

MILITARY LEADERS IN THE FACE OF HYBRID THREATS: BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: This article explores the pivotal role of adaptive leadership in enhancing military resilience in the face of hybrid threats. Hybrid threats, which combine conventional and unconventional tactics such as cyber warfare, disinformation, and economic warfare, present unique challenges to military leaders in modern operations. The research assesses how adaptive leadership can help military leaders navigate these complex and evolving threats by fostering resilience and adaptability. Through examining key hybrid threats and their impact on military operations, the study highlights the significance of resilience and adaptability in the modern military environment. The article also investigates the relationship between these traits and their contribution to overcoming hybrid threats. Findings suggest that adaptive leadership, supported by ongoing training and technological integration, is crucial for ensuring operational success and maintaining national security in the face of unpredictable challenges.

Keywords: military leader, hybrid threat, operational environment, resilience, adaptive leadership

1. Introduction

The modern operational environment is characterized by a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, shaped by a multitude of evolving factors. This has been clearly demonstrated in recent conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and ongoing tensions in the Middle East, where advanced technologies, hybrid warfare, and volatile geopolitical dynamics have transformed military strategies and operations.

Hybrid threats, including disinformation, cyberattacks, information warfare, and disruptive technologies present complex challenges that demand flexible, creative leadership. The blending of conventional and unconventional tactics by both state and non-state actors calls for a departure from traditional leadership models in favour

of more adaptive and resilient approaches. Effectively countering hybrid threats requires a focus on resilience, enabling military structures to absorb and recover from disruptions while maintaining operational effectiveness. This approach emphasizes continuous learning, rapid decision-making, and the ability to function efficiently in complex and multidimensional environments. As a result, the development of resilience through adaptive leadership has become a key element in ensuring mission success and maintaining strategic stability in an increasingly unpredictable security landscape.

Therefore, the key concepts to be operationalized include: military leader, military leadership, operational

environment, hybrid threats, resilience and adaptability. Regarding the clarification of the previously mentioned concepts, the definitions are relatively clear, as they are similarly defined in the doctrines of NATO member states. In this study, the main concepts will be defined as follows:

- Military leader – *“anyone who by virtue of assumed role or assigned responsibility inspires and influences people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization”* [1]. In the military organization, the military leader is frequently associated with the commander, the individual responsible for carrying out the act of command;
- Leadership – *“the activity of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization”* [2]. This process is fundamental as it ensures coherence of actions, maintains morale, and facilitates adaptation to complex and unpredictable situations;
- Operational environment – *“a composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander”* [3]. Due to the fact that the military operations are influenced by variable external factors, understanding the operational environment becomes crucial for the commander to make efficient and informed decisions;
- Hybrid threats – *“a type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space”* [4]. Hybrid threats represent a major security concern by merging various tactics and targeting state weaknesses through a complex, multidimensional strategy, demanding adaptable and coordinated countermeasures;
- Resilience – the ability to *“recover quickly from setbacks, shock, injuries, adversity, and stress while maintaining a mission and organizational focus”* [5];
- Adaptability – *“the ability to influence*

conditions and respond effectively to changing threats and situations with appropriate, flexible, and timely actions” [6]. In a dynamic and unpredictable operational environment, adaptability and resilience are essential for mission success, as it allows for rapid adjustments to new challenges and the implementation of effective solutions in real time.

2. Research Methodology

Following the clarification of key concepts, the present study aims to assess the extent to which adaptive leadership contributes to addressing the challenges generated by hybrid threats in the modern operational environment. In this context, the research has been structured around the following objectives:

- **RObj₁**: identifying the main developments in the field;
- **RObj₂**: defining the primary hybrid threats faced by military leaders in the modern operational environment;
- **RObj₃**: examining how resilience and adaptability manifest in the contemporary military environment;
- **RObj₄**: establishing the relationship between adaptive leadership and military leaders' ability to manage hybrid threats in modern operations.

