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The Evolution of Hybrid War: Implications for Strategy and the Military Profession

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ABSTRACT: The concept of hybrid war has evolved from operational-level use of military means and methods in war toward strategic-level use of nonmilitary means in a gray zone below the threshold of war. This article considers this evolution and its implications for strategy and the military profession by contrasting past and current use of the hybrid war concept and raising critical questions for policy and military practitioners.

In a 2005 article coauthored with James Mattis and in his 2007 analysis, Frank Hoffman envisaged the “rise of hybrid wars.” According to Hoffman, these wars involved the mixing of different methods and means and combined regular, irregular, and criminal elements with terrorism and new technologies. This variety of means and ways was expected to lead to positive synergy effects for those waging war.¹ In addition, converging modes of war and increasing complexity would result in an increased threat to those targeted.²

Hoffman’s idea of hybrid war built on two ideal types of war: regular and irregular, which fused together into a hybrid variant. The two previous ideal types are already questionable since the regular interstate variant has long been the exception.³ Even the Cold War remained cold because both superpowers sought to avoid escalation that could lead to nuclear war. While the Cold War offers excellent examples of the combined use of various military and non-military methods and means, this combined use takes place in virtually all wars.⁴ In the end, the hybrid buzzword appeared most

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1. James N. Mattis and Frank Hoffman, “Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars,” *Proceedings*, November 2005, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2005/november/future-warfare-rise-hybrid-wars>; and Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

2. Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2009): 34–39.

3. M. L. R. Smith, “Guerrillas in the Mist: Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare,” *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 19–37; and Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2016).

4. Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, eds., *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

useful if it resulted in more analytical thinking about war and warfare or how it is waged.⁵ Unfortunately, this is not what happened.

While the hybrid war concept received some initial attention, its breakthrough came in 2014 with the Russian occupation and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. Hybrid warfare was immediately linked to a now-famous speech by General Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, to the extent that it became used interchangeably with a(n entirely mythical) doctrine named after him. In the September 2014 NATO Wales Summit, hybrid warfare was discussed alongside Russian aggression.⁶ These developments caused Hoffman's original concept that already rested on shaky analytical grounds to start evolving to a problematic direction. Hybrid war now became synonymous with Russia rather than nonstate actors and was seen as the most immediate security threat for the West.⁷ This evolution turned hybrid war into an ambiguous catchall concept, which constantly risks reinventing the wheel. While this plasticity makes the buzzword useful in policy and public discussions, the lack of precision hinders its use for scholarly and policy purposes. Without a precise definition, hybrid war risks saying both everything and nothing in a way prone to hindering a better understanding of contemporary war and warfare.⁸

Contemporary research has failed to acknowledge the evolution of hybrid war from Hoffman's more precise definition to the catchall it has become today. This article argues that the problem of defining hybrid war is not merely an analytical one. As the concept essentially tries to come to terms with a more comprehensive understanding of war, immediate real-world implications for strategy and the military profession arise.

The first part of the article describes the evolution of the concept toward gray zone conflict; the contemporary understanding of hybrid war has moved away from the operational level use of military means and methods into the strategic realm. The evolved hybrid war has become a synonym for gray zone conflict with both terms typically referring to Russian action in a way that hinders more general analysis.

The second part of the article focuses on the main issue at stake, of the elevation of nonmilitary means over military ones. From the perspective of strategic theory that focuses on the relationship between ends, means, and ways, hybrid war indicates the

5. David Betz, "The Idea of Hybridity," in *Hybrid Conflicts and Information Warfare: New Labels, Old Politics*, ed. Ofer Fridman, Vitaly Kabernik, and James C. Pearce (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), 9–24.

6. "Wales Summit Declaration" (press release, NATO, August 30, 2018), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

7. Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).

8. John Arquilla, "Perils of the Gray Zone: Paradigms Lost, Paradoxes Regained," *PRISM* 7, no. 3 (2018): 118–29; Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017); Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (New York: Routledge, 2019); and Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, "Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War—Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 13–48.

insufficiency of narrow military strategy that focuses on use of force as a threat or as actual employment of violence.

