Russian Hybrid (New Generation) Warfare in the Time of a Systemic Political-Military Transition

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INTRODUCTION

The field of hybrid warfare studies has largely stagnated over the past decade. The term is almost exclusively applied to Russian policy carrying an emotional rather than an analytical connotation. Yet originally, it was introduced to describe specific types of armed conflicts. American military experts coined the concept to capture non-conventional forms of warfare encountered in Afghanistan, Iraq, and earlier conflicts of the 1990s and 2000s. Over time, it evolved to denote complex, multi-domain operations. The Russian military took interest in the idea, informally adopting elements of the concept without accepting the term itself. In Russia, however, its scope was narrower than in U.S. usage. Whereas "hybrid warfare" in the American sense referred broadly to multi-domain operations, Russia's "New Generation Warfare" (NGW) described, more narrowly, military operations to be employed in the multi-domain context. After 2014, Western discourse increasingly applied the label "hybrid warfare" to nearly all aspects of Russian foreign policy—creating a methodological problem: if a term applies to everything, it applies to nothing.

This study seeks to reassess the substance and evolution of hybrid warfare and to make sense of Russian hybrid operations by clearly distinguishing between cases that qualify and those that represent more traditional foreign or defense policy. A more precise definition will help clarify the phenomenon and enable the development of a predictive framework to anticipate when, where, and how Russia might pursue hybrid operations in the future. To this end, the study begins by tracing the emergence and evolution of the concept, then identifies the elements of hybrid warfare incorporated into Russian policy, highlighting both similarities to and differences from the original American concept. It concludes with case studies of Russian hybrid operations and considers how hybrid warfare may continue to evolve in Russian strategy.

For the purposes of this study, the term *hybrid warfare* refers to complex, multi-domain operations that employ a broad array of both military and non-military tools—political, economic, psychological, informational, cyber, and others. Used in combination, these instruments enable the achievement of operational goals without large-scale use of force, primarily by influencing political and decision-making processes in the target country. Typically, the intended outcome of hybrid operations is either a change of political regime in

the target state or the strengthening of an existing regime; in some cases, their goal is "victory without war" by disabling the adversary's ability and resolve to resist.

The military component of hybrid warfare is always limited. It may include special operations, support for paramilitary groups, sabotage, and other forms of deniable or clandestine activity. Even more open use of force is preferably implemented short of war. This study considers use of force integral to hybrid warfare and one of its defining characteristics. By contrast, a multi-domain operation that does not include any use of force is not classified as hybrid warfare.

For example, Russia's war against Ukraine cannot be considered a hybrid operation because it constitutes a full-scale war. Similarly, China's activities in Africa do not qualify as hybrid warfare: while they involve investment, construction programs, and other economic tools aimed at expanding Chinese influence as well as support for friendly political regimes, they lack a military component. Along the same lines, Russian information warfare against the West is best described as propaganda—traditional or modern (e.g., through social media)—rather than hybrid warfare. Nevertheless, information operations may form part of hybrid warfare when combined with other domains, including limited military action.

This study assumes that hybrid warfare is a universal phenomenon not limited to any single country. The tendency of the past decade to associate the term exclusively with Russian policy runs counter to its American origins and is methodologically flawed. When applied only to one country, the term becomes a largely emotional and negative label rather than an analytical tool. Hybrid warfare should instead be understood as a toolbox that any state can employ. The nature of the tool does not depend on its ultimate purpose, whether positive or negative. Indeed, Russia has borrowed many elements of its hybrid operations from U.S. practices in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. The fact that the United States pursued democratic regime-building while Russia aimed at the opposite outcome does not mean the underlying toolbox differed fundamentally.

That said, Russian hybrid operations differ significantly from those of the United States, both conceptually and in practice:

- **Defensive orientation.** Unlike the United States, which often seeks to promote democracy by supporting democratic movements or stabilizing young democratic governments, most Russian hybrid operations are defensive in nature. Their primary aim is to prevent political regimes from transitioning from authoritarian or dictatorial rule to democracy—an effort Russia frames as the "preservation of stability in the international system." This mission presents inherent challenges. Target countries cannot usually be identified in advance; operations must be improvised when a regime suddenly comes under threat. Moreover, Moscow must mobilize public support for regimes that are already unpopular, which is rarely successful. As a result, even when Russian hybrid operations achieve temporary success, the effects are usually short-lived because the underlying causes of instability remain unresolved.

- **A narrower toolbox.** Russia's set of hybrid instruments is more limited than that of the United States, particularly with respect to non-military tools such as economic, political, and informational. Consequently, Moscow leans more heavily on diplomatic and military instruments than is optimal, which constrains flexibility.

    - *Diplomacy* plays a central role in shaping an international environment that is at least neutral, if not supportive, of Russian hybrid operations. The growing importance of the Global South—particularly the BRICS states—has expanded Russia's ability to assemble coalitions of supporters or fence-sitters to counter Western pressure. Moscow frequently invokes traditional principles of international law enshrined in the UN Charter, especially sovereignty and the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination. It also increasingly uses its veto power in the UN Security Council and often appeals to precedents—for example, citing Kosovo's independence to justify Crimea's annexation.

    - *Military power* plays a disproportionately large role in Russian hybrid operations. Nearly all Russian efforts to support regimes or opposition groups involve some level of force, provision of arms, or military advisers. This limits efficiency, as local partners and allies eventually require economic support that Russia cannot always provide. Sustaining long-term commitments and logistics—particularly in distant theaters—has proven especially difficult.

    - *Out-of-area operations* are closely tied to Russia's confrontation with the United States and NATO. For the Russian military and, to some extent, the political leadership, expanding global reach is a priority in itself, not merely a means to political ends. Bases in Syria and Libya exemplify this drive for power projection.

- **Reliance on nuclear weapons.** Because Russian hybrid operations invariably involve competition with the West, nuclear weapons remain a critical—if indirect—component of the toolbox. First and foremost, they deter possible action by the West against Russia itself and thus create operational space for hybrid activities. Since 2022, Russia has also sought to employ nuclear weapons as a distinct form of hybrid warfare: such operations involve coordinated actions across multiple domains, such as traditional deterrence, political messaging, psychological pressure, and information campaigns aimed at Western policymakers, publics, and expert communities. Simple threats are often insufficient, however, because much of Western policy operates below the threshold of open military conflict. As a result, Moscow has recently resorted to brinkmanship—balancing dangerously close to the threshold of nuclear war—to enhance the credibility of its threats. This nuclear dimension was absent from the original American concept of hybrid warfare and thus represents a uniquely Russian feature.

There are relatively few cases in which the policies of any country clearly meet the definition of hybrid warfare. Russia has conducted only four operations that can reasonably be classified as such:

1. the annexation of Crimea and support for separatism in Donbass (2014);

2. intervention in the Syrian civil war (2015–2024);

3. operations in the Sahel (beginning modestly around 2018 and expanding significantly in 2023);

4. attempts to leverage nuclear weapons against the United States and NATO to limit their involvement in the war Russia launched against Ukraine in 2022.

Underlying all these instances and almost certainly in the future is development of long-range precision-guided conventional strike assets to serve as an important tool for the military component of hybrid operations.

These cases share several defining features. Each pursued political goals—whether regime survival in the target state, reshaping the international order, or both. Each sought to influence decision-making in target governments by weakening political will and capacity to resist. All were multi-domain operations that combined political, diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments with a limited but meaningful role for military power. In every case, the military component involved small-scale, often clandestine or deniable, use of force.

Despite frequent labeling, Russia's war against Ukraine does not qualify as hybrid warfare. While the initial plan may have envisioned a hybrid-style operation—employing multiple tools to topple the political regime in Kyiv—the scale of military involvement from the outset was abnormally large. Political, informational, and economic components played only a minimal role. Within weeks, the original plan collapsed, and the campaign turned into a full-scale conventional war.

In the context of that war, however, Moscow did launch a new kind of hybrid operation: it attempted to leverage nuclear weapons against the West to deter direct NATO involvement and limit Western assistance to Ukraine. Nuclear threats were virtually the only tool available, given Russia's inferiority in conventional military, economic, and political domains. As in other hybrid operations, the main goal was to influence Western decision-making through political and psychological pressure. This "nuclear hybrid operation" differed from traditional deterrence, resembling instead an offensive form of deterrence: using the threat of nuclear escalation to shield the expansion of Russian influence.

There are indications that in the fall of 2024 Russia began to develop a more traditional hybrid operation against the West, and more specifically Europe (NATO and the EU) – sabotage operations capable of inflicting tangible harm while remaining below the threshold of direct

conflict.[1] Evidence is still very limited at the time of this writing (some instances widely ascribed to Russian sabotage were later proven to be unrelated), but if such an operation does indeed take place, it would be unusual in the sense that Russia had not previously resorted to such methods, at least not on a significant scale.

This study addresses three cases – Syria, the development of conventional weapons for the purposes of hybrid operations, and attempts to leverage nuclear weapons vis-à-vis the West since 2022. These cases were selected because they represent unique features of the Russian style of hybrid warfare – the goals, the environment, the choice of tools, the tactics, and so on. They also illustrate the contrast between the conceptual work on hybrid warfare done in the first half of the 2010s and the attempts to implement that conceptual work into practical policy.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this study is the conclusion that Russia's ability to conduct hybrid operations is limited. These limitations primarily stem from a lack of resources overall (especially economic and financial), as well as the constraints on the capabilities of its Armed Forces. As a result, Russia could boast certain successes, but each time these proved short-lived, and it subsequently faced a hard choice between extricating itself from an increasingly difficult situation that bordered on failure, on the one hand, and continuing the operation for face-saving reasons with the (almost) inevitable failure at the end, despite all efforts. This does not mean that Russia will not engage in such operations in the future, but it remains an open question whether – and how well – it will be able to internalize past lessons.

[1] See Charlie Edwards, "The Scale of Russian Sabotage Operations Against Europe's Critical Infrastructure," IISS, August 2025, https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/08/the-scale-of-russian--sabotage-operations--against-europes-critical--infrastructure/.

THE NOTION OF HYBRID WARFARE EMERGES

The concept of hybrid warfare has undergone significant evolution since its inception, its meaning having changed rather fundamentally in two ways. First, it has expanded from a narrow definition of a new type of warfighting to include almost any imaginable kind of external action. Second, it eventually came to be applied solely to characterize the policies of Russia and other adversaries, while it ceased to be used in reference to the United States and other Western policies.

The term "hybrid warfare" was introduced by Frank Hoffman in 2007[1] to describe a new kind of challenge encountered by the U.S. military in the first years of the 21st century. Having established control over the territory of Afghanistan in 2001 and, following a quick and decisive victory, over Iraq in 2003, U.S. and allied forces encountered a new kind of war: one fought against irregular forces—highly motivated guerrillas, former military personnel, paramilitaries, or even civilians—attacking troops anytime, anywhere, and conducting sabotage. They employed a broad range of capabilities, both advanced and rudimentary, often using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which became perhaps the greatest problem. The adversaries enjoyed strong support from the population and, at times, external support from outside these countries. They usually lacked formal organization but were connected to each other through informal networks; hence, it was impossible to weaken the resistance by targeting command centers.

As a result, U.S. and allied forces sustained significant losses of personnel and equipment because traditional tools and tactics employed by armed forces were ill-suited for this kind of combat. Unceasing low-level warfare also complicated the implementation of the main mission: building a stable democratic government. Eventually, the United States had to leave Iraq after ten years, arguably without completing the task of stabilizing the democratic regime; Afghanistan was abandoned after twenty years, only to see the main foe, the Taliban, instantly take control of the country.

[1] Frank Hoffman, Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007.

While this type of warfare in and of itself was not completely new (one is tempted to recall Spanish and Russian resistance to Napoleon in the early 19th century), the scale and effect it demonstrated in the first decade of the 21st century represented a qualitatively new phenomenon and merited close attention. Hoffman defined it as follows: "Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder." [2] Some years later, Hoffman adjusted that definition to emphasize that the "fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior" can be used "simultaneously and adaptively" to achieve "political objectives." [3]

Hoffman placed hybrid warfare in the context of Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), a concept proposed by William Lind more than a decade earlier but roundly dismissed by military professionals and theoreticians as an artificial construct and an "elegant irrelevance." As summarized by one critic, the theory proceeded from the notion that previous generations of warfare were shaped by the congruence of technology and battlefield applications, whereas the fourth generation is born out of political necessity—a response to a new type of adversary, including guerrillas, international organized crime, and similar actors.[4] The largely theoretical and widely disregarded notion of 4GW suddenly became relevant when the United States faced hybrid warfare a decade later, which closely fit the definition offered by Lind.

Central to the notion of 4GW was the primacy of political drivers. In contrast to the centuries-old pattern of interstate conflicts, 4GW is primarily about changing the political system in the target country. In hindsight, Lind was able to capture a new phenomenon, which allowed the conceptualization of a new class of warfighting, even though he did not define it with sufficient clarity. The goal of changing the political regime is apparently the main cause of the new type of war, which Hoffman defined as hybrid warfare. In that context, hybrid wars differ from more traditional guerrilla wars that have occurred over many centuries. Traditional guerrilla wars aim to defeat an invading enemy through non-traditional means, whereas hybrid wars are also—perhaps primarily—driven by internal conflict between proponents of the old system and the new system. Armed forces that seek to change the political regime in the target country are just one, perhaps the most visible and tangible, target because they actively support and enforce the new regime.

The Soviet Union encountered precisely that contingency in Afghanistan in the 1980s; it was the United States that organized the supply of arms to the resistance (by the end of the 1980s, the resistance was dominated by the same Taliban that later fought the Americans and their allies). Although Lind did not specifically refer to the Soviet war in Afghanistan, that war neatly fits the 4GW notion. A bit more than a decade later, the United States encountered

[2] Ibid., p. 29.
[3] Frank Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War." 2016 Index of US Military Strength. The Heritage Foundation (October 2015).
[4] Ibid., p. 53.

the same type of war in the same country—entered primarily driven by political goals (counterterrorism, which foresaw a change of political regime, similar to the objectives the Soviet Union pursued in the 1980s). Almost simultaneously, the United States faced the same type of warfare in Iraq, where the goal was the same: regime change.

Consequently, it can be confidently said that the advent of hybrid warfare was predicted in the 1990s as 4GW, but the concept was dismissed until the United States faced that kind of war in the 2000s, conceptualized under a different name: "hybrid war." The fact that this new type of conflict first revealed itself during the war pursued by the Soviet Union resulted in its dismissal as atypical and linked to the nature of the Soviet regime—until the United States encountered the same kind of war in the early 2000s.

Observations regarding the nature of 4GW and hybrid warfare do not clarify the causes of this qualitative transition—why did the nature of war change so dramatically in the early 21st century (and, if one includes the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, in the 1980s)? A comparison of three campaigns—two in Afghanistan (Soviet and American) and one in Iraq—reveals a common feature that likely illuminates the roots of hybrid warfare: in all of them, the primary goal was regime change rather than a strictly military endeavor aimed at one state defeating another.

Regime change almost invariably generates internal opposition, as such change is never universally supported by the population and opinion leaders. New institutions take time to build and even longer to stabilize and become effective; the resulting chaos produces resistance, including armed resistance, which may be poorly organized and have access only to low-technology weapons, but is widely dispersed, capable of attacking anywhere at any time. As a result, it is difficult to distinguish fighters from civilians. In countries with a strong role of religion (as in both Afghanistan and Iraq), opposition—including but not limited to armed resistance—may also be strongly motivated by religious factors, exhibiting stubbornness (even fanaticism) and broad appeal to the population.

Under these conditions, the mission of armed forces becomes fundamentally different from what it had been trained to do for centuries: instead of fighting an organized adversary, forces are tasked with maintaining control of the occupied country while new institutions take root. In other words, the "political necessity" of confronting an unusual enemy (part of the 4GW definition) arises directly from the political mission, creating a new, unexpected, and unforeseen challenge for armed forces.

Comparison of the First ("Desert Storm") and Second ("Iraqi Freedom") Wars in the Gulf illustrates the difference between traditional and 4GW wars. The former was a typical interstate war, ending with the defeat of the Iraqi army, the withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait, and the imposition of various sanctions against the country and Saddam Hussein's regime. The regime itself, however, survived: George H.W. Bush rejected proposals to change it and deliberately limited the campaign's objectives to traditional military goals. The second war, in contrast, sought to change the regime and build a new political system in the same country—replacing dictatorship with democracy. The breakdown of the old regime exposed

deep-seated contradictions within Iraqi society, leaving American and allied forces in the middle of the turmoil—effectively a civil war—facing unconventional adversaries.

The Soviet campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom in the same country a decade later show significant similarities, which support the hypothesis above. In both cases, the goal was regime change—the Soviet Union sought to establish a Soviet-style system, while the United States and its allies attempted to build a democracy. Despite the diametrically opposed end states, in both cases the external powers encountered strong resistance and were forced to leave the country without achieving their objectives, while rival political forces came to power.

The nature of 4GW/hybrid wars makes them, in many ways, more difficult and costly than traditional wars, while clear-cut victory is less likely. Hoffman highlighted one reason: regular armies are neither designed nor trained for this type of conflict. A deeper reason for the difficulty of these wars lies in their very nature—success is primarily, if not overwhelmingly, determined by the establishment and stabilization of a new regime. Achieving this success depends on a broad range of variables and policies, among which military power plays a supportive role. In campaigns like those in Afghanistan and Iraq, military efforts are intended to stabilize the environment in which the external power and local groups pursue political and economic reforms. Failure of the military support mission may jeopardize the prospects of these reforms, but success of the former does not guarantee the success of the lattter. In Iraq, reform efforts had mixed results, while in Afghanistan the mission ultimately failed.

EVOLUTION OF VIEWS ON HYBRID WARFARE

The 2007 concept of hybrid warfare proposed by Frank Hoffman was refined and expanded by U.S. military services in subsequent years. The U.S. Joint Forces Command defined hybrid warfare as "any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism, and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace. Rather than a single entity, a hybrid threat or challenger may be a combination of state and nonstate actors."[1] The U.S. Army Field Manual, issued in 2011, defined it as "the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and elements, all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects."[2]

The *Dictionary of Military Terms*, however, did not include the term "hybrid warfare" and instead used two terms that together characterize the same concept. One term, "irregular warfare," was defined as "violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations," while the other, "unconventional warfare," denotes "activities 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."[3]

The use of at least three different terms with similar meanings suggests that military theoreticians and practitioners were still grappling with the conceptualization of contingencies encountered by U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is hardly surprising, as the phenomenon exhibits many case-specific variations and, in fact, depends to a degree on whose side the irregular forces are on (for example, they were on the side of the United States and its allies during the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s). The tactics for

[1] Maj. Bryan P. Fleming, The Hybrid Threat Concept: Contemporary War, Military Planning and the Advent of Unrestricted Operational Art (School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2011) https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA545789.pdf, p. 2.
[2] Ibidem.
[3] The Joint Staff, "Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*," November 15, 2015.

handling insurgencies were also unclear: the United States tested a variety of approaches during the operation in Iraq after the defeat of Saddam Hussein.

The absence of the term "hybrid warfare" in the 2015 *Dictionary of Military Terms* can be partly explained by the evolution the original concept underwent after 2011. Whereas the original definition, which seemed relatively stable if not fully developed, addressed a specific mode of warfighting, it was quickly expanded to include political and economic components of decidedly non-military nature. Effectively, what began as a concept developed by the military for military use evolved into a concept of political action, applicable to both state and non-state actors.

