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ENABLING SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES POWER IN A HYBRID ENVIRONMENT

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AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to describe hybrid warfare, explore the policy and authority challenges associated with it, and offer potential applications for Special Operations Forces (SOF) power in a hybrid warfare environment. Since its creation in 2006, Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) has become a trusted partner and ‘force of choice’ within Canada’s national defence and national security apparatus. Beyond counterterrorism and crisis response, CANSOFCOM has evolved into a strategic tool that enables global access, understanding, and influence. To preserve this privileged position, CANSOFCOM must be an engaged and informed partner that understands the hybrid threat as well as the complex policy and authority frameworks that guide strategic decision making. This knowledge will ensure that SOF power is applied judiciously and effectively across the conflict continuum in pursuit of Canada’s national interests.

INTRODUCTION

2. The contemporary operating environment is characterised by uncertainty and a shift away from the rules-based international order.¹ The geopolitical shift from a unipolar American-led world to a multipolar system has given birth to renewed great power competition, and the rapid proliferation of advanced technologies has fundamentally changed the breadth and depth of potential threat vectors.² Throughout human history, state and non-state actors have employed a broad spectrum of military and non-military capabilities to achieve their strategic objectives.³ However, the scope, scale, and speed at which modern threats can layer hybrid effects has grown exponentially and has fundamentally altered the traditional concepts of peace, competition, and war. This shift has debilitated the way that western liberal democracies detect and counter hybrid threats precisely because it exploits critical vulnerabilities in western legal frameworks, authority processes, and confounds the application of national-strategic capabilities.⁴ This

¹ Chatham House, “Session One – The Search for Global Leadership. Challenges to the Rule-Based International Order,” The London Conference, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015, accessed on 31 January 2021 at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/London%20Conference%202015%20-%20Background%20Papers.pdf>

² Lauren Speranza, “A Strategic Concept for Countering Russian and Chinese Hybrid Threats,” Atlantic Council: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, accessed on 31 January 2021 at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Strategic-Concept-for-Countering-Russian-and-Chinese-Hybrid-Threats-Web.pdf>

³ Charles K. Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” Military Review: The Professional Journal of the US Army, January-February 2016, accessed on 31 January 2021 at: https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art009.pdf

⁴ Raymond L. Reilly III, “Strategic Competition and Escalation Management in the 21st Century: Russian Hybrid Warfare and China’s Rise,” University of Denver, June 2020.

service paper contends that CANSOFCOM can play a significant role in a hybrid warfare environment; however, before effective SOF power can be applied, the problem must be framed so that appropriate policy and authority frameworks can be established.

3. This service paper will be organized in three sections. First, hybrid warfare will be described to ensure the problem is appropriately framed using consistent terminology. Second, challenges associated with the current definition of hybrid warfare will be explored as well as the impact they have on extant policy and authority frameworks. And lastly, potential applications of SOF power to address hybrid threats will be proposed.

DISCUSSION

4. At its most basic level, hybrid warfare is defined as the use of military and non-military capabilities to achieve objectives. In Canada's most recent defence policy document *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE) hybrid warfare was defined as "...the coordinated application of diplomatic, informational, cyber, military and economic instruments to achieve strategic or operational objectives."⁵ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States, and the United Kingdom all have similarly themed definitions for hybrid warfare that emphasize the use of highly coordinated and adaptive elements of national power to achieve specific objectives. The hybrid threat environment was succinctly characterized by General Votel, Commander US Special Operations Command, when he reported to the House Armed Services Committee that "...the spread of technology and the diffusion of power are being used...by wicked actors to orchestrate terror and violence regionally and globally. Non-state actors...[and] menacing state actors [are] affecting the strategic environment in which we operate."⁶

5. What is noticeably absent from these definitions however are the geopolitical conditions and international legal constructs under which hybrid warfare occurs. The term *warfare* suggests that hybrid tactics are only employed during periods of conflict and hostility. History has shown however, that this is simply not the case. Hybrid warfare techniques have been employed across the entire spectrum, from peace to high intensity combat, to shape and influence outcomes for millennia.⁷

6. Adversaries employ hybrid warfare tactics precisely because they offer a highly effective way to mobilize all elements of national power to achieve an outcome. Further, they are not necessarily constrained by the traditional rules of war. In fact, hybrid warfare

⁵ Department of National Defence, "Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy," 2017, page 53, accessed on 31 January 2021 at: <http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>

⁶ General J. Votel, US Department of Defence, Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee, "Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities Hearing on Special Forces in an Uncertain Threat Environment", U.S. Government Publishing Office, 18 March 2015, accessed on 02 February 2021 at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg94226/html/CHRG-114hhrg94226.htm>

⁷ Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicization*, Oxford University Press, 2018, page 158.

tactics may be the preferred option because they avoid war altogether and provide a competitive advantage that does not trigger an overwhelming response.⁸ Conversely, if war is inevitable or the preferred option, hybrid warfare techniques provide a broad spectrum of capabilities than can significantly shape the modern battlefield and degrade an adversary's capacity for war.⁹

