
THE CONCEPT OF HYBRID THREATS

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Abstract: In 2016, during the Warsaw summit, NATO and EU reached an agreement to improve the cooperation in the fight against the hybrid threats, describing the security situation in Europe as space where many hybrid activities take place. The security environment of the modern democratic societies is endangered due to the intensive hybrid activities that are manifested via campaigns aimed to misinform, hostile cyber-activities and radicalisation of vulnerable groups in the society.

The security environment during the Cold War was defined with the two confronting super powers, with each trying to surpass the other building an international security system of bipolar relations. Today, in state of hybrid threats, when the security environment is not more secure than during the Cold War, the security setting is much harder to define. The threats, methods of action and activities are multidimensional and the relations among various actions remain unclear.

The state actor constantly try to become stronger, while the non-state actors seek own statehood or recognition of their activities. Seeking to achieve their own ambitions, the non-state actors challenge the West and its institutions, representing thus hybrid threats for their security. Dealing with the hybrid threats includes synchronised use of military and non-military means against specific weaknesses of the enemy. Unless detected and dealt within timely manner, the state of dealing with hybrid threats will reach the state of hybrid warfare.

We live in a time of hybrid influences, where state and non-state actors challenge the modern western democracies and their institution that are considered to be a threat or competition in meeting their goals and interests. The aim of the hybrid threats is to create – by detecting the adversary's weaknesses, such as ideological differences, technological deficiency, society polarisation, geostrategic factors and infrastructure – conditions to achieve their own goals.

If the desired goals are not achieved with the hybrid methods, the hybrid threats can create conditions for future conflict, when the situation can escalate in hybrid war with significant increase of the armed violence. The modern democratic states should have coordinated coherent approach to understand, detect and respond to hybrid threats as collective interest.

Keywords: hybrid threats, hybrid wars, hybrid terrorism, international security

1. INTRODUCTION

In their nature the hybrid threats are not new; it is actually the perception that is new, defined by these multi-modelled threats that need comprehensive combined approach by conventional and nonconventional measures by the states and security agencies. The answer in dealing with these threats should be proportional, with wide spectrum, ranging from civilian self-protection and police measures to fight against insurgency and military measures.⁵⁷ The wide range and complexity of the threat causes fear within societies, since it is hard to detect and understand. What is a “hybrid threat”? A definition that will not omit the important characteristics of the future threats is needed; but a definition that will not at the same time cause confusion in the concepts of defining the threats.

2. CATEGORISATION OF THE HYBRID THREATS

The hybrid threats are diverse and dynamic combination of conventional forces, irregular forces and criminal elements that are united to achieve a common benefit. They are innovative, adaptive, globally connected, in network, and deeply enrooted among the vulnerable citizen categories. They posses wide spectrum of old adapted and new advanced technologies. They act in a conventional and asymmetric way, using conventional military, terrorist and criminal tactics. They degrade – directly and indirectly, states' national security, the international security, via sophisticated information campaigns, but also through direct physical attacks against the Western allies. Hybrid threats can cause economic instability, incite mistrust in governments, attacks on the information networks

⁵⁷ Bachmann, S.-D. & Gunneriusson, H. „Hybrid wars: the 21st-century's new threats to global peace and security“, *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2015

by ensuring promotion of their ideological messages, cause humanitarian crises and attack physically their adversaries. The synchronised hybrid activities can be carried out in the field of informatics, the social, political, infrastructural, economic and military sphere.

Hybrid threats represent organised network of people with informational and military-technical capacities. These networks have the capacity to wage war against the armies of modern states, since the range of their actions covers the whole spectrum of the conflict, unclearly acting on the borderline between insurgency, terrorism and war.⁵⁸ The hybrid threats include in their lines criminals and criminal groups that work to support regular and irregular military forces. Example for this represents the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008, in which Russia included criminal elements in South Ossetia that undertook ethnic cleansing in that region.⁵⁹ The hybrid threats are capable to adapt and move from one shape to another. Their speed, agility, diversity and changing nature, are key to their success in the fight against far bigger and more powerful adversary. Hybrid threats are adapted in two ways, natural and controlled (directed).

