SILENT INVADERS: THE GROWING THREAT OF DRONES AND BALLOONS

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The use of drones and balloons as tools of hybrid warfare has become a reality in recent years that has complicated the security equation in Europe and especially on the Eastern Flank. The threat generated by the use of aerostats and drones in a pernicious manner seems to become an essential component of contemporary confrontation strategies. And this preference for these low-cost and operationally flexible technologies allows states and non-state actors to carry out actions that are difficult to attribute to hybrid aggressors, thus increasing strategic ambiguity. Drones facilitate smuggling, surveillance, intelligence gathering, and targeted attacks, while balloons can serve as monitoring platforms and as a means to test the limits of adversary airspace. Together, they expand the spectrum of unconventional tactics, altering the balance between offense and defense and complicating deterrence mechanisms. This article examines how these systems are reshaping the dynamics of modern conflicts, highlighting their security implications.

Keywords: drones; aerostats; hybrid warfare; hybrid threats; European Union;

INTRODUCTION

If discussions regarding drones are generally more recent, meaning the last few decades, as a result of their emergence, those regarding the use of balloons, whether we are referring to gas or hot air balloons, should take us back in time to long-gone periods, meaning several centuries ago.

Each of the two elements fits perfectly into the civilian dimensions of human activities, from leisure, to aerial filming of cultural, sporting and personal events, to mapping and use in agriculture, or in various fields, such as construction, civil emergencies, etc., and these are just a few of the actions that these types of aerial vehicles can perform. In general, balloons can be used for aerial photography, surveillance and monitoring, meteorological actions, and emergencies involving certain categories of disasters, while drones focus on largely the same aspects of entertainment, meteorology, search and rescue actions, etc.

Analyzing the various actions for which balloons and drones can be used, we identify a wide range of advantages that arise from their use, which inevitably led to the proliferation of these types of aircraft. A proliferation that over time has also seen an expansion of their use in the military field, an evolution that has also occurred as a result of the possibility of using drones in particular in a manner that is more than opportune for international state actors who have been concerned with equipping their own armies with such elements, primarily as a result of the advantages that arise from the options for their use.

From this point towards the direction of hybrid warfare involving the use of such elements was only a step, and this was taken by countries that use this type of unmanned aircraft for military purposes. The big problem, however, became the folding of the advantages of using drones and balloons on the characteristics of hybrid warfare, a situation that has recently exposed a multitude of advantages in terms of the use of such objects, to the detriment of the targeted countries.

HYBRID WARFARE – AT THE CONVERGENCE OF THE MILITARY AND THE NON-MILITARY. WAR BY ALL MEANS

In recent decades, the international security environment has undergone a series of mutations that have complicated developments in the security field through the emergence of a new form of warfare - hybrid warfare. And if previously,

the confrontation between international actors revolved around classic conflicts, specific to past centuries, the emergence of the hybrid dimension of conflicts has come to complicate the situation. In the sense that hybrid wars combine military and non-military means, overt and covert actions, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, the use of regular forces and irregular armed groups, etc., with the aim of blurring the boundaries between war and peace, in order to sow doubt in the minds of target populations, in order to undermine them and implicitly destabilize the respective states (NATO, 2024).

With the emergence of this type of conflict and the awareness of the effectiveness of the magnifying glass taken to the "gray area", countries that use such actions to achieve their goals have diversified their options for action, so that currently we can explain the tactics of hybrid warfare by bringing into discussion urban guerrilla fighting, disinformation, kidnappings, terrorism, the use of drones and balloons, etc. (Bargués, Bourekba, 2022), in a combination of actions and elements that speak of waging a war by all means at hand, military and non-military.

In other words, hybrid conflict can be explained by the use of a full range of different modes of warfare, which include conventional and unconventional capabilities, involving irregular tactics and formations, acts of terrorism, but also actions that may involve indiscriminate violence and coercion (Hoffman, 2007, p. 8).

Then, also due to the need for a more applied explanation of hybrid warfare, it is useful to divide the elements that can be used in the logic of a hybrid approach to conflict, into military means, that is, the use of what is conventional, including sophisticated weapons, and unconventional, which can mean the covert use of special forces, or the support of groups that can act as proxies. If the military dimension in any conflict remains tributary to that involving equipment and access to technology, the non-military dimension of hybrid offers even more opportunities for actors who resort to this type of confrontation, that is, the use of a wide range of non-kinetic measures. And here we are talking about propaganda and disinformation, as options for spreading fake news and more; cyberattacks and hacking; economic pressure (sanctions, trade restrictions, interruption of the supply of vital resources); diplomatic pressure and related tactics (lawfare); sabotage and terrorism, elements used simultaneously and adaptively in a combined mix to achieve the desired political objectives (Hoffman, Neumeyer, Jensen, 2024).

