Hybrid Wars and the Reshaping of the Global Security System

Dr. Fatima Hamouta[1]

[1]Lecture A, University of Batna 1, NIADEV Laboratory, Algeria, Email: **Fatima.hamouta@univ-batna.dz**

Abstract

This study reviews the concept of hybrid wars and compares it to traditional wars. It examines how both types of war have contributed to the reshaping of the global security system. The aim is to highlight the characteristics of these wars and the threat they pose to global security and stability. The methodology employed involves reviewing relevant academic literature and presenting real-life examples related to these wars, as well as the use of specific defence strategies within the framework of the global security system. The research concludes that these wars transcend national and regional boundaries and affect societal existence. This necessitates a re-evaluation of how states can defend themselves and protect societal security.

Keywords: hybrid wars, traditional wars, reshaping, global security system.

Introduction

The global system has undergone significant changes in the nature of conflicts. Wars are no longer confined to traditional military confrontations; new patterns have emerged, most notably hybrid wars combining military, economic, media and cyber tools. This has brought about a profound change in the nature of international conflicts, surpassing traditional security and defence frameworks and resulting in unprecedented challenges for states and international institutions in terms of understanding and addressing this type of warfare.

The blending of military tools with technological advancements has eroded the boundaries between peace and war, raising questions about the effectiveness of deterrence, sovereignty and collective security in a complex and rapidly changing global environment.

The research problem therefore lies in the profound changes to the global security system brought about by the rise of hybrid warfare, which combines traditional military tools with unconventional methods such as cyberattacks, media manipulation, economic pressure and the involvement of non-state actors. This new pattern of conflict has complicated classical concepts of security and threat, weakening the capacity of international institutions and states to respond effectively.

Thus, the research problem revolves around two variables: hybrid warfare and the global security system. This leads us to pose the following question:

How have hybrid wars contributed to the reshaping of the global security system?

This issue has been broken down into the following sub-questions:

What characteristics distinguish hybrid warfare from traditional warfare?

What is the magnitude of the threat posed by hybrid wars to global security?

What are the most prominent non-military tools used as lethal weapons in these wars?

Do hybrid wars establish a new multipolar global security system?

Importance of the study:

Scientific importance: This study is scientifically significant as it provides an analytical framework for understanding how states can integrate hybrid and technological tools within a comprehensive defence doctrine. Additionally, this study enriches security and political literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the global security system and its transformations, which have completely changed the rules of the game. The threat is no longer limited to traditional warfare; it has evolved into a hybrid threat.

Practical importance: The study highlights the need for governments and militaries to recognise that traditional military arsenals alone are insufficient to protect the state from the dangers of 'fifth-generation wars' and media manipulation campaigns. There is a need to blend traditional and new tools, especially technological ones, and to clarify how to deal with 'non-state actors'.

Study objectives:

1. Identify the characteristics that distinguish hybrid wars from traditional wars, and assess the magnitude of their threat to global security.

2. To reveal how military and non-military means can be integrated into a unified strategy to achieve political objectives within an ambiguous and complex global system.

3. Understanding the radical transformation brought about by hybrid wars in the nature of the global security system.

Theoretical Framework of the Study: Fourth Generation Warfare Theory

Since the late twentieth century, the radical transformation in the nature of conflicts has surpassed the traditional boundaries between regular armies, as the dominance of regular armies has declined in favor of non-state actors and the war for minds and public opinion rather than merely the destruction of military forces.

American military analyst William S. Lind first articulated the concept of "fourth-generation warfare" in a joint article titled "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation" published in 1989. This theory draws from Clausewitz's work on the integration of politics and warfare, but it is not his original concept. Rather, it is a modern classification of the evolution of warfare patterns. This makes it fundamental to understanding contemporary conflicts, such as terrorism and hybrid wars.

The theory applies to hybrid wars because it expands the theater of conflict from the military battlefield to society, the media, the economy, and politics. This shift has transformed global security, shifting the focus from armies and borders to a networked security system based on societal resilience, international cooperation, and cyber and media defense. Ambiguity between peace and war is a structural characteristic of this new security system.

