

# What is Hybrid Warfare?

*Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud & Patrick Cullen*

## Introduction

The term Hybrid War or Warfare (HW) rose to prominence in defense and policy circles as well as in the media after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. It was dragged out from the relative obscurity of military theory circles to become a mainstream term used to describe a myriad of seemingly different security and defense challenges to the West. The invention of new terms (or the adaptation of old ones) to describe and explain the challenges we face is a common tendency among security and defense analysts and practitioners. And like many new terms that become widely used, HW has received a substantial amount of criticism. Largely because the concept was deduced from looking at the enemy, thus shifting its definition and meaning according to the subject of analysis, HW lacks conceptual clarity. It has been attacked for being a catch-all phrase or a buzzword with limited analytical value that does not contain anything distinctly new. It is also criticized for distorting the traditional distinctions between peace, conflict and war, and for being stretched so broad as to become conceptually synonymous with grand strategy itself. Just how far to extend the concept of HW to include the full spectrum of conflict without denuding it of its utility – or breaking the meaning of war by slipping into a broader discussion of coercion and competition—is still an open and heated question debate. While these criticisms remain valid, it is also clear that the literature on HW, as well as its critics, provide fertile grounds for discussing the future of war and warfare as well as broader security and defense challenges to which the West currently lack responses.

In addition to being a useful concept to describe current and future security challenges, HW is a valuable way of describing the intellectual challenges adversaries are bringing to the table in terms of what war is and how it should be understood. While the West is largely stuck in an instrumentalist, technicist, battle-centric and kinetic understanding of war, its opponents have been busy redefining war. The lack of conceptual clarity is a problem for HW, but so is the lack of agreement on what war is, how its character is evolving, and what this means for distinctions between peace, conflict and war.

Much of this problem stems from the fact that Western military theory has only a loose understanding of what war itself amounts to. Following Clausewitz, there is an understanding of war as being political in nature and instrumental in character. But war is also an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will. This then gives rise to the question of how to interpret “force.” Suffice it here

to point out that HW is more than warfighting but also less than grand strategy—the connection of all means and ends in times of peace and war. In this Policy Brief, grand strategy is seen as a precondition for action at a specific time and place, with HW as the application of this strategy. In many ways HW can be distinguished from normal or competitive politics only in that the use of force or the threat of the use of force plays a central role. In this sense it fits more with Clausewitz’s concept of war as an act of force intended to compel the enemy to do our will and less with the often apolitical, battle-centric and kinetic Western understanding of war.

The real issue with hybrid warfare is not so much the problem of defining the term as how to clarify the concept so to make it useful. Concepts shape not only the content of our communications, but also the way we think and act. With the political adaptation of the term comes a strong need for conceptual clarity HW, rather than simply debating whether HW is “new” or not, or whether it has any analytical utility distinct from war or grand strategy. The aim of this policy brief is thus to provide some conceptual clarity into the term HW.

## Evolution of the HW concept: from non-state to state actors

There is no agreed definition of hybrid warfare. Moreover, the meaning and usage of the term itself have shifted considerably in the period between 2002 and 2015. Since, as one analyst has noted, “the hybrid construct was deduced from looking at the enemy,”<sup>1</sup> the simple fact that different studies of HW reference different wars is itself a source of analytical confusion over the meaning and content of the term “hybrid warfare.” This can be seen most dramatically in how the concept of HW has evolved in Western defense circles, away from a discussion of an allegedly novel way of warfare conducted by non-state actors, and towards a similarly novel yet distinct form of warfare conducted by states—most notably by Russia in the Ukraine.

## Non-State Hybrid Warfare

HW was originally used to describe the growing sophistication and complexity of non-state actors on the battlefield in places like Chechnya and Lebanon, and was later applied to Afghanistan and Iraq. The term “hybrid” in this non-state actor context was used to illustrate how actors such as Hezbollah – previously considered the quintessential non-state hybrid threat – combined the characteristics of unconventional and conventional warfare

<sup>1</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, “Further Thoughts on Hybrid Threats,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 3, 2009, available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/03/further-thoughts-on-hybrid-thr/>

with other non-military modes of operation in novel and unfamiliar ways that challenged both Western military practice (due to perceived effectiveness) and strategic thinking (due to perceived unfamiliarity). HW in this sense represented a “blurring” of traditional Western categories of conventional and irregular warfare.

