Moderator: What does the Western way of war mean to you?

Ewan Lawson: That's a great question, Peter. I'd say the Western way of warfare as we now conceive it and I think it's not static, it changes over time, is one that is about the overwhelming use of force. It is increasingly about the use of precision and it's increasingly about-, perhaps perversely, whilst the overwhelming use of force is at the heart of it, at the same time trying to do that with zero or certainly minimal civilian casualties which is an entirely appropriate aspiration if perhaps challenging in certain contexts.

Moderator: Do you think the Western way of warfare will continue to evolve in this way such that the drive towards zero, minimal casualties will change this idea of overwhelming use of force as a central facet?

Ewan Lawson: I think what we're looking at here is a fairly recent development as you rightly say. You're absolutely right. If you look back at the Second World War, the whole philosophy of metal not flesh was at the heart of the Allies' approach. The overwhelming use of as much equipment, as much capability as possible, and therefore minimising the risk to our own soldiers at that point. Personally, I point the finger-, and, I've been criticised for doing this, at the Liberation of Kuwait as being a critical turning point in that whether the reality which was precision, precision, precision isn't really the point. The point is the narrative was precision, precision, precision. The fact that actually a relatively small proportion of the weapons employed in the Liberation of Kuwait were precision is forgotten. It's all about how the overwhelming use of force in precise ways enabled a quick victory and therefore minimum casualties albeit, one only has to look at the Basra Road to see that actually that's not the reality. But, it is the narrative. And, I think we've rather caught ourselves up in that through Kosovo, through the air campaign, and indeed through pretty much all of the subsequent conflicts. It's this overwhelming focus on precision. And, this is one of the things that our adversaries, of course, are deliberately trying to use against us in a perfectly logical, strategic approach.

Moderator: Is it correct to say that in Bosnia, after the UN mission failed and NATO intervened, the use of precision munitions to achieve success, that didn't come with zero civilian casualties, was seen as the lesser of 2 evils?

Ewan Lawson: Yes, I think I would question completely what you're saying there because I think if you look at the employment of NATO in Bosnia, that's much more about the use of boots on the ground with robust rules of engagement. By the time we get to Kosovo, the narrative is much more about precision. In part, that is successful. You can debate the reasons for the ultimate, we could say capitulation, but the ultimate standing back of the Serbian Government, my own personal view for a long time has been for a long time that that has been much more about the pressure that was being put on the finances of those who were supporting and surrounding Milošević. Some of that involved the targeting of industrial facilities with links
to them and the threat of that which you can do with precision. And, I think again it's about imagery. What you didn't see was a Belgrade that looks like Berlin in 1945. Of course, the counter to that is, you saw a Mosul not that long ago that did look a bit like a Berlin in 1945, if not worse, which I think rather puts a lie to some of this.

**Moderator:** When we were using airpower weapons of precision, and it was about boots on the ground, right through to (TC 00:10:00) Kosovo, this became more about the narrative and less about the reality and more about how you sowed this. Did this count for home audiences or did it count for adversaries as well?

Ewan Lawson: I think what adversaries spotted was that home audiences were increasingly expecting the reduction in civilian casualties. And, of course, when you talk about those campaigns, it's sometimes really difficult to know. Civilian casualties recorded which you could probably do a whole episode about this on with people much more competent on the topic than me. Civilian casualty recording is a real issue because don't actually know half the time. Unhelpful, I have to say, was the British narrative that there had only been 1 or 2 civilian casualties as a result of British air strikes. That's actually not what we said. What was actually said was that there was only 1 or 2 confirmed civilian casualties as a result of British airstrikes but it was an unhelpful way of saying it for me because that's probably not the reality. But, civilian casualty recording is challenging. I think it is about a narrative. It is about a narrative which, at 1 point, was probably very useful for the military because it was then about the ability to procure equipment, advanced equipment, precision equipment, and why wouldn't we want to do that, if that minimises the risk of excessive casualties? But, I think our adversaries looked at this and said, 'Well, this is one of the areas in which we can now potentially exploit this reluctance for our own casualties as well as our reluctance for civilian casualties.'