To achieve these research objectives, the main research hypothesis (RH) asserts that *adaptive leadership significantly contributes to overcoming the challenges posed by hybrid threats encountered by military leaders in the current operational context*. Furthermore, to support the validation of the previously mentioned hypothesis, the following research questions have been formulated:

- **RQ₁**: What are the main advancements in the field?;
- **RQ₂**: What are the most prominent hybrid threats characteristic of the contemporary operational environment?;
- **RQ₃**: What specific challenges do these hybrid threats pose to military leaders?;

- **RQ₄:** In what ways do resilience and adaptability manifest among military leaders in current operational contexts?;
- **RQ₅:** What are the key factors that contribute to the development of resilience and adaptability within the military environment?;
- **RQ₆:** To what extent does adaptive leadership affect military leaders' ability to effectively manage hybrid threats?.

In order to achieve the research objectives and validate the proposed hypotheses, this study will employ qualitative methods such as literature review, critical analysis of relevant resources, comparative analysis, and indirect observation.

Each research objective (RObj) is correlated with specific research questions (RQ) and appropriate research methods (RM). RObj₁, which addresses the identification of key advancements in the field, is linked to RQ₁ and will be explored through literature review. Moreover, RObj₂ corresponds to RQ₂ and RQ₃, and will be investigated through critical analysis of relevant resources, comparative analysis, and indirect observation. Similarly, RObj₃, which is associated with RQ₄ and RQ₅, and RObj₄, which is correlated with RQ₆ will employ the same methodological approach. In terms of methodological application, the literature review will serve to identify the main advancements in the field by synthesizing existing theories and models. Furthermore, the critical analysis of relevant resources will facilitate the examination of academic studies, strategic documents, and military doctrines to identify the primary hybrid threats and their impact on military leaders.

Additionally, comparative analysis will support the evaluation of adaptive leadership strategies applied in various operational contexts, highlighting the most effective practices, while indirect observation will offer insights into how military leaders manage hybrid threats, based on the analysis of scholarly studies and personal experiences.

3. Literature Review

As a preliminary section of the literature review, it can be stated that, although a considerable number of studies address relevant topics such as hybrid threats in various types of conflicts or the role of leadership in modern warfare, there is a noticeable scarcity of works that adopt an integrated approach to examining how military leaders can develop resilience to hybrid threats by applying adaptive leadership.

In this regard, a first article highlights the idea that the international security landscape is increasingly defined by hybrid threats and hybrid warfare (HT&HW), which blur the lines between war and peace. The authors emphasize the urgent need for a comprehensive, cross-sector approach to understanding and countering these complex challenges, particularly for Western democracies, which are both frequent targets and especially vulnerable due to their open and rule-based societies [7]. Moreover, the paper highlights Russia's prominent role in developing and employing hybrid tactics, especially in Ukraine, and emphasizes that such strategies, involving a blend of military and non-military means like propaganda, cyberattacks, and economic coercion, are also adopted by other state and non-state actors including China, Iran, North Korea, ISIS, and Hezbollah, with the concept of hybrid warfare remaining analytically valuable despite criticism of its ambiguity. As a result, in recent years, Western democracies have significantly intensified efforts to counter hybrid threats, leading to enhanced cooperation, policy implementation, and capability-building across multinational, governmental, and non-governmental entities in response to evolving security challenges.

Regarding the importance of adaptability, another article highlights that, although the military is often associated with a rigid structure defined by strict adherence to rules and procedures, the nature of modern conflicts has led the military organization to

recognize that a lack of adaptability can have catastrophic consequences on the battlefield. This is because certain factors that have the potential to influence a commander's decisions can only be accurately assessed in the field, during the actual course of military operations [8]. On the other hand, as the author also states, military leaders are required to possess a thorough understanding of regulations and procedures in order to recognize when it may be necessary to deviate from them and adapt to the specific contextual situation in order to achieve the desired end state.

Furthermore, as a change agent, the adaptable leader consistently seeks to step outside of the comfort zone, challenging and re-evaluating previously held ideas and assumptions. A military leader fosters the development of adaptability by maintaining an open mind, demonstrating the ability to consider multiple perspectives, perceiving situations as they truly are rather than as one might wish them to be, showing a willingness to take risks, and effectively overcoming failures.

