



*We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats, where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design." — from the NATO Wales Summit Declaration<sup>(1)</sup>*

## COVER STORY

# CONTINUED EVOLUTION OF HYBRID THREATS

## The Russian Hybrid Threat Construct and the Need for Innovation

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**Editor's Note:** The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of the Army, the U.S. Department of Defense, NATO, or any of their agencies.

**Left, middle:** Lviv, Ukraine, 30 December 2014. Armed forces of Ukraine. Military and armoured vehicles at the International Center for Peacemaking and Safety before transferring into zone of military conflict. Photograph by Drop of Light/Shutterstock.com. **Bottom:** Russian soldiers, 4 March 2014, in Perevalne, Crimea, Ukraine. On 28 February 2014, Russian military forces invaded Crimea peninsula. Photograph by photo.ua/Shutterstock.com.

**T**HE NORTH Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) currently faces a new, but familiar foe. Waging hybrid warfare to defeat hybrid threats is not a new phenomenon. History is abound with examples in which the weak employed different, hybrid ways and means to achieve their desired end state and defeat the strong.<sup>(2)</sup> However, deterring and defeating future hybrid threats still poses a significant and daunting challenge for NATO. In the future, hybrid threats will continue to evolve as more lethal and precise weaponry becomes readily available to information age guerillas, funded with capital from global criminal activities. Additionally, the current hybrid threat construct that the Russians are employing on the plains of Eastern Europe represents a particularly ominous example of things to come. In this case, it is the strong, Rus-

sia, employing an unprecedented degree of hybrid ways and means against the weak or weaker state (Ukraine) to coerce and compel it to submit to Russia's will. Traditional hybrid threats focus on the blending of various capabilities at the tactical and operational levels of warfare. Russia, however, is now employing not only the military Instrument of Power (IOP) of the modern state, but also the economic, informational, and diplomatic IOPs in its hybrid threat construct to exacerbate an already complex problem for NATO.<sup>(3)</sup>

When faced with quandary of deterring, and if required, defeating this Russian version of a hybrid threat, NATO will have to adjust its thinking and its approach to achieve success. As future conflict continues to transition into thinking men's wars, in a race to out-think and out-learn an adaptive adversary, NATO will have to adapt as well. In this evolved conflict, finding





**"In this evolved conflict, finding novel ways to link military capabilities amongst all NATO members together with ongoing diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts, holds the key to success."** Photograph by NATO.

novel ways to link military capabilities amongst all NATO members together with ongoing diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts, holds the key to success. However, how can NATO enable operational level change throughout the inter-governmental military Alliance in order to confront the complexity of an evolving Russian hybrid threat? Developing a culture of innovation throughout the force will help set and maintain the conditions required for successful transformation to occur in NATO.

Throughout history, militaries that successfully developed new approaches to problems when preparing for the next war fostered a culture of innovation that permeated throughout the whole force. The institutionalization of learning organizations full of warrior-scholars could be one way to cultivate this throughout NATO. Another way could be the development of a hybrid mindset, or a hybrid way of thinking. A hybrid mindset focuses on the interaction of four mental characteristics — understanding strategic context, a holistic approach to operations, a focus on potential opportunities, and embracing the natural complexity of the operational environment — to develop innovative approaches to create desired operational en-

vironments. Before further elaborating on these potential ways to deter, and if required, defeat the Russian hybrid threat, it is important to explore contemporary research on the concept of hybrid threats. Knowledge of the evolution of the hybrid threats will facilitate a better understanding of the Russian hybrid threat construct and their actions in Ukraine.

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UNITED STATES (U.S.) Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0 currently defines a hybrid threat as, "the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects."<sup>(4)</sup> Furthermore, the NATO Capstone Concept characterizes hybrid threats as "those posed by adversaries, with the ability to simultaneously employ

conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives."<sup>(5)</sup> Both of these definitions align with Frank Hoffman's vision of hybrid warfare, which is also the most predominantly accepted military and academic conceptualization of the subject. Hoffman, a retired U.S. Marine officer and a Senior Research Fellow with the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, theorized, "hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."<sup>(6)</sup> Although all three of these definitions are thorough explanations of a hybrid threat and hybrid warfare, is there more to the Russian construct than just the simultaneous employment of forces and forms of warfare at the tactical level? A more expansive review of contemporary literature with a focus towards the Russian model indicates, yes.

