Russia’s war on Western cohesion



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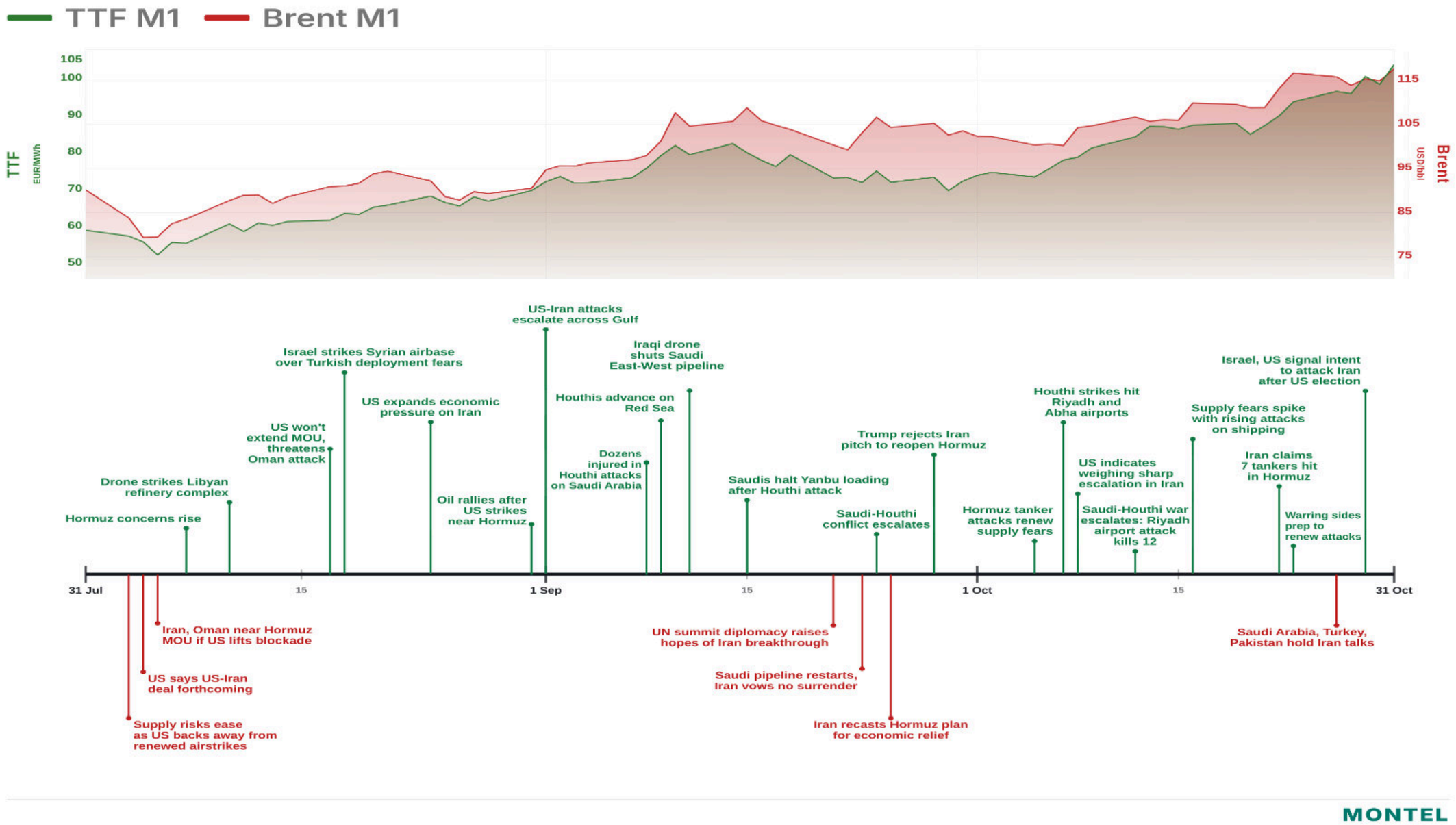

Whether Russian activities in Europe are described as hybrid warfare or, more recently by the President of the German Federal Intelligence Service, as a shadow war, one word remains constant: war. Yet for most people, this term evokes images of past and present conflicts: tanks, bombers, warships, destroyed cities and soldiers fighting on battlefields. In military terminology, these are commonly referred to as kinetic effects. But they are merely the most visible manifestations of war, not necessarily its defining characteristics.

