

# Strategic Communication as a Mean for Countering Hybrid Threats



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## 1 Introduction

Recently, the international security environment has changed dramatically and as a result, the global community is facing with new security challenges and threats. As Robert Kagan points out in his book, “The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled

World” [6], the world as we know, is changing fast and new actors are emerging in global politics. Today the jungle is growing back, history is returning, and we are witnessing a time when nations are reverting to the old and traditional geopolitical patterns. Great-power spheres of interests and geopolitical ambitions are creating international instability and regional conflicts [6].

One of the most important threats to international peace and security is hybrid warfare.

Hybrid warfare is a type of war in which all available resources of a state or a nonstate actor are used in combination with conventional, unconventional (unorthodox), and political means. These actors can act in both the physical, digital, and cognitive domains, and can use a variety of strategies and tactics to achieve their strategic objectives and finally, to undermine and destabilize their opponent [7].

In particular, the hybrid actors (states, teams, individuals) use means and unconventional techniques, such as covert military operations and soft power tactics, in order to exploit the vulnerabilities of the opponent without violating the limits of deterrence, which would lead to total war and finally to achieve his coercion.

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These tactics referred to a conflict mode that is called as “gray zone conflict.” Actors in the gray zone are, employing sequences of gradual steps to secure strategic leverage. The efforts remain below thresholds that would generate a powerful response, but nonetheless are forceful and deliberate, calculated to gain measurable traction over time [8]. Others argue that, the gray zone is characterized by intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war [9]. In the same frame, gray zone conflicts, involve some aggression or use of force, but in many aspects their defining characteristic is ambiguity about the ultimate objectives, the participants, whether international treaties and norms have been violated, and the role that military forces should play in response [10].

The toolkit for coercion below the level of direct warfare includes informational and psychological operations, political coercion, economic coercion, cyber operations, proxy support, and provocation by state-controlled forces [11].

From the above, it is understandable that most hybrid warfare strategies are related to information and communication. Communication is a component of all operations and its effective use is crucial during informational and psychological operations. Information dominates in all fields of operations; therefore, it is paramount for a manager of hybrid threats and crises to understand the information environment in which hybrid operations are conducted and how the hybrid actors use communication to influence different forms of decision-making and undermine citizens’ trust in their leadership.

In this vein, the author will use the perspective of strategic communication as a basic function of statecraft for the understanding of actors and audiences, and the integration of policies, actions, and words across the government in a coherent way so that strategic communication is used as a means of countering hybrid warfare threats.

Under this frame, hybrid warfare will be defined in the beginning, followed by an analysis of the theory of strategic communication to explore the utility and extent to which it can be applied as a means of countering the hybrid warfare threats.

## **2 Definition of Hybrid Warfare**

Hybrid warfare is a type of a war in which all available resources of a state or a nonstate actor are used with a combination of conventional, unconventional (unorthodox), and political means. Specifically, the term “hybrid” has been used to describe a wide array of measures, means, and techniques including, but not limited to: disinformation; cyberattacks; facilitated migration; espionage; manipulation of international law; threats of force (by both irregular armed groups and conventional forces); political subversion; sabotage; terrorism; economic pressure; and energy dependency [12]. These multifaceted activities may be conducted by separate units or even by the same unit and are operated and regularly directed and coordinated

within the main battlefield in order to achieve synergistic results [13]. Taking into consideration the above frame, hybrid threats can also be created by a state actor using a proxy force. A proxy force sponsored by a major power can generate hybrid threats readily using advanced military capabilities provided by the sponsor [14]. According to Hoffman: “hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, terrorist acts, including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder” [15]. Hoffman later expanded this definition to reflect hybrid war as being, “sophisticated campaigns that combine low-level conventional and special operations; offensive cyber and space actions; and psychological operations that use social and traditional media to influence popular perception and international opinion” [16]. He also, points out that: “In hybrid warfare, each adversary uses simultaneously and on the same battlefield a tailored mix of conventional weapons, unconventional tactics, and terrorist and criminal actions to achieve its political objectives” [17].

Russia’s actions in Ukraine in 2014 intensified interest in the concept of hybrid warfare.

