‘Hybrid Threats’:
Neither Omnipotent Nor Unbeatable

by F.G. Hoffman

F.G. Hoffman, a former Marine officer, has also served on the staff of the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century (Hart-Rudman Commission); was the National Security Analyst and Director, Marine Strategic Studies Group, at the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico; and served on the Professional Staff, Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces.

Abstract: Hybrid threats have now joined a growing suite of alternative concepts about the ever evolving character of modern conflict. Here and abroad, the hybrid threat construct has found traction in official policy circles despite its relative novelty. It has been cited by the U.S. Secretary of Defense in articles and speeches, and by policymakers now serving in the Pentagon. Heretofore, the rapidly growing hybrid threat literature has focused on the land warfare aspects of the threat. Modern hybrid threats, including Hezbollah and Iran, have demonstrated the ability to employ irregular tactics and advanced naval capabilities along with illegal or terrorist activity. Thus, the hybrid threat is applicable to naval forces and the U.S. Navy needs to dust off lessons learned from its last experience in the Persian Gulf in the late 1980s to better prepare for an even more challenging future.

The purpose of this article is to provide an interpretation of what is commonly referred to as hybrid wars, and extends the research base of this emerging theory by exploring a maritime case study. Heretofore, the research base for this topic has been limited to conflicts primarily centered on ground operations. Such a narrow suite of cases has the potential to exclude the unique contributions that naval forces might bring to bear against adversaries exploiting hybrid combinations of capabilities and tactics. Even worse, it might leave our naval forces unprepared for the complexities of hybrid threats in their particular domain.

Over the past few years, a number of very interesting conceptualizations of conflict have emerged. Mary Kaldor’s work on “new wars,” John Robb’s Open Source Warfare, and General Rupert Smith’s modern wars...
have joined the previous literature about so-called 4th Generation Warfare. These conceptualizations routinely face strong criticism among defense scholars and the military officer corps despite their manifest relevance and relation to ongoing events in the real world.

Hybrid threats now have joined this pantheon of alternative concepts, but have received the usual short shrift from reactionaries enshrined in military institutions. However, here and abroad, the hybrid threat construct has found traction in official policy circles despite its relative novelty. It has been cited by the U.S. Secretary of Defense in articles and speeches, and by policymakers now serving in the Pentagon.

It was also referred to in the new Joint Capstone Concept for Joint Operations, in Joint Forces Command’s Joint Operational Environment 2008, in the latest Maritime Strategy signed by three Service chiefs. It is central to the Marine Corps’ latest strategic vision. Additionally, the serving Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and the Commanding General at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) have acknowledged the utility of the concept. Allies in the UK, NATO and Israel are also studying this phenomenon as well. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gary Roughhead, speaking at the Naval War College last summer, explicitly mentioned the need to study hybrid conflicts at the Current Strategy Forum.

---


Hybrid Threats Defined

So what exactly are hybrid threats or wars? What are the implications for operational art, for educating future military or policy planners, and critically at this juncture in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), for force planning in the Pentagon? A number of defense scholars have described the emerging character of modern conflict as hybrid wars. This term attempts to capture the blurring and blending of previously separate categorizations of different modes of conflict.\(^5\) Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.

There are various definitions of hybrid wars. My own is adapted from the National Defense Strategy of 2005 and the QDR of 2006 and focuses on the adversary’s modes of conflict. That document notably laid out four distinct types of challengers that the U.S. military needed to prepare for; including traditional threats, irregular foes, catastrophic threats, and disruptive challengers. The last category sought to identify long range revolutionary breakthroughs that might pose “game changer” shifts in new weapons or technology that would totally offset American advantages today. This definition builds on the 2006 QDR and emphasizes the potential of combinations of threats as an *al la carte* menu instead of distinct and rigid bins.

