

HYBRID WAR IN UKRAINE, HYBRID THREAT OVER UKRAINE AND BEYOND



Ukraine is afflicted by a hybrid war with fall-outs in Central and Eastern Europe. Whatever the definition of this type of war, it appears that “hybrid” is a key word in this geopolitical situation. The hybrid war led by Russia on this battle-ground is a part of a grand strategy which combines various means and tools. This strategic mix is a global hybrid threat for the Euro-Atlantic Community and it is generating a political climate of tension between war and peace. It will be a long-running challenge.

Text of the speech of Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER, Research Fellow at the Thomas More Institute, at the seminar "Future Operations and 2C", organized by the Headquarters of the Rapid Reaction Corps - France (HQ RRC FR) , May 22, 2015 in Lille (France)

First of all, I wanted to thank the organizers for this invitation. I am very honoured to be here, in this citadel designed by Vauban in the 17th century.

In the past, this citadel was a part of the Iron Belt which was to protect and enlarge France's "pré carré" i.e. its own territory. Today, this citadel is a NATO's headquarters devoted to the defence of Europe and to crisis management, and this is a very good thing.

We are gathered to talk and debate about hybrid wars and threats but I have to confess that I am more of an historian and a geographer, specialised in Geopolitics, than a tactician or a strategist. It means that I am also here to listen to all of you and learn about this new concept.

My communication will focus on Ukraine, a European country which is afflicted by what one calls a hybrid war with potential fall-outs in Central and Eastern Europe, and a global hybrid threat to the Euro-Atlantic Community (i.e. the EU and NATO).

It seems that there is an intellectual debate about the concept of hybrid war and its scope (I mean its validity). Whatever the case, it appears that "hybrid" is a key word in Ukraine's geopolitical situation and its consequences in all Europe.

The hybrid war led by Russia on this battle-ground is a part of a "grand strategy" which combines various means and tools. This strategic mix is a global hybrid threat to Europe generating a political climate of tension between war and peace.

That will be my working hypothesis.

| A Hybrid War in Ukraine

First, we must recall that the current hybrid war in the Donbas was preceded by Russia's *manu militari* seizing of Crimea and its illegal annexation. This act cannot be glossed over as mere gains & losses

On the one hand, this is an act of international banditry, a defection from the rules and norms that render the international competition more stable and predictable. On the other hand, Russia's seizing of Crimea was the first step toward a hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine. Indeed, all of us keep in mind the role of the "little green men" who came from no-where and took the Ukrainian peninsula.

Briefly, the hybrid war was started in Crimea.

We know that there is a debate about the concept of hybrid war and its definition: a hybrid war is currently defined as an undisclosed war, i.e. a planned and skilled mix of combats, disinformation, intimidation and destabilisation measures¹. The use of armed violence at a low level and the non-military means are backed by the threat of a full-scale military intervention.

This type of war, this shadow war, is almost always deniable and Moscow very much does so against all the evidences of an active support to the so-called pro-Russia separatists, and even of a Russian military commitment in the combats since last summer.

Following the fall of Debaltsevo on 19 February, seven days after the agreement of Minsk-2 (and four days after the ceasefire came into force), the front remained relatively calm and it was thought that the worst case scenario - a much broader offensive and the loss of Eastern Ukraine - was behind us. Moscow would shift from war to diplomacy and negotiation with the West:

¹ The concept of « hybrid war » emerged with the second Lebanon war (2006), between Israel and the Hizballah.

In fact, the current off-phase is not the first one and it must be put into perspective. On the ground, there is almost no day without any casualties and local fights. When she went to Moscow, on 10 May, Ms. Merkel was very clear on this point and told the truth.

Let us quote her: "We still do not have a ceasefire," said Ms. Merkel. "There are a lot of violations on the part of separatists". And she added, citing information from international observers: "Every day we get OSCE [Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe] reports that explain quite objectively why this ceasefire isn't observed."

Actually, war is not over and a new military escalation cannot be excluded. However, many experts think that a large Russian offensive in Ukraine is unlikely. Despite the unbalance of power, Ukraine proved much more resilient than Russia's rulers thought and a full-scale war followed by a military occupation of all or part of Ukraine would have to fight an insurgency. All of that would cost a lot of Russian lives and money.

In addition, Vladimir Putin seems to have been surprised by the Western diplomatic front and the reality of sanctions that are hurting Russia's economy.

Thus, a full-scale war in Ukraine would not allow to Moscow to stay below the radar and to try to divide the EU and split the Atlantic Alliance. Moreover, the Kremlin is trying to hide its military engagement from the Russian public opinion and that could explain the fact that many Russian formations are being used to deploy troops and gear to the Donbas (too many casualties in the same military units would call attention in Russia).

