

1. SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

“HYBRID WARFARE”: MINDING THE CONCEPTUAL GAP

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a series of difficulties raised by the concept of hybrid warfare. The central tenet is to demonstrate that hybrid warfare as an expression has less academic than political validity. In other words, it is more often used as a normative denunciation for Russian actions than as a term grasping the relevant experience of contemporary warfare. The article sets out to demonstrate that hybrid warfare as set out by Russia should rather be understood as a tool of integral statecraft. The article outlines the main determinants of Russian security policy and puts hybrid warfare into perspective with the main technological disruptors affect the nature of contemporary warfare. The article finally advocates for a clearer division of work between NATO and the EU in countering hybrid threats.

KEY WORDS

Hybrid warfare, Russia, security dilemma, integral statecraft, escalation, deterrence.

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Introduction

In retrospect, the demise of the Soviet Union – the collapse of the last systemic alternative to liberal democracy¹ – offered only temporary peace dividends. The end of the Cold War durably confused Western conceptions on the notion of power. The perspective of any major state presenting a significant challenge to the international order suddenly became unlikely. The November 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe² reflected Western expectations towards a post-Cold War concert of power³,

allowing states to collect peace dividends – enabling savings on military spending. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act further insisted on a “lasting and inclusive peace” based on “democracy and cooperative security”. It is perhaps easy to say that the West was deluded by a post-Cold War liberal hubris, but this left silent a series of territorial frictions that resulted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union⁴.

The aspirations of the 1990s to a durable continental partnership with Russia left Western democracies unprepared in facing today’s intricate challenge posed

¹ Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, Harper Perennial, 1993).

² Charter of Paris for a New Europe, Paris 1990, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe

³ Sten Rynning, “The False Promise of Continental Concert: Russia, the West and the necessary balance of power”, *International Affairs*, 91:3, 2015.

⁴ E.g. Russia in 2015 questioned the way the Baltic States acquired independence back in 1991: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33325842>

by the Kremlin. Western states still cling to the finality of restoring cordial mutual relations. At the same time, ambiguous political warfare and the inextricable stalemate in Ukraine have consistently led to deteriorating relations⁵. The Kremlin's blows at the fundamentals of the European security architecture since 2014 took Western states off-guard and in disunity. The discourse on hybrid threats and hybrid warfare can be understood in this sense to reveal definitional shortcomings that impede devising a smart and strategic posture to Russia's agenda⁶.

"Hybrid" has become a buzzword that abuses the reality it aimed to designate. Therefore, this paper exploits the concept of coercive power projection in order to analyse "hybrid warfare" not as a new substance of war but rather a strategy of integral statecraft that is used by Russia in a particularly agile fashion. This would allow critical distance from the too narrow focus on "hybrid threats" by devising a more comprehensive framework to understand hybridity. NATO and EU structures made in the past years significant investments in the study of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare. In spite of this focus, reflections came largely inconclusive⁷.

This paper will propose a series of elements to better account for the Kremlin's policies, whether in Ukraine or towards the wider Europe. The first part of the development will propose to read Russian hybrid warfare through the prism of a country's ability to exercise the full extent of its statecraft. The second part attempts to contex-

tualise the determinants of Russia's actions. The final part aims to put into perspective Russian hybrid warfare with the evolution of warfare in relation to technological disruptors brought about by the information age.

1. Russian hybrid warfare as an expression of integral statecraft

Russia and the West, for historical and strategic reasons, have widely different conceptions of the importance and role of statecraft in nowadays world. Western reflections on war and warfare often fail to grasp sets of beliefs that fundamentally differ from their own defence and security planning assumptions. Russia being a plain land power without natural borders or protections, it has repeatedly been subject to land invasions throughout its history. This nurtured a feeling of insecurity and vulnerability that placed territory and border issues as centrepieces in Russian foreign and security policy. Therefore, the Russian military consistently plans for potential surprises that adversaries might inflict upon Russia. This created a culture of strategic surprise and a traditional posture of pre-emption and strategic counter-surprise⁸.

This feeling of vulnerability is a source of a further rift in conceptions with the West. It gave Russia the conviction that state *agency* can decisively influence the external conditions of its existence. Because of this conviction in the power of agency, Russia acts along a modern conception of state actorness. In direct line with its existential border and territory disputes, Russia assumes it has the power to change the international system as well as to avoid a regime change domestically. By contrast,

⁵ Sanctions remain linked in their lifting to the long term objectives as set out in the 1997 Founding Act, Rynning, *Ibid*.

⁶ Alexander Lanoszka "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe", *International Affairs*, 92:1 (2016), pp. 175-195.

⁷ Although it is worth noting the sheer amount of official and non official publications on the subject, it is the opinion in this paper that the overall level of reflection is rather superficial and fails to penetrate the depth of the topic.

