

AN ATTEMPT TO IDENTIFY HYBRID CONFLICT

Adam Wetoszka



Abstract

The article examines the nature of contemporary hybrid warfare and describes the characteristic features and properties of present day hybrid conflicts. The author also analyses the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and tries to identify its phases and those elements which classify it as hybrid warfare. He shows how hybrid actions may affect a state which is targeted by the conflict as well as the external environment.

Moreover, the author identifies the particular tactics used by the aggressor against a state and symptoms which may indicate the initial development of hybrid warfare.

Contemporary armed conflicts fought over European borders undermine the familiar status of the uninterrupted peace and safety of the Old Continent. The warfare staged close to the border line of the European Union supports this thesis. The Ukrainian conflict not only generates classic threats to the safety of neighbouring states, but a careful observer will notice new, unconventional activities of the involved parties, which point to a different nature of adversary – a novum of the recent armed conflicts – hybrid warfare.

The question then arises: what is hybridity and how is it applied? Perhaps, as a rule, it is something difficult to define, unpredictable in order to be unnoticeable, camouflaged, multilateral, and yet an effective instrument used in modern armed conflicts.

This article attempts to identify the particular elements of a hybrid conflict as well as determine the specific characteristics which are attributed to this phenomenon.

Current threats and conflicts differ significantly from those that occurred in the not so distant past. The disintegration of the bipolar Cold War world and progressive globalisation have altered the nature of the global security environment. Present day armies have to face new challenges, risks and

threats, including asymmetrical ones¹. It is also becoming increasingly true that massive armies, even professional ones, are incapable of dealing with the tasks they face.

Today military operations of a regional nature and a wider range are characterized by the complexity of all the means engaged. This comprehensive nature is understood as hybridization, in the broad sense of the word, which is challenging to understand. In the most recent armed conflicts, the mutual overlapping and combining of regular and irregular warfare techniques is clearly evident.² For example, a common strategy is to bring about economic dependency on the potential aggressor. Another distinctive characteristic of hybrid warfare is seen in the use of media and diplomatic efforts to impact society, national ethnic or religious groups, soldiers and civilians. These activities are influenced by such factors as the security environment, including asymmetry, political and cultural divisions, as well as the side effects of globalisation.

The etymology of the term “hybridity” derives from the Latin word *hybrida*, which means a hybrid, an individual created from crossing two genetically different individuals, belonging to different types of species or breeds³, e.g. a descendant of a Roman male and a non-native Roman female.

A hybrid is a very broad concept occurring in almost all sciences, including biology and technology. The effect of a hybrid takes place due to crossing or mixing properties, or elements belonging to various objects, organisms or states, often different structurally, distant genetically and opposed. The goal of this process is to give rise to a better, “superior” organism in terms of resistance to diseases, endurance or enhanced adaptation capabilities. We are well aware of the fact that, in the automotive industry, a hybrid propulsion system (a combination of a combustion engine and an electrical engine) produces higher performance with less fuel consumption by using the two engines interchangeably, depending on the needs of certain driving conditions. In aviation, the unsuccessful German transport aircraft Messerschmitt

¹ For the needs of this article we may assume that an asymmetrical threat is a subject (currently associated with the weaker party of a certain conflict), using certain unconventional means and techniques and unusual, non-traditional methods of operation, from the standpoint of its opponent (endangered subject).

² This type of warfare is conducted by units (formations) created already in times of peace or on an ad hoc basis during a war that exploit specific, unconventional and burdensome, for the opponent, ways to combat and disrupt enemy activities, in an area held by the enemy.

³ **Słownik Wyrazów Obcych PWN** 1980. [Dictionary of Foreign Terms PWN]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 290.

Me 323 Giant of 1942 was referred to as a hybrid, since initially its design was a sailplane, which had engines mounted on the wings, three on each side of the fuselage.

Thus, hybrid warfare combines strategy and tactics with irregular operations, along with cyber warfare and information operations. Hybridisation of war is characterized by the coexistence of various parties in the conflict (states and external actors, soldiers and civilians) and different types of armed operations – both symmetrical and asymmetrical⁴.



