



# In Light of the Return of Great Power Politics: Countering Hybrid Threats to Europe

## Panel Proceedings



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**In Light of the Return of Great Power Politics:  
Countering Hybrid Threats to Europe  
Panel Discussion**

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# Agenda

- **Opening Remarks**

- Mr. Tunne KELAM, MEP, EPP
- Ms. Rebecca Harms, MEP – Greens/EFA
- Mr. Andrii Nadzhos, Counsellor, Mission of Ukraine to the European Union

- **Panel Discussion**

- **Moderator:** *James Moran*, Associate Senior Research Fellow at CEPS and former Ambassador and Head of the European Union Delegation in the Arab Republic of Egypt, and he headed the EU missions to Jordan and Yemen

- **Political Warfare, Hybrid Threats and Europe's Response**

Panellist: *Antonios Nestoras*, PhD Researcher, Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)

- **A Strategic Foresight for Europe: Countering Hybrid Threats Through the Lens of Strategy**

Panellist: *Murat CALISKAN*, PhD Candidate at UCL and Senior Research Fellow at Beyond the Horizon International Strategic Studies Group

- **Hybrid Threats Through the Prism of Illegal Occupation of Crimea**

Panellist: *Olena Snigyr*, PhD, Chief analyst of the Center for International studies of the Hennadiy Udovenko Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

- **Russia and Iran's Role in the Middle-East and its impacts in Europe**

Panellist: *Ambassador Marc Otte*, Senior Advisor at BIC-RHR, Belgium Special Envoy for Syria, Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont Institute, Vice-President at EIP

“ Panel discussion has provided insight on how Europe can address challenges emanating from expansion of political warfare.”

The panellists have addressed the highest trending challenges of our time: frightening applications of deep-fake technology, digitisation of hybrid warfare through artificial intelligence, sophisticated and autonomous cyber-attacks, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, interference in elections to name just a few... These are all very serious and complex threats that constitute different forms of hybrid warfare and unfortunately, there is no silver bullet for countering them. Therefore, we, as democratic societies, will have to build resilience and learn to fight against this new form of warfare, if we want to keep Europe free and safe.

Then, against this definition and background, we have focused on countering hybrid threats in light of the return of great power politics. Panel discussion has provided insight on how Europe can address challenges emanating from expansion of political warfare. As you will verify upon reading transcripts in the booklet at your hand, we have no doubt that the panel has served as a perfect platform to share ideas and experiences and also develop further cooperation among all participants.

As final word, we want to thank our speakers, Mr. Andrii Nadzhos, Dr. James Moran, Dr. Antonios Nestoras, Mr. Murat CALISKAN, Dr. Olena Snigyr, and Ambassador Marc Otte for sharing their invaluable views and to Mr. Tunne KELAM (MEP - EPP) and Ms. Rebecca Harms (MEP – Greens/EFA) for hosting and participating the panel.

# Hybrid threats through the prism of the illegal occupation of Crimea

*Olena Snigyr \**

The distance – physical and psychological distance of many European capitals from Crimea dwarfs the sense of danger many Europeans tend to feel about the annexation of Crimea. Despite the fact that Crimea is a part of natural-Mediterranean – Black Sea security area and everything that happens there directly impacts European security.

The Russian occupation of Crimea was itself a hybrid operation, in the meaning of the disguising the event with fake political procedures and massive disinformation. We can already speak about a richer spectrum of hybrid threats that emanate from the occupation of Crimea, as well the literal use of the peninsula as an instrument of hybrid warfare. Three main dimensions of hybrid threats in the context of the occupation of Crimea by Russia can be sorted out today:

I. Conventional Security; II. Legal warfare aka “lawfare”; III. Humanitarian Dimension.

## 1. Conventional Security

In the dimension of conventional security, Crimea has already become an instrument of further Russian military expansion. Since illegally annexing Crimea in 2014, Russia has drastically increased its military presence in the Black Sea region. It is fair to say that Russia boasts military control over the region.

