



Hybrid Warfare – Potential and Limitations

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author argues that hybrid warfare, without resorting to a full-scale conventional offensive, cannot conclusively defeat an adversary nation state or opposing government. The author begins by explaining hybrid warfare and its main characteristics. Next, he attempts to discuss the limitations of using hybrid warfare and thus the restrictions in conclusively defeating an adversary. Subsequently, the author studies the potential of hybrid warfare, and assesses if it can secure victory conclusively without any conventional offensive. The author also explores the role of full-scale conventional offensives in complementing hybrid warfare to achieve conclusive victory.

Keywords: National Security; Warfare; Military; Strategy; Russia

INTRODUCTION

The concept of hybrid warfare is relatively new, and possibly first surfaced when Lieutenant General James Mattis referenced to the new form of challenges to the military.¹ Then, the 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah, had expounded the threat of hybrid warfare against modern militaries.² Hezbollah, a non-state actor, was able to simultaneously employ a mixture of guerrilla tactics, fighting from behind civilians and villages, and conventional weaponries, such as cruise missiles and rockets, against the Israelis. Hezbollah had launched more than 3,500 rockets across the border to terrorise the northern region of Israel, to make an economical and psychological impact against the Israeli population.³ While the Lebanon War had concluded through United Nations (UN) intervention, the impact that a hybrid war could wield against a world's top military was telling. More recently and strikingly in February 2014, Russia sent 'little green men' i.e., men in military fatigues and without any identification insignias, into Crimea, Ukraine.⁴ These men subsequently seized its regional parliamentary building and airport, raising the Russian flag at these buildings. The Russians simultaneously launched information operations, 'masterfully orchestrated propaganda efforts... exploited Russian ethnicity,

language... to fracture Ukrainian populations.'⁵ Russia had mastered the potential mix of different techniques aimed at Ukraine, seemingly non-kinetic and below the threshold of a kinetic war, and successfully annexed Crimea from Ukraine. It was noted that 'the Russians vertically integrated Cyber-disinformation to systematically exploit human nature, resulting in the successful invasion of the Ukraine without the West firing a shot.'⁶ The two conflicts highlighted above showcases the potential that hybrid warfare can offer in tilting the war in favour of its employer.

This essay argues that hybrid warfare, without resorting to a full-scale conventional offensive, cannot conclusively defeat an adversary nation state or opposing government. The author begins by explaining hybrid warfare and its main characteristics. Next, he attempts to discuss the limitations of using hybrid warfare and thus the restrictions in conclusively defeating an adversary.

Subsequently, the author studies the potential of hybrid warfare, and assesses if it can secure victory conclusively without any conventional offensive. The author shall also explore the role of full-scale conventional offensives in complementing hybrid warfare to achieve conclusive victory.

DEFINING HYBRID WARFARE AND ITS MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

One of the key definitions of hybrid warfare was expressed by Frank Hoffman, ‘incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion and criminal disorder.’⁷ Distinctively, Hoffman highlighted that while there were already established regular and irregular war, hybrid wars have these components integrated within the same battlespace and that the irregular component of it would often be the multiplier effect in deciding the fate of the war.⁸ Teija Tiilikainen, Director of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (CoE) described hybrid warfare to involve the exploitation of information and attacks on critical infrastructure.⁹ United States (US) Army Lt. Gen. Karen H. Gibson, then-Deputy Director of National Intelligence for National Security Partnerships, described it as ‘an effort to achieve strategic objectives without using significant force,’ and added that it provides a low risk and low cost option for enemies to complicate and confuse through its non-attributable nature.¹⁰ Overall, the author defines hybrid warfare to be a varied employment of conventional military

capabilities, irregular warfare capabilities such as insurgency and guerrilla warfare, cyber warfare, information operations, executed in a co-ordinated manner in the battlespace of a war.

The two key characteristics of a hybrid warfare are obscurity in defining the state of conflict, and the lack of attribution.

The first characteristic of a hybrid war is obscurity and ambiguity in determining the state of conflict, operating below the threshold of war and yet be able to result in discernible effects on the adversary.¹¹ An example would be the cyber war between US and Iran in 2020, where an escalation of cyber-attacks, initiated by the US, originated in 2006, the covert operation codenamed Operation Olympic Games. Iran retaliated subsequently by targeting email accounts of citizens, journalists and government officials in a bid to impact the US presidential election campaign. The intensity of these cyber-attacks corresponded with critical events, such as Iran’s drone strike on two Saudi oil facilities.¹² This had presented means of retaliation between states below the threshold of war, while still creating substantial effects on adversaries.



Armed men with insignia (so-called ‘little green men’) at Simferopol Airport, 28th February, 2014.

The second characteristic of hybrid war would be the attributability of an action. For example, the cyber-attack that Israeli intelligence executed to disrupt Iranian's nuclear programme, by disrupting the uranium enrichment process. While the impact was considerably high, possibly setting back Iran's nuclear programme by two years, the attributability of the cyber-attack was indiscernible.¹³ This results in the inability for the adversary (Iran) to launch any counterattack or strategies immediately, thus preventing the likelihood of an escalation into war.

