

## Research Article

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# Hybrid warfare and hybrid threats today and tomorrow: towards an analytical framework

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**Abstract:** This article first traces the origin of hybrid warfare and the label game surrounding the concept, asking whether it is merely old wine in a new bottle, and if so, whether it is still a useful concept. It is found that while being old wine in new bottles, it is still a good wine well worth drinking. While there is not much new in the concept itself, it is a useful tool to think about past wars, today's wars and the wars of the future. Thereafter, this paper analyses how hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are to be understood in the context of peace, conflict and war. It is shown how hybrid warfare and threats fit into our traditional understanding of conflict dynamics.

**Keywords:** Hybrid Warfare; Hybrid Threats; Russia, irregular warfare, gray zone, conflict dynamics, new generation warfare, Sweden, warfare, asymmetric warfare.

## 1 Introduction

*“The greatest victory is that which requires no battle.”*  
Sun Tsu

Challenges related to hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are today high on the agenda of most of the world's governments. So why are we talking about hybrid warfare today? The short answer is Russia. Russian imperialism has emerged as a “spectre” that “is haunting Europe” (Galeotti and Bowen 2014). It is encapsulated in

*a style of warfare that combines the political, economic, social and kinetic in a conflict that recognizes no boundaries between civilian and combatant, covert and overt, war and peace ¼ [where] achieving victory – however that may be defined – permits and demands whatever means will be successful: the ethics of total war applied even to the smallest skirmish. (Galeotti 2016, 7)*

Regardless of the validity of the above statement, it has – over time – become increasingly clear that Russia, in recent decades, has – at least in part – deceived the West about its intentions.<sup>1</sup>

Russia's actions in Ukraine have manifested this Russian paradigm, being a good example of dividing war and peace – as we see it – problematic. The grey area, or the ‘grey zone’, between peace and war has grown considerably; so the need to understand how we can handle this kind of warfare and related threats seems increasingly necessary. How does a country or group of countries deal with threats and aggression in this grey area, such as ‘little green men’ who appear in uniform but without national denomination and refuse to tell where they come from, election influence operations or cyberattacks, to mention but a few possible actions?

<sup>1</sup> Here it should be noted that the Russian perspective is different from that of the West. Their narrative about history and what has happened since the end of the Cold War is very different from the Western security narrative. See, e.g. Marshall and Scarlett (2016, 6–7).

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As Russian deception about its intentions have become generally accepted, at least in the West, a consensus has emerged – at least in the military and security sectors – that Russia’s mindset with regard to security politics is a zero-sum game where the aim always is to win, with the underlying thinking being founded in a perception of an always ongoing state of war. Thereby, the border between war and peace does not follow international law – that is the way the West defines war. Hence, the grey area between war and peace has become substantially larger, creating an empty space in need of being understood. In short, the thinking about the international security setting was ripe for a ‘new’ concept to help make sense of the situation. As we will see, the ‘new’ buzzword was not so new, nor unique, but it did arrive and has – arguably – contributed to the current understanding of today’s warfare and threats.

Hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are here understood as two phases, or viewpoints, of the same phenomenon. Hybrid warfare concerns active measures taken by an actor towards another actor. In contrast, hybrid threats are passive, being real or imagined threats from possible future actions against oneself. This chapter is only concerned with actor-driven hybrid threats. This said, the emphasis of the chapter is on the warfare dimension.

In the first part of the chapter, the origin of hybrid warfare and the label game surrounding the concept will be briefly outlined. After that, it is asked whether it is merely old wine in a new bottle, and if so, whether it is still a useful concept. In the second part, three alternative ways to understand hybrid warfare are outlined: the phase-based scale of asymmetric warfare proposed by the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS), the Russian military’s eight-phased ‘new generation warfare’ strategy and the strategic map presenting the Swedish doctrinal understanding of strategic measures and tools that can threaten and influence Swedish security. Subsequently, the paper analyses how hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are to be understood in the context of peace, conflict and war, presenting a number of analytical frameworks to understand and analyse hybrid warfare and threats. It is shown how hybrid warfare and threats fit into our traditional understanding of conflict dynamics in theory and practice. Here, a framework for understanding both hybrid warfare and the dynamics of conflict is presented. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

## 2 Hybrid warfare as a label game

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ rose in prominence in academic and pundit debates alike after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (See Polese et al. 2016 for emergence of term.). The term itself has received much criticism (see e.g. Renz 2016), not least for its lack of clear definition and its tendency to be used as a catch-all phrase. However, the author here agrees with Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen, who argue that the term hybrid warfare ‘provide fertile grounds for discussing the future of war and warfare as well as broader security and defence challenges to which the West currently lack responses’ (Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016, 1). As they correctly note, lack of conceptual clarity is not a unique problem for hybrid warfare, but a problem that is shared in ‘the lack of agreement on what war is, how its character is evolving, and what this means for distinctions between peace, conflict, and war’ (Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016, 1).

