

Thoughts on “Hybrid” Conflict

Dr. Russell W. Glenn

The categories of warfare are blurring and no longer fit into neat, tidy boxes. One can expect to see more tools and tactics of destruction -- from the sophisticated to the simple -- being employed simultaneously in hybrid and more complex forms of warfare.¹

--Robert M. Gates, U.S. Secretary of Defense

During the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the Israel Defense Forces were stunned by Hizballah's advanced battlefield tactics and weaponry, including the successful use of an advanced ground-to-ship missile and anti-tank weapons. The Israeli experience in Lebanon has become a textbook case of the kind of hybrid warfare that many defense analysts believe will be a defining feature of the future security environment.²

--Michèle A. Flournoy (U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy) and Shawn Brimley

The last several years have seen the rise of “hybrid warfare” as a term in international and U.S. armed forces literature. Others similarly write of “hybrid conflict,” “hybrid war,” or “hybrid threat,” for example:

Hybrid conflicts therefore are full spectrum wars with both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for, control and support of the combat zone's indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community.... To secure and stabilize the indigenous population, the intervening forces must immediately rebuild or restore security, essential services, local government, self-defense forces and essential elements of the economy.³

¹ Robert M. Gates, “A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2009), 2009<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20090101faessay88103-p20/robert-m-gates/a-balanced-strategy.html>, (accessed February 13, 2009).

² Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, “The Defense Inheritance: Challenges and Choices for the Next Pentagon Team,” *The Washington Quarterly* 31 (Autumn 2008), <http://www.twq.com/08autumn/index.cfm?id=315> (accessed February 13, 2009).

³ John J. McCuen, “Hybrid Wars,” *Military Review* (March-April 2008): 107-113.

War of the next century will comprise a kind of hybrid war, projecting all elements of national power along a continuum of activities from stability, security, and reconstruction operations, to armed combat.⁴

Hybrid threat (1): Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace. Rather than a single entity, a hybrid threat or challenger may be comprised of a combination of state and non-state actors.⁵

Hybrid threat (2): An adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs some combination of (1) political, military, economic, social, and information means, and (2) conventional, irregular, catastrophic, terrorism, and disruptive/criminal warfare methods. It may include a combination of state and non-state actors.⁶

We can credit Hezbollah for the recent and rapid spike in such interest. That group's success in defending against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) over 34 days spanning July 12 - August 14, 2006 gained worldwide attention. The notice is unsurprising given the success experienced by a non-state actor's military against a national armed forces with an established reputation for excellence. But do "hybrid warfare," "conflict," "war," or "threat" merit this newfound notoriety in light of both the Second Lebanon War and broader analysis? The question is a nontrivial one at a time when challenges in Iraq, Afghanistan, southern Philippines, and elsewhere continue to challenge Western defense thinkers while foes of developed nations demonstrate an ability to share proven techniques. Comments made by Israelis in the aftermath of the July-August 2006 Second Lebanon War add further impetus to questioning the value of adding yet another concept to defense thinking. Among the problems recognized as undermining IDF performance during that conflict was penetration of the country's military doctrine by an "intellectual virus," i.e., the introduction of new and opaque thinking that clouded rather than clarified the guidance provided those committed to Israel's security.⁷ U.S. doctrine and thinking are similarly vulnerable to adverse influences. The confusion wreaked by effects-based operations (EBO) ended only after the commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command

⁴ Margaret S. Bond, "Hybrid War: A New Paradigm for Stability Operations in Failing States," Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, March 30, 2007.

⁵ Definition adopted in support of U.S. Joint Forces Command hybrid war conference held in Washington, D.C., February 24, 2009.

⁶ This definition appears in Russell W. Glenn, *Evolution and Conflict: Summary of the 2008 Israel Defense Forces-U.S. Joint Forces Command "Hybrid Threat Seminar War Game,"* Santa Monica, CA: RAND, TBP in 2009. This document will not be available to the general public. The inclusion of "catastrophic" encompasses events defined in joint publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 12, 2001 as amended through October 17, 2008, p. 79 as "any natural or man-made incident, including terrorism, which results in extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption severely affecting the population, infrastructure, environment, economy, national morale, and/or government functions." The author thanks Mr. Robert Everson for suggesting this addition to the definition.

⁷ Russell W. Glenn, *All Glory is Fleeting: Insights from the Second Lebanon War*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008, p. 18. This document is not available to the general public at the present time.

recently declared it would not become a part of joint doctrine. (Interestingly, EBO was cited by Israelis as one of the imported concepts found unhelpful in 2006.)

