

The Russian Concept of Hybrid War and Why it Matters for US Policy

Featuring Mason Clark



JUNE 24, 2021

Russian leaders and policymakers use the term “hybrid war” to refer to a very specific type of conflict, while their counterparts in the West tend to use that same term in a general sense to refer to different kinds of conflict that include a mix of conventional and asymmetrical means. US leaders cannot allow this semantic difference to go unexamined because those same Russian leaders believe they are on the defensive side of a hybrid war perpetrated by the West against Russia. Failing to appreciate the nuances of the Russian interpretation of hybrid war is therefore akin to ignoring a potential adversary’s rules of engagement and could easily lead to policy missteps and unintended consequences. Mason Clark leads ISW’s Russia Team and has been closely studying the Russian definition of hybrid war. He joins this episode of Overwatch to talk about the importance of this term’s definition in US–Russia relations.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I’m Jacob Taylor. If you’re a follower of international conflict, you may have heard the term hybrid war used to describe conflicts that involve conventional fighting as well as battles in the political, economic and information space. Mason Clark leads ISW’s Russia team and has been studying hybrid war for much of the last two years. And he’s found that Russia, under Vladimir Putin, operates using a very specific understanding of the term hybrid war, one that differs from the common US definition. He has further concluded that failing to fully understand the Russian concept of hybrid war is likely to lead policymakers in the US to make grave missteps in their interactions with Russia. Mason, thanks for being with us today.

Mason Clark:

Thanks for having me here, Jacob.

Jacob:

So just to start out, how do you define hybrid war?

Mason:

Sure. It’s a tricky question, as you already referred to, there’s a lot of different potential definitions, including the US’s definitions and Russia’s definitions. But at its core, hybrid war is a term for the use of both traditional military, as well as non-military, actions with an increasing emphasis on these non-military actions. So what do I mean by non-military actions? When most people think of war, they think of what we would call a conventional war, like World War II. Large-scale maneuver conflicts between in-uniform armies using military equipment, armor, aircraft, that sort of thing. On the other hand, you have non-military means of waging war. In a modern context, this could include cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, spying, political influence campaigns, that sort of thing. These non-military actions have of course always been part of war, but essentially the idea of hybrid war is that they’re increasing in prominence to the point that they’re becoming the main way that states carry out war.

Jacob:

So that’s the general definition of hybrid war. But now you’ve said that the Russians specifically have their own understanding of this concept that’s actually relevant to the way they carry out operations. Can you explain that a bit? What does the Russian concept of hybrid war mean and how is it different from the way people in the US or in the West or anywhere else, how they talk about hybrid war?

Mason:

Sure. To explain that, I also want to talk a little bit about how the US often discusses the Russian threat. So the way that the US uses the term hybrid war is often general and focused just on the use of non-military means separate from the use of conventional forces. The Russians' focus on defining hybrid war as a sort of typology of war, instead of means combining the two.

So to go back to how the US often talks about the Russian threat, we often split it into two parts. On one hand, you have the threat of conventional war against NATO. This is generally what people think of when they think war with Russia, ideas of large numbers of Russian tanks attacking the Baltic states or Poland and confronting NATO. On the other hand, however, you have Russian clandestine and subversive actions. This can include cyber attacks, sabotage, manipulating media or the deployment of what came to be known as little green men in Crimea, which were Russian special forces soldiers that were out of uniform.

So most American discussion of the Russian threats splits into these two separate categories. Hybrid is essentially everything that isn't traditional conventional conflict and then there's a Russian invasion of Eastern Europe. However, the way the Russians discuss it is as a convergence of the two. And they include the use of conventional forces in support of these non-military, what we would call hybrid means, to be the true definition of hybrid war. And the way that they structure their own actions, their own campaigns, is dependent on this definition.

Jacob:

Okay, when I'm not hosting this podcast, I'm serving as ISW's editor. So I certainly appreciate the value of worrying about the very specific definitions that we use for certain terms. Hybrid war is certainly one that gets used in a lot of different ways and certainly across different countries. But how does that affect US policy? Why are you arguing that this is such a big deal, that we need to really understand the nuances of this term at the highest levels of US policymaking?

Mason:

Sure. So the core of it is that, as strange as it sounds, the Kremlin assesses that it is involved in an ongoing hybrid war with the West, and they compare the struggle to the Cold War in many respects, but don't at all say that it's an extension of the Cold War. The Kremlin conceptualizes a lot of actions and events over the last two decades, such as the NATO intervention in Libya, the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014 and various so-called color revolutions in the former Soviet Union in the 21st century, to be part of this overarching Western hybrid war against Russia.

And the Kremlin assesses that changing technologies and a number of other factors are driving this hybrid war. But the key thing that they need to worry about is defending against this claimed Western threat. And this Russian conception that they're conducting this defensive hybrid war against the West shapes their own decision-making.

