



Unkonventioneller und hybrider Krieg in der Ukraine: zum Formenwandel des Krieges als Herausforderung für Politik und Wissenschaft*

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The annexation of Crimea and the covert military support of the separatists in Ukraine by Russia came as a surprise for many. The West is struggling to find an appropriate response to this challenge. One reason for this is the particular way of warfare. While NATO uses the term “hybrid warfare”, the Russian engagement can also be grasped by the specific term “unconventional war”. The hybrid form of warfare can be interpreted as a development of the unconventional one. Both pose a great challenge for politics and science.

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Hybrid warfare has become a new buzzword since the Ukraine war. The Russian activities can also be interpreted as unconventional warfare. Both unconventional (UW) and hybrid warfare (HW) often take place in a grey zone under the threshold of the direct use of military force. Rather, indirect and covert operations are used. According to the US military handbook, unconventional warfare consists of “[a]ctivities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area”. Two criteria must be fulfilled: “UW [unconventional warfare] must be conducted by, with, or through surrogates; and such surrogates must be irregular forces”. UW is a specific form of irregular warfare, which is regarded as equally important strategically as traditional warfare. The notion of hybrid warfare, although having been part of the debate since the success of the Hezbollah war in Lebanon in 2006, only became part of the US military doctrine during the Ukraine conflict. Since then, HW has been seen as a distinct challenge for the US and its allies, posed by state and non-state actors which use all possible means to destabilize an opponent.

For Russia, the Western civilian and military activities during the crises in Libya, Syria and the color revolutions in Georgia and the Ukraine led to the conclusion that the difference between war and peace is blurring and that the rules of warfare have changed. General Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov concluded in 2013 that the importance of civilian means has grown as have the roles of asymmetric actions, the use of Special Forces, and precision strike weapons, as well as the domestic opposition of the target country. On the one hand, Russia wants to protect itself against this new way of warfare. On the other hand, it has made use of it in the Ukraine conflict. After having had some negative

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experiences in the Georgian conflict in 2008, Russia began a comprehensive military reform in order to be more agile in local and regional conflicts. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula displayed improved command and control capabilities and modernized weaponry, while the covert intervention in the Eastern Ukraine demonstrated Russia's readiness to use conventional military force if deemed necessary.

Unconventional and hybrid warfare usually serve a political-strategic purpose. State actors choose violent action because they perceive that this purpose is in jeopardy and that there is a good chance of its own behavior being successful. In the case of the violent conflict in Ukraine, Russia and the West are following completely different political-strategic goals. Moscow is thinking primarily in terms of political realism, grounded in categories such as national might, influence and balance of power. It is striving to keep Ukraine or parts of it in the Russian sphere of influence and to block its rapprochement with NATO. The activities of the West are based on a liberal logic emphasizing goals such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Its core message is that Russian behavior is unlawful and illegitimate. Its political-strategic goals are self-determination for Ukraine and its integration into the Western structures. As long as the strategic goals of Russia and the West differ so much, there is the risk of a political ice age or at least a long period of a mix of confrontation and cooperation, both of which imply instability.

Unconventional and hybrid warfare is nothing new and seem to be flourishing again. Russia practiced it in Ukraine, the US did it in Afghanistan and in Iraq. In all of these cases, external powers supported insurgents in waging war against a contested government. War tactics, such as terrorism and guerilla activities, played a minor role in these cases, but the classical form of unconventional warfare was preserved by supporting the insurgents covertly. At the same time, unconventional evolved into hybrid warfare that is a mixture of conventional and unconventional means, such as new communication technologies, covert cyber attacks, use of irregular forces and the growing importance of civilian means and actors. At a time when direct conventional inter-state conflicts have become rare and the grey zone of indirect and covert operations is increasing, there is a growing risk that unconventional and hybrid warfare could become the preferred ways of dealing with inter-state conflict. This may be positive if compared with the alternative of a more costly direct military conflict. However, it is still problematic due to the problems involved.

On the political level, this means more instability as long as Russia and the West do not adapt their strategic goals, their narratives and their means. A more stable solution requires the renunciation of the use of violence, empathy and common responsibility for security. Such a cooperative approach is necessary because unconventional and hybrid warfare are so destabilizing and violate international law. It also furthers regional conflict as demonstrated in the recent efforts at regime change, such as in Afghanistan and Libya. It is not necessarily a low-cost endeavor either if the conflict becomes protracted. It is incalculable, not least because the proxies usually follow their own agendas and there are always unintended consequences. Furthermore, such kinds of warfare are normatively unacceptable. Finally, if it spirals out of control, it could end in a nuclear war if nuclear weapon states are involved.

On the scientific level, the concept of hybrid warfare and its analytic value must be more precise. Is it really a further development of unconventional warfare? Which role do the various civil-military fields of action play? How does the interplay of symmetry and asymmetry evolve given the military and technological dominance of the US, on the one hand and the new means of unrestricted warfare on the other? Which short- and mid-term countermeasures and which long-term peace strategies should be applied? The list of questions is surely not complete, but it already shows that there are huge research desiderata to be tackled. For political science, however, this is a theoretical and an empirical task which has high practical and political relevance.

