

# Ukraine Conflict: Hybrid Warfare and Conventional Military Intervention

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## Abstract

The war between Russia and Ukraine represents one of the most significant challenges to the Kremlin in its recent history. Undoubtedly, one of the main objectives of Moscow's power game is to occupy geographical spaces on its western border to repel any action that contravenes its geopolitical interests. The use of military and non-military means by Russia -whose actions are defined as a "hybrid war"- become the main strategy to confront any advance by the West on its immediate borders. The analysis of the war in Ukraine must therefore be approached not only from the military perspective, but also from the perspective of strategy of communications, where propaganda and disinformation become useful tools for contemporary tactics. Therefore, "hybrid wars" go beyond the military field and are complemented by attacks in cyberspace to destabilize governments, as happened in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** United States, conventional war, hybrid war, NATO, Russia, Ukraine, European Union.

## Introduction

The development of a hybrid warfare - in the context of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine - highlight the use of military force and other means (such as cyber-attacks) which disrupts European collective security and defies the "world order" established after World War II. In that sense, the use of strategic means contributes to deterrence and disinformation, as well as, cyber-attacks denote a clear axis of action by Russia to undertake its military projection in Ukraine. Hence, new forms of warfare, beyond the conventional, are becoming the main component in the 21st century conflicts.

Russia's strategic thinking recognizes that hybrid warfare is the basis - or the new form- to confront the adversary to the detriment of its interests, becoming the main line for the expansion of military maneuver. Undoubtedly, the objective of the Russian hybrid warfare implemented in Ukraine, beyond the fusion of conventional and non-conventional means, seeks to avoid West direct military confrontation. If -as Clausewitz mentioned- "*war is the continuity of politics by*

*other means*", it is noteworthy that these "other means" have been transformed into a digital architecture that contributes to new modalities - such as cyber-attacks - being the favorite tool today. Similarly, economic and financial sanctions are part of a new modality of hybrid warfare, generating counterweights to Moscow's objectives in Eastern Europe, particularly in Ukraine.

### Understanding hybrid warfare

To understand the fact of the ongoing crisis between Ukraine and Russia over the past few years, one must first analyze the concept of "hybrid warfare". According to this concept, Russia intervenes in Ukraine through two types of forces: on the one hand, through unconventional armed groups (the spy service) and, on the other hand, through military forces.<sup>1</sup> The popularization of the term "hybrid warfare" can be attributed to the American military theorist Frank Hoffman, who in his famous work "Conflict in the 21st Century" made an attempt to conceptualize the evolution of the battlefield environment that go beyond the commonly and accepted linear division between regular and irregular types of warfare.<sup>2</sup> As explained by Ofer Fridman, in his book "Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicization", hybrid warfare was a tactical-operational concept aimed at improving the performance of military units in the complex battlefield environment of the 21st century.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, however, this theory was reconceptualized, including additional dimensions beyond those contemplated in the original concept. The first comprehensive attempt to reconceptualize hybrid warfare was made by NATO in its 2010 "Bi-Strategic Command Capstone Concept," which stated that "*hybrid threats are those posed by adversaries with the ability to simultaneously employ conventional and unconventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives.*" Additionally, this document noted that "*Hybrid threats are composed of and operate across multiple systems/subsystems (including economic/financial, legal, political, social and military/security) simultaneously.*"<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, it is striking that hybrid warfare, with the adoption of new forms of warfare and series of actions to destabilize a country, shows a Russian strategy capable of dissuading any Western country to intervene and be involved in Ukraine war. In that sense, the Gerasimov Doctrine underpins the concept of hybrid warfare applied by Russia and shows a very particular strategic vision. The operational concept is developed through what Makotczenko determines as "*the adoption of military and non-military measures.*" On the one hand, military measures are the same as those applied in a conventional war, based on the relative combatant power of a nation. On the other hand, non-military measures are shown operationally through actions in the form of coalition, political and diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, economic blockade, cessation of diplomatic relations and seeking media support, among others.<sup>5</sup> However, the greatest criticism comes from those who fear that hybrid warfare risks on losing its explanatory value as it has become popularized to understand Russian interventions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, arguing that it simply is the depiction of the Gerasimov doctrine or that Moscow has adopted the precepts of hybrid warfare.<sup>6</sup>

Contextualizing, the way the conflict in Ukraine has been evolving, highlights those war scenarios that were not immediately visualized. The speech by Vladimir Putin's government stating that an attack on Ukraine was not possible, was the tactic to undertake one of the riskiest geopolitical strategies of the post-Cold War period in Europe. The start of the offensive operations on February 24, 2022, highlighted the Kremlin's intention to continue to maintain its sphere of influence in the heart of the European continent, to the detriment of any conception of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Thus, the hybrid war was accompanied by a military intervention, considering - finally - that the traditional military strategy is the one that allows gaining ground. In that sense, the missile attack on Ukrainian military installations, the electronic warfare and the disinformation made aggression the way to demonstrate Russia's real power in Ukraine.

