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The US and hybrid challenges

Past, present and future

Jed Willard

Introduction

It has been said, judgmentally, that the United States plays risk, with a near-worldwide forward presence; while Russia plays chess, sometimes responding far away from the immediate zone of tension. But as a maritime power benefiting greatly from the post-Second World War global order, the United States arguably has no choice but to play risk. While Russia, as a continental power par excellence, for which threats to its periphery are always existential, has no choice but to play chess.¹

Sometimes, however, the United States must play chess. There are many levels of warfare, from tactical to operational to strategic to political to existential. The United States does not need to always respond directly to tactical operations. Rather, America could respond strategically, in chess-like manner, using pressure points far away from the theatre at hand. In contests between a maritime power and a continental power, it's important to recognize both games, and not to be confined to playing only one game well.

China, for example, is a continental power with sea lanes to the outside. They need access and influence in a series of concentric circles radiating from Beijing. The inner circle is essentially the Han world, from which emperors used to keep the barbarians at bay. Beyond that circle are the sometime vassal states of Korea and Vietnam and the old rival, Japan. Further out are the weak land borders, beyond which China does not seek wars of conquest or colonies, but rather way-stations to get to resources needed at the centre. Last is the periphery: again, a source of resources rather than colonies. China, an imperial power within the inner circle but not a colonial power, has no need to take over these outer circles, only to use them for supplies. To maintain access to these resources, China has a long-developed bag of tricks, many of which resemble what in this book we call 'hybrid warfare'.

Some argue that America, and the West in general, is always engaging in offensive political warfare, but that our tools are so different from those of our adversaries that it is challenging to describe them both with the same word, 'hybrid'. The argument runs

that the tools are different because authoritarian countries' weaknesses are different, and therefore our methods of influencing them, if we're going to be successful, must be different from their methods of influencing us. But while viewing Western behaviour through the same lens as authoritarian behaviour is arguably problematic, the notion that our methods are so different as to be unrelated seems to be a minority viewpoint.

States such as Russia, China and Iran have hybrid warfare incorporated into their military doctrine, says Professor Alina Polyakova of the Brookings Institution, and they assume the US does as well. When Russia uses the term 'hybrid', she says, they are describing what they perceive to be standard American tactics: 'they see themselves as on the defensive . . . [and] use hybrid [warfare] to contest US power.'² Some European officials agree, suggesting the Russian view is that America habitually wages hybrid war against post-Soviet regimes via colour revolutions.

'We [Americans] are weak in our understanding of [the low end of] full-spectrum warfare', Polyakova says, 'and especially don't understand Russia's ability to use different tools in combination'. The way the United States thinks about warfare is 'not how our adversaries think', she continues, it's not 'either/or' for them.³ The United States needs other ways to hit back at China's posturing in its near-abroad, for example, not in a tit-for-tat manner, but rather by using non-kinetic 'munitions' such as points of economic leverage and diplomatic manoeuvring alongside our friends in ASEAN.

While Polyakova believes the United States should be prepared to respond in-kind to the chess-like moves of hybrid warfare, she recognizes that developing such a capability is 'uncomfortable territory right now', and that debate and self-criticism are well-warranted.⁴

The 'grey zone'

The US does not operate in either the gray zone or as a hybrid force

– Taylor Fravel, MIT University⁵

The US Defense department recognizes traditional and irregular warfare as separate modes of conflict that can and should be used in combination. So while defence leadership has not formally defined 'hybrid', it considers all war, waged effectively, to be hybrid in this particular sense.⁶ Both traditional and irregular warfare were used, for example, in Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–), and irregular operations were carried out by the United States throughout the Cold War. Participants in the irregular components of these operations describe them as tactically similar to standard irregular tactics, though strategically different in that they were local aspects of a larger struggle.

'Grey zone' is an unofficial, sometimes loathed term that is not used in American military doctrine. Nonetheless, in some American military circles it is a more popular term than 'hybrid', and is important to consider when examining the US approach to hybrid conflict.

