# The Future of War Is Hybrid

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Johann Schmid




## About the Article About the Author

Hybrid warfare is shaping the future of conflict by expan ding battlefields beyond the military domain, leveraging political, economic, and societal pressures. Drawing from Clausewitz, Johann Schmid argues that defense remains stronger than offense, but hybrid strategies exploit grey areas and strategic ambiguity to circumvent strong defen ses. As warfare blurs the lines between war and peace, military and civilian targets, nations must prepare holisti cally to counter hybrid threats.

Colonel Dr. Johann Schmid is the project officer for the subject matter of hybrid warfare at the Center for Military History and Social Sciences of the

Bundeswehr (ZMSBw). He is also a lecturer at the Chair of Military History and Cultural History of Violence at the University of Pots dam and a non-resident fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH).

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## Abstract

nyone who understands the DNA of war can **A**look a little way into its future. Hybrid warfare will shape this future to a considerable extent. Its strate gists are expanding the battlefield horizontally, operating in gray areas and using unorthodox combinations of me ans and methods. Nonetheless, military combat will not lose any of its importance. However, in future it will have to be increasingly placed in the overarching context of hybrid warfare.

**Keywords:** Hybrid warfare, Clausewitz, On War, Russian-Ukrainian war

## The DNA of war

Much is written about the future of war. The half-life of such considerations is generally limited. However, one work stands out in terms of its significance across time, even though it does not explicitly deal with the future of war. It is called “On War” and was written by the Prussi an general and philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). The background was the social upheavals of the French Revolution and the revolutionary changes in warfare that accompanied it. The Napoleonic wars of conquest were the result. They also provided the empirical background for “On War”. But what is the significance of this work for the future of war? It lies in Clausewitz‘s inte rest in understanding the unchanging nature of war. He sought to fathom this in “On War”, detached from the ma nifold and ever-changing empirical manifestations of war. In other words, “On War” is about decoding the DNA of war. In doing so, Clausewitz identifies principles, connec tions and interactions that transcend time and develops a method of thinking that corresponds to the nature of war. On this basis, it is possible to look a little way into the future of war in order to understand its contours and re cognize basic constants and protect one’s own judgment from major deviations.

## Clausewitz and the future of war

Following Clausewitz‘s analysis of the nature of war, war will continue to be a continuation of politics by other me ans. It will also continue to be an act of violence in order to force the opponent to fulfill one‘s own will. Uncertainty, chance and friction, as well as psychological and moral factors, will continue to play a decisive role in the future and thus make war impossible to be calculated mathema tically. Last but not least, war will continue to be more a matter for the defender than the aggressor. After all, it is only with the defense that the battle begins and with it the war. The “peace-

loving" aggressor, Clausewitz refers in this context to Napoleon Bonaparte's self-portrayal, ge nerally wants to conquer, dictate or unilaterally use force, but not necessarily fight. It is therefore particularly up to the defender to prepare for war.

Figure 1: Carl von Clausewitz 1780-1831

„War serves the purpose of the defense more than that of the aggressor. It is only aggression that calls forth de fense, and war along with it. The aggressor is always

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peace-loving (Bonaparte); he would prefer to take over our country unopposed. To prevent his doing so one must be willing to make war and be prepared for it." (Clause witz, On War, VI, 5, p. 444).

## The greater strength of the defense

After all, the war of the future will also be characterized by two main forms: attack and defense. Clausewitz has a special message to convey in this regard. It is his theorem of the fundamentally greater strength of the defense at both the tactical and strategic levels. This strength results, among other things, from the support of the theater of war (terrain, fortresses, bases), the people (population, use of conscription) and great

well-prepared military defense. Despite Western wea pons assistance, its long-prepared counter-offensive became bogged down after a few kilometers in the mi nefields and in the fire of the well-organized Russian de fense. This confirmed the principle that the better prepa red a defense is, the stronger it is.

## State of weapons technology

In addition, the greater internal strength of the defense described by Clausewitz is massively reinforced by the current state of weapons technology. The battlefield has become transparent thanks to drone-supported continu ous observation from the air. Real-time data transmission enables responsive preci

moral forces (motivation, willingness to make sacrifi ces, ability to suffer), which a legitimate war of popular defense against an exter

Hybrid warfare blurs the lines bet ween war and peace, leveraging military and non-military means to achieve strategic goals.

sion fire from artillery, dro nes, attack helicopters and air forces. Fire dominates movement on the ground to an unprecedented de

nal invasion is particularly capable of arousing. Without this inner strength, Ukraine's successful defense against the Russian attack would have been almost inconceiva ble. It is the single most important factor in explaining the war in and over Ukraine since 2014 and increasingly so since February 2022.

## Battle for Ukraine

One of the reasons why Ukraine was not able to deri ve far greater benefit from the strength of its defense was its lack of preparation, particularly for the military esca lation since February 2022. For example, the crossings from Crimea to the Ukrainian mainland were not sustai nably defended, there were no larger bodies of troops in defensive positions between Kiev and the Belarusian border, and a (potentially deterrent) partial mobilization was not carried out. Despite the transparency of the Rus sian deployment and the relevant warnings, Ukraine‘s political leadership failed to recognize the danger. In the summer of 2023, Ukraine had to learn the hard way how difficult or even impossible it can be to overcome a

gree, allowing defense to dominate offense. Paradoxical ly, the war in Ukraine today is more like at the Western Front of the First World War than at the Eastern Front of the Second. This raises a fundamental question in rela tion to war: how can a well-prepared military defense be overcome?