The Russian doctrine of hybrid warfare as expressed—through an article in 2013 in the Russian Newspaper *Military Industrial Courier*—by the current Chief of the Russian General Staff and Deputy Minister of Defense General Valery Gerasimov, stresses that “civilian means achieve better military or political results than military means” [18]. In particular, Russian techniques included the traditional combination of conventional and irregular combat operations, but also the support and sponsorship of political protests, economic coercion, cyber operations, and, in particular, an intense disinformation campaign. According to General Valery Gerasimov, this new generation of warfare includes the following elements: [19]

- Military action is started during peacetime (without declaring war).
- Noncontact clashes between highly maneuverable specialized groups of combatants.
- Annihilation of the enemy’s military and economic power by quick and precise strikes on strategic military and civilian infrastructure.
- Massive use of high-precision weapons and special operations, robotics, and technologically new weapons.
- Use of armed civilians.
- Simultaneous strikes on the enemy’s units and facilities throughout all of its territory.
- Simultaneous battles on land, air, sea, and in the information space.
- Use of asymmetrical and indirect methods.
- Management of combatants in a unified information system.

NATO, in trying to contextualize the events occurring in Ukraine presented it as being, the use of asymmetrical tactics to probe for and exploit weaknesses via nonmilitary means such as political, informational, and economic intimidation and manipulation and are backed by the threat of conventional and unconventional military means.

Especially, NATO defines hybrid threats as a “type of threat that combines conventional, irregular, and asymmetric activities in time and space” [20]. This provides the essence of something produced by the synergy of different measures but used alone it is too broad.

This perspective of hybrid war establishes an environment that is complex, rapidly changing and nonlinear in character. In this complex environment, the methods employed by a hybrid actor are “the use of military and nonmilitary tools in an integrated campaign, designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative, and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information; electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure” [21]. In this vein, we can conclude that hybrid threats are characterized by the following actions [22]:

- Are coordinated and synchronized across a wide range of means
- Deliberately target democratic states’ and institutions’ systemic vulnerabilities
- Use a wide range of means
- Exploit the threshold of detection and attribution as well as the border between war and peace
- Aim to influence different forms of decision-making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level
- Favor and/or gain the agent’s strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target

Finally, the central theme of this new form of warfare, is the blurring of the boundaries between war and peace between those involved in the conduct of a hybrid conflict (regular and irregular forces or terrorists, criminals, and other nonaligned actors), that see an opportunity to achieve their own goals such as the destabilization of the government or abets the insurgent or irregular warrior by providing resources, or by undermining the host state and its legitimacy [23].

In summary, hybrid warfare is characterized by a hybrid mix of conventional and asymmetric tactics, decentralized planning and execution, with the participation of nonstate actors and the use of both simple and complex technologies in an innovative way [24].

Furthermore, hybrid warfare involves the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power against targeted vulnerabilities of the adversary across the entire spectrum of society’s functions, aiming at effects resulting from the sum of the combined use of the various instruments of power [23]. Finally, hybrid warfare is asymmetrical in texture, employing a variety of power tools in multiple dimensions and levels of escalation simultaneously in a synchronized pattern, emphasizing creativity, unpredictability, and unaccountability, and primarily targeting the cognitive underpinnings of War [23].

### 3 Definition of Strategic Communication

An effective communication response to a hybrid threat or crisis requires effective coordination and the use of all the resources of a state's national power. That is, it requires that a state's diplomatic, intelligence, military, and financial resources be effectively combined to meet the communications objectives of the crisis management team [25].

Strategic communication is approached as a process aimed at understanding key audiences and ensuring their participation and support through informational and psychological operations, public affairs, and public diplomacy [26].

In the implementation of strategic communication, the emphasis goes to the way each organization communicates during the realization of its aims and how it works as a societal structure to promote its mission. The nature and the target of strategic communication play an important role when dealing with a crisis, because while the organizational communication in the broad meaning examines the communication procedure and how people interact in complex organizational situations (interpersonal, collective, digital), strategic communication focuses on the way the organization will represent itself through targeted actions and initiatives of its personnel [27].

