

MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project



Hybrid Warfare and its Countermeasures

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In many ways, the term 'hybrid' could be regarded as a misleading term, and there is a case for simply using the word 'warfare' as a description of unrestricted and unconventional activities. War has usually referred to a bounded, definable phenomenon, while *warfare* has described both the practice of war and something more ambiguous and irregular. What we can be sure of is the unchanging nature of war. It is driven by a political purpose.¹ It consists of rational decisions in the use of force. It consists of irrational passions in violence. It is plagued by unpredictable chance events and a dynamic caused by the inherent struggle for ascendancy or survival. The character of war we know changes with each encounter. While certain manoeuvres and principles can be traced through time, the actual collision will generate entirely new situations in unique contexts. Since we cannot predict what these situations will look like, even though we know they will require changes in their duration, the most useful thing we can do is to prepare ourselves to be adaptable, creative and innovative, knowing that the war, when it comes, will be very different from what we expected.

There are also changes which appear to characterise longer periods of time, sometimes referred to as generational developments in war's character. Some have labelled our era the 'information age' while it seems likely that we are entering what might be called a 'synthetic age' or perhaps a robotic era. Within this period, we have been warned that we are in a 'fourth generation' of warfare. This has consisted of protracted wars amongst the people; local forces teamed up with special operations forces and air power; terror tactics; decentralised command and control; higher levels of surveillance and precision strikes; psychological and media operations directed against the public and politicians, and the comprehensive coordination of political, military, legal and developmental/economic instruments. This period of war has required unity of command, of purpose and of effort across political and military personnel, a greater awareness of the media and public opinion; engagement with the private sector in security and procurement, and a reachback into the expertise of universities and other specialist institutions.

Amongst the future projections we are offered, which are too complex to detail here, there is an expectation that wars are and will be fought for influence and that we will see a great deal more coercion, short of war, where weaker adversaries and states seek to avoid the full costs and condemnation of aggressive war.

To understand how to counter this phenomenon of hybrid warfare and coercive influence without recourse to war, we might refer to historical precedents. One striking example comes from the late nineteenth century in Central Asia. In essence, Russia was engaged in a twenty-year incremental annexation of territory in the region. To the British government, this steady advance southwards seemed a threat because each year brought the Tsar's more numerous forces closer to the continental land frontier of British India.² This frontier was inhabited by hostile peoples and would need an army of perhaps 1.5 million, at prohibitive cost, to counter. Britain's strength lay in its navy, not in a large army and there was concern that reinforcements, sent from the United Kingdom, would take too long to arrive if the Russian border was eventually coterminous with India and the Tsar decided to challenge the Queen's rule in South Asia.

Russian methods of annexation gave further cause for concern. Columns of Russian troops, sometimes disguised as native Turcomans would provoke skirmishes with the khanates of Central Asia, and then escalate force to overmatch them. All the while the Russian government issued denials that they had advanced or had any designs on the region. In fact, operations were orchestrated by the Asiatic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in combination with ambitious Russian officers. British suspicions were increased when these same officers were officially rewarded by the Tsars for their actions, and unofficially, Russian leaders hinted that they could use the advances in Central Asia and British anxiety about them as diplomatic leverage. Russia had therefore seized Kazakhstan, Tashkent, Chimkent, Ak-Tepe (now Ashgabat) and Khiva by 1873 and looked set to continue across the Pamirs and into Afghanistan, and thence on to India.

The British developed a response to these tactics. First, they developed understanding with the establishment of an Intelligence Division in London. This organisation was ordered to collect and collate details of Russian advances which could be presented to the British government and used to expose Russian designs at the diplomatic level with St Petersburg. The second action was the establishment of an intelligence and early warning screen across Asia, from Turkey in the west to China in the east. A collection of consulates, news-writers, and British officers monitored Russian bases and transport nodes. In Russian Turkestan (present day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) there were four overlapping networks of human intelligence operatives.

The third action was the establishment of security or buffer zones to buy time for mobilisation and deployment should there ever be a conflict with Russia. These zones included the Turkish Ottoman Empire, Persia, Afghanistan, China and Tibet. The gap between the

1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (translated and edited by Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

2 Robert Johnson, "'Russians at the Gates of India': Planning the Strategic Defence of India, 1884-1899" *Journal of Military History* (USA: Virginia Military Institute), 67, (July 2003): 697-743.

