

# Russia and ‘hybrid warfare’

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In the aftermath of the Crimea annexation in March 2014, the idea of ‘hybrid warfare’ quickly gained prominence as a concept that could help to explain the success of Russian military operations in this conflict. Although the concept continues to enjoy widespread popularity in both scholarly and policy circles, its utility as an analytical tool is also heavily contested. This article adds to the literature critical of the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept. It argues that in addition to the fact that what is now described as a ‘hybrid’ approach to war is in fact nothing new, the problems pertaining to its utility for the study of contemporary Russia go deeper than this. ‘Hybrid warfare’ inadequately reflects the direction of Russian military modernisation and as such has led to a skewed understanding of Russian military capabilities. Moreover, the tendency to use ‘hybrid warfare’ not only to conceptualise developments in the Russian military, but in the country’s foreign policy in general, can lead to serious unintended consequences.

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Russia’s military operation leading up to the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 took the world by surprise. Its swift victory in this campaign appeared especially impressive, because it stood in stark contrast to the failures of its past military interventions. The Chechen wars and the war with Georgia in 2008 were criticised for excessive use of force and were poorly executed campaigns that demonstrated a lack of coordination, obsolete equipment and poor strategy. Throughout much of the post-Soviet period the idea that the Russian military was outdated and stuck in Cold-war thinking about the utility of military force had dominated Western perceptions, so the pursuit of an approach that relied heavily on non-military armed force and instruments, such as the use of information and disinformation, was particularly unexpected. The concept of ‘hybrid warfare’, which had emerged in US military thinking in the mid-2000s to describe an operational approach to warfighting that uses an explicit mix of military and non-military tactics, seemed to provide an appropriate analytical construct that could help explain why the Crimea operation had been so successful. The concept quickly gained in popularity not only amongst analysts writing on Russian military affairs, but it also has entered the lexicon of policy- and decision-makers and is now ‘permeating the doctrine and thinking of NATO member states’ (Giles 2016, p. 6).

The large volume of work published on Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ since spring 2014 and referred to throughout this article shows that it is a highly contested concept. Proponents of

the concept argue that with ‘hybrid warfare’, as demonstrated in Crimea, Russia had found a new approach to war that both its neighbours and the West are unable to stand up against. Authors sceptical of the concept, in contrast, assert that ‘hybrid warfare’ is in fact nothing new, because indirect approaches and unconventional tactics, such as the use of proxy fighters, information, psychological operations or sabotage, have been tools in the military arsenal of most states for many years. This article argues that problems pertaining to the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept go beyond the fact that the tactics used by Russia in Crimea are nothing new. Discussing the concept in the context of other presumed war-winning approaches in the history of strategic thought the article shows that the effectiveness of Russia’s operation in Crimea was not the result of applying a new war-winning formula. Instead, the swift achievement of objectives in this case was the result of extremely favourable circumstances that are unlikely to work in a different scenario. The focus on Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ capabilities, moreover, does not adequately reflect the direction of ongoing Russian military modernisation. Contrary to the claims made by some observers, the perfection of ‘hybrid warfare’ capabilities, where the use of actual military force will play at best a secondary role, is not a Russian ambition. As such, an exaggeration of the centrality of ‘hybrid warfare’ thinking in Russian military policy can lead to a one-sided understanding of Russian military capabilities. Finally, the article shows that the way in which the ‘hybrid warfare’ label is now often used to conceptualise Russia’s international policy beyond Ukraine and Crimea is particularly problematic. The idea that Russia is waging ‘hybrid war’ against the West not only oversimplifies Russian foreign policy thinking and tells us little about the goals or intentions behind such a presumed approach. Even more importantly, the portrayal of Western weakness in the face of superior Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ capabilities has played directly into Putin’s hands.

### *Why the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept became so popular*

Antulio J. Echevarria argued that new strategic concepts can be useful to draw the attention of policymakers to emerging security challenges. However, he also warned that, as they gain in popularity, they have the tendency to evolve into claims about contemporary wars that are not supported by strategic analysis and can be counterproductive to decision-making and strategic planning in the long term (2015, p. 16). Unfortunately, this has already happened with regards to the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept in the aftermath of Crimea. Russia’s swift

victory there had taken the world by surprise. This was not least due to the fact that it stood in stark contrast to previous military campaigns, such as those in Chechnya and Georgia, which were fought by conventional means and often criticised for the excessive use of force. ‘Hybrid warfare’ was useful to highlight how Russia’s approach in Crimea differed from previous, less successful wars. However, some observers and even policy makers quickly jumped to the conclusion that with ‘hybrid warfare’ Russia had found a ‘new art of war’ that made up for its shortcomings in conventional capabilities and posed a significant threat to the West (Jones 2014). For example, A UK House of Commons Defence Committee report published in July 2014 concluded that Russia’s ‘new and less conventional military techniques’ now represented ‘the most immediate threat to NATO neighbours and other NATO members states’ (House of Commons 2014, p. 12). Describing Russia’s approach as ‘ambiguous warfare’ before ‘hybrid warfare’ emerged as the most prominent label in subsequent months, the report recommended that in response to this challenge NATO should ‘create an Alliance doctrine for “ambiguous warfare” and make the case for investment in an Alliance asymmetric or “ambiguous warfare” capability’ (ibid, p. 44). A general report issued by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in October 2015 designated Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ as a ‘new strategic challenge’ that would require NATO member states to act on the local, national and international level in order to ‘prepare and defend their populations in light of the post-2014 security environment’ (Miranda Calha 2015, p. 1).

