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Simons G.

*Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies (IRES) at Uppsala University
Box 514, 75120 Uppsala, Sweden*

*Ural Federal University
51 prosp. Lenina, Yekaterinburg 620075, Russian Federation*

*Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Federation
53/2, str. 1, ul. Ostozhenka, Moscow 119034, Russian Federation*

OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND EFFECTS OF INFORMATIONAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF WESTERN HYBRID WARFARE

ABSTRACT

Aim. This paper critically examines these political and informational aspects of hybrid as used and defined in the West.

Methodology. The paper applied critical discourse analysis to the collected research materials. In this manner, the power relations and dynamics are revealed more clearly for the reader.

Results. It reveals that Western hybrid warfare consists of constraining the strengths and opportunities of other targeted powers while minimising their own weaknesses and threats within the context of the decline of the US-led Western global hegemony.

Research implications. Hybrid warfare is a very commonly heard, used and abused concept in the 21st century. On the one hand, it is subjectively used as a concept of non-conventional warfare, often in the context of what the hostile and 'aggressive other' inflicts upon a 'defensive us.' It is also at times an accusation used against a foreign policy opponent or competitor as a means of constraining their operational choices.

KEYWORDS

hybrid warfare, information realm, physical realm, cognitive realm, obstructive foreign policy, perception, influence

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Саймонс Г.

*Институт исследований России и Евразии (IRES) Уппсальского университета
75120, Вох 514, Уппсала, Швеция*

*Уральский федеральный университет
620075, г. Екатеринбург, пр-т Ленина, д. 51, Российская Федерация*

*Дипломатическая академия Российской Федерации
119034, г. Москва, ул. Остоженка, д. 53/2, стр. 1, Российская Федерация*

ПРАКТИЧЕСКИЕ ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ И РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ ИНФОРМАЦИОННЫХ И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ АСПЕКТОВ ГИБРИДНОЙ ВОЙНЫ ЗАПАДА

АННОТАЦИЯ

Цель. В статье даётся критический анализ политических и информационных аспектов гибридной войны в аспекте их определения и использования Западом.

Процедура и методы. Собранные для исследования материалы рассмотрены в статье с использованием критического дискурса-анализа. Это позволяет яснее представить для читателя отношения сил и их динамику.

Результаты. Установлено, что гибридная война Запада – это сдерживание сил и возможностей других целевых сторон и минимизация своих собственных слабостей и угроз в условиях ослабления западной мировой гегемонии, возглавляемой США.

Теоретическая и/или практическая значимость. Уточнено понятие «гибридная война» применительно к XXI в. С одной стороны, этот термин используется для обозначения нетрадиционных военных действий, которые «враждебные и агрессивные они» ведут против «обороняющихся нас». С другой стороны, этот термин используется как обвинение, выдвигаемое против иностранного политического оппонента или соперника с целью ограничить его оперативные возможности.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

гибридная война, информационная сфера, физическая сфера, когнитивная сфера, препятствующая внешняя политика, восприятие, влияние

INTRODUCTION

Warfare in the contemporary age consists of three distinct and yet interrelated and interacting realms of existence – the physical, informational and cognitive realms (Alberts et al., 2001). This present article intends to examine the conceptual aspects of Western hybrid warfare in terms of its activity and effects, where the activity takes place in the information realm and the effects occur in the cognitive realm. The assumption being, informational activities are intended by their very nature should have calculated and anticipated cognitive effects to deliver advantage to the communicator in their policy goals and objectives. This situation becomes increasingly actual in a situation of changing global orders, where a rising potential order threatens the viability of the incumbent hegemony.

An increasingly number of analyses and prognoses are emerging that evaluate the transformation of the global order, from a unipolar United States-led Western order towards a multipolar non-Western order [3, 5]. The relative decline in US (and Western) political, economic and military power and influence creates the motivation to try and save its privileged position by means that incur lesser economic, political and military risks and costs [29]. This is where the logic of Western conceptualisation and operationalisation of hybrid warfare is rooted as a relatively inexpensive form (in terms of political, military and economic costs) and plausibly deniable form of covert and indirect form of warfare upon a targeted government and country [20, 13].

Hybrid warfare as a concept was coined by Frank Hoffman [12]. He predicted a convergence in future warfare where challengers would engage in multi-modal warfare that combined organisation and means of the lethality of state conflict and fanatical passion of irregular warfare. The concept is a highly contested one, owed in no small part to the very high levels of politicisation and the absence of a clear and concise definition [4]. This brief paper intends to look more closely at specific aspects of hybrid warfare in terms of its political and informational dimensions. This leads logically to the following research question. How do the intangible elements of politics and information shape and influence tangible (physical realm) outcomes?