**Moderator:** Would you agree that, as adversaries have started to use narratives which have a long history of success, these narratives are being waged and used better by such adversaries than they by Western powers?

Ewan Lawson: I think it's more of a case of-, the thing that has changed is the digital revolution and I think, for me, however we end up conceptualising, defining, hybrid, grey-zone, whatever you want to call it this week, the thing that is really different, if anything is different at all, is the impact of the digital revolution. I was thinking about this the other day in terms of saying where people got their news in the UK 20 years ago, half a dozen mainstream newspapers, a couple of television channels. Now, you have a proliferation of television channels. But, probably more important, the proliferation of social media as a relatively uncontrolled space. Indeed, a space which at various times the regular news media have exploited. It's not uncommon to see mainstream news outlets put at the bottom of a story, 'Were you there? Did you see anything? Send us a message,' because journalists have been cut back in numbers and the funding and the support for journalism relatively speaking I think.

So, I think this is for me the thing that almost defines this challenge. And, I think some of our adversaries-, partly because if you're a regime concerned about regime security, the Internet and social media more specifically represent a particular challenge to you and a particular threat. So, perhaps in looking to defend themselves from the threat from social media, they also spotted the opportunities to undermine Western states. And, I do think the key thing here is-, one of the real challenges of this whole conversation is, where is the boundary between traditional statecraft but just delivered in the digital era, and labelling pretty much everything as warfare. That for me has been, as you know, one of the most concerning things, is that labelling everything as warfare tends to point you at the military as a solution, whereas actually a lot of this is more about things like educating young people to engage critically with material they find on the Internet.

**Moderator:** This idea that it's the military's problem is one of the most important facets of hybrid warfare. I think that came out of 2014 and Ukraine and the West being caught by surprise by something it hadn't
seen coming. We saw a new type of warfare that employed little green men and narratives and cyber to annex whole regions. It strikes me that this was the start of the hybrid industry, would you agree?

Ewan Lawson: I think 2014 is a significant turning point and is part of the problem. I think you can make a case that one of the reasons there was a sudden spike in this was the sense that we, in the West, have been caught out here. So, it clearly can't be that we got things wrong, it must be that there is something new happening here. And, I think that did drive something of a hybrid narrative which has moved quite a long way from Frank Hoffman's original concept of the blurring of conventional and irregular warfare with terrorism and a bit of crime and so on and so forth which, of course, is a also bit like Mary Kaldor's, 'New wars.' And again, the problem with both of those is-, not about problems, I think it's always worth reminding ourselves about these things, is that again those sort of things have been going on throughout history. So, 2014 is significant but 2014 I think is both significant in terms of the turning point but it's also the point at where we really start to get confused about what it is we're talking about.

So, Crimea, stand-alone Crimea, is a military operation fundamentally with a significant element of obfuscation designed to slow down the political-military response of the West if there was going to be one. So, just by putting enough doubt in there, politicians were going, 'Perhaps we aren't seeing what we think we're seeing.' There's just enough doubt. The problem is that label then was applied to pretty much everything Russia has done subsequently, and this is why I start to have an issue because there is no doubt, in my mind, that Russia is trying to keep the Ukraine destabilised and it is doing that in part through its occupation still of Crimea and also in parts of the East. And, in those parts of the East, it's doing some things which look a bit like hybrid warfare as defined by Hoffman and others. There are irregular forces, there are regular forces. Irregular forces are being obfuscated, there's a bit of crime involved, there's a bit of legal warfare, the issuing of passports and all that sort of thing. Taken on its own, I would not particularly have an issue with thinking of that as a slightly different form of warfare to perhaps some of the ones that we traditionally look at. Albeit, I don't think that's a new form but one we perhaps haven't seen much of recently.

