



The Case Against ‘Hybrid’ Warfare

Major Jason Adams

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Exercise Solo Flight

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The Case Against ‘Hybrid’ Warfare

Major Jason Adams

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THE CASE AGAINST ‘HYBRID’ WARFARE

Unconventional, irregular, grey zone, ambiguous, threshold, tolerance, and hybrid warfare – all attempts to describe the changing character of conflict in the 21st century, written from a Western perspective and as if warfare is either conventional or something else. This paper is a general survey of Hybrid Warfare (HW) and begins with a general dissatisfaction with the concept, its apparent novelty, and overall utility. While there has been some convergence on countering HW, namely strengthening alliances, integrating whole-of-government, improving resilience, and deterrence, the concept has continually evolved and remains contested. HW was introduced in the early 2000s to help describe United States operations in a counterinsurgency environment. It has since evolved and seen increased usage, especially since the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea as a concept where the “...norms of war are circumvented”.¹ In general terms, Hybrid Warfare aims to describe the adversarial practice of fusing different modes of conflict to confuse Western binary ideas of war and peace, of military and non-military, and of conventional and irregular approaches.”² But if the main geopolitical problems today are revisionist countries bent on neutralizing Western conventional state power to change the status quo, how effective is it to continue framing that problem from a Western perspective that takes for granted the very norms that are being challenged?

Hybrid Warfare does not represent something new in military affairs and it is not significantly different from a Western Whole-of-Government or Comprehensive Approach. While conventional war in the 21st century remains possible, HW is likely to be far more persistent. The main problem facing policymakers is to conceptualize “a challenge that doesn’t conform to the rules while responding in a way that will reinforce those rules.”³ Said differently, the challenge is once again countering authoritarianism while preserving the ideals of liberty and democracy as core components of the international system. Hybrid Warfare is an insufficient concept to understand that problem and does not reveal the assumptions underneath the norms being attacked. Finally, HW is not a term or concept used by strategic competitors. While this paper argues against the use of Hybrid Warfare, it will continue to refer to the concept throughout for clarity and continuity. This paper will argue that HW isn’t new, it isn’t different, and that what the concept is trying to describe is more likely in the future. By continuing to distinguish it as something different, the West is perpetuating the tendency to counter the tactics of hybrid actors ahead of the strategic intent guiding them. Perhaps

¹ Ewan Lawson. ‘We Need to Talk About Hybrid’. The RUSI Journal, Vol. 166, Issue 3 (2021). 59.

² Bastian Giegerich. ‘Hybrid Warfare and the Changing Character of Conflict.’ Connections: The Quarterly Journal 15 no. 2 (Spring 2016): p. 67.

³ Sean Monaghan, ‘Countering Hybrid Warfare: So What for the Future Joint Force?’, *Prism: A Journal of the Center for Complex Operations* 8, no. 2 (October 2019): 89.

just calling it ‘warfare’ is more appropriate to understanding the severity of the threat.

Chinese doctrine and thinking on Unrestricted Warfare will be presented to change the perspective. The focus is on China for three primary reasons: (1) China is the most significant geopolitical challenger with both resources and intent, (2) a case can be made for convergence with other revisionist countries, and (3) to narrow the scope compared to HW which fairly is criticized as too broad. While understanding warfare from the Chinese perspective is beneficial, this alternate perspective is intended to reveal unchallenged assumptions and norms that thus enable a better strategy. What is Unrestricted Warfare and is it unrestricted? What would be the implication of making the wrong or superficial interpretation? What is China’s strategic intent? How Chinese doctrine is interpreted and how warfare is defined will have implications for how governments and militaries respond. This paper will not offer new recommendations for countering Hybrid or Unrestricted Warfare but is intended to be cautionary, to challenge assumptions, and to support framing the right problem.

