

# Hybrid vs. compound war

The Janus choice: Defining today's multifaceted conflict

**BY FRANK G. HOFFMAN**

Over the past two years, the hybrid threat construct has found some traction. It appears in official government reports and has been cited by the defense secretary in articles and speeches. In addition, it was referred to in the new Joint Capstone Concept for Joint Operations, in Joint Forces Command's Joint Operational Environment 2008 and in the latest Maritime Strategy.

However, it is not clear this usage is based on a common understanding of what a hybrid threat or hybrid warfare entails. Hence, this article details an array of definitions and debates their merits and an alternative concept — compound war. It also provides a preliminary overview of ongoing historical study related to this issue.

Some colleagues resist new adjectives and prefer to retain oversimplified depictions of warfare in two distinct bins: conventional and irregular. I do not share their concerns about new adjectives if they help us think about, debate and prepare for the future. I have greater concerns about preparing for the future by just looking backward. I fear we face a more complex phase in the ever-evolving character of modern conflict, and that a Janus-like approach would allow us to better understand modern conflict and better prepare our operating forces for success. We need a sound appreciation of history, and we need to understand the ever-evolving character of the emerging future all at the same time. In short, as warfare evolves, which Clausewitz reminds us it will do in every age, our professional lexicon should evolve, too.

## **HYBRID THREATS DEFINED**

Recently, in an essay in the foreign policy journal *Orbis*, Col. Gian Gentile of the U.S. Military Academy posed a number of unique insights into the debate about future threats. In this essay, hybrid warfare was labeled "vague." In another monograph out of the Army War College, the hybrid threat concept was simply truncated to blurring of regular and irregular warfare. Neither author found the construct clear or of much value. As H.L. Mencken said: "Any man who afflicts the human race with ideas must be prepared to see them misunderstood."

There are a number of hybrid definitions in today's debate. Marine Lt. Col. Bill Nemeth's graduate work on Chechnya and hybrid warfare is path-breaking research. He defined hybrid warfare as "the contemporary form of guerrilla warfare" that "employs both modern technology and modern mobilization methods." He noted that the Chechens were capable of easily transitioning from conventional to guerrilla tactics, as needed, and that their tactics would often straddle the boundary between guerrilla warfare and terrorism.

Nathan Freier of the Center for Strategic and International Studies was one of the originators of the hybrid warfare construct when he worked in the Office of the Secretary of Defense on the national defense strategy. That strategy laid out in its now famous "quad chart" four threats — traditional, irregular, catastrophic terrorism and

disruptive — that exploit revolutionary technology to negate our military superiority. This strategy noted that in the future, the most complex threats would be combinations of these four. Freier's version defines a hybrid threat as any actor who uses two of the four modes of conflict. Additionally, unlike my definition, Freier retains the fourth mode as "disruptive technology," per its original usage by the Pentagon.

Retired Army Col. Jack McCuen focuses on the loci of the asymmetric battle, fought on three decisive battlegrounds "within the conflict zone population, the home front population and the international community." This definition emphasizes the battle of the narratives, and reinforces Nemeth's emphasis on modern information tools and mass mobilization. Dave Kilcullen is another advocate. In his acclaimed book, "The Accidental Guerrilla," he supports hybrid warfare as the best description for today's modern conflicts. Yet, he emphasizes combinations of irregular modes of conflict, including civil wars, insurgency and terrorism. Other contributors to hybrid wars find more utility in conceptualizing the hybrid threat in terms of how the adversary is organized or his legal status (states and nonstate actors as proxies).

My own definition is adapted from the national defense strategy and focuses on the adversary's modes of conflict. It explicitly eliminates "disruptive technology" and incorporates "disruptive social behavior" or criminality as the fourth modality. Many military theorists are uncomfortable with this element and do not want to deal with something our culture curtly dismisses as a law enforcement matter. But the nexus between criminal and terrorist organizations is well-established, and the rise of narco-terrorist and nefarious transnational organizations that use smuggling, drugs, human trafficking, extortion, etc., to undermine the legitimacy of local or national government is fairly evident. The importance of poppy production in Afghanistan reinforces this assessment. Additionally, the growing challenge of gangs as a form of disruptive force inside America and in Mexico portends greater problems down the road.

I define a hybrid threat as: Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior in the battle space to obtain their political objectives.

There are a number of issues raised by my definition. These include five distinct elements of the definition:

- Modality versus structure: Should our definition focus on the adversary's modes of fighting or his structure (combinations of states, nonstate actors, foreign fighters)?
- Simultaneity: Does the force have to simultaneously employ four different modes of conflict or demonstrate the capacity to employ all four during a campaign?
- Fusion: Does the force have to fuse different forces, regular and irregular, into the theater or must it mix different modes of conflict? How much coordination qualifies and at what level of war?
- Multimodality: Does an actor have to mix all four modes, or are three out of four sufficient to make it hybrid?
- Criminality: Is criminality a deliberate mode of conflict, or simply a source of income or support for gangs and the Taliban?

