

Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in eastern Europe

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The way in which Russia has used force against Ukraine since early 2014 has prompted some observers to remark that it is engaging in 'hybrid warfare'. Rather than openly using military power to secure its political objectives in Ukraine, Russia has adopted a subtler approach intended to give the Kremlin 'plausible deniability' while reducing the costs associated with engaging Ukraine's armed forces directly. For example, Russia did not launch a traditional invasion to wrest Crimea away from Kiev's control; instead, it fomented local pro-Russian demonstrations, inserted unmarked militia groups ('little green men') to occupy official government buildings, and oversaw a local referendum to lend an air of legitimacy to the annexation effort. In eastern Ukraine, Moscow continues to deny that it is directly involved in armed hostilities between Kiev and rebel groups. Nevertheless, it provides those rebels with diplomatic cover as well as heavy munitions and logistical support. Despite the Kremlin's assertions to the contrary, there is strong evidence that some Russian units are fighting Ukrainian forces in the Donbas region.¹

Russia's military statecraft has also raised concerns regarding the security of its other neighbours, especially the Baltic countries. These concerns were amplified by the announcement in June 2015 that Russia is reconsidering the legitimacy of the independence those states achieved in 1990–1991.² Individually and collectively, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania suffer from an unfavourable balance of power with Russia. Their armies comprise about 2,800, 1,250 and 7,350 soldiers respectively; by contrast, the Russian ground forces amount to 250,000 soldiers, to say nothing of the country's aerial, maritime and nuclear capabilities.³ The Baltic countries are members of NATO and so enjoy a commitment from the

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¹ Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyajova and Damon Wilson, *Hiding in plain sight: Putin's war in Ukraine* (Washington DC: Atlantic Council, 2015), <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/hiding-in-plain-sight-putin-s-war-in-ukraine-and-boris-nemtsov-s-putin-war>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015. Other labels have been used to refer to Russian military tactics in Ukraine. On non-linear warfare, see Mark Galeotti, 'The "Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian non-linear war', *In Moscow's Shadows*, 6 July 2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

² 'How Russia sees Baltic sovereignty', *Moscow Times*, 14 July 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/how-russia-sees-baltic-sovereignty/525643.html>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

³ *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015), pp. 90, 114–15, 180.

United States and other allies under Article 5 of the alliance's founding treaty, which affirms that an attack against one member constitutes an attack against all. Thus the disparities between their own and Russian forces are offset by the military protection of a conventionally superior and nuclear-armed NATO. Still, the Baltic states see themselves as vulnerable, not least to the application of hybrid warfare; Russia, they fear, may use subversion rather than pursue a conventional military engagement against them. It remains unclear what an alliance like NATO could do to deter (and defend against) such forms of aggression.

Despite these concerns, existing descriptions of hybrid warfare suffer from important conceptual weaknesses. The purpose of this article is to describe the logic of hybrid warfare and explain why former Soviet republics like the Baltic countries might be vulnerable to it. It first defines hybrid warfare, conceiving it as a marriage of conventional deterrence and insurgent tactics. Rather than being a new form of conflict, hybrid warfare is a strategy that the belligerent uses to advance its political goals on the battlefield by applying military force subversively. The article then describes why former Soviet republics are vulnerable to Russian hybrid warfare. In the course of this analysis, it identifies four conditions that jointly make hybrid warfare more likely: first, the belligerent has local escalation dominance; second, the belligerent seeks to revise the status quo; third, the belligerent has a relatively weak neighbouring state in so far as the latter lacks a robust civil society and has local ethnic or linguistic cleavages that can be exploited; and fourth, the weak neighbour has some ethnic or linguistic ties to the belligerent.

By describing why Russia has resorted to hybrid warfare within the former Soviet Union, and where other belligerents might do the same elsewhere, this article shows that military solutions to this threat are incomplete. After all, hybrid warfare exploits nationalist identities, thereby blurring responsibility and even gaining political support among foreign audiences. Hybrid warfare incorporates the most potent attributes of an insurgency while minimizing the drawbacks associated with using conventional force. It is a strategy born not out of weakness but out of strength. Thus, in the Baltic context, Russia's strategy aims to weaken NATO's willingness to follow through on its own deterrent threats. Military solutions overlook this dimension of Russian hybrid warfare because they focus disproportionately on modifying or restructuring military capabilities. These capabilities can deter some forms of aggression, but they may be insufficient to prevent Russia from sowing local discord. Political solutions that lie beyond NATO's ambit are necessary if the Baltic countries are to address their greatest vulnerability to hybrid warfare: namely, the presence of large stateless populations in Estonia and Latvia.

This article first conceptualizes 'hybrid warfare' and proceeds to explain its appeal for the Kremlin in respect of NATO's eastern flank. It then identifies the general conditions under which a belligerent might launch hybrid warfare before reviewing recent proposals for how NATO should deter Russia.

The concept and utility of hybrid warfare

Military strategists have long been aware that belligerents can wage war against their adversaries in ways that do not involve set-piece battles or large coordinated military campaigns between opposing armies to score decisive victories. With the emergence of nationalism and class identities in the nineteenth century, military theorists such as Carl von Clausewitz and political thinkers such as Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin contemplated the conditions under which insurgencies could prevail against central governments. T. E. Lawrence and Mao Zedong also wrote on how best to mount military operations against stronger adversaries. A common thread in all these analyses is that direct military confrontations would only benefit the strong. Accordingly, for weaker combatants, more incremental, subtler and indirect tactics are appropriate. These tactics include using propaganda to mobilize support for the insurgency and to demoralize enemy forces as well as attacking the weak points of opposing militaries.⁴

Contemporary military theorists have drawn on this intellectual tradition to speculate on the nature of war in an age marked less by interstate conflict and more by civil wars. Presumably because nuclear weapons make direct military confrontation between them too risky and costly, major powers choose not to fight each other.⁵ When they do wage wars, as the United States did in Vietnam and Russia did in Chechnya, they fight weaker adversaries, usually to change regimes, mount counter-insurgencies or launch proxy campaigns against peer competitors. Military theorists argue that contemporary wars between adversaries of vastly unequal capabilities now combine elements of regular conventional warfare with elements of irregular (guerrilla) warfare. That is, in one military campaign, large formations might still be used for some missions, while other missions could require smaller, more mobile units that sometimes need to act covertly to inflict damage on the adversary. Russell Glenn cites a US definition of a hybrid threat as

any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace. Rather than a single entity, a hybrid threat or challenger may be comprised of a combination of state and non-state actors.⁶

Similarly, although they argue that hybrid warfare has been a feature of international politics for millennia, Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor define hybrid warfare as ‘a conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents and terrorists), which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose’.⁷

⁴ András Rác, *Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine: breaking the enemy's ability to resist*, FIIA Report 43 (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015), pp. 19–24.