ONE AREA of study focuses on the impact of the concept of hybrid at the strategic level. The research of Nathan Freier, a defense strategist and a former Director of National Security Af-





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Photograph by Flight Sergeant C. Artigues (HQ MARCOM).

fairs at the Strategic Studies Institute, outlined challenges and threats to the United States in the post September 11, 2001 security environment. While working as a strategist on the 2005 National Defense Strategy (NDS), Freier developed the concept of a "hybrid norm — the routine state of nature where key aspects of multiple strategic challenges" combined into one.<sup>(7)</sup> This was a marked change from previous thoughts of strategic challenges, which traditionally focused on separate irregular, catastrophic, traditional, and disruptive events instead of the combined interaction of these challenges. Freier continued by arguing that hybrid challenges would evolve in complexity from the melding of irregular challenges (unconventional warfare by state and non-state actors) and catastrophic challenges (weapons of mass destruction), with existing traditional challenges (conventional warfare).<sup>(8)</sup> Freier's concept of the simultaneous merging of irregular and traditional challenges when combined with an updated catastrophic challenge — for example, the potential threat that cyber-attacks pose to economic and energy infrastructure — has distinct implications for the Russian hybrid threat construct.

Another area of contemporary research focuses on the war or battle that transcends beyond the physical realm and into the cognitive realm, which seems most applicable to the current Russian hybrid threat construct. Qiao Liang, a Major General in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China, and Wang Xiangsui, a retired PLA officer, devised the concept of "unrestricted warfare" in 1999 as a means by which weaker countries could overcome their military inferiorities in relation to an advanced nation in a high-tech war. The concept of unrestricted warfare is in essence a war without limits or beyond the traditionally accepted physical limits of a war.

Liang and Xiangsui postulated, "The first rule of unrestricted warfare is that there are no rules, with nothing forbidden."<sup>(9)</sup> Additionally, Liang and Xiangsui argued that future conflict would involve connection points between technology, politics, economics, religion, culture, diplomacy, and the military to create endless possibilities and complexity. The crux of this argument, and its implications for Western militaries, is that it expands warfare beyond the cognitive boundaries and dimensions of warfare common to most Western military

thinking. To understand unrestricted warfare, Liang and Xiangsui acknowledged, would require a shift in the minds and thoughts of the Western way of war.<sup>(10)</sup> Victory would not be found on the physical battlefield, a notion that is common to the Western way of war. Instead, "the struggle for victory will take place on a battlefield beyond the battlefield."<sup>(11)</sup> With a broader and better understanding of hybrid threats, a more thorough analysis of the Russian hybrid threat construct can now occur.

#### At the tactical level:

Russia is employing irregular forces and tactics with advanced conventional weapons and elite regular military special operations forces (Spetsnaz) synergistically for a common goal.<sup>(12)</sup> Throughout contested areas in Ukraine, there are consistent reports of "little green men" along with Russian volunteers moving around the battlefield without Russian military insignia or affiliation.<sup>(13)</sup> These fighters are linking up with, and then augmenting, local pro-Russian irregular units and criminal gangs to boost their numbers and capabilities. With increased capability, Spetsnaz can organize these soldiers to execute guerilla type operations to wage an





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unconventional warfare campaign in order to erode Ukraine's power, influence, and will.

As the conflict protracts and extends in time and space, this unconventional warfare campaign sets the conditions for ethnic Russians to overthrow government control of contested areas within Ukraine.<sup>(14)</sup> Additionally, Russia is employing cyber-attacks against critical Ukrainian communications infrastructure in order to disrupt the flow of their information and allow the Russians to gain intelligence on Ukrainian intent and actions.<sup>(15)</sup> When combined, these actions directly align with ADP 3-0, the NATO Capstone Concept, and Frank Hoffman's definition of a hybrid threat.

#### At the operational level:

Russia is linking tactical level actions with information operations in order to achieve an operational level deception. Russia is overtly positioning and repositioning conventional military formations and capabilities along Ukraine's border. Once in position, these armored and mechanized forces are executing feints, demonstrations, and training exercises that divert attention from other operations.<sup>(16)</sup> Simultaneously, Russia is covertly moving more weapons and paramilitary proxies of "little green men" into Ukraine under the cover of humanitarian aid to the ongoing crisis.<sup>(17)</sup> When

combined, these actions create a continuous deception operation preventing exact knowledge of Russian intent and the full disposition of their forces in Ukraine.

