

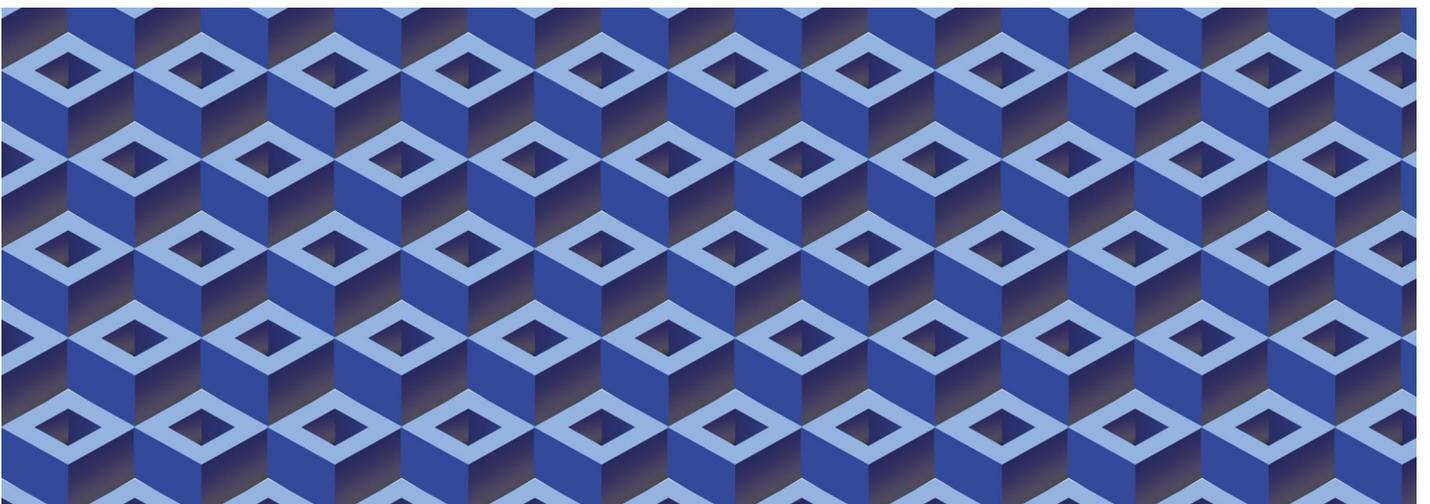
NATO Foundation
Defense College

Presentation from the Max Weber International Workshop

“Fears of Trolls and Little Green Men. Does Hybrid Warfare Work, for Whom, and When?”

Hybrid Warfare in Historical Perspectives

Dr. Stefano Marcuzzi



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Does Hybrid Warfare Work, for Whom, and When?”

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In 2005 British General Rupert Smith wrote that “War no longer exists”.

He continued: “Confrontation, conflict and combat undoubtedly exist all around the world. [...] Nonetheless, war as known to most non-combatants, war as battle in the field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such war no longer exists.” At least for the time being

Smith saw in the tank battles on the Golan Heights and in the Sinai desert in 1973 the last example of a real field battle, which then gave way to the so-called “new wars”.

These were various types of combat that broke the paradigm of interstate industrial warfare and brought about a new paradigm, namely that of “war amongst the people”, where “all the people – anywhere – are the battlefield.” Partisan warfare was the herald of this relatively new form of warfare since the II WW and several decolonisation conflicts were of the same nature.

They also brought about a number of “asymmetries”:

- In objectives (which are less clear because they are less connected to the paradigm of interstate war).
- In time (because these wars tend to be timeless).
- In protagonists (because they tend to involve a variety of state as well as non-state actors).
- In modes of fighting (because they tend to be fought with a mix traditional and new weapons and tactics, and to erode the distinction between combatants and non-combatants).
- Even in space (in the sense that today there tends to be no distinction between “front” and “rear”, or “war front” and “home front”: the battle is everywhere, often simultaneously).

