde* in April 2015.



the deployment of advisors to Iraqi government troops and sectarian militias, and training activities for Syrian opposition forces.³⁴ Regionally led military counter-offensives, border controls, the disruption of financing mechanisms, the protection of minorities, the coordination of counter-ideology efforts by Muslim authorities, and the prevention of mass media exploitation for recruiting and training are the main components of this strategy. Above all, the formation of a broad and resolute international response to ISIL, including from the Arab states, has been the most effective element in the counterstrategy against the hybrid threat posed by ISIL.³⁵

The next hybrid war scenario: Libya

Since early 2015, Libya has been mutating into a failed state, with tribes, jihadist groups and militias fighting each other. For the moment, the two main political poles in the complex Libyan theatre are the internationally recognized government in the eastern part of the country, and the Islamist government in the Tripoli-Misurata area in the west. Both political poles have consolidated sufficient military power and external allies to sustain and escalate their fight for control of the country.³⁶ Given the explosive situation and political circumstances in the region, a hybrid war scenario in Libya is more than likely.

The Islamist groups controlling the western part of the country have increasingly come under pressure from global and regional jihadist movements such as Al-Qaida and ISIL, which want to use Libya as a new jihadist hub. Local jihadists operating under ISIL's banner already control a sizeable amount of

support in Derna, Sirte and Nofaliya. It now seems that these groups are more closely aligned with ISIL's central command than was previously understood. Obviously, ISIL applies the same strategic mix of slow infiltration and propaganda that it successfully implemented in Iraq. Several video statements and online essays linked to ISIL, or ISIL-affiliated groups and individuals, have recently built up the narrative of Libya as one of the most important frontlines of the "caliphate."³⁷ According to these propaganda sources, Libya is important not only because it houses the greatest weapons stockpile in the world, but also for its geographical proximity to Europe and the possible exploitation of human trafficking rings, making Libya an unparalleled strategic foothold for attacking Europe and neighbouring Arab and African states. In ISIL's apocalyptic narrative, Libya also plays a prominent role as the launching pad for the final battle against the infidel Western civilization, usually referred to as "Rome."³⁸

Given the jihadist infiltration and ISIL's claim on Libya, the Tobruk-based government, under Abdullah Al-Thinni, is now forcefully seeking external support not only in Egypt and other Arab countries, but also in the West and in Russia. In spite of political reservations towards the intentions and legitimacy of the Thinni government and towards the newly appointed commander-in-chief of the Libyan armed forces, "Field Marshal" Khalifa Haftar, some NATO member states are already calling for closer coordination and further efforts to counter the jihadist advance in Libya. Italian politicians, in particular, have repeatedly demanded that NATO put Libya on top of its agenda.³⁹

³⁴ Deep, "Hybrid War: Old Concept, New Techniques."

³⁵ For NATO's role in building a coalition against ISIL see Andreas Jacobs and Jean-Loup Samaan, "Player at the sidelines - NATO and the fight against ISIL," *Research Paper* no.107, NATO Defense College, December 2014.

³⁶ Yossef Bodansky, "Libya Now Assuming a Central Place in Islamic Caliphate Thrust Against Egypt, Maghrebi States, and Africa," *ISPSW Strategy Series*, no. 327, March 2015.

³⁷ Charlie Winter, "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State. Translation and Analysis of IS Recruitment Propaganda for Libya," Quilliam Foundation, London 2015, p. 4.

³⁸ Jean-Loup Samaan, "An End-of-Time Utopia: Understanding the Narrative of the Islamic State," *Research Report 04/05*, NATO Defense College, April 2015.

³⁹ "Libia: Renzi, è priorità per Italia e NATO," *Corriere della Sera*, 25 February 2015.



The situation in Libya is not yet one of hybrid war, according to the definition given above. However, it bears many characteristics of a hybrid threat: the presence of transnational terrorist organizations, external sponsorship, the involvement of foreign powers, the desire by many of the actors to keep the confrontation under the threshold of a larger conventional military confrontation, the criminal activities such as human trafficking and smuggling, and a strong ideology-based propaganda narrative. Given this volatile mix, NATO should prepare for Libya, a state in Europe's backyard, to become the next hybrid battlefield.

