Defence-In-Depth

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Hybrid War: The Perfect Enemy

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Why does hybrid war cast such a long shadow over Western conceptions of future threats? The ubiquity of the idea of hybrid war is interesting given the many serious problems with the concept.

Hybrid war has, for example, little intellectual coherence, since different commentators define hybrid war in different ways. For **Frank Hoffman (http://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf)**, hybridity expresses the difficulty that: 'Instead of separate challengers with fundamentally different approaches (conventional, irregular, or terrorist) we can expect to face competitors who will employ *all* forms of war and tactics, perhaps simultaneously.' For **J. J. McCuen (http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/mccuen08marapr.pdf)**, hybrid wars are 'full spectrum wars with both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for, control and support of the combat zone's indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community.' NATO has defined hybrid war as 'a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian

measures […] employed in a highly integrated design.' Often, then, we are using the same hybrid war label to describe different things.

The above problem exposes another flaw: that we may be guilty of engaging in a process of generalising from the specific. Hoffman generalised about hybrid war from the specifics of the armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006; McCuen generalised from the specific state-building conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan; and more recently, hybrid war has been generalised as a phenomenon from the specifics of Russian activities in Crimea and the Donbas. Hybrid war seems to be redefined in relation to the characteristics of each new conflict that worries the West. To compound this problem, if we try and generalise across the different definitions of hybrid war, we are left with a concept that is so broad as to be almost meaningless. As **Damien van Puyvelde (https://www.academia.edu/12278418/_Hybrid_war_does_it_even_exist_NATO_Review?auto=download)** notes, 'In practice, any threat can be hybrid as long as it is not limited to a single form and dimension of warfare. When any threat or use of force is defined as hybrid, the term loses its value and causes confusion instead of clarifying the "reality" of modern warfare.'

We have also been guilty of over-inflating the value of hybrid war as a new concept. We do not need to invent a new classification of warfare to explain hybrid warfare successes. For example, that Hezbollah did better than was expected during in 2006 can easily be attributed to Israeli weaknesses, including poor strategy and a focus on low intensity operations in Gaza. Russian successes in Crimea depended upon such situationally specific factors as the presence of a large Russian population; the presence of Russian military bases; and a primed Russian domestic audience. In assuming that hybrid warfare is a uniquely effective tool we are, first, guilty of what Hew Strachan has termed astrategic thinking – of assuming that tactical and operational techniques can be successful whatever the strategic context. Second, we are guilty of ignoring hybrid warfare's often ambiguous results. Russian actions in the Donbas, for example, have been much less decisive than those in Crimea and have involved significant costs and an increasing Russian commitment. In many respects hybrid warfare has simply become any non-conventional military strategy that worries us.

Finally, hybrid warfare is a malign reflection of what the strategist Colin Gray has termed 'presentism:' the tendency for each generation to see the problems that it faces as unique and to fail to see the powerful historical continuities that often are present. **Mark Galeotti (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09592318.2015.1129170?needAccess=true)** and **Geraint Hughes (https://defenceindepth.co/2016/03/14/little-green-men-and-red-armies-why-russian-hybrid-war-is-not-new/)** have already illustrated the historical precedents for Russia's current hybrid warfare. Proponents of hybrid wars struggle to provide a meaningful unifying definition of the concept because hybrid war actually does not have a distinct nature and it is not a separate form of war. What we define as hybrid wars are simply expressions of the inherent relational and asymmetric nature of all wars. 'Hybrid wars' are examples of belligerents trying to side-step the strengths of their adversaries and to focus the terms of conflict on their weaknesses. But that's not new. If Lebanon in 2006 and Crimea and Donbas in 2014 are hybrid wars, then so is German submarine warfare in the First and second World wars; British strategic bombing in World War Two; British counter-insurgency in Malaya; or the actions of General Aideed in Somalia. These are all hybrid in the sense that they reflect the use of different tools to get at an opponent's weaknesses whilst trying to mitigate their strengths.

All of this raises an important question: why, despite its intellectual shortcomings, is hybrid war such a pervasive concept? The answer, I think, is because it is a manifestation of our own insecurities about the world in which we live. These insecurities have two dimensions. The first concerns our own perceptions of the weakness and decline of the West. These perceptions have their roots in such things as the crisis in confidence in the western economic model created by the 2008 crash and continued weakness ever since. It reflects fear over our vulnerability and cohesion – fears over our loss of control over globalisation; fears for what we see as the basic pillars of international order: Western predominance; US-European relations; European cohesion; NATO. It reflects perceptions, as a consequence of such conflicts as Afghanistan and Syria, of our inability to deal effectively with critical security challenges. These fears also stem from perceptions regarding the internal weaknesses of western states: growing fears about the political cohesion of our societies; the rolling back of democracy; political polarisation.

The second strand concerns perceptions of the strength and guile of our adversaries. This crisis in self-confidence has been accompanied by a tendency to downplay the weaknesses of our competitors; to see only strength wielded in the service of superior long-term strategies. These problems aren't necessarily new. **Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith (http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english/publications/presentations/papers/ap_1_2016.pdf)** argue that the West's fear of Russian hybrid war is 'reminiscent of the West's enemy image of the Soviet Union, which viewed the Soviet leadership as a chess master that was vastly superior in terms of centralisation, organisation and co-ordination.'

We are afraid; and because of this we have invented for ourselves the perfect enemy. We feel increasingly insecure, increasingly fearful; we have as a consequence created the image of a potent new threat from powerful adversaries who suffer none of our problems and by-pass our strengths. But intellectually, the concept of hybrid war says more about our fears than it does about any genuinely new model of war. This is not to say that that the current security environment isn't difficult and dangerous. However, if we stopped connecting together all of our difficulties, multiplying them by the assumption of superior adversaries and then labelling them hybrid war, we might find these challenges easier to address.

*Image: Russian-Belurssian military exercises in the Baltic, 2009, via **Kremlin.ru (http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5598/photos)**.*

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