According to Richard Halloran [28], strategic communication is a method of persuasion to make others accept ideas, actions or a situation. In other words, it is the mean that an actor has and uses to convince friends and allies to support or to stay neutral, and to adversaries in order they understand that he has the power to dominate on them. It pointed out also, that strategic communication is viewed through the lenses of exercising persuasion in the citizens of a country, in order to support the choices that the political leadership makes, and to that end, build national consent as far as it concerns national goals. Therefore, during the communication confrontation of a crisis, strategic communication is able to exert effective influence in the target—audience, to achieve required perceptions and behaviors, to influence the attitude—stance of the stakeholders involved in a crisis, to moderate or change negative or hostile views of public opinion, allowing the interested actor to acquire the desirable legitimacy to materialize its strategy [27].

In the case of military operations, strategic communication is a continuous function that occurs throughout the whole spectrum of military operations. Joint force strategically communicates with friends and rivals. Similarly, it strategically communicates with the public, population groups, governments, and other organizations, in the framework of conflicts, competition, and cooperation, while it also includes communication with domestic audiences [29].

Furthermore, as Dr. Harlan K. Ullman points out hybrid war is like old wine in a new bottle, in which technology and globalization have transformed aspects of war in the twenty-first century. Limits in military achievements, economic interdependency, and cyber technology are just a few examples of how the new bottle has taken another contour [30].

Moving further, the boundaries between the different aspects of strategic communication are blurred and this is reflected as to whether strategic communication should be considered as “communication of strategy or communication as a strategy.” In the first case, the role of communication is limited to the implementation of a strategy, in a primarily secondary role. The strategy makers decide for it and then, activities are coordinated, such as press conferences and information campaigns, which operate as a reactive measure in times of crisis.

In this context, the coordination capacity of the policymakers focuses on the process of getting the right message from the target audiences and addressing the factors that can weaken the strength of this message. However, this perspective overlooks the ways in which each government actor communicates, by engaging in activities involving separate actions, words, and policies. In relation to the definition of the term “strategic communication,” it should be noted that, despite the fact that strategic communication is widely used in international relations, the academics and professionals of strategic communication do not clearly define its content and the way it can be used.

In particular, from the perspective of international relations, strategic communication is approached as a process aiming at enabling publics to understand, and ensure their participation and support, through information operations, actions related to public affairs and public diplomacy ([31], Paxviii).

Approaching this procedure, thus, seeks to ensure consistency between the messages transmitted and the objectives pursued, in order to avoid communication overlaps or inefficiencies. In order to achieve this consistency, a strategic communication program requires the participation of all of the above components, either at a strategic or at an operational level [31]. Strategic communication is also approached as a capability or an activity supported by certain capabilities ([32], p. 22).

Specifically, in line with this approach, in order for an actor to communicate strategically, it should have the ability to develop a communication plan, synchronize all the functional parts involved in the implementation of the strategic communication program, and, finally, the ability to use specific channels of communication to transmit its messages [32].

In addition, strategic communication is approached as a means of achieving results [31]. More specifically, according to this approach, strategic communication is the means for a body to inform its stakeholders and the public and to exercise influence on them over specific issues. Lastly, strategic communication is viewed as an art form [31]. According to this approach, strategic communication seeks to control the communication environment of an international actor with the aim of shaping the attitudes and behavior of its stakeholders and public.

In 2009, the US Department of Defense in a Strategic Communication Report pointed out that strategic communication should be approached as a process, not a set of capabilities or distinct organizational activities. In this respect, it was stressed that strategic communication “is the process of integrating the stakeholders’ issues, as well as of those that affect the public, in the policy development and the implementation planning of operations to be executed at each hierarchical/functional level” [33].

Therefore, the strategic communication process can result in a more efficient harmonization of government activity to lead and coordinate the decision-making process in a manner favorable to national interests. It should be supported as a guiding principle at all government sectors and levels in order to be effectively implemented. This principle fits into the articulation of strategic communication as a philosophy or mindset. The implementation of strategic communication as a process can function as a binding film between strategy and action, integrating efforts across the government and favoring the unity of effort toward the common strategic objectives.

Such an approach would maximize the use of available resources and reduce the risk of failure. This requires a strategic culture of communications absorbed at all levels of government that looks at foreign policy through the “lens” of communication, identifying relevant audiences and understanding how they form views and make decisions. There will inevitably be specific competence requirements, such as assessment and analysis, planning and implementation of transnational activities, such as media management, public opinion management of stakeholders, marketing, and the level of engagement of actors.