While the above characteristics cited examples relating to the cyber war, it should be noted that hybrid wars such as insurgencies or guerrilla warfare can also be conducted in proxy, through the employment of non-state actors.

The author posits that hybrid warfare can only be effective in achieving specific objectives and may not be sufficient to conclusively defeat the adversary. He first expounds the limitations of hybrid war in achieving decisive victories. Thereafter, he discusses through examples, the advantages of hybrid war and how these can only result in victories or defeat within a narrow band of defined objectives or mission.

HYBRID WARFARE HAS LITTLE HOPE OF CONCLUSIVELY DEFEATING ADVERSARIES WITHOUT CONVENTIONAL OFFENSIVE

Firstly, one of the key challenges faced by hybrid warfare, is the need for persistence and pervasiveness of effects as experienced by the adversary. In the August 2008 Russia – Georgia War, in a bid to shape the narrative of its invasion, the Russians conducted large scale cyber campaigns, comprising of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) and hacking of government websites and defacements, aimed at introducing cognitive dissonance within the government to react.¹⁴ It also co-ordinated for information operations, comprising propaganda and disinformation, to influence local population in believing in the need for Russia's military intervention. These non-kinetic measures were performed while synchronised with the conventional forces invading South Ossetia. In contrast, Georgia was able to launch counter-information operations, limiting the

availability of Russian's disinformation campaign, engage in commercial entities to aid in carrying Georgia's intent.¹⁵ The presence of counter-operations from Georgia meant that the cyber and informational campaigns were not as effective in achieving the objectives.

Instead, it was the full-scale invasion by the Russian military, past the two disputed territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and into Georgian territories, that had conclusively defeated the Georgian military.¹⁶ In addition to beating the adversarial force, the presence of Russia's military in and around Georgia serves to maintain a credible and pervasive military threat, that cannot be delivered via the non-conventional methods within hybrid warfare.

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Secondly, hybrid warfare can be ineffective when used against sectarian violence or ideological conflicts. One example would be the ineffectiveness of hybrid warfare by Russia's involvement in Syria, specifically on counter-terrorism. While Russia was successful in retaining the regime of Assad, pitting against opposition backed by the Western forces, it cannot be said on the front of countering the threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).¹⁷ On the front of countering opposition and supporting the regime security of Assad, Russian forces had largely employed military kinetic means against its adversaries, such as aerial bombardments.¹⁸ In contrast, the same success could not be applied in the counter-terrorism campaign, although one could argue that counter-terrorism was not the priority for Russia in Syria. In fact, the number of terrorists had increased within the three years from 2015 to 2018 when the Russian campaign was on-going.¹⁹ In contrast, the terrorists were able to utilise hybrid warfare to spread its ideologies and recruit through information campaigns.²⁰ Overall, when dealing with ideological

adversaries, a full-scale offensive is often required, as there would be no convergence in ideologies that the adversaries would succumb to the effects of the non-conventional methods, such as informational or cyber warfare.

Thirdly, the non-attributable nature of hybrid warfare methods would similarly equate to the inability of the adversaries to detect and attribute it. This phenomenon is a double-edged sword. As in the case of the sabotage explosion of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, the ability to exploit detection and attribution plays in favour of the hybrid actor, allowing deniability of the act, and making any form of strategic responses by the target state to be irrelevant. Conversely, the ambiguity also presents the opportunity for targeted states to exercise deniability in any consequences from the act, unless the effects can be discernible in the open. This leaves the only option of a conventional offensive, in order to achieve a conclusive victory over the adversaries.

HYBRID WARFARE HAS HOPE OF CONCLUSIVELY DEFEATING ADVERSARIES WITHOUT CONVENTIONAL OFFENSIVE

Hybrid warfare has been associated with the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, and commonly known as the Gerasimov Model or Doctrine. Within this doctrine, it argues that military hard power is an enabler to the hybrid war, or it serves as an insurance to ensure the effectiveness of the hybrid war. He also recommends that deployment of covert operatives and limited contingents to complement and enforce submission under the aggressor's terms, without a full scale conventional offensive unnecessarily.²¹ In the ensuing discussions, the author highlights that hybrid warfare while hopeful of securing a conclusive victory, has limitations which requires conventional offensives.

