

Ten-Minute-Read

What is hybrid warfare and what (if at all) does it affect Ireland?

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The term hybrid warfare has become increasingly popular over the last decade. Despite this, there is little consensus over its exact definition, and therefore its distinction from “plain” warfare. This paper examines the roots of the hybrid warfare concept in order to draw conclusions about its relationship with the broader concept of warfare, and investigates the relevance of the concept to Ireland.

The central argument of the paper is that all war is hybrid warfare. The term usefully highlights certain characteristics of warfare, but it is not a new conception of warfare in itself. Whilst a reader might instinctively conclude then that the hybrid warfare concept has no relevance to Ireland, given its military neutrality, the characteristics of warfare highlighted by the term hybrid warfare actually serve as a reminder of the relevance of warfare to Ireland.

What is Hybrid Warfare?

Where did the term originate?

Frank Hoffman (2007) is credited with coining the term hybrid warfare in his book *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Hoffman proposed that war had entered a new era; one characterised by the blurring of distinctions - between conventional and non-conventional forms of war; between war and peace; between the civilian and military spheres. He drew on many other theories of warfare, such as 4th generation warfare, compound warfare, unrestricted warfare and complex warfighting, in order to develop his theory of hybrid warfare

Since Hoffman’s seminal work, much has been done to expand the concept of hybrid warfare. In the context of a post-9/11 world, Hoffman (2007) was concerned primarily with the role of non-state actors in conducting hybrid warfare. However, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 there has been a shifting focus towards the use of hybrid warfare by state actors, in particular Russia and China (Mumford & Carlucci, 2023).

Hoffman (2007) also used the terms hybrid warfare and “hybrid threats” interchangeably. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Giannopoulos, et al., 2021) has attempted to draw a distinction between the two concepts, with hybrid warfare falling under the umbrella term of “hybrid threats” – though a lack of clarity around the two terms persists (Solmaz, 2022). The primary difference between the hybrid warfare and hybrid threats is the use of force as part of hybrid warfare.



What makes a war hybrid?

A seemingly defining characteristic of hybrid warfare is its omnidirectionality. In hybrid warfare, the military domain is not the sole, decisive centre of gravity, but instead another supporting element in the “orchestra” of war (Schmid, 2019). Hezbollah’s strategy in Lebanon is an excellent example of this. Whilst hard-power is of course essential to Hezbollah’s success in Lebanon, their evolution into a socio-political actor has been critical in consolidating support for their cause, and ultimately their success in the region (Ramani, et al., 2022). This highlights that war is not only won on the battlefield

The use of the term “orchestra” above also highlights another key characteristic of hybrid warfare – synchrony. Actors conducting hybrid warfare will synchronise actions across time and space in order to achieve an objective, with a particular focus on simultaneous actions (Giannopoulos, et al., 2021). Russia’s 2015 air strikes in Syria exemplify cross-domain synchrony. Russian information campaigns used the Western counter-terrorism narrative to their advantage, legitimising indiscriminate strikes against any opposition to Assad’s regime (Ramani, et al., 2022). It is important to note here that space is meant in the broadest sense – across natural and social spaces. Also, simultaneity does not have to entail action at the exact same time. Instead it means synchronized within a relevant time period.

There also seems to be a general consensus that the purposeful creation of ambiguity is a key characteristic of hybrid warfare (Hoffman, 2007; Schmid, 2019; Giannopoulos, et al., 2021; Mumford & Carlucci, 2023). Mumford and Carlucci (2023) even go so far as to say it is the “essence” of hybrid warfare; its defining characteristic from other forms of warfare. Their definition of ambiguity as having multiple interpretations rather than vagueness is useful in capturing the deliberate nature of ambiguity creation in hybrid warfare. For example, Russia’s use of private military contractors, such as the Wagner Group, allows Russia to plausibly deny the actions of the contractors, purposefully creating layers of ambiguity (Ramani, et al., 2022; Mumford & Carlucci, 2023). In hybrid warfare, the strategic, operational and tactical elements, right down to the tools and points of attack are shaped specifically to create a sense of ambiguity. It is also worth mentioning again the proposal that a defining characteristic of hybrid warfare, in comparison to hybrid threats, is the use of force (Schmid, 2019; Giannopoulos, et al., 2021).

