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Russia's Concept of Hybrid Wars: Implications for Small States

By Michael Raska and Richard A. Bitzinger

Synopsis

A strategic concept of "hybrid wars" or "non-linear wars" has reshaped the new doctrine of the Russian Armed Forces. While its underlying principles are still imprecise small states should study such ideas with an eye to how it might impact their national defence in the future.

Commentary

IN FEBRUARY 2013, the current Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, and first Deputy Defence Minister, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, published an article in the Russian newspaper *Military-Industrial Courier* projecting the conceptual contours of future conflicts: the so-called "hybrid wars" or "non-linear wars."

Underscoring Gerasimov's concepts of "hybrid wars" are three mutually-reinforcing principles. First and foremost, it is the idea of the "permanency of conflict," which blurs the boundaries between wartime and peacetime, space and time, as well as actors involved. In essence, ascertaining whether a state of war exists becomes increasingly difficult, particularly for the one under an attack. According to Gerasimov, 21st century conflicts in Africa and the Middle East show that prosperous and stable regimes can, within a short period of time – perhaps even in the space of a few days – transform into arenas of intense conflicts. These events may not reflect an official state of war, but their social, economic, and political implications for individual countries and their societies are comparable with the consequences of real wars.

Multidimensional, unified conflict

The second characteristic of emerging hybrid conflicts is "multidimensionality." Specifically, achieving political and strategic objectives are no longer bound solely to traditional conventional military means; what is more important is the confluence of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military means that, in turn, achieve the desired strategic effects, while also reducing the necessity for deploying hard military power to the bare minimum. Hybrid warfare, therefore, compels the opponent's military and civil population to support the attacker, to the detriment of their own government and country.

The third defining principle is “unified effort” – simultaneous application of “mixed tactics” conducted across the enemy’s entire territory, and more importantly, within its “spheres of influence.” In Russian strategic thought, the main battlespace is inside the mind of the enemy. Therefore, hybrid warfare is as much about the primacy of “influence operations,” including elaborate internal communications, deception operations, psychological operations and well-defined external strategic communications in the cyber domain. These “invisible operations” subsequently pave the way for military victory on the battlefield.

Operational conduct

Assessing the operational conduct by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine shows at least eight distinct phases of hybrid conflict. According to writings by Tchekinov & Bogdanov, the first phase is a non-military asymmetric warfare encompassing information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic, and economic measures as part of a plan to establish favourable political, economic, and military conditions.

This is followed by special information operations to mislead political and military leadership carried out by diplomatic channels, media, and top government and military agencies by leaking false data, orders, directives, and instructions. The resulting destabilising propaganda aims at increasing discontent among the population, creating conditions for the arrival of paramilitary forces which could further escalate subversion.

In the overt phases or “commencement of military action,” no-fly zones are established over the country to be attacked, followed by large-scale reconnaissance and subversive missions. These are characterised by a combination of targeted information, electronic warfare, and aerospace operations, and continuous air force harassment, combined with the use of high-precision weapons launched from various platforms. In the final phase, special forces, reconnaissance units, and ground troops conduct roll-over operations of the remaining points of resistance in order to destroy any surviving enemy units.

Implications for small states

Emerging concepts of hybrid warfare, particularly its diffusion and adaptation in East Asia’s strategic context, have potentially grave implications for small states like Singapore. In the first place, such states may not be adequately prepared to deal with hybrid or nonlinear operations arrayed against them. The “permanency of conflict” is a difficult environment in which to operate on a daily basis; individuals and most nations (Israel may be the exception) are not normally accustomed to operating in such a milieu, psychologically, politically, economically, or militarily.

Singapore’s abiding sense of vulnerability, due to its small size and lack of strategic space, can help contribute significantly to a function of watchfulness, but it might not be enough. It is difficult for a country like Singapore, in which day-to-day normalcy is the goal, to remain constantly “on guard”.

More importantly, hybrid warfare is generally about situations where conflict may be ambiguous – such as in the context of territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. Armed fighting may not yet have occurred, but the war is already raging psychologically, politically, and economically. The battle may be so subtle and incremental, and the propaganda war so abstruse, that a state may not know it is even challenged.

On the other hand, Singapore has many strengths to help it combat hybrid warfare: a highly capable intelligence apparatus, which can detect and counter influence operations; a strong sense of patriotism and “total defence” education, which reinforces national resiliency and can help citizens resist foreign propaganda and other types of compulsion and a professional air and naval force, which can function as a screening force to give the army time to mobilise an adequate homeland defence.

Hybrid warfare offers challenges to the future of Singapore’s national defence; at the same time, Singapore may find ways to use hybrid warfare to its own advantage. Obviously, further study is warranted as to how hybrid warfare might specifically impact Singaporean defence, from where it might emanate, and how it might manifest itself.

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