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## The Need for a Taxonomy of Hybrid Warfare: Population-Centric vs. Enemy-Centric Approaches

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Since Russia's ambiguous intervention in Ukraine in 2014, the concept of hybrid warfare has gained attention in Western academic, defense policy, military practitioner, and media circles. Despite its rising popularity, the concept hybrid warfare is analytically problematic. One of the reasons for this is that the existing conceptualization of hybrid warfare is too broad for theoretical analysis and defense policymaking. [Hybrid warfare](#) is commonly described as a way of attaining strategic goals by using a mixture of kinetic and non-kinetic instruments while remaining below conventional armed conflict. With this understanding, the hybrid mode of warfare may take a wide variety of shapes and be practiced in different ways.

The examples of case studies that have been labeled as hybrid warfare span from [Russia's](#) operations in Crimea and the Donbas region, to [China's](#) intimidatory activities against Taiwan, to [Iran's](#) destabilizing behavior around the Middle East, to [North Korea's](#) hostile and provocative actions towards South Korea. Apart from perhaps being categorized under the single term hybrid warfare, there is little evidence to suggest a strong connection between them.

Given that hybrid warfare is an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of activities, creating a taxonomy to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of its diverse manifestations would be helpful. In this sense, this paper proposes applying David Kilcullen's famous taxonomy, originally used in counterinsurgency, to differentiate between population-centric and enemy-centric approaches to the hybrid warfare model. Before that, however, let us briefly explain what Kilcullen means by population-centric and enemy-centric approaches within the context of counterinsurgency.

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## **Population-centric vs. Enemy-centric Counterinsurgency**

Kilcullen describes [the population-centric approach](#) as viewing counterinsurgency primarily as a control challenge, or even as an armed extension of government administration. Its primary aim is to maintain control over the population and the environment in which that population exists. While techniques within this model may vary from hardline methods to softer ones, the fundamental belief is that obtaining control over the population is essential, with other goals following suit.

On the other hand, for Kilcullen, [the enemy-centric approach to counterinsurgency](#) understands it as a variant of traditional warfare. It focuses on defeating the adversary as the main objective. Having said that, this approach also seeks to establish control over the population and the environment where that population lives. However, while it shares certain elements with the population-centric approach, its fundamental focus remains on prioritizing the adversary's military defeat above all other objectives.

## **Population-centric vs. Enemy-centric Hybrid Warfare**

As noted above, applying the concepts of population-centric and enemy-centric approaches to the phenomenon of hybrid warfare may illuminate the different forms of hybrid warfare. In that sense, this paper introduces a new taxonomy of hybrid warfare, by classifying it into two main sub-types based on the nature of operations (disruptive versus destructive) and their primary targets: *population-centric hybrid warfare* and *enemy-centric hybrid warfare*.

In population-centric hybrid warfare, the main focus is on influencing the adversary's population and key decision-makers by means of intimidatory and coercive activities, with minimal actual confrontation. That is to say, the hybrid warfare operator does not seek to damage its adversary's warfighting capabilities in a population-centric hybrid warfare campaign. In contrast, enemy-centric hybrid warfare encompasses comparatively high levels of violence and military engagement (whether covert and/or indirect) aimed at defeating the adversary's armed forces while also using psychological and disruptive tactics to influence the adversary's population and key political decision-makers.

It is worth mentioning that some characteristics of enemy-centric hybrid warfare overlap with those of population-centric hybrid warfare. Despite its significant use of violence, enemy-centric hybrid warfare also seeks to establish control over the conflict-zone population and influence enemy decision-makers. However, the fundamental mindset differs. In enemy-centric hybrid warfare, the main thrust is on securing victory over the opponent as the highest priority, with all other goals falling into place thereafter. To illustrate this distinction, it would be helpful to take a look at the two defining examples of hybrid warfare—China's efforts to destabilize Taiwan and Russia's operations in Donbas.

## **China's Efforts to Destabilize Taiwan**

The landslide victory of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Tsai Ing-wen in the 2016 presidential elections over the China-friendly Kuomintang candidate, Eric Chu, marked the end of the "[honeymoon](#)" period in Cross-Strait relations from 2008 to 2016. This shift occurred because Tsai and her party, the DPP, had refused to recognize the "[1992 Consensus](#)," which asserts that both sides of



the Taiwan Strait are part of one China and should work toward national reunification. Since Tsai took office as President of Taiwan in May 2016, hybrid warfare actions have become a central element of Beijing's policy to destabilize the Tsai Ing-wen administration, which China sees as "[separatist](#)."

