



## Expert Comment

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# Hegemony, power, and hybrid war

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# Hegemony, power, and hybrid war

Elinor Sloan

One of the salient features of the contemporary global landscape is that key state actors are seeking novel ways through which to maintain, achieve, or reestablish hegemony at the regional or global level. ‘Hegemony’, here, refers to a state exercising preponderant influence over another actor or actors, usually one or more states.<sup>1</sup> The key ingredient for hegemony is ‘power’, a concept that can be understood both in terms of tangible and intangible inputs (population, GDP, size of military, soft power, etc.), and in terms of outcomes—the ability to get others to do something they otherwise would not do, or to achieve a circumstance to their liking that other actors would not choose.<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines how states are using tools and techniques of hybrid warfare to increase their power, exercise influence over other actors, and achieve self-interested outcomes. It does so from a theoretical perspective, without identifying specific states and their activities. The paper begins by outlining the parameters of what is meant by hybrid war and placing it in the context of other forms of war. It then identifies key attributes of hybrid war, before discussing likely reasons *why* states are pursuing hybrid approaches today.

The paper concludes that states are using hybrid war to pursue their national interests because the particular tools available to them today are amenable to hybrid war; because the alternative is to risk nuclear escalation and/or conventional annihilation; and because hybrid war allows states to operate outside the bounds of global norms on the use of force. The backdrop to these circumstances is a decline in America’s relative power vis-à-vis other states which has opened up opportunities for countries to act on their discontent with the US-led world order. All of these factors indicate that hybrid war will remain a central feature of the global security landscape for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise discussion of the many definitions and interpretations of the term ‘hegemony’ see Brian Schmidt (2018), ‘Hegemony: A Conceptual and Theoretical Analysis’, unpublished paper, Carleton University, 26 April 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on defining power is vast. See, for example, Morgenthau (1973), Dahl (1957), Keohane and Nye (2001), Waltz (1979), and Mearsheimer (2001).

## Hybrid war in context

### Weapons/tools

The 'hybrid' in hybrid warfare refers to the coordinated use of conventional and irregular tools of warfare within the same battlespace either by a state or non-state actor. Conventional weapons include all military instruments that are not weapons of mass destruction (WMD), i.e., not nuclear, biological or chemical. Irregular tools of warfare have traditionally included terrorism, criminal activity, insurgency, and guerrilla war (the tactics of 'hit and run'), and in the 2000s came to include disruptive technologies like cyber war. Cyber war refers to sustained computer-based attack against adversary computer systems, that is, hostile digital attacks on information technology infrastructure.

More recent 'novel' irregular approaches include the use of special operations forces, unmarked soldiers, proxies, and new forms of information operations, notably through social media. Information operations, which in the 1990s was called information warfare (Sloan, 2017), refers to measures designed to influence or corrupt adversary information. Types of information operations encompass cyber war, psychological operations (PSYOPS), electronic warfare, and even the kinetic strike of command and control sites. PSYOPS, an age-old component of war, is meant to induce emotions in enemy thinking that are amenable to one's own side. Such operations can range from the non-technical dropping of leaflets on adversary populations through to today's internet-based spread of 'fake news'.

Finally, some conceptions of hybrid war include wider, non-military tools. From this perspective, a hybrid threat is an adversary that simultaneously employs a combination of conventional and irregular methods along with political, military, economic, social, and information means.<sup>3</sup> Examples might include, among other things, intense diplomatic pressure, large military exercises along borders, controlling access to key economic assets

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Russell Glenn (2009).

like oil and gas resources, exploiting nationalist identities and cultural differences, and waging a media campaign of false information on the internet.<sup>4</sup> For some, the return of political warfare – the employment of military, intelligence, diplomatic, financial and other means, short of conventional war, to achieve national objectives – is the defining feature of the contemporary security environment (Jones, 2018).