Figure 1. Hybrid warfare. Source: <http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/news/2015/mar/05mar15_news.html>

In relation to modern armed conflicts, hybridisation can be understood as the coexistence of “old” and “new” wars, classic armed conflicts and the most recent wars, clashes of national armies and asymmetric conflicts, state-of-the-art military technologies and primitive weaponry, fights over territories and resources as well as disputes about identities and values, and confrontation of the local and cosmopolitan⁵.

⁴ **Czaputowicz, J.** 2012. *Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe. Współczesne koncepcje* [International Security. Modern Concepts]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

⁵ **Kaldor, M.** 2001. *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford University Press, pp. 5–10; **Krystiana, J.; Robb, J.** 2007. *Brave New War. The Next Stage of Terrorism and the End of Globalization*. Wiley, Hoboken, pp. 152–164.

Hybridisation may apply both to the warring parties (state, external actor, irregular armed formation) and the space of the conflict (in particular, the battlefield), its origin and nature (conflict ecosystem)⁶.

In principle, it results from the coexistence in time and space of several different generations of warfare, which cross over and mutually penetrate the battlefield or operations other than war. For an outside observer, on one hand, war is the space where regular units of the armed forces of a state, divided into certain types of loosely organised and poorly armed local gangs stage warfare; special operations of military formations equipped with cutting edge military technology and at the same time an attack of an infuriated crowd on “invader army”, application of technologies and instruments of cyber battlefield and on the other hand, ambushes and traps made by the enemy in confrontation⁷.

A careful scrutiny reveals that hybrid warfare generates four types of threats: traditional, irregular, terrorist and destructive. The basic area of hybrid warfare is obviously the conflict zone as well as the area adjacent to the conflict zone and the international community.

A characteristic feature of present day hybrid-type warfare is the fact that military armed operations must be accompanied by non-military components. This can be seen through the prism of contemporary conflicts in which armies often take on a policing role, provide humanitarian aid, the so-called post-conflict rehabilitation or training missions in a new environment. They also become involved in stabilization phases on completion of a conflict. Such activities require the trust of the local community due to the fact that civilian communities perceive soldiers either in friendly or hostile terms, with no intermediary stages. The experiences obtained during missions in Afghanistan and Iraq indicate that military operations (conducted even with state-of-the-art equipment) do not guarantee victory over an enemy who uses unconventional, asymmetrical methods and means of combat. This results from the fact that war has undergone the process of hybridisation, which presents a new type of military challenge in this modern age.

Likewise, the subject literature proves that the concept of hybrid warfare is vague and uncertain, deprived of defined precision, and full of blurred

⁶ **Doctrine and Training Centre of the Polish Armed Forces**, collation on: Works undertaken in the Ministry of National Defence, NATO, EU in operational capabilities in the area of hybridity of contemporary warfare, Bydgoszcz 2015, p. 7. [**Doctrine and Training Centre of the Polish Armed Forces 2015**]

⁷ *Ibid.*

principles, and what is worse, it undermines clear and stringent considerations about the future global security environment⁸.

The characteristic quality of hybridity in contemporary wars is the coexistence of two essential planes of conflict: territorial and virtual. The territorial plane refers to the classically understood national, state and traditional ethnic communities, clans or tribes permanently inhabiting a given territory. In contrast, the virtual plane has a cross-territory, cross-border network structure which allows communication within a given network, and global promotion of values, ideas and principles, including the sustaining and recovery of its own structure. Warfare on the territorial plane is designed to extend and maintain jurisdiction and administrative control over a given area, protect the borders defining the extent of the jurisdiction, enforce constitutional principles and legal norms with regard to the population living in the area, and ensure public order and the management of natural resources and economic activity. Warfare in the virtual dimension redefines conflict parameters, and even eliminates certain determinants such as territory, natural resources, military organization and public order⁹.

The Russian Federation, by practising the concepts of hybrid warfare in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine and Crimea, effectively achieved its political objectives. This has led to a situation in which the status of the waged war has become the state of peace; also humanitarian intervention made it possible to conduct the war without a formal declaration.

The Russian idea of “new generation warfare” is based upon the following elements: political diversion, creation of support infrastructure interventions, deterrence and manipulation of negotiations¹⁰.

The war in Ukraine proved that political sabotage may be accomplished through media, on the basis of propaganda and agitation, at the same time touching upon socially sensitive issues, such as social, language and cultural differences. Media operations are designed to deepen the differences and bilateralism between social groups, create corruption and agitate influential officials. Creating support infrastructure interventions means taking over key national infrastructure components, i.e. airports, stations, depots. These activities are of a non-military nature and aspect, e.g. by creating a situation

⁸ **Gentile, G. P.** 2009. The imperative for an American general purpose army that can fight. – *Orbis*, 2009, No. 3, p. 461.