As was outlined in the analysis of Ruslan Minich, published at the Atlantic Council, Russia has been creating an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) zone over the Black Sea that will allow Kremlin to deny other countries' access and free movement in the region. The A2/AD zone today already includes several elements: coastal defence systems with anti-ship missiles and air defence systems using advanced anti-aircraft missile systems. With its capabilities allocated in Crimea Russian military forces can threaten most of Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as part of Central Asia and the Middle East. An integral part of establishing the anti-access/area denial zone is electronic warfare thus allowing Russian reconnaissance assets in Crimea to monitor NATO ships in the Mediterranean.

Within four years, Crimea has turned into a giant military base. The number of the soldiers has risen to 32,000, aiming to reach 43,000 by 2025, the number of aircraft – to 122, warships – to 71, long-

range surface-to-air missile systems – to 16, and up to seven submarines are now docked where there had been none before. To date, there is still no evidence of the presence of Russian nuclear weapons in Crimea.

As soon as there is no access of international organizations to the territory of the occupied Crimea and thus no monitoring, the international community cannot be assured of the nuclear-free status of peninsular in future - some weapons in Crimea are capable of carrying nuclear warheads, and Russia is upgrading facilities that housed nuclear bombs prior to 1994.

## 2. Law Warfare

In launching its military campaign against Ukraine 5 years ago, Russia violated more than 400 bilateral and multilateral agreements and fundamental norms and principles of international law. Russia is also conducting legal warfare that uses Crimea as an instrument. As it has been outlined by Dr. Olexander Zadorozhny - a legal scholar at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv in his book “Russian Doctrine of International Law After the Annexation of Crimea” - since 2014 Russian lawyers have been shifting their interpretation of the fundamental regulations and principles of international law, especially concerning issues of territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders and national self-determination. And as James R.

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Holmes points out in his article "Goodbye Grotius, Hello Putin" - "much like its attempts to create an alternative political reality in its neighbourhood, Russia is trying to bring an alternative legal reality into existence in which strength and power trumps equal standing before the law".

The security system based on law and trust has almost been ruined. The downward trend began when European democracies agreed to the compromise of combining the systematic human rights violations by Russia with its full-fledged membership in the Council of Europe, and continues with the insufficient reaction against the Moscow's aggression against several independent states in its neighborhood and Russia's de-facto occupation and annexation of some territories (in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine). Russia never experienced any serious consequences for the violations of its commitments. This dangerous trend is now escalating via the violation and derogation by Moscow the basic principles of international law, the worst part of which is happening in the sphere of international maritime law.

With the military blockage of the Kerch Strait and the resulting de-facto blockade of two Ukrainian ports on the sea of Azov, Russia violates both the UN Convention on the law of the sea and the 2003 Ukraine-Russia agreement on the Sea of Azov. Russia's provocations in the Kerch Strait, in the Sea of Azov, and its aggression in the international waters of the Black Sea aren't just a challenge to Ukraine. As James R. Holmes mentions in his article, Moscow is seeking to resuscitate the closed-sea doctrine and has sympathisers in this intention among ambitious international actors. If Russia and China succeed in extending their sovereignty in the Sea of Azov and the South China Sea, it may put freedom of navigation in other parts of the globe under risk.

In the strategy of expanding their areas of geopolitical control, Russia, as well as China, use infrastructure and engineering works present in the waters of the targeted seas. China has built artificial islands for its military purposes. Russia has constructed a bridge over the Kerch Strait and uses seized Ukrainian offshore oil platforms near Odesa for military intelligence operations. We also have to be aware of the possible dual-use of underwater gas pipelines both in the Black Sea and in the Baltic Sea.

### 3. Humanitarian Dimension

In the sphere of non-material values – democracy, human rights and the rule of law are the most

vulnerable in the face of hybrid threats. Basically – these are the doors of hybrid war. Compromise is an indispensable part of international politics and diplomacy, but a compromise between Russia and Europe at the cost of European values is harmful to Europe itself. This kind of compromise has a long-lasting and damaging effect on the resilience of the European institutions, organisations, and states. The logical consequence of Western pliancy is Russian movement forward in further testing its limits – e.g. the military aggression against Ukraine, intervention, occupation, and the illegal annexation of Crimea.

