

# The Ghost of Hybrid War

**Samuel Charap**

Following Moscow's invasion of Crimea and support for the insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the concept of 'hybrid war' has emerged as a catch-all description for the new Russian threat to European security. The concept itself – a blending of conventional and non-traditional tactics to achieve political–military objectives – is not novel.<sup>1</sup> But its prominence in Western analysis of Russia's actions over the past two years surpasses all previous usage. In this same period, Russian military strategists have also written extensively on hybrid warfare. The assumptions underlying both perspectives are equally misguided.

Russian strategists use the term 'hybrid war' to refer to alleged US efforts to weaken and ultimately overthrow unfriendly governments, particularly, but not exclusively, the Russian government, using a variety of kinetic and non-kinetic means.<sup>2</sup> In Ukraine, according to the Russian literature, it was the US that successfully launched a hybrid war in late 2013 to overthrow an unfriendly government and install a puppet regime. One author essentially defines hybrid war by describing the Russian perception of events in Ukraine:

The main instrument of hybrid war is the notorious 'fifth column' of agents of influence controlled by the adversary ... [Hybrid operations] involve the legitimization of anti-government political forces and a recognition of their right to represent the people who allegedly spoke out against the tyranny of the existing rulers ... The legitimate actions of the state

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authorities to restore order are condemned as violating human rights and suppressing the civilian population. That is, those vying for power who are under the aggressor's control are legitimized and the existing system is delegitimized, and then demonized.<sup>3</sup>

Russian strategists conclude that the US use of hybrid war in Ukraine is a rehearsal for an analogous operation in Russia. They warn of the 'increasing likelihood of hybrid operations on Russian territory'.<sup>4</sup>

Western policymakers would consider this assertion either absurd ranting or devious (and insincere) manipulation. But upon inspection, much Western analysis of Russian hybrid war is no less fantastical. In March 2015, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said:

Hybrid is the dark reflection of our comprehensive approach. We use a combination of military and non-military means to stabilize countries. Others use it to destabilize them ... So NATO must be ready to deal with every aspect of this new reality from wherever it comes. And that means we must look closely at how we prepare for; deter; and if necessary defend against hybrid warfare.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, there are serious Russia-related contingencies for which NATO must plan. The hybrid element of Russia's operation in Ukraine, however, is not one of them. Indeed, the focus on Russia's hybrid tactics has led to the creation of a bogeyman. Western analysis gives the impression that Russia is already conducting hybrid war against the West. This is a dangerous misuse of the word 'war'. Moreover, the focus on the purported success of Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine has led to a view that there is a Russian hybrid-war doctrine that could be applied against a NATO member state. However, this view ignores key aspects of the Ukraine operation and therefore draws the wrong lessons from it. This new conventional wisdom further assumes that Russian military strategy would consider an ambiguous, hybrid operation in a NATO member state both important for achieving objectives in a crisis and preferable to the other options at Moscow's disposal in such a crisis.

Russian actions in Ukraine did demonstrate important new developments. Most significantly, Moscow coordinated the arms of national power effectively in order to achieve its objectives. In previous military operations in the post-Soviet period, Russia was not able to do so. The operation in Ukraine included the successful use of subversion, cyber, proxies, conventional military interventions and military exercises to deter and coerce, all conducted under the cover of the nuclear umbrella, which Russian officials regularly brought to the world's attention. Moscow attempted a joined-up approach in the war with Georgia in August 2008, but the results were mixed at best. The relative success this time was in part a function of military modernisation generally, which began in earnest only after the Georgia war, and more specifically as a result of the creation of a new institution in Moscow: the National Center for the Management of Defense of the Russian Federation, a 24/7 interagency nerve centre that came online in early 2014.

But recognising that Russia is no longer the basket case it once was does not mean that Moscow has a hybrid-war doctrine that could be effectively deployed against NATO. Some have sought to deduce such a doctrine from an article written by General Valery Gerasimov, chief of Russia's general staff, in early 2013;<sup>6</sup> one analyst even extrapolated a 'Gerasimov Doctrine' from the piece that allegedly forms the basis for Russian hybrid war.<sup>7</sup> In his article, Gerasimov states that the 'role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness'. These means include 'the use of special operations forces and internal opposition' to create a 'permanently operating front' inside enemy territory. The foreshadowing of Russian tactics in Ukraine seems clear. However, Gerasimov is actually describing what he sees as the new US way of war, not Russian doctrine.

### **A closer look at Ukraine**

Even if we disregard the military literature and focus on the known facts regarding Russian operations in Ukraine, there is no evidence to suggest the emergence of a hybrid-war doctrine. Firstly, the nature of Russia's military objective in eastern Ukraine was specific, and quite limited: to prevent the post-Maidan government from establishing or restoring its writ over parts

of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Compared to the goals pursued by NATO and the US in the context of the 'comprehensive approach'<sup>8</sup> or the 'full-spectrum approach',<sup>9</sup> let alone counter-insurgency doctrine, this objective was very modest. For example, General Stanley McChrystal, then the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, declared in 2010 that his goal was delivering 'government in a box'.<sup>10</sup> That is, after soldiers defeat enemy combatants, civilian specialists build up alternative governance structures. Russia's objective of preventing governance from being established is far more circumscribed and easily achieved. As the US experience in Afghanistan and Iraq has demonstrated, it is much easier to destroy than to build.

