

THE PERILS OF HYBRID WAR

By Peter Grier

THE “little green men” were one of the first signs of Russia’s strategy. Commandos wearing green uniforms stripped of insignia, they occupied key government institutions in Crimea during the early months of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014.

For a time, their ambiguous identity allowed Russian leaders to deny that Moscow had launched a military offensive to seize the Crimean Peninsula and its Black Sea ports.

But these Russian Special Forces were not the only indication Moscow had launched a complex, multifaceted operation in the region. That October, as Ukraine neared a crucial snap parliamentary election, electronic advertising billboards in the capital of Kiev suddenly began showing a video accusing Ukrainian politicians of war crimes. Then they displayed graphic images of civilians killed in the eastern part of the country.

The electronic network had been compromised by a shadowy, pro-Russian group of hackers.

Russia also relied on conventional forces to push for its objectives. Regular infantry units eventually took the place of the little green men in Crimea. Russian artillery and military personnel crossed into Ukraine proper to help pro-Russian insurgents seize and hold strips of territory in the Donbass region in the country’s east.



The situation in the Donbass remains violent and unsettled. But one thing is clear: Russia's intervention in Crimea and the Ukraine is a textbook example of hybrid warfare, the combination of unconventional means (subversion, cyber attack) with conventional might to reach a geostrategic objective.

Hybrid war may be the most likely type of conflict the US and its allies will face in the near future. In part that is because of the increasing prevalence of state sponsorship of revolutions and insurgencies in weak, crumbling, or vulnerable regions of the world.

Hybrid warfare is a way for a stronger power to keep its involvement in such fights hidden as much as possible. Its fist becomes visible only if necessary, near the end.

Both Russia and, to a lesser extent, the Islamic State have used hybrid war approaches in recent years. Their efforts have affected an arc of crisis from Ukraine down through Iraq and across to Syria. For the US and its allies that has meant trouble on NATO's northern and southern flanks.

OLD TRICKS

"Hybrid warfare is a probe, a test of our resolve to resist and to defend ourselves. And it can be a prelude to a more serious attack, because behind every hybrid strategy, there are conventional forces, increasing the pressure and ready to exploit any opening," said NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in a 2015 speech.

Hybrid war as a concept is nothing new, of course. It is as old as the trick misdirection of the Trojan horse. According to Stoltenberg, the difference is that today the scale is bigger, the speed

But as a concept to illuminate modern conflict, hybrid war may date back to the Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006. This 34-day conflict took the vaunted Israel Defense Forces by surprise. The IDF had grown used to fighting small unit counterterror operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In Lebanon, it encountered a Hezbollah backed by Iran, employing highly disciplined and well-trained cells outfitted with powerful anti-tank missiles and other modern weapons.

At the battle of Wadi Salouqi, Hezbollah used these capabilities with deadly

The US and NATO are still trying to figure out how to respond to "hybrid warfare."

and intensity is higher, and the danger is right at the gates of the western alliance.

Technology has taken the complexity of hybrid war to a new level. Cyber and information war in the age of spear phishing emails, Twitter, and YouTube has increasingly become a form of warfare unto itself.

precision, damaging 18 Merkava tanks. Guerillas even managed to launch a few armed drones. Meanwhile Hezbollah flooded the information space with battlefield photos and videos and propaganda about kidnapped Israeli soldiers.

The IDF inflicted more physical damage on its enemy and won many

Unidentified military personnel—"little green men"—hefting AK-74Ms blockade a military base near Simferopol, Ukraine, in 2014.



Photo by Arton Holoborodko

encounters at the tactical level. But the court of public opinion in Israel, Lebanon, and the rest of the world saw Israel as the loser.

“As a hybrid force, Lebanese Hezbollah was able to use its internal strengths of narrative, weapons mix, and tactics to overcome the weaknesses of its much stronger opponent,” concludes a 2013 Joint Special Operations University report on hybrid warfare.

In the wake of Israel’s 2006 strategic setback, many western military analysts intensively studied what had happened to determine where a proud, highly trained, and modern armed force had gone wrong. They found that in part the Israelis simply were not prepared for Hezbollah’s spectrum of advanced weapons. But some felt that the IDF might not have precisely understood the overall nature of the conflict. It wasn’t all-out combat, analogous to the 1973 Yom Kippur War. It wasn’t a rock-throwing intifada.

It was something else.

It was a combination of elements. A hybrid war.

Retired Marine Reservist Lt. Col. Frank G. Hoffman was among the

first theorists to begin using the term “hybrid war” to refer to this hydra-headed concept. He referred to it as a “blurring of modes of war, the blurring of who fights, and what technologies are brought to bear.”