The sad fact is that today's processes in occupied Crimea demonstrate the inability of existing international organisations and institutions aimed at the protection of human rights to contain the expansion of human rights violations and lawlessness in Europe. Crimea has become a "grey zone", a territory that international organisations with a mandate to protect human rights (UN, OSCE, Council of Europe) cannot access despite the fact that the mandates of UN and OSCE missions extend the territory of Crimea.

### 4. Conclusion

The occupation of Crimea and Russian aggression against Ukraine in general and especially the recent aggression on the sea brings into sharp focus a slew of new hybrid threats.

Firstly, we have to mention the engagement of an international organisation and some European politicians by Moscow in pursuit of the "normalisation" of the illegal status of the occupied Crimea. In 2014 the Red Cross Society of Ukraine declared that the operation of the Russian Red Cross in Crimea, seizing the property of the Ukrainian Branch of the Red Cross, broke the statutes of the Red Cross and Red Crescent international movements. There has been an absence of a reaction from the International Committee of the Red Cross on this issue. The ambiguous legal status of the Russian Branch of the Red Cross in Crimea demands a reaction from this global organisation. This silence can't be accepted as something normal, and a selective approach of sometimes helping and other times ignoring the victims of Russian repressions in Crimea cannot be accepted.

Since foreign visitors of Crimea are legally responsible only to Ukrainian civil law, they may consider financial blandishments from Moscow more convincing. Still, those European politicians who take such a decision are responsible for the whitewashing of the repressions of the Russian

occupational regime in Crimea against Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians as well as Russia's military aggression on land and sea.

Secondly, we are aware of Russian tactics of "low level" terrorist activities. Repressions against Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians are conducted to make people leave the territory of Crimea. The result of this Russian policy of terror is an increase in fear and insecurity and a feeling that the efforts of imprisoned Ukrainian citizens and their supporters are futile, as well as psychological and emotional violence against those who are expecting to be arrested. Meanwhile, Russia is implementing a program of the resettlement of Russian citizens in Crimea. Today around 50,000 people from Russian territory have already been resettled in Crimea. Of course, such an occupational demographic policy delegitimises any future seemingly "democratic" procedures and processes on that territory.

Thirdly, the Russian policy of repression, detention, and imprisonment of Ukrainian citizens has reached the status of mass repression. Today we can speak about more than 100 illegally imprisoned Ukrainians on the territory of Russia and in the occupied Crimea. According to the reports of the human rights organisations in Ukraine, there are about 400 Ukrainians detained on the occupied

territories of Eastern Ukraine. Russia has been blocking the process of releasing hostages and political prisoners and says openly that it will block all initiatives and is waiting for a change of power in Ukraine. Thus, Russia has introduced a new instrument in international politics – the use of foreign political hostages on a massive scale.

In this context, an extraordinary role belongs to the 24 Ukrainian seamen, captured by the Russian Navy in the international waters of the Black Sea on the 25th of November, 2018. With its aggression on the sea and its detention of the Ukrainian seamen, Moscow is now testing the international reaction of its violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Geneva Convention of 1949 relating to the treatment of prisoners of war. The European Union has reacted with the "Azov package" of sanctions, with a list of the eight individuals that carried out the orders to attack the Ukrainian ships, but none of those who made these orders. Russia's refusal to release the Ukrainian seamen shows that the EU's reaction has more symbolic than effective. While Russia continues to test the limits, other states shift from watching to following, in the South China Sea today, in the other seas around the globe tomorrow, suffocating to death the freedom of navigation.