These wars could be referred to as “asymmetrical wars,” “compound wars,” or “irregular wars”, “small wars or guerrilla” depending on the definitions of various authors in different ages and the distinct characteristics they wished to emphasise.

However, none of these terms was new. Nor did they describe any new concept.

War has always been “a-symmetrical”. By its nature, as noted by Carl von Clausewitz in the 19th century, war is “unpredictable” – he called it “a chameleon” that “changes its aspect at each occurrence, reflecting the features of the competing political entities that engage in it.”

And even 500 years BC, the famous Chinese theorist, Sun Tzu, preached to “avoid strength, strike weakness, and be unpredictable.”

So in practice war has always been about exploiting different means of fighting in order to achieve strategic goals; furthermore, guerrilla tactics, insurgency and revolutionary warfare certainly were not invented in 2005.

Yet, we do have – I believe – the impression that something has changed in the way we wage and face war and, more generally, organised violence today. We kind of feel that General Smith was right, that there is a different way of fighting today, but in 2005 we lacked a term that could deliver that sort of novelty.

The following year the Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon provided further stimulus to the debate.

Throughout the war, Hezbollah displayed a complex and adaptive threat made of regular and irregular aspects that created a synergistic effect. They employed a lethal combination of conventional weaponry such as anti-ship missiles, Kornet anti-tank missiles and Katyusha rockets with improvised weaponry suited for irregular warfare and ambush attacks.

They fought in many sustained battles, but also maintained an ability to disengage when it was advantageous, turning instead to terrorist attacks. This way, they managed to bring the numerically, technologically and apparently doctrinally superior Israeli military to a stalemate that resulted in Hezbollah’s victory thanks to Hezbollah’s exploitation of the media and to a deceiving political result for the Israeli government.

In August 2008, the war between Georgia and Russia broke out. Along with the conventional conflict, Georgia experienced massive cyber-attacks against its government, banking services and media websites, which denied Georgian citizens and the international community important services and information from both sides about what was going on. The latter strategy evolved into General Valery Gerasimov’s 2014 doctrine of “non-linear war”, that capitalised on the previous experiences of the US nudged “coloured revolutions” and inspired the Russian campaign in Ukraine the following year.

Russia aims to achieve politically decisive outcomes by using all available tools, both regular and irregular, based on the assumption that conventional structures are oriented primarily on symmetrical adversaries, or in the lesser case a-symmetrical adversaries, but not on a simultaneous efficient combination of the two.

In the West, Gerasimov’s “non-linear” war came to be called by US thinkers “hybrid war”.

The term “hybrid” seemed to provide the very novelty that was lacking in the doctrinal discourse to describe a style of war that a former US Marine Officer, Frank Hoffman, predicted will become “the most frequent in the 21st century”. Over the following years, however, definitions of the phenomenon multiplied. I will pick-up just a few to give you an idea.

Thomas Huber found that hybrid warfare was just an extension of compound warfare, which mixes regular and irregular force – hybrid warfare providing simply new tools such as terrorism.

General George Casey, former Chief of Staff of the US Army, insisted that a key component of a hybrid threat is its “decentralisation” – putting an emphasis on the fact that hybrid warfare is specifically meant at tackling Western opponents. It is quite ironic, but not unprecedented, that a centralist authoritarian government is capable to express more decentralisation and delegation in combat than democratic ones. One should probably look first at bureaucratic ossification and then at the substance of political values.

The US military doctrine resulting from this conception, defines a hybrid threat as dynamic combinations of conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal capabilities adapting to counter traditional advantages – meaning those held by the West.

British military doctrine, in contrast, follows Huber’s definition, and captures hybrid warfare as an aspect of irregular warfare. As a result, the British do not consider a differing logic regarding the nature of a hybrid threat, exposing a gap in common understanding between the US and its closest ally.

This confusion generated conflicting interpretations of the effectiveness of hybrid warfare:

Some argue that the hybrid concept is not something unique at strategic and operational levels but only at tactical level.

