The threat of hybrid warfare to development: How Russia’s new military strategies have impacted progress in Ukraine

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GLOBAL RISKS TEAM

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ABSTRACT

The growing interest of the Russian Federation in Eastern European nations is a major concern in terms of state development. Over the course of the last 10 years, the world has seen Russia becoming ever more reliant on a hybrid war strategy to circumvent international law. This paper seeks to illustrate the evident threat that this military strategy poses to Eastern European states by examining Russian actions in Ukraine. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in the Donbass region exemplifies the deadly effectiveness of hybrid warfare in the pursuit of geopolitical objectives on the world stage.

RÉSUMÉ

L’intérêt croissant de la Fédération Russe vis à vis des nations d’Europe de l’Est apparaît comme une préoccupation majeure en termes de développement de l’État. Au cours des 10 dernières années, le monde a observé la dépendance croissante de la Russie vis à vis d’une stratégie de guerre hybride pour échapper le droit international. Ce document cherche à démontrer la menace évidente que cette stratégie militaire présente pour les États en Europe de l’Est, à partir de l’analyse des actions russes en Ukraine. L’annexion de la Crimée par la Russie et son support aux mouvements séparatistes dans la région de Donbass illustrent l’effectivité mortelle de la guerre hybride pour la poursuite d’objectifs géopolitiques dans la scène mondiale.
## CONTENTS

Abstract 2  
Résumé 2  
The role of Ukraine in the global context 4  
What is hybrid warfare? 5  
Crimea, Ukraine and Russia: A contentious history 5  
  *The fall of President Yanukoych: Pretext for Russian intervention* 7  
  *The second face of Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy: Conflict in the Donbass region* 8  
  *How hybrid warfare has impacted the Ukrainian crisis* 11  
Bibliography 14
The role of Ukraine in the global context

Since the early 2000s, the Russian Federation has attempted to reestablish itself both as a world power and as a competitor to the west, specifically to the European Union. Eastern European states have always been a key strategic middle ground in the division between the west and east. Their geographical orientation has therefore made States such as Ukraine incredibly important in terms of economic growth, strategic NATO operations, and regional stability. Brussels saw Ukraine as a nation that could perpetuate growth of the eurozone and serve as a buffer between the west and east, while Russia saw it as an essential component of its economic reconstruction (Trenin, 2014). While Europe and Russia initially focused on securing Ukrainian allegiance through economic incentives, the strategic importance of Ukraine has resulted in the escalation of this geopolitical competition. Woehrel (2014) concisely explains the origin of geopolitical tensions between the west and east:

“...[Ukraine] occupies the sensitive position between Russia and NATO member states Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania adds to its geostrategic significance. Many Russian politicians, as well as ordinary citizens, have never been fully reconciled to Ukraine’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and feel that the country belongs in Russia’s political and economic orbit. The U.S. and European view (particularly in Central and Eastern Europe) is that a strong independent Ukraine is an important part of building a Europe whole, free and at peace” (Woehrel 2014).

Russia’s desire to outmaneuver the west has led it to engage in a hybrid warfare strategy that undermines Ukrainian sovereignty. By utilizing hybrid warfare, the Russian Federation has been able to operate in combative ‘grey zone’ that skirts the traditional understanding of warfare. Putin’s administration has used this technique to secure the region of Crimea and support an armed rebellion in the Donbass region. As a result of these conflicts, Ukraine has continued to struggle to develop democratically and economically. Furthermore, progressive strides in governance have been lackluster and continue to be undermined by political coups, secession movements, and Russian influence. By understanding the Ukrainian crisis, we can see how hybrid warfare poses a severe threat to state development.
What is hybrid warfare?

Hybrid warfare is a concept that has existed since the beginning of time. However, due to growing technological capabilities, globalization, and the state-based international system, hybrid warfare is slowly becoming a major national security threat. The threat hybrid warfare poses to international stability comes not from the development of new unforeseen strategies, but from a compression of the various levels of warfare. One of the best definitions of this compression is provided in Hoffman (2009), who states that:

“Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts that include indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict” (Hoffman 2009).

