

Hybrid Warfare and Modern Conflicts in Different Cultural Geographies: Why Consensus Definition Remains Impossible

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Abstract

Originally defined by Hoffman as a specific operational concept, the term ‘hybrid warfare’ has mutated into a catch-all narrative for Western anxieties about the changing character of conflict, creating practical obstacles for policymakers. This article argues that the ongoing search for a universal consensus academic definition is unlikely to ever succeed. Therefore, rather than pursuing an impossible academic consensus, policymakers should let scholarly debates continue and instead utilize practical classification tools to adapt to the ‘fuzzy logic’ of modern, complex conflicts. The article supports the argument for the inevitable failure to find a consensus definition through four primary explanations. First, political science lacks a universal definition of the genus ‘war’ itself; without this foundation, defining the sub-variant ‘hybrid war’ is logically impossible. Second, the essentialist tradition in social sciences seeks rigid, binary definitions that cannot capture the ‘fuzzy continuum’ of reality in which modern conflicts occur. Third, war is not a universal concept; its meaning, justification, and ethical framework vary profoundly across different cultures. Consequently, attempting to frame non-Western strategies within Western conceptual models is a methodological mistake. Fourth, the concept of war ‘travels’ and evolves over time, with worldviews shifting as conflicts become more complex and non-linear—phenomena that elude traditional conceptual frameworks.

Key words: *Hybrid Warfare, Hybrid Threats, Conceptual Confusion, Conceptualization of War, Non-Kinetic Means.*

Introduction

Originally used in a battlefield-centric way in the West’s military lexicon, the term ‘hybrid war’ has moved far from Hoffman’s original definition (Hoffman 2007,) to become ubiquitous among politicians, journalists, and experts in the last decade, particularly since Russia’s intervention in Ukraine began in 2014. As the understanding of the term departed from Hoffman’s definition, sometimes referring only to non-kinetic destabilization operations, defining the term’s theoretical boundaries became an intellectual challenge for scholars. As Person et al. (2024) rightly noted, there are currently ‘almost as many

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definitions of hybrid war in the literature as there are authors,’ a situation which, as Solmaz (2022a) rightly pointed out, means that ‘when scholars or practitioners mention the ‘hybrid model of warfare’ they do not always imply the same thing.’

The widespread use of ‘hybrid warfare’—in politicians’ speeches as well as in strategic documents—without a precise, consensual definition is not only an intellectual challenge (Bankov 2024, 1-23) for scholars but also a practical obstacle to policy-making at both national and international levels. Even before the invasion of Ukraine and the popularization of the ‘hybrid war’ term, in 2010 the Armed Services Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, while seeking ‘to determine how DOD defines hybrid warfare... and how DOD (the US Department of Defense) uses the concept in its strategic planning documents,’ found a contradiction. On the one hand, the DOD had not defined a single agreed-upon and official definition, did not intend to do so, and did ‘not consider it a new form of warfare.’ On the other hand, not only did senior military officials refer to the term, but different organizations within the DOD also gave different descriptions of hybrid warfare (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2010).

In 2024, seeking to end the intellectual confusion caused by diverse and fragmented commentaries on hybrid warfare, the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes and its Emerging Security Challenges Working Group convened a group of scholars and security experts. Their goal was to bring conceptual clarity and an academic approach to the subject, culminating in the document ‘The Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare Reference Curriculum (HTHWRC).’ The reference curriculum claimed to be authoritative in representing *the consensus views* of a number of scholars from a representative number of partner nations, and comprehensive to the extent that it seeks to highlight a range of key facets and approaches to these complex subjects. However, it acknowledged that the final document is prescriptive only in highlighting certain agreed elements, issues, and themes. This document highlighted that ‘*no single agreed definition exists for either hybrid war or hybrid threats*’ (Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes, 2024) and suggested only a ‘*working definition*’ for the purpose of the document (Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes 2024).