The paper begins with establishing the method and approach used to collect and analyse the data set of academic literature. Then the paper turns to the issue of outlining and understanding the aspects involved in the politicisation of the hybrid warfare concept. It then moves to the issue of the informational operationalisation of the hybrid warfare concept as a mechanism and means of obstructive foreign policy.

METHOD AND APPROACH

A general internet search was conducted to search for academic articles engaging in the political and informational elements of hybrid warfare. The specific search terms used to locate the articles were: “hybrid warfare”; “hybrid warfare + politics”; “hybrid warfare + information”. Results obtained from the search were then subjected to a manual evaluation as to the suitability for further analysis based on the focus of this article. A pool of over 50 relevant academic articles were collected for this purpose. This was the basis for a semi-structured literature review, which seeks understand the logic and influence of political and informational elements on the outcome of hybrid warfare by Western actors on targeted countries and governments.

This article shall employ a form of textual analysis with critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the above-mentioned sample of academic literature. It is noted that CDA intends to employ a critical dimension in the theoretical and

descriptive analyses and evaluations of those texts seen through the relations of power that are revealed by the inequalities in use of and access to language [15, 7, 28, 2]. This is motivated by the inherent embedded relationship between discourse and political power that is derived through meaning “as constructed during production or comprehension, is liable to embody opinions that derive from underlying ideologies” [27: 283]. A definition of hybrid warfare is needed at this stage, before moving to the consequences and implications of the concept’s operational deployment.

For the purposes of this paper, NATO [20] defines “hybrid warfare and its supporting tactics can include broad, complex, adaptive, opportunistic and often integrated combinations of conventional and unconventional methods. These activities could be overt or covert, involving military, paramilitary, organised criminal networks and civilian actors across all elements of power.” The following section deals with the politicisation of the concept of hybrid warfare in the information realm, with a focus on the political construction of the definition and how this discourse is employed to influence comprehension and perception of the physical realm.

POLITICISATION OF THE HYBRID WARFARE CONCEPT

By the very essence of its nature, hybrid warfare is an attempt to lever maximum possible advantage against a target in achieving foreign or security policy goals and objectives at a bare minimum of exposure to risks (political and military) and costs (political and economic). Hybrid warfare is a form of potential force multiplier that crosses and connects the physical, informational and cognitive realms. At the same time there is an evident hyper-politicisation of the hybrid warfare concept as something that is done by the ‘Other’, rather than an activity conducted by ‘Us’ [6, 8]. In this respect, it is politicised along similar lines as the concept and practice of propaganda, with the myth that this is not something that is done by so-called ‘democracies’ [23, 17: 137-174, 25]. It is seen as being ‘unethical’ as its definition and perception is firmly ensconced in the notion as being a deceptive and manipulative practice somewhere between the grey and black forms of information operations and influence activity.

Concepts, such as hybrid warfare, are subjected to definitions in the information realm that are useful or convenient for interpreting and analysing people, places and events situated in the physical realm as a means for shaping the cognitive realm of the various segmented audiences. Therefore, concepts form a potential bridge between the physical realm realities and the cognitive realm interpretations. Potentially, they are an important building block in establishing the orthodoxy of knowledge (the commonly assumed ‘facts’ and ‘knowledge’ on a particular object or subject). Caliskan [4: 40] notes the lack of conceptual clarity around hybrid warfare and “the opportunity cost of mis-conceptualisation is too

high, as it creates confusion rather than clarity and obscures strategic thought.” However, the lack of definitional precision creates an environment that supports political and policy opportunism owing to an abundance of potential political manoeuvring through the flexible and multiple potential operationalizable interpretations.

The heuristics of the term hybrid warfare tell us much about our philosophical interpretation of war. Like most fashionable ideas, the idea of hybrid warfare is condemned or embraced in equal measure, and discussions take the notion far beyond the initial conception. In doing so, the first iteration is changed beyond all recognition: it is reinterpreted and restyled until such a time as it is superseded by a new concept [13: 143].

Johnson goes on to argue that this makes dramatic and compelling grounds for the deployment of emotional logic to subvert the established norms and grounds for conducting warfare (and the basis for diplomacy and international relations) and to form the basis of a call and generate a desire for urgent remedies to combat this constructed threat. Mumford [19] argues that this situation creates difficulties in understanding the origin and meaning of a hostile action. This tends to increase the fog of (pre)war, permitting the cognitive manipulation of different stakeholders towards an operational objective. For example, to create an armed conflict, but the attacker may be perceived as the victim.

