# [ 20 ]

## Hybrid Wars

> In the aftermath of the relative certainty of doctrine, training, tactics, adversary, and known terrain of the Cold War, our military today is in a sense operating without a concept of war and is searching desperately for the new "unified field theory" of conflict.
>
> **GENERAL DAVID BARNO,** 'Military Adaptation in Complex Operations', 2009[1]

By early in the twenty-first century it was apparent that the inherited scripts for future war were inadequate. The US military had clung to an ideal type derived from the classical model and then faced a more unruly form of warfare for which it was poorly prepared and from which it struggled to extricate itself. Their British allies believed that they understood the requirements of Iraq based on their peacekeeping experience of Bosnia and aid to the civil power in Northern Ireland, but their scripts were also inadequate; they found themselves struggling even more than the Americans.[2]

Was there a way of thinking about war that might prepare forces better for the sort of challenges that they might meet in the future? It was evident that it was not sufficient to prepare just for the type of war which Western armies wished to fight. But did that mean that it was necessary to prepare for a great variety of contingencies, each with their own special scripts, or might something else be going on, in which different forms of warfare were being followed at the same time? In 1997 US Marine Corps

Commandant General Charles C. Krulak coined the term “Three Block War” to convey the special requirements of the modern battlefield.

> In one moment in time, our service members will be feeding and clothing displaced refugees, providing humanitarian assistance. In the next moment, they will be holding two warring tribes apart—conducting peacekeeping operations—and, finally, they will be fighting a highly lethal mid-intensity battle—all on the same day… all within three city blocks.[3]

This idea that a number of different tasks had to be accomplished at the same time was eventually turned into a form of strategy, capable of confounding an opponent. This would stretch an adversary relying solely on conventional warfare. With problems in Iraq, this intermingling of irregular with regular forces attracted more interest. In 2005 General James Mattis and Lt. Col. Frank Hoffman described a ‘four-block war’, with the additional block dealing ‘with the psychological or information operations aspects’. They described this as a ‘hybrid war’.[4] The term was given greater prominence in 2007 by Hoffman, referring not just to how irregular forces might be used to add to the pressure on the regular but something more coordinated and melded.[5] Over time it came to refer to an approach drawing upon instruments from across the full spectrum, including terrorism, insurgency, criminality, and conventional operations, along with the extensive use of information operations.

Hoffman’s prime example of the concept at work was Hezbollah’s campaign against Israel in the Second Lebanon War of 2006, in which the IDF relied on air power to attack Hezbollah sanctuaries but then faced rocket attacks from Lebanon. They were then drawn into Lebanon where they struggled to deal with the militia. Hoffman described this as ‘a classic example of a hybrid threat’:

> The fusion of militia units, specially trained fighters and the anti-tank guided-missile teams marks this case, as does Hezbollah’s employment of modern information operations, signals intelligence, operational and tactical rockets, armed UAVs and deadly anti-ship cruise missiles. Hezbollah’s leaders describe their force as a cross between an army and a guerrilla force, and believe they have developed a new model.[6]

Hezbollah was an interesting case, both well embedded in its community and sponsored by Iran, which provided it with money and arms. In 2006 its tactics showed up those of Israel, which judged the demands of the war poorly, relying too much on air power without a strong ground presence. But the war was also costly for the militia, with a lot of fighters killed, and the Israeli campaign battered its urban sanctuaries.[7]

Interest in the approach was revived as it was apparently followed by Russia in its campaign against Ukraine that began in 2014. In early 2013 Valery Gerasimov, chief of Russia's general staff, had described how this might work. He noted how in Middle East conflicts there had been a progressive erosion of the distinctions between war and peace and between uniformed personnel and covert operatives. Wars were 'not declared but simply begin,' so that 'a completely well-off and stable country' could be transformed into 'an arena of the most intense armed conflict in a matter of months or even days.' In these circumstances, military means became more effective when combined with non-military means, including 'political, economic, information, humanitarian and other measures.' These could be supplemented by covert and thus deniable military measures as well as offers of peacekeeping assistance as a means to strategic ends. 'New information technologies' would play an important role. As a result, 'frontal clashes of major military formations… are gradually receding into the past.' At issue was how these capabilities related to the local population, whose support could swing a campaign one way or the other. Gerasimov suggested that they could be fired up as a fifth column and by 'concealed' armed forces.[8] The Russians were also looking for way to prevail in a conflict without having to rely on superior force in a classic battle.

