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Article · June 2017

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## Western Denial and Russian Control

### How Russia's National Security Strategy Threatens a Western-Based Approach to Global Security, the Rule of Law and Globalization

**Abstract:** The Russian National Security Strategy of 2015 aims at achieving autarky from Western influences on global security, the rule of law and global trade. Russia aims at attaining this by applying a holistic mix of military, political and economic means to weaken the West and to strengthen its own role as a global player. The Russian approach builds on a strategy of reflexive control which as such is an old method, but the outcome of the application of this approach results in hybrid warfare which as such is a new emerging concept of warfighting. This short article looks at one particular aspect of this Russian strategy, namely using Hybrid, or non-linear, Warfare against its Western direct neighbours in particular and the West in general. We will discuss the underlying cultural logic in Russia's actions and will reflect on the impact of Russia's utilization of the existing cultural asymmetry as a form of warfare in regard to the West. The examples used in this text are taken from the context of the conflicts of Ukraine and Syria, but have to be seen as constituting a part of an on-going global conflict aimed at NATO and the EU. The text builds on years of research within the hybrid threat, warfare respectively, context by both authors.

**Keywords:** *hybrid warfare; national security policies; East-West conflict; NATO policy and doctrines; exploitation of cultural asymmetries; disinformation strategies; state vulnerabilities; reflexive control*

## The Hybrid Warfare Blueprint: it is About Us Not About Them

The purpose of this text is to discuss hybrid warfare as a *result* of the Russian use of power in a wide range of ways, military as well as in other ways best described by the military strategist as DIMEFIL (McDonnell, 2009)<sup>1</sup> Power can be defined in a variety of ways. One definition is that if one has both the *willingness* and the *capability* to act, then one has actual power in/over a given situation. In an armed conflict situation, this often turns into a duel situation, own versus adversary's willingness and capability.

Power requires the capability to make an assessment of the situation based on more or less accurate information. What Russia has attempted in Ukraine is to avoid the classification of its actions as armed conflict in its legal and political form and yet, Russia has and continues to launch warfare at an impressive scale. Russia tries to impose its will – on what it seemingly sees as its adversaries – in a manifold host of ways and areas (again, DIMEFIL). Giving a full range of examples of this is all to elaborate and the text would lose focus. Narrowing down the examples given in the text would on the other hand give a skewed impression of how wide the range of Russian activity is.

*Reflexive control* refers to a Soviet war strategy of trying to manipulate the mind of the adversary in order to create vulnerabilities. The well regarded Russo- American psychologist Vladimir Lefebvre defines reflexive control as “a process by which one enemy transmits the reasons or bases for making decisions to another” (Timothy, 2004). The concept is not unknown in sociology, for example can an operational area be conveyed as a social field and the actors on it be pinpointed to act in a way which is beneficial for your own forces.<sup>2</sup> Timothy Thomas writes that reflexive control can be used on all levels of warfare, even in strategy (Timothy, 2004). He states that one of the most complex ways to influence a state's information resources is by use of reflexive control measures against the state's decision-making processes. He includes deception and disinformation (Timothy, 2004). That is true in most cases where deception is needed. In the following we will show that Russia has an easy task with its disinformation strategy, as Western Europe seems to be willing to act according to Russian reflexive control objectives. One could even argue that Russia's warfare against Western power projection in the East can be best described as reflexive control, *resulting* in hybrid warfare. It is an important distinction that the hybrid warfare is the outcome of the Russian logic of its practice of reflective control applied to the

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<sup>1</sup> Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence and Law Enforcement.

<sup>2</sup> For more about Pierre Bourdieu applied on warfare, see Gunneriusson, 2017 (coming).

contemporary context, rather than hybrid being an action in itself.<sup>3</sup> The following text will deal with Russian projection of reflexive control as the prime source of hybrid warfare as evident in Eastern Europe.

We in Europe all know that Russia is de facto waging a war of aggression in Eastern Ukraine but we prefer not to name it as such and instead, opted for viewing the *nature* of the Russian aggressive action as a manifestation of a new form of warfare, namely that of Hybrid Warfare. It is not the Russian warfare in itself which is the novelty, but it is in duel situation between the West and Russia which holds a novelty.<sup>4</sup> But it seems apparent that Russia is having success with its attacks on the West. The success varies, it can be said a bit sweeping that Russian attempts at influence is less successful in states which previously were part of the Warsaw pact and are familiar of the reality of Russian occupation, domination respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Hybrid Warfare as a recognised term for the result of Russian operational modus operandi allows the West to refrain from taking direct military action against Russia while at the same time it sends the message that we regard the Russian action as a form of warfare which we recognise as a form of aggression<sup>6</sup> without the need to take immediate kinetic action. See (Bachmann & Gunneriusson 2015b) for more on Russia's hybrid war in its contemporary form and in Ukraine especially. (Hoffman, 2009a & 2009b) gives a pretext for this discussion on the term *hybrid war*. The way to look at hybrid warfare presented in this text is a similar way to look at the concept but still slightly different to Mark Galeotti's perspective. He defines Russian hybrid warfare as the use of political means to prepare the battlefield on one hand and the pure use of political methods to bring about desired changes in policy in another state (Galeotti, 2016, p.7). We take it a step further, yes the reflexive control is trying to bring about changes in both EU and NATO, but Russia is also showcasing the