A principal argument this paper makes against the continued use of Hybrid Warfare is that it is not new. It remains a widely used yet contested concept with no agreed definition across NATO or Western allies. That warfare continues to be defined from a Western perspective in a globalizing world further limits the ability to frame the environment and respond accordingly. HW was initially introduced by Frank Hoffman in the early 2000s to describe the combination of “new technologies and fanatical fighting styles without state structures, uniforms or obedience to the laws of armed conflict.”⁴ In 2014 the US defined it as “a state or state-like actor’s use of all available diplomatic, informational, military, and economic means to destabilize an adversary.”⁵ In 2021 NATO described it as the “fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion...to exploit vulnerabilities and achieve synergistic effects.”⁶ By 2021 both the UK and the US were starting to avoid the term hybrid and use terms such as state threat or grey zone.⁷ Independent of a specific definition of Hybrid Warfare, there are four common themes: (1) deliberate ambiguity, (2) remaining below the threshold of a conventional response, (3) using all levers of national power including conventional and unconventional, and (4) leverage the interconnectedness of globalization amplified by new and emerging technology.⁸

⁴ Robert J Johnson. ‘Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature’. *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 141.

⁵ Ehrhart, Hans-Georg. ‘Postmodern Warfare and the Blurred Boundaries between War and Peace’. *Defense & Security Analysis* 33, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 269.

⁶ Bilal, Arslan, ‘Hybrid Warfare: New Threats, Complexity, and “Trust” as the Antidote’, NATO Review, 30 November 2021.

⁷ Lawson. ‘We Need to Talk About Hybrid’. 60.

⁸ Lawson. ‘We Need to Talk About Hybrid’. 60.

Hybrid Warfare is a challenge as the international system has been taken for granted and the tactics of HW intentionally exploit Western ideas of war and peace, of military and non-military, and of conventional and irregular. In the Western tradition, the notion of nation-states, sovereignty, and non-intervention have been central since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This has supported a dichotomous interpretation of war and peace, where war is declared and then ended with a peace treaty.⁹ Hybrid actors are accused of blurring those lines to confound legitimate responses. However, the widening of the 'grey zone' is also a strategy in the West to open up options short of conventional war. All the while the risk of unintended consequences continues to grow due to increasing interconnectivity. Western nations have experienced centuries of inter-state wars and ideological conflict. This has led to a legalistic framework in the enlightened tradition that seeks to constrain warfare, establish ethical conduct, and protect civilians. While this is a noble idea, it is also a convenient self-delusion. To believe that war can be limited or regulated forgets what Clausewitz emphasized as the unrestrained nature of war.¹⁰

Western countries also tend to have democratic systems of government which provide civilian oversight of the military. Militaries adhere to civilian control with civil-military relations tending to be less integrated. The trend in democratic countries has led to a separation and frequent misalignment of tactics with strategy. Governments tend to speak strategy or purpose; militaries tend to speak tactics.¹¹ The West is also traditionally focused on decisive battles and maneuvers. It uses conventional strength and the symmetrical conflict while avoiding mobilization of the entire society or engagement of all resources.¹² Hybrid tactics intentionally seek to exploit assumptions in Western thinking while avoiding conventional military strengths. Understanding assumptions in Western thinking is important to responding effectively. However, understanding what lessons or experiences shaped the evolution of that thinking is critical to responding in a way that preserves norms under threat.

On one hand, HW is argued as useful for policymakers as it challenges the simple delineation of war and peace and highlights the need for a comprehensive government response.¹³ It is also argued that it is "too conceptual to be useful and that it reflects a focus on a collection of tactics rather than the identification of a strategy."¹⁴ Both of these

⁹ Ehrhart. 'Postmodern Warfare,' 264.

¹⁰ Johnson. 'Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures,' 143.

¹¹ Antulio J Echevarria II. 'Combat, War's Only Means'. In *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, edited by Antulio J. Echevarria II, Oxford University Press, 2007. 144.

¹² Tomasz Wójtowicz and Dariusz Król. 'Chinese Concept of Unrestricted Warfare – Characteristics and Contemporary Use', *Humanities and Social Sciences* 28, no. 4 (28 December 2021): 167.

¹³ Lawson. 'We Need to Talk About Hybrid,' 58.