Caliskan and Liégeois (2020), in their article, which tried to explore the meaning of hybrid warfare from the viewpoint of NATO based on in-depth interviews with NATO officials, conclude that hybrid warfare is an ambiguous concept that undermines NATO’s strategic thinking, which ‘leads NATO to forget the difference between war and peace.’ Schadlow (2015) observed that in the past, the prime targets of this form of warfare—Baltic and Central Europeans—expressed their frustration with the concept, and even some Poles, Swedes, and Finns dislike the phrase because they ‘view the concept as

merely another mechanism by which the West can avoid decisive action against Russia, particularly because NATO has not developed, really, an operational concept to address hybrid threats.’ They believe that the concept ‘allows NATO to avoid action because a range of activities – from the aggressive use of disinformation by Moscow, to economic pressure, to bribery and threats, to use of “locals” to stir up protests – become conveniently categorized as being under the threshold of war.’

The reference curriculum of NATO and other attempts to agree on a definition of hybrid warfare have not yielded any results so far, and there remain ‘almost as many definitions of hybrid war in the literature as there are authors.’ Solmaz (2022b) classified these interpretations into five different forms, which I have summarized as follows in Table 1.

Table 1: Hybrid Warfare: Definitions, Instruments, and Theoretical Origins

Classification	Definition focus	Primary instruments	Theoretical origin
Synergistic fusion	Integration of conventional & irregular tactics in the same battlespace	Kinetic weapons, terrorism, criminal activity	Hoffman (2007), Post-2006 Lebanon War analysis
Unified direction	Combined use of regular and irregular forces under a single command	State military forces, proxy militias	Traditional Counter-Insurgency (COIN) studies
Multi-modal menace	Use of various military and non-military means to menace an enemy	Diplomacy, economic sanctions, military threats	Broad Strategic Studies
Sub-threshold activity	Activities involving any mix of violent and non-violent means below the war threshold	Cyber-attacks, disinformation, special forces	Post-Crimea (2014) analysis; Gray Zone theory
Non-violent subversion	Achieving political goals via non-violent subversive activities	Propaganda, political corruption, lawfare	"Color Revolution" theories; Soft Power weaponization

Source: The table was prepared based on the Classification of Hybrid Warfare Interpretations by T. Solmaz.

Methodology

To investigate the structural limitations of establishing a consensus definition of 'hybrid warfare', this study employs a qualitative, multi-disciplinary research design rooted in conceptual analysis and comparative political theory. Rather than seeking to operationalize 'hybrid warfare' as a static variable, this article evaluates the conceptual evolution, linguistic structures, and philosophical traditions that govern how organized violence is defined across different historical eras and civilizations.

The methodological framework of this paper is constructed around three primary analytical approaches:

1. **Sartorian Conceptual Analysis.** The foundational framework for assessing the current "conceptual quagmire" relies on Giovanni Sartori's semantic and conceptual analysis (Sartori, 1970; Teune, 1975). This approach is utilized to trace how the term 'hybrid warfare' has mutated from Frank Hoffman's original, localized operational description of battlefield tactics into an overextended, catch-all narrative for Western security anxieties. By applying Sartori's principles regarding "conceptual stretching," this study examines the logical fallacies that arise when a sub-variant (hybrid war) is structurally decoupled from its genus (war)—a genus that itself lacks a universal definition within contemporary political science and International Relations (IR).
2. **Comparative Intellectual and Civilizational History.** To demonstrate that war is not an absolute or monolithic concept, a comparative philosophical approach is used to examine diverse cultural traditions. The study maps and contrasts the epistemic baselines of alternative strategic paradigms, including:
 - **The Classical Western Realist/Idealist Tradition:** Grounded in Greco-Roman thought, early Christian just-war theories, and Clausewitzian state-centric, secular political rationality.
 - **The East Asian Pragmatic/Spiritual Tradition:** Exemplified by Sun Tzu's psychological manipulation and the modern evolution of "unrestricted warfare" (Liang & Xiangsui, 1999).
 - **The Abrahamic/Islamic Legal Tradition:** Analyzed through the ethical constraints, spiritual dimensions, and jurisprudence of *Jihad* (Al-Dawoody, 2011; Sonbol, 2009; Feirahi, 2009).
 - **The Russian Military-Academic Tradition:** Specifically evaluating the indigenous development of "New Generation Warfare" as an expression of a distinct strategic culture that cannot be cleanly superimposed onto Western "hybrid" models (Bērziņš 2019).

This comparative matrix highlights how profound semantic and linguistic divergences compel different societies to organize strategic knowledge in fundamentally incompatible ways, rendering a global consensus definition structurally impossible.