### 2.1 *Old wine in a new bottle*

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ itself was first introduced more than a decade ago by Frank Hoffman, a former US Marine officer, to facilitate a needed change in the established beliefs in the US military about the utility of military force in the post-Cold War environment (Renz 2016, 385). In Hoffman’s view, hybrid warfare was a suitable analytical construct to explain the success of a relatively weak opponent, such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or Hezbollah, against the vastly technologically and numerically superior militaries both in Afghanistan and Iraq and in the 2006 Lebanon war against Iraq and Israeli forces (Renz 2016, 385).

From the beginning, hybrid warfare was merely one of many related labels, such as ‘new wars’, ‘fourth-generation warfare’ and ‘asymmetric warfare’, to mention a few. These were coined by analysts to conceptualise changes in contemporary warfare based on the idea that war had become ‘substantially distinct’ from older patterns of conflict (Berdal 2011: 109-110).

It should be acknowledged that hybrid warfare is a recent concept in the view of state-centred warfare, having its origin as a way to describe and understand the complexity and efficiency of non-state actors on the battlefield (Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016, 1–2). Here, there ‘are similarities between Russian actions in Ukraine and previous examples of non-state hybrid warfare – most notably the in the “blurring” of traditional concepts of warfare, its unfamiliarity, the use of non-military means, and the asymmetric relationship to conventional Western warfighting – have all contributed to labelling these Russian actions as HW’ (Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen 2016, 2).

Hybrid warfare is a concept that is very close to irregular warfare and asymmetric warfare. Hybrid warfare and asymmetric warfare can be seen as two sides of the same coin. They may look different, but in reality, they are very similar. Asymmetric warfare is about compensating for one’s own military and organisational weakness compared to ones’ opponent. This feature is shared by hybrid warfare, though it is a generally broader concept and less linked to one’s organisation. This said, as both concepts lack clear definition, the purpose of asymmetric warfare is to maximise your strengths and exploit the opponent’s weakness. Simply put, if you have a stronger opponent, you need to find other solutions than conventional warfare. The need to conduct asymmetric warfare applies both to insurgents, guerrillas and terrorists and to states with comparatively weaker conventional forces. This is very much the same as hybrid warfare. The latter could be seen as an operationalisation of asymmetric warfare, being a way to exploit the opponent’s weaknesses. It plays out at all levels, from tactical, through operative, to the strategic level. It is important to remember the political framework and its narratives within which all wars occur (Mansoor 2012, 3). Mansoor is correct when he points out that hybrid war is not something that ‘change the nature of war; it merely changes the way forces engage in its conduct. However it is waged, war is war’ (Mansoor 2012, 3).

Irregular warfare is also similar, with the main difference between asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare being linked to who is conducting warfare. In contrast to the other two concepts, it is built on the presence of a non-state actor – normally, some form of insurgent or terrorist actor; with some, the goal is obtaining political power to achieve political, social, economic and/or religious change (Jordan et al. 2016, Ch. 13). However, this concept is often used in a broad and sloppy manner referring to a broad range of undefined warfare that is not conventional warfare. Thus, it is often wrongly used as a synonym.