# A Strategic Foresight for Europe: Countering Hybrid Threats Through the Lens of Strategy

Murat Caliskan\*

## 1. A Critique of Hybrid Warfare Concept

It was retired Marine Officer Frank Hoffman who popularised the Hybrid warfare concept in a series of articles and books since it was first publicly used in 2005 in a conference, by General Mattis, the U.S. General Secretary of Defense who resigned in last October. For Hoffman, hybrid warfare can shortly be defined as the combination of different modes of war on the same battlefield, which is a military-dominant approach. However, Russia's invasion of Crimea was a milestone, not only for the West-Russia relations but also for the content and the use of hybrid warfare concept. The term gained huge popularity after Russia's invasion of Crimea. NATO and EU, labelling Russia's activities as hybrid warfare, adopted the term in their strategic documents. If we look at the definitions of NATO and EU, we can see that these later definitions include broader aspects such as economy, disinformation, diplomacy in addition to the Hoffman's more military-oriented definition. In fact, Hoffman himself confessed in an article in 2014 that his theory fails to capture non-violent actions, such as economic, subversive acts or information operations.

While the concept is used widely by NATO, EU or Western nations and politicians, analysts, there is also an increasing number of critiques about the validity and the use of the concept. The critiques can be grouped in four main titles. First of all, the term is criticised for being ambiguous, it so inclusive and broad that it loses its value to be analytically useful. It actually describes warfare itself, and every conflict can be named as hybrid as long as it doesn't have the characteristics of a single form of warfare. Secondly, almost everybody agrees that it is not new. As American scholar Echevarria noted, from a historical standpoint, hybrid war has been the norm in fact, but it is the conventional war that has been the illusion. And Thirdly, like many new concepts, it encourages tactical thinking focused upon the enemy's way of fighting, rather than upon strategy,

or the strategic effectiveness. And finally, by creating another war category, in addition to traditional and irregular warfare, it urges us to expect future conflicts to be in hybrid character and this causes us to miss the real complexity of warfare, as the war can take infinite forms in the tactical level.

For instance, in another research I carried out with a colleague, we made a "content analysis" of 66 media items such as the news articles and commentaries in which the term "hybrid warfare" is used. We concluded that only in 18 items the term was used in its true meaning. The authors implied "information warfare" in 20 items, "political warfare" in 14 items, "unconventional warfare" in 5 items, "conventional warfare" in 2 items, "irregular warfare" in 1 item, "comprehensive approach" in 1 item and "subversive warfare" in 1 item when they used the term "hybrid warfare". In 4 items, no specific meaning could be determined. This ongoing study demonstrates that hybrid warfare is an ambiguous concept which the international community cannot agree upon.

But hybrid warfare is not alone in its effort to conceptualise contemporary warfare. Compound Warfare, New Wars, Asymmetric Conflict, Fourth-Generation Warfare, Revolution in Military Affairs, Network Centric Warfare, Effects-Based Operations, Comprehensive Approach, Political Warfare are some examples to the concepts and terms that have emerged since the end of Cold War. But as time passed by, most of them become passé and lost their popularity, but probably just to return in future, with a slightly different name, when similar conditions arise. It is understandable, even commendable, that analysts make an effort to conceptualise contemporary warfare. However, the opportunity cost of misconception is too high, as it creates confusion rather than clarity and obscures the strategic thought. These attempts to categorise war usually discount the role of strategy whereas Strategy lies at the nexus of all dimensions of warfare and it is only through strategy where the character of warfare takes shape.

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All the terms/concepts have the right aspects in their observations and assessments about contemporary warfare. However, there is a common fallacy of generalising from specifics of their own period and labelling these generalisations with a new term as if they are a new type of war. First, Hoffman generalised from the specifics of the war between Israel-Hezbollah in 2006, then the U.S. generalised from the specifics of Afghanistan and Iraq Wars and recently defence community has generalised from the specifics of Russian activities in Crimea and Ukraine. It seems that warfare is redefined in relation to the characteristics of each conflict Gray calls it as “presentism”, which means the tendency to see the current problems as unique and fail to see historical continuities. Lonsdale draws attention to “reductionism”, which means concentrating on just one or two of the many dimensions of strategy and suggesting that success can be gained through this particular dimension. In fact, war is an elephant, though it may appear in hybrid, compound, irregular, traditional or other forms—depending upon one’s view of it. And in most cases, analysts describe one part of this elephant. What we need is a more holistic approach to warfare, and to understand what the constants and variables of warfare are. I believe the strategic theory might be the answer to what we are looking for.

