

MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project



‘A Deadlier Peril’: The Role of Corruption in Hybrid Warfare

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‘A Deadlier Peril’¹ information note prepared for the MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare project by Lt Col Dave Allen, Military Advisor to the UK Defence Academy’s Building Integrity Programme.

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ has become something of a cliché through repetition, evolving into a catch all term for the non-military aspects of what had previously been presumed to be achieved through a military campaign. Many will argue it is nothing new whilst others will argue it does not exist at all in a formal sense but is merely the manifestation of political friction². In this Information Note, the term ‘hybrid warfare’ is used for simplicity, while recognising it is a broad and multifaceted concept with global relevance.³

Trying to achieve military ends using non-military means is not new but its potential has been amplified by the exponential expansion of the information domain through technology in the hands of the individual and not just the organs of the state and corporations⁴. Military force has a role to play but its deployment is not inevitable and in fact there may not be any appearance of overt military acts at all. A defining characteristic may in fact be that the target does not even know it is being waged against it - with the unexpected corollary that many of those waging it may not even know they are waging it either.

What constitutes a weapon in this grey area no longer has to go ‘bang’. Energy, cash - as bribes - corrupt business practices, cyberattacks, assassination, fake news, propaganda and indeed military intimidation are all examples of the weapons used to gain advantage in this era of ‘constant competition’

Chief of the General Staff⁵

One of the strengths of the ‘hybrid threat’ is that it represents true asymmetry. It does not require equivalence of capability or aim and so holds great appeal to both the non-state actor, seeking to advance a political or criminal end, and the state actor, seeking to achieve ends through plausibly deniable means. A hybrid ‘campaign’

1 ‘We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we now know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength, is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even **deadlier peril**. The very desire of it corrupts the heart’. JRR Tolkien Lord of the Rings.

2 <https://jamestown.org/program/does-russias-hybrid-war-really-exist/>

3 Use of the term ‘hybrid warfare’ is consistent with MCDC (2019), *Countering Hybrid Warfare*. For further discussion of the origins and limits of Russia’s ‘hybrid war’ see Bettina Renz ‘Russia’s Military Revival’ (2018) Polity Press pp160-188; or Bob Seely ‘A Definition of Contemporary Russian Conflict: How Does the Kremlin Wage War?’ Russia and Eurasia Studies Centre Research Paper No. 15 (June 2018).

4 David Patrikarokas, *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is reshaping conflict in the 21st Century*. (2017) ISBN 978-0-465-09614

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/dynamic-security-threats-and-the-british-army-chief-of-the-general-staff-general-sir-nicholas-carter-ccb-cbe-dso-adc-gen>

does not have to be linear and sequential, or even planned in any centralised way. As such it is extremely difficult to predict and counter.⁶

In many ways hybrid warfare defies a doctrinal approach as it is rarely a carefully thought out campaign in the conventional sense. It is truly the ‘weaponisation of chaos’⁷. The lack of planning and centralised control required makes it difficult to predict and counter the threat presented. The ability to attack the three elements of a stable state (security, societal and economic development, governance and the rule of law) simultaneously creates a pervasive threat.⁸ Synergy, non-linearity and unpredictability are key characteristics.

The nature of hybrid warfare – as an attempt to control chaos – can be as unpredictable and dangerous to the aggressor as it is to the target. It could be argued the same characteristics are true for corruption as a tool of power. The aim of this paper is to explore the link between corruption and hybrid warfare, before discussing how to counter corruption as a tool of hybrid warfare.

Corruption defined

Corruption is often as difficult to define as hybrid warfare. Typical definitions include the dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power, typically involving bribery. Transparency International terms it ‘the abuse of entrusted power for private gain’. A recent Chatham House report that terms it as ‘the misuse of public institutions and office to the detriment of the common good’. Yet these terms are imprecise and often subjective. For example, does ‘entrusted power’ extend beyond public office? Or, what is ‘private gain’, which can include financial gain, power, influence, and even sex⁹.

One way of conceptualising corruption is the ‘corruption triangle’. For corruption to take place requires three key factors to come together: motivation, an opportunity and a rationalisation by those carrying out the corruption. In the context of hybrid warfare it is important to stress that corruption has both a physical and a psychological component. The physical component centres on the loss of resource to the endeavour that the resource was originally intended for. This manifests in capabilities costing more than they should (the corruption ‘overhead’) or degraded performance.

