



Research Article

Hybrid Operations Below the Threshold of War: Target Systems, Campaign Logic, and Vectors of Influence

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Abstract: This article examines hybrid operations below the threshold of war as coordinated actions that combine heterogeneous instruments to manipulate target systems and produce defined political, strategic, operational, or enabling effects. It distinguishes hybrid operations from broader concepts such as hybrid warfare, gray-zone conflict, irregular warfare, and malign influence. It introduces the related concept of hybrid campaigns as a sustained, adaptive, and integrated series of such operations conducted to achieve political or strategic ends. Using a structured comparison of selected cases—Russia’s campaign in Mali and the Sahel, Russia’s sanctions-evasion procurement networks, Iran’s Axis of Resistance, China’s critical-minerals leverage, and Belarus’s instrumentalization of migration—the article explores how diverse actors pursue influence, coercion, circumvention, dependency creation, and dilemma generation without crossing into open war. The cases show that hybrid campaigns are best understood not as lists of tools, but as forms of operational design targeting systems such as security sectors, supply chains, border regimes, deterrence architectures, and elite decision-making networks. The article identifies common features across cases: exploitation of seams, adaptation, manipulation of ambiguity, creation of costly response dilemmas, and a variable role for corruption, from background condition to operational instrument producing strategic effects.

Keywords: hybrid operation, hybrid campaign, strategic corruption, state capture, proxy warfare, sanctions evasion, critical minerals, strategic leverage.

Introduction

Hybrid operations have become a central feature of contemporary strategic competition. States and state-aligned actors increasingly seek political and strategic advantage without crossing the threshold into open war. They do so by combining diverse tools: disinformation, cyber operations, economic pressure, legal manipulation, diplomatic coercion, corruption, and deniable military-type actions. Such activity is not new, but its contemporary significance has increased as open societies, global supply chains, digital infrastructures, financial systems, border regimes, and democratic institutions have become both more interconnected and more vulnerable to manipulation.

The problem is not simply that adversaries use “non-military” means. Rather, the challenge lies in the purposeful orchestration of heterogeneous instruments to manipulate target systems, generate leverage, constrain response options, and achieve political effects while avoiding the legal, political, and military costs and risks of open war. In some cases, hybrid operations rely on coercive ambiguity and plausible deniability. In others, they exploit legal thresholds, market dependencies, weak governance, corruptible elites, or the seams between public and private authority. The result is a form of competition in which political effects may be pursued through actions that are individually ambiguous but cumulatively strategic.

The importance of this subject is reflected in recent analyses of Russian strategy and NATO responses. Gintaras Bagdonas argues that Russia’s behavior toward NATO, Europe, and Ukraine should not be interpreted merely as reactive or episodic, but as part of a coherent, long-term strategy aimed at restoring imperial power and reshaping the international order.¹ Anca Ioana Anescu, focusing on Russian sabotage and NATO deterrence, similarly highlights the difficulty of responding to coercive, security-relevant actions that are calibrated to complicate attribution, proportionality, and escalation.² These studies illustrate a broader analytical problem: contemporary security competition often occurs in the space between routine statecraft and open warfare, where adversaries seek cumulative advantage through campaigns that are difficult to detect and classify and, therefore, difficult to deter and defend against.

This article contributes to that discussion by focusing not on hybrid warfare as a broad condition, but on the more specific concepts of *hybrid operations* and *hybrid campaigns*. The distinction matters. Most academic sources and policy documents on hybrid warfare, gray-zone conflict, irregular warfare, and malign influence emphasize the blending of military and non-military means, ambiguity,

¹ Gintaras Bagdonas, “Know the Enemy: Understanding Russia’s Global Political End-State,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 24, no. 4 (2025): 17–36, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.24.3.23>.

² Anca Ioana Anescu, “Deterring Hybrid Warfare: NATO Approaches to Russian Sabotage,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 24, no. 4 (2025): 70–88, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.24.3.27>.

and competition below the threshold of war.³ Yet these concepts often fail to specify the difference between isolated hostile activities, bounded operational designs, and sustained campaigns. A disinformation episode, corrupt transaction, cyber intrusion, sanctions violation, proxy attack, or export-control measure may be important, but it becomes analytically more significant when understood as part of a coordinated operation or as one element within a broader campaign.

The article asks three related questions. First, how can hybrid operations and hybrid campaigns be conceptualized in relation to adjacent concepts such as hybrid warfare, gray-zone conflict, irregular warfare, and malign influence? Second, what common features can be identified across diverse cases of below-threshold coercion, penetration, circumvention, dependency creation, and dilemma generation? Third, what role does corruption play within the hybrid toolbox⁴ – not merely as a background vulnerability, but as a possible operational instrument?

The study addresses these questions through a structured comparison of selected cases. The cases are not chosen to provide statistical representativeness. Rather, they are selected to span different regions of the below-threshold operational space: strategic corruption and state capture; sanctions circumvention and defense-industrial sustainment; proxy coercion and multi-front deterrence; geo-economic dependency and strategic leverage; and legal-humanitarian dilemma creation. This approach allows the article to compare cases that differ substantially in their relationship to force, target systems, mechanisms, visibility, time horizon, and reliance on corruption.

The argument proceeds as follows: the next section develops the conceptual approach and explains the case-selection logic. It is followed by an examination of four principal cases and one shorter contrasting case. The fourth section presents cross-case findings concerning campaign logic, target systems, corruption, exploitation of seams, adaptation, and strategic leverage. The conclusion outlines the approach's benefits and limitations, suggests directions for future research, and returns to the central claim: hybrid operations are best understood not as lists of tools, but as coordinated below-threshold actions designed to manipulate target systems, while hybrid campaigns integrate such operations over time to generate cumulative political or strategic effects.

³ For details, see the introductory article in this special issue: Todor Tagarev and Julien Theron, "Toward an Operational Understanding of Hybrid Threats," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 25, no. 1 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.11610/conn.25.001>.

⁴ The role of corruption as an instrument in the hybrid toolbox is of increasing interest. See Todor Tagarev, David Whetham, and Grazvydas Jasutis, eds., *Building Integrity & Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices*, vol. II (NATO & DCAF, 2026), www.dcaf.ch/building-integrity-reducing-corruption-defence-compendium-best-practices-volume2.

Conceptual Approach and Case Selection

This article uses the terms *hybrid operation* and *hybrid campaign* to distinguish bounded below-threshold actions from sustained strategic designs. The distinction is inspired by military doctrinal usage, in which operations are planned and executed to achieve specified objectives, while campaigns integrate a series of operations over time to achieve broader operational or strategic aims. U.S. joint doctrine, for example, treats campaigns and operations as related but distinct levels of purposeful military activity, while joint planning doctrine emphasizes the integration of ends, ways, and means in the design and execution of campaigns and operations.⁵ This study applies that logic outside the conventional military domain. It asks whether similar distinctions can clarify the study of coercive and manipulative action below the threshold of war.

The need for such clarification arises from the conceptual congestion surrounding terms such as *hybrid warfare*, *gray-zone conflict*, *irregular warfare*, *malign influence*, and *hybrid threats*.⁶ These concepts capture important features of contemporary security competition, but they do not always distinguish between individual activities, operational design, and sustained campaigns. James K. Wither's review of hybrid warfare as a "battle of buzzwords" is useful in this respect, as it shows both the persistence of the hybrid warfare concept and the risks posed by its expansive, sometimes inconsistent use.⁷ Similarly, NATO defines hybrid threats as combining military and non-military, covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, irregular armed groups, and regular forces.⁸ This definition helps identify the heterogeneous character of the threat, but it does not, by itself, specify when a set of actions becomes an operation or when multiple operations amount to a campaign.