Russian Pamirs and China was covered by creating the Wakhan ‘pan-handle’ as part of Afghanistan, and there were other border delimitations to check the Russian advance. The fourth action was to design schemes for the rapid mobilisation of the Indian Army and its reinforcement by British troops. To buy extra time and establish a more defensible line, the British created a scheme that would be activated the moment the Russians invaded Afghanistan, namely the seizure of strategic passes in the Hindu Kush. This would constitute an enhanced forward deployment.

The fifth and final action was in robust and unambiguous diplomacy. In 1885, when the Russians attacked an Afghan brigade at Penjdeh, Britain called up its reserves, sent a Royal Navy flotilla to Vladivostok and threatened war. With memories of the Crimean War and the unrest that had caused inside Russia, they were compelled to accept a border settlement for their southern frontier. The war was averted by negotiations in the capitals.

This historical vignette offers several instructive points. It suggests that the problem of operations below the threshold of war are not new, despite our unfamiliarity with them. It also reveals that our ancestors found a solution. In essence, this consisted of: intelligence and early warning; security zones; forward deployment with a rapid reinforcement scheme; credible forces with a strong will to use them; and robust diplomacy.

Arguably the electronic environment makes this historical example less valid, but it does expose one vital principle, a key point in fact, namely, that British actions *compelled their adversary to make a choice*. They could continue with the same measures of subterfuge and face the consequences, or they could change as they were no longer effective.

Much time and effort has been spent on defining hybrid warfare, those combinations of actions with a political purpose.³ In discerning the most effective countermeasures, like all strategy, we should first decide on the political purpose or intent before us. The critical question that arises is, first, how can we frustrate, deny or defeat that objective? We do not start with the means or ways because the only response to these would lead us to tackle the symptoms and not the cause. If we ourselves are considering a hybrid approach, we should initially decide on our clear political objective and not focus on the means or ways. To do so, would risk the tacticisation of our strategy.

If we are confronted by ambiguous or hybrid activity, we might reflect on why it is happening. In the early 2000s, Dr Frank Hoffman anticipated that, given the West’s conventional power, it would face an enemy that combined fanaticism with advanced weaponry, combining its ways and means to achieve a strategic

3 Most contend that hybrid warfare is simply the *combination of regular and irregular forces* on the battlefield; irregulars being defined as militia, guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists. The United States Army TRADOC G-2 expands this list slightly to include: ‘two or more of the following: military forces, nation-state paramilitary forces (such as internal security forces, police, or border guards), insurgent organizations (movements that primarily rely on subversion and violence to change the status quo), guerrilla units (irregular indigenous forces operating in occupied territory), and criminal organizations (such as gangs, drug cartels, or hackers)’ with a heavy emphasis on the use of cyber operations. TRADOC G-2, “Operational Environments to 2028: The Strategic Environment for Unified Land Operations” (August, 2012), p. 5.

advantage.⁴ Russia made use of deception and a rapid military operation to achieve its objectives in Crimea. The disinformation campaign was appealing to a media that is invariably hungry for exclusive information and a ‘story’. The Russian forces were able to ‘hide in plain sight’ because they knew that unidentifiable troops would generate a media interest. Recently, an officer remarked in frustration that ‘we need to educate the media’ but what he meant was not that journalists are poorly educated but that he wished they were more loyal. The solution to the media is to treat it as a battlespace like any other. One has to feed the story, offer dazzling data, engage in multiple activities to generate interest, and therefore keep the initiative.

An example of success in this regard is the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and their careful sequencing of information and action for the operation against Ahmad Jabari, the leader of Hamas, in 2012. Prior to the mission, the IDF released information summaries about Jabari and his notoriety. Then, in real time, the air strike on his car was released with an accompaniment of social media messages to reinforce the central idea of his guilt and record of crimes against Israel. After the strike, this mainstream, international and social media operation was sustained and expanded. Despite inevitable criticism from the pro-Palestinian lobbyists and Hamas itself, the Israelis had ‘established the facts on the ground’, seized and retained the initiative and created a story the media wanted to tell.