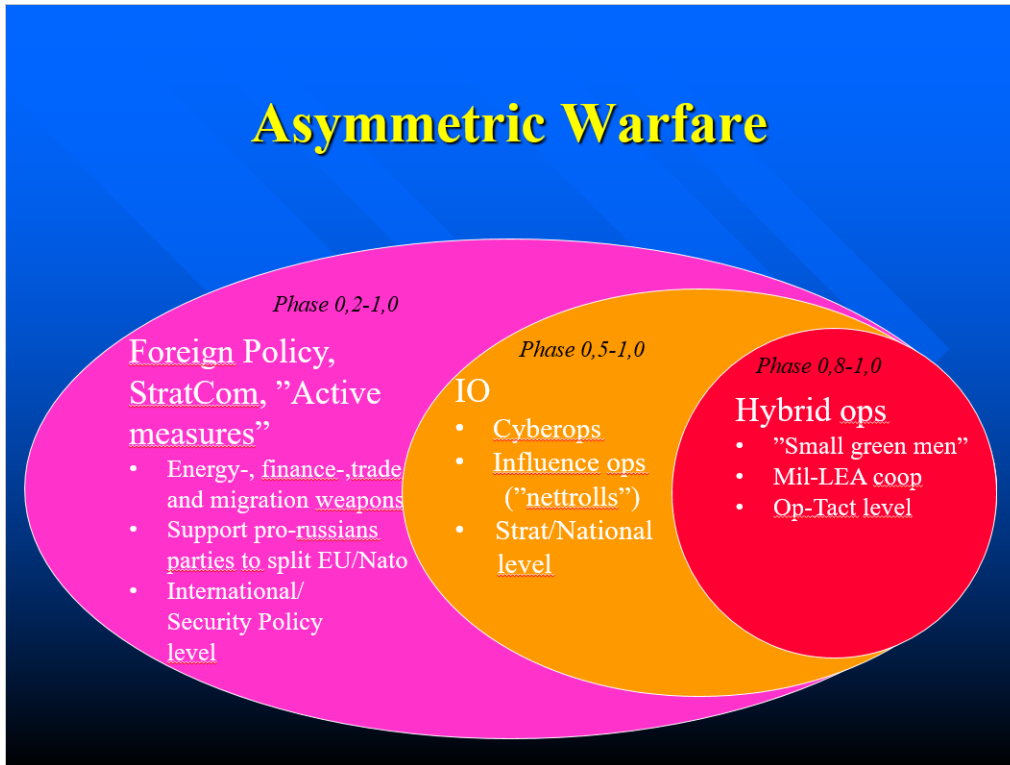
In conclusion, hybrid warfare is about asymmetric warfare under a new label. Hybrid war itself is just one of a variety of terms used to describe this phenomenon, where ‘Sixth-generation warfare’, ‘Contactless warfare’, ‘New warfare’, ‘Next-generation warfare’, ‘Ambiguous warfare’, ‘Asymmetrical warfare’, ‘Non-linear warfare’ and ‘Full spectrum conflict’ are examples of more-or-less synonymous terms. Nevertheless, while being old wine in new bottles, it is still a good wine. While there is not much new in the concept itself, it is a useful tool to think about past wars, today’s wars and the wars of the future.

### 3 Analytical frameworks

How then is hybrid warfare to be understood? Here, three different ways to understand hybrid warfare are outlined: those of the CATS, Sweden’s leading institution on the subject; the Russian military’s eight-phased ‘new-generation warfare’ strategy; and the strategic map presenting the Swedish doctrinal understanding of strategic measures and tools that can threaten and influence Swedish security.

#### 3.1 Understanding hybrid warfare: the CATS model

The CATS, the leading centre in Sweden on the subject, has suggested a phase-based scale using three separate but coordinated levels of asymmetric warfare, all of which occur during peacetime before acts of war have occurred in the grey zone, which is useful for analysis (see Figure 1) (Nicander and Arnevall 2015). In this model, hybrid operations occur on the operational–tactical level; influencing operations and cyberattacks are linked to the strategic level; and on the overarching level of security politics, you find foreign policy, strategic communication (StratCom) and ‘active measures’ such as Russia cutting off energy supplies in Ukraine. The scale in this model ranges from zero to one, where zero refers to peacetime and score of one encodes a situation with some form of heightened readiness. It separates



**Figure 1:** The model of asymmetric warfare of the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS). *Source:* Presentation at the European External Action Service (EEAS)/EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (INTCEN)/EU Hybrid Fusion Cell on 'How to Understand and Counter Hybrid Threats – A Swedish View' by Dr Lars Nicander. Also see Lars Nicander and Linnea Arnevall (2015, 135).

between measures in the realm of foreign policy, strategic communication and other 'active measures' (0.2–1.0), information operations (0.5–1.0) and hybrid operations (0.8–1.0).