¹⁴ Lawson. 'We Need to Talk About Hybrid,' 61.

arguments are valid, the problem is that HW lacks historical and cultural context. The above definitions of HW all highlight a key challenge for the West in integrating a whole-of-government response. They stop at the military and do not adequately link to national-strategic objectives – to destabilize and subvert are means, not ends. The Chinese concept of Unrestricted Warfare itself is largely a result of Gulf War I which saw the United States lead overwhelming diplomatic, legal, economic, psychological, and propaganda actions against Saddam Hussein ahead of a decisive conventional military campaign.¹⁵

History is ripe with examples of combining levers of national power below the threshold of conflict in pursuit of strategic interests. The Opium Wars with China or the Perry Expedition that opened up Japanese ports to American trade are two examples from the 19th century. During the early Cold War years, George Kennan, who saw the Soviet Union as inherently expansionist, laid out a strategy of Political Warfare (PW) that called for “the employment of all means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives, to further its influence and authority and weaken those of its adversaries.”¹⁶ Russia also has a version of PW, Reflexive Control and Active Measures, which dates back to the 1920s. The entirety of The Cold War saw the US and Soviet Union conduct PW and battle each other through proxies in seeking to reduce the risk of a direct confrontation and nuclear war. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also said: “Hybrid is the dark reflection of our comprehensive approach.”¹⁷ Hybrid Warfare was developed to help understand trends in conflict and warfare that did not fit existing models. Yet it is not a term used by Russia or China. It has also evolved without consideration of assumptions and historical context. It simply added another model to the existing pile rather than creating the “understanding that all of this activity is an essential part of the realm of human conflict.”¹⁸

If it isn’t new, it isn’t different, why has it been a struggle to define and counter? Arguments in favor of HW tend to promote its utility in thinking about war’s past, present, and future, that it is useful for policymakers in considering contemporary conflict, and that it helps challenge the Western peace-war framework.¹⁹ However, in seeking to understand something that isn’t new, there is a tendency to overlook what is new. That is the overt strategic challenge in a post-Cold War, post-hegemonic period

¹⁵ R.J. Bunker. ‘Unrestricted Warfare. Review essay I. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 11(1), 2000, 114.

¹⁶ Ehrhart. ‘Postmodern Warfare,’ 269.

¹⁷ Lawson. ‘We Need to Talk About Hybrid,’ 58.

¹⁸ Hoffman, Frank. ‘Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges’, Prism: a Journal of the Center for Complex Operations, Washington, Vol. 7, Issue 4 (Nov 2018), 36.

¹⁹ Lawson. ‘We Need to Talk About Hybrid,’ 58.

where the norms and hegemony of the international system had been taken for granted.²⁰ Hybrid Warfare as it has evolved misses that point. That it is so broad and defines warfare from a Western perspective further degrades its utility. The concepts were already there, whether it be a Western Comprehensive Approach, Chinese Unrestricted Warfare, or Russian Non-Linear Warfare. The focus on defining something different has led to a superficial focus on countering the tactics and not the strategy or purpose guiding those tactics.

There are many arguments that ‘hybrid’ warfare will be the norm in the future, which also should support dropping the hybrid label and simply calling it ‘warfare’. Nuclear weapons and economic interdependence are two of the main factors that raise theoretical costs and have a limiting effect on conventional war.²¹ Western conventional military strength, even if declining in relative terms, is also likely to continue which will have an effect. Russian military challenges since 2022 could also have a limiting effect. This has the potential to cause a policy dilemma for the West. On one hand, revisionist powers employ indirect means and ambiguity to counter Western conventional strength.²² On the other hand, the Russo-Ukraine war since 2022 has shown the world that conventional war remains possible, and that warfare is the most complicated endeavor a nation-state can undertake. This dilemma has to do with the often forgotten or overlooked centrality of combat. Clausewitz saw “combat and the threat of combat as war’s fundamental, indeed only, means.”²³ Clausewitz was speaking in a purely military context but did speak of diplomatic, economic, or political measures in support of an aim. However, he saw combat or the threat of combat as decisive. The threat of violence, described as capability and credibility, remain key components of deterrence.²⁴ The Russian military under-performed dramatically in 2022 as it suffered from civil-military challenges, command and control issues, and strained logistics. But Russia is outpacing the West as it slowly transitions its economy to a wartime footing. Ceding a position of conventional military strength is not the position from which to defend the rules-based international order. While the West must become more resilient against ambiguous and indirect threats, that doesn’t mean conventional strength will be less important.