3. **Interdisciplinary Paradigm Mapping (Scientific Metaphor Translation).** Finally, this article utilizes an interdisciplinary comparative approach by examining how shifts in the natural sciences historically mirror and shape doctrines in the social and military sciences. Specifically, the study contrasts:

- **The Newtonian/Mechanistic Paradigm:** Deterministic, linear, and reductionist frameworks that attempt to isolate a limited number of variables to predict conflict outcomes (Mann 1992).
- **Chaos Theory and Fuzzy Logic:** Non-linear frameworks, as conceptualized by Steven Mann (1992) and Lotfi Zadeh (1973), which treat physical and social reality as a continuous "fuzzy continuum" where extreme complexity and minute deviations generate unpredictable outcomes.

By cross-referencing these scientific models with contemporary defense challenges—such as the "weaponization of everything" highlighted by Mark Galeotti (2022)—the methodology establishes the practical utility of classification matrices over rigid binary definitions for modern policymakers and strategic planners.

Searching for Definition

The recent intellectual debates around hybrid warfare and the search for a consensus definition stem primarily from a necessary realization of the fact that conventional military strategies and planning have become outdated for the needs of modern conflicts. This obsolescence becomes evident when modern military budgets fail to meet the challenges posed by the evolving nature of conflict. As conflicts grow more complex, it becomes harder for policymakers and planners to design effective defence strategies and budgets. It is now especially difficult to base defence budgets solely on conventional military spending—such as tanks, bullets, infrastructure, procurement, and personnel salaries—in an era where 'everything can be weaponized' through often, bloodless yet destructive means (Galeotti, 2022; Ljungkvist, 2024; Chiragov, 2025).

The complexity of modern conflict means it can be hybrid, representing a mixture of virtually any elements. Depending on its geography, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and adversaries, each country faces unique security challenges. Consequently, each state builds its own defence strategies and, based on its capabilities and intellectual traditions for viewing conflict, designs its offensive strategies.

We have many definitions of hybrid warfare because states now confront many forms of conflict, and every state seeks to apply its own conceptual framework of hybrid war to others. The table above, developed from Solmaz's (2022b) classification of different definitions, could be a practical tool for policymakers and planners at national and international levels. When designing budgets to counter their specific hybrid threats, defence planners could use this table by checking the relevant cells. States can select one definition of hybrid war—with its particular focus and primary instruments—that aligns with the threats they face, or they may combine several, as purely one kind of hybrid warfare is now rare.

My central argument in this article is that we will not be able to find and agree on a consensus definition of hybrid warfare for the following reasons.

The Foundational Deficit – Defining “War”

First, before agreeing on a definition of hybrid warfare, we should determine whether a universal definition of war and warfare (without the ‘hybrid’ adjective) even exists as a category in modern political science. For political analysis, clarity requires strictly differentiating the analytical category of war from its common rhetorical uses or legal definitions (Dinstein 2011, 3). As Collier and Mahon (1993) rightly pointed out, ‘stable concepts and a shared understanding of categories are routinely viewed as a foundation of any research community.’ The problem is that while the study of war is a central pillar of political science, particularly within International Relations and Conflict Studies, the concept of ‘war’ is neither monolithic nor universally agreed upon (Bosio 2020; Kaldor 2012, 18). As Dinstein (2011) rightly pointed out: ‘The word ‘war’ lends itself to manifold uses. It is necessary, at the outset, to differentiate between ‘war’ as a figure of speech... and ‘war’ as a legal term of art.’

If we had a universal definition of war as a category in modern political science (Schu 2017), then it would be easier to define ‘hybrid war,’ where the adjective ‘hybrid’ describes the specific qualities and characteristics of the type of war we mean. The obscurity comes not from the ‘hybrid’ adjective, but from the word ‘war’ itself. Literally, ‘hybrid’ means ‘a thing made by combining two different elements,’ denoting a mixed character or composition. Thus, the term ‘hybrid war’ presupposes a mixture of already known forms of warfare. This leads to the logical question: a hybrid war is composed of a mixture of what forms of war?

Adjectives function as tools for precision, replacing vague descriptions with more informative ones. They narrow meaning by providing specific details about a noun's characteristics, such as its quality, shape, or type. All this means that by using the ‘hybrid’ adjective, we narrow the broader concept of war, whereby all ‘hybrid wars’ are ‘war,’ but not all wars are ‘hybrid wars.’ And since we do not have

a universal definition of war as a category, we will never have a universal definition of hybrid war as a category in political science either.

