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Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare: Time for a Comprehensive Approach?

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SYNOPSIS

Hybrid warfare strategies blend conventional warfare, irregular warfare and cyber-attacks with other influencing methods, such as disinformation, diplomacy and foreign political inteference. There is a need for novel comprehensive approaches to counter them.

COMMENTARY

DESPITE THE attention and a growing body of studies on specific issues focusing on hybrid threats and hybrid warfare (HT&HW), there is a lack of research that would provide a comprehensive approach towards identifying, analysing, and countering HT&HW challenges.

Helping to fill this gap is a recently published volume on hybrid warfare by the Swedish Defence University which outlines key observations on the varying threats as well as the tools and means to counter them, along with a number of real-world case studies.

Strategic Challenge

HT&HW refer to the strategic blending of conventional and unconventional means of power and influence. This terminology has rapidly gained traction in the Western public and political debates, where it has evolved into an all-encompassing view, particularly reflecting Russia's international behaviour at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

Strategies involving HT&HW have been enacted out of a perceived necessity to challenge Western military supremacy by other means and to describe the varying

asymmetric ways of waging conflicts by Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, and certain non-state actors, particularly ISIS and Hezbollah.

Iran, for example, has devised a strategy of guerrilla warfare performed largely by proxy forces in areas outside Iran's territory amid perceived existential threat posed by the United States.

The diffusion of varying hybrid threats essentially challenges the Western binary thinking on war and peace as well as conventional and unconventional warfare. Hence, there is a need for a more comprehensive understanding of how adversaries may innovatively combine a range of foreign policy tools to target the particular vulnerabilities of Western societies and circumvent their existing defensive structures.

The Western Response

The Western response to these threats fundamentally boils down to the question of the capacity of its national and international institutions to confront HT&HW by understanding the particular vulnerabilities in their societies, addressing them, and devising responses to hostile measures by external actors.

Open societies built on the normative foundations of the rule of law, human rights and democracy, protective of the freedoms of speech, association, and the press, need to devise solutions that preserve these fundamental freedoms and draw on their particular strengths. This work is well underway, in the form of numerous entities tasked with analysing and addressing the problem.

Key actors such as NATO and the European Union have devised a series of detection and response mechanisms focused on providing early warning and attribution of aggressive actions, as well as deterrence and retaliation. These reactions reflect a common realisation of previously unidentified weaknesses in Western societies and joint efforts to close these gaps.

There are also successful examples of countermeasures against HT&HW. For example, Ukraine has, in the midst of an armed but covert attack against the country, proved capable of combining a conventional military response with a sustained informational campaign. This has, despite the severe losses incurred, served to expose Russia as the aggressor and consolidated domestic cohesion as well as international support for the country.

Forging a Comprehensive Approach

There is no single response to HT&HW, nor to building resilience. Nor can any single actor or structure succeed in this endeavour. Governments must accept reality, while adapting and re-adapting along with the varying opponents and threats. So how do we address these challenges in practice?

There is a need for pragmatism, flexibility and inclusiveness of actors, sectors and levels – within and between countries. Hybrid measures will be unexpected by design, and when countermeasures are successful, the opponent will change patterns of

attack. This calls for a strategic approach inclusive of all relevant actors and short- and long-term perspectives.

These cannot be separated; long-term vulnerabilities are the target for hybrid warfare, and resilient societies will enhance the effectiveness of responses and countermeasures. The development of total- or comprehensive defence capabilities provides a potentially successful model.

It is also crucial that key international and regional organisations cooperate with various partners both within and outside their usual area of engagement.

Moreover, dedicated organisations such as the Hybrid CoE and the different NATO centres of excellence are key platforms. While part of NATO and many of the dedicated centres, the United States is a key power capable to protect Western democracies against HT&HW.

Multi-dimensional Collaboration

It is also essential to collaborate across sectors and levels and to reduce obstacles posed by traditional borders. When countering HT&HW, vulnerabilities tend to exist precisely in the seams between sectors and levels, making them potential targets.

One key answer can therefore be found in the collaboration between the military, political, economic, civilian and informational spheres ─ evolving across the public and private sectors, and between local and regional levels, through the national to the international level.

Combining various skillsets and perspectives is critical when building analytical capability, societal awareness and resilience or directly countering HT&HW. Cross-sector collaboration does not only increase the possibility of early warning, a wider field of view and greater contextual knowledge. It also affords decisionmakers a more precise brief regarding the proactive or reactive measures at hand, and how they can be combined.

There is no single correct approach on how to counter and respond to HT&HW threats, nor how to build resilience. Therefore, we have to take it for what it is, build on our strengths, limit access to our vulnerabilities and always adapt as threats, opponents and methodologies evolve and take new shapes.

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