In 2015, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) defined hybrid warfare as follows:

> "The use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative, and gain psychological as well as physical advantages, utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic, and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure."[4]

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki offered a more detailed three-part definition in 2020:

> "1) Coordinated and synchronized action that deliberately targets democratic states' and institutions' systemic vulnerabilities through a wide range of means (political, economic, military, civil, and information)
>
> 2) Activities [to] exploit the thresholds of detection and attribution as well as the border between war and peace; and
>
> 3) The aim is to influence different forms of decision-making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level to favor and/or gain the agent's strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target."[5]

These definitions demonstrate that the understanding of hybrid warfare evolved in three important ways between 2011 and 2015:

First, hybrid warfare came to include political and propaganda tools, such as communications via the Internet or social networks; the exploitation of border permeability to ideas, propaganda, and disinformation; as well as the use of travel, financial transactions,

[4] International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance 2015 (Abingdon: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2015), 5.
[5] The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 'Hybrid CoE - the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats', accessed 5 March 2020. https://www .hybridcoe.fi/.

and economic relations (including sanctions and activities intended to circumvent them). Whereas the original definition placed military action (insurgency and counter-insurgency) at the center with non-military tools marginally present, by 2015 these priorities were reversed: non-military tools became central, with military action playing a largely supporting role.

The second change pertained to the purpose of hybrid warfare. The term no longer referred primarily to conflicts against armed guerrilla movements resisting political change or foreign involvement. Instead, it came to denote primarily state-driven operations aimed at undermining the cohesion of the policymaking process, public support for the government, and the military capability of the target country. This objective was to be achieved largely by influencing the general public through informational campaigns utilizing media, increasingly tangible social networks, and other channels.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, hybrid warfare was no longer associated primarily with non-state actors. The focus shifted to state-driven activities: hybrid war came to be understood as hostile actions pursued mainly by a state seeking to destabilize an adversary's political system, render policy-making and implementation inefficient, and create a gap between the public (voters) and the government or political parties. These operations employ a broad range of tools, including, but not limited to, military action. This new iteration of hybrid warfare can be characterized as a continuation of war by other means, to paraphrase von Clausewitz, or as adversarial action short of full-scale war, but with equally strategic consequences.

Within the new understanding of hybrid warfare, military components were accorded a supportive role. Hybrid operations were understood as a method of defeating an adversary using primarily non-military means, by degrading its cohesion and capability to the extent that it could no longer resist. Force would be employed on a limited scale in support of ongoing operations or at the final stage to deliver the decisive blow. The transition from the original to the new definition of hybrid warfare was so fundamental that casual use of the term after 2015 sometimes excluded any role for military tools at all. The definition offered by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats quoted above, for example, makes only cursory mention of military tools in the context of attempting to "exploit … the border between war and peace."

The concept of hybrid warfare evolved at a remarkable pace—literally within a few years—unheard of for the evolution of academic and political theories. As a result, the term came to describe a fundamentally different phenomenon. In addition to this new substance, it became applied primarily to Russia, losing its original universal scope.

These developments were clearly driven by a major political upheaval: a radical increase in tensions between the West and Russia following the annexation of Crimea and Russia's subsequent support for the anti-Kyiv rebellion in Donbass, eastern Ukraine. The Crimea and Donbass cases, which occurred in quick succession, share several important traits:

- **Primacy of non-military tools:** Both cases focused on propaganda, capitalizing on pro-Russian sentiment among the local population and negative attitudes toward the Second Maidan in Kyiv—the popular unrest that led to the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich and his escape to Russia. Public unrest, heavily supported by Russian special services and propaganda operations, occurred across eastern and southern Ukraine but succeeded only in Crimea and Donbass. Operations in Donbass were launched only after the Crimea operation proved to be a decisive—and easy—success. In most other regions, operations were defeated by forces loyal to the new government, often paramilitaries or organized groups, while the Ukrainian army remained in disarray during the initial stages.

- **FSB-led operations:** In both cases, the Federal Security Service of Russia (FSB) spearheaded operations using a broad range of methods: overt and covert political support, information and disinformation campaigns, funding, mobilization of receptive populations, and the organization of limited and large-scale protests or rallies. These efforts relied on extensive networks of local agents, often voluntary but financially supported. After these operations failed in most regions due to local resistance—sometimes supported by Ukrainian businessmen—the FSB shifted to more overt support of anti-Maidan and separatist forces in regions whose outcomes were still uncertain. Activities included mobilizing volunteers in Russia to train local civilians and directly participate in fighting, as well as organizing and supporting armed groups. These operations were clandestine and deniable. This stage of the Donbass operation closely aligns with the original definition of hybrid warfare.

- **Supporting role of armed forces:** Armed forces were engaged in a tangible but supporting role and entered relatively late in both operations. In Crimea, their involvement came after the political operation had largely succeeded, consolidating victory and preventing possible Ukrainian resistance. In Donbass, armed forces intervened only after the Ukrainian army had stabilized and achieved successes against separatist paramilitary groups. Effectively, Russian armed forces were brought in to rescue a failing operation and, according to Russian sources, initially against the Ministry of Defense's wishes, as it regarded the conflict as a civil war in another country. Even in this phase, Russian military involvement was not fully open: long-range fires were often employed from within Russian territory, and troops operating inside Ukraine were carefully disguised.

The events of 2014–2015 represented a unique type of operation, especially for Russia, and called for conceptualization. The term "hybrid warfare" seemed to capture these events at least at an emotional and political level, even though pre-2014 definitions did not fully fit, as paramilitary operations constituted only a relatively small—but highly visible—part of the overall strategy. The result was an unusual process in which an existing term acquired new meaning very quickly to conceptualize ongoing events.

The central element of the new definition was a vastly broader toolbox, with military tools occupying a supporting role. John Chambers, in a 2016 study, captured the essence of hybrid war:

> "hybrid threats can use one or more of a nation's instruments of power (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) to influence an adversary and achieve strategic objectives, often below the threshold of war in the gray zone. In essence, hybrid threats in the gray zone are often implemented to achieve objectives without violating international norms and/or crossing arbitrarily established thresholds (...) that would lead to the intervention of an adversary."[6]

Young scholars from the post-Soviet space, including Azerbaijan and Poland, echoed this understanding, emphasizing the primacy of political tools:

> "Superpowers or regional actors can 'justify' their intervention in regional affairs by means of different methods which in fact contributes to a 'purposeful instability' gained through non-kinetic operations."

Finnish scholars similarly noted that "hybrid operations aim to influence the internal affairs of other states without resorting to direct use of force."[7]

This understanding was summarized by Mark Galeotti in 2018, who wrote that hybrid warfare in the West is "a style of warfare that combines the political, economic, social and kinetic in a kind of conflict that recognizes no boundaries between civilian and combatant, covert and overt, war and peace."[8]

Comparing hybrid warfare to non-linear warfare, Joshua Ball noted both differences and similarities:

> "Hybrid warfare combines conventional and unconventional methods, including military operations, cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure. Non-linear warfare, on the other hand, refers to a strategy that disrupts the traditional battlefield, making it difficult to distinguish between combatants and civilians or between times of war and peace. These strategies have become increasingly prevalent in the 21st century as state and

[6] John Chambers, Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats: An Analysis of Russian 'New Generation Warfare' and Implications for US Army, Modern War Institute at West Point, October 8, 2016, p. 12.
[7] Hanna Smith, Jarna Petman, Aki Huhtinen, "Hybrid influencing is a gray zone between war and peace – how to resist it?" 14.12.2018, https://www.helsinki.fi/en/news/economics/hybrid-influencing-gray-zone-between-war-and-peace-how-resist-it.
[8] Mark Galeotti, "(Mis)Understanding Russia's two 'hybrid wars'," Eurozine, November 29, 2018, https://www.eurozine.com/misunderstanding-russias-two-hybrid-wars/.

> non-state actors seek to gain strategic advantages without resorting to full-scale conventional warfare."[9]

Indeed, both hybrid and non-linear warfare emphasize actions intended to undermine an adversary's ability to resist rather than engaging in direct confrontation. Hybrid warfare places greater emphasis on non-military instruments, whereas non-linear warfare focuses primarily on military aspects. In this sense, non-linear warfare can be understood as part of the broader hybrid warfare concept, which may also include a kinetic phase.

At the same time, the definition of hybrid warfare that emerged by 2015–16 proved to be quite broad and imprecise, making it difficult to apply to specific cases—almost any conflict could be classified as hybrid warfare or not, at the discretion of the writer. This prompted two leading experts on Russian foreign and defense policy to express skepticism about its value:

> "The 'hybrid' aspect of the term simply denotes a combination of previously defined types of warfare, whether conventional, irregular, political, or information. Even those who have put forward such a definition must admit that the combination of war across domains is not new, but in fact is as old as warfare itself."[10]

The vagueness of the notion of "hybrid warfare" likely reflects the vagueness of the more fundamental term "war." This term has evolved considerably from the classic understanding, which views war as a kinetic conflict between states and postulates a fundamental difference between the state of peace and the state of war, linked only by Carl von Clausewitz's famous dictum that "war is not merely an act of policy, but a true political instrument, a political intercourse carried on with other means"[11] (more commonly simplified as "war is the continuation of policy by other means"). This classic formula is based on a vision of an abrupt transition from one state to another—from peace to war—linked only by underlying policy.

This understanding was typical in the 19th century, when Clausewitz wrote his famous treatise, and persisted at least until the mid-20th century, when war was primarily defined by kinetic conflict employing large standing armies, often involving mass mobilization. Of course, the phenomenon of regular armies facing irregular forces was far from unknown: British troops encountered it during the early stages of the American Revolution and the War of Independence, while Napoleon faced irregulars in Spain and Russia. The same phenomenon occurred during the Boer Wars in the early 20th century. Evidence suggests that Clausewitz himself intended, in subsequent revisions of his treatise, to address forms

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[9] Joshua Ball, "The Changing Face of Conflict: What is Hybrid Warfare?", Global Security Review, August 1, 2018, https://globalsecurityreview.com/hybrid-and-non-linear-warfare-systematically-erases-the-divide-between-war-peace/.

[10] Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "A Closer Look at Russia's 'Hybrid War'," Wilson Center, Kennan Cable, No. 7, April 2015, p. 2.

[11] Carl von Clausewitz, On War, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 87

of war other than high-intensity interstate conflict;[12] one may argue that he foresaw something resembling the "hybrid warfare" of today, at least in its original, narrower definition.

Over time, the notion of "war" expanded to include many types of conflict not limited to, or even necessarily including, kinetic engagement. The Cold War provides the most obvious example: it was primarily a socio-economic and political conflict with a strong military component—mutual deterrence by the main adversaries and their alliances. During the Cold War, the superpowers refrained from using force against one another or their allies but actively intervened militarily in Third World states. Many aspects of the Cold War—economic, informational, political—were also characterized as war to emphasize the intensity and totality of the conflict. Today, almost any confrontational relationship is routinely called "war." Consequently, the term "war" has lost its original meaning, becoming broader and vaguer; from this shift, it was only a small step to characterize certain types of conflicts as "hybrid."

The broadening of the notion of war was partly driven by the changed nature of conflict: with the emergence of nuclear weapons, kinetic conflict became extraordinarily costly, as a defeated state could escalate to the nuclear threshold, turning regular war into collective suicide. Confrontation during the Cold War therefore gradually shifted to non-kinetic tools. Seen in this light, the evolution of "hybrid war" toward an all-encompassing definition is hardly surprising. As Kofman and Rojansky noted, the cost of this evolution is that the term became almost meaningless as a tool for understanding present-day conflict.

The vagueness of the term certainly limits its analytical utility. If a term cannot be clearly defined—delineating which phenomena fall under it and which do not—it cannot be effectively employed to understand or predict policy. The problem with an excessively broad definition is that states always use multiple tools simultaneously; if any multi-domain conflict can be called war, then any policy employing multiple instruments can be called hybrid warfare.

A group of scholars writing in 2021 highlighted the drawbacks of the common use of the term:

> "The hybrid terminology [has] rapidly gained traction in Western public and political debate, where it has evolved into an all-encompassing view of Russia's international behavior, permeating the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. [Hybrid threat and hybrid warfare] have become terms commonly used to describe the strategy of challengers to the global hegemony of the West, aside from Russia also including, for example, China,

[12] Paul Donker, "The Evolution of Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*: A Reconstruction on the Basis of the Earlier Versions of his Masterpiece," 2019, https://clausewitzstudies.org/bibl/DonkerP-TheEvolutionOfClausewitzsVomKriege.pdf.

> Iran, and North Korea, but also non-state actors, particularly ISIS and Hezbollah."[13]

This observation identifies two additional limitations of the concept of hybrid warfare as it has emerged since 2015, beyond the imprecision noted above:

- The term came to be applied only to adversaries of the West; multi-domain operations by the United States, its allies, and partners are instead described as "non-linear warfare," "full spectrum conflict," or other similar terms.

- Almost any policy pursued by adversaries is categorized as hybrid warfare; the term has become political and emotional, losing whatever analytical value it once possessed.

Thus, the evolution of hybrid warfare has effectively led the concept into a dead end. What began as a theory of irregular warfare, later developed into a theory of multi-domain conflict, quickly became essentially a propaganda tool, exploiting the underlying negative connotation of the term. It became useless for the study of national security policy as a field of political science or for analyzing the policies of adversaries such as Russia or China, as it no longer differentiates between different types of policy—all are labeled the same.

This evolution represents an analytical loss. The later definition of hybrid warfare, circa 2015, held promise as a new analytical tool capable of characterizing modern conflict and addressing the disappearance of a clear-cut line between war and peace. Using Clausewitz's definition of war as the continuation of policy by other means, one can hypothesize that today, hybrid warfare can be understood as the replacement of war, or perhaps the continuation or precursor of war, by other means. In any event, the notion of hybrid warfare remains worth rescuing.

[13] Niklas Nilsson, Mikael Weissmann, Björn Palmertz, Per Thunholm and Henrik Häggström, "Security Challenges in the Gray Zone," in Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations, ed by Mikael Weissmann, Niklas Nilsson, Björn Palmertz and Per Thunholm (I.B. Tauris: 2021), p. 3

MAKING SENSE OF HYBRID WARFARE

As described above, the meaning of the term "hybrid warfare" has evolved—or, rather, its original meaning was replaced by something completely new around 2015–16. The new meaning is so vague that it borders on being unusable and has largely been reduced to a label for Russia (or China, Iran, and other adversaries). In practical terms, stating that Russia pursues hybrid warfare conveys almost nothing beyond the assertion that Russia pursues some policy deemed undesirable by definition.

That said, the notion of hybrid warfare remains potentially useful to the extent that it describes multi-domain policy short of actual war but potentially having, or intended to have, strategic consequences—such as adverse impacts on domestic politics, the incapacitation of political or defense capabilities, regime change, or even the de facto surrender of the target country. As referenced above, it can be understood as policy that substitutes for or continues war by other means. Before proceeding further, it is therefore imperative to clarify the term "hybrid warfare" or, at a minimum, outline the requirements for a better definition that makes it usable for explaining, predicting, and planning policy.

At a minimum, a methodologically sound definition should meet the following criteria:

- **A clear boundary:** The definition should allow a reasonably clear distinction between what constitutes hybrid warfare and what does not. In other words, it should be possible to say when Russia—or any other actor—is employing hybrid warfare approaches and when it is not. Otherwise, the term remains merely an emotionally charged label without analytical meaning or utility.

- **Fungibility:** The term and concept should apply not only to Russia (or China, Iran, etc.) but also to policies and strategies pursued by "good" countries, including the United States and its allies. For political discourse, it may be acceptable to use different terms for the same policy, but the definitions should align.

- **Presence of a kinetic phase:** A distinctive feature of hybrid warfare should be the inclusion of a military component—the use of armed forces and/or paramilitaries (irregulars), or the explicit threat of force. There are two reasons for this requirement: first, the phenomenon remains, fundamentally, warfare; second, it reflects the original definition of the term. This criterion also aligns closely with the cases that inspired the updated definition of hybrid warfare—Crimea and Donbass. Consequently, policies devoid of a military component should not be classified as hybrid warfare and would require a different term.

At this stage, the operational definition would still remain somewhat vague. However, it may at least help establish a pattern in the tools employed, the sequence of actions (strategy), and other features, which can help differentiate hybrid warfare from unrelated or disjointed policies pursued by a state across multiple domains.

The key feature that may distinguish hybrid warfare from other types of multi-domain conflict is its position between the conditions of war and peace. As noted above, in the past, the transition from peace—even if peace was dominated by conflict between two or more adversaries—to war was abrupt and complete: yesterday, adversaries were at peace, meaning simply that they did not shoot at each other; today, they were at war, with all that entails—crossing borders, employing arms against military and civilian targets, mobilization, etc. Nowadays, this transition is more complex and can be conceptualized as a continuum: adversaries may gradually move toward increasingly intense conflict, which at some point may include a low-level kinetic phase—war, in the sense of shooting at each other—but so limited that it does not yet constitute a full-scale state of war. Only later, if this escalation is not arrested by political means (such as negotiation or controlled de-escalation), may it reach the level of full-scale war.

Thus, a working definition of hybrid warfare should include the following elements:

- **Multi-domain operations:** Hybrid warfare uses a variety of toolboxes, including kinetic action, whether open (regular armed forces), irregular (including external support by the actor pursuing hybrid operations), or both.

- **Strategic goal:** The objective is destabilization of the political, economic, and military system of the target state, depriving it of the ability to resist, influencing long-term policies (for example, facilitating a change of government from one party or coalition to another), altering the political system, or achieving similar outcomes.

- **Exploitation of modern environments:** Hybrid warfare frequently utilizes the permeability of borders to human movement and interaction, the open Internet space including social networks, economic interdependence, and other characteristics of the contemporary international environment. Closure of borders to information, travel, and economic exchanges can significantly reduce the effectiveness of hybrid operations.

- **Short of open war:** Hybrid operations remain below the threshold of full-scale war. Even when armed forces are used in such operations, if the conflict escalates to full-scale war (as in the Russian operation against Ukraine in 2022), it signifies that the hybrid operation has failed.

This working definition aligns with the definitions from 2015–16 quoted above, which marked the transition from the original to the new understanding of the term. It is somewhat stricter and provides clearer boundaries between hybrid warfare and other foreign policy, subversive, or military actions. Clear lines are particularly needed today, when the term "hybrid warfare" is frequently used carelessly, bordering on meaninglessness.

Using this working definition, the following conflicts can be classified as hybrid warfare:

- **Russia:** Ukraine in 2014 (both Crimea and Donbass) and Syria (2015–2024).
- **China:** Expansion of territorial waters into disputed islands.
- **United States and allies:** Iraq (after the defeat of Saddam Hussein and regime change), Afghanistan, and Libya in 2011 (operation launched by Great Britain and France and later assisted by the United States). Afghanistan and Iraq are unusual cases in that open use of force preceded hybrid warfare, whereas typically the sequence is reversed.

Obviously, these cases are not identical. From political and moral perspectives, Russian and American operations cannot be equated. Yet, all share key traits, most notably the combination of political, informational, and military tools. The same tools may be used toward different goals—positive or negative—but differences in objectives do not negate the similarity of the toolbox.

This list can be contested. One possible addition is the short war against Georgia in 2008 or, more appropriately, the entire period from 1992 to that war. For similar reasons, the conflict around Transdniestria in Moldova may also be claimed to represent a hybrid operation. However, evidence suggests that the inception and development of the Georgia and Moldova cases differ significantly from those in Ukraine and Syria.

