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AN ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIA'S WAY OF WAR IN THE WAKE OF ITS AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

This research aims to look into Russia's ways of war, as revealed from its aggression in Ukraine since 2014. In particular it will explore the analytically obscure concept of "hybrid war", which has been prominent in political debates on European security after Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea. The contribution of this analysis to the wider debate includes placing "hybrid war" into a wider analytical context of interstate aggression, proposing a clear mechanism for the "hybrid war" that helps understand its impact, and offering a structured comparison with other types of interstate aggression. The latter strongly suggests that the phenomenon known as "hybrid war" can conditionally achieve the same goals that another tool of interstate aggression – the conventional war – has been traditionally employed for.

Introduction

What can we learn about Russia's ways of war, given its almost a decade-long interstate aggression against Ukraine? Russia used multiple approaches, finally switching in February 2022 to open conventional warfare. Following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, with its annexation of Crimea and a proxy war in Donbas, a large and continuing debate was triggered discussing Russia's model of conflict and if it had the potential to change the face of modern warfare. This view emerged to dominate the security-related policy and academic debate in Europe, under the loosely defined term of "hybrid war".[1] It even inspired the adoption of the "hybrid threat" official concept by both the European Union[2] and NATO[3], used to describe Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its coercive activities towards the West. Notably, the

[1] The term did not get traction in the United States, where both policymakers and think tank community largely prefer the alternative label of "gray zone conflict".

[2] See European Commission, *Joint framework on countering hybrid threats: A European Union response*. Joint Communication: JOIN (2016) 18 final, 6 April 2016, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016JC0018.

[3] Following 2014 NATO Wales Summit, a NATO Hybrid Strategy was developed and released in December 2015, as a classified document – see G. Lasconjarias and J.A. Larsen (eds.) *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats*, NATO Defense College Forum Paper 24, 2015, pp.11. The NATO definition of "hybrid threats" accepted at the NATO Wales Summit in 2014, as "a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures [that] are employed in a highly integrated design"; see "Wales Summit Declaration", https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm, para 13. NATO's operationalization of this concept evolved, to include *inter alia* "propaganda, deception, sabotage and other non-military tactics"; see "NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats," https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.

EU and NATO preferred to use the term of "hybrid threats" instead of "hybrid war", as both were rather hesitant to imply that they may be in a state of war with Russia.

The operational definition of the term varies but it generally implies the use of a combination of methods of warfare – conventional, irregular, or political – to achieve strategic goals. For instance, the EU definition refer to the "mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner… to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare".[4] Despite formalizing the term in its official documents, there seems to be a growing consensus among European officials that the concept is extremely ambiguous, has little analytic value and that there is little new about it. More recently, a group of NATO officials and professionals interviewed by researchers even went as far as to acknowledge that there was little or no operational value in the concept.[5]

This analysis will avoid addressing the issue of the concept being analytically obscure. Rather than focusing on the label, it will instead focus on the phenomena behind it. From a policy perspective this is crucial, since no effective response can be designed, unless one accurately understands the phenomenon behind the ill-understood concept of "hybrid war". From a scholarly perspective this approach is novel, as to the knowledge of this author there has been no systematic and considerable attempt to clearly understand the underlying mechanism of hybrid war.

Russia developed its own version of "hybrid warfare" – it has learned from the Western respective strategic thinking, consequently adapting these lessons for its own doctrinal and operational use.[6] Therefore, the debate on the semantical origins of "hybrid war", arguing whether the term originated in Russia or the West[7] is inconsequential for the understanding of the phenomena behind it. For instance, the gun powder, artillery, or tanks did not originate in Russia either, but this does not mean Russia did not adopt both these technologies and the related strategies of employment. In fact, Russia's military analysts have been developing concepts related to "hybrid war" – along with their operational employment – similarly to how the EU and NATO invested in it after 2014. For example, an article in a Russian professional military journal claimed that "no goal will be achieved in future wars unless one belligerent gains information superiority over the other", and that "armed struggle has expanded from the ground, sea, and aerospace into an entirely new environment – information".[8]

The approach this paper takes is different from the analytic angles chosen by other scholars, who also examined the phenomenon of "hybrid war". For instance, one of the strongest criticisms of the "hybrid warfare" concept poses that it represents nothing new and even is damaging as it misleads us about Russia's contemporary military