Methodological Approach of the Study

This topic falls under descriptive studies.

The primary objective is to describe the nature of the relationships among the three variables (hybrid wars, reshaping, and the global security system) as they exist in reality. The study does not alter or intervene in these relationships; rather, it clarifies conceptual ambiguities.

The study adopts a systemic approach, viewing the global security system as a system with inputs of "hybrid threats," processes such as "international responses, alliances, sanctions, etc.," and outputs such as "redefining security and warfare and expanding the security threat from traditional to hybrid."

Definitions of Terms:

1. Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare is defined as the combined use of military and non-military means to achieve political or strategic objectives. This is often done in a way that keeps the conflict below the threshold of traditional

war or obscures its legal characterization as war (NATO, June 2014). According to NATO, hybrid warfare may include regular and irregular military capabilities, as well as activities across the full spectrum of diplomatic, economic, media, and social dimensions, in order to achieve the adversary's objectives while keeping the situation below the threshold of traditional war. (NATO, June 2014).

2. Global Security

Global security is one of the most recent security concepts and is closely related to the concept of international security. However, the fundamental difference between the two concepts lies in the fact that international security is limited to social political units (states), whereas global security has a broader scope. It encompasses social political units (states), as well as new units in the international system, such as regional and international organisations, which have emerged since the early twentieth century, including both general and specialised, governmental and community-based organisations. This has also been extended to include multinational corporations and transnational economic interests (Murad, 2017).

The emergence of the concept of global security, which is not exclusively or even primarily concerned with states, but also encompasses these new international units with their own security demands, has resulted in the two concepts differing in the following ways (Murad, 2017):

- The number and nature of the actors involved in each concept.

The nature of the security demands of the actors involved in each concept.

- The types of means and methods suitable for the security demands of the actors involved in each concept.

- The types and levels of appropriate responses to the security demands of the actors involved in each concept.

Therefore, while global security encompasses international security, international security does not encompass global security.

3. Global Security System

The term 'system' generally refers to a set of interconnected and coordinated elements that work together to achieve a common goal. In contrast, a security system is an integrated structure of procedures, technologies, administrative policies and legal measures aimed at protecting individuals, institutions and states from internal and external risks and threats. This includes preventive measures, surveillance devices and crisis management systems, which enhance stability and security.

The global security system, on the other hand, comprises legal mechanisms, procedures and means of organising relations between states based on respect for international law and agreed standards. Its goal is to prevent wars and aggression while safeguarding peace and security for all (Castillo-Gonzalez, 2024).

Thus, the global security system is a complex network of rules, institutions and international arrangements that aims to protect peace and security for all individuals and nations while safeguarding the vital interests of states by managing traditional and non-traditional threats within a comprehensive legal and institutional global framework.

Previous literature

A study by James K. Wither, titled 'Rethinking Hybrid Warfare: The Battle of Terms', published in Connections: The Quarterly Journal in 2023 examines the evolution of thought regarding 'hybrid warfare', shifting from a purely military concept to one that encompasses all the tools of state power. Drawing on Russian and Chinese approaches to hybrid warfare, the researcher provides non-Western perspectives and offers initial observations about the nature of the current war in Ukraine.

Despite the focus on non-military means such as disinformation, cyberattacks and economic pressure, the researcher concludes that military power remains significant. However, the effective implementation of these measures ultimately depends on the presence of military strength to support them (Wither, 2023).

The researcher's discussion of "hybrid warfare" not only changes the way wars are fought, but also forces the world to redefine the meaning of "security" and how to protect it. This aligns with the central idea of our study, which posits that the global security system has been reshaped and that global security is no longer solely dependent on traditional armies. Instead, it now encompasses cybersecurity, economic stability, and the protection of information from disinformation. This leads to hybrid threats that complicate the ability of international security systems to determine when war actually begins.