It is understandable that as much as strategic communication is stronger, the fewer procedures are required. In practice, these two approaches—communication at the core of the strategy’s development, or subsequently in the implementation phase—are not mutually exclusive. They are often incorporated in varying degrees, either deliberately or as a feature of the way that governments operate. This is reflected in the balance that governments need to find between the expansion of all specialized communication capabilities and the encouragement of a strategic communication culture, which is indispensable in every section, policy, and strategy [34].

## **4 Strategic Communication as a Mean for Countering the Hybrid Threats**

According to Sun Tzu, the first attack a general will launch is against the moral of the enemy. Moreover, Sun Tzu writes down: «In times of war, adaptability and flexibility are needed», concepts strongly related with hybrid threats almost 2500 years before. He continues in his masterpiece “The art of war”: “the greatest achievement is not to fight and win all of your battles, but to break the will of the enemy to resist, without a battle” [35].

A smart leader overwhelms the enemy without a fight. He conquers his cities without besieging them. He wins his empire without long-lasting operations in the battle field. He invades to his terrain against its governor and his triumph is ultimate without losing a single man [35].

The shift of the conflict from the physical to the information environment, as a theory, is based on the idea that the “War for Hearts and Minds” is an integral,

permanent, and decisive existing element in today's conflicts, the implementation of which is carried out after thorough planning by the participants. The impact of public opinion on military actions creates the need for those involved to incorporate communication as one of the key elements in the planning and execution of any operation. However, as the media environment becomes increasingly complex, results can be pursued and achieved even without an actual—physical conflict [36]. Modern conflict can range from political confrontation to physical confrontation. The boundaries between peace and war have blurred and the information environment acts as a battlefield, where rival narratives clash to prevail over one another, to guide and shape public opinion. Even actual conflicts or proxy wars can be exploited as strategic communication platforms, serving the interests of third parties [36]. In the context of hybrid warfare, the focus of the strategic competition is the so-called “information battles,” in which information is turned into a weapon, and a struggle for the predominance of one's “truth” becomes a struggle. Under this perspective, hybrid threats have the malign intent of manipulating the political decision-making processes of a targeted nation by influencing the behaviors and attitudes of key audiences such as media organizations, the general public, and political leaders [12]. Furthermore, can be considered as information or influence activities. These are actions that influence audience perception and decision-making. Such activities are not limited to the “Information” instrument but involve the combination of different instruments of power, including diplomatic, economic, and military [12]. The smart use of information, through the tailoring of messages, narrative, and persuasion, is able to potentially reach the whole world and provide a dynamic impact on various target audiences. The use of information in a strategic way can exert influence on the stakeholders of a hybrid crisis and a crisis manager wins legitimacy and support from them during the management of the crisis. In this vein, during the management of a hybrid crisis, it is a necessity the delivery of information at the right time and in a coherent manner via the correct message, the suitable and effective communication tools, so that to provide a satisfactory advantage over an opponent, with a massive effect and precision in disrupting and balancing him.

The hybrid warfare is conducted on three interrelated fields of operation. The first is the physical domain, the second is the digital domain, and the third is the cognitive domain. On all three domains, the most hybrid warfare strategies are related to information and communication. The quintessence of all operations is communication and its effective utilization during information and psychological operations. That is, information dominates all fields of operations; therefore, it is of paramount importance to understand the information environment in which hybrid operations are conducted. The information environment represents a set of factors, resources, and processes, which demonstrate the knowledge that has been accumulated and used by a specific society, community, or individual, looking also at ideas and assumptions. There is also the issue of how this knowledge can be obtained, created, expanded, and used. This means that the information environment is a requirement for the survival of individuals and societies and for progress in the development of individuals and societies. That is because information provides an opportunity for necessary exchanges between and among us [37].



In summary, the Information Environment (IE) is a model for understanding how actors and audiences interact, how people see the world around them and consequently make decisions based on the meaning they deduce from it [38]. In this context, during a hybrid operation, a hybrid actor tries to control and influence the information environment of its enemy. Through the control and manipulation of information, a hybrid actor tries to influence the cognitive level of the population and the stakeholders of its opponent. He conducts operations that affect the mind and the emotional level of his audiences through the spread of fear, doubt, and uncertainty about the outcome of the crisis. His objective is to break the morale of the opponent's citizens, to create polarization and controversy so as to shake the citizens' trust in its leadership, and to create social instability and destabilization in the targeted nation.