China is the most significant geo-political challenger today and is an inherently expansionist Marxist country that seeks outright change to the international system. Much of their modern military thought is based on the book *Unrestricted Warfare* which

²⁰ United States Department of Defense. ‘2023 Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,’ 2023. 1.

²¹ Ehrhart. ‘Postmodern Warfare,’ 270.

²² Lawson. ‘We Need to Talk About Hybrid’. 60.

²³ Echevarria. ‘Combat, War’s Only Means’. 145.

²⁴ Robert P Haffa. ‘The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies for Great Power Competition’. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*: SSQ 12, no. 4 (2018): 96.

describes the concept of 'Beyond Limits Combined War'. The book was written by two Chinese military officers Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. It is important to highlight that the book cannot be considered in isolation. *Unrestricted Warfare* was written in response to geo-political events of the 1990s and sought to describe how warfare was already evolving. It was not offered as revolutionary or necessarily new but was written from a Chinese perspective and position of relative military weakness. In essence, it says that the new principles of war are no longer "using armed force to compel the enemy to submit to one's will, but rather are using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests".²⁵ As a concept, it should be considered as consistent with a Chinese war making practice that emphasizes "the element of surprise, misleading, and intermediate actions" to win without fighting.²⁶

The context in which *Unrestricted Warfare* was written is important to understanding the concept and its implications. It was written partly in response to Gulf War I and to increasing interconnectedness due to technological developments and globalization. In the views of the authors, the arena of war has expanded to include "the political, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and psychological spheres" and the complex interactions of these factors "made it difficult for the military sphere to serve as the automatic dominant sphere."²⁷ In the wake of Gulf War I, the authors recognized the conventional military dominance of the United States and sought to develop strategies to overcome their military inferiority.²⁸ In a world where everything was increasingly connected, they saw the United States as overly fixated on conventional operations and that it was critical not to be "convinced that the only means to confront the US is by emulating it."²⁹ The entire book is essentially making the case for thinking outside the box and avoiding strengths by changing the terms of the engagement.

Is warfare truly 'unrestricted'? Here again, it is important to understand context and perspective. "In a world where all things are interdependent, the significance of boundaries is merely relative."³⁰ The authors are not suggesting or advocating unrestricted warfare in the sense of warfare having no limits or constraints. What they are suggesting is that limits or boundaries need to be considered in a broader sense and to select the most appropriate means. While extreme means are an option, they explicitly

²⁵ Qiao, Liang and Xiangsui Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America*. Panama City, Panama: Pan American Publishing, 2002. 4.
Unrestricted war 4

²⁶ Wójtowicz and Król. 'Chinese Concept of Unrestricted Warfare', 175.

²⁷ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 272.

²⁸ R.J. Bunker. 'Unrestricted Warfare. Review essay I', 114.

²⁹ D. Cheng. '*Unrestricted warfare: Review essay II*'. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 11(1), (2000), 124

³⁰ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 290.

say that “it does not mean that extreme means must be selected always and everywhere.”³¹ Where the military is no longer the sole or even dominant sphere in the conduct of war, the aim is to be unrestricted in combining means across spheres to achieve objectives. When selecting means, what matters is not what category it is or whether it conforms to a moral standard. The guiding principle in selecting means is whether or not it is “the best way to achieve the desired objective.”³² Limits here need to be considered in the relative sense. Going beyond limits “means going beyond what is understood as limits.”³³

While the book advocates breaking through all restrictions, it does describe essential principles as the “one constraint which must be strictly observed.”³⁴ Those principles are omnidirectionality, synchrony, limited objectives, unlimited measures, asymmetry, minimal consumption, multidimensional coordination, and adjustment and control of the entire process. Some of these principles are similar to Western principles of war, but the language or perspective of many is worth comment.