### 3.2 Russia's eight phases of 'new generation warfare'

Moreover, in Russia, there is an understanding of hybrid warfare. As outlined by Jānis Bērziņš, Managing Director of the Center for Security and Strategic Research at The National Defence Academy of Latvia, the Russian military has developed a strategy they call 'New generation warfare', which combines 'asymmetric, nonlinear, unconventional tactics with modern forms of traditional warfare' (Bērziņš 2014b, 1. Also see Bērziņš 2014b). Though each of the individual tactics is not new per se, he argues that 'it is their combination boosted by modern technology that makes them different' (Bērziņš 2014b, 1. Also see Bērziņš 2014b). The strategy has eight consecutive phases, as outlined below (Bērziņš 2014b, 1):

*First phase:* non-military asymmetric warfare (encompassing information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic and economic measures).

*Second phase:* special operations to mislead political and military leaders by coordinated measures carried out through diplomatic channels, media and top government and military agencies involving leaking false data, orders, directives and instructions.

*Third phase:* intimidating, deceiving and bribing government and military officers with the objective of making them abandon their service duties.

*Fourth phase:* use of destabilising propaganda to increase discontent among the population, boosted by the arrival of Russian bands of militants, escalating subversion.

*Fifth phase:* establishment of no-fly zones over the country to be attacked, imposition of blockades, extensive use of private military companies in close cooperation with armed opposition units.

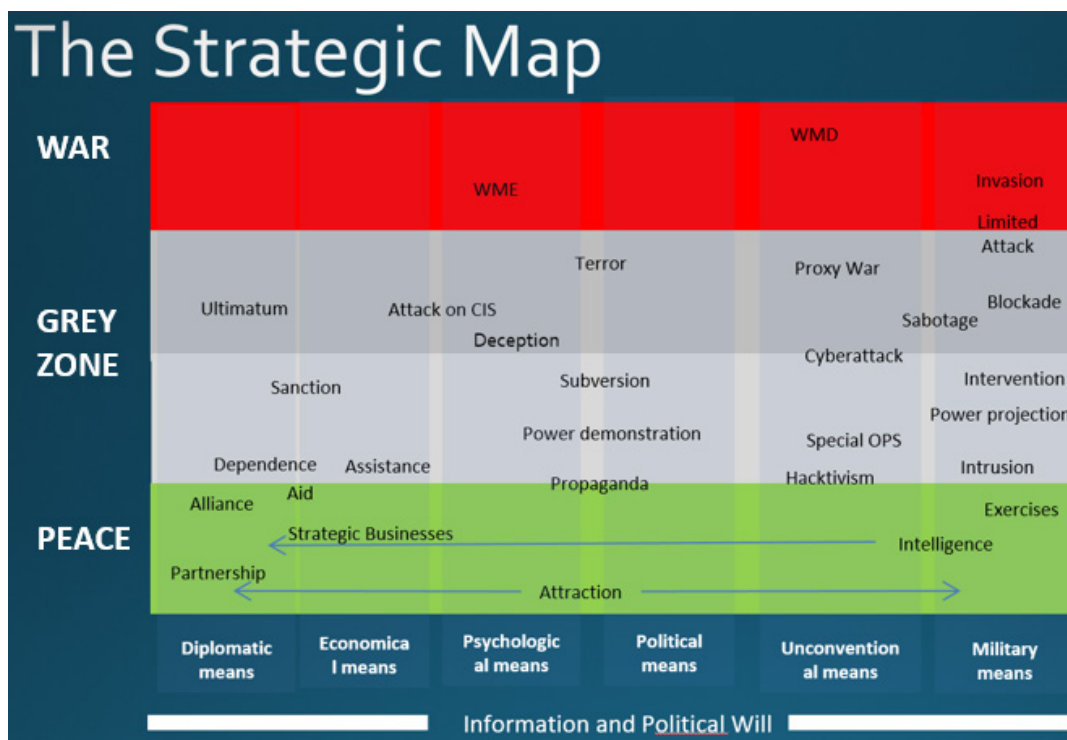


Figure 2: The Swedish strategic map. Source: Anders Palmgren, based on Sweden’s Military Strategic Doctrine (MSD 16) (Swedish Armed Forces. 2016, 35). The author has added ‘War’, ‘Grey Zone’ and ‘Peace’ from the Swedish original.

*Sixth phase:* commencement of military action, immediately preceded by large-scale reconnaissance and subversive missions of all types, forms, methods and forces, including special operations forces; space, radio, radio engineering, electronic, diplomatic and secret service intelligence; and industrial espionage.

*Seventh phase:* targeted information, electronic warfare and aerospace operations along with continuous air-force harassment, combined with the use of high-precision weapons launched from various platforms (long-range artillery and weapons based on new physical principles, including microwaves, radiation, radiological and ecological disasters and non-lethal biological weapons).