As is well known, ‘hybrid warfare’ was first employed about a decade ago by a former US Marine officer, Frank Hoffman, essentially in response to the need to challenge what he saw as engrained beliefs in the US military about the utility of military force in the post-Cold war environment. In Hoffman’s view, ‘hybrid warfare’ is a suitable analytical construct that can explain the success achieved by comparatively weak opponents - non-state actors such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda or Hezbollah - against the vastly technologically and numerically superior militaries of the US coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq and Israeli forces in the 2006 Lebanon war. What makes a war ‘hybrid’, is the coordinated and combined use of different modes of warfare, both military (use of force) and non-military (irregular tactics, criminal disorder, terrorist acts, et cetera) to achieve ‘synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict’ within the main battlespace (Hoffman 2007, p. 8). At the time of Hoffman’s writing, ‘hybrid warfare’ was only one of many related labels, which also included ‘new wars’, ‘fourth-generation warfare’ and ‘asymmetric warfare’ amongst others. These were being coined by analysts in an effort to conceptualise changes in

contemporary warfare based on the idea that war had become ‘substantially distinct’ from older patterns of conflict (Berdal 2011, pp. 109-10). All of these labels are contested and have been criticised subsequently for lacking historical and international context in portraying a straightforward division between ‘new’ wars and warfare and ‘traditional’ inter-state conflicts fought by conventional means (Strachan & Scheipers 2011, pp. 18-20). In the aftermath of the Crimea annexation in March 2014, the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept quickly gained traction, because it appeared to be particularly relevant to this operation where non-military tools, and the use of information in particular, played a central role. Few analysts applying the concept to Russia, however, have explicitly based their conclusions on Hoffmann’s specific understanding of the term and instead have tended to refer loosely to the general idea of ‘hybridity’ as a mix of military and non-military tools. This has resulted in widely varying understandings and definitions of what exactly ‘hybrid warfare’ entails and enabled the extreme stretching of the concept ultimately to frame Russian foreign policy in general, as discussed in the article’s final part.

Considering the concept’s origins and its growing popularity in the aftermath of Crimea, it is important to bear in mind that it was made prominent by Western analysts and is not embedded in Russian military thinking. Although the term ‘hybrid warfare’ is now also often referred to by Russian authors, they mostly discuss it, as Keir Giles has observed, in reference to Western and US thinking on war, and not as a Russian approach (2016, p. 9). A number of Russian commentators, moreover, have dismissed it as a Western invention used to discredit Russia. For example, writing about the 2015 Brussels Forum, *Novaia gazeta* journalist Aleksandr Mineev observed that ‘in a global context, Russia was mentioned only in a negative sense. Today, the key concept instead of “Cold War” has become “Hybrid War” (2015, p. 6). In an article entitled ‘The myth of “hybrid war”’, the military expert Ruslan Pukhov concluded that ‘it is obvious that the term “hybrid warfare” is used as a propaganda device and not really a classification. This is because any attempt to define it ends with the conclusion that there really is nothing very new in the idea’ (2015).

Following the Crimea annexation, a number of scholars tried to find evidence for an emerging Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ doctrine in the writings of Russian military thinkers in the years leading up to the crisis. In particular, a now well-known article authored by the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valerii Gerasimov in 2013, in which he discussed the increasing importance of non-military tools in conflicts as an important element of change in the current operating environment, caught the attention of analysts (2013). Although neither ‘hybrid

warfare', nor Ukraine are mentioned in the article, Gerasimov was later identified as 'the face of the hybrid war approach' (Snegovaya 2015). The designation of Gerasimov's article as the origin of Russian 'hybrid warfare' thinking has since been criticised as selective and mistaken by a number of authors (Giles 2016: 10). Focusing on the Arab Spring and NATO's intervention in Libya, Gerasimov outlined his views on general trends in Western and US approaches to warfare, which he traces back to the 1991 Gulf War. As Charles Bartles' in-depth analysis of the article showed, rather than outlining Russian doctrine or future approaches, Gerasimov's discussion of the growing importance of non-military tools in warfare in fact described 'the primary threats to Russian sovereignty as stemming from US-funded social and political movements such as color revolutions, the Arab Spring, and the Maidan movement' (Bartles 2016; see also Persson 2013, 82).