⁵ Robert Jervis, *The meaning of the nuclear revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁶ Definition adopted in support of US Joint Forces Command hybrid war conference, Washington DC, 24 Feb. 2009, cited in Russell W. Glenn, ‘Thoughts on “hybrid” conflict’, *Small Wars Journal*, 2 March 2009, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/188-glenn.pdf>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

⁷ Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, *Hybrid warfare: fighting complex opponents from the ancient world to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 3.

Yet the alleged hybrid warfare that Russia has used against Ukraine reveals the inadequacies of these definitions. Specifically, the focus on the combined use of regular and irregular warfare is at once too broad and too narrow. It is too broad because many wars in history have incorporated features of both regular and irregular warfare. As much as the Grand Alliance waged set-piece battles against Nazi Germany in the Second World War, its members also backed resistance groups fighting Nazi occupation, dropped propaganda leaflets and supported acts of sabotage (e.g. Operation Gunnerside, undertaken by Norwegian resistance to prevent Germany from obtaining materials for its nuclear weapons programme). Even the Second World War, then, can be considered to have been a hybrid war. The focus is also too narrow because in these definitions both regular and irregular wars are used either simultaneously or sequentially in the theatre of operations. However, the occupation of Crimea did not involve Russian deployment of new regular forces in Ukraine until Russian control of the peninsula was already secured. The annexation of Crimea was conspicuous in its *lack* of regular warfare.

Mindful of these observations, I reconceptualize hybrid warfare as a strategy rather than a new form of war. It is a strategy because it deliberately integrates the use of various instruments of national power so as to achieve foreign policy objectives in the light of the believed goals and capabilities of the adversary. It can cover a range of expedients so long as they are guided by an overarching goal.⁸ As such, hybrid warfare involves the coordinated use of irregular and regular military means towards different but complementary ends. Irregular warfare is used to expose and to exploit a target's vulnerabilities at lower levels of violence than a direct confrontation between militaries, while regular warfare is used—somewhat ironically—as minimally as possible. That is, the belligerent threatens to use higher gradations of military force so as to deter its target from retaliating strongly. Hybrid warfare thus requires that the belligerent possess escalation dominance, meaning that it can engage and defeat its target at different levels of military escalation.⁹ In waging hybrid warfare, the belligerent is actively striving to undermine its target's territorial integrity, subvert its internal political cohesion and disrupt its economy. Hybrid warfare can serve such revisionist goals as territorial expansion and the imposition of indirect rule over another (nominally) sovereign state.

The irregular military component of hybrid warfare can encompass different tactics of varying intensity, many of which have been used in insurgencies. At one end of the spectrum is *propaganda*, which is a communicative act that a belligerent undertakes in order to influence the attitudes held by members of the target's society. Propaganda serves to hamper the target's ability to draw on popular support in pursuing its policies and mobilizing its resources. Next is *espionage*, whereby agents clandestinely gather intelligence in order to confer on the belligerent a coercive bargaining advantage, and/or spread deliberately false information

⁸ Accordingly, a belligerent using hybrid warfare can alter and adapt its approach to respond to unforeseen events or moves made by its target.

⁹ A similar point is made in Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine crisis: what it means for the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 129.

among unsuspecting members of a public regarding the activities and intentions of particular organizations. Another stage along the intensity spectrum is *agitation*, to which the belligerent can resort to create dissension and discord within a target society when none previously existed. After this comes *criminal disorder*, whereby the belligerent's agents engage in hit-and-run attacks, cyber attacks, sabotage or kidnapping. The belligerent could also cultivate *fifth columns*: groups of individuals, usually acting covertly, embedded within a much larger population that they seek to undermine. Fifth columns may agitate, or may simply wait for hostilities to break out between the target and the belligerent before becoming active. Such fifth columns might facilitate the military campaign of the government they support at an opportune moment. Next, the belligerent could *insert unmarked soldiers* who are armed but lack the insignia that would identify them and their home government. Unmarked soldiers enable the belligerent to establish and operate checkpoints, occupy government buildings and other sites of strategic interest, seize prized military assets and clear an area ahead of an overt military operation. Most intensely, but still short of a direct military confrontation, the belligerent might launch *border skirmishes* to unsettle the target, probe its weaknesses and sap its resources.

All these actions take place in the shadow of possible conventional war, and from this fact alone it should be apparent that hybrid warfare is not a recent invention. Indeed, the Soviet Union employed these tactics immediately after the Second World War with Cominform, sponsoring communist movements in Europe and elsewhere to undermine capitalist countries from within. Aggressors have long used 'fifth columns' to pursue political objectives at the expense of their adversaries. One illustrative example of a 'fifth column' was the Sudeten-German Free Corps, which was active in Czechoslovakia in the late 1930s. This paramilitary organization was ethnically German and had Nazi sympathies. It launched terrorist attacks aimed at provoking the Czechoslovak government into a military or political response that would precipitate Nazi actions to rescue co-ethnics and annex the Sudetenland into the Third Reich.¹⁰

Hybrid warfare is not simply guerrilla warfare waged by a strong state. Consider one definition of guerrilla warfare that emphasizes four distinguishing attributes. First, guerrilla fighters are irregular forces 'organized in small, highly mobile units and operating without heavy weaponry such as tanks, artillery, or aircraft'. Second, guerrilla fighters prefer protracted warfare, use such tactics as hit-and-run attacks and terrorism, and avoid set-piece battles. Third, guerrilla forces often operate in areas that their adversaries control, thereby waging warfare in a manner that obscures the lines of battle. Finally, guerrillas depend on local populations for support. Guerrilla fighters even hide among members of the local population to prevent detection by their adversary.¹¹ Hybrid warfare can incorporate these features, but some aspects of guerrilla war do not have to be present. For example,

¹⁰ Bruce B. Campbell, 'The SA after the Rohm purge', *Journal of Contemporary History* 28: 4, 1993, p. 667.

¹¹ Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, "'Draining the sea': mass killing and guerrilla warfare", *International Organization* 58: 2, 2004, pp. 383-4.

hybrid warfare does not preclude the use of heavy weaponry. The belligerent can arm local groups with heavy weapons in order to erode the strength of the target while still avoiding a direct confrontation. The belligerent might deem protracted warfare unacceptable, in which case it might use a fifth column to destabilize a contested environment, thereby positioning itself to move swiftly to grab a certain prize before the target can respond.

The desire to avoid a direct military confrontation may spring from any of a range of sources, some of which may be more salient in contemporary times. First, global norms against war, conquest and territorial violations have strengthened since the Second World War.¹² States find it harder to justify unilateral seizures of territory held by other sovereign states. They prefer to legitimate or rationalize their uses of force through international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council.¹³ Accordingly, Russia annexed Crimea in a manner intended to make the takeover appear indigenously led. Second, more direct use of force might elicit resistance from a militarily superior coalition of adversaries. If the target has powerful allies or friends, then hybrid warfare also helps avoid triggering an intervention that the belligerent does not believe it can handle. This observation implies that the belligerent has local escalation dominance but not global escalation dominance. By maintaining an element of 'plausible deniability', the belligerent could forestall a widening of the conflict while still degrading the capabilities of its target. Third, domestic considerations might make hybrid warfare an attractive option to the belligerent. An overt military conflict could be unpopular, especially if it means imposing some hardship on the domestic public. Put all these factors together and it becomes apparent that hybrid warfare is appealing because it is not as costly as a direct military confrontation on the battlefield, it skirts around direct contravention of international norms and it avoids incurring harmful political consequences at home.

