

The Future of Hybrid Warfare



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Audio Briefs

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This series—featuring scholars from the Futures Lab, the International Security Program, and across CSIS—explores emerging challenges and opportunities that NATO

is likely to confront after its 75th anniversary.

In the future, NATO should embrace the concept of hybrid warfare and incorporate it into how it deters and defends. Starting with resiliency as the first step, NATO can use its inherent strengths to put adversaries at a disadvantage and strengthen its strategic approach to hybrid warfare.

Warfare evolves and belies the Western tendency to make black and white distinctions, such as that between conventional and irregular warfare. This reflects a rigid categorization rather than a continuum of conflict and a variety of methods and modes of warfare. However, in spite of this tendency, NATO should more fully integrate hybrid warfare in its defense strategies. To do this, it must overcome natural disadvantages while using its own strengths, interests, and values to establish resilience against adversaries' hybrid activities.

The original perspective on hybrid threats reflected a violent blend of regular capabilities and irregular tactics. This mode of conflict was defined as an adversary that “simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, catastrophic terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to obtain desired political objectives.” Violent conflict is increasingly likely in the future, and it is *very* likely to be hybrid in its character due to the desire of great powers to avoid direct confrontation.

Perhaps because of its intensive but stalled battle with Kyiv, Moscow is starting to expand its active measures and hybrid conflict tactics throughout Europe. This includes sabotage, arson, and cyberattacks. NATO's concern about the dark side of Russian hybrid conflict is warranted. NATO publicly warned Russia about its hybrid activities identified in Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Regardless of how it fares in Ukraine, it is clear that Russia will continue to try to destabilize the West, interfering through funding friendly media outlets and subverting political parties. As noted by Mark Galeotti, there is nothing novel in Russia's use of these techniques, most of which are as old as time. NATO countries will have to be prepared to deflect this “war in the shadows” while also preparing its collective defense capabilities.

The fusion of advanced capabilities with irregular forces and tactics is also key, as borne out repeatedly over the last decade in conflicts involving Hezbollah, the conflict in Syria, and Russian campaigns in Georgia and Ukraine. The Syrian case study is concerning, as the civil war in Syria has evolved into a hybrid conflict where Russian military support, Syrian irregulars, and mercenaries are fighting against an equally blended mix of local irregulars supported by U.S. air and artillery support.

Hybrid conflict takes an indirect approach via proxy forces to increase deniability. Autocratic powers would prefer to advance their interests as sponsors of proxy forces. Proxy wars, appealing to some powers as “warfare on the cheap,” are historically ubiquitous. Sponsorship from a major power can generate hybrid threats more readily by the provision of advanced military capabilities to the proxy. Russian private military companies like the Wagner Group operate as subsidiaries of the Kremlin and have operated in Syria, Ukraine, and Libya. Putin has provided advanced weapons, intelligence, and various “volunteers” to these conflicts. Although the private military companies have a rather mixed track record, Russia's use of the companies will likely continue. More important to major states, the lack of direct contact helps defuse the potential for attribution and escalation. Proxy wars have taken many forms in the past, and the employment of cyberattacks and drones may continue to expand the use of proxy actors.

Chinese thinking about more unconventional approaches to conflict includes the "three warfares" (psychological, political, and lawfare) to achieve its goals. For example, its investment in the United Front department serves to control the behavior and narrative of Chinese diasporas and foreign communities, while using front organizations to maximize Chinese influence overseas. China is also increasing its use of commercial security operations to protect its economic and political interests abroad. The probability of indirect and proxy Chinese intervention should be anticipated as Chinese interests expand in depth and reach. Lastly, China's continued use of blurred tactics and quasi-military forces in the maritime domain manifestly demonstrates Chinese use of coercive force in innovative ways. China has been carefully adapting its maritime assets and extending its influence, conducting hybrid or gray zone actions with "Chinese characteristics." As NATO countries deploy forces to the Pacific region to defend international norms and order, they will face Chinese

hybrid warfare activities there as well as in other regions, as China's reach expands to the Middle East and possibly the Arctic.

In response, NATO has adopted an expansive definition of hybrid conflict that includes political interference, sabotage, subversion, and malign influence activities. That perspective captures the alliance's persistent challenge from Moscow, which has long favored indirect methods or "Active Measures," and now includes mass media disinformation. In response, NATO places resiliency as the "first line" of deterrence and defense. This emphasis is a key shift but is also difficult to do, or do quickly. The very things that make NATO and its democracies strong in the face of autocracies—laws, principles, and values—also make collective action and decisions difficult in the grey zone. It is relatively easier to focus on nuclear and conventional military forces than to discuss societal resiliency in the context of an alliance. The results of the 75th NATO summit will help determine if NATO is collectively prepared to deter and deflect the ambiguous tactics of hybrid warfare in spite of its constraints or prepared to leave more to individual states.

The future is likely to see the most consequential form of armed conflict in the lower-to-middle portion of the conflict spectrum, likely with surrogates and proxies. Fortunately, NATO has invested time and thought into this problem and has slowly integrated countering surrogates and proxies into its strategies for collective defense and integrated deterrence. As Russia continues to antagonize the West and China looks to gain advantages across the globe, NATO will have to reinforce its ability to detect, deter, and respond to this type of malign assault on its values and freedoms.

Frank Hoffman is a distinguished research fellow at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C., with over 43 years of government service, including 30 years in the U.S. Marine Corps. Colonel Matt Neumeyer is currently serving as the department chair and military faculty for the Strategic Security Studies Department of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His views presented in this article do not reflect those of the Marshall Center, U.S. Army, or U.S. Department of Defense. Benjamin Jensen is a senior fellow for Futures Lab in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., and

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