⁹ **Doctrine and Training Centre of the Polish Armed Forces** 2015, p. 8.

¹⁰ **Antczak-Barzan, A.** 2016. Dynamika wojny hybrydowej na Ukrainie [Dynamic hybrid warfare in Ukraine]. – *Kwartalnik Bellona* 1/2016, p. 46. [**Antczak-Barzan** 2016]

in which the personnel, crew or workers themselves desert a captured facility on their own. Well-organised support also includes properly trained militants who secure the interests of an aggressor at the occupation point. Intervention is the utmost element of hybrid warfare. The experiences of the war in Ukraine showed that it may take the form of a sudden impromptu organization of field exercises at the border with a significant number of deployed troops and equipment. At the same time, illegal cooperation is carried out with a transfer of equipment, the training of insurgents and the creation of logistic bases. Deterrence consists of the threat of using nuclear weapons, organising manoeuvres and aggressive activities of land and air forces so that neighbouring states are wary of engaging in the conflict.

The Russian approach to the concept of conducting hybrid warfare was partially revealed by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, General Valery Gierasimow, during his speech on 26 January 2013 addressed to the members of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, at the meeting which concluded the work of the Academy in 2012. The speech was primarily an expression of the views of the Command of the Russian Federation military forces on how to stage a new type of war – a conflict where all differences disappear between war and peace in the classical approach, and also between uniformed personnel and undercover activities. According to Gierasimow, such a combination, especially when wars are not declared and conflicts are in the initial stages, is quite different than the usual focus of military thinkers. Most importantly, it has the potential to change an utterly stable country into an arena of the most intense armed conflict within several months, if not days. Moreover, as mentioned by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, the new conflicts entail a fundamental change in the laws of war. The role of non-military measures undertaken to achieve political and strategic objectives has grown. According to the Chief of the General Staff, these measures may be significantly more efficient than the conventional military methods, since the use of asymmetrical actions reduces the enemy advantage in armed combat. The use of special forces and internal opposition in order to create an ever-growing front over the whole territory of a hostile state, as well as information operations (the forms and means of which undergo constant change) have been mentioned as examples of such methods. In addition, Gen Gierasimow clearly stated that current military actions are becoming more and more dynamic, active and effective. Tactical and operational intervals, which an enemy might take advantage of, are also disappearing¹¹.

¹¹ **Doctrine and Training Centre of the Polish Armed Forces** 2015, p. 15.

Upon analysis of Gen Gierasimow's address and the events in Crimea, or recently in eastern Ukraine, it is clear that the Russian concept of waging a contemporary conflict (a hybrid war) assumes adherence to the following scheme:

- 1) **Phase 1. Preparation** – the launching of PsyOps (psychological operations) over the area of a planned conflict by rekindling separatist mindsets and creating an atmosphere of inevitable conflict, combined with diplomatic efforts in the international arena (both in relation to its own allies and the potential enemy's allies).
- 2) **Phase 2. Disinformation** – carrying out disinformation activities (at all levels, starting with strategic communications and ending with local messages) by all available communication media responsible for transferring information in the conflict area and in the international environment:
 - In the diplomatic aspect – in order to achieve the desired response, each recipient (including the aggressor for internal needs) receives a message aimed at mitigating or exacerbating the actual picture of the situation. It must be adapted to the individual characteristics of the country, its international and internal situation (differing for politicians and for domestic public opinion);
 - In the military aspect – throughout the whole period of the operation, conducting a significant number of exercises and repositioning of tactical battle groups by the aggressor, in the guise of carrying out a training cycle of military units in order to facilitate a covert deployment of troops intended for actions in the enemy area, and simultaneously distracting the enemy's attention.
- 3) **Phase 3. Destabilizing** – overpowering central and local centres of enemy authority, its power structures, media and business representatives, using commonly applied methods and tools, including political, economic and technologically advanced (e.g. cyber attacks).
- 4) **Phase 4. Military operations** – establishing local units of separatists composed of e.g. national minorities acting with the support of armed forces and special forces of the aggressor (without any identifying marks), equipped with specialist equipment and armament, whose main task is to hinder the armed forces of the target country's ability to conduct operations and in a coordinated way to take control of key installations and areas which exert an impact on the success of the operation (border crossings, media relay, major roads, bridges, railway lines and airports).