Thus, hybrid threats can be defined as: “*any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives.*”

This definition displaces the catastrophic threat of the QDR, which focused on so-called rogue states with nuclear weapons, with the more likely element of terrorism, which could be catastrophic in its impact. This definition also explicitly eliminates the Pentagon’s “disruptive technology” challenger 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-terrorism and nefarious transnational organizations who 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 portend greater
problems down the road.  

Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state
actors. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or
even by the same unit but are generally operationally and tactically directed
and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in
the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict. The novelty of this
combination and the innovative adaptations of existing systems by the hybrid
threat is a further complexity. As the original scholar on hybrid threats
observed several years ago

Hybrid forces can effectively incorporate technologically advanced systems into their
force structure and strategy, and use these systems in ways that are beyond the
intended employment parameters. Operationally, hybrid military forces are superior
to western forces within their limited operational spectrum.

Hybrid threats incorporate combinations of different modes of warfare
including: conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist
acts involving indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.
These multi-modal operations display a novel degree of operational and
tactical fusion in time and space. They may confound purely conventional
approaches and kinetic solutions, and may also foil today’s emphasis on
population-centric counterinsurgency strategies.

Elements of this definitional and historical debate appear tedious or
even counterproductive to some. Such a response may really be only a way for
those who prefer conventional thinking and other conventional opponents to
block out evidence that does not conform to their preferences. Others prefer
the turgid compromises of Joint Publication 1, the U.S. military’s official bible
for definitions. This is reflective of the lack of imagination that has too often
impeded our planning in operations against today’s enemies, as well as
doctrinal adaptation which has not kept pace with a more agile set of
opponents. We can and must do better.

A change in terminology is required to stimulate both the hard
thinking and the debate that precedes constructive adaptation in the

---

6 For a superb assessment of this problem see Phil Williams, “Criminals, Militias and
7 On the earliest scholars in this area is LtCol William. J. Nemeth, USMC,
8 To assess the development of the concept see James N. Mattis and Frank G. Hoffman,
“Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars.” Proceedings, November 2005, pp. 18–19; Frank G.
Quarterly, 1st Quarter 2009, pp. 34–48; Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing
the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict,” Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic
Studies, Strategic Forum 240, April 2009.
profession. In the past, we changed our language and definitions to adapt to new technologies or unique approaches of our opponents. New language and new terms aid us in thinking differently and characterizing what is truly new, hopefully without overlooking what is enduring in war. Military cultures tend to cling to the past and tradition, providing a powerful prism through which current and future trends are seen. “Armed forces,” notes LtGen Sir John Kiszely of the British Army, “need to be highly aware of this prism, and the distorting effect it may be having on their perspective, if they are to see military affairs clearly and objectively.”

Up until 2003, the traditionalist camp was blinded by its distorted prism, and our military leaders were not able to see military matters with clarity and objectivity. We should ensure that the culture and its prism are reframed in order to prepare for a future characterized by a wide continuum of threats and not merely a false dichotomous choice.

The hybrid-threat construct is a tool that has proven useful in evaluating what, up to now, has been an argument too often debated in terms of false choices between poorly defined positions in a binary or bipolar argument between “nation building” and counterinsurgency (COIN) on one end and conventional/large scale industrial war on the other. This is a woefully inadequate—if not distorted—set of lenses to look at the future through. What is “conventional” or traditional in war historically? What is different about Irregular Warfare, and why do some in our profession believe that the nature/character of war is inherently and solely related only to conventional combat between nation states?

There are those uncomfortable with the messy combinations of modern conflict, and those who like new notions or modifiers to traditional war, like hybrid threats. Many defense specialists express concern about the proliferation of new terms regarding security issues. But the security profession evolves over time, and a 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, we are not, and the gladius and pilum have passed us by. Until very recently, poor doctrinal terms like “Low Intensity Conflict” and “Military Operations Other Than War” were the standard Joint terms. That was the best the U.S. military could do, mislabeling those conflicts short of our preferred big conventional conflicts as “other than war.” These terms were eventually dismissed as inadequate and the profession of arms benefited from their extirpation.