Meaning, roughly, 'the zone of competition below the level of armed conflict', the grey zone represents an environment in between war and peace: a challenging setting for the United States to operate within. General Joseph Dunford, Chairman

of America's Joint Chiefs of Staff and America's highest-ranking officer, describes the challenge this way:

So I'm trying to shy away from the gray space hybrid because it's kind of – it doesn't really do justice to what we're talking about. We're talking about, you know, a competition with an adversary that has a military dimension, but the adversary knows exactly what the threshold is for us to take decisive military action. So they operate below that level. They continue to advance their interests and we lose competitive advantage. And, frankly, our interests are adversely affected. And for me it's actually one of the most significant challenges that we're dealing with right now.⁷

Or, as a Center for Strategic and International Studies report summarizes:

The United States faces an array of challenges from adversaries that blend all tools of statecraft while also operating below the threshold of conventional war. The United States lacks clearly defined strategies to address these challenges.⁸

On the other side of the Atlantic, the terms 'hybrid' and 'grey zone' have both sometimes raised hackles. Some European officials insist that 'hybrid' is pejorative: that it is what Russia does, that it means 'warfare by sneaky people', a shadow policy when regular policy is not achieving desired goals. Others consider 'grey zone' to be a useless new term. 'If you put everything in there it becomes blurry', says one Council of the European Union official commenting anonymously,

[these tactics are] often not part of a grand, strategic objective . . . Everyone does 'influence,' [which] is seen as more-or-less legitimate. The US is very good at exporting its culture, economic model, companies, and technology. Is this a hybrid campaign? Or must it be malicious to be hybrid? Must hybrid warfare involve a wedge strategy, [or otherwise] be meant to be nefarious? Overt and transparent influence campaigns probably aren't hybrid warfare.

There is an understanding, however, that the ability to create *faits accomplis* by getting inside – or staying outside – an adversary's decision loop is a potent capability. Andrea Dew, Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy at the US Naval War College, clarifies: a strategy that 'gets you to your political goals, under the threshold of acceptable risk, is not ambiguous'.⁹

Others see 'Hybrid' as a useful term. For them the scope of hybrid is not a problem: hybrid warfare incorporates real but explicitly non-military capabilities such as cultural and educational exchanges, yet also extends the other end of the spectrum further into the kinetic.

'My understanding', writes Atlantic Council Senior Fellow Jakub Kalenský,

is that 'hybrid' means a combination of traditional warfare, irregular units, information operations and political / diplomatic / economic pressure to achieve

both military and political goals. It might frequently describe similar activities we would describe when we talk about what's happening in the gray zone, it is just that in one case [gray zone], we are talking about where the conflict is happening, whereas in the other case [hybrid], we are rather describing what are the methods and tools that are being used in this conflict. That might be the most important distinction.¹⁰

Structural challenges

Unlike many of its adversaries, the United States largely continues to conceptualize conflict through the traditional black-and-white model of war and peace, fixating on conventional military warfare, while marginalizing the other critical instruments of national power

– Deterring Russia in the Gray Zone, Strategic Studies Institute¹¹

The larger the administration, the tougher it is to execute whole-of-government responses. For small countries, countering hybrid threats is a survival strategy. For a country the size of the United States, hybrid threats are often perceived as non-critical. With less need to think in terms of national survival, the United States can focus on parochial interests. And when the United States plans policy based on parochial interests, information sharing across agencies is difficult. This is partially by design: coordination, when perceived as unnecessary, can be easily seen as cumbersome. There is simply a different culture of threat perception in smaller countries. This difference may be partially behind America's over-emphasis on military solutions to hybrid threats.

One of the most difficult aspects of hybrid warfare for the United States is defining the responsibilities of civilian assets versus the responsibilities of the military. The US military, which has enormous assets on the ground worldwide, is often first to 'see' hybrid tactics deployed. Yet without declared hostilities, they have no authority to strike back. Civilian agencies, which lack equivalent assets on the ground, can sometimes be guided by the military to, for example, make appropriate arrests and seizures, but these agencies aren't tasked with engaging in 'warfare' of any sort and therefore measuring the effectiveness of such cooperation in the 'grey zone' is problematic.