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<sup>3</sup> This take, calling hybrid a result, make the use of the theoretical term *hybrid* the more justified as it then does not compete with theoretical terms from the Russian doctrine as for example *Contactless War*. The term hybrid is by that a phenomenological term.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Snegovaya (2015) looks at Russian warfare as a revival of the concept *reflexive control*, which is true. But she does not take into account that the result is vastly different compared with during the Cold War as the West is really not trying to oppose the reflexive control as before. This matters very much, as it is what shapes the Russian warfare against the EU and NATO in a new way.

<sup>5</sup> In the text, Europe and EU are used partly for variation. The reception of Russian influence does of course vary between the states covered by these statements. The subject for this text is not to pinpoint these differences, thus a somewhat imprecise blanket statement.

<sup>6</sup> More on Russia's hybrid war in its contemporary form and in Ukraine especially, see: Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015b. For an older discussion on the term 'Hybrid War', see Hoffman, 2009.

weakness of EU and NATO to other states with authoritarian governments. It is in other words a way for Russia to create legitimacy for its policies and ultimately trying to shape hegemony in its favour.

The term Hybrid Warfare should be treated as covering something novel in both war-fighting doctrine and science.<sup>7</sup> We see it as less fruitful to try to categorise different past irregular conflicts as for example the American revolution; the Spanish war 1807–1814 or the Japanese occupation of China during World War Two as hybrid just because of the conflicts irregularity (Murray & Mansoor, 2012). Such conflicts are best described as insurgencies, compound operations perhaps at times or examples of COIN depending on perspective.

Alternatively, such armed conflict could fall under other terms which cover what Russia is doing, as for example full spectrum warfare or High-end warfare (Kofman, 2016; Traynor, 2007; Vandiver, 2016; Czuperski & Herbst, 2015; Yashin & Shorina, 2015). Proponents of concepts already in use, such as the ones mentioned, sometimes refuse to fill the concept of hybrid warfare with any meaning and then accusing it of having “intellectual shortcomings” (Tuck, 2017). This is a somewhat lazy intellectual approach, similar to a scarecrow argument where you define something as dysfunctional and then accuse it of being just so. If the concept is treated as something novel on the other hand, one is also more open minded to find out what is new in the Russian war fighting approach and what can be done in countering it. Changing perspective in order to finding something new is important if one wants to find new solutions even though there are always handy conventional responses possible. This demands a heuristic method, were the studied object is allowed to change and redefine the theoretical frame one departed from. Discussing it solely as 6<sup>th</sup> generation of warfare or Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) is counterproductive and does not further any understanding of what Russia is doing.<sup>8</sup> To clarify, the “generation” discussion of warfare is Russia’s way of discussing its doctrine (Gerasimov, 2013). Our approach instead should be to rely on our empirical material, not our theory to analyse Russian war fighting doctrine and its manifestation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For an example which tries to bridge contemporary events in Ukraine and earlier events as the 2008 war in Georgia and two examples from Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Neville, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> An article which discuss if Russia’s hybrid warfare can be seen as RMA: Palmer, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Secondly, both the contemporary Russian generation terms and RMA stem from dialectical historical materialism, with the evolvement of history happening in sharp steps (i.e. revolutions) rather than evolvement. That is the original Marxist explanation of how history evolves. It is ironic that the US just at the collapse of the Soviet Union picked up a fundamentally Marxist way of explaining the evolvement of new warfare

We will now highlight some noteworthy examples of the present Russian war-fighting approach. Russia's weaponization of culture has been discussed by Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss in their seminal paper "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money" (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2016, pp. 18–21). The authors discuss the narrative of a strong, homogenous and nationalistic Russia in comparison with a perceived "Euro-Sodom". Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict seems to have turned the conflict in favour of Assad's regime (and also the US backed Kurds) – at least until the winter of 2016 before new developments in Syria might change the endgame. For political and diplomatic reasons, the West is reluctant to acknowledge the Russian role in degrading ISIS in Syria. What the West seems to forget is that its ill-advised support of a ragtag assembly of various opposition groups, including hard-line Islamist groups, coupled with only moderate use of air strikes against Islamic State/ISIS (with the support of the Kurds in their previous fight for Kobane as the one notable exception) have directly contributed to the present status quo in Syria: Assad and his Russian ally have consolidated the governmental position in the conflict and brought Assad back into the game of finding a peace solution. Exploiting the opportunity to concentrate on one enemy alone, which was created by the present ceasefire with the other rebel groups, Assad's military and Russia have now turned fully on ISIS. The continuing military success has made Russia a key stakeholder in the region: the US at times has even voiced a willingness of contemplating enhanced cooperation with Russia in the common fight against ISIS. The US (and the West) in its desire to find quick and economical solutions (which means fewer boots on the ground in order to reduce combat casualties) in its operations of the 'Global War on Terror' since '9/11', is willing to cooperate increasingly with Russia despite the ongoing aggression in Eastern Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. There are ongoing incidents – certainly on the cyber arena where the actors most often are unknown – which can be combined with other acts of force. For example, a major cyber-attack on Finland in April 2016, this was accompanied by a major Russian snap exercise (O'Dwyer, 2016). Coincidence or not, these kinds of events do have effect on populations as well as politicians and these effects are observed by Russia.

