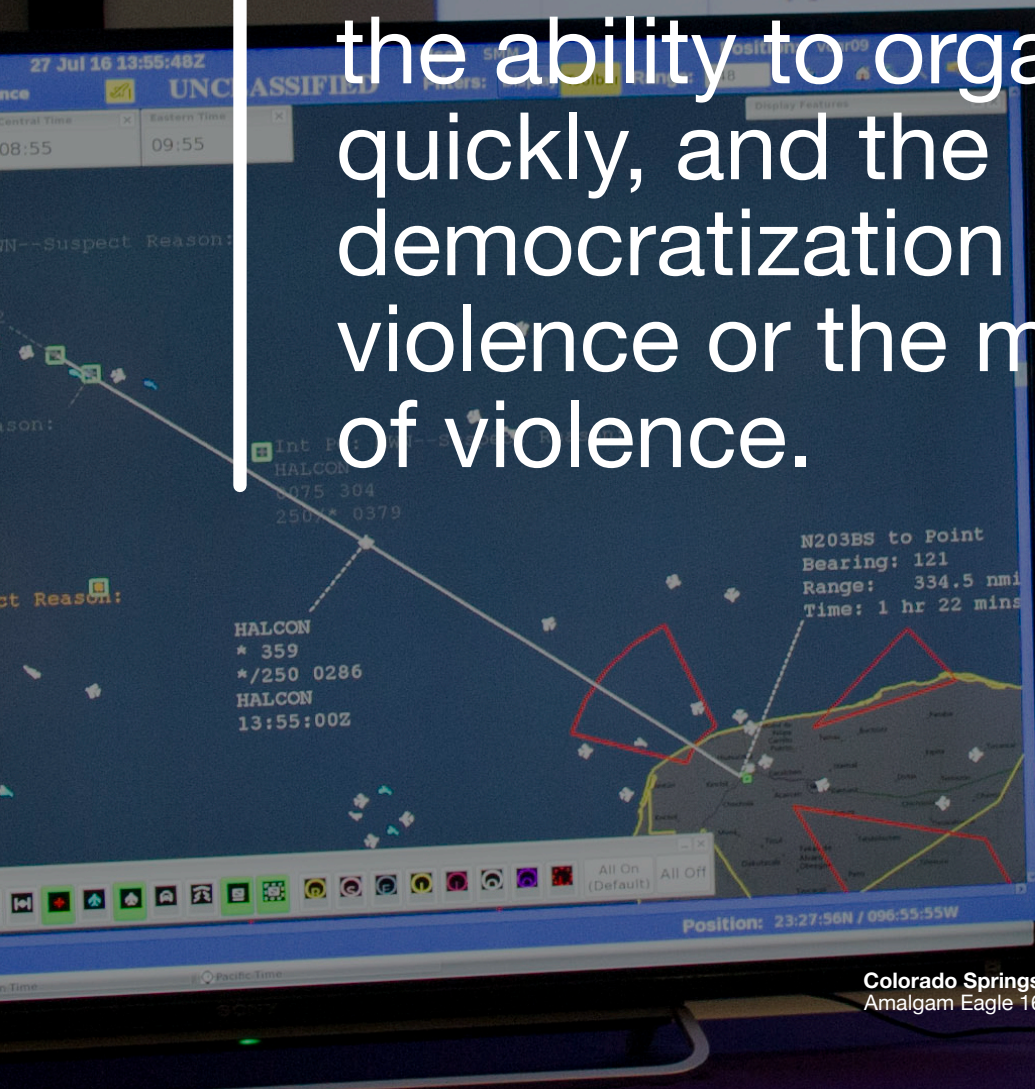


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# Russian Hybrid War, Ukraine, and U.S. Policy

## A Conversation with Col. Liam Collins

Interviewed by Lukas Bundonis

**Fletcher Security Review (FSR):** Colonel Collins, thanks for coming in for your interview with the Fletcher Security Review. You gave an ISSP luncheon lecture at The Fletcher School on Russian hybrid war, Ukraine, and U.S. policy. I'd like to start with hybrid warfare. For the sake of definition, what is hybrid warfare?

