

1 The creation of a threat

NATO's greatest challenge coming out of the [2014] Wales Summit is to take on two different forms of strategic challenge from the East and South simultaneously. These challenges are composed of very different actors, and various forms of modern hybrid warfare.

(Then Supreme Allied Commander Europe
General Philip Breedlove, 2015)¹

A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of hybrid war. In the introduction to the 2015 edition of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' authoritative *Military Balance*, for example, Russia's hybrid warfare is described as including

the use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilising diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure.²

This is a good summary, although in many ways what is actually being described is a corollary of the Clausewitzian doctrine that war is politics by other means. This is that politics can also be considered war by other means, that it is not about making deals and brokering consensus, but imposing one's interests on others. There is already active and sometimes ferocious debate as to whether Russia's current approach is something truly new or not, and whether it is limited to certain specific theatres and contexts, rather than any wider evolution of military art.³ This very uncertainty has led to some epic examples of buzzword bingo, such as the Baseline Assessment definition of the Multinational

8 *Birth of a notion*

Capability Development Campaign Countering Hybrid Warfare, which, with no apparent irony, says that ‘to clear up conceptual confusion regarding hybrid warfare’ it considers it ‘the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects.’⁴ In other words, doing several things at once, in a way that is intended to work, to achieve a result – hardly a ground-breaking approach.

In light of such conceptual car-crashes, it is fair to ask how far this may be a threat of the West’s own imagining. It is striking how US and NATO military perspectives on Russia have changed since 2014. From being all but written off as a decaying post-imperial nation of, at best, limited regional military significance, it is now being characterised as the West’s most serious threat, even – in something of a rhetorical over-statement – a plausible ‘existential threat.’ Thus, in July 2015, newly-nominated chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford placed Russia at the top of his list of military threats to the USA,⁵ a view echoed by a string of other senior US military commanders.

The reason for this is not so much a sudden reassessment of Russia’s military, although the neat and professional way it occupied Crimea in 2014 was a useful wake-up call, just as the deployment to Syria in 2015 demonstrated unexpected power projection capabilities. Rather, it is rooted in alarm that what has widely been called Russia’s ‘new way of war’ bypasses or neutralises much of the West’s undoubted capacities and superiorities. NATO, after all, has more combat troops and reserves than Russia, spends ten times as much on defence in absolute terms,⁶ and can deploy much more advanced forces on the ground, at sea and in the air. But just as having an advantage in horse cavalry mattered little in the age of machine guns and barbed wire, so too the fear is that, as one US Marine Corps officer suggested to me, ‘we spent billions preparing to fight the wrong war.’⁷

The war that soldier felt he was unprepared to fight was a hybrid one, a term that has, rightly or (probably) wrongly, become the term of art for a style of warfare that combines the political, economic, social and kinetic. (It would be tempting to offer an alternative, but as will become clear, my inclination is to believe that much of what is being called hybrid war should really simply be called ‘war.’) This kind of conflict recognises no boundaries between civilian and combatant, covert and overt, war and peace. Achieving victory – however that may be defined – permits and demands whatever means will be successful: the ethics of total war applied even to the smallest skirmish. Although the antecedents of such an approach lie elsewhere, current concerns very

much focus on a revanchist and adventurist Russia. As Putin becomes increasingly assertive and also apparently genuinely gripped by a belief that the United States and the West are bent on undermining Russia, this has eclipsed such concerns as the turbulence in the Middle East and North Africa and nuclear proliferation as the primary concerns of NATO and its member states. However, in the process of seeking to understand and define this challenge, the West has, in a way, created it. Words have meaning, they invoke our fears and give them form and substance.

Although the term ‘hybrid’ had been bandied about before, it really was the brainchild of Frank Hoffman, who saw in the asymmetric clashes in Lebanon between Israel and the Hezbollah in 2006 a distinctive mode of conflict involving ‘[a] range of different forms of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.’⁸ In this, he was also speaking to an emerging body of Western military thought that saw chaos as a defining characteristic of modern conflicts, even those fought between states. Just as the end of the Cold War made it look unlikely that NATO, and the United States in particular, would be fighting peer rivals – the two Gulf Wars demonstrated the extraordinary impact of Western technological supremacy on the battlefield – the concept of the battlefield itself was changing. The front lines were either deepening or disappearing, depending on how one chose to look at them. In what became called fourth-generation warfare, the focus would shift from killing enemies to breaking their will to fight, as suited an era in which the West saw itself most likely fighting insurgents or ‘insurgent states.’⁹ The classic model was a putative – and hybrid – clash with Iran, where the high-technology US Navy might find itself threatened by swarms of speedboats packed with explosives or Revolutionary Guards with anti-tank rockets.

