

The Evolution of the Hybrid Threat, and Resilience as a Countermeasure

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Introduction

The year 2014 marks a strategic 'inflection point' in world history. To make sense of the new security challenges, NATO officials and member states' governments have used the term 'hybrid warfare,'² although some scholars have criticized it as a buzzword lacking a clear definition. However, since hybrid warfare is rather more about exploiting the vulnerabilities of statecraft than about destroying armed forces, states have slightly different understandings of it consistent with their own specific security challenges. Consequently, for scientific research, as well as for security organizations such as NATO, finding a common definition is not easy and probably not useful.

In drawing conclusions from the analysis of the changed security environment, NATO has referred to the concept of resilience. Not surprisingly, this term has also been criticized as being meaningless.³ The concept of resilience may be better understood if it is associated with hybrid warfare as the most significant 'game changer' in security affairs. For that reason we need to ask: why do states conduct hybrid warfare against NATO and its member states? What characterizes their strategies? With answers to those questions, we will know what resilience should focus on as a counter measure.

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² The scholarly discussion about hybrid warfare is best reflected in Guillaume Lasconjarias' and Jeffrey A. Larsen's (ed.), *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats*, (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015).

³ The origins and different understandings of resilience are discussed by Michael Hanisch, "What is Resilience? Ambiguities of a Key Term," *Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, Security Policy Working Paper*, no. 19 (2016). See also Guillaume Lasconjarias, "Deterrence through Resilience. NATO, the Nations and the Challenges of Being Prepared," *NATO Defense College, Research Division*, Eisenhower Paper No. 7, Rome: May 2017.



This paper argues that hybrid warfare is an attack against NATO's strategy-making. Its strategies are designed to undermine the statecraft of competing nations and/or the political resolve within security organizations. Since hybrid threats will likely become even more complex and, therefore, unpredictable, NATO and its member states should strengthen their efforts to enhance resilience, particularly in strategy-making. NATO has not grasped this dimension of resilience yet. So far, the Alliance has focused rather on the technical aspects of resilience as a way of enabling rapid military operations. Consequently, resilience should become the guiding principle in NATO's forthcoming strategic concept.

The Objective of Hybrid Warfare

In broad terms, hybrid warfare can be understood as a creative combination of civil and military ways and means that are deployed in a synchronized manner.⁴ The political aim of state or non-state actors that conduct hybrid warfare is to preserve or create non-democratic regimes and increase strategic options to enhance their power in international relations.

Russia serves as an excellent example in support of this understanding of hybrid warfare. It does not possess sufficient resources to win a conventional war against NATO. Consequently, civil means must be

used to the greatest extent possible. Thus, a strategy to compete with the West necessarily becomes hybrid and, finally, becomes a "grand strategy."⁵

In conducting hybrid warfare in Ukraine, the Russian government has rejected the rules of the international system that have not provided 'relative advantages' to Russia. It is Russia's determined intention to undermine the world order, and in particular the European security system, as established after World War II and reinforced after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One way of achieving this has been to blur the binary distinction of those terms on which the international system and, in particular, international law, is founded: war and peace, state war and civil war, symmetric and asymmetric warfare, combatants and non-combatants, are no longer clear-cut terms. As a result, they have lost their usefulness in the analysis of conflicts and any agreement on how to manage them. In the end, this confusion of language leads to a world without order and ethos.⁶

1. Characteristics of the Strategic Approach to Hybrid Warfare

Evidently, bad strategies cannot be made good by tactical or operational successes. Although it is widely argued that Russia is a declining power, it possesses a strength that it uses effectively at the strategic level.⁷ Its strategic thinking is characterized by the following principles:

⁴ The novelty of modern hybrid warfare is analyzed by Frank G. Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies Arlington*, Virginia (December 2007).

⁵ The term 'grand strategy' goes back to the British strategic thinker Basil Liddell Hart (Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, New York: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 319-333).

⁶ Münkler, Herfried, *Kriegssplitter. Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*, Berlin: Rowohlt, 2015, p. 208; Klaus Naumann, "Europa for alten, neuen und künftigen Gefahren – Herausforderung fuer die Nationen Europas, die EU und die NATO." In: Wolfgang Peischel (Hrsg.), *Wiener Strategie-Konferenz 2016. Strategie neu denken*, Berlin (Miles) 2017, p. 179.

