



Hybrid Threats and Challenges: Describe... Don't Define¹

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Food for Thought: Describe and Analyze; Don't Define.

The emerging concept of “hybrid warfare” is one of many attempts to clarify the contemporary defense operating environment for senior Washington decisionmakers and warfighters in the field. The more intense debates occurring on the margins of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) center on hybrid threats and their impact on defense strategy and plans. Like post-QDR '06 debates on “irregular warfare” (IW), there is a great deal of buzz around hybrid warfare and challenges. In the end, how DoD leaders choose to characterize, respond to, and use outcomes of the hybrid debate will determine corporately what the defense enterprise means by “balance” and how it operationalizes “balance” in the future.²

There is a cautionary tale for DoD in the post-QDR '06 quest to define IW. Those familiar with that process know that it ended with a definition few — if any — fully accept to this day.³ Amazingly, DoD's IW work succeeded in saying too much, too little, or nothing at all depending on one's particular point of view.

Look closely at the definition of IW and it appears to be just another description of insurgency and counterinsurgency.⁴ The torrent of “presentism” characterizing contemporary defense discussions about IW is responsible for this. Defense strategists and concept developers tend to project current “irregular” challenges — classical insurgency and terrorism in and around the Middle East and Muslim world — as DoD's dominant IW demands into an uncertain and

¹ This article draws heavily from a recent Parameters article by the author. See Nathan Freier, The Defense Identity Crisis: It's a Hybrid World, Parameters, Autumn 2009, Available from <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/09autumn/freier.pdf>, Accessed December 13th, 2009.

² To get Secretary Gates' take on balance, see Robert M. Gates, A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age, Available from http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2009/0509_qdr/gates-article.html, accessed December 28th, 2009. The author also recently commented on the subject of balance. See Nathan Freier, Defining and Operationalizing “Balance” in Defense Strategy, CSIS Critical Question, October 5th, 2009, Available from <http://csis.org/publication/defining-and-operationalizing-%E2%80%9Cbalance%E2%80%9D-defense-strategy>, Accessed December 28th, 2009.

³ See Department of Defense, Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept, Version 1.0, 11 September 2007, Available from http://www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/concepts/iw_joc1_0.pdf, Accessed December 28th, 2009, p. 6.

⁴ The author made this point recently in an unpublished briefing “The DoD Identity Crisis: A New Hybrid Status Quo” presented to the staff and faculty of the U.S. Army War College on December 9th, 2009.

indefinite future. This may prove grossly insufficient. However, the current defense era's sensational start (9/11) makes it quite difficult to break free from conventional wisdom long enough to explore IW more broadly.

The hybrid debate hazards a similar fate. Therefore, it may be prudent for DoD to describe and not define its newly appreciated hybrid environment, its myriad hybrid challenges, and its likeliest (and most important) hybrid responses to both. What is critical to increased defense appreciation for the operating environment is not 'one time' precision in defining hybrid warfare but instead perpetuation of an active dialogue on a new and expanding universe of complex defense-relevant challenges. This requires active, adaptive learning where defense strategists persistently examine and adjust defense priorities to external security conditions that themselves are moving targets. This is a tall order for a bureaucracy that values and rewards order and predictability. In truth, the defense enterprise should avoid over-thinking hybrid warfare altogether, focusing instead on responding to the environment's complexity and the defense response to it.

A range of purposeful and contextual hybrid threats will spring from an increasingly "unconventional" operating environment and persistently challenge defense convention. Most of these will violate classical DoD conceptions of war. Nonetheless, due to their scope and degree of hazard, a good number of them will also fall — without warning — into the defense in-box. Thus, as a hedge, DoD should reserve the "hybrid" space for persistent inquiry, asking on a continuing basis how the most complex, interdisciplinary defense demands will evolve over time and how the defense enterprise should respond as a consequence. Any alternative course (e.g., one that seeks to put too fine a point on the hybrid concept) may be doomed to mediocrity from the start. The remainder of this brief discussion is an opening shot in a new direction on "hybrid" threats.

War as the New "Lesser Included?"