President Putin's imperial vision, in his eagerness to bring Russia back as a global power, encouraged the use of classical geopolitics. Russia's military actions show Moscow's desire for Ukraine to remain a buffer state to prevent NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and its borders. However, despite the Ukrainian aspiration, the truth is that it was the United States who rejected at the time the integration of Ukraine into NATO and did so -precisely- because of its lack of interest in stopping the hybrid war already in progress and in getting involved in Eastern Europe region.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, when Russian troops began their offensive actions in the early hours of February 24<sup>th</sup>. Cyber-attacks were simultaneously carried out against Ukraine, damaging important government websites, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Infrastructure, among others.

According to Mason Clark, an analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, "*Russia sees itself waging an ongoing hybrid war against the United States and is shaping its military and non-military tools of state power to win this war.*"<sup>8</sup> In September 2020, Clark stated that the Russian military was actively focusing its preparation to increase its capabilities to win hybrid wars in future conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

### Involvement of international actors

However, both opposing sides have their own hybrid warfare tactics. On the one hand, since the beginning of February 2022, cyber-attacks by Russia against the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and two of Ukraine's largest credit institutions, PrivatBank and Oschadbank, became evident. Also, on February 21st, 2022, President Putin recognized the two self-proclaimed independent republics of Dombas, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. On the other hand, the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, stopped the authorization of the operation of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, replicating the sanctions imposed by Western countries against Russia. In the same context, US President Joe Biden was presented with options for defining technological blocking measures against Russia (such as blocking Internet connection, cutting electricity supply and collapsing the railway system, among others), while it was announced that the G7 had agreed on applying "*devastating sanctions packages*" against Russia. In addition, the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, ordered the exclusion of Russian banks from his country's banking system, thus affecting Russia's procurement of sovereign debt in the British market. Similarly, the United States, the European Union and

Canada decided to close their airspace to commercial flights from Russia, but Moscow did not lag behind and, by reciprocity, applied the same measure.

Even so, it is not ruled out that more conventional military methods, such as bombing and intervention in Ukraine, may be used in the hybrid war. In this regard, on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the Russian Defense Ministry announced victories in Crimea and Dombas, as well as claimed air superiority over Ukraine, reinforcing misleading perceptions of an easy military operation in Ukraine for the Russian public. Russian state television channels claimed that the Russian military could no longer retreat, especially after gaining control of Ukrainian airspace, which has proven misleading and has shown the information narrative for future Russian escalations in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> In addition to military tactics by Russia, the Kremlin largely froze foreign exchange trading and raised interest rates to stop the free fall of the ruble, which - by February 28<sup>th</sup> - had already fallen 30% against the dollar. Meanwhile, the United States and its European allies imposed new sanctions against Russia's Central Bank, strangling its ability to prop up the ruble. Tax havens, Switzerland and Monaco, joined the European Union sanctions, breaking the Swiss tradition of neutrality.<sup>11</sup>

Within the framework of the UN, on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, the General Assembly approved the condemnation of Russia and called for the cessation of hostilities against Ukraine. The resolution was endorsed by 141 out of the 193 member states of the organization, in accordance with the territorial integrity and humanitarian effects that the war is generating for Ukrainians. Days earlier, on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Finland and Sweden had expressed their sovereign right to decide to join NATO, despite Russia's threats. This announcement provoked the annoyance of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who warned that the accession of Finland or Sweden to NATO *"would have serious military and political repercussions"*. Indeed, the convergence of factors in the current hybrid war, from deterrence by Russia to the implementation of economic sanctions by the West, has serious implications and it disrupts the "world order" established after World War II.

### A new world order

The creation of NATO in 1949 involved the establishment of a military and political bond between the United States and Western Europe, whose vital spaces were defined to repel any influence of Moscow on the European continent. In this sense, NATO's extensive security ring -close to Russia's borders- generates great frictions to the Kremlin, considering that in the 90's NATO had 16 members, while now it has 30. It is evident that the escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine and the involvement of the main international actors generate a distortion or, at least, a change in the established "world order".

In this regard, the Argentine political scientist Natalia Peritore states that before delving into the subject, it is first convenient to define the concept of "world order". In this sense, it could be said that the "world order" is a set of game rules, principles and institutions agreed by the dominant powers, which govern the relations between the various actors on the international scene. In formal terms, Russia - by invading Ukraine - infringed international norms. However, has Russia

been the only state to do so in recent decades? The answer is certainly no; the United States is a clear example of this. Therefore, the supposed legal equality of (sovereign and independent) states often turns out to be a fiction. So, would it be necessary to change the rules of the established world order? Undoubtedly, in an eventual Russian victory, alarm bells would go off with respect to the structure that has been governing the world since the end of World War II.<sup>12</sup>

