

1. SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

HOW CAN NATO AS A COLLECTIVE ALLIANCE EFFECTIVELY COUNTER THE THREAT OF RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE?

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ABSTRACT

Currently some are arguing that we are facing a change in the character of warfighting – the emergence of hybrid warfare. This as this evolution has been rapid enough to raise concerns about the security of even the strongest contemporary military alliance, evoking questions of NATO's ability to cope with the alleged transformation. It is visualized by many articles published after Russia's surprising aggression in Crimea in 2014, that brought the term hybrid warfare to widespread use, several publications mention specific NATO members as the next possible targets of similar belligerent actions. The paper is discussing opposing opinions and argues that the hybrid warfare concept used by Russia cannot be applied universally; therefore NATO can devise successful preventive and counteractions by focusing its efforts to specific threatened regions. The theoretical background of Russia's new generation warfare concept is presented along with its practical application. Next, the implications for NATO – the extent of the threat and the possibilities for countering it – is discussed.

KEY WORDS

Hybrid warfare, NATO, European security, military affairs, Russian security.

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Introduction

Now we have reached the hour when we can no longer ignore this problem, which, in the interest of national defense, we should face squarely (Douhet, 1921, p. 31).

Almost a century ago Giulio Douhet foresaw a dominant role of air power in warfighting. Although a large part of his vision proved to be untrue, producing opposite effects to what he imagined (most notori-

ously, carpet bombings in World War II), some of his ideas are still highly regarded – a sentence resembling his 'To conquer the command of the air means victory; to be beaten in the air means defeat and accept-

ance of whatever terms the enemy may be pleased to impose' (Douhet, 1921, p. 28) are probably voiced in most of modern military educational institutions. Today, some have argued, we are facing a comparable change in the character of warfighting – the emergence of hybrid warfare. This evolution has been rapid enough to raise concerns about the security of even the strongest contemporary military alliance, evoking questions of NATO's ability to cope with the alleged transformation (Berzins, 2014, pp. 8-9; Vandiver, 2014). Amongst myriads of articles published after Russia's surprising aggression in Crimea in 2014, that brought the term *hybrid warfare* to widespread use, several publications mention specific NATO members as the next possible targets of similar belligerent actions (Stoicescu, 2015; Colby and Solomon, 2015, pp. 22-24). On the other hand, counterarguments rejecting any relevance of 'hybrid element of Russia's operation in Ukraine' to NATO (Charap, 2015, p. 52) have also been presented. This essay positions somewhere in-between of these opposing opinions and argues that the hybrid warfare concept used by Russia cannot be applied universally; therefore NATO can devise successful preventive and counteractions by focusing its efforts to specific threatened regions. To support this argument, firstly the theoretical background of Russia's *new generation warfare concept* and its practical application will shortly be presented. Secondly, the implications for NATO – the extent of the threat and the possibilities for countering it – will be discussed.

Russia's hybrid warfare in brief

First of all, one must consider, what is meant by *hybrid warfare*. The definition has evolved since 2002, when it was first used (Racz, 2015, p. 28), denoting different

ways of waging war observed by researchers. Initially the term described the mixture of regular and irregular tactics stemming from the combination of traditional social structure and modern technology successfully employed by Chechens against Russia (Nemeth, 2002, pp. 49-54; Racz, 2015, pp. 28-29). Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2006 was also described as a hybrid war incorporating 'a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder' (Hoffman, 2007, p. 8). These two conflicts can undoubtedly be classified as wars and hence these two descriptions incorporate only the military domain – different tactics and strategy used in warfare, from conventional to different kinds of irregular methods. Considering that lately Russia has been accused of waging hybrid warfare even against European Union (Holmes, 2015; The Baltic Times, 2016), it is clear that to date this definition has evolved much further from the original.

What NATO calls *hybrid warfare* today is more accurately defined as a *full spectrum conflict*, encompassing not only military, but also political, economic, technological, informational and other domains. The conflict in Ukraine, to which NATO refers as *hybrid warfare*, has arguably been based on a concept of *new generation warfare* mostly attributed to general Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation (Racz, 2015, p. 36). According to this concept, open warfare is rarely thought (as events in Crimea proved) and non-military methods are preferred (*ibid.*). As the situation in Ukraine has proved to be difficult to be indisputably defined as a *war* (at least formally and legally, which is exactly what Gerasimov's theory foresees), the term *full-spectrum conflict* proposed by Jonsson and

Seely (2015, p. 2) could be used to provide more clarity. In essence all of these terms encompass the same comprehensive approach (understandably, because they are all used to describe the same events), while the latter puts more emphasis on *full-spectrum* versus the emphasis on *warfare* in both the NATO's and Russia's definition. However, for the purposes of achieving coherence between this essay and the references herein used, only the definitions *hybrid warfare* and *new generation warfare* will be used (as synonyms).