⁸ Stephen R. Covington, "The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare", *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, Paper, October 2016.

the West has *postmodern* expectations as to the international society of states⁹. The post-modern condition reckons the modesty of agency – in this case, that a state is neither able nor entitled to change the international order unilaterally¹⁰. The Paris Charter of 1990, which ignored the perspective of territorial change, illustrates the discrepancy between Russia's modern actorness and the West's post-modern attitude. The drafters of the Charter deemed irrelevant to make for a renewed balance of power since state resurgence would be unlikely. The hope for a restoration of cordial relations took precedence.

The combination in Russia of a culture of strategic surprise and a belief in the power of modern actorness made for a military doctrine that could qualify as *total* or *integral defence*. Russia's coercive power projection takes roots in the belief that its territory is indefensible. Russian military doctrine poses that effective defence requires "total" defence, which is the overarching *weaponization* of regular areas of public life. Threat perception in Moscow consequently led to an all-out securitization of society. Virtually every aspect of the political, media, economic, social and cultural life can gear into offensive and defensive configurations¹¹.

Much has been written arguing of Russia's use of hybrid warfare. However, such a label could prove misleading. The literature on hybrid warfare broadly suggests that it refers to the combination of military and non-military means in a profoundly asymmetric fashion. Hybrid warfare is mostly considered as an instrument of the weaker power in order to negate the more powerful adversary's advantages. The use of ambiguous, multi-vector military and

non-military operations is a rather pragmatic, cheap and efficient manner of achieving objectives without perilous escalation with an adversary whose power cannot be matched. Russian actions however go beyond hybrid warfare understood as an instrument of the weaker. Instead, Russia uses hybrid warfare as an instrument of the *regional powerful*¹². As seen in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Russia's coercive power projection was enabled by its possession of regional escalation dominance¹³. On the one hand, the sheer presence of Russian troops on the Peninsula and the massive numbers of them bordering Ukraine incited Kiev not to respond too strongly while the Kremlin made a point to maintain the level of violence below a certain threshold in order not to warrant Western intervention. It is in sum a perilous equilibrium attempt that shows an aversion to military escalation – because of global inferiority to NATO – combined with regional offensive deterrence.

The Kremlin's equilibrium exercise, between threshold violence and escalation dominance, frames Russia's actions less as a mode of hybrid warfare than as an application of a strategy of integral statecraft. This relates to the ability of a state to mobilize the near totality of its levers of power towards a given purpose. Russia's use of integral statecraft, or the *total mobilization of the instruments of the state towards a given aggressive objective* is a conceptual asymmetry to Western democracies. It merges the realms of war, peace, and crisis as well as it fuses civilian and military capabilities. For Russia, to paraphrase Clausewitz and stretch his point, *peace is merely the continuation of war by other means*. Western

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *La condition post-moderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1984)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe", *International Affairs*, 92:1 (2016), pp. 175-195.

¹³ See Lanoszka 2016, it is the ability for the belligerent to "engage and defeat its target at different levels of military escalation".

political philosophy on the contrary cannot understand war without peace as the former's necessary end¹⁴.

This fundamental discrepancy between the West and Russia as to the conception of war and peace unfolds along a series of asymmetries. The most striking of all in operational terms concerns the degree of integration of civil and military actors at the highest strategic levels. Russia's National Defence Management Centre constitutes a Command and Control capacity in its own right and of its own type, which liberal democracies can not match. The Centre integrates the 50 departments, agencies and ministries that have mobilisation responsibilities in the country's Plan for Defence¹⁵. The depth of integration of actors, the co-operation and information exchange protocols upon which it relies are necessary to steer Russia's integral statecraft mobilisation. The Centre exemplifies that Russia's political backwardness offers undeniable operational advantage towards Western states because it rests on the absence of the principle of separation of power as well as of civilian control over the military.

The Kremlin's appetite for such integral statecraft has emboldened Russia to press upon asymmetric pressure points in western societies. To name but a few domains, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the rule of law are turned into weaknesses and weaponized against Western societies' resolve through irregular and covert tactics. Information warfare exploits opportunities laid out by the existence of a free press and a culture of contradiction. The steering of popular resentment takes advantage of the right of assembly. Finally,

the use of subversive methods remaining below a certain threshold of deniability aims at frustrating the authorities' response and denying them the legal argument and political narrative for retaliation.

Imagining the sources of Russian conduct to avoid a fateful replay of the previous war

The manifestations of Russian integral statecraft exacerbate a security dilemma. The more Russia appears revisionist and resurgent towards its Western neighbours, the more the latter will be compelled to beef up deterrence in the eastern flank of the Atlantic Alliance. The objective of Russia's strategy is to be able to show to its population that its relations with the West remain adversarial. This has especially been the case after President Putin's contested election of 2012 and the country's economic downturn. Therefore, it is beneficial to the Kremlin to have its propaganda validated by Western reactions.