The problem is that despite possessing ancient roots tracing back to classical political thought, political science as a discipline lacks a unified global identity, a cohesive methodology, and effective communication channels like those found in natural sciences such as math, biology, or chemistry (Zaytsev et al. 2023, 113-142; Trent 2010). Political science as a science also lacks universal categories like the natural sciences and its fragmentation is reinforced by global power differentials, the institutional incentives of different agencies, and diverse intellectual traditions across different civilizations about life, its meaning and politics, as well as the concept of war, which I will discuss below (Almond 1990, 13; Acharya & Buzan, 2007, 1-22). The differences lead to ambiguity and confusion about words, concepts, and understandings that we often assume have a universal meaning by default; attempts to elevate these common rhetorical usages into agreed-upon categories has always been common in the social sciences. In the last century, Giovanni Sartori (1970) observed that political science, unlike natural sciences such as physics and biology, lacked a universally accepted terminology. To remedy this, he authored foundational works advocating the ‘intentional’ use of concepts to ensure they were understood uniformly (Teune 1975, 93). For this purpose, in 1970, he and other like-minded intellectuals established the Committee on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis of the International Political Science Association (IPSA)—an association founded in 1949—with the aim of standardizing conceptual categories and terminology in the political sciences.

Second, by default we assume that defining and categorizing a phenomenon is the beginning of understanding it scientifically or grasping its true nature. We assume that ‘a “good” definition with its power to discriminate’ helps us to simplify the complex world for a better and more scientific understanding of it. However, as Teune (1984) noted, we should not forget that ‘Because of the fuzzy nature of social systems, their boundaries are difficult to specify.’ This means that we should be aware of the fact that while clear definitions are the foundation of science, an awareness of their potential limitations and a willingness to adapt them are essential for the pursuit of a more complete truth (Spagnesi 2025).

For centuries, scientists have believed that the search for a definition is a search for truth, leading us to assume there is only one ‘definition’, one ‘truth,’ and one ‘logic’ for every entity. Stemming from essentialist traditions, this intellectual practice—which is a foundation of all academic endeavours—leads us to believe that, by default, the entire universe is composed of distinct and discrete entities (Dupre 1993, 15-85). The desperate effort to define hybrid warfare also stems from these essentialist traditions

in social sciences. Deriving from Platonic idealism and Aristotelian categories, essentialism asserts that objects possess an inherent set of necessary attributes that define their identity. Contrary to essentialists, nominalists indicate that categories are mental constructs imposed upon reality rather than derived from it. For them, definitions are merely names invented by the human mind for cognitive economy (Popper 1994, 29-31; Cowling & Giberman 2025).

The history of science demonstrates that the search for absolute definitions often fails because the natural world resists binary categorization. The difficulty of finding one definition is not merely a linguistic failure (stemming from diverse cultural and philosophical approaches, as discussed below) or a temporary gap in empirical data. It is also a mismatch between the discrete tools of human language and the continuous, fuzzy continuum of physical reality, where sharp boundaries are the exception rather than the rule (Zadeh 1973, 28-44).

In science, rigid definitions are crucial for precision and clear communication. Yet, they can also obscure the full complexity of a phenomenon. Lotfi Zadeh's Fuzzy Logic also postulates that the hardship of finding one definition is a signal that we must abandon the quest for binary boundaries (Morgan 1998). Furthermore, case studies from biology, astronomy, cognitive science, and law demonstrate that scientific truth is better understood as a matter of degree—a verisimilitude—rather than a binary state (Vignero & Wenmackers 2021, 11729-11764).

Thus, if rigid definitions can obscure reality in the natural sciences, they can certainly obscure it in the social sciences, which are more socially constructed, subjective, and prone to ideological and cultural biases.