As a supporting effort for its ongoing physical deception operations with the movement of heavy conventional forces, Russia is also waging psychological and information operations to help achieve its operational level deception. These operations rally support for the rebel cause and incite violence to compel the public to act when required. Conversely, they can intimidate and coerce the public to inaction, as well.<sup>(18)</sup> When analyzed collectively, these deception, psychological, and information operations create a Russian curtain of ambiguity that obscures reality and hinders a calculated NATO response due to the "fog and friction" of war.<sup>(19)</sup>

These operational level actions, when coupled with tactical level actions, start to align with Liang and Xiangsui's concept of transitioning the battle beyond the battlefield.

#### At the strategic level:

Russia is synchronizing all of the IOPs towards a common goal. Russia exploits the information IOP to construct competing strategic narratives that affect multiple audiences. For external and international audiences, Russia employs a

strategic narrative that garners support among international organizations suing for peace in the ongoing crisis. For internal audiences and ethnic Russians in Ukraine, Russia promotes another strategic narrative of nationalism and the oppression of its people in Ukraine to rally and maintain domestic fervor at home.<sup>(20)</sup>

Diplomatically, Russia pursues and agrees to ceasefires and pauses in hostilities by the pro-Russian rebel forces in Ukraine, but not completely for humanitarian reasons. The Russians utilize these ceasefires more as tactical pauses in ongoing operations and opportunities to consolidate, reorganize, and reposition forces to achieve a relative position of advantage for future missions. This diplomatic tactic allows Russia to reinstate hostilities again at a time and place of their choosing.

Russia wields the economic IOP to threaten and coerce other nations to action or inaction. Economic sanctions, the destabilization of energy prices and physical access to energy resources, and the actions of transnational criminal organizations can all deter a country from action. However, positive incentives for inaction against Russia or support for the Russian cause can also have a profound effect on the decision-making calculus of another nation.<sup>(21)</sup> In essence, Russia's actions have become the quintessential economic carrot







JWC Situation Centre (SITCEN) during exercise TRIDENT JAGUAR 15/NRDC-ITA: JWC is NATO's main provider of Command Post/Computer Assisted Exercises (CPX/CAX) at the operational level, providing training across the full spectrum, including the hybrid warfare challenges. Photograph by Marina Dore (NRDC-ITA PAO).

and stick method of international discipline. Furthermore, the sinister capabilities of cyber warfare possesses the potential to achieve catastrophic effects if employed to disable financial and/or energy infrastructure in Ukraine or Western Europe. When coupled with their ongoing operations by the military IOP, this hybrid and coldly calculated strategy aligns with Freier's concept of hybrid norms and Liang and Xiangsui's concept of unrestricted warfare.

While Russia's use of hybrid ways and means to achieve its desired end state in Ukraine is not completely new, after synthesis of the Russian hybrid threat construct, some interesting overall implications exist. The Russians have been able to combine various military forms of warfare with economic, information, and diplomatic IOPs into essentially a hybrid threat whole of government approach. In addition, Russia is employing this hybrid threat whole of government approach during Phase 0 (Shape) of Joint and Multinational Operations.<sup>(22)</sup> This plan has allowed Russia to keep the conflict "below the threshold normally deemed necessary for invoking NATO's Article 5 Collective Defence guarantee."<sup>(23)</sup> Russia's hybrid presentation and employment of military forces with the other IOPs has also created uncertainty on how to deter or counter it. This ambiguity from Russia's continually

adjusting hybrid threat whole of government approach is the most thought-provoking implication of the current Russian hybrid threat construct because it has truly taken the battle beyond the battlefield.

U.S. AIR FORCE General Philip M. Breedlove, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Commander of U.S. European Command, echoed this point of view during a recent Brussels Forum in March of this year. General Breedlove highlighted that Russia is using diplomacy and information warfare along with military and economic means to wage this campaign.<sup>(24)</sup> He went on to state, "Informationally, this is probably the most impressive new part of this hybrid war, all of the different tools to create a false narrative."<sup>(25)</sup>

Jens Stoltenberg, the former Prime Minister of Norway and current NATO Secretary General, added to General Breedlove's thoughts when he discussed the deception operations, and covert and overt actions associated with hybrid warfare.<sup>(26)</sup> Synthesis of General Breedlove and Secretary General Stoltenberg's comments elucidates the problem of uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding Russia's true intent and actions. If this Russian hybrid threat construct continues to be their chosen operational approach for future

campaigns, then this construct necessitates a change in NATO's approach to deter, and if required, defeat it. In this case, innovation will hold the key to success.