- **Limited intentionality:** The beginnings of separatism in Georgia and Moldova, which almost led to regions breaking away, were not an intended policy of the Russian government. These movements had domestic roots, and at the time (early 1990s), the Russian government did not control armed forces in Georgia and Transdniestria. Local commanders made their own choices and supported the side they preferred. Attempts to bring these forces under Moscow's control—for example, assigning General Alexander Lebed in Transdniestria in 1992—failed; instead of curbing involvement on the separatist side, he publicly supported them and directed troops under his command to assist. Similarly, Soviet troops in the Caucasus sided

with Abkhaz separatists without instructions from Moscow; control was established only later, at the cost of de facto acceptance of their role.

- **Limited leverage:** Russian influence over separatist governments in Abkhazia and Transdniestria was restricted. During elections in Abkhazia, candidates openly supported by Moscow consistently lost; until 2008, Abkhazia had laws prohibiting foreigners from owning land, explicitly preventing Russian citizens from buying property.

- **Official stance:** During the 1990s and early 2000s (roughly Putin's first presidential term), Russia's official position was that Georgia and Moldova should negotiate with separatists, and Moscow would not interfere if an agreement was reached. Russia only objected formally to the forcible reintegration of breakaway regions.

- **Separatist regions as a liability:** Breakaway regions constrained Moscow—for instance, the presence of forces there delayed the entry into force of the Adapted Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty—but domestic politics prevented unilateral action without consent from local populations and separatist authorities.

- **Peaceful resolution in Ajaria:** The Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003–2004) demonstrated that Russia was willing to divest the separatist burden. Secretary of the Security Council Igor Ivanov facilitated the peaceful transfer of power from Eduard Shevardnadze to Mikheil Saakashvili and negotiated with Ajaria's leader, Aslan Abashidze, to facilitate the region's peaceful reintegration. While Ajaria did not border Russia, this case illustrated Moscow's more flexible approach at the time—a stance that would later harden.

These factors exclude events in and around Georgia and Moldova from likely hybrid warfare cases. It is far from certain that similar operations would have occurred in more stable environments where national governments maintained control over political developments, the public, and armed forces. These cases belong to the domain of "normal" foreign policy and are excluded from the scope of this study.

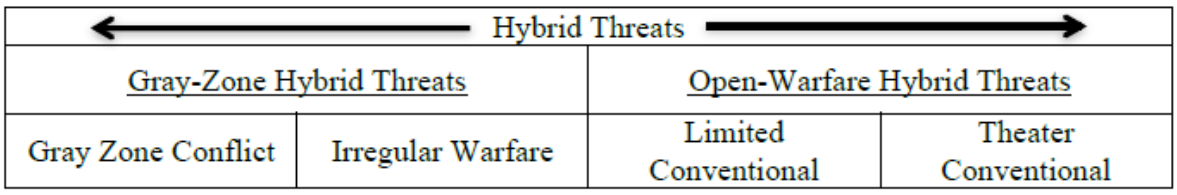
In Russia, a different series of events is also classified as instances of hybrid warfare, but in these cases the operations were allegedly implemented by the United States and its allies: the 2004 "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia, the Arab Spring, the popular resistance in Syria to the Assad regime, and, finally, the 2014 Maidan in Ukraine. These cases cannot—and should not—be classified as hybrid operations. Formally, they did not include a kinetic phase and therefore do not fit the working definition of hybrid warfare outlined above. More importantly, they represented indigenous popular movements, which enjoyed significant public support and, to some extent, backing from Western governments, but did not result from purposeful actions by the United States and its allies.

The Russian perception—or rather, intentional misclassification—of these events played an important role in subsequent actions. They were interpreted as a global political offensive by the West, generating a perceived need for a commensurate response. This perception contributed to Russian actions in Crimea, Donbass, and elsewhere, and it shaped the Russian understanding of hybrid warfare, which began to emerge just before the Maidan in Ukraine, around 2012–2013.

Thus, one immediate benefit of applying a stricter definition of hybrid warfare is the ability to sort various conflicts and determine which cases may represent hybrid operations and which do not. This is particularly important today, when it is commonly assumed that Russia, China, and other adversaries of the West pursue nothing but hybrid warfare. The ability to classify past—and, crucially, future—cases provides a foundation for further study of hybrid warfare.

The working definition and the seven cases listed above allow us to identify common characteristics of hybrid operations:

First, kinetic component within the continuum between peace and war: The kinetic element of hybrid operations always occurs within the gray area between peace and war. As noted in the working definition, kinetic operations are an integral part of hybrid warfare. Moreover, if this phase escalates into open, full-scale conflict (war), the hybrid operation is considered to have ended. Gray-area operations—understood here as the kinetic component of the broader phenomenon of hybrid warfare, which employs a wide range of political, informational, economic, and military tools—were defined by Philip Kapusta as "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between traditional war and peace."[1] A study by John Chambers further distinguishes between several stages of conflict, emphasizing what he terms gray-zone action short of open warfare:[2]



According to Chambers, gray-zone warfare represents a major challenge for the military because it does not entail full-scale combat operations for which militaries are commonly trained. Instead, it can be conceptualized as "Phase 0," or the "shape" phase of operations, which precedes combat and is intended to "dissuade or deter potential adversaries and to assure or solidify relationships with friends and allies," according to official Pentagon guidance.[3] In other words, it is preparation for war, using political tools and potentially

[1] Philip Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," *Small Wars Journal*, October-December 2015, pg. 20
[2] John Chambers, op. cit., p. 5.
[3] The Joint Staff, "Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning*," August 2011.

adjustments in military posture (number and deployment of troops, equipment, etc.) as a country moves toward a war footing.

The use of armed forces during this phase does not necessarily lead to full-scale war: tasks may be limited or accomplished during Phase 0 without escalation. This phase can deter an adversary, preventing the onset of war, or it can better prepare the state for impending aggression. A potential aggressor may also use this phase to pre-deploy forces or gain tactical advantages to achieve objectives without entering open conflict. Phase 0 is, however, inherently risky, as the adversary may misinterpret these actions as imminent preparation for war and launch a preemptive attack before the shaping phase is completed.

Chambers argues that Phase 0 should integrate both military and political tools. He proposes that the military should:

1. Preposition forces in at-risk countries,

2. Work closely with the State Department and host nations "to better integrate at-risk ethnic populations into the host country," and

3. Build local civil resistance networks to be utilized if the adversary occupies these territories.

Simultaneously, the Army should enhance the capabilities and training of special operations forces to operate effectively in this environment.[4]

Other scholars have taken a broader view of gray-area operations to include a limited kinetic phase, not merely preparation. According to Andrew Monaghan, gray-area operations are "a method of operating that relies on proxies and surrogates to prevent attribution and intent, and to maximize confusion and uncertainty."[5] He effectively describes the stage of conflict in which adversaries not only prepare for potential kinetic operations (the shaping phase) but also engage in limited, unofficial, and deniable kinetic actions, often through proxies. In this sense, gray-area warfare overlaps with the original definition of hybrid war, which centers on conflicts involving irregular forces. The overlap, however, is insufficient to claim continuity between the original hybrid warfare definition and the contemporary understanding of gray-area operations. Frank Hoffman himself noted that the original term "focuses on combinations of tactics associated with violence and warfare (except for criminal acts) but completely fails to capture other non-violent actions."[6]

Even a cursory look at Russian operations in Ukraine in 2014, and later in Syria from 2015 onwards, demonstrates these characteristics. These operations occurred in the gray area between peace and war, involving irregular forces or actions by regular military units against

[4] John Champers, op. cit., p. 7.
[5] Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'," Parameters 45(4) Winter 2015-16, p. 66.
[6] Frank G. Hoffman, 'On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare Vs Hybrid Threats', War on the Rocks, 28 July 2014, http://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/.

irregulars. In addition to military activity, these campaigns featured a strong—often dominant—political component, including official and behind-the-scenes diplomacy, international influence, and manipulation of local political leaders and public opinion. While military operations played an important supporting role, their presence indicated that the state of peace had ended, although the state of war had not yet been fully reached.

Second, prevalence over traditional military action, due to lower cost than full-scale war: Simply put, the number of hybrid operations significantly exceeds the number of traditional open wars during the post–Cold War period. One researcher wryly noted that nowadays "most military operations are conducted in the gray zone."[7] General Joe Votel, commander of US Special Operations Command, similarly observed that adversaries were "purposefully selecting such strategies to stay within the gray zone."[8]

Emphasizing warfare short of war—whether gray-area operations or hybrid war—makes strategic sense because only by keeping conflict in the gray zone, through low-key and often deniable operations, can a country hope to achieve its objectives while avoiding the economic, human, political (both domestic and international), and other costs typically associated with full-scale war.

Cost considerations apply equally to the United States and its allies. It is sufficient to recall that normal life in the U.S. continued even while the country was engaged in large-scale counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan for much of this century (ten years in Iraq and twenty years in Afghanistan). These operations had only limited impact on domestic politics. In contrast, a conventional war with a state like Russia—or, even more so, with China, North Korea, or Iran—risks destabilizing the economic and political systems of the United States and other Western countries. For this reason, hybrid or gray-area operations remain the preferred option.

For states such as Russia, and other U.S. adversaries, hybrid warfare—and, for the kinetic component, gray-area operations—helps avoid full-scale confrontation with overwhelming American military power, which would likely result in defeat even in a limited conflict. In extreme cases, defeat in a conventional war may, depending on the stakes, trigger escalation to the nuclear threshold or force the actor to leverage nuclear weapons to avoid strategic loss.

The risk of escalation—potentially to the nuclear level—shaped the Biden Administration's policy during the Russian war against Ukraine. By limiting the extent of American and NATO involvement, the United States sought to avoid provoking Russia into expanding the relatively limited conflict in ways that could directly involve NATO and the U.S., potentially increasing the likelihood of nuclear use.

[7] Sanu Kainikara, 'Air Power in the Information Age: The Deciding Factor', Air Power Development Centre, February 2015, p. v.

[8] Cited in Keir Giles, Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West, Chatham House, March 2016, p. 10.

This consideration adds another reason for preferring hybrid or gray-area conflicts over open war, regardless of scale: as long as conflict remains below the threshold of full-scale war between major powers, the chances of avoiding dangerous escalation are highest. All states, including Russia, are inherently motivated to avoid nuclear war. Weaker actors in the conventional domain have additional incentive to confine hostilities to the gray zone, since full-scale war could lead to certain defeat or compel them to threaten nuclear escalation, increasing the probability of an outcome they would prefer to avoid. Politically, it is also easier to disengage from a gray-area conflict, as any defeat is limited and manageable, particularly in terms of domestic perception.

All of this suggests that hybrid and gray-area wars are likely to remain the prevalent mode of using force in international relations in the foreseeable future. A close look at Russian aggression against Ukraine indicates that it was initially intended as a short operation designed to achieve a fait accompli, similar to the 2014 Crimea operation, allowing expansion of influence—through territorial control, government change, and regime manipulation—while limiting costs and minimizing the risk of direct conflict with the West. As observed, that plan ultimately failed.

Third, hybrid operations tend to be lengthy. U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Russian operations in Ukraine and Syria, have all extended over long periods. Indeed, open war may require only a limited duration: the United States completed the kinetic phase in Iraq and Afghanistan in a matter of months, but formal victory was followed by years of fighting irregulars and paramilitaries, alongside efforts to establish a new political regime. The Russian hybrid operation in Crimea was short and decisive but ushered in an eight-year operation in Eastern Ukraine, which culminated in a campaign initially intended to be as short and decisive as Crimea but instead degenerated into a multi-year full-scale war. The operation in Syria similarly lasted nine years.

The long duration of hybrid and gray-area operations appears almost inevitable due to several factors:

- The need to keep conflict below the threshold of open war dictates a limited scale and intensity of involvement, including measures to prevent intervention by outside actors.

- Application of non-military tools, such as informational, political, or economic instruments, usually requires significant time.

- Irregular warfare, which is almost always based on attrition of the adversary, takes time to succeed or to be defeated, depending on whether the gray-area operator is on offense or defense.

- Employment of military and, to a more limited extent, economic tools inevitably incurs costs; the party engaged in such operations must keep these costs low to avoid undermining domestic support. Effectively, daily life for the

general population must remain “as usual” as much as possible. Stretching hybrid or gray-area operations over time is one of the most effective ways to achieve this.

From this, it follows that **an integral part of hybrid operations are efforts to manage costs so that their impact on economic and political life remains acceptable to the general public and businesses**. The definition of “acceptable” may vary from one state to another, but all seven cases of hybrid warfare discussed above display this feature in some form. Russian operations in Crimea, Donbass, and Syria, for example, were largely overlooked by the public and, to some extent, reinforced the political regime through triumphant media coverage. U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq similarly had limited impact on political, social, and economic life in the United States, despite casualties; however, over time, the cumulative human and financial costs prompted withdrawal.

The extended duration of hybrid operations can also become a strategic trap: even if involvement is kept at a low level, costs accumulate, and the length of the commitment makes withdrawal difficult. As a result, accumulated costs may create serious political and economic problems. From this perspective, the U.S. withdrawals from Iraq and later Afghanistan represent sound decisions: despite unavoidable political costs, ending the engagements prevented prolonged crises similar to the Vietnam War. Likewise, the Russian decision to launch a short, decisive overt military operation against Ukraine in 2022 may have been motivated by concerns about the mounting costs of hybrid operations in Donbass without a foreseeable end. Finally, the costs of European assistance to Ukraine since 2022—which could be conceptualized as a hybrid operation against Russia—have already begun to create challenges for individual countries and for the cohesion of the European Union.

Analysis of hybrid warfare cases suggests that cost considerations apply in much the same way as they do in regular wars: over time, costs—economic, human, political, psychological, and otherwise—accumulate and may exceed anticipated benefits. In this sense, defeat in hybrid warfare is possible, just as it is in conventional war. Hybrid warfare differs, however, because costs accumulate more slowly and in a more controlled manner, increasing the likelihood of success and making such operations more feasible. This dynamic also explains why hybrid warfare is often chosen over full-scale war.

Fourth, the political nature of hybrid operations. The primary objective of hybrid operations often involves either changing or supporting the political regime in the target country. This objective necessitates a large-scale effort to maintain the new or rescued regime and to ensure political and economic stability. Such activities may begin even before the hybrid operation concludes—especially if the goal is to sustain an existing regime—and may continue long after the immediate objectives have been achieved. Installing a new regime through occupation or suppressing opposition may be relatively straightforward, but a “puppet” government is often unstable; maintaining it may require a significant military presence and substantial economic investment.

Consequently, the long-term effect of a hybrid operation is difficult to achieve and typically requires considerable resources, while ultimate success is never guaranteed. The United States, for example, was able to create a reasonably stable regime in Iraq after ten years of military presence; that regime survived the withdrawal of U.S. forces, signaling success. In Afghanistan, however, the U.S.-supported government collapsed the same day U.S. troops withdrew, rendering the 20-year operation a failure. Similarly, Russia succeeded in preventing the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, but was unable to stabilize it fully due to a variety of factors, ultimately resulting in a partial failure.

Regime building is not entirely new: the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in it after World War II, creating a new international system with two opposing blocs. However, the emergence of hybrid warfare and the availability of new tools—informational, cyber, and others—by the late 20th and early 21st centuries have elevated regime support and change to a top priority and made it achievable without resorting to full-scale war.

Regime change or sustainment remains a major element of foreign policy for all great powers—such as the United States, Russia, and China—although not every instance qualifies as hybrid warfare. In most cases, these policies rely primarily on informational, economic, and other non-military tools. Hybrid warfare, in contrast, involves activities that go beyond propaganda or economic pressure and is typically employed opportunistically—during a regime crisis or similar political disruptions. Across all cases, the stakes involve domestic political stability, the durability of the political regime, and, in some instances, the defense capability of the target country.

It is reasonable to anticipate a decline in the incidence of hybrid warfare—or comparable operations—on the Russia-West or China-West axis. This decline is likely because states have introduced stronger controls over information flows across borders, while economic sanctions and other measures have reduced economic interdependence, a trend that is expected to continue in the near future.

RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HYBRID WARFARE

As we consider the Russian approach to hybrid warfare, two key points must be kept in mind. First, the term itself is not indigenous to Russia: it was borrowed from American discourse and, in Russian usage, is applied primarily to Western policies—an irony, given that in the West, the term is predominantly applied to Russian actions. Second, Russia not only adopted the term but also borrowed the concept, albeit in a modified form. Importantly, this borrowing occurred during the period when the concept was undergoing the transformation described in the previous chapter, meaning that Russia adopted the understanding of hybrid warfare that had emerged by 2015.

Interest in hybrid warfare in Russia was stimulated by the Arab Spring and the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, events that caught Moscow by surprise. These were instances of regime change, often occurring without the use of force by the West—or with only limited military action toward the end, as in Libya. Russian leaders realized that regime change could now occur without traditional military intervention. Previously, Western interventions followed direct military action, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, but in Libya, force was used mainly to consolidate an already ongoing regime change—or, in some cases, was not needed at all.

Russian concerns were further compounded by disagreements over the UN Security Council resolution establishing a no-fly zone in Libya. Then-President Dmitri Medvedev chose to abstain, although many in the Kremlin, including Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, advocated a veto. Medvedev exercised his presidential prerogatives, while Putin publicly warned against the abstention—a highly unusual display of open disagreement with a superior in Russian political tradition. Whether or not Allied aircraft exceeded the UNSC mandate by targeting ground positions is largely immaterial; Moscow treated the campaign as a violation of international law, undermining both written and unwritten conventions. These events also had a lasting domestic impact, reinforcing perceptions that Medvedev was too soft and contributing to Putin's return to the presidency.

In addition, Russia itself experienced events reminiscent of the Arab Spring in 2011, when mass protests erupted in Moscow and other cities demanding greater political freedoms and curbs on the security services. Though these protests were ultimately suppressed, they

demonstrated that even seemingly stable authoritarian regimes could be destabilized by popular movements. Russian analysts attributed these movements entirely to Western influence, including the activities of NGOs, the use of social networks, and other non-military mechanisms, which until then had not been regarded as serious threats.

Interestingly, the first substantive Russian reaction came from the military rather than the political leadership. In a 2013 speech at the Academy of Military Sciences, Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov addressed the concept of hybrid warfare, emphasizing its American origins. This speech later became widely known as the "Gerasimov Doctrine," although in reality it reflected Gerasimov's analysis of Western policy rather than a uniquely Russian doctrine.

Gerasimov noted: "The experience of military conflicts, including those associated with 'colored revolutions' in North Africa and the Middle East, confirms that a fully stable state could, within a matter of months or even weeks, become an arena of heated armed struggle, fall victim to foreign intervention, descend into chaos, experience humanitarian catastrophe, and erupt into civil war."[1]

Assessment from the political level came a year later, which is unsurprising—statements of this kind typically reflect internal deliberations and subsequently serve as policy guidance. In 2014, Vladimir Putin observed that "changes in the world order, and what we're seeing today are events on this scale, have usually been accompanied, if not by global war, then by chains of intensive low-level conflicts," and he added that "today we see a sharp increase in the likelihood of a whole set of violent conflicts with either the direct or indirect participation by the world's major powers."[2]

The central role of the Ministry of Defense in developing Russia's understanding of hybrid warfare is somewhat unusual. Following the war with Georgia in 2008, the Russian military undertook a major reform to clarify its core missions and the nature of future conflicts, shaping the reformed army in terms of training, equipment, and structure. Unsurprisingly, the General Staff—traditionally called the "Brain of the Army"[3] and responsible for producing relevant analysis—was at the forefront of this work.

