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* * * **Evro-atlantski Bilten** * * *
* * * **Euro-Atlantic Bulletin** * * *

Izdajatelj/Publisher: EASS / EACS
Urednik/Editor: prof. dr. Iztok Prezelj
ISSN 2712-5270
<http://www.euroatlantic.org/bilten/>

Vol. 2 No. 1, 2021
February 12, 2021

Hybrid Warfare and the Future of European Security

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Abstract: *Hybrid warfare is a phenomenon that has gained quite significant traction in the contemporary security discourse. Despite its popularity it remains poorly understood which leads many decision-makers to struggle with how to deal with it when it occurs. This paper suggests that Euro-Atlantic decision-makers should aim to lower the kinetic response threshold to new hybrid threats and improve the spectrum of their coercive capabilities in order to counter instances of hybrid warfare. Furthermore, a normalisation of relationships with Russia and a re-evaluation of enlargement policies for NATO and the EU would diffuse regional tensions, which, coupled with other improvements, would significantly reduce the threat of hybrid warfare in Europe.²*

Key words: *hybrid warfare, international security, EU, NATO, Russia, China*

Hybrid warfare is a phrase that will be familiar to most of us due to its regular appearance in news reports, political speeches, and various publications across the world. Given its prominence as a perceived security threat, it is a term that should be widely understood and clearly defined. However, it remains contested and unclear, despite its widespread use. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to present a number of guidelines and policy tools for anyone interested in the topic, and specifically for policy and decision-makers. This edition of the Euro-Atlantic bulletin is based on the book *The Hybrid Age: International Security in the Era of Hybrid Warfare* by Brin Najžer, PhD., published by I.B. Tauris in July 2020.

The *Hybrid Age* tackles hybrid warfare by clearly defining the phenomenon as well as placing it into a proper context. Given the potentially existential threat that hybrid warfare can pose to

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² Views and opinions of the author of this paper do not necessarily correspond to views of the Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia.

actors in the international system this is an important and difficult aim to achieve. Through a combination of a theoretical and historical framework, and the use of three case studies which illustrate well the development and current use of hybrid warfare, *The Hybrid Age* seeks to show to its readers both the complexity of the phenomenon as well as a clear way to understand it. In this light, this edition of the Euro-Atlantic bulletin will first briefly outline key examples, observations, and limitations of hybrid warfare and then offer some policy recommendations for NATO and EU decision-makers on how to deal with instances of hybrid warfare.

Examples of hybrid warfare

The first instance of what we today call hybrid warfare can be traced back to the First and Second Chechen Wars in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Chechen forces fought in a distinctly different way to any previously studied conflict which appeared to baffle both the Russian military they were engaging as well as outside observers. As one of the first post-Cold War conflicts, the Chechen wars offered an early insight into what conflicts would look like in a world that was no longer tightly controlled along ideological, nuclear backstopped, lines. It was also an interesting contrast to the US first post-Cold War experience, the 1990-1991 First Gulf War.

While the final stages of the conflict in Chechnya were still going on, the second, much more widely known, use of hybrid warfare occurred, this time in the Middle East. The 34-day conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, also known as the 2006 Lebanon War, sent shockwaves through the international security community. That a non-state actor could so effectively engage the premiere conventional military power in the region was utterly unexpected. Although the conflict would end with both sides claiming victory, it was nevertheless an important milestone in the study of hybrid warfare. The key to the success of Hezbollah lay in its state-like organisation, which enabled it to use its military forces in a manner almost similar to a conventional force, and its sophisticated use of unconventional means such as information and cyber warfare. The combination proved difficult to defeat and illustrated a problem with the general Western military trend towards doctrinal specialisation.

Perhaps the most (in)famous use of hybrid warfare was the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014. Previously, hybrid warfare was largely debated only within professional circles, however, after February 2014, seemingly everyone was talking about it. Russia's seizure of Crimea through the use of 'little green men' and the subsequent proxy conflict in eastern Ukraine shattered the European perception of continental security. Coupled with the inability of Western decision-makers to respond to this intervention in any meaningful way, except for the knee-jerk reaction of imposing economic sanctions, the Ukraine crisis of 2014 cemented hybrid warfare as part of the national security vocabulary. Unfortunately, in a bid to quickly come to grips with the nature of this mode of warfare, most EU and NATO decision-makers focused too heavily on the information warfare and propaganda aspects of the conflict, largely ignoring its conventional aspects.