At first glance the *new generation warfare concept* is similar to NATO's *comprehensive approach*; however there are two fundamental differences between these, which give the former an advantage over the latter. Both NATO's and Russia's concepts highlight the importance of other sources of power besides military. According to Allied Joint Doctrine (NSA, 2010, pp. 1-2–1-3) the essential instruments of NATO's strategy are military, diplomatic, economic, and information instruments, additionally it stresses the utility of states' and non-governmental organisations' civil capabilities. Russia's *new generation warfare* concept also lists almost identical domains (diplomatic, economic, political, military) (Racz, 2015, p. 36). The first thing that separates these concepts is their respective purpose. The concept of comprehensive approach arose from the experiences in the Balkans and Afghanistan and was therefore devised to contribute to the resolution of an already existing crisis (Rotmann, 2010, p. 2). The *new generation warfare concept* however aims at creating one, discussing the ways an aggressor could overcome its intended victim (Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013, p. 13). Therefore it also includes more aggressive measures, some of which clearly cross the line between legal and illegal actions (active use of asymmetric warfare,

including committing terrorist acts and employing mercenaries) (Ibid., p. 20). The second major difference derives from the different command and control structures, influencing the practical application of these concepts. Due to a more streamlined and effective command and control structure of Russia, all actions between command levels, state institutions, services and armed forces' components can be effectively synchronised. Lately this capability was further enhanced by the establishment of Armed Forces Central Command Centre, which enables to coordinate the activities of not only military forces, but also other security institutions (Rogoway, 2015). NATO as a collective alliance in contrast, requires agreed consensus, and relies on cooperating and coordinating with its members and other agencies and organisations, which constrains the level of success (NSA, 2010, pp. 1-2; Rotmann, 2010, pp. 3-4).

Based on theoretical foundations and observed actions in Ukraine, Russia's *new generation warfare* can be divided into two prominent phases – preparations for and attack. Referring to the work of Chekinov and Bogdanov, Janis Berzins (2014, p. 6) divides new generation warfare into 8 phases starting with non-military asymmetric warfare and concluding with the final elimination (mopping up) of any resisting armed units. Observing the actual events during the conflict in Ukraine, Andreas Racz however divides it to 9 sections, grouped to 3 main phases: preparation, attack and stabilisation (2015, pp. 58-67). Comparing these two approaches by looking at the actions taken in each phase (Berzins) or section (Racz), one can conclude that despite the different naming and theoretical division Berzins' phases largely coincide with the preparation and attack phases of Racz. In fact, Chekinov and Bogdanov acknowledge the need for preparations

(creating favourable settings) but do not clearly distinguish the line between these and the actual attack itself (2013, pp. 19-23). The stabilisation phase however is altogether excluded in the work of Chekinov and Bogdanov. Similarly, the latter will not be discussed in this essay, since it only follows the successful completion of previous phases and therefore commences only if countering hybrid warfare proves to be unsuccessful in the first place. The essence of and possibilities of countering the preparation and attack phases of Russia's hybrid warfare will however be further explored.

The aim of the preparation phase is to identify the vulnerabilities of a possible target country and to create conditions for effectively taking advantage of these later in the attack phase. For the most part it includes using various economic, cultural, diplomatic and informational measures that are common in international relations. But it also encompasses establishing pro-Russian non-governmental organisations and media channels that are then used to fuel dissatisfaction, and even bribing politicians, government officials and armed forces' commanders who would be used to cripple the targets ability to resist from the inside. (Racz, 2015, pp. 58-59; Sherr, 2015, p. 26; Giles, 2015, p. 42) Considering that according to the "new generation warfare" concept the state of conflict is considered to be permanent, rather than restricted in time (Berzins, 2014, p. 5), it is hardly surprising that these measures are constantly used by Russia in relations with its neighbours. Moreover, detecting these actions cannot provide the intended target definite warning about a planned hybrid attack, because 'traditional acts of Russian diplomacy may function as preparations for future hybrid warfare action, if the Kremlin decides so, while also serving their conventional, everyday purpose' (Racz, 2015, p. 58).