As Frank P. Harvey put it in his remarkable deconstruction of the run-up to the 2003 Second Gulf War, the US and its allies at the time failed to imagine why Iraq's autocrat would keep pretending to have weapons of mass destruction¹⁶. There is a similar risk to fail to imagine the drivers of Russian strategic security policy. From a strategic viewpoint, positioning troops and capacities in the Alliance's Eastern flank denotes that Euro-Atlantic leaders

¹⁴ Pierre Hassner, "Guerre et paix", in P. Raynaud and Stephane Rials (dir), *Dictionnaire de philosophie politique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2008, p. 301.

¹⁵ Julian Cooper "If War Comes Tomorrow: How Russia Prepares for Possible Armed Aggression", Whitehall Report 4-16, RUSI, August 2016, p. 47.

¹⁶ Frank P. Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic and Evidence* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012). The argument is that political and intelligence analyses failed to understand that Saddam Hussein kept pretending to detain WMDs in order to keep balancing Iran's assertive efforts against Iraq. Estimates failed to imagine that Saddam Hussein was betting that the US and its allies would not act upon his assertions and that it would permit him to maintain ambiguity as to his retaining a nuclear arsenal to deter Iranian aggression.

would assume Russia to be the potential attacker in a conventional conflict. To ground this view, it is often pointed out that massive Russian capabilities are positioned in the Western Military District, directly threatening the Baltic States. However, it could be argued that Russia relies rather on the sheer massive presence of its troops as an enabler of other non-military actions than on actually combat-ready troops. Russian strategic documents prepare for ambiguity and non-attribution of hostile actions precisely as a way to circumvent NATO's conventional superiority. It is a political challenge that NATO and the US do not seem to prepare for.

The formulation of Russia's coercive power projection is less the pursuit of national interest than that of the regime's and its method of vertical power. The authoritarian nature of Russia's governance makes its strategic security policy reflect the regime's self-preservation imperatives. This is characteristic of "limited access order"¹⁷ as a form of governance such as Russia's. Understanding Russia as a limited access order means to consider it as a society in which power positions of the economy are divided among elites whose interest remains to maximize and maintain a steady rent. Douglas North *et al* argues that in such a system, elites are encouraged to be peaceful to each other in order to contain violence that would entail their ruin. National interest gets confused with "special interests"¹⁸ – opening up the regime and the economy would break up fruitful monopolistic positions, which makes for a continuous posture of confrontation. Russia's power vertical entails its leader to

distribute advantages linked to the state apparatus in exchange for political loyalty. Considering Russia's governance as a limited access order allows understanding its drive for external provocation as *discursive bellicosity*¹⁹ in order to maintain societal consensus on the regime at home by sustaining a passive and resiliency-oriented popular mind-set.

Responses from NATO seem to overlook that, just as in counter-terrorism, the devil lies in the reaction²⁰. Deploying land forces in the Baltic states allows Russian propaganda to denounce "aggressive" Western military build-up and to claim validation for domestic propaganda. Although the Kremlin's propaganda machine would always find ways to claim NATO to be an aggressive alliance against Russia, it is fair to say that despite the reassurance effect for the Baltic populations, aligning ground troops does not necessarily make sense. The Russian military will always have land power escalation dominance because of its size and culture. However, a more efficient posture for NATO would be to fill up the naval and aerial gaps in the Baltic region²¹. This would be especially relevant if NATO's deterrence posture is to be credible in the face of enhanced A2/AD and electromagnetic Russian capacities²².

Countering Russian hybrid warfare – or more precisely Russian integral statecraft – requires political build-up and targeted military gap filling. Russia does not possess global escalation dominance to NATO. The situation is therefore different from

¹⁷ Douglas C. North, John Joseph Wallis, Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Vadim Kononenko, Arkady Moshes (Ed.), *Russia as a Network State: What Works in Russia When State Institutions Do Not* (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) p. 7.

¹⁹ Discursive bellicosity is understood here less as a reflection of objective national interest and rather as reflecting an actor's political imperative for self-preservation.

²⁰ Maxime Lebrun, "Lost In Reaction: The French War on Terror", ICDS Blog, 18 April 2017.

²¹ Wesley Clark, Juri Luik, Egon Ramms, Richard Shirreff, "Closing NATO's Baltic Gap", ICDS Report, May 2016.

²² Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Electronic Warfare Capabilities to 2025", ICDS Report, September 2017.

Ukraine's. While in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Russia used hybrid warfare as an instrument of the stronger, its expression of integral statecraft towards Western states is characteristic of the weaker power. Responding to "hybrid threats" is a delicate balancing exercise. NATO logically grants primacy to a military response, but building deterrence at higher levels of violence – through land power – might perversely render hybrid warfare more attractive.