⁷ To attack the strategic level of an enemy is one of the principles of the Chinese strategic advisor Sun Tzu. See Baylis, John and Wirtz, James J. and Gray, Colin S., *Strategy in the contemporary World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 78. The ends of the Russian strategy are reflected upon in Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*, pp. 41-42, 45; Deborah Yarsike Ball, "Protecting Falshoods: With a Bodyguard of Lies: Putin's Use of Information Warfare," *Research Paper NATO Defense College*, No. 136, Rome February 2017, p. 2. Ball analyzes the end of regime preservation and the concern of color revolution inspired by the West (pp. 3-7). In this respect, the so-called Gerasimov-doctrine is often referred to. See Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review*, January/February 2016, pp. 30-38. http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art009.pdf. (Accessed 24 April 2017).



- Emphasizing the enemy: Analyse the enemy using scientific methods.⁸ The aim is to identify and exploit the vulnerabilities of opponents, in particular at the strategic level.
- Developing coherent strategies: Connect all military (conventional/irregular/nuclear) and civil instruments of statecraft, as well as all levels of command (strategic, operational, and tactical) under a unified national command that develops, implements, and adjusts the grand strategy.⁹
- Executing strategies ambiguously: Be unpredictable and opportunistic in your actions, and adapt your strategies flexibly to meet unforeseen opportunities and risks.¹⁰
- Challenging the war paradigm of the West: Refrain from officially declaring and ending wars. Conventional war should be as short as possible,¹¹ while the hybrid threat can endure permanently.
- Adhering to the new paradigm of “war amongst the people”¹²: Instrumentalize people to act in ways that support your political purposes, by e.g. conducting information campaigns, contracting paramilitary forces and using proxies. In Strategic Communications,

present Russia as the opposite of the West, thus offering cooperation to all who want to overcome the dominance of the West in the international system. Hit competing states with information campaigns on their territory while controlling the public narrative to its own population.¹³

- Using time as a strategic advantage: Shape the battlefield in advance. Buy time through implementing hidden strategies (‘maskirovka’) and strategic surprise. Keep the initiative, since Western states find it difficult to predict conflicts, conduct preemptive action, and verify occurrences of hybrid warfare.¹⁴
- Using the military without risking strategic defeat: Integrate military ways and means to threaten governments and people, to support civil actors, and to protect your own territory against military responses from NATO (e.g. through A2AD or high-precision weapons).¹⁵

Russia’s approach to strategy is to attack NATO’s and its member states’ perceived weaknesses. In particular, Russia learned from the US and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq that Western states struggle in developing coherent strategies for political (non-existential) conflicts.¹⁶ Countering hybrid threats

⁸ Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” p. 31.

⁹ Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare*, pp. 4, 10, 12, 15-16. See also Magarete Klein, “Russia’s New Military Doctrine. NATO, the United States and the ‘Colour Revolutions,’” *SWP-Comments*, No. 9, February 2015.

¹⁰ Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare*, pp. 17-20.

¹¹ See Ralph D. Thiele, “Building Resilience Readiness against Hybrid Threats – A Cooperative European Union / NATO Perspective,” *ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security*, No. 449, September 2016. http://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/449_Thiele_Malaysia_Sep2016.pdf. (Accessed 10 April 2017). See also Covington, “The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare,” pp. 34, 36-38.

¹² Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, New York: Random House, 2007.

¹³ The re-emergence of the importance of controlling narratives and discrediting the West is described in Ball, “Protecting Falshoods,” pp. 9-13.

¹⁴ Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare*, pp. 13-20; Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” p. 31

¹⁵ Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare*, pp. 29.

¹⁶ One senior US official from the Pentagon underlined, during a lecture at the NDC in Rome, that the Russians “... looked at us and saw us struggling in Afghanistan and Iraq.” The difficulties in strategy-making of the US are described by Ricks (Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasko. The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, London: Penguin Books, 2007) and Woodward (Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, (New York/London/Tokyo/Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2010).



should, therefore, not focus exclusively on the three Baltic States that see themselves in the middle of a hybrid war with Russia.¹⁷ In contrast, the focus of Russia's hybrid warfare is probably targeted against the US and the major European nations that drive the strategic decision-making processes in NATO.