More recently, the weaponization or instrumentalization of migrants has been added to the list of hybrid threats (Gkliati, 2023), their transformation into a "weapon" demonstrating how any means can be used in this type of confrontation, as long as it can bring advantages to the aggressor.

An important aspect of what it means to wage a hybrid war is that the "dosing" of actions and the "mixing of ingredients" depend on the military strategies of the international actors who resort to such actions, hence the complexity of hybrid wars as a result of the fact that the aggressors use any means at hand to affect the security and stability of the targeted international actors.

The term hybrid warfare is linked to the year 2005 and Lt. Gen. James Mattis of the US Marine Corps, who explained this relatively new type of conflict, and then wrote, together with Lt. Col. Frank Hoffman, a work dedicated to this type of war, called "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars". Hoffman later continued the effort to popularize this term through a series of essays and books in which he explained hybrid warfare by referring to the 2006 conflict in Lebanon, more specifically to the way in which the Lebanese group Hezbollah acted against the State of Israel, effectively combining high-tech firepower – cruise and anti-ship missiles, with classic guerrilla warfare tactics, to which it added a media campaign directed against the Israeli state.

Identifying the effectiveness of such a combination of actions, Frank Hoffman warned at that time that future adversaries of the United States of America would act relatively similarly, by combining the conventional military dimension with acts of terrorism, cyberwarfare, propaganda, etc., the purpose of this mix of elements being to cause maximum damage to the security of the American state, both physically and psychologically (Baku Network, 2025).

The period that followed partially validated Hoffman's theory regarding the USA, which is the target of actions that fall within the scope of hybrid warfare, backed by states such as China and the Russian Federation, but the "textbook case" on this dimension is dedicated to Ukraine and the effects that the conflict in Eastern Europe has, especially on countries that are part of the Euro-Atlantic space.

BALLOONS AND DRONES – THE THREAT FROM THE GRAY AREA OF HYBRID WARFARE

The last few decades have witnessed technological developments unprecedented in history, while the emergence of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), also known as drones, has opened up unprecedented opportunities. Unmanned aerial vehicles are aircraft without a crew or passengers on board, and can be automated or remotely piloted, while the ability to fly for long periods of time and over long distances increases their usefulness in both civilian and military use (The Editors of ProCon, 2025).

And the discussion on the military utility of these devices can start from the difference between drones and cruise missiles, two overlapping elements as technology from several points of view, from what it means to use them for guided flights, to almost similar capabilities, while the differences come from the reuse of drones, which are aerial vehicles that return to base after the mission is completed (with the exception of the kamikaze ones), unlike cruise missiles that are destroyed upon reaching the target.

Other differences relate to the fact that a cruise missile generally carries a much larger explosive payload, while drones, due to the technology they are based on, are most often controlled and monitored remotely by the crews that operate them, being programmed to return to base, unlike cruise missiles which, once launched for a mission, operate based on pre-programming, being largely completely autonomous once they have left the launch point (Schmidt, Haider, 2021).

However, discussing the use of drones and balloons in hybrid warfare transcends the military dimension of the conflict, as it is not exclusively about the use of military UAVs in actions against enemies on the battlefield.Rather, it is about incidents involving civilian drones and balloons that paralyze air traffic in the countries where they occur, creating a state of panic in the affected societies, while increasing anxiety among the authorities of the respective states, who are faced with difficulties in how to frame such incidents and how to manage them.

BALLOONS – THE (NEW) FLYING THREATS

Aeronautics explains balloons (Rumerman, n.d.) as unpropelled aerostat objects that, as a result of their characteristics, can remain in the air or float due to their buoyancy, differentiating themselves from vehicles that are part of the airship category, which are propelled aerostat objects that fly in a controlled manner.

The first elements that speak of hot air balloons are related to the history of China, more precisely to the era of the Three Kingdoms, when Zhuge Liang of the Shu Han kingdom (220-280 AD), used aerial lanterns for military signaling (Atkins, 2022).

History also shows that the first inventions used in aerial warfare were balloons and kites, with their main role being reconnaissance, providing an overhead view of the battlefield and the positioning and movements of enemy troops. Later, balloons were used to set fire to enemy targets, while the first recorded military use of balloons is related to the French Revolutionary Wars. The military efficiency of such elements made their use even more widespread starting in the 19th century, and the technological level of those times led to their equipping with cameras, telegraphs

and other instruments that allowed for much more operational, detailed and precise reconnaissance and observation actions, essential in the military dimension (Britannica Editors, 2024).

