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Hybrid wars: modern challenges and prospects

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Abstract. This study examines the concept of “hybrid war”. It is noted that this phenomenon is characterized by high complexity, dynamism, and a wide range of strategies employed. The key characteristics of hybrid wars are identified, with particular emphasis on their ability to rapidly adapt to changing conditions and the specifics of particular conflicts. The aim of the study is to identify the key mechanisms of hybrid wars, analyze their impact on state institutions and international organizations, and consider the most significant examples of the 21st century. The research is based on a comprehensive approach that includes the analysis of official documents, reports from international organizations, academic publications, and media materials. Methods of systematic and comparative analysis, induction, deduction, and generalization have been applied. As a result, the main features of hybrid wars have been identified, including information attacks, economic pressure, cyber influence, and the use of irregular armed groups. Examples of hybrid conflicts, such as the Syrian Civil War and the crisis in Venezuela, are analyzed. The role of international institutions in regulating such confrontations is highlighted. Special attention is given to the strategies of leading states in hybrid wars, their influence on international security, and the transformation of the geopolitical balance. The ineffectiveness of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in addressing new challenges is demonstrated. In conclusion, it is noted that hybrid wars are becoming a dominant tool of geopolitical competition, necessitating a revision of international norms and the development of adaptive response strategies to protect national interests and ensure global stability.

Keywords: soft power, sanctions, color revolution, Russia, USA

Contribution. All the authors participated in the development of the concept of this review, data collection, processing and analysis, drafted the manuscript, and formulated the conclusions.

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Гибридные войны: современные вызовы и перспективы

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Аннотация. Исследовано содержание термина «гибридная война». Отмечено, что этот феномен отличается высокой сложностью, динамичностью и многообразием используемых стратегий. Выявлены ключевые характеристики гибридных войн, среди которых особое внимание уделено их способности быстро адаптироваться к меняющимся условиям и специфике конкретных конфликтов. Цель исследования — выявить ключевые механизмы гибридных войн, проанализировать их воздействие на государственные институты и международные организации, а также рассмотреть наиболее значимые примеры XXI в. Исследование основано на комплексном подходе, включающем анализ официальных документов, докладов международных организаций, научных публикаций и материалов СМИ. Применены методы системного и сравнительного анализа, индукции, дедукции и обобщения. Выявлены основные черты гибридных войн, среди которых информационные атаки, экономическое давление, кибервоздействие и использование нерегулярных вооруженных формирований. Рассмотрены гражданская война в Сирии и кризис в Венесуэле. Показана роль международных институтов в регулировании подобных противостояний. Особое внимание уделено стратегиям ведущих государств в гибридных войнах, их влиянию на международную безопасность и трансформацию геополитического баланса. Подчеркнута несостоятельность традиционных механизмов урегулирования конфликтов перед новыми вызовами. Отмечена необходимость пересмотра международных норм и разработки адаптивных стратегий реагирования для защиты национальных интересов и обеспечения глобальной стабильности в условиях возрастающей роли гибридных войн как доминирующего инструмента геополитической конкуренции.

Ключевые слова: мягкая сила, санкции, цветная революция, Россия, США

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Introduction

As a result of the large-scale changes and trends observed in recent decades under the influence of globalization and the digital revolution, forms, mechanisms, tools, as well as concepts of national interests and security are undergoing a noticeable transformation. If throughout the previous history military power was the main means of ensuring them, then in modern realities, along with it, alternative methods and approaches are becoming increasingly influential. Elements of the so-called “soft power” are beginning to play a special role, among which economic and sanctions instruments, mechanisms of image influence, digital technologies, propaganda strategies, as well as other forms of ideological, informational and cultural dominance should be highlighted.

The object of the research is the phenomenon of hybrid wars in the 21st century, including the forms, mechanisms and tools of their implementation in international conflicts. The methodological approach is based on interdisciplinary analysis, combining systemic, comparative and structural-functional methods. The work also uses general scientific methods, including analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive approaches, generalization and systematization.

