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Research Report

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A Hybrid Security Policy for Europe

Resilience, Deterrence, and Defense as Leitmotifs

Claudia Major and Christian Mölling

Under the term “hybrid warfare” the different methods with which Russia destabilizes Ukraine are discussed, be it propaganda or the infiltration of society. However, the problems that NATO and EU states face in dealing with hybrid threats go far beyond the Ukraine conflict – they point to systematic vulnerabilities of Western societies. This greater spectrum of risks disappears from view, because the current debate is focused on the conflict with Russia and its military dimension. The next conflict may already not follow the Ukrainian pattern. Therefore, EU and NATO must place systematic vulnerabilities at the center of a hybrid security policy, which should build upon a reorganized relationship of resilience, deterrence, and defense.

“Hybrid warfare” means to use, in a coordinated way, conventional military and unconventional civilian and military means in a conflict. Currently the term is almost exclusively defined in light of Russian behavior in Ukraine, which applies tools such as propaganda and military personnel without insignia. However, the unique security political challenge is to shape a future hybrid security policy, rather than adding interpretations of the current Ukraine conflict.

The current crisis highlights the general vulnerabilities of EU and NATO states – they are largely unprepared for this form of conflict, which other actors could also wage against Europe in the future. EU and NATO states should seize the opportunity that comes with the current security political awareness and willingness to act, which

emerged with the Ukraine crisis, to develop a “Hybrid Security Policy Action Plan”. It should be guided by two questions: Which European weaknesses could opponents exploit? How can Europe prepare itself and reduce such risks?

Civilian Tools in a Military Context

Hybrid tactics are traditional components of warfare. It is a basic principle of strategy that all means are employed to assert one’s interests and that this is most effective if done in an orchestrated fashion.

The distinguishing feature of hybrid tactics is the use of civilian tools in violent conflicts. In hybrid conflicts, armed forces are not primary a tool to exert military force: They rather serve as a means to create a scenario of intimidation. The idea of war

as a struggle between two armies does not apply here. Consequently, military responses by NATO-forces are not the first or most appropriated security policy tool. Instead, irregular means are used to bring a conflict into an area in which the (military) capabilities of the opponents are less decisive. It is about using the weaknesses of the opponent, particularly the vulnerabilities of societies. Thus, the gray area between peace and conflict expands – violence is still a core means, it is not clearly attributable to either party to the conflict, nor of a definite military character. This makes a joint reaction of the international community more difficult and undermines the internationally recognized prohibition on the use of force.

Russian actions help to reveal Europe's difficulties in responding to hybrid approaches, which often use tools that run counter to European norms – such as the incitement of ethnic minorities. Therefore, such a course of action exploits Europe's values by turning them into weaknesses.

Four Kinds of Vulnerability

The EU and NATO states are vulnerable in four areas. Besides the potential use of hybrid tactics, they also have to think of the classic military conflict.

Territorial integrity: The likelihood of a military conflict between EU/NATO and other actors has increased. One reason is military weakness: NATO itself has noted that it is not sufficiently prepared for a large interstate conflict. Other actors may be tempted to make use of this weakness to advance their own interests militarily. Particularly the Baltic States fear such a scenario.

Another reason could be that the EU and NATO states can hardly ignore conflicts on their borders – because it would destabilize the border region, because it affects their security interests or because conflict could spread. This is one of the reasons why European states get involved in the fight against the Islamic State (IS).

Both Ukraine and IS show that organized force – in various forms, and carried out by diverse actors – remains a core component of the continuous change of global and regional orders. As the EU and NATO could themselves become the targets of violence or could be hit by its effects, they must mitigate these risks.

Political cohesion: The Ukraine crisis has made it clear that the EU and NATO states only have influence when they act together. Bilateral negotiations and national measures against Russia would hardly have carried any weight. The unity of Europeans is at the same time a weak spot. In the current conflict, it depends significantly on the degree to which countries are affected: states that directly border Russia, with dependencies (such as on energy) or with historically strained relationships react more sensitively to Moscow's threats. Though Russia's behavior reverberates throughout Europe, parts of Eastern Europe feel much more directly threatened. The Baltics, for example, recall the Soviet annexation of 1940, while for other countries, especially in the South and West, Russia itself is not the main problem. France, for example, is more worried about instability in the Sahel.

The Europeans can only act jointly if they first agree on a common analysis of the problem and the type of response. Up until now, however, they have interpreted the conflict in Ukraine differently, for one thing because there are doubts concerning the accountability of hybrid actions: Who is involved and what kind of action is required? This uncertainty has the potential to divide Europe politically.

Interruption of global interdependences: One of Europe's main vulnerabilities comes from its interdependence. In the course of globalization, Western societies have become enormously dependent on international infrastructures and trade, service-, human-, and capital flows. The linkages are not restricted to European territory only, but are of a global nature – trade, energy, raw materials, or infrastructure, like internet communication. The openness from

which Europe profits also makes it susceptible to disruptions of its global inter-dependences.

“Internal” vulnerabilities of open societies: One significant lesson from the Ukraine crisis for EU and NATO is that an escalation is not likely to begin with an attack of armored divisions from the East, but rather through the destabilization from within, such as through the incitement of minorities. The Baltic States, for example, fear their Russian minorities be instrumentalized. Both the UK and France ponder how to handle returning IS fighters and home-grown terrorism.

This points to the growing significance of the social space as a point of reference for security precautions, in addition to the state and territorial borders of Europe. Also, the radicalization of people, for example through IS, occurs within European societies. The pluralism of European society means that different ethnic and religious communities jointly live in social spaces. This increases vulnerability if communities with incompatible values clash, if they are excluded, or if they no longer offer an identity for their members and they in turn then search for new guiding principles. Such situations cannot only breed extremists in the country itself, but could also instrumentalize those from outside.

Next to these social vulnerabilities, the technical foundations of social life are also increasingly subject to risks. Infrastructure, which ensures essential functions of our societies – supply of water and power, transport, finance- and economic systems – are often privately owned. They are profit motivated and are not designed to work under conflict conditions.

Three guiding themes

The EU has put the theme of hybrid warfare on the agenda of the next defense summit in June 2015. NATO also wants to present a concept. To realize an effective hybrid security policy, EU and NATO should 1) better connect existing instruments of security

policy and risk management, namely resilience, deterrence, and defense; and 2) readjust the mix of civilian and military shares in those three themes.

Resilience: The interconnectedness and openness of Western societies are simultaneously one of their greatest strengths and weaknesses. Their resilience needs to be increased: Societies have to be empowered to better resist and to quickly recover from various attacks on their values and every day functioning. As this must happen before hybrid tactics are applied, prevention becomes essential, including better early warning. The weaknesses that could be taken advantage of reach from economic dependence to discontent minorities; therefore, measures need to cover a wide range of areas – infrastructure as well as the freedom of the press and opinion.

Strengthening social unity: This demands a migration and integration policy that regards the diversity of societies as a basis worth safeguarding and manages immigration. These are in turn supported by economic, social, and education policy. It is necessary to integrate minorities in a way that renders them less sensitive to sedition and radicalization. In the Baltics, for example, this could be achieved among others through better youth work and an improved Russian-language media offer.

Also, border security and international trade offer tools to increase resilience. This would include, for example, securing the borders between the Baltic States and Russia to prevent the infiltration of irregular troops.

Increasing buffers in daily necessities: The resilience of the technical foundations of societies relies above all else on redundancies, network structures, and alternative supply routes – in the field of energy, for example, through the diversification of sources.

Deterrence: Military conflict – as a conventional war or as part of hybrid warfare – remains a risk for which Europeans must prepare. The goal of deterrence is that opponents perceive the risks associated with

an attack as higher than the anticipated gains, and consequently refrain from it.

During the Cold War, deterrence primarily had a military and a nuclear component. These dimensions remain relevant, but the prevention of an escalation brought about by hybrid means requires civilian tools, which can react quickly and directly to attempts to exploit weaknesses and dependencies. In addition to the measures described under “resilience”, internal security is crucial, the functioning of police and administrations; for example, Special Forces can support border security, or police and the judiciary can ensure the maintenance of the public order.

Defense: The most likely sort of scenario for which the military must prepare itself continues to lie somewhere between defense and crisis management: Should deterrence fail, the defense of territory and national institutions against a military attack remains the central task. However, crisis management cannot be neglected, because EU and NATO states cannot guarantee their security through territorial defense alone. In light of their global interdependences, they will be required to defend their security outside of Europe as well. The military here is an instrument of last resort in acute emergencies. The use of political and economic tools to defend and support a stable international order remains the priority, because such an order strengthens the openness and interconnectedness from which Europe benefits so tremendously. This applies even more as none of the emerging powers has so far been willing to take on international responsibility to a great extent.

Action Plan “Hybrid Security Policy”

Hybrid security policy is primarily a task of the states, as most opportunities for action are at the national and regional levels. However, states often do not possess the necessary measures, or to an insufficient degree. Therefore, EU and NATO states together with the EU institutions should develop a

European Action Plan for Hybrid Security Policy.

That would also serve to strengthen the political unity required for successful action. It could be useful to carry out an analysis of where and how Europe’s unity is vulnerable and what the consequences might be for EU and NATO members should single states not receive enough support. The findings could increase the willingness of states to agree on mutual support and prepare for future crises with practical measures – before the next real crisis strikes.

Since the 1967 Harmel Report, security remains the sum of defense and detente. Therefore, it is not enough to reduce the vulnerabilities of EU and NATO states. Permanent offers of dialogue and trust-building measures are needed, which contribute to de-escalation and pave the way for a cooperative approach to shape the future security order.

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