### 2. Strategic Theory and Hybrid Warfare

So, what are strategy and strategic theory? The strategic theory is a general term that refers to the interconnected principles pertained to strategy and grand strategy. It assumes that all wars share certain common characteristics and it provides guidance on how to manage the complexities of using force to achieve policy ends. While the strategy has a narrower meaning restricted to the use of the military as a tool, it always must be nested in a broader framework, which is called the grand strategy. In contemporary literature, grand strategy usually refers to “national strategy” or “national security strategy” for the states. To complicate the things further, strategy as a term, though technically restricted to the use of military, is usually used with strategic theory interchangeably. Therefore, when I said strategy, I mean strategic theory. Below, I tried to depict those principles and common characteristics in a nutshell, while it is very difficult indeed to include all details. It is a depiction of the universal and eternal features of strategy-making, which means this construct works in every conflict whether we are cognizant of it or not.

The strategy is usually divided into three essential components: ends + ways + means where “policy

end”, denotes the goals we aspire to achieve, “strategic ways” correspond to the alternative courses of action to follow, and “means” are the resources that we can use. In an ideal world, politics produces policy; strategy connects policy with means by determining required capabilities/forces and by assigning specific tasks to those forces that can achieve policy goals; and finally, operational and tactical levels execute those concrete tasks decided by the strategy.

The levels are different in nature, and they answer different questions. Policy answers to the question of “why and what”, while strategy seeks an answer for “how”; and operational/tactical levels do it. At the operational/tactical levels, operations can take infinite forms, from humanitarian aid to full conventional war.

A good strategy is expected to be one in which all three components are tuned; that is, the means are sufficient to accomplish the ends through the designated ways. The most challenging part of this structure is to convert military power and other tools into political effect. It is extremely difficult because it requires exceptional talent to determine which actions or which combination of different dimensions match policy ends. This is called strategy, and it ensures all levels function properly. It is more an art than science. Despite huge advances in technology, there is no scientific method to determine how much military power- or other national powers- is enough or when the balance is achieved. This largely depends on the strategic sense and judgement of strategists. Another reason why the strategy is so difficult is the fact that warfare or conflicts are very complex. War is “a function of interconnected variables” whose weights differs by the context and circumstances. One scholar uses a “bridge” metaphor, name it as “strategy bridge” to explain the instrumentality function of the strategy. This bridge must operate in both ways; therefore, the strategist does not just translate policy intentions to operations but also to adjust policy in the light of operations. This is done through constant negotiation between levels and among the dimensions, by a civilian-military partnership. It is usually a committee process.

There might be cases that the military plays no part. Instead of direct use of force, sometimes, only the threat of force can provide the desired effects. But whether it is the leading component or not, the military is indispensable in designing and executing strategy and grand strategy. For this reason, putting a strategy in practice requires an appreciation for military power, what it can and cannot do, and how they can be linked to form operations and

campaigns to achieve policy goals. Apart from non-military dimensions, which are economic, social, informational and diplomatic dimensions, as you can see in the slide, arguably, there are eight eternal factors of the strategy, namely adversary, complexity, human, culture, technology, geography, logistics and doctrine, which needs to be taken into account and are valid for all conflicts, whereas their relative weights depend on the context of each specific case.

I would like to draw your attention that whether we are aware of strategic theory and we plan our activities through these principles or not, this mechanism works. Every conflict has different dimensions. Fewer dimensions might be in action in a limited operation while all dimensions and factors are in full use in a major conflict.