Even before the ‘little green men’ turned up in Crimea, there was a growing sense that such blended and protean ways of war could also be employed by peer and near-peer states, the dominant side in a conflict, rather than just guerrillas and plucky (or intransigent) underdogs.¹⁰ After all, since 1999 the Chinese had been toying with the notion of so-called ‘Unrestricted Warfare’ – although Ofer Fridman rightly and usefully notes that a better and less value-laden translation would be ‘warfare that transcends boundaries.’¹¹ The book of that name by Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui presents the familiar notion that old understandings and boundaries of warfare were coming into question, and that success would depend on ‘synchrony,’ the capacity to fight wars in coordinated simultaneity in a variety of not just physical

fronts but also whole domains, from the kinetic to the informational.¹² In what has clear resonances with the Russian approach discussed in future chapters, the Chinese put an emphasis on what they call the ‘three warfares’ – psychological, informational and legal – to achieve their strategic objectives.

‘Between chaos, confusion and Clausewitz’¹³

Russia has increasingly focused on new and less conventional military techniques. These asymmetric tactics (sometimes described as unconventional, ambiguous or non-linear warfare) techniques [*sic*] are both more aligned to Russian strengths, and considerably more difficult for NATO to counter. The Russian use of asymmetric warfare techniques ... therefore, represents the most immediate threat to its NATO neighbours and other NATO Member States.

(British House of Commons Defence Committee, 2014)¹⁴

Russia has not redefined the nature of war through its use of proxies, undeclared armies and covert political operations in Crimea and the Donbas, nor yet by twinning this with a campaign of disinformation and political meddling. Although it does cynically cultivate rival extremes abroad, all in the name of spreading chaos and division. In Italy and Greece, for example, it eggs on parties of both left and right (the Five Star Movement and the *Lega*, *Syriza* and Golden Dawn, respectively), not just to make allies but also to generate tensions. Likewise, in its broader narrative it is happy to encourage anti-capitalist and liberal protest movements such as Occupy, as well as to cultivate big business and play to social conservatives.

Any notion that only in the late twentieth century fluid, state, non-state or para-state actors were mixing conventional and unconventional forces and methods as well as espionage, sabotage, criminality, propaganda and subversion is patently untrue. Michael Kofman has drawn imaginative parallels with the *chevauchee* raids that were such a feature of fourteenth-century Europe, but the fact is that the historical examples are ubiquitous.¹⁵ When the thirteenth-century Mongols were rolling across Eurasia, they deliberately spread news of the atrocities they perpetrated on cities that did not surrender and dragged branches behind their horses to raise dust clouds suggesting their armies were far larger than they were, *maskirovka* (deception) and disinformation in one. When privateers – sanctioned pirates – were deployed in conflicts from the medieval campaigns of the Mediterranean to the American Revolutionary War, or when the Allies enlisted the support of the Mafia when invading Sicily in 1943,¹⁶ were these not precursors of Moscow’s

use of gangsters? One can understand why Russian defence expert Ruslan Pukhov wrote that

it is obvious that the term ‘hybrid warfare’ is used as a propaganda device and not really a classification. This is because any attempt to define it ends with the conclusion that there really is nothing very new in the idea.¹⁷

Each individual aspect of recent operations is familiar, and Moscow maintains a focus on conventional, high-intensity warfighting. Rather, what Russia’s recent actions have done is highlight changes in the nature of war that say as much about the evolving battlespace as about Russian military thinking. Thus, the whole hybrid war debate is really two debates intertwined: one about the strategic challenge from an embittered and embattled Russia, and one about the changing nature of war in the modern age.