In this study, a *hybrid operation* is defined as a coordinated set of actions conducted below the threshold of war that combines heterogeneous instruments—informational, cyber, economic, legal, diplomatic, criminal, or corrupt practices, and possibly the threat or deniable use of military or paramilitary force—to manipulate a target system and produce a defined political, strategic, operational, or enabling effect. This definition has several implications. First, not every hostile or malign activity is a hybrid operation. A single disinformation message, corrupt transaction, sanctions violation, cyber intrusion, or diplomatic

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Campaigns and Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 18, 2022), <https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-DocTrine-Pubs/3-0-Operations-Series/>; Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 1, 2020), https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp5_0.pdf.

⁶ Tagarev and Theron, "Toward an Operational Understanding of Hybrid Threats."

⁷ James K. Wither, "Hybrid Warfare Revisited: A Battle of 'Buzzwords,'" *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 22, no. 1 (2023): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.22.1.02>.

⁸ NATO, "Countering Hybrid Threats," last updated January 29, 2026, www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/countering-hybrid-threats.

threat may contribute to a hybrid operation but does not necessarily constitute one. Second, military force is not a defining requirement. Hybrid operations may include threats of force, proxy violence, private military activity, or deniable military-type action, but they may also be conducted solely through economic, legal, informational, criminal, or corrupt practices. Third, the immediate effect of a hybrid operation need not be strategic. Some operations create access, shape perceptions, test responses, conceal logistics, enable procurement, or prepare conditions for later coercion.

A *hybrid campaign*, by contrast, is understood here as a sustained, adaptive, and integrated series of hybrid operations, sequenced across time, domains, actors, and target systems, through which a state or state-aligned actor seeks to achieve political or strategic ends—including the creation of strategic leverage—while remaining below the threshold of war or managing escalation short of open war. A campaign is therefore not merely a large operation. It implies continuity, sequencing, adaptation, and cumulative purpose. A procurement network that obtains restricted dual-use components may be a hybrid operation; a sustained effort to circumvent sanctions and sustain defense-industrial production is better understood as a hybrid campaign. A specific episode of proxy pressure may be a hybrid operation; the long-term development and employment of a proxy network to deter, coerce, or constrain an adversary is a hybrid campaign. A discrete circumvention of export controls may be a hybrid operation; the long-term creation and exploitation of dependency in a critical sector may amount to a hybrid campaign.

The phrase “below the threshold of war” requires clarification. In this article, it does not mean non-violent. Rather, it refers to actions designed to avoid, delay, obscure, or manage escalation into acknowledged interstate war. Hybrid operations may therefore include coercive military signaling, the threat of force, proxy violence, sabotage, paramilitary activity, or deniable military-type action, provided these remain short of open war between the principal actors. The threshold is political and strategic as much as legal. Hybrid actors often seek precisely to exploit ambiguity over attribution, responsibility, proportionality, and escalation. Their objective is not necessarily to avoid all confrontation, but to achieve advantage while constraining the target’s ability to respond decisively.

This approach differs from several adjacent concepts. *Hybrid warfare* is broader and often war-centered; it can encompass the full combination of conventional, irregular, terrorist, criminal, cyber, informational, and economic methods in conflict.⁹ *Gray-zone conflict* usefully emphasizes ambiguity and competition short of war, but it is less precise about the internal structure of operations and campaigns. *Irregular warfare* captures indirect and unconventional uses of force, but it is less suitable for non-force-based cases such as critical mineral dependency, sanctions circumvention, or regulatory manipulation. *Malign*

⁹ See, for example, the definitions offered by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats: <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-warfare/>.

influence highlights information, political, and social manipulation, but can be too narrow for cases involving procurement networks, proxy coercion, strategic corruption, or geo-economic leverage. The terms *hybrid operation* and *hybrid campaign* are therefore used here not as replacements for these concepts, but as analytical tools for examining how heterogeneous instruments are deliberately combined, sequenced, and adapted to achieve defined effects below the threshold of war.

The case studies were selected accordingly. They are not intended to represent all hybrid operations statistically. Rather, they were chosen to span different regions of the below-threshold operational space. The selection varies along six dimensions: relation to force, target system, operational mechanism, visibility and deniability, temporal profile, and the role of corruption. The cases include operations and campaigns involving strategic corruption and state capture, sanctions circumvention and defense-industrial sustainment, proxy coercion and multi-front deterrence, geo-economic dependency and strategic leverage, and the creation of legal-humanitarian dilemmas. This variation allows the article to examine whether common features can be identified across cases that differ substantially in instruments, targets, and degrees of violence.

The role of corruption receives particular attention. Corruption is often treated as a background vulnerability in target states, but in hybrid operations, it may also serve as an operational instrument or a cross-cutting enabler. It can provide access to decision-makers, conceal ownership and finance, facilitate procurement, weaken institutional resistance, create dependence, enable logistics, and convert influence into control. In some cases, corruption is central to the campaign design, as in state capture or elite co-optation. In others, it is an enabling mechanism, as in sanctions evasion, smuggling, or illicit finance. In still others, corruption may be marginal, with leverage generated primarily through market structure, legal authority, or technological dependency. Treating corruption as a variable rather than an assumption makes it possible to compare cases more precisely.

The article therefore proceeds from the premise that hybrid operations should be studied less as lists of tools and more as forms of operational design. The central analytical questions are: What political or strategic end is pursued? What target system is manipulated or pressured? What instruments are combined? How are actions sequenced? What role do ambiguity, deniability, corruption, or dependency play? How does the target respond? To what extent are the intended effects achieved? These questions guide the analysis and the structured comparison of the cases that follow.

Case Studies

Case 1. Russia in Mali and the Sahel: State Capture, Security Dependence, and Strategic Corruption

Mali's turn toward Russia emerged from a longer crisis of state authority, counterterrorism failures, and deteriorating relations with Western partners. Since

2012, Mali has faced overlapping insurgencies, separatist violence, coups, weak governance, and expanding jihadist activity. France intervened first through Operation Serval in 2013 and then through Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014 as a broader Sahel counterterrorism mission. Although Barkhane achieved tactical successes against jihadist leaders, it did not reverse the expansion of insecurity across central and northern Mali. After the coups of August 2020 and May 2021, relations between Paris and Bamako deteriorated sharply. French forces completed their withdrawal from Mali in August 2022, and President Emmanuel Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane in November 2022.¹⁰ The broader Western and multilateral presence also contracted: the UN Security Council terminated the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2023 at the request of the Malian authorities, and the EU Training Mission in Mali ended its 11-year presence in May 2024.¹¹

This created an opening for Russia to present itself as an alternative security partner. The Russian offer was attractive to Mali's military rulers because it linked regime security, counterterrorism assistance, diplomatic support, and anti-Western political messaging. Unlike Western partners, Russia did not condition assistance on democratic transition, human rights, or civilian oversight. Wagner personnel reportedly arrived in Mali in December 2021, initially framed as military instructors and providers of counterterrorism support.¹² In practice, Russia's presence became part of a broader hybrid campaign to displace Western influence, bind Mali's ruling elite more closely to Moscow, gain political and economic leverage, and demonstrate that Russia could offer an alternative model of security assistance to post-coup Sahel states.

The political goal of the campaign was not simply to provide counterterrorism assistance. At the strategic level, Russia sought to weaken French and broader Western influence in the Sahel, cultivate friendly military regimes, gain access to resources and strategic positions, and project itself as a great-power patron of anti-Western sovereignty. At the operational level, the campaign sought to make

¹⁰ Morgane Le Cam, "France's Barkhane Military Operation Discreetly Withdraws from Mali," *Le Monde*, August 16, 2022, www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/08/16/france-s-barkhane-military-operation-discreetly-withdraws-from-mali_5993721_124.html; Elise Vincent, "After Ten Years, France to End Military Operation Barkhane in Sahel," *Le Monde*, November 9, 2022, www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/11/09/after-ten-years-france-to-end-military-operation-barkhane-in-sahel_6003575_4.html.

¹¹ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2690 (2023): Termination of the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), S/RES/2690, June 30, 2023, [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2690\(2023\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2690(2023)); European External Action Service, "End of Mandate EUTM Mali," May 17, 2024, www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/end-mandate-eutm-mali_en.

