

THE DECLINE OF RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE? LESSONS FROM UKRAINE

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Abstract

Before 2022, many scholars held the view that Russia operated just below the threshold of war in pursuing its objectives in Europe. Important works applied the concept of hybrid warfare (HW) to argue that Russia prefers to wage a grey zone conflict rather than a large-scale conventional war. However, the invasion of Ukraine invalidated these assumptions. As a result, scholars now argue that HW is significantly less useful in analysing Russian strategy and operations because large-scale conventional war does not fall within the conceptual scope of HW. Although the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had previously used the concept to address Russia’s actions, they have also removed HW from their political rhetoric towards the Kremlin. This article examines the extent to which HW is a useful conceptual framework for analysing Russia’s war against Ukraine. The author argues that while the use of the concept in the context of the war is no longer politically advantageous, HW still provides a practical conceptual framework for analysing the war and, by extension, for informing decisions on Western defence policy. There exists more than one definition of HW and, depending on which version is applied, the Kremlin’s resort to large-scale military action does not mean that Russian HW is in decline. Instead, there is a shift towards an earlier understanding of HW, which puts a greater emphasis on using military force and violence. Consequently, since Russia keeps waging HW, the EU and NATO must not remove HW from their security toolbox, but rather enhance their defence against HW. To do so, they must increase their focus on multi-purpose defence capabilities and develop expertise in disrupting any adversarial capacity for multi-modal campaigns.

Keywords: *Russia, Ukraine, conventional warfare, hybrid warfare.*

INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine challenged security assumptions by bringing conventional war back to Europe. Despite any evidence to the contrary, most analysts previously assessed that the Kremlin chose to operate just below the threshold of conventional war in pursuing its objectives in the continent (Arutunyan, 2022, p. 233; DW News, 2023, 1.12; Solmaz, 2022). Most analysts used the 2014 illegitimate referendum in Crimea as empirical evidence that Russia eschews large-scale military action and instead employs subthreshold methods. To underpin their empirical findings with a theoretical framework, many scholars applied the concept of hybrid warfare (HW) (e.g. Chivvis, 2017; DeBenedictis, 2021; Erol and Oğuz, 2015; Saessalo and Huhtinen, 2018). As a result of their works, the concept became popular and nearly synonymous with Russia's grey zone operations, such as propaganda and election meddling. The European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also used HW in their political rhetoric regarding Russia's activities against Ukraine. Eventually, the concept was also codified into various EU and NATO strategic documents.

The aftermath of the 2022 invasion marked a stark difference in the language used to address Russian operations. Scholars now argue that HW is considerably less useful in analysing the Kremlin's actions against Ukraine (Goodson and Żakowska, 2023; Kandrik, 2023; Kormych and Malyarenko, 2022, p. 3). They argue that Russia's large-scale conventional war does not fall into HW's conceptual scope. The popularity of HW has significantly decreased at the EU and NATO too. Both organisations replaced HW with 'Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine' in their political rhetoric towards the Kremlin (European Council, 2022; NATO, 2022).

In these new circumstances, analysts wonder whether the West had previously overestimated Russia's preference for grey zone or HW operations (e.g. Dalsjö, Jonsson and Norberg, 2022, p. 15; Goodson and Żakowska, 2023; Kandrik, 2023; Solmaz, 2022). They argue that given how common the HW concept is in Western defence policies, such a strategic miscalculation may now have left EU and NATO states vulnerable to conventional military campaigns. The implication is that the West needs to remove HW from its threat awareness methodology as the concept no longer corresponds to reality. However, if the abovementioned analytical works are inaccurate and Russian HW still persists in some form, it would be detrimental to remove the concept from the West's security architecture. Thus, discussing Russian HW and its exact modalities has critical real-world implications and requires careful examination.

Hence, this article examines the extent to which HW is a useful conceptual framework for analysing Russia's war against Ukraine. The author suggests that while using the concept in relation to Russia's offensive is no longer politically advantageous, HW still provides a practical conceptual framework to analyse the Kremlin's actions and, by extension, inform decisions

on Western defence policy. In fact, since Russia keeps waging HW in the form of multimodal operations, which blend conventional with unconventional methods, an attempt to completely remove HW from the daily operational analysis and defence planning at the EU and NATO would have a negative effect on Western defence posture. This claim is in obvious contradiction with the growing body of literature, which suggests that HW is no longer useful for exploring Russia's efforts against Ukraine. However, this article does not seek to refute the recent critical publications towards the concept. Rather, the author suggests that the critics of HW need to be more precise on which version of HW they are calling into question because there exists more than one definition of the HW phenomenon.