In essence, hybrid warfare is a multifaceted strategy that alters the traditional understanding of warfare, which is what prompted several academics to assert that “the most distinctive change in the character of modern war is the blurred or blended nature of combat” (Hoffman, 2009, p.37). This blurring prevents a clear understanding of what constitutes acts of war and what is simply aggressive behavior, as states “…lack a legally or politically-recognized division with which to determine at what point network intrusion and sabotage becomes an act of war” (Hunter & Pernik, 2015, p.3). These realities allow states, such as Russia, to operate in combative ‘grey zones’ that permit them to pursue political objectives militarily without formal declarations of war.

Crimea, Ukraine and Russia: A contentious history

The Crimea region has consistently been a source of trouble for the Ukrainian state and a major point of discussion among Eastern European nations. Located in the south, Crimea is situated between the Black Sea and the Sea of Aznov, both of which have considerable geopolitical implications for the region.
The threat of hybrid warfare to development: How Russia’s new military strategies have impacted progress in the Ukraine

Figure 1: Map of Ukraine

These implications include trade and energy distribution, primarily in oil and natural gas. Russia’s substantial energy sector may explain its interest in the region (Winrow 2007). However, the complicated history of Crimea, Ukraine and the Russian Federation seems to serve as the basis for much of the conflict. Prior to the formation of either Russia or Ukraine, Crimea was also a member of the USSR. As such, it played an important role in the communist regime, which explains the strong Russian presence in terms of language and perceived identity (Kramer 2014). In fact, Russian leaders have asserted that their interest in the region is purely humanitarian with “…the justification for that assertion [being] an alleged right to protect Russian citizens and ‘compatriots’ (persons deemed to be linked to Russia by language, culture, or ethnicity)” (Woehrel, 2014, p.11). In fact, following the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union “…the Autonomous Republic of Crimea was not consulted on whether they desired to remain in Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR or alternatively to rejoin the Russian Federation” (Bebler 2015, p. 39). The Crimean state has therefore always found its status as a Ukrainian territory contentious, while many in Russia still viewed Crimea as Russian land.

These feelings of animosity were simply exacerbated following years of nationalism within Ukrainian politics during which the Russian minority was oppressed.

Ukraine has frequently ignored Crimea’s desire for self-determination. In 1992, one year after the formal formation of Ukraine, Crimea drafted its own constitution in hopes of becoming independent. After a couple years of negotiation, Crimea was granted autonomous status under Ukrainian law. However, in 1994 the desire for independence once again appeared. The Crimean Republic, in hopes of gaining independence, drafted a new constitution under President Yuriy Meshkov (Eur, 2004). In response, the Ukrainian council abolished the constitution and the post of president (Eur, 2004). Despite several years of negotiation, the notion of Crimean independence was never considered. This contentious history explains why Crimea has been susceptible to Russian aid and why they were more than willing to participate in the annexation of the region. Collectively speaking, the issue in Crimea “… must be understood in the context of tenacious historic links of Russian people with the peninsula and the Ukrainian nationalist politics that alienated the country’s ethnic Russian community” (Saluschev, 2014, p.9).

The fall of President Yanukoych: Pretext for Russian intervention

Ukraine’s current sovereign crisis can be linked to the public protests in early 2014. Former President Viktor Yanukoych, a known Russia sympathizer, was the target of the Euromaidan Revolution that aimed to address rampant abuses of government power and decisions to strengthen ties with Russia (Euromaidan Press, 2016). After skirmishes between protestors and police within the capital of Kiev, the protests bloomed into revolution. While Ukrainians viewed this as a major win for fair governance, many in the west viewed “…the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014 merely…[as] a pretext for Putin’s decision to order Russian forces to seize part of Ukraine” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.1). The revolution lasted from the 18th to the 23rd of February, with Russian forces crossing into Crimea the 27th (BBC, 2015). In a show of their new military strategy, unmarked Russian soldiers and pro-Russian gunmen stormed key infrastructure within the Crimean capital of Simferopol (BBC 2015). Despite the Kremlin denying direct involvement, it has been documented that “…the Kremlin deployed thousands of unmarked Spetsnaz squads” to assist in the attack and occupation of Crimea (Financial Times, 2014, p.5). Following nearly a month of Russian occupation, the Crimean state held