Omnidirectionality is the most important as it is essentially the framework that orients the concept towards the non-linear. It demands that all factors to war be considered, to be unhindered by obstacles, and makes no “distinction between what is and is not the battlefield.”³⁵ Traditional domains are defined as battlefields as are the social spaces of the military, politics, economics, culture, and psyche. Most importantly, this principle identifies that the technological space linking the physical and social battlefields is “the battlefield over which all antagonists spare no effort in contending.”³⁶ Unlike Western concepts or principles of warfare, omnidirectionality is seen as a principle that applies to every level including national-strategic.

‘Limited Objectives’ is somewhat analogous to the Western principle of Selection and Maintenance of the aim. It defines limited objectives as limited related to measures used or available.³⁷ This principle contains a series of best practices familiar to a Western military reader. Objectives must be feasible, and they must not be open-ended in time and space. It stresses the conscious pursuit of limited objectives and the elimination of those beyond the ability or means available.³⁸ It also provides several cautionary tales to warn against expanding objectives such as the US in Korea or Vietnam, and the Soviet Union

³¹ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 290.

³² Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 311.

³³ G. Commin and E. Filiol. ‘Unrestricted Warfare versus Western Traditional Warfare: A Comparative Study’. *Journal of Information Warfare* 14, no. 1 (2015): 19.

³⁴ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 330.

³⁵ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 332.

³⁶ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 432.

³⁷ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 334.

³⁸ Qiao and Wang. *Unrestricted Warfare*. 334.

in Afghanistan where overreach led to failure. The point here is first to highlight that much of the language is not new and is similar to Western thought. The second is to raise and clarify the limiting effect of the means and the objective. Unrestricted Warfare is a rational concept and is not divorced from reality. It stresses being unrestrained in how you employ means, but very clear consideration is given to the pursuit of attainable objectives with available means.

‘Unlimited Measures’ is tightly related to Limited Objectives. However, it is worth commenting as ‘unlimited’ or ‘unrestricted’ are prone to absolute interpretations. ‘Unlimited Measures’ means not limiting what can be used and not limiting how it is used. The authors explicitly say that “it is not intemperate use of measures, and even less is it absolutist use of measures, or the use of absolute measures.”³⁹ But as with Limited Objectives, it is also stressed that measures cannot be separated from objectives.

Synchrony is similar to the Western idea of synchronization. The authors comment at length on Gulf War I, noting that new technologies were enabling synchronization at scale and transforming the battlefield. The US was moving more towards striking the enemy’s depth but was limited to the military sphere and was unable to expand to the non-military.⁴⁰ This remains a challenge for Western countries, but it is interesting to see that observation in 1999 while at the same time commenting on the levers of national power employed by the US in Gulf War I.

Asymmetry does not have a direct Western counterpart but is related to the center of gravity in a maneuverist sense that seeks to strike key nodes. It is however interesting to see it as a core principle stressing the importance of thinking differently. The authors acknowledge that asymmetry is a part of “every aspect of warfare” but must be considered “as a measure to accomplish the objective” as it allows “us to find and exploit an enemy's soft spots”.⁴¹

Multidimensional coordination is similar to the Western principle of cooperation. The authors acknowledge that the only new idea here was the “introduction of non-military and non-war factors...directly rather than indirectly.”⁴² This idea has certainly evolved in both East and West since 1999, but it was again very deliberate in relating a principle, coordination, to the pursuit of a specific objective. It is also important to note that while coordination is “absolutely necessary but must be limited to what is necessary” as going too far can be just as problematic as not going far enough.⁴³

³⁹ Qiao and Wang. Unrestricted Warfare. 336.

⁴⁰ Qiao and Wang. Unrestricted Warfare. 334.

⁴¹ Qiao and Wang. Unrestricted Warfare. 338.

⁴² Qiao and Wang. Unrestricted Warfare. 342.

⁴³ Qiao and Wang. Unrestricted Warfare. 343.

There are three summary points worth reiterating from looking at Unrestricted Warfare. First, is that it was written to explain developments the authors already saw as underway. The authors commented on the gradual diffusion of power away from the nation-state which was no longer the principal actor in the social, political, economic, or cultural organizations.⁴⁴ That historical context is often missing from Western concepts of warfare, especially Western operations or tactics in that environment, considered separately from intent or objective. What the authors sought to do was describe how to conduct warfare in broad terms, think unconventionally in a world where rules were already changing, and explicitly avoid adversary strengths in doing so.