However, under these circumstances, what would be the cost of a Russian victory? In this highly globalized and interdependent world, being considered a "pariah" (acting outside international norms of behavior) would not be a viable option for Russia. In this context, some analysts argue that the People's Republic of China (PRC) could "win" from this contest by strengthening its relationship with Russia, given the strong economic sanctions imposed on Moscow. However, it is necessary to understand that the PRC is not in a comfortable position as its economic interests outweigh its relationship with Russia. This is where European states come into play, given the significant weight of their trade relationship with China. These states should also analyze their security architecture with and without the United States, a country that for some years now has been focusing intensely on the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, Irma Argüello, president of the NPSGlobal Foundation, claims that the real-world struggle is between East and West, but she considers that the actor representing the East is the PRC. China is an actor to be taken into account, because it seeks global expansion by other means. The PRC's expansionism is not in line with Russian military expansionism, which has been evidenced by China's abstention from voting in the Security Council and the UN General Assembly. The PRC has realized that it is not in its interest to go down the path of war, rather the path of economic expansionism. So, even if it cannot be shown concretely, this situation represents a certain fracture with the East, at least with the decision taken by President Putin to invade Ukraine.<sup>14</sup>

### Russian perspective

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has multiple edges that involve relevant actors in international relations, generating counterweights in international public opinion. For the past eight years, Russia has been blaming Ukraine for the outcome of this situation, through a mixture of fake news, accompanied by historical revisionism of the former Soviet Union. The Russian narrative justifies its actions due to the alleged Ukrainian genocide in Dombas and NATO's constant advance on Moscow. These facts have served as a pretext for President Putin to justify an invasion of Ukraine in "self-defense".

The Russian president states that Ukraine is an inseparable part of Russia. Therefore, it's not important to him what the majority of Ukrainians think since the only thing that matters is the greatness of Russia and its place in the world. However, President Putin's goal transcends Ukraine. His war is aimed at the entire European system, which is based on the inviolability of borders. With his attempt to redraw the map by force, Putin aims to reverse the European project and re-establish Russia as the leading power, at least in Eastern Europe. The aim is to



erase the humiliations of the 1990s and to make Russia a global power again, on a par with the United States and the PRC.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the geopolitical, military and economic actions surrounding the conflict in Ukraine, it is worth highlighting the way in which the communicational strategy is capturing the world's attention. The disinformation war is one of the main objectives of the conflict. The game of hybrid warfare and the implementation of powerful linguistics denote a character that sometimes is not subjective but appeals to the power of conquest that Russia has been longing for. On February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, the Russian president claimed that Ukraine was a "failed state," blaming Ukrainian nationalism for the country's problems. Subsequently, on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Putin ordered to start offensive operations by Russian military forces against Ukraine, causing the largest invasion in post-war European history. According to the Russian president, the official aim of the attack is to "denazify" Ukraine and stop the "ongoing genocide of Russophones" in the country.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, the announcement that Russian strategic nuclear forces would be raised to a higher alert status was a clear attempt to deter direct Western military action. But while politicians are right to take nuclear escalation seriously, they should not discount the risks of a conventional war between NATO and Russia. Indeed, if the economic damage in Russia becomes severe enough, Putin may decide that it is worth retaliating through non-military means, such as cyber-attacks. Likewise, the Russian president might appreciate that things are bad enough to make it worthwhile to forgo energy revenues and shut down some pipelines to Europe, which would make energy prices skyrocketing.

Presumably, Russia would employ these actions to gain sway over Western policy, but cyber-attacks could easily backfire, triggering consultations under Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty, which states that an attack on one-member state will be considered an attack on all of them. This situation could lead to retaliatory cyber-attacks against Russia and an escalation of tension.<sup>17</sup> However, public opinion in the United States views cyber-attacks as a very different means to the one employed in conventional warfare. Thus, it could be predicted that the United States and European countries involved in the Ukrainian conflict would resist some level of damage caused by a Russian cyberattack, removing the possibility of a direct conventional confrontation.

## Conclusion

The war in Ukraine disrupts the stability not only of Europe, but also of the "world order" established after World War II. On the one hand, the use of strategies in the context of a hybrid war shows forms of a non-linear war, through the employment of military forces on conventional battlefields, as well as, the employment of the other instruments of Russian national power in different geopolitical scenarios, by means of the Gerasimov Doctrine. On the other hand, Western sanctions against Russia become a counterbalancing tool - through non-military power - to prevent the achievement of Russian strategic objectives.

The military, economic, technological and diplomatic challenges faced by the United States, the European Union and NATO -during the conflict in Ukraine- deconfigure the Western status quo in the face of non-conventional wars, which become more competitive and where cyberwarfare becomes the step prior to the military offensive. In this sense, the implementation of military and non-military strategies is a game that Moscow has adapted to maintain its power and influence in its near borders. Disinformation constitutes the Kremlin's main tool to justify its expansion in conventional military terms in Ukraine. However, on all other fronts (political, economic, financial, media, digital, cultural, among others) it has become a global war implemented by Russia after its intervention in Ukraine and whose effects have been felt in all fields of human activity.

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