On the other hand, it is not clear what constitutes conventional or traditional wars or exactly who our conventional enemies might be. China, Russia, Iran and North Korea are often cited. Yet, while they field large forces that we might classify as conventional, few planners believe that a major conflict with any of these states will be confined to one of our preferred definitions. Their strategic culture and history suggest a much more complex range of operations, especially if pressed by our own military superiority. More distressing is the return of the idea of a “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) thinking in the literature. A reflexive return to the RMA and Transformation agenda of the 1990s with its excessive techno-centric solutions will never get us to where we need to go.\(^\text{12}\)

### Historical Cases

The combination of irregular and conventional force capabilities, either operationally or tactically integrated, is quite challenging but it is not, necessarily, a new phenomenon.\(^\text{13}\) Nor is it restricted to the ground domain, solely. The war between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006 is often cited as an example of a hybrid threat.\(^\text{14}\)

Hezbollah incorporated a maritime dimension to that conflict by successfully engaging and striking an Israeli corvette at sea with an Iranian supplied anti-ship missile, probably a Chinese variant of the C-802 Silkworm. The Israeli ship was not aware that it needed to activate its missile defense systems, and was completely taken by surprise. Israel has always had a maritime element to its counterterrorism defenses, but Hezbollah surprised them with such an advanced missile capability.

---


There is a warning here for other advanced naval forces: they cannot afford to overlook force protection and defensive requirements against maritime armed groups or hybrid threats that possess state-like capabilities despite their relative small size or non-state status. Irregular warfare is becoming increasingly lethal and complex, a tactic employed not just by the weak, but the cunning, as well. Moreover, irregular and hybrid threats are not just of concern to the Army and the Marines. It has not been, nor will it remain, a concern for those whose principal focus has been the land domain.

**Maritime Hybrid Threat Case Study: Iraq and Operation Earnest Will**

The Iranians represent such a case study. In 1984, the protracted and costly Iran-Iraq War had spilled into the Persian Gulf and was threatening international trade and energy requirements. In desperation, and to pull in the international community, Iraq initiated the so called Tanker War. Saddam Hussein began by attacking Iranian oil tankers and Teheran responded by attacking ships destined for Iraq or to its supporters, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. On May 13, 1984, an Iranian F-4E Phantom attacked a Kuwaiti tanker, the *Umm Casbah*, which was laden with a cargo of oil bound for the United Kingdom. These attacks marked a major escalation in the war. For the first time ever, Iran had deliberately targeted neutral shipping. This was the beginning of a new and larger phase of the war, one in which by the end, Iran attacked nearly 200 ships and killed no fewer than 60 sailors.¹⁵

The American response to this crisis was diplomatic: providing security assistance to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). But in 1986, the growing conflict in the Persian Gulf forced Washington’s hand. Iran had crossed the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and captured the al-Faw Peninsula. Iraq responded to its losses on the ground by escalating attacks on Iranian shipping. In turn, Iran retaliated by attacking any tankers headed to the Gulf States, especially Kuwait. Iraq, of course was being bankrolled by Kuwait.

Kuwait was hurt by these attacks, and in late December of 1986 formally asked for U.S. assistance. The Kuwaitis inquired if the United States would consider registering its tankers as U.S. vessels assuming that they would consider registering its tankers as U.S. vessels assuming that they would

be protected or that Iran might be deterred from attacking them. American planners were worried about U.S. neutrality but also by a need to establish U.S. credibility in the region vis a vis expanding Russian interests. Over the objections of U.S. Navy officials, then President Ronald Reagan ordered the reflagging and naval convoys in March 1987.

The initial operations were not auspicious. The first tanker was reregistered by the end of June: the 400,000-ton al-Rekkah, now renamed the Bridgeton. The first convoy began on July 22, 1987. Eight naval combatants were assigned to the Gulf for Operation Earnest Will, with three providing a close escort for two reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, the Gas Prince and the Bridgeton, bound for Kuwait.

