

Introduction

Hybrid warfare has become one of the main forms of strategic competition in the twenty-first century. Its ambiguous, multi-domain and hardly attributable nature has posed significant challenges to governments and international organisations, whose institutional structures were conceived, to a large extent, to deal with conventional or clearly identifiable threats. Activities conducted in the so-called grey zone (understood as the space between formal peace and armed conflict) have gained increasing relevance in the European strategic environment, particularly since episodes such as the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, information interference campaigns targeting Western political processes, and the use of economic and energy instruments for coercive purposes.

In this context, an increasing number of state and non-state actors has demonstrated its ability to operate on a sustained basis in the grey zone, employing means that hinder attribution and complicate the political and strategic response. The evolution of these dynamics has profoundly altered traditional forms of confrontation between states, shifting competition towards non-military domains in which perception, influence and indirect pressure assume a central role.

From a European perspective, these transformations particularly affect the European Union and its Member States, due to their high economic, energy and technological interdependence, as well as the open nature of their societies. The geographical position of certain Member States, their proximity to unstable regions and their status as the Union's external borders increase their exposure to hybrid activities that can generate destabilising effects without resorting to the overt use of force. In this regard, several recent episodes in the European neighbourhood have highlighted the ability of these dynamics to produce rapid and significant impacts in the political, social and security spheres.

These dynamics do not emerge out of nowhere. Between Clausewitz and current debates there is a longstanding tradition of analysing how states compete with, pressure or wear down others without necessarily resorting to open war:¹ propaganda, economic

¹ George F. Kennan, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare" (Policy Planning Staff Memorandum), 30 April 1948 (PDF)

pressure, indirect support to local actors or covert measures. In recent years, all of this has been reorganised under labels such as “grey zone”² and “hybrid threats”, which help to describe deliberately ambiguous actions that remain below the threshold of a clear response while combining several instruments at the same time.

In this context, the enduring relevance of the thought of Carl von Clausewitz, one of Europe’s foremost strategists, provides a useful analytical framework for interpreting this strategic environment. Clausewitz emphasised that war is a profoundly political phenomenon and that its concrete form adapts to the conditions of each era, potentially taking shapes far removed from conventional combat. This conception is particularly pertinent in light of the proliferation of activities that seek to influence an adversary’s will without crossing the threshold of armed confrontation. From this perspective, hybrid warfare can be understood as a contemporary manifestation of Clausewitzian logic, in which political pressure is exerted through non-military instruments that generate cumulative strategic effects.

Building on this conceptual framework, the present analysis addresses a central question: to what extent is the European Union capable of articulating a coherent and effective response to sustained hybrid campaigns conducted in the grey zone and characterised by their multidomain and sub-threshold nature? The working hypothesis is that, despite the normative, doctrinal and institutional progress made in recent years, the European response remains constrained by a set of structural challenges linked to the fragmentation of competences, the dependence on national implementation, and the inherent complexity of coordination among EU Member States in a strategic environment that is in constant flux. Clausewitz can help decision-makers to better understand this type of threat and to shape more coherent defensive responses.

Clausewitz in the Hybrid Era: Continuity and Adaptation of Strategic Thought

The transformation of the contemporary strategic environment, marked by sub-threshold activities and dynamics characteristic of hybrid warfare, demands a reassessment of the classical foundations of the theory of war. In this context, the work of Carl von Clausewitz

² Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (U.S. Army War College Press, 2015)

remains highly relevant. His conception of war as a political, social and strategic phenomenon provides useful conceptual tools for interpreting current hybrid competition. Although the technological environment and the instruments employed have changed, the underlying logic of confrontation continues to follow principles that Clausewitz identified early on.

In *On War*³, Clausewitz stated that “war is nothing but the continuation of policy by other means.” This premise acquires renewed significance in the context of the grey zone, where aggressor actors employ non-military means (informational, technological, economic or social) to pursue political objectives without resorting to open combat. Hybrid warfare fits squarely within this broad definition of political confrontation, as it seeks to alter the adversary’s behaviour without the need for conventional hostilities. Instrumentalised migratory pressure, energy coercion, drone attacks (or disruptions) at European airports, and cyberattacks thus become mechanisms that extend policy through indirect means.

Another essential Clausewitzian concept is the “fog of war”⁴ (Nebel des Krieges), understood as the set of frictions, uncertainties and lack of information that hinder decision-making. As the author himself remarked, “war is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser obscurity.” Hybrid warfare is located precisely in this nebulous space, exploiting difficulties of attribution, legal ambiguity and informational dispersion. Plausible deniability and the gradual nature of hybrid actions amplify the Clausewitzian fog, extending it into the political, social and strategic domains.