All these factors lead to the perpetuation of a limited and open war, that is to say to a hybrid war. This scenario does not mean that Russia's purpose in Ukraine is just about the Donbas. If this were to be the case, an open war could be led without too high a price and would find support in the Russian public opinion.

Putin could even bet on Europe's culture of permissiveness i.e. the temptation of complacency, even of appeasement, in some parts of Europe (some governments and segments of public opinion): "Why such a mess - why take such a risk - for a region in the middle of nowhere?"

In fact, the political purpose is much broader than a statelet in the Donbas, a sort of little "Novorossiya" on a small part of Ukraine's territory. Putin and Russian rulers want to regain control over Ukraine. The Donbas, in what they call a Ukrainian "federation", that is to say a weak and shaky (almost disintegrated) Ukraine, would be a Trojan Horse.

It would provide Russia with further leverage on Kyiv and the ability to veto any decision in domestic issues and, above all, in foreign affairs. In this purpose, a full-scale open war would be counterproductive and a hybrid war seems much more adapted.

| A Grand Strategy upon Ukraine and the "Near Abroad"

As mentioned earlier, a hybrid war is a mix of combats, disinformation (see political defamation of Ukraine in the West), intimidation through military manoeuvres on the borders, and political destabilisation of the Ukrainian state.

This shadow war is a part of a grand strategy that combines military actions, a coercive diplomacy and a geoeconomic battle (geoeconomics are here defined as the use of economics as a means of power and a tool for pressuring the enemy).

This mix of war on the ground, of diplomacy and geoeconomics - without forgetting the information warfare about the geopolitical situation, the role of NATO and the Russia-Western relationship -, represents an overall and hybrid threat to the destiny of Ukraine.

Let us start with a few words about the diplomatic dimension of this global and hybrid conflict over Ukraine. It has to be said that the package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk ceasefire agreement is rather successful for Russia. Unlike the original document signed in last September, Minsk-2 seeks to reintegrate Donbas in Ukraine on Russia's terms: a very broad decentralisation even if the word of federalization does not appear in the document. Thus, Moscow will most likely stick to this text and try to use it in order to achieve its objectives.

In that prospect, military measures will be used to put pressure on Ukraine and convince Kyiv that there is no alternative to Minsk-2. As long as Moscow reckons that this agreement is useful, Russia's military activity should remain limited and used to support a coercive diplomacy.

However, there is space for different interpretations and disagreements in Minsk-2. So, each side is fighting in order to enforce its own interpretation of this text and we can speak of a battle of interpretations and narratives.

So, at much broader level, Russia's power is leading a grand strategy that combines a diplomatic battle with a hybrid war on the ground, and if Moscow does not achieve its political goals by diplomatic means, a larger-scale offensive is not to be excluded.

In this case, Russia's political goals could be scaling down to consolidate its gains in the Donbas and build a statelet with a larger territorial base instead of gaining leverage and keeping control over Ukraine as a whole.

This geopolitical confrontation has also an economical dimension as does the grand strategy led by Moscow. In fact, this geopolitical conflict started 2 years ago with a trade war against Ukraine's exports to Russia. This trade war was aimed to make Kyiv renounce its adhesion plans to the EU's Eastern Partnership. All of us know what has happened after that introduction.

Now, the geoeconomic confrontation is much broader, with Western sanctions and Russian countersanctions. It is true that Russia's economy is suffering and sliding into recession but, at the same time, Ukraine's economy is on the brink of disaster and the war in the Donbas does inflict huge damages.

The separatists have targeted key economic assets and Russia has leverage on Ukraine's economy: an energy leverage based on gas supplies (but less leverage in this field than a few years ago), and A financial leverage with a \$3 billion loan obtained by Yanoukovitch in December 2013 (it has to be repaid next December).

From Russia's point of view, the preamble to a re-orbited Ukraine is a dysfunctional Ukraine and a Ukrainian population exhausted and demoralized by various difficulties. In this prospect, the economic avenue is promising and we can observe that Russia's grand strategy has also an economic dimension. From the opposite side, there is both EU and US support to the Ukrainian economy through the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and bilateral channels.

At last, it must be recalled that this geopolitical conflict is not just about Ukraine. In fact, Ukraine is the cornerstone of a grand strategy aimed to bring all or part of "Near Abroad" (i.e. the ex-USSR) back under Russia's geopolitical control. For this purpose, a Eurasian Union has been build up in the very beginning of this year (January 2015). This project is in phase with the Eurasian proto-ideology developed in Russia after the Cold War. The Eurasian Union will not be a framework for a pragmatic cooperation in the economic field but rather a project for Russian power and a force of opposition to the West.

| A Geopolitical Situation between War and Peace

Let us sum up. The hybrid war in the Donbas led us to Russia's grand strategy, multiple and multidimensional by nature, over Ukraine, the ex-USSR and beyond. This is a clear threat to Ukraine and what they call in Moscow the "Near Abroad", but also a global and hybrid threat to Europe and the West.