Taking into consideration the above mention, the author of this article believes that strategic communication is the appropriate tool for the prevention, detection, and reduction or elimination of the consequences of hybrid threats. Since the hybrid information environment is complex and the confrontation of hybrid threats requires the allocation of significant national resources, strategic communication can contribute to the understanding of the information environment. In particular, it helps the managers of hybrid threats or crises to proceed in the human perception assessment and in the shaping of human perception about the situation of a hybrid threat or crisis. Human perception's assessment should be central to the understanding of the dynamics of hybrid threats, the way they are being perceived, interpreted, and attributed to. The analysis should focus on the relevant issues and components of a hybrid threat or crisis: actors (political leaders, civil society, and military), networks (military, economic, cyberspace), and the means (disinformation, cyberattacks, bribery) and understanding how they could exploit vulnerabilities to harm national security interests. The continuous assessment should define the basic regularity lines (of operations, for instance, during an operational planning) and define modifications in standards (operational standards) [29]. In this procedure, strategic communication can ensure the exchange of information, both within and between governments, and the ability to synthesize different types of information and elaborate intelligence. It can put suitable information at the heart of all levels of policy, planning, and implementation, and then, as a fully integrated part of the overall effort, ensure the development of practical, effective strategies that will make a real contribution to the successful management of a hybrid threat or crisis.

Additionally, strategic communication consists the mean of the sensemaking of a hybrid threat or crisis from the managers of a hybrid threat or crisis and also from the stakeholders in a specific way that favors the crisis managers. Sensemaking is the process of social construction that occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals' ongoing activity, and involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalize what people are doing. Central to the development of plausible meanings is the bracketing of cues from the environment, and the interpretation of those cues based on salient frames. Sensemaking is thus about connecting cues and frames to create an account of what is going on [39].

Crises, by their nature, come as a surprise. They often shock a system so radically that responders, at least for a moment, have no clear idea how to respond. From the perspective of sensemaking, understanding of a crisis situation comes from taking action and observing the feedback to that action. Organizations make sense of their environments retrospectively through a sequence of three stages: enactment (action), selection (interpretation), and retention (learning). This process is generally based on interpreting feedback from an organization's environment. If the feedback is positive, more of the same action is warranted. Conversely, negative feedback requires divergent response strategies [40]. Taking into account the above definition, in the case of a hybrid threat or crisis, strategic communication is central to interpreting this feedback and developing a coordinated response.

Furthermore, strategic communication consists of the meaning-making [41] of a hybrid threat or crisis from the managers of a hybrid threat or crisis. Via meaning-making crisis, leaders employ deliberate and concerted moves to influence public perceptions and emotions [42]. In this vein, the managers of a hybrid threat or crisis utilize strategic communication for the framing [43] of the crisis in such a way that highlights positive elements of the crisis and which will exert influence on stakeholders and the citizens so that managers of a hybrid threat or crisis receive legitimacy and support.

Additionally, during the procedure of managing a hybrid threat or crisis, strategic communication is a reliable strategic tool for planning, coordinating, and implementing a crisis communication plan that will cover the following strategic communication goals. It helps in the deconstruction of the rhetoric and the argumentation of hybrid actors (it is the right instrument for dealing directly and effectively with the disinformation campaigns), in the mitigation of disputes and the negative attitude of stakeholders or social groups affected by the crisis, in the mobilization of all institutional and social forces, as well as the alliances of an agency/organization involved in the crisis, in order to support the efforts of the crisis management team to cope with the hybrid threat or crisis and support the procedure of legitimization of the crisis manager's strategy by the audiences who are in their internal and external environment and the wider national and international audiences [44].

Furthermore, strategic communication is the proper mean for the information and education of the stakeholders who are involved in a hybrid crisis as well as the wider population of one hybrid target. During the management of a hybrid threat or crisis, many managers fail to communicate with their audiences because the audience members resist their messages because they contradict adopted habits and ingrained behaviors. Understanding of human perception and behavior should be central to understanding the dynamics of hybrid threats. Through strategic communication, the managers of hybrid threats or crises can understand how their audiences are perceived, interpreted, and attributed in their messages and can produce effective narratives where they will appeal directly or indirectly to targeted audiences using appropriate emotional or logical persuasive appeals designed to elicit desired attitudes and behaviors.