The political informational dimensions and elements are a means of attempting to engineer audience perception and consent. Several myths were actively perpetuated to raise the level of perceived risk and threat of hybrid warfare’s use against Western targets. These included: 1) it is a strategy; 2) it is something new; and 3) it is below the threshold of NATO’s article 5. However, the main arguments have been formulated against hybrid warfare: 1) it is about tactics; 2) it is not new; 3) the concept is weak; 4) creates an unnecessary category; and 5) it is not below NATO’s article 5 [16, 4: 49]. In Western academic discourse there has been a gradual and incremental shift in trying to associate the act of hybrid warfare as being something done by countries like China or Iran, and especially Russia, to “undermine” Western security, interests and the way of life [24, 26]. In doing so, the informational realm is used to create a highly simplified binary interpretation and representation of the physical realm, in order to deliberately shape the minds and behaviour of various target audiences in a manner that benefits the interests of the US-led global order.

HYBRID WARFARE AS A MECHANISM FOR OBSTRUCTIVE FOREIGN POLICY

Obstructive foreign policy as a concept and a practice occurs when the proactive party seeks to retain or attain a competitive relative advantage over its rising geopolitical competitors or rivals through simultaneously limiting their opponent's strengths and opportunities, increasing their opponent's weaknesses and threats. This is done while increasing their own strengths and opportunities and reducing their own weaknesses and threats. The obstructive foreign policy makes use of activity in the information realm to try and limit the perception of operational choice in the cognitive realm of the targeted country's decision-makers. This is intended to cause indecision, delay or 'forcing' inappropriate choices based on creating a phantom-effect of international 'opinion', 'consensus' or 'realities' that prevent the target from taking a course of action that would effectively defend and preserve national security and stability.

Fridman [9] observed that, in political terms, the vague concept of hybrid warfare makes it easier to accuse the other side of illegal actions and activities while fending off similar criticisms from their opponent as they gather the requisite political support and legitimacy from domestic and international audiences. In the analysis of Wither [30], it is noted that hybrid warfare does not change the nature of war but is rather attempting to gain some form of physical or psychological advantage over an opponent or target.

Various Western academics attempted to assign the operational use of hybrid warfare to Russia after the Western-led regime change of President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014 [10, 22, 30, 4, 6, 26]. This was based upon the supposed 'evidence' of the Russian Chief of General Staff, Gerasimov's 2013 article [11], which was widely misinterpreted as a signal for use of Russian hybrid warfare rather than a defence against Western hybrid warfare. Although, Fabian [6: 322] concluded that "the Russian hybrid warfare strategy is rather a Western myth than a comprehensive Russian strategic concept." This is the deliberate and calculated use of the information realm to influence the cognitive realm, where an Orwellian reality is created with the aggressor being perceived as the victim. In this instance, the Ukrainian people are the primary victim of this aggression and attempts are made to constrain Russia's operational choices by controlling the information flows around the event.

Therefore, hybrid warfare is developed operationally as a tool of cognitive constraint or restraint on the actual target of hybrid warfare through the use of assertion. This is not based on an absolute truth and maybe not even a partial truth, the main intended effect is that it resonates in the manner intended with the target audience. The target audience will react to the perception of reality that it believes to be true, rather than is objectively true. A desired outcome of the actual aggressor is to put the target in a reactive and defensive posture by manipulating and managing the reputational and brand elements of the actors

and events (present and future). This enables the aggressor to enable a stance that is proactive and offensive (although appearing as being the binary opposite) in their policy enactment of informational and physical realm activities.

Kofman [14] noted that the association of the concept of hybrid warfare to Russia when formulating political and military strategy that deals with Russia is not only a bad narrative, but is also leading to malinformed analysis. Although the practice of deception in politics and foreign policy is far from being a new phenomenon as the works of the likes as Machiavelli attest. The use of hybrid warfare as a mechanism for obstructive foreign policy seems to be an exercise of shifting the balance of political capital and legitimacy among the various target audiences. By evoking the sense of 'Russian hybrid warfare' risks and threats among domestic audiences, the political class communicating the threat can create the impression of an extraordinary situation in national and international relations as a means of manipulating and engineering public consent to pursue an aggressive foreign policy in the guise of a defensive posture.