The natural adaptation can be a state or non-state actor that acquires or adapts its capabilities to apply political, economic, military, and information power. The natural adaptation can be developed through:

- Equipping with modern technology, the key capacities or resources (financial and material).
- Efficient organisation.
- Efficient use of the information from the surroundings, creation of regional or global alliances.

The controlled adaptation is based on lessons learned, and refers to countering the power and influence of the Western allies. The hybrid threats will control and direct their capabilities and capacities according to the actions that will be undertaken by the Western allies. They will be everything the Western allies are not. Those who will master the needed skills to act react and adapt in a fast and creative manner will become successful. Hybrid threats learn and change fast, without limitations, rules and bureaucracy, adapting themselves and using all the available sources of power.

One of the most dangerous aspects of the hybrid threats is the capacity to transform in different forms. If a militant group organised as military force is in question, it can easily take off the uniform and the ranks and fit in the local population. Rebel forces can simple put aside their arms and merge with the innocent population. The criminals can present themselves as policemen in order to ensure access to strategic objects. Hybrid threats use the weaknesses of the positive identification⁶⁰. The international security environment is full with actors that conduct activities opposite to the Western allies' interests, but they are without visualisation of their status of threat. In other words, very often these hybrid threats are identified wrongly as friendly or neutral actors. The concepts of "conventional" and "nonconventional" wars and the "traditional" methods as opposed to the "adapting" ones are the weapons of the hybrid threats.

The time concepts of "conventional" and "nonconventional" wars and "traditional" methods as opposed to the "adapting" methods are the weapons for the hybrid threat. These concepts of the hybrid threats look at the war in a holistic way and do not strive at decomposing it in different parts. The forces of the hybrid threats will take the role of regular military units, at a certain point, in order to succeed. In other situations they will act as irregular military forces, and very often it will be a combination.

Hybrid threats will act in many ways, but they will always maintain the capability to adapt to the time and place where they operate.

Through formal structure and an informal arrangement the state military and paramilitary forces can work in agreement, on different levels with the insurgency, guerrilla and criminal groups to achieve common goals. Usually, the common goal is to remove the Western allies from their operating zone. The goals of the hybrid threats may or may not coincide with the goals of the other state and non-state actors that operate in the same geographical area.

There are different types of actors or participants in today's complex global security environment. Most dominant are the nation states or **state actors**; however in certain cases the power is in the hands of the non-traditional or **non-state actors**. To define the actors in the operational environment of the hybrid threats it is necessary to conduct continuous assessment and analysis that would confirm the motives, intentions, capabilities

⁵⁸ Gary H. Cheek, "Effects-Based Operations: The End of Dominant Maneuver," in Transformation Concepts for National Security in the 21st Century, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2002

⁵⁹ [Jane Buchanan](#), „Up in Flames: Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict Over South Ossetia“, [Human Rights Watch \(Organization\)](#), Human Rights Watch, 2009

⁶⁰ Evidence that proves that you are not the one you claim to be, that is, an evidence to prove you are among the group of people that are already known to the system and being recognized by the system leads to acceptance.

and limitations of the hybrid threats. This refers to categories of threats that can be combined, complemented or affiliated among themselves in order to increase the threat and the hybrid capabilities. The key components pertinent to the hybrid threats are two or more from those listed below:

- Military power
- Non-military power of a nation state (the internal security forces, police or border security)
- Insurgent and terrorist groups (movements that predominantly rely on subversion and violence)
- Guerrilla units (irregular autochthonous forces that operate on an occupied territory)
- Criminal organisations (gangs, narcotics cartels or hackers).

3. STATE ACTORS

State actors can be divided in four categories, according to their role in the international community: developed states, states in transition, rogue (hostile) states and failed states. Depending on the conditions, states can move from one category to another.