Russia and Ukraine since 2014

The most prominent empirical case study – and the culminating point of the hybrid war discussion – is Ukraine, with Russia's aggressive actions there since 2014.⁴⁰ The methodology behind these actions has a history. In the mid-1990s, during the first war in Chechnya, Russia faced a type of war for which it was not well prepared. The Chechens were blending conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, information operations, and deliberate terrorism, waging war not only in the territory of Chechnya, but also deep in Russian territory with high-visibility terrorist attacks and notorious incidents of mass hostage-taking. This series of blows led Moscow, at that time under President Boris Yeltsin, to withdraw its forces and sue for peace. When Vladimir Putin was put in the driver's seat years

later, things changed: "As a former KGB operative, he fused together intelligence and military measures. In Chechnya he relentlessly pursued the rebels, often using undercover operations that adopted terrorist tactics, until one Chechen leader switched sides and helped him defeat the rebels."⁴¹ Additionally, the war in Georgia during 2008 provided many components that would be rediscovered in Crimea in 2014. In Georgia, "... Russia was able to execute a combined political-military strategy that isolated Georgia from its western partners while setting the conditions for military success."⁴² Based on these experiences, the Kremlin fine-tuned its approach, modernized its forces and exploited the lessons learnt.⁴³

In Ukraine, Putin has been supporting the insurgents, not the government, and backing a rebellion in a neighbouring country. "Putin is to Kiev what the mujahedeen and the Chechens were to Kabul and Moscow, respectively."⁴⁴ The result is a strategy of ambiguity. Russia has developed the ability to employ non-linear and asymmetric tactics, in place of – or alongside – conventional means of warfare.⁴⁵ It used a variety of military and non-military tools, reaching its desired end-state not only through force, but through the combination of all available means.⁴⁶

Between 2010 and 2014, Russian doctrine also evolved, giving birth to the "Gerasimov doctrine" (named after the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia). This doctrine focuses particularly on "the integrated utilization of military force and forces and resources of a non-military character," that is to say, the role devoted

⁴⁰ For a deeper discussion of Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine see Reisinger/Gotz (quoted) and Dave Johnson, "Russia's Approach to Conflict - Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defense," *Research Paper* no. 111, NATO Defense College, April 2015.

⁴¹ Roman Olearchyk and Neil Buckley, "Ukraine's security chief accuses Russia of waging 'hybrid war'," *Financial Times*, 28 May 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/789b7110-e67b-11e3-9a20-00144feabdc0.html> (accessed 13 April 2015).

⁴² Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, "The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications," Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, June 2011, p. 7. See also p. 17 for the military tasks, which shape the environment and are of a dual nature.

⁴³ Keir Giles, "Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Two – NATO," *House of Common Defence Committee*, Third Session 2014-2015, HC 358, 22 July 2014, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmdfence/358/358.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2014).

⁴⁴ Roman Olearchyk and Neil Buckley, "Ukraine's security chief accuses Russia of waging 'hybrid war'," *Financial Times*, 28 May 2014.

⁴⁵ Giles, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁶ Mark Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War," *In Moscow's Shadows Blog*, 6 July 2014, <https://inmoscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/> (accessed 29 March 2015).



to interagency forces and components. In addition, the document assesses the crucial role of information warfare “in order to achieve political objectives without the utilization of military force and, subsequently, in the interest of shaping a favourable response from the world community to the utilization of military force.”⁴⁷ In short, it is about using every possible means, kinetic and/or non-kinetic, in a blended way to confuse, surprise, immobilize, and eventually defeat an opponent – the most notorious successes even being accomplished without openly committing regular forces.⁴⁸

In the meantime, massive disinformation campaigns are carried out both at home and abroad, (mis)using historical narratives to discredit the Kyiv government as “fascist” and using every possible channel to undermine Ukraine’s democracy.⁴⁹ In Crimea, the take-over was facilitated by the presence of Russian regulars according to the agreements between the countries (even though other Russian troops infiltrated, to increase the volume of forces and weaken any potential response from the Ukrainians). The use of special operations units – the so-called “green men,” in unmarked uniforms, supposed to be “local security forces” – added to the confusion and prevented effective countermeasures.⁵⁰ However, when moving deeper into Ukraine, the situation required some changes: beyond the narrative of

rebels backed by Russian “volunteers,” separatists received equipment – including heavy gear – while the direct intervention of Russian forces became a reality.⁵¹

What defines Russia’s new doctrine and courses of action in Ukraine is the systematic use of means that, all together, can undermine and seriously weaken their adversary without crossing established thresholds that would trigger a military response.⁵² Put simply, the Russian hybrid forces use “conventional warfare capabilities to win symmetric battles at decisive points in a conflict and then quickly dissolve into the population to continue a protracted campaign of asymmetric tactics for steady state operations.”⁵³

NATO’s responses to hybrid threats

The abovementioned case studies indicate why the concept of hybrid warfare is useful and important (disregarding the issue of whether or not the tactics are new). The very aim of hybrid warfare is to keep war “below the radar of traditional collective defense,” meaning below the threshold of a reaction from traditional defence institutions and organizations such as NATO.⁵⁴ Consequently, NATO has difficulty in reacting to hybrid warfare

