Hybrid War: Old Concept, New Techniques

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While the means by which state and non-state actors conduct hybrid war today have changed, the fundamental principle of utilizing a combination of conventional and irregular methods to achieve a political objective is consistent with older forms of conflict. This blending has historic examples in the American Revolution with George Washington’s Continental Army and robust militia forces; the Napoleonic Wars where British regulars challenged French control of major Spanish cities, while Spanish guerrillas attacked their lines of communication; and the Arab Revolt where the British Army combined conventional operations in Palestine with irregular forces under British operational control.[i] However, despite having its roots in history, modern hybrid war has the potential to transform the strategic calculations of potential belligerents due to the rise of non-state actors, information technology, and the proliferation of advanced weapons systems.

The unipolar moment that has persisted since the fall of the Soviet Union has given rise to an international system in which unconventional challenges to the idea of traditional state-on-state war are increasingly prevalent. The preponderance of American military power has tempered conflicts in Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the South China Sea, but has given rise to a method of war that attempts to leverage the weaknesses of conventional military structure. Where wars traditionally have regular and irregular components in different areas of operation, modern hybrid war has the tendency to combine these aspects. Modern hybrid war practitioners apply “conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, and terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence, coercion, and criminal activity” simultaneously.[ii] Under this model, war takes place in a variety of operating environments, has synchronous effects across multiple battlefields, and is marked by asymmetric tactics and techniques.[iii] These tactics are difficult to defeat for militaries that lack the flexibility to shift mindsets on a constant basis, especially since the interconnected nature of modern society is such that hybrid war takes place on three distinct battlefields: the conventional battlefield, the indigenous population of the conflict zone, and the international community.[iv]

Major powers have historically sponsored irregular fighters and non-state actors in the execution of broader military campaigns, and modern examples such as Iranian support to Hezbollah and other Shia militant groups are continuations of these policies. The Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006 showed that although the concept of hybrid war in this fashion is not novel, some of the sophistication and lethality of non-state actors, along with their ability to persist within the modern state system, is a new occurrence. Hybrid organizations such as Hezbollah are well armed and equipped due to the availability of technologically advanced weapon systems at low prices and pre-existing commercial technologies such as
cell phone and digital networks. During the Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006, decentralized cells composed of guerrillas and regular troops armed with precision guided missiles, short and medium range rockets, armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and advanced improvised explosive devices executed an irregular urban campaign against a conventional Israeli opponent. With Iranian Quds Force operatives as mentors and suppliers of advanced systems, Hezbollah cells downed Israeli helicopters, damaged Merkava IV tanks, communicated with encrypted cell phones, and monitored Israeli troops movements with night vision and thermal imaging devices. Hezbollah leveraged information technology as fighters immediately uploaded and distributed battlefield pictures and videos in near real-time, dominating the battle of perception throughout the operation. The Israeli military did not lose the war in 2006 on the conventional battlefield, but did little to alter the strategic environment in Southern Lebanon and lost the information campaign as the overwhelming perception within the international community was of Israeli military defeat at the hands of Hezbollah.

Apart from the increased effectiveness and lethality of non-state actors within hybrid war, the symbiotic relationship between sponsor and client is another variable that differentiates modern hybrid war from traditional forms of conflict. The Syrian Civil War and spread of Islamic State (IS) presents a complex strategic challenge to Iran and Hezbollah as modern hybrid war practitioners. Iran cannot afford to lose its link to its non-state proxy in Lebanon as its means by which to accomplish foreign policy goals in the Levant if forces not amiable to Iran dominate Syria. At the same time, Hezbollah cannot afford to lose that same link to its principle supporter, lest it forfeits its ability to remain relevant as a pseudo state within Lebanon. Therefore, while Iran has been supplying advisors, weapons, and equipment to Shia groups in Syria, it also compelled Hezbollah to send 2,000 fighters into the conflict zone as it simultaneously orchestrates a modern hybrid war within Syria.

The Israel-Hezbollah War and the Syrian Civil War also show how modern hybrid war increasingly focuses on non-state entities within the state system. Just as Clausewitz made an assumption that the belligerents in war are hierarchically organized states, the dominant force within traditional hybrid war examples has been the state. However, non-state and sub-state actors are the focal points in modern hybrid wars as proxies for state sponsors at certain times, but also executing their own independent policies. It was the policy of Hassan Nasrullah, rather than Iran, of kidnapping Israeli troops that led Israel to war with a non-state actor. Furthermore, the spread of IS to Iraq was initially a non-state executing a hybrid war against a conventional Iraqi military. However, this has transformed to the state of Iraq executing its own version of hybrid war utilizing non-state, sub-state, and international actors to counter IS advances. In addition, one of the arms of Iraq’s hybrid war, the United States, is executing its own hybrid war against IS through a combination of traditional air power, advisors to Iraqi government troops, Kurdish peshmerga, and sectarian militias, and training opposition forces within Syria. In the end, the Iraq-Syria hybrid war is not one hierarchical entity against another, but rather an interconnected group of state and non-state actors pursuing somewhat overlapping goals where the “social and political context is complex and the state is weak.”

Modern hybrid war that simultaneously combines conventional, irregular, and terrorist components is a complex challenge that requires an adaptable and versatile military to overcome. The United States has increasingly focused on counterinsurgency doctrine in the wake of its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, insurgency alone is not the singular challenge against which the United States must structure its military. Clausewitz stated, “Every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions.” It is important that the United States, and other global powers, do not focus on insurgency as the war of the post-Cold War era. On the contrary, the commander of a military fighting a hybrid war will need to leverage a wide range of capabilities including conventional high intensity conflict units, decentralized special operations forces, and sophisticated information operations and
technology platforms. The concept of hybrid war is not new, but its means are increasingly sophisticated and deadly, and require a response in kind.

Works Cited


End Notes


[ii] Ibid. 8.


[xi] Ibid, 863.

About the Author

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Captain Alex Deep is currently a Master of Arts in International Relations and International Economics candidate at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), focusing on Strategic Studies. Alex was previously assigned to 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. During his most recent combat deployments, Captain Deep served as a Special Forces Operational Detachment – Alpha Commander operating throughout Eastern Afghanistan, and Chief of Operations for Special Operations Task Force - Northeast. Captain Deep has been selected to instruct International Relations and Comparative Politics at the United States Military Academy upon completion of his studies at Johns Hopkins SAIS.

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