The project of gathering all or part of the ex-USSR under Russia's domination is rooted in "sad passions" as revanchism and it is aimed to a geopolitical revisionism. There is a will in Moscow to challenge the European security architecture, a will to return to square one and negotiate a new geopolitical bargain based on the recognition of Russia's sphere of influence in its "Near Abroad" and, by extension, a will to trigger a logic of dilution of the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

These revanchism and geopolitical revisionism are very dangerous, and that's a real hybrid threat to a Europe whole, free and at peace. On the ground, we can observe military action bringing into question the international borders: this is an attack against international law and the rules of just conduct that reigns among European and Western nations and even, perhaps, the return to a sort of political Darwinism on the Old Continent.

Indeed, we must recall that Europe's geopolitical structures – I mean its political geography and internal borders - are much more recent and fragile that the expression of Old Continent may suggest: 27 % of Europe's internal borders have been drawn since the end of the Cold War (the period between 1989 and 1991) and only 15 % of these borders were drawn in 1815 and before.

Consequently, Putin's historical arguments and geopolitical rhetoric about Ukraine, Novorossiia, Russian Empire's boundaries, Russian minorities and the long shadow of the USSR are very dangerous for peace, freedom and stability in Europe². If we were to admit this rhetoric, what would be the consequences for the Baltic States? And if Russia's rulers want to go back in history in order to argue, what should we say about the enclave of Kaliningrad, the old Königsberg, Emmanuel Kant's homeland?

In fact, Moscow is opening Pandora's Box and the "European Europe" put forward by Russia's friends would just be back to "self-help", with all its negative consequences. Indeed, Russia's challenge is a global and hybrid threat to the future of Europe and Europeans.

So, Europeans and North-Americans have set up a diplomatic front against Russia's ambitions, have put in place diplomatic and economic sanctions, and they are reasserting NATO's overall defense and deterrence posture. Consequently, Russia's geopolitical revisionism, its hybrid war in Eastern and Southern Ukraine and its grand strategy have provoked a reaction and generated a hybrid geopolitical situation between war and peace.

Naturally, this hybrid situation makes us think to the Cold War: the same protagonists, the same East-West axis and the same part of the world where the Cold War was rooted before the fall of Berlin Wall and globalization.

However, there are some differences: the enlargement of the EU and NATO to most of Central and Eastern Europe, the fact that Russia is no longer carrying a global and dynamic ideology able to rally many countries in the world and above all, the global balance of power is no longer the same one.

² The use of hybrid tactics could progress incrementally toward the violation of NATO-countries' borders while remaining under the Article 5 threshold until a new "fait accompli".

On this last issue, let us think about China, its growing ambitions in Asia-Pacific and beyond. In response to Western sanctions, Putin has put into evidence a tight partnership between Russia and China but Russia is the junior partner and it may be turned into the near abroad of China³.

For all these reasons, the current hybrid geopolitical situation between Russia and the West should rather be named a Cold Peace than a new Cold War. It should not be the global conflict of this century but it is of great importance for Europe and Europeans and it could last : duration is a key-parameter in this conflict as in others, in the Middle-East.

| In conclusion

In conclusion, « hybrid » as mentioned before is a key word in the current geopolitical context. It is true that in any conflict, the enemies use irregular tactics, and the time of regular wars - I mean formal wars as in the Westphalian Age -, is far behind us. However, the mix is not the same as before, and this hybrid war is waged by a conventional actor. Thus, the expression of "hybrid war" is, in my opinion, adequate and convenient: it is important to name this new reality on the borders of Europe and to call the attention of policy makers to it (the NATO-summit Wales was just a first step⁴, and the rise of hybrid threats is a long-running challenge).

More broadly, this type of war is very symptomatic. It has been written that hybrid war was the continuation of naughty politics with nefarious means (in a long-term historical perspective, such a grand strategy with irregular tactics classical). It could be added that hybrid war is also the mirror of a murky world where all distinctions vanish. This is the realm of what some people describe as a Post-Modernity Age. *Mezzo voce*, Russia's rulers tell us: "Everything is relative, everyone is cynical, and we are just as cynical and corrupt as everyone else ». In fact, the hybrid war is a true image of our time and the challenge is also domestic.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER

³ Let us think of Eastern Siberia and Russian Far East where the human densities are very low. Furthermore, the last energy contracts signed between Moscow and Beijing about a gas pipeline from Eastern Siberia to China have put into evidence Russia's weakness in this unbalanced partnership.

⁴ In last September, the Allies decided to set up a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) in order to project power and forces to any corner of the Atlantic Alliance and ensure member states security in the face of hybrid warfare.