Hybrid warfare thus features a paradox. By resorting to irregular warfare in order to realize political objectives, the belligerent appears to be averse to military escalation. However, the belligerent is using the threat of military escalation to unsettle its target and deter it from responding strongly. How can this threat be credible if the very adoption of the hybrid strategy should undercut it? Several answers are possible. Because the belligerent has local escalation dominance, the target is self-deterred from escalating: it knows that it will be defeated in an actual military confrontation with that belligerent. Another possibility is that hybrid warfare gives the belligerent 'plausible deniability' and thus deters external intervention by confusing the potential opposition. The belligerent can disclaim responsibility for local agitators and rebel groups. Alternatively, it could claim that the actions of local agitators have popular support. In either case, the

¹² Tanisha Fazal, *State death: the politics and geography of conquest, occupation, and annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹³ On legitimating military force, see Ian Hurd, *After anarchy: legitimacy and power in the United Nations Security Council* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). On rationalizing military force, see Alexander Thompson, 'Coercion through IOs: the Security Council and the logic of information transmission', *International Organization* 60: 1, 2006, pp. 1–34.

belligerent can exploit the resulting uncertainty so as to keep its adversary off balance.

Of course, the costs of hybrid warfare must be considered alongside the benefits. Subterfuge generally requires patience and care. It does not yield immediate results: fifth columns need nurturing before they can become operational, and propaganda might take time to resonate with the target population, or fail to gain purchase at all. Local enforcement agencies and intelligence communities can also undertake counter-measures against agitators, saboteurs and enemy agents. Moreover, targets of hybrid warfare will not take the bait if they suspect that they are being goaded into a certain reaction. Agitation may even backfire if members of the target population rally around their government rather than show dissension. Finally, as in any war, miscalculation is likely; it might even be more common because the local agents serving the belligerent could have their own interests and become difficult to manage once they are armed.

The appeal of hybrid warfare in the former Soviet region

Situational factors may also contribute to resolving the seeming paradox at the heart of hybrid warfare. Below I argue that particular conditions within the former Soviet Union might facilitate Russian subversion, forestall military escalation, deter external intervention and, by extension, make hybrid warfare viable. At least four attributes of the region deserve mention: its ethnic heterogeneity; the presence of latent historical grievances; the weakness of local civil society; and the resulting regional complexity, which Russia is better positioned to grasp than external powers. Although Russia has escalation dominance over Ukraine, this asymmetry alone does not account for the substance of the Russian hybrid warfare we have so far observed. Nor does it fully reveal the ways in which other countries of the former Soviet Union might be vulnerable. Finally, the attributes of the region itemized above would not matter if Russia had no interest in mounting hybrid warfare. Here I will discuss briefly the political and doctrinal drivers of this interest before formulating several general propositions regarding where we should observe hybrid warfare.

Because the following discussion addresses issues regarding ethnicity and nationalism, several definitions are necessary. An ethnic group has a group name, a sense of common descent, shared historical memories, shared cultural attributes (such as language and religion) and some degree of territorial attachment.¹⁴ A nation is a 'socially mobilized body of individuals ... striving to create or maintain their own state'.¹⁵ Nationalism is the ideology underpinning this effort. Ethnic groups can engage in nationalism if they value independent statehood.

¹⁴ Anthony Smith, *The ethnic origins of nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 22–8.

¹⁵ Ernst B. Haas, 'What is nationalism and why should we study it?', *International Organization* 40: 3, 1986, pp. 707–744.

Ethnic heterogeneity

The Soviet Union was one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Ethnic Russians barely formed a majority of its total population. At its collapse in 1990–1991, some ethnic groups declared the Soviet republic they dominated as their own newly independent country.¹⁶ Conversely, many ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking peoples found themselves in new countries governed by an elite who did not speak their language or share their ethnicity. For example, the populations of Estonia and Latvia are about a quarter Russian; and ethnic Russians form a majority of the approximately 7 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively, of those populations who are stateless, lacking political rights and experiencing disproportionate rates of unemployment.¹⁷ Other post-Soviet countries have much smaller proportions of ethnic Russians but still contain diverse populations. Ethnic groups in these countries sometimes clamour for greater autonomy: Abkhazians and South Ossetians in Georgia, to take two examples. Ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis still contest the region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The ethnic heterogeneity of the former Soviet region does not of itself mean conflict, but it does offer opportunities for the Kremlin to foment local discord to its advantage. First, Moscow can assist the efforts of aspiring secessionist groups at the expense of those countries that pursue foreign policies Russia sees as inimical to its own interests. These secessionist groups do not necessarily have to be Russian or speak Russian to be of value to the Kremlin. What matters is whether they can challenge or fight governments that the Kremlin dislikes. Second, as the Kremlin has done already in the case of Ukraine, it can assert itself as a guarantor of the political rights of self-identifying Russians or Russian-speaking people. Whether those groups see such protection as desirable is immaterial. Russia can still intervene in the domestic policy debates of its neighbours when language and other cultural rights come under discussion. The Kremlin might even find individuals within those Russian minority populations to do its bidding. Such a situation is dangerous. If governments start seeing certain minority populations as potential fifth columns, then they could take repressive measures. Not only would such a response entail the unfair and harmful treatment of minority populations, it would also prompt the Kremlin to act upon its self-proclaimed status as the defender of Russian rights.

Latent historic grievances

Ethnic politics owes its salience in this region in part to the many myths and symbols that continue to resonate. Symbols are emotionally charged referents to beliefs that supply meaning to events or actions for a particular group of people.

¹⁶ On how ethnic mobilization and nationalism spurred the demise of the Soviet Union, see Ben Fowkes, *The disintegration of the Soviet Union* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist mobilization and the collapse of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Astrid S. Tuminez, 'Nationalism, ethnic pressures, and the breakup of the Soviet Union', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5: 4, 2003, pp. 81–136.

¹⁷ *Amnesty International Report 2014/15: the state of the world's human rights* (London: Amnesty International, 2015), pp. 147, 226.