The audience to which Gerasimov's article was initially addressed casts further doubt on the idea that it outlined a new Russian 'hybrid warfare' doctrine that was subsequently tested in Ukraine, as noted by Ulrik Franke. Gerasimov's article was based on a speech he had presented to fellow officers in the Russian Academy of War Sciences. As such, it was intended as a provocative appeal to the military establishment for the need of innovation in military thinking as part of the wider modernisation of the Russian armed forces (Franke 2015, p. 41). Indeed, a close reading of the article and of its conclusions in particular shows that one of Gerasimov's central messages was to reproach Russian military leaders for not keeping up with contemporary strategic thought and as such for being in danger of falling behind the West in this respect. Having outlined his views on the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare, Gerasimov concluded with a scathing critique of the lack of new thinking amongst Russian military leaders:

*The state of Russian military science today cannot be compared to the heyday of strategic thought in our country at the beginning of the Second World War... There's only one thing we can conclude from this: we can no longer allow a contemptuous attitude towards new ideas, towards thinking outside of the box and different points of view in military science (Gerasimov 2013).*

*'Hybrid warfare' – a war-winning formula?*

As the Director of the US Strategic Studies Institute, Douglas Lovelace, remarked, new concepts ‘need to be tested rigorously, for the cost of implementing a false theory and developing operational and strategic concepts around it can be great’ (Echevarria 2005, p. iii). As a strategic concept, ‘hybrid warfare’ does not pass the test. The idea that Russia demonstrated an innovative war-winning approach in Crimea not only overstates the ‘newness’ of hybridity in warfare, as has already been discussed at length by a number of analysts critical of the concept (Galeotti 2016, Giles 2016, Popescu 2015). It also falsely implies that there is such a thing as a universal war-winning formula. ‘Hybrid warfare’ is only one of many concepts in the history of strategic thought that claims to offer a war-winning formula. What unites many of such concepts is the fact that they tend to be constructed, with hindsight, on the basis of a recent military success. For example, the concept of ‘strategic bombing’, underpinning the allied combined bomber offensive during the Second World War, emerged from the psychological effects of German bombing raids on the United Kingdom that had occurred in the previous World War. Based on this limited and specific experience, Giulio Douhet and other airpower proponents argued in the interwar years that military victory could now be achieved quickly by overcoming the fog of war on the ground with the destruction of ‘strategic’ targets, such as population centres or industry, from the air (Meilinger 1997). The so-called ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA) is another example of a concept that was hailed as a new war-winning approach. This was made popular in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, when the US military coalition achieved victory in record time using previously unseen technology. Some strategists believed that, based on the experience in Desert Storm, any strategic problem in the future could be overcome with advanced technology networked into a ‘system of systems’ (Galdi 1995). But attempts to replicate military success with these presumed war-winning approaches in subsequent conflicts showed that neither was a panacea. Contrary to expectations, extensive aerial bombardment of cities in the Second World War did not collapse industrial output or cause targeted populations to turn on their government and bring the war to a premature end. On the converse, industrial production in Germany continued to grow and the morale and resilience of the British people under attack was enhanced, rather than broken. In the case of the RMA, protracted ethnic conflict in the Balkans throughout the 1990s, and the drawn-out wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the following decade quickly cast doubts on the promise that advanced military technology would make wars more winnable. In neither case it was possible to repeat the successful application of a presumed ‘silver bullet’.

The idea that any set approach to warfare can lead to repeatable military victory reflects what Hew Strachan has called an ‘astrategic’ approach to war that overemphasises *operational* capabilities and doctrine at the expense of *strategy*. In other words, the assumption that any doctrinal approach can guarantee military victory in various circumstances disregards the fact that the success of a strategy is always context-dependent. As Strachan has put it, “Strategy is about doing things, about applying ends to means. It is an attempt to make concrete a set of objectives through the application of military force in a particular case” (2013, p. 13). This means that presumed ‘silver bullets’ like ‘strategic bombing’, ‘network-centric warfare’ and also ‘hybrid warfare’ are not a strategy in themselves, but merely means to an end (Strachan 2010, p. 158-9). An operational approach can be successful if it matches the objective to be achieved and the circumstances specific to a conflict, but it can never be a universal tool.

When it comes to evaluating the key to success of Russia’s military operation in Crimea, it is clear that a suitable strategy, in Strachan’s sense of the word, rather than the application of a universal war-winning formula was central. In Crimea, extremely favourable conditions meant that Russian tactics hit on fertile ground and the use of large-scale military force was simply not required in pursuit of its objectives (Norberg, Westerlund and Franke 2014, pp. 44-47). As Nico Popescu has argued, favourable circumstances in Crimea meant that ‘it was not only easy for Russia, it was almost effortless’ (Popescu 2015, p. 2). Favourable conditions included the fact that Russia already had military installations and a substantive number of soldiers stationed on Crimea, which made the infiltration of special operations forces inconspicuous. Moreover, the Ukrainian political and military leadership was severely weakened and thus unable or unwilling to put up any measure of resistance. Most importantly, Russia could rely on a large pro-Russian civilian element that welcomed rather than resisted Russian actions. As the Russian security analysts Vladimir Mukhin asserted ‘the relative success of a ‘hybrid war’ in Crimea was due to ethnic...factors. Obviously, a Russian ‘hybrid war’ would not have succeeded in Crimea if the majority of the population there had been Crimean Tatars’ (2015, p. 3).

An important factor enabling Russian military success in Crimea, in addition to historical, ethnic and geopolitical issues specific to the region, was the element of surprise Russia achieved both vis-à-vis the Ukrainian government and the rest of the world. Using, for example, disinformation and diversions, such as unmarked soldiers posing as ‘concerned civilians’, the Ukrainian authorities and outside observers were left guessing about Russia’s intentions and the course of events, at least in the crucial initial phases (Norberg 2014). This

element of surprise meant that reactions to Russia's actions were slow both in Ukraine and internationally, enabling the annexation of Crimea before anybody knew what was happening. Simply speaking, Russia's approach in Crimea worked not least because it did something that nobody expected.