Directly linked to the Syrian conflict and often overlooked, is Russia's role in both cause, and exploitation of the so-called migration crisis which will create social, political and economic tensions within Western Europe (Bachmann & Paphiti, 2016). Social tensions will increase as the cohesive fabric of Western culture is already facing changes arising from the irreversible 'Islamization' of Europe: migration crisis and Islamist terrorism have become elements of daily life with the potential to affect both national and social unity in Western Europe.

Political dissent and domestic tensions caused by the ongoing mass migration directly benefits the rise of radical parties, which often display a positive attitude towards Russia and its policies: see e.g. Front National in France and the Freedom party in Austria. Economical tensions in Europe are increasing, fuelled by the increased spending to socially accommodate and absorb mass migration into the economies of the EU, which affects negatively the budgets of defence, health care and education. Such budget cuts will make it very unlikely that NATO Member States will be able to fulfil the 2 % GDP defence spending pledge. We see migration integrated in Russia's hybrid warfare approach, thus de facto weaponizing migration. It is clear that Russia has expanded the cultural weapon as an offensive weapon delivered on foreign ground and not only as a way to shape Russia internally.

What is more important is the unwillingness of primarily Europe to acknowledge that a full-scale armed conflict is underway in Ukraine, with Russia as the main aggressor. This denial can perhaps be explained with the observation that Europe (with the exception of the United Kingdom) in today's globalised post-industrial, post heroic world after the end of the so called Cold War, does no longer believe in the rationale and use of inter-state armed conflict as a means of politics. With the strength of the economical social field with its agenda of globalisation the current weakness of the dethroned political social field is apparent. West - European actors these days are more ruled by the logic of globalisation than by autonomous political doxa of own national policies. The end of the Cold War after all did not result in a 'peace dividend' in terms of lawfulness and mutual recognition of legislative acts in international relations. Western culture, technical knowledge and innovation were once justifications and motors of Western power projection: little does remain when weighted against the logic of economic globalisation. The new Asian players China and India have no reason to pay attention to an increasingly outdated western system when the West step by step is downsizing its role in world global affairs.

In order to protect its master narrative of peaceful conflict resolution instead of adopting a militarily forceful approach in terms of warfighting as a means of politics in times of military threats, Europe simply looks the other way when it comes to Russia's belligerent activities in Eastern Europe. By doing so Europe gives up protecting its core values. International conventions against wars of aggression are not worth much without the relevant backing by states willing to go to war. What has this to do with law then? What we see here is an erosion of the international legal system as Russia continues to violate the core principle of international law: that of non-aggression in international relations, enshrined as the prohibition of the use of force in Article 2 Paragraph 4 of the UN Charter. By doing this Russia can argue that the West is not only weak and distrustful, but also that there might be an alternative to be seen in

the Russian approach to problem-solving at the international level. They can at least point to the fact that the act and they act according to what they are standing for. Is it *lawfare* what Russia is applying, the usage of international law in an unscrupulous way to achieve political objectives by non-military means (Bachmann & Mosquera, 2017, pp. 63–87)? Can one term it as *lawfare*, if such takes place outside a traditional armed conflict. This is about dodging involvement at all so that the question of law becomes irrelevant if the hybrid approach is successful. That is successful as we in the West *want it to be successful* and that is in its turn because we lack both in terms of the *willingness* to act and the *capability* to act. That is what Russia's reflexive control strive to achieve. It is particularly effective as Russia is regionally militarily strong in relative terms versus EU and NATO. Russia's use of *lawfare* is just a continuation of its policies of the total utilization of all means available to achieve its political and geo-strategic goals. Russia is continuing to see and use law fare as a non-military method as part of a confluence of political, military and legal options, as explicitly highlighted in the Russian Military Doctrine 2014 and falling under the wider scope of the Russian Federation's National Security Strategy of 2015. Russia is in this regard. Unlike the West, Russia does not distinguish between warfighting as such and other nonlinear, hybrid, methods as long as they serve its national security and prepares the ground for Russia being able to reduce its economic and political dependency of the West.