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[4] European Commission, 2016.
[5] Caliscan, Murat and Michel Liegeois, "The Concept of 'Hybrid Warfare' Undermines NATO's Strategic Thinking: Insights from Interviews with NATO Officials," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (2021), pp. 301–304.
[6] Rod Thornton, "The changing nature of modern warfare: Responding to Russian information warfare," *RUSI Journal* 160:4, p. 42.
[7] For this type of argument, see Samuel Charap, "The ghost of hybrid war," *Survival* 57:6, 51-58; or Dmitry Adamsky, "Cross-domain coercion: The current Russian art of strategy," *Proliferation Papers* 54, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, (November 2015), pp. 21–24.
[8] S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "On the Nature and Content of the New-Generation War", *Voennaya Mysl'* 10 (2013). pp. 13–24.

and security strategies.[9] There are a few issues with this kind of arguments. These statements lack a strong analytic framework that is grounded in a proper comparative methodology. They thus carry the form of untested hypotheses or unverified claims, failing to properly show whether the modern phenomenon of "hybrid war" is different or not from those instances of interstate conflict in the past that might have revealed some similarity.

A more related debate surrounding the "hybrid war" concept, focusses on whether it represents Russia's new way of war.[10] I argue that this analytic angle is not very helpful for knowledge building. Even if the "hybrid war" approach is not a dominant Russian strategy, there is significant policy and scholarly value in examining it since it can be another tool in the Russia's foreign and security policy arsenal. Despite the signs indicating that Russia continues to focus on conventional warfare, this does not mean that Russia has not been developing alternative means of interstate aggression, as some analysts seem to imply.[11] Recent research astutely argued that "there are many kinds of war and many ways to wage it", and that shifting interstate conflict among the various operational domains of war – land, air, sea, space and cyber – affects its costs and therefore is politically important.[12]

In the next sections I will introduce an alternative logical framework of interstate conflict to address the biased primacy on conventional warfare, which dominates the literature. I will use that to conduct a structured and focused comparison among the three types of interstate aggression, including conventional and proxy warfare. Furthermore, I will propose a reviewed conceptual framework for "hybrid war", suggesting its population-centric nature and examine other unique properties and qualities of that conflict technology. Finally, I will present a number of preliminary conclusions, addressing policy related implications.

Comparative analysis of warfare types

A major flaw in existing "hybrid warfare" analysis, is the failure to provide a coherent comparison among different types of interstate aggression and across a number of their relevant common features. To build a methodologically proper comparison we need to identify the most suitable variables across the examined cases and conduct a structured and focused comparison, allowing us to observe the variation of these respective variables and understand how it might affect the compared qualities.[13]

For that purpose, the starting assumption of this analysis is that "hybrid war" is a conflict technology[14] similar to conventional war. To provide sufficient analytic

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[9] For this criticism see Bettina Renz, "Russia and 'hybrid warfare'", *Contemporary Politics* 22:3 (2016), pp. 283–300.

[10] Mark Galeotti, "Hybrid, ambitious, and non-linear? How new is Russia's 'new way of war'?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:2 (2016), pp. 282–301.

[11] For an illustrative example of the latter camp, see Andrew Monaghan, "The 'war' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'", *Parameters* 45:4 (2015), pp. 65–74.

[12] Jon R. Lindsay and Erik Gartzke, "Politics by many other means: The comparative strategic advantages of operational domains", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45:5, pp. 743–776.

[13] See Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2004), pp. 67–124.

[14] By conflict technology or the technology of aggression, I mean a causal mechanism of conflict process, drawing similarity from the economic concept of "technology of production". Coined in J. Hirshleifer, "The Macrotechnology of Conflict", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.44, No.6, 2000, pp. 773–792, a conflict

grounds for accepting and conducting this comparison, it is necessary to introduce the broader concept of interstate aggression, as an umbrella logic containing different types of aggression, such as conventional war, nuclear war, proxy war, and "hybrid war" among others. While this may not be fully justified by the current international law,[15] it can be justified analytically.