The third part of the article discusses the implications for the military profession. Regardless of what the phenomenon is called, contemporary conflict is perceived to have shifted from the narrow military domain. What does this shift away from use of force mean for the military profession, which has traditionally focused on managing and meting out death and destruction? The article concludes by exploring the centrality of these questions for policymakers and military practitioners.

Evolution of Hybrid War to Gray Zone Conflict

The concept of hybrid war has constantly evolved. The concept dates to 1998 when it was used to describe the combination of conventional forces with special forces.⁹ Whereas Hoffman's understanding of hybrid war focused on mixing regular and irregular means and methods on the operational level during war, the Russian invasion and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in early 2014 caused practitioners to broaden the description. This almost bloodless operation was interpreted through Gerasimov's prescient, if not prophetic, speech printed a year earlier in February 2013.¹⁰ Although Gerasimov did not mention the words hybrid or Ukraine, his speech was soon interpreted as a Russian "Gerasimov doctrine" of hybrid war.¹¹ According to Gerasimov, nonmilitary means can be used to ignite an armed conflict in a previously flourishing state that justifies a decisive intervention by foreign forces.¹² The resulting gray zone conflict waged under the threshold of war bears more resemblance to the strategic-level use of nonmilitary means than either traditional war or Hoffman's hybrid variant. Gerasimov and gray zone conflict thus envisage a shift from use of force in war to use of nonviolent means below the threshold of war.

While the interpretation of a Gerasimov doctrine was incorrect, it proved politically helpful after the exhausting wars waged in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Russian aggression against Georgia and Ukraine and more limited operations elsewhere have contributed to the belief that Russia poses the greatest and most immediate security threat for the Western countries. The Russian threat was familiar to many politicians and armed forces. This threat was also politically convenient since it allowed the focus to shift from a costly and uncomfortable war on terror to what some observers immediately understood as a renewed Cold War.

9. Robert G. Walker, *Spec Fi: The United States Marine Corps and Special Operations* (thesis, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 1998), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA359694.pdf>.

10. Originally published in *Voenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, February 27, 2013.

11. Mark Galeotti, "The Mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the Language of Threat," *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no. 2 (2019): 157–61.

12. Gerasimov, "Value of Science," 24, 27.

Politics aside, there are two reasons why equating hybrid war with Russian foreign policy is unfortunate. First, this equation lacks conceptual clarity and skews the understanding of reality by connecting dots in what may be unwarranted places. If only Russia wages hybrid war, it logically follows that hybrid war can be studied through Russian actions. From this perspective, every action Russia undertakes can constitute warfare.¹³ This reasoning helps little in understanding a more general category of war applicable even to other actors. Empirically, it is uncertain whether Russia achieved its goals on Crimea, where unique circumstances allowed limited use of force.¹⁴ Understanding all Russian actions as a part of a coordinated strategy will undoubtedly lead to hawkish overestimations of the Russian threat and risk the development of poor strategy for countering real dangers, including unnecessary escalation.¹⁵

The second issue with equating hybrid war with Russia is the assumption hybrid war will always be initiated by an aggressive opponent, leaving everyone else on the receiving end. This difference between the perceived need to become better at strategy while reactively shielding ourselves from outside interference is a crucial one; status quo actors seek to protect and maintain what they have, whereas revisionist actors like Russia actively seek to attain change. The assumption that only our adversaries possess active strategies betrays a limited understanding and practice of strategy and a lack of urgency to master hybrid war.