Others argue that hybrid warfare plays simultaneously at a strategic and a tactical level because the blending of conventional, unconventional, criminal, and terrorist means compresses the levels of war thereby accelerating tempo – and gaining a more or less concrete strategic advantage.

Still others held that hybrid organisations rely on inherently defensive type operations – whereas NATO emphasises the offensive use of hybrid warfare, especially by Russia. One could easily argue that Russian operations can be defensive-offensive, the first aspect at strategic level (defending a geostrategic space) and the second at tactical-operational level.

So the hybrid concept expanded significantly over time: it is no longer limited to a specific portion of the capability spectrum between irregular and conventional warfare, but now it embraces any aspect related to the increasing complexity of modern conflicts – including terrorism, economic warfare, mass migration, organised crime and so on.

This galaxy of definitions and interpretations spurred Élie Tenenbaum to conclude that “hybrid warfare” was “an originally sound concept whose meaning has been diluted to the point of absurdity.”

At the same time, many authors noted that the very idea of mixing various means of fighting at the same time is not as new as it seemed when the term “hybrid” was coined.

What follows is a list of just a few examples in history where either one side or both sides in the conflict used hybrid warfare:

- The Peloponnesian War (431-405 BC).
- The French and Indian War in North America 1755-1763.
- The American Revolution (1875-1883).
- The Peninsular War of 1808-1814.
- Garibaldi’s Campaign in Southern Italy in 1860-1861 (a masterpiece on its own).

- The Union's Counter-guerrilla War, 1861-1865.
- The British campaign against Ottoman Turkey during World War I, led by T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia").
- The Soviet Union in WW2.
- The Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945.
- The Chinese Civil War (1927-1950).
- The War in Indochina (1946-1954).
- Vietnam (1955-1975), and so on...

...So much so that Damien Van Puyvelde wonders: "Does Hybrid Warfare exist at all?"

To sum up: we have a very popular term, created to describe a new version of warfare, which turned out to be not so new, and which has been simultaneously expanded to "the point of absurdity".

So is it worth it to continue our discussion today at all?

Is there anything new in the concept of hybrid warfare?

If hybrid conflicts have been with us for so long, why is it that the West is so alarmed at them today?

At what level of warfare does hybrid warfare play a role?

These are my final questions for this session.

I'll give you my answers straight away, and then I'll briefly explain you why.

I believe the hybrid concept is sufficiently original to merit addition to military intellectual discourse – so yes, I think we should keep it and study it, and I will tell you why answering the first 2 questions together, because they are strictly linked; as far as the third question goes, I believe it plays a role at all levels of warfare but it is not equally effective at all levels.

In answering the first 2 questions, I shall emphasise two points.

1) In the first place, hybrid warfare has a significant relevance today – and is perceived by the West as more threatening than it was in the past – because it emerges from a global security scenario that has itself become hybrid. That said, institutional memory is so short to forget what sort of worries created then during the III WW (aka Cold War) the then very new practice of revolutionary warfare among the armies of the "Free World".

This is arguably an undesired effect of the globalisation.

Globalisation has had several positive outcomes, but it has also progressively led to the collapse of the *jus publicum europaeum* upon which both the international law and the traditional rules of war (*jus belli ac pacis*) rested.

Such international system which originated from the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, did not remove war from civilised societies, but it did establish a clear distinction between war and peace, as well as between legitimate combatants (*hostes*) and non-combatants.

Regular warfare came to be defined by two major characteristics.

The first was the slow emergence of a military discipline that transformed wild bunches of warriors into effective instruments of political authority. This change was concomitant with the birth of modern statehood as the sole legitimate provider and user of organised violence.

The second feature of regular war was the uninterrupted development of firepower, encouraged by the Western industrial development at the end of the Renaissance.

Directly associated with the latter was the gradual adoption of linear tactics, making it possible to combine fire with movement, thus giving birth to the modern idea of manoeuvre. This trend paved the way for the emergence of the idea of front and a rear, which is still today a central feature of our representation of war.

