



United in Ambiguity? EU and NATO Interpretations of, and Policy Responses to, 'Hybrid Warfare' and 'Hybrid Threats'

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Abstract

'Hybrid warfare', sometimes known as 'hybrid threats', became an inevitable buzzword in recent years, used by policy-makers and academics to describe a broad panoply of seemingly different threats. Since neither the EU nor NATO appear to have a set definition of this term, and with both organisations seeking to 'counter' this type of warfare or threat in recent months, I set out to explore why 'hybrid' has been adopted to describe their perceived security environment. Equally important, I seek to understand, how this semantic choice has influenced the actual policy responses and cooperation of both NATO and the EU.

Often used to denote different threats emanating from the Eastern and Southern flanks of NATO and the EU, 'hybrid' has in fact been around for a decade, gradually undergoing a transformation, and a diffusion across the Atlantic. Through extensive primary and secondary sources research, supplemented by interviews with high-ranking officials from both organisations as well as experts, I have shown that 'hybrid war' and 'hybrid threats' have been deduced by looking in the mirror – a product of self-diagnosed vulnerabilities. As such, in a complex, dynamic and networked environment, 'hybrid' became a way for states to project their different threat prioritisations, resulting in an impossible to define amalgam, and an ensuing confusion surrounding this buzzword.

While 'hybrid warfare' is a term very present in top policy-makers' soundbites, among the staff and at national levels within NATO, the term is dismissed and consciously avoided. While there is no single perception of what 'hybrid warfare' is, the focus is on concrete responses to threats posed by Russia and, to a lesser extent, ISIL. Cooperation with partners, and chiefly with the EU, however, is perceived as necessary given the limits to NATO capabilities and competence in countering threats which are often civilian in nature. In the EU, there seems to be even more confusion regarding the adopted 'hybrid threats' terminology. While the term 'warfare' seems consciously avoided, the adopted Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats largely repurposes actions which were previously carried out in the framework of EU's policies on terrorism, critical infrastructure protection or cyber-security. Some new proposals nonetheless address the need for more situational awareness and better information-sharing within the EU, and with partners. It is precisely EU-NATO relations which exhibit the most telling signs of being influenced by 'hybrid'. Although official cooperation progressed to a limited

extent, due to known political blockages, the scope of unofficial cooperation has clearly been on the rise and is set to further continue on this path, especially ahead of, and after, the June 2016 European Council and July 2016 NATO Summit.