A study by Sadaam Marir Hamad Al-Jamili (2024) on "Hybrid Warfare and Its Impact on the Future of Global Conflict," published in the *Tikrit Journal of Political Science* in Iraq, relied on a future-oriented methodology to analyze the topic and provide future insights and risks associated with hybrid wars. The study reached important conclusions, including that the mechanisms for managing wars have changed dramatically, with new mechanisms such as remote warfare management that do not require direct intervention by the state. This shift can be attributed to technology's significant impact on the phenomenon of war (Al-Jamili, 2024).

In parallel, this study affirmed the notion supporting our research on hybrid wars, namely the emergence of new types of 'hybrid wars', such as pandemic, psychological, cyber, cognitive and biological warfare. This undoubtedly affects the global security system, especially since the researcher anticipated a future scenario of escalating international conflicts — a trend that is evident in the current situation — with 'individuals' emerging as actors competing with states in global politics and influencing the escalation of conflicts. This makes it difficult to control these conflicts or understand their objectives.

The report 'Hybrid Threats and Hybrid Warfare', issued by NATO in 2024, considers the report's findings to constitute a 'strategic framework', as it precisely defines the concepts of hybrid threats and hybrid warfare, clarifying their overlap in targeting the will of peoples and national institutions. It also identifies the unconventional means employed in hybrid warfare and mentions the contribution of non-state actors, suggesting the adoption of confrontation strategies (NATO, 2024).

Therefore, this report serves as an educational roadmap for our study, enabling us to develop a comprehensive understanding, from conceptual analysis to outlining the most effective strategies for confronting hybrid warfare.

I. The Shift from Traditional Wars to Hybrid Wars

Hybrid wars are a modern type of conflict combining traditional and unconventional methods of warfare. They utilise military force alongside non-military means, such as media warfare and cyberattacks. This type of warfare is one of the most complex developments in modern military history because it is no longer limited to 'tank versus tank'. Instead, it has become a cunning (and sometimes malicious) blend aimed at achieving victory without firing a single shot in some instances.

The concept of blending regular and irregular forces is not new; it has existed since ancient times. However, the term 'hybrid warfare' was coined by American military analysts to explain the complexities of conflicts after 2001.

The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon in 2006, which took place in the 1990s and early 2000s, demonstrated the limitations of traditional Western power against adversaries that combined guerrilla warfare, advanced missiles and media propaganda. It was during this period that the term 'hybrid warfare' first emerged among American analysts such as Frank Hoffman (Wither, 2023).

The pivotal moments of this shift are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Pivotal Moments in the Transition from Traditional to Hybrid Wars

Stages	What has changed?	Examples
- Pre-2000	The parallel use of military and non-military means is now viewed as a 'conventional + special operations' war.	Historical guerrilla wars
- 2001-2006	The term 'hybrid' has emerged to describe the inadequacy of Western military superiority against non-state actors.	The Taliban, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah in 2006.
- Post-2014	The concept has expanded to encompass non-violent tools and the role of states, particularly Russia.	Annexation of Crimea, Ukraine: 'grey zone'

Sources: Livaja (2021) and Milinko S. Vračar (2018).

The reasons that led to the 'model of hybrid wars' replacing the 'model of traditional wars' are as follows:

- The cost of total wars and public rejection of them (Wither, 2016).

Globalisation and the digital revolution have made cyberspace and the media an effective and low-cost arena for conflict (Duginets, 2021).

- The political and military elite's need for a concept to explain this new 'synthesis', which led to the emergence and subsequent spread of hybrid warfare in NATO, the European Union and academic literature (Mumford, 2020).

Based on this, the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 can be considered a turning point, with the concept expanding to include non-violent tools (economic, political and informational) and narrative warfare. This has particularly linked it to Russia and, more recently, China (Käihkö, 2021).

This indicates that hybrid warfare can be characterised by the following points:

- A combination of traditional methods (e.g. regular armed forces) and non-traditional methods (e.g. informal groups, terrorism, organised crime) (TURAN & KORKMAZ, 2021).