The main aim of the attack phase is to expel the central government from (at least) part(s) of the target country and create alternative political power centres, while denying Russia's involvement in the conflict to avoid the intervention of international community. The start of the attack phase is distinguished from the preparatory phase by the appearance of organized, armed violence, although the direct involvement of regular military units is avoided. Unmarked troops and (often armed) demonstrators try to block security and police forces, take over administration buildings and key media and civilian infrastructure. These actions are supported by massive information campaign with the aim of portraying the attackers as local citizens and flooding the local media with own propaganda to alienate the locals from central government. The information campaign is also directed to the international media, where it is supported by Russia's top level politicians, denying any involvement. At the same time the decision making cycle of central government and security forces is further disrupted by sabotage, cyber-attacks, electronic warfare and activation of bribed officials. Finally, if the central government has lost control over the territory, the so-called separatists could hold referendums for independence. (Racz, 2015, pp. 60-64) To avoid the escalation of the conflict into open conventional war, especially if an attack against a NATO member is considered (i.e. evade the activation of article V of the Atlantic Treaty), concealing Russia's involvement during the attack phase is of particular importance. This is well illustrated by the fact that president Putin himself played an important part of the denial effort during the hybrid attack against Ukraine (Shuster, 2015).

It is important to notice however, that for successful accomplishment of hybrid warfare there must be several preconditions

(vulnerable points to exploit) present in the target country. First of all, there should be dissatisfaction with the central government, which is persistent and preferably regionally concentrated. Secondly, there is a need for Russian-speaking minority to justify Russia's involvement in the rising conflict and provide operational advantages. Additionally, the victim's central power and its security structures must be too weak to avoid or resolve the disorder and chaos resulting from hostile demonstrations, subversions and information warfare (Racz, 2015, pp. 73-83). Unfortunately the presence of Russian-speaking minority does not only serve as a quasi-legitimate reason for invading its neighbours (as it was justified both in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014), but it also helps to build discontent with the central government, provided that the latter represents (or is perceived representing) different ethnic, religious or cultural group. Moreover, according to Racz's observations in Ukraine, in the absence of actual lasting disagreements this minority can be used to portray (by information operations) an internal confrontation that does not actually exist (Ibid.). One can conclude then, that the target country must at very least have a Russian minority and vulnerable governance and security structures to be vulnerable to a hybrid attack.

In addition to the vulnerabilities of the intended victim itself, there is also a need for further preconditions that the attacker must ensure. Firstly, Russia needs to have military superiority to deny the target's ability to conduct effective armed resistance (by concentrating regular troops near the border, thereby threatening to start also a conventional attack) against irregular attacks. Moreover, there might be the need to provide direct support to irregular fighters or even to escalate the conflict to full scale (that is, reverting to open employment of

conventional forces), if previous measures proved to be unsuccessful. Secondly, there is a need for strong media presence both in the target country and international media. This enables to generate and escalate tensions between minorities and central government, as well as to provide an alternative narrative about the events to the international media. And finally, to conduct the attack phase of hybrid warfare, there must be sufficient logistical support either from already existing stockpile or via adequate supply lines from Russia to support the irregular fight. (Racz, 2015, pp. 73-83) Regarding the first two points, Russia would probably not have major difficulties to establish versus most of the countries it considers being in its sphere of influence. Ensuring logistical support however is more difficult, since it requires either already existing resources (e.g. permanent military bases) the ability to build these up during preparations (for example, some form of covert pre-stocking) or favourable conditions for establishing appropriate lines of communications (i.e. suitable geography) during the execution.

How can NATO counter the hybrid warfare threat from Russia?

Considering the prerequisites of successful hybrid warfare discussed above, one can identify that only certain NATO members – the three Baltic States – are prone to Russia's hybrid attack. First of all, only five NATO members (Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) are neighbours to Russia, which would enable Russia to secure the necessary supply lines which are needed for the logistic support of the hybrid warfare's attack phase. Out of these five, the Baltic States are militarily the weakest, not reaching the military capabilities of Poland or Norway (not to men-

tion Russia) even with their armed forces combined. Moreover, only the Baltic States have a substantial Russian minority, which could be used to heighten domestic tensions and justify Russia's intervention. Therefore, NATO's efforts to counter Russia's possibilities to employ its new generation warfare can be focused to a specific region. As a consequence, this essay will further explore this issue solely from the perspective of defending the Baltic States.

Resulting from the nature of hybrid warfare's preconditions, some of them (dissatisfaction with the central government, weak governance and Russian minority) must be addressed by the threatened countries themselves. Resolving any domestic dispute is clearly a national responsibility; interference with these matters falls not only outside the provisions of the Atlantic Treaty, but also violates the sovereignty of the respective nations. Similarly, strengthening governance and security institutions is up to nations themselves, although NATO can assist by providing military assistance. Nevertheless, this support is limited primarily to the military domain and does not cover legislative, anti-corruption, policing, integration or other issues. Finally, the presence of Russian minority is a fact that is not going to change in the foreseeable timeframe. While there are ways to mitigate the possibility for them to be used in a hybrid warfare campaign (for example, better integration to the local society, economic and social development to minimize dissatisfaction with central government), these measures are also up to the countries themselves to carry out.