In his 2013 speech at the Academy of Military Sciences, Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov described hybrid warfare as follows:[4]

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[1] Valerii Gerasimov, "Tsennost Nauki v Predvidenii" (The Value of Science is Prediction), Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kurier, 2013, No. 5, February 2013, https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632.

[2] "Zasedaniye Mezhdunarodnovo Diskussionnovo kluba 'Valdai'," October 24, 2014.

[3] This definition of the General Staff was created by the former Chief of General Staff, Boris Shaposhnikov, who in 1920s published a study about the place of the General Staff in the military structures of the state, which was widely popular and is still considered a classic book on the subject: Boris Shaposhnikov, Mozg Armii (the Brain of the Army), Moscow: Voyengiz, 1927-1929.

[4] Gerasimov, "Tsennost Nauki v Predvidenii."

> "Emphasis in the methods of conflict is shifting toward broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military means implemented with the help of the protest potential of the population. All this is complemented with military means of clandestine nature, including informational warfare and activities of special operations forces. Open use of [military] force, often under the guise of peacekeeping operations and crisis management, is used only at a certain stage, mostly to ensure the final success in the conflict."

Gerasimov slightly updated this definition in 2019:

> "[Modern conflicts display employment of] tools of economic, political, diplomatic, informational pressure, as well as demonstration of military power to enhance the effectiveness of non-military measures. Military force is used only when defined goals cannot be achieved through non-military methods."[5]

Another term sometimes used in Russian (and international) literature is "non-linear warfare." This term first appeared in 2014 in a short story by Vladislav Surkov, writing under the pseudonym Nathan Dubovitsky, who at the time was a personal advisor to Putin responsible for relations with Ukraine. Surkov described a non-linear World War V in which multiple groups of countries fought simultaneously—not two sides as in traditional wars—using all available tools.[6]

A Russian author wrote in 2015 that operations in Ukraine exemplified this non-linear approach:

> "The reluctance of Russia to engage forces or directly interfere in the conflict [in Crimea and initially in Donbass] might look strange from the perspective of the classic image of war, but when using a non-linear approach, everything falls into place. [...] There may be developments in a conflict between two entities where the winner is not the side with stronger initial positions or more aggressive actions; instead, the weaker but more flexible side may prevail."[7]

Neither the term "non-linear warfare" nor the term "hybrid war" gained widespread traction in Russia. The latter, borrowed from Western discourse, was applied primarily to Western strategies. While Russian strategists adopted the concept itself, they never achieved consensus on a domestic label, leaving the policy effectively without a formal name.

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[5] "Vystuplenie Generala Armii Vitaliya Gerasimova na Koferentsii po Razvitiyu Voennoi Strategii "(Speech by Army General Valerii Gerasimov at a Conference on Development of Military Strategy), March 2, 2019, http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/.

[6] Natan Dubovitsky, "Bez Neba" [Without a Sky], *Russkii Pioner*, March 12 2014, http://ruspioner.ru/honest/m/single/4131.

[7] Pavel Bykov, "Yuytnye Ruiny Yaltinskoi Sistemy" [Comfortable Ruins of the Yalta System], Voyennoe Obozrenie, February 12, 2015, http://expert.ru/expert/2015/07/uyutnyie-ruinyi-yaltinskoj-sistemyi/

Gerasimov's 2013 and 2019 statements reveal a key aspect of Russia's approach: hybrid warfare was seen as an American concept—an adversary's strategy that needed to be understood to counter successfully, but also to adopt selectively to achieve Russia's own objectives. This leads to the first and perhaps most important conclusion: Russia's hybrid warfare strategy is not indigenous; it is borrowed—or, arguably, plagiarized. This observation is not new. In 2018, Marc Galeotti, who first analyzed Russian strategic innovation in 2013, published a telling article titled: *"I am Sorry for Creating the 'Gerasimov Doctrine.'"*[8]

> "Gerasimov was actually talking about how the Kremlin understands what happened in the 'Arab Spring', uprisings, the 'color revolutions' against pro-Moscow regimes in Russia's neighborhood, and in due course Ukraine's "Maidan" revolt,"

wrote Galeotti.

> "The Russians honestly — however wrongly — believe that these were not genuine protests against brutal and corrupt governments, but regime changes orchestrated in Washington, or rather, Langley. This wasn't a "doctrine" as the Russians understand it, for future adventures abroad: Gerasimov was trying to work out how to fight, not promote, such uprisings at home."

It should be noted that, in hindsight, the theorizing by Gerasimov and others was not limited to counteracting Western policies. The term **"new generation warfare"** was never widely adopted in Russia and has remained primarily a Western label used to describe what was seen as Russian strategy. As a result, the strategy itself remained without an official name domestically, even though its key elements were implemented in practice.

According to Gerasimov, American hybrid warfare operations can be conceptualized as occurring in six stages (contrary to a common misconception that he proposed these as prescriptive stage[9]). The first three stages rely exclusively on non-military tools, emphasizing political, informational, economic, and diplomatic measures. The subsequent stages involve the optional use of military tools, applied as needed to achieve operational objectives. These stages are subdivided into: limited use of military force in stages 4 and 5, intended to support ongoing non-military operations and peacekeeping operations in the final stage, conducted to consolidate control and stabilize the situation after the operation has concluded.

[8] Marc Galeotti, "I am Sorry For Creating the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'," Foreign Policy, March 5, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/.

[9] Amos C. Fox and Andrew J. Rossow, "Assessing Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Successful Tool for Limited War," Small Wars Journal, August 2016, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/assessing-russian-hybrid-warfare-a-successful-tool-for-limited-war.

Overall, the ratio of non-military to military tools in such operations is estimated at approximately 4:1, highlighting the primacy of non-kinetic measures in achieving strategic goals (see Fig. 1).

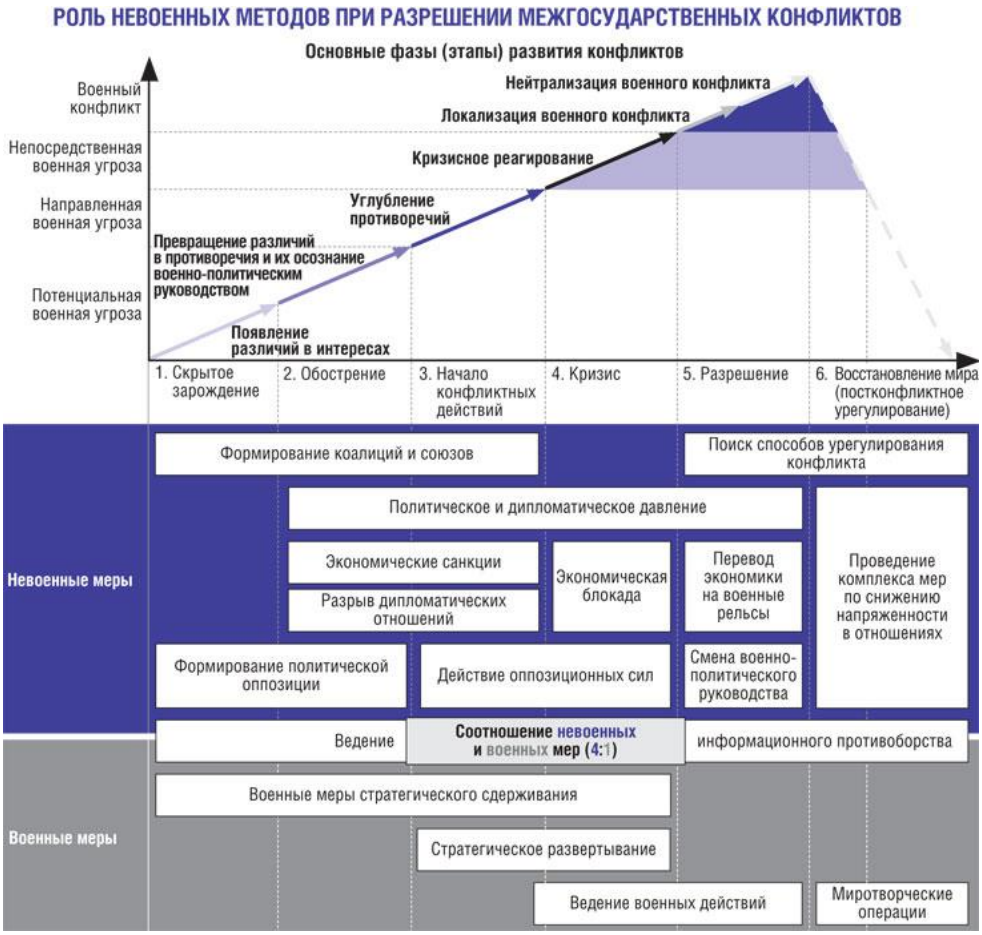

Fig. 1: Development of a hybrid conflict according to Valerii Gerasimov.

The scheme proposed by Gerasimov has broader implications than just the collapse of authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East. It can apply to any conflicts involving great powers, including potential conflicts between them, primarily because hybrid operations can be conducted below the level of war. Russian policymakers and strategists were acutely aware of the 2011 protests in Moscow, attributing them largely to subversive U.S. operations. Although not directly referenced by Gerasimov—likely because military tools were not involved—these events reinforced the perceived relevance of hybrid strategies. Subsequently, Russian observers also tracked what they considered American and European hybrid operations against China, often interpreting pro-democracy movements or unrest in Xinjiang and Tibet as hybrid warfare.

Gerasimov particularly highlighted the role of informational tools as part of “shaping operations,” a concept borrowed from American terminology: “Informational war opens broad asymmetric possibilities for reducing the combat potential of the adversary. In North

Africa, we witnessed the implementation of technologies of affecting state structures and population with the help of information networks."[10]

Military experts S.G. Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov further analyzed non-military tools in new generation warfare (NGW), identifying their benefits both in peacetime and during armed conflict. These include deterring war, stabilizing the international system, strengthening inter-state relations, and neutralizing adversary threats. They emphasized informational warfare as an independent tool, alongside economic, political, ideological, diplomatic, and other instruments. Such tools could weaken an adversary's military potential and resolve, influence decision-making, and shape public opinion—all without employing Russian armed forces. In the best-case scenario, non-military instruments could prevent adversaries from using force altogether, while simultaneously multiplying the effectiveness of Russia's military capabilities.[11]

Despite the focus on non-military instruments, the Russian understanding of hybrid war—at least as presented by Gerasimov and other military authors—paid primary attention to the military component (perhaps not surprising coming from the military). The role of military power could range from indirect deterrence to limited operations (special forces or private military companies), or in extreme cases, direct application of advanced military power in a limited war.

In his agenda-setting 2013 article, Gerasimov stressed that military tools could be used differently than in traditional war, including measures short of full-scale combat, such as naval blockades, no-fly zones, operations by private military companies, and special operations coordinated with internal political opposition. A more sophisticated application involved preventing or halting armed conflict, using military power for deterrence and de-escalation alongside non-military tools—a conceptual innovation in hybrid warfare.[12]

Gerasimov's main innovation was the reconceptualization of military power as an integral but secondary component of broader hybrid operations. Military tools could be applied in gray area operations below the level of war or, if necessary, overtly in a limited war. Both modes could apply to conflicts against major powers, including the United States and its allies, contrasting with Western reluctance to use force against nuclear states. Russian experts envisioned two stages of direct conflict with great-power rivals:

1. The pre-conflict period: Non-military means, psychological operations, subversion, and similar activities, and

[10] Gerasimov, 2013.
[11] Gerasimov, 2013.
[12] V.B. Zarudnitskiy, "Kharakter i Soderzhanie Voyennykh Konfliktov v Sovremennykh Usliviyakh i Obozrimoi Perspektive" [Character and content of armed conflicts in modern conditions and near term perspective], Voennaya Mysl', no. 1 (2021).

2. Full-scale war: Deployment of the entire range of military assets (air, sea, land, space) combined with continued informational operations.[13]

These plans did not extend to the use of nuclear weapons, which were considered a separately category, though the threat of escalation to the nuclear threshold remained part of the hybrid toolbox, as evidenced in subsequent proxy conflicts and the war in Ukraine.

Gerasimov also emphasized several new points directly relevant for the status of the military at the start of conflict. Until World War I, he emphasized, wars were preceded by mobilization, but by the 1930s, wars could begin with standing forces while mobilization occurred secretly prior to the war or concurrently with the war. Gerasimov cited Soviet theorist Georgii Isserton (purged in the late 1930s) to support the idea that any use of force—below or above the level of war—must nowadays rely on standing armed forces. This applied to both the U.S. and Russia, whether deterring adversary force or applying it directly.

This approach imposed strict requirements on the standing Russian army, which was expected to enter a conflict without a lengthy preparatory phase—even in a potential confrontation with the United States or NATO. At the very least, the army needed to be sufficiently robust to deter direct intervention by these adversaries. In retrospect, the Russian military's focus, starting around 2015, on rapid redeployment of significant forces across potential theaters of conflict can be seen as an effort to ensure that its relatively limited force—especially when compared to major adversaries like NATO or China—could be concentrated quickly and effectively wherever needed.

Consequently, the Russian military underwent reforms to ensure its ability to rapidly relocate and concentrate forces across potential theaters, starting around 2015. This ensured that Russia's relatively limited forces could still deter or confront major adversaries, including NATO and China, without relying on prolonged mobilization. Notwithstanding, the Russian army faced significant limitations that could not be quickly overcome. Chief among these were the ability to project forces beyond Russia's borders and sustain them: airlift and sealift capacities were—and remain—limited, with no realistic prospect of matching the United States. Rearmament was also constrained by financial and economic factors, meaning that modernization of equipment would proceed slowly.

These limitations implied that any use of military force, even within hybrid operations, had to be executed rapidly, particularly when there was a risk of direct US involvement. The goal was to act before adversaries could respond effectively. For operations beyond Russia's immediate neighborhood—where forces could not move over land—the number of troops and amount of equipment had to remain modest. Failure to satisfy these conditions exposed Russian operations to high risk of setbacks or outright defeat**.**

[13] Aleksandr Serzhantov, Sergey Mazhuga, and Vladimir Loiko, "Voiny Gryadushchego: Kakimi Oni Budug?" [Wars of the future: what will they be like?], Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie, no. 35 (2019).

In sum, the Russian military did not aim to develop a "new generation warfare" theory or capabilities from scratch. Rather, it reacted to Western (primarily US) theory and practice, assessing both present and potential future threats. Whether the analysis was accurate is beside the point because perception of threat is inherently subjective.

This analysis served two functions: first, it generated recommendations for preparing the Russian military for emerging contingencies, and second, it stimulated adoption of key tenets of hybrid warfare as it had developed by the mid-2010s. In particular, it underscored that military tools could be productively integrated into multi-domain operations as a supporting element. In other words, the Russian military began to move beyond the classical dichotomy of war and peace and concentration on deterrence of the "main advdrsary," acquiring both interest and capabilities for gray-area operations and limited extraterritorial actions.

In practice, Russia developed its own version of hybrid warfare, consistent with the working definition outlined above. The most visible element was the use of military force, reflecting the military's proactive role in its development. Other key features were also present: coordination across multiple domains, prominent use of informational tools, supportive military role, and broad deployment of private military companies (albeit limited to a single sanctioned company).

Notably, this Russian-style hybrid warfare had no official name and its existence was never formally acknowledged. This likely reflected the fact that it originated as a response to an American concept, which Moscow could not publicly embrace without contradicting its official stance against "imperialist" policies. Pragmatism, however, dictated adoption of the elements Moscow deemed most effective. Consequently, the emergence of a de facto Russian hybrid (or new generation) warfare was unsurprising, even if Western observers tended to label Russia as the sole practitioner of hybrid warfare.

Part of the confusion about the sources of Russian New Generation Warfare arises from the timeline of the concept. While the term "hybrid war" emerged in the early 2000s to describe a proliferation of a previously limited form of warfare, Gerasimov in 2013 discussed American multi-domain operations—starting with Georgia in 2008 and later in the Middle East—with reference to Moscow's 2011 experience, calling it "new generation warfare". He did not use the term "hybrid warfare" because it had not yet fully transitioned to its 2015-16 definition. Russia then conducted its own multi-domain operations in Ukraine in 2014-15, completing the adoption of the concept, which subsequently became associated with Russian policy because Western discourse was reluctant to acknowledge its own prior practices.

The confusion was compounded when Marc Galeotti labeled Gerasimov's analysis "new generation warfare" as if it reflected an indigenous Russian policy; Galeotti later clarified that this was unintended, and that Gerasimov had been describing American strategy rather than a new Russian doctrine.

This timeline clarifies the evolution of “hybrid warfare” in both the West and Russia, and highlights the largely unscientific, non-rigorous use of the term. In hindsight, the finger-pointing between the two sides is unsurprising: public perception often outweighs systematic analysis. What remains clear, however, is that the origins of the phenomenon lie in the West, and that Russia has adopted it in a modified form, while the West continues to apply similar methods in practice.

CASE STUDIES OF RUSSIAN-STYLE HYBRID WARFARE

The following section contains several case studies of hybrid (new generation) warfare implemented by Russia since its government and military paid attention to Western multi-domain (hybrid) operations or policies they perceived as such. The most obvious case is omitted: operations in Ukraine (2014-2022). The omission is intentional: it has been extensively researched,[1] but there are other, under-researched examples of hybrid operations:

- **Syria (2015-24):** Soon after the formulation of New Generation Warfare, Moscow sought to apply what it had borrowed from Western discourse on hybrid war to try to stem the wave of regime changes in the Arab world known as the "Arab Spring." This case provides a particularly clear picture of the hybrid war toolbox at Russia's disposal and how it sought to compensate for weaknesses in some elements with greater emphasis on others.

- **Attempt to leverage the newly acquired long-range conventional capability toward political ends (2015-22):** Since the military were the central driver of hybrid warfare theory and practice, they explored ways to include this new capability into multi-domain operations.

- **Employment of nuclear threat vis-à-vis NATO, with particular emphasis on Europe in the context of the war against Ukraine:** The unusual feature of this case is the employment of nuclear weapons for missions that are not commonly associated with that asset and for which Russia did not have a strategy. Essentially, nuclear weapons became part of the military toolbox of hybrid operations simply because Russia did not have any other military assets to put on the table.

[1] The list is almost unending. For an example of a comprehensive study, see Rusia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015.

Inquiry into these cases illuminates both the Russian attempts to implement the hybrid warfare concept as it was borrowed from the United States as best as it could and the unique features specific to Russian hybrid warfare operations dictated by limitations on the available toolbox and preexisting strategic thinking

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SYRIA: A STANDARD HYBRID GAME

The case of Syria represents an interesting combination of policy pursued simultaneously at three levels. One was Syria itself—an attempt to prevent it from becoming another case of the Arab Spring, with a democratic, pro-Western, but also highly unstable regime. The second level was international interaction around Syria at the regional level (Turkey, Gulf states, Israel, etc.). The third level was global—interaction with the United States first and foremost, but also Europe and international organizations.

Although this might look like a traditional multilevel diplomatic "game," it displays key features of a hybrid operation, namely:

- The crux of the "game" was the fate of a political regime: in contrast to most hybrid warfare cases, this one was not about its change but rather about the preservation of an existing one (and modification as necessary to enhance its stability).

- Russia employed multiple non-military tools, including political, economic, and informational, both in Syria and throughout the region, in conjunction and close coordination.

- Military power was an integral part of this operation—first through presence, then through direct involvement, including long-range strikes from Russian territory. The military power, however, played—or at least was intended to play—a limited role in ensuring the survival of the regime in the face of increasingly effective operations by various opposition groups.

