

## Further Thoughts on Hybrid Threats

**Frank G. Hoffman**

I commend everyone's attention to Dr. Russ Glenn's [belated entry](#) (*Small Wars Journal*, 2 March 2009) into the hybrid conflict debate. I share with him some concerns about new terminology but such changes in lexicon help distinguish changes or nuances. It's important to professional discourse, and sometimes new thinking requires new terms. The utility of the hybrid construct is not as a new entry into the long and pathetic list of US Joint Forces Command's (JFCOM) Three Letter Acronyms (TLAs). Rather it is critical to current critical debates we have presently having. Taking Dr. Glenn's argument to an extreme, there would be little utility to anyone in our community reading Rupert Smith's *The Utility of Force*, or T.X. Hammes *The Sling and the Stone*, or John Robb's *Global Guerrillas*. All of these scholar/ practitioners have offered useful constructs on top of those like Van Creveld non-trinitarian wars, Arguilla's Netwars and Bunker's Epochal Wars. To ignore them because they posed a new construct, or one not invented at JFCOM where Russ now sits is simply bunk.

Each of these books and essays have tried to help capture new elements (if not entirely new, then different) in the ever evolving character of conflict. I have shamelessly stolen from them. Each of these constructs has had to overcome the narrow if not dead hand of the traditional school in military affairs. Dr. Glenn is *not* part of that rigid community, having committed a number of years to enhancing our understanding of urban operations. But his stated position suggests he might be willing to climb into bed with some traditionalist thinking that too often oversimplifies and underestimates our enemies. That approach has very little to show for it the last decade and is principally responsible for the ghastly cost we've paid since 9/11. Let's not repeat that mistake as we peer into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and tried to pierce the fog.

As I stated at JFCOM's hybrid warfare conference the other day, this debate is not about the hybrid threat. For me it's about conceptualizing the future. We need to recognize our failings in the U.S. warfighting community for failing to capture the ever evolving character of conflict, for conceptualizing what the future holds, and then pressing on with the necessary preparation. The costly learning curve of the past 7 or so years is quite evident of institutional biases and prisms that constitute what Carl Builder once called our Masks of War. I suggest that Russ is hiding behind one of those "masks" at present.

This hybrid threat construct appears valuable at this point in time for a number of reasons. It serves as:

- A concept to describe evolving character of conflict (for those looking for a better one or even aware of changes).
- A construct to challenge current “conventional” thinking and the binary intellectual bins that currently frame our debate between Crusaders and Traditionalists.
- A concept that highlights and reinforces the true granularity or breadth of spectrum of human conflict, not as a new bin but as something more reflective of the broader continuum than just COIN.
- A concept that raises awareness of potential risks and informs ongoing threat/force posture debate in the QDR (the most important debate of all given very constrained resources).

I think the utility of the concept has already been proven (but not the concept itself) given the fact that the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman and JFCOM have all included references to the construct in key speeches and articles by Mr. Gates, the Joint Capstone Operating Concept and in the latest issue of the Joint Operating Environment. The latter used to include many references to 4GW constructs and non-trinitarian war, perhaps Dr. Glenn found them more constructive. The tri-service Maritime Strategy, the Marine Corps Vision and Strategy, the Marine Corps capstone operating concept EMFTS, British irregular conflicts doctrine, British concept papers on the evolving character of conflict and the Australian complex warfighting presentation all employ the construct. Some important people have invested some serious money into wargaming the challenge. At least one Undersecretary of Defense and a few new DASDs have endorsed the concept as a description of a possible contingency. It is possible that all these people are simple-minded Lemmings incapable of independent thinking. I doubt that my limited writing skills and even worse oral presentation skills have seduced so many senior people with so much experience to simply follow my lead (and that of Erin Simpson, Bill Nemeth, John McCuen, David Betz, Ralph Peters, Mac Owens, Patrick Cronin, David Kilcullen, etc). I think they found something they needed or were searching for.