Are any of these characteristics unique to hybrid warfare though? It could be argued that all war is inherently hybrid – in the reality of war are there ever any neat distinctions between domains; between the civilian and military spheres? As Clausewitz (1984) famously stated, war is simply “a continuation of policy by other means”. This statement astutely implies the relationship between politics, war, and their broader relationships with society, economics, culture, law, and so on.

Similarly, are synchrony and ambiguity truly the preserve of hybrid warfare? The creation of ambiguity has deep historical roots in Chinese military strategy for example (Liang & W., 1999), and Murray and Mansoor (2012) have highlighted that history is littered with examples of hybrid warfare. Consider the tactics used by the Athenians and Spartans during the Peloponnesian War from 431 to 404 BCE. The war blended the involved conventional conflicts, but also the use of information campaigns to incite revolts and proxy conflicts, and the use of economic warfare in the form of naval blockades and trade disruption (Murray & Mansoor, 2012).

Building on the above, hybrid warfare should not be seen as a new conception of war. As Mumford and Carlucci (2023) state: “Types of warfare do not redefine war”. Hybrid warfare is

simply warfare. As shall be explored below, the usefulness of the term might not be in highlighting something new, but instead calling to attention something that is can be forgotten – the boundless nature of warfare.

Rather than encompassing new paradigms of warfare, terms such as hybrid warfare should be seen as seeking to explain the complexity of war in a given context – to highlight particular characteristics of war in given circumstances. In the case of hybrid warfare, that is omnidirectionality, cross-cutting synchrony and the purposeful creation of ambiguity.

How useful is the term hybrid warfare?

If the term hybrid warfare is supposed to illuminate certain characteristics of warfare, one must ask: how useful are these characteristics for understanding the current conduct of warfare?

Given that the hybrid warfare framework is a “Western” concept, in order to assess the usefulness of the term in understanding the current state of warfare, it would seem logical to consider two of the modern antagonists of the “West” – Russia and China – and their understanding of modern warfare, and whether it aligns with the hybrid warfare concept.

Understanding China's foreign policy objectives can be difficult, as their stated policy is seemingly intentionally opaque. Nathan and Zhang (2022) describe the obscurity of Chinese rhetoric as conducive to mistrust: “The world doesn’t know what China’s ultimate goals are”. Similarly Medeiros (2009), whilst identifying some objectives, acknowledges that the objectives and their importance change over time. However, there does appear to be several overarching guiding principles to Chinese foreign policy, all of which can be encapsulated in the notions of “peaceful rise” – though from the “Western” perspective this rise might be considered anything but peaceful – and more recently so-called “wolf warrior diplomacy” posited by President Xi Jinping.

The concepts of “peaceful rise” and “wolf warrior diplomacy” provides insight into China’s views on warfare. Effectively, China wishes to upset the current international order without appearing to do so (Medeiros, 2009; Nathan & Zhang, 2022). Chinese actions under Xi Jinping have become more assertive, leading to Western analysts coining the term “wolf warrior diplomacy” to describe this shift from a more “peaceful” approach (Yuan, 2023). Nonetheless, actions under each approach still fall short of conflict and generally Chinese rhetoric emphasises the importance of diplomacy rather than conflict in achieving a “peaceful rise” (Nathan & Zhang, 2022).

China’s approach to modern warfare, encapsulated in *Unrestricted Warfare* (1999) and the *Three Warfares* concept (Lee, 2014), specifically emphasises the importance of non-military and non-violent warfare. In other words, the Chinese approach to warfare seems to emphasise the importance of conduct in the “grey zone” – the murky area between war and peace. This conception would seem to provide the ideal platform from which to achieve their “peaceful rise”.