So because Russian leadership, Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin, thinks that they're in an ongoing hybrid war with the United States, we need to understand their definition of the term and how they're conceptualizing their own actions in order to properly confront it. We won't succeed if we're worried just about confronting a major Russian invasion of Eastern Europe, or just confronting cyber attacks or disinformation campaigns, that sort of thing. The Russians think of these as a very holistic set of actions that they can undertake to support hybrid wars and we need to understand how they're planning their operations in order to properly deal with them.

Jacob:

Can you provide just the dictionary definition of hybrid war in the Russian eyes?

Mason:

Sure. So the Russian military defines hybrid war as a war in which all efforts, including military operations, are subordinate to an information campaign, which I'll discuss in a second. They argue that the objective of a hybrid war is to determine the long-term orientation and worldview of a target state, essentially where it stands in the international system and who it supports. They argue that a vast array of means up to and including the use of conventional forces can be used in support of a hybrid war. And the way that they define a hybrid war is on these objectives of trying to change the orientation of a state rather than the means used, which is how the term is most often used in the United States.

Now to clarify, the Russians think that hybrid war dominates both current and future conflicts, but it's not a general term. I'm not trying to say that just everything is hybrid war now. The Russian military maintains space for the idea of a traditional conventional war, and they acknowledge that there's still a possibility of that occurring either between them and NATO or the United States and China or any number of other actors. They don't assert that all conflicts are now hybrid wars. Instead, they believe that conventional war is increasingly almost a legacy type of conflict that's increasingly unlikely due to technological changes and the sheer cost of it. They argue that hybrid war is becoming more common and is furthermore the best way for states, not just Russia, but the US as well, as I mentioned earlier, they think that the US is carrying out a hybrid war, is the best way for states to achieve their objectives.

Jacob:

What are the core components of a hybrid war? What actually separates a hybrid war from other types of conflict?

Mason:

What separates hybrid wars from conventional conflict is that hybrid wars must be centered on an information campaign.

Jacob:

Is that purely in the Russian view, or are you saying that's hybrid wars across the board no matter who's doing them or thinking about them?

Mason:

That's how the Russians conceptualize a hybrid war, how they discuss both their own actions and what they think the United States is doing as well.

Jacob:

Gotcha. Please continue.

Mason:

An information campaign can be a bit of an abstract term, but at its core, it boils down to an effort to shape norms and perceptions in some target, be it a state or a society, an organization, that sort of thing. A lot of Americans are actually familiar with the idea of an information campaign, even if they don't recognize the term. For example, think about Russian efforts to cast doubt on US election security or China's efforts to shape the response to COVID-19 and remove blame from their own actions around the world. Those were both information campaigns and the Kremlin is shaping its understanding of hybrid war on this key concept.

All actions, as I mentioned, up to and including the use of conventional forces, have to support an information campaign. And Russian writers are openly discussing the need to prepare for their military to support these narratives, which may sound strange, but I'll discuss shortly how they can support. This is actually sort of the key

item that the Russian military has identified is again, not that these nonmilitary actions are somehow new and that they've never been part of warfare in the past, but rather that the emphasis has flipped and traditional military actions need to support these non-military actions.

The Russians believe that these information campaigns that are at the core of hybrid wars are aimed at states and norms, not just territory or governments. A lot of Russian writers state that political objectives or claiming as areas of territories, such as Russian efforts to secure territory in Eastern Ukraine or the occupation or illegal annexation of Crimea are in fact, just one of several means to the end of changing the orientation or worldview of a target state in a hybrid war.

Now, this is a bit of a tricky point, so I kind of want to break it down as it's essential to understand the Kremlin's conception of its objectives and understanding how the Russians think of their own means. For example, in the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine, the Kremlin's objective is not occupied Eastern Ukraine, the Donbas, which is a tactical or operational effort to pressure the Ukrainian government in Kiev, nor are they seeking to simply ensure that there is a Kremlin-favorable government controlling the Ukraine. The Kremlin's objective is rather to return Ukraine as a state to Russia's sphere of influence and change norms so that is the case.

This is the key element of the information campaigns being at the center of a hybrid war. It's not just about changing alignments of forces or who controls what territory on the ground, but making it to where it's almost normalized whoever controls a given area. Similarly in Syria, the Kremlin's big objective is not just ensuring that its client, Bashar al-Assad, remains in power, but instilling the message in the international community that he's the rightful ruler of Syria and that efforts to undermine him have been de-legitimized.

Jacob:

Fair enough to all of that. But I do want to ask, how is what you just described genuinely different from what might just be called regular warfare? Why does the distinction between hybrid war and other things matter? Not just, we've talked about how the US understanding Russia's intentions and methods certainly matters, but propaganda and information campaigns have played a role in, as I understand it, basically every conflict going back to the Romans labeling their enemies as savages to justify conquest. And then you also said that hybrid wars are aimed at changing governments, but that's also been a feature of what we might consider conventional conflict. The Allies sought to basically to depose Hitler and the Japanese Imperial government during World War II. And you can even argue that like the core British goal during, as far back as the American Revolution, was the recapture of American decision-making to reassert British control over that zone, but in a political sense. How are all of those conflicts different from the concept that you've presented of modern hybrid warfare?