The rush to officially define hybrid warfare is unnecessarily self-limiting; especially when there are more fundamental questions to answer about 21st century security challenges and their impact on both the identity and missions of the U.S. armed forces. For example, given all we know about the strategic environment (increasingly complex) and its challenges (increasingly "defense-relevant" and not "defense-specific"), what does it really mean to be the Department of Defense today?⁵ More specifically, what is DoD defending U.S. interests from and how? And, what do answers to these questions portend for defense and military professionals into the future? Asking and answering these should help DoD, its subordinate agencies, and its service departments adjust to what is in fact a more generalized "hybridization" of core defense business overall.⁶

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the author's conceptions of "defense-relevant" and "defense-specific" challenges, see Nathan Freier, *Known Unknowns: Unconventional "Strategic Shocks" in Defense Strategy Development*, PKSOI Papers (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2008), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=890>.

⁶ On the author's views on this point, see Nathan Freier, *Parameters*, Autumn 2009, pp. 81-94.

War isn't the only thing that's hybrid now in defense and military affairs. DoD more generally has entered a period punctuated by overlapping compound challenges that defy defense-specific solutions but nonetheless demand DoD attention. Indeed, under the most demanding circumstances, an effective response to them often requires DoD leadership as well. Just one indication of this new reality is the fact that "combat" is only one of four "basic categories of military activity" recognized in the most recent "Capstone Concept for Joint Operations" (CCJO).⁷ The other three categories are less martial — security, engagement, and relief and reconstruction.⁸

In point of fact, emerging doctrine or doctrine-like pronouncements like the CCJO recognize that both the operating environment and DoD-heavy responses to it are themselves complex "pol-mil-econ-info" hybrids. More evidence of this is recognition in Army doctrine that full-spectrum operations involve blended combinations of offense, defense, stability, and civil support activities.⁹ Thus, today both defense challenges and defense responses are often as much (or more) issues of social science as they are military science. Yet, singular defense and military capability, capacity, and responsiveness leave DoD as the near-term instrument of 'only' resort. And, resource realities indicate that DoD will remain the USG's most useful, capable, and dependable "utility player" for the foreseeable future.

Narrower notions of "hybrid warfare" and "hybrid threats" as described by Frank Hoffman and others remain important to the "futures" dialogue. However, they do not automatically qualify as discrete points of defense emphasis.¹⁰ Nor, given the pace of change in the environment, are they necessarily reducible to parsimonious, durable, doctrine-ready definition.¹¹ Quite the contrary, if the term hybrid is accepted to mean "composed of elements of different or incongruous kinds," then hybrid in a defense context also accurately describes DoD's worldwide demand set.¹² Defense challenges, capabilities, and operations are all now unique combinations of different — and, yes incongruous — components; so much so that "pure" military affairs no longer usefully or accurately describes either key defense challenges or responsibilities. Indeed, many of DoD's external demands are "non-military" in origin and character. However, non-military here does not imply non-violent, purposeless, or non-threatening. It does mean *not originating in or involving the uniformed forces of enemy states*. These non-military hybrids often manifest as complex combinations of unsanctioned violence and human insecurity,

⁷ See Department of Defense, Capstone Concept for Joint Operations, Version 3.0, 15 January 2009, Available from <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/dod/ccjov2.pdf>, Accessed December 14th, 2009, pp. 14-21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 3-0: Operations, Available from: <http://downloads.army.mil/fm3-0/FM3-0.pdf>, Accessed December 29th, 2009, p. 3-1.

¹⁰ Among other studies on the subject by Hoffman, see Frank G. Hoffman, Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007, Available from http://www.potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf, Accessed December 14th, 2009.

¹¹ See Frank G. Hoffman, Hybrid vs. Compound War—The Janus Choice of Modern War: Defining Today's Multifaceted Conflict, Armed Forces Journal, October 2009, Available from: <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2009/10/4198658>, Accessed December 14th, 2009. Hoffman himself seems to (at least in part) agree as he concludes, "If at the end of the day, we drop the hybrid term and simply gain a better understanding of the large gray space between our idealized bins and pristine Western categorizations, we will have made progress."

¹² hybrid. (n.d.). Dictionary.com Unabridged. Retrieved November 30, 2009, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hybrid>

springing either from the environment itself or from some purposeful anti-U.S. design. Regardless of their origin, however, the most important among them will commonly defy favorable resolution without skillful, discriminating, and innovative application of military resources; of course, in combination with various other instruments of power.