Limitations in regard to strategy are perhaps best evident in the Afghanistan War, which demonstrates how strategies narrowly focused on deployment of force are bound to face difficulties. With national defense establishments focusing on deterrence and maintenance of the status quo during the relatively stable years of the Cold War, most countries lacked experience on how to change it through warfare. The Russian occupation of Crimea came at the precise moment when the withdrawal of most Western forces from Afghanistan confirmed the counterinsurgency strategy had failed. Paradoxically, the concept of hybrid war, which emphasizes combining different ways and means, allowed shifting attention from the failure to do so in Afghanistan. In this way, the timing of the Russian occupation of Crimea was opportune for Western militaries, which never had to admit defeat against the Taliban. With an urgent new threat, there was little pressure to draw lessons from the long war.

Gerasimov's presentation can be understood to advocate the opposite course of action and to take stock of past experiences. The cumbersome full title of the presentation was "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges

13. Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*.

14. Michael Kofman, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts," War on the Rocks, March 11, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>; and Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*.

15. Freedman, *Future of War*; and Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*.

Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations.”¹⁶ As can be expected, the core issue was emphasizing the crucial role played by military science in understanding contemporary realities. Much of the presentation focused on key lessons of several recent wars fought by Russia and the United States. One lesson was that “the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”¹⁷ A figure attached to the presentation illustrated this new reality by proclaiming a current “correlation of nonmilitary and military measures” at a “4:1” ratio.¹⁸

The efforts in Afghanistan, descriptions of hybrid war, and Gerasimov’s portrayal of contemporary war bear more than cursory resemblance. Counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan too sought to combine different military and nonmilitary means and ways to achieve positive synergy. In fact, Gerasimov essentially repeated the classic counterinsurgency ratio of military to nonmilitary means in a more general context that war consists of four-fifths political action and one-fifth military action.¹⁹ Perhaps then, the main difference between counterinsurgency and hybrid war is that we waged the former there, while the latter targets us here? Is it possible that we are observing the same kind of war, but that we are as unaccustomed to wage it as we are to experience it waged against ourselves?

While it has since been emphasized that Gerasimov merely provided his interpretation of the way Western countries wage war, the discrepancy between our failures and perceived Russian successes in combining military with nonmilitary means has been explained not only by skillful new strategy but also by a superior Russian command and control system.²⁰ Both explanations have been criticized as “simply unrealistic.”²¹

To summarize, hybrid war and gray zone conflict suggest that success in contemporary war depends on coordination and combination of military and nonmilitary means. This is not a new argument and has been discussed at least since the so-called Three Block War of the late 1990s.²² Neglecting to analyze

16. Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations,” *Military Review* (January–February 2016): 24.

17. Gerasimov, “Value of Science,” 24.

18. Gerasimov, “Value of Science,” 28.

19. For counterinsurgency, see David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 63.

20. Charles Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review* (January–February 2016): 36; Roger N. McDermott, “Does Russia Have a Gerasimov Doctrine?,” *Parameters* 46, no. 1 (2016): 97–105; and Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely, “Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal after Ukraine,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 1 (2015): 21.

21. Bettina Renz, “Russia and ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 297.

22. For instance, see Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA399413.pdf>; and Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

our own experiences in places like Afghanistan and equating Russian action and hybrid war have contributed to a poor understanding of Russia and how we can combine various means and ways to achieve our desired political ends.

Associating hybrid war with Russia alone also reflects the absence of a major rethinking of war and warfare in general even though the Afghanistan War alone illustrates how we struggle to wage this kind of war ourselves. It is equally difficult to see any major organizational reforms these new insights have heralded, for instance the need to coordinate and combine military and nonmilitary means. Considering that armed forces do not possess most of the nonmilitary means emphasized by notions of hybrid warfare, it is unsurprising that use of force and military technology have remained top priorities even in Russia.²³

As its title suggested, even Gerasimov's speech focused on carrying out combat operations and soon turned to high-tech capabilities, including artificial intelligence and robots. Military professionals around the world still assume the centrality of traditional military operations and above all the use of violence in war. This kind of narrow military strategy does not correspond with the emphasis in contemporary conflicts that has shifted from use of force in war to use of nonviolent means below the threshold of war. The evolution of hybrid war indicates that the current emphasis lies in a grand strategy that applies all available means an actor possesses, not in narrow military strategy that focuses on mere violence.