To understand the nature of war, we must look beyond its visible symptoms and examine its underlying logic. This brings us to Carl von Clausewitz, who argued in his nineteenth-century work On War that armed conflict is an act of force intended to compel an enemy to fulfil one’s will. To achieve this, the enemy must be rendered incapable of resistance.

In the historical context that shaped Clausewitz’s thinking, this usually meant defeating an opponent’s army on the battlefield or forcing it to surrender. This familiar understanding of warfare also explains why Russia’s invasion of Ukraine fits so easily into our traditional conception of war.

But why should Russia's activities elsewhere in Europe also be understood through the logic of war, even where large-scale kinetic violence is absent?

Political will and the Russian objective

To answer this question, we must return to Clausewitz and examine two elements: the political will Russia seeks to impose and how it seeks to disarm its opponents.

Russia's political ambition is to restore its dominance over territories and states formerly within the Soviet sphere of influence. Vladimir Putin has described the collapse of the Soviet Union as a historical catastrophe. However, Russia faces a fundamental obstacle. Many states formerly within Moscow's sphere of influence are now members of NATO, the European Union, or both.

These alliances collectively prevent Russia from imposing its preferred political order upon its neighbours. Consequently, NATO and the EU become strategic opponents from Moscow's perspective. Their individual member states are therefore relevant targets of Russian coercive activities, regardless of how Russia-friendly their governments may appear or how strongly they emphasise neutrality. The decisive issue is therefore not whether individual European countries seek confrontation with Russia, but whether their membership in collective institutions obstructs Moscow's political objectives.

Alliance cohesion as the centre of gravity

This brings us to the second element of Clausewitz's logic: rendering the opponent incapable of resistance.

To understand how this might work against NATO and the EU, we must first identify what makes these alliances powerful. Clausewitz introduced the concept of the centre of gravity, the source of an opponent's strength and ability to act. For NATO, alliance cohesion can be understood as such a centre of gravity. The same logic applies, despite institutional differences, to the European Union.

A useful analogy is a jigsaw puzzle. It is most valuable when all its pieces are present and fit together neatly. Its integrity depends not merely on the existence of individual pieces, but on the connections between them. The same applies to NATO and the EU. Their power does not simply result from the combined military, economic or political capabilities of their members. It depends on their willingness to act collectively.

Anyone with small children knows how easily a puzzle can come apart. Sometimes bending an edge or wearing down a connection is enough to prevent individual pieces from fitting together. When the pieces represent sovereign states, however, bending the edges means weakening the political and societal ties that hold them together.

From a Russian strategic perspective, this means encouraging developments within European societies that undermine their willingness to cooperate internationally. Nationalism becomes particularly useful in this context. So do narratives portraying alliances as unnecessary, expensive or detrimental to national interests. These narratives become more effective when accompanied by a widespread perception that the country is experiencing a serious crisis and that domestic problems must take priority over international obligations. The political message is simple: First, we must take care of ourselves.

Not every nationalist movement or criticism of international cooperation is Russian-inspired. But Moscow can exploit and amplify such sentiments to weaken the political foundations of collective action. If this succeeds partially, individual pieces of the puzzle no longer fit together. If it succeeds more comprehensively, pieces may effectively fall out. Either way, the alliances lose their ability to act.

For Europe as a whole, this represents a serious security challenge. For the Baltic states, whose geography and size make them particularly dependent on collective defence, it can become an existential threat. An alliance that possesses powerful armed forces but lacks the political cohesion to employ them collectively may ultimately become incapable of effective resistance.

This is where Clausewitz's concept of rendering an opponent defenceless acquires a different meaning.

Undermining the will to use NATO's power

Following this logic, Russian activities beyond Ukraine can be understood as elements of warfare even where the familiar kinetic conflict remain largely absent. This does not mean that every hostile Russian act automatically constitutes an act of war in the legal sense. Rather, they follow a strategic logic aimed at weakening an opponent's capacity to resist to ultimately impose political objectives.

We should not make the mistake of labelling this phenomenon as something entirely new. Many methods associated with contemporary Russian hybrid warfare have their origins in Soviet intelligence practices, particularly the KGB's active measures. Disinformation, political interference, subversion and the exploitation of societal divisions are established instruments of strategic influence. What has changed is the technological environment in which this methods are employed. Digital communication, social media and cyber capabilities allow such activities to be conducted with greater speed, scale and reach.