### **Actors, targets, and goals**

Conventional war exists when a state actor uses conventional tools of warfare. The main target in this form of war is the adversary's military forces. Irregular war exists if a non-state actor employs one or more of the 'traditional' irregular tools of warfare. The main target of these irregular approaches might be the adversary's military forces but is more likely to be the civilian population. A war is considered hybrid if the actor – state or non-state – undertakes the coordinated use of tools from both the conventional and 'traditional irregular' baskets of tools. A state-led hybrid war is still more complex because it might also include some of the 'novel irregular' approaches which are not available to non-state actors (e.g., a non-state actor, by definition, does not have proxies). In addition, it is state actors that will have the opportunity to incorporate methods of political warfare into their hybrid war approach.

Both state-led and non-state-led hybrid wars target the adversary's military forces and civilian population. Their goals, however, will differ. Non-state actors wage a hybrid war for things like secession, or to forestall a state actor from intervening. A state actor, by contrast, will have in its mind achieving self-interested objectives vis-à-vis another state that are larger in geographic scale. Notably, all these warfare forms, whether waged by a non-

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<sup>4</sup> Others argue that this sort of grand strategic approach, where tactical aspects of hybrid war are only part of a larger subversive and indirect weakening of the enemy, is better labelled "non-linear warfare". See Tad A. Schnauffer (2017).

state or state actor, target state actors. Counter-insurgency and civil war, where state and non-state actors, respectively, target non-state actors – and which dominated the first quarter century of the post-Cold War era – are not included in this schema. Figure 1 attempts to capture the distinction among conventional war, irregular war, and hybrid war, based on the actors and tools involved.

**Figure 1: A schema of warfare types**

	<b>Regular war</b>	<b>Irregular war</b>	<b>Hybrid war – 1990s and 2000s</b>	<b>Hybrid war – 2010s</b>
<b>Actor</b>	State	Non-state	Non-state	State
<b>Tools</b>	All conventional military weapons (i.e., not weapons of mass destruction)	Terrorism Insurgency Criminal activity Guerrilla tactics Subversion Sabotage Cyber war (from mid-2000s)	Irregular war combined with one or more tools of conventional war normally associated with states	Conventional military weapons combined with one or more tools of irregular war. May also include ‘novel’ irregular tools and wider political, military, economic, social and information means
<b>Target</b>	State adversary, military forces	State adversary, military forces or, (more often) civilian population	State adversary, military forces, and civilian population	State adversary, military forces, and civilian population
<b>Goal</b>	Defeat adversary military forces	Secession or overthrow government	Secession or to forestall state actor from intervening	Achieve regional objectives in circumstances short of open conventional war

### **Hybrid war then and now**

It is evident from this chart that the hybrid war concept has undergone a transformation over the past few decades. As originally conceived in the 1990s and early 2000s, hybrid war was

used to describe an activity carried out by a non-state actor. The Chechen struggle against Russia was considered hybrid because the Chechens employed, alongside their predominant guerrilla tactics, modern military communications technology and large coordinated military operations that are normally associated with state-based warfare.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, during the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon, Hezbollah combined terrorist activity and cyberwar with the use of high-tech military capabilities like anti-satellite weapons to effectively stymie Israeli objectives (Hoffman, 2006).

In 2007 Frank Hoffman, a prominent thinker on hybrid war, argued that in future it might be state actors that would blend high-tech conventional military capabilities with the use of terrorism and cyber warfare (Hoffman, 2007, p. 28). But it was not until after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 that hybrid war became associated with state behaviour. Casting around for a descriptor of Russian action in Crimea and Ukraine, NATO argued that the Russian method was one of hybrid war (2014). Since then scholars and policymakers have primarily focused on hybrid war as a state-led activity that incorporates non-state actors and other components.

Many observers have pointed out that hybrid war is not new; conflicts going back decades, centuries and even millennia have combined conventional and irregular approaches (e.g., Kofman and Rojansky, 2015; Wither, 2016; Lanoszka, 2016; and Mecklin, 2017). But hybrid war as conceived today is new in magnitude, not kind. Whereas regular and irregular elements have always been present in war, today they are more purposefully and substantially integrated in a coherent, holistic way. Whereas in yesterday's hybrid wars a conventional war marked the main military campaign and irregular war was considered a secondary theatre, in today's hybrid wars the main campaign *is* one of a hybrid approach.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Racz's (2015) discussion of Nemeth (2002) makes this point.