The second point is much of the writing is similar to Western ideas or principles. This opens the possibility of Western bias to downplay it as nothing new. When confronted with something that looks different, the focus is on similarities to explain it, and then less so on what is different. This is a strange contradiction as one hand, principles tend to be interpreted or assumed as more rigid than they are, and on the other, there is a tendency to treat everything as new or unprecedented. Western models of warfare, continuities can be overwhelmed by the new. However, more tends to stay the same than changes. What should be expected is “alterations in the way the principles are articulated and applied.”⁴⁵

The third point is Unrestricted Warfare was written at the national-strategic level. This can cause criticism of the concept as an incomplete idea that is not an executable doctrine.⁴⁶ This misses the point of Unrestricted Warfare as a guiding ideology applicable at every level of conflict in the Chinese tradition that favors the indirect. To reconcile the differences in thinking relies on three strategies. Downplay it as nothing new, map perspectives onto the adversary through Western modeling, and most negatively, focus on countering the tactics with specific targeting. Unrestricted Warfare deliberately stresses the relationship between means and objectives but does not define what the objectives are. The authors state that “mankind’s dream of peace is still as allusive as ever,” which sounds reassuringly rational, but they do not define peace.⁴⁷ It’s the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that defines objectives and what peace looks like. Meanwhile, the West struggles to move beyond countering tactical threats to countering strategic threats.

⁴⁴ Qiao and Wang. Unrestricted Warfare. 352.

⁴⁵ Pokrant, Marvin. ‘New Principles of War: Enduring Truths with Timeless Examples’, Parameters: Carlisle Barracks, Vol. 53, Issue 2, (Summer 2023), 165.

⁴⁶ John A Van Messel, ‘Unrestricted Warfare: A Chinese Doctrine for Future Warfare?’, Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, 1 January 2005. 6.

⁴⁷ Qiao and Wang. Unrestricted Warfare. 354.

Understanding warfare and its methods from an adversary's perspective is critical, but an effective response is difficult without understanding strategic orientation. That only enables an adversary to retain the initiative. Hybrid Warfare or Unrestricted Warfare seeks to leverage ambiguity through all levers of power, exploit Western binary thinking, and confound a conventional response. If the tactics are aimed at challenging the status quo, the strategy is concerned with what replaces it. Does China intend to integrate into the international system or replace it? What is the CCP worldview? Is China a rising power or a peaking power? The answers to those questions have significant implications for the strategies to be adopted.

The answer to the first question is increasingly clear the CCP sought to integrate only to gain access and subvert the international system. Their intent was never to be absorbed, but rather for China to do the absorbing.⁴⁸ It is clear now that the CCP sees competition with the US as a “clash of opposing ideological systems” with its strategy intended to place China “in a leading position” in that competition.⁴⁹ While many had hoped that market capitalism would have a moderating effect on China, that has definitively not happened. President Xi has called Karl Marx “the greatest thinker in human history.”⁵⁰ The CCP worldview remains strictly communist and is inherently expansionist. CCP textbooks on Xi's thought state that “revolution is an ideal higher than the sky,” and that “the fundamental mission...is achieving Communism.”⁵¹ China's strategic actions across all levers of national power must be considered as guided by that vision.

Any response to this worldview must also learn the right lessons, especially since the February 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine. One lesson is the importance of cohesion among Western allies in response and the considerable negative attention brought on Moscow and Beijing.⁵² However, how long this cohesion will hold vis-à-vis Beijing is unknown. Chinese wolf-warrior diplomacy may be softening subtly in response to the cohesion. In May 2024, President Xi made his first trip to Europe since before the pandemic.⁵³ This is no doubt part of a charm offensive to shore up trade relations and indirectly complicate European decision-making dynamics. Remembering his Marxist ideology guiding unrestricted measures is critical. The Russian war may have created

⁴⁸ Ian Easton. 'Xi Jinping's Endgame for America.' *The Diplomat*, Tokyo, United States: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 8 September 2022.