*Eighth phase:* crushing the remaining points of resistance and destroying surviving enemy units by using special operation units.

### 3.3 The strategic map: the grey zone and Swedish doctrine

The lack of a clear threshold between war and peace is streaming through the current Swedish strategic doctrine (Swedish Armed Forces 2016). Here, a grey zone [‘gråzon’] is identified between war and peace (Figure 2) (Swedish Armed Forces 2016, 35). This model outlines a wide range of different strategic measures and instruments that may threaten and influence Swedish security, divided into six dimensions: diplomatic, economic, psychological, political, unconventional- and military means (Swedish Armed Forces 2016, 35).

This model has been developed to prepare for current and future threats to Swedish security. According to the official narrative, here represented by the Swedish Armed Forces’ assessment of military strategic trends, the character of future conflicts and operation environments is presented in a 20-year perspective, the assessment of which can be seen as the commander-in-chief’s way to tell how/what h/she thinks about the security environment today and in the future.<sup>2</sup>

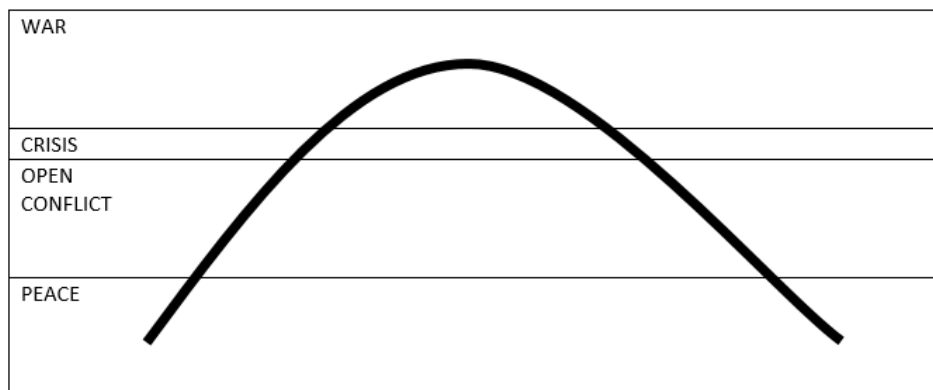
<sup>2</sup> Swedish Armed Forces (2018). Also see <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/om-myndigheten/dokument/perspektivplanering/>.

In the assessment, a number of clear threats stand out, with a stronger Russia being at the forefront. This is a Russia that seems to pursue a change in current security order at the global and regional levels. There is an increased uncertainty and unpredictable behaviour here, where it is assessed that attack would most likely be aimed at denying freedom of action. Russian strategy and doctrine development are systematically aimed at using the Western world's weaknesses and it does include hybrid warfare. It is also stated that Sweden will inevitably be affected by violent conflict in the Baltics. It is concluded that to be able to manage hybrid warfare scenarios, there is a need for a coherent national strategic communication and for the society to be able to act quickly and effectively in the grey area between war and peace. Thus, it can here be assumed that Sweden needs to prepare for and act against asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare scenarios (alleged on-going and future, violent and non-violent ones).

So what type of warfare is to be expected? Clearly, both asymmetric and hybrid types of warfare are to be expected.<sup>3</sup> Russia is perceived to systematically strive to create a grey area between peace and war, where it is unclear if there has been an attack or not. Examples used in the analysis are sabotage of infrastructure or economic flows, acts of terror to create fear and insecurity, as well as military attack. Sweden is also to expect the use of long-distance weapons, including mobile security forces and Special Forces. Hence, there is clearly a need for comprehending the full scale of threats and warfare.

### 3.4 Hybrid warfare and the dynamics of conflict

It is clear that hybrid threats and hybrid war do not fit into the traditional divide between peace and war. Nor do they fit well into traditional conflict scales (Model 1) or the idea that a conflict moves through different stages of conflict in a certain order.<sup>4</sup>