A last article conceptualized resilience as a fundamental capacity to respond to the complexity and unpredictability of threats associated with hybrid warfare [9]. In NATO's context, resilience is essential to collective defense, but baseline requirements like energy or transportation infrastructure are inadequate against the complexity of hybrid threats. A reassessment of strategy-making processes is necessary, emphasizing continuous, inclusive, and self-reflective approaches that manage institutional and cultural differences. The article concludes that resilience is a strategic attribute that reflects the cohesion, adaptability, and sustainability of democratic systems in facing hybrid challenges.

4. Key Hybrid Threats in Modern Warfare: Challenges and Responses

In the complex and rapidly evolving landscape of modern warfare, hybrid threats

have emerged as a central challenge for military leaders across the globe. These threats combine a wide range of tactics, from conventional military force to unconventional methods like cyber-attacks, disinformation, proxy warfare, and economic warfare, creating an intricate web of challenges that are often difficult to identify, combat, and counter. This section will explore each key hybrid threat in detail, alongside the main challenges they pose to military operations and leadership in contemporary conflict environments.

4.1. Cyber Warfare

Cyber warfare represents a significant and global hybrid threat in today's interconnected world, where digital attacks can transcend physical boundaries and disrupt critical infrastructure such as power grids, defense systems, and communication networks. As a relevant study shows, existing threat modeling frameworks like the Cyber Kill Chain, MITRE ATT&CK, and SWOT analysis are demonstrated to be inadequate for these entities, as they do not fully address specific vulnerabilities [10]. It can be stated clearly that the biggest challenges are faced by less technologically advanced adversaries, such as smaller nations or resource-limited organizations, who are often ill-equipped to defend against sophisticated cyber threats. From the perspective of the tactical leader, cyber threats have the potential to adversely impact the quality of decision-making, facilitate the dissemination of disinformation, and compromise critical weapon and communication systems essential for the effective coordination of forces during the missions.

4.2. Disinformation and Information Warfare

Disinformation and information warfare have evolved into central tools of statecraft in the digital age, both authoritarian and democratic governments engage in organized campaigns to influence foreign and domestic audiences. As Hamid and Arhad relate in their study, the widespread

use of state-sponsored "cyber troops" highlights how disinformation is increasingly used as a strategic instrument to distract, confuse, or discredit opponents [11]. Moreover, while traditionally seen as a tactic employed by non-democratic states, democracies like the United States, France, and Hungary have also participated in such operations. These hybrid tactics have the potential to undermine troop morale and increase the level of uncertainty in the operational environment in which military leaders carry out their missions.

4.3. Psychological Operations (PSYOPS)

This type of operation represents a means through which state or non-state actors employ disinformation and propaganda to exploit specific cultural, social, or organizational vulnerabilities. These actions are carried out in a coordinated manner, targeting both the civilian population and military structures, with the aim of undermining trust in state authorities, dividing society, or weakening the morale and cohesion of armed forces.

4.4. Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDT)

The accelerated evolution of technology is fundamentally reshaping the domain of international security, with emerging and disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous systems and weapons as critical enablers of this transformation [12]. These technological advancements significantly enhance military capabilities, bolster cybersecurity, and reinforce other strategic sectors, equipping states with sophisticated tools for defense and threat mitigation. Nonetheless, their integration also presents complex challenges for the preservation of international security and stability, while simultaneously giving rise to ethical dilemmas and potential risks associated with the disruption of the global balance of power. The integration of emerging and disruptive technologies carries significant implications for tactical leaders, affecting not only their decision-making processes

and the nature of field operations, but also increasing the overall complexity of the modern battlespace.

4.5. Economic Warfare

Economic warfare, particularly through the use of sanctions, has become a central instrument of contemporary foreign policy. Although frequently employed to penalize state behaviors deemed unacceptable by the international community, the effectiveness of such measures remains highly contested. Empirical evidence suggests that sanctions seldom achieve their intended political objectives and tend to disproportionately impact civilian populations. In his book, Mulder highlights the idea that economic warfare is not perceived solely as an alternative to military conflict, but also as a means of maintaining global order and reinforcing power hierarchies [13]. It is evident that for military organizations, state-imposed sanctions have direct consequences by depleting the resources required to sustain troops in the field, while also altering the operational landscape, as military leaders must adapt to the constraints these measures impose.