Hybrid wars

In recent decades, the topic of hybrid warfare has become increasingly relevant, as it has become one of the most common tools of interstate rivalry. This is largely due to the dynamics of international processes, which not only change the format of interaction on the world stage, but also make adjustments to the very principles and mechanisms of globalization [1. P. 40].

O.V. Tikhanychev in his article “Hybrid wars: history, current state, fundamentals of counteraction” gives several definitions of the term “hybrid warfare”, noting that this phenomenon is a form of aggressive actions in which the attacking side avoids a classic military invasion, but exerts pressure. to the enemy through covert operations, sabotage, cyber-attacks, and support for rebel groups conducting subversive activities on the opponent’s territory [1].

Western researchers offer an alternative interpretation, focusing on the complexity of combining closed and open forms of confrontation. At the same time, it is emphasized that responsibility for sabotage, provocations and conflicts is becoming less obvious, since the forces behind these actions deliberately hide their true motives and participation in the escalation of tension [2].

Complementing the above definitions of hybrid warfare, attention should be paid to the interpretation provided in the Military Balance handbook. This source focuses on the integrated use of both military and non-military means as part of an integrated strategy aimed at achieving surprise, seizing the initiative and creating psychological superiority. In this context, diplomatic resources, large-scale information, electronic and cyber operations, as well as covert cover mechanisms for military and intelligence activities, complemented by economic pressure, are involved [1].

The analysis of modern hybrid warfare allows us to identify several key characteristics of this phenomenon. First, it is the blurring of borders, which makes it impossible to clearly distinguish between the states of war and peace. As a result, the ability to record the moment of the beginning of an open armed confrontation is lost, which significantly complicates the process of peaceful settlement even in the early stages of the conflict. The current situation creates the effect of a permanent, hidden confrontation, which at any moment can escalate into a full-scale crisis with large-scale consequences.

Secondly, one of the fundamental features of hybrid wars is the uncertainty in the issue of establishing responsibility. A situation is deliberately created in which it is impossible to unambiguously identify the key actors inciting the conflict. This is a deliberate strategy that makes it difficult to apply retaliatory measures against the main participants in the hybrid impact. States that are subjected to systematic pressure from external forces are often unable to promptly and reliably identify the organizers or sponsors of destructive actions. In such circumstances, the initiator of the conflict deliberately confuses the situation, creating false trails and preventing the development of an effective response from the victim of aggression [3].

For the deeper understanding of the nature of hybrid wars, it is important to systematize them, identify key relationships and components of this phenomenon. The central element of such a confrontation is the involvement of paramilitary formations and armed groups operating bypassing official government structures. At the same time, the direct association of these forces with the key players in the conflict is not allowed, which makes it possible to hide the true goals of the initiators. As a result, a strategic goal is achieved — maintaining instability and turning the local confrontation into a protracted conflict without an explicit and open military clash [4].

In addition, one of the defining characteristics of hybrid wars is the use of information attacks, the importance of which has increased many times in the era of digital technologies and the global network. In the context of the information society, manipulation of facts, the spread of disinformation and the introduction

of new technological methods of influence have become particularly acute, which makes it possible to consider information wars as the leading tool of modern hybrid conflicts. It is no coincidence that the term “post-truth era” has become established in the current political agenda, reflecting the phenomenon of the mass influence of disinformation campaigns on public consciousness [5]. The very fact that hybrid wars increasingly rely on the control of the information space demonstrates the large-scale changes in international relations that have occurred over the past century [6].

The sphere of economic relations between states is an integral component of modern hybrid wars. One of the oldest forms of rivalry — the struggle for resources and influence — remains relevant in modern conditions. However, with the development of technology and the increasing complexity of global connections, it has undergone significant changes.

Resource warfare is taking on new forms, among which energy, transport, and information blockades (sanctions) occupy a special place. These tools allow you to inflict serious damage on the enemy without the need for an official declaration of war. A characteristic feature of hybrid wars is also their indirect nature — they are often conducted through third parties or on the territory of third-party states, which allows the initiators to remain in the shadows and avoid direct responsibility for the escalation of the conflict¹.