- For the first time, Russia actively leveraged a private military company, Wagner, as part of the military component of its operation, giving it additional flexibility, deniability, and limited responsibility (Moscow did not have to react to any troubles Wagner might encounter).

Russia—and the Soviet Union before it—had consistently had a strong interest in Syria and a close relationship with the Assad regime (both father and son), driven by both political and strategic interests (including a naval base in the Mediterranean). Until 2015, however, Russia had remained relatively passive, as a result of the general weakening of its global position

and a broader loss of appetite and, especially, capacity to engage far from its borders. It also lacked the ability to provide significant funding, both monetary and in-kind (such as arms, commodities, and investment). Additionally, it had ended the Soviet tradition of unquestionable and unlimited support for the Palestinian cause, having established a strong positive relationship with Israel and encouraging the peace process in the Middle East. This attitude continued even as the Assad regime began to falter.

In mid-2011, Russia changed its largely "hands-off" policy on Syria. Active involvement was triggered by the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya—or, more precisely, by the role of Western powers and the United Nations in that event. Coming on the heels of the Arab Spring—a quick succession of popular revolts against authoritarian regimes in Northern Africa—a similar movement in Libya hit a stumbling block: a combination of popular protests in major cities and armed opposition groups, which had been successful in other countries, failed to topple Gaddafi. His regime was overthrown—and Gaddafi himself killed—only after direct military involvement by Great Britain and France, whose aircraft, operating under a UN Security Council mandate, enforced a no-fly zone, thus denying Gaddafi his most powerful tool vis-à-vis the armed opposition, and then quickly expanded their action to include his ground forces. The United States also had to come on board when Great Britain and France began to run out of ammunition; it also provided valuable intelligence and other forms of support.

Russia's concern had been growing as the Arab Spring unfolded, but it limited itself to angry statements accusing the West of incitement, political and financial support, and extensive use of informational tools such as social networks. Initially, its reaction to events in Libya was the same; the "moment of truth" came when the opposition failed to topple the government and outside interference became necessary. The United Kingdom and France introduced a resolution in the UN Security Council to authorize the enforcement of a no-fly zone, which would have deprived Gaddafi of his most powerful asset, the Air Force.

This resolution caused a serious internal conflict in Russia. In a highly unusual development, Vladimir Putin, who at that time was Prime Minister, publicly objected, saying that Great Britain and France would extend military involvement beyond the declared mandate. Then-President Dmitry Medvedev nonetheless instructed the Russian mission to the United Nations to abstain (interestingly, Putin, in spite of all his influence, deferred to presidential prerogatives—in Russia, prime ministers do not have authority over foreign and defense policy). China, which at that time was still relatively passive at the UNSC, followed Russia's example. As a result, the resolution passed.

The expansion of the British and French operations, as well as U.S. support, thoroughly discredited Medvedev's policy of cooperation with the West and apparently contributed to Putin's decision to return to power the following year. These events were interpreted in Moscow as evidence that the West could not be trusted and had a profound, lasting effect on Russian foreign policy. Among the consequences was the Russian decision to interfere in Syria to prevent a repetition of the Arab Spring and the Libyan scenario. Russia began by

vetoing a resolution on Syria proposed by Great Britain and France similar to the one that had authorized military operations in Libya; China once again followed Russia's example. Medvedev explained the choice by direct reference to the Arab Spring:

> "Russia condemns and does not accept bloodshed and civil war, which have become the result of the so-called 'Arab Spring.' From our perspective, the perspective of the Russian state, people's yearning for democracy is understandable. Regimes that have been removed as a result of these events were old and rotten; people were unhappy with them. This is explainable and understandable. [These events resulted in civil wars, however,] and this is an absolutely unacceptable outcome."[1]

Russia's alternative resolution ruled out the use of force and was predictably rejected by the Western permanent members of the UNSC. In February 2012, Russia vetoed another draft UNSC resolution on Syria, this time over the demand that the regime withdraw its military from cities. Moscow insisted that armed formations of the opposition also be withdrawn. The amendment did not pass, and the resolution was vetoed.

In early 2012, in the run-up to the presidential election, Vladimir Putin published a long article defining his foreign policy for years to come.[2] With respect to the Middle East and Syria, he began, much like Medvedev a few months earlier, with a few positive words about the Arab Spring:

> "A year ago the world encountered a new phenomenon—almost simultaneous demonstrations in many Arab countries against authoritarian regimes. The 'Arab Spring' was at first seen with hope for positive changes. The sympathies of Russians were on the side of those who strove for democratic reforms."

After that, also much like Medvedev in the fall of 2011, he pointed out that outcomes were the opposite of expectations:

> "Instead of consolidation of democracy, instead of protection of the rights of minorities, [we saw] that [political] opponents were pushed out by coup d'états, when domination of one power was replaced with even more aggressive domination of another."

Next came condemnation of Western interference in Libya "in support of one of the parties in an internal conflict and the military nature of that interference." "Some states, under the cover of humanitarian slogans, used Air Force to finish off the Libyan regime. As the

[1] "Medvedev: RF Osyzhdaet Mezhdousobitsu, Stavshyuy Itogom 'Arabskoi Vesny'" [Medvedev: RF Condemns the Civil War Which Resulted from the "Arab Spring"}, RIA-Novosti, November 19, 2011.
[2] "Medvedev: RF Osyzhdaet Mezhdousobitsu, Stavshyuy Itogom 'Arabskoi Vesny'" [Medvedev: RF Condemns the Civil War Which Resulted from the "Arab Spring"}, RIA-Novosti, November 19, 2011.

apotheosis, an ugly scene of not even medieval, but rather prehistoric execution of M. Gaddafi."

From this, he drew the guidelines for Russian policy with respect to Syria:

> "We cannot allow the repetition of the 'Libyan scenario' in Syria. Efforts of the international community should be aimed at achieving internal Syrian reconciliation. It is important to urgently stop violence regardless of where it originates, and finally launch a national-level dialogue without preconditions, without international interference, and with respect for the sovereignty of the country. This would create a foundation to make sure that democratization steps promised by the Syrian leadership are truly implemented. The main thing is to avoid a full-scale civil war."

Perhaps the most important element of this programmatic article was an open declaration of Russia's intention to pursue a proactive policy, breaking with the post–Cold War pattern of limiting activities to the immediate neighborhood.

Second, Putin declared that Russia would actively oppose Western regime-change policies. These were deemed unacceptable and harmful to local populations. Instead, the once and future president of Russia emphasized stability and controlled change, which assumed inclusion of departing regimes into "national unity" governments as well as high barriers to outside (meaning Western) interference. Preference for stability and controlled change helped Russia to build bridges with conservative Arab regimes at a later stage.

Third, all opposition to existing regimes was divided into "constructive" and "terrorist." The former were entitled to dialogue and could be included in "national unity" governments; the latter had to be isolated and defeated. This element of policy reflected concern that power could end up in the hands of radical Islamists—a concern inherited from the Chechen wars of the 1990s and early 2000s. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov remarked in 2013 that it was wrong to conceptualize the Arab Spring as a conflict between democracy and tyranny, and that the tendency to classify any opposition as pro-democratic ushered in a wave of extremism engulfing the region.[3]

Toward that end, Moscow was prepared to work with moderate groups, including those supported by the West, and believed that this approach resonated with U.S. policy, which at the time was battling militant Islam not only in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in sub-Saharan Africa.

With that agenda in mind, Russia launched itself into the middle of turbulent events in and around Syria, using initially diplomatic instruments. Kofi Annan, who was appointed UN Special Representative and League of Arab States Special Representative on Syria, came up

[3] "Lavrov: Vouyuyshchie v Sirii Radikaly Khotyat Unishtozhit Svetskie Gosudarstva" [Lavrov: Radicals Fighting in Syria Seek to Destroy Secular States], RIA-Novosti, September 27, 2013.

with a plan that had been developed primarily by the largest opposition group, the Syrian National Council. That plan provided for the retirement of Assad and the future of Syria as a democratic state. Surprisingly, Russia supported that plan, although with one amendment—it sought to keep Assad at least as a temporary, transitional head of state. Dmitry Medvedev declared: "The internal contradictions, which divide Syrian society today, will not disappear as a result of the departure of this or that person."[4]

In line with these plans, Moscow plunged into the Geneva process, trying to create a "national unity" government with the participation of Assad, pressuring him to accept a plan devised by Kofi Annan, which Damascus initially flatly rejected. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov disclosed that Moscow openly told Syrians they should accept and "more actively" implement that plan.[5] At the same time, Russia refused to accept the part of the plan that foresaw Assad's departure: "We do not negotiate about the future of Bashar Assad," Lavrov insisted.[6] Russia also continued to supply the Syrian regime with arms—not only those needed to continue the war with the opposition, but also anti-ship weapons (*Yakhont* missiles) and the S-300 air defense system, which could threaten Israeli and Western assets.

Behind closed doors, however, Russia conceded that eventually Assad would have to go. Martti Ahtisaari, former President of Finland and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who held consultations with the five permanent members of the Security Council in early 2012, confirmed that at least at that time Russia was contemplating the replacement of Assad as part of a political transition. Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vitaly Churkin, according to Ahtisaari, "said three things: One—we should not give arms to the opposition. Two—we should get a dialogue going between the opposition and Assad straight away. Three—we should find an elegant way for Assad to step aside." Ahtisaari added: "It was an opportunity lost in 2012."[7]

Initial Russian plans were upset by changes in the Syrian opposition: gradually, fragmented groups began to coalesce around the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which enjoyed the support of both the opposition in exile and the United States, even though it was a radical Islamic group. The rise of the FSA sidelined the previously influential Syrian National Council and, to a large extent, doomed the entire idea of a non-religious democratic future for Syria. Washington still hoped that relatively moderate Islamists could stabilize Syria.[8] For Russia, however, the

[4] "Medvedev Schitaet, chto Ukhod Assada Ne Reshit Problem Sirii" [Medvedev Believes that Departure of Assad Will Not Resolve the Problems of Syria], RIA-Novosti, March 27, 2012.
[5] "Moskva Schitaet, chto Damask Mog by Aktivnee Realizovyvat Plan Annana" [Moscow Believes that Damascus Could More Actively Implement the Annan Plan], RIA-Novosti, April 10, 2012.
[6] "Sergeya Lavrova Poprosili ob Otstavke Bashara Assada" [Sergey Lavrov was Asked to Send Bashar Assad to Retirement], Kommersant-Daily, No. 234 (5019), December 11, 2012.
[7] "West Ignored Russian Offer in 2012 to Have Syria's Assad Step Aside," Guardian, September 15, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/15/west-ignored-russian-offer-in-2012-to-have-syrias-assad-step-aside.
[8] Hassan Hassan, "The Army of Islam is Winning in Syria, and That's Not Necessarily a Bad Thing," Foreign Affairs, October 1, 2013.

very notion that a pro-Islamic group was vying for power was anathema, and this development seriously undermined the nascent dialogue with the Americans.

Already at this stage, Russia engaged military tools, albeit still in a limited manner: the Russian Navy placed its ships in the vicinity of Syria to serve as a counterweight to the American naval presence and to provide political, as well as, if necessary, military support to the Assad regime. Sergey Lavrov declared that the Russian naval presence was playing a "stabilizing" role in the region,[9] while the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that Russian naval presence near Syria would continue indefinitely.[10] For the Navy, this was also about a permanent military base: "Russia does not plan to abandon the naval base in Syrian Tartus," declared the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy, Vice-Admiral Viktor Chirkov, in the spring of 2012.[11] The Syrian National Council, during a visit to Moscow, conceded that after the replacement of Assad with a new government, the Russian base would be discussed as part of a package on military cooperation.[12]

Russian diplomacy also helped to defuse a major crisis over the use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013, which caused a major confrontation between Russia and the West at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) over who was the perpetrator—the Assad regime or one of the opposition groups. The United States came to the verge of military action against the regime of Assad. When Russia and China blocked a draft UNSC resolution threatening the use of force against Syria, the Permanent Representative of France to the UN, Laurent Fabius, even threatened that force could be used without UNSC authorization.[13] Moscow, anxious to avoid a major confrontation and at the same time protect its client, proposed that Syria join the Chemical Weapons Convention, followed by an international effort to eliminate chemical weapons in that country. The Obama administration agreed, and only days later the two countries adopted the *Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons*. The chemical disarmament of Syria is widely regarded as a success story; yet, it did not preclude further and more intense conflicts at the OPCW over past and subsequent cases of chemical weapons use, nor did it affect the broader context of conflict within and around Syria.

Overall, effectiveness of political tools proved very limited. Opposition supported by the United States and Gulf monarchies remained on the offensive and continued to resist Russian attempts to keep Assad at the helm in Syria even if temporarily. As a result, Putin's original plan to replace Arab Spring-style change of regimes by revolution with gradual

[9] "Lavrov: Korabli RF v Sredizemnom More Stabiliziruyut Situatsiyu v Regione" {Lavrov: Russian ships in the Mediterranean Stabilize the Situation in the Region], RIA-Novosti, January 23, 2013.
[10] "Korabli VMF Budut Postoyanno Dezhurit u Beregov Sirii – Minoborony" [Russian Navy Ships will be Permanently on Duty near Syria – Ministry of Defense], RIA-Novosti, April 13, 2012.
[11] "Rossiya ne Otkazhetsya ot Bazy v Siriiskov Tartuse, Zayavil Glavkom VMF" [Russia Will Not Abandon the Base at Syrian Tartus, Declared Navy CINC], RIA-Novosti, June 26, 2012.
[12] "Siriiskaya Oppozitsiya v Sluchae Prikhoda k Vlasti Obsudit Bazu f Tartuse" [Syrian Opposition Will Discuss the Base at Tartus if It Comes to Power], RIA-Novosti, July 11, 2012.
[13] Pavel Tarasenko, "Voinoi na Siriuy Idut v Obkhod OON" [War is Coming to Syria in Circumvention of the UN], Kommersant-Daily, No. 151 (5182), August 23, 2013.

controlled transition to moderate government failed. Moscow could not abandon Assad because this would have opened doors for what it saw as an unacceptable outcome – a government consisting of rather (although not extreme) radical Islamists and continuation of the Arab Spring through the region, including potentially on the borders and perhaps inside Russia. Although by that time the Arab Spring wave was clearly losing momentum (in 2014, Egypt saw another change of regime and the new government led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi reversed many of the policies of the previous government and moved to revive closer relations with Russia), defeat was clearly unpalatable for Moscow.

Another development, which probably changed Moscow's attitude toward events in Syria was a radically worsened relationship with the United States following events in Ukraine – the Maidan, which overthrew the government of Viktor Yanukovich (who was perceived in the West – mistakenly, in hindsight as pro-Russian) and annexation of Crimea. Hopes for cooperation in Syria were abandoned and Russian concern about American support for "moderately radical" Islamists moved to the forefront.

In these circumstances, Russia made an unexpected move – it sent its army into Syria in September 2015. At first it was the Air Force for aerial operations against opposition – primarily the Islamic State (IS) groups – and later also ground troops because the Syrian army was incapable of regaining ground even with Russian air support.

The military component of the Syrian operation was very different from how it was originally conceived. According to Gerasimov, limited use of the military force was supposed to enter the scene at the last stage of operation to consolidate success achieved through the use of non-military tools. Here, force was used to "save the day" – to arrest and reverse the failing operation. Paradoxically, the same happened in Libya, where the British and French involvement helped save an operation, which had ground to a halt, at best.

Although Russia used military force to turn the tables, it did not fully abandon political tools. A degree of interaction with the United States was preserved, although it could never reach the level shown in 2013. Nonetheless, a month after Russian troops landed in Syria, the two countries signed a memorandum to prevent accidental clashes between both ground forces and aircraft.

Nor was the idea of dialogue with non-IS opposition fully abandoned, at least not right away. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced that non-IS groups would not be bombed.[14] According to Russian reports, the Russian military even establish contacts with FSA and it provided targeting for some of Russian bombing raids against IS.[15] Deputy Minister of Defense Anatoly Antonov (later appointed ambassador to the United States) stated that Russia was also coordinating its actions with other regional actors: "[We have] established

[14] "V Minoborony Iskluchili Udary po 'Umerennoi' Oppozitsii v Sirii" [Ministry of Defense Rules out Strikes at "Moderate" Opposition in Syria], Kommersant-Daily, November 4, 2015.
[15] Maria Bondarenko, "Siriiskaya Oppozitsiya Predostabila Rossii Koordinaty dlya Udarov po IG" [Syrian Opposition Provided Russia with Coordinates for Strikes at IS], RBC, November 3, 2015.

a 24-hour direct channel with Turkey. [We] continue consultations with Israel, Egypt, states of the Persian Gulf. {We] agree with Jordan about establishing in Amman a working mechanism to coordinate activities 'in the skies' over Syria."[16]

By Russian assessment, the military operation was a success, at least at the initial stage. According to official data presented at a Moscow Conference on International Security at the Ministry of Defense in 2018 by Colonel General Sergei Rudskoi, the chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff,[17] at the beginning of the operation the Assad regime controlled only 10 percent of the territory of Syria while 65 percent was controlled by "terrorists" (IS and similar groups) and the remaining 20 percent by "other armed groups" (FSA and similar). In 2018, according to his calculation, the regime controlled 65 percent of the country, 30 percent by Kurds and other opposition groups, and 5 percent were deconfliction zones.

Only two months after the beginning of the military operation in Syria, Russian military and diplomatic representatives held consultations in Abu Dhabi with representatives of FSA. Several meetings were also held in Russia. In 2017, Moscow succeeded in launching a new dialogue, the so-called Astana Process. Like the Geneva format, however, its work remained inconclusive and lasted until 2023, when Kazakhstan, the host of the regular meetings, decided to terminate it. By that time, the international agenda was dominated by the Russian war against Ukraine, and any semblance of dialogue, which had to include the United States and Europe, was no longer possible anyway.

By that time, Russia was getting tired of the operation in Syria, especially since the war against Ukraine was drawing all resources and Moscow could no longer sufficiently support its military presence. Worse, the Assad regime continued to falter: it completely failed to stabilize the political and economic situation and was growing increasingly repressive progressively losing whatever support it still had. The territory it controlled was once again shrinking. The lightning-speed fall of the regime in December 2024 was surprising only due to the speed, but by that time it was clear to everyone – including Russia – that the regime was doomed. Russian reaction to the fall of Assad was calm, perhaps with a note of relief. It promptly entered dialogue with the new government and, according to Russian reports, in the summer of 2025 the Syrian government even asked Russian military police to patrol the southern part of the country, in which it failed to establish control and gain support.[18] As of the summer of 2025, it was still in an unhurried consultations about keeping its naval base in Tartus. In a way, the operation that lasted for ten years was not a complete failure, it would seem.

[16] Ministry of Defense Rules out Strikes at "Moderate" Opposition in Syria.
[17] Video of the presentation can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwxeGbi7JEI&t=1s.
[18] "Siriya Soskuchilas po Russkim Voennym" [Syria Misses the Russian Military], Kommersant-Daily, August 11, 2025, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7957442?from=glavnoe_1.

To conclude the overview of the Syria case, Russian involvement had all the characteristic features of a hybrid operation. Yet, it also displayed major departures from how such an operation was conceptualized at the inception of the concept. The biggest differences were:

- **Weak non-military components:** Russia's informational campaign and use of economic instruments in particular were not spectacular, to say the least. The former weakness was caused by the fact that the population of Syria (at least the overwhelming majority) was very much against Bashar Assad's regime. Information warfare is effective when it has a receptive audience; thus, it works best when the goal of the operation is regime change. In the case of Syria, Russia sought to prop up a regime hated by the population, and no amount of propaganda could change that. It also had limited capability to invest in Syria's economic development and well-being, while much of what it could afford was either wasted or stolen by the regime.

