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## ARE ALL WARS HYBRID WARS?

*‘When I use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean  
– neither more nor less’.*  
Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll

*ABSTRACT: Although there are some semi-authoritative definitions of hybrid war currently in use, the term is still subject to various interpretations, and it usually means what the individual author or speaker chooses it to mean. The author discusses the origins of the concept and the characteristic of hybrid war. He recommends analyzing and describing hybrid conflict using two NATO analytical tools, PMESII and DIME, that model the operational environment, as well as a decision matrix (borrowed from the military decision making process) to evaluate the various factors that spell success or failure of a hybrid operation. Finally, he compares the two current semi-authoritative (NATO and EU) definitions of hybrid war, and recommends a working description, rather than a new definition of hybrid war.*

*KEYWORDS: definitions of hybrid warfare, DIME, PMESII, gray zone*

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## THE ISSUE OF TERMINOLOGY

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ was first used in 2002 by Major William J. Nemeth in his master’s thesis which analyzed how the Chechens blended the methods of irregular warfare with modern technology, and thereby produced a new form of warfare.<sup>1</sup> Frank G. Hoffman expanded on the idea and in a series of papers brought it into the mainstream of military science.<sup>2</sup> Then it became the subject of common discourse and serious study only in 2014, as a result of Russia’s seizure of the Crimean Peninsula.<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, even after all this time, there is still no agreement on a common definition among security professionals. All agree that it is characterized by the combination of conventional warfare, irregular warfare, and a lot of non-kinetic actions, such as economic and financial measures, subversion or information operations. According to some specialists, it is an entirely new way of waging war. Others argue that it is little more than just a new buzzword, because all wars are hybrid wars. Yet others acknowledge that the appearance of

<sup>1</sup> Nemeth, W. J. “Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare”. Monterey, Naval Postgraduate School, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman, F. “Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars”. Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Rácz A. “Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist”. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), 2015.

such new enabling factors as global connectivity or cyber capabilities have brought significant changes but the nature of war is unchanged.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, hybrid warfare is subject to various interpretations to this day, and it usually means what the individual author or speaker, like Humpty Dumpty, chooses it to mean.

There are several definitions for hybrid warfare, but most suffer from the same defect: they use ‘hybrid threat’ and ‘hybrid warfare’ interchangeably. The problem with this is that words do have meanings, and ‘threat’ and ‘warfare’ mean two different things. The best way I can explain it is that a ‘hybrid threat’ should denote the concrete action or potential action of an actor (state or non-state) that is capable and prepared to employ hybrid means. On the other hand, ‘hybrid warfare’ should be more of a concept, a framework that describes the various hybrid means and actions, how they can be deployed, how they can be countered.

The European Union has a good definition of hybrid warfare, but it also uses ‘hybrid threats’ when it is actually describing hybrid warfare:<sup>5</sup>

*[A] ... mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare. There is usually an emphasis on exploiting the vulnerabilities of the target and on generating ambiguity to hinder decision-making processes.*

NATO’s first definition (again, of hybrid threats not of hybrid warfare), contained in the Wales Summit Declaration was actually quite comprehensive:<sup>6</sup>

*[A] ... wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary and civilian measures ... employed in a highly integrated design. The adversary tries to influence ... policy-makers and key decision makers by combining kinetic operations with subversive effort [and] ... resorts to clandestine actions, to avoid attribution or retribution.*

Subsequently this definition was simplified and became so general that now it can be applied to any conflict, all the way up to nuclear Armageddon. Furthermore, the idea that hybrid war is below the threshold of conventional war is entirely absent from this definition:<sup>7</sup>

*A type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space.*

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, an international think tank maintained by 31 nations and located in Helsinki, also offers a definition for hy-