An analysis of the key elements that form the basis of hybrid wars confirms that force remains one of their most important components. In particular, the practice of using mercenaries is actively used at the present stage. Even though back in 1977, mercenary activity was officially prohibited by the international documents, including the UN Convention, this mechanism continues to be widely used in armed conflicts. The UN documents emphasize that mercenary groups are recruited, funded and trained for actions that violate the principles of international law, including the sovereign equality of states, their political independence and territorial integrity. Moreover, such activities are considered a crime that poses a serious threat to the international community. In this regard, States are obliged either to bring to justice those involved in the recruitment and financing of mercenaries, or to extradite them².

¹ *The history of the Second World War 1939–1945: in 12 volumes*. Ed. by A.A. Grechko. Vol. 2. Moscow: Voenizdat; 1974. 474 p. (In Russ.).

² International Convention for the Suppression of the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries. Adopted by General Assembly resolution 44/34 of December 4, 1989. *UN Official Website*. URL: http://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/mercen.shtml (accessed: 10.01.2025). (In Russ.).

Of particular concern is the fact that modern illegal international structures are increasingly bringing together arms dealers, drug dealers and mercenaries to implement violent scenarios that threaten the constitutional order of individual countries. In this regard, the adoption of the convention on combating mercenary activities was aimed at eliminating this destabilizing practice. However, despite international prohibitions, mercenary armed groups continue to be an effective tool of hybrid warfare, allowing the initiators to hide their direct involvement in the conflict³.

Hybrid destructive structures have a wide range of illegal activities, covering various forms of subversive activities. They can participate in terrorist activities and acts of violence, initiate “color” revolutions, organize drug trafficking, as well as carry out cyber-attacks and fraudulent schemes. In addition, such entities often use non-standard methods to replenish their ranks, including recruiting both prisoners and influential public figures. Such tactics allow not only to expand their influence, but also make it difficult to identify the true organizers, which makes hybrid threats especially dangerous in modern conditions⁴.

In modern conditions, hybrid strategies are becoming more widely used, as confirmed by the major international crises of the 21st century. The civil war in Syria, which began in 2011, and the political and economic crisis in Venezuela since 2013 are vivid examples of such conflicts.

The civil war in Syria, which began in 2011, has turned into an arena of hybrid confrontation between many sides. Russia, the United States, Iran, and Turkey used proxy groups, private military companies (PMCs), and information operations to advance their interests. PMC Wagner actively participated in the fighting, supporting the legitimate regime of Bashar al-Assad and defending the control of the Syrian state over oil fields. The United States and its allies supported the Syrian opposition and Kurdish formations, while simultaneously conducting cyber attacks on the infrastructure of the Syrian government and using economic sanctions, terrorist attacks and contract killings in addition to active military intervention in the country's sovereignty and bombing of civilian and infrastructural facilities. Terrorist organizations used information warfare methods, recruitment through social networks and terrorist attacks outside Syria, which also became an element of the hybrid conflict. The intervention of Turkey and Iran reinforced the multilayered nature of the war, turning it into a complex knot of military and

³Silantyev RA, Malygina IV, Poletaeva MA, Silantyeva AI. *Fundamentals of destructology: textbook*. Moscow: Smolin Publishing House; 2020. 204 p. (In Russ.).

⁴Ibid.

political interests, where official and unofficial actors used a variety of tactics, from disinformation to direct military intervention [7; 8].

Another striking example of hybrid warfare is the crisis in Venezuela, where the confrontation developed without large-scale hostilities, but with the active use of political pressure, economic sanctions, cyber-attacks and information warfare. Since 2019, the hybrid confrontation in the country has reached a new level. On January 23, 2019, opposition leader Juan Guaido declared himself interim president, receiving recognition from the United States, Canada, many Latin American countries and the European Union. In response, Russia, China, Iran and Turkey continued to support Nicolas Maduro as the legitimate head of state, providing him with economic and diplomatic assistance. The imposition of US sanctions in January 2019 against the Venezuelan oil company PDVSA dealt a serious blow to the country's economy, but Russia helped circumvent the restrictions. At the same time, an information confrontation unfolded: Western media focused on repression against the opposition, while Maduro accused Washington of trying to organize a coup d'état [9; 10].