5) Phase 5. Incorporation – establishing central and local authorities dependent on the aggressor that will support the process of a formal inclusion of the area of activity into the state structures of the aggressor¹².

In addition the Russian Federation attempted to disrupt the authorities and Ukrainian troops by launching military exercises in all military zones. There were also activities aimed at undermining the actions and unity of international organizations, such as NATO, the EU and the UN. Economic blackmail was also used, which threatened to suspend gas and oil supplies. The corruption of officials in the ministries responsible for the military and law enforcement also occurred on a frequent basis. By combining activities in cyberspace with conventional activities, the aggressor introduced units without valid state identifications. In consequence, public facilities and military bases were captured; simultaneously, separatists were trained and supplied with modern weapons.

An analysis of the elements of modern hybrid war reveals the following significant threats:

- **Political threats**, as a state of intensified actions run by organised social groups (political), prevent the country from fulfilling its main functions, and thereby weaken or nullify the actions of bodies or institutions which are responsible for pursuing national objectives and interests.
- **Economic threats** are perceived as a security threat to the national economy, to the extent that the economy cannot develop, generate profits and savings for investments, or when external threats lead to disruptions in its functioning, which compromise the citizens and companies and may even endanger the physical survival of the State.
- **Military threats** constitute a situation where a reduction or loss of conditions for a peaceful existence and the development of the State may occur; also an infringement or loss of its sovereignty or territorial integrity as a result of the use of armed violence (military).
 - **Social threats** relate to all that threatens the loss of the national and ethnic identity of individual communities.
 - **Threats to critical infrastructure.** Critical Infrastructure is the systems and the inter-related functional facilities, including buildings, technical installations and services critical to the security of the state and its citizens, which are to ensure the proper functioning of public administration authorities, and also institutions and companies.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

- **Information threats.** This is the security area whose content (objectives, conditions, methods, contents) refers to the information environment (including cyberspace) of the State, such as:
 - propaganda/information operations;
 - manipulation of information;
 - launching propaganda campaigns and psychological operations using services offered by the Internet and mobile telephone network;
 - operations against the critical infrastructure of the State, including hacking security systems. Unauthorised access or misuse of information or unauthorised modification of information;
 - cyber terrorism, cyber crime, hacking.

Contemporary hybrid warfare and its nature may be best illustrated by the example of the Ukrainian – Russian conflict and the annexation of Crimea. It is occasionally described as a war of a new kind, without the direct use of military force. The involvement of non-military means is clearly evident here: political, economic, and social means lead to similar results without the use of force or personal losses¹³. Information warfare played a fundamental role in shaping the conflict “without conflict” or “non-occupation war”¹⁴.

The war of information may be compared to the development of a disease in the human body, for instance, diabetes. Initially it develops and attacks in an inconspicuous way, followed by a stage of rapid development, which results in weakening and later damage of different organs. The war of information may take years. When carried out systematically, it may have irreversible consequences. Hybrid warfare and information warfare have certain common features. They may be conducted in a secretive manner, “on the sly”, without a public declaration of engagement, from the position of a neutral state or a neutral arbitrator, or a proxy of either warring party, and in this way they may enable continuation of intended operations by the actual side of the conflict. They use a similar range of means and resources, and similar or complementary technologies of operation. However, hybrid war should yield a substantial politico-military result; whereas information warfare is designed to initiate and act as a catalyst for this success¹⁵.

¹³ See: **Antczak-Barzan** 2016, p. 47.

¹⁴ Experiences show that this type of action may be efficient with regard to States which are weak, collapsed, stratified and ridden by social conflicts.

¹⁵ **Pac, B.** 2016. Integration of information and hybrid warfare in international conflicts. – *Kwartalnik Bellona* 1/2016, p. 56.

The propaganda warfare with Ukraine and the dissemination of information abroad showed Russia as a generous and caring country supporting a neighbour in chaos. In reality the support was to strengthen the separatists.