<sup>4</sup> For the various opinions see: Abbott, K. “Understanding and Countering Hybrid Warfare: Next Steps for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”. University of Ottawa. 2016. 03. 23., 18.; Cullen, P. J. and Reichborn-Kjennerud, E. “MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project: Understanding Hybrid Warfare”. 2017. 01. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/647776/dar\\_mdcd\\_hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/647776/dar_mdcd_hybrid_warfare.pdf), Accessed on 10 November 2021; Jacobs, A. and Lasconjarias G. “NATO’s Hybrid Threats: Handling Unconventional Warfare in the South and the East”. Research Paper, Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015; Chivvis, C. S. “Understanding Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’ and What Can be Done About It”. Testimony, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017, 7–8.; Raitasalo, J. “Getting a Grip on the So-Called ‘Hybrid Warfare’”. *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie*, 3/2017, 20–39., 21.

<sup>5</sup> Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. Brussels: European commission, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, 5 September 2014. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm), Accessed on 10 November 2021.

<sup>7</sup> NATOTerm – The Official NATO Terminology Database. <https://nso.nato.int/natoterm/Web.mvc>, Accessed on 10 November 2021.

brid threat but not for hybrid warfare. It also sneaks in a veiled value judgement, implying that only non-democratic states resort to hybrid operations, whereas democratic states are too noble and principled for such underhanded, nefarious measures:<sup>8</sup>

- *Coordinated and synchronized action that deliberately targets democratic states' and institutions' systemic vulnerabilities through a wide range of means.*
- *Activities that exploit the thresholds of detection and attribution, as well as the different interfaces (war-peace, internal-external security, local-state, and national-international).*
- *Activities aimed at influencing different forms of decision-making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level, and designed to further and/or fulfil the agent's strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target.*

There are common elements in the above definitions: combination of conventional and unconventional measures; coordinated and synchronized actions; ambiguity; below the threshold of war (although some of them are absent from the current NATO definition). In my view, the two most important common elements are ambiguity and the hybrid actor's intention to keep his operations below the threshold of war. That is, hybrid conflicts – even if a considerable armed force is deployed – are still in the gray zone between the black of war and the white of peace. This latter element is often absent from current scholarship. And failure to consider this key attribute leads to the Humpty Dumpty effect.

Since the concept of hybrid warfare is still evolving, the lack of a clear-cut, generally accepted, doctrine-ready definition may not be such a bad thing. Nathan Freier and some other authors suggest that creating a precise definition is self-limiting. The hybrid operator can frustrate the desire for clarity by finding new ways to execute his attacks and adapting his operations to the political, strategic and operational environment. Therefore, he suggests that describing and analysing hybrid war is far more useful than trying to define it.<sup>9</sup> These authors are correct when they imply that description and understand can bring us closer to definition. However, a clear, doctrine-ready definition will be needed eventually.

## DO WE REALLY NEED A PRECISE DEFINITION?

Our usual understanding of war and peace proceeds from certain assumptions. First of all, it is the affair of nation states or alliances, non-state actors play no role in it at all. Second, it is an either-or proposition: nations are either at peace with each other, or they are at war. (Figure 1) The transition from peace to war is symbolized by a declaration of war, and the transition from war to peace by a peace treaty (or outright annexation). Third, one set of laws applies when a nation is at peace, and another when it is at war. We have well-developed mental

<sup>8</sup> Hybrid threats as a concept. Hybrid CoE. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>, Accessed on 10 November 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Freier, N. "The Defense Identity Crisis: It's a Hybrid World". Parameters, Autumn 2009. <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/09autumn/freier.pdf>, Accessed on 10 November 2021; Freier, N. "Hybrid Threats and Challenges: Describe... Don't Define". Small Wars Journal, 01. 06. 2010. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/hybrid-threats-and-challenges-describe-dont-define>, Accessed on 10 November 2021; Weissmann, M. et al. (eds), "Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations". London: I. B. Tauris, 2021, 47.

models and terminology to conceptualize and describe both peace and war, and even better developed doctrines to conduct them.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1 *The general western perception of war*

