

## NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat - ACT

Written by By Michael Miklaucic, Director of Research and Editor of PRISM at the Center for Complex Operations at National Defense University  
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In May 2011 nearly 100 private sector professionals joined military and civilian counterparts from the transatlantic security community to collaborate in an experiment called; “Countering Hybrid Threats.” Based on a fictional scenario resembling the complex geo-strategic and fissure ridden Caucasus region, the experiment was organized by NATO Allied Command Transformation (NATO ACT) and conducted over a full week. It proposed to test and examine the viability of two key concepts that have emerged following the adoption of the new NATO Strategic Concept last November. Hybrid threats “are those posed by adversaries, with the ability to simultaneously employ conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives.” The concept that has evolved to counter the multi-dimensional nature of hybrid threats is the “comprehensive approach,” which promotes the coordinated application of the full range of collective resources available, including diplomatic, military, intelligence and economic among others. The experiment benefited substantially from the participation of the private sector participants, each of which invested a full working week, demonstrating their interest as well as NATO’s continuing credibility within the international business community.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was the most successful collective security arrangement among states in the 20th century. Having deterred and outlasted its primary adversary, the Soviet Union, NATO today faces the challenge of re-defining its roles and purposes in the 21st century. Like all pluralist organizations NATO must reflect the common interests of its 28 members, and defining common interests that motivate all members to sacrifice for the good of the whole has been difficult. In the absence of a direct common military threat, such as that once posed by the Soviet Union, disparate interests, commitments and visions of the trans-Atlantic future have fragmented Alliance coherence.

The Strategic Concept adopted by heads of state and government in November 2010

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reconfirms NATO's commitment to, "deter and defend against any threat of aggression, and against emerging security challenges where they threaten the fundamental security of individual Allies or the Alliance as a whole." It offers itself as the strategic map for NATO in the 21st century and touches on extremism, terrorism, and trans-national illegal activities such as trafficking in arms, narcotics and people as well as cyber-attacks and other technological and environmental threats. It does not however refer to hybrid threats or provide insight into the magnitude, likelihood, nature, or nuances of the "emerging security challenges." Moreover it does not address the possibility of having to face some or many of these challenges simultaneously, or the threat posed by the convergence of these many separate elements, which when braided together constitute a threat of a new and different nature.

### The Hybrid Threat

The new threat confronting NATO's diverse nations is insidious and not easily defined or identified. It flourishes in the seams between states, and in the soft areas of bad or weak governance. The new threat consists of distinct but tangled elements; hence the rubric "Hybrid Threat." Hybrid threats are much more than the amalgamation of existing security challenges. This is due, in part, to the interrelatedness of their constituent elements; the complicated and interdependent nature of the activities required to counter them; the multiplicity of key stakeholders with vested interests; and the dynamic international security environment in which traditional military solutions may not be best (or even a key component) but may nevertheless be necessary. As NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has recently written, "The paradox then is that the global order enjoys more stakeholders than ever before yet it has very few guarantors."

Admittedly, hybrid threat is an umbrella term, encompassing a wide variety of existing adverse circumstances and actions, such as terrorism, migration, piracy, corruption, ethnic conflict etc. What is new, however, is the possibility of NATO facing the adaptive and systematic use of such means singularly and in combination by adversaries in pursuit of long-term political objectives, as opposed to their more random occurrence, driven by coincidental factors. It is this possibility that merits a fresh and more conceptual approach from NATO. It is particularly important to note that hybrid threats are not exclusively a tool of asymmetric or non-state actors, but can be applied by state and non-state actors alike. Their principal attraction from the point of view of a state actor is that they can be largely non-attributable, and therefore applied in situations where more overt action is ruled out for any number of reasons.

The most recent iteration of the NATO Capstone Concept defines hybrid threats as, "those posed by adversaries, with the ability to simultaneously employ conventional and

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non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives.” By not specifying state adversaries this definition acknowledges both the ambiguity of the enemy, as well as the simultaneous and combined conventional and unconventional nature of the threat itself. Clearly the traditional boundaries defining the conflicts that served as the basis for the Alliance’s historic shared interests no longer apply. It is no longer true that only the most powerful states have the means and intention of posing a dire security threat to the Alliance or its members. The means of destruction have proliferated from the few to the many, with the barriers to entry for some technologies and methods capable of wrecking havoc relatively low or nearly non-existent. As noted, adversaries capable of threatening NATO and its members need not be government actors; non-state and anonymous actors can and do pose such a substantial threat. Security threats are no longer bound by geography and can have impact on a sub-state or worldwide basis. They are not even bound by terrestrial limits and may manifest themselves in space or cyberspace against Alliance interests or against NATO itself. Deadly and devastating attacks against Alliance members can be perpetrated and initiated in an instant from remote locations, leaving no trail to determine their origin.