Cultural and Civilizational Relativity

Third, while war is a recurring phenomenon in human history that has left indelible marks on the formation of civilizations, its meaning, justification, and significance have not been universal across different cultures. Various cultures have not only experienced war differently but have also approached it in distinct ways, leading to diverse philosophical interpretations and conceptual understandings. These differences stem from the interplay among cultural values, historical contexts, and philosophical traditions (Finnström & Nordstrom 2015, 377-381; Fry 2015, 614-619). In other words, not all cultures evaluate war, the distinctions between war and conflict, or the role of violence through the prism of modern Western intellectual traditions, categories, or a universalist lens (Herberg-Rothe 2001, 175-186; Barkawi 2016, 199-214). Since the concept of war varies across cultures, the Western concept of 'hybrid war' is also not a suitable or universal lens for analysing warfare in other cultural traditions, therefore,

we should not try to fit the Western concept of ‘hybrid war’ into others. As Bērziņš (2019) observes, ‘it is a conceptual mistake to try to fit Russian New Generation Warfare, the result of a long military academic discussion, into Western concepts (i.e., hybrid war). It is a methodological mistake to try to frame a theory developed independently by the Russian military as a theory developed in another country. It reflects another culture’s way of thinking and strategic understanding about the way warfare should be conducted.’

Probably, to explain the fragmentation of political science and the difficulty of finding universal categories, we must look deeper than surface-level disagreements, even within the concept of war. Whereas modern Western intellectual thought often defines war strictly in kinetic terms, other traditions encompass a spiritual dimension (Keegan 1994, 463; Juergensmeyer 2000, 153). We should search for the root of these disagreements in profound semantic differences across languages. Empirical evidence from cognitive linguistics and linguistic anthropology suggests that not only does profound structural divergence result in different lexical representations and conceptual understandings—compelling speakers to adopt distinct models for organizing knowledge—but also that languages differ so fundamentally at every level (sound, grammar, lexicon, meaning) that it is difficult to find any single structural property they share (Evans & Levinson 2009, 429). Consequently, as Solmaz (2022a) argues, “the main reason for the conceptual confusion surrounding hybrid warfare and the mismatch with the original concept” is not merely Giovanni Sartori’s “conceptual stretching” (Solmaz, 2022b) (where a concept is applied to new cases beyond its original context). Rather, this confusion stems from deeper cultural, semantic, and linguistic differences.

Cross-cultural examination of how different societies have defined ‘war’ reveals that the conceptualization of organized violence is fundamentally determined by the prevailing sources of legitimate authority in a culture—shifting from kin-based vengeance to cosmic/divine mandate to secular political rationality (Juergensmeyer 2000, 6). The glorification of military service in some cultures sharply contrasts with pacifist approaches, such as the tradition of non-violence in Jain philosophy (Howard 2023). These differences generate profound incompatibilities in ethical frameworks, particularly regarding the concepts of non-combatant status and the ultimate moral purpose of violence (Keegan 1994, 20-22; Cox 2018, 592-613). As argued by Coker (2007) and other scholars, cultural and philosophical research shows that concepts such as honour, sacrifice, and heroism vary widely from one society to another, whereas the ‘post-heroic’ West often views sacrifice as a failure of protection, other traditions maintain a warrior ethos where such acts are central to moral identity (Keegan 1994, 6; Sun, Kinsella & Igou 2024).

In Classical Greece, warfare was philosophically normalized as an inevitable and a fundamental building block of political life. Heraclitus characterized conflict as the “father and king of all,” while Plato described existence as a perpetual war (O’Driscoll 2015, 2-23). Thus, this view accepted war as an ontological given, in contrast to traditions pursued in the name of non-violence. By treating war as both politically necessary and morally meaningful, the Greeks created an intellectual foundation upon which later thinkers would stake their claims to include organized violence within the framework of the state, with important spillover into subsequent Roman and Christian just-war traditions (O’Driscoll 2015, 2-23).

The Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have common in basic theological doctrines regarding justice and mercy. Within these traditions, war is conceptually filtered through frameworks that define conflict either as a necessary evil, a moral obligation, or a discretionary political action (Popovski 2009, 12).

Within Islamic thought, the subject of war is deeply tied to religious texts and legal norms, primarily the Quran, the Hadiths (the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), and classical jurisprudence. Central to this discourse is the concept of Jihad (struggle), which encompasses both spiritual and physical striving. The physical struggle, known as “lesser jihad,” refers to armed conflict under specific conditions and is justified as a means to protect faith, ensure justice, and defend against aggression (Sonbol 2009, 297). The Quran underscores this justification while establishing moral boundaries: “Fight in the cause of Allah ‘only’ against those who wage war against you, but do not exceed the limits. Allah does not like transgressors.” (Quran 2:190). A second crucial point is the emphasis on ethical constraints. Islamic law stipulates strict rules of conduct during war, including the prohibition of targeting civilians, destroying crops, and damaging religious sites to minimize suffering and uphold moral conduct (Feirahi 2009, 262). A third important aspect is that war is often described as a means to establish justice and prevent oppression, transcending territorial or material interests to emphasize universal moral principles (Al-Dawoody 2011, 102-105).