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2 The Euromaidan Revolution, also known as the Ukrainian Revolution, was a collection of demonstrations and protests that began in 2013 in response to the government’s decision to develop closer ties with Russia. This relationship came at the expense of an agreement which sought to develop stronger economic and social association with the European Union.
a referendum in March to officially secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. On the same day, Russia recognized Crimea as a sovereign state (Times, 2014).

**The second face of Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy: Conflict in the Donbass region**

Crimea served as a test scenario for the Russian hybrid strategy. The successful annexation of Crimea signaled to Russian military leaders that the strategy was not only effective, but incredibly efficient. In response to these positive results, Russia quickly turned its attention to the Donbass region, which is home to a large portion of the Ukrainian manufacturing industry. Coincidently, following word of Crimea’s successful separation, pro-Russian protests began to escalate in early April along the eastern border of Ukraine, specifically in the Donetsk and Lugansk region. These movements quickly turned into a full-on separatist movement, with both regions declaring themselves sovereign and independent.

![Figure 2: Rebel Controlled Areas in the Donbass, August 2014](source: BBC, 2015)

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The threat of hybrid warfare to development: How Russia’s new military strategies have impacted progress in the Ukraine

Figure 3: Rebel Progress with Backing of Russian Soldiers, September 2014⁴

Similar to Crimea, “rather than openly using military power to secure its political objectives in Ukraine, Russia has adopted a subtler approach intended to give the Kremlin ‘plausible deniability’ while reducing the costs associated with engaging Ukraine’s armed forces directly” (Lanoszka, 2016, p.1). While initially supporting the rebel factions with weapons and intelligence, this role quickly expanded to include their own troops. Under the guise of humanitarian aid, Russian convoys crossed the border to escort casualties and wounded Russian soldiers back to the Russian Federation. Although Putin and his administration have worked tirelessly to preserve their deniability, it has been well documented that “Russian authorities have worked to systematically silence human rights workers’ complaints over soldiers’ deaths, intimidating those who question the Kremlin’s denials that its soldiers are in Ukraine” (Moscow Times, 2014, p.3). With this support, the rebel groups were able to defeat the Ukrainian army in early September that same year, allowing the separatists to gain considerable ground as shown in Figure 3. Once again, the utilization of unmarked militia members and Spetsnaz units allowed the Russian government to circumvent full-fledged military conflict. More telling is the utilization of advanced weapon systems in the region. Russia provided the separatists with not only munitions but also tanks and precision guided missile technologies (Retuers, 2018). The provision of these weapons displays the growing nature of Russia’s hybrid strategies and the incorporation of advanced technologies into the equation.

One of the reasons the international community is aware of such behavior is related to the incident involving Malaysia Airline Flight 17. In early July 2014, the flight was shot down while crossing rebel occupied territories. Besides the obvious international ramifications from the destruction of a commercial airliner which resulted in the death of 283 civilians, this event revealed to Ukrainian officials the growing nature of the hybrid strategy they faced in Crimea. Following months of investigation, it was determined that “…MH17 was shot down by a 9M38 missile launched by a Buk, brought in from the territory of the Russian Federation, and that after launch was subsequently returned to the Russian Federation” (Dearden, 2016, p.3, p.). However, despite the ambiguity of the situation, Russia was able to avoid any ramifications outside of international sanctions. Although Russia provided the technology and weaponry, it was the separatists who launched the rocket, giving the Putin administration, once again, ‘plausible deniability’. The use of traditional troops, weapons technology, rebel support, and funding for terrorist operations exemplifies how “hybrid warfare brings significant conventional military power together with tactics normally associated with guerrilla operations” allowing the aggressor “…to obtain its political objectives at the expense of its target by keeping the conflict local” (Lanoszka, 2016, p.5).