¹² Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2022, www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali.

Mali's authorities increasingly dependent on Russian security support, normalize the presence of Russian personnel within the security sector, amplify narratives of Western failure and neocolonial interference, and convert security dependence into political alignment.¹³

The principal target system was Mali's political-security decision-making structure. Russia did not need to capture the entire state. It needed privileged access to the junta, the armed forces, information channels, and selected economic opportunities. This is why the case is best understood as a hybrid campaign aimed at state capture rather than a conventional military intervention.¹⁴ The instruments included paramilitary support, military advice, arms and equipment, information operations, diplomatic backing, elite engagement, opaque contracting, and resource-linked economic arrangements. Across the wider region, Russia's approach has combined Wagner, later deployments by the Russian Ministry of Defense-affiliated Africa Corps, counterterrorism narratives, support for post-coup regimes, anti-French and anti-Western messaging, and efforts to gain access to gold and other mineral resources.¹⁵

Corruption and opacity were central to this campaign logic, enabling the blurring of public and private authority, the concealment of contractual arrangements, the alignment of elite incentives, and the conversion of the regime's security needs into strategic dependence. In other African cases, especially the Central African Republic, Wagner-linked structures secured significant influence over security institutions and resource extraction. Mali appears to have been less straightforward as a revenue-generating case, but the same broader pattern of opaque security contracting, elite bargaining, and resource-seeking influence was present.¹⁶ The broader significance is that corruption functioned not merely as a background vulnerability but as an operational instrument: it facilitated access, reduced accountability, complicated external scrutiny, and helped bind local rulers to an external patron.

Responses to the campaign were mixed because Mali was both a target and a partner in the operation. The junta welcomed Russian support and used it to consolidate its autonomy from France, the European Union, and the United Nations. For the authorities in Bamako, the partnership offered immediate political

¹³ Joseph Siegle, "How Russia is Pursuing State Capture in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 21, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/russia-pursuing-state-capture-africa/>; Federico Manfredi Firmian, "Russia's State Capture Strategy in Africa, from Wagner to the Africa Corps," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 36, no. 4 (2025): 783–812, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2432832>.

¹⁴ Siegle, "How Russia is Pursuing State Capture in Africa"; Manfredi Firmian, "Russia's State Capture Strategy in Africa, from Wagner to the Africa Corps."

¹⁵ "After the Fall: Russian Modes of Influence in Africa post-Wagner," Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, February 3, 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/after-the-fall-russian-modes-of-influence-in-africa-post-wagner/>.

¹⁶ *Mercenary Meltdown: The Wagner Group's Failure in Mali* (Washington, DC: The Sentry, August 2025), <https://thesentry.org/reports/mercenary-meltdown-wagner-failure-mali/>.

benefits: regime protection, symbolic sovereignty, anti-Western legitimacy, and a security partner willing to operate with fewer constraints. For Western partners and the United Nations, the response consisted primarily of withdrawal, suspension, or termination of cooperation, accompanied by diplomatic criticism and sanctions against selected individuals and entities.¹⁷ For civilians, especially in conflict-affected areas, the consequences were more ambiguous and often damaging. Malian forces and foreign military personnel were accused by the UN of killing more than 500 people during a March 2022 operation in Moura, highlighting the human-rights costs associated with the new security model.¹⁸

The campaign achieved several of Russia's intermediate objectives. It contributed to the displacement of France as Mali's principal external security partner; reduced Western access and influence; strengthened Moscow's position with the junta; and demonstrated a model that could be marketed elsewhere in the Sahel. It also helped Russia exploit the political symbolism of sovereignty and anti-colonialism while offering practical support to regimes facing armed opposition and international pressure. After the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and the restructuring of Wagner, Russia moved to bring its African presence under more direct state control through the Africa Corps. Wagner announced its departure from Mali in June 2025, but the transition to Africa Corps indicated continuity rather than withdrawal.¹⁹

The record on effectiveness is more limited. Russia did not resolve Mali's security crisis. Violence persisted, jihadist groups adapted, and Russian and Malian forces suffered setbacks.²⁰ The reliance on coercive counterterrorism, civilian intimidation, and opaque foreign support may have strengthened the junta in the short term while further weakening state legitimacy in contested areas. Thus,

¹⁷ See, for example, Council of the EU, "Wagner Group: Council adds 11 individuals and 7 entities to EU sanctions lists," *Press Release*, February 25, 2023, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists/; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Malian Officials Facilitating Wagner Group," *Press Release*, July 24, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1645>.

¹⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Malian Troops, Foreign Military Personnel Killed over 500 People during Military Operation in Moura in March 2022 – UN Human Rights Report," May 12, 2023, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/malian-troops-foreign-military-personnel-killed-over-500-people-during.

¹⁹ Benjamin Roger, "Au Mali, les Russes de Wagner quittent le pays, remplacés par ceux d'Africa Corps," *Le Monde*, June 6, 2025, www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2025/06/06/au-mali-les-russes-de-wagner-quittent-le-pays-remplaces-par-ceux-d-africa-corps_6610872_3212.html; see also Portia Crowe, "Report Spotlights Tensions in Mali Military over Wagner Mercenaries," *Reuters*, August 27, 2025, www.reuters.com/world/africa/report-spotlights-tensions-mali-military-over-wagner-mercenaries-2025-08-27/.

²⁰ Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, "Russian Mercenaries Defeated in Northern Mali Battle," *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, July 30, 2024, <https://pism.pl/publications/russian-mercenaries-defeated-in-northern-mali-battle>.

the campaign appears more successful as a political-influence and regime-support operation than as a counterinsurgency strategy. It created leverage for Moscow and dependency for Bamako, but it did not deliver sustainable security.

The Mali case illustrates several broader features of hybrid campaigns below the threshold of war. First, the campaign targeted a state's strategic orientation by securing influence over key nodes of decision-making rather than by conquering territory. Second, it combined deniable or semi-deniable force with information influence, diplomacy, elite bargains, and economic interests. Third, corruption and opacity were not incidental; they formed part of the operational environment that made the campaign possible.²¹ Fourth, success depended less on military effectiveness than on exploiting political vulnerability: legitimacy deficits arising from coups, public frustration with Western-backed counterterrorism, weak institutions, and the ruling elite's demand for regime protection. Finally, the case shows that hybrid campaigns may achieve strategic leverage even when they fail to solve the security problems that justified their entry.

Case 2. Russia's Sanctions-Evasion Procurement Networks: Circumvention and Defense-Industrial Sustainment

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine triggered an unprecedented sanctions and export-control campaign aimed at constraining Moscow's ability to finance the war²² and replenish its military-industrial base. Western measures targeted not only major banks, energy revenues, and defense enterprises, but also the flow of advanced technology, dual-use goods, microelectronics, aviation components, computer numerical control (CNC) machine tools, and other items needed for weapons production. Yet Russia continued to import critical components through indirect channels. The result was not simply "sanctions evasion" in the ordinary commercial sense, but a sustained hybrid campaign to defeat the regulatory, financial, and logistical systems designed to restrict Russia's defense production.

The strategic aim of the campaign was to preserve Russia's ability to produce, repair, and modernize weapons despite international restrictions. The operational objectives were more specific: identify Russia's foreign dependencies in weapons production; preserve access to microelectronics, machine tools, and

²¹ An investigation of Wagner's role in Mali describes a relationship marked by opaque arrangements, preferential treatment, weak oversight, compensation disputes, and efforts to secure mining concessions, thus connecting the security partnership to broader patterns of violent kleptocracy and elite bargaining. See *Mercenary Melt-down: The Wagner Group's Failure in Mali*.