Ethnic groups value symbols that evoke kinship feelings as well as a shared sense of history. Sometimes these symbols justify chauvinism or hostility towards another group. When members of an ethnic group fear that their rights and welfare are threatened, the symbols by which they orientate their world-view can shape their response. Those groups with a history of having experienced victimization, domination and other collective traumas might react more forcefully than others in order to safeguard their interests. Accordingly, ethnic conflict is not necessarily the result of cynical elites seeking to maintain their hold on political office. Mass-led movements could emerge, compelling elites to appeal to ethnic loyalties in order to retain support.¹⁸

In eastern Europe, as elsewhere in that continent, nationalist and ethnic identities were generated by social processes that began in the nineteenth century. However, the formation of these identities was influenced by elite reactions to imperial domination. Lithuanian nationalism developed in response to perceptions of Polish cultural hegemony among literary elites. Ukrainian nationalism was partly born out of a shared sense of subjugation to Polish, Russian and even Soviet control.¹⁹ Several other nationalisms coalesced in the light of how ethnic groups (for example, the Georgians) experienced imperial Russian, and later Soviet, colonization.

A historical experience of domination can create an acute sensitivity to external threats. Compounding this problem in the former Soviet region is the way in which traumatic events impinged upon the historical development of these nationalisms over the course of the twentieth century. By way of illustration, consider the history of Polish–Ukrainian relations. In the interwar period, ethnic Ukrainians living in eastern Poland saw Polish rule as discriminatory and repressive—so much so that some used the Soviet invasion in 1939 as an occasion to launch reprisals against local Poles. The bloodshed that ensued created spiral dynamics whereby members of both ethnic groups would escalate conflict by targeting each other with increasingly brutal violence.²⁰ A campaign by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) to bring about the ethnic cleansing of the region of Volhynia led to the killing of about 100,000 Poles. In the internecine conflict that continued even after 1945 in what is today western Ukraine, Poles committed their own atrocities against Ukrainian populations, particularly during a campaign of forced resettlement called Operation Vistula. Both sides thus have their own grievances and a sense of being wronged. The history of Lithuanian–Polish relations features similar moral controversies surrounding Polish massacres of Lithuanians and Lithuanian cooperation with Nazis.²¹

These events unfolded against the backdrop of a larger struggle between Nazi German and Soviet forces. This conflict had visited its own terrors upon the many

¹⁸ Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern hatreds: the symbolic politics of ethnic war* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 30–38.

¹⁹ For a comparative history of how these nationalisms developed, see Timothy Snyder, *The reconstruction of nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

²⁰ On spiral dynamics and ethnic war, see Barry R. Posen, 'The security dilemma and ethnic conflict', *Survival* 35: 1, 1993, pp. 27–47.

²¹ On these ethnic conflicts in the 1940s, see Snyder, *The reconstruction of nations*, pp. 154–201.

civilians caught in the middle. The Soviet Union ultimately prevailed against Nazi Germany, putting it in a position to rule over a large share of central and eastern Europe in the postwar period. The establishment of this rule was often violent. The three Baltic countries once again lost their independence and were absorbed into the Soviet Union. During the interwar period, those elites who had survived the conflict fled from their home countries, withdrew from political life or suffered some fate at the hands of the Soviet police. The communist parties that installed themselves in power in the region regarded stakeholders in the interwar regimes and anti-communist opponents alike as counter-revolutionary enemies and treated them accordingly. Over time, these communist regimes consolidated their power, even gaining the acquiescence of the populations over whom they ruled, despite the occasional revolt and reformist movement.

These traumatic experiences provide a repository of historical grievances and emotionally charged symbols that the Kremlin can use to divide and conquer target societies and to prevent strong ties of alliance from developing between them. It is no accident that Moscow denounced the Euro-Maidan movement in Ukraine and the post-Yanukovich regime in early 2014 as being steeped in the historical influence of Stepan Bandera, the leader of the OUN. After all, it was under Bandera's leadership that the OUN briefly sided with Nazi Germany in 1941 to subvert Soviet influence in Ukraine. Even after the annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin appealed to the linguistic and ethnic identities of populations in eastern Ukraine in order to present itself as a legitimate guarantor of their security. The Kremlin arguably hoped to inspire an indigenous movement that would agitate for unification with Russia, provoke Kiev into a violent response and invite a Russian intervention to rescue it.²²

Such manipulation of symbols has become common. Elsewhere in the region, Facebook groups have appeared demanding the deployment of 'little green men' to support greater independence for Russian- and Polish-speaking populations living in Lithuania.²³ Polish and Lithuanian government officials quickly denounced these efforts as provocations. Another cynical manipulation of symbolic politics involved President Vladimir Putin's defence of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. This treaty of 1939 between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union contained guarantees of mutual non-aggression as well as secret provisions outlining the annexation and partition of countries in eastern Europe. In defending this treaty, Putin referred to Poland's annexation of disputed territories in Czechoslovakia to argue that the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was typical of its time. These abortive efforts to create discord are a reminder of how nationalist controversies could be stirred in a manner that disrupts the internal cohesion of NATO members and the diplomatic relations between them.

²² For a refutation of these propagandistic efforts, see 'Four myths about Stepan Bandera', BBC Russia News, 28 Feb. 2014, http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/02/140227_bandera_myths.shtml, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

²³ 'Chcą na Wileńszczyźnie "polskich zielonych ludzików". I podszywają się pod legalną organizację' ['They want in the Vilnius region "little green Polish men". And they pretend to be a legal organization'], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2 Feb. 2015, http://m.wyborcza.pl/wyborcza/1,105226,17346094,Chca_na_Wilenszczyznie_polskich_zielonych_ludzikow_.html, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

Weakness in civil society

Because of the historical legacies with which they have to deal, civil society is weak in many former Soviet states.²⁴ Of course, groups of people participate in voluntary associations independent of government and business, but social networks in the region have not acquired the density found in western Europe.²⁵ The weakness of civil society in the region has several implications for local political order. First, norms conducive to liberal democracy and civic values, including those that promote community participation and intergroup cooperation, remain underdeveloped. Second, given that, as Francis Fukuyama has written, ‘civil society serves to balance the state and to protect individuals from the state’s power’,²⁶ authoritarianism remains a persistent feature of the post-Soviet space. Alexander Lukashenko’s autocracy in Belarus endures partly because national identity is weak and voluntary associations have historically been repressed. Lukashenko has sought to extend his rule by actively discouraging the formation of Belarusian national identity and keeping tight control over associational life in Belarus. Even where elections are contested, as in Ukraine, elite infighting dominates national politics, resulting in governments with democratic *and* authoritarian features.²⁷ In robust liberal democracies such as the Baltic countries, civil society is stronger than anywhere else in the former Soviet space.²⁸ Nevertheless, in both Estonia and Latvia there are large numbers of stateless people who are not yet integrated into either local political institutions or the domestic economy.

Civil society matters in the present context because it provides a buffer against the exploitation of social cleavages by hybrid warfare. After all, hybrid warfare involves manipulating existing cleavages to sow internal dissension and foment local discord. A strong civil society is one where different groups overcome the cleavages that may divide them to cooperate with one another in the interests of larger political stability. It thereby immunizes the country against some forms of hybrid warfare. By contrast, a weak civil society and the accompanying weakness of civic values will not inspire confidence among citizens in the governing institutions of the state. A belligerent can exploit this situation by finding recruits and opportunities to pursue its political objectives to the detriment of the target government.

