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Different Regional Theatres

This chapter aims to contextualise the notion of hybrid warfare in three regional theatres. Different political, economic and strategic contexts offer to state and non-state actors peculiar ways to employ “hybrid warfare” tools; as a consequence, this chapter intends to take into account case studies in order to highlight: how the specific context impacts on the hybrid warfare notion; how various actors can use different approaches; how hybrid warfare changes in different strategic environments. In the academic literature, hybrid warfare is a rather nebulous term, therefore, in this chapter we will use the two most common meanings of the notion of hybrid warfare: as a way to describe modern irregular groups and their method of fighting; a concept used to describe Russian operations during and after the conquest of Crimea in 2014.

Middle East: The Islamic State Case

In the section that follows, the case study of the Islamic State (ISIS) is presented as a good example of hybrid warfare. In this context, hybrid warfare describes a modern and technological insurgency, i.e. a modern conceptualisation of the notion of “irregular conflict”, that is a conflict in which at least one actor is not a State. Consequently, hybrid warfare can be understood as a synonym of guerrilla warfare, low intensity conflict and similar concepts. In this context, the notion was first used and defined by Frank Hoffman and according to his ideas, hybrid warfare is based on four key elements. First, regular and irregular elements become blurred into the same force in the same battle space, even though the irregular component becomes operationally decisive.² As far as ISIS is concerned, this feature is evident looking at its operation in Iraq and Syria where it has used conventional infantry tactics in several occasions. During 2015 Spring, ISIS tried to conquer the city of Ramadi, in May it finally was able to

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² HOFFMAN 2007.

do it employing a coordinated attack. The first round of the attack was composed of a bulldozer followed by several large cargo and dump trucks that were crawling toward the heavily barricaded Iraqi checkpoints. Iraqi Security Forces did not have any anti-tank weapons but only machine guns and rifles that were useless against the ISIS vehicles armoured by steel plates. Therefore, the bulldozer began to remove the concrete barriers that blocked the road until it was clear. When a breach was created, the trucks began to pour through. These trucks were vehicle-borne bombs that was another ISIS speciality, a very effective weapon using a technology remarkably simple. When the trucks reached their target, its suicide bomber drivers detonated the payload producing two results: it destroyed the Iraqi defensive positions and shocked who were not killed. So, the suicide trucks were used as a Precision Guided Munition and of artillery fire in conventional Western way of war.³ Thereafter, ISIS foot soldiers assaulted the Iraqi defence positions and conquered the city. Therefore, in this occasion ISIS developed a coordinated attack using “artillery” and “infantry” to achieve the desired results. During the battle of Mosul in 2017, ISIS was able, even though it lost the battle at the end, to fight a conventional urban battle against Iraqi forces supported by Kurdish militias and U.S. special forces and airpower. The battle of Mosul lasted as long as the battle of Verdun during the First World War and demonstrated the ability of ISIS to slow down the Iraqi advance and produce a very costly battle. Similar situations were repeated in other cities like Ramadi, Raqqa in Syria and Sirte in Libya. Moreover, ISIS in other battles used artillery fire to pound enemy defensive positions or to support infantry units, used tanks and other military equipment seized from the Iraqi Army. In this context, it is also fair to say that ISIS, and other non-state actors in the Middle East like Hezbollah, Hamas and other Shia militias in Iraq, are increasingly using modern weapons such as MANPADS.⁴ The second element of hybrid warfare is that terrorism becomes the main fighting method. This is certainly true for ISIS because terrorist tactics are easier and cheaper to use than more conventional ones. ISIS has relayed on terrorist tactics in cities where it had not the control of terrain, but it also used terrorism as a tactic to terrorise the local population in order to gain its support, as it did, for instance, in Mosul during the months and weeks before the conquest of the city. However, ISIS is not a true terrorist group because ‘pure’ terrorist groups do not hold terrain as ISIS did in Iraq and

³ OLLIVANT 2016.

⁴ VINSON–CALDWELL 2016.

Syria and elsewhere. This control of terrain and its ability to boast some 30,000 fighters can better define ISIS as an insurgent group. Furthermore, ISIS has a “transnational nature” that explains both its use of terrorism, because it is a perfect stand-off tactics to cross national borders and strike targets that are not in the main theatre of operations; and the way in which it controlled terrain using ideology and people who shared the same understanding of Islam. The third element of hybrid groups is their use of modern technology “to avoid predictability and seek advantage in unexpected ways and ruthless modes of attack”.⁵ ISIS has used technology in several different ways. First, it has used modern media and social media to broadcast its propaganda. We can divide ISIS video propaganda into two different types. Soft propaganda that targeted people who already supported the group, or were already sympathetic to the group, and aimed to show how good ISIS was in organising the life inside the Caliphate. The goal was to convince people to move to Iraq and Syria, live under the ISIS rule with their family and fight for it. Hard propaganda composed of the most violent and brutal videos of killing prisoners, beheaded westerners and so on, the goal of which was to terrorise both local and Western population and security forces in order to soften their ability to resist. Second, it uses modern weapons, or it has created–modified its own. Mainly in Syria and Iraq it has used chlorine gas, it has manufactured its own tele-operated sniper rifles and submachine guns. Moreover, during the battle of Mosul in Iraq, ISIS has widely used drones in offensive operations. Finally, the fourth element of hybrid warfare is related to the battle space because hybrid war, like every irregular war, takes place in complex terrain, most likely the burgeoning cities of the developing world. The most recent and important battles against ISIS were all fought in an urban environment. Among the most recent examples, not only related to ISIS, are: Aleppo, Syria, 19 July 2012 to 22 December 2016; Ghouta, Syria, 7 April 2013 to 14 April 2018; Deir ez-Zor, Syria, 14 July 2014 to 10 September 2017; Ilovaïsk, Ukraine, 7 August 2014 to 2 September 2014; Kobani, Syria, 13 September 2014 to 26 January 2015; Debal’tseve, Ukraine, 14 January 2015 to 20 February 2015; Ramadi, Iraq, 11 August 2015 to 9 February 2016; Sirte, Libya, 12 May to 6 December 2016; Fallujah, Iraq, 22 May 2016 to 29 June 2016; Mosul, Iraq, 16 October 2016 to 20 July 2017; Raqqa, Syria, 6 November 2016 to 17 October 2017; Marawi, Philippines, 23 May 2017 to 23 October 2017; Tal Afar, Iraq, 20 August 2017 to 2 September 2017. ISIS is a “hybrid” threat because

⁵ HOFFMAN 2007.

in Iraq, in Syria, in Libya and in Egypt it has used both modern advanced weapons, such as armoured vehicles, tanks, missiles, drones, artillery and conventional-like infantry tactics and terrorism, and guerrilla warfare. It has also used suicide attackers and suicide vehicle borne IED as a kind of cruise missile able to strike precisely the desired target. Reading the problem of suicide attacks in this light, Bunker and Sullivan underline two features of the tactics included even in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) concept of stand-off weapons. First of all, the suicide fighter is invisible to the defender who reckons that they are under attack only when the explosion has occurred. In this way the suicide attack is a surprise attack and represents the most important tactics in an irregular war. Secondly, suicide bombings could be absolutely precise, enabling the attacker to hit difficult and well protected targets, and they are flexible enough to change target or attack procedure if necessary.⁶ Another common feature between modern weapon systems and suicide bombing is the ability to project force. Cruise missiles, aircraft like B2 and so on were designed to penetrate in-depth into enemy territory due to their “invisibility”, a suicide fighter can carry out the same deep penetration, albeit with less destructive power, allowing the militias to strike in territories which are far beyond the recognised battlefield. According to Lewis, suicide bombing is not simply a metaphor of technology, it is a kind of technology: “In this light, suicide bombing appears as a technological solution to a practical problem.”⁷ While the United States, in particular, have spent billions and billions on technological research and innovation, militias use what they have in a new and unexpected way. Moreover, while the United States installs in their bombs or missiles devices able to guide them precisely to the target, ISIS and other militias, who have not the same technology, money and research possibilities, have used a “human device” for the same purpose.⁸

MENA region: The Russian operations

The notion of hybrid warfare has also been used in a completely different strategic context compared to the previous one focused on non-state actors, militias,

⁶ BUNKER–SULLIVAN 2004.

⁷ LEWIS 2007.

⁸ For an in-depth analysis see BERTOLOTTI–BECCARO 2015.

the role of terrorism and so on in order to describe recent Russian military operations. In this sense, the notion of hybrid warfare was “originally introduced by NATO’s Allied Command Transformation as part of planning for out of area activities” and then it “gained a foothold in NATO Headquarters in mid-2014 as ‘the Russian hybrid model in Ukraine’ became a means of explaining operations that did not fit neatly into NATO’s operational concepts”.⁹ However, understood in this way hybrid warfare can hardly be considered a doctrine for Russia’s power projection.¹⁰ This is evident looking at Russian operations in Syria and then in Africa. Traditionally,¹¹ Moscow perceived Syria and the Middle East to be part of its extended neighbourhood, and Syria has been Moscow’s closest Arab ally since the Cold War.¹² It is true that Russia’s influence on Syrian policy has been, and is currently, limited; however, the two countries have developed a strong political, economic and military relationship since the 1950s. Moreover, Moscow has viewed Damascus as a potential foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean, with its warm water ports at Tartus. Although the relevance of this military base can be questioned since the fleet’s dismissal in 1991, it was the only Mediterranean base that Russian vessels may have used. In addition to its military base and its geopolitical role, while Syria is not the most important economic partner, it has always been an important one for Russia.¹³ Moscow has always supported Assad politically and diplomatically. Russia played a key role in 2012, reaching an agreement with the United States regarding the destruction of Syria’s chemical arsenal. However, Russia’s goal in Syria has never been to “win the war” for Assad; instead, it has been to preserve the pro-Russian Syrian state system. Consequently, Moscow strengthened its military presence, fortifying its air base in Hmeimim and its naval base in Tartus, and intensifying cooperation with Iran-backed Shiite ground troops in an attempt to cleanse Syria’s key areas of anti-Assad opposition. The Russian military presence in Syria has improved not only the fighting effectiveness of the Syrian Army and paramilitary units but also, and probably most importantly for Moscow, Assad’s negotiating position with rebel groups.¹⁴ In the MENA region, Moscow is seeking to deny NATO

⁹ GILES 2016: 8.

¹⁰ KOFMAN–ROJANSKY 2015.

¹¹ BECCARO 2021.

¹² VASILIEV 2018.

¹³ KOZHANOV 2013.

¹⁴ SOULEIMANOV–DZUTSATI 2018.

freedom of movement and impede the United States' success in playing the role of regional hegemon. Consequently, Russia first reinforced the Black Sea Fleet to use it as a platform for denying NATO access to Ukraine and the Caucasus, and to serve as a platform for power projection into the Mediterranean and Middle East. Studying modern American military operations, Russia has inferred that one way to hinder, or even to negate American military superiority, is to create an environment where American air power cannot operate, or cannot operate freely, and thus an environment where the United States Air Force cannot use all of its arsenal in an uncontested way. In order to achieve this goal, an A2/AD strategy, i.e. Anti-Access Area Denial, has to be developed. The goal of this concept is to prevent an opponent from entering into theatre (Anti-Access) by means of long-range weapons, and deprive it of freedom of action in the theatre (Area Denial) by means of shorter-range tools. To carry out A2/AD tasks, the entire range of missiles is used, including surface-to-air missiles (SAM), anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), mines or drones. Russia has been increasingly using the A2/AD measures, and Syria is now part of Russia's defence system. The western Russian flank is now completely closed to Western air forces because Russia has altered the security balance in the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East by establishing large Anti-Access Area Denial exclusion zones, while the north section of the flank had been an exclusion zone for years. Russia operates advanced air defence not only within its own territory but also from sites in Syria and Crimea, as well as cooperatively through the Joint Air Defence Network in Belarus and Armenia. This use of modern military weapons, air power, the creation of A2/AD bubbles and so on are the most clear and straightforward examples of conventional military approach. Russian military operations in Syria were mainly based on the airpower and this is a novelty in the context of Russian military approach, but it is not hybrid. Moreover, in Syria, despite various technical setbacks, Russia tested modern weapons, such as the new attack helicopter Mil Mi-28, used its only aircraft carrier, which was a novelty in Russian military operations, fired ballistic and cruise missiles from sea and Russian territory, and used its Special Operations Forces (SOFs) in their classic role of training and support forces to local allies. Russia used almost its entire conventional arsenal because Syria was a testing ground for new weapons and to advertise them for sale abroad, and because Russian capabilities had to impress Western audiences and create a sort of

deterrence.¹⁵ Furthermore, Chief of Russia's General Staff General Valery Gerasimov stated that the Russian military is acquiring priceless combat experience in Syria because Russian servicemen have been deployed on short tours, in order to maximise exposure to real operating conditions and to "training" under real conditions.¹⁶ Nothing of what we have previously described suggests a new approach to military operations and strategy and lead to use a new label as "hybrid warfare". On the contrary, the Russian approach in Syria emulated the U.S. approach based on stand-off fire, air power, small units on the ground to support local allies. In spite of these findings about the notion of hybrid warfare and Russian operations, the African case study is more consistent with the notion of hybrid warfare. However, it is fair to say that such approach is not new since it is a classic approach of influence, economic and military support that the U.S. and Western countries have extensively used labelling as soft power. Russia's expansion of military, economic and political cooperation with Africa has grown in recent years. For example, Russia signed more than 20 bilateral defence agreements with African countries, increased its trade volume with the continent, and also expanded its media presence.¹⁷ In doing this, Russia capitalised on frustrations with Western policies and skilfully played the anti-colonialism card on the African continent. The result of this Russian growing influence has been the first Russia–Africa summit in 2019. Another sign of Russian leverage in the continent has been the fact that 24 out of the 54 African countries did not support the UN General Assembly resolution in March condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Another important sector that highlights the Russian role in Africa is the military as Russia is the largest supplier of arms to Africa, accounting for 44% of the imports to the region between 2017 and 2021.¹⁸ Compared to the Syria case study, in Africa Moscow has used a completely different approach, far less military and much more economic and diplomatic. These engagements extend from deepening ties in North Africa (Algeria, which is an old and traditional ally since the Cold War; Libya in which Moscow has been able to take advantage of the chaos created by NATO intervention in 2011; Egypt), expanding its reach in the Central African Republic and the Sahel, and rekindling Cold War ties in southern Africa. Moscow typically relies on

¹⁵ BLANK 2019.

¹⁶ GILES 2019: 287–288.

¹⁷ DREYFUS 2020.

¹⁸ WEZEMAN et al. 2022.

irregular and/or extra-legal means to expand its influence: deployment of mercenaries, disinformation, election interference, support for coups, and arms for resources deals. This is a low-cost strategy which can exert a significant influence to advance Russian interests. In contrast with Chinese inroads into the African continent, which have a much larger footprint and consist of visible infrastructure projects, Russia manages to accrue influence more haphazardly by playing to its strength and exploiting Western weaknesses. While the sustainability of Moscow's influence can be doubted, its efforts are proving effective and can be conducted cheaply. One important element of Russian influence in Africa is the rhetoric that support it. Moscow presents itself as a natural ally to African states, one that respects their sovereignty, in contrast to neo-imperialist Western States. Not only this approach has been used in several countries like the Central African Republic (CAR), South Africa, Sudan, Libya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali, but it also refers to the Soviet Union's legacy of supporting liberation struggles and post-colonial governments. Russia's soft power in Africa is run primarily by a vast net of politico-oligarchic individuals and their networks.¹⁹ This approach has several advantages. First, Russian interests are tied to individuals and their networks and as a result they are resilient to political changes. Generally speaking, the Russian approach is more pragmatic and less ideological than the Western one, so it is not interested in the legal status or democratic legitimacy of its local partners. Second, it provides a veneer of deniability, since Russia's agents act independently, this also allows Moscow to establish networks without straining the administration's budget. An important element of Russian intervention in Africa is related to the use of private military companies. The Kremlin, therefore, has been able to consolidate its strategy and fully capitalise on the advantages inherent in the use of Private Military Companies. By deploying more and more contractors rather than regular troops, Russia has obtained natural resources, minerals, energy, strategic positions. According to Faulkner, the Wagner Group has operated in as many as 28 countries across the globe, but it has become most visible on the African continent, having deployed to at least 18 African states since 2016.²⁰ The strength of this expansionism lies in offering political leaders complete and economic solutions to stay in power: training and advice to local security forces, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, protection of natural resources and strategic

¹⁹ ORIZIO 2022.

²⁰ FAULKNER 2022.

infrastructures. In exchange for their services, the Russians obtain mining, energy and other commercial contracts through specially created companies: M-Invest and Meroe Gold in Sudan, EvroPolis in Syria, M-Finans, Lobaye Invest and Sewa Security Services in the Central African Republic and others. Since May 2018, the Wagner Group has supported general Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army – LNA. In addition to training militiamen and arms transfers, Wagner soldiers took part in the failed attempt to conquer Tripoli in September 2019. The Russian contractors also conquered and garrisoned oil fields and infrastructures in the so-called Libyan oil crescent. In the summer of 2020, for example, al-Sharara and Es-Sider ended up in their hands: respectively the most important oil field and the main port oil terminal in the country. In 2017, the Wagner Group was hired by Omar al-Bashir in Sudan to strengthen his regime, training the Army and subsequently participating in the repression of street protests that broke out in December 2018. The Russian military company, through M-Invest and Meroe Gold, would also be in charge of the safety and exploitation of gas, oil and gold fields, as well as prospecting projects for the extraction of uranium in the western part of the country and in the Darfur. These mining concessions by the fifth largest gold producer in Africa would have allowed Moscow to increase its gold reserves, mitigating the effects of Western sanctions. At the end of March 2018, Russian contractors arrived also in the Central African Republic to protect President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and support him in the ongoing ethnic-religious civil war. In addition to training local security forces, Wagner's men helped repel an offensive by the rebel which, after taking control of areas south and west of Bangui, threatened the capital itself. In September 2019, the Wagner Group arrived in Mozambique and at the same time Moscow forgave 95% of Mozambique's debt and proposed a whole series of industrial, commercial and military cooperation agreements. The initial Wagner's assignment was to protect President Filipe Nyusi and support his political position. Wagner's mission then extended to a counterinsurgency operation against Islamic guerrillas who since 2017 have spread death and destruction in the region of Cabo Delgado, rich in important natural gas fields. In Mali, the Wagner Group arrived in December 2021 with the task of training the local Armed Forces, the protection of some political figures and fighting local jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda.²¹ This situation angered Paris which

²¹ ORIZIO 2022.

soon announced the official withdrawal from the country of all its troops by June 2022 along with the forces of a dozen European partners (including the Italian contingent of the Takuba Task Force).

East Asia: China

Modern international politics has some revisionist powers whose aim is to erode and slightly change the current balance of the international system. Russia is one, but also Iran and China have revisionist goals, even though they are different in scope and possibilities. At least in terms of economy, China and Russia differ profoundly. Russia has a weak and stagnant economy that relies mainly on the energy sector, while China is one of the most important economies of the world. However, China shares with Russia a similar political position because both are revisionist powers, they try to undermine the U.S. position, they both are nuclear powers and member of the UN Security Council. During the last decade, both countries have collaborated in the military sector and done drills together. Nevertheless, the competition between the two is probably a serious obstacle for a closer collaboration in terms of military technology. China can use and has used Gray Zone Warfare tools to improve its political position on several issues. The last example is probably the use of propaganda after the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. The use of propaganda, information and the Internet is a central tool for each country that has global or regional goals. The Chinese strategic thought is one of the most important traditions in the world, suffice it to mention Sun Tzu and Mao Tze Tung. Soon after the end of the Cold War, two colonels in the People's Liberation Army, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui wrote the book *Unrestricted Warfare*²² in which they try to explain how a nation such as China can defeat a technologically superior opponent (such as the United States) through a variety of means. Rather than focusing on direct military confrontation, the book instead examines a variety of other means, including the use of International Law and a variety of economic means to place one's opponent in a bad position and circumvent the need for direct military action. The book aims to devise a strategy to fight and win a war against a stronger opponent without using military means, and, therefore, it lists alternative methods that in contemporary world characterised by a rapid and

²² LIANG–XIANGSUI 1999.

continuous technology evolution and economic interdependence can have the same destructive force than traditional military warfare. For instance, because of the international nature of the modern world and activism, it is much easier for nation states to effect policy in other nation states through a proxy. Consequently, lawfare or political action through transnational or non-governmental organisations can effect a policy change that would be impossible otherwise. This is the notion of colour revolution that Moscow used some years later and influenced the Russian understanding of 21st international politics. Owing to the interconnected nature of global economics, nations can inflict grievous harm on the economies of other nations without taking any military offensive action, suffice it to mention economic sanctions. This is another element that Russian strategic debate is using to describe current security environment. One of the better-known ideas in the book is that of attacking networks (data exchange, transportation, financial institutions and communication). Attacks that disable networks can easily hamstring large areas of life that are dependent on them for coordination. This is an example of cyberattack and the use of the Internet to harm the enemy without using military force directly. Finally, terrorism erodes a nation's sense of security, even though the direct effects of the attacks only concern a minute percentage of the population. As the Russian strategic debate that sees the Gulf War the turning point in modern warfare and technology as the most important element, the book aims to describe war and international competition in an era of increasing technology evolution. The American strategic debate of those years was focused on how technology has impacted warfare and on the notion of Revolution in Military Affairs. The 1991 Gulf War showed the American technological gap and consequently less advanced armies needed both new tools and new ideas. In this new and highly technological context, information technology plays the most important role: it has radically changed warfare. However, this radical revolution is an underway process that started during the Cold War and will continue in the next decades. According to the authors, even the most modern weapon system is old because it has been made using old conceptions of war. Consequently, in the new context a new approach is needed. As the new weapons are increasingly costly, it is necessary to find cheaper way of attacks, i.e. a new approach to weapons. This means that weapons have to be seen outside the mere military sphere, but have to be seen as a tool that transcend military force. This new way to understand weapons encompasses everything that can be used against the opponent: civil protest, economic measures, information and so on. The battlefield of such conflict is everywhere because

it encompasses cyberspace and the Internet and consequently information and propaganda. The actors are not only traditional state and their armies, but also hackers and non-state actors. *Unrestricted Warfare* has several shortcomings; however, it shares interesting elements with the notion of Gray Zone Warfare. First, it describes a holistic approach to strategy that mix military, economic, political, informational elements in one single strategic plan. Second, it breaks down the dividing lines between civilian and military affairs and between peace and war.²³ Third, the adjective “unrestricted” does not refer to a kind of warfare with extreme violence (a kind of nuclear Armageddon), but to the fact that in the 21st century security environment is not limited to military tool, but it encompasses economic, financial, social, political sphere and means. Despite the fact that the book was written by two colonels of the Chinese Armed forces, it should be noted that it did not represent official military doctrine. While China, as Russia, is using GZW tools to improve its political position and developing military tools to counterbalance the U.S. military strength, i.e. A2/AD strategy in the Pacific region, one should be wary of the idea that a future confrontation between China and the U.S. will be a kind of indirect war of rapprochement or proxy war. A more likely scenario is an economic competition, with non-violent subversion, and, if that fails, high-intensity warfare. This because China’s greatest strength is its economic might. It is the world’s leading trading nation, and uses its global reach to export everything from consumer goods to high-tech tools. The result of this dominance is the Belt and Road Initiative, in which Chinese firms have spent more than \$450 billion building infrastructure around the world since 2013. The Belt and Road Initiative highlights the Chinese approach to the international system, because when inducement fails, China does not hesitate to employ coercion and even espionage to achieve desirable trade terms. Moreover, China is willing to exploit asymmetric economic interdependence and economic leverage to force other states to take political and military actions it desires.²⁴ On the one hand, China is investing in a “Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese characteristics” developing A2/AD strategy for denying the western Pacific to American forces, in part by making extensive use of guided missiles deployed in a decentralised manner. An important element of this strategy is the artificial island bases that allow China to control the sea and airspace of the South China Sea at the outbreak of hostilities. As a consequence,

²³ MAZARR 2015.

²⁴ MATTIS–BRAZIL 2019.

the South China Sea is a no-man's land for most U.S. forces (submarines excepted) giving the islands considerable military value for Beijing. However, the aim of the artificial islands is not only to be an element of a conventional military strategy against the United States, but also to use civilian and paramilitary pressure to coerce neighbouring states, making it prohibitively risky for South-east Asian players to operate in the South China Sea. The threat dissuades neighbouring states from using more forceful military responses against illegal actions and from supporting the U.S. that are not able to provide security. In these artificial islands, and in other islands in the area, China has deployed several fighting jets and this along with the distance from the nearest U.S. base has enabled Beijing to have a full dominance of air space in the region. Considering that China has deployed in these islands anti-ship missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, radar and signals intelligence capabilities, that such facilities are very vast and spread out across a considerable area, they represent an almost insurmountable defence line. They represent both an asymmetric tool since the construction of artificial island to change the geography of the battle space is something surprising and it exploits an adversary weakness; and a major element of a conventional strategy and not hybrid because such islands are part of a conventional approach and confrontation based on aircraft, vessels and missiles. On the other hand, China has proven willing to employ nonviolent subversion worldwide because it considers actions below the threshold of armed conflict (influencing public opinion, legal and psychological warfare) essential to success in future competition. Consequently, China is more likely to employ economic and informational tools to achieve its aims, while focusing on partnerships with state actors and striving to remain below the threshold of armed conflict. As far as the cyber dimension is concerned, "China has developed official military doctrine for cyberwarfare, trained large numbers of military officers to conduct offensive operations on the internet, and conducted an extensive series of exercises and simulations".²⁵ Moreover, Beijing has done it partially in consultation with Russia.²⁶ Chinese strategy uses GZW approach because it emphasises the holistic, multi-domain aspects of military confrontations, tightly integrating political, diplomatic, informational and economic elements. Moreover, China tends to favour patient, indirect approaches.

²⁵ BREEN-GELTZER 2011: 48.

²⁶ BREEN-GELTZER 2011: 48.

Conclusion

In different geopolitical contexts the notion of hybrid warfare assumes different meaning and encompasses different approaches. In a more conflictual situation like the Middle East, hybrid warfare has been used to describe modern militias that leverage contemporary strategic trends such as the increasing role of terrorist tactics, the urbanisation of conflicts and the use of modern technology to improve the military capabilities of so-called irregular groups (from social media for propaganda purposes to the use of both commercial and military drones). The Russian approach in the MENA region and Africa is very different and is more related to the notion of soft power because in this context hybrid warfare is a set of economic contracts, military deals and political influence. At the same time in Syria, Russia has used a more traditional military approach based on airpower and A2/AD that can be hardly labelled as hybrid. The China approach has been described also as Grey Zone Warfare meaning that Beijing operates in the area between war and peace using both political–economic–diplomatic leverage along with some kind of conventional military tools to improve its global and regional geopolitical position.

Questions

1. In which way can you describe ISIS warfare?
2. How did Russia intervene in Syria?
3. How did Russia operate in Africa?
4. Why does *Unrestricted Warfare* define China approach to warfare?

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