My definition incorporates these elements, so my own determination on these questions should be clear. I don't think this definition is vague; quite the opposite. If anything, it's too precise. However, the plethora of definitions in the literature is generating the perception of vagueness.

## **COMPOUND WARS**

Hybrid threats are not novel. Over the past few years, I have delved deeper into a number of case histories. This analysis has greatly benefited from the work of numerous historians, but I learned a lot from Thomas Huber's "Compound Wars: That Fatal Knot." This is a much-underappreciated gem.

Huber notes that great captains have often been frustrated by guerrilla warfare that is used in concert with a regular force. In compound war (CW), there is a deliberate simultaneous use of a regular main force with dispersed irregular forces. Huber asserts that the complexity of the admixture of approaches gives distinct advantages to the "CW operator" because it forces the intervening power to both concentrate and disperse at the same time. This increases the command-and-control, logistics and security problems for the CW commander, making him risk averse and slower. Huber's definition assumes that there are separate forces and that they are working in concert; that is, their activities are being coordinated at higher levels. He also notes that there are degrees of coordination, and that sometimes the coordination is limited or simply inadvertent.

Thus, CWs are conflicts with regular and irregular components fighting simultaneously under unified direction. The complementary effects of compound warfare are generated by its ability to exploit the advantages of each kind of force and by the nature of the threat posed by each kind of force. The irregular force attacks weak areas and forces a conventional opponent to disperse his security forces. The conventional force generally induces the adversary to concentrate for defense or to achieve critical mass for decisive offensive operations.

In my study of CWs, the irregular forces are used as an economy of force, to attrite the opposing force and to support a strategy of exhaustion. They are employed to create the conditions for success by the conventional force. The forces operate in different theaters or parts of the battle space but never fuse or combine in battle. Hybrid threats, on the other hand, appear to have a greater degree of operational and tactical coordination or fusion. It does not appear that any separate force exists or that conventional combat power is decisive in the traditional sense. The unanswered question raised by this is: What is the defeat mechanism or a defeat avoidance strategy of the hybrid threat?

The table at right presents my evaluation of 14 case studies starting with the French and Indian War. The fusion of British and French regulars with their respective militias, mercenaries and Indian forces qualifies as a hybrid conflict to me, as does the raiding and deliberate terrorism employed by both sides. The American Revolution, on the other hand, is a classic compound war, where George Washington's more conventional force stood as a "force in being" for much of the war, while the South Carolina campaign was characterized by irregular forces in general. Some exceptions in Nathan Greene's employment of regular and militia units at Cowpens are noted.

The Napoleonic era is frequently viewed in terms of its massive armies marching back

and forth across Europe. But the French invasion of Spain turned into a quagmire with British regulars contesting Napoleon's control of the major cities, while the Spanish guerrillas successfully harassed his lines of communication. Here again, strategic coordination was achieved, but in different battle spaces.

Likewise, the American Civil War is framed by famous battles at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Antietam. Yet, partisan warfare and famous units like John Mosby's 43rd Battalion, Virginia Cavalry, provided less-conventional capabilities as an economy of force operation. Huber has classified the Plains Wars as compound, but I am hard-pressed to support that conclusion and do not see how these frontier fights fit the hybrid definition.

The second Boer War has some elements of hybrid warfare in it. I was particularly struck by the Boers' modern Mausers and Krupp artillery, and their mobility and commando structure. However, the war's opening phases were rather conventional, and the British were ultimately successful in forcing the Boers to reconsider their strategy. Ultimately, they fought a rather traditional guerrilla war until a negotiated settlement was ground out.

T. E. Lawrence's role as an adviser to the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans is another classic case of CW that materially assisted Gen. Edmund Allenby's thrusts with the British Expeditionary Force against Jerusalem and Damascus. But here again, Lawrence's raiders did not fight alongside the British; they were strategically directed by the British and supplied with advisers, arms and gold. One could argue that the Arab forces were irregular forces by definition and that they employed terrorism and some looting. Yet this did not attain any element of simultaneity or fusion.

The French return to Indochina against the Viet Minh is an interesting case. The Viet Minh could certainly conduct a fluid form of warfare with modern conventional capabilities. Their success at Dien Bien Phu might be taken as a manifestation of hybrid combinations. Gen. Henri Navarre's poor choice of terrain and overreliance on air-delivered logistics may have doomed the French more than the Viet Minh's combat capability.

The American intervention in Vietnam is another classic case of the strategic synergy created by compound wars, posing the irregular tactics of the Viet Cong with the more conventional capabilities of the North Vietnamese Army. The ambiguity between conventional and unconventional approaches vexed military planners for several years. Even years afterward, Americans point to the conventional nature of the final victory by North Vietnam's armor columns as an indicator that it was a conventional war.