⁴⁷ Even if a new military doctrine was signed and published by the Kremlin on 26 December 2014, most of the specifics were already included in the previous version of 2010 and re-emphasized. Thus, we quote the initial document of 2010 which already gave the pattern and framework. See “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, approved by Russian Federation presidential edict on 5 February 2010,” translation by the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf (accessed 31 March 2015). According to Olga Olyker (“Russia’s New Military Doctrine: Same as the Old Doctrine, Mostly,” *The RAND Blog*, 15 January 2015 (<http://www.rand.org/blog/2015/01/russias-new-military-doctrine-same-as-the-old-doctrine.html>, accessed 31 March 2015), Russia perceives a broad range of threats that will look familiar to Western readers as they discuss “hybrid warfare”: the danger of unnamed actors using information warfare and political subversion, as well as force, to destabilize and overthrow regimes, as well as the use of “special forces and foreign organizations.”

⁴⁸ Dave Johnson, “Russia’s Approach to conflict – Implications for NATO’s Deterrence and Defence,” *Research Paper 111*, NATO Defense College, April 2015.

⁴⁹ Simon Shuster, “Russians Rewrite History to Slur Ukraine Over War,” *Time Online*, 29 October 2014 <http://time.com/3545855/russia-ukraine-war-history/> (accessed 5 March 2015).

⁵⁰ F. Stephen Larrabee, Peter A. Wilson and John Gordon IV, “The Ukrainian Crisis and European Security. Implications for the United States and U.S. Army,” *RAND Report*, 2015, p. 6.

⁵¹ Michael R. Gordon and Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Continues to Train and Equip Ukrainian Rebels, NATO Official Says,” *The New York Times*, 4 November 2014 and Keir Giles, “Ukraine crisis: Russia tests new weapons,” *BBC News*, 6 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31146595> (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁵² Larrabee, Wilson and Gordon, p. 6.

⁵³ John R. Davis, “Defeating Hybrid Threats,” *Military Review*, September–October 2013, p. 24.

⁵⁴ For this aspect see Reisinger/Golts.



with the traditional instruments of collective defence, which are not designed for dealing with insidious and ambiguous threats. Because of this, a new concept of defence against hybrid threats, able to react flexibly to hybrid challenges, is needed. NATO and its member states have already taken some first steps in order to develop and implement such a concept. However, this has to be made more effective and be fully amalgamated into its doctrine and military thinking.

Unsurprisingly, the US took the lead in those efforts. Prompted by the Iraq War, the 2005 US National Defense Strategy and the 2006 and 2010 Quadrennial Defense Reviews dealt with the use of US military forces in non-permissive environments and the question of how forces would support “the political, informational and economic projections of national power, in addition to conventional military force, to achieve political objectives.”⁵⁵ Allied Command Transformation (ACT), in 2009-2010, already started developing an overarching Concept for the NATO Military Contribution to counter hybrid threats, highlighting not only the challenges posed by current or future threats, but also the need to adapt the Alliance’s strategy, structure and capabilities.⁵⁶

But it was the crisis in Ukraine that was a true wake-up call, deeply changing the perception of the security environment in Europe. The NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014 was initially planned to be a transitional summit, marking the end of the decade-long ISAF operation.⁵⁷ However,

with the Russian action in Ukraine, the Allies recognized the need for a response that would not just be a mere adaptation to, but would encompass every dimension of, the ongoing crisis. The outcome was the “Readiness Action Plan,” a political measure providing a renewed “Reassurance Policy” in the form of help and assistance to any member state that came under attack. This measure “... provides a coherent and comprehensive package of necessary measures to respond to the changes in the security environment on NATO’s borders and further afield that are of concern to Allies.”⁵⁸ NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg reaffirmed recently that one of the Alliance’s “greatest strengths is (the) ability to adapt.”⁵⁹ This adaptation of NATO’s strategy focusses on three keywords: comprehensive, responsive, and rapid.

The Readiness Action Plan showed that the development of NATO’s strategy against hybrid threats did not start from nothing. First, if hybrid threats are a blend of means used by different actors in a variety of fields (such as those defined earlier in this paper), they can be seen as “the dark reflection” of NATO’s Comprehensive Approach.⁶⁰ This is not to imply that NATO had the solution before even examining the problem. But NATO can build on extensive lessons learnt from the implementation of the Comprehensive Approach, while modifying the context and increasing interaction with other actors.⁶¹ With this in mind, SHAPE established the Comprehensive Crisis and Operations Management Centre (CCOMC), inaugurated in 2012.