I am using the logic that interstate aggression is an attack against the sovereignty of a country. I define sovereignty based on a minimalist definition, logically containing the territory of a country, its people, and its government. Any foreign attempt to control the territory or resources of a country, its people or policies, would then be an act of interstate aggression.[16] This definition follows the spirit and logic of the UN Charter; it also accurately reflects the conceptual meaning of national sovereignty. Coincidentally, the large majority of wars have been conducted to either take control over the territory, the resources on the territory of a state, or to change its policies by putting pressure on the leadership.

For the sake of my analysis, I will examine three types of interstate aggression, and consider whether and to what extent their different causal patterns could lead to similar outcomes. Russia's aggressive activities in Ukraine will be used as the source for my data and related micro-examples. I will consider that the dependent variable is the outcome of aggression – the success or failure in controlling territory or resources, influence population, or policies. To determine the independent variables of each type of aggression, I examine and compare their microdynamics, which follows the logic of process-tracing approach. This will allow us to better capture the internal dynamic of a specific war model. The differences these conflict technologies show, revealing our independent variables of interest, are the attack sequence, the attack target, and the attack means.

If the phenomenon labeled as "hybrid war" after Russia's invasion in Ukraine is at least theoretically able to replace conventional war in achieving its traditional goals, then we are dealing with a potentially new conflict technology. The emphasis on "theoretically" is because even though a conflict technology may not be successful today, it can become so as the related science and technology knowlege evolves. For instance, although drones and Artificial Intelligence today may not be able to determine the difference between victory and defeat at present, they could achieve this later, as engineering technology matures.

Conventional warfare

Simplified, the classical-conventional war aims to basically crash the armed resistance of the target state, which operates as a physical barrier and aims to prevent the attacker

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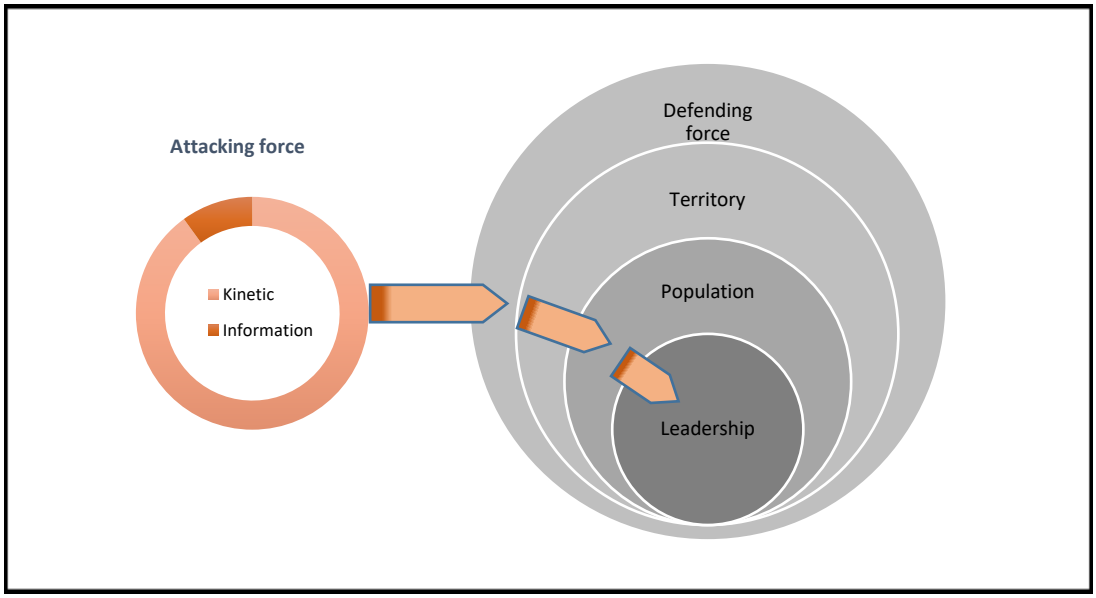
technology takes the conflict efforts from the input, specifically processes them depending on the technology nature, to provide victory or defeat at the output.

[15] International law literature defines interstate aggression as any use of, or threat to use force in interstate relations; see Quincy Wright, "Subversive intervention," The American Journal of International Law 54:3 (1960), pp. 528. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court links the crime of aggression to the use of military force, following lengthy negotiations among both members and non-member states of the International Criminal Court; see https://www.coalitionfortheicc.org/explore/icc-crimes/crime-aggression.