Many Western strategists and military thinkers emphasised the need to adhere to such rules even after massive social changes such as the French Revolution and the birth of nationalism had brought about an increased role of “the people” in war.

Mass mobilisation of the people was inevitable, but it should not challenge the fundamental rules of international law. In a sense, international law and military doctrine went hand in hand: for example, Antoine Jomini stressed that guerrilla actions – being based on the principle of dispersion of forces – not only were illegitimate legally, they also contradicted the principle of concentration of forces to achieve a decisive victory – that lay at the heart of Western operational art.

Irregular war was pursued, but not legitimised, so much so that many leaders of insurgents, including Giuseppe Mazzini, were convinced that guerrilla tactics were necessary only as a first step, and that even a revolutionary war should at some point produce a regular armed force, able to stand against a conventional opponent. A tenet cherished later also by Communist revolutionary warfare.

We could discuss for hours subsequent transformations in the art of war, but essentially what happened in the last century was that the decline of the state as a form of sovereignty, progressively eroded international governance and opened the path for a more complex network of providers of organised violence, including conventional forces, terrorist organisations, organised crime, and so on. It also eroded the distinction between war and peace, to the point that what we are facing today is essentially what I call “low-intensity endemic warfare.”

Once again, this is not new in history – we had pretty much the same scenario in Europe during the so-called “14th-16th century crisis”. But it is definitely something our society is not familiar with, and not used to anymore.

In this sense, it is a new phenomenon.

2) Secondly, hybrid warfare has a new outlook – and again, is perceived by the West as more threatening than it was in the past – because of the unprecedented impact of new forms of technology.

New technologies are growing increasingly cheap and available. On the one hand, this has positive consequences in terms of mass involvement and sometimes empowerment; but it also means that we face an increased number of different channels of vulnerability through which the average person, group, corporation, or state might face attack.

For example, an aspect that makes modern warfare different is the effect that a vastly-pervasive and manipulated media can influence to the development of the conflict: whoever can claim victory in the information space, will likely do so in the political-diplomatic field too.

In particular, by extending conventional war to include the people, hybrid forces amplify their otherwise limited power and extend the conflict in convenient dimensions both in time and space, providing a chance to win a just in time or a protracted clash of wills.

Another change brought about by technology is the new window of opportunity hybrid actors have of doing the greatest possible harm to opponents and their societies while at the same time leaving a probability to remain, if not anonymous, at least not easily identifiable – thus receiving less punishment or escaping punishment altogether.

Consider the absence of any laws prohibiting cybercrime in some countries, the complete lack of control over biological or chemical agents in others, and the entire collapse of domestic law and order in still others.

I am not deepening this aspect further because I believe it will be the core of the final session by Dr. Valeriano, but certainly the development of new technologies is a crucial element of novelty in the modern version of hybrid warfare.

As far as the third question goes – at what level does hybrid warfare play – as I said, I believe it plays a role at all levels of a conflict. At the strategic level, nations might choose to support insurgent movements with conventional forces to weaken an adversary. At the operational level, a commander might use guerrilla forces to harass enemy lines of communication or might use a blend of dispersion and concentration to prevent the enemy from massing forces.

Furthermore, regular and irregular forces might join tactically. In this case, we generally see heavy, conventional capabilities (traditionally associated with regular warfare) associated with the typically irregular & non-linear tactics.

More importantly, the hybridity of a conflict lies not only in the exploitation of all available tools simultaneously, but also in the way they are combined at the various levels of warfare.

And finally, a major distinction between current and past hybrid wars is that the various tools that are used in a hybrid conflict can be more easily managed by a single commander – the overall direction is facilitated by the use of modern technologies.