**Col. Liam Collins (LC):** Hybrid warfare is kind of a mix of conventional and unconventional tactics using modern technologies, information operations, electronic warfare, and kind of transitioning from one to the other in a highly flexible, fluid format and method.

**FSR:** Got it. So to apply that to Russia, Ukraine, and U.S. policy, how has Russia employed hybrid warfare in recent years?

**LC:** So Russia, I mean, most recently in Ukraine got its start or its test run and learned a lot from the Russia-Georgian war in 2008 and its invasion into Georgia. Their experience really goes back to their war with the Chechens in the nineties, in which the Chechens were able to be a guerrilla type of force, but then turned conventional to do large raids or ambushes against them. So they really learned from their experience there, then did a kind of test run of hybrid warfare in Georgia in 2008, and then really employed it with amazing success in Ukraine in 2014.

**FSR:** Is Russia the only military power that has done so?

**LC:** I mean, hybrid war, in some ways, is nothing new, right? This goes back to the American Revolutionary War, where we had our regular forces, and then the irregular ones. And so it really that isn't new. What is new is kind of the modern technology information matters—the speed of the information flow, the ability to organize quickly, and the democratization of violence or the means of violence. So those things allow you to do it in a way that you couldn't do in the past. But the idea really isn't anything new, others have done it. But what Russia was able to do was effectively annex the Crimea without firing a single shot. And so that that was pretty new.

**FSR:** Speaking of new cyber attacks and information operations, they get a lot of play in the national media, but can you speak a little bit to Electronic Warfare (EW), specifically Russian EW capabilities?

**LC:** So, electronic warfare. Again, this is something we were as a military kind of prepared for during the Cold War. But with nearly 20 years in Afghanistan and Iraq doing counte-

rinsurgency operations, we never had to worry about what was up in the sky. We didn't have to worry—we could talk on a radio as long as we wanted. You could set up a tactical operation center, your headquarters, anywhere you wanted, put your antennas up right next to you, and you didn't have to worry about electronic warfare. So the two main kind of components that they can do with electronic warfare is, for one, they can jam your radio, so you'd lose the ability to communicate if you're used to doing that. The second is that they can spoof GPS technology. Our smart munitions or, you know, if everybody gets used to or is completely reliant on technology, they don't know how to navigate without their technology, without their GPS devices. So those are ways electronic warfare, combined in some ways with cyber at times, can be used. It can also be used to identify your position by the electronic signature that you give off. Just by talking on the radio, you give off electronic signature, and they can use that, along with a direction-finding capability, to identify your location. Then either that by itself, or in combination with a UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) flying in the sky, the enemy can identify your position and drop artillery on you. This tactic proved very effective against the Ukrainians earlier in the conflict. The big threat from electronic warfare is again our reliance on this advantage of technology that can be used against us. And we've got a generation of officers that grew up not understanding that this is something that can be leveraged against them, who are at that same time becoming more and more reliant on constant communication and expect to have that with their elements all the time.

**FSR:** Understood. Do you believe that electronic warfare is one of the primary threats to be concerned about in this kind of hybrid warfare format? What are the biggest threats you see, maybe using Russia as a focus?

**LC:** I don't know if I would say that it's just a concern in hybrid war, but in warfare in general, it's definitely a concern. I mean, when you think of hybrid war right now, Russia's main effort in Ukraine is political subversion. That first and foremost is their main effort. So they're going to avoid using overt forces, having learned from their mistakes in Georgia in 2008. They wanted the international community to believe that they were coming in south of the city's defense, and that it was the Georgians who instigated the conflict. Blame lies on both sides, but most people believe it was premeditated—a term some have used—by the Russians. So that's something to be concerned with. But in terms of electronic warfare, the reason that we have to be concerned about it is because of what I would say is our inability to defend against it—not so much because of the technological solution to it, though that



**London, UK.** Then-SECDEF Ash Carter and then-Ukrainian Defense Minister Stepan Poltorak at a UN Peacekeeping Ministerial meeting. (Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brigitte N. Brantley / Public Domain)

is a piece of it. It's more about organizational and cultural techniques, tactics, and procedures. We have a generation of officers that have grown up, again, in constant communications. For example, they set up a headquarters out in the field, put up their antennas right next to it, and then maybe don't realize that, okay, maybe you have to displace those antennas a thousand meters away, right? Because even if they're 200 meters away, that's close enough for Russian artillery when they're saturating the area with artillery rounds. And so it's something to be concerned with only because this threat is something we are, at the current time—and this is my assessment, again, not speaking for official Department of Defense policy or anything—not prepared for adequately.