Various characteristics have been attributed to HW conducted by non-state actors. First, these actors exhibit increased levels of military sophistication as they move up the capabilities ladder, successfully deploying modern weapons systems (like anti-ship missiles, UAVs), technologies (cyber, secure communication, sophisticated command and control), and tactics (combined arms) traditionally understood as being beyond the reach of non-state adversaries. Combining these newly acquired conventional techniques and capabilities with an unconventional skill set – and doing so simultaneously and within the same battlespace – is seen as a potentially new and defining characteristic of non-state HW.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on greater military sophistication and capabilities is one of the key features of non-state actors using HW.

A second core characteristic of non-state HW is the expansion of the battlefield beyond the purely military realm, and the growing importance of non-military tools. From the perspective of the non-state actor, this can be viewed as form of *horizontal escalation* that provides asymmetric advantages to non-state actors in a conflict with militarily superior (state) actors. One widespread early definition of HW refers to this horizontal expansion exclusively in terms of the coordinated use of terrorism and organized crime. Others have pointed to legal warfare (e.g. exploiting law to make military gains unachievable on the battlefield) and elements of information warfare (e.g. controlling the battle of the narrative and online propaganda, recruitment and ideological mobilization).<sup>3</sup> A case in point here is the sophisticated information warfare capability of IS, with the incorporation of a highly successful online propaganda and recruiting campaign into its broader war effort.

## 2

### State Hybrid Warfare

Broad and generic similarities between Russian actions in Ukraine and previous examples of non-state HW—most notably the “blurring” of traditional concepts of warfare, its unfamiliarity, the use of non-military means, and the asymmetric relationship to Western conventional warfighting – have all contributed to labeling these Russian actions as HW.<sup>4</sup>

State HW involves the full integration of the military and non-military means of state power to achieve political goals, in which the use of force or the threat of force plays a central role. States with highly centralized abilities to coordinate and synchronize their instruments of power (government, economy, media, etc.) can create synergistic force multiplying effects. Specifically, state HW allows for operations that “target and exploit the seams” in Western-style liberal democratic societies that do not have similar coordinating offices or capabilities. To quote one US DoD report, Chinese “Three Warfares is challenging for the US because it is a concept executed by an organization (the General Political Department) that has no analogue in the US.”<sup>5</sup> Without such an office, or a political mandate, or even a philosophical understanding that warfare operates in a coordinated fashion along the full spectrum of civilian and military space, Western coordination of a response to HW becomes complicated.

2 Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges”, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 52, 1st quarter 2009  
 3 Andres Munoz and Dov Bachmann, “Hybrid Warfare and Lawfare,” *The Operational Law Quarterly* November 23, 2015, pp.2–4.  
 4 John Vandiver, “SACEUR: Allies must prepare for Russia ‘hybrid war’”, *Stars and Stripes*, September 4, available at: <http://www.stripes.com/news/saceur-allies-must-prepare-for-russia-hybrid-war-1.301464>

The single critical expansion and alteration of the HW concept when applied to states is the strategically innovative use of ambiguity. Ambiguity has been usefully defined as “hostile actions that are difficult for a state to identify, attribute or publicly define as coercive uses of force.”<sup>6</sup> Ambiguity is used to complicate or undermine the decision-making processes of the opponent. It is tailored to make a military response – or even a political response – difficult. In military terms, it is designed to fall below the threshold of war and to delegitimize (or even render politically irrational) the ability to respond by military force.<sup>7</sup>

