

# Building a Comprehensive Approach to Countering Hybrid Threats in the Black Sea and Mediterranean Regions

by Chris Kremidas-Courtney

## Introduction

The future security of the Black and Mediterranean Sea region depends upon a cooperative and collective ability to understand and shape conditions to counter traditional and emerging threats. Resurgent 'great power competition' and insidious non-state threats introduce disquieting alternatives to democratic governance, market economies, and social egalitarianism.

Today, state and non-state actors are challenging nations, institutions, and private companies through a wide range of overt and covert activities targeted at their vulnerabilities. Both NATO and the European Union refer to these aggressive acts as "hybrid threats." As we've seen recently in both Crimea and the South China Sea, a hybrid approach lowers the political price for aggression, making regime

change and territorial annexation possible "on the cheap."

Hybrid threats use subtle, far-reaching, and opportunistic methods – and seldom with a return address. In certain cases, they can be more brazen, but operate in a legal and normative 'gray zone' in which the impacted state has few good response options without escalating the situation into armed conflict.

## NATO and EU Response to Hybrid Threats

In the wake of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, NATO developed and adopted a Hybrid Warfare Strategy in December 2015. In early 2016, the European Union adopted its Joint Framework for Addressing Hybrid Threats. Both documents call for working to improve resilience, security and continuity of governance. Both documents also call for greater NATO-EU coop-

eration in addressing hybrid threats.

Since June 2016, both organizations have agreed on dozens of areas in which to focus their efforts. Neither organization has fixated on an exact definition of hybrid threats, but instead concentrated on identifying their characteristics and working approaches so that they can coordinate efforts to effectively counter these threats.

Within NATO it can be difficult to reach a consensus on Article 5 (collective defense) in the face of a hybrid campaign; however, a stricken ally can always bring its security concerns to the alliance via Article 4, under which allies can exchange views and information and discuss issues prior to taking any action. Thus, Article 4 consultations are the most likely venue for the North Atlantic Council to first discuss options when facing hybrid aggression against an ally.

Within the European Union, Article 42 (7) of the Treaty of the European Union and Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union are the most applicable to hybrid threats. Though similar to NATO's Article 5 in that it is triggered by an armed attack on a member-state, Article 42(7) can also be applied to some situations below the threshold of armed attack. Article 222 (the Solidarity Clause) applies more broadly to natural or man-made disasters, terrorist attacks and situations that align more closely with a hybrid campaign. It is also tied to the EU's Solidarity Fund, which can provide immediate funding to recovery and response efforts.

Both NATO and the EU recognize hybrid threats as a distinct category of adversary that possesses distinctive attributes and capabilities. Hybrid threats are distinguished from traditional adversaries by their novel exploitation of information networks, engagement in 'lawfare', and oblique employment of high-end military capabilities via proxies, which provides them with strategic tools that were once exclusively controlled and monitored by state actors under established rules and precedents.

Currently NATO and the EU are working together on enhanced cooperation in four areas: civil-military planning, cyber defense, information-sharing and analysis, and coordinated strategic communications. Since 2016, they have agreed on 74 areas of deeper cooperation, 20 of which relate to countering hybrid threats. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, established in 2017 in Helsinki, effectively contributes to strengthening NATO-EU cooperation in this area. Both organizations' personnel have participated in a number of the center's activities.

In September 2018, NATO's North Atlantic Council and the EU's Political and Security Committee held the first-ever scenario-based discussion on hy-

brid threats, and subsequent parallel exercises have validated the improved cooperative working mechanisms being put into place at staff and senior levels. Also since 2018, NATO adopted the concept of establishing Counter Hybrid Support Teams (CHST) to give ad hoc assistance to allies in the event of a hybrid crisis.

The first CHST was deployed to Montenegro in November 2019, and it remains to be seen how Allies requesting their assistance may integrate them into their own national processes.

In any case, determining attribution of potential hybrid attacks and decisions on responses to them (including any public announcements) remains a sovereign responsibility of the stricken nation. Internally, providing credible deterrence to hybrid threats is straightforward: building and maintaining resilient, credible and capable governance that raises the price of hybrid aggression and reduces its chance for success. To do so requires cooperation and collaboration from all entities.