In the immediate aftermath of the Crimean seizure, though, the notion of a radically new style of hybrid warfighting took the West by storm, and led to both insightful analysis and panicked caricatures.¹⁸ This has been called ‘new generation warfare,’¹⁹ ‘ambiguous warfare,’²⁰ ‘full-spectrum warfare’²¹ or even ‘non-linear war,’²² not least as these are terms with less intellectual baggage associated with them. Robert Seely made a valiant bid to develop a conceptually broad but geographically limited framework with his notion of ‘contemporary Russian conflict,’ as ‘a sophisticated and integrated form of state influence closely linked to political objectives.’ He points out that ‘[i]t has, at its core, the KGB toolkit of “Active Measures,”’ which usefully shifts the spotlight from military to political ends, of which more below.²³ For better or (probably) worse, though, hybrid war remains the accepted term of art in Western military and strategic circles. Perhaps, as Latvian scholar Jānis Bērziņš has acidly noted, it has caught on because ‘the word hybrid is catchy, since it may represent a mix of anything.’²⁴

This tendency has only been encouraged by the emergence of what one could, perhaps rather too belittlingly, call a ‘hybrid-industrial complex’ of government agencies, think-tanks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and pundits whose prominence, relevance and, above all, funds depend on maintaining the drumbeat of alarmist analyses. It has long been a depressing truth that securitising something tends to push it up the political agenda. When refugees become potential terrorists, or when criminals become fifth columnists, then the budgets available to deal with them expand and politicians take greater notice. The hybrid war label, which meant that everything from online

disinformation to the flows of dirty Russian money could be considered a precursor to military conflict, became a powerful and contested political instrument.

It is easy to be sanctimonious, of course – not least because the author himself undoubtedly benefited from this moral panic – and it is by no means the case that all or even most of those who threw themselves into the debates about Russian hybrid war were cynical opportunists or clueless followers of fashion. Indeed, this helped bring attention and action to a number of very serious political, security and even ethical concerns. The corruption of Western institutions through dirty money and non-transparent lobbying is a real and present danger to democracy, for example, and even if it took a ‘Russia scare’ to compel action,²⁵ then progress in addressing this is surely to be welcomed. Much the same could be true of the debates over the scale and nature of the ‘fake news’ challenge and how best it can be resisted.

Hybrid war as a security challenge nonetheless

Besides which, whatever one may call it, Russia is mounting a campaign to influence and subvert the West, using everything from aggressive intelligence operations to cultural manipulation. On one level, some argue that it does not matter whether hybrid war exists as a distinct or novel style of contestation, or what we call it. But it matters to get things right. Any effective new policy – both to resist further Russian adventures and also deter other revisionist or aggressive powers from considering this an example to follow – depends on a timely, nuanced and accurate understanding on the strengths and weaknesses of this ‘new way of war.’

The risks are, after all, considerable. The current Russian regime appears not only to have staked its political credibility on its revisionist programme,²⁶ it seems genuinely to believe that this is the only way to preserve Russian sovereignty and cultural integrity. Putin himself speaks increasingly the language of the clash of civilisations between Russia and the West. When justifying the annexation of Crimea, for example, he framed it as a response to a generations-long strategic campaign by the West to isolate and control Russia:

[W]e have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy.²⁷

This atmosphere of tension and confrontation is thus likely to continue, regardless of the outcomes of the current struggle in Ukraine.²⁸ On the one hand, an over-reaction will play to Putin's narrative of grievance. It may also force the Kremlin into more overt aggression in its neighbourhood and mischief-making beyond it. On the other hand, under-reaction could encourage further adventures, just as the unexpected ease of the seizure of Crimea helped make the case in Moscow for further moves in Ukraine. It may also embolden and inform other revisionist states that may see in Russia's techniques a blueprint for their own destabilising adventures.

So, this is why it matters to understand the phenomenon we are calling hybrid war, and to appreciate that it only truly can be said to apply to a proportion, a fraction, of Russia's wider challenge, and, as will be explored below, why it is best considered through the lens of political warfare. To deter and resist Russia most effectively, it must be understood, shorn of the temptations to exaggerate, demonise and mobilise the threat for political purpose. In comprehension there is the best security: to flip an increasingly over-used cliché, this is the true weaponisation of information.