Resilience as a Countermeasure

With the rise of hybrid warfare, the scholarly discussion on resilience has associated this term with the increasing complexity of the modern security environment, the changing threats and the unpredictability of attacks. Democratic states cannot guarantee complete security without becoming the enemies of their own open societies.¹⁸ Consequently, international organizations as well as state institutions, and even individuals, must somehow be prepared to absorb shocks, recover fast to counteract, and learn from the experience.¹⁹ In the best case, resilience can contribute to deterring further hybrid attacks.

NATO decided to enhance resilience as one measure to counter hybrid threats.²⁰ At the last summit in Warsaw, member states agreed on the importance of their commitment to common values, as well as on seven 'baseline requirements'.²¹ These reflect a view on resilience that is very much driven by the

operational demands of collective defence. Progress in these areas is indispensable. However, baseline requirements, such as energy, food and water or civilian transportation, do not provide the necessary strategic resilience to hybrid warfare which leverages the weaknesses of NATO. The value of agile and sustainable conventional forces will be small if the strategy-making processes are not able to counter the challenges inflicted by competitors, and remain an easy target for their hybrid attacks. Therefore, NATO's and its member states' strategy-making processes should be analysed critically. Resilience should primarily focus on hybrid attacks that are designed to destabilize functioning alliances and states, to polarize societies, and to spread distrust in the military, and which are most dangerous when they affect the critical juncture where the "fascinating trinity"²² of government, people and military interact in strategy-making.

What are the principles in strategy-making that help to enhance resilience? And what strengths and weaknesses does NATO have in strategy-making?

- **Being self-critical:** Honestly and critically reflect on the weaknesses within NATO as an organization, and in its member states. Due to its perceived uniqueness, NATO has been rather critical of others, but not much of itself. Hence, the biggest threat to NATO is

¹⁷ Andrew Radin, "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics. Threats and Potential Responses," *RAND Corporation* 2017. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1577.html. (Accessed 22 April 2017). A potential hybrid warfare scenario for the Baltic States is described by Mark Galeotti, "Time to Think About 'Hybrid Defense,'" *War on the Rocks*, 30 July 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/07/time-to-think-about-hybrid-defense> (Accessed 17 April 2017).

¹⁸ The threats to democratic societies are analysed by the philosopher Carl R. Popper in his book *The Open Society and its Enemies*, originally published in 1945 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Wide agreement exists among scholars on these tasks for resilience. See Jamie Shea, "Resilience: a core element of collective defence," *NATO Review Magazine*, p. 4. <http://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2016/Also-in-2016/nato-defence-cyber-resilience/EN/index.htm> (Accessed 17 April 2017).

²⁰ NATO's strategy on countering hybrid threats is a classified document. Articles refer to this strategy, among others "Successful 'Countering Hybrid Threats' experiment in Estonia," *Allied Command Transformation*. <http://www.act.nato.int/successful-countering-hybrid-threats-experiment-in-estonia> (accessed 23 April 2017).

²¹ The 'baseline requirements' are described by Lorenz Meyer-Minnemann, "Forward Resilience: Protecting Society in an Interconnected World. Working Paper Series. Resilience and Alliance Security: The Warsaw Commitment to Enhance Resilience," *Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*, p. 2-3.

²² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 89; see also Julian Lindley-French, "NATO and New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid Threats," *NDC Conference Report*, No. 3, Rome May 2015, p. 1.



inflicted by the member states themselves.²³

- Understanding strategy-making as a permanent process: Constantly rebalance ends, ways, and means with all stakeholders involved. NATO has established processes that meet some of the basic requirements of strategy-making, and meet the expectations of member states. However, significant disconnects exist: First, even major European nations do not possess institutions designed for strategy-making. Second, cohesion between the processes to generate resources and the conduct of military operations is limited; often, a mismatch exists between ends and means;²⁴ and nations do not honestly report their actual military capabilities. Third, different strategic cultures exist among NATO member states,²⁵ as well as between NATO and other international organizations.
- Respecting all stakeholders involved: Enhance mutual trust to improve synchronization. Civilian officials at NATO HQ should show respect for military personnel and the military should not treat civilian partners as “second-rate citizens’ on operations.”²⁶ Dialogue between politicians and their military advisors remains an “unequal dialogue”²⁷, since politicians are the ones who make the decisions. However, it is still a dialogue in which military personnel must

have the opportunity to give their best advice. Nations and NATO HQ face significant stress in civil-military relations.

