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Introduction

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the concept of hybrid warfare has come to dominate the international security debate. Although imprecisely defined, the term encompasses a mix of conventional and unconventional methods of warfare below the threshold of traditional conflict. Russia has often been associated with these tactics, prompting the need for a response from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU). NATO and the EU have adapted to the growing threat of hybrid warfare by developing specific strategies and institutions, including the Hybrid Fusion Cell and Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. While these efforts are commendable, their actual effectiveness is still questionable. This paper looks deeper at how the EU deals with the threat of hybrid warfare. The aim is to understand better how the EU can increase its resilience to future hybrid attacks. It analyses the strengths and weaknesses of existing strategies and suggests possible improvements. It focuses on how the EU uses different tools, such as soft power and institutional capacity, to counter hybrid threats.

I. Hybrid Warfare: New Phenomena or Aged Concept?

The terms "hybrid warfare" and "hybrid threats" have become one of the most widely used buzzwords in international security over the past decade. The concept of hybrid warfare was introduced by author Frank G. Hofmann in 2005 when he defined hybrid warfare as "a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (Hofmann, 2007, p.14). In particular, hybrid warfare has been more widely discussed in the context of the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

However, to date, there is no universal definition of the concept, with several academics criticising it for not being a new phenomenon (Libiseller, 2023), arguing that it creates an unnecessary category or is a weak concept (Caliskan, 2019). The fact is that hybrid warfare refers to older concepts of irregular and asymmetric warfare. At the same time, the works of the Chinese master Sun Tzu and the Prussian strategist Von Clausewitz are considered the so-called bible of hybrid warfare (Mansoor, 2012). What is also problematic is the diverse understanding of the concept by various actors, reflecting the geopolitical tensions in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, despite the concept's vagueness, it has become part of the strategic documents on military affairs within NATO and the EU.

As Clausewitz stated in his work "On War", war is a continuation of political intercourse, and the nature and form of war are determined by the same objectives of such policies (Von

Clausewitz, 1832).

While the nature of the modern battlefield today is much more complex and encompasses various domains, the foundation remains the same: war is still war. What remains problematic, however, is that most of the tools of hybrid warfare are employed in the so-called grey zone. In practice, this poses the problem of attribution of threats and attacks, which are often 'laundered' through non-state actors and various unconventional methods of warfare (Marsh, 2024).

The utility of the concept of hybrid warfare lies not in its modernity but in its potential to draw attention to what is important. The concept itself has become particularly influential thanks to NATO, which has begun to use it since 2014 to refer to Russia's actions against Ukraine. However, the focus was not on the operational concept; instead, it was a political narrative meant to serve as a "wake-up call" (Libiseller, 2023). Yet, modernisation and adaptation in the face of Russia's hybrid action by Euro-Atlantic structures (especially in Europe) did not come easily, and the actual sobering did not come until February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

II. The EU's Approach to Hybrid Threats

War is a complex and wide-ranging phenomenon, and so are hybrid threats. Developing a strategic approach is, therefore, a daunting task that requires cooperation across different security sectors, both military and civilian. The important fact remains that countering hybrid threats (as well as defence itself) is primarily the task of individual states. However, opportunities to strengthen resilience to such threats also come through cooperation in various alliances and international organisations (Balcaen et al., 2021).

In the Euro-Atlantic space, NATO plays the primary role in building resilience to hybrid threats, which has a wide range of tools and structures at its disposal to build resilience and defend against hybrid action. Alliance officials have been communicating since 2016 (NATO, 2024) that hybrid action against one or more allies may lead to the activation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (on collective defence); however, this has not happened yet.

The EU has become more active in addressing hybrid threats in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the case of foreign meddling in the 2016 US presidential election. The first-ever strategic document on this topic was the 2016 Common Framework to Counter Hybrid Threats (European Commission, 2016), followed by the creation of the Hybrid Fusion Cell in the same year (Bajarūnas, 2020).

It was succeeded a year later by the Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which today brings together 36 EU and NATO member states. This represented the first significant milestone towards building confidence and capacity among member states to counter hybrid action through joint exercises and resilience building (Kalniete & Pildegovics, 2021). Its main components are three active expert groups focusing on hybrid influence, strategy, defence, vulnerability, and resilience. Meanwhile, the Center defines hybrid threats as "Coordinated and synchronised actions that target systemic weaknesses in democratic states and institutions through a wide range of means" (Hybrid CoE, 2024).