**FSR:** That's right. Moving on to the broad topic of leadership. Can you talk a little bit about your time serving under General John Abizaid in Ukraine?

**LC:** So just over two years ago, then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter appointed General Abizaid as a senior defense adviser to Ukraine for defense reform. In that mission, they had asked for advisers from several of our allies. The group was composed of the British General Nick Parker, who's a retired land forces commander, which is equivalent of our chief of staff of the Army; Canadian Jill Sinclair, who is senior civil servant in their department, and General Jonas Andriškevičius, a former chief of defense from Lithuania. And a German and a Polish advisor came on later. Abizaid's primary role over there was to advise the Ukrainians on how to reform their defense establishment to become on par with NATO standard. That increases their effectiveness, and improves things like civilian oversight of the military and other aspects. So for the last two years, we've been going over there every

four to six weeks to look at their system and make recommendations to them as to how they can reform. And then also, you know, providing feedback to our senior leaders as well.

**FSR:** So speaking of Ukraine, how do you view the current state of their defense and organs of state? How do you assess the conflict, four years on?

**LC:** So Ukraine is kind of still a strange place out there, as there's still the conflict zone in the east. They had a tentative agreement, Minsk 1, that didn't really hold and then Minsk 2, which held, and that's been going since February of 2015. And so what we see there now is not constant violations of the cease fire. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) typically reports hundreds of thousands of violations, but they report a single mortar round or artillery round as an individual violation. So if you have a strike that has 40 rounds, that would be 40 violations. But nobody is really trying to advance on the other, it's more what I would describe as constant, periodic probing, artillery round exchanges—again, initiated from the Russian side for the most part. It's kind of described as WWI has been with technology—they're in trenches, more or less static trenches, but you'll see artillery exchanges, and you'll have, you know, unmanned aerial vehicles flying in the sky. You've got to worry about electronic warfare, identifying the position, information operations. They even have cell phone targeting with what has been characterized as pinpoint propaganda aimed at soldiers that are there. That's a snapshot of what you see now in Ukraine. There's at least one or two Ukrainian soldiers that are killed and about seven to ten that are typically injured every week.



**FSR:** You also mentioned NATO. Do you believe that NATO is adequately prepared for the potential of a repeat performance by Russia in other Eastern European countries?

**LC:** I would say NATO would not be caught by surprise. I think, again, of my assessment in 2014 with Crimea. And I think part of it is that no one was really sure what the little green men were doing, but I also think nations that didn't want to get involved could use ignorance as plausible deniability. So Russia then performed their information operations, just putting enough distraction out there, enough confusion so that no one could come to a consensus early on about what exactly the Russians were doing—and it was just enough time to paralyze everybody. So by the time nations figured it out, it was a *fait accompli*. But again, Ukraine is not part of a NATO alliance and so it's a different situation than it would be if it were the Baltics or some other state.

**FSR:** I'd like to stay on the topic of leaders to talk a little bit about Slobodan Milosevic. You spent some time in the Balkans in the 1990s. Do you believe that he and Putin have some similarities?

**LC:** I mean, I could see similarities in that both leaders don't allow their citizens to have a little democracy. But I think Milosevic is probably more concerned with holding the territory that he had, not as expansionist as many would assess Putin to be. Though some would say Putin is responding to what he views as NATO aggression. But I'd say there could be some similarities in those ways, and that they both are not afraid to use military force as a tool of statecraft.

**FSR:** Fair enough. As a career leader yourself, specifically of

Special Operations Forces (SOF), how do you assess the current state of SOF in the United States? Is the military, or its civilian overseers, using these highly trained personnel effectively? And if not, what can be done to improve that?

