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# Hybrid Warfare in Vietnam – How to win a war despite military defeat

Johann SCHMID

“I wrote this book to explain to my own satisfaction how the United States won every battle in and over Vietnam and yet lost the war. Such a defeat is unprecedented in the annals of military history. And we did lose the war. Our objective was to preserve South Vietnam as an ‘independent, non-Communist State’, and we obviously failed to do that. Refusing to accept this defeat, or saying that we won the shooting war, may assuage our bruised egos, but it oversimplifies the conflict and distorts our understanding of its true nature.” (Davidson 1988)<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Hybridisation of the War Debate<sup>2</sup>

With the takeover of Crimea by masked Russian soldiers without national insignia between February and March 2014 and the Kremlin’s initial denial of any involvement, war has become “hybrid” in European minds. The follow-on conflict and war in Eastern Ukraine, with separatism supported by the neighbouring country and the armed establishment and military protection of pseudo-state “people’s republics” with support from Russian fighters “on holiday”, among other things, has reinforced this perception of a hybrid way of warfare. After the debate on *hybrid warfare* had gathered momentum in autumn 2014 (Ehrhart 2014, pp. 26–32; Reisinger and Colts 2014, pp. 1–12), the civil war in Syria – which had been continuing since 2011 – and the activities of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria were retroactively also declared to be “hybridised” (IISS 2014). This occasionally led to the impression that hybrid warfare was a new phenomenon that had also permanently changed the character of war and would therefore pose a fundamentally new security challenge. It seemed that the old debate on *new wars* was experiencing a *hybrid* revival.

In contrast, however, there were also lines of argument which stated that hybrid warfare, from a historical point of view, was by no means a “new” phenomenon (Popescu 2015, pp. 1–2). The Trojan Horse, the role of Russian Spetsnaz forces during the Cold War, or the activities of Hezbollah, which combined conventional and irregular tactics during the Lebanon War in 2006 (Hoffmann 2009; Gaub 2015), are evidence of the timeless relevance of this type of warfare. The “hybrid hype” which has developed since then eventually also prompted critics to criticise the value of this narrative and concept, and to even call it entirely into question (Münkler 2015, pp. 22–25).<sup>3</sup> But what is *hybrid war* and *hybrid warfare* really about?<sup>4</sup> Is it a well-known phenomenon, or is it really a new type of conflict? What is the difference between *hybrid warfare* and non-hybrid warfare? What is specific about this phenomenon? Is it necessary to criticise the narrative and concept, or should the current debate about it be criticised instead? Which criteria for a character-focused comprehensive understanding of hybrid warfare have actually emerged from the debate so far? The regular indication that

there is no clear “definition” of hybrid warfare at least shows that there is still some need for clarification in this area.<sup>5</sup>

But one main question remains: *Why did we not have this debate at an earlier point?* Are the wars in Afghanistan (since 2001) and in Iraq (since 2003) not hybrid wars? And what about the war in Vietnam, which resulted in the first large-scale defeat of the United States of America in an armed conflict? A defeat which traumatised the country and left its self-confidence shaken for many years as it did not seem plausible that a superpower – despite deploying a maximum in terms of assets and also making a considerable effort and far-reaching own sacrifices – could lose a war with an opponent who was far inferior in many respects.

Can a war that is fought in the rice fields and jungle of Southeast Asia at the military level, but that is psychologically, morally and politically decided in the living rooms of an American television audience, also in terms of its legitimacy, not be described as the incarnation of a *hybrid war*? Does the concept of hybrid warfare perhaps provide the precise missing link needed to systematically explain this defeat? Based on these questions, the *hybrid dimensions* of the Second Indochina War (1961–1975), i.e. the American phase of the Vietnam War, will be examined so as to move closer to the specific characteristics of hybrid warfare. Besides gaining knowledge in terms of war theory, this approach can also contribute to improving our judgement regarding current manifestations of the phenomenon of hybrid warfare.

## 2. War in Vietnam: An Unexplained Defeat

The Second Indochina War is a prime example of the range and possibilities of hybrid warfare and the strategic approaches that are based on it. After all, the United States as a superpower was decisively defeated by a supposed fourth-rate opponent who employed a superior strategy. After many years of struggle, resulting in the loss of approximately 58,000

American soldiers and some two million Vietnamese deaths<sup>6</sup>, the US was forced to withdraw from the country and give up its political objectives (Frey 2010, p. 222). In his work *Vietnam at War*, in which he examines the question of how the United States lost the war in Vietnam, US General Philip B. Davidson, who served as head of military intelligence at the height of the Vietnam War (1967–1969), sums up the reasons as follows:

“To sum it all up, the United States lost the war in the way all wars are lost – to a superior strategy which availed itself of our political and psychological vulnerabilities while negating our great military strength. [...] We lost because the United States government was *unable to comprehend the strategy of revolutionary war*, and thus, unable to counter it.” (Davidson 1988, p. 811, emphasis by the author)

The trauma of this devastating defeat, which to date has remained nearly the only US defeat in a larger war<sup>7</sup>, was accompanied by incomprehension. Despite having won almost every single military battle, the overall war had been lost. This Vietnam trauma has existed for many years and continues to influence US foreign policy until today (Frey 2010). The starting point of this defeat was broad ignorance that resulted in misjudgement of the opponent. The motive and will of the Vietnamese opponent had been misjudged (Tuchmann 2001; Knöbl 1966), and his revolutionary and hybrid strategy approach had also not been understood until the end.

