

# The Hybrid Warfare Vulnerability

Assessing the need for a hybrid warfare joint operating concept

by Maj Patrick S. Hassett

Hybrid warfare has emerged as a prototypical form of warfare for state and non-state actors to counter the relative strength of western nations. This form of warfare is the logical reaction to the western revolution in military affairs.<sup>1</sup> It is evident that this form of warfare is unlike any form the United States has encountered or defeated in the past and will likely continue in the future. The U.S. military's recent experiences in small wars fail to adequately prepare our forces for the complexity associated with hybrid threats in the future. A cohesive joint operational concept is required to focus U.S. capabilities to defeat a hybrid adversary.

The United States has yet to encounter a hybrid threat directly, although recent trends indicate increasing regularity of this advanced form of warfare against Western states. Hybrid warfare is a novel form of warfare that has continuously evolved for at least the previous decade due to weapons proliferations, globalization, diversification of communications systems, and most importantly the Western revolution in military affairs.<sup>2</sup> The overwhelming likelihood is that

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the United States will soon be a direct target. Recent U.S. small war operations have taken the form of counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, foreign humanitarian assistance throughout USINDOPACOM, and counterterror operations in various locations in Af-

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rica and the Middle East. These types of operations are genuinely complex, but these operations differ starkly from hybrid warfare threats.

U.S. operational planners have not encountered firsthand the challenges associated with hybrid warfare. Various state actors, such as Russia in the Ukraine and Georgia, and non-state actors, such as Hezbollah while fighting against Israel, have effectively demonstrated the utility and severity of advanced weapon systems blended with insurgent and paramilitary tactics. Of specific concern in these instances is the victim state's inability to develop cohesive responses to counter the "simultaneous and adaptive ... fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, catastrophic terrorism, and criminal behavior,"<sup>3</sup> these victim states have endured. The United States cannot wait to experience the challenges associated with a hybrid adversary's complex, multi-domain order of battle first hand. Instead, U.S. forces must analyze and understand the inherent challenges of hybrid warfare before we encounter this form of warfare directly.

One of the most significant challenges of the hybrid adversary systems is that this adversary concept occurs simultaneously with both conventional and irregular tactics, including terrorism and criminal activity, operating within the same battlespace as an orchestrated and networked operation.<sup>4</sup> These challenges include a continuous modernized conventional adversary military capability. In the current operating environment, sophisticated and increasingly lethal weapons naturally draw the focus of our conventional operational commanders and staffs. Meanwhile, hybrid adversaries engage in discreet criminal activities such as narco-terrorism, illicit arms transfers, and other criminal enterprise activities



**Figure 1. A heuristic construct for conflict. Depicts the current conventional spectrum of warfare as represented by Dr. Frank Hoffman. Current joint doctrine exists for all forms of conflict depicted except Hybrid Warfare. (Figure provided by author.)**

to fund operations, strengthen political power bases, draw law enforcement and military resources, and destabilize adversary's political and economic systems.<sup>5</sup>

In the hybrid warfare environment, adversaries further seek to exploit the non-attributional nature of the information and cyber domains to exponentially increase the effects of conventional force operations as well as irregular and insurgent tactics. Perhaps the most significant component of this diverse threat profile is that hybrid adversaries seek to execute some or all of these operations *concurrently* within one operational battlespace. The sequencing of these disparate efforts has an exponential yield, previously unseen by any single methodology. Dr. Frank G. Hoffman, foreign policy expert and security analyst, writes, "Hybrid threats are qualitatively different from less complex irregular or militia forces" and "cannot be defeated by Western counterterror-

ism tactics and protracted counterinsurgency techniques."<sup>6</sup> If traditional counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations alone cannot defeat a hybrid threat, a holistic, integrated, and joint/interagency approach becomes prudent.

The U.S. joint force lacks a cohesive joint doctrine for defeating hybrid warfare. Dr. Hoffman describes hybrid warfare as a unique and distinct form of war along a *continuum of conflict* occupying a space between irregular warfare and conventional warfare. Certainly a plethora of joint doctrinal publications exist on conventional warfare operations, namely the cornerstone doctrinal references of *Joint Publication (JP) 1* through *JP 6*. Joint publications sufficiently address irregular warfare via the *Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept*, which outlines the DOD's "holistic governmental ... approach to irregular warfare."<sup>7</sup> However, there is a stark lack of integrated operational-level guidance to which commanders and planners can

refer in order to aid in synchronizing efforts to achieve maximum unity of effort and unity of action in the hybrid warfare environment.