There are new hybrid “military” threats as well. These can threaten core interests via novel blending by adversaries of equally incongruous traditional, irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive capabilities and methods.¹³ Increasingly, these new age military challenges are characterized in defense parlance as “high-end asymmetric threats” (HEAT).¹⁴ One defense official described HEAT challenges as those “where rising regional powers and rogue states...use highly sophisticated technologies to deny us access or deny us the ability to use some of our advantages.”¹⁵

These two categories combined make up a new, quite complex unconventional defense status quo. As the most capable instrument in the contingency tool box, DoD will frequently be called upon to respond to both when they pose fundamental hazards to core interests; this in spite of lingering defense preference for narrow conceptions of war and warfighting. Defense-heavy responses them will be hybrids as well; often requiring senior military leaders in the field to nimbly blend military and non-military — public and private instruments and effects together to achieve favorable outcomes. DoD responsibilities in this regard are inescapable realities, reflecting long-recognized gaps in wider USG capability and capacity. Practical realities — cost, redundancy, institutional culture, ethos, law, and tradition — indicate that these gaps will remain for the time being.

Many of DoD’s hybrid civil-military defense responsibilities remain counter-cultural to an institution that 1) grew to adulthood during an excessively traditional Cold War and 2) was allowed through most of that period to define its own institutional boundaries. Times have changed dramatically. Thus, DoD can no longer pin its broad relevance exclusively on convenient definitions of warfighting (now MCO, COIN, and CT) and still hope to fulfill its national security responsibilities. Some of DoD’s new age demands comport well to classical conceptions of deterrence and combat. Most do not. Nonetheless, they are all now the unavoidable burdens of a 21st century great power military.

¹³ For a description of the four “mature and emerging challenges” (traditional, irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive), see Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Available from <http://www.defense.gov/news/Mar2005/d20050318nds1.pdf>, Accessed December 10th, 2009, pp. 2-3. For a comparison of this view of “hybrid” threats and warfare to others, see Frank G. Hoffman, *Hybrid vs. Compound War — The Janus Choice: Defining Today’s Multifaceted Conflict*, Available from: <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2009/10/4198658/>, Accessed December 10th, 2009.

¹⁴ The term “high-end asymmetric threat” or HEAT is now common in the QDR-related defense dialogue. See Michele Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, *The Contested Commons*, Available from: <http://www.defense.gov/QDR/flournoy-article.html>, Accessed December 14th, 2009 and Michele A. Flournoy, *Rebalancing the Force: Major Issues for QDR 2010*, Federal News Service, April 27, 2009, remarks delivered at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Available from http://policy.defense.gov/sections/public_statements/speeches/usdp/flournoy/2009/April_27_2009.pdf, Accessed December 29th, 2009, p. 7.

¹⁵ Flournoy, April 2009.

Intervention against foreign insurgency, civil war, or insurrection — DoD. Opposed and/or unopposed stability operations — DoD. Military support to civil authorities in the event of catastrophe — DoD. Foreign humanitarian assistance — DoD. “In kind” retaliation for a crippling but bloodless cyber attack — likely DoD. And, of course, the rare MCO — DoD as well. The list is illustrative and incomplete. A telling indication of just how much new unconventional defense demands are taking root within some defense quarters is evidenced in recent draft Army work on its capstone operating concept. Remarkably, “traditional” conflict is conspicuously absent from the catalog of illustrative scenarios in the draft document posted for public comment on the *Small Wars Journal* website in September.¹⁶

Thus, in the end, it seems clear that “war” as U.S. military professionals have preferred to define it — especially over the last half century — is now likely the least of DoD’s contingency concerns. And, it is not the only (or perhaps even the most important) single point of defense failure any more either. Though it is difficult to classify the contemporary defense and military focus today, it is clear that MCO — as defense and military leaders most commonly imagine it — is actually DoD’s “lesser included” strategic planning case.

In the future, the ability to “fight and win” in the rare event of an “all arms” traditional crisis might have to come from aggregating defense capabilities that are otherwise focused on two new (and dissimilar) priority contingency bins. The first of these bins is what has most recently been referred to as “irregular warfare” and the second HEAT. Frankly, what either bin is called is far less important than what each represents in practice.

The HEAT challenge springs from *functioning but unfavorable order* — hostile, aggressive, enemy states and state-like entities employing myriad hybrid high-low combinations to purposefully resist U.S. influence and designs. The former springs from the *absence or failure of order altogether* — state failure or collapse, civil violence, insurrection, insurgency, civil war, natural or human disaster, etc. Threats from disorder become compelling when, by purpose or happenstance, they pose real threats to one or more vulnerable U.S. interests. Given the proliferation of dangerous capabilities, increased interconnectedness and co-dependencies, and the potential for catastrophe resident in each illustration, it is both inappropriate and misleading to use labels like “high-intensity” or “low-intensity” to describe them.