The problem comes when that term is then expanded to all the other activities that Russia is doing to keep Ukraine destabilised. So, it's economic coercion, constant information campaigns about corruption. The desire effectively to just keep Ukraine in a slightly chaotic state such that the EU is not going to rush to embrace it anytime soon, NATO is not going to rush to embrace it anytime soon. I've referred to this somewhere else as a bit of a close and a deep battle if you like, that the close battle is what is happening in the Donbas and happened in Crimea whereas in wider Ukraine and indeed beyond Ukraine in the rest of Europe, that's more a case of a form of statecraft and that's not me legitimising it, it's a form of coercive statecraft but using modern tools, using the digital revolution to take up opportunities, whether that's cyber attacks against the power grid in Kyiv or whether it's social media enabled information campaigns.

And, I think we run the risk when we start to blur these things and I'll give you a line to move you on if you wish to but-, and then, try to shoehorn that model into other states' activities whether that's China, North Korea, Iran, or somebody else. The problem is we're taking what was, perhaps, a useful way of looking at a particular conflict in a particular context and now trying to apply it to everything. And, particularly with this use of the word 'warfare' because I do think it's almost inevitable if you start using the language of warfare and war and conflict, that the military has to be the answer to that problem. As I said earlier, this is much more about a domestic-political response, a civil contingencies type response, as it is about a military response. What the military needs to be able to do is recognise that, for example, when they're on enhanced forward presence, they will be the subject of disinformation campaigns and they have been, the false allegation of rape against a German military on an enhanced forward presence, false allegations about British soldiers at various stages. That's where the military have got to be focused, not necessarily in my view, in countering the broader information campaigns which I think are the responsibility of other bits of government.
Moderator: I want to come back to 3 parts in there, about how the branding of other states as hybrid actors, the domestic responses, and firstly, the idea that hybrid as warfare. The worry for me is how we make the division between the military effort for annexation, and what we perceive it as, which is everything else, about economic coercion, the weaponisation of corruption, we lump it all in 1 area and hybrid becomes warfare, which becomes the military's problem. That's one of the biggest problems that I can see.

Ewan Lawson: I entirely agree. I think that the military also need to look at it. We need to look at ourselves, those of us who are ex-military as well because we've rather embraced the terminology and the language. The recent UK's Future Integrated Operating Concept, there is again nothing particularly new in that. Those were ideas of making sure that you leverage all military activity towards an operational functional output. That's not new. We were talking about that in PJHQ in the early 2000s and I'm pretty sure it was being talked about before then. But, when we listen to Chief of the Defence Staff and the Secretary of State at the paper launch, most of what they talked about wasn't the paper. They talked about the threat from Russia, the threat from China and so on and so forth. But, most of what they were talking about in my view and I'm sure others will disagree is not the responsibility of the military.

And, I think your point about Eastern Ukraine and Crimea is absolutely right and that's why, as I say, for me, there is a difference between-, I think it's a Henry Jackson Society paper where it's called 'Russia's new conventional way of warfare', deliberately not using the word 'hybrid' to take it out of that language problem and say, 'What you've got here is a Russia that's operating in a particular way which is fundamentally designed to stay below the threshold of a conventional Western military response. So, in Ukraine, not a Ukrainian response but bringing outsiders in, NATO, the US, the UK, whoever.' So, to stay below there, and they do that through obfuscation and doubt and hence the whole little green men thing. 'No, no, these really aren't Russian soldiers. They're local patriotic business people,' or whatever it was. That's deliberate and was designed with that single purpose in mind. So, that's really the key for me is, if you want to talk about something and call it hybrid warfare, it's recognising that unsurprisingly a military is going to use deception as part of its operating plan and for me, there was a little bit of a sense of, 'Well, that's all a bit unfair,' when actually, deception is a key part of all militaries' thinking or at least should be.

Going back to an observation that you made earlier which I think, similar to this, may be a rabbit hole that you don’t want to go down, is I think for the UK, with the information space, there has been a problem that outside actual conflict, it has really struggled to justify having a decent information operations capability and I say that based on my time as the CO of the 15 Group. And, I know the current narrative is 77 Brigade is the answer to all the world’s problems but I’m afraid the sceptic in me is not entirely convinced by that. I know a lot of good people working really hard to do some good stuff and I think there are particular individuals, who I won’t embarrass by naming them, who have moved the narrative on inside MoD, so it is positive in that sense. But, it’s something we’re still fundamentally not really comfortable with. Ships, tanks, and planes, that’s all fine but people doing deception and information operations, that’s-, very good at it in wartime, if you look at the British record both in the First and Second World Wars, people come to the surface who have the ability to do this stuff but we’re very uncomfortable about it in what is being conceptualised as peacetime and there’s another whole podcast on the war, peace divide issue.

