

Nothing 'Hybrid' About Russia's War in Ukraine

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May 26, 2015



Russia's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine over the past year gave rise in the West to a widespread theory about some kind of "hybrid war," an innovative form of military intervention that Moscow created specifically for this crisis. However, upon closer inspection, the term hybrid war is more a propaganda tool than hard fact and any attempt to fully define it strips the idea of any novelty.

One Western attempt at defining the term states that hybrid war is a combination of overt and covert military actions, provocations and diversions in conjunction with denial of involvement, significantly complicating any full-scale response to those actions.

A more extensive definition of hybrid war appears in the editor's introduction to "The Military Balance 2015" published by The International Institute for Strategic Studies. It describes hybrid war as "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."

It also points out that during the Crimean operations in February–March 2014 "Russian forces demonstrated integrated use of rapid deployment, electronic warfare, information operations (IO), locally based naval infantry, airborne assault and special-forces capabilities, as well as wider use of cyberspace and strategic communications. The latter was used to shape a multifaceted and overall effective information campaign targeted as much at domestic as foreign audiences."

In eastern Ukraine, Moscow demonstrated the ability to quickly create "pressure groups" composed of "elements of the local population" but that are managed and supported from outside, and that such a tactic can be used to defend ethnic minorities.

In this regard, the document stated that NATO considers hybrid warfare a serious challenge because it takes place in a "gray zone" of the alliance's obligations and could lead to a split between its members.

It is not difficult to see that these definitions of hybrid war, and especially the characterization of Russia's actions in 2014 as such, are out of touch with reality. For example, it is unclear which special "information" and "cyber operations" — much less which "wider use of cyber space and strategic communications" Moscow employed during its operations in Crimea. No information has come to light concerning "cyber operations" in Crimea — and what need was there for them considering the archaic condition of the Ukrainian armed forces?

Russia conducted only a sluggish propaganda campaign in support of the Crimea operation, for both foreign and domestic audiences. In fact, Moscow did not so much broadcast its actions in Crimea or the reason behind them as keep silent on the subject, concealing its end game.

As a result, the annexation of the peninsula came as a surprise to many. The de facto justification for those actions also seemed like an afterthought. The annexation of Crimea enjoyed wide popular support in Russia without much propaganda because most Russians already believed that Crimea is Russian land. On the other hand, Russian forces occupying Crimea apparently waged an active propaganda campaign aimed at the besieged Ukrainian soldiers there, proposing that they switch allegiance to the Russian side.

That effort was successful. Only about 20 percent of those Ukrainian soldiers decided to retain their allegiance and evacuate Crimea, while the other 80 percent either joined the Russian army or deserted.

At the same time, this success was due more to the fact that most of the military personnel on Crimea were residents of the peninsula and had no desire to leave than to any particular merits of the propaganda employed.

The actions attributed to so-called hybrid warfare are fairly standard to any "low intensity" armed conflict of recent decades, if not centuries. It is difficult to imagine any country using military force without providing informational support, using methods of "secret warfare,"

attempting to erode enemy forces, exploiting internal ethnic, social, economic, political or other divisions in the enemy camp, and without the use of retaliatory economic sanctions. These have been the fundamentals of war since antiquity.

The widely accepted definition of a hybrid war as using a combination of overt and covert actions, including the deployment in Crimea of "polite men in green" ignores the unique nature of that military operation. In Crimea, Russia relied on the nearly total support of the local population and the resultant complete isolation of the Ukrainian forces there.

It was this fact that made it possible for soldiers in unmarked uniforms to remain in place as long as necessary. However, that is also specific to the situation in Crimea. Such polite men in green would not last long if they showed up in, say, Poland or the American Midwest. In that case, simply concealing their origins would not help them.

In fact, there is a long history of soldiers concealing their identities and using unmarked uniforms for limited military actions and special operations, just as there are historical precedents for claiming that regular army soldiers are actually local "volunteers."

In essence, history shows that any external military intervention by a foreign army into another country's civil war has inevitably involved similar practices. Neither is this the first time that a government has used both regular army and rebel forces together. Such practices are standard when deploying military resources under specific conditions. Recall that one of the main tasks of the U.S. Special Forces is the organization and support of "friendly" rebel and guerrilla movements.

With this in mind, the current Ukrainian conflict bears less resemblance to Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938 — where, by the way, German irredentist militia were active — and more to the United States' Mexican War of 1846–48 that led to the accession of Texas and a number of other Mexican states to the U.S., and also to the Italian Risorgimento that unified Italy in the mid-19th century.

In both cases, the reason for an irredentist war is evident, as well as the fact that the "mother country" could not openly intercede militarily on behalf of the irredentists. That is why they used the widest possible array of methods to support the irredentist cause — by supporting and replenishing their fighting formations, sending large numbers of real and alleged volunteers, as well as camouflaged units of their armed forces, and by staging limited interventions.

Thus, the novelty of this so-called hybrid war begins to fade upon a closer look at history. Russia's hybrid war is simply a modern application of an age-old set of military and political practices.

It is the presence of forces friendly to the outside power that makes it possible to employ methods that have now become known as "hybrid." In applying the term hybrid war to the conflict in Ukraine, modern observers use politically biased wording to overstate the importance of external factors in the conflict and to downplay the significance of internal factors.

That attempt to downplay the significance of internal factors in the Ukrainian conflict goes

over very well in the West, and explains why it persists in suggesting that Russia's hybrid war is something new.

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<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/05/26/nothing-hybrid-about-russias-war-in-ukraine-a46913>