Likewise, the notion of “centre of gravity” proposed by Clausewitz (the key point whose neutralisation decisively weakens the adversary) acquires new dimensions in the hybrid era. Today, the centre of gravity is no longer solely military: it may lie in social cohesion, institutional stability, digital infrastructure or energy autonomy. Information manipulation aimed at polarising a society, campaigns to undermine public trust in institutions, or attacks against critical systems are examples of how adversaries select new centres of

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *De la guerra*, versión digital en PDF (sin datos editoriales visibles en el archivo consultado), disponible en: <https://archive.org/download/de-la-guerra-carl-von-clausewitz/De-la-Guerra-Carl-von-Clausewitz.pdf>. Libro I, cap. I, p. 20.

⁴ Clausewitz, *De la guerra* (véase n. 3), Libro I, cap. III, pp. 42–43.

gravity in order to destabilise without resorting to combat.

From this perspective, some European states exhibit characteristics that may increase their exposure to hybrid pressures, stemming from their energy dependence, the complexity of protecting critical infrastructure, the vulnerability of the cognitive domain or the instability of their immediate strategic environment. For Clausewitz, identifying the adversary's centre of gravity is a necessary condition for formulating an effective strategy; in the European context, the difficulty lies precisely in recognising and protecting those elements whose erosion can generate strategic effects without recourse to armed force.

Finally, Clausewitzian thought underlines the importance of political will as a central pillar of defence. Hybrid warfare essentially seeks to erode that will without the need for military attack. From this perspective, institutional stability, social cohesion and the credibility of public action become decisive factors in sustaining resilience against prolonged hybrid manoeuvres. As has been evident in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, despite clear elements of traditional warfare, the conflict is not confined to the physical battlefield; it goes far beyond it, and Clausewitz can greatly help to understand this broader reality.

Hybrid Warfare and the Grey Zone as a Contemporary Strategic Challenge

The concept of hybrid warfare has evolved⁵ significantly over the last decade. In this article, "hybrid threat" is used to refer to the combined use of military and non-military tools to destabilise or constrain an adversary. "Hybrid campaign" or "hybrid warfare" refers to the sustained and coordinated application of these tools in order to generate cumulative effects. Finally, the "grey zone" denotes the space between formal peace and armed conflict, where ambiguity and difficulties of attribution complicate the response. NATO defines hybrid threats as the combination of military and non-military methods employed by state and non-state actors to destabilise an adversary through tactics designed to hinder attribution and avoid direct escalation of the conflict⁶. For its part, the European Union has developed the term "hybridisation of threats" to encompass actions aimed at exploiting the vulnerabilities of Member States by combining cyberattacks, information

⁵ Josep Baqués, Manuel R. Torres, Javier Jordán y Guillem Colom, Las pretensiones de Marruecos sobre Ceuta y Melilla desde la perspectiva de la zona gris (Informe, Observatorio de Ceuta y Melilla, noviembre 2021).

⁶ (NATO). Countering hybrid threats. Página oficial de la OTAN.

manipulation, economic pressure or the instrumentalisation of migration⁷.

Despite terminological differences, there is academic consensus around three fundamental characteristics. First, ambiguity, which allows aggressor actors to operate outside traditional response frameworks. Second, gradualism, which prevents the crossing of legal thresholds that would trigger collective defence mechanisms. Third, its multidomain nature, which combines political, social, economic, informational and technological instruments to generate cumulative effects.

From this perspective, the evolution towards forms of hybrid confrontation can also be interpreted in light of Clausewitz's thought. He argued that war is always conditioned by the moral and political forces that generate it, and that its concrete form depends on how actors employ the means at their disposal to achieve their ends. This idea is particularly relevant in the face of the proliferation of non-military instruments that seek to influence an adversary's will without resorting to the direct use of force. Hybrid warfare, with its combination of informational, economic and technological pressures, confirms this Clausewitzian thesis: conflict can unfold through indirect modes which, while retaining their political nature, take forms different from traditional combat. For European states, this approach underlines the need to understand that contemporary confrontation is not confined to the military realm, but can advance silently and persistently in domains where politics, technology and social perception intersect.

The impact of these activities on European Union states has been extensively documented by think tanks such as RAND, the Elcano Royal Institute⁸, or the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE)⁹, among others. Open and highly digitalised societies are particularly vulnerable to information manipulation, while states with high levels of energy or trade interdependence are exposed to greater risks of economic coercion¹⁰.