Political Warfare and Strategy

Strategy lies at the core of the military profession because it bridges war and politics. Without this connection, war would be mere violence, and those who wage war little more than murderers. From the strategy perspective, the use of what has been called the "full spectrum," that includes even nonviolent means, should only be surprising if one perceives strategy and warfare narrowly as predominantly belonging to a military domain.²⁴

Continuing a long emphasis of combining various military and nonmilitary means in Russian strategic thinking, Gerasimov explicitly avoided this pitfall by noting that "the focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population."²⁵ As hybrid war evolved to overlap gray zone conflict, it

23. Renz, "Russia and 'Hybrid Warfare,'" 291.

24. Hoffman, *Conflict 21st Century*, 5, 56.

25. Gerasimov, "Value of Science," 24.

simultaneously expanded from narrow military strategy to subsume broader grand strategy in a manner reminiscent of political warfare waged during the Cold War. This evolution indicates devaluation of the perceived utility of violence in contemporary war and comes with immediate implications for strategy.

The centrality given to violence in Western military theory can be traced to Clausewitz's early-nineteenth-century writings. Despairing over his contemporaries' relative lack of interest about fighting, Clausewitz emphasized violence in war to the point of elevating violence as the constant nature of war, and he defined war as the use of force to make the enemy submit to our (political) will.²⁶ His definition of war paved the way for a military profession focused on a single activity—applying violence to make the enemy defenseless.

This focus has endured, as illustrated by Harold Lasswell's definition of soldiers as "specialists on violence."²⁷ Samuel Huntington famously built on the definition when he dubbed officers "managers of violence," claimed that "the function of a military force is successful armed combat," and argued that the military constitutes a profession.²⁸ Huntington saw that effectiveness dictated leaving military matters to professionals, who acted under "objective civilian control."²⁹ The domain of the military profession thus constituted war and warfare or use of violence in war.

This division is evident even in strategic theory. While the prefix military to strategy explicitly refers to violence, most writings on strategy still depart from Clausewitz's writings. For Clausewitz, strategy was "the theory of the use of combats for the object of the War," and tactics "the theory of the use of military forces in combat."³⁰ While grand strategy encompasses all means actors may employ to achieve desired political ends, military strategy focuses more narrowly on a subordinate level where military means and actors prevail.³¹ Military strategy, therefore, involves the use of force, which in turn forms one of the means available for broader grand strategy.

Clausewitz's influence is discernible even in attempts to make sense of hostile activities in the gray zone below the threshold of war. This is the starting

26. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 1.

27. Harold D. Lasswell, "The Garrison State," *American Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 4 (1941): 455–68.

28. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981), 11.

29. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*. For critical views, see Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, reprint (New York: Anchor Books, 2003); Suzanne C. Nielsen, "American Civil-Military Relations Today: The Continuing Relevance of Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*," *International Affairs* 88, no. 2 (2012): 369–76; and Risa Brooks, "Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States," *International Security* 44, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 7–44.

30. Clausewitz, *On War*, 66. Emphasis removed.

31. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Military Strategy: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

point of George F. Kennan, the American diplomat best known for writing the “long telegram” analysis of the Soviet political system. He defined political warfare as “the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.”³² With his definition and despite its age, Kennan succeeds in capturing gray zone conflict better than many who write about the phenomenon today. Nevertheless, the definition builds on potentially unstable conceptual foundations.

From the perspective of Clausewitz’s theory of war, political warfare is an oxymoron.³³ There are two reasons for this. First, considering Clausewitz’s view of war as a continuation of politics by other means, the political prefix makes little sense to warfare. For Clausewitz, all war and hence warfare is inherently political. Considering the way Kennan believed “the realities of international relations” to consist of “the perpetual rhythm of struggle, in and out of war,” the prefix political was likely chosen by Kennan to de-emphasize violence and to move narrow military strategy toward broader grand strategy. Political warfare in any case soon became a way to wage the Cold War in a manner less likely to escalate to a nuclear exchange.