However, there is a critical difference between what the “West” seems to define as warfare and what China seems to consider warfare – the use of force. Therefore, whilst the term hybrid warfare seems useful in understanding much of China’s approach to warfare and how it might achieve its political objectives, it may fall short in one critical area which could misinform an understanding of China’s decision making calculus.

There are thematic similarities between Russia and China’s objectives, however Russia’s are more plainly stated and more aggressively acted upon. Similarly to China, Russia has a vision of a

multi-polar world, and sees itself as having an indispensable role in shaping international affairs (Rumer, 2019; Kubica, 2024). However, Russia has been more overt in its anti-Western rhetoric (Rumer, 2019), and explicit in its desire to either reabsorb or reassert primacy over the former Soviet Union nations (Rumer, 2019) – most recently exemplified by its invasion of Ukraine (Kubica, 2024). It is not surprising then that the use of force is associated the Russian conception of modern warfare.

Hard-power is critical to Russia's modern conduction of warfare. The so-called *Gerasimov Doctrine*, whilst not actual doctrine, reflects what the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov wishes to convey about Russia's approach to warfare. In it he explicitly states the open-use of force is the final stage of securing success in conflict (Gerasimov, 2016). This is demonstrated in Russia's use of hard-power in conflicts over the last 2 decades (Rumer, 2019; Kubica, 2024). Rumer (2019) even goes so far as to say that hard-power is a critical enabler of Russia's non-traditional means of warfare. Evidently, there is an increased use of non-traditional means of warfare, but Russia still seems to view hard-power as critical to achieving its political objectives. Thus, the term hybrid warfare would seem useful in capturing the Russian conception of warfare.

The concept of hybrid warfare does seem to provide a useful lens through which to understand the conduct of modern warfare, in that it highlights the truly boundless nature of war and captures aspects of what modern adversaries consider warfare. However, as stated above, its usefulness should not be conflated with novelty.

Also, its shortcomings as a concept, underlined by the discussion regarding China, highlight one of the most important components of warfare – understanding what the adversary considers warfare, rather than one's own definition. It is important not to be limited by the constraints both explicit and implicit in the term hybrid warfare – in fact, such rigidity could conceivably be exploited by an actor in the conduct of warfare.

How (if at all) does hybrid warfare affect Ireland?

Does hybrid warfare affect Ireland?

Given the increasing popularity of the concept of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare, it is unsurprising to discover the use of the terms in Irish defence policy (Department of Defence, 2015; Department of Defence, 2024) and the Irish national risk assessment (Department of the Taoiseach, 2024). However, their use in these documents still identifies them as distinct from warfare. If hybrid warfare is just warfare, then the question becomes whether warfare affects Ireland. If warfare, and those who conduct it, know no boundaries, then Ireland could hardly consider itself exempt from its reach. Nonetheless, it is important to examine the actuality of the relevance of warfare to Ireland.

Consider Russia, whose stated objective is to become an indispensable player in a new multi-polar world (Rumer, 2019). Achieving this objective is primarily oriented around its "sphere of influence" over the former Soviet nations (Kubica, 2024). Given their ambitions and Ireland's geographical location, there is unlikely to be a conventional conflict with Russia from an Irish perspective – though Russia's interest in the Arctic (Odgaard, 2024; Starcevic, 2024) and the North Atlantic (Ryan, 2022; O'Connor, 2022; Coughlan & Galvin, 2024) are evidence that the possibility of a conventional conflict should not be precluded. Nonetheless, the omnidirectional, supranational characteristics of warfare, highlighted by the concept of hybrid warfare, illustrate the more likely

nature of the threats that Ireland faces from Russia. It is more likely to be a secondary target in order to achieve a primary objective – a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

The case is similar with China. Geography plays an even larger role here, given Ireland's lack of proximity to China and its territorial interests in the South China Sea and the Pacific (Medeiros, 2009). As a result of these interests, as well as China's broader objectives, it is primarily focused on the US rather than Europe (Medeiros, 2009; Nathan & Zhang, 2022) – though a shift in attention towards Europe has become apparent (Herrero, 2023). Nonetheless, the effects of this attention on Europe – and Ireland – are unlikely to be felt as conventional conflict, but non-conventional methods in order to achieve China's broader objectives.