### The Conflict in Ukraine<sup>10</sup>

In order to make it easier for the West to ignore the sincerity of a threat by looking the other way, as discussed above, we need to remain naïve and in a state of deniability: having recognised this, Russia utilizes the potentials of dominating the information sphere by investing in its PR campaigns via media as *RT* and employing what is known as *Maskirovka*, military and political deception. Hence, the use of air power in Ukraine would have pointed to an obvious Russian military intervention. The examples of Russian military equipment never used by Ukraine are quite numerous, way beyond a handful incidents. (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015a, p. 206–207). Artillery is used extensively in/into Ukraine by Russia/Rebels as compensation for the lack of air power. (Rettman, 2015) One can see the Russian army in Ukraine as a *hybrid army*. One can also see it as a proxy army which enables the hybrid scenario, which fits better with the description given in this text as hybrid is defined more as a result

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive explanation of the conflict as a whole: Robert R. Leonhard and Stephen P. Philips, "Little Green Men": A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013–2014" The United States Army Special Operations Command Fort Bragg, 2015.



of action than action itself. There were at least one possible use of Russian air-force intervention resulting in the downing of a Ukrainian fighter the Summer of 2014, but it an isolated and early incident in the conflict (Interfax-Ukraine, 2014).

For the same reasons of maintaining the momentum of deniability we argue that Russia did not commit fully in the offensive against Mariupol in August 2014 as such would have dispelled the myth of non-official Russian involvement and also lifted the thin veil of so called ‘non-contact’ war-fighting (Reisinger & Golts, 2015, p. 121). The contactless war as Russia’s Chief of staff General Valery Gerasimov writes, should appear of lacking kinetic contact in its methods and ways (Gerasimov, 2013). Such an example can be found in Russia’s frequent use of cyber to aid its conventional war-fighting and more recently as a means of its own, *sui generis* as a method of contact less fighting. The Russian cyber-attack on the Ukrainian power grid in December 2015, which disrupted the electricity for 225,000 people during winter (Tucker, 2016), is such an example. The attack was very much real, even lethal in its consequences for vulnerable members of the Ukrainian society but still contactless in its appearance. As a cyber-attack it could not be attributed as such but within the context of the on-going conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the message became clear: Russia can shut down the power grid if it wants to. This was very much the same *modus operandi* when the Internet in Estonia was brought down for three days in 2007 in the wake of the diplomatic clash between Russia and Estonia about the relocation of a Soviet war memorial and Soviet graves to a new cemetery (Traynor, 2007). These activities, one has to bear in mind have been planned long in advance and not *ad hoc*: Russia has invested for years in assets necessary for gaining a lead in its cyber-operations in the global information sphere (Bachmann & Gunneriusson 2015a.). The effects of these cyber-attacks were felt: but with no clear attribution possible as such attacks are launched by both Russian state organs as well as so called ‘patriotic’ groups did help to weave the narrative for the underlying message to be sent: intimidation without clear attribution avoiding clear ‘ownership’ and hence accountability.

Our unwillingness to see armed conflict as a rational choice to exert power as part of today’s *Realpolitik*, is harder to overcome and will not be so in the foreseeable future. It is a cultural attitude, which cannot be fixed as easy as the military capability part which very much is about increasing military spending. Even when EU cautiously calls out Russia it is too little and definitively too late.<sup>11</sup> This is plain to see for Russia as

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<sup>11</sup> For example, did Sweden’s minister of defence talk about “the Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine” which was a bolder statement before, but still a rather general statement. He also mentioned “Russian actions are beyond an aggression on Ukraine”. Apparently that aggression

well as for the EU, this mutual – albeit not expressed – acknowledgment is important for Russia's reflexive control to work.

As long as the West hesitates to confront Russia over its war of aggression in Eastern Europe there will be erosion in the maintaining of the international system of peaceful international relations. This result is one of Russia's end-state objectives of destabilizing NATO, EU and the international UN order. With the current relative military weakness in regards to conventional combat power, there is not much for the West to do when it comes to stand up for conventions against military aggressions. The first step for the West must be so military strong that they can have an autonomous foreign policy versus Russia and stand up for the conventions we say that we stand for.

With the political logic and necessity of acting in the best interest of national economic wellbeing being on top of any national political agenda there exist no prospect for states to threaten its own economic wellbeing by countering Russia's continuing breach of international law. This leads to deniability as political dogma which we have seen in regard to the Rwandese genocide of 1994 when no state wanted to call it a genocide when nearly a million Tutsis (and moderate Hutus) were slaughtered because of their race. An honest characterization of the events as constituting genocide would have resulted in unwanted political obligations to intervene in force, something no Western state was willing to undertake post Somalia.<sup>12</sup> This was a signal among others sent to Russia that the West would not stand by its principles if the costs in terms of own economic losses were too high. The West seemed to be willing to have peace with Russia at every cost by failing to take a resolute stance when Russia launched its cyber-attack on Estonia in 2007 and attacked Georgia with ground forces in summer 2008.

