



# The Implosion of Realpolitik: Russia's Revisionism Undone

**Niharika Gangadharanellore**  
**Masters in International Relations**  
**Amity University, Noida**

## Hybrid War or Grey Zone Conflict

Picture a world where warfare is no longer fought on traditional battlefields but rather in a high-tech, air-conditioned room by a group of friends or peers. In this age of advanced technology and asymmetrical warfare, nations engage in confrontations through unconventional, non-military means as part of national competition. The concept of hybrid warfare has existed since ancient times, with spies and espionage being common tactics used to gain an advantage over an opponent. In the 21st century, [increased sophistication of technology has allowed for the development of hybrid warfare tactics](#) that blend both military and non-military strategies to achieve strategic objectives. The aim of the article is to examine Russia's use of hybrid warfare tactics against Ukraine in the lead-up to and aftermath of its invasion, and to what extent these nefarious machinations have backfired, exposing the hollowness of Russian military might in the face of indomitable Ukrainian patriotism and Western support.

As defined by Frank Hoffman, [hybrid war](#) is a sophisticated campaign that combines both military and non-military tactics to achieve strategic objectives without triggering a full-scale military response. This means that instead of engaging in traditional warfare, nations use a combination of low-level conventional and special operations, offensive cyber and space actions, and psychological operations that use social and traditional media to influence public opinion. Supply chain constraints and industrial espionage are viewed as conventional measures that can be induced with technology. This may involve the theft of intellectual property through acts of industrial espionage and hacking, as well as the manipulation of supply chains to disrupt an opponent's ability to manufacture critical goods.

The definition and views of Hybrid warfare vary depending on the doctrines and perspective of different nations. The US's declassified files of [Competition Continuum, a Joint Doctrine 1-19](#) view competition as existing in a continuum from cooperation to armed conflict. This means that nations may cooperate in areas such as disaster management, but still engage in competition in fields like trade. In contrast, Russia's concepts of hybrid warfare are openly available in journals and citations, such as Armeiskii Sbornik. Additionally, various Russian media outlets, including Red Star, VPK military newspaper, and Rossiyskaya Gazeta, have transcripts of speeches by senior Russian political and military leaders openly and repeatedly discussing the demands of hybrid warfare. While American thinking emphasises hybrid means, Russian thinking focuses on achieving objectives.

The Berlin Wall stood tall as a symbol of division, separating families and friends for decades. But why was it built? Contrary to popular belief, it wasn't constructed to keep American tanks out, but rather to keep East Germans in. Similarly, Eastern Bloc countries didn't ban western radio transmissions to coordinate invading forces, but to control the spread of foreign ideas and information to their populations. These examples demonstrate

the lengths nations will go to control their people and ensure their objectives are met, even if it means building walls or controlling the spread of information.

### **Russia's Cyber Campaign Against Ukraine**

The advent of cyberspace has revolutionised the way nations engage in modern warfare, and Russia has been at the forefront of this new battlefield. In the lead-up to the 2022 Ukraine invasion of Russia, a "War before War" unfolded in cyberspace, with Russian groups invading Ukrainian territories and critical government departments. The Kyiv government websites were rendered inaccessible, including the parliament, government, and foreign ministry, among other state institutions. Hackers used [denial-of-service \(DDoS\) attacks](#), flooding servers with illegitimate requests, causing infrastructure to crash. Ukraine also faced a data wiper malware attack known as [Hermetic Wiper](#), which destroyed vast amounts of data without detection, similar to the 2017 Russian cyberattack using [NoPetya malware](#), which caused enormous economic damage.