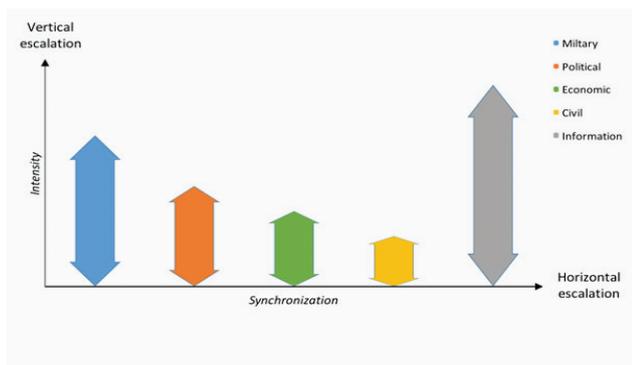
These principles of ambiguity can be operationalized in many ways, from the tactical to the strategic. At the strategic level, state HW is designed to avoid conventional war. It targets perceived “red lines” or thresholds of its opponents and operates below them; it finds “gray zones” where these red lines are not articulated and exploits these undefended spaces; and it hides its military means while emphasizing non-military means to achieve its political goals. Ambiguity in the form of plausible deniability can be achieved by hiding and denying agency through the use of proxies, non-attributable forces (e.g. little green men) and attacks (e.g. cyber). It can also be achieved through the use of non-military comprehensive state power that is difficult to characterize as coercive force, thus limiting the ability to legitimize responses. At a broader level, HW is also ambiguous both because it operates outside of Western perceptions of war as a violent clash of kinetic forces, and because it blurs the distinction between war and peace and the beginning and end of hostilities.

### The Hybrid Warfare Model

The fact that HW has been applied to describe state-centric and non-state-centric versions of HW has increased the conceptual haziness of HW. However, through an incorporation of the diverse characteristics of state and non-state HW we have created a model, although crude, under a single descriptive HW concept that is meant to provide conceptual clarity. Our decision for doing so is both principled and practical. In principle, although it is clearly possible to distinguish between state and non-state HW (and even actor-specific traits), we also find conceptual similarities that unify non-state actor and state actor HW strategy. We believe that the starting point should be agnostic as to whether the actor is classified as a state or a non-state actor. HW is best understood by focusing on various characteristics of the actors’ capabilities and vulnerabilities as well as the ways the means are employed and to what effects. This unity of hybrid warfare (see below) is built on a number of characteristics: *it is asymmetric<sup>8</sup> and multi-modal along a horizontal and a vertical axis, and to varying degrees shares an increased emphasis on creativity, ambiguity, and the cognitive elements of war.*

The model depicts how a HW actor uses its instruments of power (MPECI: military, political, economic, civilian and informational) across the PMESII (political, military, economic, societal, informational and infrastructure) vulnerabilities of a target system, to escalate – vertically and horizontally – to achieve the desired goals.

5 Stefan Halper (ed.), “China: The Three Warfares” Report for the Director of Office of Net Assessment, DoD, May 2013.  
 6 Andrew Mumford and Jack McDonald, “Ambiguous Warfare”, Report produced for the DCDC, October 2014.  
 7 Mumford and McDonald (2014).  
 8 Here akin to Liddell Hart’s “the indirect approach” focusing on avoiding the enemy’s strength and probing for weakness. See B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*, London: Faber and Faber, 1929.



Rather than an attrition based understanding of warfare where one matches the strength of the other and slowly tries to degrade the opponent militarily, HW is characterized by the tailored use of all instruments of power against the vulnerabilities of the opponent's system. These instruments can be divided into the more traditional MPECI categories, but will be used in synchronized and coordinated fashion against the opponent's system centers of gravity, critical functions and vulnerabilities (PMESII). The goal will be to effect a change in the behavioral or physical state of a system or elements in the system, according to the political goals. In this, HW is similar to how Western military theory thinks about the Comprehensive Approach and Effects Based Operations EBO/EBAO.