I just happened to be reading David Kilcullen’s new book (shameless plug here for Dr. K.’s long awaited treatise), which also incorporates the concept of hybrid wars, and notes that much of our problem today is that our current models for Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency (COIN) are inadequate for the types of conflict that we find ourselves in. (more later on the book when I review it). He’s well ahead of the rest of us on both the problem and solution. Our current model, as reflected in the Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept is simply classic COIN and poorly captures the complexity of our current challenges much less what I perceive as the future. The answer may NOT be hybrid threats as the problem, and we’ll never arrive at a solution by not debating the problem we are trying to solve.

I would like to point out some ironic distinctions in the Hezbollah case study, which Dr. Glenn cleverly introduced to help me. This is a case worthy of detailed study, and it’s not been done yet. Dr. Steve Biddle's work and Andrew Exum come closest to understanding the distinctions in the operational and tactical methods of Hezbollah. Dr. Glenn notes that some Israelis believe that they foolishly embraced some of JFCOM's

former concepts like Effects Based Operations (EBO) and Rapid Decisive Operations (RDO). These were also useful operating concepts to test but they are not descriptions of the threat spectrum like the hybrid threat concept. In fact, EBO and RDO were rather silent on what threats they were designed to defeat and I think most of recognize that they were mostly designed to mirror image our enemies in our own image. I think it was Eliot Cohen who described them as vacant on what opponents we would face. Its a shame that the Israelis so blindly follow shallow JFCOM constructs (and over-invested in airpower), but the hybrid construct wasn't invented at JFCOM and its deduced from looking at the enemy instead of simply planning as if the enemy doesn't get a vote which has been regrettably the hallmark at JFCOM. Hybrid threats, again, are the problem, not an operating concept that presents a solution.

It's also a shame that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) takes US concepts in experimentation and applies them against enemies that they were not designed for. Sloppy thinking and aping from the IDF shouldn't preclude us from thinking clearly about our enemies. Russ's argument sounds like a case to take responsibility for all concepts away from JFCOM and give them back to the Services or Joint Staff. They also suggest the IDF should have nothing to do with JFCOM too.

Cause and effect in Southern Lebanon in 2006 cannot be painted on JFCOM's concepts, failure ultimately must rest in Israel. There were so many other strategic and operational deficiencies that Russ's (and others who have understudied and over-concluded from 2006) conclusions are not defensible. Moreover, I'm puzzled by the suggestion that any new concepts from the United States could also produce intellectual viruses. Should we shut down thinking??? Given the track record of American adaptation over the past five years, I wish we had a few more viruses about hybrid theats and adaptive enemies in the late 1990s (see Gen. Krulak on Stepchilds of Chechnya) instead of the techno-centric Full Spectrum Dominance nonsense we were fed by the RMA/Transformation agenda.

What is ironic to me is that hybrid threat concept would certainly have helped the IDF understand the complexity if not the novelty of the challenge they faced. They attempted to shift from their Counter-Terrorism and Population Control posture and approached the adversary as a conventional opponent and got surprised. They got surprised, not because they were not ready, but because they did not conceptualize or appreciate what Hezbollah was. We are making progress. In a set of four different wargames, various teams have tried different COIN-centric or conventional approaches, and I've not yet seen a convincing argument that either approach satisfied the political and strategic guidance attached. Perhaps that is because Hezbollah is neither fish nor fowl but something combinational or hybrid. Just perhaps.

To sum up, I appreciate the time Dr. Glenn has given to his commentary and his contribution to our community. His interest in the concept I think is proof positive that folks are starting to think about the future in a more rigorous way. Notice, I said "starting." I encourage everyone to continue the debate. It's important that we properly frame our understanding of the future on a clear idea of what the enemy is doing, rather than simply "bin" a range of threats into a false, shallow "Conventional vs. Irregular"

boxes as Dr. Biddle recently commented at our FPRI military conference in Washington. Let me close with a comment from Hezbollah's leader, Nasarallah. **The resistance withstood the attack and fought back. It did not wage a guerrilla war either...it was not a regular army but was not a guerrilla in the traditional sense either. It was something in between. This is the new model.**"

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