#### Hybrid Threats in the Black Sea and Mediterranean Region

The Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean region is home to several NATO Allies and partner countries. The region is of particular security concern for Europe, since it serves as a strategic maritime corridor at southern Europe's four-way intersection with Eurasia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Threats emanating from these peripheral regions range from hostile state actors to terrorists and insurgents who deliberately aim to disrupt governance, reduce stability, and challenge the Western liberal world order.

At a gathering of regional hybrid experts from throughout the region held at the NATO Maritime Interdiction Operations Training Center (NMIOTC) in September 2019, the panel identified the following five major categories of hybrid threats in the region:

- Economic and Energy Coercion
- Disruption of Governance
- Disinformation Campaigns
- Lawfare
- Paramilitary Threats

#### Economic and Energy Coercion.

Moscow uses both direct and indirect economic pressure to influence politics, security, and trade in Europe. Throughout Europe, Moscow exploits its dominant role in energy provision. State-owned gas giant Gazprom and its subsidiaries leverage European dependence on natural gas to shape political agreements and trade arrangements in their favor. For example, Romanian imports of natural gas from Russia soared by 26.8 percent in 2018, despite extensive offshore gas deposits in Romania's Black Sea exclusive economic zone. In an ironic and frustrating twist, last year Romanian lawmakers increased taxes on domestic production of natural gas, further incentivizing increased dependency on Russian imports and stymieing opportunities to develop energy independence.

**Disruption of Governance.** Russia also exerts its historical political influence in the Black Sea region to disrupt or discredit Western-oriented democracies. In Moldova, Moscow leverages identity politics, a large pro-Russian bloc of Moldovan emigrants, and weak government institutions in Chisinau to maintain influence and counter NATO-EU alignment. Moreover, Russia supports the breakaway regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia with Kremlin subsidies and on-the-ground 'peace-keeping' forces to actively challenge Chisinau's control. Russia employs similar tactics in Georgia's breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Ukraine's Donbass region; and the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

**Disinformation Campaigns.** Disinformation might be considered the 'go-to' play for hybrid aggression, from so-

phisticated disinformation campaigns down to tactical level deception. In one tactical example, last summer a Russian Navy frigate audaciously shadowed and harassed the USS Gravelly missile destroyer navigating as part of a carrier battle group in the eastern Mediterranean. The intent became clear when the Russian frigate displayed maneuver 'distress' symbols as it adjusted course towards the Gravelly. Immediately thereafter, the Russian ministry of defence issued an official statement and 'deckside' video that captured the USS Gravelly's "dangerous maneuvers."

This calculated tactical example is one small element of a broader strategic disinformation campaign that includes misrepresentation of international law, election meddling, and culturally and ethnically divisive social media campaigns aimed at disrupting governance, eroding public trust, and proliferating pro-Russian sentiment in former Soviet states.

**Lawfare.** Lawfare is a term used to describe the manipulation, misapplication, or exploitation of laws to avoid attribution for hostile actions, engage in disruptive operations and shape political and socio-economic conditions, and justify questionable military interventions. While Russia's "peaceful" annexation of the Crimean peninsula to "defend the rights of Russian-speakers living abroad," is the most blatant regional case, it is by no means the only example of Russian engagement of so-called 'lawfare' in eastern Europe. Indeed, one hybrid panel lawfare expert noted that Rus-

sia regularly deploys invading military forces as thinly-veiled "peacekeepers" to impose Russian control in disputed territories in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In the maritime domain, Russia willfully abuses maritime law to assert dubious territorial claims, disrupt or deny freedom of navigation, and encroach on the sovereign waters of allies and partners.