Over time, the EU's approach has evolved, and several key strategy documents and new structures have emerged to address the issue on a day-to-day level. From the outset, the main objectives of the EU in countering hybrid threats have been to strengthen situational awareness, build resilience, coordinate and strengthen member states' approaches, and cooperate with NATO (EC, 2016).

NATO is a key partner for the EU in countering hybrid threats, thanks to their relatively common strategic objectives and interests in this area, especially on the issue of Russian hybrid threats (Kalniete & Pildegovičs, 2021). In doing so, both organisations seek to avoid duplication and implement a complementary approach that consists of a 'tandem' of hard power (NATO) and soft power (EU). In general, this approach has worked for many decades, and the EU has earned recognition precisely because of its skilful use of the wide range of soft power tools at its disposal (Balcaen et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, this tandem has not been able to prevent Russia from its invasive interventions since 2008, including Georgia and Ukraine. Similarly, the EU has failed to enforce its objectives through soft power regarding world trade and climate regimes, including its objectives in the Doha Development Round and goals within the Paris Agreement framework (Dee, 2015).

III. The Importance of Capacity Building for Achieving Strategic Autonomy

In an era of escalating crises of the international liberal order, ambiguity is also manifested in terms of cooperation with NATO. After the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, European states have fully realised the importance of capacity building and the need to enhance resilience. The debate on achieving EU strategic autonomy in the field of defence (Bronk, 2023) has returned to the discourse, which is also expressed in the framework of the new European Defence Industrial Strategy unveiled in March 2024. However, the presence of the forthcoming US presidential elections brings a question mark about the future of the Alliance's functioning regarding the future US administration priorities.

In addition to the vital need to secure the capacities for effective defence and conventional capabilities of European countries, this situation also raises the question of whether the EU today has the necessary capabilities to counter hybrid threats.

Regarding hybrid threats, the cornerstone of the path towards effective resilience building remains an uplifting holistic approach, including leveraging political, military, academic, civic and societal assets. Resilience measures in each area affect the others and the overall resistance of the EU against hybrid threats. The Strategic Compass, approved by the Council in 2022, urged the development of the EU's hybrid toolbox (EUHT). The primary goal is to develop civilian and military tools to effectively counter hybrid threats at the Union level. However, responding to those threats remains primarily a matter of national level. The role of the EU in this sense is instead to help member states enhance preparedness and resilience, assist in response to hybrid campaigns and facilitate know-how sharing platforms (Lasoen, 2022).

One of the critical elements for ensuring security is the concept of deterrence. For Europe, NATO and the principle of collective defence remain the key platforms for providing conventional deterrence in the medium term. However, the main problem lies not in the lack of capabilities, as reflected in the debate on the need for increased defence spending (Baccini, 2024), but in the unsystematic approach to building its capabilities. Europe, therefore, remains stuck in dependence on a key ally: the US (Weber, 2023).

While the EU aims to address this through initiatives like the European Defence Industrial Strategy, which promotes joint procurement and intra-EU defence trade (EU, 2024), progress toward strategic autonomy remains slow, highlighting an interplay between soft power ambitions and conventional military needs. Paradoxically, the institutional nature of the EU presents an advantage for countering hybrid threats. Thanks to its 'soft power', it plays the role of a global actor in areas that, although not strictly related to hard security, undoubtedly impact it. These areas are trade, environmental policies, cybersecurity, and energy security (Beaucillon, 2023). At the same time, the EU is a normative actor, and its 'strength' lies in regulatory frameworks that build a bulwark against the operation of hybrid warfare tools. Specific examples are the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act (CIDOB, 2022). The cruciality of a regulation framework was also proved on several occasions concerning GDPR.

The EU's concrete approach to the current security environment is expressed in the framework of the Strategic Compass of 2022, which, with exaggeration, represents a blueprint for a European Defence Union that could significantly contribute to achieving strategic autonomy (Blockmans et al., 2022).