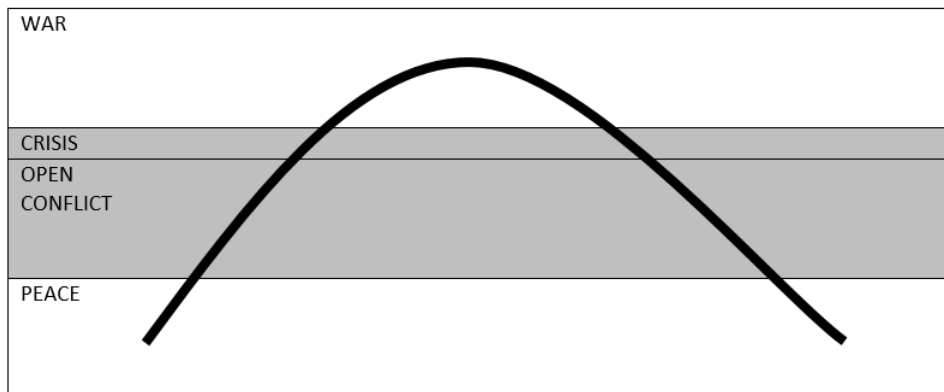
**Model 1:** Simple conflict curve. *Source:* Author.

To be accurate, a conflict scale of today needs to encompass threats that cannot be directly described as regular warfare but still pose a threat to national security in a way other than traditional insurgent and guerrilla warfare do. Furthermore, the warfare is often cloaked in deception, not being open and, if identified, denied. This is represented in grey in Model 2.

<sup>3</sup> It should here be noted that in the perspective analysis, the term 'hybrid warfare' is used in the meaning of full-spectrum warfare combining regular and irregular forces. The purpose is to act and reach political goals in the grey zone.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the dynamics of conflict, see Swanström and Weissmann (2005).

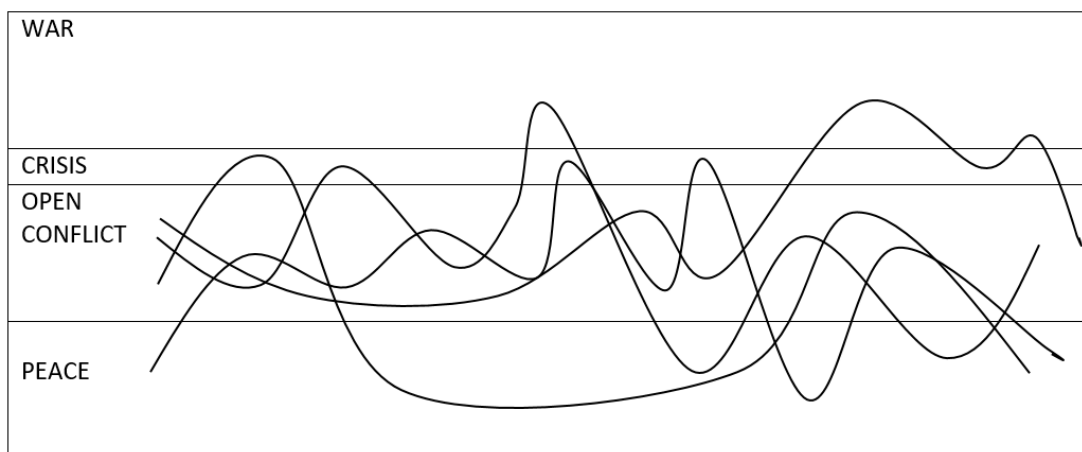




**Model 2:** Conflict curve (version 2.0). *Source:* Author.

There is also a need for a more complex scale accounting for a range of different hybrid warfare measures taking place simultaneously and at different levels of intensity at each point in time (Model 3).