²⁴ On the origins of authoritarianism in some post-communist states, see Keith Darden and Anna Grzymala-Busse, ‘The great divide: literacy, nationalism, and the communist collapse’, *World Politics* 59: 1, 2006, pp. 83–115; Valerie Bunce, ‘The national idea: imperial legacies and post-communist pathways in eastern Europe’, *East European Politics and Societies* 19: 3, 2005, pp. 406–42; Grigore Pop-Eleches, ‘Historical legacies and post-communist regime change’, *Journal of Politics* 69: 4, 2007, pp. 908–926.

²⁵ Roger Sapsford and Pamela Abbott, ‘Trust, confidence, and social environment in post-communist societies’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39: 1, 2006, pp. 59–71.

²⁶ Francis Fukuyama, ‘Social capital, civil society and development’, *Third World Quarterly* 22: 1, 2001, p. 11.

²⁷ On the elite nature of Ukrainian politics, see Neil Robinson, ‘Economic and political hybridity: patrimonial capitalism in the post-Soviet space’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4: 2, 2013, pp. 143–4; Taras Kuzio, ‘Twenty years as an independent state: Ukraine’s ten logical inconsistencies’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45: 3–4, 2012, pp. 429–38.

²⁸ See Anders Uhlin, *Post-Soviet civil society: democratization in Russia and the Baltic states* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Regional complexity

The former Soviet region is complex because it features diverse ethnic groups, some of which have their own latent historical grievances against each other. These tensions are likely to persist if local civil society remains weak. A complex regional political environment is thus prone to misunderstanding by outsiders. They might attribute ethnic conflict to situations where none exists; underestimate the power of symbols that particular groups cherish; overlook cleavages that could affect local political allegiances; and mistake the goals and preferences of local populations and their leaders. Accordingly, because it is relatively more familiar with its own region, the Kremlin has a tactical advantage over other major powers. It can exploit western uncertainties and misperceptions by justifying its actions as having indigenous support. Other states (or at least members of their publics) that could otherwise mobilize a response to Russian hybrid warfare might too easily accept the Kremlin's interpretation of regional events. Using its media outlets, the Kremlin can disseminate its own perspective widely, thereby framing local political developments in terms favourable to its own interests.

This tactical advantage was apparent in the early stages of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine in early 2014. Beforehand, a common interpretation in the western media was that Ukrainian politics featured two coalitions, one pro-western (or pro-European) and another pro-Russian. These coalitions were formed on the basis of the linguistic cleavage between Ukrainian-speakers located in western Ukraine and Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine. Samuel Huntington once called attention to these demographic factors to argue that Ukraine represented a 'fractured state'—the allegiance of which would always be torn between the West and Russia so long as it continued to exist in its post-Soviet form.²⁹ Yet this view oversimplifies pre-2014 Ukrainian politics. The western city of Odessa is a pocket of Russian-speaking people whose relationship and identification with Russia is at best ambiguous. The Crimean status referendum in March 2014 is another case in point. The reported poll results suggested that voters overwhelmingly favoured joining Russia as a part of the federation. Although reports of coercion and fraud cast doubt on these results, studies predating the Ukrainian crisis nevertheless show that survey respondents in Crimea were mostly in favour of Crimea gaining at least more autonomy *vis-à-vis* Ukraine, if not integration with Russia. Yet pro-separation forces in Crimea generally lost strength over the course of the post-Soviet period.³⁰

Notwithstanding this complexity, the western narrative of the Ukrainian political crisis in early 2014 relied on standard tropes of an east–west national division. The implication of such characterizations of Ukraine is that Russian claims of indigenous support might have some validity, if not legitimacy. In consequence, international efforts to challenge Russian efforts become difficult to mount on

²⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 165–8.

³⁰ Taras Kuzio, 'Strident, ambiguous, and duplicitous: Ukraine and the 2008 Russia–Georgia war', *Demokrati-zatsiya* 17: 4, 2009, p. 357.

liberal principles, especially if the majority of a region's population have expressed support for Russian integration in the past; and uncertainty deepens among outsider states as to the true nature of the political interests of local actors and how they ought to be accommodated in a political solution that differs from Russian proposals. Russia's strategy had this very goal in mind, its leaders adopting legal rhetoric to deter a western response. As Roy Allison wrote, that legal rhetoric 'aimed to blur the legal and illegal, to create justificatory smokescreens, in part by exploiting some areas of uncertainty in international law, while making unfounded assertions of "facts" (especially ostensible threats to Russians and Russian-speakers)'.³¹ And so, while condemning the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent local referendum, NATO leaders had few ideas for reversing this outcome.

Why Russia might use hybrid warfare

The Baltic states or other former Soviet republics are vulnerable to hybrid warfare only if Russia has an interest in expanding or reasserting its regional hegemony. This is certainly a possibility. Putin famously stated that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century. Moreover, Putin and other Russian leaders might see their political survival as linked to the fate of those neighbouring regimes that share similar political values. The Kremlin might regard the success of opposition movements in nearby countries as unsettling because it fears 'the transnational spread of revolution'.³² In any event, the interest driving hybrid war is not orientated on defending the international status quo since it can involve territorial expansion and violating the sovereignty of other countries.

Contemporary Russian military doctrine emphasizes the need to respond to both external and internal threats. This doctrinal perspective has a historical basis: in the past, the Kremlin has feared not only other Great Powers, but also subversive organizations operating within areas under its control. Against external threats, under the influence of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky's military thought, Soviet war planning after the First World War centred on using combined arms to strike deep into the enemy's rear, thereby exploiting firepower and mobility to go on the offensive.³³ These plans remained unchanged even when the Soviet Union incorporated nuclear weapons into its arsenal. Against threats emanating within its sphere of influence, the Soviet military played more of a domestic political role within satellite countries, intimidating potential opponents by its mere presence.³⁴ In Czechoslovakia, where the Soviet Union did not have a troop presence before 1968, Warsaw Pact forces invaded in order to quash the Prague Spring. Similarly, the Soviet Union deployed its military in Afghanistan to prop up a communist regime.

³¹ Roy Allison, 'Russian "deniable" intervention in Ukraine: how and why Russia broke the rules', *International Affairs* 90: 6, Nov. 2014, p. 1259.

³² Mark R. Beissinger, 'Structure and example in modular political phenomena: the diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions', *Perspectives on Politics* 5: 2, 2007, p. 259.

³³ William E. Odom, *The collapse of the Soviet military* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 72–82.

³⁴ Condoleezza Rice, *The Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak army, 1948–1983* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia inherited most of its military assets. During the post-Cold War period, the country's weakened international position and fragmented domestic politics meant that the attention of the Russian armed forces was focused on countering internal threats. Between 1994 and 2009 they fought two brutal counter-insurgencies in the republic of Chechnya that employed indiscriminate warfare extensively. Over time, partly thanks to increased revenues from its indigenous energy sources, Russia restored its economy, modernized its military and became more assertive in the former Soviet space. In 2008 the Kremlin fought a war against Georgia, ostensibly to protect South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgian military aggression. Here, Russia resorted to traditional military means: this war involved set-piece battles and large-scale conventional military operations. Though Russia eventually prevailed, its conduct of the war was vitiated by several logistical challenges and poor tactical performance.³⁵ Moscow evidently learned sufficiently from these mistakes to avoid showing the same clumsiness in its use of force against Ukraine in 2014.