U.S. Navy P-3 surveillance aircraft and carrier-based tactical aircraft provided cover around the Strait of Hormuz. To avoid any accidental attacks by Iran or Iraq, the convoy schedule was published in advance. On the night of July 23, a small Iranian logistics vessel departed Farsi Island and laid a string of mines across the path of the convoy. The next morning, the Bridgeton struck one of these mines.

The vestiges of the shah’s once-impressive navy suffered from the U.S.-imposed arms embargo. By the beginning of the Gulf conflict, the Iranians had only one functioning Harpoon anti-ship missile, which was on board the missile boat Joshan. The principal challenge to the Joint commander in the Gulf was unconventional or hybrid: swarms of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) small boats, a combination of fast Swedish-built Boghammers, “Boston Whaler”-type small boats armed with a hodgepodge of rockets, rocket-propelled grenades, and machine guns. The highly maneuverable small boats could also function as improvised mine-layers in numerous shallow chokepoints along the five-hundred-mile convoy route.

Instead of posing what Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan might have preferred, in terms of a traditional blue water threat, the Iranians more closely resembled a “guerilla war at sea,” as the CENTCOM commander called it. Not surprisingly, the U.S. Navy, configured as it was in the 1980s to confront its preferred opponent, the more demanding Soviet fleet, possessed neither the plans, doctrine nor the equipment needed to deal with the unique challenges posed by the Iranian threat. Iran’s hybrid mixture of conventional frigates, fighter bombers, cruise missiles and Boston whalers complicated the sight picture of a force bred to satisfy John Lehman’s Maritime Strategy and the 600-ship Navy.

Iran’s seaborne war posed a particular problem in the northern Gulf, near where the Bridgeton met misfortune. The United States wanted to ensure protection for international tankers and shipping along the 50- to 70 mile long route running past Farsi Island. But with the spillover of the Iran-Iraq War and the presence of mines, U.S. military planners did not want to operate large American warships in such a hazardous space.
In August 1987, the U.S. naval commander, in the Gulf developed an innovative concept-of-operations based on classical COIN theory. He emphasized providing security for the Gulf and for its population of ships rather than dealing kinetically with the Iranian actions. “In my view, to be successful in the northern Gulf we must establish intensive patrol operations to prevent the Iranians from laying mines. I believe we can achieve the desired results with a mix of relatively small patrol craft, boats, and [helicopters]. . . .” Looking at the problem through a land lens, rather than as a traditional naval mission, is certainly indicative of an agile mind and one that draws upon experience in Vietnam. Bernsen’s concept was based upon a Sea Float practice utilized during the Vietnam conflict in which floating patrol bases were employed to establish a more permanent presence in strategic waterways. Admiral Bernsen recommended establishing waterborne patrol bases, or Mobile Sea Bases, and using U.S. patrol boats, helicopters, and Navy SEALs to conduct intensive patrols to prevent Iran from laying mines or using its IRGCN small boats to attack the convoys.

This approach would give the naval task force the means to control the northern Gulf through persistent but credible presence and active patrols via ships, boats and air assets. Instead of commuting from local ports, the Navy and the Joint Force would maintain a full-time presence in the combat zone, which several analysts have noted bears close relation to those tactics utilized in current counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The American response to the hybrid threat was innovative. Two large oil construction platforms were leased from Brown and Root to serve as seabased platforms and patrol bases. They were the *Hercules* and *Wimbrown VII*. A unique joint force operated from the platforms, including: SOF units; Mark III patrol boats; three Army Special Forces “Seabat” helicopters; a SEAL platoon, and a reinforced Marine platoon.

These forces patrolled in their assigned area maintaining a 24-hour presence on the water to prevent penetration by Iranian small craft. Augmented with surveillance systems, the helicopters provided a quick reaction force and nighttime visibility. Doctrine for such operations did not exist, and certainly such an odd mixture of units had not previously trained or exercised together.