An intensive information campaign was also conducted in Western Europe and in Russia itself for the sake of its own citizens in order to back up the separatists in Crimea. The internal activities were to generate awareness and to mobilize society in consolidating the image of NATO and Western Europe as a permanent adversary of Russia. Meanwhile, they created a strong image of Ukraine as a nationalistic, Bandera's State, with a new fascist biased government aimed at restricting the rights of the Russian minority. Furthermore, the thesis of the historical background of Crimea belonging to Russia was spread. The aim of such propaganda actions focusing on Russia's own society is to arouse the feeling of injustice, isolation and unfair treatment by the rest of the world.

On one hand, the society has the feeling of its own uniqueness and is convinced of the appropriateness of the actions undertaken by the state (reconstruction of Russia as a superpower). On the other hand, the society experiences 'unfair' alienation; it faces deepening antagonisms between the values of the East and the West. It is easier to manipulate such a society, which, in turn, can alleviate hardships and inconveniences resulting from waging an armed conflict over a longer period of time (e.g. shortage of food caused by western sanctions or reductions in expenditures on social benefits and salaries)¹⁶.

Propaganda aimed at neighbouring countries is a warning meant to evoke fears of conflict escalation and loss of freedom. This method is applied to the Caucasian countries, i.e. Georgia, Moldova and Belarus. Another type of propaganda is directly addressed to the Baltic countries. All international propaganda is in fact information chaos, disinformation, fabricating reality, and manipulation aimed at destroying the unity of Western Europe. In a sense, the activities partly fulfilled their objectives by dividing the West, arousing fear in neighbouring countries and, in particular, by dividing Ukraine in terms of ideology, community and, above all, territory.

This conflict has also exploited the use of sound and image for propaganda manipulation. Television footage often presented materials from other locations and a different time than it was broadcast. Amidst the information chaos, the average viewer was unable to notice significant differences.

¹⁶ See: **Antczak-Barzan** 2016, p. 51.

Showing the suffering of civilians, children in particular, became the fundamental “propaganda trump”¹, targeting “the rich west”.

During the crisis in Kiev Maidan, protesters used mobile phones and cameras as shields, since the recorded and forwarded pictures might serve as evidence of the aggressive activities of the authorities. It was also intended to cause an international intervention, which, in the end, did not occur.

Another issue connected with waging a hybrid war is humanitarian intervention or its proper use for the sake of the conflict. Humanitarian aid, present in international law, begins to be used for other purposes. Under the pretext of such aid, foreign armed forces are introduced, not necessarily acting in the manner the supported State would wish. In addition, reality showed that humanitarian intervention may be carried out against the will of the supported country and the humanitarian aid serves the interests of the state it was sent from.

In conclusion, it must be stressed that the hybrid nature of contemporary wars reveals that the opponent who uses asymmetrical methods of combat will not follow the principles of the humanitarian laws of armed conflicts. They will attack persons and objects protected by international law, exploiting civilians to shield their own operations. They will predominantly use local militias and other non-state players, creating situations where the key points and installations are taken control of by an indirect aggressor. As for direct action, the aggressor will seek to create military-like situations, as a result of which the crew, personnel and/or employees will abandon the desired target facility.

It is quite likely that the aggressor will not use any uniforms or identification badges of military formations. This was seen through the activities of the Russian Federation in Crimea and currently in the eastern districts of Ukraine (Lugansk and Donetsk districts). On one hand, we may distinguish the hybridity of these activities that connect the old and new methods of combat (regular and asymmetrical methods, as well as state-of-the-art or primitive measures of exerting an influence), including “subliminal aggression” (which does not exceed the borderline of an open, regular war). On the other hand, we may observe the combining of military operations with information warfare (at all levels, from strategic to local communication).

In the subject literature, there is no definite and generally comprehensible definition of a “hybrid war”. Neither is it present in any available classification of wars in the art of war theory. Nevertheless, as stated above, hybridity of contemporary wars should be understood as a coexistence of “old” and “new” wars, classic armed conflicts and most recent wars, clashes of national

forces and asymmetrical conflicts, state-of-the-art military technologies and primitive weaponry, fights over territories and resources as well as disputes about identity and values, and confrontation of the local and the cosmopolitan. It must be assumed that hybridity in contemporary wars has also become a sign of our times and its existence is palpably clear.

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Col. Dr. **ADAM WETOSZKA**, Head of the Department of Tactics and Armament and Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Aviation in the Polish Air Force Academy