But countering hybrid threats is a policy-side effort, and some at the US Defense department find it frustrating to see regular military assets used in conflicts that are more suited to irregular or more delicate operations. The armed forces can sometimes be seen as an 'easy button' for American policy makers; a better approach might be to use defence assets and expertise to inform civilian agencies.

'Winning wars, as well as hearts and minds require[s] a combination of hard and soft power', notes David Phillips, Program Director on Peace-building and Rights at Columbia University,

This balance is especially important when countering or preventing violent extremism. The US has overwhelming military capacity, but it cannot hope to drain the swamp of support for radical extremism without soft power tools: economic

development, education for all, women's empowerment and good governance. These soft power tools are also essential during Phase IV stability operations in order to consolidate peace and prevent spoilers from resuming their attacks.¹²

America's size creates other vulnerabilities, as well. The federal system allows state and local entities some detachment from the country's unitary systems, allowing for hybrid competitors to gain access and influence beneath the federal level. Allocating more freedom and power to the lower levels of government creates a major weakness for the United States in terms of lowering the difficulty level of attacks, though it arguably also builds resilience by spreading risk over fifty states.

'We need to create better defensive infrastructure' in the information space, writes Brett Bruen, president of Global Situation Room. 'Not just the ability to counter disinformation, but support and services that allow campaigns, companies, and citizens to tap into more resources that help them protect themselves, their organisations, their messages, from manipulation.'¹³

Broadly, this defensive infrastructure could take three forms: awareness, attention and alternative narratives.

Awareness refers to the American public's general knowledge of who the bad actors are and the tactics they use. This should not take the form of fact-checking, but of general warnings about which divisive or hot-button issues are likely to be selected for interference. Warnings such as 'if a post makes you angry, double check the source', or 'be aware that false information is being circulated about topics x, y, and z' are more effective than labelling disinformation, and far better than repeating disinformation in the form of fact-checking.

Attention means attention from American entities with a responsibility to understand, communicate about and respond to active measures. These include political campaigns at all levels of government, corporate communicators (including financial communications), journalists and media platforms. Fact-checking and details of specific campaigns and threats are useful for these types of responsible entities.

Alternative narratives are the most important form of defence against information operations. False stories spread to sow confusion and disunion cannot simply be corrected, they must be replaced. Political voices at all levels should understand that only positive visions of America's future can counter the narratives of division and dystopia sown by the United States' hybrid opponents.

Looking beyond the information space, some in the US defence establishment agree that America has more to learn from our European friends and allies than we do from them. Strategic patience, for instance: the United States, could use a longer attention span. America could also use a structure for waging hybrid warfare across agencies.

Professor Hy Rothstein, director of the DoD IO Center for Research at the US Naval Postgraduate School, agrees that America needs a separate structure for hybrid engagement. 'Irregular warfare capabilities should [have] a separate entity' from which the full array of tools in America's military toolkit can be deployed. Irregular 'gets squashed and conventionalised' in the regular military, he adds, since it's seen as inconsistent with the American way of war.¹⁴

Such an entity would need to be subject to strategic oversight. This would be essential since mistakes can and will happen, and America needs to be able to self-police. Overreaction to hybrid threats is already a vulnerability, and with America a global military super power, even the perception of abuse can be targeted.

Leadership challenges

Embracing a narrow conventional conception of conflict does not prepare future leaders for the range of emerging threats we face, nor is it conducive to developing doctrine and training

– Frank Hoffman, National Defense University¹⁵

America is better at waging offensive hybrid war, especially when the United States sets the tempo, than at defending against hybrid threats. One reason defence is challenging is that America's political leadership does not seem to care that much about hybrid warfare. Hybrid, being all about perceptions, legitimacy and relevance, is more challenging to explain to the public than, for example, kinetic warfare or threats to physical infrastructure. Adversaries can make hybrid look like a game, or at least unlike a potent threat. For American leaders to frame for the American people why they are in this fight for the long term is a real challenge.