East Asian traditions have approached war with a blend of pragmatism and spirituality. In ancient China, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* described warfare as a strategic and psychological activity, emphasizing wisdom, preparation, and the minimization of violence. In contrast, Confucianism generally prioritizes harmony and conflict avoidance, favouring diplomacy and ethical governance (Feng 2007, 17-23). China’s history is rich with examples of asymmetric warfare, where intellect and strategy compensated for material disadvantages (Handel, 2005). From the Warring States period to resistance against Western imperialism, Chinese leaders consistently employed unconventional tactics to defeat stronger

adversaries, highlighting a lasting value placed on adaptability (Mott & Kim 2006, 4-8). These principles form the core of China's modern concept of "unrestricted warfare" (Liang & Xiangsui 1999, 169), which has significantly influenced the development of hybrid warfare. Foundational ideas like deception, the indirect approach, and psychological manipulation remain central to this modern strategy (Mott & Kim 2006, 41-42). Sun Tzu's adage that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting" can thus be seen as a philosophical precursor to the central idea behind "unrestricted warfare."

In many Western cultures, particularly those influenced by Greco-Roman traditions, war has been conceptualized either as a means to achieve justice or as an absolute moral evil. Ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle viewed war as a mechanism for establishing order or achieving higher moral ends (O'Driscoll 2015, 7-10). Later, the Just War Theory, developed by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, sought to define the moral frameworks for justifying war, paying particular attention to intentions, proportionality, and consequences (Phillips 2017; Lazar 2017). In more modern times, Western existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre questioned war's ultimate meaning and value, seeing it as a reflection of human freedom and absurdity (Sartre 1984, 291-292). Similarly, pacifist traditions such as Tolstoy's Christian anarchism reject war entirely, embracing non-violence as a moral imperative (Coker 2007, 81-84). Western philosophy also encompasses a fundamental tension between realism and idealism. Realist thinkers such as Thucydides and Machiavelli viewed war largely as an inevitable outcome of power struggles, detached from moral considerations. In contrast, philosophers like Immanuel Kant regarded war as a failure of reason and advocated for mechanisms to achieve perpetual peace, proposing a universal framework based on reason and international cooperation (Kant 1991, 93-130).

The Scientific Paradigm Shift – From Newton to Chaos

Fourth, the meaning of the term "war" varies not only across cultures but also evolves over centuries within the same civilization; in other words, the term "war" "travels" conceptually over time within the same civilization. Consequently, it should not be surprising that the concept of "hybrid warfare" also evolves and changes conceptually over time. As Clausewitz (1976) mentioned, "every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own preconceptions." Within the Western intellectual tradition, the interpretation of "war" has evolved toward its current classical meaning. War is now predominantly understood as military operations involving lethal weapons between the armed forces of states or political groups in tangible physical domains—land, air, and sea. In this framework, war is "the continuation of politics by other means," an attempt by one party to impose its will upon another through

force or the threat of physical destruction (Schu 2017). Clausewitz, who played a major role in shaping and continues to exert significant influence on the Western worldview of war, conceptualized it within a specific framework: as a form of armed confrontation that extends the political rivalries between states.

After the Enlightenment, Western intellectual thought—in tandem with the development of the natural sciences—became increasingly secularized, adopting a more materialist perspective in its approach to warfare. This shift pushed Christian religious justifications into the background, emphasizing reason, state sovereignty, and human rights as the primary framework (Johnson 1975, 150-259; Gat 1989, 139-150). The development of the natural sciences in the West profoundly influenced not only the understanding and assessment of war but also the very quality and conduct of warfare. Among one of the most valuable works discussing the impact of scientific development on the Western worldview of war and the necessity for a new strategic approach is Steven R. Mann’s 1992 monograph, *Chaos Theory and Strategic Thought*, published by the US Army War College (Mann 1992).