Another pointer for Russia was the treatment of the *causa* Kosovo by the West.<sup>13</sup> Russia did oppose the ceding of Kosovo, by democratic vote of the majority ethnic group in Kosovo, from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (in effect Serbia by then) and its questionable legality.<sup>14</sup> Russia also did take note on the legality of cross-border military responses and years later they staged the same routine in Crimea with what

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did not pass the line of war as that would demand action, and so it goes on with the reluctance of the EU (Hultqvist, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Not that the legal system after the genocide was stellar in any way with both the Gacaca courts and ICTR being very much failures.

<sup>13</sup> Another one who discusses Russian hybrid warfare in the light of NATO and Kosovo (among other examples) as socio-political warfare is Hall, 2015; Gerasimov, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Self-determination versus sovereign equality of states as enshrined in Article 2 (1) UN Charter.

we can label *hybrid warfare*.<sup>15</sup> One can also mention the Iraqi-war of 2003 (Operation Iraqi Freedom) which was launched by the US and UK without UN SC mandate. The attempts to justify this as “pre-emptive self-defence” (and even humanitarian) are basically indistinguishable from a *war of aggression* which is both illegal under the UN Charter<sup>16</sup> and an international crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.<sup>17</sup> The West did not stand up for its values in that case but supported a narrative which weakened what the West had created and undermined the narrative of Western Justice and adherence to the Rule of law even to this day. This also contributes to present Russia (and China) as an alternative in terms of authority in international relations and morality. And it has to be borne in mind that Kosovo did not vote to become a part of another sovereign State after their independence (e.g. with Albania), as Crimea did with its ‘referendum’ to join Russia. This difference also shows that Russia took notes for actions and formed a doctrine by it, which is being applied as we speak.<sup>18</sup> All of this connects with Russian official statements as can be seen in Sergey Larov’s (Foreign Minister of Russia) statement “I hope that (the world) will choose a democratic world order – a post-West one – in which each country is defined by its sovereignty” (Times of Israel, 2017; Fox & Rossow, 2017, p. 3–4). Therefore, while the case of Kosovo was for the USA (and some Western states) merely an *ad hoc* operation to weaken Serbia and ‘stabilise’ the Balkans, there was no real national value attached to it. These examples served as valuable lessons for Russia’s post 2008 aggression in Georgia and Ukraine. Russia, which has been good at the use of exerting power through the exploitation and weaponization of the principle of self-determination by minority groups in the context of ‘passportization’, has re-drawn the distinction between legitimate intervention and foreign illegal involvement in another state’s affairs. The latter is of course important given the article

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<sup>15</sup> One can also mention the Iraq war which did go against the UN, another primarily western institution, with the made-up term “pre-emptive warfare” which basically is indistinguishable from a *war of aggression* which actually is an existing term. West did not stand up for its values in that case either but supported a narrative which weakened what west had created and undermined the narrative of justice even to this day.

<sup>16</sup> Under Article 2(4) UN Charter.

<sup>17</sup> Under Article 8bis of the Rome Statute which is in force from 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Valery Gerasimov presented his ideas in the following article, which was incorporated in what is commonly called the Gerasimov doctrine which is the doctrinal foundation for the annexation of Crimea: “The value of science in anticipation. New challenges require rethinking the forms and methods of warfare”, “Russia’s military doctrine of 1014: 2014” and “The main points regarding Crimea can ironically be found under bullet 12: “The main external military dangers” [sic!].

5 of the NATO Washington Treaty which specify that NATO countries shall help each other in case of an *armed attack* against anyone of them (NATO, 1949). This is to be interpreted as a state actor acting versus a NATO state. The same would go if Russia decides to activate Transnistria in Moldavia in the same way as Crimea, there is currently no way to stop Russia in acting there if she wants to. Such a scenario might have serious effects on the stability on NATO's eastern flank (Baban, in Lasconjarias & Larsen, 2015, p. 202). Russia is manoeuvring in the space of definitions both in the case of article 5 and what a War of Aggression might mean. NATO's Baltic Member States are the first in line to test how resolute NATO's response to Russia's aggression is. Already, there have been some concerns regarding NATO's willingness to invoke Article 5 NATO treaty on collective self-defence in a future Baltic conflict scenario following along the lines of the Crimean scenario of 2014 (Berzins, 2014, p. 8 and 12). Consequently, arguing that if NATO article 5 is not valid in a Crimean-scenario on Latvian soil then a provocation by the Latvian Army "must be avoided by all means" (Berzins, 2014, p. 9).

This resonates in the words of the Polish Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski, who stated: "[NATO] had given Ukraine every support short of help" (Quoted in Reisinger, Heidi and Golts, Alexander. p. 134). A lack of collective action in the case of a Baltic 'Crimea' - armed conflict scenario would also be lethal for NATO's future as an alliance. What we perceive as the primary effect is what we can see in Ukraine, but the actual effect is reaching further, the undermining of the international system which the West is meant to support. The plan is the destruction of the narrative which the West *represent* (rather than *stand for*), being replaced with another served by a Russia proving its narrative's value by action.