4.6. Implications of Non-state Actors

Non-state actors, also referred to as proxies, encompass terrorist organizations, criminal syndicates, rebels, insurgents, mercenaries, or separatist groups that employ asymmetric tactics to achieve clearly defined objectives. Most often, they support the interests of a state which finance their activities. Additionally, the actions of these groups can target both military structures and the civilian population or critical infrastructures through violent acts intended to undermine the authority of a state [14]. Although non-state actors often lack the numerical strength or advanced resources of the military forces they oppose, their use of unconventional tactics poses significant challenges for tactical leaders, requiring constant vigilance and an ongoing commitment to maintaining situational awareness.

5. Resilience and Adaptability in the Contemporary Military Environment

In today's rapidly evolving military landscape, resilience and adaptability have become essential traits for operational success. Numerous studies have extensively examined these concepts, highlighting their critical role in contemporary military operations.

As highlighted in a relevant study, in the contemporary military environment, resilience manifests as the ability of soldiers and military leaders to adapt quickly and effectively to the challenges posed by volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) operational settings [15]. It is evident that soldiers encounter cognitive overload, caloric deprivation, physical exhaustion, and sleep restriction during their missions, making resilience essential for sustaining both physical and cognitive performance. Moreover, resilience is regarded not merely as psychological strength, but as a multidimensional skill that integrates emotional, mental, spiritual, and social adaptability.

Another study illustrates that resilience is built through multiple interdependent layers, starting with physical training (especially aerobic and anaerobic conditioning) and psychological preparation to manage stress and discomfort [16]. Although resilience is rooted in cellular biology and psychology, it can be enhanced through training and experience.

At the international level, several initiatives are underway to enhance the resilience and training of soldiers and tactical leaders, aiming to support their performance and adaptability in challenging operational environments. These include the Master Resilience Training (MRT) in the United States, Battle Smart in Australia, the British Army Mental Resilience Programme, Resilience Training for the Danish Armed Forces, and Soldier Performance and Resilience Enhancement (S.P.A.R.E) in Canada. All these programs are designed to enhance the mental, physical, and social

resilience of military personnel, helping them cope with challenges and perform optimally in extreme conditions.

Furthermore, multiple studies present the idea that adaptability is a core aspect of resilience, enabling individuals and organizations to adjust and thrive in the face of change [17]. Adaptability is essential for success in dynamic environments, as it allows effective responses to new challenges. Traits like hardiness, commitment, control, and challenge, enhance adaptability by helping individuals navigate uncertainty.

Boylan and Turner divide the general concept of adaptability into two categories: individual adaptability and organizational adaptability. Regarding the adaptability of military leaders, the authors believe it is the ability to change behavior and think creatively in response to environmental changes, effectively combining proactive anticipation with reactive responses [18]. Moreover, it involves cognitive skills like critical thinking and creativity, as well as relational skills such as self-awareness and social competence. Effective adaptability enables leaders to solve problems and adjust to unforeseen challenges.

For tactical leaders, adaptability is essential in modern military operations, especially in dynamic conflicts like the Russian-Ukrainian war. It allows them to adjust strategies and tactics in response to changing situations. For example, adaptive leadership, through mission command, empowers lower-level commanders to make decisions aligned with the commander's intent, ensuring flexibility in operations. This approach fosters critical thinking and creativity, enabling commanders to adapt their plans in real-time while balancing short-term needs with long-term goals [19]. In an increasingly unpredictable environment, adaptability is key to maintaining operational effectiveness and achieving mission success.

6. The Relationship between Resilience, Adaptability and Leaders' Ability to Face Hybrid Threats

Increasing the level of adaptability and resilience is, according to experts, a key solution for preventing and countering the challenges posed by hybrid threats. In an operational environment characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity, the leader must consistently be capable of adapting to emerging changes. The modern battlefield will present leaders with increasingly complex situations, making their effectiveness in responding directly dependent on their level of adaptability.