7. There is significant debate within academic and policy circles about the precise definition of hybrid warfare. Grey-zone operations, compound war, and hybrid warfare are but a few of the numerous terms used to describe the fusion of military and non-military power to achieve objectives. Although each term and corresponding definition offers a unique perspective on a similar theme, the critical concept is that the line between war and competition is eroding and the ways in which various forms of power are applied is evolving. Dr. Frank Hoffman reinforced this sentiment when he asserted: "[If we] gain a better understanding of the large gray space between our idealized bins and pristine western categorizations, we will have made progress. If we educate ourselves...for that messy gray phenomenon...we will take great strides forward."¹⁰ This essay argues that the term *hybrid warfare* is sufficient so long as strategic leaders and policy makers understand it is amorphous in nature and that detection and response options should not be constrained by rigid authority constructs.

8. The contemporary operating environment demands that the evolving nature of hybrid warfare be taken extremely seriously. Modern technology and globalisation have transformed the way that state and non-state entities interact, and the profound speed at which environments can be influenced and shaped by hybrid tactics has the potential to be highly injurious to the national interest. And even more vexing than the speed and tempo of modern hybrid warfare is the extraordinary challenge of attribution. Absent a clear understanding of who the enemy or adversary is, responding responsibly and effectively becomes exceedingly difficult.¹¹

9. In response to the evolving threat, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence (MoD) developed the Integrated Operating Concept¹² (IOC). The IOC is a broad and

⁸ Phillip Lohaus, "A New Blueprint for Competing Below the Threshold: The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning," War on the Rocks, 23 May 2018, accessed on 01 February 2021 at: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/a-new-blueprint-for-competing-below-the-threshold-the-joint-concept-for-integrated-campaigning/>

⁹ Frank Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 52, 1st quarter 2009, page 34 to 39.

¹⁰ Frank Hoffman, "Hybrid vs. Compound War - The Janus choice: Defining Today's Multifaceted Conflict," Armed Forces Journal Online, 01 October 2009, accessed on 31 January 2021 at: <http://armedforcesjournal.com/hybrid-vs-compound-war/>

¹¹ Raymond L. Reilly III, "Strategic Competition and Escalation Management in the 21st Century: Russian Hybrid Warfare and China's Rise," University of Denver, June 2020, page iii.

¹² Nick Carter, "Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter launches the Integrated Operating Concept," GOV.UK. 30 September 2020, accessed on 31 January 2021 at:

aggressive modernization plan focused on upgrading capabilities for the information age and integrating all elements of national power to address new threats. Those initiatives in themselves are highly applicable to hybrid warfare. However, the concept that is most applicable to this service paper is the notion of ‘persistent competition’. The IOC states that UK MoD must “...drive the conditions and tempo of strategic activity, rather than responding to the actions of others.”¹³ It further states that in an era of persistent competition “...our deterrent posture needs to be more dynamically managed and modulated... [there is a] need to compete below the threshold of war...to prevent one’s adversaries from achieving their objective in fait accompli strategies.”¹⁴ This strikes directly at the challenge of extant policy and authority structures that firmly delineate war from competition and peace. Without a more fluid and flexible governance structure, national defence and national security capabilities will have great difficulty responding to hybrid threats.

10. For western liberal democracies like Canada, defence and national security policy decisions are made by elected officials. Meanwhile, responsibility for implementing that same policy rests with military and national security professionals. However, because of the speed, scope, and tempo of hybrid threats, maintaining equilibrium between those two bodies in terms of awareness and understanding is extremely difficult and has a direct impact on the timely deployment and employment of national-strategic capabilities to address the threat. Dr. Jean-Christophe Boucher reinforced this concept when he stated that “...hybrid warfare is not a tactical or strategic challenge; it is a political issue. Hybrid warfare is particularly problematic for Western democracies because it exploits our civil-military governance tradition.”¹⁵ The Economist supported this argument by stating that “...responding to greyzone threats is hard. Murky provocations...hardly justify sending in tanks...most western armed forces, accustomed to a clear transition from peace to war, lack the legal authority to jump into a peacetime crisis with guns blazing.”¹⁶

11. During periods of competition below the threshold of war, western liberal democracies like Canada tend to respond to dynamic hybrid threats with well established capabilities with relatively constrained authorities. This essay contends that this model is too cumbersome and too slow to adequately respond to the nature of the threat. Civilian oversight and control are critically important, but the system must become more dynamic

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chief-of-the-defence-staff-general-sir-nick-carter-launches-the-integrated-operating-concept>

¹³ Her Majesty’s Government, United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, “Introducing the Integrated Operating Concept”, September 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jean-Christophe Boucher, “Hybrid Warfare and Civil-Military Relations,” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, December 2017, page 1.