In contrast to the then prevailing dogmatic assumption that all of Southeast Asia was threatened by a communist conspiracy (domino theory), the main motive of the Vietnamese for fighting against both the US and previously against France was not so much their support of communism, but their desire for national independence and self-determination. This goal of the Vietnamese was incompatible with the post-colonial aspirations of France and the activities of the US, which were perceived as something quite similar. The great communist powers, the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, therefore became natural allies of the Vietnamese in their struggle for national liberation, although mainly for pragmatic reasons rather than due to ideological conviction.

In her work *The March of Folly*, Barbara Tuchman (2001, p. 473) states that Washington's biggest mistake was its underestimation of North Vietnam's determination to achieve its objective. Enemy motivation was an element that was missing in the United States' calculations. Washington was therefore able to ignore all the evidence of nationalist fervour and passion for independence. Information about the persistence of Vietnamese resistance against foreign rule would have been available in any history book about Indochina. "Wooden-headedness, the 'don't-confuse-me-with-the-facts' habit, is a universal folly never more conspicuous than at upper levels of Washington with respect to Vietnam." (Tuchman 2001, p. 473)

At the same time, lacking knowledge about the opponent made it impossible to understand his strategic approach and, on this basis, to develop an appropriate strategy. The way in which the United States stumbled into the Vietnam War almost exactly corresponds to the negative example set by the "defeated warriors" described by the Chinese warrior-philosopher Sun Tzu (1990, p. 79):

"Therefore, they say that victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win."

### 3. Vietnamese Hybrid Strategy and the *Center of Gravity* of Decision

But what were the special characteristics of the Vietnamese hybrid strategy? While the United States primarily saw the *center of gravity* concerning the anticipated decision of the conflict and the war to be in the military sphere and therefore in the jungle and swamps of Vietnam, as well as in the airspace above North Vietnam and the neighbouring states of Laos and Cambodia<sup>8</sup>, the strategy of its Vietnamese opponents was aimed in a completely different – and mainly non-military – direction. In an effort to achieve exhaustion, it eventually focused on weakening the United States' political and societal willingness to fight the war at all, and on weakening its *will* to continue fighting in the long run. As a result of media

coverage, the US population, and particularly the television audience, became the neuralgic point in a hybrid political-psychological strategy approach aimed at motive, morale and legitimacy. The intention indirectly was to achieve delegitimisation, rather than a military defeat of the opponent. Paradoxically, this delegitimisation was indirectly carried out via the opponent's media. The special characteristic of this approach was that military victories or defeats remained largely irrelevant, as long as the war as such could be continued with significant media attention. Therefore, even severe military setbacks of the Vietcong – the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam<sup>9</sup> – and of the North Vietnamese forces, as in the 1968 Tet Offensive, were transformed into political successes as a result of dramatic television pictures and a superior long-term strategy. Writer and journalist Kuno Knöbl summed up these connections with visionary foresight as early as 1966 (p. 398): "The military victory of the guerrillas may indeed be ruled out; but can the political defeat of the Vietcong not also be ruled out?"

### 4. Guerrilla Warfare and Conventional Warfare

After first having mainly fought the war in rural areas according to the principles of guerrilla warfare, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese launched a surprise all-out attack against cities throughout South Vietnam (Tet Offensive or New Year's Offensive) on New Year's Day 1968. This day also marked the beginning of the Buddhist festivities during the Tet celebrations. The South Vietnamese and the Americans, who by then had more than half a million soldiers deployed in Vietnam, were completely taken by surprise. The Vietcong, together with the regular North Vietnamese forces, succeeded in capturing important positions throughout South Vietnam, in some cases holding them for more than one month. Not only the old imperial city of Hue, but nearly all the villages of the Mekong Delta temporarily fell under the control of the insurgents or North Vietnamese forces. However,

their plan to lead the South Vietnamese population into an uprising of the masses did not succeed. The majority of the population essentially remained passive. Eventually, the offensive collapsed under overwhelming US defensive firepower and subsequent counter-attacks. Despite being a military failure, the Tet Offensive nevertheless became the turning point of the war. Peter Scholl-Latour, the journalist and eyewitness of both Indochina Wars, describes these connections as follows:

“From a purely military point of view, the New Year’s Offensive had been a fiasco and a terrible setback for Hanoi. [...] In reality, with this tragic beginning to the Year of the Monkey, the fortune of war had finally tipped in favour of North Vietnam. In the United States, the accumulated indignation about the ‘dirty war’ transformed into a hurricane. [...] The US Army had achieved a perfect defensive victory in this battle at the beginning of the new year. The long-term political success, however, was achieved by North Vietnamese commander Võ Nguyên Giáp. His untiring troops had shaken the morale of their far stronger US opponent.” (Scholl-Latour 1981, pp. 135–136)

Two things became clear after the Tet Offensive: First of all, it was now obvious that neither side could win the war militarily at the local level in Vietnam. General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the long-time commander of the North Vietnamese armed forces and Minister of Defence of North Vietnam, could not hope to repeat a military victory against US firepower similar to that achieved in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu against the French in 1954. At the same time, however, a *crucial weakness* of the United States also became apparent: the possibility that it could lose the war at its own home front for psychological reasons and in terms of lacking legitimacy. General Giáp and the North Vietnamese were not unaware of these *vulnerabilities*. As experienced strategists, they knew how to exploit them. For them, the decisive factor was to not lose the war in Vietnam at the military level.<sup>10</sup> Their ultimate objective would eventually be achieved through time, the lacking legitimacy of the US war effort, and especially as a result of the horrors of war being shown in the media. Davidson (1988, p. 808) outlines the strategic approach taken by

General Giáp following the Tet Offensive as follows:

“[...] Giáp’s whole strategy after Tet 1968 was aimed at one decisive objective – to attack the greatest American vulnerability, its *will* to continue the struggle. The protraction of the war, the propaganda, the inconclusive negotiations, the ambiguities and the military actions which produced American casualties were *blended* and used to strike at this American weakness.”