The deliberately brief discussion to follow considers the value of a hybrid construct in two contexts. First, we consider none-too-consistent usage of the term in light of its applicability to the security challenges of today and tomorrow. Second, we confront the issue of whether the hybrid concept is sufficiently original to merit addition to military intellectual discourse and – ultimately – armed forces doctrine as a separate form of warfare. Another possibility, of course, is that the term may serve to educate even if the concept represents nothing new, much as did Basil Liddell-Hart’s “indirect approach” in the aftermath of World War I.

The quotations at the opening of this discussion variously employ “hybrid” as an adjective for “war,” “conflict,” “warfare,” and “threat.” The four terms at first appear components of a common whole. Closer investigation suggests otherwise, however. First, some are considerably broader in application, seeming to apply to all levels of war while others deliberately or inadvertently are limited only to the tactical. Three span the tactical, operational, and strategic levels:

- John McCuen’s definition of hybrid conflict in terms of “a struggle against an armed enemy and...a wider struggle for control and support of the combat zone’s indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community”
- Margaret Bond’s articulation of hybrid war as “projecting all elements of national power along a continuum of activities from stability, security, and reconstruction operations to armed combat”
- The second definition of hybrid threat, which encompasses “political, military, economic, social, and information means.”

Inherent in all three is recognition that the challenge posed is more than a military one alone. Our exemplar of the Second Lebanon War supports this thesis. Those 34 days were but a spike in violence during a conflict that has lasted for years and continues today. A stunning IDF victory would have been far more comforting to Israel’s citizens. It would not have ended the conflict. Hezbollah is more than a military force, and therein lies its real strength. It has political, social, diplomatic, and informational components that provide bedrock support for its military organization. That foundation, established by years of providing humanitarian aid, building physical infrastructure, educating Lebanese, and serving as medical provider would remain even in the aftermath of military defeat. Like the deep roots of a plant, these other facets of Hezbollah would over time spawn new forces to replace those lost in combat.

This key to Hezbollah’s strength is a capability many developed nations seek as they pursue their international objectives: an effective “comprehensive approach.” Several definitions of the term exist. The same is the case for the term’s close kin, “whole of

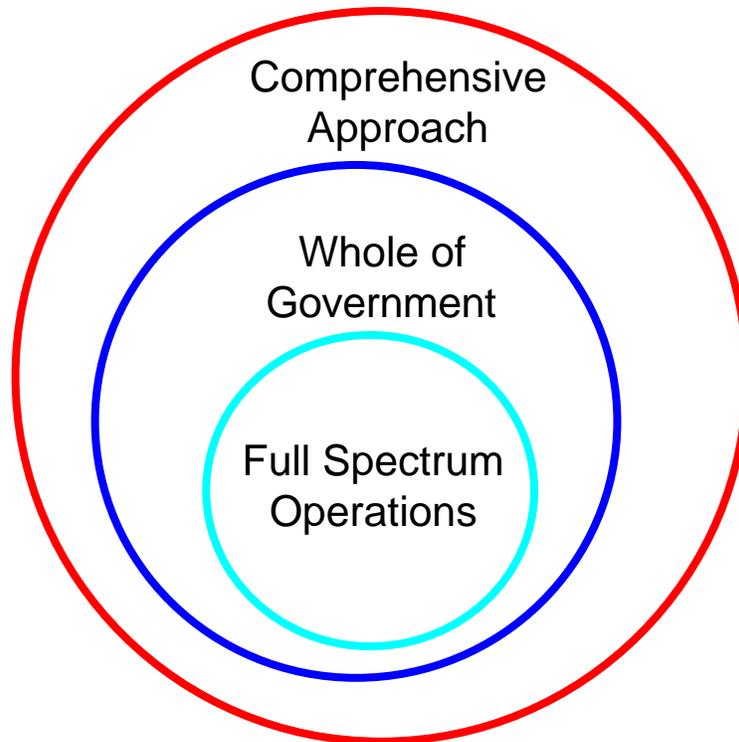
government.” The Canadian military has done a particularly effective job of articulating both and the relationship between the two. As explained by the Canadian Army’s Lieutenant Colonel David Lambert, a comprehensive approach “uses all elements of power necessary to address all the systems in an environment that play a role in the crisis or issue at hand. Within that, Canada may apply multiple agencies from various elements working to a common purpose and, ideally, with a common effort. Hence, whole of government is the [Canadian] portion of the Comprehensive Approach, [the latter of] which may of course include agencies from the UN, EU, etc.”⁸ Recent steps to improve cooperation between the Departments of Defense, State, Justice, and various intelligence agencies mark progress toward better U.S. whole of government operations. This nesting of concepts involving potential capabilities available to leaders during a campaign can be taken a step further as is visually depicted in the figure below. If one wants to address only the military component of the comprehensive approach or whole of government operations, the term “full spectrum operations” applies. Though not yet defined in U.S. joint doctrine, U.S. Army and USMC doctrine defines “full spectrum operations” as “the range of operations Army [and presumably Marine] forces conduct in war and military operations other than war.”⁹

Expanding on these concepts the better to include nongovernmental and intergovernmental agencies, relevant commercial enterprises, and other pertinent parties during a campaign remains an area meriting further effort.¹⁰ Hezbollah’s notable success where national governments have yet to reach desired levels of cooperation is unfortunate but understandable. Ships of state are far harder to turn than small craft relatively unencumbered by multiple layers of organizational structure and their accompanying bureaucracy.