US, EU and NATO could respond with undercover actions themselves, as happened (allegedly) with STUXNET-attack (Rid, 2012, pp. 5–32). They could act as hackers unaffiliated with any state. For example, did one hacker group digitally attack the Syrian Army in the summer of 2013 (Rad, 2015). Nothing suggests that it was a government actor, but it could have been. The problem with this kind of 'black Ops' covert operations is that the own narrative will not be supported by it for two reasons. Firstly, no one might know about such an attack is being launched, and if such knowledge exists deniability comes into play. Secondly, it isn't very much of a show of force when performing such a cyber-attack and consequently the underlying message of using such cyber assets as deterrence or countermeasure might actually get lost or at least becomes deniable. And finally, such 'black Ops' in Cyber are highly unlikely given the legal restraints of any illegal counter-action due to the general adherence to the rule of law in the EU and Western European NATO states.

## Syria, Russia and Hybrid Warfare

The unwillingness of liberal Europe to look at global crises in a pragmatic, Realpolitik informed and manifesting way, can be seen in the present migration situation in Europe. The decision by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, to disregard applicable European law (Schengen and Dublin), when she decided to grant Syrians generally asylum status has led to a split within the European Union and to diplomatic upsets in the affected EU countries. Mass migration has the potential to be used as a geo-strategic weapon: State and non-State actors gain direct financial and political benefits from this situation (Bachmann, 2016, pp. 85–87). The migration crisis of 2015 has already seen the limits of EU's solidarity, rule of law and political cohesion, and will have further consequences for the rule of law inside and outside the EU. Turning migration into a weapon is something what Russia does not shy from: with its support of Syria's Assad being one of the main causes for the migration crisis. In addition Russia is fuelling the anti-immigrant sentiment within the EU through deliberate misinformation through its media operations, such as the Russian state financed internationally operating media outlet *RT* (Lucian, 2016). The increasing direct costs associated with accommodating the ever increasing migration numbers does already now weaken national GDPs and thus making it ever harder to reach the agreed 2 per cent defence spending target for NATO states: a double win for Russia and its application of its National Security Strategy of 2015.

It is important to remember, there is a media war of conflicting narratives taking place with the goal to gain political leverage in a strategic way, something which is often harmful to Western-styled information management. In Syria, Russia demonstrated to the world that Russia has the military capability to strike well beyond its territorial borders with high precision: this was evident in the use of cruise missiles, and the successful operation of expeditionary forces combining air, land and naval assets (Kim, 2016). With this, Russia communicated to the World in general and to NATO in particular, that it is catching up in terms of military and expeditionary capabilities, aiming to challenge the US in its role as the sole 'proprietor' of such capabilities. Russia, of course, is not alone in this regard: its present ally, China, is following a similar tactic in regard to the South China Sea: its Anti-Area/Access-Denial strategy is being implemented through threats and the show of force but not the actual use of force for now. This show of restraint may change in the future at any time. All these hostile activities are – again – supported by lawfare.

It is equally important to recognise that Russia often merely exploits a weakness their adversaries happen to have while not necessarily being the sole cause. Russia is

framing and exploiting the European immigration problem.<sup>19</sup> Russia attacks our asymmetrical weaknesses out of calculation. It is likely a side effect of Russia's involvement in Syria that Europe suffers a migration crisis and not the prime reason for Russia's involvement. It does benefit Russia nevertheless and it weakens the cohesion of the EU. The worst way to deal with it is to ignore it and state that there is no problem, in order not to meet the Russian challenge. One has to recognise the weaknesses of ones' adversaries which Russia targets with their hybrid warfare approach.

Syria is a good example for Russia's exploitation of such vulnerabilities: Russia's involvement in Syria is benefitting Russia directly and shows already now two direct results. One is the weakening of the EU by forcing another wave of immigrants into an already hard pressured EU. The liberal attitude of the EU is presented as a problem by Russia, a showcase for other states that EU got problems based on its globalist ideology. There is no easy way out of this for the EU as Russian reflexive control is both the cause for increased migration as well as leading to closed borders, both can be used as useful propaganda tools for Russia. From a Russian perspective one can break down EU's options into two main scenarios which Russia can spin on. Either the EU continues to face up to increasing social, economic and security problems caused by mass-migration, or the EU will experience serious political problems arising from a departure of its liberal agenda. This can truly be seen as an example for reflexive control as Russia is trying to get the EU to act in a self-harming way one way or the other. Migration into the EU is a tool Russia has been using both in regards to Ukraine as well as with Syria (Motyl, 2016; Loveluck, 2016). The second objective for Russia is to create yet another frozen conflict, in this case in Syria, which Russia has done before in Ukraine (Motyl, 2016). You do not need ISIS to prevail for as long as Turkey has an ongoing conflict with the Kurdish nation in the border region. Russia's circumventing of international conventions might be mistaken for being justified when one is willing to follow the Russian narrative. Russia's support for Assad's regime in Syria can for example be seen as just the expected support of an old ally (Sanders, 2016). But Russia has no ambition to restore peace in Syria, not for altruistic reasons and also not for the long-term benefit of Assad's regime. What Russia really wants, as highlighted in its military doctrines, is another 'frozen' conflict at the periphery of NATO, as described in Russian military doctrine "the creation in the territories of the warring parties permanent war zone" (Russian Military Doctrine, 2014). Russia has achieved that in Syria as early as 2016. The Russian air force in Syria has not only

