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Hybrid Wars in the Indian Subcontinent: Possibilities and Response

One of the most talked about events of 2015 was the Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. What sets this apart is the manner in which Russia executed this operation. This article will steer clear of how the operation was executed by Russia, however, the broad contours are: foment trouble in Ukraine; follow it up by sending in Special Forces troops in the guise of volunteer militiamen who takeover key locations; declare independence through a 'popular uprising'; move in regular troops while engaging in war rhetoric and then formally annex the area occupied. All this took place in the backdrop of an aggressive information campaign carried out in the cyber space as well as on international TV.

Around the world, volumes have been written about this war, even giving it a name – **hybrid warfare**. While one may mull over the novelty of hybrid warfare, it is not new; particularly in the Indian context. In 1947, Pakistan sent in tribesmen, supported by its Army into Jammu and Kashmir¹ (J&K) with an aim to annex it to Pakistan. Pakistan succeeded in illegal occupation of a third of the state which continues till date. In 1965, Pakistan again



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Key Points

1. Recent events have showcased hybrid warfare being executed to take over territory of another country. While hybrid warfare per se is not new, the present information age has thrown up new possibilities for effective conduct of the same.
2. Given its volatile neighbourhood and belligerent neighbours, India too is susceptible to a hybrid attack. Hybrid warfare will be the preferred method at a time when the adversary wishes to cause damage even while remaining below the threshold of a full-fledged war.
3. The danger is clear and present, therefore, the Indian Army should factor hybrid warfare into its operational plans and devise ways and means to counter enemy moves.

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attempted the same but failed. What sets apart the action by Russia is that the operation as well as the annexation of Crimea was carried out without even a formal declaration of war. Russia denied its involvement till the very end even in the face of mounting evidence.

Definition of Hybrid Warfare

Out of the various definitions of hybrid warfare, one of the most apt has been given by Frank Hoffman wherein he describes it as one incorporating “... 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 While the same may be mixed up with other names like ‘fourth generation warfare’ or ‘asymmetric warfare’, what makes hybrid warfare stand out is the enmeshing of conventional tactics with irregular tactics to achieve the desired goal(s). Hoffman even states that hybrid warfare does not mean the end of traditional (or conventional) operations as they are known today – but it certainly does complicate the process of defence planning in the 21st century.³

Unlike conventional warfare wherein the operations are divided into properly sequenced ‘phases’ or ‘operational cycles’, hybrid warfare will generally not play out as an orchestrated symphony and, therefore, any generalisation will be counter-productive. However, for understanding the issue, a hybrid warfare framework as defined by Phillip Karber⁴ is being referred to. This generally follows a four-stage process, gradually increasing in intensity and visibility. The stages, along with the author’s understanding of the same, are:

- Political Subversion:** This is generally covert and low intensity. It is done with the aim of ‘setting the stage’. Local grievances are played up and orchestrated low level violence is perpetrated. This is also done with the aim of forcing the local government to ‘make mistakes’ which can be played up in the local and international media to further undermine credibility. The end result of this stage will be the local government losing legitimacy in the eyes of the locals (and, may be, the international community).
- Proxy Sanctum:** The literal meaning of the term is ‘alternate sanctuary’. During subversion, certain pockets of influence would have been created by the subversives and in this stage, these are consolidated. This is generally done by proxies who might be anti-social elements within the target area or through specially trained Special Forces personnel. This generally involves securing important locations like airports, radio/ TV stations, government buildings, etc. The attacking nation would generally maintain deniability at this stage, as far as possible. The intensity of conflict will generally depend on the reaction of the target state although the attacking state would like to keep it as low as possible.
- Intervention:** This is the stage where the attacker becomes more overtly involved in the conflict. In this stage, the troops of the attacking country will move into the target country and engage its forces in active combat. The kinetic means will be accompanied by non-kinetic means like cyber attacks, propaganda and the likes. The aim of this stage would be to take over as much territory, particularly the important cities/towns, in order to claim legitimacy and set the scene for the next stage.
- Coercive Deterrence:** This is the stage where the attacker’s actions are overt and the intensity of violence is at its highest. During this stage, the affected nations would be in a state of war and there would be a possibility of big power intervention on behalf of the target country. In this phase, the attacker would like to present a state of ‘fait accompli’. While the attacker would indulge in sabre rattling, it would also call for a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement – thus, buying time to install a pliable regime. In certain cases, formal annexation of the area may also be declared, as happened in the case of Crimea.