Several European Union Member States possess characteristics that increase their

⁷ European Commission. European External Action Service. Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response. JOIN(2016) 18 final.

⁸ Carlos Galán, "Amenazas híbridas: nuevas herramientas para viejas aspiraciones", Documento de trabajo, Real Instituto Elcano, 12 diciembre 2018.

⁹ Guillem Colom Piella, "La amenaza híbrida: mitos, leyendas y realidades", Documento de Opinión 24/2019, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE), 2019.

¹⁰ RAND Corporation. Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses. Research Report RR-1772, 2018. Disponible en https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1772.html

exposure to this type of threat. For example, countries that constitute the Union's external border and face pressure along their perimeters, such as Spain, Italy or Greece; states located in areas of strategic friction on the eastern flank, such as Poland or the Baltic countries; and, in parallel, those with a high degree of energy and/or trade interdependence with external suppliers, which may open up avenues for indirect coercion. These circumstances can amplify the impact of hybrid activities on internal stability and strategic autonomy, while at the same time reinforcing the importance of these states in the management of regional security.

The European Union in its Geostrategic Environment: Exposure to Hybrid Activities

The European Union's position in the Western Mediterranean, the Atlantic and its southern neighbourhood places it in a space where great-power competition, regional instability and hybrid pressures converge. The growing importance of the southern flank has been highlighted by both NATO and the European Union itself, which recognise the Sahel as one of the most volatile regions in the international system and a persistent source of risks for European security. Nevertheless, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reshaped strategic priorities, shifting attention partly towards the eastern flank without eliminating the structural challenges that persist in the south.

The presence of external actors such as Russia, through indirect security instruments and reconfigured military structures¹¹, and China, through its economic projection and the development of dual-use infrastructure, has intensified strategic competition in the Sahel and North Africa. These dynamics affect relations among Maghreb states, whose historical rivalries have direct repercussions on the stability of the European neighbourhood and on the security of those Member States that are geographically more exposed, such as Spain or Italy, for example.

Energy dependence is another relevant factor in this context. The European Union maintains a high degree of interdependence with external suppliers of critical resources, which has exposed the vulnerability of its energy systems to unilateral decisions or

¹¹ Ryan Bauer et al., Russian Mercenary and Paramilitary Groups in Africa: Examining Changes and Impacts Since the Wagner Rebellion, RAND Corporation, RR-A2613-1, 2025.

deliberate disruptions of supply.

Migration constitutes another vector of pressure. Although migration is a structural, global phenomenon, its instrumentalisation by certain actors has been extensively documented by European institutions, which have identified cases of migratory pressure being used as a political lever¹². The migration crisis in Ceuta in 2021 showed that the southern borders of the European Union can become a vulnerable space in the face of non-conventional actions.

To these elements must be added the risks stemming from global technological competition. The European Union depends on critical supply chains in sectors such as semiconductors, telecommunications and advanced digital infrastructure, which introduces additional vulnerabilities in a context of rivalry among great powers. The concentration of key technological capabilities outside the European space underlines the strategic dimension of these dependencies and their potential use as instruments of indirect coercion.

Architecture, Will and Friction: A Clausewitzian Reading of the European Response to Hybrid Warfare

The European Union's response to hybrid threats is articulated within an institutional framework that does not correspond to the classical parameters of the nation state. Unlike the latter, the Union lacks a single decision-making centre in the field of security and defence, and its strategic action relies on a multi-level system in which common institutions and national sovereignties intersect. This configuration, inherent to the European project itself, structurally conditions the way in which the Union confronts forms of confrontation located in the grey zone, characterised by ambiguity, gradualism and difficulties of attribution.

From a Clausewitzian perspective, this reality can be interpreted through the concept of friction, understood as the set of obstacles, resistances and contingencies that separate strategic intent from its execution. Clausewitz stressed that friction is not an anomaly, but

¹² European Commission Proposal for a Regulation addressing situations of instrumentalisation in the field of migration and asylum. COM(2021). Disponible en: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2021:890:FIN>

an inherent feature of war and of political action in complex contexts.

Hybrid warfare heightens these frictions by unfolding deliberately in spaces where legal thresholds remain blurred and attribution is uncertain. By remaining below the level of armed conflict, such actions do not automatically trigger traditional collective defence mechanisms, shifting the burden of the response towards political interpretation and consensus-building among actors. From a Clausewitzian standpoint, this situation reinforces the political nature of confrontation, but also highlights the inherent difficulties of forging a common will in the face of gradual and persistent threats.