However, the real world hardly ever works this way. The orderly procession from peace through a declaration of war, large-scale military operations, and armistice to a return to peace again is the rare exception, rather than the rule. In reality, there is an intermediate, ambiguous social and political space between white (peace) and black (war), where competing states and non-state actors can assert their interest by using some force, but without reaching any recognized threshold of international war. This gray zone between peace and war can be quite narrow and restricted, as it was during the cold war, for example, or quite extensive, as it is today. (Figure 2)



Figure 2 *The reality: the gray zone of conflict below the threshold of war*

Furthermore, in most cases the participants in a hybrid conflict – or any conflict, for that matter – do not perceive themselves to be in the same place on this peace-to-war continuum. Taking the conflict in Ukraine as an example, each principal actor perceives the conflict differently, and deploys the instruments of power accordingly. (Figure 3)

- For both Ukraine and the separatist republics, the conflict is an existential one, deep in the black zone of war: their national sovereignty is at stake, and it justifies the full mobilization of all elements of national power.
- For Russia, the situation is not nearly as acute: it is not an existential conflict, but it is still in the very dark gray area of limited war because existential national interests (and great power prestige) are at stake. The deployment of all instruments of power is appropriate, albeit not necessary their full mobilization.
- NATO and the EU cannot view the conflict complacently: several member states – in particular the Baltic States – of both organizations are threatened by Russia’s potential for destabilization. All their instruments of power are deployed but with emphasis on the diplomatic and economic instruments. So far, their military instrument is engaged to support Ukraine with war materiel and intelligence, but their military forces are not involved in combat operations.
- For much of the rest of the world (as represented by the United Nations) the conflict is in the light gray area, and only the diplomatic instrument is deployed but even that only in a cursory manner.



Figure 3 *The perception of the affected parties in a conflict*

<sup>10</sup> Kiss, Á. P. “Meeting the Gray Zone Challenge. In *Conflicts in the Gray Zone: A Challenge to Adapt*”. 135–144. Budapest, Hungarian Defence Forces Scientific Research Centre, 2017.

There is a good reason for seeking a precise definition. As the beginning of this chapter showed, most nations make a clear distinction between war and peace. They have a set of laws for peacetime, and another set of laws that mobilize society's resources and grant greater freedom of action to the armed forces are implemented when war makes that necessary. The ambiguity of hybrid warfare is of great utility to the attacker, but it can backfire and cause great societal-level confusion and uncertainty as well.

A recent, telling example is Russia's grave difficulties in the Russo-Ukrainian war, caused by the political leadership clinging to the fiction of the "special military operation". Without a declaration of war (a weighty political decision), conscripts cannot be deployed beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, volunteers (who can be deployed) can decide to terminate their contract when they feel like it, and mobilization of the nation's material and manpower resources cannot be carried out.

## DESCRIBE AND ANALYSE

So, eventually a clear-cut, doctrine-ready definition will be needed, but meanwhile the next best thing is to accurately describe and analyse hybrid warfare, as recommended by Freier and others. Fortunately, NATO doctrine provides a number of analytical tools that help do just that. Moreover, these tools can be used not only to analyse hybrid operations that have already taken place, but also operations in progress, as well as to identify potential threats that may materialize in the future.

The first tool is the instruments of power: the actions and resources available to a state to protect and advance its interests in the international environment, influence the rest of the world, coerce or incentivize other nations. NATO adopted the USA acronym DIME.<sup>11</sup> It stands for diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments. Whatever the state does, it can be squeezed into these four categories. Sometimes the fit is not very comfortable, sometimes it requires a little effort, but it can be done.

The second tool is the concept of the societal sectors or key systems of a state or a polity within the state. Originally, it was an analytical tool for operational planning developed in the US in the mid-2000s, and subsequently it entered NATO doctrine as well.<sup>12</sup> The NATO acronym is PMESII. It stands for political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information sectors or subsystems. It describes the foundations and key features of a state or a polity within a state, helps identify the polity's key nodes, links, strengths and weaknesses, and helps estimate the effects that various adversarial actions will have in these areas.