One of the key advantages to why states or non-state actors would launch hybrid warfare against its adversaries, is in its potential cost savings and resource preservation, should the adversary get defeated. As with Clausewitz's theory of war, whereby war is an extension of political intercourse, politicians would prefer to attain political goals without the high cost and resources required in a full-scale invasion.²²

Using the same example from above, to extend its geopolitical interest in Ukraine, Russia initiated a hybrid warfare to which it successfully annexed Crimea from Ukraine.²³ While the 'little green men' who were essentially Russian special forces, the occupation of Crimea was relatively less kinetic and involved less resources than a full scale invasion, expected in the occupation of territories. Prior to the incursions by the approximately 30,000 unidentified armed men into Crimea on February 27th, Russia was amassing 150,000 troops for a major military exercise close to Ukraine's border.²⁴ While the exercise was made to dissuade any potential intervention from foreign actors, and to distract the actual plans happening in Crimea, the difference in scale reflects directly on the military resources saved from embarking on a hybrid war than a full-scale conventional offensive. The successful annexation was a result of Russian maintaining 'the overall military initiative... included diversions such as denying the identity... planting the idea of Crimean referendum on autonomy, and installing a puppet government in Crimea.'²⁵



Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, First Deputy Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, General of the Army, Valery Gerasimov.

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However, there were also other underlying contexts within Crimea that had presumably allowed for the successful annexation by Russians, through hybrid warfare and without the conventional offensive. Firstly, the lack of substantial force presence to deter and defend against the Russian military in Crimea. Secondly, a majority of the population in Crimea were more familiar with Russia, they were either former Soviet Union residents, or that they were retired employees working at the Russian Black Sea Fleet base in the region. The entire population speaks Russian and less than half sees Ukraine as their homeland. Thirdly,

Crimea was already an autonomous region from Ukraine and had its local government and a Crimean Prime Minister. These subsequently became weaknesses that played into Russian's favour through its effective use of hybrid warfare and negated a conventional military offensive.

Hybrid warfare could also be applied through non-military methods, such as a combination of grey zone methods and economic coercion, to effect the defeat of an adversary without actually going into conventional offensive. In the overlapping territorial claims around the disputed islands of the South China Sea, China unilaterally claims the possession in accordance to the nine-dash line on the Chinese maps.²⁶ In the next example between China and Philippines, China employed a mixture of grey zone tactics and economic coercion to overcome the skirmishes with other claimant naval ships out in the sea, while staying below the threshold of war. First, to avoid a military or armed confrontation in the seas, the use of 'unarmed white-hull' ships lowers the threat perception and corresponding triggers, without escalating into a war. Second, the use of non-kinetic weapons that could appear to be non-substantial, such



Russian President Vladimir Putin signs the treaty of accession (annexation) with Crimean leaders in Moscow, 18th March, 2014.

as laser pointers. Third, China employed economic coercion over Philippines. China unilaterally suspended the import of bananas, as well as tourist groups, to coerce the Philippines from backing out of the contested waters.²⁷

However, it shall also be noted that the outcome from such coercion methods practised by the Chinese, might not necessarily be consistent, and would be reliant on the subjective requirement and national interest, at that point in time.

COMPLEMENTARY ROLE OF CONVENTIONAL OFFENSIVES

The complementary role of conventional offensives in supporting hybrid warfare is an important factor to consider in all conflicts. Hybrid warfare or its tactics can be mostly effective in creating ambiguity and confusion but falls short in achieving any decisive military objectives. Referencing to Russian's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, to prevent the expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to Russia's doorstep and to continue having Ukraine under its sphere of influence, Russia had set its objectives to capture Kyiv and to topple its government.²⁸ It launched a full-scale conventional offensive, complementing the simultaneous hybrid war campaigns ranging from information operations and cyber offensives. In comparison to the Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the scale of force had to commensurate with the expected scale of combat to achieve the objectives, i.e., whole of Ukraine versus Crimea. As with the above discussion in this essay, the use of conventional offensives is always necessary, but the scale of employing them can be varied to meet the intent, as hybrid warfare is often insufficient to achieve decisive military objectives. With the proliferation of hybrid warfare and technological advances, such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics, hybrid warfare will increasingly play a bigger role in every war, but the conventional offensives will remain necessary to deterministically defeat the adversary.

The use of conventional offensives is always necessary, but the scale of employing them could be varied to meet the intent, as hybrid warfare are often insufficient to achieve decisive military objectives.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, the author had argued that hybrid warfare is only effective in achieving specific objectives in a conflict and may not conclusively defeat the adversary. He goes on to explain the limitations of hybrid warfare and hence the requirement for conventional offensives. These factors include the ability for the aggressor to project persistent and pervasive effects experienced by the adversary. The author discusses the Russian – Georgia war, whereby the full scale offensive launched by Russia would cement its objectives over Georgia. He then describes two other conditions in which hybrid warfare will be less effective, attempting to defeat ideological beliefs as well as the largely non-attributable nature of hybrid warfare. Subsequently, in the study of how hybrid warfare could be the ultimate solution that could do away with full-scale conventional offensive, the author had consistently found exceptions which hybrid warfare could not fulfil. This translates to the need and relevance for conventional offensives, but relative to the scale of conflict, could determine the force sizing of a full-scale offensive. Finally, the complementary role of conventional offensive in supporting hybrid wars is described through the two conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, in 2014 and 2022 respectively.

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