- Involving societies: Overcome increasing alienation from civil society. People are important for securing the acceptance and continued support of one’s strategies. To enhance their interest in security policy, politicians should address security questions with their electorates, and officials and officers should discuss security issues publicly. Propaganda campaigns that are targeted against specific groups of society should be countered by public diplomacy campaigns using truthful and independent media.²⁸ The limited involvement of society seems to be the weakest point in Western strategy-making.
- Arguing about the truth instead of pursuing national interests: Keep the consensus rule within NATO, but clarify its purpose. Consensus prevents the defection of member states from decisions, and thus enhances cohesion. However, some nations use it as a tool to impose their national interests, while others try to generate win-win situations. The best way to enhance cohesion, unity of effort, support of the people, and, thus, resilience would be to encourage debate in order to find the best solution beyond national interests.²⁹

²³ As highlighted by a high-ranking retired general from NATO HQ during a lecture at the NDC in April 2017: “The biggest threat to NATO is ourselves.”

²⁴ Also, political inertia by NATO and its member states must be taken into account. See Lindley-French, “NATO and New Ways of Warfare,” p. 1.

²⁵ See *Strategic Cultures in Europe. Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*, ed. by Heiko Biehl et al., Wiesbaden (Springer) 2013.

²⁶ Alan Ryan, “The Strategic Civilian: Challenges for Non-Combatants in 21st Century Warfare,” *Small Wars Journal*, Journal Article March 31, 2016, p. 9. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-strategic-civilian-challenges-for-non-combatants-in-21st-century-warfare> (Accessed 12 April 2017).

²⁷ Elliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command. Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2013).

²⁸ Sven Biscop, “Hybrid Hyseria,” *Security Policy Brief*, No. 64 (June 2015), p. 3-4. <http://aei.pitt.edu/64790/> (Accessed 20 April 2017).

²⁹ As an example of the constructivist approach to international relations see Thomas Risse, “Let’s argue!: Communicative Action in World Politics,” in *International Organization* 54, No. 1, Winter 2000, p. 10.



- Educating and selecting the right personnel and emphasizing mission command: Educate leaders who think critically at the strategic level and who thrive in situations of uncertainty.³⁰ Mission command is the leadership philosophy that is most appropriate for complexity and uncertainty.³¹ Resilience requires improving educational efforts and linking mission command at tactical and operational levels with the strategic level.
- Revitalizing the comprehensive approach: Achieve better cooperation in spite of divergent organizational interests, limited understanding and different expectations among partners, through improved information sharing, as well as through shared planning and education. The resilience of civil partners, on whom the success of military operations depends, can be increased if the military is capable of supplementing their activities and taking over their tasks for a limited period of time, if required.

All these principles of strategy-making are major insights which come from the scientific community working on security policies. Their positive impact on resilience is evident. However, they are not deeply enshrined in NATO's strategic culture. The consequences are grave: Even if NATO had sufficient conventional forces to conduct major operations in collective defence, their usefulness will remain limited unless the strategy-making processes are

significantly improved. An enhancement of NATO's strategy-making by adapting its strategic culture is decisive for any improvement in resilience.

The Evolution of Hybrid Threats until 2035

How can competing or adversarial actors use the ways and means available over the next 20 years to prevent NATO from accomplishing its mission? Among the future major challenges not covered in this analysis so far, the people and technology are of utmost importance.

The people

While societies in many Western states have become post-heroic and older,³² states, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, are challenged by a youth bulge suffering from extremely high unemployment rates and, at the same time, empowerment.³³ Competing state and non-state actors are likely to transform the empowerment of unemployed youth into forms of radicalization, including uprisings and terrorism. A number of mission areas of NATO (e.g. the Balkans and Afghanistan), as well as megacities, are ideal locations to create turmoil and chaos, unfreeze frozen conflicts, and, finally, overload NATO.

Technology

Technological developments will probably contribute to undermining the superiority of Western states: by the faster use of disruptive tactics and technology in all domains, including space.³⁴ Resilience requires

³⁰ Critical thinking on strategic levels is discussed by Stephen J. Gerras, "Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking: A Fundamental Guide for Strategic Leaders," *US Army War College*, Carlisle, August 2008.

³¹ Ingo Wittmann, *Auftragstaktik. Just a command technique or the core pillar of mastering the military operational art?*, Berlin: Miles, 2012.

³² Münkler, *Kriegssplitter*, p. 169-187.