Developed states are more than half of almost 200 countries in the world today. They are in essence democratic, although they do share common interests and values, to a certain degree. In this big group there is a core of big powers led by US which dominate the world politics. The conflicts with global consequences involve modern states in the resolution processes. They are usually recognised as rich nations with wide spectrum of resources being on a favourable location, as compared to the other states. They have strong state institutions, powerful military and powerful global political alliances. US, Canada, the EU states, Australia, South Korea and Japan are examples for developed states that have the greatest power in the world economic system.⁶¹

The states in transition are larger industrial states, mainly new regional powers that have the potential to be accepted by the developed states. In the period of transition the states go through cycles of political stability and instability, and the outcome of the transition is unpredictable. Some of the states in transition can successfully join the group of developed states, and even become competitive.

The notion of transition states includes the countries from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. There are also countries outside Europe, such as China that emerges from a socialist economy. In broader sense, the definition for the transition states refers to all the states that try to change leaning towards the foundations of market society.⁶²

Rogue states are those that are hostile to its neighbours or the interests of developed democracies. These states attack their neighbours or threaten them with war. They can supply with weapons the non-state actors or the states in their region, and thus jeopardise the regional and international security. They can sponsor the international terrorism and face the military forces of the western allies.⁶³

Failed states are non-functional in terms of absence of the rule of law. Their instability represents security threat for their neighbours and the developed countries.

Failed states have the following characteristics:

- loss of control over their territory and the exclusivity for legitimate use of physical force,
- erosion of the legitimate authority to make collective decisions,
- failure to provide public services to citizens,
- failure to interact with other states as full member of the international community.

Non-state actors that are outside the system of the legitimate governmental institutions – such as the terrorist and criminal organisations – take over the control over the territories where the state power is not present. Failed states are most often safe haven for the groups that are against the interest of the Western allies⁶⁴.

4. NON-STATE ACTORS

In international relations, non-state actors are individuals or groups that have influence and that are completely or partially independent from the state. Non-state actors do in no way represent the power of authorities of a certain nation-state. Such non-state elements include hostile actors, as well as actors from third parties. Non-state actors differ according to their structure, interest and influence. For example, non-state actors are corporations, media, lobby groups, religious groups, humanitarian organisations and violent non-state actors, such as paramilitary forces.

⁶¹ Margaret L. Andersen, *Sociology: the essentials*. Howard Francis Taylor, Cengage Learning. February, 2006

⁶² Falke, Mike. „[Community Interests: An Insolvency Objective in Transition Economies?](#)“, No. 01/02, Frankfurter Institut für Transformationsstudien, 5 March 2009

⁶³ Minnerop, P., „[Rogue States – State Sponsors of Terrorism?](#)“ German Law Journal No. 9, 2002

⁶⁴ Braathen, Einar., „Brazil: Successful country, failed cities?“, NIBR International Blog 24.01.2011

The non-violent non-state actors are hostile and can be present in one state or dispersed in more countries. The following can be seen as examples:⁶⁵

- Criminal organisations and gangs, narcotics cartels that carry out assassinations, kidnappings, extortions
- Popular movements that use guerrilla tactics or asymmetric warfare to achieve their goals
- Private military companies and corporations that offer private military services
- Ideological organisations, such as Boko Haram that operates in Nigeria and its surroundings, supporting the military violence as holy duty
- Civilian militia that can be forms for local protection from attack
- Paramilitary groups that use military methods and structures to achieve their agenda, such as the Irish Republican Army that is no longer active.
- Leaders or military leaders that use military violence to impose military, economic and political control over the territory of a sovereign state
- Rebellion, an organised movement that is aimed to destroy an established government with the use of subversion and armed conflict
- Militia, which are military or non-military organisations that protect a certain community, its territory, composed of a small unrepresentative part of the population that enables its leader to enjoy military, economic and political control over a specific territory in a sovereign state
- Terrorist organisations that jeopardise the security, infrastructure and citizens of nations and communities worldwide representing a particular source of danger, since they can possess the most sophisticated technology, equipment and weapons.