- **Very active use of diplomatic tools:** Moscow consistently sought to establish a degree of cooperation with the United States and, to a more limited extent, Europe, hoping to arrange a gradual, controlled transition to a new, more stable regime that would also be reasonably friendly to Russia. The record was mixed: Moscow succeeded in preventing the use of force against the Assad regime, but its plans for controlled political transition failed. This was caused, to a large extent, by the overall worsening of relations with the West after 2014 and also by Washington's expectation that the Assad regime would soon fall (in fact, Russian presence helped it last ten years).

- **The centrality of military power:** Military power played a key role in the entire operation, but not at the final phase, where it could be used to complete success already achieved through non-military tools. Rather, it became a means of saving the "game" that had already, de facto, been lost.

Overall, the Syrian case demonstrated that Russia's toolbox for multi-domain, hybrid operations was very limited. It had significant diplomatic and political leverage, which it used with some success, and even more powerful military tools, which initially brought decisive gains and subsequently postponed what, in hindsight, was inevitable failure for a significant period of time. Economic tools were very limited and had almost no bearing on the course of the operation, while the effectiveness of informational tools was minimal because they sought to prop up a highly unpopular and inefficient regime. Overall, this was a defensive operation, and these are almost always more difficult to implement than offensive ones—put simply, it is easier to overthrow a regime than to support it. The United States faced a similar conundrum in Afghanistan and Iraq. The reversal of the Arab Spring in several countries in the same region attests that it might be wiser to abandon a weak regime than to invest resources in keeping an unpopular one in power.

In this sense, the policy proclaimed by Putin in 2012—support of existing regimes while allowing only gradual, controlled transitions to new ones—put Russia at a disadvantage by default. Chances of success were further reduced by the insufficiency of economic,

informational, and other non-military tools, as well as by the repressive policies of the Assad regime, which effectively doomed attempts to save him. This dynamic was not characteristic of Russia alone—the United States similarly failed to stabilize the new regime in Afghanistan, for example, while the failure of some new regimes in Northern Africa was noted above. The inherent limitations of the Russian toolbox displayed in the Syria case, however, continued to haunt Russian policies in subsequent years.

PRECISION-GUIDED CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS: DEVELOPING A TOOL FOR HYBRID OPERATIONS

Central in Russian thinking about the military component of conflicts, including those conducted in the context of hybrid operations, were advanced precision-guided conventional weapons, including their long-range variety. Following the First Gulf War, which demonstrated the high effectiveness of these systems, Russian military experts began to contemplate how such weapons could change military strategy and tactics. Perhaps the best known and most popular was the view of Gen.-Maj. (Ret.) Vladimir Slipchenko, who proposed that their introduction constituted a qualitative change: the emergence of "Sixth-Generation" warfare.[1]

Slipchenko divided all wars in human history into six categories depending on the technological level of weapons. The first four he called "contact wars" because they were waged by armies on the battlefield and in the close rear. The fifth and sixth generations he classified as "contactless wars," waged at long ranges and, perhaps, without direct engagement of armed forces. The defining feature of the fifth generation was nuclear weapons, and according to Slipchenko, they invalidated all the properties of earlier wars—both in terms of the relationship with international and domestic politics and in terms of the organization of armed forces and preparation for war ("[this] form of war eliminated its substance and goals"[2]). Large-scale use of nuclear weapons, he posited, destroyed all political systems and international relations; they presumed violence not only with respect to the countries that participated in the war, but also against non-participating and neutral countries. Such wars, therefore, could not serve the attainment of political goals. At the same time, he noted the limits of these overwhelmingly powerful weapons: they could not help their possessors cope with other challenges, such as asymmetric strikes or economic, political, ideological, financial, or ecological pressure.

The introduction by the United States of long-range precision-guided conventional weapons, Slipchenko wrote, once again changed the nature of war. The main goal of a sixth-generation war is not to defeat the armed forces of the adversary, but to destroy, without entering direct

[1] Vladimir Slipchenko, Voiny Shestogo Pokoleniya. Oruzhie i Voennoe Iskusstvo Budushchego (Sixth Generation Wars. Arms and Military Art of the Future), Moscow: Pereplet, 2002.
[2] Ibid., p. 8.

contact, its economic and political potential regardless of where critical targets may be located. "Mass use of conventional precision-guided contactless weapons against military facilities [and] economic targets of states at intercontinental distance could paralyze life in any state in any region of the world, and in cases where destruction of facilities is fraught with fires, explosions, chemical and radioactive contamination, and other potentially dangerous consequences, such strikes could also cause global ecological catastrophes."[3]

Slipchenko even went so far as to suggest that, in the future, traditional armed forces—especially ground-based ones—might not be targeted at all, or at least would become a secondary mission.[4] He even predicted that traditional armed forces, as well as nuclear weapons, would gradually become obsolete. He cautioned, however, that if the adversary state possessed nuclear weapons, the prospect of complete loss of economic capability could trigger a decision to use them.

Further development of the concept of "sixth-generation warfare" emphasized the role of surveillance, targeting, and communication assets. Mikhail Trebin posited a transition from platform-centric to net-centric warfare, characterized by a radical increase in the volume and comprehensiveness of data available to warring parties from remote sensing assets, including—but not limited to—space-based ones. \[5] Similar views were expressed by other military experts, but always with the understanding that Russia lagged far behind the United States and other Western countries in these capabilities. The requirements were sufficiently clear, but acquisition was not possible, at least within a reasonable time frame.

After the NATO military operation in Serbia, Russian thinking about the prospects of a conflict with the United States and its allies can be summarized in just one word: **fear**. The perceived military potential of NATO was many times greater than that of Russia. The relationship was decidedly asymmetric not only in the economic and political realms (as it had been during the Cold War, although the asymmetry was not as massive), but also in military power, and especially in the ability to conduct war at a distance without direct engagement on the battlefield. With respect to conflicts with smaller states on the periphery, Russia clearly understood the limitations of traditional conventional forces compared to the ability of the United States to quickly and decisively win military campaigns using precision-guided conventional weapons. The experience of the wars in Chechnya demonstrated that Russia should stay away from any kind of conflict, whether with great powers or small states.

Under these circumstances, the only tangible asset at Russia's disposal was nuclear weapons. The United States was supposed to think twice before entering conflict with Russia if it risked threatening nuclear war. But for most contingencies—except the most dire, such as the survival of the state—such a threat was "overkill." The scale of damage associated with even limited use of nuclear weapons was simply too high to be credible.

[3] Ibid., p. 31.
[4] Ibid., p. 34.
[5] Mikhail Trebin, Voiny XXI Veka [Wars of the 21st Century], Moscow: AST, 2005, p. 216.

Nuclear weapons were unusable in lower-level conflicts with non-nuclear states, where such a threat could not even be issued.

Predictably, the initial Russian response was to enhance reliance on nuclear weapons. A new Military Doctrine, approved in 2000,[6] introduced a new mission for nuclear weapons—the less-than-global "regional" conflict[7]—and a new criterion for the scale of their use: "tailored damage" (the criterion for global conflict remained the same as during the Cold War, "unacceptable damage"), defined in 2003 as "damage, subjectively unacceptable to the enemy, which exceeds the benefits the aggressor expects to gain as a result of the use of military force."[8] A seminal 2003 document on the development of military posture,[9] however, declared enhanced reliance on nuclear weapons a temporary measure and postulated "the utmost necessity of having the capability to strike military assets of the adversary (long-range high-precision weapons, long-range Air Force) outside the immediate area of conflict. To achieve this, [we] need both our own long-range high-precision strike capability and other assets that enable [us] to transfer hostilities directly to the adversary's territory." Work on this capability tentatively began in the late 1990s, when Russia converted a Soviet Kh-55 air-launched cruise missile (ALCM) for a conventional warhead (the new version was designated Kh-555), and in the first years of the 21st century the effort to develop modern precision-guided long-range conventional capability went into full swing.

A group of military theorists led by Maj. Gen. A. Sterlin pointed out the drawbacks of excessive reliance on nuclear weapons, which they saw as an extremely unstable construct. Without conventional deterrence capability, the weaker side (for all practical purposes, Russia) would be forced to choose between defeat and crossing the nuclear threshold; the stronger side, knowing that, might be tempted to preempt nuclear use with its own first strike; and, in turn, the weaker side would be even more inclined toward early use of nuclear weapons, creating what Sterlin et al. called a "catalyst for a mutual game of nuclear preemption."[10] Long-range conventional capability, they argued, allowed for greater

[6] For an analysis of nuclear policy-related elements of the 2000 National Security Concept and Military Doctrine see Nikolai Sokov, "Russia's New National Security Concept: The Nuclear Angle" (January 2000), https://nonproliferation.org/russias-new-national-security-concept-the-nuclear-angle/ and "Russia's 2000 Nuclear Doctrine," https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/russias-2000-military-doctrine/.

[7] The notion of global war is self-explanatory; the category of regional wars pertains to the situation in which Russia faces a coalition of states, some of them from out-of-the-area and/or some of them nuclear. The example the drafters of the 2000 Military Doctrine had in mind was escalation of the war in Chechnya through direct military involvement of the United States and its allies. The doctrine also included two other categories – a "local war" (in which Russia faced one or more neighboring states that had limited goals) and a "military conflict", which meant fighting with non-state actors (like the war in Chechnya).

[8] "*Aktualnye Zadachi Razvitiya Vooruzhennykh Sil RF*" [Outstanding Tasks of the Development of Armed Forces of the Russian Federation], available at http://old.redstar.ru/2003/10/11_10/3_01.html.

[9] *Aktualnye Zadachi Razvitiya Vooruzhennykh Sil RF*.

[10] A. Sterlin, A Protasov, S. Kreidin, "*Sovremennye Transformatsii Kontseptsii i Silovykh Instrumentov Stretegicheskogo Sderzhivaniya*" [Contemporary Transformation of Concepts and Military Instruments of Strategic Deterrence], *Voennaya Mysl*, August 2019, p. 9.

flexibility in choosing the tools of deterrence and, by implication, strengthened deterrence overall and, more narrowly, enhanced the credibility of nuclear deterrence.

This line of reasoning demonstrates that Russian military leaders primarily contemplated advanced conventional weapons in the context of the military balance with the United States and its allies. This was logical, given their preoccupation with fear of possible U.S. interference in conflicts inside Russia or on the Russian periphery (the wars in Chechnya in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as with Georgia in 2008). There is, however, a second, less pronounced layer in the Russian interest in long-range conventional weapons, which related to Russia's ability to wage conflicts with weaker states on its periphery and, later, far from its borders (the hybrid operation in Syria described in the previous case study). U.S. and NATO operations in Serbia, Iraq, and Libya demonstrated that such weapons could ensure efficient use of military tools while keeping involvement limited and, perhaps most importantly, entailing very limited own casualties.

This dual role of long-range precision-guided conventional capability became clear already after 1991. Although the number of conventional cruise missiles at the disposal of the U.S. military during that time was relatively limited, they played an important role in destroying the entire command-and-control structure of the Iraqi army, as well as elements of critical infrastructure, and decisively facilitated the successful ground campaign.[11] A study by the Los Alamos National Laboratory's Center for National Security Studies described the impact of that war on the Russian military:

> The most radical interpretation of the meaning of the Gulf War comes from some elements of the Russian General Staff (...). From this perspective, future war will be dominated by attacks on systems rather than attacks on forces. In this kind of war, aerospace operations become the primary means to accomplish strategic objectives. These objectives—control or denial of territory—can be fulfilled without physically occupying that territory. In such a war, linear formations and stable fronts are obsolete. Tank-heavy, mass formations are irrelevant; surprise, strategic initiative, preemption, and space systems are critical.[12]

Indeed, the defeat of Iraq in 1991 represented a major shock for the Soviet military: the Iraqi army had been shaped and trained by Soviet advisors, outfitted with reasonably modern equipment (although not the latest, of course), and its planning and operations represented the best that this military—many of whose officers had been trained by the Soviet Armed

[11] For an early analysis of the impact of precision-guided conventional weapons on warfighting see Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, vol. IV, *The Gulf War* (Westview Press, 1996) and Richard Schultz and Robert Pfaltzgraff, *The Future of Air Power in the Aftermath of the Gulf War* (Air University Press, 1992).

[12] Patrick Garrity, *Why the Gulf War Still Matters: Foreign Perspectives on the War and the Future of International Security*, Report No. 16 (CNSS, LANL: July 1993), p. xvi.

Forces—could provide. Prior to the war, the unanimous forecast in Moscow was that, at a minimum, the war would be protracted and result in massive American and allied casualties.

The failure of Operation Gothic Serpent (a peacekeeping operation in Somalia in 1993), coming on the heels of the successful war in the Gulf, can be regarded as evidence that traditional ways of fighting carried the same risks as the war in Vietnam—first and foremost high own casualties, which undermine political support at home and force the government to retreat. The Soviet Union had the same experience in Afghanistan, making the Russian military aware of the need to avoid lengthy ground campaigns fraught with losses and other costs.

The Russian military saw the NATO military operation against Serbia in 1999 as a pivotal moment in the transition to new ways of fighting. There was no battlefield. Strikes with precision-guided weapons against Serbian air defense assets; command, control, and communication centers; key elements of the armed forces; and critical civilian infrastructure (including the energy grid, TV stations, etc.) sealed U.S. and NATO victory in record time. The Serbian army was reduced to receiving blows without a chance to respond—an example that shocked the Russian military.

The record of the United States and its allies using long-range conventional weapons in the 1990s and early 2000s revealed the following features, which were of considerable interest to the Russian military:

- They allow strikes without direct engagement of troops and "traditional" arms such as tanks, artillery, armored personnel carriers, aircraft, helicopters, etc. Consequently, own casualties—and, accordingly, the domestic political fallout—are minimized.

- Strikes can be launched to significant depth into the territory of the adversary, targeting entire command, control, and communications systems, high-value military assets, as well as critical civilian and transport infrastructure. This radically weakens and disorganizes defenses. The opponent may surrender without further fighting, as Serbia did, or a direct encounter on the battlefield will be shorter and result in fewer casualties.

- Precision guidance helps minimize collateral damage among civilians and, to an extent, civilian infrastructure that is not critical to the war effort. This aspect was perhaps not as relevant for the Russian military as for their Western counterparts, but nonetheless could help minimize political fallout.

- Precision-guided conventional weapons are usable, in contrast to nuclear weapons: the threat is credible, while their employment in war entails acceptable costs and a high probability of winning.

The lack of advanced conventional capability became particularly obvious to the Russian military during the short war with Georgia in 2008. The unreformed, still very much Soviet military machine won primarily due to sheer mass as well as the insufficient capability of the Georgian army. This short campaign appeared successful, but in fact demonstrated major inadequacies in the Russian army. It triggered a new, third attempt at military reform, which finally succeeded in transforming the Russian military and also gave new purpose to the decade-old effort to create long-range conventional strike weapons, whose absence had been acutely felt in the context of limited wars.

Russia concentrated on air-launched (Kh-101/102) and sea-launched (Kalibr) cruise missiles (ALCMs and SLCMs), which can be classified as theater-range (2,500 km for ALCMs and 1,500–2,500 km for SLCMs), as well as shorter-range Iskander ground-launched missiles, both ballistic and cruise (range up to 500 km, although the United States charged Russia with creating a longer-range version of the Iskander cruise missile in violation of the INF Treaty). Subsequently, it added hypersonic aero-ballistic missiles Kinzhal and Tsirkon. Work was also pursued on the development of short-range assets, including missiles (in particular shore-based missiles intended against naval targets, such as Bastion) and gravity bombs, as well as artillery shells.

Russia demonstrated its initial long-range conventional capability by launching strikes against opposition forces in Syria using Kalibr SLCMs (launched from the Caspian Sea) in October 2015 and then Kh-101 ALCMs in November 2015. Subsequently, it employed all available new types of precision-guided weapons, both long- and short-range, in Syria, using that country as a test range and an opportunity to demonstrate new capabilities. The long-range variety was particularly important because cruise missiles launched from deep inside Russian territory—including from seas such as the Caspian—could reach almost the entire Middle East (Syria and beyond).

Since then, Russia's conventional deterrent has grown at a fast pace. According to credible anonymous sources, in 2015 Russia switched to three-shift work at production plants to build the arsenal as fast as possible. In 2021, the stockpile was assessed at 600 deployed long-range missiles capable of reaching targets in the Baltic Sea area alone (the author's own calculation suggested about double that number). An authority on Russian military doctrine, Konrad Muzyka, noted that "the 2021 iteration of the ['West'] exercise did not seem to include a nuclear element [unlike its predecessor in 2017]. … Does that say something about how conflict termination could occur in a conflict with NATO? Is Russia more confident in its conventional deterrence vis-à-vis NATO?"[13]

In any event, this growing capability undoubtedly made Russian policymakers much more confident and less fearful of possible conflict with NATO. The experience of conflict in Syria led Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov to conclude that Russia would need to

[13] Konrad Muzyka, *Zapad-2021 – Logistics and Key Fighting Concepts*, International Centre for Defense and Security (Estonia), December 2021 https://icds.ee/en/zapad-2021-logistics-and-key-fighting-concepts/.

maintain a strong grouping of cruise missiles of various basing modes in each strategic direction.[14]

The war against Ukraine demonstrated that the perception of long-range precision-guided conventional weapons as an "ultimate" war-winning capability was, at best, overestimated—although not for lack of trying. The scale of their use against Ukraine far exceeded that of any previous war. Until then, the most intense use of such weapons was during the Second War in the Gulf in 2003—750 sea-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles, approximately double the number used during the First War in the Gulf in 1990.[15] In the first two months of the war against Ukraine, Russia reportedly used 1,300 such missiles.[16] According to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI),[17] Russia used between 1,100 and 2,100 long-range conventional weapons against Ukraine in the first three months of the war alone. The total stockpile at the beginning of the war is assessed as high as 4,000 missiles, well beyond the most optimistic pre-war estimates. Shortly after the beginning of the war, Russia began to ramp up production and was apparently able to catch up with the United States in terms of production capacity. About one year into the war, in 2023, it increased production rates even further. Nonetheless, the impact of this effort was underwhelming, at best.

One, perhaps not sufficiently foreseen, reason was that previous conflicts featuring the use of these weapons were all conducted against much weaker and technologically backward enemies; their performance in a peer-to-peer conflict was bound to be less impressive and their role less decisive. Advanced and numerous air and missile defense assets demonstrated that cruise missiles are vulnerable and may have to be launched in large numbers to overwhelm defenses. Losses of expensive cruise missiles reached such a level that Russia had to rely primarily on cheap uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), whose large numbers could help overwhelm Ukrainian air and missile defenses and allow much smaller numbers of cruise and ballistic missiles to get through. Aircraft could be used only on a very limited scale and, as a rule, without crossing into the adversary's airspace.

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[14] Valerii Gerasimov, "*Vliyjaniye Sovremennogo Kharaktera Vooruzhennoy Borby na Napravlennost Stroitelstva i Razvitiya Vooruzhonnykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii*" [The Impact of Present-Day Nature of Armed Struggle on the Directions of Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation], *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk* 2 (2018).

[15] Sharon Weinberger, "The Million-Dollar Weapon," March 25, 2011 https://publicintegrity.org/national-security/the-million-dollar-weapon/.