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean there will no longer be conventional wars.

In such a campaign, “regular and irregular components...become blurred into the same force in the same battlespace” (Hoffman, 2007, p. 29).

New tools, too, magnify the degree to which contemporary hybrid war is impactful. Most notable is access to advanced military communications technologies and precision weapons, cyber war, and the conduct of information operations through social media. Indeed, the repercussions of the internet for information operations – another age-old component of war – is of a degree that cyber-related activity is increasingly the centrepiece of hybrid war discussions (Dumitry, 2016).

### **Characteristics of contemporary hybrid war**

Hybrid war today is often characterised as existing in the ‘grey zone’ between peace and war because states seek to carry out their objectives without crossing the threshold to open conventional war. Since the traditional trigger to conventional war is clear-cut military aggression, states waging hybrid war pursue activities that are amenable to non-detection, non-attribution, plausible denial of responsibility, or a “masquerade of non-involvement” (Bachmann and Gunneriusson, 2015). Hybrid war is about as far away from a formal declaration of war, the overt statement of an impending or existing use of military force, as a conflict can get. It may involve very limited actual combat, defined as “violent struggle” (Cooper and Shearer, 2017), or even no combat at all. The idea is to create sufficient ambiguity in the mind of the state’s adversary to forestall any conventional military response.

The importance of non-attribution for keeping tensions below the use of force threshold points us to the central role cyberwar can play in a hybrid war. Depending on the skill of the perpetrator, it can be very difficult to determine who or what entity launches a cyber-attack. Cyber-attack is thus particularly amenable to non-attribution. For some, the challenges associated with the identification of perpetrators in cyberspace mean that “cyberspace will be the crux of future hybrid war” (Saalman, 2017, p. 145). Although at one

time it was thought the cyber domain could level the playing field between state actors and non-states actors like terrorists, in fact it is states that have proven to be the most formidable cyber warriors because of the substantial resources that they can devote to capability development.

That hybrid war operates in the space short of clear-cut military action recalls the admonishment of the ancient Chinese general, Sun Tzu, that “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill” (trans. Griffith, 1963, p. 77). Central to the indirect approach to war attributed to Sun Tzu is deception or creating uncertainty and confusion in the mind of the adversary with regards to things like the disposition of forces, military plans and intent; surprise; and sowing dissent, nurturing subversion, and seeking to divide allies. Notes one Sun Tzu interpreter, “only when the enemy could not be overcome by these means was there recourse to armed force” (Ibid, pp. 39-41). All of these ideas can be seen in state-led hybrid war today.

Finally, contemporary hybrid war is an offensive, not defensive, military strategy. Those who wage hybrid war are not responding to a proximate event or threat. Rather, they are pursuing a ‘long game’ of seeking, below the radar of open conventional war, cumulative tactical successes that ultimately add up to a strategic win. This might most often be a fait accompli, where the facts on the ground have concretely changed and the costs to the defender of reinstating the pre-existing situation are too high. Hybrid war is waged by actors who are not content with the status quo and who seek to increase their power in a regional setting. Many are specifically determined to challenge the US-built world order that was established in the post-WWII period.

### **Why hybrid war?**

Contemporary hybrid war, then, is waged by state actors who want to change their position in the international system, at least at the regional level. In adopting a hybrid war approach,

they are calculating that their interests are best served by pursuing their objectives without triggering a major conflict or waging conventional war. Why is this the case? Why are states going to pains to pursue their objectives indirectly, patiently, through sustained measures just short of war, when in another age they might have simply gone to war?