Use of active hybrid warfare measures

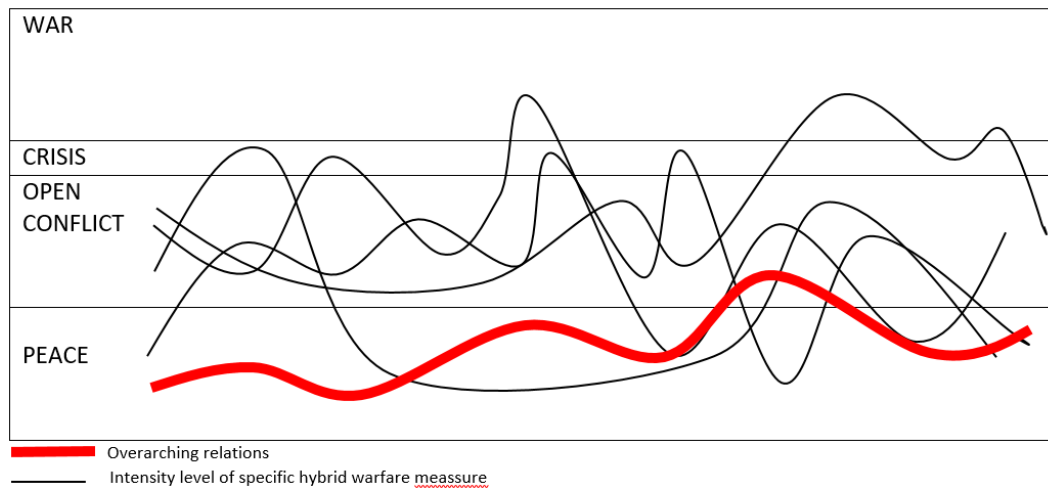


**Model 3:** Use of active hybrid warfare measures. *Source:* Author.

Furthermore, this should preferably happen without pushing up the intensity of the overarching level of conflict between the adversaries. The figure in Model 4 shows an ideal scenario, where most of the active hybrid warfare that goes on is not adequately identified and successfully attributed (Model 4).

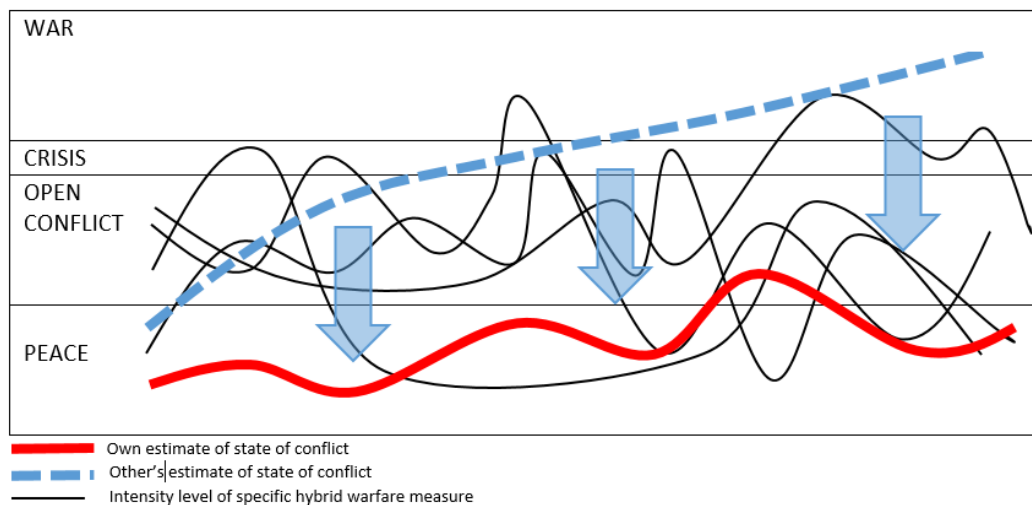
In a less-successful scenario, the accumulated level of hybrid warfare measures risks pushing the overarching relations into a state of open conflict, crisis and war. However, this is a complex process, because, even if there will be confirmed but denied acts of war in a traditional and legal sense, there is not a clear and mutually agreed threshold for war. This leaves a lot to how different active measures and events are interpreted, defined and attributed with meaning. This, of course, is a challenging and problematic task, as deception and deniability are the key features of hybrid warfare, where the focus is on war with other means and the ultimate goal is to win the war without any battle. Hence, as perception and interpretation underlie how the overarching conflict is understood, there is always a serious risk of miscalculations and misunderstanding. This risk of underestimating the adversary’s intentions, thereby underestimating the risks of being slow in one’s preparations and defensive measures whereby one risks losing the war by not knowing the adversary one was preparing for (Model 5).

Hybrid warfare vs overarching level of conflict



**Model 4:** Hybrid warfare vs overarching level of conflict. *Source:* Author.

Miscalculation (underestimating)