### Vertical and horizontal escalation

As such, "hybrid" refers not only to the means (or combination of means), but also to how these are employed in a highly coordinated and synchronized fashion to create synergistic effects beyond the immediate element of power. This synchronization has the effect of acting as a force multiplier. This, in turn, assumes that HW requires or at least can leverage a high degree of centralized operational command and control and strategic coordination of the elements of power, and not only a unity of effort among the elements. As the figure shows, the means (the elements of power) may be vertically escalated or de-escalated (increased/decreased intensity), or horizontally escalated or de-escalated (synchronization of elements of power creating effects that can have the same impact as vertical escalation of one mean, without necessarily overstepping the opponent's response thresholds) – or a combination of the two, to achieve a goal. For instance, one could vertically escalate the political spectrum of the PMESII while horizontally escalating into other spectrums such as the informational and military. By employing all elements of national power, the ability to escalate vertically and horizontally increases, and thus also the ability to create effects.

### Phases

Several studies of HW have used phases to explain how HW functions—especially in a Russian HW context. For instance, Berzins has cited Russian military writers (Tchekinov and Bogdanov) to describe an eight-phase model of HW that emphasizes the non-kinetic and cognitive/psychological aspects of HW that precede the kinetic.<sup>9</sup> Phases are a traditional way of thinking about war in which the events are seen as following a linear causal trajectory towards a given end. Although phases are useful for thinking about HW, if the concept is too stringently applied, certain important aspects of HW may become obscured or under-emphasized. Because an HW campaign can operate along both the vertical and the horizontal escalation axes, it is unlikely that such a campaign will consistently follow a linear and causal trajectory where one

stage (or type of power projection) always follows from the other. Escalation will most likely be followed by periods of de-escalation, and vice-versa, to control the operational tempo. Escalation and de-escalation will also be calibrated to occur simultaneously along different instruments of power. Additionally, horizontal escalation of HW may occur in the form of battlefield preparations (like mapping adversary cyber networks, crafting creative legal arguments for future coercive actions, normalizing snap military exercises) that may never escalate vertically to a level where these tools are actually deployed in an "attack phase." Crucially, much of what is done in the horizontal axis might be ambiguous – whether hidden from view (cyber operations), conducted with unclear intent (investing in foreign ports), or not readily definable as a hostile and aggressive act (instigating non-violent protest) – unless these resources are activated in a more explicit or intensified sense wherein the benefits of ambiguity are lost – and the conflict is likely to escalate.

Here we can see how HW complicates the concept of phases in several ways. First, it will be hard to discern a beginning or indeed an end to hostilities. Second, this blurring of distinctions leads to thinking about HW as a form of permanent war in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between normal legal activities, coercive diplomacy and war. This is correct as far as the relationship to formal /legal concepts of war and peace is concerned, but viewing HW as something permanent results in unclear and unrealistic understandings.

### Expansion of the battlefield

In addition to blurring what is considered peace, conflict and war, hybrid warfare breaks down the distinction between what is and what is not part of the battlefield, by using all available means across the PMESII spectrum. HW is both multimodal and employed on multiple levels at the same time: that compresses the traditional levels of war – tactics, operations and strategy – thereby accelerating the tempo at the strategic and tactical levels faster than a more conventional actor is able to do. Traditional physical spaces such as land, sea, air and space are increasingly accompanied by social and built spaces such as the political, economic, cultural and infrastructural and cyber. Achieving political and strategic objectives is no longer bound solely to traditional conventional military means, as the cognitive and psychological spaces have become an important aspect of war – if not the most important one.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the confluence of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military means that can achieve desired strategic effects serves to reduce the necessity for deploying hard military power. Instead of making the opponent succumb by destroying its military capabilities to resist, the main battlespace occurs inside the cognitive spaces of key populations (domestic, international and in operational area) and key decision- and policymakers, making them, and not the military, the main target of operation.

Though the cognitive elements of war are not a novelty as such – it could be argued that they have always played a prominent role in wars despite the emphasis put on the material side (apolitical and technicist view of war) of wars by Western militaries – they assume a much more prominent role in HW. Hybrid warfare is as much about the primacy of "influence operations" as it is

8 Here akin to Liddell Hart's "the indirect approach" focusing on avoiding the enemy's strength and probing for weakness. See B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*, London: Faber and Faber, 1929.