Intensive non-military use of information, cyber, economic, diplomatic and media propaganda to break the opponent's will and destabilise them (Voyger, 2021).

- Ambiguity in identifying the actor, timing and location of the attack, which makes it difficult for the targeted party to respond or identify an ongoing war (NATO, June 2014).

These characteristics demonstrate the significant and structural threat that hybrid wars pose to global security. They not only threaten the security of states in isolated crises, but also reshape the rules of the game in the international system as they are the preferred means of competition among major powers. These powers treat them as an existential test of their ability to deter and provide collective defence, developing specific frameworks to confront them and keeping the world in a continuous state of tension between peace and war, with increasing risks to global stability and security.

II. The Overlap of Tools Used in Hybrid Wars

Hybrid wars rely on an overlapping array of military and non-military tools that are coordinated to exploit the vulnerabilities of the targeted state, all the while maintaining ambiguity and innovation. This creates an interconnected and interwoven network. This situation is primarily attributed to changes in the environment of warfare, technology and constraints on traditional warfare.

Therefore, we can compare these two types of warfare in the following table to better understand what distinguishes them from one another:

Table 2: Comparison between Hybrid Warfare and Traditional Warfare to Understand the Tools Used in Each

Dimensions	Conventional war	Hybrid War
- Nature of means	- Primarily material military (forces, firepower and territorial occupation).	Military and non-military elements combined: diplomacy, economics, media, cyber warfare, psychological warfare.
- Scope of battlefield	- A relatively defined battlefield with a clearer distinction between the front and the rear.	The space becomes extended and multi-domain, with the boundary between 'front' and 'depth' disappearing as societies and infrastructures become part of the field.
Actors:	- Regular armies of warring states.	A network of governmental and non-governmental actors (militias, terrorist groups, criminal networks and civil organisations)
Direct Objectives	The aim is to defeat the enemy's armed forces, destroy their combat capability and control their territory.	- Paralysis of state and societal functions, political destabilisation and control of minds and narratives rather than territorial occupation.
Role of armed violence	- Central, overt and declared	It is part of a mix that is supplemented by 'soft' tools and legal/media strategies, with potentially low-intensity or undeclared violence.
Political-diplomatic dimension	- Complementary to or preceding war (e.g. alliances, negotiations).	- An offensive tool in itself, involving diplomatic pressure, legal investment, international support and separatist movements.
Informational and cyber dimension	- Limited or secondary	- Propaganda, disinformation, information warfare, cyber-attacks and the exploitation of media and social platforms are central.
Targeting civilians	- Often involves "collateral damage" within the clearer constraints of the law of war.	- Civilians and civilian infrastructure are deliberately targeted to create chaos and political pressure, which complicates the application of international humanitarian law.

Sources: Sascha-Dominik Dov Bachmann (2023) and Qureshi (2020).

In traditional warfare, information and politics serve the military battle. In hybrid warfare, however, information becomes a primary offensive tool and politics become a direct battleground used to achieve strategic objectives while minimising or delaying direct military confrontation.

Current examples illustrate this, notably the Russia–Ukraine crisis of 2014, which is a significant historical example of the use of hybrid warfare tools, particularly in Crimea and Donbas. Here, Russia employed a combination of irregular forces, cyberattacks and propaganda to achieve rapid change without full-scale escalation.

III. Key Radical Transformations Brought About by Hybrid Warfare in the Global Security System

Hybrid warfare blends military and non-military tools to confuse adversaries without direct conventional confrontations, causing radical transformations in the global security system. This type of warfare has become a tested model in conflicts such as Russia–Ukraine and Iran–Israel, reshaping defence strategies. The following points highlight this:

1. Transformation of the nature of threats and conflict structures

Hybrid warfare has integrated traditional military power with other forms of power, expanding the theatre of conflict to the digital space and beyond.

2. Erasure of traditional boundaries

Hybrid warfare has removed the distinction between military and civilian, peace and war, and frontlines and rear lines. Civilians have become strategic targets through the attack of banks or power grids. In the Iran-Israel conflict, for example, cyberattacks coincide with military strikes to create psychological chaos (Daphna Canetti, 2025).