⁸ David Lambert (LCol, Canadian Army) email to Russell W. Glenn, Subject: Draft of conference document, November 6, 2008 as cited in Russell W. Glenn, *Questioning a Deity: A Contemplation of Maneuver Motivated by the 2008 Israeli Armor Corps Association “Land Maneuver in the 21st Century” Conference*, Latrun, Israel: Israeli Armored Corps Association, 2008, p. 25-26. This document is not available to the general public.

⁹ Field Manual 1-02/MCRP 5-12A, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, Marine Corps Combat Command, September 2004, p. 1-87. Thanks to Dr. Daniel Marston for pointing out the potential relationship of “full spectrum operations” within the comprehensive approach and whole of government construct.

¹⁰ As a brief aside to the argument regarding hybrid as a construct, the broad character of non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and others and the desirability of nation states to improve their employment of all available resources in the interest of national objectives suggests that the DIME (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) construct to represent the full scope of a country’s capabilities may be insufficient. The social component (e.g., humanitarian aid, provision of health services, and education) is vital to its establishing links with the indigenous population and gaining or maintaining the people’s support. As such, those desiring to employ the DIME model might consider adding a social element, one that could easily be overlooked otherwise. The construct would then become “DIMES,” a more comprehensive and appropriate representation of today’s campaign environments and one applicable to both nation states and select non-state actors.



The Relationship Between Comprehensive and Whole of Government Approaches and Full Spectrum Operations

Hard to turn, but not impossible to set on a new course. The British demonstrated considerable success in attaining a successful whole of government approach in both Northern Ireland and Malaya. The pretender Chinese communist government did so in overthrowing Chiang Kai-shek, as did the People's Republic of Vietnam in melding the capabilities of irregulars, political indoctrination, assassination, regular military forces, and diplomacy. The Confederate States of America provide a counterexample with its failure to find success while employing regular forces, diplomacy, economic pressure, and irregulars, the last including forces that operated in Missouri and Kansas. Some might argue that the above are examples of "compound warfare" rather than hybrid entities, the former of which Frank Hoffman describes in terms of

... those major wars that had significant regular and irregular components fighting simultaneously under unified direction.... Compound wars offered synergy and combinations at the strategic level, but not the complexity, fusion, and simultaneity we anticipate at the operational and even tactical levels in wars where one or both sides is blending and fusing the full range of methods and modes of conflict into the battlespace. Irregular forces in cases of compound wars operated largely as a distraction or economy of force measure in a separate theater or adjacent operating area including the rear echelon. Because it is based on operationally separate forces, the compound concept did not capture the

merger or blurring modes of war identified in past case studies such as Hizballah in the second Lebanon war of 2006 or future projections.¹¹

With his mention of “full range of methods and modes of conflict,” Hoffman lends further support to the argument that the broader, more-than-military challenge posed by Hezbollah and similar threats is worthy of further intellectual pursuit. In fact, the construct of the comprehensive approach rather than hybrid conflict seems the better construct to address this breadth of challenges. There is an inherent clarity in the concept of a comprehensive approach (CA), one that further provides helpful nesting with the concept of whole of government (WoG). Further, both CA and WoG have broader application. “Hybrid warfare” and “hybrid conflict” both suffer from the restriction of applying only to circumstances involving a threat. The less encumbered CA and WoG apply equally well across the entire spectrum of conflict, to include that end at which the measure of conflict is zero, e.g., to humanitarian missions where there is no threat. We therefore have an initial response to our two phases of pursuit. The issues brought forward by hybrid conflict are certainly relevant, but they would seem to be of lesser value in moving doctrine and security thinking forward than the alternative “comprehensive approach.”

Or so it seems at least at the operational and strategic levels. A return to the first definition of “hybrid threat” provided at the opening to this discussion and the comments of two senior members of the Department of Defense appear to focus exclusively at the tactical level of war. Secretary Gates writes of the “tools and tactics of destruction” while Michelle Flournoy highlights “Hizballah's advanced battlefield tactics and weaponry.” That first definition of “hybrid threat” speaks to what could be interpreted as purely tactical “means and activities [, a] tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal.” The issue is not one of whether the comprehensive approach and whole of government constructs also apply at this level—they undoubtedly do—but rather whether the nature of operations at the tactical level such as those approaches employed by Hezbollah constitute a form of warfare unique from conventional and irregular operations. It is certainly possible that while a hybrid concept may prove un-unique at the operational and strategic levels; its tactics constitute a different kind of fighting.