It is also important to note the relevance to Irish military deployments abroad. With Irish troops deployed on peacekeeping missions, the characteristics of warfare highlighted by the concept of hybrid warfare are extremely relevant. Russia, China and non-state actors, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, respect no boundaries in their conduct of war in the Middle East (Ramani, et al., 2022). Being there in a peacekeeping capacity does not restrict Irish troops from the reach of warfare. This is exemplified by Israeli troops firing on UNIFIL position in Lebanon (Lally & O'Halloran, 2024)

What would motivate an attack on Ireland?

Ireland's role in a globalised world means that whilst it states it is militarily non-aligned, it is most certainly aligned with the interests of the current international order. Ireland economic strategy has seen it become home to many large multinationals, attracting large capital investments from the US in particular (Central Statistics Office, 2024a). Large multinationals also store vast amounts of data in Irish data centres (Ryan-Christensen, 2024). Similarly, three quarters of all the undersea fibre-optic cables in the northern hemisphere pass through or near Irish waters (The Upfront Team, 2023).

Ireland is also heavily dependent on trade as part of its economic strategy (Central Statistics Office, 2024b) and its current energy mix (Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, 2024), again emphasizing the implicit political ties it has. More explicitly though, Ireland is a member of the European Union (European Union, n.d.), the United Nations (United Nations, n.d.) and is also a partner of NATO through the Partnership for Peace programme (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024). These alignments with the current international order, in particular Ireland's membership of the EU and close relationship with the US, mean the threat of being effected by warfare is not insignificant.

What are Ireland's vulnerabilities?

Whilst there are many ways that warfare could manifest in Ireland, the most likely materialisations would seem to be cyber-attacks, attacks on critical undersea infrastructure, promoting social and political unrest, the exploitation of Ireland's military neutrality, and the exploitation of Ireland's open economy.

As information and communications technologies (ICT) interface with and enable almost every aspect of our lives, cyber-attacks are a constant threat. The HSE ransomware attack is a high-profile example (Health Service Executive, 2023), but the figures outlined in the latest National Cyber Security Annual Update Report (2024) illustrate the ubiquity of cybersecurity threats. Whilst Ireland has a National Cyber Security Centre and states that it takes a "whole of government" approach to the implementation of its National Cyber Security Strategy, increased digitalization

means the risk posed by the threat of cyber-attacks will only increase.

Ireland's lack of security strategy and maritime security strategy leave critical undersea telecommunications and energy infrastructure vulnerable. Russia's continued violation of Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone (Coughlan & Galvin, 2024) and the Nordstream explosions in 2022 (Walker, 2024) serve to highlight the reality of this threat. Ireland is also struggling with Naval Service numbers and deploying an adequate number of vessels (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2024; Gallagher, 2024). There would be serious ramifications of compromises to the telecommunications and energy infrastructure in Irish water, both locally and globally. Yet Ireland appears incredibly vulnerable to attacks in the maritime domain.

There is a limited, yet simmering far-right movement in Ireland. Oriented around the issues of immigration, housing, cost of living and healthcare provision, Ireland has seen increased social unrest – though there has been limited political impact so far (Craig, et al., 2023; Harrison, 2024). The digitalised nature of these movements, however, makes them prime candidates for information campaigns aimed at stoking further tension (Craig, et al., 2023; Harrison, 2024). Given Ireland's role in multilateral organisations, political disruption in Ireland could provide a way for a malign actor to disrupt the decision making process of these organisations.

Ireland's military neutrality also offers an avenue for actors to exploit. Ireland's neutrality and the ambiguity surrounding its meaning is a contentious issue in Ireland as well as abroad. In Ireland, it has increasingly become a mainstream political topic, particularly with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, renewed conflict in the Middle East, and discussions regarding amending the so-called "Triple Lock" (Lehane, 2024). Abroad, it is not military neutrality that causes tension, but rather the lack of investment in security and defence that it has entailed (Drea, 2024; Mooney, 2024), as domestic politics has likely shied away from it in order to avoid aggravating the voter base. Exploiting this tension both in Ireland and in Ireland's relationship with other nations provides an opportunity for malign actors to disrupt the decision making process of these nations and organisations.