So, if we go back to hybrid warfare and want to see where it falls under the realm of strategy, I claim that hybrid warfare was mainly about operational and tactical levels until 2014. Only after Russia's annexation of Crimea that the defence community began to incorporate other dimensions. However, this time the focus was rather on the informational dimension, which means that hybrid warfare is usually seen as a variant of propaganda, psychological and information operations. I believe that war is the war that you can conduct in many different ways. What is required is to have a holistic vision of the strategic context and the adaptability to meet the unique challenges of the day through the use of all instruments of grand strategy. As mentioned, at the operational and tactical level, operations can take infinite forms. Given that every challenge is unique in many important details, they must first be assessed at the level of grand strategy. If it is decided that the challenge requires a military reaction, then grand strategy must employ military instrument tailored against that specific challenge.

### 3. Recommendations and Implications for Europe

So far, the right perspective that is believed to be adopted for approaching to the warfare and conflicts is summarised. In this section, some advice and implications for Europe are provided considering the current security and defence posture of the EU. I would like to start by pointing to the need for a change in the defence mentality especially of policymakers and key decision makers.

There is a shocking Youtube video where General Wesley Clark, then Chief of Staff, Head of Armed Forces of the U.S., explains how the U.S. made the decision to make war against Iraq and seven

other countries in the Middle East. Firstly, it is very surprising that General Clark was not involved in the decision-making process. Secondly, this is a very good example of the complete loss of strategy, of which we are still experiencing dire consequences in Afghanistan and the Middle East, even in Africa. And history is full of these examples. Was the war against Afghanistan and Iraq the best option for the U.S. to eliminate terrorism? I don't think so. General Clark's says "if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem has to look like a nail." Of course, the U.S. had many tools other than military; the problem was decision-makers at that time were not aware of that. As I mentioned, it requires exceptional talent to determine which tactical actions match policy ends. Unfortunately, in democracies, politicians and decision-makers, in general, do not have required appreciation of strategy-making.

Of course, the change is needed not only in the mentality but also in the structure. It doesn't necessarily require adding a new layer or a new institution. It is more about how different existing components work better together. Recently the EU has taken some important steps, like PESCO and EDF, whose main aim is to jointly develop defence capabilities, and it is very important, but I think it is still about increasing tactical capacities. Again, strategic and policy levels are neglected.

I believe, EU needs a committee supported by intelligence and high-quality staff, whose function is to convert EU's defence policies to actions, or vice versa, to ensure that tactical deeds are tuned with these policies. To be able to do that, this committee should have a cross-departmental ability to work in collaboration with EU institutions in other dimensions. The key issue here is to have the ability to handle cross-cutting issues, because the silo thinking or some say, stove piping is the current biggest challenge of EU structure. In fact, External Action Service is a good candidate to assume this responsibility, as many of its current tasks overlap with the committee proposed here. But it should be transformed into a service that can carry out this bridge function between policy and means, and that have an ability to better collaborate with other dimensions.

When it comes to NATO-EU relations; as many analysts suggested, I support the idea that NATO and EU could be complementary to each other as NATO is mainly a military organisation focused on collective defence and EU has capabilities in other dimensions. However, if EU can transform itself and has this working mechanism from policy to the tactical level, which balances the essential

components of strategy; NATO would become a major part of EU's military tool, rather than an alliance that EU based all its defence on. As NATO-EU complementary relationship goes on, the EU could keep on improving its defence posture through crisis management operations, such as in Mali and Bosnia. Because these operations are currently conducted on ad hoc mechanisms rather than well-designed structure.

With the same logic, if succeeded in designing and institutionalising its defence posture, the EU can and should create its regular army as well, beginning with military headquarters like NATO's SHAPE. I believe, a European Army wouldn't conflict with NATO. Because NATO, especially the U.S. would prefer a

stronger EU in that sense to ease the burden on its shoulders. There might be some concerns regarding the cost of such an army, but I do not think it will cause a considerable cost as member states have already national forces perform in accordance with NATO standards. Apart from all, the EU definitely needs its army if it wants to be a global actor, in other words, if it wants to get its strategic autonomy.