### **The Comprehensive Approach**

The organizations, individuals and networks that animate the hybrid threat, “employ a complex blend of means that includes the orchestration of diplomacy, political interaction, humanitarian aid, social pressures, economic development, savvy use of the media and military force.” In short they avail themselves of a comprehensive range of methods and weapons to accomplish their objectives; a comprehensive approach to goal attainment. What changes in structure, process and procedure might NATO adopt to account for the recent evolution of the international security environment and enable it to respond effectively to the comprehensive range of methods and weapons employed by hybrid threat adversaries?

Countering hybrid threats is first of all about new understanding of such threats and the innovative use of existing capabilities to meet these new challenges, rather than about new hardware. Indeed the relevant countermeasures are largely included in the existing comprehensive approach to strategy, a concept NATO has embraced. However, the current understanding of the comprehensive approach is heavily influenced by the conflict that brought it about, as is often the case with innovation in the field of strategy. NATO therefore needs a more generic and conceptual grip on the kind of hybrid threat/comprehensive response cycle, of which Afghanistan is but one example. A recent NATO study of members’ perspectives on the comprehensive approach concept found amid a range of interpretations, from which three consistent themes emerge;

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- (i) Coherent application of national instruments of power;
- (ii) Comprehensive interaction with other actors;
- (iii) Comprehensive action in all domains and elements of crises.

While these consistent themes emerge, the concept remains relatively undeveloped. The necessary tools for economic development, rule of law, governance and institution building, and other “comprehensive activities” traditionally reside in non-military governmental and inter-governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as the private sector. These capabilities are not found either in member nations’ militaries or in the NATO bureaucracy itself. And the civilian organizations or actors best equipped to provide them are frequently suspicious of, or even hostile to, the military. At best, they are unaccustomed to working with the military, with few exceptions.

To overcome many civilians’ lack of familiarity or reluctance toward working with NATO, one of the lessons learned from Afghanistan and Kosovo is that where the military and civilian sectors must work together, the military must often take the initiative to establish trust and communication with civilian counterparts. Collaboration and cooperation should begin with a shared analysis; all participants in a comprehensive approach must understand the challenge not only from their own vantage point, but from those of the other major participants as well.

Many of the perceived threats (terrorism, trans-national crime, violent extremism) are symptoms or consequences of underlying root causes (poverty, ethnic strife etc) that are not within the technical competence of most military organizations. Whereas treating the symptoms is about preventing actions in the shorter term, addressing the root causes of instability is about changing conditions in the longer term, which is the fundamental goal of development. Consensus on solving fundamental problems is far more difficult to achieve at the national as well as the international or coalition level; this is a challenge of political agreement and thus of diplomacy. This means of course that in the absence of a political agreement, NATO may have to accept that treating the symptoms, despite its limitations, is “the best buy under the circumstances”. Even in such cases, the participation of non-military organizations will enrich the military’s understanding of the challenge they face.

As for planning, while the military may be best equipped to plan and facilitate the cooperation through planning and outreach, the civilian sector should be included in the earliest aspects of the planning for best results. Outreach should be done early and often to permit the civilians the necessary time for budgetary and other preparation. It should not be left to commanders on the ground to begin the search and engagement for the non-military capabilities and partners they may need.

Once initiated an effective comprehensive approach requires unity of effort. Due to the diverse stakeholders and their respective equities full unity of command will be impossible. The challenge is how to achieve unity of effort in the absence of full unity of command. Many NGOs reject any kind of inclusion in coordinated strategies, particularly when they also involve the military, since this violates their principle of strict neutrality in any conflict. Other factors are bureaucratic rivalry between the different government agencies and departments which must necessarily contribute to a comprehensive effort, lack of trust between public sector agencies and private sector participants and national sensitivities at coalition level. The overall effect of the absence of unity of command is a considerable dissipation of energy and effect for a comprehensive approach strategy. This means that achieving success will require more time, more treasure and potentially more human lives than would otherwise be the case. However, it seems to be a firm conclusion that unity of command cannot be achieved, at least not unless and until the group of nations forming the coalition face an immediate existential threat. A comprehensive approach to hybrid threats is, in other words, as much an institutional as a conceptual problem. The fact is that there will rarely if ever be a single overarching goal to which all actors can be expected to subscribe. It is better to acknowledge that different actors in the same situation have different perspectives and purposes, and seek to identify the common ground that can form a basis for collaboration.

### **What Role for the Private Sector?**

Arguably the single most important factor in successful stabilization of failed or failing states is economic development. This, in its turn, depends on financial incentives to investors, improvement of infrastructure (digital as well as physical), access to energy and a skilled workforce. This makes institutions like the World Bank and IMF key players and potential partners of NATO. This requires some qualification however. Although economic development is obviously of the utmost importance in most scenarios, we should bear in mind that the western, materialistic definition of development is not a universally accepted standard or measure of welfare or happiness. Notably religion and adherence to religious customs are on the rise, particularly in the muslim world, as the most important metric of human progress. In other words, not all root causes of hybrid threats can be eliminated simply by improving the material conditions of the people in question. The rage commonly felt by many in the muslim world today towards the West – irrational as it may or may not be and sustained as it is by conditions stemming from the incompetence and corruption of their own governments – is nevertheless very real. NATO therefore needs to partner with, or have in-house institutions capable of precise appreciations of the non-material dimension of the root causes of hybrid threats. It is also interesting that many people living in poverty and squalor in many parts of the world rank competent and honest government as more important in the short term than a larger income, presumably because they realize that good governance is a prerequisite for any degree of sustained economic growth.

