



NIDS

FOREIGN EXPERT PERSPECTIVE (No.001-June 2017)

Hybrid Warfare in a Contested World Order: Insights and Implications

by Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, NATO International Staff¹

STRATEGIC INTENT IN A CHANGING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

The world's liberal order is currently under challenge in unprecedented ways, from eastern Ukraine to northeast and southeast Asia. Furthermore, the global economic crisis that started in 2007-2008 has placed the global economy and mutual trade flows under severe strain, depriving natural resource producers of revenue streams and manufacturing countries of customers.² An increased sense of economic vulnerability, but also of geopolitical opportunity, is fueling anxiety, as well as, at times, belligerence.

“Hybrid warfare” is the preferred Western choice of words to describe a strategy that thrives on ambiguity to generate systematic uncertainty.³ While the terminology “hybrid warfare” does not accord with either Russian or Chinese usage, it does, in different ways, with their doctrinal views. The terms “hybrid” and “warfare”, therefore, adequately reflect a *strategic intent* that looks upon the remodeling of the global international order as a contest of wills and narratives, and one that relies on influence, deception, and manipulation. On occasion, it can also have recourse to the covert and overt use of force, as witnessed in Russia's illegal occupation and annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Countering successfully hybrid warfare, as a concept and as a tactic, requires therefore, a combination of awareness, resolve and resilience.

¹ Diego A. Ruiz Palmer serves on the NATO International Staff, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium. The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and should not be taken to reflect those of NATO or of NATO member nations.

² For an authoritative assessment of the global economy, see *From Great Depression to Great Recession: The elusive quest for international economic cooperation* (Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, March 2017).

³ Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, Back to the future? *Russia's hybrid warfare, revolutions in military affairs, and Cold War comparisons*, Research Paper 120 (Rome: NATO Defense College), October 2015.

HYBRID WARFARE'S DUAL PILLARS

Ideology and technology are hybrid warfare's essential drivers. Ideology helps shape the contest as, fundamentally, a quest for identity and distinctiveness⁴, and for legitimacy and influence through alternative constructs, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS, etc. Technology, in turn, is the enabler for the anchoring of a compelling ideological narrative in the cyber and psychological dimensions of the "global conversation", as well as for giving operational content to coercion of regional neighbors and intimidation of their allies or international partners.

Hybrid warfare is hardly new. Its aura and practice extend from the Bolshevik use of *Agitprop* a century ago, to contemporary Chinese textbooks, such as *Unrestricted Warfare*.⁵ Russian reliance on "strategic *maskirovka*" is currently its most evolved form.⁶ Hybrid warfare's keystone is its focus on ideological distinctiveness and impetus, combining rejection of Western norms and social codes ("push back") and embrace of an alternative set of values and principles ("pull back and pivot").⁷

ANTI-ACCESS AND AREA DENIAL: 21ST CENTURY FORTRESSES AND IRON CURTAINS⁸

The ubiquity of the information revolution has transformed old-fashioned and sclerotic ideological slogans in newspapers and sound bites on radio into an all-pervasive ideological narrative delivered on social networks by custom-made troll armies. Russia calls this construct "information confrontation",⁹ China has conceptualized it in the form of its "three warfares"- strategic psychological operations; overt and covert public opinion manipulation; and "legal warfare".¹⁰

Technology is also the fast-track conduit to the conversion of ideological "bubbles" into geopolitical "domes" on Russia's Western periphery, from the Kola Peninsula to the Black Sea, and on China's eastern and southern borders. "Anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD) is as much an ideological construct as an operational concept – to create mental and spatial separation from geopolitical adversaries, in order to reduce one's own vulnerabilities,

⁴ Marlene Laruelle, *The "Russian World": Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Interests, May 2015); and Igor Zurliev, *The Russian World in Moscow's Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 August 2016).

⁵ Colonel Qiao Ling and Colonel Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999). See also Tony Corn, "Peaceful Rise through Unrestricted Warfare: Grand Strategy with Chinese Characteristics", *Small Wars Journal*, June 2010.

⁶ The expression «strategic *maskirovka*» is borrowed from Julian Lindley-French, *NATO: Countering Strategic Maskirovka* (Calgary: Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, May 2015).

⁷ Ruiz Palmer, *Russia's hybrid warfare, revolutions in military affairs, and Cold War comparisons*, op.cit., p.6;

⁸ The reference to fortresses is borrowed from Tetsuo Kotani, *China's Fortress Fleet in-Being and its Implications for Japan's Security*, *Asie Visions* no. 62 (Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, February 2013).

⁹ On the concept of "information confrontation", see Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, Fellowship Monograph 9 (Rome: NATO Defense College, November 2016), pp. 3-15.

¹⁰ On China's three warfares, see Stefan Halper, *China: The Three Warfares*, Report to Andrew W. Marshall, Director of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2013; and Michael Raska, "China and the Three Warfares", *The Diplomat*, 18 December 2015.

as well as exploit, asymmetrically and decisively, game-changing opportunities.¹¹

Central components of A2/AD postures are:

- (i) Enhanced regional situational awareness, readiness and responsiveness;¹²
- (ii) 24/7 shaping of the information environment, through propaganda and deception;
- (iii) Near-real time tracking and targeting of opposing forces;
- (iv) Network-centric command and control;¹³
- (v) Non-kinetic and kinetic, distant engagement and disruption or destruction of adversary forces and associated economic and information resources in all domains (cyber; space; air; maritime; land), through offensive cyber warfare and electronic warfare, as well as precision-strike; and
- (vi) Resilience, recovery and reconstitution.