The receptivity of the region to hybrid warfare was not apparent to the Kremlin during the 1990s and the first decade of the new century. However, some Russian military theoreticians and leaders did speculate on the future of war, and have continued to do so. They have been aware since the 1970s that the United States was gaining an edge in information, precision strike and communications technologies. One prominent Russian military theoretician declared in 1995 that countries could 'become objects of information warfare'. He speculated that the opening stages of a war would feature disinformation campaigns whereby belligerents would seek to undermine local trust in the governments they targeted.³⁶ More recently, Sergei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov have described 'new-generation war', noting that 'the role of mobile joint forces operating in an integrated reconnaissance and information environment is rising'.³⁷ In their view, information superiority has become a necessity in contemporary warfare. Though they have the United States in mind as an adversary that will exploit such advantages, they write that 'with powerful information technologies at its disposal, the aggressor will make an effort to involve all public institutions in the country it intends to attack'.³⁸ Subversive missions would thus precede any conventional military campaign.³⁹ Other Russian military leaders have drawn similar conclusions. The Chief of the General Staff of the Russian armed forces hypothesized that in future conflicts the use of force would be disguised and the information space exploited so as to undermine the target's ability to retaliate. Even presidential adviser Vladislav Surkov, writing under a pseudonym, claimed shortly after the annexation of Crimea that contemporary war would be total yet discreet in

³⁵ Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, 'Russia's war in Georgia: lessons and consequences', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 20: 2, 2009, pp. 400–424.

³⁶ Makhmut Gareev, *If war comes tomorrow? The contours of future armed conflict* (London: Cass, 1998 [first publ. in 1995]), p. 53.

³⁷ Sergei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov, 'The nature and content of a new-generation war', *Military Thought* 22: 4, 2013, p. 12.

³⁸ Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'The nature and content of a new-generation war', p. 17.

³⁹ Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'The nature and content of a new-generation war', p. 20.

its conduct. Thus, by the time Russia launched hybrid warfare against Ukraine, its military leaders and strategists had come round to the view that war would increasingly use subversion in the information space to achieve coercive effects.⁴⁰

Putting it together: a theory of hybrid warfare

Several features of the former Soviet political landscape make hybrid warfare a tempting strategy for Russian leaders. The diversity of the groups that inhabit the region, some with at least latent historical grievances against others, make the area ripe for tension. Russia has a tactical advantage by virtue of being in it; it has historical familiarity with the plethora of conflicts in it; and it is well positioned to frame local events and conflicts in a manner helpful to its interests, thereby forestalling unfavourable responses from outside actors. Yet these factors would be irrelevant if Russia did not have escalation dominance over its neighbours and an interest in expanding its zone of influence and revising the status quo.

To be sure, hybrid warfare has not been equally effective across all parts of the former Soviet space. Russia has found some areas of Ukraine more amenable to this strategy than others. This observation is unsurprising, since war turns on unforeseeable and sometimes random developments. In annexing Crimea, Russia was able to avail itself of the large military presence it already had there. Indeed, the presence of many retired servicemen in Crimea's major cities was useful for rallying indigenous support. By contrast, in eastern Ukraine it has proved harder for the Kremlin to mobilize the local population against Kiev. Russia remains prone to miscalculation despite its relative familiarity with the region. Yet the larger point stands: at least during the beginning of the crisis, Russia was able to draw on greater knowledge of regional politics than outsiders, and to frame local events favourably to itself. That is, Russia's advantage in local knowledge and access over NATO was relative and not absolute. When other governments finally started appreciating the complexity of Ukrainian politics, Russia had already taken control of Crimea and begun arming rebels in eastern Ukraine.

This discussion has revealed four conditions in which a belligerent might use hybrid warfare. First, the belligerent has local escalation dominance but not necessarily global escalation dominance. Because the belligerent has greater military power, it can threaten to unleash greater violence than its target can marshal in order to deter a particular military response from that target. Not having global escalation dominance means that the belligerent wishes to contain the conflict locally and deter external intervention. Second, the belligerent wishes to expand its sphere of influence and to revise the status quo by changing borders and influencing the political regimes of neighbouring states. Hybrid warfare is not a defensive strategy used by status quo states. Third, the target state is weak specifically because it lacks a strong civil society that mends ethnic and linguistic cleavages. The belligerent can manipulate local grievances and animosities to weaken the target from within. Finally, there are ethnic or linguistic groups in the target

⁴⁰ Rácz, *Russia's hybrid war*, pp. 36–7.

state that have some ties with the belligerent. These ties confer an informational advantage on the belligerent, giving it a better understanding of local rivalries and grievances. Moreover, these ties might even lend the efforts of the belligerent some legitimacy in its framing of the conflict.

Implications for NATO in the former Soviet region

If the post-Soviet region is a favourable environment for Russian hybrid warfare, how can the United States and NATO best contribute to defence and deterrence against such forms of aggression? How should they use military power to protect members such as the Baltic countries from hybrid warfare? What are the limits in providing extended deterrence on their behalf?

The Baltic states already benefit from NATO membership in many ways. They can call other allies to a joint session for consultations if they feel threatened, as Poland and Lithuania did in April 2014, by invoking Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Moreover, Article 5 of this treaty asserts that an attack against one ally is an attack against all; and the treaty also facilitates joint military exercises that enhance the war-fighting capabilities of its members. Beyond the provisions of the treaty itself, NATO has an aggregate conventional and nuclear supremacy over Russia. Even so, Russian actions against Ukraine have prompted observers to debate whether NATO poses as effective a deterrent as possible against Russia. Many of the solutions that strategists have described as useful for countering Russian aggression rely largely on making adjustments to the military infrastructure that NATO already has in place in Europe. The problem is that Russia pursues its hybrid warfare specifically to lower the risk of triggering the use of NATO's capabilities, which are more appropriate for conventional or even nuclear war.

Consider a sophisticated and comprehensive discussion by Matthew Kroenig of how NATO should adapt its military posture to the current security environment in the former Soviet Union.⁴¹ The US and NATO military presence in the Baltic countries is limited; American forward-deployed troops and tactical nuclear weapons are located primarily in western Europe.⁴² Kroenig's proposals include extending and expanding NATO's temporary deployments to the Baltic states; having a forward presence in eastern Europe despite the injunctions against so doing in the NATO–Russia Founding Act; assisting east European members with the modernization and standardization of their military forces; and developing and deploying to Europe a new generation of substrategic nuclear weapons to respond to potential Russian nuclear aggression at the tactical level.⁴³

Kroenig does address strengthening NATO capabilities at levels of violence lower than conventional and nuclear war. He writes that NATO ought to:

⁴¹ Matthew Kroenig, 'Facing reality: getting NATO ready for a new Cold War', *Survival* 57: 1, 2015, pp. 49–70. For a similarly strong but military-centric view of how NATO should respond, see Edward Lucas and A. Wess Mitchell, *Central European security after Crimea: the case for strengthening NATO's eastern defense*, Report No. 35 (Washington DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 25 March 2014).