[16] For instance, the UN General Assembly call in 1949 upon countries to "refrain from any threats or acts, direct or indirect, aimed at impairing the freedom, independence or integrity of any state, or at fomenting civil strife and subverting the will of the people of any state". See Q. Wright (1960, p. 524).

from achieving control over its objectives (Pic.1). The attacker's objective may be capturing a piece of territory, such as the target country's capital city, among others. It then can replace the governance of the targeted area or country in the attempt to rule it. It uses either brute force - when the objective is fully achieved through the use of military means and thus does not require the decision of the target state - or compellence[17], aiming to convince the target state's leadership to accept the demands of the attacker, by inflicting costs (pain and damage) or threatening these costs. The Russian bombing of Ukrainian cities and infrastructure aims to inflict costs and force the Ukrainian side to come forward and negotiate with Russia a cessation of military activities at the time favorable to Russia.

The sequence of coercion in case of conventional war is the following: the attacking force targets and attempts to destroy the defending force; it then establishes control over the target state territory and its resources by replacing its administration; it then governs the population and/or directs the defeated country's domestic and foreign policies. A shorter sequence would emerge when only change in target state's policy is sought, which could be achieved even after making credible threats of military actions.



Picture 1. The mechanism of conventional war, as an interstate aggression technology

An important trait of conventional war is that kinetic actions form most of its activities. It uses various non-kinetic, information tools, such as disinformation, propaganda, or cyber-attacks *only* in support of and augmenting kinetic activities. Their goal is typically to soften the target state's defending forces and population, either reducing or limiting their potential resistance against the attacking forces. For instance, the Russian take-over Crimea was in essence a traditional conventional attack, as Russia deployed its troops to take over various installations and governmental buildings on the peninsula. The non-kinetic actions, including disinformation and influence operations, aimed at discouraging the Ukrainian troops stationed on the peninsula from fighting back, and instead coercing them to surrender. Another goal of non-kinetic

[17] In security studies *compellence* is a "threat to make an adversary do something", being a subset of coercion and introduced by T.C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, pp. 69–71.

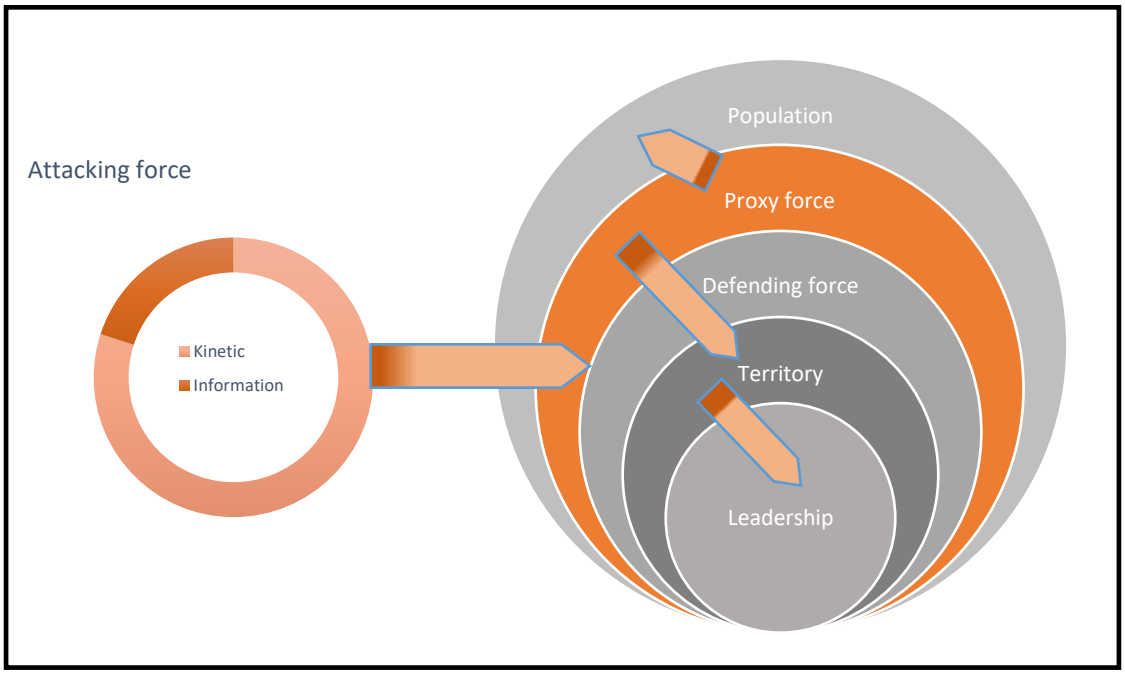
actions is to improve the knowledge about the enemy through the collection of intelligence and thus make the use of arms more effective in hurting the opponent. In the Crimea case, this was done predominantly before the invasion, when Russia collected information about the leadership of different Ukrainian units, the potential for their recruitment, the command-and-control system between the peninsula and the capital, and ways to undermine the effective response of Ukraine's military by the start of the invasion.

