Hybrid warfare has emerged as a prototypical form of warfare for state and non-state actors to counter the relative strength of western nations. This form of warfare is the logical reaction to the western revolution in military affairs. It is evident that this form of warfare is unlike any form the United States has encountered or defeated in the past and will likely continue in the future. The U.S. military’s recent experiences in small wars fail to adequately prepare our forces for the complexity associated with hybrid threats in the future. A cohesive joint operational concept is required to focus U.S. capabilities to defeat a hybrid adversary.

The United States has yet to encounter a hybrid threat directly, although recent trends indicate increasing regularity of this advanced form of warfare against Western states. Hybrid warfare is a novel form of warfare that has continuously evolved for at least the previous decade due to weapons proliferations, globalization, diversification of communications systems, and most importantly the Western revolution in military affairs. The overwhelming likelihood is that the United States will soon be a direct target. Recent U.S. small war operations have taken the form of counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, foreign humanitarian assistance throughout USINDOPACOM, and counterterror operations in various locations in Africa and the Middle East. These types of operations are genuinely complex, but these operations differ starkly from hybrid warfare threats.

U.S. operational planners have not encountered firsthand the challenges associated with hybrid warfare. Various state actors, such as Russia in the Ukraine and Georgia, and non-state actors, such as Hezbollah while fighting against Israel, have effectively demonstrated the utility and severity of advanced weapon systems blended with insurgent and paramilitary tactics. Of specific concern in these instances is the victim state’s inability to develop cohesive responses to counter the “simultaneous and adaptive ... fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, catastrophic terrorism, and criminal behavior,” these victim states have endured. The United States cannot wait to experience the challenges associated with a hybrid adversary’s complex, multi-domain order of battle first hand. Instead, U.S. forces must analyze and understand the inherent challenges of hybrid warfare before we encounter this form of warfare directly.

One of the most significant challenges of the hybrid adversary systems is that this adversary concept occurs simultaneously with both conventional and irregular tactics, including terrorism and criminal activity, operating within the same battlespace as an orchestrated and networked operation. These challenges include a continuous modernized conventional adversary military capability. In the current operating environment, sophisticated and increasingly lethal weapons naturally draw the focus of our conventional operational commanders and staffs. Meanwhile, hybrid adversaries engage in discreet criminal activities such as narco-terrorism, illicit arms transfers, and other criminal enterprise activities.
to fund operations, strengthen political power bases, draw law enforcement and military resources, and destabilize adversary’s political and economic systems.5

In the hybrid warfare environment, adversaries further seek to exploit the non-attributional nature of the information and cyber domains to exponentially increase the effects of conventional force operations as well as irregular and insurgent tactics. Perhaps the most significant component of this diverse threat profile is that hybrid adversaries seek to execute some or all of these operations concurrently within one operational battlespace. The sequencing of these disparate efforts has an exponential yield, previously unseen by any single methodology. Dr. Frank G. Hoffman, foreign policy expert and security analyst, writes, “Hybrid threats are qualitatively different from less complex irregular or militia forces” and “cannot be defeated by Western counterterror-
ism tactics and protracted counterinsurgency techniques.”6 If traditional counterterror and counter-insurgency operations alone cannot defeat a hybrid threat, a holistic, integrated, and joint/interagency approach becomes prudent. The U.S. joint force lacks a cohesive joint doctrine for defeating hybrid warfare. Dr. Hoffman describes hybrid warfare as a unique and distinct form of war along a continuum of conflict occupying a space between irregular warfare and conventional warfare. Certainly a plethora of joint doctrinal publications exist on conventional warfare operations, namely the cornerstone doctrinal references of Joint Publication (JP) 1 through JP 6. Joint publications sufficiently address irregular warfare via the Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept, which outlines the DOD’s “holistic governmental ... approach to irregular warfare.”7 However, there is a stark lack of integrated operational-level guidance to which commanders and planners can refer in order to aid in synchronizing efforts to achieve maximum unity of effort and unity of action in the hybrid warfare environment.

If hybrid warfare occupies a unique and independent position of the continuum of conflict, a joint operating concept must address it directly. Unified action is the “synchronization, coordination, and integration of government, nongovernmental, and international entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort.”8 Unified action is best accomplished across the joint force commander’s forces as well as interagency stakeholders and multinational agencies and partners through familiar command relationships, experiences, and training. Defeating hybrid threat forces requires unified action at the operational and strategic levels.

The best way to focus U.S. military capabilities and enable operational planners and commanders for success is to develop a counter-hybrid warfare
The U.S. military is insufficiently postured, trained, and resourced through doctrinal publication guidance to counter current and emerging hybrid threats in the future. Hybrid warfare will continue to serve as an effective operational concept for adversary state and non-state actors in the future. The joint force must develop a counter-hybrid operational concept to defeat hybrid adversaries and remain competitive in the future operational environment.

**Notes**


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Command and Staff College, 8905 Small Wars Module Coursebook, (Quantico, VA: Command and Staff College Distance Education Program, 2020).

6. Ibid.


10. “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges (Excerpt).”


12. Ibid.

13. “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges (Excerpt).”

14. Ibid.