One of the key events was a large-scale power outage in March 2019, which covered almost the entire territory of Venezuela. The country's authorities said that the reason was cyber-attacks on the national energy system, which was considered as an element of hybrid impact. Thus, the Venezuelan crisis has demonstrated the use of hybrid strategies, where political destabilization, economic pressure, information campaigns and cyber-interference are used in the struggle for influence without a direct military clash [10].

It should be emphasized that the weakness of democratic institutions in the context of hybrid conflicts is manifested not only in manipulating public consciousness, but also in weakening trust in international organizations, as well as in the purposeful use of legal mechanisms in the interests of individual States. In particular, the UN Security Council is often unable to make consolidated decisions due to the veto power of the permanent members. For example, during the Syrian crisis, the United States, Britain and France repeatedly vetoed resolutions proposed by Russia and China, and thus blocked attempts to take unified measures to de-escalate the conflict. As a result, the impression is created that international structures are ineffective in the face of hybrid threats, which allows state actors to continue their policy of intervention without serious international consequences [11].

We can also cite the example of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is often seen as an instrument of geo-economic pressure. In 2018, Ukraine received a multibillion-dollar loan from the IMF, subject to reforms

consistent with the Western economic model, which strengthened its financial system and allowed to avoid default. At the same time, Venezuela, which was facing a severe economic crisis, was denied similar funding, which was officially explained by political instability, but in fact indicated ideological bias. Such selectivity of decisions forms the basis for accusations of double standards, which are actively used in the information war against the West, undermining confidence in international financial institutions and their neutrality [12].

Thus, hybrid warfare continues to evolve, covering new areas, including cyberspace and information technology. In the near future, we should probably expect an increase in the use of artificial intelligence in big data analysis, information campaign management, and the creation of disinformation strategies. In addition, the spread of quantum computing may lead to changes in methods of data protection and strategic information interception. International organizations and government institutions will face the need to review existing security doctrines and develop new response mechanisms [13].

The main challenges remain the difficulty of identifying the sources of hybrid attacks, their rapid adaptation to changing conditions, and the increasing impact of cognitive warfare. The latter include manipulation of public consciousness, undermining trust in government institutions, and influencing decision-making through disinformation. Comprehensive measures are needed to counter such threats, including the development of cybersecurity, strengthening the system of international law, and implementing adaptive response strategies. For example, NATO is actively developing programs for information protection and countering cognitive warfare, and the world's leading powers are investing in artificial intelligence technologies to detect and neutralize destructive information flows. In the context of the growing hybridization of conflicts, only an integrated and multi-level approach will minimize risks and protect national interests [14; 15].

Conclusion

Thus, the era of hybrid warfare is far from over, as it is at the peak of its development and is complicated by accumulated global problems. Today, the main solution is seen only on the basis of a general cultural and humanistic dialogue at all levels of political, economic, legislative, environmental, and socio-cultural interaction between various states and peoples. Recent world events,

taking place at the level of macroeconomic close state ties, have shown how dangerous conflicts accompanied by hybrid wars can be, and the consequences of disruptions in relations between the most important actors with the main resource reserves of the earth.

In this regard, the issues of countering and regulating information and psychological warfare as an integral part of hybrid aggression should be highlighted as one of the priority areas of analysis in developing effective adaptation measures. The insufficient effectiveness of the state information policy in the context of the hybrid war being waged against Russia is due to the fact that traditional forms and methods of political regulation are ineffective in the context of the changing paradigm of modern conflicts.

The solution of these issues is directly related to respect for human capital, rethinking the semantic attitudes that unite humanity, and the formation of a new civilizational value system based on dialogue and mutual trust.

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