The political objective of Beijing's [hybrid warfare](#) campaign against Taiwan is to deter the Taiwanese government from declaring "de jure independence," and keep the ruling DPP from re-election in Taiwan. Roughly speaking, during its hybrid warfare campaign, Beijing predominantly relied on non-kinetic tools, with kinetic tools playing an ancillary role. It has carried out [propaganda and disinformation](#) operations to influence the Taiwanese population and to discredit and delegitimize the Taiwanese government. Beijing has also employed [diplomatic pressure](#), [economic pressure](#), and [cyber-operations](#) targeting the island's general public and key decision-makers. Such measures have aimed to, among others, erode public trust in the government, create internal divisions, and shape public opinion in favor of reunification with China.

As for the kinetic aspects of China's hybrid warfare campaign, they have primarily aimed at intimidating and harassing Taiwanese decision-makers and the population rather than engaging in direct combat. In this context, [large-scale military exercises](#), [violations of Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone \(ADIZ\)](#), [the use of irregular maritime militias](#) called the "little blue men," and [threats of actual force](#) have been used to instill anxiety among both the Taiwanese public and leadership. The focus on influencing key political decision-makers and controlling Taiwan's societal and political spheres aligns with the features of population-centric hybrid warfare. In accordance with its population-centric nature, Beijing has prioritized the support or subjugation of the populace over military defeat.

### ***Russia's Subversive Operations in Donbas***

On 21 November 2013, then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign [the European Union Association Agreement](#) aimed at removing Kyiv from Russia's geopolitical orbit. Yanukovych's decision to suspend its preparations for signing the agreement with the European Union led to mass [anti-government demonstrations](#) in late 2013, known as the "Revolution of Dignity." Although Yanukovych attempted to suppress the demonstrations [violently](#), pro-European protesters ultimately succeeded in overthrowing him, and he fled the country in late February 2014.

The Donbas region in eastern Ukraine had long served as [the main base of support](#) for ousted President Yanukovych. Most residents of Donbas, with a significant ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking population, had voted in favor of Yanukovych and historically supported his political party, the Party of the Regions. Therefore, they were deeply disheartened by Yanukovych's ousting and felt concerned about the country's future political course. A week after President Yanukovych was removed from office, [pro-Russian demonstrations](#) erupted in several eastern Ukrainian oblasts, most notably Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv.

The chaotic situation presented Moscow, which sought to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence, with an opportunity to intervene in the Donbas region. Russia undermined Ukraine's sovereignty in Donbas by conducting covert military actions via gunmen wearing no identifying marks, often



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referred to as “[little green men](#).” Under the strategic guidance of President Putin, these efforts were operationalized through [several elements](#) such as tactical battalion groups, special forces like Spetsnaz, the Russian Airborne Troops (VDV), and the Special Operations Command (SOC ), and intelligence agencies like the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU). Additionally, Russia waged a proxy conflict against Ukraine using several non-state groups, including [the Wagner Group](#) and [Cossack militias](#).

The [fiercest clashes](#) in Donbas took place in 2014 and 2015. In the years that followed, the situation in the region appeared relatively stable, but the conflict was not frozen. Fighting between Ukrainian security forces and Russian-linked forces continued until February 24, 2022, when Russia escalated its protracted hybrid warfare campaign into a [full-scale conventional military operation](#).

As part of its hybrid warfare campaign in Ukraine, Moscow has also considerably benefited from a broad array of non-military instruments, such as [disinformation](#), [cyber-attacks](#), and [economic coercion](#), to decrease the necessity for using military force to the minimum level. Yet, Russia’s main strategy in the Donbas operation was the military defeat of the adversary. The high number of casualties highlights a substantial focus on military actions against adversary forces. From 2014 to 2022, the war in Donbas resulted in over [14,000 deaths](#). Therefore, the Donbas operation exemplifies enemy-centric hybrid warfare, where the main thrust is on securing victory over the opponent as the highest priority, with all other goals falling into place thereafter.

### **Conclusion**

Hybrid warfare remains an overly broad concept that requires a taxonomy to effectively analyze its diverse manifestations. By applying David Kilcullen’s famous taxonomy, initially used in counterinsurgency, to differentiate between population-centric and enemy-centric approaches to the concept of hybrid warfare, we can better differentiate between distinct types of hybrid warfare, as seen in the cases of China’s efforts to destabilize Taiwan and Russia’s subversive operations in Donbas. China’s disruptive efforts against Taiwan have reflected an enemy-centric hybrid warfare, as they primarily lie in psychological intimidation rather than physical subversion. Unlike Chinese efforts, Russian actions in Donbas involved actual fighting and bloodshed. They clearly indicate a higher level of organized violence compared to the Taiwanese operation. Thus, Russia’s campaign in Donbas illustrates an enemy-centric approach, prioritizing military dominance over its adversary. The proposed taxonomy provides a more nuanced lens to policymakers and analysts in understanding and addressing contemporary hybrid warfare challenges.



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