Ideological and geopolitical aims are meant to be achieved by “information

confrontation” and “no-contact warfare” -- the synchronized and mass application of non-kinetic and kinetic means, in order to achieve decisive and irreversible outcomes, without close-range engagement with opposing capabilities. In this essential regard, the conceptual outlook of current Russian strategy is fundamentally different from the mindset of Soviet Cold War strategy – large-scale, “force-on-force” engagement of coordinated echelons, as practiced during the *Zapad 77* and *Zapad 81* exercises¹⁴ -- even if the distinctive focus on “deep operations” remains.¹⁵ In this construct, short and long-range multiple rocket launchers and short-range ballistic missiles, equipped with very destructive sub-munitions and fuel air explosive warheads and guided by drones, can inflict unimaginable levels of devastation upon opposing forces on short notice, as witnessed in Russia’s Chechen Wars, in Ukraine’s Donbas region¹⁶ and in the siege of Syria’s city of Aleppo. China also aims to create spatial separation from its eastern and southern shores by keeping United States and other Western forces at a strategic distance and at a growing “over-watch” risk from its territory, coastline and airspace.

¹¹ On the A2/AD concept, see Guillaume Lasconjarias and Alessandro Marrone, *How to Respond to Anti-Access/Area denial (A2/AD)? Towards a NATO Counter-A2/AD Strategy* (Rome: NATO Defense College), February 2016.

¹² In Russia’s case, enhanced responsiveness is facilitated by the conduct across Russia’s force structure, since spring 2013, of periodic, no-notice, “snap-alert” exercises of varying scale. See Johan Norberg, *Training to Fight: Russia’s Major Military Exercises, 2011-2014* (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2015).

¹³ Russia and China have both enacted since 2010 major reforms of their respective command structures that emphasize jointness, a theater focus, and a smooth transition from a peacetime to a wartime posture. See Trude Pettersen, “New Military Command System in Russia”, *The Barents Observer*, 25 October 2010; and Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, *China’s Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms*, Strategic Forum 294 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, April 2016).

¹⁴ Ruiz Palmer, “The NATO-Warsaw Pact strategic competition in the 1970s and 1980s: a revolution in military affairs in the making or the end of a strategic age?”, *Cold War History*, special issue, Volume 14, number 4, autumn 2014, pp. 546-551.

¹⁵ Ruiz Palmer, *Russia’s hybrid warfare, revolutions in military affairs, and Cold War comparisons*, op.cit., p. 6.

¹⁶ Dave Majumdar, “Russia’s Lethal Thermobaric Rocket Launchers: A Game Changer in Syria?” *The National Interest*, 2 December 2015; and Philip A. Karber and Joshua Thibeault, *Russia’s new generation warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Association of the United States Army, May 2016).

At the same time, the ubiquity of modern technologies extends their accessibility and kinetic and non-kinetic applications to a growing range of non-state actors with a militant ideological narrative and a commitment to the systematic use of terror.

HYBRID WARFARE, MILITARY POWER, AND THE USE FOR FORCE

Geopolitical petulance, and the danger of an increased proclivity towards risk-taking, could well enhance the attractiveness of hybrid warfare strategies, as a substitute for, or as a precursor to, the use of force, while concealing hybrid warfare's *central military component*. Hybrid warfare helps shape the ideological and supporting activities, through characterization of their mundane and routine nature, as well as concealment of deep-seated motives, through information saturation and the creation of a self-imposing, "alternative reality".¹⁷

At the same time, the military instrument contributes to the attainment of a hybrid warfare campaign in a latent way -- in synchronized, covert and overt ways -- to intimidate and coerce, or to transform, through the tailored, often rapid, use of force, a favorable situation into a decisive outcome.¹⁸ Hybrid warfare might be an attractive and dependable alternative to the use of force, but it is *not* the non-military counter-part of traditional military operations. It is the thick skin, outer shell of raw military power, without which hybrid warfare campaigns would be at risk of

being excessively vulnerable to opposing strategies and counter-measures.

COUNTERING HYBRID WARFARE AND NATO'S RESOLVE AND ROLE

Western democracies are confronted today with an ideological and geopolitical challenge that is unprecedented since the end of the Cold War, as well as by growing skepticism in their midst regarding the continued return on seven decades of Western investment into a stable, peaceful and prosperous liberal world order. This generational challenge could well test the West's resourcefulness and steadfastness in new and, possibly, unwelcome ways.

Meeting this challenge successfully has been facilitated by the much greater awareness that now exists of the nefarious aims and tactics of hybrid warfare. NATO has taken important steps since the Wales Summit in September 2014 to strengthen its deterrence and defense posture and to build-up its capacity and resilience against disinformation, cyber threats, and coercion risks.¹⁹ A persistent Allied military presence guards the Alliance's eastern flank, backed-up by other military arrangements and by a constellation of multinational Centers of Excellence on Cyber Defence, Strategic Communications, Energy Security, and, most recently, Hybrid Warfare. Other measures are being taken to mitigate the threat from terrorism and to help project stability beyond the Alliance's borders. Countering successfully and, if necessary, defeating hybrid warfare, however, will

¹⁷ Molly K. McKew and Gregory A. Maniatis, "Playing by Putin's tactics", *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2014; Deborah Yarsike Ball, *Protecting Falsehoods With a Bodyguard of Lies: Putin's Use of Information Warfare*, Research Paper No. 136 (Rome: NATO Defense College), February 2017.

¹⁸ Russia, since Soviet times, has a long tradition of "preparing the engagement space" as a prelude to the quick use of force, from the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, to the illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in March 2014 and the deployment of Russian forces in Syria in autumn 2015.

¹⁹ *Warsaw Summit Communiqué* (Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation), 8-9 July 2016, paragraph 72.

continue to require unity and steadiness of purpose.