### 5. Military vs. Comprehensive Hybrid Strategy Approach: Inability to Understand the Opponent’s Strategy

**Unexpected Center of Gravity.** The intensity of the military resistance of the Vietnamese, who were essentially fighting an all-out war and showing a tremendous willingness to make sacrifices, seemed to attract particular attention in the United States and apparently strengthened the US belief that the conflict needed to be decided primarily at the military level. What seemingly did not occur to the superpower is that its opponent was seeking a decision indirectly via a hybrid strategy approach in a wholly different area, i.e. in an area that closely combined political, social and military elements. The hybrid strategy of the Vietnamese, indirect and aimed against an unexpected *center of gravity* from their opponent’s point of view, seemed to exceed the imagination of both the US and its South Vietnamese allies. Knöbl (1966, p. 380) expressed this as follows:

“The political and military leadership of South Vietnam does not understand the essence, the ‘independent’ foundation of this multi-level war that is being fought with various motivations, and neither do the Americans.”

The extent to which the American strategic approach focused on a purely military decision in Vietnam, its lacking inclusion of politics, psychology, morale and legitimacy, as well as the incorrectness of the associated scientific evaluation of the war as a whole, is particular-



ly reflected in the military strategy of “*search and destroy*”. This strategy was propagated as the “new formula for victory” and as the “infallible recipe” of General Westmoreland, the commander of the US troops in Vietnam, “to combat the partisans” (Scholl-Latour 1981, pp. 112, 128). The “body count” system was introduced as a “controlling method”. The computers at the US headquarters in Saigon were fed with these actual – although mostly somewhat fictitious – figures in order to “calculate” the opponent’s remaining fighting strength (Scholl-Latour 1981, pp. 112-113, 128). Based on this approach, the assumption in autumn 1967 still was that the war had essentially been won. The US leadership never seemed to realise that this very approach was mainly playing into the hands of the long-term strategy of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong.

**Hybrid Combination of Different Forms of Warfare.** However, it was not only the overall strategy (*grand strategy*) of the Vietnamese that can be described as hybrid in view of the close combination of political and military elements as well as morale and legitimacy. The combination of different forms, concepts, means and methods of warfare and fighting meant that military combat at the local level also became hybrid to a large extent. A wide range of different methods was used that included conventional fighting as well as subversion, agitation and propaganda<sup>11</sup> by means of targeted terror and guerrilla activities. The irregular guerrilla warfare of the Vietcong was combined with conventional operations of North Vietnam’s regular armed forces, and every effort was supported with Soviet equipment and technology (in some cases also including operating personnel). Added to this was China’s very substantial military support<sup>12</sup> for North Vietnam and, as a result, the potential threat of the war escalating into a direct confrontation with China as a nuclear power. It could not be ruled out that China would intervene in the fighting on a larger scale, as this had already happened after 1950 in the Korean War<sup>13</sup>. As a result of these various interrelations, the conflict – in addition to its original postcolonial and domestic dimensions – also gained a multiple interstate and international dimension. The war with North Vietnam was a

veritable interstate war. Despite being limited at the political level, it had caused a considerable degree of destruction, not least due to the US bombing campaigns<sup>14</sup>.

**Operations in the Grey Area of Vulnerable Interfaces.** At the same time, the Vietnamese were fighting the war in a grey area of various *interfaces*, including the interface between domestic and interstate wars, and between irregular and conventional fighting carried out by state and non-state actors. The categories of war and peace, friend and enemy, as well as domestic vs. interstate were largely dissolved. North Vietnam’s regular armed forces took part in the fighting in South Vietnam on a broad scale, and after the military failure of the Tet Offensive in 1968, they even became the main pillar in the ground fighting. Initially, however, they did not primarily intervene as part of larger conventional operations and offensives from the outside, but through concealed infiltration and conventional military reinforcements during the fighting deep inside South Vietnam. At the political level, any involvement was denied throughout long phases of the conflict. The Vietcong’s guerrilla warfare was therefore directly connected to the more conventional fighting of the regular and highly disciplined North Vietnamese intervention regiments and units.

Later on, additional direct offensives from the outside were also carried out, for instance in connection with the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam. As a result of this partially covert – although in later phases of the war quite open – intervention by the regular North Vietnamese armed forces, China’s and the Soviet Union’s substantial support for Hanoi, as well as the possibility of a direct intervention by China, the US forces and their South Vietnamese allies were never able to focus exclusively on counterinsurgency measures against the Vietcong. Conventional fighting and its potential escalation always had to be taken into consideration.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, despite the considerable expansion of the conflict with North Vietnam, US warfare remained subject to certain limits at the political level. A direct confrontation with China, with its nuclear weapons and millions-strong army, had to be avoided. At the same time

the US could stress the legitimacy of her own cause and her credibility as a member of the international community only to a certain degree. An expansion of the ground war to North Vietnam and an intensification of the bombing campaigns, for instance by also attacking most vital critical infrastructure in North Vietnam like the big dam, which were protecting around 15 million people living in the Deltas of the Red River, therefore had to be ruled out.