Taking into account that the weak spots of NATO identified earlier are confined to a specific region, some of the Russia's hybrid warfare's prerequisites – namely military superiority and presence in international media – can and should be addressed by

NATO. Although military power is difficult to measure accurately, there is no question about the superiority of NATO's combined military might over Russia's (Bender, 2015; Karlin, 2015). Looking at the Baltic region however, the situation is radically different with Russia's unchallenged position of advantageous military presence. The only way for this to change (without reducing Russia's capabilities) would be to enhance NATO forces' presence or at least to develop the capability to increase this presence rapidly once the situation requires it¹. Similarly, the three Baltic states on their own cannot afford to counter Russia's capabilities in the international media. Considering the massive and so far also largely successful efforts of Russia's state-run media apparatus (Jonsson and Seely, 2015, p. 12; Freedom House, 2016), it would be a challenge even for larger states. Here the application of NATO's comprehensive approach, mobilising the full potential of its members' information operations capabilities, is needed to counter hostile messages and portray the victim's side of the story.

Considering the nature of Russia's tools used in the preparatory phase of hybrid warfare, the primary responsibility to counter these lies within national level. First of all, the obvious reason for this is that the article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty explicitly requires nations to prepare for their own defence (NATO, 1949). Secondly, given the fact that NATO is a military alliance, all its members are free to exercise their independent economic, foreign and domestic policies. The latter includes also the crucial subjects of integration, anti-corruption and internal security, which not only fall out of the scope of NATO but are also considered strictly sovereign matters. Although the concept of comprehensive approach

¹ That is, before the attack phase of hybrid warfare commences or at least in time to prevent an intervention by regular troops.

also includes diplomatic, economic, and information instruments, the coordinated employment of NATO members' respective instruments is only possible after a collective decision has been reached (NSA, 2010, pp. 1-2). That implies that for such a decision sufficient threat has to be recognised in the first place, both by the target nation itself and the other allies. And even when this happens, any countermeasures implemented within the target country must be led by that nation's government to avoid (actual or perceived) violation of its sovereignty.

Looking at the attack phase of Russia's hybrid warfare, especially its underpinning conventional military threat, it is evident that the help of NATO allies is needed to defend the Baltic countries. The Baltic countries could probably be able to deal with the "local militia" and even a moderate number of special forces troops with the employment of police and voluntary military organisations. The territorial defence forces have similar roles in all of the three countries, encompassing also crisis response and cooperation with other internal security forces (Szymański, 2015). If needed, even regular troops could be employed in a state of emergency. However, once Russia's conventional military is concentrated to the border areas, or in the worst case used to intervene inside national borders of target countries as it was done in Eastern Ukraine, the victims' ability to resist will be severely restricted. In this regard, the author of this essay agrees with Samuel Charap's otherwise incomplete² understanding of Russia's hybrid warfare: '...it could not sus-

tain such an operation without employing its regular military...' (Charap, 2015, p. 55). Therefore, the primary purpose of NATO's assistance would be to deny Russia's ability to fix the defenders' freedom of action by (threatening of) employing its regular troops. Arguably, even the stationing of a small number of allied troops (as it is today) would effectively serve as a tripwire, initiating allied response if these were to be attacked (Kacprzyk, 2014, p. 7; Rogers and Martinescu, 2015, p. 19). Following the concept of new generation warfare however, the first targets would be the governmental institutions and internal security forces, while direct and overt fighting with regular units is avoided. Stepping on the tripwire would most likely be avoided by refraining from kinetic attacks.

Therefore it can be stated that to diminish Russia's ability to conduct hybrid warfare in the Baltic countries, NATO needs to establish a (clever) balance of military power in the region, thus removing a major precondition for successful *new generation warfare*. Although it is not conceivable to match Russia's military presence in the Baltic region by sheer numbers of soldiers and major equipment, robust and modern capabilities are needed to complement the Baltic militaries instead of *tripwires*. NATO should consider providing prioritised critical capabilities (to minimise or protect currently existing critical vulnerabilities) to enhance the capability to conduct joint and combined operations against an aggressor. For example, the ability to achieve air superiority and sea control (or even favourable air situation and sea denial) is lacking. Some of these capabilities should be prepositioned to avoid the delay of their deployment during an emerging crisis (i.e. heavy land units, medium- or long-range air defence units, elements of command and control structure etc.), some could be stationed