**LC:** Overall, I think that we are using the Special Operations Forces effectively. It's really grown in confidence from 2001. I think prior to that time, there was some uncertainty among civilian leaders as far as to what the capability of SOF is. They weren't sure what it was at that time. SOF had a reputation, whether it was deserved or not, of maybe being cowboys, people that civilian leaders couldn't trust. But I think in the last 17 or 18 years, they've demonstrated their capability and their credibility. So much to the point now that if anything, it's either a matter of too much comfort with these forces or not enough oversight and just deferring to the military to do what it's capable of doing. But SOF is definitely used effectively, and it's probably grown as much as it can. There was some growth in the mid 2000s, but the challenge in doing so is that the standards of those type of elements of those organizations cannot be lowered in order to grow them. You have to know what the standard is and have the organization meet that high standard because there are so many milestones on missions of national importance. And so they're about where they can be, I think in terms of size.

**FSR:** That definitely speaks to the effectiveness, but there have also been some general opinions in the defense establishment that Special Operations Forces are overworked or overused. Do you agree with that?

**LC:** I guess it would depend. It would probably be on an individual level, you'd have to ask them. When I was a command-



**Drawksow Pomorskie, Poland.** Croatian, American, and Polish SOF operators at the Jackal Stone 10 exercise. (Master Sgt. Donald Sparks / Public Domain)





**West Point, NY, U.S.A.** U.S. Military Academy cadets speak with visiting officers. (U.S. Army / Public Domain)

der, there was one year when I was not gone more than three and a half months at a time. But during that year, I had over 52 weeks where I was never home more than seven days straight. But personally, I didn't feel like I was over-employed. Of course, I didn't have family or kids and stuff, which maybe factors into it. I think SOF is used at a sustainable level. They do a pretty good job of managing it. When we're deployed, we're working hard, and when we're home, we train hard, but we ensure people have time to be with their families and we don't have yearlong deployments. It might be a four- or six-month deployment, so they may be more frequent, but they're not as long so I think there are ways to mitigate this.

**LC:** But I would agree that it'd be tough to, extend these forces beyond where they're at now. I think they've reached their maximum stage. You know, we kind of surge until it's at a steady, surge until it's at a steady state, and then surge until it's at a steady state. It'll be tough to surge anymore from where we're at. We've kind of reached an equilibrium where the leadership has managed it, to "This is what it is". So they're constantly turning down missions or opportunities because of that. If there was a need to increase SOF forces, for example, a situation in North Korea, Russia, or whatever it is, then of course, we could surge and do more. But we're at an equilibrium now that is sustainable.

**FSR:** Last general topic is about the programs you're involved with. What can you tell me about your role at the Modern War Institute?

**LC:** It helps to think of the Modern War Institute as kind of a research institute, one that you'd see at any academic univer-

sity—that's kind of our role within our department of military instruction. We're really focused on better understanding the contemporary environment and contemporary conflict. And the reason is that we still have forty-seven months to take mostly high schoolers and graduate them as lieutenants in the Army. When I graduated twenty-six years ago, it was a simpler world. Primarily you were concerned about the Russians, but now there is a diversification of the threat. While we've still got to worry about near-peer adversaries and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, we also have to worry about terrorist organizations, drug trafficking organizations and criminal cartels. All these contribute to the diversification of the threat. And so how do we adequately prepare these students for that? So that's one focus of the Modern War Institute—to enhance the military program there, and then to serve as a place that the Army can turn to for research.

**LC:** We have different mechanisms that we use to accomplish these goals. I mean everybody I have on my staff teaches in the classroom. We host guest lectures or panels, and oftentimes we'll film those. For example, earlier this month, on October 3rd, was the 25th anniversary of the battle of Mogadishu, so we brought in three veterans from the battle to talk about their experience. So we did a panel on that, we filmed it, and put it on our YouTube channel and on our website, so that others who were not able to sit in the room can benefit from it. And those videos will typically get about several thousand views. We also have two different podcast series — one that has academics and practitioners, the Secretary of the Army, or maybe the training and doctrine commanders, to share combat stories, to capture their experiences so that people can learn from that.

