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HYBRID WARFARE AND RUSSIA'S CONFLICT AGAINST THE WEST

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Exercise Solo Flight

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HYBRID WARFARE AND RUSSIA'S CONFLICT AGAINST THE WEST

Since the end of the Cold War, warfare has evolved quite substantially. By analyzing various conflicts in the 21st century, several scholars and experts have attempted to define and develop a nomenclature for modern day warfare. The generally accepted term is *hybrid warfare* and in this paper, we will focus on how Russia, during the past 25 years or so, has seemingly engaged in hybrid warfare to re-take its place in the world as a global political, social, cultural, economic and military power. More specifically, we will answer the following question: Is Russia successfully using hybrid warfare as part of its grand strategy to retake its place on the global stage and to pursue its national interests? To do this, we will first examine two important terms within the main thesis question, which are *grand strategy* and *hybrid warfare*. The former has a generally accepted definition and will be important to determine if Russia's recent actions are in line with its long-term objectives. The latter expression is much more complex and will involve a comprehensive analysis of many scholarly works to ensure the correct terminology is used to describe Russia's actions. The popular opinion in the West is that Russia is in fact using hybrid warfare (or a variation thereof) to pursue its international agenda. Many scholars and Western media have been especially critical of Russia, and accuse them of using various forms of hybrid warfare tactics to undermine Western states, while denying responsibility in many cases, and always with actions that remain below the threshold for NATO and its allies to classify them as acts of war. We will enumerate some examples of this and highlight some of the successes and failures of Russia's use of hybrid warfare. Subsequently, we will provide counterarguments of Russia's apparent mastery of hybrid warfare to show that Russia's use of

hybrid tactics has been opportunistic and that their capabilities are not nearly as developed as perceived by the West. We will then present what has resulted from the world's perception of Russia's use of hybrid warfare against the West from a NATO perspective to show how and if Russia is successfully using hybrid warfare as part of its grand strategy to retake its place on the global stage and to pursue its national interests.

Before we delve into the subject of Russia's use of hybrid warfare tactics, let us first explain what we mean by *hybrid warfare*. Contemporary warfare scholars and experts consider that “[p]ure conventional wars have lost value as a measure to complete political goals.”¹ One could argue that this assertion is indicative of the importance and evolution of hybrid warfare in modern times. In our study of scholarly works, we found that hybrid warfare is referred or compared to many other types of warfare such as unlimited, non-linear, asymmetric, political, psychological, unconventional, new, compound, small, fourth generation, sixth generation, noncontact, low-intensity, irregular, ambiguous, bloodless, full-spectrum, new-generation and modern warfare. Although these expressions mean relatively different things, they all point to a general theme involving the use of maximum non-conventional and minimal conventional means to achieve certain objectives. There are two important factors to understand about hybrid warfare: 1. Hybrid wars neither supplant conventional warfare, nor do they confine future threats to mere sub-state or trans-state irregular actors; and 2. Hybrid wars typically combine cyber, kinetic, media, terrorist, and military (regular and irregular) command structures.² In addition, hybrid threats include many facets such as, but not limited to, “cyberspace, low-intensity combat operations ..., global terrorism, piracy, illegal migration, corruption, ethnic and religious

¹ Schnauffer, Tad A. II. "Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-linear War against the West." *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 1 (2016): 17-31, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 55-56.

conflicts, demographic challenges, organized crime, ... [and] the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”³ In an attempt to simplify and “operationalize a term to provide the foundation for the rising strategies and tactics of state actors on the world stage”⁴, some argue that the term *non-linear warfare* should be the contemporary expression to replace *hybrid warfare*, which is defined as “the application of collective subversive measures on a state(s) by another state actor, targeting its government, population, and vital social functions, in order to fulfill a grand strategy and to do the latter ... without a clear declaration of war.”⁵ This last definition is rather significant because it brings forth two new arguments: 1. Non-linear warfare is not “war” per se, as it does not include a declaration of war; and 2. Non-linear warfare is part of a grand strategy. We would support this last statement in that “the idea that Russia is involved in ‘hybrid warfare’ against the West ... is a ‘dangerous’ (sic) misuse of the word ‘war’.”⁶ In other words, non-linear warfare employs many measures that would not seem like warfare although the goal, as in all war, is to force the enemy to do your will.⁷ In terms of grand strategy it is defined as “the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state’s deliberate effort to harness political, military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that state’s national interest.”⁸ The latter is a significant statement as it indicates that a state can be involved in non-linear warfare against another state, whether covertly or overtly, and that it can be included in a state’s strategic policy and doctrine. In this paper, we will use *hybrid warfare* as a catchall expression, leaning heavily towards the definition of non-linear warfare, keeping in

³ Banasik, Mirosław. "Russia's Hybrid War." *Science & Military* 2 (2016): 39-47, 41.