² Charap (2015, pp. 54-55) considers only the employment of special forces, "rebels", propaganda, cyber warfare etc. as part of *hybrid tactics*, and detaches the usage of conventional military capabilities from the concept. Although the theoretical backgrounds used in this essay include the latter as well, the notion of the significance of conventional military power is agreed on the both sides of this argument.

elsewhere (navy and air force units, information operations capabilities, etc.), provided that their deployment is assured to be timely. By selective prepositioning a heavy military build-up and thus raising tensions could be avoided or at least minimised. Alternately, providing assistance and modern equipment with affordable prices to the Baltic States themselves would also raise their initial defence capabilities, thus reducing the need for other allies to relocate their troops to the area.

The main challenge for diminishing the possibility of the Baltic states being a victim to Russia's new generation warfare is finding the reasonable balance between (combined) national capabilities, mere tripwires and more substantial (and costly) military build-up, keeping in mind that future employment of hybrid warfare is likely to be different from previous ones. As a starting point, the Baltic militaries need to work more effectively together and create a common vision of their role in NATO's framework, followed by practical cooperation to enable this vision to realise. The response to a possible conflict must be discussed and coordinated starting from the political level to avoid creating confusion among the rest of the allies. Also, the vision of NATO's peacetime presence and employment during emerging crisis should be uniformly understood, enabling fair share of the burdens resulting from growing host nation responsibilities. Will the former be achieved at any satisfactory level or not, there still remains the tortuous task to define and agree on the exact level of allied capabilities and mode of their employment required to ensure military balance in the region. The latter presents a complex challenge, especially in the light of McDermott's (2014) assertion that Russia does not actually have a set of fixed rules (that is, agreed and enforced doctrine) of new

generation warfare, leaving ample room for further refinement and development for future engagements.

Whatever the shape and size of allied contribution to the Baltic States might be, in any case there is a need to conduct joint training and exercises between the host nations, NATO's readiness units and command structures. Since the territory of the Baltics is small, giving little opportunity to trade space for time, NATO's collective response to one or more of the countries being attacked needs to be fast. This means that the response must be planned and rehearsed, covering different contingency plans. It also means that the Baltic militaries themselves should be ready to integrate seamlessly to NATO command structure and be ready to cooperate in a joint and multinational environment. Such cooperation needs to be thoroughly rehearsed to work effectively, thus implying the need for regular exercises. Although the major exercises conducted currently involve allied troops as well, these are usually company (land forces) and squadron (air force) level, seldom involving bigger units or higher headquarters. Even at today's scale, allied troops training in the Baltics is valuable, providing opportunities to study the terrain and local weather conditions, demonstrate allied commitment, build personal relations and practice unit deployment to the region. Still, as much as the Baltic military forces need the ability to cooperate with other NATO allies on unit level (for example, with NATO air units to be able to receive air support), they must also and foremost be able to work jointly on operational and strategic levels (to help NATO to achieve air superiority in the first place). On the other hand, NATO also needs to enhance its responsiveness and agility in transitioning from crisis response to collective defence (Lindley-French, 2015, p. 3), in which multinational

exercises including also the involvement of political decision makers could prove to be a valuable tool.

Conclusion

The essence of hybrid warfare is that it uses the full spectrum of power instruments in a coordinated manner, employing not only military, but also economic, diplomatic, informational and other tools. As a result, the preparation phase of it is hardly distinguishable from regular Russian realpolitik, making early reaction difficult. The attack phase however has not been always fully successful, highlighting the need for specific preconditions to be established. While some of these preconditions (i.e. existence of unsatisfied Russian-speaking minority, quality of governance) can and should be addressed on national level and require long-term efforts, others (balance of conventional military power, presence in international media) can be diminished by collective efforts of NATO members. Moreover, a closer look at these preconditions accentuates that out of the NATO members only the Baltic region is susceptible to hybrid attacks. Following this conclusion NATO should not only continue its current efforts of providing assurance measures to this region, but take it to the next level. A more credible balance of military power should be established in the Baltics and its near proximity, reducing the currently existing capability gaps and integrating the national headquarters to common command and control structures. To realise this, it is not enough to merely position the required capabilities to Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, in fact, some of the capabilities probably need not be constantly deployed; of equal importance is regular training and exercises to enhance the cooperation of host nations and allied troops not only on tactical level, but also the ability to fight effectively and

jointly also on the operational and strategic levels. And in the end, however successful these efforts might be, one must still bear in mind the importance of being alert and receptive in predicting the future, to avoid being surprised on yet another occasion.

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