It did not take long for the concept to prove itself. On September 19, U.S. intelligence detected the Iranian logistical vessel *Iran Ajr* getting under way for another mining operation. The United States moved the USS *Jarrett* with two Army helicopters on board to monitor the Iranian ship. When Army pilots observed mines being pushed over the side, the helicopters opened fire with rockets and machine guns, killing at least three Iranian crewmen. The Iranians abandoned ship. The next morning, a SEAL platoon boarded and secured the *Iran Ajr*. Its capture was of great strategic communications value since her very obvious cargo of mines was hard to refute and the public revelation through the media undercut Iran’s protests and legitimacy.
Nimble Archer

On October 15, 1987 a Silkworm missile struck the American-owned Liberian-flagged tanker Sungari. The ship suffered extensive damage. The following day, the reflagged Kuwaiti tanker Sea Isle City was hit by another Silkworm. The United States decided it could no longer ignore the Iranian attacks. However, instead of striking the missile sites that threatened Kuwait and carried out the attack on Sea Isle City, the United States’ government elected to avoid targets on the mainland and instead targeted the Iranian Rashadat oil platforms in the northern area of the Gulf. These were not active production facilities but had been used as an intelligence collection and staging area for attacks. Operation Nimble Archer began on October 19. A Surface Action Group comprised of six vessels commenced the operation by warning the platforms’ Iranian occupants to abandon the platform, all of whom quickly complied. The American vessels then started shelling. One platform quickly caught fire, but the second remained standing after nearly 1,000 rounds had been fired at it. Ultimately, the platform was destroyed by explosives placed by a SEAL team.

Escalation of force in 1988

Under new military leadership in the region, the United States began executing a more aggressive strategy against Iran. Over the next two months, U.S. warships aggressively shadowed their Iranian counterparts. In one instance, the Iranian frigate Saband nearly collided and exchanged fire with the USS Samuel B. Roberts during a high-speed game of chicken. The aggressive tactic worked, as Iranian attacks and interference in the Gulf declined.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) countered by launching another mining campaign against the U.S. naval forces in the region. On April 14, 1988, the frigate USS Samuel B. Roberts was operating on patrol and its lookouts identified three mines ahead of the ship. As the Roberts reversed engines to try to back out of the field, it struck another unseen mine. The blast caused extensive damage to the ship, wounding a dozen sailors. The ship itself was only saved by the heroics of its captain and crew.\(^\text{16}\)

The White House again ordered a limited military response. U.S. forces destroyed two Iranian oil platforms, Sassan and Sirri, both important IRGCN staging bases. Sassan was a large set of Iranian offshore platforms. A proposal was made to add cruise missile strikes against selected IRGCN targets at Bandar Abbas, but Washington rejected the idea of initiating any attack on the Iranian mainland. The task force was ordered to strike at one Iranian naval combatant

\(^{16}\) For an inspiring story about the damage control efforts that saved the Roberts see Bradley Peniston, *No Higher Honor: Saving the USS Samuel B. Roberts in the Persian Gulf*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006.
in order to signal Washington’s displeasure. More pointedly, the Joint Chiefs chairman, Admiral Crowe, wanted to place one of theirs “on the bottom” in retaliation for daring to attack a U.S. naval combatant.

Operation Praying Mantis began on the morning of April 18. U.S. Marines and Navy SEALs simultaneously attacked Sassan and Sirri. A few dedicated defenders remained on both platforms, opening fire on U.S. warships from the Sirri with an Iranian 23 mm antiaircraft gun. U.S. vessels returned fire, silencing the gun; but the resulting fire prevented the boarding of Sirri by a U.S. SEAL platoon. Meanwhile, Marine Cobra helicopters and naval forces raked Sassan with gunfire. Marines fast-roped onto the burning structure. After securing it, the Marines withdrew and detonated a large explosive package to eliminate the platform.