Russian strategy in Crimea was successful, because its approach was tailored to the circumstances and political objectives to be achieved in this particular case. A very favourable context for achieving the operation's objectives meant that the use of conspicuous military force was simply not required. Interestingly, Gerasimov himself pointed out the importance of strategy in his much-cited article, in direct contradiction to the idea that he presented a 'new' way of war:

*The distinguished Soviet military thinker Aleksandr Svechin wrote: "the conditions of war... are extremely difficult to predict. A specific strategic approach needs to be worked out for every war. Every war is a special case that requires its own logic and cannot be pressed into a template". This approach retains its relevance today. It is true that every war is a special case and we need to understand its specific logic and uniqueness. Therefore, the character of war that Russia or its allies might get drawn into is difficult to predict today. (Gerasimov 2013)*

Exaggerating the extent to which the 'hybridity' of Russian tactics used in Crimea determined military success in this case obscures more than it can explain and it is also likely to preclude the flexibility of responses needed in any potential future Russian hostility. As Mark Galeotti cautioned, 'None of the current uses of Russian military power should be considered the standard blueprint. If they do anything direct in the Baltic States – and I don't actually think that they will – it will not be Crimea 2.0 or Donbass 2.0, but something that will be tailored to the situation there' (Galeotti 2015). Indeed, it would be bad strategy on the part of Russia if its leadership simply tried to replicate the Crimea operation elsewhere. Certainly, the element of surprise, which was central to success in Crimea, would be absent as any potential opponent would expect exactly that.

The circumstances specific to Crimea are also significant when it comes to estimating Russian information warfare capabilities and the country's ability to influence international public opinion. The centrality of information and propaganda in the Crimea operation is one of the reasons for why the 'hybrid warfare' concept has become so prominent. Based on the perceived success of Russian information operations in this case – later famously termed 'the



most amazing information blitzkrieg...in the history of information warfare' by NATO SACEUR Philip Breedlove (quoted in Thornton 2015, p. 40) – some analysts concluded that this Russian 'hybrid' tool posed a fundamental threat to the West. As Giles put it, for example, 'Russia has built up a highly developed information warfare arsenal NATO and EU are currently unable to compete with' (Giles 2015). In Rod Thornton's words, 'the major threat to Western interests anywhere in the world is not terrorism, it is the threat posed by information warfare such as that recently conducted by Russia. It has achieved clear results, and this success can be repeated' (Thornton 2015, p. 45).

Even a cursory look into military history shows that conclusions about Russian 'information warfare' prowess based on evidence from the Crimea operation should be treated with caution. After all, approaches to warfare relying heavily on the achievement of information and morale effects on civilian populations have rarely delivered consistent success. Counterinsurgency warfare is a good example in this respect. This rose to prominence in the mid-2000s as a concept that would help make wars like those in Afghanistan and Iraq more 'winnable' for the US. It was based on the premise that technological superiority and conventional military force was of limited utility or could even be counterproductive in conflicts where support of the local population was essential. Instead, knowledge of culture, traditions and history would be used to influence and convince the civilian population that denying support for insurgents was in their best interest. As the experience of the drawn-out campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have showed, 'winning hearts and minds' was clearly easier said than done (Egnell 2010). In a study of the implications for US defence policy of 'grey zone wars', a concept that is sometimes used as an alternative to the 'hybrid warfare' idea, Echevarria cautioned that coercive practices using information and communications are never straightforward. In his words, such practices are 'vulnerable to mirror-imaging, or projecting one's values and ways of thinking onto one's adversaries. Such projections lead to risky assumptions about what one's rivals hold dear and how they will behave' (Echevarria 2015, p. 18). The fact that influencing enemy populations through information has been historically difficult is significant for the estimation of Russian 'information warfare' capabilities, especially on an international level. Favourable circumstances specific to Crimea in the form of intimate knowledge of local sentiments meant that Russian 'information warfare' in this case was also effortless. Russia correctly estimated that it could rely on a predominantly ethnic Russian population that would happily agree with its narrative of events and not be too concerned whether the portrayal of the Maidan protestors as fascists or the

idea that Russia was merely protecting ethnic Russians and Russian speakers corresponded to the truth. Given the overwhelming referendum vote in favour of becoming a part of Russia – even if the results were skewed – it is also clear that the ethnic Russian majority in Crimea required little convincing that the annexation was in their best interest.

