



Hybrid tactics: Russia and the West

by Nicu Popescu

For most of the last two decades European security was mostly discussed in terms of peacekeeping, counter-terrorism and, at times, counter-insurgency. Now Europe has to re-learn the ropes of a ‘harder’ security conversation that is currently developing around the concept of ‘hybridity’.

A series of terms containing the word ‘hybrid’ – war, threats or tactics – has entered into the mainstream vocabulary of political debates in Europe. At the same time many defence analysts – in both Russia and the West – have been puzzled by the popularity of the term for the very simple reason that all attempts to define ‘hybrid threats’ have referred to tools that have already been part and parcel of the conduct of war in the past.

The debate in Russia

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ is now intimately linked to Russia. The term itself was coined in 2002 by William J. Nemeth to describe the Chechen insurgency that blended (hence the word ‘hybrid’) traditional societal organisation and guerrilla warfare with modern military tactics and use of technology – from mobile telephones to the internet.

A decade later the term (albeit with its meaning slightly modified) was popularised following Russian military operations in Crimea and the Donbass region of Ukraine in 2014, which seemed to follow a script very much in line with General

Gerasimov’s 2013 doctrine of ‘non-linear’ warfare.

The term itself is a Western description of Russian military practice, rather than a conceptual innovation originating in Russia. Russian analysts tend to talk about hybrid tactics with a mixture of pride and misgiving. The pride is fuelled by the belief that it was Moscow’s efficient military and information campaign which catapulted the term ‘hybrid’ into mainstream political discourse worldwide. EU and NATO concerns about hybrid tactics are thus seen as indirect compliments to the conduct of the Crimea operation. Yet there is also a tendency to contest the use of the term by arguing that Russia did not do anything particularly unique.

Russian analysts and commentators are quite firm in their conviction that the West, and notably the US, also pursues hybrid tactics – in Afghanistan in the 1980s, for instance, but also over the last decade in the Middle East. Another Russian claim is that the West is carrying out its own hybrid operation against Russia in the shape of smear campaigns and the imposition of economic and financial sanctions.

More eccentric though far from marginal views argue that the West’s own hybrid war against Russia was first and foremost conducted through support and alleged instigation of the ‘coloured revolution’ or even the design of the Eastern Partnership and Association Agreements.

The debate in the West

Whatever the rhetoric, Russian military operations in Ukraine fundamentally altered the European security debate due to a number of reasons. First, the ‘surprise’ of Russia’s military operations in Ukraine was not generated primarily by the tools used (deception and disinformation campaigns, economic coercion and corruption, which all play a supportive role for military action) but rather by the efficiency and versatility with which they were employed in Crimea and beyond. The novelty, in other words, was how well old tools were utilised in unison to achieve the desired goal.

Second, until Crimea, hybrid operations were thought to be mainly conducted by non-state actors (e.g. Chechen separatists or Hizbullah). In the Ukraine crisis, however, it was a major state – and one of the strongest military powers in the world – which adopted hybrid tactics to remain below the threshold of outright, formally declared war.

But the final, and most important, reason for which the term has gained such salience in public debates in the West is that Russia’s use of hybrid tactics has elevated concern regarding such manoeuvres to the strategic level. The concern is not so much about Russia’s tools and capabilities (be it tanks or TV channels), but about how their combined use can affect political and strategic realities within the EU and NATO. And that has raised a number of strategic questions that had faded into the background since the end of the Cold War and are now regaining prominence. These questions are related to:

Collective deterrence: the reason hybrid operations have been perceived as so worrying is because it is feared that they might have an impact on the credibility of deterrence – both conventional and nuclear. A ‘hybrid’ and limited operation – say, the swift takeover of a town in a NATO country by unmarked groups of men (even if for a few days only) – could lead to a dilemma over whether and how to respond. Hybrid operations might indeed constitute a risky but effective means of circumventing NATO’s Article 5, and simply strike at the heart of political solidarity inside NATO and the EU, rather than capture territory. The issue is exacerbated by Russia’s ‘nuclear signalling’ to the rest of Europe and the US – which took the form of statements by President Putin that nuclear forces were put on alert during the Crimea takeover, but was also demonstrated by the presence of nuclear strike scenarios in many of Russia’s recent large-scale military exercises. Such hints at readiness to escalate beyond the threshold of conventional warfare (it is called ‘de-escalation’ in Russian security

debates) – something which is not present in the debate over the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – have also heightened concern, as Russia appears to be playing both below and, potentially, beyond the threshold of conventional warfare.

Alliance politics: just as hybrid operations blur the distinction between war and peace, they also complicate responses to them. Politically, it would be relatively easy for NATO or the EU to assess and then decide to respond to an open, large-scale, frontal military attack against any of their members. In the case of a hybrid operation, the risk is that instead of discussing possible responses, NATO or EU members would get bogged down in arguments over what is really happening. By the time a degree of clarity could be achieved, it might be too late or at least much more difficult to neutralise or track down the perpetrators – with all the related risks of military and political escalation.

Domestic implications: the challenge of maintaining inter-state cohesion may also filter down to domestic politics. Here the ‘info-war’ aspect of hybrid operations is of great significance as it directly targets the general publics and political elites in Europe. If effective, it has the potential to undermine political support for common responses. In this regard, Russia’s activities again differ from those of non-state actors like ISIL, whose information and outreach efforts tend to target small and often marginalised segments of society, whereas Russian media campaigns target large strata of society.

Russia’s ‘nuclear signalling’ is viewed in a similar vein – not as a declaration of Russian intent to launch nuclear strikes against the rest of Europe, but as part of a strategy of political intimidation aimed at European elites and publics and designed to constrain the domestic room for manoeuvre in the event of crises.

None of these questions have ready-made answers. But right now the European security debate is in a bind. Tackling these issues will feed further into the already existing security dilemma in Russia and the West about each side’s intentions (and capabilities). But not addressing them is even more dangerous, as the slightest hint of wobbly solidarity inside NATO or the EU can be destabilising in and by itself. Hence the reason why ‘hybrid’ tactics – old tools in a new box – have become so worryingly central to the European security debate.

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