Within the strategic document, a chapter is devoted to hybrid threats and defines the objective of creating a so-called EU Hybrid Toolbox. This would provide a framework for a coordinated joint response by member states to hybrid action, building prevention and recovery (EEAS, 2024). If implemented, it would also facilitate the merger of other EU instruments, such as the cyber diplomacy toolbox and the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) toolbox. Another specific initiative of the Joint Intelligence Centre (Single Intelligence Analysis Capability) is to include a Hybrid Fusion Cell. The primary role of this organisational component is to enhance situational awareness (Lasoen, 2022).

IV. Between Strategic Autonomy and Multilateralism: Balancing EU Defence Initiatives and Cooperation with NATO

The Strategic Compass still represents a turning point in the EU's view of the international security environment. While it clearly states the ambition towards achieving strategic autonomy, it reflects the importance of multilateralism, which the EU has always championed. However, European leaders' political will is needed first and foremost to achieve these objectives. Hybrid interference vis-à-vis the Member States is not homogenous, and the new institutional approach must consider regional characteristics and specificities (EP, 2020). However, mutual trust building through information sharing across Member States will be a crucial element, which, combined with EU capacities, will contribute to creating an adequate response from individual Member States and the EU as a whole.

Regarding the conventional tools, enhancing preparedness and interoperability through increased engagement of member states in PESCO or Rapid Deployment Capacity is the *sine qua non* for achieving strategic autonomy goals, with both offering solid incentives for European defence initiatives (Blockmans et al., 2022). However, the strategic and policy levels fall short. As long as the individual member states defence planning and procurement are not coordinated with the PESCO secretariat, the harmonisation and interoperability are not achievable (Biscop & Murillo, 2024). Greater participation of member states in these structures could trigger a spillover effect and proceed towards coordinated defence planning and joint procurement under the umbrella of PESCO (Rutigliano, 2023).

In practice, however, we continue to observe that the division of labour between the EU and NATO in the field of 'hard security' remains primarily the domain of the Alliance. Nevertheless, in the event of a shift away from the current status quo on the functioning of the Alliance (and in the pursuit of strategic autonomy), the EU must also contribute more significantly to conventional deterrence. Concrete examples are, in addition to the structures mentioned above, the strengthening of Frontex or the gradual replacement of US troops on the Eastern Flank by troops of the armies of other European countries (Weber, 2023).

At the same time, while Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is relatively clear about what falls under its meaning, including cyber threats (even if it ignores hybrid action in practice), Article 42.7 of the TEU remains more ambiguous. NATO is primarily responsible for territorial defence, while the EU focuses on crisis management (Rehrl, 2015). Although NATO's Article 5 is often preferred in defence matters, some experts argue that Article 42.7 is more relevant, as it creates a clearer obligation of mutual assistance than Article 5, leading to varied interpretations and applications of these clauses (Serradell, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the European Union's approach towards hybrid warfare by defining its strategies and capacity-building efforts. It started by outlining the concept of hybrid warfare, its historical roots and implications for contemporary security. By analysing the EU's approach to countering hybrid threats, the paper has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of its framework and proposes a recommendation for enhancing the resilience of the EU regarding threats stemming from the grey zone.

Countering hybrid threats remains primarily the responsibility of individual states, just as conventional deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic area remains the domain of NATO. The EU is actively trying to adapt to the modern security environment, paradoxically benefiting from its soft power concept in the context of hybrid threats. This represents a complementary part of the tandem with NATO's hard power. However, the ambiguity posed by the current geopolitical situation and the future functioning of the Alliance poses several challenges. The EU is aware of the need to build its capabilities, as it declares in the new Strategic Compass of 2022. A vital element in doing so will be building trust across member states, many of which have long faced hybrid operations from Russia and China. At the same time, the EU has inadequate conventional and nuclear deterrence capabilities or the ambiguity of the "collective defence" included in Article 42 of the Treaty on the European Union.

Implementing the Strategic Compass is a long haul and will likely require upgrading in the face of constantly changing geopolitics. However, the EU's action remains primarily in the realm of soft power rather than hard power. It should make the most of this position until it achieves its goal of becoming resilient and effectively countering hybrid threats. As a normative actor, it must take a more active role in maintaining a liberal international order and actively contribute to sanctioning violations of international law. At the same time, the need to revitalise the defence industry brings opportunities to increase competitiveness, which contributes to strengthening the EU as a global trade power. Last but not least, civil society and national experts should take individual small steps to strengthen the EU in the fight against hybrid action.

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