Second, if indeed all war is violent in the manner Clausewitz believed, it is unlikely that he would have recognized activities that lack violence as constituting war or warfare.³⁴ While the evolution of hybrid war stemmed from the emphasis given to nonviolent means, the gray zone furthermore suggests these means are not employed during war or the traditional military domain. Kennan’s political warfare departed from similar premises.

Appraisals of contemporary conflict which devalue violence have immediate bearing for strategy: highlighting nonviolent means elevates broader grand strategy at the cost of narrow military strategy. While it is first and foremost Russian action that has fed into these theories, even other past conflicts—including our own engagement in Afghanistan—illustrate how military strategy and violence alone are unlikely to deliver wide-ranging political goals.³⁵ In this regard, it is important to note that Clausewitz’s

32. George F. Kennan, “Long Telegram,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, February 22, 1946, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178.pdf>; and Office of the Historian, “269. Policy Planning Staff Memorandum,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1945–1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment*, ed. Glenn W. LaFantasie, C. Thomas Thorne, Jr., and David S. Patterson (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d269>.

33. Frank Hoffman, “On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs Hybrid Threats,” *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.

34. See Thomas Rid, “Cyber War Will Not Take Place,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012): 5–32.

35. Smith, *Utility of Force*.

understanding of strategy has been criticized as focusing too much on what is understood today as the operational level of war.³⁶

Another criticism comes from the admission that the threat posed by actors like Russia requires a more total defense than what armed forces alone can provide. While total defense—the use of all available means in the defense of a country and its interests—links back to grand strategy, this thinking betrays the passive status quo assumption that it is others who engage in what could be understood as a full-spectrum offensive.

The broadening of strategy to encompass nonmilitary means in ways that potentially put them ahead of military means raises a troubling question for military professionals. Regardless of the label used, many of the activities ascribed to gray zone, hybrid war, and political warfare lie outside the traditional military domain, or use of violence in war. How does the devaluation of conventional warfare influence the military profession? In other words, how will a profession that has so far focused narrowly on managing death and destruction meet the new opportunities and threats?

Politics and the Military Profession

The Western military profession is founded on the ideal of its apolitical nature. This emphasis is justified by the special remit of the profession—use of violence. While necessary for protecting polities, militaries' capacity for violence raises the threat of militarism that endangers democracy. Violent capacity allows not only maintaining political order, but also undemocratic seizure of power. This type of loss of democratic political control was also what Lasswell feared during World War II when he described "garrison states" dominated by the military.³⁷ As a result, militaries have been subjected to tight political control and separated from and subordinated to democratic politics when possible.³⁸ This was Huntington's solution, which envisaged a narrow military domain that focuses on use of force and keeping the military separate from politics.³⁹

Huntington has since been accused of misunderstanding Clausewitz, who according to a different reading rejected a politically neutral military that

36. Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2–4; and Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd rev. and expanded ed. (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 26.

37. Lasswell, "The Garrison State."

38. Jan Willem Honig, "Military, War, and Politics," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., ed. James Wright (Oxford, UK: Elsevier, 2015), 518–23.

39. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*.

waged compartmentalized war in isolation from the surrounding society.⁴⁰ The question of whether warfare can be thus compartmentalized highlights the two understandings of strategy—broad grand strategy and narrow military strategy—and ultimately begs the question of who owns war. This question of ownership is entrenched in bureaucratic, normative, and legal frameworks. Ownership comes with crucial ramifications, not least political ones. If war is mainly understood to concern use of force, it belongs to the remit of the military profession which, like all professions, seeks autonomy within its professional domain. Here it is important to emphasize that one key reason why the concept of grand strategy was invented was to assert that the political control of war remains in civilian, not military, hands.⁴¹

If one believes the adherents of hybrid war and similar concepts, much of contemporary conflict lies outside this traditional military domain, raising fundamental questions for the military profession. If violence is devalued in contemporary conflict, then what remains of the special remit of the military profession? Must the profession reinvent itself by expanding its traditionally narrow professional domain? Would interfering with existing boundaries lead to conflict and clash with democratic civil-military relations as militaries inevitably become involved in what must be considered political activities?