Having analysed the possible stages of a hybrid war campaign, the following characteristics emerge:

- **Directed at the People:** The people are the main 'centre of gravity'. The attacking country would like to exploit some grievance of the local population which may be lack of governance, paying no heed to the collective aspirations of a section of the population, actual/ perceived wrongs committed, etc. The attacking country would have some racial/ communal affinity with the people of the target area. Having a contiguous land border is also very important to conduct an effective hybrid campaign. Even in the absence of a land border, some amount of land basing will be required for the forces of the attacking country.
- **Method of Fighting:** Initially, the moves would be more covert and restrained. This is done to enable building up of the requisite strength or in other words, achieving the 'critical mass'. This also ensures that if the target country does launch preemptive operations, it can be shown in a poor light. The actual fighting will generally start only in the intervention and coercive deterrence phase. Fighting will generally consist of swift actions to capture important installations in the opening stages; later on, there will be pitched land and possibly air engagements once the armed forces of both nations have joined the battle. Carrying on the fight in a nuclear backdrop will further complicate the scene.
- **Force Levels and Structures:** As seen earlier, the force levels required are less when compared to a conventional war. In the political subversion and proxy sanctum phases, the quantum of force required is minimal. This may be restricted to a limited number of Special Forces operators only. It is only in the intervention and coercive deterrence phase that a larger quantum of forces, of, may be, up to a balanced division sized force, will be needed – this, of course, will depend upon the area of operations, the reaction of the target nation as well as the end state desired

by the attacking nation. The quantum of forces engaged depends upon the "whole gradation of military operations that can range from sending 10 people into blocking a bridge, to sending a 100 people to help foment a local insurrection, to sending 10,000 people in a full-scale war".⁵ This will, however, change the paradigm of readiness and mobilisation for both the attacking as well as target armed forces. More of it later. In the initial phases, the operations will be predominantly Special Forces based. However, later this will be based on infantry/mechanised forces (as dictated by the terrain). Use of air power and sea-based resources (if in proximity to the coast) cannot be ruled out, but at the end, given the importance of 'boots on the ground', a hybrid war will remain a predominantly Army-centric operation. However, this in no way will preclude the requirement of synergised joint operations which will also involve civilian elements.

- **Information Operations:** This is the most important facet of hybrid warfare. The information operations campaign needs to project the 'just cause' to give legitimacy to the operation. This involves extensive use of all media to include television, print and cyber space. The attacking country needs to prevail in the battle of perceptions in the eyes of the target population as well as the international community and, therefore, the information operations also need to be conducted on these two separate threads, albeit in a coordinated manner⁶.

Applicability in the Indian Context

The events which have taken place in far off Ukraine hold great lessons for India as well. India has long standing territorial disputes with Pakistan and China – both nuclear weapons armed states. The Indian held territory both opposite Pakistan and China does have peculiarities that can be exploited by an adversary desirous of fighting a hybrid war.

- Pakistan – Old Aims, New Methods:** The ‘*casus belli*’ between India and Pakistan is the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). In the state, the boundary with Pakistan comprises many military held lines which can provide the best opportunity to launch a hybrid war with an aim to alter the status quo. Pakistan presently does, and will always, aim to create an anti-India feeling among the masses of Kashmir. ‘Agitation Dynamics’ if handled ineptly by the civil administration and security forces, can present an opportunity for Pakistan to exploit. The proliferation of the internet and social media in the Kashmir Valley and other parts of the state adds another dimension to the already complicated issue. Apart from that, Pakistan has at its beck and call the *jihadi* terrorists (‘strategic resources’ as they are referred to by various people in the Pakistani military establishment) whenever it would like to muster them. As stated by Praveen Sawhney, the Pakistan Army has the capability to fight a conventional and unconventional (terrorism) war together.⁷ The threat from Pakistan is, therefore, clear and present.
- China-Embrace and Fight:** The boundary with China is also a military held line at various places. Intrusions up to the perceived line are commonplace. China has leveraged its economic and military might to assert itself in areas which it claims as its own (South China Sea and Ladakh/ Arunachal Pradesh). Hybrid warfare is not new to China and as stated by Benjamin Baker in *The Diplomat*, throughout China’s history, elements of hybrid warfare have often been crucial components of its conflicts with its neighbours⁸. Given the economic ties with India, China may not want to indulge in an open war with India and whenever it decides to go to war, it would like to keep it as short as possible. Hybrid warfare fits into this pattern as in such cases, open hostilities are generally the last step. The Indian controlled region of the Indo-China border/ Line of Actual Control