Nowadays, balloons are not widely used in the military field, with an obvious preference for technologies such as drones and satellites for access to information and monitoring options, but today, centuries after the beginning of the use of this type of aerostat objects, the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation against countries in the Euro-Atlantic space exposes a complicated reality. The one in which mysterious balloons can have the most diverse effects on the states to which they are sent, including from the perspective of the options these countries have to manage this type of threat coming from the air.

The case of Lithuania and the mysterious balloons that have been flying over its skies since September 2024 is a relevant one in the logic of analyzing the challenges that come in this dimension. In short, during the aforementioned period, dozens of balloons carrying large packages floated from Belarus to Lithuanian airspace. In October 2024, such a balloon landed at Vilnius airport, and it was discovered that the large packages attached to the balloons coming from Belarus contained smuggled cigarettes, and were also equipped with satellite tracking devices to be later recovered by the cigarette smugglers. A few days after the incident involving the balloon landing at Vilnius airport, another similar one landed at a military complex in Lithuania.

At that time, even though evidence indicated that the balloons were only carrying contraband cigarettes, being the only option left for smugglers after Lithuania, in 2023, built a 550 km wall and closed some border crossings on the frontier with Belarus, the Baltic state did not feel comfortable in the context of these developments, especially since the same period coincided with the one in which the Lithuanian authorities made efforts to strengthen defenses on the Eastern border, in an attempt to limit the risks and threats coming from the Russian Federation and Moscow's ally, Belarus. Despite these efforts, in recent times, balloons flying from Belarus have become a common occurrence in Lithuania, with around 250 balloons crossing the border between the two states in September 2024 alone (Seputyte, 2024), a situation that has generated major concerns in the Baltic country.

Then, on 24 November 2024, Lithuania had to deal with the largest flow of balloons entering its airspace to date, so Vilnius Airport had to suspend its operations twice due to balloons in its vicinity, initially for five hours, a period that was later extended. It was not the first disruption of Vilnius Airport's operations, with ten flights and 1,100 passengers affected on 20 November 2024. Earlier,

in October of the same year, as a result of similar incidents, approximately 95 flights were affected and over 14,000 passengers. The decision of the Vilnius regime last autumn to temporarily close the border with Belarus was designed to reduce the number of incidents coming from Belarus and their effects (Kulakova, 2025).

Even if at first glance the balloons can be associated with an action that can be classified as organized crime, more precisely the illicit trafficking of cigarettes, the problem itself is much more complicated. And this complication comes in the context in which it is not excluded that the balloons with trafficked cigarettes test the reaction of the Lithuanian authorities to incidents that are *"harmless"* at first glance for the security of the Lithuanian state, but much more profound in terms of possible direct and secondary effects in the future, for several reasons. First of all, due to the fact that hybrid warfare is a type of warfare that combines the use of all possible means to create situations that are difficult for the target state to manage. And, starting from this approach in which a hybrid aggressor will transform any offererelement for its stage win into an institutionalized one, the actors behind hybrid actions will use elements related to the unconventional dimension in devising broad strategies that have the ability to circumvent the clear demarcation between what can be considered civilian activity and the security risk for the state in the midst of such a situation.

And from this point of view, it is relevant to analyze the way in which the action is *"staged"*, and the example of Lithuania is a relevant one, since it is obvious that no balloon carrying smuggled cigarettes left the state border without this being known to the Belarusian intelligence.Hence the more than pertinent assumptions that once the Belarusian KGB accepted such actions, there is no doubt that the actions are known and, most likely, carried out with the acceptance and encouragement coming from Moscow. An assumption that is related to the close relationship between the Minsk regime and the Kremlin, that is, to the fact that from the moment of the start of the so-called *"special military operation"* in Ukraine, the Belarusian state was used by the Russian Federation to prepare and *"cosmeticize"*, at the same time, its bellicose actions against the Ukrainian state (Bajarūnas, 2024).

Given these developments, the question that arises is whether the swarms of balloons carrying contraband cigarettes from Belarus to Lithuania represent an action by smugglers, are they part of Russia's hybrid war against the Euro-Atlantic space, or are both valid? The Lithuanian Prime-minister has classified the incidents involving weather balloons arriving from Belarus to Lithuania as *"hybrid attacks"*. Analyzing the immediate consequences that the balloons crossing the Lithuanian border generate, interpreting them as related to the intention to create chaos

and *"test"* the weaknesses of the Lithuanian state is not considered inappropriate. At least not in the context of recent years, marked by the effects of hybrid warfare in the region and the intention of the Russian Federation to create confusion and instability in the states on NATO's Eastern Flank. Lithuania seems to be at the forefront of this new type of action, while Poland and Latvia have also been affected, in the sense that balloons have also arrived on their territory, but in much smaller numbers.