A year later when in response to an uprising in Kiev, which saw the Ukrainian President flee and an anti-Russian government take over, Moscow moved first to annex Crimea while launching an incursion into parts of Eastern Ukraine, all while claiming that these were indigenous, spontaneous, popular movements managing without Russian military personnel. The Russian claims did not survive scrutiny. There were professional soldiers in uniforms without markings playing key roles. The role of the separatists had some similarities with Hezbollah. They also had

a state sponsor, which ensured that they had resources and modern weaponry, though they were more of a proxy for Russian interests. Unlike Hezbollah they did not have deep roots among local people, at least not in Eastern Ukraine.[9]

The experience demonstrated the limits of hybrid warfare as well as the possibilities.[10] Complex command arrangements complicated Russian attempts to control the situation on the ground, while efforts at deception were by and large ineffectual, as they became progressively transparent. The aim was more to avoid accepting the political and legal implications of what outside observers assumed to be true. Admitting the role Russian forces were actually playing in Ukraine would have required admitting aggression. The pretence was therefore that the individuals concerned were volunteers or on holiday. When one of their anti-aircraft missiles shot down a Malaysian Airlines aircraft in July 2014, with the loss of 298 lives, instead of accepting responsibility they sought to implicate the Ukrainians, with explanations of the shoot-down becoming ever more fanciful. One possible success with this approach was in projecting a more menacing image than Russia's actual strength warranted, which served to deter the West from escalating the conflict.

By and large, however, the result was that Russian officials were not believed about anything, even when telling the truth. Russian propaganda played extremely well in Russia but badly everywhere else, which had the effect of increasing Russia's sense of isolation but not of its influence. 'Russia may have a megaphone', observed Mark Galeotti, 'but this just means that when its message is laughable or offensive it can alienate more people at once'.[11] In terms of the campaign on the ground, the Russian operation got stuck in September 2014 and despite a peace process there was little movement to bring the conflict to a close either militarily or diplomatically. On the ground the fighting was reminiscent of so many wars, old and new, with exchanges of mortar and small arms fire.

In this respect 'hybrid war' emerged as a lesser form of warfare, coming to the fore because of problems with regular warfare, and an appreciation of the possibilities of popular resistance. It gave coherence to what was often no more than a set of ad hoc and improvised arrangements. As with many similar concepts, such as asymmetric warfare, once adopted

as a term of art 'hybrid war' tended towards a wider definition. As the term came to be adopted by the US armed forces, the theory became more elaborate, exploring the social and cultural links between the disparate elements.[12] *If pushed it could encompass almost everything.* It could describe the mingling of types of operations and forces evident in many contemporary conflicts but it lacked specificity. No conflicts could be considered in some sense 'pure'. All tended to include regular and irregular elements, and there were many precedents.[13] Commanders had long faced the challenges of combining classical forms of conventional warfare with partisan campaigns on the one hand and forms of civilian destruction (such as air raids) on the other.

As a deliberate strategy it generated its own demands. A competent and extensive command structure was needed to pull together the different strands of activity so that they reinforced rather than contradicted each other. More seriously, there was a distinction between capabilities that were necessary to achieve the objectives of war, which normally meant reasonably disciplined and substantial forces able to take and hold contested territory, and supporting capabilities that could help to disorient and demoralise an opponent and erode the ability to sustain a conflict over time (such as economic measures) but did not by themselves provide for political control.

NATO nonetheless became sufficiently alarmed that this was a new type of warfare for which it was unprepared that it issued its own report on how to counter the challenge in the future. Thus in 2015 NATO's Secretary General reported that:

> Russia has used proxy soldiers, unmarked Special Forces, intimidation and propaganda, all to lay a thick fog of confusion; to obscure its true purpose in Ukraine; and to attempt deniability. So NATO must be ready to deal with every aspect of this new reality from wherever it comes. And that means we must look closely at how we prepare for; deter; and if necessary defend against hybrid warfare.

He described hybrid warfare as 'a probe, a test of our resolve to resist and to defend ourselves' but also as a possible 'prelude to a more serious attack; because behind every hybrid strategy, there are conventional forces, increasing the pressure and ready to exploit any opening.'[14]

One part of the mix—information operations—was assumed to be the most original and required the most attention.[15]

Russia had a long history of controlling media, but was also sensitive to the role played by uncontrollable and subversive foreign media in stimulating the Soviet Union's crisis of legitimacy and then how a number of governments in post-Soviet states had been overthrown in 'colour revolutions' backed by the west.[16] Although Marxism was no longer the official ideology, it left an intellectual legacy in which issues of mass consciousness and how it could be shaped were to the fore. In addition, the possibilities of disinformation as war-fighting had been part of Soviet military doctrine.[17] Russian efforts used social media to spread false messages and create misleading impressions to weaken opponents, especially with their own public opinion. The EU spoke of 'hybrid threats' because it saw this as a form of activity that could help undermine security even at times of comparative peace. Evidence was found in the role, confirmed by the US intelligence community, played by Russia during the 2016 presidential election, employing disinformation and leaks of hacked emails, in undermining Democrat Party candidate Hillary Clinton.