However, in this particular case, the non-kinetic means could not achieve the guiding strategic objective alone, at their small scale and without the use of military force. Without the Russian troops taking control over the local government buildings, and replacing the local leadership in Crimea, the Kremlin would not have been able to annex the peninsula. To exclude Russian military units from Crimea's take-over operation would have required a different sequence of actions – a conflict technology with a different causal mechanism. In fact, traditionally and historically the use of information in conventional war, or even the more organized effort in form of information warfare, has not been able to alone achieve the strategic objectives of the attacking state. Even when the aggressor obtained its demands without fighting, it typically was due to the threat to use force, leading to the target state having expectations of potential harm and destruction that the armed attack would produce.

Proxy warfare

Next, it is useful to also shortly examine the phenomena of proxy war. In a proxy war context, the attacking state is basically outsourcing the conduct of military operations against the target state to an apparently non-state group that is operating on the territory of the target state (Picture 2). This non-state group functions as the attacker's proxy, and it is either recruited locally on the target's territory or is being infiltrated across the border by the attacker. It is not uncommon for the attacker to covertly provide the command and control of the armed proxy. The proxy war is thus very similar to the conventional war, with the critical difference being the delegation of coercive actions to an armed actor that is not overtly affiliated with the attacking country.

This allows, in particular, saving on political costs and provides the aggressor with the ability to plausibly deny direct involvement in the armed conflict, usually disguising its aggression as a local civil conflict. The driving force of a proxy war type of conflict is again constituted of kinetic actions, with information having a supporting role. The role of information as a tool of conflict can be more extended in comparison to conventional war. This is so, as the attacking force needs to both try building support for its proxy on the territory of the target country but also cover up its role of conflict participant. The sequence of coercion is similar to one of conventional war, though the attacking country applies armed coercion indirectly, through its proxy.



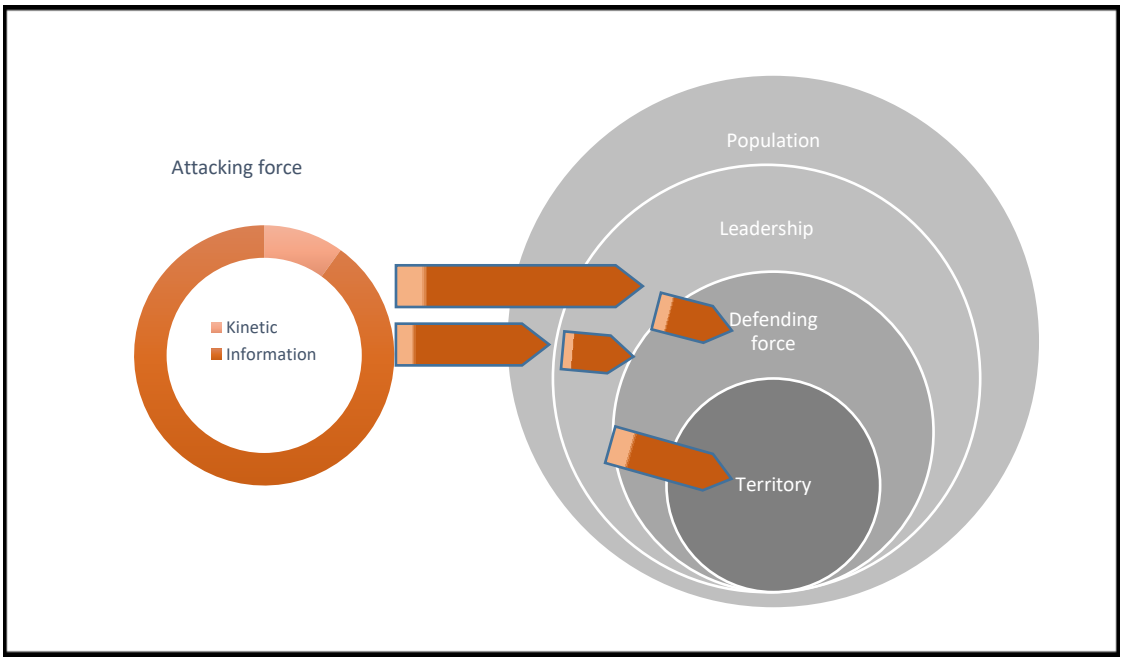
Picture 2. The mechanism of proxy war, as an interstate aggression technology