Moderator: Does the West have it within their grasp and power to respond appropriately and have credible response options to what we term 'Russian hybrid aggression'?

Ewan Lawson: I think it is within the power and economics is probably key but that’s challenging for governments because it comes at a cost. You only need to see the continuing debate in Germany about Nord Stream 2 to realise-, Germany rescues effectively Navalny and yet, having seen that happen, a deliberate attempt to kill an opposition leader with a nerve agent, having seen that happen, it's still going, 'Yes, well we might do Nord Stream 2 anyway because we want cheap gas or whatever it is.' And, thereby hangs part of
the problem. London is still, I'll overstate the case to make the point, awash with dodgy Russian money and until such time as governments are willing to push back in those areas-, ultimately, that's what will constrain Putin, is when his financial backers start to say, 'No, Vlad. You've got to stop, mate, because you're hurting us financially.' Yes, enhanced forward presence and deterrence has a role to play, absolutely has a role to play, but it can only really be successful if there's pressure in other areas.

But also, I'd like to think that we need to think a little bit more about our protective measures, our defensive measures if you like. We don't, I think, still have a particularly good understanding of our critical and national infrastructure, what's critical in the national infrastructure, what's critical in the critical national infrastructure, which we might have done 30, 40 years ago during the Cold War with the Key Point Programme but we certainly, I would suggest, don't really know now because digitisation has made that 10 times more complicated. And, I think there's almost a point where people are going, 'It's just too difficult.' And, I think, 'No, that's not a good enough answer. We should be looking at that.' But, I do also think we should be looking at education. The Latvians are doing this now, educating their young people at school in national security. Now, I'm not saying we should mirror exactly what the Latvians are doing but getting our young people to critically engage with material, that's a first step in doing all of this. So, it's not just about the punishment measures. It's also about making sure we become more resilient as societies, not just infrastructure resilience, but societal resilience.

Moderator: How much of a mistake is it in us classifying all these other actors as only doing hybrid operations as well?

Ewan Lawson: I think it's interesting, sat here as I am in South East Asia, a lot of the paperwork, you see here out of think tanks in Australia and places like that, tend to use grey-zone rather than hybrid. I'm intrigued as to why that is. That's a little bit of research that I want to do. Why the language is subtly different? My hope is because people here are recognising that you shouldn't just mirror what the analysis rightly or wrongly has said about Russia and apply that to China. I think the Chinese case is an interesting one, the use of coastguards, maritime militias. Again, I think this is about staying below thresholds and I think that's where the similarity (TC 00:30:00) almost begins and ends. I would suggest that, in part, this may be because the PLA and the PLAN doesn't feel it's quite ready yet for that force-on-force confrontation and these so-called hybrid approaches or this desire to stay below the threshold will last as long as they feel that they're not capable of direct competition, particularly with the US Navy, but also increasingly Australians and others in the region.

So, this might not be a way of warfare but rather an approach to be followed to achieve political objectives in a meaningful way in the short term until such time as China becomes a meaningful military power once again. But, there is a real problem with China with all these things. IRGC today, I think it looks more like Hoffman than pretty much anybody else does, certainly more than Russia does in terms of combining conventional, irregular terrorism with a criminality. That's kind of the way Iran seems to be operating. North Korea's ransomware attacks and indeed its general use of cyber seems to me to be much more about a state that's desperate to get currency because it's so completely and utterly isolated and that's 1 way to do it. That's why the attack on Bank of Bangladesh a few years ago has been linked to North Korea. That was absolutely about getting cash. Is that about warfare? I'm not so sure.

Moderator: Fascinating as ever Ewan and we're going to have to come back to you for those additional podcasts that we identified as requirements to get on to.