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NGOs and industry have been dealing with some of the issues and many of the geographies of interest to NATO for much longer than the Alliance. Indeed it is in the private sector, individual companies and industry sectors, that the harm done by hybrid threat elements is felt most intimately. Counterfeiting networks steal the intellectual property and potential revenues from legitimate companies. Cyber attackers can disable information and communication companies resulting in lost business. Financial institutions are compromised by money laundering and other illicit financial transactions. These adversaries attack their bottom line. Their more direct familiarity with the illicit networks and other discrete elements of the hybrid threat that leech their operations provides them with a far more granular appreciation of the identity, methods, and extent of the hybrid threat. Indeed the business community has been countering discrete elements of the hybrid threat for some time. Innovative techniques have been developed to counter specific threats and risks, but they are not widely shared. Private sector experience is extremely valuable to NATO in this regard. At a minimum, NATO could greatly benefit from this expertise.

Assuming NATO decides that engaging the private sector is worthwhile, it must examine ways to ensure that industry is incentivized to respond to NATO's outreach attempts favorably. Ideally, industry should be encouraged to reach out to NATO on its own initiative if it believes it necessary or desirable. To incentivize industry, NATO should consider ways to make both outreach and responses to industry engagement transparent and easy. Regular engagement will go a long way toward that end. NATO must also listen and genuinely seek input and collaboration. Finally, NATO should consider what, if anything, it might provide to industry. On this latter point, recent U.S. experience might be illustrative. Senior Command and Department officials regularly engage the defense, technology, space and other industry members by providing insights into Department activities and goals, speeches on leadership or "war stories" of lessons learned that might be applicable to industry. In exchange, they receive unprecedented access to high-level management and expertise, and even task various private organizations for assistance.

### **Conclusions**

A hybrid threat is more than just the sum total of its constituent parts. Combating such threats does not require new capabilities as much as new partners, new processes and, above all, new thinking.

Experimentation and gaming offer benign, non-hostile fora in which to conduct outreach and to

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engage civilians where they do not feel threatened. Through the give-and-take of such activities, both military and civilians may be encouraged to overcome predispositions concerning each other, begin to understand each other and the civilian participants might make progress toward questioning their prejudices, if any, concerning cooperating with NATO. Experimentation and gaming may also provide an atmosphere where important issues can be explored collaboratively that are related to the best means of conducting NATO engagement with “soft power” providers. While it might be clear that each NATO member nation is best suited to engage its own government institutions and individuals who can provide the needed capabilities, it is less clear who should approach the private sector. It also might seem obvious that NATO should reach out to large multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, World Bank or Gulf Cooperation Council to provide them with capabilities needed for the “hold and build” in its most recent deployments, but is institution-to-institution the only type of desirable engagement? What about NATO engagement of civilians in the preventative or pre-deployment stage in which it might be interested in the knowledge and experience of others in order to understand and shape the environment? What about interactions with non-governmental and smaller multilateral institutions, including those of the host country or region? At what level should NATO reach out to them and begin to plan cooperatively with a needed civilian workforce? When should that happen? Does it make sense to establish regular relationships with institutions in anticipation of likely problems that NATO may be called upon to address in order to shape the environment early? Where should that engagement happen – is that a function reserved for Brussels and other NATO headquarters elements or to local commanders, as they see fit? Should NATO develop a broad, overarching policy that guides these types of engagements; and what input, if any, should the non-NATO, civilian government and private players have in developing such a policy?

Synergies between NATO’s various bodies must be enhanced. This will allow experimentation and the lessons that emerge from experimentation to impact the ongoing work on the ‘Deterrence and Defence Posture’, the ‘Comprehensive Approach’, ‘Strategic Planning’ and possibly in time, NATO reform. One can hope that this will provide food for thought to the North Atlantic Council in the course of its work over the next few months. It might even allow NATO, with the agreement of member states, to remain ahead of developments, become more proactive rather than remain simply reactive. The United Nations, European Union, Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, African Union and others should be engaged, as well as more experts from the diplomatic field.

While NATO member states must lead the way on anticipating the skills, practices and capabilities needed to confront emerging hybrid threats, the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT) and ACT have a vital role in “soft power” engagement and in initiating a necessary dialogue with those non-NATO actors best positioned to assist in this endeavor.

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*Sir Michael Aaronson, Generals Yves de Kermabon and Sverre Diesen, and the Honorable Mary Beth Long. The author wishes to acknowledge their substantial contributions.*

*Photo caption: SACT is greeted by the Estonian Chief of Defence, Lieutenant General Ants Laaneots, and Allied Command Transformation Brigadier General Roy Hunstok before informal discussions at the CHT-E.□*