



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 334

March 2022

Hybrid War in Ukraine Will Have Blowback Impact on Europe



Brig Narender Kumar, SM, VSM (Retd), is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) and former Distinguished Fellow, USI (New Delhi).

Introduction

Ukraine's call to invite volunteers to fight against the invading Russian Forces in Ukraine may hastened up the process of initiation of hybrid war in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is not ready to deploy its forces in Ukraine due to fear of escalation of conflict. Therefore, arming the legions of domestic and foreign mercenaries, is one of the options of fighting back. The weapons being supplied by the US and individual European Nations are primarily small arms, anti-tank weapons and man portable air defence systems, that are best suited for hit and run tactics in built-up areas. If the NATO member countries continue to support Ukraine as individual countries, then Russian response will not be limited only to Ukraine but even Baltic States and East European Nations too will become the battleground. The only option Ukraine has now is to counter 'Russia through Hybrid War' whereas, the effectiveness of the Russian narrative depends on combining conventional military positioning with hybrid tactics or "active measures".¹

Key Points

- Russia believes that US is using Ukraine and promoting NATO expansion to contain Russian National Security interests.
- 'Hybrid warfare' is a central element of Russian Military Strategy and combining conventional military with hybrid tactics is demonstrated by Russia in war against Ukraine.
- Hybrid war is easy to initiate but difficult to extinguish. It may take decades and at times more than a lifetime, to end such conflict.
- Destabilised Ukraine will become a gateway for Russia to trigger instability in East Europe through refugees, mercenaries and anti-west Jihadist organisations.
- While arming civilians and legions, NATO member countries must keep in view that hybrid war will ultimately be fought on European soil and not on Russian soil.
- The status of Ukraine as a state may hang in balance if Russia is further provoked by proxy/hybrid war.
- Weaponising of economy is unlikely to deter Russia and sanctions will further harden Russian stance on Ukraine. It may be ideal to roll back sanctions if Russia is willing to end conflict.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an independent Think Tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional & sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

Website: www.claws.in

Contact us: landwarfare@gmail.com



Russia and NATO member countries must keep in view that hybrid war is easy to initiate but difficult to control and extinguish.

Frank Hoffman, a Former US Marine and defence expert wrote that, "Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder".² On the contrary, Russia's 'hybrid warfare' is a central element of its military strategy, in which operatives remain just below the radar and work with proxies to stage false flags operations to justify an invasion.³ Russia believes that US is using Ukraine and promoting NATO expansion to contain Russian national security interests and encroach on its traditional spheres of influence.⁴

Is Hybrid War Against Russia a Right Strategy?

Ukraine has given a call for volunteers to join them in their fight against Russian Forces. Some NATO allies also announced the type of weapons they would plan to supply to Ukraine⁵; the weapons include air defence man portable systems, antitank weapons and small arms. There is wide spread support from NATO member countries to arm and support domestic & international Legions of the Territorial Defence of Ukraine consisting of volunteers from Ukraine, Europe and non-European countries. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO has activated its response force, in addition Germany, France and others are sending man portable missiles and other weapon systems amid escalation.⁶ UK Foreign Secretary– Liz Truss was asked if it is fine with UK Government to allow volunteers to fight against Russians in Ukraine, to which she replied that , "she supports British nationals who might go to Ukraine to fight for democracy".⁷

In fact, there are two separate legions being raised by Ukraine with the support of European allies. *One* is 'volunteer force' consisting of Ukrainian nationals and the *second* is a 'separate unit of foreigners'— the International Territorial Defence Legion of Ukraine. Ukraine has promised that, they will be treated as fellow Ukrainian military members and will have the same rights— "A regular Ukrainian Army member makes \$3,500 per month. So, they will make the same money".⁸ There are reports that foreign mercenaries are being offered \$2,000 (£1,512) a day to fight against the Russian Troops as part of the new foreign legion.⁹ The role of private military contractors was being envisaged but same has been denied by Ukrainian officials stating that the government wasn't hiring any private military contractors but will only accept volunteers to its own foreign legion.¹⁰



Foreign fighters from various countries have begun making their way to Ukraine in response to Kyiv's call to help in fighting the Russian invasion. Syrian rebels are seeking passage to eastern Europe, for them the battle is intensely personal.¹¹ Abu Amin a Syrian rebel said, "There are hundreds of fighters who would like to go to Ukraine, but it is up to our Turkish ally". Will it open the borders?¹² There are young men who may go as volunteers because it is a great opportunity to take revenge on the Russian Forces.¹³ Kyiv and Moscow are both seeking to attract foreign fighters, with some commanding high salaries. The Foreign Ministry of Algeria has ordered the Ukrainian Embassy to delete a post on its Facebook page inviting Algerians to go to Ukraine to join the fight against the Russian invasion.¹⁴

In addition to the international legion, it has been reported that thousands from Kharkiv in the east to Lviv in the west, in recent months, have joined the forces, which are composed of about 80,000 volunteers in 25 separate brigades, or one for every region of Ukraine as well as the country's capital city.¹⁵ Ukraine is also supporting Azov Battalion to fight invading Russians in built up areas. The popularity of right wing Azov battalion is increasing and the numbers of volunteers are rising. It is estimated that the overall strength of all-volunteer force is approximately 900 to 1000 highly motivated members. Azov Battalion is considered ultra-nationalists and accused of harbouring neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideology.¹⁶

It is clear that these legions will not fight conventional war against Russian Forces but will rather choose hybrid war to counter Russian Forces in built-up areas. Hybrid war may cause damage to the Russian Forces especially in built-up areas, but to expect these legions to achieve decisive victory or drive out Russian Forces from Ukraine may not be a plausible counter strategy. It is near impossible for the Ukrainian Government to retake territory captured by Russian military through hybrid/proxy war.

West is introducing a new and non-traditional method of warfare in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Only time will tell if this is a smart strategy to invite Syrian, Algerian, Arabian fighters to Europe. What will happen to these fighters once Ukraine war ends? Will Arab refugees, already in Europe, join the fight in support of Ukraine or some may switch sides to fight against the European allies of Ukraine?

Russia was being accused by the West of hybrid war against Ukraine and Baltic States since 2014; it has now chosen to openly invite non-state actors from across the globe to fight against western imperialism. If Russia also raises foreign legions, then it will be disastrous for Ukraine and Europe. In light of the above, a significant Ukrainian resistance movement



based on hybrid warfare is almost certain to emerge. With sustained Western support, it could prolong the warfare for months, if not years.¹⁷

Russian Hybrid War: A Potent Threat to Europe

In 2014, mysterious “little green men” without military insignia, emerged in Crimea, and wrested the peninsula from Ukraine with hardly any shot being fired.¹⁸ Having succeeded in Crimea, Russian hybrid war picked up intensity and soon Russia, with the help of “little green men” (armed militia), took over enclaves in Donbas to claim independence from Ukraine. These events, coincided with cyber attacks and meddling in elections in the West and followed by conventional military attack on Ukraine. All these events have been labeled as forms of “hybrid war”.¹⁹ This had set the stage for Russian counter to the expansion of NATO towards the East.

NATO member countries are now at greater risk of Russian hybrid warfare. Big concerns are Baltic States with their significant Russian speaking minorities. The Baltic States provide Russia with a potential leverage to create instability among the East European Nations. There are fears of Bulgaria getting unstable because the entire political system is believed to be compromised by criminal organisations linked to Russian intelligence agencies.²⁰ Russia now have reasons to ‘spark a fire’ in Europe especially among the East European countries. However, it is not just Kyiv's fate but also Europe's that “lies in the balance”²¹ due to the war in Ukraine. As a first option, Russia could intensify pressure on states neighbouring Ukraine (Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) that could provide safe havens for insurgents or the inevitable government-in-exile.²² Russia could deploy hybrid war tactics— cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic sabotage—to destabilise countries providing safe havens²³ or actively support the arming of Ukraine’s Territorial Defence Legions.

Balkans is an “Achilles Heel” for Europe. In recent years, Russia has undertaken a number of destabilising actions in the region, seeking to weaken Montenegro after its accession to NATO.²⁴ Triggering instability in Balkans would complicate the security calculus of all countries in the region, as well as that of Germany and France, which have significant interests there.²⁵ Bosnian Serb Forces enjoys Russian support and hence this could allow Russia to penetrate deeper in Europe.

Russian actions in Ukraine may have stirred great crisis among NATO countries, but bigger worry for the NATO should be beginning of hybrid war on European soil. Europe should realise that, ‘ethnic and sectarian tensions’ will fuel instability and hybrid warfare model may



grow in prominence.²⁶ Inviting non-state actors to fight on behalf of Ukraine may be a 'disaster in waiting' because that will also give Russia a reason to invite Jihadi and non-state actors to join fight against West. It must be kept in view that Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and their affiliates exploit disorder. Jihadists' expansion is more a product of instability than its primary driver of radicalisation.²⁷ Russia may not hesitate to push the Jihadist along with Chechnya rebels in Ukraine to exploit disorder and instability in Ukraine.

Is Weaponising the Economy a Restraining Factor?

As per rough estimate, Ukraine's losses in the war are more than \$100 Billion. European Bank has pledged €2 billion to support resilience & livelihoods in Ukraine and affected countries.²⁸ US has also pledged \$13.6 billion aid to Ukraine. But out of this sanctioned aid, \$6.5 billion is estimated to be the cost of sending troops and weapons to Eastern Europe and equipping NATO Forces to deal with the threat from Russia. \$6.8 billion to be spent for refugees and provide economic aid to allies, and more to help federal agencies enforce economic sanctions against Russia and protect against cyber threats at home.²⁹ So far there is no pledge of funds for reconstruction of Ukraine by any country or institution. Sanctions are 'double edged weapon', it has pushed the prices of the commodities to all-time high, moreover, oil prices are set to rise to an unprecedented level in the coming weeks. Sanctions will certainly cripple the Russian economy but will also have serious consequences for Europe and rest of the world. In light of the above, at this stage, these countries cannot be left to fend for themselves.

Julia Friedlander, Former US Treasury Officer of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence opined, "What they are trying to do now is to align financial tools and weaponisation of finance to fit into military prerogative of raising the cost and pulling the bottom out of the Russian economy before the Russians completely destroy Ukraine".³⁰ There is also a counter view that suggests that, weaponising economy may not yield desired results since Russia will use oil and gas as bargaining tools. Germany is dependent on Russian fossil fuels— importing an estimated 55 percent of its gas and 42 percent of its oil and coal..³¹ Conventional military operations may end sooner or later but hybrid war is likely to continue till Russian security concerns are addressed.

After Shock of Hybrid War in Europe

All the international volunteers may become a problem for Europe because if they decide on not returning to their countries, it will be another disaster; switching sides for money has



been the characteristics of most non-state actors and if that happens no one knows how this hybrid war will end. International volunteers are mercenaries who could be hired even by Russians, Islamic terror organisations and NATO member countries. The Arabian and North African volunteers could start an insurgency in Europe since they have their scores to settle against NATO and the US. The situation may become even more volatile if these volunteers stay back in Europe.

Russia is master of hybrid war. They are capable of pushing refugees and volunteers, who want to fight against the NATO, in Europe. NATO member countries must not be reckless in arming civilians and international volunteer force. Russia has been running a hybrid war in East Europe since long and some weapons falling in the hands of pro-Russian groups is a possibility.

To build up further pressure, Moscow could also “weaponise” the inevitable refugee flows into neighbouring states.³² Russians would choose to push refugees, who are essentially anti-west, so that it can use them as and when the situation so demand. There is a likelihood that, refugees would move first into unoccupied Ukrainian territory and eventually into adjacent European states, which have shown little tolerance for outsiders.³³ Destabilised Ukraine will become a gateway for Russia to trigger instability through refugees, mercenaries and anti-west Jihadist organisations.

Unaccountable proliferation of small arms and man portable air defence systems could be a big risk to the aviation sector and law enforcement agencies. To consider that it will not fall in the hands of anti-west forces will be a monumental mistake. Major terror activities have not taken place in Europe for long, as the access to weapons was limited. Arming of civil population and international volunteer force could create instability in Europe. There is a possibility that these weapons may ultimately fall in the hands of those who want to take revenge against the US led NATO countries.

Conclusion

It is evident that sanctions have not deterred Russia as of now, and there is a likelihood that the conflict may further escalate if Russia is pushed to the corner through economic sanctions and arming of legions by NATO member countries. The status of Ukraine, as a state, may hang in balance in light of impending hybrid war and post war financial crisis. As an incentive, few relaxing sanctions could be considered, if Russia is willing to end war.



Russia will trigger 'new generation warfare' or 'non-linear warfare' as they refer these terms to hybrid warfare against NATO member countries, since the gloves are already off. It must be remembered that Russians are master of hybrid war and no one can fight it better than them. It is very difficult to say at this stage whether the strategy of hybrid war against Russia is correct or it will have 'blowback impact' on Europe. NATO member countries should keep it in mind that the hybrid war will be fought on the European soil and not on Russian soil. Thus, all their actions of arming Ukrainian and international volunteers, from Europe and outside, must be carefully choreographed. It is important to understand that proxy wars cannot be doused overnight. It takes decades and at times more than a lifetime. Is Europe ready to face the onslaught of Russian hybrid war on their doorstep? The answer to this question is, how Europe restricts the conflict to Ukraine and prevent entry of members of international legion into the neighbouring European countries.

End Notes

¹Chris Dolan, "NATO Must Boost Hybrid Warfare Defenses", *Just Security*, 15 February 2022. Available at <https://www.justsecurity.org/80176/nato-must-boost-hybrid-warfare-defenses/>. Accessed on 05 March 2022.

²Jyoti Thakur, "Explained: What Is Hybrid Warfare And How Russia Is Reportedly Using This Tactic In Ukraine", 26 February 2022. Available at <https://www.indiatimes.com/explainers/news/russias-hybrid-warfare-in-ukraine-563018.html>. Accessed on 05 March 2022.

³N.1.

⁴Ibid.

⁵"NATO to deploy thousands of commandos to nations near Ukraine", *Al Jazeera*, 25 February 2022. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/25/nato-allies-to-provide-more-weapons-to-ukraine-stoltenberg-says>. Accessed on 08 March 2022.

⁶Raghav Bikhchandani, "NATO finally comes to Ukraine's aid with response force debut, members send arms, ammunition", *The Print*, 27 February 2022. Available at <https://theprint.in/world/nato-finally-comes-to-ukraines-aid-with-response-force-debut-members-send-arms-ammunition/850453/>. Accessed on 08 March 2022.

⁷Christopher Miller, "A Team of American and British Special Forces Veterans Are Preparing to Join Ukraine's Fight Against Russia", *BuzzFeedNews*, 27 February 2022. Available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/christopherm51/american-nato-military-veterans-fight-russia-with-ukraine>. Accessed on 08 March 2022.

⁸MEE Staff, "Russia-Ukraine war: Kyiv invites Algerian fighters to Ukraine to protect world security", *Middle East Eye*, 05 March 2022. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-algeria-kyiv-protect-world-security>. Accessed on 10 March 2022.

⁹Bill McLoughlin, "Ukraine: Foreign fighters 'offered £1,500 a day to fight against Russia'", *Evening Standard*, 04 March 2022.

¹⁰N.8.

¹¹Harun al-Aswad, "Russia-Ukraine war: Syrian rebels seek passage to Europe for revenge against Putin", *Middle East Eye*, 01 March 2022. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-syria-rebels-revenge-seek-passage>. Accessed on 10 March 2022.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴N.8.

¹⁵Kateryna Malofieieva & Christopher Miller, "Taxi Drivers, Schoolteachers, Bankers: Meet The Ukrainian Guerrilla Army Preparing to Fight Russia", *BuzzFeedNews*, 21 December 2021. Available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katymalofeyeva/ukraine-russia-invade-volunteer-fighters-training>. Accessed on 15 March 2022.

¹⁶"Profile: Who are Ukraine's far-right Azov regiment?", *Al Jazeera*, 01 March 2022. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/1/who-are-the-azov-regiment>. Accessed on 15 March 2022.

¹⁷Thomas Graham, "Preventing a Wider European Conflict", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 08 March 2022.



¹⁸ “What is hybrid war, and is Russia waging it in Ukraine?”, *The Economist*, 22 February 2022. Available at <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/02/22/what-is-hybrid-war-and-is-russia-waging-it-in-ukraine>. Accessed on 15 March 2022.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sam Jones, “Ukraine: Russia’s New Art of War”, *Financial Times*, 28 August 2014.

²¹ “EU says Europe’s ‘fate in the balance’ over Ukraine war”, *The Economic Times*, 01 March 2022. Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/eu-says-europes-fate-in-the-balance-over-ukraine-war/articleshow/89928819.cms>. Accessed on 15 March 2022.

²² N. 16.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ N. 20.

²⁷ “Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State”, *A Special Report Jihad in Modern Conflict*, 14 March 2016.

²⁸ Richard Porter, “EBRD unveils €2 billion resilience package in response to the war on Ukraine”, *European Bank*, 09 March 2022. Available at <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/ebrd-unveils-2-billion-resilience-package-in-response-to-the-war-on-ukraine-.html>. Accessed on 15 March 2022.

²⁹ “United US House OKs \$13.6 billion for Ukraine in huge spending bill”, *The Economic Times*, 10 March 2022. Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/united-house-oks-13-6-billion-for-ukraine-in-huge-spending-bill/articleshow/90116679.cms>. Accessed on 15 March 2022.

³⁰ Robin Wigglesworth, “Colby Smith and Claire Jones, The west’s hybrid war on Russia”, *Financial Times*, 05 March 2022.

³¹ “German ministers warn against boycotting Russian oil”, *EURACTIV.com with AFP*, 07 March 2022.

³² N. 17.

³³ Ibid.

The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.



CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in