(LAC) areas of Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh are grossly underdeveloped. This difference becomes particularly stark when compared with the infrastructure development which has taken place in the Tibet Autonomous Region controlled by China. This difference can always be exploited as a propaganda tool to question India’s commitment to the development of the border areas. Economic development in Tibet and Xinjiang will invariably lead to people of the same stock on the Indian side demanding the same for themselves and this is exactly what China can exploit. In 2014, residents of the Pin Valley of Spiti in Himachal Pradesh (bordering Tibet), angry over the lack of infrastructure development, threatened to seek help from China if India couldn’t develop the area. Mr Lobsang Tandup, president of the Sagnam Panchayat, said, “If our government has nothing to do with the pain and problems of its citizens, then we will not be averse in seeking help from China.”⁹ Mr Tandup, along with one more person, is also said to have been slapped with sedition charges. Needless to say, it is exactly such kind of disaffection which hostile neighbours would like to exploit.

While the areas mentioned above are the most likely areas where hybrid operations can be launched, there are many other border areas where the possibility of launching such operations by the adversary exists. At these places, the adversary may not go for outright annexation but may try to create instability. The Pan Naga Movement in the border areas of Nagaland and Manipur can be leveraged by the adversary to create instability. With ever rising stakes in the Indian Ocean Region, our island territories can be prone to such attacks and this should be factored into our security calculus.

Response by the Indian Army

Like most of the world, the Indian Army too is yet to conceptualise and put into place a robust response

mechanism. The Indian Army Doctrine does make a mention of hybrid warfare while describing the spectrum of conflict; however, it falls short of describing its ramifications. Defensive warfare in a hybrid scenario has not been discussed¹⁰. As stated above, the threat of hybrid warfare is clear and present and, therefore, the Indian Army should chalk out a strategy to defend against such a threat. Some matters which merit consideration have been given below.

- **All of Government Approach:** As seen above, bad governance and the resultant disaffection is generally the precursor to such attacks. It is, therefore, incumbent on the central and local governments to ensure rapid, visible and relevant development in all border areas. At present, only the armed forces are visible in the border areas, with the civil administration virtually absent. This needs to change soon. The next time when the chief states that the Army is interested in governance, it should not be taken amiss.¹¹
- **Understanding Population Behaviour:** This has always been the cornerstone of counter-insurgency warfare. However, in the event of hybrid warfare, this gains much more importance. Commander Steve Tatham (Retd) of the Royal Navy in an interview to the *Small Wars Journal* has analysed the events which had taken place in Ukraine. He is convinced that the human domain is the most important facet in hybrid warfare. He states, "It (human domain) is the single, most important issue that has to be dealt with. Since the root cause of all conflict is people, understanding people better must be the starting point if we are to prevail in war. If there was no human domain, there would be no conflict or an issue for us to be dealing with. There is nothing more important than the human domain."¹² He thereafter stresses upon Advanced Population Analytics or Population Intelligence (or POPINT). He says that while Human Intelligence works with individuals in

small groups, POPINT works on more larger groups and seeks to understand how people form groups, what drives them and what motivates/ de-motivates them, among others.¹³ POPINT analyses three issues concerning population: the locus of control, the propensity for change and the normative affiliations.¹⁴ Understanding these three issues will enable us to understand the 'churnings' within the target population. This will enable us create the right influences and leverages over the population. Therefore, it is important that a study of POPINT in the target area be started at the earliest. This complex field cannot be the sole preserve of the security forces and so there is a need to bring in professionals to carry out the same.

- **Border Management:** This is a tricky issue even in those stretches which have no dispute. The borders in the subcontinent are a colonial legacy without any consideration of the age old ethnic affinities. Therefore, interaction between people on both sides continues – at some places it is formalised like in the Free Move Regime between India and Myanmar, whereas at other places it continues openly/ in a clandestine manner. Complicating the matter is the plethora of Border Guarding Forces (BGF) – different in each sector. The BGF should be trained and equipped to deal with the first two stages of a hybrid attack – political subversion and proxy sanctum. They should also have the requisite synergy with the Army which will induct for the third phase. This needs to be practised extensively during peace-time.
- **Force Structures:** As brought out earlier, the traditional force structures may not be very effective while dealing with hybrid threats, particularly in the initial stages. All actions will be going on under intense media glare as well as in the backdrop of an aggressive information operation by the enemy. In such a situation, an overkill may make bad press for the Army (particularly in the event of 'collateral damage') whereas going soft will signify weak resolve,

