

The real threat of hybrid conflict

Talk to ten different military analysts about the meaning of the term "hybrid war," and you'll probably get 20 different answers. Some folks like to talk about hybrid *threats*, others about hybrid *warfare*; some talk up hybrid *adversaries*, and still others worry about hybrid *conflict*. Usually what they're getting at falls into the grey area between irregular warfare conducted by poorly-armed non-state militants and the purportedly more traditional, "conventional" conflict waged by high-tech, capital-intensive state militaries. In the hybrid future, we're told, irregular adversaries will employ high-tech weapons while sophisticated state enemies are likely to adopt guerilla-style tactics—avoiding American strengths while maximizing their own.

Nearly all wars are a strategic hybrid: a mix of violent action, diplomacy, and messaging, combining destruction, coercion, and persuasion. The modern hybrid war construct implies that future conflict will take on a more *tactically* hybrid character: that states will employ guerilla tactics in concert with heavy weapons, or that sub-state groups will use sophisticated weapons hand-in-hand with terrorism and insurgency.

You see, as Conrad Crane has said before (and as I love to repeat), there are only two kinds of war: asymmetric and stupid. Capable adversaries will always seek to capitalize on their own strengths and focus on our weaknesses. The hybrid concept simply tells us that violent actors will seek to diversify their capabilities and become less predictable by employing weapons and tactics more frequently associated with different parts of the sophistication and organization spectrum.

Big deal, right? If a weapon system or tactical method is proven to be effective, shouldn't we expect that our adversaries will make it a part of what they do? Frank Hoffman says hybrid war is defined by a "blend of the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular war," which I'm not sure tells us all that much of anything about how it differs from the sort of war we already know. If those capable of state-like lethality had access to a sustaining base of manpower imbued with the "fanatical and protracted fervor" of violent extremists, why haven't they blended the two before now?

Hoffman does put his finger on the characteristic that seems important to the whole range of hybrid warfare disciples, and that's increased lethality. But dramatically increased battlefield lethality has been a challenge for military planners and theorists for a century and a half, one that has been addressed pretty well by those militaries with economic and intellectual capacity to adapt. For our adversaries to combine weapons lethality with "fanatical and protracted fervor" doesn't pose nearly so significant a military challenge as does the combination of lethality with effective force employment.

The big problem with the modern hybrid war concept is that it's based both on a misunderstanding of military effectiveness – one that fails to acknowledge that we do, in fact, know with relative certainty what works on the battlefield (Stephen Biddle calls it "the modern system of force employment," and has specified its component parts pretty elaborately in a 2004 book called *Military Power*) – and on a blurring of the real distinction between success in battle and success in war.

Still, not every organized violent actor fights the same way, and there are a variety of reasons for that. But if you want to kill the enemy, destroy formations, and seize and hold ground, you do your best to employ your forces in line with the dictates of the modern system. That is, if you want to *fight*, you do the things you have to do to get good at fighting—you learn to shoot, move, and communicate in dispersed formations, operating with a combined-arms team that seeks maximum cover and concealment to blunt enemy firepower, and you procure the weapons and equipment that facilitate those skills.

Some of those that *have* learned the modern system are still not capable of producing favorable war outcomes, owing to strategic failures or other circumstantial limitations. And other entities *do* achieve political success even when they simply cannot do the things that are necessary to operate effectively on the modern battlefield, whether for internal political, cultural, or economic reasons. That's because they wage war in a strategic fashion (*asymmetric*, even!)—by minimizing the importance of fighting to the accomplishment of their goals.

Futurists hawking hybrid concepts that focus on tactical or technological hybridity often seem to overlook this basic point: tactical effectiveness is really important, and almost every violent actor is going to do his best to achieve it when the political, cultural, doctrinal, or financial barriers are surmountable. But tactical effectiveness isn't everything, and it's often extremely difficult and extremely expensive to achieve and sustain. All the "hybrid warfare" idea tells us is that in the future, the range of potential adversaries is not so clearly dichotomous when we look at buying power, human capital, and tactical and strategic imagination as it may have been before. Sometimes guerillas will want to fight, because they've gotten better at it. And sometimes armies will want to talk, because they think it's gotten too expensive to fight.

We needed a new term for that?

I bring all of this up in relation to an article that ran on AOL Defense last week, headlined "[How to Fight Hybrid Threats: Tanks, Airstrikes, and Training](#)." The piece could just as easily have been called "How to Be Good at Battle: Shoot, Move, and Communicate." I don't mean to be too dismissive, though, because it's a useful reminder to the general audience of the point I made above: we know certain things about how to *fight* effectively, and our recent involvement in the sort of conflicts where fighting power has thus far failed to translate well into "victory" ought not make us forget that.

The piece is built around an interview with [Dr. David Johnson](#), a RAND scholar and retired Army officer who published a book last year about the lessons of the Israel's recent wars. I'm sure some of you will have read (or at least skimmed) *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza* when it first appeared; if not, it's [available for free](#) (pdf) on RAND's website, and the AOL Defense interview does a good job of getting at some of the major conclusions.