9 Janis Berzins, "Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy", *National Defense Academy of Latvia*, Center for Security and Strategic Research, Policy Paper, No.2, April 2014.

about hard military power. This does not mean that hard military power does not play a large role in HW (in deterring and controlling escalation for instance) – but that the will to fight back at the HW actor is as much determined by how key populations and decision-makers perceive the situation as by brute military power. While all the individual elements of power may be well known, the synchronized, combined approach to influence the cognitive spaces adds a new dimension to how coercion, aggression, conflict and war are understood.

Actual implementation of the instruments of power will hinge on the capabilities of the HW actor and on the perceived vulnerabilities of the opponent, the political goals of the hybrid actor, and its planned ways of achieving those goals. As with all conflicts and wars, the shape the HW will take depends on the context. HW is conducted by both state and non-state actors, but state actors will usually have a broader array of sophisticated instruments available and can thus be more able to escalate vertically and horizontally. They also differ significantly in how they apply their means. The similarities are in the way that both use their instruments in synchronized fashion against the perceived vulnerabilities of an opponent across the PMESII spectrum. In this sense, non-state and state use of HW can be seen as two different models of the same phenomenon, where the means and ways differ.

Because the instruments of power that an HW actor may leverage against an opponent's weaknesses are highly contextual, it is difficult to provide a generic list of instruments for HW. In addition, breaking up these instruments into neat groups does not explain the ways in which a HW actor may be organized. For instance, in many HW actors there may not be a clear dividing line between the military, the political and the civilian. Although all these elements can be studied separately, it is essential to recognize that the different elements of power occur in multiple dimensions and on multiple levels in a synchronized and synergistic fashion, tailored to the perceived vulnerabilities of the target system to create cognitive and/or physical effects. That makes it more important to comprehend the synergistic effects and not only the functional

capabilities of the HW actor. Understanding how these are linked and how they are used to shift among material and cognitive approaches through vertical and horizontal escalation or de-escalation to create effects is crucial in order to counter HW.

### Conclusion

Due to the lack of conceptual clarity, hybrid warfare (HW) has been exposed to harsh criticism. While much of the criticism is valid, HW has utility beyond the mere fact that it produces valuable thinking about current and future security and defense challenges. This policy brief has provided clarity to the concept by combining the seemingly opposed notions of state and non-state use of HW into one model of HW. Analyzing the literature on HW and case studies of actors described as HW actors, we have identified several common characteristics that make up the model of HW. Despite the many differences, there are similarities among the actors in how they use their instruments of power against the opponent's perceived vulnerabilities in order to create synergistic effects.

This can offer greater conceptual clarity with regard to HW, but should not be read as a blueprint for action. It is meant as a common starting point for further discussion on the future security environment and how to deter, mitigate and counter HW threats, from states or non-state actors. We must think broadly about security and defense challenges. Many of these lie outside of the traditional military domain, and we lack readily available ideas on how to respond to them.

Moreover, the creative and adaptive use of all instruments of power by our adversaries means that it may be more important to focus on our own vulnerabilities and the synergistic effects, rather than on the functional capabilities of the HW actor on its own. The concept of HW provides an analytical language that allows for flexibility in approaching how to think about and operate in the future security environment. That being said, however, HW should not be seen as a substitute for thorough and contextual understanding of different actors and challenges when strategic choices are to be made. HW describes the problem, not a solution.

4

9 See for instance Richard Szafranski, "Neocortical Warfare? The Acme of Skill," *Military Review*, November 1994, pp. 41–55.

This Policy Brief is part of the *Multinational Capabilities Development Campaign (MCDC)* project Countering Hybrid Warfare (CHW) funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence. <https://wss.apan.org/s/MCDCpub/default.aspx>

## Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from short-term applied research to more long-term basic research.

### About the Authors

**Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud** is a Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. He is currently a PhD candidate at the Department of War Studies at King's College London. His research interests include military theory and strategic thinking, contemporary Western warfare and technology and IR theory.

### NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway  
[www.nupi.no](http://www.nupi.no) | [info@nupi.no](mailto:info@nupi.no)

**Patrick Cullen** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs where he writes on security and defense issues. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics.