The New NATO: Prepared for Russian Hybrid Warfare?

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ABSTRACT *The Ukrainian crisis altered the security paradigm in Europe by forcing NATO to revise its stance towards Russia, as it employed a wide array of military and non-military tools and tactics called "hybrid warfare." To counter Russian hybrid warfare in future, the NATO Alliance implemented functional and structural changes known the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) and endorsed the New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare. This paper will study Russian hybrid warfare activities and the preparedness of an Alliance shaped by the RAP and the New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare. It discusses whether this new NATO will be able to deter Russia from resorting to hybrid warfare against a NATO ally. While the Alliance has enhanced its military capabilities to a great extent, the Allies' ability to achieve consensus on a response is the factor most likely to deter and dissuade Russia from engaging in hybrid warfare.*

Introduction

The Russian military activities that resulted in the illegal annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine have been defined as "hybrid warfare" by Western countries and declared one of the greatest security threats facing Europe and NATO. There is consensus among most observers, including NATO officials, that the Alliance was caught by surprise, failing to deter Russian activities and prevent the annexation of Crimea. In the face of reluctance amongst member countries to invest funds and attention, the Ukrainian crisis served as a warning on the new security risks facing the Alliance.

Under pressure from Eastern European members who felt under imminent Russian threat, the Allies opted for structural and functional improvements to NATO's military systems. Convened in the midst of the crisis, the Wales Summit played an important role in framing the new NATO. Today the Alliance is expected to provide military capabilities to counter Russian hybrid warfare activities that threaten European security in addition to emerging threats from

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Northern Africa to the Middle East. Allied leaders accepted the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), which consists of assurance measures (including continuous air, land, and maritime presence and meaningful military activities in Eastern European countries), as well as adaptation measures, ensuring the Alliance can respond swiftly, firmly and fully to security challenges.

Given its success in the Ukrainian crisis, Russia is expected to continue covert military activities on the NATO border in pursuit of two goals: its political ambitions in the region and its effort to dissuade the Alliance from continuing the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) System. The latter constitutes one of the most serious potential crisis points, alongside the possibility of Ukraine or Georgia joining the Alliance. Given Russia's agenda, the next challenge for NATO may well be hybrid warfare in a member country. Those particularly susceptible or vulnerable to Russian hybrid activities may include the Baltic countries or Poland.

In such a scenario, the main question will be whether the "New NATO," whose military capabilities have been enhanced through the RAP and the New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare, will possess the political will to deter and counter this threat. Consensus on invoking Article 5 for the sake of Vilnius or Warsaw, in the face of "undeclared and unattributed warfare" by Russia, will constitute one of the most difficult decisions the Alliance may be called upon to make.

Hybrid Warfare Theory

Although the Ukrainian crisis has sparked debate on hybrid warfare, no comprehensive definition or consensus on its characteristics has emerged. Some analysts argue these strategies have been employed since ancient times: Peter R. Mansoor places the historical pedigree of hybrid warfare at least as far back as the Peloponnesian War of the fifth century B.C.,[1] while Timothy McCulloh dates it to 66 A.D., arguing that during the Jewish rebellion a hybrid force of criminal bandits, regular soldiers, and unregulated fighters applied such tactics against Vespasian's Roman Legions.[2] Both argue that most wars since then have included a hybrid warfare component.

Hybrid warfare theories became an intense area of study after the Cold War. The term "hybrid warfare" is attributed to Robert G. Walker, who in 1998 defined it as "lying in the interstices between special and conventional warfare."[3] Retired United States Marine Corps Officer Frank G. Hoffman contributed one of the most widely referenced definitions with "the blend of the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare." Hoffman further argued that "hybrid warfare incorporates a full range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics

and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."[4]

The 2006 second Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah also played an important role in the evolution of hybrid warfare studies, as Hezbollah's irregular tactics had success against the conventionally superior Israeli Defense Forces. As Copeland pointed out, "the very origin of the term hybrid warfare appears in an implied way to come from the leader of Hezbollah, Hasan Nasrallah, who stated in an interview that his new model army was not a regular army but not a guerilla in the traditional sense either but it was something in between."[5] Hoffman described the Lebanon war as "the clearest example of a modern hybrid challenger."[6]

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Even before the crisis in Ukraine, NATO identified hybrid threats as significant challenges to the security of the Alliance. The working study group organized by Allied Command Transformation in 2011, one of two Strategic Commands of NATO, defined hybrid threats as "threats posed by adversaries, with the ability to simultaneously employ conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives."[7] However, NATO tended to neglect studies designed to counter hybrid warfare despite Russian regular and irregular military activities during the Georgian war, instead focusing on crisis management and partnership.

In the U.S., there was intense study of hybrid warfare, although official documents did not employ the term "hybrid warfare." It is worth noting that the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2010 that the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) had not officially defined "hybrid warfare" and has no plans to do so because DOD does not consider it a new form of warfare.[8]

Russian Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine

The removal of Ukraine's pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovich through street protests resulted in mass demonstrations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, supported overtly and covertly by Russia. To keep Ukraine out of the NATO and European Union orbits, Russia resorted to strategies the Western countries termed "hybrid warfare," and succeeded in illegally annexing Crimea while creating what was first a prolonged, and then a frozen, conflict in eastern Ukraine. As a result of Russia's actions, hybrid warfare emerged as one of the most serious threats to European security and prompted a significant, if

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko after signing bilateral agreements in Kiev on September 22, 2015.

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non-military response from NATO. In the Wales Summit declaration, NATO leaders agreed Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenge the vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace.[9]

Russian military activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine have also been described as hybrid warfare by Western officials, scholars, and the media. *The Washington Post* described it as "a conflict waged by commandos without insignia, armored columns slipping across the international border at night, volleys of misleading propaganda, floods of disinformation and sneaky invasions like the one into Crimea."[10] The noted German magazine *Der Spiegel* called it "war without a formal declaration, rules, or borders; the belligerent is anonymous, does not identify itself and often operates invisibly; rather than weapons, fighting is done with words; the Internet is the most important battlefield."[11] Numerous other definitions describe Russian military activities as "hybrid warfare," but as McCulloh and Johnson point out, definitions of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare vary and contradict one other.[12]

Studies of Russian hybrid warfare began mainly in the wake of the Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in the early 2000s. The role of Western countries in the Color Revolutions and in the Arab Spring figured significantly in the evolution of Russian hybrid warfare studies, as Russian authorities have noted. In his opening address before the Moscow Conference on Inter-

national Security in 2014, Russian President Putin made the case that "Color Revolutions" now constitute the main threat to peace,[13] while Valeriy Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, argued that "Arab Springs are precisely typical of warfare in the 21st century."[14]

Gerasimov further argues that "in the 21st century there has been a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace, and wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template." He summarized the Russian understanding of modern warfare as follows:

> The role of non-military 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. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.[15]

Based on experiences of the Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring, and encouraged by its success in the 2008 Georgian crisis, Russia introduced unusual military strategies in Ukraine dubbed "hybrid warfare" in the West. Russian hybrid warfare strategies consist of both traditional and irregular warfare strategies (primarily the latter) along with the intense use of modern technologies, such as social and conventional media.

To date, Russian hybrid warfare has relied on irregular warfare strategies with heavy use of irregular forces, especially in Crimea. Armed men in military uniform without marks of identification, famously called "little green men" by former Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Philip M. Breedlove, played the decisive role in the seizure, control, and annexation of Crimea. Operations by irregular forces, termed "self-defense forces" by Vladimir Putin in the early stage,[16] provided deniability and zero political responsibility for Russia. Local and criminal groups, in particular those under the leadership of former illegal arms dealer Sergey Aksenov, who became Prime

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Minister of Crimea after the 2015 referendum, played an instrumental role in helping Russian irregular forces seize control.

Russian irregular forces also played a crucial role in the mass mobilization of the local population in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, thereby destabilizing the country and undermining the legitimacy of the legal government. By exploiting its influence in Eastern Ukraine, Russia leveraged local populations and promoted division within these regions, especially in Crimea, thus discouraging any local reaction against Russia. The Russians fed dissatisfaction with local political leadership by teaming up with and supporting local Russian minorities, before moving on to covert militarization of these same movements. For propaganda purposes and to deflect attention from the outside world, Russia labels this "protecting Russians abroad."[17]

Russia has also deployed conventional forces on the Ukrainian border, along with snap exercises that offer plausible deniability about their main purpose. Effective tools of intimidation and threat within Ukraine, they also offer a strong deterrent to third parties, especially NATO and the United States. Since the 2008 Russia – Georgia War, military reforms have increased Russian ability to deploy its modernized forces in neighboring countries at short notice, and events in Crimea have shown their effectiveness.[18] Russia's began exercises just one day before soldiers without insignia appeared in Crimea, helping to distract Western attention. In addition, Russia conducted several hundred snap exercises during the crisis – mostly close to the Ukrainian border.

Former SACEUR Breedlove described Russia's information warfare campaign as "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare."[19] Russia controlled the narrative in eastern Ukraine and Crimea by using all available means in the information environment, in the Russian language. The information warfare mainly targeted Ukrainians, Russians inside Russia and abroad, and third party countries, with Russian legal claims constructed to mobilize and consolidate Russian domestic opinion around Putin's leadership. These included justification for the Russian use of force and the annexation of Crimea, blanketed in partial truth and disinformation, and cast in terms that appeal to deeper sentiments and grievances in Russian society and among Russian elites.[20] To highlight

Russia's decisiveness, Putin claimed that he also weighed putting Russia's nuclear arsenal on alert because of his concerns about anarchy and Western intervention.[21]

According to the NATO officials, cyber warfare has become one of the most important characteristics of Russian hybrid tactics. NATO's Secretary General Stoltenberg stated that hybrid warfare combines different types of threats, including conventional, subversion, and cyber,[22] stressing in particular its cyber dimension. Russian cyber capabilities, used successfully against Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008, have not changed the course of the war in Ukraine but, nevertheless, constitute an important and imminent threat against the Alliance.

Moscow also proved remarkably effective in the use of non-military instruments of influence and diplomacy, which emphasized plausible deniability in an effort to disable international responses and bolster domestic Russian support.[23] Non-military instruments included issuing Russian passports to Crimean to justify the protection of 'its citizens' (also used in Georgia in 2008), exploiting Ukrainian dependence on Russian energy imports – impacting Crimea[24] as well and orchestrating a referendum within Crimea designed to legitimize the annexation internationally.

Russia's warfare methodology of denial, deception, and ambiguity caught not only Ukraine unprepared, but also the whole of Europe and NATO. The resulting hesitation of Western countries because of the surprise effect of Russian hybrid warfare facilitated the achievement of Russian goals. Despite strong pressure by the Western powers, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and triggered a prolonged conflict in eastern Ukraine, likely to which most probably will become a frozen conflict in the long term. In Ukraine's case, NATO's deterrence strategies did not work for the security of this non-NATO state whose affairs are closely related to the security of Europe and the Alliance.

NATO's Reaction

Russian hybrid warfare activities in Crimea and then in eastern Ukraine have been described as one of the main threats to the security of Europe as well as NATO since the end of the Cold War. Thus Russian hybrid warfare has changed the security paradigm in Europe, which had enjoyed a relatively long peaceful period. The Wales Summit Declaration described hybrid warfare as "a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures … employed in a highly integrated design," while former Secretary General Anders F. Rasmussen defined it as the "combination of covert military operations combined with sophisticated information and disinformation operations."[25]

His successor, Stoltenberg, described it as warfare that combines the power of unconventional means such as cyber and information operations, and disguised military operations.[26]

NATO was caught off guard when the crisis started in Ukraine. At the beginning, Russia's hybrid warfare strategy of deception, ambiguity, and denial complicated attribution and response, and rendered the decision-making process more difficult for NATO. The Alliance did not manage to assess the environment correctly.[27] As Major General Gordon Davis, the United States general in charge of operations and intelligence at NATO's military headquarters in Belgium during the Ukrainian crisis, admitted, it took some time for the Alliance to determine the "size and the scale" of the troop reinforcement, which was continuously denied by the Russians.[28]

Russian President Putin masterfully played off the regional divisions within NATO during his slow-rolling invasion of Eastern Ukraine.[29] The crisis shed some light on the fact that the sense of insecurity is not the same in all NATO countries. Despite significant pressure from the United States and NATO's worried Eastern European members, countries enjoying good relations with Russia, notably France, Germany and Italy, refrained from challenging Russia, and tried to mitigate the crisis via diplomacy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated she was "convinced that there is no military solution to this conflict, adding on the other hand that no one could be sure they would manage to achieve a truce through talks," such as those between Merkel, Hollande, and Putin.[30]

And so the Russian methodology outflanked NATO's reaction policies, with the Alliance and its 28 members remaining bystanders, though there was clear potential for the conflict to spread far beyond Ukraine. The course of the conflict also proved paradoxical: Germany, for instance, delivered military equipment to the Iraqi Kurds in the Middle East but not to desperate Ukraine.[31] France's focus on operations in Mali and the Central African Republic during the Ukrainian crisis also highlighted the superiority of national interests over the collective in the Alliance.

However, subsequent Russian activities bolstered solidarity among the Alliance and all members agreed upon political and military measures that broke the tangled relations between NATO and Russia. The Wales Summit became a cornerstone of solidarity and cohesion for the Alliance, as the allies agreed upon measures to counter the Russian threat. The RAP sought to ensure a rapid and firm response to new security challenges.

The RAP includes assurance measures, designed to reassure the Alliance's worried members (especially in Eastern Europe) of NATO's solidarity and com-

mitment against Russian aggression. These include continuous air, land, and maritime presence and activities in Eastern Europe, specifically in the Baltic countries and Poland, on a rotational basis. As a result, the Alliance increased its air-policing activities over the Baltic States, enhanced naval patrols in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean, commenced AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) surveillance flights over eastern Allies, deployed ground troops to the eastern members for training and exercises, and conducted three hundred NATO and national exercises in 2015 alone.

The framework of the New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare enhanced the Alliance's counter-hybrid-threat capabilities

The RAP also has adaptation measures that envisage major structural and functional changes in NATO's military system. Specifically expected to enhance the Alliance's capabilities is the reorganized NATO Response Force (NRF), set up after the Prague summit in 2002 and including the new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) of around 5,000 troops, some of are deployable within 48 hours. The size of the enhanced NRF has since tripled to around 30,000 troops, composed of land, air, naval and special operations forces. The RAP insists on responsiveness and, above all, on the mutation of the NRF into a new, revitalized model.[32]

Other measures to forge a stronger, more agile, and more capable NATO so as to deter and, if necessary, respond quickly include: establishing NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) in the Baltic members, Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania; pre-positioning military supplies on the territory of eastern Allies; setting up a new standing Joint Logistic Support Group Headquarters to support deployed forces; enhancing the capabilities of Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters in Poland; and establishing a new multinational headquarters in Romania.

During the Warsaw Summit in 2016, the Allies also decided to establish a forward presence of multinational troops in the eastern regions of the territory, in order to reassure worried member countries, just as during the Cold War the Alliance's strategy included demonstrating solidarity, cooperation, and cohesion. As the Warsaw Summit declaration has it, Alliance members "have decided to establish an enhanced forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to unambiguously demonstrate, as part of overall posture, the Allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression."[33]

In addition to RAP, the leaders also approved the New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare during the Foreign Ministers' Meeting in December 2015. NATO Sec-

Russian armored vehicles on the road between Simferopol and Sevastopol, in Crimea, on March 17, 2014.
AFP PHOTO / VIKTOR DRACHEV

retary General Stoltenberg described the new strategy: to prepare, to deter, and to defend. He stressed the Alliance requires many different kinds of capabilities in order to defend its population, since hybrid threats are themselves so diverse in nature, and he outlined the key elements: increased responsiveness and readiness of NATO forces, of intelligence, and of surveillance; improved situational awareness; the use of special operations and of cyber capabilities; and close cooperation with the European Union.[34]

The framework of the New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare enhanced the Alliance's counter-hybrid-threat capabilities. Improved situational awareness through enhanced intelligence and reconnaissance, and better information sharing between allies as well as other international organizations, constitutes one of the main developments. The Alliance aimed to quickly identify low-level attacks or indications of impending hybrid warfare, in order to reduce ambiguity and surprise, as well as to enable more precise, timely, and correct decision-making.

The Special Operations Forces are expected to provide strategic and operational support for the Alliance's efforts, most especially in effectively countering irregular warfare elements, as they are more effective in this realm than regular forces. For this reason, the integration of special forces into the NRF and VJTF constitute another key measure adopted in the New Strategy. The first demonstration of this integration took place during the Noble Jump exercise of June 2015, when NATO deployed VJTF based on scenario that Poland was under threat of irregular warfare. The deployment made clear in terms of potential

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aggression against Alliance members, Russian irregular warfare is seen as far more likely than conventional warfare.

Arguing that Russia resorted to massive and effective cyber assaults against both Ukraine and NATO countries, the Alliance enhanced its cyber warfare capabilities as well. A February 2016 technical agreement launched a joint program with the European Union, which initiated the exchange of information and incident data, in order to boost situational awareness of cyber threats.[35] The Alliance also began to study the legal background of the relation between cyber assault and common defense. The statement by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg that "a major cyber attack against the Alliance could trigger a collective response"[36] has made clear that cyberspace is likely to be an important operational domain in future.

Additionally, NATO opted to counter hybrid threats by pursuing a comprehensive approach across all military, diplomatic, economic, information, and social levers available to the international community. Cooperation and coordination with other partner countries and international organizations, especially with the European Union and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), is recognized as key to countering hybrid threats; in particular in this regard, the critical civilian assets and civil issue capabilities of the European Union.

Both during and after the Cold War, Russia enjoyed an advantage over NATO in speedy decision-making and deployment of forces, as well as in the use of special forces. Ever since the establishment of the NATO Alliance, authority to deploy troops, and the use of these troops, has constituted a critical issue between member nations and NATO officials. During the June Defense Ministerial meeting in 2015, leaders decided to grant authority to SACEUR to prepare troops immediately when the Allies deem it necessary, thereby accelerating the military reaction process. As a result, when SACEUR sees an unfolding crisis he is authorized to mobilize NATO's new VJTF and send troops to the nearest flight line, to await final orders for takeoff. Authority from the Alliance's highest decision-making body—the North Atlantic Council—must be

Now not only the United States, but some European countries might well be reluctant to risk their capital cities for the sake of repelling Russian incursion into Eastern European countries at a level below the threshold

granted before actually deploying the troops.[37] In this way, member countries retained final authority for use of the troops.

The new measures were adopted to deter, dissuade, and challenge Russian hybrid warfare in addition to a Russian conventional assault against the Alliance—the latter scenario described by Putin himself as only a madman's fantasy.[38] The Alliance is militarily stronger, swifter, and more capable of responding to any Russian hybrid threat, particularly against a member country. Nevertheless, political determination will remain a key factor in challenging Russia.

NATO challenge will remain how to generate consensus amongst members to agree on the nature of the threat posed by Russia to Europe's security, and to decide how to respond.[39] Building consensus on whether Russian actions are hybrid warfare against NATO or fall under Article 5 and the appropriate response constitute the most challenging parts of countering a hybrid threat. As General Petr Pavel, the head of NATO's military committee, pointed out, "the primary purpose of Russian hybrid warfare is to create an influence that is strong enough, but below the threshold of Article 5, so they achieve the goals without provoking the enemy or opponent to initiate a defense response."[40] Thus invoking Article 5 which is the primary trigger to a NATO response, would most probably create disagreement amongst the Allies.

NATO Officials have already articulated this probability. During the Defense Ministers Meeting in February 2015, Stoltenberg highlighted that NATO has improved its ability to identify, recognize, and attribute hybrid actions and to respond quickly, and took steps to increase the Allies' resilience in areas vital in any crisis. However he underlined that resilience is primarily a national responsibility.[41] Former SACEUR General Philip Breedlove also highlighted the issue stating, "This hybrid war, if it kicks off and it is unattributable, this is not a NATO issue. It is an internal-to-that-nation issue" and clarified that "there is no NATO policy on what to do in nations outside the Alliance and not in the Russian Federation."[42] Leaders also underlined during the Warsaw Summit that "the primary responsibility to respond to hybrid threats or attacks rests with the targeted nation."[43]