As discussed in more detail in the article's final section, it is not in doubt that various information tools used by Russia to seek international influence, including the much-discussed troll farms, the Russia Today channel, or political statements interfering in the domestic affairs of foreign states, pose certain challenges. From this point of view, the operations in Crimea highlighted the extent of Russia's use of information as a foreign policy tool, which had perhaps been underestimated before this crisis. But the conclusion that the information element in Russia's Crimea operation demonstrated the existence of a highly developed information warfare arsenal used in a 'hybrid war' against the West simply does not follow. The prowess of Russian 'information warfare' used against the West seems to be accepted as a fact and various mechanisms to counter it, including the European Union's EastStratCom Team<sup>1</sup> and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence,<sup>2</sup> were quickly instituted. However, these decisions seem to be based on little hard evidence showing how and in what sense Russian 'information warfare' in the West really has been successful. As Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin cautioned, the extent to which Western populations are exposed to Russian narratives, watch Russia Today or pay attention to Russian political statements was far from clear. In their view, 'the weaponisation of information officials decry appears primarily on the terrain of elites (2014)'. An extensive study of Russian 'strategic deception' attempts during the time of the Ukraine crisis in eight European countries, moreover, concluded that the influence of Russian narratives and disinformation on mainstream media coverage in these states was 'largely limited' (Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016, p. 310). Galeotti went as far as to dismiss fears of Russian 'infowar' in the West as a panic reaction. In his view, rather than a reaction to a Russian information 'battlefield, on which disciplined forces wheel and charge', such fears are mostly a reflection of the West's own political insecurities and contradictions that Russia has been able to (often clumsily) exploit (Galeotti 2015).

*'Hybrid warfare' = 'bloodless' warfare?*

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<sup>1</sup> For official information on the EastStratCom team see [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2015/261115\\_stratcom-east\\_qanda\\_en.htm](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/261115_stratcom-east_qanda_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> For official information on the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence see <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/>

In the view of some observers, the skilful application of non-military instruments in Crimea enabled Russia to achieve an almost bloodless victory, in stark contrast to previous military interventions that largely unsuccessfully relied on the use of brute force. In line with this thinking, an argument has been made that a major lesson to be learned from Crimea is the development in Russian strategic thinking and doctrine of ‘contactless’ warfare in which the use of force would play a secondary role. In the words of Thornton, the innovation in Russia’s approach to warfare was ‘to remove, as far as possible, displays of “hard military power” from modern warfare, with “war” becoming something fought at “arm’s length” without the need to engage with an adversary’s forces’ (2015, p. 44). Similarly, Janis Berzinš argued that the ‘new generation warfare’ Russia tested in Crimea was based on the ‘idea that “supreme excellence” consists of breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting’ (2014). This new approach would be particularly hard for Western powers to respond, as it allows Russia to ‘negate the significant advantage held by the US and its NATO allies in terms of their conventional military force, mostly in the technological realm’ (Thornton 2015, p. 44). It is true that in Crimea advanced technology or indeed the use of military force *per se* played a limited role. However, as discussed above, this was not the result of strategic innovation, but because favourable circumstances in this case meant that a large-scale military campaign simply was not required in the first place. The idea that Russia’s view of the future is one of contactless war where ‘the main battlespace is in the mind’ (Berzinš 2014) and actual military force will take on a secondary role does not accurately reflect the direction of ongoing Russian military modernisation. In this sense, the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept with its strong focus on non-military tools and approaches might lead to a skewed understanding of Russian military capabilities and ambitions.

The current process of Russian military modernisation has been ongoing since 2008. Compared to previous futile attempts at military reform, these modernisation plans for the first time since the creation of the Russian armed forces in 1992 have led to systematic and significant improvements. On the one hand, developing the ability to deal with small-scale contingencies, low-intensity conflicts or ‘new-war type scenarios’ has been an important part of the modernisation process. This was because Russian military planners recognised that conventional approaches relying on heavy firepower and conscript troops had been largely to blame for military failures in Chechnya and, to an extent, in Georgia. Measures towards this end were implemented with the creation of more permanent-readiness units staffed entirely by professional soldiers, the announcement of new Special Operations Forces in 2013, and

also with the modernisation of the education and training of soldiers (Bukkvoll 2015; Renz 2014, p. 75). On the other hand, dealing with low-intensity conflicts has not been the only focus of military modernisation and the development and maintenance of conventional war-fighting capabilities are an important factor in the reforms. Russian military spending has risen inexorably since the announcement of the modernisation programme in 2008 and the largest portion of the defence budget is being invested in the development and procurement of new hardware and weaponry, both high-tech and 'traditional', including vast numbers of new tanks, vessels, aircraft and missiles (Cooper 2016). The latest Russian military doctrine, issued in December 2014, explicitly listed the development of a non-nuclear deterrent based on high-precision conventional weapons as an ambition (Sinovets & Renz 2015, p. 3). Russian military exercises, the scale and volume of which also has increased considerably in the last few years, moreover, have not trained troops for 'hybrid' or 'contactless' political warfare, but on the converse, as Johan Norberg showed in an extensive study of such exercises, 'to launch and fight largescale joint inter-service operations, i.e. launching and waging interstate wars' (2015, p. 5).

There is nothing in contemporary Russian strategic thought to suggest that the use of force and military technology is now seen as secondary, or that the country is 'increasingly focusing on new forms of politically-focused operations in the future', as Galeotti claimed (2014). As Bukkvoll demonstrated in a study of Russian military thinking, all major schools of thought, which he loosely grouped into the 'traditionalists', 'modernisers' and 'revolutionaries' agree that advanced lethal weaponry is of central importance, although they differ in their views on the degree to which this should impact on manpower requirements (Bukkvoll 2011). Even those Russian strategic thinkers that are often hailed as the architects of Russian 'hybrid warfare' thinking emphasise technology and lethal force in their writing. This is true for Gerasimov's abovementioned article and also for a much-discussed piece called 'The nature and content of a new-generation war', written by officers of the Russian General Staff Academy, S.G Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov in 2013. Both articles address the growing role of non-military instruments in contemporary warfare, and the importance of information particularly, in the initial phases of a conflict. However, they do not envisage 'contactless' wars and clearly view the role of violent force as an essential aspect of today's and future wars. Both articles discuss the need for innovation in high-technology weapons, which they describe as the key to military success. Interestingly enough, Chekinov and

Bogdanov even define new-generation warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as ‘an age of high-tech wars’ (2013, p. 13).