Both represent new benchmarks for defense risk assessment and both should ultimately have a profound impact on future defense risk calculations. The past gold standard for risk assessment was the ability of the joint force to confront two mirror-image traditional warfights near simultaneously (2 Major Theater Wars — or 2MTWs). Now, it might be more appropriate to judge defense risk and readiness on the department’s ability to respond and succeed against two-plus fundamentally dissimilar contingency missions simultaneously — a much more complex, less quantitative endeavor.

¹⁶ Headquarters, United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, Army Capstone Concept Draft Version 2.7: Operating Under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict, 21 September 2009, Available from <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/doc/Army%20Capstone%20Concept%20V%202%207.2.pdf>, Accessed December 14th, 2009, pp. 8-9.

Instead of two mirror-image contingencies, gross defense risk calculation — vis-à-vis current and future challenges — now involves three distinct measurements. First, an evaluation of how effectively DoD can respond to consequential loss of order in a key region (Box A in Figure 1 below). Second, an assessment of the how effectively DoD might respond to hybrid, multi-modal war with a HEAT power (Box B).¹⁷ And, finally third, thoughtful evaluation of how DoD might aggregate capabilities focused on the former two to successfully prosecute limited “all arms” campaigns against a more traditional military opponent (Box C).

The homeland is not forgotten in this risk model. Rather, the lightly shaded Homeland Security (HLS) and Homeland Defense (HLD) extremes on the left and right of Figure 1 demonstrate new relationships between foreign and domestic mission areas. Traditional HLS — civil support, consequence management, etc — is more closely aligned with DoD’s irregular or unconventional demand set, whereas classic HLD missions — missile defense, air sovereignty, maritime security — align better with HEAT challenges.

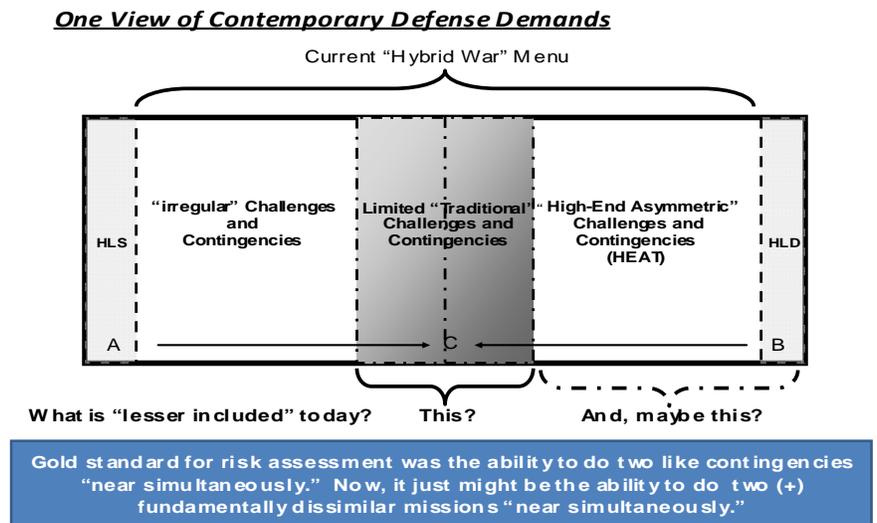


Figure 1: Contemporary Defense Demands.¹⁸

It’s the Environment Stupid.

Contemporary hybrid discussions normally center on aggressive and purposeful adversaries who resist U.S. military dominance through the innovative combination of “high-low” methods and capabilities (e.g., hybrid Hezbollah or potential HEAT powers like China or Iran). Most defense analysts contend, without argument, that the U.S. military will increasingly face violent opponents that are functional hybrids both operationally and tactically. This high-low competition and conflict will undoubtedly require evolutionary changes in training, education, doctrine, tactics, and materiel. As indicated previously, however, purposeful actors are not the

¹⁷ One important branch is multi-modal “war” where military violence is less prominent — “war without warfighting.”

¹⁸ This chart was developed for the unpublished briefing “The DoD Identity Crisis: A New Hybrid Status Quo?”, presented to the U.S. Army War College class on December 9th, 2009.

only strategic-level hybrid challenges on the horizon. At a minimum, if these by themselves are representative of hybrid threats today, they will not be tomorrow.