**Paramilitary threats.** Russia avoids attribution and legal accountability for full-spectrum attacks by exploiting paramilitary and criminal groups as proxies. The most notorious incident of Russian proxies is of course the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17. After five years of investigation, international courts have finally brought the case to trial, asserting that the civilian airliner was shot down by a Buk missile system that was covertly deployed from the Russian city of Kursk into eastern Ukraine. Moscow likewise leverages highly organized Russian-aligned criminal groups throughout the region as proxy agents. The European Council on Foreign Relations published a detailed policy brief that exposes Russian-affiliated criminal groups engaging in 'black cash' fund sourcing, launching cyber attacks, influencing corrupt politicians, and even carrying out targeted assassinations in direct or oblique support to Kremlin authorities.

NATO, the EU, and affected nations must take concerted and unified actions to counter these and other hybrid threat activities. A more predictive and pro-active collective posture could prevent or mitigate many 'below

the threshold' actions, while a credible and capable military option should be openly maintained as option of last resort to deter and defend against these threats. Given the complexity of the threat, it is necessary to employ a comprehensive approach that combines political, socio-economic, information, and military tools to identify, mitigate, counter, and failing all else, recover from the effects of hybrid warfare.

### The Comprehensive Approach

The Comprehensive Approach (CA) is a way to achieve a common understanding and approach among all actors of the International Community through the coordination and deconfliction of political, development and security efforts in solving an international crisis. CA focuses on building a shared understanding of the problem, developing a shared overarching vision of the solution and facilitating coordination of effort while respecting the roles and individual mandates of multiple entities.

At the Lisbon Summit in November 2010 and in its new Strategic Concept, the Alliance "...decided to enhance NATO's contribution to a comprehensive approach to crisis management as part of the international community's effort and to improve NATO's ability to deliver stabilization and reconstruction effects."

The effective implementation of a comprehensive approach requires all actors to work together with a shared sense of responsibility and openness, taking into account and respecting each other's strengths, mandates and roles, not to mention their decision-making autonomy. In other words, the Comprehensive Approach is not hierarchical but rather it is a collaborative effort among equals.

NATO's experience from operations, including Afghanistan and in addressing piracy, has demonstrated that managing complex conflicts and cri-





ses requires a wide range of internal and external actors, including governments, civil society, the private sector and international agencies, to work together in a coherent and coordinated effort.

### **Hybrid Warfare: The Comprehensive Approach in the Offense**

Looking through the military and security lens, Hybrid Warfare appears to target critical vulnerabilities and seeks to create ambiguity in order to hinder swift and effective decision-making. Taking a broader perspective, Hybrid Warfare is actually the comprehensive approach (CA) in the offense. Where CA seeks to create space for friendly actors to strengthen governance, hybrid warfare seeks to shrink it.

Where CA strengthens and enables governance, hybrid warfare weakens it. Where CA seeks to build trust and societal cohesion, Hybrid Warfare seeks to sow mistrust and confusion between segments of the population as well as between the people and their government.

Where CA seeks to heal a society's divisions and seek reconciliation, Hybrid warfare targets a society's deepest historical wounds to make them bleed again.

As recent history tells us, hybrid warfare lowers the political price for aggression. Thus, building resilience against it is an effective deterrent because it raises the price for such aggression while reducing its chance for success.

### **Building Resilience through a Comprehensive Approach**

When we refer to resilience, we mean resiliency of institutions and people to deal with natural and manmade disasters, social cohesion, and the ability of civilian infrastructure and capabilities to support military operations – and vice versa. Resilience is therefore an

important aspect of deterrence by denying the hybrid actor an easy target: dissuading an adversary by convincing them an attack will not be successful.

While civil preparedness is a national responsibility, NATO Allies have a collective interest, as spelled out in Article 3 of the Washington Treaty (self-help and mutual aid), to build resilience together since a gap or vulnerability in one of our countries can impact other Allies' security.

Resilient societies are more able to bounce back after a crisis and they to restore functions much faster than less resilient societies. In resilient societies, continuity of government and essential services are more reliable and able to be sustained during natural and manmade crises.

Both NATO and the EU, as well as their member states stress the need for a posture of resilience in the face of uncertain security conditions and the ambiguity associated with hybrid threats. The term resilience carries similar connotations between NATO, EU, and member states, but there are a few important distinctions:

At the national level, resilience is a matter of sustaining national sovereignty and integrity in the face of national crises, including direct and oblique attacks from hostile actors. National resilience strategies focus on mobilizing a whole-of-society response to disruptive attacks or catastrophic events.