Secondly, the setting of eastern Ukraine made Moscow's objective far easier to pursue. In fact, the region is the most permissive environment outside Russia's borders for this kind of operation. The Donbas shares with Russia a common language, as well as historical and cultural traditions. It is connected to Russia by thick cross-border interpersonal ties. Russian business and intelligence networks deeply penetrate the region. The Russian military had near-complete knowledge of the battlefield, and, given the highly porous border, thousands of kilometres of access to the theatre. Ukraine's already weak governance had essentially collapsed in the east after the revolution. And there was already widespread resentment among the population towards the post-Maidan government. Polling data from April 2014 showed that over 70% of residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions considered the new government in Kiev 'illegal'.<sup>11</sup> In short, eastern Ukraine is perhaps the only place beyond Russia's borders where Moscow can sustain an insurgency, and events in early 2014 made it an even softer target. As a counterfactual, one could imagine the fate of a hypothetical deployment of 'little green men' to Lvov, the traditional home of Ukrainian nationalism located in the west of the country. They would likely have ended up hanging from the lamp posts, not leading an armed insurgency.

Even given the limited objective and a very permissive environment, Russia would not have succeeded using hybrid tactics alone. In August 2014, the Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine were on the verge of defeat. The Ukrainian military vastly outgunned and outmanned them. Once Kiev's forces recovered from the initial shock of aggression and invasion,

they began encircling rebel strongholds and recapturing strategically important towns and villages. Despite the massing of Russian forces just across the border, cyber operations, special-forces support, continuous delivery of materiel, constant propaganda, airspace dominance and so on, the rebels, and thus Russia, would have lost. In the event, the regular Russian military intervened in a very old-fashioned, non-hybrid way, using artillery barrages to pound the Ukrainian forces into submission.<sup>12</sup>

Russia's Ukraine operation, therefore, does not amount to a template for potential conflict with NATO, not only because the objective was limited and the environment was uniquely permissive, but also because Russia would eventually be forced to deploy its regular military.

So even in the handful of other contexts where some of the hybrid playbook could theoretically be replicated (Estonia and Latvia are often mentioned, given their sizeable Russian-speaking, non-citizen minorities), it would only be a matter of time before Russia's uniformed army would be involved in the conflict. In other words, there is no such thing as a Russian hybrid war with NATO that

will be limited to the hybrid realm. Even if Moscow thinks it can create a fait accompli on the ground in Estonia or Latvia using hybrid tactics, Ukraine demonstrates that it could not sustain such an operation without employing its regular military and thus starting a very traditional war with NATO.

Analysts in the West tend to think that Russia would choose hybrid tactics in order to sow discord within NATO – using ambiguity to create divisions among allies about what was happening and how to respond – and thus break the Alliance politically, without firing a shot.<sup>13</sup> This scenario reflects well-founded doubts about Alliance cohesion and unity. It does not reflect the reality of Russian strategy. An extensive search of Russian military writings produces no evidence of such considerations. Moreover, what we do know about Russian military thought suggests that a hybrid war with NATO would not make strategic sense from Moscow's perspective. For the Russian military, the most significant threat in the Baltic region, particularly because of the strategically vulnerable Kaliningrad exclave, where the Russian Baltic Fleet is based, is the potential deployment of US forces and high-end capabilities. A

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Russian hybrid operation would give ample time for the US to do just that. So, in the time it took for Narva, the Russian-speaking Estonian border town, to be occupied by the little green men, the 101st Airborne Division could land in Tallinn and a US carrier group could set sail for the Gulf of Finland. Moreover, Moscow has options to prevent this scenario from materialising. For example, the army, with air support, could rapidly push from the Estonian border to the Baltic Sea, destroying all Estonian forces and denying the US access to the region before anyone in Washington or Brussels had the chance to navel gaze. One Russian analyst noted that it would take 30,000 NATO troops about a month to deploy to the Baltic region, while a Russian force of three times the size could be sent there in just 24 hours. He concluded that ‘while Europe’s top brass discuss and argue how to transit to the theater, and coordinate all of this with [the US], Warsaw, Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius would be transformed into a rubbish heap’.<sup>14</sup>

Some analysts have gone even further than discerning a doctrine and now claim that Russia is *already* conducting hybrid warfare on the West. As one recent report claimed, ‘The various diplomatic, economic, military and subversive measures that have been employed by Russia in the Baltic Region and increasingly in the Balkans, Black Sea and Mediterranean regions, could be interpreted as elements of a protracted campaign already underway.’<sup>15</sup> The author thus equates hard-nosed – but commonplace – tactics to gain influence with subversion that represents a threat to national security. But there is a major difference between efforts to subvert a population against its government on the one hand, and the use of normal tools of statecraft to gain influence on the other.<sup>16</sup> The former would be, of course, a real problem for NATO; fortunately, nothing like the subversion of eastern Ukraine is happening inside member states today. As for all the other unpleasant activities that Russia undertakes inside NATO and EU member states, such as funding political parties or developing media in local languages, these certainly do not merit the label ‘hybrid’, let alone ‘war’. After all, Western countries have been doing many of the same things inside of Russia for years. And no one considered those activities ‘elements of a protracted campaign already underway’.