The driver of the hybrid threat, for Johnson, is the spread of long-range weapons: anti-tank guided missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft weapons (called "man-portable air defense systems," or MANPADS), even relatively unsophisticated long-range rockets like those used by Hezbollah in 2006. When [Israeli](#) airstrikes alone couldn't find and destroy the well-hidden rocket launchers, Israel sent in ground troops, only to be bloodied by unexpectedly fierce resistance.

Here we see the bankruptcy of the hybrid idea as a tactical construct laid bare: what's just been described as "the driver of the hybrid threat" is in fact the driver of nearly all tactical adaptation over the last century or so: the problem of the offensive in the face of overwhelming firepower—increasing weapons range and rate of fire, the deepening of the battlefield, and the consequent limitations on tactical and operational maneuver.

So why is "the hybrid threat" any different to the basic military problem we've been trying to solve for all this time? Johnson contends that a shift in Western states' priorities from inter-state war to counter-guerrilla operations has pushed them to forget about that basic problem: instead of worrying about the perfection of protected maneuver in order to close with and destroy a lethal enemy, Israel and the U.S. have focused narrowly on the subsidiary issue of how to identify and target the enemy.

So how can the US prepare for hybrid threats? In part by going back to the future, said Johnson, whose books include a history of how the US learned to use [tanks and airpower in World War II](#). "It is a problem that can't be solved by a single service," he said. The [Air Force](#) and Army today work together more closely than ever before in providing [air support to ground troops in Afghanistan](#), but air-ground cooperation has gotten good in past conflicts as well, only to break down post-war when bureaucratic and budgetary battles between the services start to matter more. Hybrid threats will impose serious limits

on helicopter operations – as the Soviets found out in Afghanistan after the CIA provided the mujahideen with Stinger missiles – so support from higher, faster, and harder-to-hit fixed-wing aircraft will be essential. Conversely, the Air Force will need the ground troops to root out hybrid enemies from their hiding places, he argued, just as the Israeli Air Force proved unable to spot Hezbollah's rocket launchers from overhead. "Ground maneuver is the only thing that will make him visible because he's hiding from everything overhead," said Johnson.

The challenge of so-called hybrid war is that it's reminded us of the need to consider these two questions together: firepower *and* maneuver, attack *and* defense, target identification *and* force protection. The excerpt above is like a billboard for Biddle's modern system (miraculously, Johnson doesn't cite *Military Power* in his recent study, though he does take lessons from a [recent monograph](#) Biddle co-authored about the Lebanon war): artillery and air power are used in close combination with ground forces to pin down the enemy, force him to keep his head down and allow friendly ground forces to maneuver on his position. But how to separate him from the population, to force him to come out and fight? Well-trained infantry must be capable of meeting the enemy in his sanctuaries – whether forests or mountains or urban areas – to identify, isolate, and fix him for destruction. These are the fundamentals of combined-arms land warfare, as useful for Americans in 2018 as for Germans in 1918.

But this is all somewhat peripheral to the real cause for concern with hybrid war: it exacerbates the expectation–outcome gap so often responsible for puncturing our will to fight. The real problem with so-called hybrid adversaries isn't that they're so much more dangerous than the range of threats we've prepared for—it's that they're so much more dangerous than we expect that they *should* be, because they're not states. We don't expect Hizballah or the Taliban to be able to deepen the battlefield with anti-access technologies, the sort of weapons that allow them to target exposed forces even when they're *not* on patrol. We don't expect guerilla fighters to take on Western infantry and armor on the conventional battlefield. When it comes down to it, we frankly don't expect sub-state groups to be able to kill Americans in what we've always considered to be the sort of straight-up battlefield fight in which U.S. arms are dominant; this explains the widespread [freak-out](#) in response to Wanat, where American soldiers were killed and positions overrun by Taliban infantry using infiltration tactics and small arms.

I recently mentioned Patricia Sullivan's "[War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars](#)," a paper that I think can help us to understand the true *political* danger of the hybrid threat. Sullivan constructs a model for war outcomes in asymmetric conflict in which

strong states select themselves into armed conflicts only when their pre-war estimate of the cost of attaining their political objectives through the use of force falls below the threshold of their tolerance for costs. The more the actual costs of victory exceed a state's prewar expectations, the greater the risk that it will be pushed beyond its cost-tolerance threshold and forced to unilaterally withdraw its forces before it attains its war aims. (497)

She goes on to make a compelling case about the difference between wars of coercion and wars of destruction, but that's less germane to our point here. What I'm getting at is this: because we don't expect irregular adversaries to fight in conventional ways and with conventional weapons, we're not prepared for the sort of casualties that are normally associated even with wildly successful conventional ground combat. (This expectation is exaggerated yet further by the experiences of Desert Storm and OIF I, when U.S. forces inflicted historically unprecedented casualty ratios on conventional enemies due to a remarkable confluence of American technological edge, extraordinarily poor Iraqi force employment, and good fortune. Our recent opponents have been irregulars who mostly lack the capacity to engage our forces using the modern system and regulars who proved unwilling or incapable of doing so.) In short, we have forgotten that land warfare has significant costs in men and materiel, even when waged successfully.

This is the real threat of hybrid conflict: that it reminds us of how bloody war is and has always been; that it delivers that reminder during a strategically inconsequential war; and that the lessons we learn about cost tolerance during that strategically inconsequential war shape our expectations for the future in perverse ways and leave us unwilling to sustain the necessary costs when the next Big One comes along.