In his seminal 1992 monograph, Steven R. Mann illustrated how, since the 18th century, Newtonian physics has profoundly permeated modern Western thought. Mann terms this the “mechanistic worldview” and describes how it shaped military thinking and the very concepts of war in the West. He writes that the Newtonian paradigm—“deterministic, linear, concerned with the predictable interaction of objects and forces, and oriented toward sequential change”—influenced all fields of science, including military science (Mann 1992, 55). For centuries, when scholars in psychology, sociology, or economics sought a scientific model, they turned to the basic concepts of Newtonian physics, accepting its mechanical view of reality as correct and modelling their theories accordingly (Mann 1992, 55).

According to Mann (1992), this worldview led Western military thinkers to conceive of combat as mechanics, grounding military strategy in a mechanistic framework (Gat 1989, 183). However, he contends that “the process of battle itself is manifestly nonlinear and irregular.” Mann (1992) points out that the traditional mechanistic paradigm views wars as the interaction of a limited number of factors, primarily military, economic, and political. According to Mann (1992), as the world grows more complex, simplistic worldviews and traditional theories that attempt to explain complex situations with only a few major variables increasingly fail to account for real-world events, particularly wars. This is because modern processes, especially conflicts, are too complex to be described by the interaction of a few simple variables. Mann (1992) observed that the chasm between traditional theory and reality is deepening at both military and national strategy levels. He therefore suggested rethinking old paradigms, arguing that the world and warfare are too complex to be explained by a few major variables. He

illustrated this point by quoting the German physicist Gerd Eilenberger: “the tiniest deviations at the beginning of a motion can lead to huge differences at a later time” (Mann 1992, 62).

The event that prompted U.S. military officials, security experts, and the broader community to re-examine the changing character of war in 1992—and which motivated S. Mann to write his monograph—was the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was a state possessing immense military potential, including nuclear warheads and the capability to wage conflict across all continents, yet it was ultimately defeated and disintegrated in the Cold War through primarily non-military means. It was no coincidence that Joseph Nye first introduced the famous “soft power” concept in 1990, just two years before Mann wrote his monograph (Nye 1990, 25-35). At the time, U.S. strategists observed that the decisive factors in achieving victory over the USSR were not instruments of hard power—such as tanks, nuclear-armed submarines, and intercontinental ballistic missiles—but rather the tools of soft power: Western cultural values, films, music, consumer products, and propaganda.

The influence of universalist narratives—more precisely, the modern Western worldview that seeks to identify general causes, justifications, and outcomes of armed conflict—has been also criticized by philosophers who argue that the meaning of war is fundamentally shaped by specific social and cultural contexts. This critique highlights the limitations of universalist approaches, emphasizing the need for deeper, context-sensitive analyses. Philosophers such as Michel Foucault have challenged these narratives, arguing that dominant societal structures and cultural norms actively produce the meaning and interpretation of war. For Foucault (1997), war is not merely a geopolitical event but a space for the production of power and knowledge. He contends that Western narratives often serve to legitimize state interests and marginalize alternative perspectives. Similarly, Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony explains how dominant groups propagate their interpretations of war, presenting them as natural and inevitable. A clear example is the historical framing of colonial wars as “civilizing missions,” a narrative that reflected imperial interests rather than universal truths.

Under the influence of scientific and technological progress, the rapid development of weapons of mass destruction after 1945 began to fundamentally alter both the nature of warfare and the strategic thinking of major powers. Consequently, it has become difficult to understand modern wars solely through past definitions, traditional strategic frameworks, or the literal meaning of the word “war” (Kaldor 2012, 1-15). Furthermore, as technology continues its revolutionary advance, a significant shift has been occurring in recent decades with the rise of non-Western powers. These actors often do not perceive war in modern Western terms and, being still unable to compete with the West in kinetic and conventional military capabilities, are pushed to invest in asymmetric competition. They challenge more

technologically advanced adversaries using non-kinetic means in grey zones below the threshold of direct armed conflict.