The Iranian missile boat Joshan was ordered out by its commander to reinforce Sirri. As previously noted, the Joshan packed a powerful punch, with the only working American-made Harpoon missile in the Iranian inventory. The cruiser USS Wainwright issued warnings to the Joshan not to approach the U.S. warships. The Iranian vessel declared that it had no hostile intent and continued to close on the Americans. The Wainwright issued a final warning. While waiting for a response from the Iranian skipper, the sole known Harpoon missile in Iran’s inventory was launched. The Wainwright fired its countermeasures and watched nervously as the missile passed down her starboard just yards off board the U.S. ship. The American warships responded with six missiles—all reaching their target—reducing the Joshan to a battered hull. Almost simultaneously, a Phantom F-4 headed out into the Gulf from an Iranian base with hostile intent. The Wainwright fired two surface-to-air missiles and scored one hit, which only damaged the fighter bomber.

A flotilla of Boghammers then sortied out of Abu Musa Island to attack the neighboring UAE Mubarak oil fields. After spraying several ships and a portable drilling rig with machine-gun fire and grenades, the Iranian ships returned to the island. An hour later, the IRGCN boats ventured out again to attack UAE facilities. This time, a pair of U.S. attack aircraft were ordered to intercept them. The fast small boats were driven back, with one boat sunk.

While the Sassan and Sirri platforms were being destroyed, another U.S. Navy surface action group, made up of the warships Jack Williams, Joseph Strauss, and O’Brien, were transiting the Strait of Hormuz looking for the Sabalan. In the middle of the day, the small Iranian surface force finally moved out. First was the Sahand heading due south to attack the UAE-owned Saleh oil field. In order to obtain a positive identification of the Iranian ship, a Navy A-6 flew over the Sahand. The Iranians responded by launching a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile. The A-6 climbed away and launched one of its own Harpoon missiles. The USS Strauss successfully engaged the Iranian frigate with a Harpoon of its own. Both missiles struck home destroying the Sahand’s command and control center. Late in the afternoon, the Sabalan finally steamed out of Bandar Abbas, engaging U.S. naval aircraft by surface to air
missile. The U.S. planes were successful at avoiding the missiles, and responded by dropping a 500-pound laser-guided bomb on the Sabalan and rendering it dead in the water. The daylong fight had been a disaster for Iran. Its attack was utterly without effect and the outcome was never in doubt.

Another naval example of irregular warfare occurred in a final clash on July 3, 1988 between the Iraqi small boats and American warships. This engagement inadvertently exploited the aggressive captain of the cruiser USS Vincennes which accidentally shot a pair of missile at an Iranian commercial airliner killing 290 civilians. The circumstances around this mistaken decision were complicated by an active gunfight between the Vincennes and a number of IRGC boats.17 However, the impact on American prestige in the region was devastating. Operation Earnest Will formally ended the following year after a slow wind down of Iranian activity.

Current Case Study

Iran learned much from its experience and has had two decades and a lot of oil money to fund its own revolution in military affairs. Iranian military capabilities include a small fleet of frigates and fast patrol craft, and a few submarines (including Ghadir midget boats and Hahang littoral subs armed with torpedoes).18 It also possesses the world’s fourth largest mine inventory, estimated at between 3,000 and 5,000 mines. Its inventory includes as many as 1,000 Chinese EM11 influence mines and EM52 rocket-propelled mines. In addition to advanced mines from China, Iran bought 1,800 mines from Russia in 2000. The antique World War I-era contact mines used in the 1980s by Iran are a thing of the past.

U.S. planners must be prepared to deal with both the formal Iranian navy and IRGCN forces in these tight waters. The Iranian ability to constrict, if not deny, access is palpable given the geography of the Gulf and Iran’s multiple means for producing maritime mayhem. Historically, the Iranians have proven to be tactically innovative with limited resources.19 Iran’s coastline and 17 islands provide numerous hiding places for small boats and fast attack craft. This is a classic “contested zone” and Teheran is fully aware of it.20 In addition to mines,

the Iranian naval arsenal includes a modest inventory of Chinese anti-ship cruise missiles, largely upgraded versions of the Chinese HY-2 Silkworm, and the Noor, which is an upgraded copy of the Chinese C-802.21 Iran is also fielding the Raad, which has replaced the HY-2 Seersucker. With its large (1,000 pound) warhead, and terminal maneuverability, the SS-N-4 Raad could prove deadly to even large warships. As one study recently concluded, the Iranians are dangerous but clearly not omnipotent.22