## 6. Theory and Strategy in Vietnam

The type of warfare fought by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong was no coincidence. It followed a clear and ultimately superior overall strategy. But there were setbacks as well. For instance, the transition phase from guerrilla warfare to more conventional warfare was repeatedly initiated too early<sup>16</sup> from a military point of view. This had devastating consequences at the military level every time, given the far superior firepower of the United States, especially in terms of its air force.<sup>17</sup>

The Prussian general and military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz already described these basic interrelations of the revolutionary people's war in the early nineteenth century and against the background of entirely different weapons technology:

“According to our understanding, people's war should resemble fog or clouds. It should nowhere consolidate into a concrete body, otherwise the enemy can direct an sufficient force at its core, crush it, and take many prisoners. [...] It is the principle that in using this great means of strategic defence one should rarely or never allow oneself to be drawn into tactical defence.” (von Clausewitz 1980 [1832], pp. 803–804)

This was precisely the kind of tactical defence the North Vietnamese and Vietcong allowed themselves to be drawn into when they overran large parts of South Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive and subsequently attempted to hold their positions. Against the far superior firepower of the American war machine, this was only possible for a limited period of time and with heavy losses. From a military

point of view, the offensive was condemned to failure from the outset. By changing the *center of gravity* of conflict decision through political and strategic adaptations, however, the North Vietnamese not only managed to overcome these military setbacks, but eventually also succeeded in transforming them into a political victory. As part of a cross-domain operation and in an apparent application of the Aikido principle, the military power of the opponent was thereby shifted from the military to the domain of legitimacy and directed against the opponent himself. In this context, it was important to accurately assess both one's own physical and moral strength and abilities as well as the sensitivities of the opponent. Identifying the specific weaknesses and particular vulnerabilities of the United States, especially regarding its *limited willingness* to continue the war for an indefinite period – also in view of its delegitimation in the media and considerable own losses – eventually became the decisive key to victory.

On a theoretical level, the approach of the North Vietnamese was partially inspired by the writings of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and the *Theory on Guerrilla Warfare* by Mao Zedong (1966) via their defence minister and military strategist Võ Nguyên Giáp. In addition to the close integration of military and political activities, this new generation of warfare focused on the systematic coordination of irregular guerrilla warfare and conventional warfare with regular armed forces. In this respect, particular attention was paid to the transition between the different phases of the revolutionary fight for liberation, in which conventional warfare gradually gained importance compared to guerrilla warfare. Having started as a partisan war that was later conducted in a hybrid combination of guerrilla and conventional war for long phases, the war finally ended with regular North Vietnamese troops using mechanised mobile warfare in a “Blitzkrieg-mode” to take control of Saigon in 1975 when US-troops already had left Vietnam. According to today's terminology, Mao's theory of guerrilla warfare could also be described as a theory or concept for hybrid warfare.

The fact that this approach was also not genuinely *new* is already reflected in the cir-

cumstance that both Lenin and Mao, in their considerations on the theory of war, had extensively borrowed ideas from the writings of Carl von Clausewitz (Schössler 1991, pp. 124–129; 2009). In his deliberations on “arming the population” (von Clausewitz 1980 [1832], pp. 799–806) in his main work entitled *On War* published in 1832, as well as in his lectures on the “Small War” (von Clausewitz 1966, pp. 208–599), Clausewitz had already laid crucial foundations for a theory of guerrilla warfare. In this context, besides factors associated with psychology and morale, he particularly also addressed the possibility of collaboration between a guerrilla movement and regular armed forces.<sup>18</sup> Although he is rarely associated with this type of war, the conciseness of the Prussian military philosopher’s thoughts on the strategic principles of guerrilla warfare remains unsurpassed to this day. In this respect, it remains a paradox of military theory that the significance of Clausewitz’ work *On War* is often overlooked when irregular forms of warfare are examined, particularly by Western authors. This is because he is often thought to have only written about regular interstate war (van Creveld 1998; Keegan 2003), even though the current and past theorists and practitioners of revolutionary guerrilla warfare proofed how the ideas of Clausewitz can be successfully applied particularly with regard to their cause.

## 7. Results for the Theory of Hybrid Warfare

In addition to one central and general characteristic of war, the type of warfare used by the Vietnamese against the United States in the Second Indochina War exhibits three key characteristics of hybrid warfare in the narrower sense. These characteristics are suitable to determine the nature of hybrid warfare.

**General characteristic.** Every war essentially has hybrid dimensions and elements, on the one hand because it arises from and pursues a political rationale and, on the other hand, because it is usually not carried out purely at the military level. The interconnec-

tion of the military and political dimensions is an intrinsic feature of war, regardless of how stringently or professionally this connection is brought into play. According to Carl von Clausewitz, war is “a continuation of politics by other means” (von Clausewitz 1980 [1832], p. 210), which means that it is always hybrid. In addition, it is also possible to identify a specifically hybrid form of warfare in the narrower sense. This form can be described using three characteristics exemplified in the approach taken by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong in the Second Indochina War.