Frank Hoffman, Distinguished Research Fellow at the US National Defense University, describes three consequences of this conundrum:

- Unreasonable political and public expectations for quick wins at low cost,
- An overly simplistic grasp of the application of blunt military power and what it will supposedly achieve and
- Naïve views of both adversaries and the context for conflict.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the American military itself, argues the US Naval Postgraduate School's Rothstein, is able to do irregular warfare successfully only when regular forces do not care about the conflict at hand or are distracted. In the 1980s, for example, America's regular forces were distracted in Europe, and the US had to engage in irregular warfare in El Salvador. It turned out successful; whereas American regular forces, suggests Rothstein, would have been much more of a magnet for insurgent attacks.¹⁷

The US military is 'allergic to irregular options', says Rothstein, and will try all other options first and perhaps fail. This is because mass firepower and attrition have worked so well for the United States in the past – and, in terms of great power conflict, present. Rothstein notes that great powers have not recently fought, and still will not fight today, with the United States conventionally. But adversaries know that they can operate in the grey zone without triggering a regular US response: America 'will not be propelled to war without a significant trigger', he points out, leaving the United States 'preparing for great power competition in an age when rival powers are preparing for irregular'.¹⁸

Just as in the post-America-Vietnam war era, Rothstein continues, the United States is ceasing large-scale training for irregular warfare. He predicts that this will be taken

advantage of by adversaries: 'we will either over-militarise, or not respond, because of the way we think.' Rothstein mostly holds America's military leadership responsible for the failure to prepare for an effective hybrid response. 'Senior military leaders have a duty' to change the way defence thinks about warfare and to prepare for a full range of threats, he says, 'but [they] are not doing so'.¹⁹

'The larger problem', writes the National Defense University's Hoffman,

is that the U.S. has a strategic culture that does not appreciate history or strategy, nor does it devote sufficient attention to the breadth of adversaries facing it and the many different forms that human conflict can take . . . While there are deficiencies in U.S. planning and strategy processes, the larger intellectual challenge is a blinkered conception of conflict that frequently quotes the great Prussian soldier Clausewitz without realizing the true essence of his theory and how it applies to the ever evolving, interactive phenomenon we call 'war.' Moreover, the U.S. national security establishment too often fails to understand opponents, their strategic cultures, and their own unique conceptions of victory and war.²⁰

In his quest for a solution, Rothstein is dismissive of looking to the 'Global War on Terror' and USSOCOM's (Special Operations Command) current approach. 'I've nothing against killing terrorists', he explains, 'that's very therapeutic'. But there is 'nothing strategic about killing terrorists'. USSOCOM, he argues, has the capability to operate in the grey zone but lacks the willingness to consider using such options, for example, in Venezuela today.²¹

'There are places in the world that will be problems in the future', Rothstein predicts, 'and someone needs to be monitoring [them] and engaged'. He wishes that USSOCOM intelligence was focused on the threats of the future, including which third-parties could potentially 'fall under the spell' of 'Russia, China, or Iran'. 'This should be a full-time job for them', he declares, adding that we should be studying how to 'force our will on our opponents' without spending 'two billion dollars a week like in Iraq'. Special Operations Forces should be 'global scouts' in combination with local sources, he continues, 'you've got to be there' or you 'can't influence squat'. US allies, he predicts, would be quite willing to sign on and assist in a hybrid effort if America created the blueprint.²²

Brookings' Polyakova agrees that America is too often 'absent from the game', for instance in the Balkans where 'Russia is getting a lot for a little' and 'the US is not there'. She also agrees that while the US does have to think about hybrid approaches, a 'Global War on Terror'-style response is not the solution. 'At least [regarding cyber threats] we are thinking about it . . . both defence and offence', she says. On cyber the United States is working well with our allies, she continues, and she is optimistic in that realm, especially with regard to infrastructure.²³

When it comes to the information aspects of hybrid warfare, the Atlantic Council's Jakub Kalenský believes the US reaction to interference in the 2016 elections gives America an advantage. 'It might be partly due to the fact that Americans are investigating this malicious activity (unlike Europeans, who seem not to react to [the] Kremlin's information operations)', he writes, 'but given the scale of [the] Kremlin's

operations, it very much seems that apart from Ukraine and the Baltic states, the US might have the biggest experience with [the] Kremlin's information operations.²⁴