⁴² Lucas and Mitchell, *Central European security*, pp. 2–4.

⁴³ Kroenig, 'Facing reality', pp. 57–65.

strengthen Eastern European states, including military assistance with intelligence and early-warning capabilities, cyber security, airpower, and stepped-up training in policing, border patrol and counter-insurgency. Although outside of NATO's normal lane, vulnerable member states should also be encouraged to pursue a political agenda to incorporate ethnic minorities into a shared national-identity conception. *In case all else fails*, Eastern European allies must make themselves indigestible to a Russian occupation.⁴⁴

This brief passage aside, however, much of his attention centres on deterring Russia at much higher levels of violence.

The primacy accorded here to military means is understandable given that NATO is a military alliance. Indeed, many of the measures adopted by NATO so far have this flavour. At the Wales summit in September 2014, NATO members agreed to a Readiness Action Plan, which included among other measures a fourfold increase in the number of fighter jets on air-policing patrols, the beginning of surveillance flights over the Baltic states, the dispatch of more ships to patrol the alliance's eastern flank and the deployment of ground forces to eastern Europe for training and exercises on a rotational basis.⁴⁵ NATO also announced a new Spearhead Force—a 'land brigade of around 5000 troops'—with the goal of bolstering its high readiness capabilities.⁴⁶ In summer 2015, the United States even decided to pre-position heavy weaponry in eastern Europe. NATO military exercises have also become more frequent, including in autumn 2015 Trident Juncture—the largest military exercise it has undertaken in 13 years.

However, the discussion above regarding the applicability of hybrid warfare in the former Soviet region reveals some of the shortcomings associated with a predominantly military solution. To begin with, too much emphasis on deterring aggression at higher levels of violence might undercut deterrence at lower levels of violence. Such is the stability–instability paradox that Glenn Snyder describes. Under conditions of mutual assured destruction between two nuclear-armed adversaries, direct and major war becomes very unlikely, since both sides seek to avoid annihilation. Consequently, both sides might perversely find it safe to engage in conflicts that do not involve nuclear weapons.⁴⁷ Therefore, bolstering alliance capabilities at higher levels of violence could make hybrid warfare even more attractive. After all, hybrid warfare exploits the vulnerability of targets at yet lower levels of violence, whereby the belligerent can plausibly deny that it is even engaging in aggression. The belligerent could thus deter its target from undertaking escalatory measures. It also denies adversaries a clear, compelling rationale for military intervention by obfuscating the nature of local crises fomented from without.

Such is the concern that the Baltic countries have with respect to NATO. Although NATO has escalation dominance over Russia, Russia has escalation

⁴⁴ Kroenig, 'Facing reality', p. 60 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ NATO, *NATO's Readiness Action Plan*, fact sheet, Dec. 2014, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2014_12/20141202_141202-factsheet-rap-en.pdf, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁶ NATO, 'Defense ministers agree to strengthen NATO's defenses, establish Spearhead Force', 23 Feb. 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_117188.htm, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁷ Glenn Snyder, 'The balance of power and the balance of terror', in Paul Seabury, ed., *The balance of power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965).

dominance over the Baltic countries individually and collectively. Their level of susceptibility to Russian hybrid warfare varies. Lithuania, for example, does not have a stateless Russian-speaking population; the most homogenous of the three states, Lithuania granted citizenship to all residents, regardless of ethnicity, shortly after independence. Elsewhere in the region, the Estonian Centre Party is popular among ethnic Russians and has even courted United Russia, which is associated with Putin.⁴⁸ The Latvian Union of Russians tried unsuccessfully to amend the country's language laws in 2011 and has supported Russian moves in Crimea.⁴⁹ More urgently, as noted above, Estonia and Latvia have substantial stateless populations that are largely Russian, rendering them vulnerable to opportunistic inciting of ethnic tensions by Russia. Such actions could destabilize those societies and forestall an unfavourable NATO reaction if its members were unable to agree that Russia bore responsibility for them, especially if some semblance of local initiative existed, making it hard to establish with clarity what and how much Russia had instigated.

The Baltic countries, then, remain exposed to more subversive Russian tactics that are ambiguous enough not to prompt escalatory measures such as the invocation of Article 5. Indeed, Article 5 is most appropriate for scenarios that involve overt and unambiguous forms of military attack against a NATO member. More subtle forms of attack that give the belligerent 'plausible deniability'—such as those involving local ethnic tensions—might not even prompt consideration of Article 5. Alternatively, though invoking Article 5 does not automatically mean a military response, it might still be a disproportionate answer to hybrid warfare; after all, it has occurred only once in the entire history of NATO to date, after the terrorist attacks on America of 11 September 2001.

The Baltic countries benefit from NATO's enhancement of its aggregate military capabilities, but they remain vulnerable if their western counterparts are unwilling to defend them. Indeed, NATO's deterrent threat depends just as much on the willingness of the entire alliance as it does on its capabilities—something which predominantly military solutions overlook. Russian hybrid warfare seeks to dampen such willingness by exploiting situational factors unique to the Baltic countries that could confound efforts to attribute an apparent act of aggression to Russia. The Baltic countries accordingly have an incentive to improve their counter-intelligence capabilities, both among themselves and with other NATO allies. Yet even this solution needs to be coupled with a concerted effort to integrate stateless populations, both politically and economically, to address existing and potential grievances regarding their status. Alliance members would do well to work at strengthening civil society and law enforcement capabilities. Strong civil society helps to inoculate states against belligerents attempting to undermine them from within. Strong law enforcement capabilities can improve the detection and arrest of agents and provocateurs.