Another field where strategic communication can contribute to managing a hybrid threat or crisis is the area of deterring a hybrid actor. Successful deterrence, in the form of a decision not to pursue intended action, is induced in the mind of the hostile actor, meaning both public and private communications play an important role in shaping the perception. When deciding on a deterrence strategy, one should consider steps to ensure that a hostile actor understands that the pressure imposed is linked to its hybrid activity.

Effective communications are crucial to ensuring this and can reduce the risk of the hostile actor spinning the narrative by portraying the actions as provocative or hostile.

As already mentioned above, strategic communication is a method of persuasion to make others accept ideas, actions, or a situation, and all actions, images, words, and policies, a government takes (or does not take) communicate something. If a government communicates with its audiences strategically via a collective and integrated strategic communication campaign and is guided by a national strategy that has the consensus and the legitimacy of the population, strategic communication can be utilized as a deterrence means of any hybrid actor. The notion of deterrence is based on the core principle of changing the hostile actor's calculus. The goal should be the deterring actor's words and actions leading to a situation where the hostile actor decides not to pursue a particular activity [45]. Via strategic communication, the deterring actor can communicate its strengths, capabilities, and resilience effectively with a message to be seen as coherent and credible and to influence the cognitive and psychological domain of the hybrid actor so that to cancel his purposes. Moreover, as part of resilience-building, strategic communication with one's population is important. It is important to make sure the public is aware of both the threats to national security and the state's preparedness to respond. The same applies to international partners and allies—popular support is a powerful and important tool in democracies. Hostile actors should also have an understanding of a deterring actor's resilience, with the aim of showing that hostility will be futile [45].

## 5 Conclusion

This article consists of an interdisciplinary approach to the communication management of hybrid threats and crises. Specifically, through an interdisciplinary study of International Relations and Communication disciplines, an attempt has been made to approach these disciplines in a multidisciplinary manner in order to identify the concept of hybrid warfare and to present the role that strategic communication plays as a means to counter them. Hybrid warfare is an attractive option for countries seeking to change the status quo, but lacking the power to impose their will by brute force. With the innovative use of new and relatively low-cost tools, they can achieve their goals by taking small steps at a time, but also by achieving the surprise of their opponents with minimal risk. As Frank Hoffman [23] points out,

“Hybrid threats are those covert or illegal activities of nontraditional politicians that fall below the threshold of armed organized violence, including disruption of order, political subversion of governmental or nongovernmental organizations, psychological actions, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated plan to achieve strategic advantage.”

Such actions are coordinated, synchronized, and deliberately target the vulnerabilities of democracies and institutions. Activities can take place, for example, in the political, economic, military, civil or information domains. They are conducted using a wide range of means and designed to remain below the threshold of detection and attribution [46].

The hybrid tactics which can be used by an attacker are various forms of sabotage, disruption of communications, and other services including energy supplies. The aggressor may work through or by empowering proxy insurgent groups, or disguising state-to-state aggression behind the mantle of a “humanitarian intervention.” Massive disinformation campaigns designed to control the narrative are an important element of a hybrid campaign [47]. Furthermore, NATO defines hybrid threats as a “type of threat that combines conventional, irregular, and asymmetric activities in time and space.” This provides the essence of something produced by the synergy of different measures but used alone it is too broad [20].

In a combination of the above definitions, some characteristics can be used so that a common understanding can be built concerning this “modus operandi” [48]. Specifically:

- Cyber today is a military domain and in the near future the cognitive domain probably.
- There are no physical borders.
- All actions are coordinated and synchronized across a wide range of means.
- They deliberately target democratic states and institutions systemic vulnerabilities.
- Actors use a wide range of means; they exploit the threshold of detection and attribution as well as the border between war and peace.
- The aim is to influence different forms of decision-making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level, favor and /or gain the agent’s strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target.