Combined cyber, electromagnetic activities and an environment of urban congestion characterised the attack by Lashkar-e Toiba (LET) on Mumbai in 2008.⁵ A relatively small terror cell inserted itself into the city by boat, and once it had commenced its attack on civilians, it used the mainstream media to provide situational awareness. Further coordination and media coverage was relayed from the cell’s headquarters in Karachi, which included the media’s detailing of what the security forces were doing. The terror group were therefore able to anticipate the actions of the police and interdict them, thus prolonging the assault. As a follow up, footage of their attack was used to recruit more young men to LET.

Such examples are prone to create an infallible image of hybrid operations, but if we study the failures of hybrid warfare we will gain two important advantages. One, we will be able to exploit and accelerate the decomposition of other hybrid operations. Two, we will be able to see how the enemy is likely to adapt and to some extent we will be able to anticipate how hybrid warfare is likely to develop.

The first area of failure is in disinformation. Russia’s attempt to conceal the identity of its ‘green gentleman’ can hardly be considered effective. The denials about the deployment of 810 Marine Brigade were blunt and implausible. They were only effective because the West was slow in its response, divided over its strategy and largely unwilling to act. What development could we expect here? In essence, one would expect there to be a greater emphasis on stealth, the use of proxies and the evolution

4 Frank Hoffman, ‘Hybrid Warfare and Challenges’, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 52, 1 (2009): 34-39. See also: Frank G. Hoffman, ‘Hybrid versus Compound War: The Janus Choice Defining Today’s Multifaceted Conflict’, *Armed Forces Journal*, (October 2009), p. 15.

5 See David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of tactical and strategic dimensions of these operations. In effect that is what we saw in Donbass: separatists supported by Russian regulars, ‘humanitarian aid convoys’ full of munitions, even more vociferous denial of the deployment of heavy weapons, such as anti-aircraft missile and artillery batteries, and other forms of aggression against the Ukrainian government.

Yet Russian stealthy operations were still not to the same standard as the Pakistanis support for the Afghan insurgents against American interests. Here, disinformation has been very effective. Many leading American politicians still believe that Pakistan has made efforts to stop Afghan insurgents despite the existence, proven in many circles, of their covert support of the Taliban and the Haqqanis.⁶ The Pakistanis have created ambiguity about the presence of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, even though it is almost inconceivable that the terrorist leader could have been living in the country’s major military town without the knowledge of the Pakistan army. Their supply of Taliban fighters, interference with the ground lines of communications into Afghanistan and sponsorship of terrorism are well established, and yet the United States has been reluctant to act decisively against this nuclear power for a variety of strategic reasons.

The second area of failure is in rapid military operations, with proxies. In the Donbass, Russia failed to secure or resolve the conflict there swiftly, which meant that the Ukrainians were able to recover. Equally, in Syria, intervention has not proved as decisive as Russia had hoped. Moreover, from a strategic point of view, Russia has not only achieved only limited operational success, it has also roused NATO and reversed the long decline of Western military spending. NATO’s enhanced forward presence in the Baltic states and in Poland has made the risk to Russia far higher. As a result, it has been compelled to reinforce Kaliningrad and the border area. It has set out to deter the West with large scale exercises (like Zapad in 2017) to show its readiness. It has been forced to consider opening new fronts, in Belarus and with extended influence across the Middle East. Russian operatives allegedly can now be found in Afghanistan, Egypt and Yemen.

For countermeasures, the West has now accumulated knowledge of what must be done. The following tables indicate these in outline.

