

WAR BY ALL MEANS: THE RISE OF HYBRID WARFARE



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Concept, origins and criticisms

Hybrid warfare became a popular concept in NATO military discussions in the early 2000s as a way to describe new ways of waging war that combined regular and irregular methods. Hybrid tactics, including urban guerrilla warfare, sophisticated weaponry like drones, disinformation, kidnapping and even terrorism, were used by state and non-state actors in the violence produced by the international interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the interfaith war between Sunnis and Shiites, the strategies of transnational terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and the war between Israel and Hezbollah. Such attacks were multiple, heterogeneous, almost always plagued by uncertainty, and paid little heed to the rules of war. Hybrid warfare thus represented a shift away from the «old wars» of the 20th century, like World War I and II, which were characterised by conventional confrontations between regular armies, while also adding complexity to the «new wars» of the 1990s, like those in Bosnia, Sierra Leone and Liberia, in which networks of state and non-state actors clashed over identity politics, and which were managed by international peacebuilding missions (Kaldor, 2001).

However, the differences between these conflicts were probably insubstantial: what really changed was the perspective of the West. In the 1990s,

blinded by a period of integration, prosperity and the perception of victory at the end of the Cold War, the United States and its Western allies failed to understand the wars being waged by others over territory, economic and strategic interests, identity and religion (Bargués-Pedreny, 2018). But in the 2000s, with the «Global War on Terrorism» in full sway, the rise of hybrid tactics brought an end to the «self-delusion» of the 1990s, when it was believed that international institutions could limit and regulate peace and war (Johnson, 2018: 143).

Soon after, hybrid threats were contaminating peaceful areas as much as conflict zones. In 2014, «little green men» in unmarked uniforms entered Crimea to take control of infrastructure, facilitate a referendum and annex Ukrainian territory for Russia. The evidence of continual cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, interference in democratic processes and the mobilisation of migrants at the European Union's external borders have seriously harmed EU–Russia relations. Hybrid attacks blur the boundaries between war and peace. They exploit the opportunities of an interconnected and globalised world to weaken the adversary without expending resources on the conventional battlefield (Colom Piella, 2018).

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Critical voices stress that the «hybrid» is not a new phenomenon – that a range of tactics have featured in almost all conflicts throughout history. Unconventional methods have been noted since at least the Punic Wars, when the Romans used demoralisation and attrition tactics, attacked supply lines and avoided direct combat to fight a Carthaginian army that was

superior on the battlefield (Carr & Walsh, 2022). Other critical studies argue that hybrid warfare is a Eurocentric *catch-all* concept that helps the West explain the strategies of third parties using examples as disparate as the war in Ukraine, the conflict between Morocco and Algeria and the deliberate mobilisation of migrants for political purposes (Johnson, 2018). So, if other concepts already exist to describe today's conflicts, like *asymmetric warfare*, *complex irregular warfare*, *connectivity wars*, *fourth* or *fifth generation warfare* and *grey zones*, what added value does speaking of hybrid warfare bring?

It is the escalation of these tactics that has placed the concept back in the spotlight. In *Europe*, like in other *regions* of the world, government and international organisations' security strategies increasingly reflect a

perception that hybrid threats are always lurking – in times of peace and war – on land, at sea, in the air, online and even in space. This conceptual chapter, which aims to lay the foundations for the analysis in this *CIDOB Report*, focuses on three features of hybrid warfare that are shaping international relations today. First, the uncertainty that surrounds hybrid warfare, which makes it difficult to separate war from peace and to prove who is behind an attack. Second, the diversification of tactics for exploiting other states' vulnerabilities. And, finally, the aims of these tactics, which seemingly seek to undermine the adversary's values and the legitimacy of their political systems. Destabilisation is the goal, rather than victory.

Uncertainty, multiplicity and confusion

Long gone are the days when hostilities between states began with formal declarations of war. Analysts have highlighted that hybrid tactics often remain below the threshold of war in order to wear the opponent down while avoiding larger-scale confrontation and the risks of mutual destruction, as might be the case in a clash between nuclear powers like Russia and NATO member states (Friedman, 2018). Hybrid tactics complicate peacetime and inter-state relations, making wars more uncertain and confusing.

