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## HYBRID WARFARE: THEORY, TACTICS AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines hybrid warfare as a distinct geopolitical phenomenon that cannot be fully addressed within conventional theories of war or security studies. Grounded in the framework of geopolitical realism, hybrid warfare is defined as a coordinated set of actions targeting an adversary's core geopolitical domains. Unlike traditional warfare, it unfolds simultaneously across political, economic, informational, cyber, and cultural spheres, aiming to erode societal resilience and weaken state sovereignty. The study highlights the key technologies of hybrid warfare, including cyber operations, disinformation, economic pressure, and the instrumentalization of energy resources, as well as its primary actors—states, non-state groups, and transnational networks. These actors exploit structural vulnerabilities to undermine legitimacy and stability without relying exclusively on military force. It is argued that hybrid warfare functions both as a strategic doctrine and as a flexible toolkit for achieving geopolitical dominance while avoiding large-scale kinetic confrontation. As such, it illustrates the transformation of contemporary power politics, where decisive struggles increasingly occur outside conventional battlefields.

**Keywords:** war; hybrid warfare; actors; technologies; methods

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## INTRODUCTION

Classical reference works offer varying definitions of “war.” V. I. Dal’s explanatory dictionary (first ed., 1863–1866) defines war as “a disagreement and military combat between states; an international affront,” whereas S. I. Ozhegov’s dictionary (first ed., 1949) broadens the concept to “armed struggle between states or populations, or between classes within a state.”<sup>3</sup> A political-science handbook (2008) further characterizes war as “an armed clash employed in conflict resolution—i.e., the use of force as a means of settling political disputes.”<sup>4</sup> Contemporary usage therefore increasingly regards war as the armed resolution of political conflicts of diverse kinds, a conceptual expansion from nineteenth- and twentieth-century formulations.

Over the past quarter century the noun “war” has acquired a rapidly changing set of adjectival qualifiers—“asymmetric,” “preventive,” “networked,” “non-linear,” “informational,” “psychological,” “chaotic,” and most recently “hybrid,” among others.<sup>5</sup> The proliferation of such modifiers, contrasted with the conceptual persistence of “war” itself, reflects an intensification and transformation of conflict across global, regional, and local levels.

## MAIN PART

Several structural drivers underlie the recent rise in interstate and societal conflict. First, the collapse of the global socialist system and the end of the Cold War produced unresolved problems of post-socialist and post-Soviet geopolitical redistribution, fostering instability in multiple regions (Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Near East, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa). Second, the United States’ effort to preserve a monopolistic global leadership has at times manifested in policies that hinder the emergence of regional great powers—whether through support for low-intensity conflicts, covert destabilization, or political interventions framed as regime change or humanitarian action. Third, the erosion of the

<sup>3</sup> Dahl's Online Explanatory Dictionary, <https://slovardalja.net/>, (Accessed 28.11.25)

<sup>4</sup>V. I. Dahl Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language. War [Electronic resource]. <https://surl.li/yuiivi>, (Accessed 28.11.25)

<sup>5</sup> D. E. Pogorely, K. V. Filippov, V. Yu. Fesenko Political Science Dictionary and Reference Book. War [Electronic resource]. <https://surl.li/mwshzw>, (Accessed 28.11.25)

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Western welfare model under competitive pressures has generated socio-economic grievances (among migrants and newly impoverished groups) that can be exploited to incite unrest.<sup>6</sup>

A more recent and decisive factor fueling the ascent of hybrid confrontation is the geopolitical revisionism exhibited by resurgent powers seeking to reclaim spheres of influence. Contemporary Russia's efforts to reassert control over territories formerly within its orbit exemplify such dynamics and constitute a major impetus for hybrid tactics.<sup>7</sup>

The term “hybrid warfare” entered anglophone security literature around 2001 and gained scholarly currency in the mid-2000s.<sup>8</sup> Authors such as Frank Hoffman, David Kilcullen, John McCuen, Nathan Freier, and others describe hybrid warfare as the co-deployment of regular and irregular methods, often incorporating terrorist-style operations; hence, both state and non-state actors are regarded as legitimate components of hybrid campaigns. Other analysts adopt still broader conceptions, arguing that hybrid confrontation permeates virtually every sphere of social life.

While many definitions catalog the manifestations of hybrid warfare across political, economic, informational, and cyber domains, this descriptive approach risks leaving the phenomenon analytically under-specified. Echoing Clausewitz's adage that war is “politics by other means,” we argue that hybrid warfare is first and foremost a geopolitical phenomenon that is not fully reducible to existing paradigms in allied disciplines.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, we define hybrid warfare as a coordinated ensemble of actions aimed at debilitating all principal geopolitical domains of an adversary society—effectively seeking its comprehensive neutralization—through simultaneous offensive activity across multiple types of geopolitical space. For analytical clarity, this study distinguishes four principal

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<sup>6</sup> J. Perkins, *The Secret History of American Empire: Economic Hit Men and the Truth About Global Corruption*. Moscow, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> J. Friedman, *The Next Hundred Years: Forecasting Events in the 21st Century* / translated from English by A. Kalinin, V. Naritsa, M. Matskovskaya. Moscow, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> McGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, Eds. *The dynamics of Military Revolution 1300 2050*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. 175

<sup>9</sup> Frank G. Hoffman. *Conflict in the 21-th Century: the Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007.

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domains: the geographic, the economic, the informational-ideological, and the cyber-informational. The methods and instruments of hybrid operations differ according to the ontological character of each domain.