²² One example illustrates the consequences of sanctions imposed on Russia: Indian Air Force officials canceled plans to upgrade 85 Russian Su-30MKI fighters because of logistical problems, noting wider concerns over spares, ammunition, and dependence on Russia's defense industry. See Matthew Stein, "India Takes a Step Away from the Russian Defense Industry," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 5 (2023): 138-145, www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3475660/india-takes-a-step-away-from-the-russian-defense-industry/.

dual-use goods; move procurement through intermediary jurisdictions; conceal Russian end-users; exploit gaps in corporate due diligence and customs enforcement; and adapt routes as sanctions expanded. The target system was therefore not a territory, population, or political elite, but the sanctions-and-export-control architecture itself: licensing systems, customs regimes, financial compliance, private distributors, corporate registries, logistics providers, and third-country enforcement capacity.

The need for such a campaign was visible early in the war. A 2022 RUSI investigation into 27 Russian military systems, including cruise missiles, communications equipment, and electronic warfare systems, found extensive reliance on foreign electronics.²³ Subsequent research by the Kyiv School of Economics and the Yermak-McFaul International Working Group examined almost 2,800 foreign components found in Russian military equipment, including missiles, drones, armored vehicles, helicopters, and electronic warfare systems.²⁴ The Kyiv School of Economics also reported that Russia imported more than USD 22 billion worth of components considered critical to its military industry in the first ten months of 2023, despite comprehensive export controls.²⁵ These findings indicate that Russia's defense-industrial resilience depended not only on domestic mobilization, but also on continued access to foreign technology.

The instruments used in this campaign were commercial and legal as much as covert. They included front companies, third-country distributors, false or misleading end-user declarations, re-exports through permissive jurisdictions, small-batch procurement, layered ownership structures, financial intermediaries, and the exploitation of dual-use ambiguity. China, Hong Kong, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Central Asian states, and other jurisdictions have repeatedly appeared in public reporting and sanctions designations as transit or facilitation points. U.S. Treasury actions in 2024 and 2025 targeted networks and companies involved in procuring technology, machinery, and components for Russia's military-industrial base, including entities in third countries.²⁶ Reuters reported in 2024 that China and Hong Kong remained important transshipment

²³ James Byrne, Gary Somerville, Joe Byrne et al., *Silicon Lifeline: Western Electronics at the Heart of Russia's War Machine* (London: Royal United Services Institute, August 2022), <https://static.rusi.org/RUSI-Silicon-Lifeline-final-web.pdf>.

²⁴ Olena Bilousova et al., *Challenges of Export Controls Enforcement: How Russia Continues to Import Components for Its Military Production* (Kyiv: Kyiv School of Economics Institute and Yermak-McFaul International Working Group on Russian Sanctions, January 2024), <https://kse.ua/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Challenges-of-Export-Controls-Enforcement.pdf>.

²⁵ Bilousova et al., *Challenges of Export Controls Enforcement*.

²⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Takes Aim at Third-Country Sanctions Evaders and Russian Producers Supporting Russia's Military Industrial Base," October 30, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2700>; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Disrupts Russia's Sanctions Evasion Schemes," January 15, 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2785>.

hubs for restricted advanced components, even as U.S. Department of Commerce data showed declines in some flows following increased enforcement pressure.²⁷

Machine tools illustrate the campaign particularly well. Russia's ability to produce precision weapons, armored vehicles, engines, and aerospace components depends heavily on CNC machinery and control systems. Western and allied restrictions increasingly targeted these items, and CNC systems were added to the list of Common High Priority Items intended to weaken Russia's war effort. Yet investigations continued to identify Western, Japanese, and other foreign-origin CNC equipment, controllers, and spare parts in Russian defense production. Peter Apps wrote in a Reuters column that Russian military production relied significantly on Chinese technology, including CNC systems containing Western components, while a Financial Times investigation found that Russian missile developers used German and Japanese CNC equipment despite sanctions.²⁸ These cases show that the campaign was not limited to microchips in finished weapons. It also involved the industrial machinery needed to manufacture weapons at scale.

Corruption is difficult to document directly in many individual transactions, but it is analytically important in this case. Unlike the Mali case, where corruption appears as elite co-optation and state capture, here it primarily functions as an enabling mechanism. Procurement networks depend on complicit intermediaries, false documentation, willful blindness, customs manipulation, bribery, opaque corporate services, and the selective non-enforcement of rules. The U.S. Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) and the Bureau of Industry and Security have issued alerts identifying red flags for export-control evasion, including anomalous order patterns, inconsistencies between customers' business lines and ordered goods, the use of shell companies, and transactions involving transshipment points.²⁹ These indicators do not prove corruption in every case, but they describe the operational environment in which corrupt and deceptive practices facilitate procurement.

²⁷ James Pomfret and Michael Martina, "Illicit Chip Flows to Russia Seen Slowing, but China, Hong Kong Remain Transshipment Hubs," *Reuters*, July 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/illicit-chip-flows-russia-seen-slowing-china-hong-kong-remain-transshipment-hubs-2024-07-21/>.

²⁸ Peter Apps, "The Western Industrial Components Rebuilding Russia's Military," *Reuters*, August 16, 2024, www.reuters.com/world/europe/western-industrial-components-rebuilding-russias-military-2024-08-16/; Stanislav Pohorilov, "Russia relies on Western equipment to produce its newest Oreshnik missile – FT," *Ukrainska Pravda*, December 27, 2024, www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/12/27/7490935/.

²⁹ Financial Crimes Enforcement Network and Bureau of Industry and Security, *FinCEN and BIS Joint Notice: Announcing New Reporting Key Term and Highlighting Red Flags Relating to Global Evasion of U.S. Export Controls*, FIN-2023-NTC2, November 6, 2023, www.fincen.gov/system/files/shared/FinCEN_Joint_Notice_US_Export_Controls_FIN_AL508.pdf.

The target response has been substantial but reactive. The United States, European Union, United Kingdom, Japan, and other partners expanded export controls, designated intermediaries, added Common High Priority Items, issued compliance alerts, and pressured third countries to strengthen enforcement. U.S. Treasury designations in October 2024 targeted more than 150 Russia-based defense, technology, manufacturing, and aerospace companies that produced or procured components, precursors, and machinery for weapons used against Ukraine.³⁰ In January 2025, the U.S. State Department announced measures targeting entities that supply dual-use goods, including CNC machine tools, to Russian users.³¹ The United Kingdom's February 2025 sanctions package similarly targeted producers and suppliers of machine tools, electronics, microprocessors, and dual-use goods in Central Asia, Türkiye, Thailand, India, China, and other jurisdictions.³²

The campaign's effectiveness was partial but significant. Russia did not fully defeat export controls: enforcement pressure raised costs, disrupted some routes, reduced some flows, and forced adaptation. However, Russia continued to obtain many categories of restricted or high-priority goods through indirect channels. This means the hybrid campaign achieved an important enabling effect: it helped sustain Russia's defense-industrial base under conditions of external constraint. The campaign also imposed a burden on Western governments and firms, requiring continuous monitoring, updated sanctions packages, private-sector compliance, diplomatic engagement with third countries, and investigative capacity.

This case illustrates a form of hybrid campaign that does not depend on armed force, propaganda, or territorial pressure. Its operational space is the global commercial system. Its instruments are corporate opacity, logistics, finance, trade diversion, legal arbitrage, and corruption. Its target is the enforcement architecture designed to deny Russia access to technology. Its strategic purpose is military: sustaining the production and repair of weapons used in Ukraine. The case, therefore, demonstrates that hybrid operations conducted through non-kinetic means may be directed not at a society's opinions or a state's borders, but at the seams between security policy and global commerce. It also shows that corruption can operate as a hidden lubricant of hybrid campaigns, enabling access, concealment, and adaptation even when the campaign's visible form appears merely commercial.

³⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Takes Aim at Third-Country Sanctions Evaders."

³¹ U.S. Department of State, "Sanctions to Disrupt Russia's Military Industrial Base and Sanctions Evasion," January 15, 2025, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/office-of-the-spokesperson/releases/2025/01/sanctions-to-disrupt-russias-military-industrial-base-and-sanctions-evasion/>.

³² "UK Announces Sweeping Package of Sanctions against Russia," *Reuters*, February 24, 2025, www.reuters.com/world/europe/uk-announces-new-package-sanctions-against-russia-2025-02-24/.