In this definition, hybrid war involves both nations and nonstate forces. Its violence can span the spectrum from intense regular unit combat to guerrilla warfare and terrorist acts. It can slot in criminal kidnapping and theft and, increasingly, cyber warfare.

It can employ state sponsorship of existing local unrest and the manipulation of currencies and other means of economic aggression. Diplomacy and propaganda play a part.

Hoffman began talking about this concept as early as 2005. He called it “unprecedented synthesis” in an article in *Proceedings* cowritten with Marine Corps then-Lt. Gen. James N. Mattis, now the new Secretary of Defense.

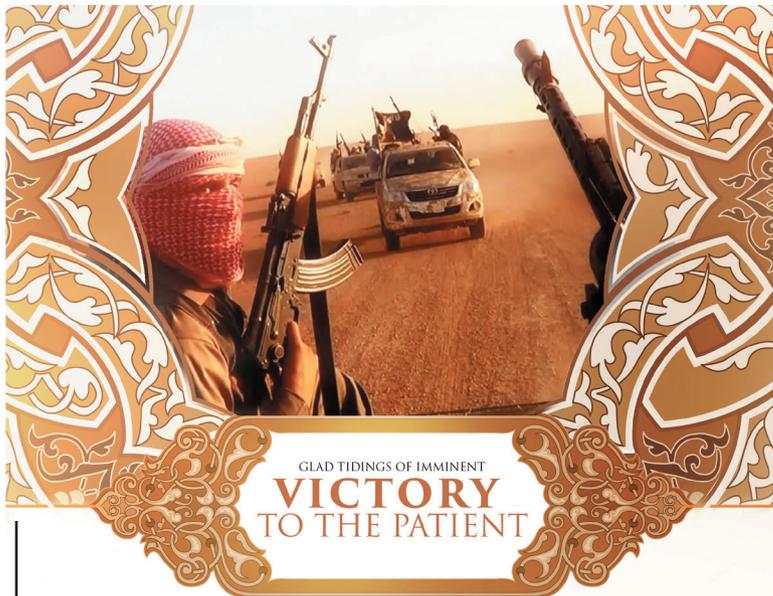
“In hybrid wars we can expect to simultaneously deal with the fallout of a failed state that owned but lost control of some biological agents or missiles, while combating an ethnically

motivated paramilitary force, and a set of radical terrorists who have now been displaced,” wrote Hoffman and Mattis. “We may face remnants of the fielded army of a rogue state in future wars, and they may employ conventional weapons in very novel or nontraditional ways.”

Hybrid war might feature attacks against US critical infrastructure or transportation networks. It could involve an electronic takedown of military or financial computer networks, Hoffman and Mattis wrote.

Many others have contributed to the development of the hybrid war concept. Some are not Western and may loom as potential adversaries. In 2013, Valery Gerasimov, current Chief of the General Staff of the Russian armed forces, published a journal article outlining his views on 21st century conflict. Much of his vision resembled hybrid war.

The rules of war have changed, and the importance of nonmilitary means of reaching political and strategic goals has grown, Gerasimov wrote. He said the broad use of such means—coupled with the use of “military means of



Above: A story published in the second issue of the ISIS magazine. The issue featured a cover shot of a blood-smeared dagger, and inside were pictures of beheadings and slaughter and articles on picking the best weapons for terrorist attacks. Right: An advertisement in the magazine promotes an alphabet app that encourages children to attack the US, Britain, France, and Russia. The terror group is adept at using disinformation and propaganda to lure in recruits and spread its message.

ISIS photos via Rumiyyh magazine



Secret Wars

One of the defining aspects of hybrid war is deniability. This is especially true of hybrid war as it is practiced by Russia, whose actions are designed to sow confusion about who is responsible for what and where a conflict is headed.

Thus Moscow uses proxy soldiers and unmarked Special Forces, shadowy hacker groups and armies of internet trolls, and slow, almost inch by inch, increases in geopolitical pressure.

Without hard evidence of bad action, confrontations with other powers can remain at a simmer. Russian moves have proved effective, yet remain under the reaction threshold of the US and the rest of the West.

“Hybrid is about reduced warning time. It’s about deception. It’s about a mixture of military and non-military means,” said NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the 2015 NATO Transformation Seminar.

Crimea and Ukraine may not be the only places where this Russian approach is evident. US and NATO officials worry that a hybrid war of sorts may already have begun elsewhere along NATO’s eastern flank.

For instance, Russian jets and submarines are now approaching the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania with a frequency not seen since the Cold War. Moscow recently publicized a move of short-range, nuclear-capable Iskander missiles into Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic Sea. And a 2016 Russian military exercise near the Latvian border featured Russian troops with loudspeakers calling on NATO soldiers to surrender.

Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia could serve as a *casus belli* drawing Russia into the region. In 2007 Russian media falsely reported that in Estonia, Russian-speakers were being drugged and tortured by police. This sparked local riots.

Around the same time, cyber attacks linked to pro-Russian groups knocked some large Estonian networks off-line.

Worry about Russian provocations led NATO in July 2016 to request that member nations station troops in Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland until at least March 2019.

The Baltic states and Poland are all NATO members in good standing. NATO’s leadership is concerned that Russia is attempting to create a “grey zone” of ambiguity along the alliance’s eastern flank to weaken the alliance’s solidarity.

“Attempts at domestic political and economic destabilization and manipulation of states along the eastern border regions of NATO from the Baltics to the Black Sea have driven many political leaders to claim that they fall within this grey zone already, and that it will only expand,” said a 2015 NATO report on hybrid warfare.

Under Article 5 of the NATO treaty an armed attack against any member state is an attack against all, requiring a collective response. This is where the deniability aspect of hybrid warfare may come into play. By using hidden tactics that target political, economic, and social vulnerabilities, Russia or any other adversary could creep toward its objectives without activating Article 5.

The West could become the proverbial frog in the soup pot, with the heat gradually increasing and the frog acclimating to the temperature until the water boils.

“Once a Crimea-style operation has begun, it will be extremely difficult if not impossible for Western decision-makers to be sufficiently confident about the other side’s intent to take consequential action before it’s too late,” according to Paul J. Sanders, executive director of the Center for the National Interest, and a former State Department official.

a concealed character”—might even exceed the power of actual weapons.

HIDDEN INTENTIONS

“The open use of forces—often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict,” the Russian military chief wrote.

Not all military analysts are fond of the hybrid war concept. Some find it too vague, changeable, a means of lumping variable actual conflicts together.

In 2010 the US Government Accountability Office surveyed officials from more than 20 US military organizations, from all services, and found they had no common definition of the term. Nor did they have plans to agree on one, since hybrid war is not an idea that has been officially incorporated into US doctrine.

Wire-guided portable anti-tank missiles discovered in a car in Southern Lebanon by Israel Defense Forces.

This may be part of hybrid warfare’s appeal to the world’s thugs, bullies, and terror mongers. It is difficult for Western powers to effectively respond to actions that can frequently be excused, explained away, or justified,

especially when there are no agreed-upon descriptions of what is going on.

Moreover, Gerasimov’s opinions on the subject have been a bit misread in the West, say some critics. While his predictions of future conflicts were similar



in some ways to those of the US and NATO, he put greater emphasis on heavy conventional capabilities, writes Charles K. Bartles, an analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., in a 2016 analysis.

“Gerasimov is simply explaining his view of the operational environment and the nature of future war, and not proposing a new Russian way of warfare or military doctrine,” Bartles writes.

Still, over the last decade the concept of hybrid warfare has spread widely among US analysts and NATO planners. To many it offers a means of making sense of militarily resurgent Russia’s moves around its perimeter and in Syria. It can explain some of the gains made by ISIS.

The 2014 US Quadrennial Defense Review cites a need for the Pentagon to rebalance to face a broad spectrum of threats, from high-end conflict to “hybrid contingencies.”

IS THIS WAR?

NATO worries that hybrid war can inch toward a geopolitical objective while remaining under the threshold for Article 5, which triggers collective armed defense of a threatened member.

Russia’s incursion in Crimea and Ukraine is a case in point. It was rooted in the Russian determination that blocking Ukraine’s further economic and political integration into Europe was a vital interest.

It began with misdirection. As protests roiled Ukraine in early 2014, Russia mounted a large military exercise within striking distance of the Ukraine border. This distracted the newly installed pro-Western government in Kiev, as the Russian force was big enough that the exercise was a plausible preinvasion movement.

Meanwhile, the little green men appeared, and Moscow began to close its grip on Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula. After it became apparent what was happening, the nearby Russian force helped dissuade Kiev from mounting its own military move to try and forestall Crimea’s fall.

On March 1 President Vladimir Putin orchestrated a Russian referendum authorizing him to use force in Ukraine. Regular infantry units moved into Crimea, covered by airpower from the Russian Black Sea fleet.

Meanwhile, Russia successfully exploited the information dimension of the conflict, according to a 2015

NATO study of hybrid war incidents. It flooded local media with propaganda depicting Moscow as the protector of Russian-language residents of the region, who were depicted as threatened by potential atrocities.