Russia in the past has employed a variety of strategies in its hybrid campaign against Ukraine. It sought to discredit the pro-Western movement by invoking past failures, labelling the 2003 Rose Revolution and 2004 Orange Revolution as foreign-orchestrated plots that led to chaos. Kremlin media branded Ukraine's alignment with the West as detrimental, spreading propaganda portraying the EU and NATO as exploitative while talking up Russia as Ukraine's only true partner. Russia nurtured radicals on both sides to stoke societal divisions. It supported far-right nationalist groups to create social tensions and undermine the state, while also funding pro-Russian separatist movements. The Kremlin exploited and exaggerated Ukraine's domestic problems to present the country as indefinitely unstable and incapable of European integration. Moscow's ultimate aim was a rapid victory to preempt Western countermeasures. It launched a lightning cyber and information operation to degrade Ukraine's institutions and overwhelm the government response. [Russian forces tactically employed deniability and deception to achieve tactical surprise, overtly intervening with military force to present the world with a "fait accompli" of annexed territory before any meaningful sanctions could be imposed.](#) This approach allowed Russia to gain the upper hand in the conflict, catching the international community off guard and imposing its will on the region.

In 2014, the Kremlin utilised hybrid warfare tactics against Georgia and Ukraine to weaken them from within. Moscow violated their sovereignty by fueling border tensions and sponsoring separatist regions. Russian forces have militarised these disputed zones to exert influence. Kremlin propaganda has stoked nationalism, division, and mistrust between citizens. The Russian government has implicitly backed extremist groups within Georgia and Ukraine. These groups incited violence, intending to delegitimize these democracies and justify further Russian intervention. Through covert actions, Moscow has tried to [damage the social, political, and institutional foundations of Georgia and Ukraine.](#) Russia did put efforts to reassert control by exploiting hybrid warfare methods.

### **Western Hybrid Tactics shift the balance**

The Kremlin's hybrid warfare tactics against Ukraine in 2022 have largely backfired. In addition to troops at the border and separatist support, [Russia attempted assassinations using Wagner Group, agents, and Chechens.](#) However, Western backing for Ukraine has been substantial. The West countered Russian actions through effective hybrid responses that changed the calculus. They warned of Russia's invasion plans, provided vital military equipment and support for Ukraine, imposed punishing economic and cultural sanctions, spread information within Russia, kept NATO united and added Finland and Sweden.

These Western hybrid manoeuvres likely surprised and frustrated Russian planners. Western aid boosted Ukraine's military effectiveness while [sanctions inhibited Russia's economic might](#). Western information exposed Russian brutality, denting its international and domestic standing. NATO expansion further diminished prospects of dividing the alliance. In sum, Russia's hybrid tactics met more adept hybrid countermeasures, shifting the strategic balance against Russian interests.

The situation on the ground in Ukraine remains fluid as Russia's military setbacks continue. Moscow faces mounting challenges both on and off the battlefield. Russia's forced mobilisation drive has been chaotic and poorly executed, depleting supplies and munitions. The Russian military is reeling from Ukrainian offensive gains, the [liberation of Kherson](#), and the withdrawal of Russian troops from the region. Nonetheless, Moscow is unleashing [brutal bombardments of Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, especially power plants](#), inflicting massive damage in winter. Talk of Russian strikes with non-strategic nuclear weapons, though reckless, persists.

Moscow is ratcheting up economic pressure by limiting energy exports to countries backing Ukraine. The Kremlin hopes to continue mobilisation until Russian forces match or surpass Ukrainian troops in size. Moscow is also attempting to exacerbate the [global food crisis](#) to its advantage. Looking ahead, the Kremlin may shift to asymmetric hybrid tactics against Ukraine and NATO nations: [false flag operations, cyberattacks, fomenting internal unrest](#). Such nefarious manoeuvres would be in line with Moscow's approach thus far - employing underhanded methods to compensate for deficits on the conventional battlefield.

In the wake of Russia's invasion, Ukraine has emerged as a beacon of democracy and freedom. Moscow's aggression has backfired, exposing the hollowness of Russian power and isolating Putin on the international stage. Despite enjoying advantages in size and military might, the Russian war machine has been blunted by stout Ukrainian resistance. The fate of Ukraine will reshape the 21st century. Either democracy will expand, nourished by the blood of patriots, or dictatorship will again plunge the world into a new era of uncertainty and instability.