6 See Edward Lucas (2017) at <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/edward-lucas-west-heeded-ukraines-warnings-russia-long-ago.html>

7 Coined by Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss (2016) in ‘The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponises Information, Culture and Money’ available at http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf

8 Joint Doctrine Publication 05, *Shaping a Stable World: the Military Contribution*.

9 For example ‘sexual extortion’. See <http://www.trust.org/contentAsset/raw-data/588013e6-2f99-4d54-8dd8-9a65ae2e0802/file>

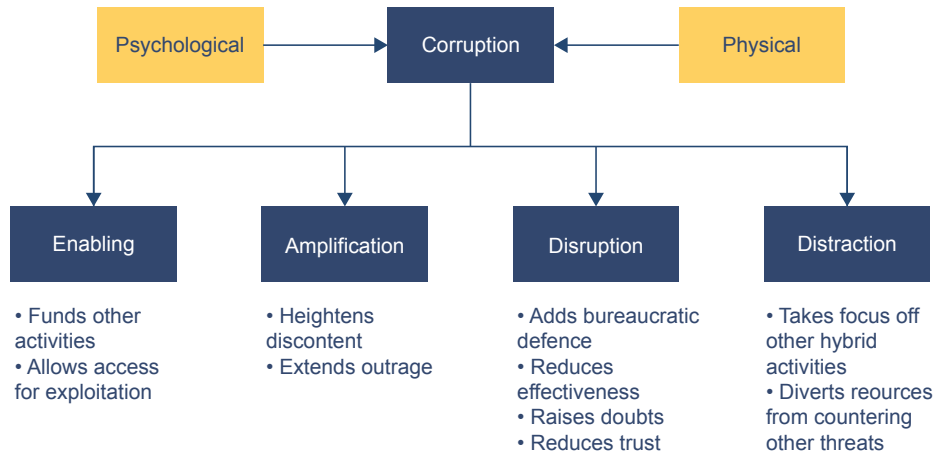


Figure 1 – Corruption and hybrid warfare

Far more pernicious is the psychological component of corruption. Corruption as a concept is closely linked in the human psyche to concepts of justice and injustice, fairness and unfairness. As such it is a powerful motivating emotion that can generate extreme passions¹⁰. It is no accident that revolutionaries seeking political change often use the corruption of their opponents as a rallying call to build and impassion support. From Garibaldi’s cries against the corruption of Rome and slavery, to the central narrative of Islamic State fighting the corruption of the Arab states and the West, the narrative of revolution has been closely aligned to the fight against corruption. Whether the revolutionary truly believes in the evil of corruption does not really matter; the central point is it remains a powerful motivating factor.

in previously corrupt institutions. Clearly corrupt activities can also be highly effective at providing funding for other weapons in the hybrid arsenal.

Secondly, corruption can amplify the impact of other activities. By tapping into the visceral emotions of unfairness, corruption as a narrative can widen already existing fractures. Cracks and vulnerabilities already there can be expanded by the corruption narrative, whether it is true or not. Corruption encouraged and enabled through legitimate businesses can fund and amplify efforts to sow dissent by funding of political parties or protest groups.¹¹ The role of organised crime both as an actor in its own right or in support of a state actor is considerable, with many criminal activities enabled by corrupt officials¹². In support of a state, rogue criminal efforts, even when broken free of their control, can still further the aim of hybrid warfare.¹³ Economic power obtained through money laundering and corruption is able to amplify the gains in political influence by setting up an ‘(un) virtuous cycle of corruption’ whereby increased political power enables increased economic power.

Third, corruption is a powerful weapon of mass disruption. It can undermine institutions such as investigatory organs and the judiciary and so reduce faith in the ability of these institutions to hold the guilty to account. When faith is eroded it makes fertile ground for others to exploit¹⁴. This undermining of the state pillars of security, social and economic development and governance and the rule of law can help break the political settlement at the heart of state stability. This disruption can be physical through such things as infrastructure projects undermined, to market manipulation but still manifests itself psychologically in the

The role of corruption in hybrid warfare

So what role can corruption play as both a physical and psychological weapon in hybrid warfare?

There are four key ways corruption works both physically and psychologically in the hybrid battlespace. These four modes are demonstrated in Figure 1.

First is the role of corruption as a key enabler in the use of the other weapons in the hybrid armoury. Corruption can allow, for example, physical access to information to generate compromising material which aims to undermine the reputations of political opponents and discredit them, to intimidate and pressure critics through both real and doctored information with threats of disclosure for those who don’t fall in line. This corruption can manifest itself with simple bribery to obtain identification and access documentation to more elaborate software ‘back doors’ obtained through deep rooted corruption. In more traditional ways corruption by security officials can allow illicit networks across borders to enable global trafficking whilst front companies and middleman can act as ‘ghosts’ in the acquisition of economic and political influence to conceal the true origins and motivations of the activity. Non State actors in particular are adept at identifying and exploiting weaknesses when integrity is improved

11 Joe Biden and Michael Carpenter ‘How to Stand up to the Kremlin’ Foreign Affairs Jan-Feb 18. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-12-05/how-stand-kremlin>

12 For example: <https://www.haaretz.com/nuclear-smugglers-sought-terrorist-buyers-1.5406045>

13 For example: <https://jamestown.org/program/as-russian-support-for-ukrainian-war-ebbs-kremlin-mulling-new-hybrid-tactics/>

14 The differing narratives to suit different purposes in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire shows how fluid a concept ‘truth’ can be. Ranging from corruption in local authorities (http://www.transparency.org.uk/corruption-and-grenfell-tower/#.Wi_I516ICtU) to state sponsored suppression of the poorest in society (<https://www.armstrongeconomics.com/world-news/corruption/grenfell-tower-fires-exposes-government-corruption/>). Many narratives are well meaning but can be exploited by the less scrupulous.