Threat	Countermeasure
Territorial threat to NATO members’ sovereignty.	Deterrence: West’s willingness and capability to use nuclear weapons; a conventional military response to any attack on a member state triggering Article 5 of NATO’s charter.
Break-up NATO alliance by demonstrating its hesitation, its dependence on an indifferent United States, or its lack of capability to defend itself.	Frequent joint exercises, with United States involvement; public affirmations of the alliance commitment; exposure of Russian or adversarial narratives, showing they intend to divide, and how they fail to match reality.
Exploitation of separatists, sympathisers, and vulnerable soft power influencers.	Good governance and democracy with vitality; free press; domestic intelligence and counter-espionage; rehearsed national defence measures and alliance defence systems; ⁷ inclusion of separatists’ interests to neutralise the potency of their messaging. Volunteer force to augment reserves and maintain essential services.
Distributed denial of service (DDOS), hybrid attack	Immediate retaliatory responses, in all domains. Estonia’s Commander of the Defence Forces announced any ‘gentlemen in green’ who violated the borders would be shot, without question. ⁸ Development of anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities for air defence, sea defence, anti-armour and fire support roles. Rapid reaction forces from allied nations, building on forward deployments from NATO nations.
Economic blockade	The blockade of a port has been considered an act of war since the Declaration of Paris in 1856, but there are rules that govern its application, including a public declaration. ⁹ Since sieges are illegal, and the economic disruption of a full scale DDOS attack would be severe, an undeclared blockade would create ambiguity in the status of a conflict, but if treated, by its effects, as an act of war, then international law, international humanitarian law or alliance terms can be invoked.
Media operations accompanied by the use of force to discredit a government	Such actions do not constitute an act of war and therefore do not lie within the purview of armed forces. Rather, they should be dealt with by a free press and democratic government exposing the interference, ‘fake news’, and intent of the perpetrators.

Figure 1 - Established hybrid warfare measures and countermeasures

6 ‘Pakistan’s ISI and Covert Operations in Afghanistan’, in K.C. Gustafson and P. Davies, (eds), *Intelligence Elsewhere* (Georgetown University Press, 2013).

Measure	Countermeasure
Engineering a border dispute, then seizing the opportunity for limited 'retaliatory action'	Sudden and aggressive counter-move, to face down and 'call the bluff' of the proponent, accompanied by complimentary avenue of a peace process to de-escalate.
Misrepresenting events in an international forum	Immediate, public and repeated exposure of the infringement of norms and standards of honesty, in order to reduce trust in the proponent.
Boycotts, sanctions and embargoes	Diversification of sources of revenue, commerce and service sector industries
Arms race and rearmament programmes, deterrence posture and deployment of particular weapon systems	Use of allies, coalitions and partnerships to create parity in adversary's deployments
Espionage	Counter-espionage and exposure of certain, selected groups and individuals to discredit the activity.
Fait Accompli: Seizure of territory and its reinforcement, usually in small incremental steps, before others' can react or remaining below a threshold that would provoke retaliation.	Rapid and forceful retaliatory action, as early as possible, to deter such activity and prevent further escalation.

Figure 2 - Thematic analysis of hybrid measures and countermeasures in history

4

We must now turn our attention to how hybrid warfare is likely to evolve, since these measures, if countered, cannot remain unaltered. The density of media in Western countries suggests that an adversary would seek to use combined ways and means to overload command, control and communications, perhaps through rapid operations in different domains or a coup de main. Even more likely will be the effort to exploit the seams and divisions of the West, by manipulating the migrant crisis (evidence of this exists in northern Norway), through the financial crisis, and by supporting extreme political groups. This would constitute what George Kennan said in the Cold War that 'political warfare' was needed to avoid costly war fighting and to signal intentions. The contrast to this development though could be the emergence of 'unrestricted warfare'. Two officers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, wrote *Unrestricted Warfare* to reset Chinese expectations about war. They disputed Clausewitz's idea, believing: '[his] principles of warfare are no longer "using armed force to compel an enemy to submit to one's will", but rather are using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel an enemy to accept one's interests.'¹⁰

Either way, the West could make greater use of the other strategic designs than the simple expedient of escalation. Escalation depends on greater strength, and it is founded on the idea that resistance can be overcome by overmatching it in numbers, munitions or speed of reaction. These efficiencies can be

thwarted however, as observations of insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014 indicate. Escalation was countered with protraction, dispersal, stealth and guerrilla tactics.