## Hybrid overcoming of military defense

The strategists of hybrid warfare have found very different answers to this. If it is not possible to defeat the enemy‘s armed forces militarily, as is currently the case in the war between Russia and Ukraine, the war can be extended horizontally and along the time axis. In this case, strate gies of denial of victory, personnel and material attrition and devastation as well as psychological and moral exhaustion are pursued. Not only the armed forces but also the economy, industry, society, science and techno logy come into play. Soft dimensions such as psycholo gy, morale, legitimacy and the political will to endure a war despite sacrifices and burdens are equally important. Morality, willingness to make sacrifices and the ability of



society to suffer are important, as are the economic, fi nancial and resource-related resilience of a state. Final ly, the resourcefulness with which new technologies can be quickly harnessed for warfare can also be of great importance. Even without its own navy, Ukraine has suc ceeded in challenging the Russian fleet for control of the western part of the Black Sea. The decisive factor in this was Ukrainian military intelligence in conjunction with the innovative use of new technologies. This made it possible to quickly develop far-reaching means of action (inclu ding naval drones) to combat the Russian fleet, inflict sub stantial losses on it and thus keep it at a distance.

## Hybrid delimitation of the battlefield

In hybrid warfare, the battlefield is expanded horizon tally. The war is waged simultaneously on different do mains, which can be regarded as “partial battlefields”. The military “shooting war” is one of these subdomains.

The information and propaganda war, the economic and resource war, the struggle in the diplomatic arena and the fight for legitimacy and international support are also part

Figure 2: Non-hierarchical / dynamic / flexible Structure Multiple and shifting Centers of Gravity

of the war as a whole. The same applies to the battle of the secret services and the cultural struggle within society. As a rule, it is not possible to predict ex ante on which field such a hybrid war will be decided. In the event of a milita ry stalemate, the opponent can also be forced to comply with its own will via other fields of action (domains), e.g. politically, diplomatically, economically, socially or tech nologically.

## Society as a target

Hybrid actors take the path of least resistance whenever possible and prefer to operate in the gray areas of inter faces. As societies are more vulnerable than their armed forces, the former can already be effectively attacked using non-military hybrid methods. The instrumentaliza tion of irregular migration flows to destabilize and disin tegrate the society of a target country ("weaponized mi gration") is currently the sharpest weapon in this context. Ideological radicalization of an Islamist nature, clan-cri minal disintegration as well as the targeted infiltration of an aggressor's "fifth column" in the form of agents, agi tators, saboteurs and terrorists can go hand in hand with this. EU Europe has been exposed to such hybrid attacks on a massive scale since 2015. Some of these attacks (including in the direction of Poland, Lithuania and Fin land) are part of the Ukraine-Russia war and are directed against supporters of Ukraine. However, even without its own EU external border, Germany is the main target country for this method of attack. The lack of awareness of this danger, the pull effect of the easy accessibility of its social systems and the lack of political will to protect its own population from this danger make Germany an "Eldorado" for such hybrid attacks. It should be borne in mind that those who fail to protect their society from non military attack vectors also jeopardize their military de fense capabilities. Germany's declared aim of making its armed forces "fit for war" and preparing its own country and society for "total defense" is thus thwarted.

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## Implications / conclusions

• Anyone who wants to understand the future of war must come to terms with its nature. Clausewitz offers an excellent approach to this with "On War".

• War will continue to be more a matter for the defender than the aggressor. It is therefore crucial for peace-lo ving nations to prepare for war.

• In the future, war will continue to be characterized by the fundamentally greater strength of the defense. This is currently being massively

reinforced by the state of weapons technology. But only those who prepare the defense can also use these strengths.

• Hybrid warfare is accompanied by three central chal lenges that must be considered with regard to resilien ce building, defense and counteraction:

• Firstly, the horizontal dissolution of the boundar ies of the battlefield in conjunction with the use of non-military centers of gravity for decision-making (including politics, diplomacy, economics, society, culture, technology, the military, information and legitimacy).

• Secondly, deliberately operating in the grey areas of interfaces between traditional categories

of order and areas of responsibility (e.g. war – peace, friend – foe, internal – external security, civil – military areas of responsibility, state – non state actor categories) in order to create ambigui ty and paralyze decision-making processes.

• Thirdly, the creative and unorthodox combination of means, methods, tactics and strategies that in a more traditional understanding would tend to be separated from each other (regular and irregular, symmetrical and asymmetrical, overt and covert,

legal and illegal, hard and soft).

• In times of hybrid warfare, the boundaries between war and peace, friend and foe and between internal and external security are becoming blurred. In ad dition to a strong military defense, the protection of one's own society against non-military attack vectors (including "weaponized migration", ideological radi calization, criminal disintegration, enemy infiltration) is therefore of central importance.

• Hybrid warfare is the more holistic and diverse form of warfare. With its unorthodox approaches, it also offers the possibility of circumventing or undermi ning a strong military defense. In many cases, it will be the simpler, cheaper and more intelligent alternative. The future of war to a large degree will therefore be hybrid.



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