Notes

- 1 Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey Larsen (eds), *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats* (NATO Defense College, 2015), p. xxi.
- 2 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2015*, editor's introduction www.iiss.org/en/publications/military%20balance/issues/the-military-balance-2015-5ea6/mb2015-00b-foreword-eff4. All websites cited in this book were last accessed on 17 December 2018.
- 3 See, for example, Frank Hoffman, 'On not-so-new warfare: political warfare vs hybrid threats,' War on the Rocks, 28 July 2014 <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.
- 4 MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project, *Understanding Hybrid Warfare* (MCDC, 2017), p. 3.
- 5 Speaking at his confirmation hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He also noted: '[If] you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States, I'd have to point to Russia.' *New York Times*, 9 July 2015.
- 6 Though, of course, there are limits to such direct comparisons, as the Russian military gets rather more bang for its ruble.
- 7 Conversation, Norfolk VA, March 2016.
- 8 Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the Twenty-first Century: the Rise of Hybrid Warfare* (Potomac Institute, 2000), p. 14.
- 9 Simplistically put, first-generation warfare was that fought by the massed armies of the ancient and medieval world; muskets and rifles ushered in

14 *Birth of a notion*

second-generation warfare, where the emphasis was on manoeuvring smaller forces into positions where they could be most effective; third-generation warfare, heralded by the German *blitzkrieg* of the Second World War, was shaped by fast, hard-striking armoured units with air support to break through enemy lines. Fourth-generation warfare sees the battlespace expanded to all available networks, whether military or political, economic or social, to deter the potential enemy or demonstrate that the cost of achieving their ends is too great.

- 10 See, for example, Michael Breen and Joshua Geltzer, 'Asymmetric strategies as strategies of the strong,' *Parameters*, Spring 2011.
- 11 Ofer Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare'* (Hurst, 2018), p. 12.
- 12 Released in translation as Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Pan-American Publishing Company, 2002).
- 13 This term was used by a participant at a 2015 NATO Allied Command Transformation conference; see Enrico Fassi, Sonia Lucarelli and Alessandro Marrone (eds), *What NATO – for What Threats? Warsaw and Beyond* (NATO, 2015), p. 10.
- 14 UK House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Towards the next defence and security review: part two – NATO,' *Third Report of Session 2014–5, HC358* (2015) www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmdfence/358/35805.htm.
- 15 Michael Kofman, 'Raiding and international brigandry: Russia's strategy for great power competition,' *War on the Rocks*, 14 June 2018 <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/raiding-and-international-brigandry-russias-strategy-for-great-power-competition/>.
- 16 The facts of such a deal have been hotly debated, but the evidence suggests an understanding, one that allowed a Mafia that had been hard-pressed to re-establish itself in Sicily. For contrasting views, see Salvatore Lupo, 'The Allies and the Mafia,' *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 2, 1 (1997) and Ezio Costanzo, *The Mafia and the Allies* (Enigma, 2007).
- 17 Ruslan Pukhov, 'Mif o "gibridnoi voine",' *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 29 May 2015.
- 18 For an interesting discussion, see Bettina Renz, 'Russia and "hybrid warfare",' *Contemporary Politics*, 22, 3 (2016), pp. 283–300. Ofer Fridman's *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare'* (Hurst, 2018) is the pick of the current literature on this debate.
- 19 See, for example, Martin Murphy, 'Understanding Russia's concept for total war in Europe,' *Heritage Foundation Special Report 184*, 9 September 2016.
- 20 See, for example, *Russia's "Ambiguous Warfare" and Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps*, CNA, May 2015 www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2015-U-010447-Final.pdf.
- 21 Usefully summarised in this context in Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely, 'Russian full-spectrum conflict: an appraisal after Ukraine,' *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 28, 1 (2015) pp. 1–22.

- 22 This term was prominent in a story written by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's former political technologist. See Peter Pomerantsev, 'How Putin is reinventing warfare,' *Foreign Policy*, 5 May 2014 and Mark Galeotti, 'Putin's secret weapon,' *Foreign Policy*, 7 July 2014.
- 23 Robert Seely, *A Definition of Contemporary Russian Conflict: How Does the Kremlin Wage War?* (Henry Jackson Society, 2018), p. 2. Active measures, which will be discussed below, are covert political operations.
- 24 Jānis Bērziņš, 'Russian new generation warfare is not hybrid warfare,' in Artis Pabriks and Andis Kudors (eds), *The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe* (University of Latvia Press, 2015), p. 43.
- 25 A particularly trenchant take is Oliver Bullough, *Moneyland: Why Thieves and Crooks Now Rule the World and How to Take It Back* (Profile, 2018).
- 26 See Dmitri Trenin, 'Russia's breakout from the post-Cold War system: the drivers of Putin's course,' *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 22 December 2014.
- 27 'Address by President of the Russian Federation,' 18 March 2014 <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.
- 28 For an excellent analysis, see András Rác, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015).