The third tool is a suitably modified Courses of Action matrix. Hybrid operations are tailored to the hybrid actor's strengths, the targeted state's vulnerabilities, and the tolerance threshold of the international environment. Nevertheless, some conditions are generally applicable for success.<sup>13</sup> Gathering them in a matrix and assigning them either pluses and

<sup>11</sup> AJP-01 Allied Joint Doctrine. NATO Standardization Office, 2017, 1–4.

<sup>12</sup> Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive. SHAPE, 2021, 1–14.

<sup>13</sup> Cederberg, A. and Eronen, P. "How can Societies be Defended against Hybrid Threats?" Genf: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2015. [https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/GCSP\\_Strategic\\_Security\\_Analysis\\_-\\_How\\_can\\_Societies\\_be\\_Defended\\_against\\_Hybrid\\_Threats.pdf](https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/GCSP_Strategic_Security_Analysis_-_How_can_Societies_be_Defended_against_Hybrid_Threats.pdf), Accessed on 10 November 2021; Neville, S. B. "Russia and Hybrid Warfare: Identifying Critical Elements in Successful Applications of Hybrid Tactics". Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 2015. <https://www.hsd.org/?view&did=790506>, Accessed on 10 November 2021; Kiss, Á. P. "Kashmir, 1947 – the First Modern Hybrid War". [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354312781\\_Kashmir\\_1947\\_-\\_the\\_First\\_Modern\\_Hybrid\\_War](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354312781_Kashmir_1947_-_the_First_Modern_Hybrid_War), Accessed on 10 November 2021.

minuses or preferably numerical values allows the hybrid actor to evaluate his chances of success – but it also allows the target of the hybrid attack to evaluate the threat and develop his plans to deploy his defensive assets to best effect. (Table 1)

Table 1 *Success factors matrix*

Success factor	Multiplier	Score
Strong political leadership		
Suitable instruments of national power		
Control over state and private resources		
Robust intelligence capability		
Surprise		
Strong political follow-up		
Control of the information environment		
Neutralization of targeted state's armed forces		
Prevention of international intervention		
Unimpeded access to operational area		

## HYBRID WAR WORKING DESCRIPTION

Based on the work of scholars that went before me, as well as on the results of my own research, I propose here a somewhat wordy working description of hybrid warfare (as opposed to hybrid threats) that may eventually help arrive at a definition that will be good enough to become a doctrinal term:

- Hybrid warfare is a form of conflict between states or states and powerful non-state actors in which the attacker seeks to achieve warlike objectives (e.g. territorial gains) without the risk of open war. He does not seek unconditional surrender, only disruption and destabilization, in order to compel the targeted state to bend to the attacker's will.
- Synchronization and coordination are the twin keys to success: several parallel operations, using various DIME instruments, directed against various PMESII vulnerabilities of the targeted polity are timed and sequenced to support and reinforce each other, and achieve synergistic effects, while the operations remain below the threshold of war.
- A key enabler of hybrid warfare is modern technology that allows close control of operations, real-time situational awareness and anonymous global reach.
- By these means, the hybrid actor creates conditions that compel the targeted state to accept a disadvantageous settlement, and the international community to consent to it.

## HUMPTY DUMPTY AGAIN

Without a clear doctrinal definition any unfriendly act that is not limited to a single dimension can be described as hybrid, and the term will mean whatever the user wants it to mean. As a consequence, it will lose its conceptual value, because if any hostile act from unflattering propaganda to the use of force up to nuclear war can be defined as hybrid wars, then we have no need for the concept at all. Hybridity is simply one more characteristic of

modern armed conflicts, just as the reliance on technology, physical destruction, or high civilian casualty rates are. Discarding the concept would certainly eliminate fruitless arguments about how to pigeonhole a particular conflict.

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