Three parallels between the developing conventional wisdom in Russia and the West on hybrid war emerge from the literature. Firstly, Russian strategists believe that the US is willing to risk conducting a limited, hybrid operation in Russia – that is, on the territory of a nuclear power – just as NATO strategists believe Russia is willing to risk the same on the territory of a nuclear alliance. Secondly, Russian analysts project well-founded fears about their country's long-term political cohesion onto the West's intentions. In other words, they know their political system is brittle, so therefore the Americans must be out to undermine it. In the same way, NATO analysts know there are divergences regarding threat perceptions inside the Alliance, so therefore Russia must be planning to take advantage of them. Finally, each side believes that Ukraine represents the other's successful hybrid operation, and a potential precursor to such an operation being directed against it. Fortunately, on all three counts, the new conventional wisdom in both Russia and the West is wrong.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

- 1 See, for example, Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), [http://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac\\_hybridwar\\_0108.pdf](http://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf).
- 2 See, for example, V.A. Kiselev and I.N. Vorob'ev, 'Gibridnye operatsii kak novyi vid voennogo protivoborstva', *Voennaya mysl'*, no. 5, April 2015; Aleksandr Vladimirov, 'Protiv vsekh – chast' II', *Voенно-Promyshlennyyi Kur'er*, 25 February 2015, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/24013>; Aleksandr Bartosh, 'Razrushitel'nyi tandem: tsvetnaya revolyutsiya – gibridnaya voina', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 24 July 2015, [http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2015-07-24/1\\_revolution.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2015-07-24/1_revolution.html); Aleksandr Bartosh, 'Gibridnye voiny v strategii SShA i NATO', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 10 October 2014, [http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2014-10-10/1\\_nato.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2014-10-10/1_nato.html); Oleg Odnokolenko, 'Gibridnaya voina: problemy i perspektivy postkonfliktного uregulirovaniya', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 13 March 2015, [http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2015-03-13/1\\_gybrid.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2015-03-13/1_gybrid.html).
- 3 Konstantin Sivkov, 'Vo glave s "pyatoi kolonnoi" – chast' I', *Voенно-Promyshlennyyi Kur'er*, 3 June 2015, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/25473>.
- 4 Kiselev and Vorob'ev, 'Gibridnye



- operatsii kak novyi vid voennogo protivoborstva'.
- 5 Jens Stoltenberg, 'Keynote Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Opening of the NATO Transformation Seminar', 25 March 2015, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_118435.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_118435.htm). For examples of Western hybrid-war analysis, see Keir Giles, 'Russia's Hybrid Warfare: A Success in Propaganda', *Arbeitspapier Sicherheitspolitik*, no. 1, 2015, available at <https://www.baks.bund.de>; Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, 'Back to the Future? Russia's Hybrid Warfare, Revolutions in Military Affairs, and Cold War Comparisons', NATO Defense College research paper, 28 October 2015, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=859>; and András Rác, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 16 June 2015), [http://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/514/russia\\_s\\_hybrid\\_war\\_in\\_ukraine/](http://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/514/russia_s_hybrid_war_in_ukraine/).
  - 6 Valery Gerasimov, 'Tsennost nauki v predvidennii', *Voenna-Promyshlennyi Kur'er*, 27 February 2013, <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.
  - 7 Mark Galeotti, 'The "Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian Non-Linear War', In *Moscow's Shadow*, 6 July 2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.
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  - 10 David Sanger, 'A Test for the Meaning of Victory in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 13 February 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/weekinreview/14sanger.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/weekinreview/14sanger.html?_r=0).
  - 11 Survey conducted from 8–16 April 2014 by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology in Odessa. Published in Inna Vedernikova, Yuliya Mostovaya and Sergei Rakhmanin, 'Yugo-Vostok: Vetv' Dreva Nashego', *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 18 April 2014, [http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/yugo-vostok-vetv-dreva-nashego\\_.html](http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/yugo-vostok-vetv-dreva-nashego_.html).
  - 12 Lucian Kim, 'The Battle of Ilovaisk: Details of a Massacre Inside Rebel-Held Eastern Ukraine', *Newsweek*, 4 November 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/11/14/battle-ilovaik-details-massacre-inside-rebel-held-eastern-ukraine-282003.html>.
  - 13 See, inter alia, Edgar Buckley and Ioan Pascu, 'NATO's Article 5 and Russian Hybrid Warfare', *NATOSource*, 17 March 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-s-article-5-and-russian-hybrid-warfare>.
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  - 16 Sven Biscop, 'Hybrid Hysteria', Egmont Institute Security Policy Brief no. 64, June 2015.