The Russian actions in Donbas from 2014, following its control of parts of Luhansk and Donetsk region, until 2022 when it started an overt military invasion against Ukraine, is a case resembling a proxy war. Another example is the Russia's aggression in Moldova's Transnistria region. In both cases, Russia did not publicly recognize its participation, while providing indirect support to the fighters in Donbas and the so-called Transnistrian authorities. This allowed Russia to later claim the role of a mediator in the negotiations, securing the consent of the West.

"Hybrid warfare"

In "hybrid war", the attacker – unlike in conventional and proxy warfare – does not first target the territory and defense forces of the opponent. That reveals one of the major differences in the examined independent variables – the target of attacks, the sequence of attacks, and the means of attacks. The sequence of interstate coercion in this particular case requires to first start by targeting the population, the aggressed state's political leadership, or both, depending on the regime type and other political factors. The "hybrid war" type of aggression is used predominantly when territorial conquest is not the main objective of the attacker, but instead change of policy is sought. However, at the extreme, it is possible theoretically to be able to influence the population of the target country to such an extent, or control the political leadership so tightly, that the target country is forced to accept giving up its sovereignty. Lukashenko's Belarus is an example of this scenario. Ukraine, if Viktor Yanukovich did not face protests in late 2013-early 2014, forcing him to flee to Russia, could had embarked on that path. As a result, "hybrid war" actions, the target country may even agree to "benevolently" become part of the attacker's sphere of influence, designed in the form of a regional organization or confederation. This makes "hybrid warfare" potent of delivering indirect control of the target state's territory, which only conventional territorial conquest can offer. That is, under certain conditions, "hybrid war" could be a full-fledged alternative to conventional war. Based on the mechanisms of conflict illustrated in this chapter, and their separate logic, the "hybrid war"

phenomenon referred to by NATO (and the EU) is in reality a distinct conflict technology and not a part of the conventional war. However, the NATO/EU definitions have too much noise in them, confounding many of its aspects together and making it difficult to understand the "hybrid war" logic and mechanism.



Picture 3. The mechanism of hybrid war, as an interstate aggression technology

What are the mechanics of the "hybrid war", then? The largest confusion about this conflict technology comes from the failure to understand its underlying logic, focusing on various mixes of non-kinetic tools rather than on its causal logic and sequence. I argue that "hybrid warfare" preponderantly weaponizes information, in its direct targeting of population (in democracies), or population and leadership in autocracies (Picture 3). This distinction is made to show that leadership of a democratic country is insulated from direct "hybrid" attack of an aggressor, given the checks and balances that democracies have in place, as a rule. The military tool and kinetic actions are used only in support of the major effort of information operations, to protect the gains. It is the other way around in conventional and proxy war cases. To clarify it – and the graphical illustrations reveal this – conventional war can make use of hybrid tools, but they will be in supporting, not dominant roles. As a parallel, consider how conventional war uses intelligence gathering tools and techniques to support warfighting, but this does not make them covert actions – a tool used by intelligence agencies routinely.

By weaponizing information and other non-kinetic tools to acquire control over or the ability to direct the population of the target state and its leadership, the attacker can advance its strategic objectives. At the initial stages, these could include getting the target government to reduce funding for its military, advancing incompetent people into key leadership positions in its military and intelligence agencies, making the target state withdraw from military and political alliances, or even join cooperation arrangements with its recent competitors.