These violent non-state actors can use terrorist tactics and non-conventional methods to achieve their goals.

4.1. Regular armed forces

Regular armed forces are regulated armed forces of a state or alliance of states with a specific function to perform military offensive and defensive actions. Traditionally the regular armed forces have been trained to

- Defeat adversary's armed forces
- Destroy enemy's capacities for warfare
- Control or keep a territory

Other legitimate functions of the regular military forces can include wide spectrum of operations for stability and support in accordance with the state policies. Also, the regular military forces can be used as assistance during natural disasters or as help for governments to deal with violence, unrests or insurgencies.

4.2. Irregular forces

Irregular forces are armed individuals or groups who are not members of the regular armed forces, police or other internal security forces. Irregular forces can demonstrate capabilities of insurgents, guerrilla and armed criminal elements. Also, directly or indirectly, in coordination with irregular forces, in the course of certain operations, conventional military units can also be involved.

Irregular forces prefer indirect and asymmetric approach in action. In such a way they can use the whole spectrum of military and other capacities in order to disable adversary's power, will and influence. Different categories of irregular forces use different level of violence to impose influence. The access to modern technologies can increase the influence of the irregular forces. Some of them use low-technology approach in the fight against their superior enemy.

The operations that are performed by the irregular forces are conflicts that border with war. On tactical level they use tactics, techniques and procedures that are common for regular forces, as well, but that they do with asymmetric approach and means. They also use methods such as guerrilla fighting, terrorism, sabotage, subversion, extortion and criminal activities.

These irregular forces that counter the conventional capacities of the Western allies use a hybrid type of warfare, including traditional, irregular and criminal actions to achieve their strategic goals. They cannot defeat the Western allies, but they can degrade and weaken their forces.

The conflicts after the invasion in Iraq, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, the conflict in Darfur, the second Chechen war – they are all conflicts where irregular forces take place. The CIA Special Operations Unit is a US unit fighting against irregular military forces.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Williams, Phil "Violent Non-State Actors", Zurich: International Relations and Security Network, 28 November, 2008

⁶⁶ Samuel A. Southworth, Stephen Tanner, „U.S. Special Forces: A Guide to America's Special Operations Units: the World's Most Elite Fighting Force“, Da Capo Press, 2002

5. CONCLUSION

The term “hybrid” is accepted to encompass the complexity of the modern warfare, the actors involved and the ambiguities around the conflicts categories. The emerging of the hybrid threats signals dangerous development of the capacities of the guerrillas and irregular forces that we see in the on-going conflicts. Hybrid threats combine state conventional military forces, their sophisticated weapons and their tactics with attributes linked to terrorist, insurgents and criminal organisations.

Hybrid threats are combination of regular and irregular forces. Regular forces are regulated with international law, military tradition and customs. Irregular forces are illegal and as a result they act without limitations in their use of violence or when achieving their goals with the use of violence. The possibility to combine and shift between regular and irregular forces makes hybrid threats particularly effective. In order to be hybrid, these forces cooperate in the context of achieving their own internal goals. For instance, the criminal elements can steal military equipment and parts for profit, while compromising at the same time, the readiness of the combat systems within the regular forces. Militia forces can defend their city or village as part of a complex defensive network. Some hybrid threats will become a result of a state – sponsor of a non-state actor.

Hybrid threats will try to use for their purposes the media, technology and position in the political, military and social infrastructure of the state they operate in. In their actions against the Western allies their operations will be flexible, combining conventional, non-conventional, terrorist and criminal tactics in different combinations and time. With insurgency they will try to create instability and isolate regular forces from the population. In addition, they will use global networks to popularise their influence. Hybrid threats do not have limitations in the use of violence. They are also perfectly capable to use terrorist and guerrilla tactics when it is needed. Western allies will face hybrid threats that will concurrently use a combination of regular forces, irregular and criminal elements to achieve their goals. Hybrid threats have a fluid organisation, equipment and tactics that will in future additionally jeopardise the international security environment.

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