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particularly to the 'fence sitters' who would want to side with the 'winning team'. The need for joint operations in this context can never be overstated, however, in such a scenario, the Army will invariably have to take on the role of the lead agency, given the requirement of 'boots on the ground'. The defensive formations should be so organised and equipped that they can intervene at multiple spots simultaneously. Command, control and communication aspects merit special attention because officer-led columns may not be possible everywhere. The forces need to be light and agile yet lethal. Combined teams of regular infantry along with wheeled mechanised infantry will be particularly effective in such a scenario. Air mobility resources need to be made integral to brigades. The initially light force should be able to evolve into a larger force by taking in heavy firepower elements (to include air power), if required. As far as defence of island territories is concerned, balanced sea-based forces should be worked out. Given the requirement of an all of government approach, adequate and effective civil military liaison staff should be posted to all defensive formation headquarters.

- **Mobilisation:** Once the adversary has launched the hybrid operations, it will be a race against time to stabilise the situation in one's favour before a ceasefire is declared. Therefore, a very important issue is the question of when to order troops to mobilise. Mobilisation is a national effort which calls for mustering of all resources. Therefore, there is a need to ensure the mobilisation does not take place too late and, at the same time, we also need to guard against 'false alarms'. As far as the Army is concerned, mobilisation needs to be nuanced such that the troops are present in the area of operations before the aggressor can create a 'fait accompli'. The forces should be able to regain control of all territory before the opposite side calls for a 'ceasefire'.
- **Information Operations:** This is the single most important facet of such operations. It needs to be

understood that once the battle is joined, it will be the Army which will have to act as the major (if not sole) content provider for the news networks as well as the internet. The present public information set-up of the Indian Army at both the Army Headquarters and lower formations, will not match up to the task. There is a need to rework the set-up. There is a need to involve the Indian media and learn its best practices to enable rapid and widespread uploading of content across all media while the news is relevant.

- **Offensive Hybrid Operations:** India does not covet the territory of any country. However, if faced with aggression of any kind, India should also be capable of waging this very effective kind of warfare on the aggressor. Having said that, it is necessary for India to develop offensive hybrid war-fighting capabilities over a period of time. This needs to combine both drive as well as finesse.
- **Doctrinal Issues:** We as a nation need to evolve a method to deal with such eventualities. To this end, the various doctrines need to be updated such that conduct of hybrid wars is explained both to the forces as well as the general public. The Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff should take the lead and update the Joint Doctrine to include the nuances of fighting a hybrid war. The various Service Headquarters can thereafter update the respective Service specific doctrines.

Conclusion

While hybrid wars are not new, the present communication age opens new possibilities for effective conduct of such operations. Given the volatile neighbourhood in which India is located, ignoring this aspect of warfare will be at our own peril. This article aims to act as a 'primer' to bring about a more in-depth study of this type of warfare. While drawing from foreign experiences, it is important that pertinent lessons be drawn in the Indian context and a robust deterrence be worked out in this regard.

Notes

1. SN Prasad and Dharam Pal, *History of Operations in Jammu and Kashmir (1947-48)* (History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India: Natraj Publishers, 2005), p.17.
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3. *Ibid.*, p.9.
4. Phillip A. Karber, *Russian Hybrid War Campaign: Implications for Ukraine and Beyond* (McLean: The Potomac Foundation, 2015).
5. Discussion between Mark Galeotti and Octavian Manea on the topic. This was originally published by the *Small Wars Journal* on August 19, 2015. Full interview can be accessed at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=193372>.
6. Lawrence E. Cline, "Strategy for the Shades of Gray", published by the *Small Wars Journal*, accessed at http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/strategy-for-the-shades-of-gray?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter.
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8. Benjamin David Baker, "Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics". published in *The Diplomat* on September 23, 2015. Accessed at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/hybrid-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics/>
9. The news article can be accessed at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Pin-valley-residents-threaten-to-seek-Chinese-help-to-improve-infrastructure/articleshow/40640699.cms>.
10. Indian Army Doctrine 2010.
11. In an interview to a national English daily in 1992, Gen SF Rodrigues, then Chief of the Army Staff had remarked that "...good governance is as much business of the armed forces as well." This had created an uproar in the Parliament.
12. Steve Tatham in an interview to Octavian Manea in *Small Wars Journal*. Accessed at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/to-respond-to-isis-and-hybrid-warfare-we-need-to-invest-in-popint>.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*

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