A common error is to believe that "hybrid war" can only be effective against countries that have a national minority of the same nationality as the attacker's main population. The Russian annexation of Crimea comes to mind as the classical modern example,

as some analysts claimed that Crimea or Donbas scenario are not reproduceable elsewhere.[18] However, the objective in "hybrid war" is not necessarily to make the population of the target country become loyal to the attacker. The most frequent approach would be to antagonize the population against an outcome that the attacker would like to avoid. Or, to create chaos and turmoil in the target country, so that it is easier to bring into power a new political leadership that is more likely to advance the attacker's favorite goals. Metaphorically, if conventional war is like a robbery, hybrid war is more similar to a swindle. It is about influencing the target state doing the aggressor's will by either confusing it and directing to erroneously follow the path that the aggressor wants; or mislead the target into believing it is the right thing to do. For instance, at the beginning of Russia's aggression in Donbas, in 2014, the aggressor managed to initially convince both the new authorities in Kyiv and a large part of the population in Donbas that the protests organized across the Eastern Ukraine were simply expressing dissatisfaction with the Ukrainian leadership that replaced Yanukovich regime. This gave the Russian side time to take over a number of administrative centers across the region, under the disguise of popular unrest. It was not until the declaration by the Russian local proxies and operatives that they intended to create local "republics" and conduct referendums of independence in early April 2014 that the Ukrainian authorities reacted.[19] It is illustrative that the official Kyiv declared an anti-terrorist operation to deal with the Russia's hybrid aggression, basically presenting the issue as a domestic conflict,[20] which was in line with the Kremlin's strategy.

Given the described microdynamics and mechanism, the "hybrid" label is analytically misleading. The term "ambiguous warfare"[21] is a more accurate description, along with "deception warfare". While deception has been historically only a lesser part of conventional warfare, it is a main and essential tool in hybrid war. This is another source of misunderstanding in comprehending "hybrid warfare" – confusing means with the ways. Military battles have been won by employing deception in support of kinetic actions. It is important to point out that hybrid warfare uses deception as the preponderant approach - along with its resulting control - to reach its ultimate strategic objectives. Moreover, given the essential emphasis of hybrid warfare on population, it is more accurate analytically describe it as population-centric warfare. One could even argue that "hybrid warfare" is an evolutionary adaptation of statecraft to modern social and technological conditions. While conventional war can conquer territory and replace leadership, it can hardly ensure the cooperation or even the passive response of the population. Quite to the contrary – populations subject to the exigencies of conventional warfare resist their attacker, generating additional costs to the aggressor. "Hybrid warfare" allows an aggressor to address these emerging political

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[18] See Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "A closer look at Russia's 'Hybrid War'," *Wilson Center Kenan Cable* 7 (April 2015), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no7-closer-look-russias-hybrid-war.

[19] See Ivan Shovkoplias, "The Invisible war: 8 years of battles in Donbas," 14 July 2022, https://war.ukraine.ua/articles/8-years-of-war-in-donbas, accessed on 5 October 2022; BBC News, "Ukraine crisis: Protesters declare Donetsk 'republic'," 7 April 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26919928.

[20] BBC News, "Ukraine says Donetsk 'anti-terror operation' under way," 16 April 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27035196.

[21] Quoted in K. Giles, "Conclusion: Is Hybrid Warfare Really New?" in G. Lasconjarias and J.A. Larsen (eds.) *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats*, NATO Defense College Forum Paper 24, 2015, p.321.

trends in a fashion that avoids the complications and costs created by conventional warfare.

Re-conceptualizing "hybrid war"

Conventional wars are becoming increasingly costly, for many reasons – the domestic audience costs as well as the international pressure in economic and political terms being the most obvious. Another important reason for this cost is the difficulty in achieving the goal of effective control over the sovereignty of the target country. The latest military operations, including those run by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq, suggested that destroying the opponent's organized military resistance, in the era of nationalism and even partially operating international law, is unlikely to achieve one's strategic objectives. The population has become the most formidable obstacle against foreign military invasions – it is impossible to coerce it into compliance unless one applies brutal coercion like ISIS,[22] and it is not feasible to persuade it unless the local armed resistance is weak. There is no doubt that Russian planners explored the experience of the US and its Allies in these two conflicts, along with its own lessons from Afghanistan and, more recently, Chechnya.