Media and psychological operations to influence the opponent’s leadership and population are, in their eyes, an important aspect of preparing the ground for ‘new-generation warfare’. Once the ground is prepared, however, Chekinov and Bogdanov expect the military phase of a ‘new-generation war’ to commence with an ‘aerospace operation several days long’, blended with the ‘massive launching of high-precision missiles from all platforms, reconnaissance and strike missions, remotely controlled aerial vehicles, and robot-controlled weapons (2013, p. 20). Gerasimov, too, does not limit his discussion to ‘non-military means’ and discusses at length the importance of force and technology in contemporary wars, highlighting in particular the need for autonomous weapons and research in artificial intelligence (2013). In fact, both articles’ visions of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare have distinct similarities to the idea of the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ and network-centric warfare, a concept to which Chekinov and Bogdanov explicitly refer (2013, p. 17). The idea that Russia is banking on ‘hybrid warfare’ capabilities and bloodless tactics to deter and defend against the West is simply fanciful. As Dave Johnson, a Staff Officer in the NATO International Staff Defence Policy and Planning Division remarked, ‘once the thin veneer of Russia’s “hybrid warfare” is peeled back, its reliance on at least the leveraging, and potential employment, of full-spectrum conventional, unconventional and nuclear military capabilities is revealed’ (Johnson 2015, p. 2).

#### *So what lessons can we learn from Crimea?*

There are a number of lessons we can learn from Crimea. However, they are a lot more modest than often implied by proponents of the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept. First, the operations, where airborne units acted with rapid-reaction forces from the special-forces reconnaissance brigades and marine infantry, demonstrated that the aim of improving rapid reaction capabilities has borne fruits. The operations also showcased the effectiveness of Russia’s newly created Special Operations Forces (SOF), which were deployed with high speed and to great effect (Nikolsky 2014). It is important to bear in mind, however, that Ukraine did not have corresponding capabilities and did not even attempt to put up a military resistance. Second, as Samuel Charap highlighted, the conflict showed the Russian leadership’s improved abilities to co-ordinate different instruments of state power, which had been seen as a major problem in previous Russian military operations. In Crimea, special

operations forces, information operations including state media, elements of cyber warfare, deterrence and coercion through staged military exercises and the use of proxy fighters, were used in a coordinated manner for the successful achievement of objectives. This indicated that the new Russian National Centre for the Management of Defence established in early 2014 was working as an effective element in military command, an impression that was confirmed in Russia's subsequent operations in Syria. (Charap 2015/16, p. 53; Giles 2016, p. 24). Third, the military exercises staged by Russia during the Ukraine crisis were unprecedented in size and served as an impressive show of force. As such, they demonstrated some of the advances Russia's conventional military forces have made in recent years, particularly given the fact that resources and capabilities to stage exercises on such a scale were lacking throughout much of the post-Soviet period. Having said this, the exercises do not allow for conclusions about the combat skills of the soldiers involved and, as Norberg argued, should be interpreted merely as posturing: 'The Russians appeared to want the world to focus on the scale of the exercise...But there was little detail about, for example, how many readiness-checked troops actually undertook field exercises' (2014).

Crimea showed that military modernisation had equipped the Russian military with the ability to stage well-coordinated special forces operations at least against opponents that do not have equivalent capabilities. In other words, the operation demonstrated that Russia's military is far superior to that of Ukraine, but this says little about its capabilities compared to other states. From this point of view, the implications of Russian military success in Crimea for the West's and NATO's defensive posture should not be overstated. After all, the modernisation of Russia's military is still ongoing and for the time being the country has a long way to go before reaching its ambition of building a conventional deterrent against the West. When it comes to Russia's defensive strategy against the West, in fact, very little has changed. Nuclear deterrence is likely to stay at the core of Russia's defence against the West for the foreseeable future, because this is the only area where Russia can truly compete (Lecik 2014). In some way perhaps, what is more significant than the military capabilities displayed in Crimea is the demonstration of a new-found confidence in using the country's armed forces. This became even more evident with Russia's intervention in Syria, which showed that the country was now able and willing to use its military in expeditionary operations outside of the former Soviet region for the first time in post-Soviet history. The fact that it chose to do so in the form of a conventional air campaign not dissimilar to Western air operations pursued over the past two decades further indicates that 'hybrid warfare' as its new weapon

of choice. Russian actions in Ukraine and Crimea have understandably led to fears that its threshold to use military force has been lowered. However, limitations of its conventional capabilities mean that it is likely to refrain from engagement in out-of-area operations beyond the post-Soviet space where there would be a risk of this leading to a direct military confrontation with the US or with NATO.