Case 3. Iran's Axis of Resistance: Coercion by Proxies and Multi-Front Deterrence

Iran's use of Hezbollah and the wider "Axis of Resistance" represents a different type of hybrid campaign: one centered on proxy coercion, forward defense, and escalation management. The campaign did not begin with the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. It developed over decades through Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, Palestinian armed groups, Iraqi and Syrian militias, the Houthis in Yemen, and other partners across the region. Akbarzadeh and co-authors describe Iran's use of proxy forces, especially in Syria, as part of a "forward-defense" strategy that provides Tehran with practical benefits in shaping regional strategic realities and performative benefits in projecting military resolve.³³ The network has been described as a loose coalition rather than a single command structure, but it has enabled Iran to project influence, threaten Israel and U.S. interests, and preserve a degree of deniability while avoiding direct conventional war.³⁴

The strategic aim of the campaign was to constrain Israel, deter attacks on Iran, weaken U.S. influence in the region, and maintain Iran's claim to leadership of the "resistance" camp. Hezbollah was central to this design. Since its emergence during the Lebanese civil war and Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah has developed from an Iranian-supported militant movement into a powerful political-military actor with substantial rocket, missile, drone, and ground capabilities. For Iran, Hezbollah provided both deterrence against Israel and a forward instrument of coercion. Other actors—Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Iraqi militias, and the Houthis—added geographic depth and the possibility of multi-front pressure.

The operational logic was not simply to attack Israel. It was to create a regional deterrence architecture in which Israel and the United States would have to consider the risk of escalation across multiple theaters. The instruments included training, funding, weapons transfers, ideological alignment, political influence, clandestine logistics, missile and drone capabilities, media narratives, and calibrated proxy attacks. The "unity of fronts" or "unity of arenas" concept, promoted within the Axis, sought to increase leverage by linking pressure from

³³ Shahram Akbarzadeh, William Gourlay, and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iranian Proxies in the Syrian Conflict: Tehran's 'Forward-Defence' in Action," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, no. 3 (2023): 683–706, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2021.2023014>.

³⁴ Renad Mansour, Hayder Al-Shakeri, and Haid Haid, *The Shape-Shifting 'Axis of Resistance': How Iran and Its Networks Adapt to External Pressures* (London: Chatham House, March 2025), <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136369>; Kali Robinson and Will Merrow, "Iran's Regional Armed Network," Council on Foreign Relations, updated April 15, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/irans-regional-armed-network>; Philip Loft, "Iran's Influence in the Middle East," *Research Briefing* 9504, July 25, 2024, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9504/CBP-9504.pdf>.

Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In practice, this created a campaign architecture in which Iran could support or encourage pressure against Israel while limiting its own direct exposure.³⁵

After October 7, 2023, the campaign entered a more active phase. Hezbollah opened sustained fire along Israel's northern border; the Houthis attacked shipping in the Red Sea and launched missiles and drones toward Israel; and Iraqi militias aligned with Iran targeted U.S. forces and claimed responsibility for attacks linked to the Gaza war.³⁶ These actions had several operational effects: they imposed military and political costs on Israel, diverted attention and resources, created insecurity in northern Israel and the Red Sea, and signaled that the Gaza war could not be geographically contained. At the same time, Iran sought to avoid uncontrolled escalation into direct war. This produced an inherently unstable balance: enough proxy action to preserve deterrent credibility and political relevance, but not enough—at least initially—to trigger a full regional war.

Corruption was less prominent in this case than in Mali, while sanctions evasion, illicit finance, and criminal facilitation remained important enabling mechanisms. Iran-backed organizations have relied on sanctions evasion, informal financial networks, smuggling, front companies, and illicit revenue streams to move money, weapons, and dual-use items. U.S. financial authorities have warned that Iran-backed groups use complex financial and commercial arrangements, including exchange houses, charities, and commercial cover, to support militant activity.³⁷ In this case, corruption did not usually function as a means of capturing the target state; rather, it enabled logistics, financing, procurement, and concealment across weakly governed or politically fragmented spaces.

³⁵ Veena Ali-Khan and Thanassis Cambanis, "Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance," The Century Foundation, March 19, 2025, <https://tcf.org/content/report/down-but-not-out-reassessing-the-axis-of-resistance/>; Gaby Tejeda, "The Diminished Strategic Value of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance,'" IntelBrief, The Soufan Center, September 18, 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-september-18/>, archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20260728191732/https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-september-18/>; Michael Young, "Israel's Attacks Should Force Hezbollah and Iran to Discard Their 'Unity of the Arenas' Strategy," The National, September 24, 2024, www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2024/09/24/israels-attacks-should-force-hezbollah-and-iran-to-discard-their-unity-of-the-arenas-strategy/; "The Axis of Resistance," Backgrounder, Middle East Institute, last updated January 6, 2026, https://mei.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Axis-of-Resistance_Backgrounder_2025.pdf.

³⁶ Ali-Khan and Cambanis, "Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance."

³⁷ Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, *FinCEN Advisory to Financial Institutions to Counter the Financing of Iran-Backed Terrorist Organizations*, FIN-2024-A001, May 8, 2024, www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/advisory/2024-05-07/FinCEN-Advisory-Iran-Backed-TF-508C.pdf.

The campaign achieved mixed results. Before the major escalations of June 2025³⁸ and the spring of 2026,³⁹ Iran's network had succeeded in creating a persistent deterrent problem for Israel and the United States. It forced Israel to plan against multiple fronts, gave Iran strategic depth, and allowed Tehran to threaten indirectly while retaining a measure of plausible deniability. However, the campaign also revealed serious limitations. Proxy actors had their own interests and constraints; coordination was imperfect; escalation control was difficult; and Israel's military response after October 7, 2023, significantly weakened key components of the network, especially Hezbollah and Hamas. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria in 2024 further damaged Iran's regional logistical architecture by disrupting the land corridor and supply routes that had supported Hezbollah.⁴⁰

The Iran case, therefore, shows both the power and fragility of proxy-based hybrid campaigns. Such campaigns can extend reach, complicate attribution, impose costs, and deter adversaries without requiring open interstate war. Yet they also create agency problems, exposure risks, and escalation dilemmas. Iran's Axis of Resistance generated strategic leverage for decades, but its utility depended on maintaining a delicate balance between pressure and restraint. Once that balance eroded, the campaign's strengths—distributed actors, plausible deniability for Tehran, ideological mobilization, and multi-front pressure—also became sources of vulnerability.

Case 4. China's Critical-Mineral Leverage: Dependency Creation as a Hybrid Campaign

China's positioning in rare earths and critical minerals illustrates a hybrid campaign in which strategic leverage is accumulated over time before it is used coercively. The campaign is not based primarily on force or deniable violence. Its logic is geo-economic: industrial policy, state financing, overseas investment, resource diplomacy, control of processing capacity, technology restrictions, and export licensing are combined to shape the choices of dependent economies. China's leverage rests not only on its domestic rare-earth reserves but also on its dominance in refining, separation, and magnet manufacturing, as well as on its expanding access to raw materials abroad.

The strategic objective is to create structural leverage over sectors central to the energy transition, advanced manufacturing, and defense production. Rare

³⁸ Kevin Huggard and Mallika Yadwad, "The road to the Israel-Iran war," Brookings, July 23, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-road-to-the-israel-iran-war/>.

³⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "2026 Iran War," Middle Eastern history, last updated October 1, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/2026-Iran-war>.

⁴⁰ Mansour, Al-Shakeri, and Haid, *The Shape-Shifting 'Axis of Resistance'*; Rachel Brandenburg et al., *Fracturing the Axis: Degrading and Disrupting Iran's Proxy Network*, Israel Policy Forum and The Institute for National Security Studies, September 2025, <https://israelpolicyforum.org/fracturing-the-axis-degrading-and-disrupting-irans-proxy-network/>.

earths, lithium, copper, cobalt, graphite, nickel, and related materials are essential for electric vehicles, batteries, wind turbines, semiconductors, aircraft engines, radar systems, missiles, and precision-guided munitions. Control over these supply chains gives China several advantages: support for its own industrial base, privileged access for national champions, bargaining power in trade and technology disputes, and the ability to impose costs on adversaries without resorting to military action.