**First characteristic.** The *first* characteristic of hybrid warfare in the narrower sense, which also became a crucial aspect in the US defeat in Vietnam, is that the center of gravity concerning the aspirational decision of the conflict and the war is neither exclusively nor primarily located in the military domain. Despite the possibility of intense hostilities, the decision is sought neither primarily in the military domain nor primarily by military means but on a broad spectrum of multiple and interconnected domains and dimensions.<sup>19</sup> In hybrid warfare, therefore, a military victory is not necessarily essential in order to ensure an overall success. In the case of the Second Indochina War, aspects of psychology, morale and legitimacy at the US home front eventually became the centers of gravity in terms of deciding the war. All activities, including the military effort, were increasingly adjusted to this effect as part of an evolutionary and strategic transformation process of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong *center of gravity*. Contrary to “conventional” or more precisely *military centric warfare*<sup>20</sup>, the purpose of combat action in hybrid warfare is not primarily to bring about a decision at the military domain and by the use of military force primarily. Instead, its purpose is to influence the decision of the conflict or war in other domains that are non-military.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to “conventional” military centric warfare, therefore, the other relevant domains, dimensions and areas of the conflict are also not hierarchically focused on a military decision.

These central characteristics are supplemented by a frictional or conscious transformation of the *center of gravity* or, in this case,

by its evolutionary shift away from the jungle and rice fields of Vietnam and into American living rooms. The central characteristics are furthermore supplemented by a combination of several different centers of gravity of conflict decision and by a generally indirect accompanying course of action. In this respect, it can generally be assumed that the parties to the conflict will have diverging ideas regarding the way in which the anticipated decision is to be achieved. This also means that not all actors involved in a hybrid war must necessarily be pursuing a hybrid approach. The United States clearly did not pursue a hybrid strategy in Vietnam, but instead aimed to achieve a “classic” military centric decision of the conflict. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of hybrid warfare with respect to a specific party to the conflict, rather than using the term to describe the war as a whole.

**Second characteristic.** A *second* significant characteristic of hybrid warfare in the narrower sense is the dissolution and blurring of established categories of order by means of intentionally operating within the grey areas of various interfaces. The blurring of these lines, especially between the categories of war and peace, friend and enemy, internal and external security, domestic and interstate conflict, civilian and military means and methods, regular and irregular forces, or symmetric and asymmetric approaches, creates interface problems that are aimed at identifying and exploiting the adversary’s specific vulnerabilities, while simultaneously creating ambiguity and hiding own vulnerabilities. In general, the hybrid actor will intentionally work within the grey zone of different interfaces where his adversary’s options to respond are blocked, limited or at least confused. While pursuing an indirect, covert or concealed strategic approach, he will intentionally concentrate his efforts against these specific vulnerabilities of the adversary.

In this case, the activities were in particular focused on the interface between domestic civil war and open interstate war, which was partially conducted in a covert manner, as a proxy war and simultaneously with substantial external support – namely from China and the Soviet Union. The combination of subversion and guerrilla warfare with conventional war-

fare within the same area in South Vietnam prevented the US and South Vietnamese forces from being able to concentrate on a single type of threat. By being able to flexibly select the type and place of the hostilities, the hybrid actor maintained the initiative and therefore also determined the agenda. At the same time, any US strategy for defeating the adversary could only be implemented to a limited degree due to the threat of a potential full-scale Chinese intervention as it happened in the Korean War.

**Third characteristic.** *Thirdly*, hybrid warfare is essentially characterised – in the narrower sense as well as in a specific military sense – by the creative, partially covert and cross-level combination and interconnection of different types, forms and concepts of warfare and fighting. This includes conventional fighting and guerrilla warfare, regular and irregular methods (including subversion, terror and propaganda) as well as symmetric and asymmetric approaches at the interstate, domestic or pseudo-state level, all of which are coordinated in terms of time and space. The newly created hybrid forms are often difficult to clearly distinguish and understand regarding their patterns, rationales and respective logic. This creates ambiguity, facilitates surprise and hampers defence, reaction and the development of appropriate counterstrategies. In this case, the entire spectrum of military concepts, means and methods was used, including subversion and terror, broadscale guerrilla activities of the Vietcong, as well as conventional combat action by regular North Vietnamese units, with indirect support provided by the conventional and nuclear escalation potential of China and the Soviet Union. Depending on the local environment, the respective center of gravity was selected with considerable flexibility, although there was a basic tendency to move from the initial irregular activities to increasingly conventional activities later on. The overall approach was based on an indirect strategy, aimed at psychological and moral exhaustion rather than physical defeat or annihilation, and its primary aim was to avoid losing the war at the military level. The war had to be won in a different area.

The three key characteristics of hybrid warfare in the narrower sense, i.e. 1) the flexible

adjustment of the decision of a conflict or war to centers of gravity on a broad spectrum of non-military domains and dimensions, 2) the intentional activities in the grey area of various interfaces directed against the specific vulnerabilities of the adversary, the subsequent blurring of established categories of order, and 3) the creative combination and hybrid coordination of different (civilian and military) forms, concepts, means and methods of handling conflicts, warfare and combat into to ever new mixed hybrid forms also mean the following: Although hybrid warfare may not be fundamentally new, there is considerable scope for innovation in its various manifestations if they are creatively designed through hybrid orchestration. Besides long-term measures to build resilience, an early recognition and understanding of the specific logic and rationale of hybrid warfare strategies used by different actors therefore becomes a neuralgic point with respect to a timely and appropriate response and defence effort. Against this background, the capability to analyse wars, conflicts and strategy becomes a key capability in conflicts with actors engaging in hybrid warfare. An identification of the characteristics of this phenomenon, as presented in this paper, can be useful as an *analysis framework* when examining and assessing current military challenges.