Both of these officials, who are amongst the most fervent supporters of a stronger NATO response to Russia, hinted the Alliance might not classify Russian hybrid warfare activities as sufficient to invoke the common defense frame-

work if these activities fall below the threshold. Statements by political and former military leaders have led observers to conclude that Russian hybrid activities in the future, based in denial and ambiguity, are unlikely to easily trigger common defense, even when they are carried out against a member country. Instead, if NATO again hesitates or fails to provide commitment, solidarity, and cooperation, it is highly likely that the result will be the same ineffective NATO response that failed to deter Russia in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Conclusion

Russia's military and non-military activities, culminating in the annexation of Crimea and the political and military crisis in Eastern Ukraine, proved its potent capabilities in hybrid warfare. Russia succeeded in accomplishing its goals despite NATO's presence, even though the latter has been described as the strongest military organization in history. The clandestine nature of many aspects of Russian hybrid warfare, combined with Russian denial, undermined cohesion within NATO at the beginning of the crisis. Caught unprepared, the Alliance could not exhibit solidarity at the beginning of the conflicts, but later reached consensus on RAP the New Strategy on Hybrid Warfare. Yet it is clear that Russia retains an advantage over the NATO Alliance, whose 29 members must reach consensus. In addition, although the newly adopted measures enhanced NATO's conventional and unconventional warfare capabilities, it remains highly unlikely that these measures could have deterred or dissuaded Russia from annexing Crimea or igniting the crisis in Ukraine.

There are two possible scenarios concerning future Russian hybrid warfare threats against Europe. The first scenario involves possible activities in a non-NATO member state in which Russia seeks to increase its influence. If NATO or the European Union were to try to improve relations with a non-NATO member and former Soviet Union country such as Belarus or Moldova, Russia might well engage such tactics to halt or to reverse the process, as happened in Georgia and Ukraine. Moldova is at particular risk due to a high level of dissatisfaction with the central government, low military capability, poor economy, strong degree of Russian language and media influence, and cultural and religious links with Russia. As the Alliance does not have any binding commitment to non-members, and faced with European countries likely to use economic or diplomatic options – rather than military ones, NATO's impact might well be limited.

As for the second, the main function of the new NATO will be to deter and, if necessary, mitigate the effects of Russian hybrid warfare against a member country, which is likely to remain below the threshold of common defense.

That would be far different from Russian military activities in Ukraine, and Russia would resort to military methods that will make attribution very difficult. Given their success in Ukraine, employing a hybrid strategy, based on ambiguity and denial, tests NATO's cohesion, solidarity, and determination without risking direct conventional military confrontation. In addition, Russia would aim to create fissures between members of NATO on the bases of threat assessment, Russian responsibility, and response options.

Finding political consensus for common defense in the event of the latter scenario would constitute the most challenging part of NATO's decision-making process, irrespective of NATO's military capabilities, just as it was for escalation from conventional to nuclear warfare during the Cold War. NATO's nuclear policies have always been couched in vague terms as the United States refrained from strict binding commitments involving a nuclear confrontation with Russia over European security issues. Now not only the United States, but some European countries might well be reluctant to risk their capital cities for the sake of repelling Russian incursion into Eastern European countries at a level below the threshold. Some Allies' unfair policies pursued in the struggle against terrorism will most likely recur in such a scenario, as they might likely overlook Russian hybrid warfare activities in East European countries just as they overlook terrorist attacks in Turkey, considering them instead to be national issues – "internal-to-that-nation."

Therefore NATO's political solidarity and cohesion, rather than political and military measures, would constitute the most important factor in deterring Russian hybrid warfare. Given the challenges associated with achieving consensus, NATO might consider focusing on its deterrence policies and capabilities in addition to clearly outline the red lines. In other words, forces, capabilities and procedures to provide and guarantee required and effective deterrence in all phases of hybrid warfare. Furthermore, it should assure all members that NATO will respond appropriately should a hybrid attack be launched against a member country – ensuring the Alliance determines and declares the threshold to trigger common defense. NATO's main strategy should therefore be to strengthen the Alliance's cohesion, commitment, and solidarity even in the face of ambiguity. ●

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