⁴ Schnauffer, Tad A. II. "Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-linear War against the West...", 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ Renz, Bettina. "Russia and 'hybrid warfare'." *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 283-300, 296.

⁷ Schnauffer, Tad A. II. "Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-linear War against the West...", 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

mind all conventional and non-conventional strategies and the evolving nature of warfare (i.e. evolution of terminology to include new means of warfare).

Now that we know what hybrid warfare entails, let us now turn to the arguments showing that Russia is successfully using hybrid warfare as part of its grand strategy to pursue its national interests. We believe that Russia's main objective is to "preserve its status of great power and to counteract not only a militarily stronger coalition of adversaries, but a Western ascendancy and a form of advancement of discursive persuasive power."⁹ Consequently, "[u]nable to compete with the conventional strength of the NATO Alliance, Russia has invested its efforts on divisions within the alliance, gray areas within the international arena and law, and blurring the line between peace and war."¹⁰ Other experts are of a similar opinion explain that the "Kremlin uses political [hybrid] warfare to weaken NATO, undermine European unity, and influence policy decisions in ways that complicate and slow Washington's ability to respond effectively."¹¹ In a world where NATO spends \$900B USD versus Russia's \$63B USD in 2017 and \$469B USD against \$29B USD in 2016 (almost 15 times more), Russia is in a significant financial disadvantage as it is already spending around 5% of its GDP on the military.¹² Despite this handicap, Russia has managed to surprise the West on two occasions in the past four years in its quest to reassert its place among the world powers; in Ukraine and in Syria.¹³ The former was done using hybrid warfare and the result was that it "contradicted the West's confidence that the Russian armed forces were largely ineffective...[and] led to the strategic advance against not

⁹ Herta, Laura M. "Russia's Hybrid Warfare...", 62.

¹⁰ Schnauffer, Tad A. II. "Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-linear War against the West...", 21.

¹¹ Chivvis, Christopher. "Hybrid war: Russian contemporary political warfare." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73, no. 5 (2017): 316-321, 317.

¹² Sandford, Alasdair. "NATO military spending continues to dwarf that of Russia." *Euronews*, 2 May 2018, <http://www.euronews.com/2018/05/02/nato-military-spending-continues-to-dwarf-that-of-russia>, accessed 23 May 2018.

¹³ Banasik, Miroslaw. "Russia's Hybrid War...", 39.

only Ukraine but also the whole Western world.”¹⁴ Russia’s involvement in Syria, using conventional warfare, demonstrated its ability to project forces, thus breaking “an American monopoly on usage of the armed forces for expeditionary interventions.”¹⁵ We note that the Russian Federation’s action, “though below the level of war, evoke fear in its neighbours and raise the possibility of applying Art. 5 of the Washington Treaty.”¹⁶ Some argue that Russia’s tactics and modes of warfare could be best described in terms of the combination of “covert small military operations with criminal disorder and hijacking social media, the blending of special forces, intelligence, malware, and local militias, but most importantly, ... in terms of systematic and integrated attempts to reverse realities.”¹⁷ There is the impression that Russia has more freedom of action than it has ever had in history and that President Putin has absolute power and influence.¹⁸

Russia’s strategies can be divided into material and ideational approaches, where the latter (cyber, kinetic, information, malware operations, backed up by auxiliary troops) is what is typically referred to as traditional hybrid warfare tactics. The ideational approach is equally important and often discounted; where Russia projects a narrative meant to explain a rationale for its actions. “[T]he new Russia doesn’t just deal with the petty disinformation, forgeries, lies, leaks, and cyber-sabotage usually associated with information warfare. It reinvents reality.”¹⁹ It’s important to reiterate that Russia’s intent is not to ostracize itself from the West, but rather to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Banasik, Mirosław. "Russia’s Hybrid War...," 45.

¹⁷ Herta, Laura M. "Russia’s Hybrid Warfare...," 63.