[16] Aila Slisco, "Russia Has Fired 1,300 Missiles in Ukraine this War, More Strikes Expected," Newsweek, April 26, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/russia-has-fired-1300-missiles-ukraine-this-war-more-strikes-expected-1701267.

[17] Alex Vershinin, "The Return of Industrial Warfare," June 17, 2022, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/return-industrial-warfare. Ukrainian intelligence provided much more modest estimates – 1,100 long-range conventional missiles in nine months (from February to October, 2022) out of the total stockpile of 1,800 (Liz Sly, "Russia's Escalation Will Not Turn the Tide of the War, Experts Say," The Washington Post, October 15, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/15/ukraine-military-situation/). The massive campaign against Ukraine's energy grid, which began on October 20, 2022, and has continued into 2024, forces one to question the accuracy of this estimate.

Ukraine was also able to disperse and conceal the majority of military and industrial targets, while its impressive industrial capacity allowed damaged facilities to be repaired quickly. It took Russia about two years of incessant pounding on Ukraine's energy grid to achieve a noticeable result (a significant drop in the supply of electricity to industry and the population), but even that damage was repaired within a reasonable timeframe.

Overall, Ukrainian strikes on Russia were as successful (or unsuccessful) as Russian strikes against Ukraine. Using large numbers of long-range UAVs, Ukraine was able to inflict substantial damage on Russian military and industrial infrastructure, but hardly critical damage. Although both countries were able to reduce the adversary's ability to wage war, they failed to achieve decisive results.

These unavoidable limitations on the efficiency of precision-guided conventional weapons in a peer-to-peer conflict were further compounded by insufficient and often obsolete surveillance and intelligence capabilities (its space-based component first and foremost) as well as the complete absence of dynamic targeting except on rare occasions several years into the war. During the initial phase of the war (2022 and lasting well into 2023), the Russian military also displayed major inadequacies in plotting cruise missile flight paths and planning strikes in general: there were multiple cases where terrain or tall buildings were not properly factored in; much-vaunted hypersonic cruise missiles were often used inefficiently (for example, against missile defense assets, when they are particularly vulnerable), especially early in the war. Nonetheless, even in 2024–25, when the most glaring inadequacies had been addressed, the effectiveness of conventional strikes—typically involving 400–500 UAVs and missiles per sortie—failed to play a decisive role.

Russia faced similar challenges when employing precision-guided weapons in Syria. At first, cruise missiles and bombs appeared reasonably effective when targets were high-value and identifiable (such as camps). But the dispersal of adversary forces into small, mobile groups considerably reduced the effectiveness of these strikes. In hindsight, the use of UAVs—with smaller explosive charges and FPVs' ability to monitor terrain and locate small targets—could have both increased efficiency and improved the cost-benefit ratio (precision-guided cruise missiles and bombs were too expensive to use against small groups). Until well into the war against Ukraine, however, Russia—as well as most other states—did not consider UAVs a critically important, indispensable strike asset.

In the end, Russian efforts to more or less copy both the U.S. long-range precision-guided conventional capability and the tactics of its employment did not yield the anticipated results—neither in a limited operation in Syria nor, to an even greater extent, in a full-scale conventional war against Ukraine. Even with all the practical experience gained in these conflicts, Russia cannot expect these assets to play a critical role in a possible armed conflict with the West—the original purpose of developing such weapons, namely to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons. Moreover, the United States and Europe have embarked on crash programs to develop and produce a new generation of long-range precision-guided conventional missiles.

On the other hand, the nature of what Slipchenko called the "sixth-generation war" has been changing, in no small part as a result of the war in Ukraine. A boost to air and missile defense systems has created major challenges for the use of long-range precision-guided missiles: at the very least, they must be employed at a considerably greater scale than in previous conflicts, and their ability to evade missile defense must be seriously upgraded. Accordingly, the costs of modern conventional war are bound to increase.

In parallel, the now-traditional missiles are being augmented by very large quantities of UAVs, which are much cheaper and, although usually less powerful, can nonetheless generate significant damage. More importantly, they can help overwhelm missile and air defenses, allowing much less numerous but more powerful missiles to reach their targets. Overall, the face of long-range conventional warfare has been changing at a rapid pace, as usually happens during wars.

In the end, Russia will likely obtain a limited conventional capability for hybrid operations (such as those developing in Africa), probably centered around advanced UAVs developed and employed in the course of the war against Ukraine. The other conventional mission—conflict with the West—appears more problematic and will probably require significant resource investment. In the near future, Russia might once again feel compelled to increase its reliance on nuclear weapons and nuclear threats, as it did in the first decade of this century.

TRYING TO FIT NUCLEAR WEAPONS INTO HYBRID WARFARE

In 2022, Russia launched a very specific, unique type of hybrid warfare—an attempt to leverage nuclear weapons vis-à-vis the United States and NATO in the context of its war against Ukraine. That type of hybrid warfare had not existed in American or, more broadly, Western theory and practice and represents a Russian "innovation" that was put into action after the original plan for a lightning-fast operation to change the political regime in Ukraine and bring the country under Russian control failed.

This failure created a grave new challenge for Russia. While Moscow could not afford to admit defeat, it faced not only the prospect of a lengthy war but also the risk of Western involvement, which could result in Russia's defeat—not necessarily on the battlefield, but through the escalation of costs to the point where Moscow would be unable to continue and would be forced to withdraw, accepting de facto defeat, as it had in Afghanistan thirty years earlier. Military and economic assistance to Ukraine began to unfold once the failure of the fait accompli became clear, but in less tangible ways it began almost instantly (for example, the provision of situational awareness and real-time intelligence by the United States). Moscow was also concerned about the possibility of more direct Western engagement in the war—for example, the declaration of a no-fly zone over Ukraine (an option actively discussed in 2022 and 2023) or even the deployment of troops.

In effect, what Moscow initially saw as a proxy operation against the West became a proxy war with the West—and, conversely, a Western proxy war with Russia. Moscow needed to limit Western assistance to Ukraine and prevent NATO's direct participation in the war. The only card at its disposal was the nuclear threat: available political, economic, and even non-nuclear military instruments were insufficient to influence Western policy in any meaningful way. The utility of nuclear weapons as a tool to affect the behavior of other countries, however, was limited by the realization that their actual use was not in Russia's interest. Moscow wanted to win the war against Ukraine, not trigger a full-scale nuclear war with the United States and NATO. Even very limited nuclear use would have been disastrous, costing Russia its position in the international system as well as the support or neutrality of virtually every other country.

While deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, is about influencing decisions made by the adversary,[1] its scope is limited to issues of war and peace; it is not supposed to affect other categories of decisions. This applies especially to nuclear weapons, which are reserved for extreme contingencies, when the existence of the state or its allies is at stake (according to the Russian Military Doctrine[2] and Vladimir Putin's decrees on nuclear deterrence,[3] when the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia are threatened). Whereas nuclear threats could theoretically prevent NATO from directly participating in the war on Ukraine's side (although even that was far from certain), such threats could hardly affect assistance to Ukraine. After all, during the war in Vietnam in the 1960s–70s, the United States did not even attempt to stop Soviet assistance to Vietnam, although that assistance bordered on open warfare: Soviet military personnel were not only present in Vietnam as advisors and trainers, but they also manned air defense systems that shot down American aircraft.

Russian strategy, adopted in 2000, foresaw the option of limited nuclear use to offset overwhelming conventional superiority of NATO – an adaptation of NATO "flexible response" strategy designed to offset Soviet conventional superiority of the 1960s.[4] The 2014 iteration of that doctrine introduced the notion of "conventional deterrence," reflecting success of R&D programs designed to give Russia long-range precision-guided weapons, to reduce the degree of reliance on nuclear weapons and give it ability to wage war at the conventional level at least on limited scale and for limited time.

These strategies were designed for the purposes of defensive deterrence – prevention of possible attack on Russia by the United States and its allies; they, however, did not fit the tasks posed by offensive deterrence – providing a cover for an offensive operation (in this case, against Ukraine). Between the two tasks – preventing the West's direct involvement in the war and preventing or minimizing Western assistance to Ukraine – employment of defensive deterrence strategies for offensive purposes could partially support the first task and minimally, if at all, help with the second.

Effectiveness of defensive deterrence is grounded in the fact that the onus of decision to go to war rests with the adversary – it is intended to influence decision-making by the adversary; adequate deterrence posture makes decision to go to war less likely and perhaps, given the balance of probabilities, refrain from war. This is how nuclear deterrence worked during the Cold War (the probability of victory in a nuclear war – to the extent that victory in a nuclear

[1] Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence (Yale Univ. Press: 1966).
[2] *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation], December 30, 2014 https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html.
[3] *Ob Osnovakh Gosudarstvennoi Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsee v Oblasti Yadernogo Sderznivaniya* [On the Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence], June 2, 2020, http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/IluTKhAiabLzOBjIfBSvu4q3bcl7AXd7.pdf; Osnovy *Gosudarstvennoi Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsee v Oblasti Yadernogo Sderznivaniya* [Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence], November 19, 2024, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202411190001?pageSize=100&index=1#print.
[4] NATO Strategy Documents, 1949-1969, Ed. by Dr. Gregory W. Pedlow Chief, Historical Office Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (NATO: 1997).

war is possible at all – was too low to take the risk). In an offensive deterrence situation, the decision to go to war rests with the party launching the offensive operation: if the adversary has adequate deterrence posture, it may be difficult to count on success of the offensive operation. In the end, offensive deterrence appears rather "iffy."

Offensive deterrence is even more uncertain when the adversary's actions remain below the level of war. The party launching the operation must demonstrate that it is prepared to initiate global war over what is effectively a local operation. Such a threat is hardly credible, especially when the adversary does not directly participate in the conflict.

This means that prewar Russian nuclear deterrence strategies lost much of their relevance, and decisions during the war against Ukraine had to be made ad hoc, essentially through trial and error. Caution was required to avoid situations where the West could call Russia's bluff, making matters worse. Moscow risked losing all credibility if it issued a threat and then failed to act on its promise to escalate. These dynamics justify classifying attempts to leverage Russia's nuclear status in the war against Ukraine as hybrid warfare—or, more precisely, as hybrid deterrence warfare, keeping in mind that deterrence is more about psychological influence than military operations. This operation was unique because the United States and its allies had never needed to leverage their nuclear status in any prior or subsequent hybrid operations.

Moscow faced three serious limitations in pursuing this hybrid deterrence operation:

- Nuclear weapons could not be used against Ukraine, a non-nuclear state. Such use would have been a long-term disaster, turning Russia into a pariah state and costing it the support or neutrality of non-involved powers, such as China, India, and much of the Global South.

- Although nuclear use was theoretically legitimate against nuclear-armed states like the United States and its allies, the credibility of such threats was low, and Moscow was not prepared to contemplate global nuclear war. Consequently, threats could only be implied, while explicit threats were avoided to prevent being forced to back down if the bluff were called.

- Russia could invoke nuclear threats against the United States and its allies only if it could plausibly claim that such use was a response to a direct threat to Russia, and that the threat was sufficiently serious to justify nuclear employment.

In line with these limitations, all Russian nuclear signaling—verbal or practical—was directed at NATO, rather than at Ukraine, as many Western analysts initially assumed. This focus aligns with Russian strategic thought: military experts Popov and Khamzatov emphasized years before the Ukraine war that striking the main adversary is preferable to

striking proxies.[5] The Ukraine conflict has always been conceptualized as a proxy war with the United States and NATO—particularly after 2014, and very publicly after 2022.

Nuclear weapons were invoked for the first time in Putin's declaration of the "special military operation."[6] The reference was vague and lacked an explicit threat; the message amounted to "do not forget about nuclear weapons, and do not interfere." Effectively, this statement marked a shift from defensive to offensive deterrence, intended to warn the West against interfering with Russian aggression.

This attempt failed quickly. The United States, its allies, and partners—including NATO, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and others—rapidly mobilized political, material, and financial support for Ukraine, helping it repel the initial Russian assault. As the war became protracted, references to nuclear weapons disappeared from official discourse. Russian officials instead consistently invoked the 2020 Decree on Deterrence, insisting that nuclear weapons were not involved in the war and were solely intended to deter attacks by others.

The next high-visibility reference by Putin to nuclear weapons occurred in September 2022, during a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions that caught Russia by surprise. Putin's remark seemed impromptu, made under stress, in contrast to the usual pattern of carefully worded statements. At that time, the U.S. Intelligence Community concluded[7] that Russia was contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons to halt the Ukrainian advance.[8] Strong signals were sent to Moscow[9] and to countries such as China and India, believed to influence Putin. Nuclear weapons were not used, and there is no evidence of preparations or high-level political discussion for such use. Instead, Russia pursued an alternative—predictable—solution: partial mobilization, which helped stabilize the frontline. The United States also limited deliveries of certain weapons to Ukraine for fear of nuclear escalation. While U.S. intelligence responses were prudent given the severity of the situation, in hindsight, the likelihood of Russian nuclear use on the battlefield appeared negligible.

Russian warnings nonetheless had a significant psychological impact on the West. In March 2022, only weeks into the war, President Joe Biden declared: "Direct confrontation between

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[5] I. Popov and M.Khamzatov. *Voyna budushchego: kontseptualnye osnovy i prakticheskie vyvody: ocherki strategicheskoy mysli* [War of the future: conceptual foundations and practical conclusions: an outline of strategical thought]. Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2016.

[6] Address by the President of the Russian Federation, February 24, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843.

[7] Jim Sciutto, "Exclusive: US Prepared 'Rigorously' for Potential Russian Nuclear Strike in Ukraine in Late 2022, Officials Say," CNN, March 9, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/09/politics/us-prepared-rigorously-potential-russian-nuclear-strike-ukraine/index.html.

[8] "Russian Military Leaders Discussed Use of Nuclear Weapons, US Officials Say," The New York Times, November 2, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/us/politics/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapons.html.

[9] "U.S. Has Sent Private Warnings to Russia Against Using a Nuclear Weapon," The New York Times, September 22, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/09/22/russia-nuclear-threat-us-options/.

NATO and Russia is World War Three, something we must strive to prevent."[10] This effectively addressed Russia's first concern—preventing NATO's direct participation in the war—but it was arguably the easiest task. Far more consequential was Western assistance to Ukraine, which complicated Moscow's prosecution of the war and made success highly uncertain.

Attempts to employ nuclear threats to influence Western assistance were repeated. In the fall of 2022, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued an official statement, "On the Prevention of Nuclear War," directly linking Western support for Ukraine to an increased risk of nuclear conflict.[11] Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, declared twice in 2024 (March and June) that Western assistance had transformed the "special military operation" into a full-scale war.[12] The implied threat was that if the West became a full-scale participant, nuclear use against the United States and NATO could be justified. These assertions were inherently weak; Moscow viewed nuclear weapons as a last-resort tool, and the statements never proceeded to actual use or crossing the nuclear threshold.

The manner of Western assistance to Ukraine played a crucial role in shaping the conflict. This aid increased incrementally over a long period, never giving Moscow a pretext to escalate. The approach closely fit Thomas Schelling's description of the "salami tactic"—a strategy of small, incremental steps, each too limited to elicit a strong response from the adversary, but cumulatively achieving a major strategic goal. Whether Russian threats significantly influenced this tactic is debatable. They clearly played some role, but it is difficult to quantify. Undoubtedly, the gradual, incremental nature of Western assistance complicated Russian war efforts, yet consistently denied Russia a pretext to escalate the conflict to the point where military action against the West or explicit nuclear threats could be credibly employed.

The incremental increase in assistance and Russian reactions to each new level created a somewhat misleading situation. As the West progressed from anti-tank weapons to tanks, self-propelled artillery, ATACMs, and eventually F-16 aircraft, Russian commentary was frequently alarmist, including repeated threats of nuclear use. Most of these threats, however, came from non-governmental sources—commentators, journalists, and experts—and were not credible. The only continuous official source of such threats was Dmitri Medvedev, former President of Russia and then Deputy Secretary of the Security Council. Even so, his statements quickly proved to lack credibility and could be largely disregarded. In practice, Russia did not formally establish red lines at each new stage of Western assistance, at least until the spring of 2024, as will be described below. Yet, this "noise" was routinely overestimated in the West, leading to the mistaken perception that Russian red

[10] https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/11/remarks-by-president-biden-announcing-actions-to-continue-to-hold-russia-accountable/.
[11] Zayavlenie Rossiiskoi Federatsii o Predotvrashchenii Yadernoi Voiny [Statement of the Russian Federation on the Prevention of Nuclear War], November 2, 2022, Document 2254-02-11-2022, https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/1836575/.
[12] https://ria.ru/20240322/peskov-1934884975.html; https://ria.ru/20240626/nato-1955560299.html.

lines had been crossed repeatedly with impunity. At one point, even the UK's Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister David Cameron described Russian threats as illusory.[13]

The situation was likely more nuanced. Russia viewed each new level of Western aid with concern but refrained from officially drawing red lines. Each increment was assessed to determine its impact on the war. If the new assistance could be managed using traditional military tools, it was largely ignored, and the conflict continued along the existing pattern. From this perspective, Russia's reactions to future Western assistance were inherently unpredictable. Aid could theoretically escalate to a level that placed Russia at imminent risk of defeat; in that case, escalation—including nuclear threats—would become possible and even likely.

The inconclusive and mostly unofficial nuclear threats of 2022–2023 further underscored the challenges of applying Russia's official nuclear strategy to the war in Ukraine. Traditional deterrence assumes that nuclear weapons are used in response to a reasonably clear red line, such as a strike by a peer adversary or the crossing of a territorial boundary. In this conflict, clear-cut red lines were absent, leaving Russia to navigate maximum uncertainty and make ad hoc decisions regarding nuclear threats.

Despite the high volume of threatening rhetoric in Russian media and the blogosphere, credible official sources remained largely silent regarding nuclear weapons from Putin's off-the-cuff statement in September 2022 until early 2024. The war continued at its own pace, as did the gradual increase in the quality and quantity of Western assistance, but no credible threats or formal red lines were issued by Moscow. This does not mean that nothing occurred in the nuclear domain. Most notably, during this period, Russia sought to enhance the credibility of its nuclear posture through nuclear sharing with Belarus. This involved supplying nuclear-capable delivery vehicles, including Su-35 aircraft and Iskander short-range missiles, training Belarusian personnel in nuclear operations, and deploying warheads on Belarusian territory for rapid mating with delivery systems. Modeled after NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements, this strategy aimed both to strengthen Russia's nuclear posture and to position nuclear-capable systems closer to Poland, as the deployment pattern made clear.

Nuclear rhetoric returned in the spring of 2024, triggered by developments Moscow perceived as far more threatening than previous aid increments: potential delivery of long-range missiles to Ukraine capable of striking deep within Russian territory, and the possible deployment of Western troops in Ukraine. A spike in nuclear rhetoric was particularly catalyzed by remarks from French President Emmanuel Macron suggesting the deployment of French troops to Ukraine,[14] which Moscow interpreted as a hint of direct military

[13] David Cameron, "Pass Ukraine Funding for the Sake of Global Security," The Hill, February 14, 2024, https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4465907-david-cameron-pass-ukraine-funding-for-the-sake-of-global-security/.

[14] "Macron Reaffirms Possibility of Sending Troops to Ukraine," France24, May 2, 2024, https://www.france24.com/en/france/20240502-macron-doesn-t-rule-out-troops-for-ukraine-if-russia-breaks-front-lines.

confrontation with a NATO member. Similarly, a comment by UK Foreign Minister David Cameron that Ukraine could employ long-range weapons against targets in pre-2014 Russian territory[15] was interpreted as escalation, prompting a marked increase in Russian nuclear signaling.