The signals coming from the Lithuanian authorities regarding the fact that the balloon swarms represent hybrid attacks on the West, being a significant threat to the security of the states on the Eastern Flank, because they are *"committed in the broader context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine"*, raise an alarm regarding the new hybrid challenges. Especially since the biggest fears are that in the near future, such balloons may be equipped with spy cameras, incendiary devices or even explosives, providing Moscow with a tool in mapping the weaknesses of the states on the Eastern Flank (Rothwell, 2025).

Another telling example of the use of balloons and their impact is the incident in 2023 when an alleged Chinese spy balloon flew over North American territories, specifically Canada and the USA, and which American officials believed was a high-altitude surveillance device.This allegation was contradicted by the Beijing regime, which officially reported that the airship was used for meteorological purposes and deviated from the planned route.The situation was, however, a delicate one, given that the Chinese balloon flew over the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, crossed Canada and then arrived in the city of Billings in Montana, a region that hosts several of the US nuclear missile silos (BBC, 2023).

THE USE OF DRONES SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF HYBRID WARFARE

That military drones have become a defining feature of modern warfare (Clapp, 2025, p. 1) is proven by developments in theaters of operations in Ukraine, the Gaza Strip/Israel, Lebanon, to the civil conflicts in Sudan, Syria and Myanmar, which demonstrate that UAVs have become ubiquitous, as a result of the preference of state and non-state international actors to use this type of military technique in their actions.

Another reality is that drones have changed the tactical dynamics of conflicts, even if there are debates regarding the strategic impact of their use, as argued by those who give examples of the numerous American drone attacks in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and who argue that despite them, the military threat in these

spaces still persists.The same is true in the case of Ukraine (Andersson, Simon, 2024, p. 1), where the large-scale use of drones by both sides has not significantly changed the front lines (Clapp, 2025, p. 2), even if their ability to cause major damage to the enemy is undeniable.

However, discussions about the use of drones in hybrid warfare go beyond the military dimension of their use and reveal a much more complex situation, due to the unpredictability of the situation. Because, in the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation against NATO and the EU member states, with the exceptions involving the passage of drones used by the Russian Army in attacks in Ukraine into the airspace of countries on the Eastern Flank, recent incidents indicate a situation that is at least complicated.

And to understand this reality, it is more than appropriate to provide an example that has not been sorted as an action that can be classified as hybrid warfare, but which may be relevant to understanding subsequent developments. And here we discuss the incident of December 2018, when hundreds of flights from Gatwick Airport near London were canceled amid reports indicating the presence of drones near the runway. In numbers, the incident translates into around 1,000 affected flights and 140,000 passengers who were impacted by what is considered to be the biggest disruption to Gatwick Airport's activity since the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull in 2010, an eruption that paralyzed air traffic across almost the entire European continent (BBC, 2018).

The period following the incidents near Gatwick Airport was marked by somewhat isolated incidents, but recent years have demonstrated the transformation of events in the same category into a major emergency. An emergency that arises from the increasing number of such events and the need for the authorities of the target states to manage such situations as efficiently as possible, especially since the examples are multiple. Thus, in November 2024, several unauthorized drone flights were reported in the UK over and near the military bases RAF Lakenheath, RAF Mildenhall, RAF Feltwell and RAF Fairford, all considered critical to US military activities in Europe, being considered of strategic importance, as RAF Mildenhall is used for refueling missions and special operations; RAF Feltwell for logistical support provided to US forces;RAF Lakenheath is home to the US Air Force's 48th Fighter Wing; while RAF Lakenheath is scheduled to host US nuclear weapons. Even though British and American officials did not provide details at that time regarding the number of drones involved in the incidents, or who might have been behind them, the events were treated seriously by the two states, which took measures to limit the effects on their security (Peart, 2024; Hearn, 2025).

Germany also experienced similar experiences in August 2024, when it reported suspicious drones near US military bases. Later, in December of the same year, the US confirmed an increase in incidents around military bases in Germany, including the famous Ramstein air base, while some industrial areas, including some owned by the arms manufacturer Rheinmetall, were under observation (Reuters, 2024; France 24, 2024).