A Council of the European Union official agrees with Kalenský, pointing out that the Mueller probe was impressively done, though he believes that at least some EU member states are equally good at reacting to information operations deployed against them. He also believes that the US is quite good at hybrid offence, writ large, especially in cyber, but also in terms of intelligence, strategic communication, economy, trade, PsyOps and cultural tools. This last, the export of culture, may seem transparent, though may also simultaneously prepare the human terrain for future intervention. The US may also have some advantage on defence, thanks to its top end intelligence techniques. Entities such as IARPA (Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity) are constantly improving the American ability to create forecasts and linkages, which is very important in hybrid warfare, since seeing the links between seemingly unrelated events is key to understanding when hybrid engagements are actually happening and what they mean.

'We are good at experimentation', in the disinformation space, adds Brett Bruen of Global Situation Room,

We are through GEC [Global Engagement Center, US State Department] and other programs piloting, seeding, testing some ideas, albeit far too few. This at least may germinate into technology or techniques that will have utility, if not for us immediately, perhaps for other nations or the private sector.²⁵

Polyakova is less sanguine, however, especially regarding the information contest Bruen refers to. 'It's much less clear what it means for the US and our allies', she says, and information is more 'complicated because so much is open-source, and often [mediated]'. The 'big black hole [for the US] is the digital domain, broadly defined'. She suggests that we look to history for guidance, specifically to how America contested the USSR, including in the information space.²⁶

The American hybrid experience

[H]ybrid/gray zone warfare is not remotely a new thing, as Clausewitz's 200 year old references to the societal dimension(s) of warfare make clear. However, this aspect was downplayed (and even ignored) particularly on the strategic level in recent decades. Not so anymore.

– Kelly Greenhill, Associate Professor and International Relations Director,
Tufts University²⁷

The United States has a long history of engaging in what could be anachronistically labelled hybrid warfare, though not in the same way as many other countries. When Washington took over the armies of the rebelling American colonies in 1775, it wanted a conventional force. Yet the success of the revolutionaries was often based on irregular

or combined warfare, especially as waged later in the war in the southern colonies by leaders such as Nathaniel Greene and Daniel Morgan.²⁸

Through the nineteenth century, the US military's preference for regular warfare coexisted with a talent for irregular warfare, which was used in situations deemed to be of less importance. During America's 'Indian Wars', for example, George Crook used irregular tactics to great effect and was, indicatively, criticized for doing so by his commander Philip Sheridan.²⁹

Twentieth-century America engaged in offensive hybrid engagements, but was rarely targeted on home soil (save by criminal cartels). An early example of twentieth-century-American hybrid warfare is the re-creation of the country of Panama. Under Teddy Roosevelt, the United States wanted an independent Panama with a US-controlled canal, and Colombia was unwilling to cede the province. Without crossing the diplomatically challenging threshold of waging open war on Colombia, the US used military and financial assets plus local forces to accomplish the policy goal of Panamanian Independence in 1903.

In the First and Second World Wars, the United States engaged across the full spectrum of warfare, with the capabilities that could be considered hybrid today commanded mostly by the military. 'We were quite strategic', says Rothstein, citing the leadership of Roosevelt and Marshall along with their British allies Churchill and Alanbrooke.³⁰

Counter-intuitively, the legacy of the Second World War may have negatively impacted the American military's ability to wage hybrid war today. The overturning of governments, the remaking of the world, the vanquishing of foes with tanks, carrier groups, and heroics – the memory of the Second World War – is a mindset not necessarily suited to the long grind of constant, irritating competition. The American military came to like mass and attrition, which worked for them; irregular or hybrid warfare came to leave some Americans uncomfortable.³¹

A separate challenge emanated from the Cold War. The United States became quite skilled at supporting rebels, undercutting governments and influencing elections, especially in Latin America. Some of these activities were not pretty, however, and perceived as out of line with America's values. At the time they were considered acceptable, though, because they were carried out in the overall context of an ideological conflict in which America was confident she was in the right. Despite many successes during this period, less-than-liberal abuses by, for instance, the CIA and FBI, led to the building of walls between agencies. Whether or not America's Cold War activities constitute hybrid warfare as defined today (an arguable point), these stovepipes left the United States with a reduced capacity to synchronize interagency campaigns – a widely recognized problem that presents yet another stumbling block for America's capability to wage hybrid warfare in the twenty-first century.

