

Opinion – The West Should Drop the ‘Hybrid Warfare’ Discourse on Ukraine

Written by Tarik Solmaz

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TARIK SOLMAZ, MAR 25 2024

Two years after the Kremlin escalated its ‘deniable’ intervention in Ukraine into a full-scale war, the term ‘hybrid warfare’ continues to be used to describe and refer to Russia’s operations. Yet, this usage presents notable conceptual and practical challenges. Firstly, it obscures the misconceptions in Western defence thinking regarding Russia’s way of warfare. Secondly, the persistent use of this label can be misleading as it overemphasises the non-kinetic aspects of Russia’s war with Ukraine, which are no longer the centre of gravity of Russian strategy in Ukraine. Finally, the continued use of ‘hybrid warfare’ distorts the original meaning of the term and leads to semantic confusion.

To better understand these points, it is necessary to apprehend how and why ‘hybrid warfare’ has become established as being central to the security discourse of Western analysts and policymakers. In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and weakened Kyiv’s sovereignty in the Donbas region by combining covert military actions, such as employing masked soldiers wearing unmarked uniforms dubbed ‘little green men’, deploying mercenaries, and supporting local self-defence units, with a broad array of non-military means, comprising diplomatic pressure, cyber operations, propaganda, disinformation, and economic coercion, all without engaging in an open conflict with Ukraine’s army.

Given that Russia’s 2014 intervention in Ukraine deviated from traditional interstate war, it was widely characterised as a novel type of warfare in Western academic, political, and media discourse. Thus, there was an intense debate aimed at defining and categorising such a form of warfare. In this context, a broad range of concepts, including ‘hybrid warfare’, ‘grey-zone conflict’, ‘ambiguous warfare’, and ‘sub-threshold activity’, has been used in the West to delineate Russia’s so-called ‘new’ kind of conflict.

In mid-2014, NATO embraced the concept of hybrid warfare to describe Moscow’s ambiguous operations in Crimea and the Donbas region. This adoption led to hybrid warfare becoming the most commonly used term in reference to Russia’s activities in Ukraine. Furthermore, it was widely expected that hybrid warfare would emerge as the primary mode of Russia’s future operations, both within Ukraine and beyond. As a consequence, while principally focused on neutralising the threats posed by Russia’s hybrid warfare tactics, Western states underestimated the likelihood of an all-out war.

However, Russia’s full-scale military operation against Ukraine in February 2022 undeniably revealed that the hybrid form of warfare is not the sole element in the Kremlin’s national security toolkit, and traditional force-on-force confrontations are here to stay. The shift to a full-scale military operation against Ukraine in February 2022 caught Western media, analysts, and the public by surprise. Nevertheless, few defence intellectuals openly addressed the inaccuracies of Western predictions regarding the prevalence of hybrid warfare.

For example, in his article entitled, *Out of the Shadows: Ukraine and the Shock of Non-Hybrid War*, Patrick Porter said: “A large body of security practitioners and scholars axiomatically expected ‘future war’ to be ambiguous and hybrid, based on recent cases. The scale and overt form of the Russia– Ukraine war, which begun on February 22, 2022, demonstrates the limits of this orthodoxy.” Similarly, In his *Real Clear Defense* piece, *What Happened to*

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Putin’s Little Green Men?, Dan Gouré said: “Moscow’s assault on Ukraine seems to contradict what we had anticipated about how a future high-end conflict with Russia would unfold.”

Nonetheless, the term hybrid warfare remains prevalent in characterising Russia’s operations in Ukraine. Specifically, Russia’s non-kinetic operations against Ukraine are often referred to as hybrid warfare. However, ‘hybrid warfare’ was essentially formulated in 2014 as an alternative to conventional military operations. The Alliance characterised hybrid warfare as a method of warfare for achieving strategic objectives through a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic tools while staying below the threshold of traditional interstate warfare. Thus, logically, engaging in a conventional military campaign should signify the end of hybrid warfare operations.

Warfare occurs across various domains, not all of which are kinetic. In other words, non-military domains have always been a part of armed conflict. Therefore, there is no need to use the term hybrid warfare to imply Russia’s non-military forms of attacks during its conventional war with Ukraine. Instead, what the West needs to do is confront and intelligently address the misconceptions surrounding ‘hybrid warfare’, rather than adapting it to new conditions. Learning from past fallacies will be essential for accurately predicting future conflicts.

Another issue with using the term hybrid warfare in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is that it may give undue prominence to non-military aspects of Russia’s engagement with Ukraine, which are no longer the central focus of Russian strategy in the region. As noted earlier, during the period from 2014 to 2022, Russia’s strategy heavily relied on elements such as cyberattacks, economic coercion, diplomatic pressure, and disinformation. However, Russia’s post-2022 operations in Ukraine represent a significant departure from its past activities. This newer approach prioritise direct, overt, and high-intensity force-on-force confrontations aimed at neutralising the opponent’s warfighting capabilities, aligning more closely with a strategy of annihilation. As such, it becomes crucial to reconsider our characterisation of Russia’s methods in light of the shifting character of the war in Ukraine.

Finally, the continued use of the term ‘hybrid warfare’ risks distorting its original meaning and leading to semantic confusion to a notable extent. While ‘hybrid warfare’ remains relevant in describing sub-threshold war activities, applying it to high-intensity warfare actions risks stretching its conceptual boundaries. For example, China’s intimidatory operations against Taiwan are better understood through the lens of hybrid warfare. However, when ‘hybrid warfare’ is applied too broadly, it loses its specificity and meaning.

In conclusion, persistently labelling Russia’s contemporary actions in Ukraine as ‘hybrid warfare’ fails to depict the evolving nature of the war in Ukraine accurately. Holding onto inappropriate terminology may impede effective strategic responses. Hence, it is crucial for defence analysts and policymakers to re-evaluate their conceptual frameworks and adapt to changing conflict realities.

About the author:

Tarik Solmaz is a PhD candidate and research assistant at the University of Exeter, Strategy and Security Institute. His thesis examines the changing character of warfare and, in particular, hybrid warfare. From 2014 to 2018, he served as a defence analyst in the Undersecretariat of Public Order and Security (Turkey). He has written on security issues for Real Clear Defense, Small Wars Journal and LSE Blog.