The main reason great powers seek to achieve their goals through hostile measures short of overt war is the existence of nuclear weapons and the risk that a conventional war between the great powers will escalate. This situation, of course, is not new, so nuclear weapons alone do not explain the contemporary currency of hybrid war (nor does it explain hybrid war waged by or against non-nuclear powers). But nuclear weapons remain the ultimate disincentive for great powers to wage [conventional] war against each other and thus a critical backdrop to other factors.

The rise of hybrid war as a state-led strategy is also a response to overwhelming conventional US power. Dramatic advances in America's conventional military capabilities, particularly in the areas of command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and precision strike, were first revealed during the 1991 Gulf War and subsequently reinforced in other wars of the 1990s and 2000s. Moreover, over the past decade, America's conventional strength has only grown. Since about 2010, the United States has been pursuing a concept called Prompt Global Strike, with the goal of being able to strike anywhere in the world with conventionally-armed long range precision weapons within one hour.

The message US opponents have taken, today and from the early days of the post-Cold War period, is to avoid America's overwhelming conventional strengths and seek alternative paths. 'Asymmetric' warfare was the term that originally appeared in the 1990s (by US thinkers) to describe adversaries who would avoid direct confrontation with the United States and, instead, target its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. One of these means was and is cyberwar, capabilities for which competing powers have been pursuing for close

to two decades. By waging hybrid war, America's opponents avoid exposing themselves to severe conventional force retribution, whether by the United States or a wider US-led coalition of countries.

Third, waging hybrid war allows powers to seek goals in circumstances where existing laws of war and global norms would not permit a use of force. Scholars note that in traditional just war doctrine the *jus ad bellum* (or 'war decision') included the right to wage an offensive war to protect vital interests that had been unjustly threatened or injured (O'Brien, 1981, p. 22). For centuries after the rise of the inter-state system in the 1600s, 'reprisals' were accepted as an international norm. But under the UN Charter framework this option was removed. Under the UN Charter all members must refrain in their use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any states. Apart from collective security measures authorised by the UN Security Council, the only permitted use of force is self-defence when a threat is apparent or imminent.

Over the past several decades, global norms against war, conquest and territorial violations have continued to strengthen (Ibid). While they have not stopped conflict, they have forced great power leaders to at least try to justify their actions in normative terms. Waging war without waging war enables states, in essence, to make their way around this framework. That is to say, hybrid war, and particularly its cyber component, allows states to bypass international legal norms regarding the use of force and territorial sovereignty (Bachmann and Gunneriusson, 2015), in pursuit of territorial gain or what in another era might have been called reprisals.

Finally, the rise of contemporary hybrid war cannot be divorced from changes in the structure of the international system. During the Cold War, under a bipolar structure of power, the United States and the Soviet Union pursued a hybrid approach particular to the time: nuclear stand-off combined with proxy wars. In the unipolar era of the 1990s America's overwhelming power precluded contenders. Since then, competitors' relative increases in

power, as defined in tangible terms of economic capacity and military strength (including nuclear), are allowing them to push back against the US-led order. The nascent return to a multipolar world, now taking place for the first time in a nuclear era, is incentivising great powers to seek hybrid warfare approaches.

## Conclusion

Key state actors today are using hybrid war to increase their power and influence over other actors and thereby seek their self-interested objectives. In doing so they have stolen a playbook from non-state actors by combining conventional and irregular warfare in the same battlespace. Contemporary state-led hybrid war is still more complex and potent because it might include novel irregular approaches along with tools of political warfare that are generally only available to states.

Operating at just below the threshold to open warfare, hybrid war enables states to pursue their interests without risking nuclear escalation and/or conventional annihilation, and do so in a manner that plausibly maintains their behaviour within global norms on the use of force. Hybrid war is an offensive strategy waged, in the main,<sup>7</sup> by non-status quo powers who seek to challenge the US-led world order. At the same time, America's inevitable *relative* decline in tangible power vis-à-vis other states over the past decade or two has opened up opportunities for states to act on their discontent. The changing global power structure, and the unique ways hybrid war allows states to act in this environment, signals the centrality of hybrid war for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>7</sup> A number of scholars and policy makers argue that the United States wages hybrid war.

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