Given that Hezbollah’s success is the primary stimulus for the recent interest in hybrid warfare, we should note that the organization’s tactics employed in 2006 do not fully explain its notable performance on the battlefields of southern Lebanon. Israelis admit to shortfalls in leadership; they also recognize that poor tactics such as inadvertently signaling attack routes before execution, over-reliance on air power, and insufficient preparation in the information realm all undermined IDF efforts. Israel’s difficulties brought about an extent of interest in the conflict that IDF overwhelming success might not have. Would the mix of Hezbollah’s use of conventional tactics (e.g., anti-armor ambushes) and irregular ones (entrenched rocket positions and placement of launchers in apartment buildings, for example) have been considered sufficiently different to claim

¹¹ Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* (1st quarter, 2009): p. 36-37. The article provides a useful articulation of hybrid warfare and related concepts.

title to a new form of warfare, one worthy of inclusion in future doctrines, had the outcome been different? Both *Blitzkrieg* and the Maginot Line were unique approaches to mid-20th-century security challenges, but no one sought to adopt the latter in the wake of World War II. Hybrid warfare may not merit adoption as a doctrinal concept even if it proves sufficiently unique were Hezbollah's success due more to Israel's difficulties than its adversary's performance.

Yet Hezbollah did achieve tactical – and by extension operational and strategic – success in 2006. It would be poor analysis to dismiss that outcome purely on the grounds of its opponent's missteps. Does the basis for the result lie not within the form of warfare but rather the warriors who waged it? Hezbollah's military is not particularly unique as a non-state entity. More capable than most, to be sure, it shares with many the support of third party nation states just as did the Vietcong, Taliban in Afghanistan, and militias in Iraq. Is there danger of confusing Hezbollah's superior military capabilities with uniqueness in its methods? Its forces were better trained, better equipped, better organized, and better led in 2006 than are most non-state actors'. Current U.S. joint doctrine defines irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capacities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.”¹² For comparison purposes, our first definition of hybrid threat – that apparently focusing on the tactical level – is “any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace. Rather than a single entity, a hybrid threat or challenger may be comprised of a combination of state and non-state actors.”¹³ It certainly seems that irregular warfare's “full range of military and other capacities” encompasses the hybrid threat's “tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism, and criminal means.” Nor do any accepted analyses of irregular warfare known to this author preclude simultaneous and adaptive application of those capacities. From a purely doctrinal perspective, hybrid threats and the methods they employ seem at best a subset of irregular warfare.

There is obviously the counterargument that the definition of hybrid threat taken here is flawed, that it fails to communicate the aspects of hybrid warfare that make it unique. If so, then the pursuit of a definition that better clarifies and reveals that uniqueness remains an unmet challenge. Understanding the subtleties of irregular warfare still poses a considerable challenge; we should not permit that difficulty to birth a misguided belief in the uniqueness of what is instead only one of its many forms or a skillful combination of irregular, conventional, and other methods. The onus of proving uniqueness lies with the pretender; the arguments for hybrid warfare seem to lack sufficiency. Given that adding hybrid concepts to doctrine should aid in clarifying the nature of modern conflict in the

¹² Joint publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 12, 2001 as amended through October 17, 2008, p. 282.

¹³ Definition adopted in support of U.S. Joint Forces Command hybrid war conference held in Washington, D.C., February 24, 2009. There is no joint doctrinal definition of “irregular threat,” and that for “irregular forces” -- armed individuals or groups who are not members of the regular armed forces, police, or other internal security forces – is far less enlightening than that for “irregular warfare.”

service of solving its challenges, perhaps attention is better granted to further developing capabilities to facilitate the comprehensive approach at all three levels of war while understanding that combinations of techniques, technologies, and skill levels at the tactical level are infinite and overlapping, making claim to separateness a very high hurdle to clear.

The best-known hybrid in the animal world is the mule, the product of a horse and donkey. The mule is sterile; it cannot by itself evolve. One must study the evolution of horses and donkeys to understand the potential nature of future mules. The metaphor holds true for the study of what are being labeled hybrid conflicts. The new term may help inspire debate and a better understanding of modern warfare much as did “indirect approach” for some. However, hybrid conflict is ultimately a concept whose character is better described in terms of other constructs that offer superior clarity and will be better understood by students of conflict. “Hybrid” in its several forms fails to clear the high hurdle and therefore should not attain status as part of formal doctrine.

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