These questions are uncomfortable, yet necessary. It is not difficult to imagine why they have often been avoided. Beginning with Clausewitz, his focus on violence largely allowed him to prescribe the core activity of the emerging military profession in a rather technical way that offered the promise of bypassing politics. Clausewitz elevated violence to the guiding principle of war and saw that wars are decided through violence; political goals in war were best achieved by forcing enemies to their knees. This belief required destroying enough of an enemy's armed forces to make them unable to defend themselves. After this, an opponent's country had to be conquered to prevent its citizens from raising new forces and offering renewed resistance.⁴² As Jan Willem Honig puts it, "such a definition of the strategic object . . . possessed the great advantage of providing a seemingly clear-cut professional remit for the military. Destroying the enemy's armed forces was a job they could do independently, without requiring constant political oversight and inviting potential meddling."⁴³ Judging from recent experiences and scholarship alike, the applicability of this prescription in the contemporary era appears questionable.

40. John Binkley, "Clausewitz and Subjective Civilian Control: An Analysis of Clausewitz's Views on the Role of the Military Advisor in the Development of National Policy," *Armed Forces & Society* 42, no. 2 (2016): 259.

41. Jan Willem Honig, "The Future of Military Strategy at Försvarshögskolan: An Attempt to Identify Some Useful Fundamentals," *Kungl Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar Och Tidskrift* 1 (2011): 151.

42. Clausewitz, *On War*, 20–21.

43. Honig, "Future of Military Strategy," 150.

Kennan fared little better in addressing the consequences broader strategy causes to the military profession. While he envisaged political warfare had a military component, he dodged addressing the role of the military in political warfare by handing the responsibility over to the Department of State instead of the Department of Defense.⁴⁴ This choice made sense because political warfare too is waged in the gray zone between war and peace. Ultimately, and against Kennan's wishes, the Central Intelligence Agency came to answer for covert operations.⁴⁵ While the supreme authority of the military continued in theatres of war, the exact role the military was to play in political warfare elsewhere was left undefined.

In this sense, Hoffman perhaps comes closest to the mark. Recognizing the contradiction between Kennan's and Clausewitz's understandings of war, Hoffman saw the main problem with the definition of political warfare was not only that it employed nonmilitary means, but that they were employed "short of war": "if it [is] short of war, then it's not warfare."⁴⁶ Like political warfare in theatres of war, hybrid war was still war in a way that allowed the military profession to remain in its traditionally narrow domain.

The problem with Hoffman's argument is that the concept of hybrid war has evolved from its original conceptualization. Whereas Hoffman's concept focused on combining regular and irregular means and ways predominantly on the operational level and during times of war, the concept has moved toward Gerasimov's and Kennan's strategic-level emphasis of nonmilitary means in the gray zone. The shift to the gray zone terminology contains the core of the issue at stake.

With its main activities lacking violence and taking place outside war, what role should the military play in such conflict? In other words, the more contemporary understanding of hybrid war conflates it with gray zone conflict and makes it impossible to avoid the implications to the military profession. To offer only one concrete example, the blurred line between war and peace questions established norms of civil-military relations and the boundaries of acceptable military action. Even policymakers should be cautious. Equaling political competition with war risks expanding the military sphere and militarizing not only foreign policy, but potentially whole societies.

44. Kennan, "Organized Political Warfare," 2, 6.

45. Office of the Historian, "292. National Security Council Directive on Office of Special Projects," in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1945–1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment*, ed. Glenn W. LaFantasie, C. Thomas Thorne Jr., and David S. Patterson (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1996), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d292>; and John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 316–19.