⁵⁵ Margaret Bond, *Hybrid War A New Paradigm for Stability Operations in Failing States*, Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, 30 March 2007, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Michael Miklaucic, “NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat,” 23 September 2011, <http://www.act.nato.int/nato-countering-the-hybrid-threat> (accessed 12 April 2015).

⁵⁷ For an assessment of the Wales Summit see Jeffrey A Larsen, “The Wales Summit and NATO’s Deterrence Capabilities - An Assessment,” *Research Report*, NATO Defense College, November 2014.

⁵⁸ NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, 5 September 2014, paragraph 5.

⁵⁹ NATO Secretary General, Remarks at the ACT Transformation Seminar, Washington DC, 25 March 2015 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_118430.htm (accessed 1 April 2015).

⁶⁰ NATO Secretary General, Remarks at the ACT Seminar.

⁶¹ Michael Aaronson, Sverre Diessen, Yves de Kermabon, Mary Beth Long, and Michael Miklaucic, “NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat,” *PRISM*, no. 4, 2011, pp. 111-124.



Second, NATO also has a set of forces at its disposal. The NATO Response Force (NRF) was introduced in 2002, initially designed to be the “iron fist” of the Alliance, capable of carrying out any type of mission. Unfortunately, the NRF almost fell into disarray.⁶² However, after years of debate on its size and true responsiveness, a breakthrough is now expected. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg recently spoke about doubling its current size to over 30,000 troops, centred on a spearhead element able to move within 48 hours.⁶³ This spearhead element, the “Very High Readiness Joint Task Force” (VJTF), is a brigade-size land component with enablers (air, maritime and Special Forces) capable of being deployed anywhere – South and East – to both reassure Allies and deter potential adversaries.⁶⁴

In conjunction with the deployment of command and control elements in countries bordering with Russia, this is a first step. Since the fall, the Alliance has been working on shaping and designing these forces – and will continue to do so in the time leading up to the Warsaw Summit of 2016. Additionally, a series of exercises will take place during 2015, acting as a test for identifying shortfalls, adjusting doctrine, and potentially reorganizing the structure.⁶⁵ In the first few days of April 2015, the alert procedures for the VJTF were tested with over 1,500 personnel from eleven Allied nations taking part, while high-readiness units from the Netherlands and the Czech Republic were physically deployed. These series of complex manoeuvres and trials mirror what is also practiced with similar success by the US Army in

Europe in the ongoing Operation *Atlantic Resolve*. Additionally, they demonstrate the enduring commitment of US troops to collective security, enhanced multinational training and security cooperation across several countries – from the Baltic states to Bulgaria and Romania – and improved responsiveness.⁶⁶ In October and November 2015, the planned *Trident Juncture* exercise in Italy, Spain, and Portugal will test the VJTF structure on NATO’s southern flank.

It is most likely that these exercises will show that comprehensive and rapid NATO action on its eastern and southern flank requires an increase of deployable forces, modern equipment, and the availability of ships, aircraft and troops. Some suggest that the pre-deployment and pre-positioning of NATO forces where common threats could be identified could be an efficient preemptive measure in places such as the Baltic states.⁶⁷ In the case of Russia, this approach could work if “... conventional military threats ... against NATO members [were] plausible and need to be stopped, preferably beyond NATO territory and sooner rather than later.”⁶⁸ However, such an approach is still considered to be insufficient to address the hybrid issue, and it neglects the increasing security challenges on NATO’s southern flank.

⁶² Guillaume Lasconjarias, “The NRF: from a Key Driver of Transformation to a Laboratory of the Connected Forces Initiative,” *Research Paper* no. 88, NATO Defense College, November 2012.

⁶³ NATO Secretary General, Remarks at the ACT Seminar.

⁶⁴ For an assessment of the VJTF see Jan Abts, “NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force - Can the VJTF give new élan to the NATO Response Force?” *Research Paper* no. 109, NATO Defense College, February 2015.

⁶⁵ The reasons for which the NRF suffered difficulties can be traced in Guillaume Lasconjarias, “The NRF: from a Key Driver of Transformation to a Laboratory of the Connected Forces Initiative,” pp. 3-5. In addition, see General Sir Richard Shirreff remarks in House of Common Defence Committee, “Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Two – NATO,” pp. 22 sqq.

⁶⁶ Interview by the authors with a high-ranking officer, US Army in Europe, 11 April 2015.