**LC:** And so that's really what we're about. We're trying to elevate the debate and the discourse for understanding how to fight in this environment that we're in and the challenging diversification of the threat that we've had to prepare our leaders for, and to serve as a source for the army to understand it better.

**FSR:** Understood, that's the overall program question, but I want to talk about a specific project that I personally found interesting. What can you tell me about the urban warfare project?

**LC:** Yeah. So I mean, the urban warfare project is something we've talked about for many years, at least within the institute. There is a lack of preparedness, I think, for operating in that environment. If you look historically at the Department of Defense's strategy for urban areas, it is just to avoid it, right? Which is great, until you have to actually go in, and you can't always control why you're going to have to go into an urban environment. The battle of Mogadishu, though it happened twenty-five years ago, is still relevant because operating within cities has only gotten harder since then. And so the project is really thinking about the complexities that these dense urban terrains present. For a while we focused on "mega cities", which are, by definition, over 10 million people. But now, the focus doesn't have to be on 10 million people, but on dense urban terrains in general, which are defined by the fact that even if you used the entire armed forces, you could never own that city because it is so big. So how do you think about operating in those cities and conducting missions in those cities? And you might be over there doing a humanitarian mission right after a natural disaster or something.

**LC:** And even if you're not fighting a foreign military, there may be local gangs, groups, drug trafficking organizations, or terrorist groups that can establish local superiority of firepower or something. So how do we think about operating in these environments and the challenges it brings with subterranean levels? You know, operating within up to 40- or 50-story complexes— how do we think about that? And then culturally or operationally, there's often a trade-off between minimizing civilian casualties, minimizing collateral damage, and minimizing friendly casualties. And I think we've grown up or raised a culture in which people think they can minimize all three. And I don't think that's possible. So we have to get people mentally prepared to understand the area. They're

either going to have to cause significant damage in the city, accept more civilian casualties, or you're going to have to accept more casualties of your own force. And I don't think we've given a real thought to what that means.

**FSR:** I think it's a fascinating project of both thought and prep for real-world missions. On a somewhat lighter note, what would you tell someone who is interested in irregular warfare or counter-terrorism, who may want to work as a researcher for, let's say, MWI, War College or something like Special Operations Command (SOCOM)? Often an individual is not able to go into the military and get that experience, whether it's due to requirements or timing, but they still want to work in a defense environment. What would you suggest, or what should they build in terms of skills to qualify them for these positions?

**LC:** I would recommend reaching out to somebody within those organizations. I mean, reach out to us, and we can point somebody in the right direction. There are other think tanks that also look at these kinds of things. I'd start more from like a network. There's probably not a single place to go. One of the things we do want to build but haven't the capacity for is almost like a professional development page, where you can find maybe 10 or 20 articles on irregular war or hybrid war. We haven't got that capacity yet. I don't think anything out there really exists like that, where it's kind of like a quick one-click literature review. We're working on some projects that could effectively do that kind of thing, almost like readers, where if you want to learn about insurgency in counterinsurgency, boom, you read this edited volume, short chapters, that really gives you what you need to know. But there isn't a good single place to go for that. So I think about just reaching out. And, you know, if someone doesn't have time the first time then reach out to someone else and kind of get in that way.

**FSR:** Fair enough. Colonel Collins, thanks for your time.

## Col. Liam Collins

Colonel Liam Collins is a career Special Forces officer, who has served in a variety of special operations assignments and conducted multiple combat operations to Afghanistan and Iraq as well as operational deployments to Bosnia, Africa, and South America. He has graduated from several military courses including Ranger School and has earned numerous military awards and decorations including two valorous awards for his actions in combat. Prior to assuming his current position as the director of MWI, Liam served as the director of West Point's Combating Terrorism Center. He has taught courses in Military Innovation, Insurgency and Counterinsurgency, Comparative Defense Politics, Research Methods in Strategic Studies, Homeland Security and Defense, Terrorism and Counterterrorism, Internal Conflict, International Relations, American Politics, and Officership. He has a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering from the United States Military Academy and a Master in Public Affairs and PhD from Princeton University. — Modern War Institute