Russia’s operation in the Donbass region demonstrates the complex nature of hybrid warfare and the challenge it poses to the Ukrainian state. Despite mounting evidence against the Russian Federation, legally the state is still dealing with a civil insurgency in a confined segment of the country. The inability of the Ukrainian government to quell the rebellion has placed a heavy strain on the new administration, with talks involving cease-fires and reconciliation at the forefront of political discussion.
The threat of hybrid warfare to development: How Russia’s new military strategies have impacted progress in the Ukraine

Figure 4: Rebel Controlled Zones Following a Brief Ukrainian Offensive, January 2015

Source: BBC, 2015

How hybrid warfare has impacted the Ukrainian crisis

The situation in Ukraine does not appear to be improving as the international community refuses to intervene. Due to the ambiguous nature of the actors operating in Crimea and Donbass, Russia’s behavior does not, in the perception of the international community, constitute outright warfare. Although the international community condemns Putin’s behavior and deems the annexation as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, a stance affirmed by a 100 to 11 vote in the UN, they did not view Russia’s behavior as a formal declaration of war. (UN News Center, 2014).

Figure 5: Comparison of Russian Intervention in Crimea and Donbass

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<th>Crimea</th>
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Russia’s support of the rebel faction in the Donbass region went substantially further than their physical presence in Crimea. Unlike in Crimea, Russia has willingly provided the rebels with weapons, explosives and tanks, and has also actively participated in the rebellion. The presence of unmarked Russian soldiers in Donbass, a situation in which foreign troops are actively fighting to overthrow the government on sovereign soil, seems to many to be an act of war. However, yet again, the ambiguity of the situation allows Russia to operate without substantial repercussions and avoid the traditional classification of warfare. Figure 5 highlights how Russia’s hybrid war strategy progressed from its initial involvement in Crimea to its presence in Donbass. Both situations highlight the complex nature of hybrid warfare and the ability of such strategies to effectively undermine state sovereignty.

These situations underscore the treacherous nature of hybrid warfare which is not clearly distinguished from traditional warfare under international law. These ‘grey zone’ conflicts within Ukraine have hindered state development, and the repercussions are now being seen by the international community. In Crimea, the minority groups are starting to experience persecution at the hands of the Russian occupiers. The BBC has several reports revealing that citizens are being forced to give up their Ukrainian citizenship or risk losing their jobs, the Ukrainian language is being eliminated, Russian laws are being implemented, and the troops are targeting the Turkish speaking minority (BBC, 2017). Furthermore, “the UN human rights agency says it has documented arbitrary arrests, torture, and at least one extrajudicial execution in the region” (BBC, 2017, p.2). In the Donbass region, thousands of casualties have been reported and millions have been displaced. The UNDP (2018) has underscored the impact of this conflict by stating that:

“The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine has had a severe impact on the national economy and social capital – some 10,000 people have been killed, and over two million displaced inside and outside Ukraine. The financial and social strain of supporting the large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has further exacerbated the strain on authorities and communities alike” (UNDP 2018).

Despite these realities, Russia continues to supply weapons and troops to the conflict, resulting in the continuation of the killings. Ukraine has attempted to progressively develop since its founding in 1991, with a positive development trend until 2014 as presented in Figure 6.
The threat of hybrid warfare to development: How Russia's new military strategies have impacted progress in the Ukraine

Figure 6: HDI trends for Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Serbia, 1990-2015

However, with the annexation of Crimea and conflict in Donbass, Ukraine has been unable to match its previous success. The current government struggles with corruption and legitimacy, as Russian influence undermines the current administration. Russia's new hybrid war strategy exemplifies a new source for the perpetuation of grey zone conflicts and the threat they pose to state development. Until Crimea is returned to Ukraine and the separatist movement in the Donbass is quelled, it is unlikely that Ukraine will advance past its current development standing.

The threat of hybrid warfare to development: How Russia’s new military strategies have impacted progress in the Ukraine

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