**THE TERM 'INFORMATION WAR' HAD BEEN AROUND SINCE THE** early 1990s with two different but easily confused meanings. The first referred to measures designed to disable systems dependent upon flows of information; the second referred to attempts to influence perceptions by affecting the content of information. The first was about engineering, the second about cognition. Information war as propaganda was a continuation of practices that had developed along with the development of newspapers with mass circulation, then radio and TV. Each had in their own way set new opportunities and limits on the ability of elites to shape popular attitudes to war, both in anticipation and once the fighting was underway, and for enemies to subvert their messages.

The two big changes made possible by the digital age were the ease of access to multiple sources of information, international as well as national, and the ability to share thoughts and plans with others. Communication with informal networks, without any commanding organisation, could be achieved through numerous outlets, some protected

and some open. RAND analysts John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt saw how this created an opportunity for what they called ‘netwars’, described as ‘an emerging mode of conflict (and crime) at societal levels, short of traditional military warfare, in which the protagonists use network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies, and technologies attuned to the information age’. The stress was on the features normally associated with insurgencies such as dispersal and limited central control, coming at opponents from various and often unexpected directions. According to Arquilla and Ronfeldt:

> The most potent netwarriors will not only be highly networked and have a capacity to swarm, they will also be held together by strong social ties, have secure communications technologies, and project a common “story” about why they are together and what they need to do. These will be the most serious adversaries.[18]

These were features generally associated with radical social movements, as well as terrorist or insurgent groups.

The importance of the common ‘story’ or ‘narrative’ in this analysis was to provide not only an ideological rationale for political struggle but also an account of the struggle’s likely course, explaining why one side was likely to prevail. The narrative therefore gave meaning to events and so shaped responses. For those engaged in counter-insurgency operations this was a very big issue as they needed communities on-side as they could offer the enemy sanctuaries, recruits, and supplies. They appreciated that this was difficult to achieve whilst ordinary people were suspicious if not downright hostile. David Kilcullen observed how the insurgents’ ‘pernicious influence’ drew on a ‘single narrative’, that was simple, unified, easily expressed, and could organise experience and provide a framework for understanding events. He understood that it was best to be able to ‘tap into an existing narrative that excludes the insurgents’ involving stories that people naturally appreciate. Otherwise it was necessary to develop an alternative narrative, which would be more challenging.[19]

This fitted in with longer-standing concerns about the need to win over disaffected populations as part of a counter-insurgency campaign,

demonstrating that by backing the government side they could expect protection from the insurgents and that life would generally get better. Yet even an appreciation of the importance of popular perceptions and how they might be influenced by social media, as well as by print and broadcasting, did not mean that they could readily be reshaped. Attempts to encourage different thoughts might benefit from sophisticated forms of propaganda but would still fail if the messages did not make sense in terms of local culture or accord with everyday experiences. It required considerable discipline to sustain a set of messages, not only in what was said but also in ensuring that behaviour in the field conformed to what was being claimed. It was especially difficult for those connected with a foreign force to construct a credible narrative that would appeal to the indigenous population.[20] Whatever was said would have to stay close to public opinion back home as well as address local concerns. The greatest difficulty lay in addressing popular grievances effectively, promising reform and military success, when it was often the failures of the host government to achieve any of this that was the reason for the insurgency in the first place.

With all military operations there was a constant and uneasy relationship with the media. At the very least armies had to be aware of the impact of images of retreat, casual cruelty, or just the regular miseries of war. Once smartphones became available in 2007, incidents could be videoed and transmitted worldwide within seconds. Military operations became transparent. The sort of secrecy that commanders would have demanded in the past was no longer possible. The only hope for surprise would be that with so much noise cluttering the Internet, bits and pieces of crucial information could easily be missed. Because there was no longer any control over what could be posted on the Internet, opportunities also grew for manipulating opinion. Information campaigns could put out misleading evidence to create completely false impressions in order to construct or break allegiances and sympathies. The causal relationships were much harder to grasp when it came to the information aspects of war, as opposed to those that were more crudely kinetic. It was not possible to reshape belief systems with the same care and precision that could now be put into lethal attacks. Distant messages from unfamiliar sources

competed for attention with the direct experience of war and its human consequences. The most telling messages were often unintended as people observed the actions of troops in their neighbourhood, or heard garbled reports of what politicians had said, or picked up lurid stories from the Internet that reinforced their prejudices.

The concept of ‘hybrid war’ implied the possibility of disparate activities having a controlling mastermind, ensuring that they were mutually reinforcing. In practice the activities were likely to remain disparate, each with their own dynamic, thwarting attempts by governments and military commanders to assert control.