¹⁸ Lardner, Cynthia. "Nationalism: Russian Hybrid Warfare." *Future Force Conference*, 9-10 February 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid., 65.

regain its status as a major world power, on par with the United States and China.²⁰ Accordingly, the Russian narrative becomes a “re-description of events which aims at shaping the construction of international reality in which international law and norms are not rejected as Western-made, but reinterpreted and amended in a Russian-made rhetoric.”²¹ For example, when justifying Russian intervention into Crimea, President Putin compared it to the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999. In his words, the annexation of Crimea was a “legitimate decision in full compliance with both general norms of international law ... to protect the people with whom we have close historical, cultural and economic ties. Protecting these people is in our national interests. This is a humanitarian mission.”²² But are these material and ideational tactics part of Russia’s grand strategy? It seems so according to Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy, 2014 Military Doctrine and 2015 Naval Strategy. In essence, “to protect its national interests, Russia ... [pursues] a foreign policy that excludes costly confrontation and a new arms race.”²³ In other words, the Russian grand strategy is to continue using hybrid warfare against the West with as little kinetic and conventional methods as possible.

Let us now move to the counterarguments that demonstrate that Russia is not using hybrid warfare against the West. Analyses by various scholars and experts show that “[t]he interpretation of almost every Russian action as part of a well-coordinated ‘hybrid warfare’ campaign against the West imbues the Russian political leadership with an unrealistic degree of strategic prowess.”²⁴ This is a very different mindset than most scholars and military planners in the West, who “argue that with ‘hybrid warfare’, as demonstrated in Crimea, Russia had found a

²⁰ Ibid., 62.

²¹ Ibid., 66.

²² Ibid., 64-65.

²³ Banasik, Miroslaw. "Russia's Hybrid War...", 40.

²⁴ Renz, Bettina. "Russia and 'hybrid warfare'...", 294.

new approach to war that both its neighbours and the West are unable to stand up against.”²⁵ Some outright refute this perception and claim that Russian success in its expeditious victory in Ukraine “appeared especially impressive, because it stood in stark contrast to the failures of its past military interventions” in Chechnya and Georgia.²⁶ Russia’s hybrid tactics, even if intentional, are therefore not part of its grand strategy and its national objectives, in stark contrast to popular opinion in the West. The “idea that Russia is waging ‘hybrid war’ against the West ... oversimplifies Russian foreign policy thinking and tells us little about the goals or intentions behind such a presumed approach”²⁷ and that the West’s fears concerning Russian hybrid tactics “are mostly a reflection of the West’s own political insecurities and contradictions that Russia has been able to (often clumsily) exploit.”²⁸ In essence, the West is playing directly into Putin’s hands.

Various other arguments show that Russia is not engaging in hybrid warfare against the West, but that is not to say that Russia is not using different tactics in its effort to level the global playing field. Russian doctrine and policy show that Russia asserts that hybrid warfare is in fact being waged by the West against the Russian Federation (RF) and that the term *hybrid warfare* was actually invented and developed by the West.²⁹ The RF contends that they have had to develop a warfare method to counter said hybrid warfare during the past six years. Russia refers to this type of warfare as *new-type warfare*. One could argue that new-type warfare (NTW) is simply an evolution of hybrid warfare to new-generation warfare (NGW) to new-type warfare. However, President Putin and the General Staff have never referred to *hybrid warfare* or *new-*

²⁵ Ibid., 284.

²⁶ Ibid., 283.

²⁷ Ibid., 284.

²⁸ Ibid., 290.

²⁹ Thomas, Timothy. "The Evolution of Russian Military Thought: Integrating Hybrid, New-Generation, and New-Type Thinking." *Journal Of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 4 (2016): 554-575, 554.

generation warfare during speeches in recent years. It is clear that *new-type warfare* has become the expression of choice at senior levels.³⁰ “NTW appears to be describing war’s evolving character, while NGW [hybrid warfare] may more likely be a reference to a method of war (the Russian military views ‘methods’ as composed of weapons and military art).”³¹ The NTW concept, developed in 2015 by the RF director of the Russian General Staff’s Main Operation’s Directorate, General-Lieutenant A. V. Kartapolov, is divided into four interconnected parts as follows: indirect actions; diplomatic pressure and propaganda to the world community; classical methods of warfare in combination with large-scale information effects; and full control of state-victim using precision strikes and ground forces. Some examples included in the model include spreading dissatisfaction among the population; covertly deploying special operations forces, cyber-attacks and software effects; and pressuring the enemy politically, economically, informationally, and psychologically. As we can see, NTW seems fairly similar to hybrid warfare, which may lead the West to believe that the term *new-type warfare* is another reality created by the RF as part of Russian rhetoric, despite the assertion “that hybrid methods were spawned and developed in the West, and [that] Russia must find ways to counter them.”³² Whether or not the RF is using hybrid warfare, it is important for the West to understand that “Westerners should not put Russia’s military thought in a box, as it is evolving and changing over time as various periods and experiences are integrated.”³³