Putin reacted almost immediately to Macron's statement, predictably invoking nuclear weapons. Speaking to the Federal Assembly on February 29, 2024, he warned that countries which "select targets in Russia" or discuss sending troops to Ukraine "must, in the end, realize that we also have weapons ... which can take out targets in their territories."[16] While theoretically this could refer to long-range conventional weapons, it was widely understood as an explicit nuclear threat.

This statement was followed by a wave of additional threats from various Russian sources, including official ones, culminating in another Putin statement several months later: "For some reason, Westerners believe that Russia will not use anything of that [nuclear weapons]. We have a nuclear doctrine—look what is written there. If someone's actions threaten our sovereignty and territorial integrity, we consider it allowable to use all means at our disposal."[17] In a separate statement, he hinted that new threats might force Russia to revise its nuclear doctrine, suggesting that the nuclear threshold could be lowered.[18]

Concurrent with these signals was the announcement that Russia was resuming production of intermediate-range missiles.[19] One such missile, designated "Oreshnik," was combat-tested in November 2024 against a missile production facility in Dnipro. Although the missile carried a conventional payload, it was understood that it could also be equipped with multiple nuclear warheads, reflecting the dual-capable design of all Russian theater-range missiles produced since 2000.

Effectively, June 2024 marked the first clear red line officially drawn by Moscow since the start of the war. For Russia, the prospect of advanced Western missiles being used to strike deep into Russian territory, combined with the potential deployment of Western troops in Ukraine—regardless of whether they were on the front lines or positioned to deter Russian strikes from the rear—represented a new strategic threshold. Moscow appeared to interpret this level of involvement as creating a choice between escalation and potential defeat.

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[15] Paul Kirby, "Kyiv Can Use British Weapons Inside Russia – Cameron," BBC, May 3, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c163kp93l6po.

[16] Poslanie Presidenta Federalnomu Sobraniyu [Address of the President to the Federal Assembly], February 29, 2024, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585.

[17] ""Vstrecha s Rukovoditelyami Mezhdunarodnykh Informagentstv" [Meeting with Heads of International Information Agencies], June 5, 2024, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74223.

[18] "Otvety na Voprosy Rossiiskikh Zhurnalistov" [Responses to Questions of Russian Journalists], June 20, 2024, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74357.

[19] "Rossiya Nachinaet Proizvodstvo Raketnykh Sistem Srednei i Menshei Dalnosti" [Russia Begins Production of Missile Systems of Intermediate and Lower Range], May 6, 2024, https://ria.ru/20240506/rakety-1944225749.html.

During this tense period, a recurring theme was Russian claims that targeting of Ukrainian strikes relied on Western specialists and data. An intercepted conversation among high-level German officers in spring 2024 regarding the need for German specialists to help target Taurus long-range precision-guided cruise missiles—should they be provided to Ukraine—was cited by Russia as proof of direct NATO involvement.[20] Compounding this, a Ukrainian strike on the Armavir early warning radar in June 2024 raised further concern.[21] According to Putin's 2020 Decree on nuclear deterrence (confirmed by a subsequent decree), a strike on early warning radars could justify nuclear use. While a strike by a non-nuclear state like Ukraine would not normally trigger this threshold, Russian assertions that Western specialists were involved elevated the perceived threat, potentially creating a pretext for escalation—though Moscow ultimately chose not to act.[22]

In August 2024, the Foreign Ministry issued a special statement declaring that a HIMARS strike provided by the United States against a bridge over the Seim River in Kursk Oblast represented the first instance of a launch against pre-2014 Russian territory.[23] In reality, such strikes were few and largely inconsequential, and Moscow again decided escalation was not warranted.

A parallel development was the public advocacy by prominent hardline expert Sergey Karaganov, who called for measures to "strengthen deterrence" and "restore fear of nuclear weapons" by actually employing them against NATO.[24] Karaganov had expressed similar views previously,[25] but they gained full national visibility in spring 2024. He was joined by other figures in Russia's expert community, sparking a lively debate about the acceptability and advisability of limited nuclear use. These authors argued that such use could avoid triggering global war, impose manageable human and environmental costs, influence Western policies, and establish a new status quo in Europe and globally.

The novel feature of these developments was the very discussion itself—never before in the Soviet Union or Russia had there been open advocacy for nuclear first use, especially "warning" or limited use, outside official government channels. Historically, the

[20] "Rasshifrovka Razgovora Vysokopostavlennykh Ofitserov Bundesvera" [Transcript of a Conversation of High-Level Officers of Bundeswehr], March 1, 2024, https://vk.com/@m_s_simonyan-rasshifrovka-razgovora-vysokopostavlennyh-oficerov-bundesver.
[21] "S Ukrainy i SShA Sprosyat za Radary" [Ukraine and US Will Answer for Radars], Kommersant, June 3, 2024, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6745135?from=glavnoe_1.
[22] "Pri Udarakh po Rossii Zapad Otvel Ukraine Rol Nazhimatelya Knopok" [For Strikes at Russia, the West Has Left Ukraine With the Role of Pressing Buttons], Vzglyad, June 3, 2024, https://vz.ru/world/2024/6/3/1271388.html.
[23] "MID Rossii: Po Kurskoi Oblasti Vpervye Udarili Zapadnyimi Raketami" [Russian MFA: First Strike with Western Missiles at Kursk Oblast], Kommersant, August 16, 2024, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6903682?from=top_main_9.
[24] "Sergey Karaganov: Zapad Nachal Ponimat, Chto Mozhet Proigrat" [Sergey Karaganov: The West is Beginning to Realize It Could Lose], Argumenty Nedeli, May 3-7, 2024, https://argumenti.ru/interview/2024/05/897101.
[25] Sergey Karaganov, "Primenenie Yadernogo Oruzhiya Mozhet Uberech Chelovechestvo ot Globalnoi Katastrofy" [The Use of Nuclear Weapons Could Save the Humankind from a Global Catastrophe], Profil, June 13, 2023, https://profile.ru/politics/primenenie-yadernogo-oruzhiya-mozhet-uberech-chelovechestvo-ot-globalnoj-katastrofy-1338893/

nongovernmental community focused largely on war prevention, arms control, or, in the case of a small conservative subset, the reliability of Russian nuclear deterrence.

There is little doubt that this open debate was triggered from within the Russian government. According to private conversations with anonymous Russian sources, a minority group within the military and government advocated early use of nuclear weapons. While small in number, this group was sufficiently influential to secure funding for nongovernmental centers capable of publicizing their views.

The higher profile of these positions was likely approved at higher levels and served a purpose. It allowed Vladimir Putin to tone down threatening signals during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2024. At a session moderated by Karaganov, who again publicly advocated "demonstrative" nuclear use in Putin's presence, the President dismissed the notion that Russia had ever threatened nuclear escalation: "We only reminded everyone to treat them seriously."[26] Two weeks later, Putin explicitly rejected the proposal for a preemptive nuclear strike "at this time," adding: "Elimination of the adversary is guaranteed by strike on warning."[27] This unusual, yet transparent, gambit allowed Moscow to present itself as reasonable while simultaneously sending a stronger-than-usual warning to the West.

The verbal message was reinforced by tactical nuclear exercises conducted in late spring and summer 2024. While the exercises themselves were not new, they were unusually publicized, demonstrating all stages relevant to tactical nuclear use—mating warheads to delivery vehicles, missile launches, and aircraft sorties with dummy nuclear warheads. The initially unannounced third stage included similar activities in Belarus involving dual-capable delivery vehicles. This practice continued the following year, with Belarusian statements confirming that West-2025 exercises would include planning and procedures for nuclear use.[28]

The question of whether Russian threats influenced Western assistance to Ukraine remains open. One possible indicator emerged in 2025. Instead of directly supplying large numbers of long-range missiles and UAVs, European countries pursued joint production of weapons within Ukraine, allowing them to be classified as Ukrainian. This approach was particularly evident in Germany, where Chancellor Friedrich Merz, previously an advocate for delivering German-made Taurus missiles, significantly downplayed such deliveries. German Minister

[26] Plenarnoe Zasedanie Peterburgskogo Ekonomicheskogo Foruma" [The Plenary Session of the Petersburg Economic Forum], June 7, 2024, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74234.
[27] Otvety na Voprosy Rossiiskikh Zhurnalistov [Answers to the Questions of Russian Journalists], June 20, 2024, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74357.
[28] "Khrenin: Na Ucheniyakh 'Zapad-2025' Otrabotayuyt Planirovanie Primeneniya Yadernogo Oruzhiya i Oreshnika" ["Khrenin: The 'Zapad-2025' Exercises Will Feature Planning for the Use of Nuclear Weapons and Oreshnik"], Belta, August 13, 2025, https://belta.by/society/view/hrenin-na-uchenijah-zapad-2025-otrabotajut-planirovanie-primenenija-jadernogo-oruzhija-i-oreshnika-731668-2025/.

of Defense Boris Pistorius openly declared that Germany would not send Taurus missiles directly but would instead support the production of long-range missiles in Ukraine.[29]

Indeed, in mid-2025, Ukraine revealed a new long-range cruise missile, FP-5 Flamingo, with a 3,000 km range.[30] While it was officially revealed that the missile had been designed and produced by a Ukrainian company, independent analysts noted its striking similarity to the F-5 cruise missile manufactured by Milanion Group based in the UAE and registered in UK,[31] with substantial production occurring abroad and only final assembly in Ukraine.[32] European countries also facilitated Ukrainian arms production within their territories, benefiting Ukraine while integrating lessons learned from combat into European defense manufacturing.

This shift in European delivery strategies demonstrates that Russian escalation threats had a measurable effect: direct provision was reduced or canceled in favor of approaches "below the level of assistance," another incremental step in the "salami tactic."

However, the "salami tactic" has limitations. The incremental "slices" are becoming thinner, and it remains uncertain how the situation will evolve. While this approach prevents giving Russia a clear pretext for escalation, Russia might eventually perceive the cumulative growth of Ukrainian capabilities as unacceptable and respond directly against the sources of assistance.

Another emerging source of tension in 2025 was economic sanctions. Although the West had imposed progressively tougher sanctions against Russia since 2014 and 2022, Moscow circumvented many of them. For example, in response to efforts targeting oil revenues, Russia created a shadow tanker fleet that continued transporting oil beyond U.S. and European control.

In 2025, Europe began discussing measures to intercept these shadow tankers in the Baltic Sea, the main route for Russian oil. Initially, Finland, Sweden, and the Baltic states detained ships suspected of damaging energy and communication cables. On May 15, 2025, the Estonian border guard attempted to detain a Russian tanker in the narrow international-

[29] "German Defense Minister Calls on Arms Makers to Deliver," Financial Times, July 14, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/a9c8d754-bea4-4f5a-887c-b2898b5d0dd3.
[30] "Ukraine Aims to Build Thousands of Flamingo Long-Range Cruise Missiles a Year," The War Zone, August 21, 2025, https://www.twz.com/news-features/ukraine-aims-to-build-thousands-of-flamingo-long-range-cruise-missiles-a-year.
[31] "Ukraine's New FP-5 Cruise Missile Flamingo Can Potentially Reach 90 percent of Russian Defense Industries," Ukrinform, August 23, 2025, https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/4028627-ukraines-new-cruise-missile-fp5-flamingo-can-reach-90-percent-of-russian-defense-industries.html.
[32] "Ukraine Shows off a Deadly New Cruise Missile," Economist, August 27, 2025, https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/08/27/ukraine-shows-off-a-deadly-new-cruise-missile.

traffic corridor between Estonia and Finland. As the operation neared success, a Russian fighter jet appeared, forcing its termination.[33]

A few days later, the Kremlin declared it would "defend its ships in the Baltic Sea with all means available."[34] Twelve days after the incident, the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet conducted large-scale exercises simulating the "liberation of a ship captured by terrorists."[35] Two weeks later, Tu-22M3 and Tu-95 bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, patrolled the Baltic Sea for four hours.[36] These exercises demonstrated Russia's readiness to escalate and reinforced by demonstrating readiness to use force.

It became clear that if Russia chose to engage vessels attempting to detain shadow tankers, Europe and NATO would face a dilemma: either use force and risk escalation to the nuclear threshold or back down, allowing Russian oil trade to continue—a politically increasingly difficult option.

The Russian war against Ukraine represents a highly unusual and instructive case of hybrid warfare. It began as a relatively straightforward operation: the limited use of military force aimed at effecting a regime change in Ukraine, following a long-term, multi-pronged campaign of economic, political, and psychological pressure designed to weaken Ukrainian resistance and influence public opinion. Military action was intended to finalize this broader hybrid operation.

However, the operation failed. Ukraine quickly consolidated its forces and, with Western assistance, mounted stiff resistance, occasionally shifting to offensive operations. This failure exposed the limitations of a military tool that Russia had regarded as central and decisive for concluding hybrid operations: long-range precision-guided conventional weapons. Despite addressing early deficiencies in planning and use, these weapons failed to deliver the expected results throughout the war.

By mid-2022, Moscow had shifted its strategy. The focus moved from Ukraine to the West, while the conflict with Ukraine became a more conventional war with limited role for non-military tools. The hybrid operation against the West aimed to limit—ideally terminate—Western assistance to Ukraine, thereby enabling Russian success at the frontlines. With conventional and non-military tools insufficient to influence the United States and its allies,

[33] "Estonia Says Russia Sent Jet after Attempt to Stop Sanction-Breaking Ship," Reuters, May 15, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/estonian-navy-says-it-tried-detain-one-russian-shadow-fleet-baltic-sea-2025-05-15/.
[34] "Kremlin Says Russia will Defend its Ships in the Baltic Sea with All Means Available," Reuters, May 21, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-russia-will-defend-its-ships-baltic-sea-with-all-means-available-2025-05-21/.
[35] "Severnyi Shtorm: Chto Nazrevaet v Baltiiskom More" [The Northern Storm: What is Brewing in the Baltic Sea], June 5, 2025, https://ria.ru/20250605/ucheniya-2020879162.html.
[36] "Russia Flies Bomber Planes Over Baltic for the First Time Since Ukrainian Drone Attacks," Reuters, June 11, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/russia-flies-bomber-planes-over-baltic-first-time-since-ukrainian-drone-attacks-2025-06-11/.

Moscow turned to its ultimate leverage: nuclear weapons. The hope was that credible threats of escalation could achieve strategic objectives.

Yet, Russia faced intrinsic limits on the utility of nuclear weapons. They were constrained not only by the low credibility of threatening a nuclear strike against Western powers but also by the inherent risk to Moscow itself. Consequently, Russia was unable to create a sufficiently credible threat to compel the West to alter its policies.

Several conclusions can already be drawn. First, the military instruments central to Russia's hybrid warfare concept—its precision-guided weapons, strategic strikes, and coercive capabilities—proved inadequate against peer (Ukraine) or stronger (the United States and NATO) adversaries. Even a tactical "victory" against Ukraine would come at such high cost that similar operations would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to repeat. This reality imposes inherent limits on Russia's ability to wage hybrid warfare against such adversaries.

Second, Russia's inability to directly influence populations in the West through information or political campaigns further restricts the scope of its hybrid operations. Its capacity to project power militarily and psychologically in the "near abroad" and in the global South is also constrained, particularly when these operations require the use of military tools.

In sum, the war in Ukraine has revealed that Russia's hybrid warfare model is fundamentally limited when applied against technologically competent, well-supported adversaries. At least in the near-to-medium term, Russia is unlikely to wage effective hybrid operations against the West or against other countries where it faces strong resistance, particularly in regions critical to its security and geopolitical interests.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Russian attempts to utilize the hybrid mode in its international operations have had limited success—none of its plans have been fully implemented, and outcomes have ranged between low and moderate. Moreover, even modest successes turned out to be short-lived.

The study has revealed the following challenges in Russia's pursuit of hybrid operations:

- **Limited toolbox:** The strongest tools at Moscow's disposal have been diplomacy and military power. Informational and cyber warfare capabilities can be assessed as moderate, while economic tools have been the weakest. The insufficiency of economic tools has probably been the greatest liability.

- **"Defensive" mode:** Russian hybrid operations (support of undemocratic regimes or new anti-Western regimes) are ad hoc—Moscow acts when it sees an opportunity or need but does not choose target countries and audiences. As a result, it has to fight an uphill battle.

- **Insufficient resources:** In addition to the limited toolbox, Russia's overall resources are not sufficient for long-term operations. Moscow can help stabilize a regime in a target country by providing military and diplomatic support, but in the longer run the imperatives of economic and political development take over. Local support, which is a *sine qua non* of a successful hybrid operation, may weaken or be lost if the regime begins to turn to the West in search of investment and trade. Alternatively, economic decline in a staunchly anti-Western country deepens the crisis and undermines stability.

- **Over-reliance on military force:** Over time, as the regime in the target country begins to falter (as happened in Syria), Russia is forced to rely increasingly on military force, which leads to a dead end. So far, the only exception to that sequence has been Crimea (2014–22), which could be relatively easily and quickly integrated into the Russian economy.

- **Popular resistance:** The effectiveness of Russian hybrid operations is also impaired by popular resistance (including but not limited to guerrilla war) against the government supported by Russia and, eventually, against Russia itself. The United States encountered this problem in Afghanistan and Iraq, while Russia faced the same conundrum in Syria, where the Assad government collapsed in just a few days.

- **Logistical problems:** Russia encounters considerable—at times very serious, if not potentially crippling—logistical problems in out-of-area operations (such as in Syria). Its airlift capacity is small; in most cases it must cross the territories of other states, generating additional political and economic costs. Finally, it depends on very few logistical points outside its territory—for example, its operations in Africa depended on the base in Syria, and when the regime there changed, it had to contemplate the use of Libya.

- **Military overstretch:** Since 2022, Russia has faced problems with the use of its main instrument, the military, because its forces were tied down by the war with Ukraine. This challenge appears temporary, however: once the war in Ukraine ends or is frozen one way or another, Moscow will once again be able to commit sizeable forces to hybrid operations. Recent events demonstrated nonetheless that Russian capabilities remain limited, especially for out-of-area ventures.

- **Sanctions and firewalls:** A relatively new limitation for Russian hybrid operations against the West consists of sanctions and informational firewalls erected by the United States and Europe, which have radically reduced Russia's opportunities to affect domestic politics. The opposite is also true, however: similar Russian firewalls have severely limited the West's ability to influence politics in Russia.

In spite of generally underwhelming performance in past hybrid operations, there is no reason to believe that Russia will abandon this type of activity. While Europe and North America are now largely closed to Russian operations, new opportunities are opening in the Global South and especially in Africa, where Russia has been gradually increasing its political and military presence. Russian military involvement has graduated from deniable operations of the private military company Wagner to the African Corps, which is officially part of the Russian Armed Forces, and has already yielded tangible results, having rather successfully stabilized several governments.

At first glance, Russian successes in Africa may look similar to its initial successes in Syria, but there is one important difference: the presence of China, which has already made considerable economic and financial investments in these areas. Russia's ability to sustain friendly regimes in the long term remains limited (except perhaps through massive grain exports, which are very tangible for Africa), but Chinese economic presence can remedy this deficiency. There is no evidence that Russia and China coordinate their activities in Africa, and it is unclear whether they will do so in the future. Nonetheless, their interests

and capabilities appear complementary and may reinforce each other even without formal coordination.

The last page on Russian hybrid operations has not yet been written. Such operations will continue both in the vicinity of Russia and globally. The degree of success will depend on whether, and how, Moscow internalizes the lessons from the past decade of such operations.

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