³³ *World Economic Forum, Insight Report: The Global Risks Report 2017*, 12th Edition.

³⁴ Muresan, Liviu and Georgescu, Alexandru, "The Road to Resilience in 2050. Critical Space Infrastructure and Space Security," *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 160:6 (2015), pp. 64.



faster and better coordinated strategic processes in terms of force planning and acquisition within NATO and its member states.

Future threats will make the execution of NATO's mission even more difficult. Next to adapting the cumbersome processes in force planning as a major element of strategy making, the main focus should be placed on the empowerment of the people in NATO member states and beyond. This requires transparent strategies, a critical assessment of past strategies and operations, initiating and sustaining a NATO-wide debate on security related issues, actively seeking the participation of civil society, and initiatives taken for the strategic education of its personnel. Another important area is the 'new approach' to cooperation with international organizations and industry, and particularly with the EU. Not only is the EU a major stakeholder in enhancing resilience in those states that belong to both organizations, but it is also a powerful driver in promoting stability and addressing the needs of the youth in Africa and the Middle East. In countering hybrid threats, NATO has become dependent on the EU. This should trigger new approaches by NATO in cooperating with the EU that would include common strategic planning. NATO could even consider suggesting an agreement with the EU that would be a reversed 'Berlin plus,' giving NATO guaranteed access to EU civilian capabilities and intelligence.

Conclusion

NATO's history can be seen as a sequence of successes, but also as a register of internal crises.

So far, its impressive record in 'crisis management' has strengthened NATO's adaptability to meet new security requirements.³⁵ With the evolution of hybrid threats, NATO's core business of strategy-making is at stake: Again, NATO must adapt.

NATO as an organization, but all its member states too, should enhance resilience with specific emphasis on the strategic level. Those member states that have been driving the decision-making processes in NATO, should take over the leadership. In parallel, the top civil and military leadership within NATO should initiate changes in its strategic culture in accordance with the principles laid down when discussing resilience as a countermeasure. This process may be inspired by scholars and could even benefit from external audits. NATO may also consider the establishment of a Strategic Advisory Group which would facilitate cooperation with partners such as the EU, civil leaders and the private sector. It is important that the leadership explains the urgency of this adaptation and communicates a clear vision as to the intended results.³⁶ Finally, NATO can use its unique strength as a socializing institution to influence the strategic cultures within its member states.

Understanding resilience beyond the seven baseline requirements is of utmost importance to foster NATO's future relevance. Otherwise, NATO's relevance as an Alliance that focuses on the application of military power will be undermined. Accordingly, resilience should become the guiding principle for the work on NATO's forthcoming strategic concept. By emphasizing resilience, this concept can:

- provide a deeper understanding of the

³⁵ Uwe Hartmann, *Carl von Clausewitz and the Making of Modern Strategy*, Berlin: Mises 2002, pp. 100-106.

³⁶ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Boston: Harvard Business Review Press 2012.



- complexity of modern warfare;
- show that NATO is willing to adapt itself, particularly its strategy-making;
- put the effort into improving interaction between politics, people and the armed forces;
- counter the “perpetual competition”³⁷ from hybrid threats with a constant process of adaptation potentially able to undermine the effectiveness of hybrid warfare and, thus, deter opponents;
- provide a comprehensive and “... comparative strategic perspective of NATO’s southern and eastern flanks, while allowing

for a differentiated response;”³⁸

- allow planning without referring to an adversary such as Russia, “because making a plan constitutes a political decision”³⁹;
- create a new basis for equal dialogue and cooperation with international organizations, in particular with the EU; and, finally and most importantly,
- increase the usefulness of NATO’s military forces.

Thus, resilience can become an overarching core theme spanning across the three pillars of NATO’s strategic concept and serve as its first line of defence in an increasingly complex security environment.

³⁷ Philip M. Breedlove, “Foreword,” in *NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats*, edited by Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen, Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015, p. xxii; Nadia Schadlow, “The Problem with Hybrid Warfare,” *War on the Rocks*, p. 1.

³⁸ Andreas Jacobs and Guillaume Lasconjarias, “NATO’s Hybrid Flanks. Handling Unconventional Warfare in the South und the East,” *Research Paper NATO Defense College*, No. 112, Rome April 2015, p. 12.

³⁹ Giles, “Conclusion: Is Hybrid Warfare Really New,” p. 325.