All these developments mean that ongoing innovations in military science, combined with a genuine transformation in strategic thinking—especially when “everything could be weaponized” across different domains—are causing the term “war” to transcend its traditional framework. It can no longer serve as a purely instrumental category in political science and security studies. British historian and Russian hybrid warfare expert Mark Galeotti (2022) rightly argues that war now encompasses a broad spectrum of bloodless yet destructive activities, from cyberattacks and disinformation to economic sanctions and cultural manipulation. In other words, war is no longer confined to the battlefield; it permeates all spheres of modern life, blurring the boundaries between war and peace. Galeotti (2022), whose central idea is that modern warfare constitutes “war beyond the battlefield,” points out that while these methods are less conspicuous than traditional combat, they can be more effective at destabilizing societies and eroding institutional trust.

This evolving nature of warfare is constantly assessed not only by theoretical circles, scientific institutions, and experts in the West but also by militaries themselves. A notable example is the 2017 publication by the UK Ministry of Defence’s Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, “Understanding Hybrid Warfare,” which states: “While the West remains largely entrenched in an instrumentalist, technical, combat-centric, and kinetic understanding of warfare, its adversaries are busy qualitatively redefining war” (Reichborn-Kjennerud & Cullen 2017, 1).

Conclusion

Since its introduction into the Western lexicon, the “hybrid warfare” concept has mutated from Hoffman’s original definition and a specific operational description of battlefield tactics into a catch-all narrative for Western anxieties regarding the changing character of modern conflict. Particularly since Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014, scholars, experts, and policy-makers at the national and international levels have been pushed to grapple with defining the conceptual boundaries of hybrid warfare. However, a comprehensive analysis of the historical, theoretical, cultural, and scientific evidence supports my central argument: we will not be able to find or agree on a consensus definition of hybrid warfare, and the quest for one is destined to fail.

This failure is not a result of intellectual laziness among scholars or experts, nor a lack of effort by national and international institutions. My first explanation for the inevitable failure is the definitional void and the lack of universal agreement on what constitutes “war.” The “war” genus is itself amorphous

and contested within International Relations and Conflict Studies. Before we can agree on a definition of hybrid warfare, we must determine whether a universal definition of war and warfare (without the “hybrid” adjective) even exists as a category in modern political science. Since we lack a universal definition of war as a category, we will never have a universal definition of hybrid war as a sub-variant.

The second explanation is that the concept of war—and hybrid war in particular—exists not only in a fuzzy continuum of reality but also within linguistic, cultural, and temporal continua, especially given that in modern conflicts “the boundaries between war and peace are blurred. Therefore, overzealous efforts to define hybrid warfare, which stem from essentialist traditions in the social sciences, will not yield meaningful results. While I accept that clear definitions are foundations of science, I highlight the importance of an awareness of their potential limitations; such awareness, along with a willingness to adapt, is essential for pursuing more complete truth. This is because the history of science demonstrates that the search for absolute definitions often fails, as the natural world resists binary categorization. In conclusion, if rigid definitions can obscure reality in the natural sciences, they can certainly obscure it in the social sciences, which are more socially constructed, subjective, and prone to ideological and cultural biases.

The third explanation is that the meaning of war, its justification, and its significance have not been universal across different cultures. Various cultures have not only experienced war differently but have also approached it in distinct ways, leading to diverse philosophical interpretations and conceptual understandings. These differences stem from the interplay of cultural values, historical contexts, and philosophical traditions. Not all cultures evaluate war, the distinctions between war and conflict, or the role of violence through the prism of modern Western intellectual traditions, academic categories, or a universalist lens. Therefore, it is a conceptual and methodological mistake to try to frame another culture’s strategic understanding of war within the Western concept of hybrid war.

The fourth explanation is that the meaning of the term “war” varies not only across cultures but also evolves over centuries within the same civilization; in other words, the concept of “war” “travels” over time. Consequently, it should not be surprising that the concept of “hybrid warfare” also evolves conceptually within Western intellectual thought.

The inevitable failure to find a consensus definition of hybrid war does not change the reality that modern conflict is becoming more complex. This complexity means it can be hybrid, representing a mixture of virtually any destructive instrument. We have so many definitions of hybrid warfare because states now confront many forms of conflict, and each state defines hybrid warfare according to the nature and timing of the conflicts it faces. The intellectual debates around hybrid warfare and the search for a

consensus definition can continue endlessly. However, policymakers and planners should not be drowned in these debates; rather, by realizing this fact, they should adjust to the fuzzy logic of modern conflicts.

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