In view of the importance of analytical capabilities in recognising and understanding the continuously changing logic and patterns of war and strategy, systematic and theory-based judgement training by using the full “depth of historic experience” (Schössler 2009, p. 130) becomes a decisive element in terms of intellectually preparing for such challenges. In this respect, special attention should be paid to the theoretical and philosophical sources of inspiration used by hybrid actors in wars. Re-examining *On War* is therefore also advisable in view of the success of the theorists and practitioners of the revolutionary struggle for liberation, which was fought in Indochina according to hybrid principles, because they were directly or indirectly inspired by Clausewitz. “Much strategy prevails over little strategy, so those with no strategy cannot but be defeated.” (Sun Tsu 1990, p. 79)

## 8. Current Relevance: War in Eastern Ukraine

The current relevance of these interrelations is, for instance, also reflected in the activities of the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine since 2014, which are in many ways similar, albeit on a much smaller scale, to the warfare carried out by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong in their fight against South Vietnam and the United States (Schmid 2016, pp. 114-120; Schmid 2019, pp. 5-15). The situation shows all three major characteristics of hybrid warfare that were identified earlier on:

*Firstly*, the activities of the pro-Russian separatists follow a hybrid *grand strategy*, with a *center of gravity* that is not primarily focused on a military decision of the conflict or war. The military activities of the hybrid actor are instead focused on preventing the adversary – i.e. Ukraine within the framework of its anti-terror operations (ATO) – from achieving a military decision of the conflict. This is similar to the situation of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong, who primarily wanted to avoid a military defeat by the US so as to achieve a decision in a different, non-military domain. In eastern Ukraine (Donbass), the main focus is being placed on the subversive, clandestine and propaganda-supported establishment of pseudo-state political structures (“peoples republics”), which is not unlike the approach taken by the North Vietnamese agitprop teams in South Vietnam. The intention is to use these structures to achieve long-term political success, especially in the form of increased influence in and regarding Ukraine as a whole. The fight for legitimacy, supported by intense propaganda, has in this case also become a decisive factor in the overall conflict.

The style of the activities carried out against Ukraine by the pro-Russian separatists is no coincidence. It follows a pattern that was already outlined by General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, in a speech held in front of Russian officers in February 2013. This speech, which was later published in a Russian-language military journal as a signed article<sup>22</sup>, provides a succinct and important

insight into the current Russian mindset regarding questions of war, armed conflict, and military and non-military activities in this context. Gerasimov's speech can be considered a *key document* in the analysis of Russia's form of non-linear or hybrid warfare. Gerasimov describes the significance of non-military means and asymmetric activities in the context of achieving political-strategic objectives as follows:

"The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures -- applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. [...] *Asymmetrical actions* have come into widespread use, enabling the nullification of an enemy's advantages in armed conflict. Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces and *internal opposition* to create a *permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state*, as well as *informational actions*, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected." (Gerasimov 2013, English translation by R. Coalson, italics added by the author)

*Secondly*, the pro-Russian separatist forces in Ukraine are also intentionally operating in the grey area of different interfaces, in a situation reminiscent of Vietnam, thereby dissolving traditional categories of order and areas of responsibility. This applies to the interface between war and peace as well as to the interface between friend and enemy. There has been no declaration of war in Ukraine either. The hybrid activities of the pro-Russian separatist forces are normally backed up by propaganda and carried out in a way that allows a somewhat plausible denial. The intentional blurring of the lines between domestic and interstate conflict as well as between state and non-state actors is particularly significant in this respect. Non-state pro-Russian separatist forces are openly taking military action in Donbass and are also securing the establishment of pseudo-national political structures

by military means. In so doing, they are engaging in open combat with the regular Ukrainian security forces. As the external adversary is already operating inside the country and joining forces with local actors, Ukraine was and still is faced with the challenge of defending its internal and external security at the same time. The presumed Russian guidance and support for the separatists in the form of weapons<sup>23</sup>, equipment, supplies and specialists – namely the interstate element of the war – is being carried out covertly. Direct Russian intervention with regular armoured units at the local level, which allowed the separatists to survive in the summer of 2014<sup>24</sup> as well as in January and February 2015<sup>25</sup>, is intentionally concealed and denied (*plausible deniability*). Ukraine's incapacitation in 2014 therefore seems unsurprising. It is an immediate result of the ambiguities and vulnerabilities created by the activities centered around the interfaces of the traditional categories of order and areas of responsibility. Gerasimov describes such situations as follows:

"In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward *blurring the lines between the states of war and peace*. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template." (Gerasimov 2013, English translation by R. Coalson, italics added by the author)

*Thirdly*, the hybrid actor in Ukraine is also creatively combining different forms and concepts in carrying out the conflict and conducting warfare. The main focus in this respect is on combining the subversive activities of intelligence services and local separatists with special forces operations and the use of means and methods of conventional warfare in a partially covert and limited way. At the same time, Russia is retaining a conventional and nuclear threat scenario in the background while ostentatiously demonstrating its ability to escalate the situation by conducting wide-ranging exercises. These measures are accompanied by a vast internal and external propaganda campaign. Ukraine thus faced the dilemma of having to conduct *anti-terror operations* and *counterinsurgency measures* against an adversary who has already gained a subversive and political foothold inside the country and is

securing his position from the outside using a superior conventional military force provided by an external state. Ukraine was unprepared for this multiple combination of hybrid challenges to its internal and external security and the technique of limited warfare carried out with – theoretically – unlimited means. This is comparable to the way in which the South Vietnamese forces and their US allies in Indochina were unprepared for the creative and essentially all-out war fought by North Vietnam and the Vietcong.