In fact, hybrid warfare abounds with uncertainty. It is difficult to trace responsibility for cyber and other types of attack, or to prove who has organised disturbances. It is impossible to know who began a disruptive rumour, and fake

news is difficult to deny. In a conventional war the state and the army are usually responsible for the fighting, but hybrid warfare may involve proxies, hackers, criminal gangs, drug traffickers, paramilitaries, terrorists and private contractors like Blackwater, G4S Secure Solutions and the Wagner Group.

The second notable feature that bears on contemporary international relations is the use of new destabilisation tactics. Unimaginable a few years ago, they are increasingly diverse. Tanks and machine guns are deployed in combination with sophisticated weaponry like drones, hypersonic missiles and **hybrid insect micro-electro-mechanical surveillance systems**. These technologies are not only in state hands, but also of **terrorists**, criminals and drug traffickers. **Terrorist groups** use social media to recruit fighters, foment

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hatred, spread propaganda and prepare attacks. States allow hundreds of migrants across borders over a few hours to generate sensations of overflow and vulnerability in a neighbouring country. Disinformation helps polarise societies and delegitimise institutions, and multinational companies participate as private actors in conflicts and international relations (see the chapters by Garcés Mascareñas and Colomina in this volume).

These diverse tactics are deployed to attack and exploit other states' economic, political and diplomatic vulnerabilities. Key to this is how globalisation and interdependence, which have facilitated cooperation and exchange, have also opened up opportunities to launch attacks and generate tension. In the words of Mark Leonard, «[i]nterdependence, once heralded as a barrier to conflict, has turned into a currency of power, as countries try to exploit the asymmetries in their relations». Every connection

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is susceptible to instrumentalisation, and thus scepticism and mistrust have grown between the great powers. As Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Commission's Vice-President, wrote in the prologue to the European Union's *Strategic Compass*: we live in a world shaped by power politics in which «everything is weaponised and where we face a fierce battle of narratives».

The third significant feature of these hybrid conflicts is their goals. Just as their beginnings are tricky to pinpoint, they do not necessarily seek a «victory» that brings the conflict to an end (O'Driscoll, 2019). So if they are not deployed to win war or peace, what are the goals of hybrid tactics? Disinformation, manipulation and electoral interference seek to undermine the legitimacy of institutions, the

trust in administrations and to alter election results. Hybrid tactics produce instability and erode democracy, create political polarisation and destroy coexistence and consensus.

States are increasingly resorting to hybrid tactics because they offer an unbeatable strategic advantage, helping achieve certain objectives, whether political, economic or of another nature, without closing the door to any form of negotiation or diplomatic or economic relations. With no declaration of war or open conflict situation between two states the

possibility of discussing peace and negotiating always remains. From this perspective, hybrid warfare usually costs considerably less than the burdens of a conventional war. It is easier to begin, as it evades direct responsibility; the means are logistically less complex and economically less costly; and it is politically less risky, as military victory is not the end goal.

Conclusion: hybrid times

Hybrid warfare is not a new phenomenon, but it has proliferated at a time when the West is feeling its hegemony being contested and international norms are being undermined. Studying hybrid tactics helps us understand the growing uncertainty that surrounds situations of both peace and war, and underscores the number of methods and means that allow an actor to achieve certain objectives. In other words, as a concept, it can help us focus on how actors relate to each other and how they intend to fight. The implications for the international order are profound. This mode of conflict is repeatedly used by state and non-state actors for the purposes of military, political, economic and social destabilisation. Rules are broken, relationships deteriorate. The strategic advantages offered by hybrid tactics, along with the low costs of resorting to them, are the reasons for their proliferation and intensification. From this perspective, we need to rethink our analytical and strategic frameworks in order to minimise the destabilising effects of this new generation of conflicts.

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