Thus, the best working *description* of consequential “hybrid threats” might be: defense-relevant challenges whose origin, character, mode, and principle domain of conflict and/or competition are difficult to identify or classify. Nonetheless, their scope, intensity, exhaustiveness, complexity, and actual or potential level of violence make it clear that favorable outcomes against them are unlikely without extensive DoD involvement. These are DoD’s new “wicked problems” where precise identification of what’s most harmful or important is problematic. Often, too, the true depth, complexity, and impact of these hazards lies un- or under-recognized until attempts to contend with them are well underway.¹⁹

They are hybrids precisely because they run along the boundaries artificially separating competition, classic war, troubled peace, and different threat archetypes — political, military, socio-economic, natural, etc. They are “defense-relevant” because 1) their character is not purely military but military capabilities, by default, are central to their resolution or management; and 2) despite the importance of defense contributions they are ‘different enough’ from classical military problems that they threaten the utility or veracity of key military concepts like threat, attack, defense, defeat, winning, and risk.

They can be violent or non-violent. As argued above, they can originate in an unfavorable order, the absence of order, or a combination of the two. They can result from willful acts of thinking adversaries. Or, they can originate in circumstances beyond any friend or adversary’s overall control; the latter being “contextual” threats where the environment itself is the adversary. Regardless of where they come from, how they manifest themselves, or where they emerge, the notion that DoD will be a key determinant in resolving them is common to all.

In the end, DoD’s central intellectual challenge over the coming decade will be identifying its role and responsibilities in an operating environment that is certain to be populated by fewer defense-specific or overtly military threats. An elastic description (vice definition) of hybrid challenges — a perspective that both inspires meaningful analysis and changes with new information and time — helps move defense and defense-interested communities forward intellectually in this regard. It is also preferable to a “consensus” definition that would be stillborn before the ink dries.

Conclusion: “Hybrid War” as a Bureaucratic Shield.

Use of the term “hybrid warfare” and the implication that it marks the arrival of a wholly new military threat allows some defense constituencies to pass on examining the broader hybrid challenge set described above. Collectively, contemporary defense demands will not always or even commonly have “war” — as DoD thinks of it — at their root. Yet, promoting the “high-low” version of hybrid warfare by itself allows DoD to again slip into the trap of pegging

¹⁹ On the concept of “wicked problems,” see Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning, Policy Sciences, Volume 4, 1973, Available from: http://www.uctc.net/mwebber/Rittel+Webber+Dilemmas+General_Theory_of_Planning.pdf, Accessed July 27, 2009, pp. 155-169.

defense relevance exclusively on arbitrating organized armed conflict — again, war by its definition. Indeed, as in the case of IW, excessive focus on hybrid warfare versus broader hybrid threats and challenges allows DoD to operate intellectually in national security space it is most comfortable with and not necessarily space where it is most needed. The bottom line: *dangerous armed conflicts are not always organized and armed conflict is only one of many contingency hybrid demands DoD will find itself responsible for in the future.*

As currently framed, the hybrid dialogue serves two competing purposes in the Pentagon. First, it is a serious attempt by some to explain new levels of complexity in the operating environment. Frank Hoffman — the most serious student of the subject — falls in this category. Others, however, use it — consciously or otherwise — to defend marginal or inadequate change in the defense status quo. Here hybrid challenges are all things to all people. In this context, hybrid threats underwrite the resource-blind, zero risk perspective that argues ‘because the enemy can resort to anything, DoD has to prepare equally for everything.’ In an era of declining defense resources, this position is untenable.

Most thoughtful analysts agree that warfare has always had high-low, hybrid components. Hostile actors have persistently sought to play up and down — depending on their capabilities and level of sophistication. Principally, they have done so to generate asymmetries. This is not particularly new. For example, the American war in Vietnam was clearly a hybrid experience. Thus, solving important operational challenges posed by these high-low competitors cannot prevent DoD from answering more profound strategic questions on its expanding demand set and portfolio.

These questions include but are not limited to — When does competition become conflict or war? What does modern war look like? And, how do we know what kind of war we’re in? Where and how does DoD fit in USG responses to challenges that are largely non-military — especially when other more appropriate agencies are resource challenged? Which security challenges pose the greatest threat — one or two large capable competitors, a universe of smaller opponents prone to violence, or the latter world combined with more generalized disorder and human insecurity?

If DoD continues to see hybrid challenges only as state militaries playing down and guerrillas or terrorists playing up, it is in for another 9/11-like surprise. It will remain under-prepared for a strategic environment with enormous potential for disruptive change. The department needs to examine its hybrid demand set through a wider, more strategic aperture. At a minimum, this provides it with some buffer against the next “how did you let this happen” moment.

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