In contrast to the Vietnam War, however, the range of forms and concepts of warfare employed in the war in Eastern Ukraine remained relatively limited. The fighting was primarily carried out with conventional weapons, with artillery (empowered by drone reconnaissance) being used as the main weapon system on both sides, and it mostly took place between combatants, despite a significant number of civilian casualties. Guerrilla tactics have hardly been used. The prerequisite for these tactics to be applied would presumably have been if Russia were to invade Ukraine on a broader scale. Ukraine's former President Petro Poroshenko has accordingly indicated that these tactics would have need to be considered an option and has already initiated the necessary preparations (*Tagesspiegel* 2014). Although terrorist means and methods have been witnessed on some occasions, they have not been applied on a broader scale.<sup>26</sup> Gerasimov stresses the significance of covert military operations applied together with a combination of various means and methods as follows:

“All this is supplemented by *military means of a concealed character*, including carrying out actions of *informational conflict* and the actions of *special-operations forces*. [...] We must acknowledge that, while we understand the essence of traditional military actions carried out by regular armed forces, *we have only a superficial understanding of asymmetrical forms and means*. In this connection, the *importance of military science* – which must create a *comprehensive theory* of such actions – is growing. The work and research of the Academy of Military Science can help with this.” (Gerasimov 2013, English translation by R. Coalson, italics added by the author)<sup>27</sup>

Although the activities of the pro-Russian separatists supported by Russia in Ukraine are considered a prime example of hybrid warfare, it must be noted that the range of hybrid warfare strategies and tactics in Vietnam was significantly broader and also featured a much larger mixture of hybrid means and methods. However, the main characteristics of hybrid warfare are identical in both cases, and the basic patterns of their empirical manifestations show a number of remarkable analogies, despite the differences in terms of geostrategic context, time, space and scale. A closer examination of the war that was fought in the jungle and rice fields of Vietnam, by now long forgotten in Europe, could therefore also be useful when analysing and trying to understand present-day forms of hybrid warfare. At the same time, the concept of hybrid warfare, as outlined in this paper, could help to make the still largely unexplained defeat of the US superpower at the hands of a physically and materially far inferior adversary more understandable.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> General Phillip B. Davidson served as the head of military intelligence in Vietnam under the command of William Westmoreland during the height of the Vietnam War (1967–1969). He also served in World War II and the Korean War.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Schmid 2016, pp. 114–120.

<sup>3</sup> Herfried Münkler describes hybrid war as a “cipher for semantic cluelessness”, as a “semantic passenger of the old binary order” from which only very little clarification can be expected (Münkler 2015, pp. 22–25).

<sup>4</sup> In the following, the main focus will be on the concept of *hybrid warfare*. On the one hand, because war can only be described as hybrid or non-hybrid in the narrower sense based on the way that it is fought. On the other hand, because hybrid warfare is usually carried out asymmetrically. This generally means that not all actors involved in a war must also specifically be pursuing a hybrid strategy. As a whole, the war will therefore not always necessarily be seen as hybrid from every perspective.

<sup>5</sup> Hereby considering that the development of a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of hybrid warfare is far more important than any nominal „definition“.

<sup>6</sup> A total of approximately 3 million Americans were deployed in Vietnam between 1961 and 1973. At the height of the confrontation (1968), the US had some 550,000 troops deployed.

<sup>7</sup> The Korean War ended in a stalemate based on the status quo ante, and it was the first (major) war the United States was unable to win. The US suffered approximately 37,000 casualties and lost about 3,000 aircraft (Chang and Halliday 2005, p. 484). The US lost its first war during the Indian Wars against Chief Red Cloud and the Lakota (Red Cloud's War 1866–1868) exactly one century before the height of the Vietnam War. Even though this remained a temporary episode, it is significant that this defeat, similar to that in Vietnam, was suffered against an opponent far inferior in terms of strength who was, however, fighting for his existential interests. Similar to the Vietnamese, the Lakota pursued a strategy of exhaustion and used an unconventional form of warfare by combining guerrilla tactics with elements of conventional fighting.

<sup>8</sup> An overemphasis on scientific approaches under Robert McNamara, then secretary of defence, popularised the idea that the course of the war could be statistically calculated and that the war could virtually be “solved” like a mathematical problem (Tuchman 2001, pp. 370–372).



Ignoring psychological and morale-related factors, US experts predicted that – in view of the bombing campaign – North Vietnam's resistance would be exhausted by 1967 at the very latest (Knöbl 1966, p. 398). This *calculation* is known not to have worked out. Although all military and industrial targets in North Vietnam had been largely destroyed by 1967, the bombing had no discernible impact on the course of the war as such. The morale of the North Vietnamese remained unbroken, and the movement of supplies and reinforcements to the south continued. It also had no significant influence on the course of the war in South Vietnam. As an agrarian society that was relatively independent of complex infrastructure, and in combination with a very high resilience to losses, the nationally oriented political leadership was willing to accept these losses. Despite enormous sacrifices, the Vietnamese opponent proved to be relatively impervious to US air raids.

<sup>9</sup> Another common term: National Liberation Front (NFL).