Having seen the arguments on the affirmation and refutation of Russia successfully using hybrid warfare as part of its grand strategy to retake its place on the global stage and to pursue its national interests, let us now examine what has resulted from the world’s perception of Russia’s

³⁰ Ibid., 557.

³¹ Ibid., 556.

³² Ibid., 559.

³³ Ibid., 573.

use of hybrid warfare against the West from a NATO perspective. Following the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, Eastern European members feared that Russia may use similar hybrid warfare tactics against them.³⁴ Subsequently, NATO opted for structural and functional improvements, which took form during the 2014 Wales Summit. The results were “the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), which consists of assurance measures (including continuous air, land, and maritime presence) and ... adaptation measures, ensuring the Alliance can respond swiftly, firmly and fully to security challenges”³⁵; the latter referring to NATO’s New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare. It is important to highlight that “[t]he Wales Summit became a cornerstone of solidarity and cohesion for the Alliance, as the allies agreed upon measures to counter the Russian threat”³⁶, especially following the Alliance’s inability to provide commitment, solidarity and cooperation during the 2008 Georgia and 2014 Ukraine conflicts.³⁷ In Europe, NATO’s new structure includes high readiness Brigade and Corps-size joint and special operations forces [Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and enhanced NATO Response Force (eNRF), for example], eight NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) in former Soviet states (Baltic countries, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania), four enhanced forward presence (eFP) Battle Groups in the Baltics and Poland, and new support and operational headquarters at Division and Corps levels.³⁸ Given all of this additional planning and readiness, “NATO’s political solidarity and cohesion, rather than political and military measures, will constitute the most important factor in deterring Russian hybrid warfare.”³⁹ It is fair to say that NATO has mobilized a large amount of human and financial capital in the past few years to counter Russia’s

³⁴ Oğuz, Şafak. "The New NATO: Prepared for Russian Hybrid Warfare...", 165.

³⁵ Ibid., 166.

³⁶ Ibid., 172.

³⁷ Ibid., 175.

³⁸ Ibid., 173.

³⁹ Ibid., 178.

use of hybrid warfare tactics. However, not knowing what Russia's exact intentions are, it is difficult to determine if the RF is in fact successful in destabilising and dividing the West as part of their grand hybrid warfare strategies. One thing is certain: whether or not Russia is using hybrid warfare tactics against the West, the RF has been successful at stirring up the Western political and military machine, and has planners, analysts and scholars reminiscing of the Cold War days. The modern-day conflict may be very different, but the political, economic and military situations are very similar.

In this paper, we examined whether or not Russia is successfully using hybrid warfare as part of its grand strategy to retake its place on the global stage and to pursue its national interests. To do this, we first examined two important terms within the main thesis question: *grand strategy* and *hybrid warfare*. The former was important to determine if Russia's recent actions are in line with its long-term objectives and the latter expression ensured the correct terminology was used to describe Russia's actions. We discussed the popular opinion in the West that Russia is in fact using hybrid warfare against the West, as seen in recent conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia. The West been especially critical of Russia and we highlighted some arguments and theories on Russia's successes and failures in using hybrid warfare. Subsequently, we presented the counterarguments that essentially contend that Russia's use of hybrid warfare has been opportunistic and that their capabilities are not nearly as developed as perceived by the West, nor are they included their doctrine and policies. In addition, we presented the Russian perspective to show how the use of hybrid warfare is perceived from Russian leaders and how they in fact feel that they are the oppressed in this apparent hybrid war. Finally, we showed what has resulted from the world's perception of Russia's use of hybrid warfare against the West from a NATO perspective to demonstrate how and if Russia is successfully using hybrid warfare as part of its

grand strategy to retake its place on the global stage. In the end, although it is not clear whether or not Russia is successfully using hybrid warfare as part of its grand strategy against the West, it is evident that their actions have provoked a strong reaction from NATO and its allies. Only time will tell who will succeed in their endeavours.

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