Ireland's open economic model could also be exploited by malicious actors, through foreign direct investment (FDI) or even cultural influence. At a European level, China's involvement in critical infrastructure, other strategic sectors – such as energy and ICT – and education has been flagged as a major concern (Herrero, 2023), and these have been echoed in Ireland (O'Keefe, 2023). New inward investment screening regulation also looks set to be significantly delayed (Curran, 2024). Ireland's generally "open door" approach leaves it vulnerable to economic espionage.

What should Ireland do?

In order to address the above vulnerabilities, the Irish government should take several steps. To begin with, Ireland should adopt a standardised definition of and framework to analyse warfare, and it needs to be a definition and framework that accounts for the boundless nature of warfare, and a potential adversary's definition of warfare rather than Ireland's siloed definition. A potential candidate for this is the Hybrid Threat framework proposed by the Hybrid Centre of Excellence in the EU (Giannopoulos, et al., 2021), not because hybrid warfare is a new conception of warfare, but because it communicates the boundless nature of warfare. However, the primary weaknesses of this framework are that it is still grounded in "hybrid" terminology and a European perspective on warfare.

The omnidirectional nature of warfare highlighted by the concept of hybrid warfare also

illustrates the necessity for a “whole of government” approach to security and defence. The Irish government should establish a body – or even department – responsible for security; one that is cross cutting, and does not draw lines between internal and external security. A siloed approach is inappropriate to address the nature of modern security threats.

Relatedly, Ireland must publish a cross-cutting security strategy, integrating existing isolated strategies, and this should be quickly followed by more detailed maritime security and critical entity resilience strategies. The lack of direction in these areas leaves Ireland vulnerable to the threats it faces.

These strategies will be extremely broad, but within them should be a number of measures to address the above outlined vulnerabilities. These include increased international collaboration and coordination to improve information sharing and interoperability – though of course this does also come with increased risks such as broader exposure to ICT networks and further political alignments, so this needs to be managed appropriately. There is also a need to increase the number of cross-departmental and international emergency scenario planning exercises to ensure appropriate preparation for emergencies.

The strategies should also outline plans to develop a “deter, detect and respond” framework for security threats and incidents, and the associated capabilities and capacity in key domains such as cyber and maritime. They should also outline a “whole of society” approach to improve resilience, including a formal strategy to counter information operations, which does appear to be in development, though has yet to materialise (O’Keefe, 2024). Evidently there are plans to introduce FDI screening (Curran, 2024), but the introduction of this should be brought forward, not delayed. Similarly, Ireland should introduce security screening policy for ICT and supply chains more broadly where it could undermine security.

There are also underlying issues in Ireland which require addressing. The weaponisation of immigration is particularly focused on the constrained housing supply – it will not disappear until the housing crisis ceases to be an issue. Also, the definition of Irish neutrality needs to be discussed publicly. Ireland must coherently define what it means to defend its security, and what that entails for its security, defence, foreign and economic policy.

Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that hybrid warfare is simply warfare – it is not a new conceptualisation of warfare. Nonetheless, the term usefully highlights certain characteristics of warfare, such as its boundless nature and the purposeful creation of ambiguity, which should prove valuable to understanding the conduct of modern warfare. Reliance on insularly defined terms and conceptualisations to understand warfare though could limit the understanding of the most important component of warfare – the adversary.

Despite Ireland’s military non-alignment, its implicit and explicit ties to the current international order mean the concept of warfare is relevant to Ireland. Despite this, actors at the political level are slow to address Irish vulnerabilities. There are many steps Ireland should take towards mitigating these vulnerabilities, but firstly it must take the time to understand the true scope of warfare, and realise that it knows no boundaries.

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