On top of that, focusing on shielding Allies militarily might obliterate strategic thinking on the political reaction to occurrences of hybrid warfare. Russian actions would frustrate the formation of political consensus throughout the Alliance. Any hybrid attempt would be deniable, emphasising local initiatives, gravely complicating unity among NATO allies in retaliation. Neither NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence nor the US' European reassurance scheme address the political dimension of any conflict that could arise between Russia and the Baltic States.

Hybrid warfare and technological disruptors

Russia's coercive power projection creates a holistic security challenge, especially for the Baltic countries. It sets a context of antagonistic intertwinement of societies and economies across borders. It has become common sense since 2014 to consider that not all threats are armed or militarized, and that economic, financial and social domains uncover a wide potential for disruption. In order to achieve regime preservation, Russia is conducting a grand asymmetric strategy, attempting to substantially offset NATO's and EU's strengths and unity. It acts along a unitary scheme of mind with a unified purpose, allowing it to compress time and space in the decision – information – action loop.

Russia seems to have grasped a series of evolutions pertaining to war and warfare that have been brought about with the information age. The first one is the democratisation of the means to inflict damage. Violence and the scale of damages has descended from the state to the individual level. It means individuals have been empowered to inflict sometimes as much damage as a state actor could have in the past, through information technologies. Cyber attacks are an example in point. The second major inflexion concerns the sources of war. Wars over borders and territory are less significant than the number of wars about government types in other countries. The Russian intervention in Syria does not intend to annex a part of territory but to maintain the regime in place. The destabilisation of some parts of Eastern Ukraine is rather a means to paralyse the government in Kiev than to annex costly territories.

The last major trend concerns the disaggregation of warfare itself. Hybrid warfare, however unsatisfactory the term might be, is essentially about violence happening below the threshold triggering state response. What the information age however brings in addition to this age-old reality of warfare is the atomisation of the components of warfare. What the Russians have efficiently grasped is that it would be a major blunder to consider war and warfare along separated but connected domains. It means that effects, due to the disaggregation of warfare, the complexity of war goals and the individuation of the means to inflict violence, would be achieved in all domains simultaneously without a clear guiding logic behind it. This is precisely the point of Russian integral statecraft.

In line with this understanding of statecraft and disaggregation – atomisation – of warfare, Russia will target open societies precisely on what constitutes their open-

ness. It would be operationally fruitful to consider contemporary *flows* as the main battlespace of this holistic security challenge. Flows of goods, people, energy supplies, information and ideas became primary targets and vulnerabilities of disruption. In terms of policy formulation, the essential challenge is to timely consider certain areas as critical and frame them as vulnerable access points. This is a policy area that is yet waiting for substantiation in terms of political dedication and investment. EU – NATO cooperation here has true potential at the condition that a real division of labour be agreed upon. To NATO, building the will and agility of political and military decision and command systems. To the EU, building of societal resilience, the whole framework linked and given coherence through the model of Centres of Excellence.

Since Russia is militarily superior to the Baltic States but inferior to NATO collectively, it is plausible that Russia will maintain a confrontational dynamic trying to drive a wedge between the Baltic States and the rest of the Alliance. It is well aware of the inner contradiction of NATO's policy towards Russia – trying to remain within the appeasement boundaries of 1997 while struggling with the need for determination and unity. The likeliest future for the Baltic region is a sustained traditional security dilemma standoff. At the same time, it is crucial to enhance the reliability of the interconnected flows upon which open, prosperous and trans-border societies rely.

has recently attempted to conceptualize, providing undeniable momentum to "resilience" as a policy tenet. In this respect, the "Secure" Policy Area of the EU's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region should be taken full advantage of as a framework for deepening cooperation among civil emergency and law-enforcement actors in the Baltic countries. This surprisingly remains an under-advertised process.

Russian hybrid warfare's strategic goal is the methodical undoing of NATO and EU structures. The window of opportunity opened by the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) should not be neglected. As laid out in the Treaty, PESCO is meant to be a process among willing Member States to gradually create an autonomous capacity for action of the Common Security and Defence Policy. The Baltic countries should not treat this opportunity lightly. It is the opinion of the author that the Baltic countries should push within PESCO to integrate societal security reinforcement as a center-piece to the agenda for a defence and security Union. NATO is destined for territorial defence and it could be counterproductive to replicate it within EU structures. Instead, PESCO being what states will make of it, is an opportunity to pursue the EU's added value on civil – military integration as well as national and local level cooperation. It would be the best arena to build a common "*societal* security union" in today's disruptive and changing threat realities.

Conclusion

Responding to hybrid threats is less a matter of defence planning than societal resilience building at national and local levels. NATO has inherent limitations in this but the EU could be a more efficient framework to enhance the Baltic Countries' immunity. This is precisely what the EU