China reached this position through several mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Domestically, it consolidated a fragmented and environmentally damaging rare-earth sector into a smaller number of state-controlled or state-influenced champions, imposed production quotas, strengthened traceability, and restricted the export of processing and magnet technologies. Reuters reported in 2025 that China had consolidated hundreds of rare-earth firms into two major state-owned groups and used quota and tracking systems to tighten control over the sector.⁴¹ The International Energy Agency reported that China's share of sintered permanent magnet production expanded from around 50 percent in 2005 to 94 percent in 2024, with its strong position in processing and manufacturing providing economies of scale and a stable demand base for upstream raw materials.⁴²

Externally, China secured access to critical minerals through investment, lending, infrastructure, offtake agreements, and corporate acquisitions. In Latin America, Chinese investment has focused heavily on critical metals and minerals. The European Parliamentary Research Service reported that critical metals and minerals accounted for 98 percent of total Chinese mining investment in Latin America and the Caribbean and that Chinese firms such as Ganfeng, Tianqi, and Zijin have obtained partial or full access to mines worldwide, including in Latin America.⁴³ Peru and Brazil illustrate the broader pattern. Peru has attracted growing Chinese investment since the 2009 Peru-China free trade agreement, especially in copper and other critical-mineral sectors, while Brazil's rare-earth, lithium, and clean-energy potential has drawn expanding Chinese interest.⁴⁴ Reuters reported in 2025 that BYD had acquired mineral rights in Brazil's lithium-

⁴¹ "How China Tightened Its Grip over Its Rare Earth Sector," *Reuters*, July 7, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/how-china-tightened-its-grip-over-its-rare-earth-sector-2025-07-07/>.

⁴² International Energy Agency, *Rare Earth Elements: Pathways to Secure and Diversified Supply Chains* (Paris: IEA, 2026), www.iea.org/reports/rare-earth-elements/executive-summary.

⁴³ European Parliamentary Research Service, *EU–Latin America: Enhancing Cooperation on Critical Raw Materials*, Briefing PE 767.163 (Brussels: European Parliament, December 2024), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)767163](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)767163).

⁴⁴ Jing Li, Daniel M. Shapiro, and Carlos Vecino, "Geopolitics, Host Country Policy, and Critical Mineral Investment in Latin America," *AIB Insights* 26, no. 4 (October 2025), <https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.146203>.

rich region, linking upstream access to its electric-vehicle manufacturing strategy.⁴⁵

Africa constitutes another important part of this broader pattern. Chinese firms have invested heavily in cobalt, copper, lithium, and related mining and processing assets, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and other resource-rich states. SIPRI reported that China's overseas investments in metals and mining reached a record USD 19.4 billion in 2023, with much of this investment undertaken by state-owned enterprises and linked to Belt and Road resource diplomacy.⁴⁶ The Africa Center for Strategic Studies similarly describes China's critical-minerals strategy in Africa as a long-term effort pursued through mining investments, refining capacity, and infrastructure-linked relationships.⁴⁷ These investments do not necessarily amount to formal control over host states. However, they can create privileged access, lock in supply, shape local political incentives, and deepen dependence on Chinese finance, infrastructure, and processing markets.

Corruption and elite co-optation are harder to document systematically than ownership stakes or trade flows, but they are relevant to the operational environment.⁴⁸ Critical-mineral extraction often takes place in states with weak governance, limited regulatory capacity, opaque licensing systems, and high exposure to illicit finance. UNODC describes corruption as a systemic enabler of minerals crime, including bribery, collusion, licensing manipulation, and illicit financial flows.⁴⁹ Reports on African transition minerals also note that corruption, labor exploitation, weak accountability, and environmental harm can accompany foreign mining activity, including Chinese projects.⁵⁰ In this case, corruption

⁴⁵ Fabio Teixeira, "China's BYD Holds Mining Rights in Brazil's Lithium Valley, Documents Show," *Reuters*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/chinas-byd-holds-mining-rights-brazils-lithium-valley-documents-show-2025-02-14/>.

⁴⁶ Jiayi Zhou and André Månberger, *Critical Minerals and Great Power Competition: An Overview* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, October 2024), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/critical_minerals.pdf.

⁴⁷ Paul Nantulya, "China's Critical Minerals Strategy in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 9, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-africa-critical-minerals/>.

⁴⁸ For example, Chinese access to rare-earth feedstock from Myanmar has depended on extraction in militia-controlled, conflict-affected, and weakly regulated areas, where payments to armed actors, illegal mining, and opaque arrangements substituted for transparent state licensing. See "Fuelling the future, poisoning the present: Myanmar's rare earth boom," Global Witness, May 23, 2024, <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/transition-minerals/fuelling-the-future-poisoning-the-present-myanmars-rare-earth-boom/>.

⁴⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Minerals Crime: Crimes in the Supply Chains of Critical Energy Transition Minerals*, September 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18356/9789211596175>.

⁵⁰ Christian-Géraud Neema et al., "Understanding China's Role in Africa's Transition Minerals: Stakeholders, Dynamics and Opportunities for Civil Society Engagement,"

should not be treated as the central instrument, as it is in state capture. It is better understood as an enabling condition and, in some environments, an enabling instrument: it can facilitate licensing, reduce scrutiny, secure local political protection, and weaken resistance to unfavorable terms.

The hybrid character of the campaign becomes visible when this accumulated position is converted into coercive or deterrent leverage. China has previously used export controls on critical materials, including through restrictions on gallium, germanium, graphite, and antimony. In April 2025, the Ministry of Commerce and the General Administration of Customs imposed export controls on selected medium and heavy rare-earth items. In October 2025, China expanded the controls to rare-earth-related materials, equipment, technologies, and some foreign products containing Chinese-origin rare-earth materials or made using Chinese rare-earth technology.⁵¹ CSIS assessed the October 2025 measures as the strictest rare-earth and permanent-magnet controls to date, with significant implications for U.S. defense supply chains.⁵² The European Parliamentary Research Service noted that the April and October 2025 restrictions affected materials indispensable for digital, green, and defense industries.⁵³ In November 2025, Beijing suspended the October measures for one year.⁵⁴

The target system is therefore not a single state but an interconnected industrial ecosystem: mining firms, processors, magnet manufacturers, defense contractors, automotive producers, clean-energy industries, customs authorities, investors, and governments seeking supply-chain security. The instruments are legal, regulatory, financial, industrial, technological, diplomatic, and, in some cases, corruption-related. The operational effect does not necessarily take the form of immediate coercion. Rather, it often takes the form of dependency maintenance: discouraging diversification, increasing the cost of resistance,

Resource Justice Network, November 2025, https://resourcejustice.org/app/uploads/2025/11/CHINA-REPORT-ENGLISH_FINAL-REPORT.pdf.

⁵¹ Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China and General Administration of Customs, "Announcement No. 18 of 2025," April 4, 2025, https://english.mofcom.gov.cn/Policies/AnnouncementsOrders/art/2025/art_Odd87cbee7b045bf93fab_e6ab2faceee.html; Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "Notice 2025 No. 61: Announcement of the Decision to Implement Controls on Exports of Rare Earth-Related Items to Foreign Countries," October 9, 2025, unofficial translation by Georgetown Center for Security and Emerging Technology, <https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/mofcom-notice-2025-61/>.

⁵² Gracelin Baskaran, "China's New Rare Earth and Magnet Restrictions Threaten U.S. Defense Supply Chains," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 9, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-rare-earth-and-magnet-restrictions-threaten-us-defense-supply-chains>.

⁵³ Marcin Szczepański, "China's Rare-Earth Export Restrictions," *At a Glance*, PE 779.220 (European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2025). www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/779220/EPRS_ATA%282025%29779220_EN.pdf.