My colleague T.X. Hammes looks at the Afghans as a hybrid threat against the Russians in the 1980s. Certainly, the infusion of U.S. arms like the Stinger shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missile gave this irregular force a particular conventional tool that helped offset the Soviet's massive firepower advantage and the terrorizing Hind helicopter. Today's fight in Afghanistan may be an even better case, as there is overt evidence of increased terrorism, information operations and the criminally disruptive influences of opium production.

In my monograph "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," I had

dismissed the Chechens' success in Grozny as a case where a former Soviet republic had access to Russian weapons and unique knowledge of their doctrine and tactics. In retrospect, I was wrong. The Chechens' fusion of conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, information operations and deliberate terrorism makes this case an excellent prototype against a modern power.

I am still finishing my study of the Balkans and the Serbian incursion into Kosovo. The latter appears to include modern air defense assets and modern armor, with ethnic cleansing and irregular urban tactics. Looking over the case history, it appears to meet the standard for hybrid warfare.

As both Ralph Peters and I have separately written in these pages, Hezbollah's defiant resistance against the Israeli Defense Force in the summer of 2006 may be a classic example of a hybrid threat. The fusion of militia units, specially trained fighters and the anti-tank guided-missile teams marks this case, as does Hezbollah's employment of modern information operations, signals intelligence, operational and tactical rockets, armed UAVs and deadly anti-ship cruise missiles. Hezbollah's leaders describe their forces as a cross between an army and a guerrilla force, and believe they have developed a new model.

More recently, the Russian incursion into Ossetia and Georgia in 2008 warrants some consideration. The Russian main thrust was conducted by armor columns, covered by bombers. However, there were irregular Chechen units, including the notorious Vostock Battalion, also present. Some of the destruction against economic targets and Georgian property can only be classified as terrorism, targeted killings and looting.

This is a preliminary overview, and more detailed research is needed to delve deeper into the case histories before we can draw out insights. It appears that CW is the more frequent type, and that hybrid threats are simply a subcomponent of CW in which the degree of coordination or fusion occurs at lower levels. It also appears that the greater degree, the hybrid version, is increasing in frequency. We need to study the interaction of different strategies and the intended victory/defeat mechanisms of the protagonists. What strategies are effective against compound or hybrid threats? How does it influence campaign design and operational art? Are classical counterinsurgency and Field Manual 3-24 relevant, or is more discriminate firepower required? Does it matter whether the hybrid threat is embedded as part of a homogenous and supporting population?

I realize that there are those uncomfortable with the messy combinations of modern conflict, and those who don't like the notion of hybrid threats. Some of my colleagues have moaned about the spate of new terminology being thrown around today. Our profession evolves over time, and new lexicon captures the changes better than hanging on to old terms with newer meanings. If we were still fighting in phalanxes or using the tactics of Marcus Aurelius, we could cling to dated definitions and conceptions. However, since we are not, the argument seems rather moot to me. Up until the current conflict, we had poor doctrinal terms such as "low-intensity conflict" and "military operations other than war." We eventually dismissed those terms as inadequate, and our profession benefited from their expulsion.

I am equally uncomfortable with untested terms and assumptions in the joint community about conventional powers and our current understanding of irregular warfare. I am distressed to hear general officers describe China, North Korea or Iran

as conventional. I am even more dissatisfied with the parochial arguments supporting a return to the Revolution in Military Affairs and Transformation agenda of the 1990s that got us where we are today. That agenda was focused without any regard to what sort of enemies we were fighting, which is the antithesis to the hybrid warfare debate.

## **A QDR DEBATE**

I would like the Pentagon and the defense community to use the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review to debate the range of threats we face and their potential combination. We need to assess today's likely irregular threat and potential for high-end asymmetric threats. But this raises a critical issue in our evaluation of the emerging character of conflict: Is the character of conflict diverging into lower and higher forms, or converging, as the hybrid threat suggests? Defense Secretary Robert Gates appears to embrace the convergence of threats and assesses this as likely and dangerous. How is this being incorporated into the scenarios and analyses of the QDR?

In closing, this effort has tried to clarify hybrid threats so that the concept can be fully debated. There are a number of definitions of hybrid threats that emphasize different characteristics. We need to work through both the definitional aspect and its implications. Undoubtedly, the concept is imperfect and its implications are unclear. Just as clearly, some of our existing vocabulary and our understanding of modern conflict are woefully insufficient. Further historical analyses and more war games are required to ascertain the implications in campaign design, operational art, doctrine and training. Our adversaries appear committed to learning and adapting; hopefully we measure up as just as curious and just as resolved to win.

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. If we educate ourselves about how to better prepare for that messy gray phenomenon and avoid the Groznys, Mogadishus and Bint Jbeils of our future, we will have taken great strides forward.  
AFJ

FRANK G. HOFFMAN served more than 24 years as a Marine Corps officer. The views expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Defense Department.