Political will occupies a central place in this context. For Clausewitz, any strategy ultimately depends on the will that sustains it, beyond the material means available. In the European Union, this will is expressed in a plural and distributed manner, through deliberative processes that reflect the diversity of interests and sensitivities of European countries.

The notion of centre of gravity, another key concept in Clausewitz's thought, acquires particular complexity in the European case. Whereas in states it is often associated with the political leadership or with specific institutional pillars, in the European Union this centre is more diffuse and distributed. The cohesion among Europeans, the legitimacy of common institutions and the credibility of the European project can be considered critical elements whose erosion would have significant strategic consequences. By targeting intangible factors, hybrid warfare finds in the Union's multi-level structure an especially favourable space for indirect and cumulative action. Precisely because of this architecture, in the European case the Clausewitzian "centre of gravity" cannot be identified with a single institution. Rather, it is expressed as the ability of the Member States and common institutions to remain united, sustain consensus and withstand external pressure.

In practice, the European Council and the Council are key to setting political direction and preserving unity; the EEAS helps to coordinate external action and communication; and the Commission plays an important role in coordination and in the implementation of Union measures and instruments. In sum, rather than a concentrated "centre of gravity", the Union has a critical point that is distributed: if cohesion and trust are eroded, the response is weakened—and this is precisely what many hybrid campaigns seek to

exploit.

From this perspective, the European response to hybrid warfare cannot be assessed solely in terms of technical capabilities or available instruments. Clausewitz warned that uncertainty is inherent to any confrontation and that clarity of purpose is an essential factor in withstanding friction.

The Euro-Atlantic Response to Hybrid Warfare: NATO, the European Union and Strategic Coordination

The response to hybrid warfare in the Euro-Atlantic area is articulated primarily through two complementary institutional frameworks: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. Both actors have explicitly recognised the growing relevance of hybrid threats and of activities conducted in the grey zone as central features of the contemporary security environment. However, their approaches follow different logics, derived from their institutional nature, competences and strategic cultures. While NATO is configured as a politico-military alliance oriented towards deterrence and collective defence, the European Union acts as a political and normative actor with broad capabilities in civilian, economic and regulatory domains. This difference shapes both the conceptualisation of the threat and the instruments employed to confront it.

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly states that hybrid threats constitute one of the main risks to Euro-Atlantic security and underscores the need to strengthen national resilience as a foundation of collective defence¹³. From this perspective, the Alliance emphasises a comprehensive approach that combines military and non-military capabilities, promoting inter-institutional cooperation and enhancing allies' preparedness in the face of sub-threshold pressures. Resilience is thus conceived as an essential element for ensuring the credibility of deterrence, especially in scenarios where attribution is ambiguous and escalation occurs gradually.

In the European Union, the approach to hybrid warfare has focused on developing policy frameworks, analytical instruments and coordination mechanisms aimed at identifying and managing threats that affect multiple domains. The EU has promoted specific tools for early detection, coordinated response and the strengthening of resilience against

¹³ (NATO). NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. Madrid, junio 2022.

hybrid activities, integrating dimensions such as cybersecurity, the fight against disinformation, the protection of critical infrastructure and economic security.

With regard to NATO–EU coordination in the face of hybrid threats, joint progress reports show that advances have focused on practical measures: improving information-sharing and analysis, coordinating strategic communication, and enhancing preparedness through exercises and parallel responses to hybrid scenarios. They also underline that part of the effectiveness depends on what Member States contribute (capabilities, attribution and national implementation), which helps to explain why results are uneven across areas and contexts.¹⁴¹⁵

However, a report by the European External Action Service and another by the European Parliament¹⁶ have pointed out that the effectiveness of these tools largely depends on the degree of commitment and coordination of the Member States, which introduces a structural dimension that conditions their practical implementation¹⁷.

This duality of approaches reflects a fundamental feature of the Euro-Atlantic space: the coexistence of military and civilian instruments to address a threat that, by definition, lies at the margins of armed conflict. From a Clausewitzian perspective, this situation highlights the difficulty of maintaining unity of effort in broad coalitions, where strategic action is permeated by frictions stemming from national interests, differing legal frameworks and divergent risk perceptions. Hybrid warfare exploits these very frictions, operating in those areas where coordination is most complex and where collective response requires a high degree of political consensus.

The southern flank of the Euro-Atlantic area is a particularly relevant sphere in this context, illustrating the importance of what has been analysed in the preceding paragraphs, as regional instability, great-power competition and hybrid pressures converge in this space.