As an alternative to the high impact and relatively short duration type of hybrid warfare conducted by Russia in Ukraine, *The Hybrid Age* also looks at a much more long-term example of China and its maritime activities in the South China Sea. By introducing a new, maritime, domain to the debate around hybrid warfare, this case study significantly expanded the possible scope of hybrid warfare. Additionally, the Chinese model of hybrid warfare is less kinetic in terms of actual warfighting although still presenting its opponents with the same hybridity

challenge. China began an aggressive programme of artificial island building between 2014 and 2017, claiming that these expanded reefs would give it sovereign rights over vast swathes of the economically important South China Sea. It coupled this with a tailored interpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and used its maritime militia to enforce its stated position. This use of international law to give a veneer of false legitimacy to Chinese actions has been termed ‘lawfare’ (1) and is an especially important segment of the Chinese long-term hybrid strategy in the region. The fishing boats which operate as a part-time maritime militia present a difficult challenge to any foreign warship wishing to transit through the contested waters, when challenged by these vessels. Through such use of legal ambiguity, massive land reclamation, and aggressive posturing, China aims to establish de facto sovereignty over disputed areas despite lacking a formal legal basis.

Context and limitations of hybrid warfare

What can we extrapolate from the list of examples given above? Three observations can be made. First, that hybrid warfare is context specific. Second, that it occurs within an international order in which, at first glance, it should not be able to. Third, that it is clearly limited in its utility and its long-term efficacy.

The first observation is that hybrid warfare contains many different methods and can take very different forms, in other words it is context specific. This has confounded the attempts at defining it as well as finding ways of dealing with it. Most definitions either focus too much on one specific attribute of hybrid warfare, such as asymmetry or cyber warfare, while others create a long list of possible characteristics without sufficient context (2). To bridge the gap between example and context, The Hybrid Age defines hybrid warfare as a type of low-level conflict combining, in an opaque manner, simultaneously both conventional and unconventional warfare across the spectrum of capabilities. The aim of hybrid warfare is to enable an actor to challenge the international order without triggering an overwhelming conventional response, hence it must control the escalation of the conflict to remain below the threshold of what the international order would consider a conventional war.

This leads to the second observation, that hybrid warfare exploits the characteristics of the international rules-based order. These characteristics include, amongst others, the rejection of the use of force, except as a measure of last resort, and the active promotion of the values and ideals of the system to all actors within it, even to those who might fundamentally disagree with it. These values and ideas can be said to be based on the Western political philosophy of liberal democratic values (democratic institutions, individual human rights, separation of powers...) and a market economy (3). The restrictions and values of the system aim to prevent instances of open conflict. However, not all actors are willing to accept either the system or their place in it and are likely to try and adjust or change it, and hybrid warfare appears to be the perfect tool to achieve those goals.

This brings us to the limitations of hybrid warfare. As the international order is underpinned by the overwhelming conventional military might of the Western powers that created it, any challenge to the system must avoid a conventional military confrontation in order to be successful. Additionally, as the fundamental advantage of hybrid warfare is its opacity, the more it is used, the more visible it becomes. With increased visibility however, it also becomes less effective and, again, more likely to trigger a conventional response. Breaching this conventional threshold can lead to a partial and even a complete failure of a hybrid warfare approach, a point

that was demonstrated by the Chechens, Hezbollah, and also the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Hybrid warfare is therefore a potent, but not an all-powerful tool of international politics.