NATO's resilience concept prioritizes the preservation of essential government functions in the face of a crisis or conflict; nations must be prepared to "endure" long enough to allow the Alliance to organize a collective response. In addition to the direct application of national level civil emergency preparedness to deter against and mitigate the effects of hostile actors,

NATO also secures additional deterrence value by reassuring Allies and Partners in other ways. These include its sustained cooperation and presence in key nations, the development of dual-use shared awareness capabilities, and the enhancement of whole-of-society readiness without broadcasting overtly aggressive overtones that may escalate regional tensions on the Alliance's periphery.

The European Union also recognizes that market pressures, mass population shifts, political discord, and belligerent actions by neighbors threaten regional unity and common security. EU's global strategy emphasizes that "[f]ragility beyond our borders threatens all our vital interests. By contrast, resilience – the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises – benefits us and countries in our surrounding regions, sowing the seeds for sustainable growth and vibrant societies."

Together with its partners, the EU therefore promotes resilience in its surrounding regions. A resilient state is a secure state, and security is key for prosperity and democracy." In addition, the EU pledges to implement both multi-dimensional and multi-phased approaches as part of an expanded 'comprehensive approach'.

Both NATO and the EU do make efforts to share their best practices on resilience with partners in the Black Sea and Mediterranean region but there is much room for improvement. A few examples include; the need to bring a comprehensive approach to these regions to counter hybrid threats, conducting hybrid tabletop exercises among EU, NATO, and partner nations, and conducting joint studies and analyses of regional issues which identify vulnerabilities in legal regimes, trade norms, disinformation, and societal cohesion.

### Building a Resilience Bridge between NATO, EU, and Regional Partners

NATO and the EU must recognize that their partners in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions are on the front lines of hybrid aggression. These countries stand as a bulwark against deeper penetration by hybrid threats, but are also the unfortunate proving ground that tests the limits of Western resolve. It is essential to enable our partners on the periphery with unwavering political rhetoric and support for democratic institutions, economic assistance, and security cooperation including defense capability development and targeted direct military support that sends a clear message to hostile actors.

To do so means thinking of collective security in a regional sense beyond just the members of NATO and the EU. Thus, a key task before us is to bring together NATO, EU, and their partners together into a regional community of interest to build resilience, share best practices, and enable re-

gional collective security against hybrid threats. In turn, this community of interest will enable a regional comprehensive approach which will not only build more effective resilience against hybrid threats but also against transnational threats such as illicit trafficking and terrorism since the response mechanisms are largely the same.

There has been much important conceptual work on countering hybrid threats over the last decade, but the time is ripe to further operationalize and institutionalize a comprehensive approach for whole-of-government assessment and action. Improving civilian participation, not to mention civilian leadership, in security planning will require significant introspection, expansion of civilian planning capabilities, and a shared commitment amongst military, security sector, and civilian actors.

At the national level, governments must be more resilient in the face of continuous aggression. This includes sober assessments of national risk and investments in national capacity

to prevent, mitigate, and recover from deliberate attacks on governance, persistent disinformation campaigns, probing of critical infrastructure, and exploitation of economic and energy dependencies.

Regionally, we will only deter hybrid aggressors if we are unified in political will, present an honest and compelling narrative in defense of Western ideals, and rapidly commit to decisive actions when necessary. This is will not be an easy task. Even if there is sufficient political will and adequate resources, it will take time to build inter-organizational trust and competence since it is not possible to “surge” trust - it must be built over time.

In light of Russian aggression in Ukraine and eastern Europe, and the challenging security conditions in the Mediterranean and Europe’s southern borders, political leaders must continue to build an informed and agile deterrent and preventative posture, lest they allow security conditions to deteriorate at the hands of more agile external actors.

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Mr Kremidas regularly publishes in European journals and makes media appearances on countering hybrid and transnational threats. He is also the course designer and chief facilitator for NATO Comprehensive Approach seminars throughout Europe and the United States.

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