Hybrid Warfare as a Contemporary Expression of Politics: A Strategic Reflection

¹⁴ Consejo de la UE / NATO, Fourth progress report on the implementation of the common set of proposals endorsed by EU and NATO Councils on 6 December 2016 (2019).

¹⁵ NATO & EU, Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation (10 January 2023).

¹⁶ European Parliament, EPRS, Countering hybrid threats: EU-NATO cooperation (Briefing, 2017).

¹⁷ European External Action Service (EEAS). Countering Hybrid Threats. EEAS, 2018.

through Clausewitz

Hybrid warfare does not represent a radical break with historical forms of confrontation, but rather an adaptation of political competition to an environment characterised by interdependence, institutional complexity and the sensitivity of contemporary societies. From this perspective, the use of non-military instruments to achieve strategic objectives reinforces the Clausewitzian idea that war, in a broad sense, is always a political phenomenon whose concrete form depends on the conditions of each era.

Clausewitz stressed that the essence of confrontation lies in the interaction between wills, and that the means employed may vary without altering the nature of the conflict. Hybrid warfare fits fully within this logic, privileging indirect modes of action that seek to influence the adversary's perception, cohesion and decision-making capacity.

In this type of confrontation, time acquires a central strategic dimension. Unlike conventional war, hybrid warfare does not aim at a rapid resolution or a clearly identifiable outcome, but rather at the gradual accumulation of effects. Clausewitz warned that moral resilience and the ability to sustain political effort are decisive factors in protracted conflicts. This is likely to pose medium- to long-term challenges for Western democracies and will test the resilience of their societies.

Uncertainty also occupies a central place in this form of competition. Difficulties in attributing responsibility, in determining the onset of the conflict or in identifying the ultimate objective of hybrid actions amplify the "fog" described by Clausewitz. This fog not only affects the operational level, but also extends to the political and strategic realms, shaping decision-making and complicating the construction of coherent responses.

Conclusions

The analysis conducted shows the importance for decision-makers in the European Union and NATO of understanding one of Europe's classic strategists: Carl von Clausewitz, a need that is heightened by the geostrategic environment in which the European Union operates. Great-power competition, persistent instability in the southern neighbourhood, strategic pressure on the eastern flank and regional rivalry dynamics in the Mediterranean shape a scenario in which hybrid activities acquire growing relevance, making it essential not only to understand how to respond to them, but above all how to

prevent them. Factors such as energy interdependence, migratory pressure, informational vulnerability and the risks associated with global technological competition act as vectors that amplify the potential impact of this type of threat.

From this perspective, hybrid warfare poses a structural challenge to the European Union that goes beyond the strictly operational realm. It is a form of competition that tests the capacity to sustain coherent policies over time and to preserve resilience in the face of indirect and cumulative pressures. In this regard, it is worth recalling Sun Tzu's well-known observation that "the supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting", an idea that is deeply aligned with the logic of today's grey zone. Hybrid activities seek precisely to exploit internal vulnerabilities in order to erode political will and decision-making capacity without resorting to open confrontation.

It is also important to underline the broader strategic dimension of this transformation. Henry Kissinger warned that international stability rests on the perceived strength, coherence and credibility of political actors. In an environment dominated by hybrid competition, such credibility does not depend exclusively on military capabilities, but also on institutional robustness, social cohesion and the capacity of political systems to articulate interests and project them consistently. In the European case, this reflection highlights the importance of political and social factors as central elements of security in a context of permanent sub-threshold pressure.

The continued relevance of Carl von Clausewitz's thought allows this interpretation to be taken further. He argued that force in war "is nothing but the expression of a will" and that every strategy must be oriented towards preserving moral cohesion and decision-making capacity. Hybrid warfare, by targeting precisely these intangible elements without resorting to open combat, confirms the contemporary validity of this approach. From a Clausewitzian perspective, strategic strength lies in the unity of political purpose and in the ability to withstand the progressive erosion of collective will, aspects that acquire particular importance in complex, multi-level systems such as the European Union.

In short, hybrid warfare should not be understood as an episodic contingency, but as a structural form of competition in the contemporary international environment. For the European Union, this reality underlines the importance of analysing security not only in terms of material capabilities, but also from the standpoint of political cohesion, social resilience and strategic credibility.

Marc Vendrell Martínez*
Profesor de Inteligencia y Geopolítica en LISA Institute
Analista en LISA Analysis Unit
[@vendrellmarc](#)