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Hybrid Warfare – the coordinated efforts of Russia and China against the West

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Russia and China are conducting hybrid warfare campaigns against Western nations, leveraging a blend of conventional military assets and non-military tactics, including cyberattacks, disinformation, economic pressure, and exploitation of political and legal systems. These efforts aim to destabilise and weaken adversaries from within.

Russia has been intensifying its sabotage campaigns across the EU, reflecting a significant escalation in hybrid hostilities. NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, pointed out that these activities are no longer confined to traditional battlegrounds but have permeated Western democracies, involving direct interference, industrial sabotage and incendiary attacks within EU borders. This is a strategic shift from where hybrid warfare tactics, including disinformation and cyber operations, are used more aggressively to undermine the stability and unity of Western nations.

China, while maintaining a more covert stance, has recently begun to employ economic coercion, bribery and corruption, along with significant lending and advancements in technology and logistics to influence political parties, subtly but effectively. By integrating itself within essential global supply chains and controlling information through technology, China exerts a soft but potent form of political influence, aimed at swaying the economic and political decisions of target countries.

In response, Western policymakers and corporate strategists need to reassess their threat perception and enhance resilience against such multifaceted threats. Developing a comprehensive understanding of the broad toolkit of hybrid warfare is crucial for crafting effective defences and maintaining the integrity of national and corporate operations. The call for a coordinated, strategic response is of upmost importance, not only to counter immediate threats but also to preserve long-term geopolitical stability and economic security. This involves strengthening cyber defences, reducing energy dependencies, and enhancing public awareness and resilience against widespread disinformation.

Russia's strategic movements

Russia's hybrid warfare tactics are evident across multiple regions. In the Balkans, Russia supports Serbia militarily and diplomatically to destabilise the region, undermining Western influence. Tensions have risen with Serbia's deployment of advanced weapons along the Kosovo border. This provocation is designed to create unease within the EU and NATO, signalling potential escalation without overt military engagement. Beyond military moves, Russia bolsters populist movements to weaken EU and NATO cohesion, aligning with the Kremlin's broader strategy of division.

The Wirecard fraud scandal highlights another dimension of Russia's strategy. Jan Marsalek, linked to Russian intelligence, used Wirecard's financial systems to support covert operations, including embezzlement of funds to Russian state accounts. Marsalek also facilitated surveillance by rerouting company internet traffic through his personal devices, enabling monitoring of transactions. It is understood that Marsalek embezzled tens of millions of dollars to Russian state-owned bank accounts during his tenure with Wirecard. Such tactics exemplify Russia's veiled and multipronged approach to exerting influence.

In the South Caucasus, Russia's ambiguous role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict underscores its strategic balancing act. While brokering a ceasefire favouring Azerbaijan, Russia also deployed peacekeepers to maintain a presence in the region, countering Turkey's influence and safeguarding its strategic interests. Moscow's actions illustrate its intent to exploit regional conflicts to sustain leverage and bypass Western sanctions via discreet trade network routes.

In Romania, Russia's hybrid tactics targeted the 2024 presidential elections with disinformation campaigns to propel a pro-Russian candidate, exposing NATO nations' vulnerabilities to external interference. A TikTok-driven disinformation campaign amplified pro-Kremlin narratives, manipulating local discontent and undermining democratic institutions. Such actions demand a robust EU and NATO response to preserve regional stability and counter Russia's influence.

China's expanding influence

China's strategic engagements in the Middle East have strengthened its global influence. Through initiatives like the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (CGCC) Summit, Beijing has deepened ties with Gulf states, advancing its role as a key economic and political player. Chinese President, Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2022 and Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Beijing in 2023, highlight China's growing involvement in regional diplomacy. The successful mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023 marked a notable diplomatic achievement, stabilising the region and elevating China's status as a peace broker.

In Syria, shifting dynamics following Bashar al-Assad's downfall present challenges for Iran, which may seek closer ties with Arab states; a scenario China could exploit to expand its influence further. China's engagement reflects its nuanced diplomacy, positioning it as a counter to Western dominance in the region. This involvement extends beyond diplomacy, encompassing investments in technology and logistics to strengthen its foothold in global supply chains, subtly increasing its leverage over Middle Eastern politics.

The Sino-Russian convergence

The partnership between Russia and China - part of the so-called "Axis of Upheaval" - underscores a shared goal of undermining the US-led global order. Their collaboration spans economic, political and military spheres. In May 2024, Putin and Xi Jinping reiterated their "no limits partnership", highlighting their joint commitment to reshaping global economic governance and countering Western alliances.

China has provided Russia with crucial technological and military assistance, particularly amid Western sanctions. This support includes sharing advanced technologies and strategic resources, supporting Russia's capabilities in Ukraine and elsewhere. Together, they challenge Western sanctions, undermine US-led initiatives, and advocate for a restructured global order. Their partnership reflects a synchronised effort to leverage each nation's strengths - economic dominance from China and military assertiveness from Russia - to reshape geopolitics.

Objectives and regional impacts

Russian President, Vladimir Putin's ambitions extend beyond Ukraine, aiming to reassert control over former Soviet territories like Georgia and Moldova. In Georgia, alleged electoral malpractices have assisted the pro-Russian Georgian Dream party, undermining Western aspirations. Widespread voter intimidation and irregularities were reported, consistent with the Kremlin's objectives of destabilising EU and NATO efforts.

Similarly, in Moldova, Russian disinformation campaigns and support for pro-Russian politicians threaten EU integration efforts. Moscow's information campaigns exploit local vulnerabilities, swaying public opinion and election outcomes. These actions illustrate Russia's broader objective to dismantle Western influence, challenge NATO expansion, and reshape Europe's security.

By weakening these former Soviet states, Putin seeks to reclaim lost territories while asserting dominance over the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe. These strategies require urgent Western responses to counter Russian advances effectively.

Western responses and strategies

Western nations are implementing multi-faceted strategies to counter hybrid warfare. The EU's joint framework on countering hybrid threats and hybrid toolbox combine measures to combat cyberattacks, disinformation and other unconventional tactics. Enhanced EU-NATO collaboration focuses on resilience and digital security.

The UK's investments in cybersecurity infrastructure and public awareness campaigns aim to safeguard critical sectors from cyber and physical threats. Public-private partnerships have reinforced defences, ensuring infrastructure resilience against hostile behaviour. In the US, the military is adapting to address potential homeland threats, including advanced technologies like drones and ultra-long-range systems.

The US Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) report underscores the evolving nature of hybrid threats, highlighting the need for advanced defences against anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies. Western approaches also include punitive measures such as sanctions and legal actions against entities involved in hybrid attacks. Engaging the public, media and private sectors is critical to strengthening societal resilience and protecting democratic institutions.

Conclusion

Hybrid warfare by Russia and China necessitates a coordinated and adaptive response from Western nations. Their use of cyberattacks, disinformation and economic coercion exploits the openness of democratic systems, requiring robust defences and strategic insight.

Western nations must enhance cybersecurity, protect critical infrastructure and foster public resilience. International collaborations and institutional frameworks such as those by the EU, UK and US, are vital to countering these threats effectively. Anticipating, pre-empting hybrid risks and promoting awareness tactics will be crucial to preserving global stability, security and democratic values.