⁴⁹ United States Department of Defense. '2023 Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China,' 2023. II.

⁵⁰ Easton. 'Xi Jinping's Endgame for America.'

⁵¹ Easton. 'Xi Jinping's Endgame for America.'

⁵² Lee Dong Gyu. 'Challenges Facing China after the Ukraine War and Its Responses'. Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2023. 2.

⁵³ Shannon Tiezzi. 'Xi Jinping to Visit Europe for First Time in 5 Years', *The Diplomat*. 30 Apr 24.

additional unexpected challenges for Beijing, but that doesn't mean their long-term objectives have changed.

The other lessons have to do with Russian military challenges at the beginning of the war and what that might say about Hybrid Warfare's limits and future likelihood. Russia has had significant civil-military, command and control, and sustainment challenges since the beginning of the war. The level of convergence in tactics or application of Unrestricted Warfare principles is certainly debatable.⁵⁴ However, given the many challenges the Russian military has had, downplaying Unrestricted Warfare is not the right takeaway. Most observers at the time gave Ukraine very little chance of lasting. Interest in the Hybrid Warfare concept largely came from Russian actions in Crimea in 2014.⁵⁵ Failure to achieve a quick victory in 2024 may be attributable to other factors. This also overlooks the Russian and Chinese cultural war-making practice that favors the indirect. Russian actions in February 2022 were certainly expected to be decisive, and that is consistent with an indirect approach. Since then, the war might demonstrate that 'Hybrid Warfare' below the threshold of conventional conflict is more likely, but conventional forces remain decisive and required.

Two important Chinese ideas related to the indirect approach are Cognitive Domain Operations (CDO) and Protracted War. To the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the cognitive domain is the next evolution in psychological warfare. CDO is seen to support national strategic objectives by "affecting a target's cognition" and causing a "change in the target's decision-making and behavior."⁵⁶ Linking CDO to the indirect approach, PLA writing indicates that "seizing mind dominance...and subduing an enemy without fighting is the highest realm of warfare."⁵⁷ China is also learning from the Russian war in Ukraine with a likely increase in commitment to CDO as deterrence, shaping opinions early in a conflict, polarizing societies, and guarding against charismatic leaders.⁵⁸ As President Xi has noted, it's impossible to transform global governance "without guiding the way people think."⁵⁹ Western models like Hybrid Warfare are ill-suited to understanding and conveying that threat.

Unrestricted Warfare should also be seen through the CCP lens of Protracted War, described as a strategy of long-term armed revolutionary struggle. In the Western sense, protracted war is more in the sense of a drawn-out war involving conventional forces. In

⁵⁴ Lucas Moers. 'The Art of War Without Limits: Analyzing China's "Unrestricted Warfare" in the Context of Ukraine'. *Atlantisch Perspectief* 47, no. 1 (2023): 30.

⁵⁵ Lawson. 'We Need to Talk About Hybrid,' 59.

⁵⁶ United States Department of Defense. '2023 Military and Security Developments', 158.

⁵⁷ United States Department of Defense. '2023 Military and Security Developments', 159.

⁵⁸ United States Department of Defense. '2023 Military and Security Developments', 159.

⁵⁹ Easton. 'Xi Jinping's Endgame for America.'

the Chinese sense, more emphasis should be put on the word ‘struggle’. Protracted War in this sense is done by slowly building influence, avoiding decisive engagement, fighting asymmetrically, and emphasizing building popular support.⁶⁰ It is also a struggle that doesn’t really end. President Xi has also said that “realizing communism is an objective that happens in a historical process...we must struggle for communism our entire lives.”⁶¹

In countering Hybrid Warfare, the main problem is conceptualizing a challenge that intentionally seeks to subvert and replace the international system while responding in a way that preserves that system. That problem is made harder by Western societies that are drawn to the sensational and describe the unfamiliar as unprecedented. This often results in a short-sighted search for quick remedies or tactical-level options.⁶² This is dangerous and questionably effective as little has changed at the tactical level and geopolitical competition is continually moving out of the military sphere.