Mason:

Right, yeah. Those are excellent questions. So the key distinction here is that the objective of a hybrid war, not just the means used is what defines a given war as a hybrid war, rather than a conventional conflict or simply international competition, on the other end of the spectrum.

Jacob:

So does that basically mean that hybrid war may be a relatively new concept, but it's basically not a new phenomenon? That it's something that has been happening for centuries and now we have a word for it and we can argue about what that word means, but that it's not necessarily a new thing?

Mason:

Yeah, that's a great question. And the key distinction here, and it's a very tricky concept that the Russians are wrestling with themselves, was that these non-military and hybrid means have always been part of conflict. But what

they assess is changing is that they're now at the center of wars in the 21st century, and will be, going forwards.

So for example, in World War II, these non-military efforts were absolutely a key component of actions by every side. But the key focus of the Allies was very much on a conventional military campaign in order to get rid of Hitler, demilitarize Nazi Germany, and end that conflict. And these objectives can define a war even today.

So as I previously mentioned, the Russians don't think that conventional war is just never going to happen. So for example, they could decide that they're going to launch a conventional war against say, Poland. They can set the objectives going forward as, okay, the point of this is we are going to invade and occupy Poland, for whatever political objectives beyond that, that they're trying to achieve. However, what they're arguing is now increasingly common, and unfortunately, what the Kremlin might actually do towards Poland is go, okay, we're going to conduct a hybrid war against Poland. The objective here is shaping the information space and shaping norms to ensure that Poland is part of the Russian sphere of influence, pulling them out of NATO, cutting off ties with Western powers, that sort of thing.

And this hybrid war, that if you articulate it from the jump, is focused on these information efforts, can include the use of conventional forces. So the Kremlin could say, okay, the best way to make sure that Poland rejoins our sphere of influence is to carry out small conventional operations or use special forces or any number of other means. It's this core objective that is what they say is what defines a hybrid war that are becoming increasingly common.

And the interesting point here is the Russian military has their own discussion of this, and they have just as many terms to describe all of these means that we're discussing of special forces or cyber attacks. And they've got their own discourse of terms like hybrid conflict or asymmetric operations or information warfare and a number of others. But the key idea that the Russian military has really coalesced itself around that is different from how the US discusses the term is hybrid war as this typology of war that depends on what you're setting out to do, essentially. Whereas, so much of the discussion in the United States is still focused on hybrid war as a description for these means, and we're not going to properly understand and confront what the Russians are doing if we're focused on these individual means without understanding what their overall objectives are.

Jacob:

Do the Russians view hybrid war, in the way they view hybrid war, as something that they do and it's a unique feature of their strategy and objectives, or do they ascribe it to other countries as well? Do they believe other countries are engaged in hybrid wars of their own?

Mason:

Interestingly enough, it's both. They discuss hybrid war as a generalized phenomenon. They don't think that they invented it. They don't even necessarily think that any one state has invented it. They argue that it's just what is coming to dominate current and future conflict. So they think that they're doing it themselves. They even talk about generalized plans for how, in theory, you carry out a hybrid war, but they also commonly and heavily discuss the fact that they're already fighting a hybrid war with the West, primarily the United States.

Now, this may seem a little hyperbolic and can be, at least when I was doing this initial research, I was asking myself, "Are they really orienting their military planning under this idea that they're at war essentially with the United States?" And they truly seem to be operating under that worldview. This discussion is not limited to blatant Russian propaganda outlets you may have heard of like RT or Sputnik. These are the highest ranking officers of the Russian military, they're arguing this worldview in public speeches outlining their priorities for each year and high profile military research, the most senior Russian military academics, discuss this concept in official military

journals, which is the main resource that I looked at doing this research. And Russian military analysts, again, are openly discussing how to wage their own offensive hybrid wars.

They're not trying to hide their intent to use hybrid means. Of course, they don't openly talk about here's how we topple a government or what have you, but they do discuss the general strategic guidelines of how you would carry out a hybrid war. They're absolutely orienting themselves around how to carry out these conflicts and how to defend against what they ascribe the US and other states to be doing as well.

Jacob:

What should the United States, or more specifically US leaders and thinkers, do in response to what you found?

Mason:

So the core recommendation that I would put forward is the United States needs to develop a more accurate understanding of this Russian concept and specifically what individual conflicts the Kremlin considers hybrid wars. Now, I'm not at all saying that the United States should mirror Russian thinking and start planning its own hybrid wars along these lines, or what have you. However, we should avoid imposing our own conceptual boundaries on the Russian threat, discussing things as either conventional or just an information operation and not understanding how the Russians are combining all of these different efforts.

Jacob:

Basically because those boundaries will lead to mistakes and unforced errors in dealing with Russia?

Mason:

Exactly. There's a real worry that if we overly focus on individual elements of what the Russians are doing as a cohesive whole, in many ways, pardon the old phrase, we can win individual battles while losing the war because we're not even aware of what the Russian military and the Kremlin considers to be an overall hybrid war.

Jacob:

Well, Mason, thank you again for being here today and sharing your insight and expertise with us.

Mason:

My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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