The scholars who argue against the concept's applicability to the current war in Ukraine do so on the basis of a post-Crimean definition of HW. This account of HW was formed after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 by way of an illegitimate referendum and other methods short of large-scale conventional war. However, scholars may be unaware that a very different, pre-Crimean account of HW also exists. Importantly, hard military power is a defining feature of the original understanding of HW in contrast to its more recent version, which focuses on non-military efforts. Thus, this article argues that while the post-Crimean understanding of HW does not apply to the ongoing war, the pre-Crimean definition does. Studies must be thus clearer that there is no decline in Russian HW but a shift to an earlier understanding of HW, which puts a greater emphasis on using military force and violence. This is the original definition of HW, developed by Frank Hoffman of the United States Marine Corps (USMC).

While this article cannot conduct an exhaustive analysis of the war, it examines enough empirics to shed new light on the conceptual applicability of HW to the war in Ukraine. By distinguishing between the pre-Crimean and post-Crimean definition of HW, the analysis aims to bring more conceptual clarity to the debate on Russian HW and the role of conventional warfare in its conduct. This article is thus more concerned with Russia's conduct of the war than its reasons for starting it, which others have extensively covered.¹

The first section offers a critical review of the HW concept and the role of conventional military power in it. The aim is to develop a working definition of HW. This is then applied to the case of the current Russian war against Ukraine in the second part. Based on the findings, the third part outlines a number of implications for Western politics and defence policies. Afterwards, a conclusion summarises the findings and revisits the opening argument.

¹ Propositions include Putin's beliefs (e.g. Liik, 2022; Torbakov, 2022), the revisions in the international balance of power (e.g. Charalambides, 2022), Russia's sense of vulnerability (e.g. Götz and Staun, 2022).

DEFINING HYBRID WARFARE

Frank Hoffman, a USMC reservist, is regarded as the architect of the HW concept. In 2007, he published his seminal work on HW, which built on a previous article he had co-authored with James Mattis, an USMC veteran (Hoffman, 2007; Mattis and Hoffman, 2005). Thus, practitioners from the armed forces first conceptualised the concept. The fact that military officers developed the framework could have important implications for its original focus.

The original definition of hybrid warfare

Except for being the first to give a thorough definition of HW, Hoffman also argued that the 2005 US National Defence Strategy failed to take into account how different modes of war converge today (Hoffman, 2007, pp. 25-28). He proposed that HW could improve the US leaders' understanding of this phenomenon, as the concept studies the merging or hybridising of different capabilities, methods, and actors. For Hoffman, HW includes the following:

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. [...] These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict. (Ibid, p. 8)

The above is considered the original definition of HW and focuses on the use of violence and military force, including conventional capabilities. Hoffman used the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War as a prototype for his theory. Hezbollah conducted guerrilla operations but also deployed a conventional military arsenal. The non-state actor fired nearly 4000 missiles at Israel (Shaikh and Williams, 2018). Hence, Hoffman reiterated that the rise of HW does not mean that conventional warfare is in decline (Hoffman, 2007, p. 43). Instead, there is a merging between conventional and unconventional capabilities and regular and irregular tactics.

However, as soon as HW came into the spotlight, Hoffman and the USMC circles lost their monopoly on the definition. Indeed, many scholars have observed that perceptions of HW have changed dramatically since its inception, to the point that only 30% of all studies on HW still use Hoffman's original definition (Caliskan and Cramers, 2018, p. 9). The EU and NATO have played a key role in HW's conceptual transformation (Uziębło, 2017, p. 5).

The contemporary definition of hybrid warfare

Today's definition of HW formed when the EU and NATO adopted the concept. NATO was first to do so since James Mattis was appointed to lead the Allied Command Transformation (Tenenbaum, 2015, p. 97). Thus, one of the co-authors of the earliest articles on HW became responsible for adapting NATO forces. As expected, his appointment put HW on the agenda, and NATO's 2010 Capstone Concept adopted the HW framework. Due to Mattis' influence, NATO initially understood HW in terms close to the original, military-centric definition.

Later, however, the Alliance shifted its views entirely. For example, in NATO's 2019 Annual Report, the experts on HW contend that 'hostile powers do not have to take to the battlefield to inflict damage on their adversaries' (NATO, 2020, p. 29). Here, the NATO experts disregard military affairs and instead focus on propaganda, cyberattacks, and sabotage. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 triggered the conceptual transformation of HW (Abbott, 2016; Maronkova, 2018). Although the Kremlin's actions in 2014 were below the threshold of war, they had to be condemned through strong political rhetoric. As of July 2014, the EU and NATO began to use HW to describe Russia's actions. As a result, the focus of HW shifted from military to non-military affairs, as Russia had not yet mounted a large-scale operation against Ukraine (Noorman, 2022, p. 143). The conceptual change was so pronounced that as early as 2014 Hoffman felt the need to clarify that his original idea did not include non-violent actions such as economic pressure (Libiseller, 2023, p. 7).

The vast difference between the original and the current perception of HW dictates that one distinguishes between two versions of HW: a pre-Crimean definition, which focuses on military force, and a post-Crimean one, which is instead an umbrella term for various non-military aspects such as propaganda. The fact that after Crimea HW became a catchall phrase has also made the concept much more ambiguous and has inevitably attracted criticism.

The criticism towards hybrid warfare

HW is among the most contested concepts in war studies (Rauta, 2020, p. 868). Many scholars describe it as a weak conceptual framework (e.g. Caliskan, 2019, p. 51; Johnson, 2018, p. 143). They believe that HW's scope is too broad to be analytically useful. If any act of violence falls into the category of HW, then the concept becomes a watered-down buzzword with limited explanatory power. Yet, this criticism is not necessarily directed against USMC's military-centric and narrower definition of HW. Arguably, this assessment is only reasonable in relation to the post-Crimean, broader understanding of HW.

Then again, when applying the HW framework, many scholars do not clearly define the concept or acknowledge the existence of the different definitions of the phenomenon (e.g. Giles, 2015; Naydenov, 2018; Shedd and Stradner, 2020). Only a limited number of experts recognise that there are two different versions of HW (e.g. Hoorickx, 2017, pp. 3-4; Wither, 2016, pp. 74-76). If scholars clearly subscribed to one or the other definition when using the concept, this would bring more conceptual clarity, even if HW is inherently ambiguous.

Thus, while the criticism of HW is not unwarranted, the issues are not necessarily related to the conceptual nature of the framework but to how it is used in the literature. Authors rarely outline a clear conceptual framework when applying HW. In contrast, this article aims to clearly operationalise the concept before turning to empirical analysis.

The operationalisation of hybrid warfare

The broader a concept becomes, the more ambiguous and less valuable it is, as in the case of HW. Thus, Hoffman's narrower definition might be more helpful, allowing for clearer operationalisation. However, apart from these methodological considerations, there are at least two other reasons for choosing the pre-Crimean definition of HW for this analysis.

First, if the conflict was previously difficult to characterise, the case closed after February 2022: Russia and Ukraine are in a state of international armed conflict. Thus, using the non-military definition of HW as a conceptual lens would not be practical. Instead, this article evaluates whether Hoffman's military-centric version of HW would be useful in this case. Second, an in-depth literature review reveals that even before 2022, a limited number of analysts called for the use of USMC's definition of HW regarding Russia (e.g. Clark, 2020, pp. 11-14; Renz, 2016, pp. 293-295). They argued that drawing firm conclusions on Russia's military doctrine solely on the basis of the illegal annexation of Crimea is wrong. This case could have been an outlier and may not necessarily be indicative of Russia's overall strategy. For example, Rumer (2019) asserted that the West mistakenly thought the Gerasimov Doctrine was driving the Kremlin's decision-making. This doctrine, named after the Russian Chief of the General Staff, is said to focus on HW in the form of non-kinetic activities such as propaganda and election meddling that were employed in Crimea. Rumer (2019) argued that the Kremlin was instead using the Primakov Doctrine, which uses HW by employing hard military power. With the benefit of hindsight, other analysts now also agree that the Gerasimov Doctrine never happened (e.g. Kandrik, 2023). Rumer's assessment is a further indication that the military-centric definition of HW may be more useful in this analysis.

This article thus operationalises Hoffman's pre-Crimean definition of HW. The analysis examines whether Russia combines various methods of

conventional warfare while engaging in unconventional warfare, as Hoffman would suggest. In addition, the role of irregular soldiers and tactics is assessed. Because Hoffman also discusses indiscriminate violence, this article investigates whether this is present. The analysis draws on research papers, books, open-source intelligence briefings, governmental texts, media coverage of the war, and other relevant resources. Because this analysis is made in the fog of an ongoing war, it can only be considered preliminary. Yet, the unknowns could be minimised by focusing on a particular region. This article zooms in on Russia's efforts in two major theatres of operation: Kyiv and Kharkiv. Figure 1 shows the two selected regions compared to other regions with large-scale military engagements. This basic map is based on data by the Institute for the Study of War (Institute for the Study of War, 2022). Notably, one region or oblast may have been the arena for several battles. Regarding the Kyiv region, for example, this article examines the battles of Hostomel Airport and Bucha while also studying the offensive against Kyiv City. Finally, the focus is on the initial months of the war. By autumn 2022, Ukraine had launched successful counter-offensives in both selected regions. In this way, the analysis can study a complete 'cycle' of the war, from initial invasion to troop withdrawal.



Figure 1: The focus of this analysis

RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE

The war began on 24 February 2022 when Russian forces used precision-guided munitions against infrastructure throughout Ukraine. While Russian missiles struck targets across Ukraine, the Kremlin's primary objective was to quickly encircle Kyiv and topple the government (Clark, Barros and Stepanenko, 2022a, p. 2). For this reason, Russia had to capture an airport near the Ukrainian capital to airlift troops and equipment close to Kyiv.

The Battle of Hostomel Airport and the importance of combined arms

Hostomel Airport could have been the ideal airbridge for the Russian forces, as it was a major cargo airport outside Kyiv. Thus, Russian helicopters attacked the facility early on 24 February 2022. However, Ukraine contested the initial raid, and the Russians managed to capture the facility only after combining air assaults with ground attacks (Clark, Barros and Stepanenko, 2022b, p. 3). By the time the Russians were able to secure the airport, the facility was too damaged to be useful. Although the battle took place very early in the war, analysts argue that Ukraine's ability to slow down the Russian capture of the airport was crucial, as this prevented a quick capture of Kyiv (e.g. Atlantic Council 2022; Patrick 2022).

Hence, the war has demonstrated the importance of a combined arms approach to warfare (Hackett, 2023, p. 12). Russia's initial failure to coordinate ground and air operations in a synergetic manner set the Kremlin back. Official sources reported that the Russian armed forces initially had no overall commander, which would explain the poor coordination and the lack of a combined arms approach (Congressional Research Service, 2023, pp. 5-6). Most Russian ground forces consist of what is known as Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs), which are, in fact, combined arms units. However, the command-and-control issues have made coordinating the different units much more difficult (Colom-Piella, 2023, p. 4).

Efforts to improve cohesion between the different units were made only after March 2022. Putin appointed General Aleksandr Dvornikov as an overall ground commander to resolve coordination challenges. Dvornikov brought a wealth of experience, having previously served in Syria, and in a more recent analysis, Hoffman assessed that the appointment was a clear attempt by Russia to adapt to the circumstances (Hoffman, 2022). The stronger coordination between different activities, which to Hoffman is a defining feature of HW, thus did not emerge as part of the original planning but as a necessity during the war. This belated organisational change does not mean that HW is conceptually less sound. On the contrary, given HW's assumption about the value of multi-modal coordination, the change in the Russian forces is logical. Hoffman would suggest, however, that Russia not only combined conventional methods of

warfare but also engaged in unconventional warfare as a part of a larger campaign. Evidence of such could be gathered by analysing the Battle of Kyiv.

The Battle of Kyiv and Russia's unconventional warfare

Russia's primary war effort aimed at gaining control over Kyiv. This assessment was shared by analysts (e.g. Clark, Barros and Stepanenko, 2022a, p. 2); correspondents on the ground (e.g. Langfitt, 2022); Pentagon officials (Powell et al., 2022); and eventually confirmed by Russia's foreign minister (Blann, 2022). Thus, the Russian offensive against Kyiv City was critical to the Kremlin's war effort. On 25 February 2022, Russian forces entered the western outskirts of Kyiv and started additional deployment (Clark, Barros and Stepanenko, 2022c, p. 1). While the results of these efforts were rather mixed, and Russia repeatedly failed to infiltrate central Kyiv, the Kremlin did not rely exclusively on conventional warfare.

Russia waged unconventional warfare in Kyiv's city centre, starting as early as 25 February 2022. According to the US Army, unconventional warfare includes espionage, assassination, sabotage, and propaganda (Kelley, 2000, p. 1). There is evidence that the Kremlin attempted to use all of these methods. First, Russia deployed reconnaissance and sabotage units into central Kyiv that were dressed in civilian clothes or stolen Ukrainian uniforms (Roscoe, 2022). Second, Russia allegedly intended to circulate a deepfake video showing President Volodymyr Zelenskyy surrendering in order to demoralise the Ukrainians (Clark, Barros and Stepanenko, 2022d, p. 4). Russia's Ministry of Defence (MoD) also claimed to have air superiority over Ukraine to create a perception of an easy victory. This statement was false (Guerrero, 2022, p. 4; Dalsjö, Jonsson and Norberg, 2022, p. 10). Finally, Zelenskyy had reportedly survived several assassination attempts by the Wagner Group who were operating in central Kyiv (Foley and Kaunert, 2022, p. 186).

Guerrero (2022, p. 2) argues that Russia's decision to use spies and other unconventional methods on the one hand and conventional military forces on the other falls within the scope of HW. Hoffman's model could indeed justify the decision to organise sabotage inside Kyiv while preparing large-scale assaults from the outskirts. However, the USMC officer argued that the ideal HW scenario would be to closely coordinate the two efforts (Hoffman, 2007, pp. 20-21). The fact that Russia experienced command and control issues right from the start of the war suggests that there was no great synergy between the Kremlin's conventional and unconventional operations in and around Kyiv. Thus, Hoffman's assumption about the importance of coordination is valuable. His theoretical ideas could inform the operational assessment of the reasons why Russia's Kyiv offensive ultimately failed.

Hoffman's model could also capture the events in the aftermath of the battle. Russian forces failed to topple Kyiv and withdrew in April 2022, but

unconventional warfare rages on. For example, Russia has crashed kamikaze drones into Kyiv. It has used Iranian-made drones for such unconventional warfare to mitigate the limitations of Russia's traditional military branches, such as the infantry and the air force (Eslami, 2022, p. 508).

Thus, Russia's use of unconventional warfare is again not by design but results from necessity. The HW concept is helpful because it encourages analysts to consider the different venues Russia could explore to compensate for its weaknesses. The next subsection addresses this issue in greater depth.

The Battle of Kharkiv and the role of private armies

The notion of relative weakness is worth mentioning here. Borer and Houck (2022) argue that the inferior side in a conflict would wage irregular warfare to compensate for its weakness in conventional warfare. Although the two scholars focus on Ukraine's weakness, the argument can also be reversed. As surprising as it is to speak of Russia's weakness vis-à-vis Ukraine, the latest assessment is that the Kremlin's capabilities have previously been overestimated (Colom-Piella, 2023, p. 2; Dalsjö, Jonsson and Norberg, 2022, pp. 7-8). Hoffman himself has recently downgraded his rating of Russia's military strength by noting that the Kremlin has incurred grievous losses in Ukraine (Hoffman, 2023). Such assessments motivate the search for further Russian irregular warfare due to its weaknesses. One can examine this in the context of the Battle of Kharkiv, which revealed some of Russia's military weaknesses.

Russia's Kharkiv offensive was a supporting effort in its war against Ukraine (Clark, Barros and Stepanenko, 2022d, p. 4). Nevertheless, it was an exhausting fight and the Russians had to draw on their reserves several times to sustain their effort. Ultimately, the battle ended in May 2022 with a Ukrainian victory. If the Kremlin could somehow justify its defeat in Kyiv in April as a fluke, the poor Russian performance after Kharkiv would become too obvious to conceal. Consequently, there was a realisation that Putin had overestimated his armed forces, whose actions were underwhelming. The poor Russian performance was due to years of corruption and a lack of modernisation in Russia's armed forces (Dickinson, 2022).

In this context, Luzin (2022) suggested that the Kremlin would compensate for the weakness in its regular units with proxy forces. Indeed, after the defeat in Kharkiv, Putin has reportedly been more inclined to bypass the Russian military, instead relying on irregular soldiers (Van Brugen, 2022). Specifically, Putin has increasingly used mercenaries as well as Chechen, Cossack, and Syrian militias as an alternative to mobilising reservists (Colom-Piella, 2023, p. 4). The result is a combination of regular and irregular soldiers, corresponding to Hoffman's HW definition. A number of scholars, such as Goodson and Żakowska (2023), agree that Russia has employed a HW

approach, blending its conventional armed forces with proxy elements. Interestingly, however, the increase in the use of irregular troops was not by design but an adjustment following the wake-up call Russia received after Kharkiv. Yet, HW by necessity and not by choice is HW nonetheless, so Hoffman's framework is applicable.

Hoffman's account of HW can also help in determining the value of using mercenaries beyond the mere increase in forces and firepower. Hoffman argues that HW is characterised by ambiguity. The Kremlin uses private military companies (PMCs) precisely in the interest of ambiguity. By using the concepts of HW and surrogate warfare, Foley and Kaunert (2022, p. 174) argue that Russia's employment of PMCs ensures that the Kremlin can deny involvement in any given operation, including in Ukraine, to avoid retribution. Interestingly, the use of mercenaries is officially prohibited in Russia, and PMCs such as Wagner exist due only to legal loopholes (Ibid, 2022, p. 176). The Kremlin skilfully uses the legal vacuum in which PMCs operate in order to keep them in line with Russia's national interests.

Still, after Wagner's attempted rebellion in June 2023 and the subsequent events, involving Wagner's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, it is evident that Russia's use of PMCs is not without issues. Putin does not have a full control over the PMCs (Sheftalovich 2023). Most importantly, despite the boasting of some mercenaries, it has been reported that they, too, are often ill-prepared (Van Brugen, 2022). This lack of preparation is because they are mainly recruited from prisons. Ex-convicts are also more prone to violate international humanitarian law, which leads to a broader discussion about violence against civilians.

The Battle of Bucha and indiscriminate violence

There is strong evidence that Russia has perpetrated indiscriminate violence, another element of Hoffman's HW. For example, Amnesty International has found that the Kremlin has used cluster bombs to shell Kharkiv (Amnesty International, 2022). Yet, the strongest evidence of violence against civilians to date has been gathered in relation to the attacks on Bucha. The Battle of Bucha, a small city west of Kyiv, began on 27 February 2022. After a few weeks of fighting, the Russians gained control over Bucha. However, later, as a part of their larger withdrawal from Kyiv oblast, the Russians eventually left Bucha as well.

On their return to the city, Ukrainians reported strong evidence of war crimes, including rape and summary executions of civilians (Marples, 2022, p. 213). Independent sources have confirmed these accusations, including Agence France-Presse (Kemp, 2022). Satellite imagery has also revealed the existence of large mass graves (Reuters, 2022). After months of excavations, Ukrainian officials reported 458 bodies, of which 419 bore markings they had been shot,

tortured or bludgeoned to death (Sly and Khudov, 2022). Apart from the killings, the Russians also looted and destroyed civilian property (Gorbunova, 2022). These kinds of criminal activities are also a main feature of Hoffman's HW framework.

Russian forces have a history of brutality. However, scholars argue that Putin's increased reliance on proxies in this war has further increased indiscriminate violence (e.g. Bufacchi, 2023, p. 4). German intelligence has gathered proof that Wagner played a leading role in the Bucha massacre (Amann, Gebauer and Schmid, 2022). There is thus evidence to support Hoffman's idea of a correlation between irregular troops and atrocities in modern warfare. HW could provide a useful conceptual framework for investigating the reasoning behind such criminal activities. Many analysts observe that Russia's attacks on civilian infrastructure are intentional but do not analyse what those intentions are and how they correspond to Russia's overall objectives. For example, Baker et al. (2023, p. 3) describe Russia's purposeful attacks on infrastructure, healthcare facilities, and personnel by conceptualising these strikes as HW. However, their research does not discuss many of HW's theoretical assumptions, which may have helped analyse why Russia repeatedly violates the Geneva Convention. That is, Hoffman suggests that there is a very specific reason to engage in such criminal activity: these efforts are used to "facilitate the disorder and disruption of the target nation" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 29). Thus, applying Hoffman's HW as a conceptual lens could help explain Russia's motivation and recommend policies for increasing the resilience of civilian infrastructure.

Towards a more comprehensive assessment

This analysis has shown that Hoffman's definition of HW, developed before the Crimean crisis, can be helpful in analysing the war in Ukraine. In contrast, the post-Crimean account of HW, which focuses on cyber and other non-kinetic efforts, would not have served well. Cyberwarfare has not played a significant role in this war so far (Willett, 2022, p. 11). However, the current track record does not preclude such discussions from gaining prominence as the war progresses. Russia has so far used some of its capabilities, such as its submarines, sparingly (Atlantic Council, 2022). Thus, while most engagements, including those under study in this analysis, predict a Ukrainian victory, it is still too early to draw firm conclusions. Another study must be conducted to analyse a more extended period of the war.

Apart from a longer time span, a follow-up analysis could unfold in several additional directions. First, such an analysis could also examine the role of non-conventional weapons. There is no evidence that Russia has used biological or radiological weapons. However, concerns have been raised that the Kremlin could justify further aggression against Ukraine by orchestrating a

false-flag operation claiming that Kyiv has used such weapons (Lawlor and Stepanenko, 2022, p. 1). The use of such multi-modal influence operations would be HW. Second, a more comprehensive assessment must also include Ukraine's conduct of multi-modal activities. While this article has focused on Russian HW, there is evidence that Ukraine also wages HW. For example, American Green Berets have reportedly trained Ukrainian forces in guerrilla warfare (Borer and Houck, 2022). This convergence of regular and irregular elements is consistent with the definition of HW and can be further explored based on Hoffman's framework. This analysis has illustrated HW's explanatory power regarding the war in Ukraine and could be a springboard for further assessments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST

While there is no certainty concerning exactly how the war will unfold, the most likely scenario is a war of attrition (Congressional Research Service, 2023, p. 24). Hoffman has expressed the same opinion (Hoffman, 2023). Thus, one can speculate that HW will become even more pronounced. In a war of attrition, the depletion of resources is an issue. Ukraine will most likely continue to depend on the assistance of its Western supporters, but Russia will be in a more difficult situation. The continuous loss of Russian regular troops, for example, must be compensated by more mercenaries and militias. In the case of the increasing convergence of regular and irregular elements, HW would be a robust conceptual framework to explore how Russia compensates for its weaknesses or eventually even reverts to operating only in the grey zone, as some analysts expect (e.g. Kormych and Malyarenko, 2022). Even so, this does not mean that HW should regain its key place in the EU's and NATO's political rhetoric.

When the West adopted HW to describe the events in Crimea in 2014, the concept lost its sharpness (Libiseller, 2023, pp. 1-2). Thus, it would be neither sensitive nor strategic to use the same wording for the largely bloodless takeover of Crimea in 2014 and the current war that has led to headlines such as the "Bucha massacre" (e.g. Webrová, 2022). In particular, EU and NATO communications teams would face a major challenge if they tried to use HW again in their public messaging towards Russia. To do so, they would need to educate the public that, conceptually, there are two definitions of HW, military and non-military, and that only the former is useful for Russia's war against Ukraine. This is, if not an impossible, then at least a pointless task from the point of view of strategic communications. Hence, in the broader discourse HW is indefinitely associated with non-military activities such as cyberattacks, disinformation and election interference. Since HW lost its political edge, it can no longer be used to increase political pressure on the Russian leadership. Thus, the EU's and NATO's decision to drop HW from their political rhetoric towards Russia is logical.

However, this does not mean that HW is not useful at all. As shown, Hoffman's pre-Crimean account of HW could help analyse Russia's current war against Ukraine. Thus, intelligence analysts and defence planners at the EU and NATO could benefit from the concept in their daily business. In fact, given that Russia continues to wage HW, an attempt to completely remove HW from the threat assessment methodology of either the EU or NATO would be rather detrimental to the Western defence architecture. HW is a crucial conceptual framework since it focuses the attention of security analysts and defence planners on the significance of the multi-modal approach to warfare. Following Hoffman, the winning side in a conflict is the one that can combine different methods of warfare. In the Russian invasion of 2022, this proved true from the start. For example, Russia failed to capture Hostomel Airport until its forces implemented a combined arms approach. Thus, HW could help intelligence analysts analyse the reasons for Russia's poor track record in Ukraine. Meanwhile, EU and NATO defence planners could also learn valuable lessons about what constitutes a robust defence architecture. To that end, this article briefly discusses two implications for defence planning.

The first implication is inward-looking. While Western countries have already consolidated politically in response to the war in Ukraine, they must also be more cohesive in developing operational capabilities. Ideally, the West should eliminate bifurcation and develop multi-purpose defence capabilities. While this is a long-term task, the least that Western defence architects can do in a shorter timeframe is improve the internal cohesion of the various assets they already manage. Several steps can be taken to this end. The EU and NATO staff must regularly map each organisation's defence assets to manage their coordination and create synergies. Next, better situational awareness and fusion of different intelligence sources are critical. For example, signals and human intelligence must be combined into a single product. This would allow for better foresight and early warning mechanisms to ensure ample time for coordination when needed. These mechanisms must use big data technologies to identify all threat patterns. An example of a helpful initiative in this area is NATO's Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA). DIANA brings together academics, innovators, and the armed forces to jointly develop new defence technologies (NATO, 2023).

Such initiatives that enable civil-military cooperation must be further developed. Regular multilateral exercises must be conducted to enhance interoperability across sectors and allied countries. Since 2017, the EU and NATO have started carrying out parallel and coordinated exercises involving HW scenarios, which is a welcome development (Hybrid CoE, 2017, p. 4). To be sure, the cooperation between NATO and the EU is vital, as the two organisations have complementary instruments of power. While the former has military expertise, the latter has a broad set of civilian tools that can be useful in countering unconventional warfare, such as propaganda. An example of the

EU's capacity in this regard is the creation of the European Digital Media Observatory, which aims to create an EU network of fact-checkers.

Admittedly, the EU and NATO have a complicated relationship. However, their traditional communication barriers are less rigid when countering HW is at stake (Raik and Järvenpää, 2017, p. 12). For example, following its establishment, their representatives can and must meet regularly in Helsinki under the auspices of the Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats to foster new channels for communication. Streamlined intra- and inter-institutional communication is crucial, and the HW framework can contribute by providing the various stakeholders with a common language on new security challenges. However, the use of HW as a common language is conditional on having a clearer collective understanding of the phenomenon. The EU and NATO defence architects would thus benefit from revisiting their understanding of HW based on Hoffman's original ideas. This analysis has shown that his pre-Crimean definition provides a concrete and, hence, actionable conceptual framework.

The second implication is outward-looking. If internal cohesion is critical to success in an armed conflict, the West must develop capabilities to disrupt the cohesion of any adversarial forces. To some extent, this is a task for Special Operations Forces. However, their work must be complemented by other lines of effort. First, the EU and NATO need to develop a more sophisticated cyber toolkit. There is still no consensus at NATO on the use of offensive cyber capabilities (Lonergan and Montgomery, 2022). But data exfiltration, cyber espionage and deception, and other cyber tools must be available to NATO staff when circumstances require them. Second, electronic warfare is essential to disrupting any adversary's ability to communicate. In the framework of the Permanent Structured Cooperation, some EU member states have started to map the EU's electronic warfare gaps (e.g. Permanent Structured Cooperation, no date). Yet, the number of states participating in such efforts is limited, so EU staff will need to encourage more member states to join. Finally, options for psychological operations (PSYOPS) are also needed. Studies commissioned by the European Defence Agency recognise the need to integrate cyber warfare with PSYOPS, but it is unclear if the EU member states have followed this advice (European Defence Agency, 2018, p. 24).

CONCLUSION

After the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine, many scholars considered that HW was no longer a valuable conceptual tool for analysing Russia's actions against its neighbouring country, as large-scale conventional war does not fit the definition of HW. This article has set out to demonstrate that this statement is only correct as far as the modern or post-Crimean definition of HW is concerned. In fact, many authors overlook the fact that there are two very different understandings of HW: the original, pre-Crimean account of the phenomenon and its post-Crimean version, which became the dominant definition of HW after 2014. While attempting to apply the contemporary version of HW would have been unreasonable as it focuses on non-military phenomena, the original military-centric framework was promising. The original version of the concept, developed by Hoffman and other USMC officers, suggests that conventional warfare is indeed an essential component of waging HW.

The empirical findings support the initial argument. Russian HW is not in decline but is rather shifting towards an earlier understanding of the phenomenon, which puts a greater emphasis on using military force and violence. That is, if Hoffman's definition of HW is applied, Russia does wage HW because it perpetrates indiscriminate violence and combines conventional and unconventional warfare. Through the study of four military engagements, the analysis found strong evidence of such multi-modal activities, which are the hallmark of Hoffman's HW. For instance, when trying to capture Kyiv, Russia waged unconventional warfare, such as sabotage, in the city centre while deploying heavy equipment on the outskirts of the capital. While some of this multi-modality was part of Russia's original planning, another part was only introduced out of necessity during the war as the weaknesses of the Russian forces were exposed. In the Battle for Hostomel Airport, for example, Russia switched to combined arms warfare because it was otherwise unable to capture the facility. After the loss at Kharkiv, the Kremlin began to use more irregular units to compensate for the poor performance of its professional soldiers. The result was a mixture of regular and irregular units, a defining feature of Hoffman's HW. While Hoffman would have expected such a combination to be a product of Russia's initial strategy, HW out of necessity and not by design is HW nonetheless, and that does not mean that Hoffman's concept is useless.

On the contrary, if operating on HW's assumptions, the organisational change in Russia's strategy was logical. Therefore, the empirical findings not only support the original argument but can also detail it. Specifically, if the original definition of HW is applied, Russian HW is not declining because of the introduction of conventional warfare. The two are inextricably linked, as the Kremlin's decision to launch a conventional campaign against Ukraine was a precondition for HW. One led to the other, as the Kremlin had to find ways to compensate for its weaknesses to wage conventional warfare. Let us assume that the likely scenario of a war of attrition unfolds. In this case, HW becomes

an even more robust conceptual framework for analysing the measures Russia would take to compensate for its dwindling war resources.

The analytical value of HW, however, does not mean that the concept must return to the West's political rhetoric towards Russia. When the EU and NATO adopted the concept in 2014 to condemn Russia's bloodless takeover of Crimea, the framework lost much of its edge. Still, the HW concept must not be completely removed from the toolbox and the daily work of the EU and NATO. In fact, not using the concept in operational analysis and defence planning would be detrimental to Western security since Russia's approach to warfare does correspond to HW. For example, as far as defence planning is concerned, applying the HW framework would ensure that all vulnerabilities in Western defence are addressed by focusing the attention of stakeholders on the importance of cohesion. Steps must be taken to strengthen the internal cohesion of Western defence assets and to develop operational capabilities that can disrupt the cohesion of adversarial forces. The only prerequisite to draw value from the HW conceptual framework is to revert to using the original, pre-Crimean version of HW, which is far more appropriate for current Russian strategy and operations.

Further research can be conducted in two specific directions. As mentioned above, a more comprehensive analysis can be performed. This would cover a longer period of time, more theatres of operations, and other factors that could not be explored in detail in this analysis. In addition to further operational assessment, an in-depth institutional analysis is needed to examine how the HW concept influences the relationship between the EU and NATO. When it comes to countering HW, cooperation between the two organisations is crucial, as they have complementary instruments of power. It is therefore important to study whether they have developed new mechanisms for inter-institutional coordination, stimulated by the new conceptual paradigm that HW brings. Ultimately, the significance of concepts such as HW is not measured by how perfectly they depict the causal mechanisms of modern conflict but by their ability to encourage conversations about innovative defence policies and capabilities.

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