Iranian military doctrine suggests that they will employ asymmetric and highly irregular tactics that exploit the constricted geographic character of the Gulf and the advanced systems that they have acquired.23 This doctrine applies a hybrid combination of conventional and irregular tactics and weapons to posit a significant anti-access threat to both military and commercial shipping. Swarming tactics employing the Tareq (Boghammer), Zolghadr speed boats, and Azarakhsb fast attack craft and the newer low-signature North Korean built IPS-16 torpedo boats could prove lethal to unsuspecting Western navies. Our Navy must be prepared to address this adaptive and hybrid form of threat.24

The Iranians are not the only potential hybrid threat at sea. A number of terrorist organizations have exploited maritime attacks including Hamas, Hezbollah, Abu Sayyaf, al Qaeda and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At one time, the last possessed a strong brown water force capable of both support and attack operations. Its recent demise eliminated its base of operations and has decimated its leadership, but not the example of its Sea Tigers. The LTTE fielded small boat squadrons for years, assisted by other states like India, and by hiding its boat production capacity in New Zealand.25 The future will clearly exhibit other low and hybrid threats, not just conventionally oriented navies.

Conclusion

In one of his well-regarded early works on naval strategy, the American strategist Bernard Brodie reminded us that “it is true that the gods favor the
bold,” but “they are notoriously harsh with the reckless.”26 It would be reckless for our planning to focus on just one of the two extremes of the conflict spectrum—either entirely on conventional threats or protracted counterinsurgency. Doing so ignores the far more likely potential for combinations represented by the hybrid threat.

Some critics find the construct of hybrid threats as too vague or still premature for application in the ongoing QDR.27 To the contrary, it’s the postulated conventional threat that is ephemeral—or at least speculative—in the near to mid-range.28 Where are these conventional threats today? Clearly Secretary Robert Gates and his policy advisors have not found it so difficult to comprehend in terms of its definition or utility. While some observers have reservations about the complexity or relevance of hybrid threats, this case study and the ever evolving nature of the Iranian challenge to maritime security in the Gulf suggest otherwise. We can and should work through the definitional aspect of the debate, as well as ascertain its operational implications.29 What we should not do is hide behind outmoded warfare categorizations of the past. That too would be reckless.

Certainly we do not want to lose sight of history, but as General of the Army Douglas MacArthur once rightly observed, “Wars are never won in the past.” He added that, “New conditions require, for solution—and new weapons require, for maximum application—new and imaginative methods.”30 The identification of new conditions like hybrid threats is the first step towards the imaginative methods required. From this new terminology and new thinking should emerge to effect our doctrine and educational system.

The traditionalist camp has made poor use of history as a guide. As Sir Michael Howard has noted, “the soldier has to steer between the danger of

repeating the errors of the past because he is ignorant” of what has preceded us and the equally dangerous error of “remaining bound by theories deduced from past history although changes in conditions have rendered these theories obsolete.”

Changes in condition have not made conventional theories obsolete, especially the necessity of applying combined arms against the enemy. However, this mode of conflict is not as dominant as it once was. The prism of the past should not be a mental prison that bars our ability to understand the present and the future of conflict.

The purpose of this essay has been to delineate and define the nature of hybrid threats and explain its relevance to today’s ongoing force posture debate, including the often-ignored maritime realm. Without any doubt, this case history from the U.S. Navy’s recent past remains an operational challenge worthy of further study.

Today, all armed forces, including the U.S. Navy, confront the challenge of a hybrid threat. Fortunately for its future endeavors, the U.S. Navy has faced the hybrid threat before, and crushed it with innovative thinking, adaptive tactics, and professional skills honed over many days at sea. It may have to do so once again in the Middle East before too long.

---