In the geographic domain, hybrid methods include localized conventional or low-intensity military engagements in resource regions, the fomentation of “color revolutions” and regime change, and the promotion of separatist movements. Such techniques have been observable in multiple late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century contexts. In the economic domain, hybrid instruments range from targeted sectoral sanctions and comprehensive economic blockades to asset freezes and personal sanctions against key political and economic actors. In the informational-ideological domain, hybrid operations seek to supplant indigenous value systems with alternative ideological constructs, falsify national narratives, desacralize symbolic leaders and institutions, and induce social decay through the promotion of criminal or morally corrosive practices. In the cyber-informational domain, methods include the removal of a target’s software and cyber products from global markets and direct hacker attacks on political and economic institutions.

Empirical studies suggest that contemporary hybrid campaigns favor non-kinetic measures over direct military force by a considerable margin—estimates indicate a ratio of roughly 4:1 in favor of non-military techniques. Actors in hybrid warfare encompass states, transnational corporations, supranational institutions, private military companies, organized criminal networks, terrorist groups, radical opposition elements, and subversive media or NGO entities. A salient characteristic of hybrid aggression is the relative absence of moral or legal restraints: outcome—namely, the destruction or neutralization of the adversary’s geopolitical space—takes precedence over normative constraints.

This willingness to eschew moral and legal limits is often driven by a perception of existential threat: actors that perceive a real danger of losing geopolitical status and associated capacities may resort to extreme measures. Contemporary strategic discourses—including some doctrinal treatments in major militaries and NATO analyses—recognize

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hybrid warfare as an integrated element of modern military strategy, combining conventional and unconventional methods across kinetic and non-kinetic spectrums.

To resist hybrid attacks effectively, states must pursue a comprehensive posture. Militarily, this entails balanced development across force types, mastery of precision weaponry, advanced communications, intelligence, automated command and control, and electronic warfare capabilities, together with force mobility to enable rapid, long-range redeployments.<sup>10</sup> Non-militarily, it requires the rapid concentration of critical resources on vulnerable fronts—today primarily information and economic domains—the cyber-protection of critical infrastructure, continuous intelligence and civil-military coordination, cultivation of expert personnel for counter-hybrid strategy development, legislative measures targeting hybrid technologies (notably operations aimed at regime overthrow), and sustained monitoring and disruption of malign information flows in media and social networks. Preemptive disruption of external financial and organizational channels that support radical opposition and expanded international cooperation with strategic partners in financial, economic, and informational fields are equally essential.<sup>11</sup>

The legal challenges of hybrid warfare are acute: conventional international law frameworks that define “aggression” and regulate the conduct of hostilities are ill-suited to contexts without clear front lines or conventional battlefields. Consequently, an international legal response requires (1) a precise legal definition of hybrid warfare and its principal modalities; (2) consistent application and enforcement of humanitarian law and cultural-heritage protections during hostilities; and (3) the development of new legal instruments tailored to counter the distinctive methods employed in each geopolitical domain targeted by hybrid campaigns.

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<sup>10</sup> Hybrid war — does it even exist? URL: NATO Review magazine [Electronic resource]. <https://surli.cc/xjmdxi>, (Accessed 28.11.25)

<sup>11</sup> The US Army Operating Concept (AOC): Win in a Complex World 2020-2040. 7 October 2014 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://surli.cc/srstsf>, (Accessed 28.11.25).

## CONCLUSION

Effectively neutralizing systematic and deliberate hybrid-warfare operations directed against a state requires more than ad hoc defensive measures; it demands new institutional capacities, strategic foresight, and a comprehensive, multi-domain response. One practical requirement is the establishment of dedicated organizational structures—counter-hybrid bureaux or units—tasked with coordinating detection, prevention, response, and recovery across political, economic, informational, cyber, and military domains. (There are reports of such institutional experiments abroad, which suggests the model is both feasible and adaptable to differing national contexts.)

A reactive posture—limited to responding after an adversary’s move—will not suffice. Reactive strategies inevitably produce delay, strategic drift, and accumulated damage. States therefore must complement defensive readiness with proactive policies: anticipatory intelligence, resilience building, information hygiene, economic diversification, and preemptive legal and regulatory measures. In this respect Liddell Hart’s maxim is instructive: the purpose of war is to secure a preferable peace, and strategic action should therefore be governed by a clear conception of that desired outcome. Applied to hybrid threats, this means designing counter-hybrid strategies that are normatively coherent and oriented toward preserving societal stability and political legitimacy over the long term.

At a higher level, countering hybrid warfare calls for a “grand project”—a comprehensive conceptualization of institutional, legal, and technological foundations for a secure international order that reduces vulnerabilities exploited by hybrid methods. However, conception alone is insufficient. Implementation requires operational mechanisms: pooled resources, interoperable technologies, trained personnel, legislative instruments, and operational partnerships among states, international organizations, and private actors. In short, systemic threats demand systemic responses.

Finally, practical success hinges on sustained international cooperation. Because hybrid campaigns exploit transnational channels—information networks, financial flows, supply chains—a resilient defense must combine national measures with multinational

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coordination on intelligence-sharing, legal standards, crisis response, and norms for information integrity. Only by integrating institutional design, proactive strategy, resource commitment, and international collaboration can states hope to mitigate the multipronged dangers posed by hybrid warfare and safeguard the political and social foundations of stable order.

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