⁶⁷ Terence Kelly, “Stop Putin’s Next Invasion Before It Starts,” *The RAND Blog*, 20 March 2015 <http://www.rand.org/blog/2015/03/stop-putins-next-invasion-before-it-starts.html> (accessed 21 March 2015).

⁶⁸ Olga Oliker, Michael J. McNerney, and Lynn E. Davis, “NATO Needs a Comprehensive Strategy for Russia,” *RAND Perspective*, 2015, p. 4, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE143.html> (accessed 29 March 2015).



Recommendations

The previous paragraph showed that NATO has started to adapt to the hybrid challenge – particularly in reaction to Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine. But the Alliance is still far from a comprehensive strategy against hybrid threats, with particular regard to those emerging in the South. In order to develop such a comprehensive strategy, NATO needs to balance the course it is following to the East and South, as well as further develop its instruments, resources and approaches.

With regard to instruments, NATO forces need to be ready to shift operations "... sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly, along the spectrum as adversaries seek the mode of conflict most advantageous to their aims."⁶⁹ This requires highly flexible and adaptive response units, be they the NRF or the coming VJTF, which would encompass every dimension of a counter-hybrid force. At a certain point, particularly when it comes to deployment hubs in the South, these efforts should include NATO partners. Structurally, the respective forces should be organized around Special Forces, assuming that these would better understand and better mirror the adversary's deployment.

Furthermore, additional resources could be fielded for such anti-hybrid missions – particularly for possible missions on NATO's southern flank. Military police and law enforcement units could train and monitor friendly forces and deal with criminal elements and armed militias. Cyber-defence teams could protect and secure NATO communication networks and deter cyber-attacks. 'Psyops' teams could counter the adversary's propaganda. Civil-military capabilities could provide support to the local population. All of these elements should be backed by accurate intelligence and situational awareness. Finally,

NATO should become better prepared to counter (untrue) narratives and challenge propaganda and disinformation. With the Communication Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, NATO has already established such a counter-narrative tool.

This approach requires more diversified scenarios, more complex exercises and a better integration of NATO's partnership infrastructure into its different strategic planning and crisis management efforts. With regard to security challenges from the Middle East and North Africa, a comprehensive approach that might include NATO's partner countries in the Mediterranean and the Gulf might be useful. This would require a completely new set of rules of engagement that needs to be integrated into NATO's strategic planning. From this perspective, complementing and adapting NATO's documents seems to be inevitable.⁷⁰

Based on a renewed understanding of NATO's Comprehensive Approach, the Alliance should also apply a holistic view to security. The security situation in the East and in the West is very different in nature, and might even require separate NATO strategies at a certain point. However, some concepts, tools and tactics that work in the East might also work in the South and vice versa. Therefore, it is necessary to better cross-connect NATO's own internal discussions and planning processes. Politically, this also requires an intensification of dialogue with other actors, such as NGOs, governments and international organizations. For instance, the EU is the only organization able to effectively apply economic sanctions against Russia. It is therefore NATO's key partner for better coordinating economic measures with military posture. In the fight against ISIL, NATO's Arab partners are of the utmost importance to the success of the international coalition. While NATO is not institutionally involved there, it could

⁶⁹ Scharre, p. 73.

⁷⁰ US Special Operations Command, "Counter-Unconventional Warfare, White Paper," 26 September 2014, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USASOC-CounterUnconventionalWarfare.pdf> (accessed 1 April 2015).



be a model for closer cooperation between Arab and NATO security efforts in the region.⁷¹

Conclusion

The concept of hybrid war is neither new, nor does it change – or even challenge – NATO’s understanding of warfare and defence. Because of this, criticism is widespread. Some observers view the concept as “... merely another mechanism by which the West can avoid decisive action against Russia.”⁷² Others argue that the concept does not provide new insights because it is included in the already existing concepts.⁷³ This paper has shown that, while the concept of hybrid warfare might have its shortcomings, it is nevertheless useful in providing perspectives on the rising complexity of NATO’s security challenge. Additionally, it is one of the few concepts that allows for differentiated views on the security challenges emanating from NATO’s South and NATO’s East at the same time. Here lies the main beauty of the hybrid warfare concept: it provides tools for a comparative strategic perspective of NATO’s southern and eastern flanks, while allowing for a differentiated response.

⁷¹ Peter Pindjak, “Deterring hybrid warfare: a chance for NATO and the EU to work together?,” in *NATO Review Magazine 2014*, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/Also-in-2014/Deterring-hybrid-warfare/IT/index.htm> (accessed 12 April 2015).

⁷² Schadlow 2015.

⁷³ United States Government Accountability Office, “*Hybrid Warfare*,” Washington, D.C., September 2010, pp. 2-3.