46. Hoffman, "On Not-So-New Warfare."

Conclusion

The purpose of Gerasimov's well-known 2013 presentation was to prod Russian military experts to think harder. Early on, Gerasimov reasoned the new context where war is waged leads to logical questions: "What is modern war? What should the army be prepared for? How should it be armed? Answering these questions will determine the construction and development of the armed forces over the long term. To do this, it is essential for military planners to have a clear understanding of the forms and methods of the application of force."⁴⁷

It is uncertain whether Gerasimov's plea led to substantial action among Russian scientists or military professionals. One wonders whether we too need a Gerasimov, someone who recognizes that war and warfare have changed and who is capable of instigating research about these and related questions. This article's conclusions, which deserve to be addressed in future debates, can be summarized as five points: poor definition of concepts, fixation on Russia, evolved concepts of hybrid war toward gray zone conflict and political warfare, insufficiency of narrow military strategy in this kind of war, and the question of how the military profession can best contribute to waging it.

While hybrid war has entered academic, policy, and public debates, it still frequently does so in the guise of a poorly defined neologism. In its evolved form, hybrid war is a buzzword that can mean almost anything. The situation is only slightly better with gray zone conflict. Like political warfare, both these concepts are equal to grand strategy in their breadth. While this kind of conceptual vagueness can explain in part the popularity of these concepts in policy circles, ambiguity hinders a better understanding of contemporary war and warfare, and ultimately a better policy. This ambiguity appears unfortunate and above all unnecessary.

Most discussions of hybrid war continue to revolve around Russia, equating the concept with its actions and saying little about the world at large. If hybrid war is something only waged by Russia, then it logically does not describe a more general type of war. This equation of hybrid war with Russia has also contributed to a lack of urgency regarding learning to wage this kind of war; if only Russia wages hybrid war, then we only need to defend ourselves. Our limited success in combining means of different kinds raises two questions. First, how has Russia succeeded in mastering this kind of war? Second, do our previous failures not suggest there is still much to learn? In any case, forfeiting active strategy risks leaving us as passive defenders of the status quo, not creators of a new

47. Gerasimov, "Value of Science," 24.

one. To make matters worse, it is far from certain whether passive strategy can safeguard our interests.

The hybrid war concept evolved after Hoffman presented it in 2007. As his later comments demonstrate, his concept focused on the operational level and gave primacy to military means—use of force—in a context that was clearly a war. The means are less obvious with the evolved concept that comes closer to Gerasimov's notion of a gray zone conflict where nonmilitary means dominate below the threshold of war. Ultimately, one wonders whether this conceptual evolution is just rechristened political warfare, a term coined by Kennan immediately after World War II. Much content in the hybrid war discussions that concern Russia resembles Cold War debates, and hence risk reinventing the wheel.⁴⁸

Regardless of what one calls this kind of war, hybrid war envisages that military means have lost their primacy in producing political ends. On one hand, relying on force has become more expensive and hence difficult. On the other hand, the aims sought in war may not be best delivered through death and destruction or the threat of it.⁴⁹ From the strategic theory perspective, this development must be understood to emphasize grand strategy that applies all available means at the cost of narrow military strategy that focuses on mere violence. The use of similar kinds of strategy that sought to tie together various military and nonmilitary means in Afghanistan suggests inherent challenges. What most practitioners can agree on, however, is that military means alone will not suffice when faced with fundamentally political problems.

This discussion suggests it is necessary to go further than Gerasimov and the Russian military, which appears to have shifted little from its core focus on conventional warfighting.⁵⁰ If one accepts the premise that contemporary conflicts witness a disproportionate use of nonmilitary means against traditional military ones, does it not logically follow that policymakers and military professionals must address this development?

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48. For example, see Gregory F. Treverton, *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

49. Smith, *Utility of Force*.

50. Bettina Renz, "Russian Responses to the Changing Character of War," *International Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2019): 817–34.