Until now, in the conventional war, there was a clear distinction between peace and war, but hybrid warfare is a form of war that is in the “gray zone” between peace and war. It is an act of guerilla tactics and means aiming to coerce and to pressure the opponent and to maintain a continuum of war [3].

With the new realities, in the hybrid warfare: [49]

- There is no traditional battlefield (this can be a capital city, a religious site, an airport, a school, a theater, a soccer stadium, etc.).
- The means have fundamentally changed (for example terrorism, piracy, incite social disorder, kidnapping, social media, etc.).

- The strategic aim of the hybrid actor is to terrify the society and to decline the morale of the population of the opponent, so he will subdue the enemy by corrosion in the internal and international field of legitimacy in many domains of the confrontation.

Through the employment of hybrid tactics, the attacker seeks: [50]

- To undermine and destabilize an opponent
- The dominance of an actor in the physical and psychological battlefield through control of information and media
- Exercising influence in order to bend the will of the opponent and to weaken his support from his population and his state services

Under these developments, it is necessary to consider that the weaponization of the communication as a means of hybrid warfare will further deteriorate the worldwide stability and security environment. Particularly, the failure to cope with this threat would definitely increase the conflicts between state and nonstate actors.

In the contemporary complex information environment, a strategic communication campaign aims to create, promote, and maintain a stable image of a country or an organization [51]. It transmits messages, information, and images with a certain scope and serves as both a way and a means to achieve the desired political ends [52]. Especially, in the context of hybrid warfare, information plays a critical role as conflict does not usually escalate into direct armed conflict [53]. The role of nonmilitary means to achieve political and strategic gains has increased, because in the balance among costs and benefits each actor calculates, the use of hard power comes as a following option, considering the destructiveness of the high-tech weapons and the severe economic cost. Within this context, the paper presented how strategic communication as a component of national strategy can help the crisis managers or the decision makers of a government to counter hybrid threats and respond to current and future national security challenges. Specifically, strategic communication is approached as a process aiming at enabling publics to understand and ensure their participation and support, through information operations, actions related to public affairs, and public diplomacy [31]. This approach seeks to ensure consistency between the transmitted messages and the pursued objectives in order to avoid communication overlaps or inefficiencies. In order to achieve this consistency, a strategic communication program requires the participation of all of the above components, either at a strategic or operational level [31].

Therefore, the strategic communication process can result in a more efficient harmonization of government activity to lead and coordinate the decision-making process in a manner favorable to national interests. It should be supported as a guiding principle at all government sectors and levels in order to be effectively implemented. This principle fits into the articulation of Strategic Communication as a philosophy or mindset. This requires the exchange of information, both within, and between governments and the ability to synthesize different types of information and elaborated intelligence. The communication must be governed by the whole of government approach. It should be, therefore, collective and comprehensive. Based

on a comprehensive understanding and continuous assessment of the information environment, governments should have a clear understanding of means available in order to reach audiences. This could be anything, from financial sanctions to a change in stance through the use of military force. All these should be incorporated and used coherently to achieve the desired strategic impacts and results. Actions taken to counter threats/hybrid threats should be guided by a strategy. The reflection on strategic communication must be at the core of the development and implementation of the strategy from the outset, and this process should be supported by the availability of appropriate resources and highly specialized personnel. National strategy should have a broad consensus for the population to support it and be supported from the top by the political leadership. This includes the formulation of the strategic position that a nation wants to take, and the way it would be structured throughout the government, engaging ministries, such as those responsible for culture, education, and home affairs. Such an approach ensures that any “story” (or national narration/narrative) that the government wants to communicate is authorized at all levels, coherent and consistent. National authorities should have structures that are flexible, decentralized, and adaptable, capable for preparation, agility, and response. The nature of threats/hybrid threats means that there are no identified handbooks that can be followed. Adversaries will continue to develop, test, and implement measures targeted at vulnerabilities. Fostering a culture of strategic communication in all government agencies will allow a nation to maintain its initiative to act [34]. The attribution of hybrid threats to an adversary is a political effort based on the public’s confidence, so reliability should be protected as a vital resource. Any governmental action, which impairs public’s confidence, will reduce the actions available for preparedness and response to hybrid threats. In any case, it should be understood that, even if there is no obvious link between the particular area of responsibility of each of the parties involved and national security, their actions can weaken national resilience [29].

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