It can also be used as a means of accumulating political capital among other international actors and entities by evoking a bandwagon effect through the notion of 'international rules' or 'international consensus' to coerce the appearance of establishing an international coalition of support for the use of hybrid warfare enacted against the country accused of waging hybrid warfare. This gives the impression that the target country is internationally isolated and needs to 're-join' the vague entity called the international community, which has a habit of giving the appearance of weakness and vulnerability in the minds of the decision-makers of the target. This is intended to persuade and influence the policy makers and decision makers of the target country that they need to 'reform' their political, economic, social and security system to be accepted in to the international system that is controlled by the US-led West. The result, if this logic is believed and followed by the target country's leadership, the political establishment is likely to collapse the appropriate and preferred policy options that can potentially challenge the West's power and influence and thereby erode its hegemony. The projection of the situation on the cognitive realm of the target country can also create a paralysis or lethargy among policy and decision makers that can create a vacuum that can be exploited by various hybrid forces in the country to precipitate the collapse of the incumbent political hierarchy or at least weaken its potential power and influence.

It is the intention to limit and weaken the strengths and opportunities for challenger actors to the global order's status quo, thereby offer the chance for the unipolar US order to survive longer based upon a relative advantage over any single rival, and to prevent the rise of coalitions. This is the reason for motivating the US-led foreign policy to weaken China's One Belt One Road project or trade wars (seen as a geoeconomic 'threat' to US global economic supremacy), but also explains the earlier Asia Pivot under Obama and more lately the Indo-Pacific

coalition as means to limit China's geopolitical rise. It also explains attempts to isolate Russia, by obstructing economic relations with other countries as the Nordstream-2 pipeline or attempting to leverage the use of Navalny to coerce change or obstruct opportunities. Independent foreign policy is not subordinate to or controlled by the system of the unipolar hegemony, so therefore the logic concludes as such, it constitutes a threat to the continued power and influence of that same said international order.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this article, a research question was posed. How do the intangible elements of politics and information shape and influence tangible (physical realm) outcomes? The human world is divided into the three interacting and inter-influencing realms of physical, informational and cognitive. Although the informational and cognitive realms belong to the intangible world, they do affect events, processes and outcomes in the tangible physical realm. All of these realms are interconnected and create various effects upon one another. Warfare is increasingly crossing these realms and becoming embedded in all of them in order to create greater effect on the intended target audiences, which is particularly relevant as information communication technologies evolve in terms of their power and reach in the era of the current information age. The very fashionable and deeply politicised concept of hybrid warfare serves as an excellent example, especially as motivation and opportunity is being driven by the political and geopolitical concerns of the currently transforming global order.

One of the more immediately obvious aspects that is readily apparent is the highly subjective and deeply politicised definition of the concept of hybrid warfare. It serves policy makers and practitioners simultaneously as both a tactical operational concept and an accusation against an opponent or rival in international relations. This may create confusion among the public and practitioners owing to a lack of clarity and precision, but it creates opportunities for the political operationalisation of the concept to create the impression of a threatening extraordinary situation that requires urgency to address. As such, it creates an opportunity by the user to break the conventions and rules of the game by creating a new orthodoxy of knowledge to shape the outcomes of the cognitive realm through manipulating the information realm content. Creating a much more flexible environment that potentially favours the possessor of the new orthodoxy of knowledge and disadvantaging rivals and competitors.

This is seen in the use of obstructive foreign policy that wields the perception and understanding of hybrid warfare as a means to render the target ineffective or at least less effective through the inflicting of reputational harm as a means to constrain their operational choices and to create a defensive and reactive posture. As such, the relative context lends an advantage, in this case, to a weakened US

unipolar hegemon over their rivals (in particular China and Russia). The cognitive realm is intended to generate or at least inflate the understanding or awareness of weaknesses and threats and minimise the strengths and opportunities. Thereby limiting their prospects for a relative rise in relation to the US and challenge the incumbent's privileged position of global power and influence. Obstructive foreign policy is conducted in the information realm but intends to affect the cognitive realm of the intended target and fits with the NATO [20] definition of hybrid warfare.

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ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Simons – Assoc. Prof., Researcher, Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; Leading Researcher, Humanitarian Institute at Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia; Assoc. Researcher, Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia; ORCID: 0000-0002-6111-5325; e-mail: gregmons@yahoo.com

Грег Саймонс – доцент Института исследований России и Евразии (IRES) Уппсальского университета, Швеция; ведущий научный сотрудник Гуманитарного института Уральского федерального университета, Екатеринбург, Россия; доцент, научный сотрудник Дипломатической академии Российской Федерации, Москва, Россия; ORCID: 0000-0002-6111-5325; e-mail: gregmons@yahoo.com

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