⁴⁸ 'Party with ties to Putin pushes ahead in Estonian polls', *Financial Times*, 27 Feb. 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/1decfbac-be8a-11e4-a341-00144feab7de.html#axzz306fvyRcV>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁹ 'Pro-Russia party signs major deal with Crimea group', *Baltic Times*, 13 Aug. 2014, <http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/35355/#.VA97mRbgJHU>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

There is another reason why western NATO allies might be reluctant to defend the Baltic countries. Already some NATO members have trouble meeting their stated alliance commitments in full. Some, such as Spain and Italy, that do not feel directly threatened by Russian actions are likely to keep defence expenditures low.⁵⁰ Those countries are also less likely to back strong sanctions against Russia. Moreover, the Kremlin has actively courted populist political parties in Europe regardless of their political orientation. The most prominent examples are Front National (France), Jobbik (Hungary), the United Kingdom Independence Party, Podemos (Spain) and Syriza (Greece). These parties have recently made electoral gains in their home countries because they capture the disaffection of voters who feel the strain of persistent economic crisis and/or are disillusioned with more mainstream political parties. Out of their affinity with the Kremlin, members of these parties have endorsed the Crimean referendum and separatist-organized elections in eastern Ukraine, criticized efforts to sanction Russia, and expressed an admiration for Vladimir Putin and his brand of social conservatism.⁵¹ If they become more popular, then NATO might be hamstrung in its efforts to show unity, counter Russian narratives and apply sanctions to Russian actions. Already surveys have shown domestic publics in some European countries expressing reluctance to provide military support to vulnerable NATO members.⁵²

These observations suggest that a reliance on military solutions obscures the underlying political dimension of the conflict. It is no coincidence that Russia has used nationalism both to legitimate its efforts and to engage in hybrid war at a time when political parties friendly to Russia in western Europe are taking populist or nationalist stances. Russian pledges to support the initiative of local co-ethnics align well with the ideological agendas of west European nationalist parties.⁵³ European nationalists in these societies lack the experience of Soviet or Russian domination and so do not feel threatened by Russian policies. Accordingly, in contrast to their counterparts in the former Soviet region, west European nationalisms lack an anti-Russian element. This political situation, along with NATO's difficulty in crafting a unified and coherent policy to check Russian aggression, creates enabling conditions for Russian hybrid warfare. Consequently, Russia is able to deter a stronger response from an international coalition while fighting to obtain its goals in Ukraine. Hybrid warfare is something that a military alliance alone, such as NATO, might not be able to deter. It could provide an institutional framework to augment jointly the counter-intelligence and law enforcement capabilities of the Baltic states; however, the integration of stateless populations

⁵⁰ NATO, 'Defence expenditures data for 2014 and estimates for 2015: financial and economic data relating to NATO defence', press release, 22 June 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_120866.htm, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

⁵¹ Michael A. Orenstein, 'Putin's western allies', *Foreign Affairs*, 26 March 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.org/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-25/putins-western-allies>, accessed 15 Nov. 2015. See also Marlene Laruelle, ed., *Eurasianism and the European far right: reshaping the Europe–Russia relationship* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015).

⁵² Pew Research Center, June 2015, 'NATO publics blame Russia for Ukrainian crisis, but reluctant to provide military aid', <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2015/06/Pew-Research-Center-Russia-Ukraine-Report-FINAL-June-10-2015.pdf>, accessed 16 Nov. 2015.

⁵³ Andrew Wilson makes a similar point in *Ukraine crisis*, p. 194.

in the region is a political challenge that demands a political solution rather than a military one.

The larger problem of nationalist politics indicates how NATO members should respond to Russian disinformation campaigns. Already the Netherlands and Poland have launched a Russian-language news agency intended to counter Russian claims.⁵⁴ The receptivity of some west European political parties to Moscow's line suggests that such campaigns should also be directed to European audiences. These campaigns would require NATO members in western Europe and North America to cultivate regional expertise in the political affairs of central and eastern Europe and the former Soviet space.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Hybrid warfare brings significant conventional military power together with tactics normally associated with guerrilla operations. The belligerent uses hybrid warfare to obtain its political objectives at the expense of its target by keeping the conflict local. Russia's use of hybrid warfare reflects to some degree its position of strength and local advantage. Accordingly, international security analysts are incorrect to argue that Russia has resorted to hybrid warfare because it is an 'option of weakness'.⁵⁶ Indeed, the strategy of hybrid warfare is applicable in the former Soviet region precisely because here Russia can leverage its escalation dominance over its neighbours and its relatively better local knowledge.

Of course, hybrid warfare has its drawbacks. Its subtlety requires patience and, as with any strategy in war, miscalculations can detract from its effectiveness. Agitators and ethnic allies become difficult to control once they receive weapons. Russia might have learned this lesson when rebels inadvertently shot down Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17, prompting the United States and the EU to impose stronger sanctions. The fact that a region is susceptible to hybrid warfare does not mean that hybrid warfare will succeed.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the military solutions that some observers advocate are at best incomplete. NATO members must display political unity and resolve as well as military capability. Vulnerable countries, especially Estonia and Latvia, require strong civil society and law enforcement capabilities, while NATO must counter Russian propaganda efforts, including among its own domestic publics.

In outlining why the former Soviet Union is conducive to hybrid warfare, I have inductively postulated the conditions under which a belligerent could engage in it. First, the belligerent has local escalation dominance but not global escalation dominance. It can deter escalation by the target but its military capabilities are

⁵⁴ 'Dutch-Polish "Content factory" to counter Russian propaganda', *euobserver*, 21 July 2015, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/129724>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

⁵⁵ Charles King, 'The death of international studies: why flying blind is dangerous', *Foreign Affairs* 94: 4, 2015, pp. 88-98.

⁵⁶ Sten Rynning, 'The false promise of continental concert: Russia, the West, and the necessary balance of power', *International Affairs* 91: 3, May 2015, p. 545.

⁵⁷ On Russia's experience of challenges in its military and political operations against Ukraine, see Lawrence Freedman, 'Ukraine and the art of limited war', *Survival* 56: 6, 2014, pp. 7-38.

insufficient against an international coalition or a global power. Second, the belligerent seeks to revise the status quo. Third, the belligerent's target is weak in so far as its society features exploitable cleavages. Fourth, the target has some ethnic or linguistic ties with the belligerent, which offer opportunities to sow local discord and confer an informational advantage over outside actors whose intervention the belligerent seeks to deter.

For policy-makers, these propositions suggest that belligerents are likely to resort to hybrid warfare in only limited sets of circumstances. Hybrid warfare, then, is not necessarily the future of warfare. However, many of the conditions described above do obtain in the former Soviet Union. In Moldova, the government currently faces allegations of corruption after US\$1.5 billion disappeared from the country's three largest banks just weeks before national parliamentary elections. Opposition groups have held large protests, demanding a government inquiry.⁵⁸ Indeed, throughout its post-Soviet existence, Moldova has experienced political instability, armed conflict with the partially recognized state of Transnistria, and tensions between the majority Romanian-speaking population and the minority Russian-speaking population. Thus, Moldova is vulnerable to Russian hybrid warfare. In other conflict-prone regions, such as East Asia, however, hybrid war should be less prevalent. China might already have escalation dominance over Vietnam and Taiwan, but only against Taiwan could it potentially use tactics to divide and agitate the population on the basis of linguistic and ethnic ties; and even then, China would find it very difficult to smuggle weapons and supplies to local agitators over the Taiwan Strait. For these reasons, too, China cannot use hybrid warfare against Japan or South Korea.

⁵⁸ '10,000 protest in Moldova over missing \$1.5 billion', Associated Press, 4 Oct. 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/d84a23a5b89c4a9ab7415a45cbb5cd2c/10000-protest-moldova-over-missing-15-billion>, accessed 13 Nov. 2015.