THE QUESTION of how militaries innovate is a critical area of study for military professionals and academics. Two prominent military historians and professors, Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, tackled this question in their edited collection of essays on military innovation entitled, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*. At the end of this study, Murray concluded that due to the complexity of multiple variables involved with the task of innovating, no exact formula for success exists.<sup>(27)</sup> However, he identified a few key characteristics of military organizations that successfully innovated during the interwar period between World War I (WWI) and WWII.

Murray argued that one central, key component for success was a military culture that embraced innovation.<sup>(28)</sup> He stated, "One of the important components in successful innovation in the interwar period had to do with the ability of officers to use their imaginations in examining potential innovations."<sup>(29)</sup>

An emphasis on learning organizations and the warrior-scholar concept within NATO will help cultivate innovation.<sup>(30)</sup> Additionally,





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**TRIDENT JAGUAR 15 at JWC:** The complex training scenario challenges the staff with restoring security in a failing state set in an unstable region, pressured by political, military, and civil turmoil. Photograph shows Commander ARRC, Lieutenant General Tim Evans, CBE DSO. Photograph by Sergeant Mike O'Neill, ARRC PAO.

leveraging warfighting exercise scenarios and technology available at the NATO Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) in Stavanger, Norway, will serve as an enabler in the struggle to innovate. These warfighter scenarios will allow officers in NATO to test and refine their ideas on how to deter the Russian hybrid threat. They will also help officers eventually develop unique solutions for future use. The idea of using war games as tools to enable operational level transformation was a point Murray highlighted that the German Army and U.S. Navy successfully employed during the interwar period, as well.<sup>(31)</sup>

ANOTHER IDEA that General Breedlove proposed during the March 2015 Brussels Forum was the need to open the aperture when exploring responses to Russia's actions in Ukraine. General Breedlove suggested, "I think that you have to attack an all of a government approach with an all of government approach."<sup>(32)</sup> He continued by stating, "We, I think, in the West, should consider all of our tools in reply."<sup>(33)</sup> In essence, to deter and potentially defeat a hybrid threat, NATO military and civilian planners may need to think like one. A hybrid mindset could be one possible

cognitive tool to enable operational level innovation in the employment of military force and integration of other IOPs within a region from a holistic approach.

**A HYBRID MINDSET** consists of the conceptual interaction of understanding strategic context, developing holistic approaches to operations focused on potential opportunities, and embracing the natural complexity of an operational environment. This conceptual interaction will help NATO military and civilian planners to develop cutting edge operational approaches to the complexity of the Russian hybrid threat by thinking differently about the actual problem set. A hybrid mindset understands and embraces the systemic nature of the operational environment and operations that occur within it. It promotes the rearrangement of existing rules and the reconfiguration of time and space through innovation in order to exploit the natural potential of an operational environment. Instead of just recognizing the underlying asymmetry between two military forces, this conceptual tool helps exploit it in a manner that supports the user's objectives.<sup>(34)</sup>

If ambiguity is the real crux of the current Russian hybrid threat, then a hybrid mindset may help to displace this uncertainty back onto the Russians concerning NATO's next actions. This mindset can help to find new ways to collaborate and conduct multinational operations within NATO. In addition, a hybrid way of thinking can help foster updated approaches to intelligence gathering and sharing among NATO nations to draw out the truth from the Russian false narrative. It can help to find innovative ways to link and synchronize military actions with ongoing diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts. Overall, this mindset possesses the potential to help NATO planners think like complex-adaptive systems in order to out-think and out-learn the continually adapting Russian hybrid threat construct.

IN 2014, Russia took NATO and the world by surprise with its employment of a hybrid threat construct in Ukraine. Although the use of hybrid ways and means is not new to the landscape of history as a means for the weak to combat the strong, the use of it by the strong in such an unparalleled manner is something of concern for the future. Upon further analy-





sis, the Russian hybrid threat construct is truly taking the concept beyond the normally accepted visualizations of the merging of irregular, regular, and criminal elements for a single purpose and into a more protracted conceptual battle of wills. In this realm beyond the battlefield, no rules exist as the Russians employ a hybrid whole of government approach to achieve their desired end state.