⁵⁴ Szczepański, "China's Rare-Earth Export Restrictions."

shaping investment incentives, and making alternative supply chains difficult and expensive to build.

The response by the United States, the European Union, Japan, Australia, and other partners has focused on diversification, stockpiling, recycling, friend-shoring, and public support for alternative processing and magnet production. Yet these responses face a significant time constraint. Mines, separation facilities, refineries, and magnet plants require years of permitting and investment, as well as technical know-how and guaranteed demand. The IEA warned in 2025 that supply concentration risks had become a reality as export controls spread across critical-mineral markets.⁵⁵ The very difficulty of diversification is consistent with the success of China's earlier positioning.

The China case thus demonstrates a hybrid campaign centered on the construction of strategic leverage. Unlike the Mali case, it does not rely primarily on strategic corruption or regime security. Unlike the Iran case, it does not rely on proxy force. Unlike Russia's sanctions-evasion campaign, it does not seek to bypass restrictions imposed by others. Instead, China uses long-term industrial policy, overseas access to minerals, processing dominance, technology control, and export licensing to create a strategic position from which coercion becomes possible. The broader lesson is that hybrid campaigns below the threshold of war may operate through the material foundations of power: supply chains, infrastructure, corporate ownership, financial dependency, and the time required for others to build alternatives.

Case 5. Belarus's Instrumentalization of Migration: Dilemma Creation at the Border

The Belarus-orchestrated migration crisis at the EU's eastern borders in 2021 provides a shorter contrasting case. Unlike the Mali, Iran, or Russia sanctions-evasion cases, the principal instrument was neither the use of proxy forces nor illicit procurement, but the manipulation of human mobility and legal obligations. Following the disputed 2020 Belarusian presidential election, EU sanctions, domestic repression in Belarus, and the forced landing of Ryanair Flight 4978 in Minsk in May 2021, relations between Belarus and the European Union deteriorated sharply. Belarus then facilitated the movement of migrants and asylum seekers, many from the Middle East, toward the borders with Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, the Euro-

⁵⁵ Tae-Yoon Kim, Shobhan Dhir, Amrita Dasgupta, and Alessio Scanziani, "With New Export Controls on Critical Minerals, Supply Concentration Risks Become Reality," International Energy Agency, October 23, 2025, www.iea.org/commentaries/with-new-export-controls-on-critical-minerals-supply-concentration-risks-become-reality.

pean Commission described the situation as the “instrumentalisation of migration for political ends” and “state-sponsored smuggling of migrants into the EU.”⁵⁶

The strategic end was to pressure the European Union and its frontline member states, retaliate against sanctions, expose divisions within the Union, and impose political, humanitarian, and reputational costs. The operational objective was not mass migration as such, but dilemma creation. By pushing vulnerable people toward heavily securitized borders, Belarus sought to force EU states to choose between enforcing border control and upholding their humanitarian and asylum obligations, under domestic political pressure.

The instruments included visa facilitation, travel routes, state-tolerated or state-enabled transport, border pressure, information manipulation, coercive diplomacy, and the exploitation of legal and humanitarian constraints. The legal assessment of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) argues that legal dynamics were central to the Belarus case: migration was used to generate coercive effects precisely because EU member states remained bound by asylum, human rights, and border-management obligations.⁵⁷ The case thus targeted not only physical borders but also the legal and normative architecture governing them.

Corruption was not the dominant instrument, but criminal and commercial facilitation mattered. Travel agencies, transport intermediaries, smugglers, and local facilitators formed part of the enabling ecosystem. The operation exploited the seam between state policy and criminal opportunity: Belarusian authorities did not need to control every actor if they could create permissive conditions and direct pressure toward EU borders.

The response combined emergency border measures, diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and efforts to interrupt travel routes. In November 2021, the Council of the EU broadened its sanctions framework to address “hybrid attacks” and the instrumentalization of migrants.⁵⁸ In December 2021, the European Council

⁵⁶ European Union Agency for Asylum, “4.1.1. Situation on the Eastern Borders,” in *Asylum Report 2022* (Valletta: EUAA, 2022), <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2022/411-situation-eastern-borders>.

⁵⁷ Aurel Sari, *Instrumentalized Migration and the Belarus Crisis: Strategies of Legal Coercion*, Hybrid CoE Paper 17 (Helsinki: European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, April 2023), www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-paper-17-instrumentalized-migration-and-the-belarus-crisis-strategies-of-legal-coercion/.

⁵⁸ Council of the European Union, “Belarus: EU Broadens Scope for Sanctions to Tackle Hybrid Attacks and Instrumentalisation of Migrants,” November 15, 2021, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/11/15/belarus-eu-broadens-scope-for-sanctions-to-tackle-hybrid-attacks-and-instrumentalisation-of-migrants/.

condemned the Belarusian regime's actions and stated that the EU would continue countering the hybrid attack while acting in line with EU law and international obligations.⁵⁹

The case demonstrates that hybrid operations can work by forcing democratic targets into costly trade-offs. Belarus did not need military superiority or economic dominance. It used vulnerable people, transport channels, legal obligations, and media attention to create pressure. The broader lesson is that hybrid campaigns may target the moral and legal operating systems of democratic states, exploiting the fact that the target's constraints are part of the operational terrain.

Cross-Case Findings

The cases differ substantially in geography, instruments, degree of violence, visibility, and relationship to war. Russia's campaign in Mali relied on security dependence, elite alignment, information influence, and strategic corruption. Russia's sanctions-evasion campaign targeted export-control systems and global supply chains. Iran's Axis of Resistance used proxies to create deterrence, coercive reach, and multi-front pressure. China's critical-minerals campaign built structural leverage through industrial policy, overseas access, processing dominance, and export-control authority. Belarus's instrumentalization of migration exploited legal and humanitarian constraints at the EU's borders. Despite these differences, several common findings emerge.

Hybrid operations are best understood as components of campaign design rather than as isolated hostile acts. None of the cases can be adequately explained by listing the instruments used. Wagner or Africa Corps personnel, proxy attacks, front companies, export controls, or facilitated migration matter because they are connected to a broader operational logic. In Mali, coercive security support, anti-Western narratives, diplomatic backing, and opaque arrangements reinforced one another. In the sanctions-evasion case, procurement networks, third-country intermediaries, corporate opacity, and financial channels formed an adaptive system. In the China case, export controls mattered because they rested on decades of accumulated industrial and supply-chain positioning. The defining feature of a hybrid operation is therefore not the use of a particular tool but the coordination of tools to produce an effect on its own or within a wider campaign.

Hybrid campaigns target systems rather than only decision-makers or territory. The relevant target system may be a fragile state's security and political elite, as in Mali; the sanctions and export-control architecture, as in Russia's defense-industrial procurement; a regional deterrence environment, as in Iran's proxy network; global critical-mineral supply chains, as in China's rare-earth and

⁵⁹ European Council, "European Council Conclusions, 16 December 2021," EUCO 22/21, December 16, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/53575/20211216-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

broader critical-mineral leverage; or the legal-humanitarian border regime of democratic states, as in the Belarus case. This system-oriented view is important because it explains why hybrid campaigns often appear indirect. Their purpose is not always to compel a single decision immediately. It may be to shape the conditions under which future decisions are made, to increase the target's costs, to reduce its options, or to create a dependency that can be activated later.

Hybrid campaigns exploit seams. These seams may lie between peace and war, public and private authority, legality and illegality, domestic and international politics, security and commerce, humanitarian protection and border control, or state and non-state action. Russia's sanctions-evasion campaign exploited the seam between private trade and national-security controls. Belarus exploited the seam between migration management, asylum obligations, and border security. Iran exploited the seam between responding to state and proxies' actions. China exploited the seam between commercial supply chains and strategic dependency. Mali showed how external actors can exploit the seam between regime survival, counterterrorism, and sovereign decision-making. These seams are not incidental vulnerabilities; they are part of the operational terrain.