### *'Hybrid warfare' and Russian foreign policy*

In the aftermath of the Crimea annexation, 'hybrid warfare' has evolved from a military concept describing an operational approach to warfare into an idea that is now routinely used to describe Russian foreign policy in general. It is not uncommon to encounter the assertion that Russia is engaged in a campaign of hybrid warfare against the West. As Thornton asserted, 'the West must adjust to the situation in which it now finds itself in relation to Russia: a "permanent" hybrid war' (2015, p. 46). The Finnish commentators Aapo Cederberg and Pasi Eronen argued that 'it is important for the West to understand hybrid warfare is not limited to Ukraine. Russia is already waging hybrid warfare throughout the West' (2015). Detailing what they describe as Russia's 'hybrid warfare' toolkit, they included issues as broad as Russian sanctions on the import of Western foodstuffs; the use of sovereign debt as a pressure tool; the purchase of stakes in Western critical infrastructure; 'lawfare'; and cyberattacks on Western companies. Eve Hunter and Piret Pernik, writing for the Estonian Centre for Defence and Security, discussed the challenges arising from what they describe as Russian hybrid warfare tactics against the West. In their eyes, such tactics include espionage, information and disinformation operations via mainstream and social media, psychological warfare and cyberattacks (2015). The German political magazine, *Der Spiegel*, similarly claimed that Russia was using propaganda 'as part of its strategy of a hybrid war aimed at destabilising the West and dividing Europe' (*Der Spiegel* 2016). The use of an already ambiguous military concept as a quasi-theory for Russian foreign policy obscures more than it can explain. The idea that Russia is conducting a 'hybrid war' against the West oversimplifies Russian foreign policy and tells us nothing about the possible intentions and goals behind such a presumed approach. Arguably, it is also counterproductive inasmuch as it unnecessarily militarises the West's language regarding its relations with Russia in an already tense situation. Finally, the implied notion of Western weakness in the face of superior Russian 'hybrid warfare' capabilities plays directly into Putin's hands.

The claim that Russia is waging a ‘hybrid war’ against the West suggests that Russia is doing so in pursuit of a specific strategic goal. These goals are rarely specified when such arguments are made. Abovementioned NATO Parliamentary Assembly report discussing Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ as a new strategic challenge explicitly stated that ‘the grand strategic vision driving Russia’s actions remain unclear’ (Miranda Calha, 2015, p. 1). Cederberg and Eronen assert that ‘hybrid’ tools used against the West ‘serve Moscow’s political goals’, but they fail to consider what exactly these goals might be (2015). If the presumed goals of Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ against the West are addressed, these tend to be limited to vagaries, such as the intention to ‘disrupt the ability of societies to function’, ‘to recreate a Russian empire’ or ‘to weaken and divide the West’ (Hunter & Pernik 2015; *Der Spiegel* 2016). It is one thing to observe *what* Russia is doing and to discuss the challenges arising from its use of various foreign policy tools. However, it is quite another thing to conjecture that everything Russia says and does is part of a consistent effort without any degree of clarity about the intentions underpinning it. The use of ‘hybrid warfare’ as a quasi-theory of Russian foreign policy oversimplifies Russian international politics and does not adequately reflect its complexity. As Dmitry Trenin showed, Russian foreign policy is determined by various geopolitical concerns and policy drivers. What Russia wants to achieve vis-à-vis NATO, for example, differs from what it wants from its relationship with the US, the European Union and with individual states. The tools Russia uses to pursue its interests also vary, depending on the specific policy goal (Trenin 2016).

The 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. In some sense, this might represent a repetition of old mistakes. Interpreting the Crimea annexation as evidence of a grander master plan of Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ is reminiscent of the West’s enemy image of the Soviet Union. This image, as noted by Christopher Fettweis, viewed the Soviet leadership as a chess master that was vastly superior in terms of centralisation, organisation and coordination (2015, p. 159). One only need to look at some Cold War speeches, such as the following excerpt from an address by John F. Kennedy delivered in 1961, to see the similarities to today’s ‘hybrid warfare’ discourse: ‘we are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence – on intimidation instead of free choice, on guerrillas by night instead of armies by day. It is a system which has conscripted vast human and material resources into the building of a tightly knit, highly



efficient machine that combines military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, scientific and political operations' (Kennedy 1961). As it turned out, the Soviet leadership's centralisation and strategic foresight was not as strong as had been presumed. Rather than a realistic assessment of Soviet strategic ambitions and capabilities, the West's enemy image of the Soviet Union was at least partially a reflection of its own insecurities. This, as Fettweis noted, is a common pattern in international politics because 'people are aware of their own internal deliberations and divisions but see only the outcomes of decisions made elsewhere, which makes other actors seem unified and strategic' (2015, p. 158).

The apparent tendency to explain away every Russian foreign policy move as 'hybrid warfare' also overstates the newness of many of these actions where there is in fact a large degree of continuity. Russia used most of these perceived 'hybrid warfare' tactics already long before the Crimea crisis. For example, the discussion of cyber-attacks originating in Russia dates back to the conflict with Estonia over the bronze soldier statue in 2007. Military provocations in the form of aircraft sorties close to other countries' borders were common during the Cold War and resumed again in 2006. What is now often described as the use of information as a 'hybrid warfare' tool is the continuation of at least a full decade of Russian attempts to use information to improve its image as a Great Power internationally and to put into question what it sees as a US and European interpretation of the world order, universal values and norms. Arguably, it was only the growing popularity of the 'hybrid warfare' concept that caused analysts to see a pattern in past and current Russian actions that they would not have otherwise seen.