The importance of adaptive leadership has been recognized by the leading military forces internationally. For example, the US Army doctrine emphasizes the need for leaders to quickly assess and adapt to changing environments, as no conflict has a predetermined solution. This requires creativity, innovation, and the ability to handle uncertainty. While flexibility and self-development are critical, they must be balanced with order and discipline, creating tension within military organizations. Nonetheless, adaptive leadership remains key to overcoming rigid doctrines and ensuring effective leadership in dynamic operational conditions [20].

In the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, adaptive leadership has proven essential in the face of hybrid warfare tactics employed by Russian forces. Ukrainian military leaders have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in adjusting their strategies to counter these evolving threats. For instance, during the early stages of the conflict, Ukrainian forces rapidly adapted to the sudden onslaught of hybrid threats, which combined conventional military operations with cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and unconventional tactics. The ability of Ukrainian commanders to adjust their plans on the fly, whether in response to terrain challenges, shifting enemy positions, or the evolving geopolitical

landscape, has been a crucial factor in their ability to resist.

From another perspective, adaptive leadership has been closely linked to the rapid technological developments that are taking place at an extraordinary pace, which significantly influence modern combat actions. In this regard, adapting to digital technology in the military will not only enhance situational awareness but also enable more precise and timely responses to evolving threats. As modern conflicts increasingly blend traditional combat with non-traditional threats such as cyber warfare, misinformation, and hybrid attacks, the role of digital leadership becomes critical. Military leaders must leverage advanced technologies to create more effective strategies, ensure better coordination between various branches of the armed forces, and optimize resource allocation [21]. Additionally, the ability to swiftly adapt to digital advancements will foster more resilient defense systems capable of tackling both conventional and unconventional threats in future warfare.

From a broader perspective, resilience and adaptability are key solutions for combating threats not only at the tactical level but also at the operational, strategic, and even political levels [22]. For most NATO and EU member states, countering hybrid threats has become a national priority, leading to ongoing efforts to establish favorable legal frameworks and allocate necessary resources. In addition to the development of military forces, significant importance has also been placed on the civilian system and critical infrastructures, which play a vital role in ensuring national security against external threats.

As previously mentioned, adaptability and resilience can be developed through training and experience. Regular, dynamic training in diverse scenarios enables individuals to confront a variety of challenges, enhancing their ability to adapt to changing situations. A practical solution lies in the use of emerging technologies,

which now play a crucial role in training for adaptability and resilience against hybrid threats in modern warfare. Virtual and augmented reality create realistic training environments that simulate complex scenarios, preparing military forces for both conventional and hybrid threats. These technologies allow soldiers to train in high-stress, multi-domain situations without risk, fostering critical thinking, rapid decision-making, and adaptability. By simulating diverse threats and operational variables, these tools boost readiness and resilience, empowering forces to respond effectively in unpredictable and interconnected conflict environments, all while reducing training costs [23].

Furthermore, to effectively manage the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in modern operational environments, particularly hybrid ones, it is crucial for leaders to consistently demonstrate adaptability and relevant competencies. Therefore, it is essential to start this training early, beginning at military schools, where modern educational and training strategies tailored to the evolving hybrid challenges should be introduced and integrated [24].

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the information presented, all research objectives have been fully achieved, and the main hypothesis has been thoroughly validated.

This study highlights the critical role of adaptive leadership in managing the complex challenges posed by hybrid threats

in modern warfare. As hybrid threats become increasingly multifaceted, including cyber warfare, disinformation, and non-state actors, military leaders must possess the resilience and adaptability necessary to navigate these volatile environments. The research underscores that these qualities can be developed through continuous training and experience, especially within military academies and schools, where modern training methods and emerging technologies like virtual and augmented reality can enhance preparation for unpredictable scenarios.

The integration of adaptive leadership practices with resilience and adaptability enables military leaders to effectively respond to hybrid threats. Additionally, leveraging advanced technologies in training allows for more realistic and dynamic simulations, which are essential for honing critical decision-making skills and ensuring operational effectiveness. As military organizations strive to counter hybrid threats, fostering adaptability from the outset of a leader's career and throughout their professional development remains key to maintaining strategic and operational superiority. Ultimately, resilience and adaptability are indispensable not only in tactical responses but also in ensuring the security and stability of nations within NATO and EU alliances.

Thus, cultivating resilience and adaptability is not only beneficial, but imperative for future military leadership.

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