The United States, in summary, has a history of deploying non-kinetic tools to promote policy preferences, Alina Polyakova of the Brookings Institution explains. Taking a long view, she says, the United States used a set of tools, including irregular and economic warfare, frequently. 'But we've been critiquing this practice since the Cold War', shifting to a more delineated vision of influence: with kinetic divorced from non-kinetic. 'What's in-between is [now] less easily deployed today [by the

US].³² As CSIS' Michael Matlaga and John Schaus write, "The United States developed decades of experience in countering these types of activities during the Cold War. However, it will have to remember, or re-learn and adapt, if it is to be as successful in the future."³³

A frequently cited example of post-Cold War US hybrid action is the engagement with Yugoslavia in the 1990s. "The US tried to ignore the collapse of Yugoslavia," writes David Phillips of Columbia University. Echoing Rothstein's comments about America only using hybrid approaches when otherwise occupied, Phillips continues:

[The US] was distracted by other events such as the Soviet Union's demise and the Gulf War. It was only after Srebrenica and the realization that forces were needed to extricate peacekeepers that the Clinton administration got more deeply engaged, supporting Bosniac and Croatian forces to reclaim territory. US engagement in Bosnia, which led to the Dayton Peace Agreement, and NATO's Kosovo intervention in 1999 demonstrated the importance of diplomacy backed by a credible threat of force.³⁴

After 9/11, the United States continued to see a hard line between war (Afghanistan and Iraq) and peace (elsewhere). Hybrid was not war, nor was it counter insurgency. There were exceptions, however. In the Philippines, where the government faced a challenge from Abu Sayyaf, their American partners were prevented from engaging in a regular approach. The US forces in the country therefore operated irregularly, and successfully, it turned out, especially in comparison to the enormous regular investment in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁵

Some see the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 as a hybrid wake-up call for the US Defense department, though perhaps not for the rest of the government. Great Power contests were back, and NATO could be re-imagined. Some had sensed a shift in international competition long before, but 2014 clarified the challenge and, more or less, gave it a name.

'Bottom line: close observers understood the game was "already afoot" long before 2014,' writes Kelly Greenhill of Tufts University,

and there were lots of examples from which to draw such inferences, including but not limited to Russian-backed cyber attacks in Estonia; (dis)information ops conducted hither and yon by violent non-state actors (as well as certain states); the conduct of the engineered migration pulses into western Europe and beyond, etc.³⁶

But Hy Rothstein and others differ with the conclusion that 2014 was an effective wake-up call. They argue that 2014 should have been a 'Sputnik Moment' but that America never 'figured it out' and has not yet been able to alter 'Putin's thinking.'³⁷ Jakub Kalenský at the Atlantic Council more or less shares this opinion, writing that 'from many public statements it would seem it was [a wake up call], but apparently the reaction of the US government was not strong enough to prevent what happened in [the] 2016 elections'. Kalenský doesn't sense a 2014 Sputnik Moment in Europe, either: 'many governments like to think that Kremlin aggression is just someone else's

problem . . . and they do not believe the expert warnings until their own countries get targeted . . . I have seen it with almost every Western European country.³⁸

The interference in the American elections in 2016, being an attack on US soil by a foreign power, sounded a louder clarion call, yet one that the United States and its friends and allies have yet to fully digest.

