

PROLOGUE



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Hybrid threats – conventional and unconventional tactics deployed in conflict scenarios or in the geopolitical tussle between leading global actors – are an increasingly destabilising factor in the international order. In the West, NATO's most recent *Strategic Concept*, presented at its Madrid Summit (June 29–30th 2022), reiterated that strategic competitors «interfere in our democratic processes and institutions and target the security of our citizens through hybrid tactics», and «conduct malicious activities in cyberspace and space, promote disinformation campaigns, instrumentalise migration, manipulate energy supplies and employ economic coercion». The European Union, meanwhile, has been producing instruments, strategies and joint communications to coordinate internal and external policies and thereby increase European resilience to hybrid threats since at least 2016, around the time its Global Strategy was published.

Far from a solely Western phenomenon, hybrid tactics are gaining prominence on several continents. In Africa, *hybrid operations* to support extremist groups have been detected, elections have been interfered with and critical infrastructure attacked. In 2021, for example, South Africa's energy supply was *sabotaged*

on more than one occasion, affecting major industries and exacerbating the country's energy crisis. In the Indo-Pacific, hybrid threats are growing «in breadth, application and intensity». And, with the invasion of Ukraine ongoing, Russia accuses the West of launching a «total hybrid war» against it, even as the Kremlin regularly uses destabilisation tactics as part of its playbook. With international relations dominated by geostrategy and realpolitik, hybrid tactics proliferate, hindering cooperation and trust in global governance institutions.

But what is new about these threats? Unconventional tactics like the use of proxies, insurgent groups and propaganda have been deployed in countless wars throughout history in order to destabilise or punish the enemy. Even in times of peace during the 20th century, interstate competition included crude strategies involving espionage, propaganda,

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economic battles, meddling in democratic processes and instigating insurgencies (Johnson, 2018). It may be that the rise of hybrid conflicts – or the increased perception of them – is due to a new awareness of vulnerability among those who believed themselves invulnerable.

As its starting point, this *CIDOB Report* takes the observed growth in hybrid tactics and the threats perceived as such, along with a generalised concern about the hybrid. Two key factors help us understand this growth: on

the one hand, the increasing interdependence between states and, on the other, the exponential diversification of hybrid tactics.

In terms of the first factor – interdependence – greater connectivity in international relations, especially since the end of the Cold War, facilitated the spread of globalisation and economic, commercial, energy, political and cultural exchanges. It was assumed that connection and interdependence between countries would curb the appetite for conflict while, at the same time, contributing to development, democratisation and peace around the world. However, as Mark Leonard argues, this «hyperconnectivity» also gives opportunities to states that are prepared to exploit the vulnerabilities of others. For Leonard, «the trick is to make your competitors more dependent on you than you are on them – and then use this dependency to manipulate their behaviour» (2016: 15). Interdependence, thus, also has its downsides and can be used to exploit vulnerabilities and exacerbate confrontation between great powers, or even between opposing or polarised communities

within a society. This has led actors like the European Union to reinforce their strategies to grant themselves greater **strategic autonomy**.

The second factor is the diversification of hybrid tactics. From migration to disinformation, electoral interference, the use of natural resources and computer viruses, anything can be turned into a weapon that can be launched from anywhere with unpredictable consequences. The exploitation of the vulnerabilities of others has also been facilitated by civil and military technological developments, as well as state and non-state actors' use of information and communication technologies. The digitalisation process, meanwhile, has exponentially multiplied disinformation's capacity to spread and penetrate.

Faced with this new scenario in which hybrid threats are growing based on the exploitation of interdependence and the diversification of tactics, which strategies and methods are used to address these conflicts? What impact do hybrid threats have on today's societies? What political responses are proposed? This *CIDOB Report* addresses the challenge hybrid threats pose in today's societies and aims to contribute to the debate at a time when the international context is characterised by **war returning to Europe**, rising **contestation and polarisation** in the liberal international order, the crisis of **multilateralism** and global governance norms and the post-pandemic **geopolitical** transformation.

To do this, the authors focus on some of the main hybrid threats, as well as the development of hybrid conflicts in various regions of the world. In the next chapter, Pol Bargués and Moussa Bourekba contextualise the emergence of hybrid conflict as a concept and examine its analytical and practical advantages. The second chapter deals with disinformation as a tool of geopolitical confrontation, as Carme Colomina analyses how technological transformation has amplified the impact of information wars. Chapter 3, by Blanca Garcés Mascareñas, reflects on the instrumentalisation of migration by state actors within the frameworks of various hybrid conflicts affecting several European countries. In chapter 4, John Kelly highlights the increasing use of disinformation tactics to destabilise democratic regimes

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and outlines the main challenges with addressing the multifaceted threat disinformation poses to democracies. Along these same lines, Manel Medina Llinàs, author of chapter 5, demonstrates how cyberspace has been added to the map of traditional conflict battlefields – land, sea and air – and how the use of cyber weapons has become a strategic challenge in the context of hybrid conflicts.

Thereafter, the volume focuses on geographical spaces of confrontation. The sixth contribution to this *CIDOB Report* addresses the concept of resilience in a conflict characterised by the combination of hybrid tactics and conventional warfare: Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Andrey Makarychev and Yulia Kurnyshova argue that Ukrainian society's response to this conflict is also hybrid, since it does not fit the traditional top-down structure by which an attacked/invaded state normally manages a civil response, but instead shows a high degree of autonomy and self-organisation. Given the increasing influence of the proliferation of hybrid conflicts on the global stage, Guillem Colom Piella's contribution examines the evolution of NATO's strategic frameworks for detecting, countering and responding to hybrid threats. Inés Arco Escriche, author of chapter 8, goes further in this direction in her analysis of China's expansion strategy. The hybrid is nothing new in Chinese foreign policy. Indeed, its age-old hybrid strategy deploys a genuine mix of diplomatic, economic and military tools to promote and defend its core interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity, even in times of peace. The final chapter addresses another region of the world in which a confrontation combining conventional and unconventional methods is blurred: the Maghreb. In his contribution, Eduard Soler i Lecha analyses the growing tensions between Morocco and Algeria and underlines that, rather than replacing conventional threats, hybrid tactics could precede or even encourage an armed confrontation.

References

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