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<sup>19</sup> The Nazi minister Joseph Goebbels, a master of propaganda, was himself clear on the fact that good propaganda should speak the truth, but from a given perspective.

been supporting the Syrian army, the Shite Iranian backed Hezbollah and Iranian troops in the country but also the Sunni Kurds (Shiwesh, 2016).<sup>20</sup> The latter might be an unexpected ally as they do not fall under the Shiite hegemony which unites the mentioned parties to the conflict. By the maxim of 'my enemy's enemy is my ally', the US has supported the Kurds directly with weapons in Syria as they oppose IS and Assad at the same time (*ARA News*, 2016). This balance act between alienating the NATO country Turkey and supporting the Kurds at the same time is not sustainable for the USA (*Al Monitor*, 2016). Russia could act more resolutely and support the Kurds to a higher extent than the USA would. The Kurds do serve an important role for Russia as the NATO country Turkey cannot accept any Kurdish autonomy on its borders as the Kurds claim parts of Turkey for its wanted future national state. Even without president Erdogan and his AKP in government it would hard for another Turkish government to accept it. Russian support of the Kurds in Syria creates a frozen conflict at the doorstep of NATO (Slavin, 2015). Actually the same could be said in regards to the US support for the Kurds, which is perhaps even more troublesome as that undermines the unity of NATO even more than what the Russian support of the Kurds does. Assad might not be very enthusiastic about all of this as he does not want the Kurds to carve out a piece of Syria. But with the current situation where Assad is fully dependent on the Russian intervention and support there is not much more left for Assad than accept such a deal (*BBC*, 2016).<sup>21</sup>

Responding to Russia's aggression in kind will be extremely difficult given the economic, political and geo-strategic vulnerabilities of Western Europe: playing it hard against Russia will be exactly that, hard. Mostly, this is because there is no real willingness (and an obvious lack of military capabilities in Eastern Europe) in the West to sacrifice anything for the sake of opposing Russia. Consequently, fantasies about increasing and extending sanctions against Russia are exactly nothing more than fantasies. Let us take for example the Russian gas pipeline Nord Stream in the Baltic Sea, which bypasses Eastern Europe and supplies Europe with gas from Russia. The bypass of Ukraine with the construction of Nord Stream was a necessary pretext for Russia to start the conflict in Ukraine. The pipeline was built with the help of and in agreement with EU. Another example of the EU being very much about economic rationality and refusing to see realpolitik as an option. The pipeline is owned by the

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<sup>20</sup> Islamists complaining about Kurds getting support by Russia and being in the Islamists' eyes the same as the forces of Assad.

<sup>21</sup> Russia withdrawing some of its air force from Syria: this reduction of some air force assets can be seen as putting pressure on Assad while Russia still got their new airbase at Hmeimim, Syria, operational with what they themselves find as a sufficient air force.



company Gazprom, directly and indirectly, and thus by the Russian state, a prime target for sanctions one might think. The reality is that it was pumping more gas into the European Union 2015 than 2014 (Nord Stream, 2016).<sup>22</sup> Why? Because we, the EU and its people, want it to be that way. In this logic, one can see the pipeline as an enabler of Russian reflexive control. Because of economic prevalent rationality in Europe the pipeline was not seen as a problem, even if the fading political rationality in the EU would advise otherwise. Economic sanctions can be made in small scale but putting Russia in dire economic problems as shutting down the Nord Stream would hurt our own economic situation as well and that is given EU's empirically proved stance in the question not an option. The same goes with blocking the international transactions with SWIFT payments for Russia would be even harsher in terms of Russian retaliatory countermeasures (Bachmann S. & Gunneriusson, H., (2017). An alternative strategy for the US would be to go 180 degrees, back-paddle and support the Assad *administration* and support him to make the fighting stop (Fuller, 2016). To hold Assad as the lesser Evil among the players involved such as Al-Nusra/Al-Qaida & ISIS is hard for the US given the justifications for opposing him – certainly so with the possible use of gas-attacks by the Assad regime. The islamistic threat can in themselves present hybrid challenges due to their non-materialistic take on rationality vs the West's materialistic, liberal-capitalistic and positivistic dogma. (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015b. pp. 89–90; Masri, 2017). Not to mention the Kurds who are a lesser evil compared with all afore mentioned factions but supporting them on the other hand threatens to seriously damage NATO's standing and leave to direct conflict with Turkey. That would not be totally wrong given hindsight, but it would destabilise the belief in NATO and EU's credibility with all the condemnation there have been of Assad from NATO & EU. That in its turn would fall under the objectives of the Russian plan of waging warfare eventually resulting in hybrid warfare.