Later, the year 2025 proved even more prolific in this regard, with the list of incidents involving unidentified drones being even longer.The first major incident of the year concerned Copenhagen Airport, on September 22 this year, Danish authorities took the decision to suspend activities at this airport for more than four hours, after several drones were observed in its vicinity, classifying the incident as a hybrid operation aimed at disrupting critical infrastructure.On the same night, Norwegian authorities made the same decision, temporarily suspending the activity of Oslo Gardermoen Airport for similar reasons.

Between September 24 and 26, similar incidents occurred near Aalborg Airport in Denmark, which has a dual purpose, civil and military, as it also hosts a military base, the activity of this airport being disrupted in two different situations, while the airports of Esbjerg, Sønderborg and FlyvestationSkrydstrup were also affected, with the latter being the main air base of the Royal Danish Air Force, which hosts the 30 F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter jets in the Danish Air Force's fleet (Jacobsen, 2025). The incidents that affected Denmark came in the context in which this state holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union (July – December 2025), but also a few days before a meeting of the EU Council that took place in Copenhagen, on October 1 this year. The topics of discussion on the agenda of the leaders of the EU states included measures to strengthen the common defense of Europe, with a focus on the violations of airspace by the Russian Federation in several European states (European Council, 2025), a topic that has become increasingly urgent and topical in the context of the challenges of hybrid warfare.

The above incidents are not unique, as Poland has also been the target of similar actions.Specifically, on the evening of September 9, between 19 and 23 unarmed drones entered Polish airspace.Polish Prime-minister Donald Tusk described this type of action, which involved the entry of foreign drones into Polish airspace, as a *"direct threat"*. Poland went even further and invoked Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty (Hubenko, Ford, Connor, Hairsine, 2025), an article that provides for the possibility for NATO member states to request consultations with other members of the organization in the event that they consider that the territorial integrity, security and political independence of the respective state are threatened (NATO, 2025).

Poland's justification for such a decision to request consultations was explained by Deputy Prime-minister RadosławSikorski, who brought up the fact that the incidents that affected Poland, including the disruption of the activities of the airports: Warsaw International Airport, Warsaw Modlin Airport, Rzeszów – Jasionka Airport and Lublin Airport, which were temporarily closed, represent *"an unprecedented case of attack not only on the territory of Poland, but also on the territory of NATO and the EU"* (Polskie Radio PL, 2025).

In the context of recent developments, the concerns of the two international organizations and the states on the front lines of hybrid warfare are more than evident.

Amid a growing number of events involving foreign drones, NATO announced on 27 September 2025 that it would increase its presence in the Baltic Sea by boosting intelligence activity and deploying the frigate FGS Hamburg, in a reinforcement of the NATO *"Baltic Sentry"* mission that began in January this year in response to a series of incidents involving damage to electrical cables, telecommunications links and gas pipelines on the Baltic Sea floor. Another NATO mission, *"Eastern Sentry"*, was launched in September this year to increase the defense of the Alliance's Eastern Flank, in response to threats generated by Russian drones violating Polish airspace (Sytas, 2025).

At the EU, the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, sounded the alarm that *"something new and dangerous is happening in our skies"*, a statement made on 8 October 2025, in front of the European Parliament. The head of the European Commission signaled the need for a reaction from the EU, explaining that *"one incident can be a mistake. Two, a coincidence. But three, five, ten? This is a deliberate and targeted campaign in the grey area against Europe. And Europe must respond."* (Lecca, 2025).

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Awareness of the challenges that international state and non-state actors in the Euro-Atlantic space face in the hybrid dimension is a mandatory condition for taking pertinent and coherent measures in the fight against an invisible enemy. In the sense that, despite the attribution, in the vast majority of cases in Europe, of responsibility for incidents in this space to the Russian Federation, the use of drones and balloons represents an option that can be included in hybrid warfare that comes with a series of advantages for the hybrid aggressor, advantages that are directly proportional to the threats that these actions pose for the target state.

And on this dimension, the characteristics of the hybrid dimension involving the use of drones and balloons are of reference, starting from the fact that they represent cheap elements, which can be used without involving high material costs. Moreover, the fact that in few cases the incidents involving drones and balloons could be attributed to the states that initiated them, in the sense of holding them accountable, reduces to almost a minimum the political costs for hybrid aggressors, which benefit from the strategic consequences that the use of such elements implies, that is, the option to create chaos and affect the security of the target states, without resorting to the military component.

Or from this point of view, the fact that the use of drones and balloons can create anxiety in the capitals of the targeted states, while the level of discomfort felt by their societies is high, we could say that such actions that can be classified as hybrid warfare generously expose more than attractive options and opportunities for the actor using them.

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