

Hybrid Warfare and the Role Civilians Play

Written by Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørv

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GUNHILD HOOGENSEN GJØRV, AUG 2 2018

On 16 July 2018 the press conference following the long anticipated Putin–Trump Summit meeting in Helsinki, Finland was met with astonishment and anger from both American media and politicians and allies. American president Donald Trump sided with Russian president Vladimir Putin regarding accusations of Russian meddling in the US 2016 presidential election. The evidence procured by American intelligence agencies against Russian agents and those cooperating with Russia to manipulate public opinion and the American elections has thus far resulted in the indictment of at least 31 people, including some of Trump's own political staff.

Since the early 2000s we have been made increasingly aware of examples of the threats posed by dis/misinformation, hacking/cyber attacks, and overall influence operations to create or exacerbate instability and insecurity by both state and non-state actors.

Is this war?

It is not the war of yore, in any case. The classic European style Napoleonic war image of armies fighting one another on a battlefield is long gone. This reality of this image already started to fade throughout 20th century, though little replaced it during the Cold War, despite the images coming from the complex wars in Korea and Vietnam. Complex, «new» wars involved and impacted civilians more visably, engaging civilian agencies, institutions, living spaces, activities (including crime), and civilians themselves. These wars largely took place outside the perimeters of Western geographies.

The breakup of Yugoslavia after the Cold War was one of the first complex wars since WWII to gain increased attention from Western audiences. The conflict in the Balkans were «civil-military», meaning that assumptions about who engaged in conflict, and who contributed to its resolution, were not restricted to military efforts assisted by diplomacy, but often involved or engaged multiple state and non-state civilian actors. The civil-military interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq followed. The resurgence of «counterinsurgency», the promotion of «comprehensive approaches», «integrated missions» and UN Security Council resolutions that promoted civilian peacemaking engagement (eg: UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security) all demonstrated that there was no solely military solution to conflict. This applies also to what is called hybrid warfare.

Though no agreed upon definition of hybrid threats and/or warfare exists, some features can be highlighted. In general hybrid warfare 1. employs a combination of military and non-military methods spanning military, political, economic, civil, and informational domains; 2. the opponent is often hidden or diffuse and can be state or non-state actors (or both); 3. it controls the narrative through combinations of information and disinformation; 4. uses cyber attacks against critical infrastructure; 5. it is meant to destabilize or weaken a target, whereby attacks are often below «NATO Article 5» thresholds. In short, it results in a blurred distinction between peace and conflict. Hybrid warfare relies heavily on non-military spaces. Civilian populations are central to the conflict as sources for potential socio-political vulnerabilities in a society and as targets for non-military threats and attacks including mis/disinformation campaigns.

The accusations waged against Russia revolve around Russia's attempts to disrupt, influence, and make vulnerable civilian institutions (elections, systems of governance) and political cleavages, in this case within American society.

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Other states, and non-state actors have been accused of doing the same, including IS/Daesh using social media for recruitment and radicalization purposes. Those who are targeting communities/societies to exacerbate weaknesses do not necessarily create the vulnerabilities themselves, but make use of divisions that already exist in civil society. Populations are targeted and massaged into being potential weapons within the state/society in question. Inequalities within a society can be used to exacerbate dissatisfaction to the advantage of an enemy that wishes to create an unstable environment. As such divisions on migration and the refugee crisis have been used to exacerbate divisions within civilian societies. At the same time, in the Western context at least, there is an assumption that civilian populations act like a homogenous unit that can be guided to react to threats in similar and/or anticipated ways, and can work to mitigate against a crisis, threat or attack.

This was demonstrated in late May when the Swedish government distributed a brochure to all households in Sweden «If crisis or war comes». The last time the Swedish government distributed conflict information was in 1961. The move reflects the reinvigoration of the «total defence» concept that assumes cooperation between government, military, and civilians in times of crisis.

The brochure is a measure that recognizes that civilians matter in combating a common enemy (state or non-state), and that the state is not capable of addressing such threats alone. At the same time, it is also an attempt to control the civilian response, to guide it as much as possible to ensure that civilian responses are predictable and unified.

To assume such unity within the civilian population can be problematic however. In a recent podcast broadcasting a roundtable session at the annual Chatham House London Conference, participants discussed the disconnect between governments and their populaces, the rise of populism and rejection of elites, and the challenges of reconnecting political processes to the everyday concerns of average people. It is increasingly clear that we still lack understanding about the civilian landscape that is and will continue to be a target for possible mis/disinformation, but is also a centre of gravity for conflict resolution. Civilians are not passive recipients of information or governmental guidance, and trust levels between the governed and government need re-examination.

Is this war?

Not in the sense of direct military confrontation. Nor insofar as the solution is solely military. However the intent to destabilize and weaken a state or community with persistent, though largely non-military-based, attacks is changing the ways in which war is understood and who counts. If not war, then it is nevertheless death by a thousand cuts. Civilians are central. Having a better understanding of where the potential vulnerabilities lie within possible target societies enables these same societies to develop measures that can build trust and solidarity within societies, making them less vulnerable to such manipulations.

About the author:

Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv is Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at the Centre for Peace Studies, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, and Nansen Professor at the University of Akureyri, Iceland. Her research foci falls under the broad umbrella of security studies and includes civil-military interaction, security in the Arctic, civilian agency, and gender and human security. She leads a NATO SPS funded project on hybrid warfare and civilian agency.