If hybrid warfare occupies a unique and independent position of the continuum of conflict, a joint operating concept must address it directly. Unified action is the "synchronization, coordination, and integration of governmental, nongovernmental, and international entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort."<sup>8</sup> Unified action is best accomplished across the joint force commander's forces as well as interagency stakeholders and multinational agencies and partners through familiar command relationships, experiences, and training. Defeating hybrid threat forces requires unified action at the operational and strategic levels.

The best way to focus U.S. military capabilities and enable operational planners and commanders for success is to develop a counter-hybrid warfare



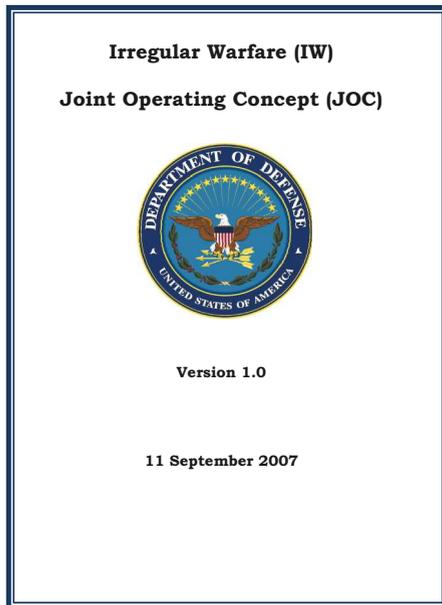
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joint operational concept for use by the joint force vice seeking to push disparate counter-hybrid threat capabilities to the tactical level. Stemming from lack of thorough understanding of the complexities of hybrid warfare, a common shortfall of operational planners is failing to integrate and synchronize lines of effort at the operational level. This shortfall can create a series of seemingly unrelated but mutually irrelevant actions at the tactical level. In hybrid warfare, operational unified action is essential. This effort is best achieved through an integrated joint operating concept for counter-hybrid warfare.

The DOD, as of 2018, has begun to pivot measurably to focus on the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition described by the *2018 National Defense Strategy*.<sup>9</sup> If great power conflict with a peer or near-peer adversary is the DOD's focus, why should we prepare to combat hybrid adversaries? The counter is clear: great power strategic competition does not inherently imply strictly conventional forms of warfare.<sup>10</sup> Russia and China are the United States' primary strategic competitors. Hezbollah, through Iranian Quds force support, has proven the single most effective hybrid warfare actor targeting a critical U.S. ally—Israel.<sup>11</sup> Both are adept and have proven the capacity to exercise their respective hybrid warfare operational concepts in pursuit of strategic competition. Russia blended conventional action with information domain operations in Georgia in 2008. This key adversary exploited gray zone, non-attribution seams through criminal operations and political subversiveness as was evidenced in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in the Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> This deliberate effort was artfully sequenced with conventional military action with paramilitary separatist tactical actions. Beyond our strategic competitors, non-state actors seek to leverage hybrid warfare against many of our strategic allies. Hezbollah regularly exercises traditional irregular warfare and terror operations against Israel's conventional force organizations while displaying a remarkable capable conventional capacity, as was the case in the Second Lebanon War.<sup>13</sup> Preparing to compete in long-term, stra-



**The joint force needs an operating concept for "Hybrid Warfare" to mirror the existing concept for Irregular Warfare. (Image: JOC IW 11 Sept 2007.)**

tegic competition against our adversaries and alongside our allies intrinsically implies our need to effectively counter and defeat hybrid threat systems. Developing a competency in counter-hybrid warfare operations actually supports the *2018 National Defense Strategy*'s objectives of remaining competitive with peer adversaries, deterring adversary aggression against vital national interests, and defending our allies from aggression.<sup>14</sup>

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The U.S. military is insufficiently postured, trained, and resourced through doctrinal publication guidance to counter current and emerging hybrid threats in the future. Hybrid warfare will continue to serve as an effective operational concept for adversary state and non-state actors in the

future. The joint force must develop a counter-hybrid operational concept to defeat hybrid adversaries and remain competitive in the future operational environment.

**Notes**

1. Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges (Excerpt)," *PRISM*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University, November 2018).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Command and Staff College, *8905 Small Wars Module Coursebook*, (Quantico, VA: Command and Staff College Distance Education Program, 2020).
6. Ibid.
7. Department of Defense, "Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)," (Washington, DC: September 2007).
8. The Joint Staff, *JP 3-29, Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
9. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
10. "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges (Excerpt)."
11. M. Levitt, "Hezbollah's Procurement Channels: Leveraging Criminal Networks and Partnering with Iran," *CTC Sentinel*, (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center, March 2019).
12. Ibid.
13. "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges (Excerpt)."
14. Ibid.