<sup>10</sup> This alone, given the military superiority of the United States and its South Vietnamese allies, was an enormous challenge that could only be accomplished by making enormous sacrifices. Besides the military capabilities needed to maintain pressure on South Vietnam and the US, this also required an extremely high level of political determination and morale.

<sup>11</sup> Carried out, for example, by the Vietcong's specialised agitprop teams.

<sup>12</sup> At the height of the Vietnam War (1965–1968), China had more than 300,000 troops deployed in North Vietnam. Most of these were air defence personnel, some of whom remained in Vietnam until 1973. Their presence enabled Hanoi to send more of its own troops to the south, although they were also accompanied by Chinese personnel (Chang and Halliday, p. 743).

<sup>13</sup> China intervened in the Korean War as of 1950. At peak times, there were 740,000 Chinese soldiers deployed in Korea (Stöver 2013, p. 77).

<sup>14</sup> For instance during Operation Rolling Thunder which targeted North Vietnam and Laos from 1965 to 1968.

<sup>15</sup> This is one of the most significant differences compared to the more recent interventions in Afghanistan (since 2001) and Iraq (since 2003), where large-scale conventional intervention from the outside was not to be expected.

<sup>16</sup> This particularly applies to the Tet Offensive of 1968, but likewise to the Easter Offensive of 1972, which also failed from a purely military point of view.

<sup>17</sup> A phase in which many uprisings failed.

<sup>18</sup> Like it happened in Clausewitz days 1807-1814 when the Spanish guerrillas were fighting supported by the British

fleet and the army under Wellington against the invading Napoleonic armies in Spain and Portugal.

<sup>19</sup> The situation was slightly different during the French phase of the First Indochina War (1950–1954), where both sides aimed for a military decision. Contrary to all expectations, the Viet Minh forces were able to achieve a significant military success over the French forces at Dien Bien Phu, which contributed significantly to decide the war in their favour.

<sup>20</sup> This is the type of warfare where the center of gravity to decide the confrontation focuses on a military decision. That means on a decision on the military domain/"battlefield" primarily achieved by military means and methods. Its style is similar to the Cabinet Wars in 18th-century Europe, the Napoleonic Wars, the German Unification Wars, and also large parts of both World Wars. Examples would also be the Falklands War (1982) or the Gulf War (1991). A bias in this form of thinking simultaneously makes it harder to understand the specific logic of hybrid forms of warfare. Compare: Schmid 2020, pp. 570-579.

<sup>21</sup> However, this does not mean that each instance where the military is employed to play a supporting role in other areas inevitably constitutes hybrid warfare.

<sup>22</sup> The article was published in the Russian military journal *Military-Industrial Courier* on 27 February 2013: cf. Gerasimov 2013. The journalist Robert Coalson produced a rough translation of the article in English and initially published it on his Facebook page on 21 June 2014. The article was later also published in the *Huffington Post*.

<sup>23</sup> Like in Vietnam, air defence systems are of crucial importance in this case.

<sup>24</sup> In the course of its anti-terror operations, Ukraine managed to retake approximately half of the area controlled by separatists in the summer of 2014. The separatists were in danger of suffering an overall defeat.

<sup>25</sup> Ukraine suffered a severe military defeat in January and February 2015 when it tried to reestablish control over the border between Russia and Donbass by military means. The intervention by armoured Russian units was decisive in this respect, and the fighting over the control of the Debaltsevo kettle is a prime example of this.

<sup>26</sup> Presumably on the basis of a tacit mutual agreement.

<sup>27</sup> In the context of Germany, this would first require the establishment of an appropriate research association dedicated to military science and the science of war (Schmid 2013, pp. 227-248).

<sup>28</sup> The article was originally published in German language: Schmid, Johann, „Hybride Kriegführung in Vietnam – Strategie und das center of gravity der Entscheidung“. In: *Zeitschrift für Außen - und Sicherheitspolitik* (ZFA), 15 August 2017, vol. 10, No. 3, Wiesbaden, 373–390, © Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH 2017.

## ABSTRACT

All war is hybrid, but there is also a specific hybrid way of conducting war. In contrast to “conventional” *military* centric warfare, its *center of gravity* is not primarily located in the military domain. Instead, one of the key factors in this respect is influencing, disintegrating or destroying the opponent’s psychological constitution, particularly his willingness and morale to fight and continue a struggle. Legitimacy and justness can become strong and effective weapons in this respect. Thus success in hybrid warfare does not necessarily require victory on the military battlefield. Success is even possible despite military defeat. The example of the Second Indochina War underlines this and shows that hybrid warfare can be conceptualized by three key characteristics. 1. Focusing the decision of the war and conflict as such on a broad and combined spectrum of non-military centers of gravity (flexible adjustment). 2. Operating in the shadow of various interfaces against the specific vulnerabilities of an opponent. Hereby blurring traditional lines of order, creating ambiguity, confusing the decision-making process of the opponent and paralyse his options to respond. 3. Creative combination and tailored integration of different - civilian and military as well as physical, mental and moral - forms, concepts, means and methods into ever new mixed hybrid forms. These characteristics and their hybrid orchestration and interplay provide the *missing link* that helps to explain this frequently misunderstood defeat in Vietnam. A comparative analysis with the war in Eastern Ukraine shows a number of interesting parallels.<sup>28</sup>

**Keywords:** Hybrid Warfare, Center of Gravity, Vietnam War, Second Indochina War, War in Eastern Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Strategy

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