The alternative strategic designs are in inflexion, reflexion, deception, contradiction and seduction. Inflexion suggests the enemy is off-balance, tilted, or that some rebalancing is possible, perhaps by opening up a new front in their rear, co-opting a new ally against them, or changing axis. Reflexion is the process of subverting, dissuading, provocation, and luring in an enemy. It makes use of the enemy's propensity to behave in a certain way, and exploits it. Deception is the way of ambiguity, which imposes delay and hesitation on the enemy; it is the ability to be unpredictable, to sidestep and conceal. Contradiction is to harry, distract, and pin, an opponent, but it is also the concept of being passive-aggressive, saying and doing in opposite ways or it is the imposition of the ancient Chinese concept of 'slow-slow: quick-quick', where two ponderous preparatory movements in one direction conceal a lightning pair of thrusts from an unexpected angle.

How would the hybrid concept manifest itself after its setbacks and successes in the last decade. We can almost certainly expect a greater use of cyber and information operations, but the most likely scenario would be city uprisings. The events of Euro-Maidan or Tahrir Square (2011), like Tiananmen Square (1989), had a profound effect on authoritarian regimes and it is obvious that Western forces would find it hard to operate in a large city revolt. Domestic divisions would be enhanced, not least over inevitable civilian casualties. Police and military boundaries are exploited. Indeed, city operations are a known weakness for the West and this alone makes them more likely.

This scenario is only one development in hybrid operations. Conceptually, we can anticipate new actors (including the greater use of viruses and bots in information warfare); the use of criminal systems (narcotics supply has been important in sustaining insurgencies in the world and could be used against the West); and belief systems (it would be relatively easy to exploit

7 See, for example, Estonia: Mikk Salu, 'Pool aastat enne Eesti soda Aslaaviaga' [six months before Estonia's War with 'Aslavia'], Eesti Ekspress, 22 June 2015, cited in Henrik Praks, 'Hybrid or Not: Detering and Defeating Russia's Ways of Warfare in the Baltics – The Case of Estonia' in Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen, *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats* (Rome: NATO Defence College, Forum Paper 24, 2015), p. 234.

8 Sam Jones, 'Estonia ready to deal with Russia's Little Green Men', *Financial Times*, 13 May 2015.

9 Declaration of Paris, 15, *Nouveau Recueil Général des Traités*, 1 Serie, p. 791.

10 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Panama City: Pan American Publishing, 2002), pp. xxi-xxii.

Muslim sensibilities and religious conflict in the West, since individual rights have become so prominent).

These developments suggest that the countermeasures required are: seamless civil-military responses; coordination across government; media warfare training and education for different levels of command; exposure of enemy lines of communication; and efforts to induce 'blow back': that is to turn the effects of hybrid warfare back on the enemy.

In the operational dimension, hybrid warfare changes very little. In intelligence preparation, one would still need to pose the 'seven questions' to ascertain what is happening and why. Operational planning and execution would still require a centre of gravity analysis to locate the critical points; arranging and shaping operations to disrupt, delay or impose friction on the enemy; manoeuvre (including interference in enemy communications and integrated action); joint and integrated fires, synchronised with information; speedy and simplified command, control and communications in highly mobile forms, and the destruction of enemy command, control and communication; acute operational security measures; and constant efforts to build the confidence of one's own forces and public, while demoralising the enemy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should bear in mind several points. **The first is that hybrid ways and means are not new.** History provides many examples of success and failure. Both are useful for study as they

offer ideas for implementation, at least conceptually. They also remind us of the importance of brevity and clarity in this issue. We should understand in order to counter hybrid warfare more efficiently. Let us study its failures.

The second point is that the idea of countering hybrid warfare is to compel the enemy to make a stark choice. Continue and face failure; or change methods.

Third, our responses need to be rapid and credible.

Fourth, we should anticipate development in hybrid warfare, including the use of proxies, electronic tools, political warfare, urban scenarios and economic elements. The most pressing evolution is likely to be in city uprisings.

Fifth, we should examine strategic designs other than escalation. This would give us a far greater range of options and enable offensive versions of the technique.

Finally, we should avoid falling into the paradigm trap. It is not simply a case of adopting hybrid warfare in the hope of being more effective in the information warfare era. Instead, military officers and government leaders need to be prepared to adapt. We need to prepare for problems and approached we haven't even encountered yet, and that means fostering creativity, flexibility and agility. It means rewarding initiative, ensuring a balance between keeping ones forces, nation and allies informed, and genuinely clandestine measures, means and capabilities.