The description of Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis the West as 'hybrid warfare' unnecessarily militarises the language of international politics in an already tense situation. The reason why 'hybrid warfare' is considered 'hybrid' in the first place is because it uses a mixture of both military and non-military approaches. In Crimea, the use of non-military means, such as information and disinformation, were important factors contributing to the achievement of objectives. However, Crimea was not 'won' by non-military means alone. Even though very little actual fighting took place in Crimea, Russia's efforts were backed up by special forces and other military personnel as well as a significant build-up of forces alongside Ukraine's borders implying the threat of more military force to come. The description of Russian uses, for example, of information beyond Ukraine as a 'hybrid warfare' tool is therefore misleading, as there is nothing 'hybrid' in the use of information *per se*. The implication that the use of various policy instruments not related to military

action, such as information, is or can be an act of war in and of itself is problematic. It is questionable whether tensions or a conflict situation that do not involve the use of military force can or should be called a war at all without using the word merely in the broadest metaphorical sense, similar to discourses like ‘war on poverty’ or ‘war on obesity’. In the words of Samuel Charap, the idea that Russia is involved in ‘hybrid warfare’ against the West therefore is a ‘dangerous misuse of the word “war” (2015/6, p. 52). Turning the idea of ‘hybrid warfare’ from a military concept describing an operational approach to warfare into a quasi-theory of Russian foreign policy makes it difficult, as experts in a workshop held by the International Institute of Strategic Studies in 2015 concluded, to distinguish not only between measures of foreign policy and warfare, but also to understand when peace blends into war (Giegerich 2015). As Kofman and Rojansky argued, various Russian foreign policy tools, such as the use of information to seek political influence abroad, do pose challenges for Russia’s neighbours and the West. However, they also warned that the discussion of such challenges within the framework of ‘hybrid warfare’ makes it difficult to assess their ‘ambiguous and often inchoate aims’ and blurs the distinction between Russian global broadcasting, public diplomacy or propaganda and (military) operational goals (2015).

Finally, rather than furthering our understanding of Russian foreign policy or aiding Western actors in identifying relevant policy responses, exaggerated notions of Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ capabilities have played directly into Putin’s hands. There is an argument to be made that reactions in the West in the aftermath of Crimea have inadvertently ensured that Putin has achieved at least one of the goals underpinning his increasingly forceful and aggressive foreign policy. After all, it is clear that Russian military aggression against Ukraine was motivated not least by the longstanding demand for respect on the international stage, as Putin explicitly confirmed in his ‘Crimea speech’. Outlining what he saw as a long history of Western meddling in Russia’s domestic affairs and in its ‘near abroad’ he claimed that the Crimea annexation set a sign that it was time to ‘accept the obvious fact: Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs. Like other countries, it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected’ (Putin 2014). From this point of view the West’s response to Russian military actions in Ukraine did exactly what he demanded. Peddling the notion of Western weakness in the face of Russia’s superior ‘hybrid warfare’ capabilities implies respect and even fear of Russia as a powerful global actor that was not afforded to the country before.

‘Hybrid warfare’ as a concept has been useful inasmuch as it highlighted the variety of tools used by Russia to further its foreign policy ambitions, some of which, such information in various guises, were not widely studied before the Crimea crisis. However, it is hard to disagree with Kofman and Rojansky, who concluded that ‘hybrid war has become a catchall phrase...resulting in a misguided attempt to group everything Moscow does under one rubric’ (2015). Not unlike the idea that we are currently witnessing a ‘New Cold War’, ‘hybrid warfare’ used as a model for Russian foreign policy is no more than a very general analogy and as such not useful either for scholarly analysis or policy making. As Andrew Monaghan argued such analogies, ‘too often frame[s] the discussion in a repetitive and simplistic polemic that inhibits understanding of Russia and its relationship with the West. This makes it harder for the West to craft realistic policies with respect both to the Ukraine crisis and Russia generally’ (2015, p. 1).

It is clear why the ‘hybrid warfare’ label quickly gained in popularity as an analytical tool in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation. It helped to conceptualise how Russia’s approach to this operation differed from previous interventions and highlighted the need to revise Western views of the Russian military. Up until this point, these views had been predominantly negative and clearly underestimated the ability of the Russian armed forces to approach a low-intensity conflict with anything other than brute force. Beyond this, however, the ‘hybrid warfare’ concept has done more harm than good to our understanding of developments in Russian military and defence policy as it neither explains the success of Russia’s military operation in Crimea, nor does it adequately reflect the content and direction of ongoing military modernisation. Perhaps the ‘hybrid warfare’ discussion also served a purpose in drawing attention to the full range of instruments used by Russia today in pursuit of a clearly more forceful foreign policy. However, the implication that almost every Russian foreign policy move can now be explained as a part of a wider ‘hybrid warfare’ campaign is not useful. Referring to Russian actions ranging from the use of social media to military provocations as ‘hybrid threats’ not only exaggerates the notion of newness where there is in fact a high level of consistency. It also implies a consistency of effort and level of strategic foresight that is simply unrealistic and risks making Russia and its leadership look stronger than it actually is.

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