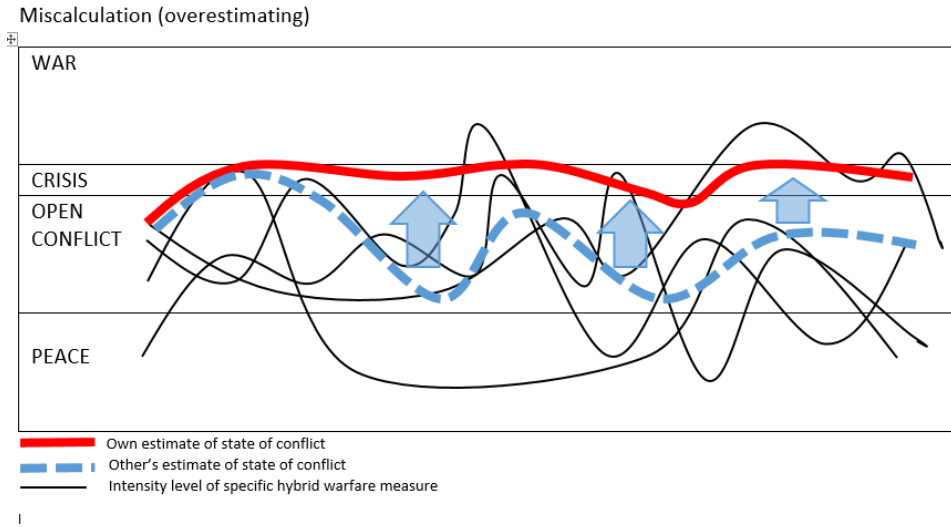


**Model 5:** Miscalculating (underestimating).

Thus, there is a need to be aware and prepared because perception might not be right. However, this is a double-sided game – what if the others mean well and it is oneself that develops the worst-case scenarios (Model 6)?

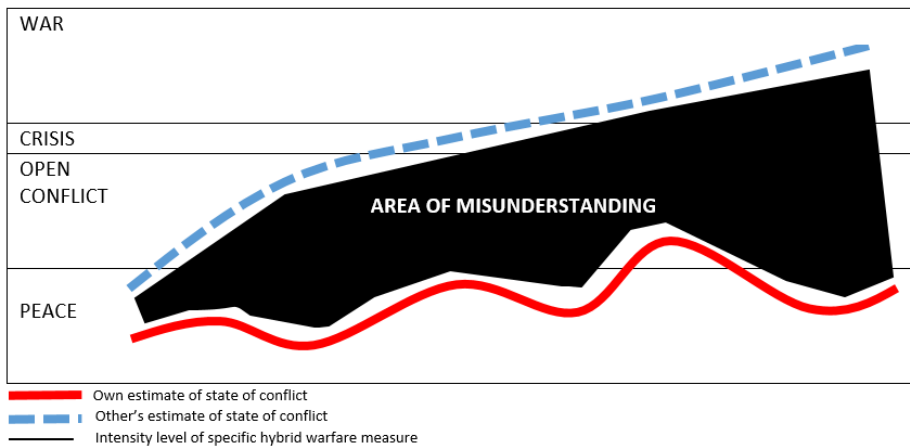
In conclusion, there is an area of misunderstanding between adversaries. Its size is unclear, but it is unlikely that it does not exist. It might be so at a time of stable peace; this will not be the case in times of tensions. Here it is problematic – even dangerous – in that you can never be sure if you are the one over- or underestimating the situation (Model 7).





**Model 6:** Miscalculating (overestimating).

Area of misunderstanding



**Model 7:** Area of misunderstanding.

## 4 Conclusion

It is clear that hybrid warfare is not new, neither unique. At the same time, it is a useful concept when analysing today's security setting. It provides an operationalisation of the broader concept of asymmetric warfare, which is needed to understand and account for warfare and threats in today's world, including – but not limited to – the case of Russia. We could use another term, with 'asymmetric warfare' being the obvious alternative, but the concepts of hybrid warfare and hybrid threat add value in that they are more concrete and inclusive. Not least, these terms account for both sides of the coin in a good and understandable way: one can account for both the passive and active phases of hybrid warfare and threats, and they allow one to analyse the opponent in an effective way, talking about hybrid (possible) warfare as a threat.

The concepts and analytical frameworks used to understand hybrid warfare and hybrid threats help us with understanding and analysing these terms. Understanding these enhances our ability to arrive at a good judgement.

When it comes to the grey zone between war and peace, where hybrid warfare and hybrid threats are located, there is – as we have seen herein – not only a risk associated with being too risk-averse but also in playing down your opponent’s intentions and/or underestimating the risk for escalation and war. However, there is also a risk related to being too negative in one’s outlook, overstating intentions and always developing worst-case scenarios. International politics is an interactive game between social actors; if reading conflict and war, you risk causing the same. This does not mean that one should be naïve, but merely that one should recognise that there is no objective truth out there waiting to be found or played out.

To conclude, yes, in essence, hybrid warfare is old wine in new bottles. Nevertheless, it remains a good wine well worth drinking. In fact, it seems like the new bottles are not only easier to sell, but there is also an indication that the wine was refined in the process.

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