

POLAND, BELARUS AND THE CONCEPT OF HYBRID WAR

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The concept of "hybrid war" became widespread in 2014 when Russia occupied Crimea and supported secession in Ukraine. In this context, these military actions were referred to with this term. It implied that the war had become a combination of regular troops, covert special forces, militias and operations in cyberspace; in other words, the regular forces did not have the main role and the objectives were sought and reached through other armed structures linked to them. The state was diluted through various forms of action, combining military and non-military tools. To some extent, the Syrian war provided examples of this new type of warfare. Kurdish militias were supported by US special forces in their conflict with the Assad regime. In turn, Russian and Iranian forces fought in favor of the Syrian President, and militias such as Hezbollah also participated in the conflict. New technological weapons, such as drones, were put to the test in this conflict. In these years, Russia began to use the services of the Wagner mercenary company, through which it carries out operations of its special forces units. They have fought in Syria, Libya and now in Mali. However, the allegations of cyber operations to influence the US presidential election that Trump won in 2016, fed the concept of hybrid war with the possibility of influencing the public opinion of different countries and determining their governments, moderating and distorting the popular will. It is true that at that time, the Russian intelligence services were the ones with the greatest capacity for action in this field, and it is hypothesized that they operated on the election. But this was never really proven.

The conflict between Belarus and Poland over the fate of immigrants brought by the former's government to encourage them to move to Polish territory, has raised a new scope for hybrid warfare. The Polish government, the European Union, the German Chancellor and NATO, among others, have characterized this conflict as an expression of hybrid warfare. In this case, immigrants from Syria, Iraq and Yemen, among others, organized by the illegal migrant smuggling networks and in combination with the Lukashenko regime, arrived by air in Minsk, the country's capital, and were taken to the border with Poland to illegally enter the territory of the European Union.

From there, they would move to other countries. In addition, Poland had been one of the EU countries that most harshly questioned the Belarusian election in 2020, denounced as fraudulent. The Warsaw government deployed 15,000 men of its Armed Forces along the 500 kilometers of its border with Belarus, to prevent the entry of immigrants, who thus accumulated on the barbed wire in extreme conditions and without being able to enter. At the same time, Russia, Belarus's staunchest ally, was sending long-range bombers to conduct exercises on Belarusian territory, and deploying troops on its border with Ukraine. The three Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), which have also strongly condemned the Lukashenko regime, took defensive positions both on the land border and in the cyber field. More than a decade ago, Estonia was the first country to suffer a Russian cyber-attack on its official information systems.

The conflict is spreading and its evolution and outcome are uncertain. The concept of hybrid warfare now spreads to the use of other means. The illegal trafficking of immigrants is considered a tool in this type of conflict. This tool produces a situation that leads to the use of military means. The Polish government, which was threatening to leave the European Union following the British Brexit model, modified its position, moderated itself and won the support of the European Union against Belarus. Warsaw also managed to involve NATO in its favor, which warned about the risks involved in the deployment of Russian troops in this conflict and the dangers that this implied for the stability of Ukraine and the actions of the separatists in this country.

In the hybrid war concept, Moscow tries to portray Poland as an aggressor country, by forcibly preventing the entry of migrants from the Middle East. For their part, the members of the European Union do the same with regard to Belarus, showing how their government leads migrants to extreme situations on the Polish border, as an element of pressure. This conflict has accelerated the project promoted by France to create a European defense system different from NATO. However, so far it is an initiative that is slowly being planned. In 2022, joint maneuvers of European forces would be carried out without US participation, while in 2023 the first units of the European military force would be organized. Only in 2025 would there be an expeditionary force of 5,000 troops to be employed in the environment of the European Union. Coincidentally, military incidents occurred in the Caucasus, on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The growing priority for hybrid warfare is demonstrated by the recent exercise of the Spanish Navy to neutralize “fake news” as a tool in this type of conflict. The hypothesis is that the increasingly sophisticated fake news constitutes a threat that can “make military missions fail”. Non-existent enemies can be created with new technologies, according to the concept in which the Fleet Headquarters operates from its base in Cádiz. "The information war includes everything from electronic warfare to fake news," according to Vice Admiral José María Núñez, under whose command the exercise that took place in the second week of November 2021 was carried out. He added that “it is very important because, for example, a country can spread fake news saying that a country has acted against human rights, breaking cohesion in this way, raising the proposal for its withdrawal from the mission and putting people against it the military”. The "information war" occupied a relevant place in the most important maneuver of the Spanish Navy this year, called FLOTEX-21. Elements of the Army and Air Force also participated in the exercise, which employed more than 3,000 men. It is about "laying the foundations to be able to confront the enemy in the cognitive field, with the same efficiency as in the physical and cyberspace fields". One of the conclusions was that it is necessary to take advantage of mobile technology to record many actions and disseminate them almost in real time, since disinformation campaigns are increasingly sophisticated, with the use of modern technologies (big data, artificial intelligence, etc.) and social media. For these reasons, a coordinated approach is required in the communication area, cyberspace and intelligence. Another conclusion is that these tools can create imaginary enemies that do not exist and that it is necessary to anticipate new technologies not yet used.

In conclusion: the concept of “hybrid warfare” spread in 2014 when Russia occupied Crimea and promoted the secession of Ukraine, combining regular and covert forces, militias and cyber operations. The recent conflict between Belarus and Poland raised a new dimension of the concept, considering the use of illegal migrant smuggling as a tool in this type of confrontation. Russia acted in support of Belarus, threatening Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic countries, leading the European Union to accelerate its project of having a self-defense structure, outside of NATO. Finally, the expansion of the concept of hybrid warfare is evidenced in the recent exercise of the Spanish Navy, which gave priority to “fake news” as a tool in military conflicts