This sort of propaganda has made Putin hugely popular in Russia and may have helped deter the West from a more muscular support of Ukraine.

Russia’s information efforts “served as a force multiplier in the conflict,” according to the NATO report.

Success for Russia is far from guaranteed in this effort, however. It did seize Crimea, but the nearby presence of Russian naval and air forces based there made that relatively easy.

The combination of little green men, local paramilitaries, propaganda, and advanced Russian weapons and technologies has thus far won Moscow only a foothold in mainland Ukraine. The incursion has pushed the current Ukraine government into making a priority of NATO membership.

“While Russia certainly used soft probing to seek its objective of bringing Ukraine back into its sphere of influence, it has clearly failed to do so as Kiev is now more firmly convinced of closer integration with the



Tactical air control party members at Fort Carson, Colo., train for helicopter extraction in November 2016. US and NATO forces must be prepared to address a full spectrum of hostile, hybrid actions.



USAF photo Desiree W. Moyle

Airmen at Homestead ARB, Fla., explore ways to prevent malware from reaching aircraft. The 482nd Communications Squadron integrates cyber operations into the wing's core mission. Electronic and cyber warfare will make future hybrid warfare conflicts even more challenging.

Euro-Atlantic community than ever," states the NATO study.

NOT JUST STATE-ON-STATE

To the south, across the Black Sea, lies another den of the hybrid threat, as practiced by ISIS.

ISIS employs a wide range of military approaches, from terrorism to small unit insurgencies to conventional set-piece battles. Their technology ranges from crude improvised bombs to intricate improvised explosive devices, drones, and captured US weaponry.

Much of the organization's activity is financed by criminal activity. It kidnaps people for ransom, extorts business owners in occupied areas, and charges "tolls" at gunpoint on highways. Combined with income from oil production, the cash has made ISIS perhaps the richest non-national military in the world.

Meanwhile, the group's use of information war is unprecedented. That is particularly true of its ability to develop and disseminate propaganda films and images that spread the group's message and serve to draw in recruits.

President Obama himself had described ISIS as "a sort of hybrid."

ISIS "has the ability to form, deploy, and sustain conventional forces and simultaneously maximize the use of irregular tactics, adapting the mix to exploit its opponent's weakness," concludes NATO's hybrid threat study.

NO EASY ANSWERS

Defending against hybrid wars might be as complex as fighting them. It requires a number of different modes of operation, as Mattis and Hoffman noted a decade ago. There's heavy conventional fighting in one area, anti-insurgency patrols in another, and peacekeeping operations in a third. There's an information dimension to all these efforts.

That might be akin to fighting World War II on one block, Operation Iraqi Freedom on another, while overseeing the Marshall Plan on a third—and tweeting and Facebooking about it all with an electronic infrastructure armored against cyber retaliation.

According to NATO, a fitting motto for countering hybrid efforts might be "adopt, adapt, adept." Western militaries may need to adopt new strategies while adapting structure and readiness to meet new challenges.

One of those new strategies might be increased support for weak or failing states. These crumbling edges are the battlegrounds for the hybrid wars of the future, pointed out USAF Lt. Col. Michael Miller in an Air War College report on preparation for hybrid conflicts.

Shoring up these vulnerable regions before they fall victim to opportunistic

aggressors might require intelligence collection to see what is going on, diplomacy to help reform governments and build international coalitions, and economic and military assistance.

A second pillar might be actions against a hybrid adversary should the first step not prevent conflict. This might depend crucially on intelligence about the actors involved, including their motives and goals; diplomacy to build international support for the objectives of the US and its allies; economic sanctions; and the exposure of state sponsorship of terrorist or revolutionary groups by information operations on a strategic scale.

Then there is pulling together a military force and operational plan to actually fight hybrid combat. Such a force needs to be flexible enough to fight conventional and unconventional threats at the same time.

"Conventional and unconventional military actions, such as targeting military supply routes and protecting the population, must occur at the same time. They will not occur in series—as is typical of traditional planning," wrote Miller in his 2015 study.

Plus, the forces must be capable and leaders must be willing to use them under circumstances that are deliberately ambiguous.

The lesson of Israel's war with Hezbollah may be that complacency can be dangerous. The US may need to prepare for an adversary that is similar to the one faced in Afghanistan and Iraq—except with far more technical and operational sophistication.

"The potential combination of improvised explosive devices, electronic and cyber warfare, anti-armor weapons, long-range rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles, and sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons will make a future hybrid conflict extremely challenging," stated Miller.

The combination has been used to great effect in Ukraine and Syria, and hybrid warfare will likely continue to be an attractive way to fight a low-level war until the West can demonstrate effective countermeasures. ✪

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