¹⁶ The Economist. “Into the Greyzone - Britain’s Armed Forces get Ready for a Revolution.” 19 September 2020. Accessed on 01 February 2021 at: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/09/15/britains-armed-forces-get-ready-for-a-revolution>

and responsive if it hopes to address the hybrid techniques employed by our adversaries. Dynamic hybrid threats must be confronted, or mitigated, by equally dynamic and layered responses that leverage all elements of national power. This approach demands a condensed decision-action cycle that connects senior decision makers with near real-time intelligence, access to national-strategic capabilities, and the legal framework to adjust authorities and force structures rapidly.¹⁷

12. CANSOFCOM is in a unique position to address national defence and national security concerns across the hybrid warfare continuum. From competition below the threshold of war to high intensity combat, CANSOF's unique relationships, access, autonomy, and capabilities give it the capacity to apply effects, collect information, and influence the environment in ways that other elements of national power cannot.¹⁸ That is not to imply that CANSOF's role cannot or should not vary according to the situation. For example, the utility of SOF power in high-intensity combat should be complimentary, and secondary, to hard conventional combat power.¹⁹ But, due to its placement and access within the national security apparatus, CANSOF can play a critical role as an integrator among interagency partners to fuse capabilities and activities across the Government of Canada. CANSOF is already a strategic advisor to the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and senior government officials, but to shorten the decision-action cycle at the political level CANSOF could be empowered to take a more active role to ensure that threat risk assessments, intelligence requirements, and tactical options are provided in a timely and seamless fashion to senior decision makers.

13. CANSOFCOM's publication *Beyond the Horizon* states that SOF power can be applied against hybrid threats to provide attribution (illuminate and inform), project power (shape and influence), and enhance protection (improve resilience).²⁰ It also states that SOF's "...ability to shape the operational environment – including shaping both the battlespace and the adversary – can function either as the decisive operation itself or as the foundation for a future decisive operation."²¹ This description of potential SOF tasks is deliberately vague because CANSOFCOM leaders recognize that each situation and

¹⁷ Phillip Lohaus, "A New Blueprint for Competing Below the Threshold: The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning," War on the Rocks, 23 May 2018, accessed on 01 February 2021 at: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/a-new-blueprint-for-competing-below-the-threshold-the-joint-concept-for-integrated-campaigning/>

¹⁸ Canada. Department of National Defence, *CANSOFCOM Beyond the Horizon*, Ottawa: DND Canada, 2020.

¹⁹ "Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is often held up as a canonical example of greyzone war, involved several armoured divisions and veiled nuclear threats – hardly something to be countered by commandos, drones and cyber-attacks. Betting on futuristic weapons while retiring proven capabilities is a 'high-stakes gamble'." The Economist, "Into the Greyzone - Britain's Armed Forces get Ready for a Revolution," 19 September 2020, accessed on 01 February 2021 at: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/09/15/britains-armed-forces-get-ready-for-a-revolution>

²⁰ Canada. Department of National Defence, *CANSOFCOM Beyond the Horizon*, Ottawa: DND Canada, 2020, page 21.

²¹ Ibid.

threat scenario will demand a bespoke solution. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that *traditional* SOF tasks like foreign internal defence, support to resistance elements, reconnaissance and surveillance operations, support to intelligence operations, and precision kinetic and non-kinetic effects are equally applicable to the hybrid domain as they have been to counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations.²² In order for these operations to be effective however, and to ensure that SOF power is employed judiciously and appropriately, the speed at which capabilities are deployed, authorities are granted, and actions are taken must be significantly improved to address hybrid warfare threats.

CONCLUSION

14. Although hybrid warfare is not new, the tactics employed by hostile state and non-state actors are evolving and have become a significant threat. Technology and globalisation have accelerated the speed, tempo, and scope of hybrid warfare, and determining attribution and formulating appropriate responses has become exceedingly difficult. As a result, legacy policy and authority frameworks that rely on a clear delineation between peace, competition, and war are no longer adequate to address the threat. CANSOFCOM is one of many tools available to the Government of Canada in a hybrid warfare environment; however, due to its unique relationships, access, and capabilities CANSOFCOM could serve as a pivotal integrator of national capabilities to deliver effects and inform strategic decision making.

RECOMMENDATION

15. To preserve its privileged position within the national defence and national security architecture, CANSOFCOM must be an engaged and informed organization that understands the hybrid threat, recognizes the policy and authority environment, and proactively develops leading edge capabilities to defend the national interest. Senior leaders within CANSOFCOM must continue to foster close relationships with the CDS, Associate Deputy Minister (Policy), Judge Advocate General, and senior leaders within other government departments so that threats, risks, and opportunities are communicated in a timely and efficient manner. Philosophically however, CANSOF's scope of responsibility must expand beyond crisis *response* and deliberately grow to include crisis *prevention*. In an increasingly complex hybrid environment, where time and awareness are critical factors for success, CANSOF must pursue two lines of effort to support this shift. First, defence intelligence authorities need to be expanded so that proactive 'steady state' intelligence collection can be used to inform threat assessments and option development. Second, CANSOF must continually re-balance capability portfolios so that crisis response, counterterrorism, and hybrid great power competition tools are ready when the nation calls.

²² Kevin Bilms, "What's in a Name? Reimagining Irregular Warfare Activities for Competition," War on the Rocks, 15 January 2021, accessed on 31 January 2021 at: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/whats-in-a-name-reimagining-irregular-warfare-activities-for-competition/>

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