

What if the Hybrid Warfare/Threat Concept Was Simply Meant to Make Us Think?

Written by Dan G. Cox

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DAN G. COX, FEB 13 2013

In the summer of 2012 my co-authors and I penned, “Why Hybrid Warfare is Tactics Not Strategy” which was subsequently published in *Infinity Journal*. In this article, we were critical of the hybrid warfare/threats concept, which is, despite our critique, gaining momentum in foreign policy and military practitioner circles. There is even a reference to hybrid threats in the new Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3.0 which is the Army’s capstone document on Unified Land Operations.[2] To be fair, the definition of hybrid threats in ADP 3.0 is one of the most precise hybrid definitions out there but it ends up resembling all the other definitions of hybrid warfare in that it is a catch-all definition describing the possible range of threats U. S. forces are likely to encounter. Further, like other definitions, the U. S. Army ironically falls under the ADP 3.0 definition of a hybrid threat so one fails to see how this adds any clarity to the categorization of threats.

This was the main problem with the hybrid war and later hybrid threat concept in the first place. It is a vague and inconsistently defined concept. Frank Hoffman’s point that future warfare will be multi-modal and not a simple black and white conception, as some have argued, is well taken. It seems that he and other proponents like Colin Gray, Max Boot, John McCuen, and Margaret Bond see a real danger in bipolar lines of argumentation. For example, one could interpret hybrid warfare as what lies between the current bipolar debate between pundits of major combat operations versus proponents of irregular warfare.

All too often scholars and policy-makers argue about constructing a strategy for the future that is all too often framed in tones of black or white. Currently the principals are at loggerheads over the notion that the United States is in an irregular “long war” versus a newer argument coming from Air/Sea Battle proponents that the United States should prepare for a potential major conventional fight with China. Again, if hybrid warfare proponents posited their concept in the hopes of breaking scholars and policy-makers out of this bipolar thinking, then the intent of hybrid warfare needs to be reconsidered and the ramifications of the movement must be reconsidered.

More evidence to support this thesis of a revised interpretation comes from a recent review essay by Frank Hoffman in *Small Wars Journal*. In Hoffman’s review of *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza*, Hoffman emphasizes the need to categorize the *type* of enemy one is facing just as Carl von Clausewitz originally argued in *On War*. This, too, is emphasized in ADP 3.0 in the section on properly understanding the “Character of the Threat.” Hoffman argues that a fundamental misunderstanding of the Hezbollah threat in the 2006 war led to Israel’s defeat.

With this new perspective in mind, a complex civilian/military relations problem is exposed. While scholars can and, perhaps, should introduce concepts to shake others from locking into lines of thought, practitioners are constantly searching for answers to pressing complex warfare problems. Military leaders and doctrine writers are attracted to faddish ideas not because they are stupid but because they are attempting to find a way to conceptualize and deal with the complexities of war. The danger with this is that if military leaders grasp onto vague or contested concepts, intellectual contractors will also gravitate to these concepts, redefine them to suit their own purposes, and then create a fancy power point presentations to offer to political and military leaders as *the* answer to all of their problems. Therefore, in an academic world, a proper and vigorous debate ensues but, unfortunately, in the practical world confusion abounds.

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Saving the Hybrid Warfare Using Political Science

If the main thrust behind the hybrid warfare concept is indeed to shake scholars and policy-makers out of the bipolar doldrums, especially in regard to categorizing enemies, then more fidelity for the hybrid construct is needed. Adding methodological rigor from political science is one way to accomplish this goal. Bard O'Neill's seminal work on terrorism and insurgency provides one of the only systematic methodologies to categorize different types of insurgent groups. O'Neill identifies nine distinct types of insurgency from traditionalists who seek to overthrow nations, regions, or, in the case of Al Qaeda, transform the whole world back to a mythical traditional past to commercial insurgents who simply wish to overturn or subvert local laws for monetary gain.

The point of O'Neill's categorization of insurgency is to increase our understanding of insurgent actors in order that specific threats could be met with appropriate and effective actions. Criminal justice responses may have little or partial impact on traditionalist insurgencies but such a strategy could prove effective against a commercial insurgency. The point is that the hybrid warfare construct needs to attain this level of fidelity in order to become a useful theory in practice.

Such a step would require a massive amount of work and dislodge it from its position as vague instigator between the bipolar ends of major conventional war and irregular war. Even suggesting such an evolution of hybrid warfare is likely to offend some proponents and most intellectual contractors who are leveraging the vagueness of the concept to their benefit. It also requires a reframing of the concept so that it is not solely outward facing from the United States but also encompasses the United States. When one really delves into the concept in this manner it becomes painfully clear that the United States military is the most dangerous hybrid threat on the earth.

In order to begin such a project, one would have to define measurable variables in order to create usable typologies of hybrid threats. A complete undertaking of such an endeavor is outside the scope of this paper but a rough sketch example is appropriate to light the way.

Under the new, more rigorous conception of hybrid threats, the U. S. military is classified as the most potent. The United States possesses the most potent conventional forces in the world and this is where most assessments of U. S. military prowess dwell. What most analysts discount is the U. S. military's unconventional capacity. In response to unconventional cyber threats, the U. S. military stood up Cyber Command. Long before the counterinsurgency fights in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U. S. military had developed a robust irregular war fighting capacity. U. S. Special Operating Forces have been so successful recently in advising and building the capacity of their Filipino counterparts that the Filipino government has recently deepened military ties with the United States.

The United States, too, has a great economic capacity she can use to help shape the international landscape to her advantage. Stability Operations often have a large economic component and compellence through sanctioning or favorable trading status has worked in certain situations to help fulfill strategic aims.

While the United States has been practicing hybrid warfare in earnest since at least World War II, it is still a far different hybrid threat than Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda must be categorized as an almost entirely irregular threat though the means and operational reach of Al Qaeda are greater than other hybrid threats. Al Qaeda has demonstrated the ability to operate in multiple states simultaneously. While terrorism seems to be the tactic of choice, Al Qaeda has recently delved into the economic sphere enacting rudimentary village stability operations in several African nations. Al Qaeda has also provided logistical and training support to insurgent groups in Southeast Asia.

Far below Al Qaeda and, perhaps, at the end of the hybrid spectrum are groups like Abu Sayyaf. Abu Sayyaf formerly was the militant/terrorist wing of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) insurgency in the Philippines. Since splitting from the MILF, Abu Sayyaf has dwindled to roughly seventy-five members whose sole purpose is to engage in illicit drug trade and ransoming civilians.

The purpose of this post is not to produce a fully formed model for categorizing hybrid threats. Instead, the motivation behind writing this is to illuminate the shortcomings of hybrid warfare as a concept, illustrate the confusion

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this concept has wrought, and point the way ahead for future research in the hopes that a robust theory would be developed. As the concept currently stands, it is too unbounded conceptually to drive foreign policy or effective military practice.

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[2] ADP 3.0 defines a hybrid threat as “the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects.”

About the author:

Dan G. Cox is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.