'I started working on [disinformation] in 2015', writes Kalenský,

since then, by far the most visible event was the meddling into the Presidential elections in 2016 – which was, however, both preceded and followed by massive long-term influence operations aimed at destabilising the US audience, operations that facilitate the shorter-term operations aiming to influence the particular election result . . . I believe that the influence operation is far bigger than just one particular election, and that the operations aimed at destabilisation, subversion, creating and/or amplifying divisions, this is something that is going on for a very long time. I believe that this particular experience with [a] several years-long campaign is pretty important.³⁹

The conflict in Syria can be considered another wake-up call, though one that came too late. By the time the US was fully engaged in the conflict, Russia and Iran had already injected themselves subtly (at first) into the fight, leaving the US boxed into a complex fight involving multiple adversarial regional powers.

In the US military today, says Rothstein,

hybrid is more like a training exercise. We have no real insight into why we're doing what we're doing . . . I would like to see the US get serious about the Russian threat and exploit Putin's vulnerabilities . . . put pressure on him . . . The real question[s are] what Russia is doing to undermine liberal democracy, and what are we willing to do to save it.⁴⁰

America's hybrid future

The United States is beginning to recognize how gray zone competitors operate. It has the capability to be a formidable and effective gray zone actor but does not yet have a plan to employ or integrate its capabilities to achieve its objectives.

– 'Competing in the Gray Zone', CSIS⁴¹

Some in America's Special Operations Forces world recognize that hybrid is already a front, one where our offensive capabilities need to be examined. We already interfere non-kinetically in the affairs of other countries, we just don't always recognize that we are engaging in hybrid warfare. From whose perspective one examines US tactics, against whom they are applied, and when, plays a role in defining the American approach to hybrid warfare.

The US military is, in fact, working on developing clear doctrine for engaging in hybrid warfare. The challenge for defence is that they must prepare for worst case

scenarios while also integrating for low-end competition. Worst case scenarios ('big war things') require extremely high-end capability and capacity, though in the case of the US military these big war things are what they have done for a long time. Low-end capability is much more expansive, and requires working with other US agencies. While the military needs to be involved in all aspects (such as early warning), there also needs to remain a line behind which conflicts don't become shooting matches.

Where to draw this line is highly problematic. For instance, if the US Coast Guard floats a cutter through the Taiwan Strait, it may be perceived as so innocuous as to go unremarked. A carrier group, on the other hand, would get attention, but also be highly provocative.

'The main worry of military planners here isn't so much a full-scale amphibious invasion', writes *New York Times* Columnist Nicholas Kristof from Taiwan,

Rather, they fear the mainland sowing chaos and disrupting the economy as a way of trying to bring Taiwan to heel. Hence the concern about a cyberattack that would take out Taipei's electric grid. Or sabotage of the underwater cables that bring data and internet to Taiwan. Or interference in the South China Sea with tankers carrying oil to Taiwan.⁴²

This specific theatre, the Western Pacific, is a hybrid classroom for the US Navy. The Navy is learning to be proactive, but still remain behind the risk threshold: to prevent Chinese *faits accomplis* without triggering an overreaction.

It's been said that countries feed their armies, but buy their navies. The US Navy has long been slow, based on building and fielding expensive platforms. This requires political and monetary capital. While the post-9/11 focus on counter insurgency was all about land forces, the Navy has awakened to hybrid threats in the South China Sea, along with the Persian Gulf. Giant, floating platforms (those that proved so successful in the Second World War) are now potentially vulnerable to, for example, faster, smaller, cheaper and disposable swarms of craft. These swarms can be deployed much more frequently and prevalently than slow, expensive, platforms. The creation of new islands and the deployment of naval ships disguised as coast guard vessels compounds the confusion. To cope with these new threats requires a massive shift to traditional naval thinking.

A similar revolution in thinking is required to understand America's role in defending itself, friends and allies from hybrid threats in other domains. A nightmare scenario for some smaller countries is that an adversarial neighbour uses hybrid tactics to create a serious crisis that nonetheless remains below the threshold that would trigger a conventional response and bring in allied assistance. Given enough psychological and economic pressure, such a hybrid action could result in a *fait accompli* on the ground.