Equally important, Russia's confrontation with the European security order did not begin in February 2022. Its hybrid activities can be traced back as early as 2014, and many patterns established then remain visible today. Yet European societies repeatedly make the mistake of treating individual incidents as isolated events.



Source: Montel Gas Analytics

A cyberattack is discussed as a cybersecurity problem. Sabotage against infrastructure is considered a matter of physical security. Disinformation is addressed primarily through media literacy. Political interference becomes a question of electoral integrity. Each perspective may be justified, but none necessarily captures the broader strategic context.

The danger of Russian hybrid warfare does not primarily lie in individual actions, but in the cumulative effects these actions produce over time. A single incident may have limited consequences. Numerous incidents affecting political trust, economic stability, societal cohesion and public confidence in institutions can gradually transform the conditions under which governments make decisions.

Understanding hybrid warfare therefore requires looking beyond individual actions and examining the relationship between those actions, their intended effects and the political changes they are designed to achieve.

Creating the weakness Russia seeks to exploit

In 2014, US Senator John McCain argued that Russia was encouraged by weakness. This observation remains relevant. But Russia does not merely identify weaknesses among its opponents. Its hybrid activities also seek to create and intensify them.

Political polarisation, declining institutional trust, economic insecurity and growing nationalism can all undermine the willingness of European states to act collectively. These developments serve Russian interests even when their immediate causes are domestic.

The resulting strategic effect is the gradual weakening of NATO and EU cohesion. What initially appears to be a national political or societal problem can therefore acquire significance for European security as a whole, creating two fundamental requirements for European states.

First, they must develop credible military capabilities. Military strength remains essential to deter aggression and demonstrate that coercion will not succeed. Second, they must counter developments that undermine political cohesion and collective solidarity.

These requirements are inseparable. Military capabilities without political willingness are of limited strategic value. Political solidarity without sufficient military strength may lack credibility.

Countering the appeal of we must take care of ourselves first is particularly difficult because such narratives frequently exploit genuine economic and societal concerns. Resilience therefore cannot be created through political communication alone. It requires addressing the vulnerabilities that make societies susceptible to manipulation. Nor can this task be solved exclusively within the political or societal sphere.

Russia's activities extend across economic structures, the information environment and critical infrastructure. The energy sector is particularly important because it connects these dimensions. Energy infrastructure is simultaneously a physical target, an economic necessity and a source of societal stability. Disruptions or rising costs can generate economic pressure, public anxiety and political dissatisfaction. Information operations can then exploit these consequences to undermine confidence in governments and international cooperation. The strategic significance of an attack on energy infrastructure may therefore extend far beyond its immediate physical damage.

It is precisely this interaction between different dimensions that makes hybrid warfare difficult to recognise when individual incidents are examined in isolation.

Conclusion: disarming an alliance without firing a shot

Russia's warfare against Europe follows a strategic logic (See *We are at war*!, Summer issue) that becomes clearer when viewed through Clausewitz. Moscow seeks to impose a revisionist political order. NATO and the EU obstruct this ambition. Their ability to resist depends fundamentally on the cohesion of their member states. Weakening that cohesion therefore becomes a means of reducing their collective capacity to act. This does not require defeating European armies on the battlefield, but undermining the political and societal conditions that enable those armies, and the states behind them, to act together.

Europe must therefore strengthen its military capabilities while simultaneously protecting the political cohesion, institutional trust and societal resilience upon which collective security depends.

However, we are still thinking and acting in silos of responsibility. On top of that, in many countries, mainstream political parties are seeing necessary reforms torpedoed by parties on the political fringes. Those same parties then exploit the resulting backlog of reforms for their own political mobilisation and to deepen divisions within society.

Finding a solution is, in my view, extremely difficult and, as pessimistic as this may sound, I cannot see one emerging in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, recent elections in Hungary, Poland and Serbia, as well as Ukraine's courageous and ongoing struggle, offer some hope that societies are still willing and able to stand up against negative developments and resist them with determination.

The decisive threat is not necessarily the individual act of sabotage, cyberattack or disinformation campaign. It is the cumulative erosion of the connections that hold the European puzzle together.

Russia does not need to remove every piece of the puzzle. It may be enough to ensure that the pieces no longer fit nicely. And that is why the logic of war can already be at work long before its kinetic manifestations become visible.