3. Transformation of security systems, law and international institutions

Hybrid attacks create legal challenges, making it difficult to characterise conflicts as 'wars' and determine responsibility for cyberattacks and unattributed strikes. This complicates the application of international law and collective defence rules.

4. Reshaping of power dynamics and the international order

Hybrid warfare provides relatively weaker actors (non-state actors) with low-cost, high-impact tools that can counterbalance Western military superiority.

5. Role of artificial intelligence and information

Artificial intelligence has become a key weapon for data analysis and disinformation attacks, turning the 'information war' into a domain that rivals traditional military superiority. The spread of fake news via digital platforms manipulates public opinion and weakens social cohesion (Daphna Canetti, 2025).

6. Responses of international allies

These transformations have prompted NATO to enhance European cooperation against hybrid threats, such as drones and cyber warfare. Plans include information sharing and joint defence systems.

The Russia-Ukraine crisis, for example, has profoundly transformed the global security system by reigniting geopolitical tensions and amplifying the polarisation between the West and Russia–China. This has led to increased defence spending, accelerated NATO expansion and global energy and food crises, which threaten global stability and security.

A research gap has emerged here that has not been sufficiently addressed in previous studies: technology and global politics are intertwined, yet there is no unified global protocol that defines how to hold the 'instigating' state accountable if actions are carried out through servers and by informal groups. This shifts the focus from "Who did this?" to "How can we legally prove this to declare a state of self-defence?"

Thus, the value of the study lies in providing a new perspective on the global security system, which has formed according to a new pattern characterised by the following:

1. Restructuring of alliances: hybrid wars have not eliminated classical alliances, but have forced them to adapt. They have prompted states to create flexible networks and new partnerships that are broader and less formal, focusing as much on cyber, information and economic aspects as on military power. This has made the security environment more ambiguous and uncertain.

2. Economic and security crises: Hybrid wars have directly contributed to deepening economic crises and destabilising internal and international security through a combination of military and non-military

tools. Rather than being merely low-intensity military conflicts, these wars are integrated systems that target both the economy and security. They transform economic, digital and social vulnerabilities into structural crises that threaten the stability of states and societies.

3. Military and nuclear implications: Hybrid wars have not sparked a nuclear war, but they have complicated strategic calculations and fuelled an arms race. This has resulted in a 'gradual shift' in the balance of power in favour of those who master hybrid tools. This increases the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation in the future.

4. Regional and global impacts: Hybrid wars do not remain within the borders of a state or region. Instead, they reshape alliances, shake the global economy and weaken the foundations of the global order. This results in high, long-lasting humanitarian and civilian costs.

Results of the study:

The study found that the term 'hybrid warfare' combines technical and national security concepts, addressing a cognitive gap in previous studies.

The logic of fourth-generation warfare theory, which targets will and society across all networks, has evolved and expanded in the hybrid warfare model. This has shifted the focus of global security from traditional threats to hybrid threats.

As shown in Table 2, the concept of hybrid warfare creates ambiguity between war and peace, which complicates the application of international law and identification of responsibility — especially given the multitude of non-state actors. This has undermined trust between states and institutions, leading to what is termed 'distrust and suspicion', a phenomenon that is currently affecting most countries.

The magnitude of the threat posed by hybrid wars indicates that they are among the most significant and dangerous new threats to global security in a globalised and digital environment, as confirmed by multiple studies.

Hybrid wars compel states to develop defensive approaches, such as cyber defence, professional media management, societal resilience and close cooperation between military and civil institutions.

The most significant structural changes brought about by hybrid warfare within the global security framework include the expansion of the theatre of conflict, the erosion of traditional war norms and the necessity for organisations and alliances to adopt new, more comprehensive and flexible security models.

A "whole-of-society" approach is necessary to address traditional and hybrid threats, as suggested by the NATO report in June 2024.

Enhance national resilience as the first line of defence.

Improve mechanisms for collecting, analysing and sharing information, along with early warning systems.

