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UNDERSTANDING HYBRID WAR: WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT IS NOT, AND WHY IT MATTERS

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The recent leaked video alleging campaign finance violations by President Nikos Christodoulides and his associates has thrust the terms "hybrid warfare", "hybrid war", and "hybrid attack" into Cyprus' public discourse. Yet for many, these terms remain poorly understood and are often used interchangeably. Some dismiss them as exaggeration or conspiracy; others see them as a convenient label used to deflect legitimate criticism and avoid accountability.

In simple terms, hybrid warfare is about using different tools together — sometimes including military means, but mostly information manipulation, cyber activity, economic pressure, or diplomacy. Hybrid war describes the broader situation that develops when such methods are used repeatedly over time. A hybrid attack refers to a specific incident within that wider context.

Hybrid war is not a theory. It is a defining form of conflict in the 21st century, and it matters most for small, open, democratic, and institutionally exposed states.

At its core, hybrid war is the coordinated use of multiple instruments of pressure, with the emphasis on non-military means, designed to weaken a state from within, without a formal declaration of war. It does not rely on tanks or air strikes. It relies on ambiguity, deniability, and accumulation. Its tools include disinformation and deepfakes, the manipulation of social media and public debate, cyber operations, economic or energy pressure, legal or institutional obstruction, and the instrumentalisation of social tensions or migration.

Hybrid war may also involve diplomacy — but only when diplomacy is used instrumentally and in bad faith. When talks are used to delay, blur intent, block collective responses, or project moderation while coercive pressure continues in parallel, diplomacy becomes part of the hybrid toolbox.

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None of these tools is new. What is new is the way they are combined, sequenced, and sustained over time. Hybrid war works slowly. It can shock at the tactical level, as the leaked video did, but its purpose is erosion at the strategic level.

It is equally important to be clear about what hybrid war is not. It is not political criticism, investigative journalism, public disagreement, or the exposure of wrongdoing supported by evidence. These are not threats to democracy; they are essential to it. Misconduct should be investigated on its merits, through evidence and due process — not through viral insinuation.

The distinction lies not in the subject, but in the method and intent. Hybrid operations rely on exaggeration, personalisation, rapid dissemination, and the absence of evidence or accountability.

The aim of hybrid war is not truth or reform, but confusion, distrust, and fatigue. When facts give way to impressions, and impressions harden into beliefs, democratic debate turns into information conflict. As Orwell warned, when language and reality are manipulated, what is defined as real acquires real power — and real consequences.

Hybrid war exists because it is effective. Paraphrasing Clausewitz, it is the continuation of war by other means. It is far less costly than conventional war, difficult to attribute, hard to prove conclusively, and politically convenient.

Conventional war carries responsibility and consequences; hybrid war offers plausible deniability. In the age of digital platforms and artificial intelligence, partial truths can travel faster and cause more damage than outright lies. Once released, they cannot be fully retrieved.

Hybrid war does not primarily target the state; it targets society. Its objectives are to erode trust in institutions, cultivate cynicism and resignation, and foster the belief that all institutions, leaders, and sources of information are equally corrupt, equally dishonest, and equally untrustworthy. It seeks to create confusion, distort and degrade public debate while blurring the line between fact and fiction. A society that no longer believes in the possibility of truth becomes easier to manipulate — not through force, but through doubt, as citizens withdraw from active participation and retreat into private resignation.

Long before modern terminology, this dynamic was well understood. As Thucydides observed during the Peloponnesian War, in times of crisis words are deliberately used in ways that alter their meaning — and with it, judgment falters.

Hybrid war is particularly effective against small states — not because they are weak, but because they are highly exposed, dependent on credibility, sensitive to reputation, and constrained in their response options.

In such contexts, very little is needed to produce disproportionate effects. No hostile act may be required at all; the cultivation of doubt is often enough. We have seen this repeatedly: institutions do not fail first. Confidence does.

The response to hybrid war is not censorship, and it is not denial. Effective defence rests on transparency, accountability, credible institutions, timely and factual communication, media literacy, and the consistent application of the rule of law by the state — supported by responsible citizens. What is needed is fewer outbursts and more judgment. Less reflex, more reflection and critical thinking.

A final thought. Hybrid war does not announce itself. It does not wear a uniform. Clausewitz taught us that war is clouded by a fog of uncertainty. Hybrid war goes further. It deliberately creates and weaponises that fog. It operates daily, quietly, and persistently.

Experience suggests this: while states can — and do — suffer aggression from the outside, they are often weakened first from within, when citizens lose the ability — or the will — to tell what truly matters and must be defended from what does not.