From a military, options to counter HW tend to fall into three broad categories.⁶³ The first is detection, which is generally seen as closer internal cooperation across government, as well as with allies and partners. The second is deterrence by both denial and punishment. The third is responding, which includes the provision of offensive and defensive military options to governments within a comprehensive framework. The problem with each of these categories is when the options are closer to the tactical level. The tactical level creates a perceived need to respond, which is reinforced by the political need to be seen to respond, but also increasingly causes coercive state activity to be labeled as hybrid.⁶⁴ On one hand, this can lead to increased scope for unintentional escalation, and on the other, can lead to a focus on symptoms rather than disease. The drive to integrate militaries with other government departments also tends to be done uncritically. Revising defense contributions to domestic defense, improving coordination across departments and re-organizing structure are all legitimate measures to improve effectiveness. However, there is a threat of over-securitization that needs to be considered. Western nations will need to be better integrated and more efficient, however, liberty and democracy aren’t preserved by becoming more authoritarian. The unifying purpose must be preserving the international system, not defeating revisionist powers.

⁶⁰ Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael S. Chase, Derek Eaton, and Kevin L. Pollpeter. ‘Entering the Dragon’s Lair: Chinese Anti-Access Strategies and Their Implications for the United States’. RAND Corporation, 21 March 2007.

⁶¹ Easton. ‘Xi Jinping’s Endgame for America.’

⁶² Johnson. ‘Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures,’ 144.

⁶³ Monaghan. ‘Countering Hybrid Warfare’, 90.

⁶⁴ Lawson. ‘We Need to Talk About Hybrid’. 66.

The solution is at the strategic level. Rather than persistent competition at the tactical level in the grey zone, strategic level integration of national powers alongside allies and partners must take primacy.⁶⁵ Where the Chinese utilize a strategy of Active Defense, the West could adopt a policy of Active Offense. Strategic offense coupled with operational and tactical defense. New technologies and better integration of the military will be needed, but the focus is on enforcing the rules at operational and tactical levels by denial. At the strategic level, highlight the differences in ideologies by leveraging other elements of national power with the military in a supporting role. China still has interests that can be struck, but it must be done at the strategic level. One example is the Global South where China seeks to expand its influence and increase access to markets to reduce dependence on Western economies.⁶⁶ Strategic offensive combined with the idea of moral responsibility can also have a norming effect and reduce grey zone activity. Competing everywhere isn't strictly required and assigning moral responsibility can counter the challenges of ambiguity or not wanting to reveal mechanisms of attribution. What is required is striking rival strategic interests across levers of national power in response to unrelated tactical activities. Understanding the most effective ways to counter Chinese strategic interests isn't through the continued use of linear Western concepts of warfare.

The main geopolitical threat today is revisionist authoritarian countries intent on neutralizing Western conventional state power to remake the international system in their favor. However, that threat continues to be framed in a Western perspective that takes for granted the very norms that are being challenged. This paper has argued that Hybrid Warfare is not a new concept, it isn't different, and that what it's trying to describe is also more likely in the future. Continuing to define it as something different perpetuates assumptions in Western thinking and limits the effectiveness of a response, handicapped by the binary notion of war and peace, where matters of war and its conduct are separate from the political context. The Chinese Concept of Unrestricted Warfare as well as CCP strategic thought has been offered for comparison as China is the most significant threat to the international system with both the resources and ideological intent to cause change. Unrestricted Warfare is not offered as revolutionary but was written to describe events from a Chinese perspective as the authors already saw it happening. While similar in ways to Western thinking, what it offers are changes in the way the principles of war are articulated and applied, consistent with traditional Chinese emphasis on surprise, misleading, and intermediate actions. It's here that projecting a Western worldview onto China becomes impossible. The CCP sees the competition with the US as rooted in ideology with a mission of world socialism. Describing that threat under the concept of

⁶⁵ Johnson. 'Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures,' 144.

⁶⁶ Gyu. 'Challenges Facing China after the Ukraine War and Its Responses'. 4.

Hybrid Warfare does not signal the gravity of the threat. Perhaps just calling it 'warfare' would be better.

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