- Develop cooperation between military and civil institutions, and between allies.

In conclusion, given the rapid changes in the nature of conflicts and international wars, and the convergence of traditional military tools with cyber, economic and media means brought about by hybrid warfare, it is evident that:

The concept of 'hybrid warfare' does not represent a complete break with the past, but rather a deepening of the methodology for integrating military and non-military means within a globalised and digital context. This makes the security of states contingent upon their ability to adapt to this new reality and the implications of this hybrid transformation in all its aspects.

The traditional global security system is no longer sufficient to respond to these hybrid and complex threats. This situation has evolved beyond merely changing the tools of conflict, reshaping the structure and framework of the global security system.

- redefining the rules of interaction

- redistributing power

- changing the nature of actors

- re-evaluating the concepts of sovereignty and deterrence.

Reshaping the global security system is now a strategic necessity, rather than a political option, imposed by the nature of structural transformations in the global system.

Therefore, our vision for the future of global stability depends on the extent to which international actors can develop flexible, participatory approaches that proactively address risks rather than merely reacting to them.

 References:

- Andrew Mumford. (2020). Understanding Hybrid Warfare. Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 33(4), pp. 824–827.
- Busarieva, T. & Duginets, G. (2021). Modern models of hybrid war. Entrepreneurship and Trade, 9(1), pp. 33–37.
- Dries Putter, Guy Duczynski and Sascha-Dominik Dov Bachmann (2023). (2023). 'Hybrid warfare and disinformation: A Ukraine War Perspective'. Global Policy, 14(4), pp. 858–869.
- Gal Dor, Tal Mimran and Daphna Canetti (2025, October 24). (2025, 24 October). The Loop. Retrieved 10 February 2026 from The Loop Publishers: https://theloop.ecpr.eu
- Huseyin, Idrees, Turan, & Korkmaz. (2021). 'Analysis of the competition between China and the US in the 21st century from the perspective of the concept of hybrid warfare'. Anadolu University Journal of Social Sciences, 21(4), pp. 367–390.
- Käihkö, Ilmari. (2021). 'The Evolution of Hybrid Warfare: Implications for Strategy and the Military Profession'. Parameters, 51(4), pp. 114–127.
- James K. Wither. (2023). 'Hybrid warfare revisited: A battle of 'buzzwords'. Connections: The Quarterly Journal, 22(1), pp. 7–27.
- James K. Wither. (2016). Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare. Connections: The Quarterly Journal, 15(3), pp. 73–87.
- Jerko Livaja. (2021). 'Decentralised security systems in hybrid war conditions, with an emphasis on the security system in Bosnia and Herzegovina'. National Security and the Future, 12(2), pp. 89–99.
- Mark Voyger (24 February 2021). What is 'hybrid warfare', really? Retrieved 3 August 2025, from CEPA: https://cepa.org/article/what-is-hybrid-warfare-really/.
- Milica T. Curcic and Milinko S. Vracar. (2018). 'The evolution of European perception of the term "hybrid warfare".' *Vožnja delo*, 70(1), pp. 5–21.
- NATO. (2024). 'Hybrid threats and hybrid warfare reference curriculum'. NATO Headquarters, Brussels.
- NATO. (June 2014). 'Hybrid threats and hybrid warfare'. NATO Headquarters, Brussels.
- Wasim Ahmad Qureshi. (2020). 'The Rise of Hybrid Warfare'. Notre Dame Journal of International and Comparative Law, 10(2), pp. 174–205.
- William Castillo-Gonzalez. (2024). 'Formation of an international legal framework to ensure economic security: The contribution of international organisations. Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología: Series of Conferences, 1–9.
- Sadaam Marir Hamad Al-Jamili. (2024). 'Hybrid wars and their impact on the future of global conflict'. Tikrit Journal of Political Science, 42(3), pp. 99–130.
- Abbas Ali Mourad (2017). (2017). Security and National Security: Theoretical Approaches. Beirut: Dar Al-Rawafid Cultural Publishers.