Last but not least, all recommendations explained here depends on one important fact, which is "EU members' willingness to see EU as a Global Actor" in their sincere thoughts. I personally believe there is no other way for EU members than to build a sound defence and security structure. But there is much to do, to persuade policymakers and populations of EU member states.

# Political Warfare, Hybrid Threats and Europe's Response

*Antonios Nestoras \**

There are many labels to describe the issues linked with the return of great power competition in the cyber era in search of conceptual clarity. I am going to talk briefly about two of them - political warfare and hybrid warfare. The definition of hybrid warfare is the combination of unconventional types of warfare with more traditional, military operations. The problem with this definition is that it is very narrow in the sense that the actual fighting rarely happens. What we have instead is prolonged unconventional conflicts, characterised by propaganda, psychological operations etc.

Scholars of hybrid warfare recognise this: they divide hybrid warfare into two phases - a political preparatory phase and the actual hybrid phase. But as I said this is slightly problematic, because the hybrid phase that involves actual fighting is rare. So, with too much focus on hybrid threats, we are at risk of seeing the tree and losing the forest.

Any form of unconventional conflict may at any time become a hybrid war. However, before a war turns hybrid, it is purely political. A term such as political warfare that includes propaganda, disinformation, psychological operations, ideological conflict, economic and trade wars, cyber warfare etc. is more inclusive, and it describes the reality better. It is a more useful term in describing what may be the new normal of international affairs: great powers constantly fighting with every means that they have at their disposal - short of war- for popularity in cyberspace, for winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Surely though, all these activities such as propaganda or disinformation are nothing new. Fake news is old news. Why are we suddenly talking about them all the time? Why are we identifying these state activities as a definitive security issue? What has changed? Three things:

1. Information and communication technology,
2. The significance of public opinion for strategy and foreign policy,
3. Public perceptions of the concept of truth - the 'post-truth' debate.

First, modern information and communication technology has collapsed the traditional conceptions of space and time. The information revolution has created a network society that is demonstrating distinctive patterns of behaviour and political significance. We are all connected through the Internet and the New Media, and we don't act as

merely individuals or groups but as networks. And networks are easier to infiltrate and manipulate than closed groups and disparate individuals.

Second, the public opinion - because of the above - participates almost in real-time with every aspect of domestic and foreign policy. Public opinion matters more than ever in a democracy, and this is why it is being targeted by state and non-state actors.

Third, and in addition to the above, public opinion seems to be moving away from traditional concepts of truth as an objective external reality. The 'post-truth' debate is not a theoretical or conceptual issue; it is a practical, noticeable cultural shift of people distrusting the experts, the state institutions, the academics etc. As a result, the network society is more receptive to fake news, alternative facts, conspiracy theories, propaganda etc. in cyberspace where alternative facts and truths are generally accepted.

The combination of 1-2-3 makes for a very explosive mix - a nearly permanent state of conflict between state and non-state actors, a new race for the heart and mind of the people. Malign actors now have the technological tools to wage political warfare against the population on a massive scale, while our societies are more susceptible than ever to propaganda and disinformation.

The EU response so far has been convincing and effective - to the extent that fake news and disinformation operations can be countered at all. There has been a systematic effort to raise awareness, create institutional structures to counter disinformation (e.g. StratCom East), there is an ongoing initiative to create a legislative framework against spreading disinformation and social and institutional pressure for the self-regulation of new media giants such as Facebook and Google.

However, it needs to be noted that all these malign influences - name it political warfare, hybrid warfare or any other term currently in use - they are not creating our problems out of thin air. They are merely exploiting the crises that we cannot deal with efficiently. Before we start circumcising our freedom of speech and other fundamental liberties, we need to listen to the valid concerns of the citizens, put our house in order, so to speak, and deal with the source of the problem. Improve our governance, improve our economy and business environment, mitigate social and economic inequality, deal effectively with increased migratory flows, improve transparency on the EU level.

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