Corruption can be an operational instrument, but its role varies across cases. In Mali, corruption and opaque elite bargaining were close to the center of the campaign. They helped convert security dependence into political influence and reduced the transparency of the relationship between Bamako and Moscow. In Russia's sanctions-evasion campaign, corruption functioned more as an enabler: false documentation, complicit intermediaries, customs manipulation, opaque corporate services, and willful blindness helped procurement networks adapt. In the China case, corruption was not the primary source of leverage, but weak governance, opaque licensing, and elite incentives in resource-rich states could facilitate access and deepen dependency. In the Belarus case, criminal and commercial facilitation supported state-directed pressure. In the Iran case, illicit finance, smuggling, and informal networks enabled proxy sustainment. The broader finding is that corruption should not be treated only as a background weakness. Depending on the case, it may provide access, concealment, logistics, financing, elite protection, or institutional capture.

Hybrid campaigns often seek to create costly response dilemmas rather than achieve decisive victories. The purpose is not always to defeat the target directly, but to narrow its freedom of action and place it in a position where each available response carries political, legal, economic, reputational, or military costs. EU states facing instrumentalized migration had to balance border control, humanitarian obligations, asylum law, domestic politics, and reputational costs. Western governments confronting Russian sanctions evasion had to preserve open trade while tightening export controls and pressuring third countries. Israel and the United States faced the problem of responding to proxy attacks without triggering wider escalation. States dependent on Chinese rare earths and critical

minerals must choose between short-term industrial needs and long-term diversification. Mali's authorities faced a different dilemma: dependence on Western partners with political conditions or dependence on Russian security assistance with fewer governance constraints but greater human-rights and sovereignty costs. Hybrid campaigns are effective when they manipulate the target's choice set so that action, inaction, escalation, and restraint all become costly.

Strategic leverage may be an end in itself. This is clearest in the China case, where the creation of dependency in critical-mineral supply chains is not merely preparation for a later coercive act. The dependency itself changes the strategic environment by shaping the expectations and calculations of other actors. The same logic appears, in a different form, in Iran's proxy architecture and Russia's position in Mali. A proxy network, a captured security relationship, or control over industrial chokepoints each generates leverage even before that leverage is openly exercised. Hybrid campaigns, therefore, should not be assessed only by asking whether they produced an immediate policy concession. They may succeed by narrowing the target's future freedom of action.

Hybrid campaigns are adaptive. Their operators shift channels when exposed, sanctioned, or countered. Wagner's role in Africa evolved after Prigozhin's death and the creation of Africa Corps. Russian procurement networks adjusted routes, intermediaries, and corporate structures as export controls tightened. Iran's network adapted to battlefield losses, changes in Syria, and shifting escalation risks. China's leverage evolved from production dominance to technology controls and extraterritorial export measures. Belarusian migration pressure adapted to EU sanctions, travel restrictions, and border measures. Adaptation is not a secondary feature; it is central to hybrid campaign design because such campaigns operate in contested environments where the target is learning and responding.

The effectiveness of hybrid campaigns depends as much on target vulnerability as on the instigator's capability. Mali was vulnerable because of coups, weak legitimacy, security failures, and public frustration with Western partners. Sanctions evasion succeeded where global supply chains, corporate opacity, and uneven enforcement created openings. Iran's proxy network depended on fragmented states and armed non-state actors embedded in local politics. China's leverage depended on the slow pace and high cost of developing alternative supply chains. Belarus's migration pressure worked because legal obligations, humanitarian norms, and domestic contestation constrained democratic states. Hybrid campaigns, therefore, exploit existing vulnerabilities rather than creating all effects from scratch.

Taken together, the cases support the central argument of this article. Hybrid operations below the threshold of war are not defined by any single instrument, domain, or level of violence. They are coordinated actions designed to manipulate target systems and produce defined effects. Hybrid campaigns integrate such operations over time to generate cumulative political or strategic leverage. Their common logic lies in orchestration, system targeting, exploitation of

seams, adaptation, and the deliberate use of ambiguity, dependency, corruption, or coercive restraint to constrain the target's response.

Conclusions

This article has argued that the concepts of hybrid operation and hybrid campaign help clarify forms of strategic competition that are often discussed under broader labels such as hybrid warfare, gray-zone conflict, irregular warfare, or malign influence. The distinction is useful because it separates isolated hostile activities from coordinated below-threshold actions and from sustained campaigns designed to generate cumulative political or strategic effects. A hybrid operation, as used here, is not defined by any single instrument, domain, or degree of violence. It is defined by coordination, target-system manipulation, and a specified effect. A hybrid campaign links such operations over time and across domains, actors, and target systems, in pursuit of political or strategic ends while remaining below the threshold of war or managing escalation short of open war.

The cases examined in this article demonstrate the diversity of such campaigns. Russia's role in Mali shows how security dependence, opaque elite bargains, information influence, and strategic corruption can support state capture and geopolitical realignment. Russia's sanctions-evasion procurement networks demonstrate how hybrid campaigns can target regulatory, commercial, and logistical systems to sustain defense production. Iran's Axis of Resistance illustrates the power and fragility of proxy-based coercion and forward defense. China's critical-minerals strategy shows that strategic leverage can be built through industrial policy, overseas access, processing dominance, and export control authority without the use of force. Belarus's instrumentalization of migration demonstrates how legal and humanitarian obligations can themselves become part of the operational terrain. Across these cases, the common logic is not a particular tool but the orchestration of heterogeneous instruments to exploit seams, create dilemmas, and constrain the target's freedom of action.

Several broader conclusions follow. First, hybrid campaigns should be studied as forms of operational design, not merely as collections of instruments. Second, the target of a hybrid campaign is often a system: a security sector, a sanctions regime, a supply chain, a border-management architecture, a regional deterrence environment, or a set of elite decision-making relationships. Third, corruption deserves greater analytical attention. It may function as a central instrument of state capture, an enabler of procurement and logistics, a facilitator of illicit finance, or a means of weakening institutional resistance. Fourth, strategic leverage may be an end in itself. The purpose of a campaign may not be immediate coercion but the creation of a position from which future coercion becomes credible and costly to resist.

The study has several limitations. It relies on open sources, which are uneven across cases and typically become rich only after an operation has been exposed, if it is exposed at all. Intent, coordination, and command relationships are difficult to prove, especially where actors deliberately use deniability, proxies, front

companies, informal intermediaries, or commercial cover. The cases were selected to span different regions of the below-threshold operational space, not to achieve statistical representativeness. The analysis, therefore, supports conceptual development and structured comparison rather than general causal claims. Finally, the boundary between hybrid operations, covert action, organized crime, economic statecraft, and war is inherently contested. This ambiguity is partly a limitation of the study, but it is also a feature of the phenomenon itself.

Future research could proceed in several directions. One priority is to develop more precise indicators for identifying hybrid operations before their cumulative effects become visible. Another is to compare target responses and resilience mechanisms: why some states or systems detect, absorb, and counter hybrid campaigns more effectively than others. Further work is also needed on strategic corruption as an operational instrument, especially in cases where foreign actors use elite co-optation, opaque finance, procurement networks, or resource deals to shape state behavior. Additional research could examine how hybrid campaigns evolve when exposed, sanctioned, or disrupted, and how they transition between non-violent leverage, proxy coercion, and open conflict. Finally, future studies may usefully explore whether the operation/campaign distinction can support practical planning for deterrence, response, and resilience building.

The central implication is that hybrid campaigns below the threshold of war are not peripheral anomalies in contemporary security competition. They are a durable mode of strategic action. Their effectiveness depends on their ability to manipulate systems, exploit vulnerabilities, adapt to countermeasures, and generate leverage without triggering the full costs of open war. Understanding them as campaigns composed of coordinated operations should make it possible to analyze them more precisely and, potentially, to respond to them more effectively.

Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Partnership for Peace Consortium, its participating institutions, or any governmental or international organizations affiliated with its governance structure.

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