Turkey has on its hand utilised its conventional defence capabilities as a state when shooting down a Russian airplane violating its airspace. These kinds of provocative intrusions by Russia happen on a weekly basis in Northern Europe without any downed planes as consequences. Russia answered with establishing heavy anti-air batteries in Syria, capable of covering major parts of Syria as well as of Turkey. This opens up a whole new problem for NATO. First Russia acts as the protector of the

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<sup>22</sup> The gas pipeline Nord Stream also creates dangerous incentives for Russia to intervene in the Baltic Sea region as it is a vital interest for them. Gazprom does for example own (51%) *Slite* harbour on the Swedish island *Gotland* in the Baltic sea. *SvD* ("Nordstream storsatsar på Gotland", 2016). Gotland is a large island (3184 km<sup>2</sup>) which in itself is an unsinkable carrier in the Baltic Sea and very strategically located if one wants to cut of the naval supply to the Baltic region.



state of Syria, invited by President Assad. Any airplanes in Syrian airspace except Russian and the Syrian are now under direct threat. Any air assets of NATO or NATO friendly countries who are performing missions in Syria fall under this Russian 'defensive' deny access shield. For example, Australia decided to disengage its air force from Syria already before the appearance of the anti-air units, when Russia sent its air force there (Medhora, 2016). Further and very important is that the whole Syrian scenario connects with Ukraine where the southern flank of the Russian/Ukrainian conflict including the Black Sea has now become checked by the Russian air and anti-air deployment in Syria.

In the end, the combined support of US and Russian air-force in support of the Kurds (and Assad in the case of Russia) will with no doubt end in the fall of ISIS self-proclaimed capital Raqqa and their ousting out of Syria. The Kurds who have fought alongside the Syrian government forces will not fight Assad as long as he gives the autonomy within the borders of Syria. This will most likely be acceptable for the Kurds as total autonomy would make them vulnerable to an invasion of Turkey. In the end Assad will regain control of Syria. Russia will have saved its ally, increased its influence in the Arab world and created a long-term security problem for the NATO-country Turkey along its southern border. NATO and EU will come out as the apparent losers, invested much and gained nothing. It will not be hard to spin such a narrative as it very much will resemble the eventual outcome hence leaving Russia as having achieved one of its end state objectives.

There continues the prospect of a confrontation between Turkey and Russia (Schindler, 2016), even though Russia and Turkey are on agreeable terms for the time being, which in any case does not improve the situation for the West compared with the two countries being on less friendly terms. Of course, the situation is tense and nothing can be excluded. What might make it unlikely is that most NATO-countries would hate to go to war against Russia because of an aggressive Turkey. The support would stay within the scope of Articles 2, 3 and 4 NATO Treaty and falling short of Article 5 NATO Treaty on collective self-defence: this will much likely give rise to another 'frozen' conflict fought by proxy: there will be a reinforced frozen conflict in the region with the Kurds gaining increased leverage against Turkey.

## Concluding Remarks

Is there a going back to the international legal and political system built during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? No there is no going back, we witness the dawn of a new era of post-cold war as Russia is strategically moving away from the West by detaching itself from Western security, legal and economic influences. This is made

easier as Russia's reflexive control makes it more unlikely that EU and NATO stand up for these systems themselves. This in its turn gives Russia further momentum in authoritarian states that stand on the side-line. Russia's National Security Strategy aims at gaining autarky by focusing economically and strategically on Asia and Latin America by beefing up its role in the various relevant organizations such as ASEAN and BRICS.

The response against Russia can be *in* force and *with* force or in a tiered, reflective, comprehensive and measured fashion which identifies and exploits Russian vulnerabilities in a holistic way (NATO, 2011). Any such approach will require firstly the end of deniability and the willingness to address the security threats and concerns. The existing division within NATO and EU's political (and military) perception regarding the Russian threat has to be overcome and a clear doctrinal approach on Hybrid Warfare has to be found. Russia is currently performing successful reflexive control on the EU and NATO with hybrid warfare in the battlefield sphere. USA's stance versus Russia under the Trump administration is yet to evolve. But if anything, it will possibly be more lenient than it has been the last decades. The full spectrum of kinetic and non-kinetic options has to be exploited such as economic sanctions, use of information and strategic communication of own political and security objectives and concerns, lawfare and the building of own resilience capabilities in addition to increased military presence and capabilities are needed. The Latin phrase *Si vis pacem, para bellum* is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago, but it is doubtful that the major Western states will agree. Military responses and coordination has to be preceded by political/foreign policy coordination. There is a growing difference among EU states in responding to the Russian challenge, as well as among NATO states, so the near future does not seem to offer any simple solutions.

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