I argue that targeting population and ruling elites for external control the Russian response in the attempt to mitigate the costs of modern conflict. This does not imply that "hybrid war" preferred by Russia to conventional wars. It rather indicates that when territorial control is not necessary or possible, the same strategic ends – directing or controlling the target state's policies – might be reached through non-kinetic ("hybrid") actions aimed at influencing populations or governments. The modern aggressor can achieve this through a complex system of social engineering measures, implemented by interfering in the domestic political process of the target country. Through economic activities the aggressor alters the physical needs of citizens, creating conditions for the manipulation of their electoral preferences. It generates funding to corrupt politicians and promotes into power loyal or sympathetic political groups. It is hardly a coincidence that Russia began amassing troops at the Ukrainian borders after the official Kyiv started to crack down on Victor Medvedchuk and his pro-Russian party "Opposition Platform – For Life".

Based on these characteristics, it should be argued that we are dealing with a totally different technology of conflict when talking about "hybrid warfare". While it follows ends that are identical to those pursued through conventional warfare, it uses a qualitatively different *distribution* of ways, means and a different causal sequence. To emphasize this, let's consider the observation that never in human history was it possible for one country to have unlimited and complete access to the whole population of another country. Global communication and information networks now make all-

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[22] Russia has also applied brutal policies to curb popular resistance to its military operations, by forcefully displacing and coercing populations that challenged its policies in Chechnya, South Ossetia, Crimea and in Ukraine's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. More recently, after its military invasion in February 2022, Russian soldiers detained and tortured Ukrainian citizens showing dissent, and forcefully displaced Ukrainian population to reduce the risk of popular resistance against its occupation, see BBC News, "Russia transfers thousands of Mariupol civilians to its territory," 27 March 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60894142. These actions, meant to prevent local insurgencies, are reminiscent of URSS similar actions in post-WWII Ukraine, see Yuri M. Zhukov, "Population resettlement in war; Theory and evidence from Soviet archives," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59:7 (2014), 1155-1185.

encompassing communication a routine activity. This connectivity is an unprecedented phenomenon, which became possible due to modern developments in science and technology. It allows a foreign country to practically operate as a domestic political actor on the territory of another country, provided the aggressor has certain technical knowledge about influencing population masses and sufficient resources to apply this knowledge. For instance, Russia was able to understand "well before the United States that the rise of social media magnified the impact of information warfare".[23] There are no national borders in the information space, which transforms it into a separate operational domain of war. And because of this, it requires a different conceptual framework, different operationalization, different forces and capabilities, as well as a different set of skills.

A major reason why many analysts are misled in their understanding of hybrid warfare, is because they seem to view (implicitly or explicitly) conventional war as the dominant or only type of interstate aggression, building their analysis of hybrid war around that logic. Instead, this research suggests we step back and conceptually view various modes of war as alternative tools of statecraft. They are just different types of interstate aggression, with their own specific logic, costs and advantages. While conventional aggression triggers population-related costs for the attacker – as the US has lately learned in Iraq and Afghanistan – a "hybrid" type of interstate aggression can allow the attacker to transfer many of the population-related costs onto the target state. This may happen when the latter tries to respond to the hybrid war that the aggressor disguised as a domestic conflict, and thus inflicts costs on some of its own citizens.

	Operational domain	**Territorial control**	**Policy control**	**Population control**	**Leadership control**
Conventional war	Physical	+	+	+	+
Proxy war	Physical	+	-	+	-
Nuclear war	Physical	-	-	-	-
Hybrid war	Synthetic	+	+	+	+
Cyber war	Synthetic	-	-	-	-

Table 1. Comparison of various types of interstate aggression and their effects

A careful comparison (Table 1) would suggest that "hybrid war" can achieve the same strategic objectives as conventional war. This is specifically possible due to its population-centric character. It is an important observation, as it suggests that Russia and other West's competitors are acquiring an advanced understanding of the potential of information domain, and develop doctrines, policies and forces to increasingly exploit population-centric warfare (the "hybrid war") as a tool of interstate aggression. It can be as effective as conventional war in achieving strategic objectives, but less costly and considerably less noticeable. "Hybrid war" will not become a dominant tool of Russia's aggressive policies, but a flexible alternative to conventional war.

[23] A. Zegart, "The Race for Big Ideas is On," *The Atlantic*, 13 January 2020.