'[T]here are various types of very small Russian probing attacks that could leave NATO flummoxed and paralyzed over how to respond', writes Michael O'Hanlon, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. 'These attacks might not reach the threshold . . . to invoke NATO's Article V mutual-defense clause and send military forces in response, yet they could be too serious to ignore.'⁴³

America's allies realize this, and at least some have considered the strategy of rapidly escalating conflicts themselves so as to trigger conventional allied aid and, with time, create a case within NATO for an invocation of article 5. That is, the inability to assist allies coping with potentially catastrophic threats that are nonetheless below America's response threshold creates a perverse incentive for US allies to unilaterally escalate conflict. The notion that America's own allies could feel forced to escalate, perhaps drastically, in order to prompt their mighty ally to intervene, should be a great motivation for the US military to think carefully about how to aid our allies in coping with hybrid threats below the threshold calling for conventional force.

'Identifying a hybrid attack/low-intensity conflict is easy'; claims Tufts' Greenhill. 'Defining where it becomes a war AND what and when laws of war come into play is not. This should be deeply concerning.'⁴⁴

Some European scholars and officials cite the US forward presence as an aid, if not a solution, to this problem. Maintaining forces constantly on rotation or training exercises means America has 'skin in the game' even at the early stages of a potential conflict.

'America's commitment to NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltics and Poland is essential', says Eityvydas Bajarūnas, Lithuania's Ambassador-at-Large for Hybrid Threats:

The US presence, the rotation of forces is excellent. [They have a] strange rhetoric problem, but the behaviour is good, including the sanctions. The big challenge to us in the West is to see the game and stay in it, [and the] US is staying in it.⁴⁵

But 'more work is needed', conclude CSIS scholars Matlaga and Schaus,

to move beyond a clear understanding of the problem into specific actions, operational frameworks, and strategic approaches that could be drawn upon to more consistently and effectively counter gray zone actions directed at the United States. The United States will need to be agile in its responses and proactive measures, both to quickly counter gray zone actions and to limit the predictability that its adversaries have exploited.⁴⁶

Beyond the military, there is the question of better coordination between the various federal entities and between the federal, state and local governments. The local level is where the greatest challenges lie, and also where real resilience can and should be built. Some help in doing so may come from Europe, where some states, being unitary, have had an easier time using their hierarchies to educate and motivate at the regional and local levels of government. Sharing intelligence and trends about and between these local levels of government could potentially help the United States develop resilience at the state and local levels.

'A key component of effective defence now as ever is societal resilience and system redundancy', argues Greenhill, 'the technologies and sources and nature of vulnerabilities have changed; the underlying issue has not.'⁴⁷

Conclusion

Traditional values are more stable and more important for millions of people than this liberal idea, which, in my opinion, is really ceasing to exist.

– Vladimir Putin⁴⁸

In the end, the American public's willingness and ability to stand up for liberal democracy is the last and best line of defence against hybrid threats.

The 'biggest threat to democracy is a poorly educated public', concludes Rothstein, 'education is key'. He believes that in addition to educating the public about history and civics, the US and like-minded countries should 'push back' and 'hold countries accountable' for pushing dangerous notions like 'illiberal democracy'. 'Most liberal democracies will recognise [this] threat to Western Civilisation', he concludes, if we 'lose track of that' then we have lost everything.⁴⁹

Europe should help American leaders make the case that hybrid warfare is a real threat to all of us. Sometimes that gets lost in the United States. The Europeans who feel most acutely threatened by hybrid warfare need to help US leaders clarify to the American people that hybrid is an existential problem for democracy.

Hybrid warfare can potentially allow adversaries to achieve their strategic objectives without firing a shot; if America gives up its constitutional values, the authoritarians win.

Notes

- 1 This chapter's author interviewed a large number of officials on both sides of the Atlantic. Most of the interviewees insisted on anonymity due to their current positions. Therefore, the majority of the interviews were conducted partially or entirely on-background. (One EU official commented off-record but not on-background, so is directly but anonymously quoted.) Much of the content of this chapter comes either from these anonymous sources or from the author's personal knowledge. The author is, of course, responsible for all of the content in its final form.
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