AS NATO prepares to develop ways to deter and potentially defeat this Russian hybrid threat, innovation will hold the key to success. Learning organizations full of warrior-scholars could be one way to cultivate innovation throughout NATO. Another way could be the incorporation of a hybrid mindset into the NATO military and civilian planner's repertoire. This way of thinking possesses the potential to help them find inventive ways to link military capabilities amongst all NATO members with ongoing diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts. Innovation and evolution always come with some associated risk, but in this case, the opportunity may be well worth the risk to deter the future aspirations of the Russian hybrid threat. ✦

## END NOTES:

- (1) Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, "Wales Summit Declaration," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), September 05, 2014. [http://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm) (accessed April 15, 2015).
- (2) John Davis, *The Hybrid Mindset and Operationalizing Innovation: Toward a Theory of Hybrid*, Monograph (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, 2014). See this monograph for an in depth analysis of the evolution of the concept of hybrid warfare and hybrid threats in theoretical and historical terms.
- (3) Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2013), 39-42. See this JP for additional details on the Instruments of National Power consisting of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments.
- (4) Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, Unified Land Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011), 12.
- (5) Cited in Michael Aaronson et al., "NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat," *Prism* 2, no. 4 (2011): 115.
- (6) Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Monograph (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 14.
- (7) Nathan Freier, *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century: Irregular, Catastrophic, Traditional, and Hybrid Challenges in Context*, Monograph (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), iii.
- (8) *Ibid.*, 6, 20, 27, 33, 36.
- (9) Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing, 1999), 2.
- (10) *Ibid.*, 162.
- (11) *Ibid.*, 153.
- (12) Richard Weitz, "Countering Russia's Hybrid Threats," *Diplomaatia*, 2014: 3-4.
- (13) *Ibid.*, 3-4.
- (14) Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2015), 261. JP 1-02 defines unconventional warfare as "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area."
- (15) Weitz, 5.
- (16) *Ibid.*, 4.
- (17) *Ibid.*, 4.
- (18) *Ibid.*, 3.
- (19) Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 89, 119-120.
- (20) Weitz, 3.
- (21) *Ibid.*, 3.
- (22) Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2011), 117, 119-120. Phase 0 of a Joint and Multinational Operation usually consists of "normal and routine military activities in which various interagency activities are performed to dissuade or deter potential adversaries and to assure or solidify relationships with friends and allies." This phase does not include more openly hostile actions that usually fall in other phases or higher along the Range of Military Operations, as we are seeing in the Ukraine.
- (23) Weitz, 2.
- (24) Jim Garamone, "NATO Commander Breedlove Discusses Implications of Hybrid War," U.S. Department of Defense, DoD News, March 23, 2015 <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128430> (accessed April 15, 2015).
- (25) *Ibid.*
- (26) Kevin McCaney "Russia's Hybrid Warfare Tactics Gain Upper Hand in Ukraine," *Defense Systems: Knowledge Technologies and Net-Enabled Warfare*, March 24, 2015 <http://defensesystems.com/articles/2015/03/24/russia-hybrid-warfare-ukraine-nato.aspx> (accessed April 15, 2015).
- (27) Williamson Murray, "Innovation: Past and Future," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. Williamson Murray and Allan Millet, 300-328 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 302-303.
- (28) *Ibid.*, 312-313.
- (29) *Ibid.*, 317.
- (30) John Davis, "Defeating Future Hybrid Threats: The Greatest Challenge to the Army Profession of 2020 and Beyond," *Military Review*, Vol. XCIII, no. 5 (September-October 2013): 27-29. The warrior-scholar concept emphasizes investment by a military in the scholarly aspects of the soldier. The central premise of this concept is to take soldiers with proven operational knowledge (warriors) and broaden their mental capacities through advanced study on military, social, international relations, and political science type disciplines (scholars). As warrior-scholars, these individuals can serve as the core of learning organizations helping to solve tough problems and to cultivate this concept in junior leaders.
- (31) Murray, 317.
- (32) Cited in Garamone.
- (33) *Ibid.*
- (34) John Davis, *The Hybrid Mindset and Operationalizing Innovation: Toward a Theory of Hybrid*. See this monograph for the origin of the concept of a hybrid mindset, or hybrid way of thinking, and additional evidence of its existence throughout history.

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