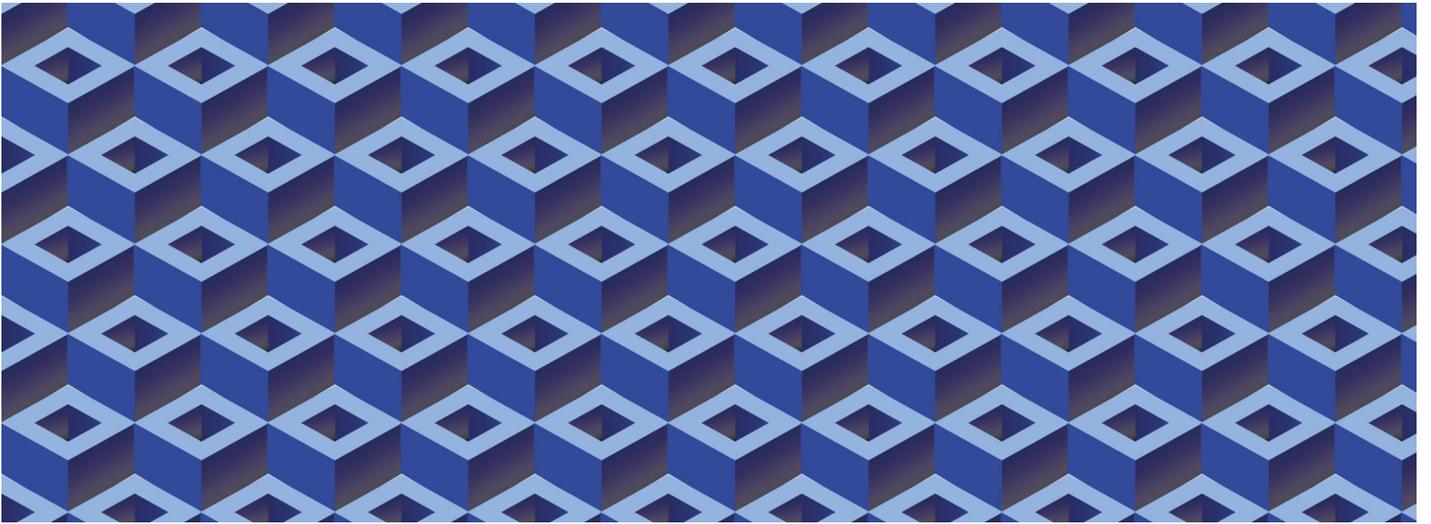
Defining at what level hybrid warfare works better, however, is a matter of debate: I do not have a definite answer to that question – this is actually one of the questions of this workshop. For the moment, I am under the impression that the effectiveness of hybrid warfare depends on the specific logic of a situation. History seems to show that it can be very effective, but it can also be beaten – and I'll give you two final examples of that.

The first is Russia. Russia in Ukraine has been very effective operationally and tactically, but less strategically, in the sense that it failed to deter the West from assisting Ukraine, or from imposing sanctions on Russia (we do not know if it wanted also the collapse of the Ukrainian state or impose the assistance burden of a rump country). In the end, Russia is somewhat constrained militarily and economically at the moment, especially due to the slump of energy prices.

The second example is DAESH: despite its tactical capabilities having remained remarkable to the very end, the Islamic State has been defeated operationally. It is predictable when an irregular force is obliged to defend fixed targets. But in spite of its military defeat, DAESH poses a significant risk to the West that is all but resolved, not just for returning foreign fighters, but because the borders in the Middle East have been radically questioned.

To come to a conclusion here: understanding the nature of hybrid warfare is important because its emergence in today's security scenario is a symptom of a major change in international governance and the future of war and organised violence. Despite the fact that we live for now in the less violent era in human history – broadly speaking – our world is rather secure. The new technologies tend to create a world of many-to-many threats, a world in which every individual, group, or state may regard every other individual, group, or state as at least a potential security risk.

Hybrid warfare erodes the modern notion of the state as the custodian of the monopoly of legitimate violence. If we take this relevant risk seriously, we may have to wonder whether states (especially the Western democratic states) will be able to survive, if they cannot comply with their fundamental task of providing security to their peoples – which was essentially one of the bases of the “social contract.”



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