Policy recommendations

The Hybrid Age concludes that hybrid warfare is most likely to remain a popular form of international competition and coercion. As such it would be wise for decision-makers, particularly in Europe and the US, to acknowledge it for the threat that it poses and create policies to counter it. The basis for a good counter-hybrid warfare strategy already exists as both the EU and NATO have created in the past relatively good definitions and recommendations. However, it seems that these had either been forgotten or are no longer considered valid. The definition offered in *The Hybrid Age* would be an excellent replacement choice as it offers both an explanation of the phenomenon as well as the key characteristics to look out for when evaluating if a crisis somewhere in the world is indeed a hybrid one. To conclude this paper, some additional policy recommendations can be made to decision-makers in NATO and the EU, and, by extension, to those in the member states of both organisations.

As the primary guarantor of European security, NATO should make an extensive effort to create a new strategic concept that is fit for purpose. Efforts are already under way, however, the report from the Reflection Group, published in November 2020 (4), while often mentioning hybrid warfare, does not offer sufficient clarity on the subject, nor does the 2019 Report on Enhancing NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats (5). The first step for NATO, and its member states, should be the lowering of the threshold for hybrid and other threats necessitating a coercive response. Some states have already begun a trend towards lowering the threshold, with the UK, for example, declaring that cyber attacks could now be responded to with kinetic means if they result in the loss of life (6). In an expanded format that would include hybrid actions, a lower threshold would limit the advantages which hybrid warfare provides, and simultaneously raise the strategic costs of hybrid actions making them less appealing.

NATO should also take care not to over-emphasise information/cyber warfare and propaganda/fake news. While these activities are worrisome and should be addressed, they do not rise to the threat level of hybrid warfare. A robust public diplomacy effort coupled with an upgrade to cyber defences should suffice to blunt the effectiveness of such activities, but the majority of NATO's efforts should be devoted to countering the broadest spectrum of hybrid warfare possible through the expansion of the coercive capabilities of the member states. This must be coupled with a clear statement and demonstration of the intent to use such capabilities in combination with the aforementioned lowering of the threat threshold. The most cost-effective way to counter hybrid warfare is through successful deterrence which requires broad-spectrum capabilities and the will to use them, neither of which NATO currently exhibits. An expansion of the capabilities would also offset and limit the increased risk of a lowering of the threshold necessitating a coercive response.

In order to lower the threat level in Eastern Europe NATO should begin the process of normalisation of the relationships with Russia, beginning with a rethink of future Ukrainian and Georgian memberships in the organisation. With long tracts of heavily contested borders, both states are currently ineligible for membership and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine would result in a de facto state of war with Russia if Ukraine were admitted. NATO should encourage both states to pursue a neutral state policy, similar to the Austrian model. While the door could be left open for full

membership in the future, such a step would require at least Russian acquiescence, further necessitating a normalisation of relations. It would also improve NATO's stance against the rising threat of China.

The EU faces a much more significant problem insofar as it cannot, as an organisation, counter the kinetic (both conventional and unconventional) elements of hybrid warfare. Nor should it attempt to do so, as its decision-making processes are not conducive to coercive activities. The biggest problem facing the EU stems from its uncritical enlargement policy. The EU's reliance on, indeed almost reverence of, the use of soft power illustrates well the weaknesses of the international world order. Through the active promotion of its ideas and values the EU is placing itself in a position of being perceived almost as an ideological colonial power by those who do not share its point of view. The inability of the EU to predict critically the resulting push-back from those actors, and their use of actual power instruments, constitutes a dangerous weakness. To paraphrase from Theodore Roosevelt's summation of his own foreign policy approach, the EU is walking loudly, but carries no stick. It further claims that the 'stick' no longer has any utility in international politics. Despite these handicaps, however, there are some basic steps that the EU can take to improve its handling of future instances of hybrid warfare. A closer cooperation with NATO would alleviate some of the issues although likely at the cost of abandoning its own ideas of an integrated military. A revision of the Global Strategy from 2016 (7) which would de-emphasise the reliance on soft power instruments would also usefully contribute but, above all, the EU must critically appraise its own enlargement policy and acknowledge that it must be limited by geostrategic considerations i.e. a buffer zone with Russia. As this policy is so central to the idea of a united Europe this would be a difficult task, however, a more neighbourly (8) relationship with Russia will significantly improve the security of the EU's member states.

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