10 Chatham House quotes a survey taken cross community in Iraq by the National Democratic Institute in 2017 asking Iraqis ‘What led to the rise of ISIS?’ 42% (The largest proportion) blamed corruption as the main reason for the rise of ISIS. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2017-07-04-iraq-after-isis-mansour-final.pdf>. Accessed 12 Dec 17

loss of trust and building a narrative of betrayal of the political settlement.

Finally corruption is a weapon of mass distraction. The emotional forces surrounding corruption switches focus from other activities. The deliberate targeted leaks of information obtained corruptly or exploiting the narrative impacted the US Presidential election¹⁵, the UK ‘Brexit’ vote¹⁶ and the French Presidential election¹⁷. Research conducted by University of California at Berkeley and Swansea University in Wales reportedly identified 150,000 Twitter accounts linked to Russia that disseminated messages before the 2016 EU referendum with a combination of messages both supporting and criticising UK membership, which indicates that the broader aim was to magnify societal discord in line with the uncontrolled ‘free flow’ character of hybrid warfare.¹⁸

The limits of weaponising corruption

There are however clear limitations as to how corruption can be weaponised. It is essentially an indiscriminate weapon in that it is essentially uncontrollable, spreading like a virus. This means that whoever unleashes it has to be immune to its effects. They can either not care about corruption’s impact on themselves or have an extremely strong counter-narrative to prevent the domestic forces falling prey to the same emotional response. This counter-narrative relies on strong control of the means of information production either in pure restrictive terms or increasingly – as this becomes impossible – through pure volume. For example, the innovation of troll factories and ‘troll bots’ allow the industrialisation of messaging that obscures and relativizes the notion of ‘truth’.

Countering the threat of corruption in the Hybrid environment

Corruption is a powerful weapon in the armoury of the hybrid warrior. With this in mind what are the options for countering the effects of corruption in the hybrid environment? To counter hybrid war the focus should be on waging ‘hybrid defence’. As Mark Galeotti has said, this involves shoring up “governance and

legitimacy”.¹⁹ Doing so works like coastal defences against erosion of the sea. However, like sea walls such barriers are vulnerable to ruthless exploitation unless the integrity of the defences is carefully and continuously maintained Building the integrity of individuals and institutions is therefore vital.

Integrity is defined by NATO as ‘behaviours and actions consistent with a set of moral or ethical principles and standards, embraced by individuals as well as institutions that create a barrier to corruption’. This is true for every institution and what lies at the heart on defence and security of NATO’s Building Integrity Initiative, launched in 2007²⁰. Anti-corruption and Building Integrity, whilst on the face of it is purely a passive measure, is in fact the only effective way to counter the impact of corruption in the hybrid battlespace.

More active measures to counter the threat of corruption include increasing the robustness of law enforcement regimes to punish and deter corruption in the first place. Yet research from the European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-building (ERCAS)²¹ suggests law enforcement and legislation is rarely the only answer. A comprehensive approach to anti-corruption as part of a ‘hybrid defence’ must rely on a combination of measures including building integrity, reducing vulnerability, understanding the motivations of those who permit and engage in corruption, and assertive measures to punish and deter the corrupt. By doing so, the ‘corruption triangle’ can be prevented from forming in the first place and corruption can be removed from the armoury as a tool of hybrid warfare.

15 Special counsel Robert Mueller indicted 13 Russian nationals and three Russian entities for allegedly meddling in the 2016 presidential election, charging them with conspiracy to defraud the United States, the Department of Justice announced in Feb 18. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/16/politics/mueller-russia-indictments-election-interference/index.html>

16 For example: Jeremy Kahn, “UK Proves Russian Social Media Influence in Brexit Vote, Bloomberg Politics, Nov. 2, 2017.

17 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39478066>. Accessed 12 Dec 17

18 Karla Adam & William Booth, “Rising Alarm in Britain Over Russian Meddling in Brexit Vote,” The Washington Post, Nov. 17, 2017

19 <https://warontherocks.com/2015/07/time-to-think-about-hybrid-defense/>

20 The NATO BI Programme is a defence capacity-building programme that contributes to the Alliance’s mission to safeguard the freedom and security of its members. It provides Allies and partner countries with tailored support to reduce the risk of corruption in the defence and related security sector and to embed good governance principles and practices in their defence establishments. UK is one of the Lead Nations of the programme. <https://buildingintegrity.hq.nato.int/index.aspx>

21 <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/anticorruption-corruption-laws-regulation-control-anticorrrp-budget-index/EN/index.htm>

