

Review - Hybrid Warfare

Written by Bernhard Hoffmann

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BERNHARD HOFFMANN, JUN 11 2016

Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present

By Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, eds.

Cambridge University Press, 2012

As the title suggests, the book is dedicated to adding a historical dimension to the emerging term hybrid warfare, which first surfaced around 2005, sometimes also labelled compound warfare or integrated approach. Both editors have a background in military history and strategic studies. Murray is Professor Emeritus of History at Ohio State University while Mansoor can besides his academic work also look back on a 26 year career in the United States Army and his experience as executive officer to the commanding general of the Multi-National force in Iraq 2007-2008, General David Petraeus.

Nine chapters have been contributed by various authors in support of the point that hybrid warfare is not a new phenomenon but has always existed in some shape or form throughout history as a combination of conventional and irregular forces or methods. Mansoor makes it clear in the introduction that the net has been cast rather wide in order not to stifle the authors in the historical context of the varied scenarios discussed and because this underlines the complexity of the subject at hand. However, he does volunteer a definition, which is a conflict "involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerillas, insurgents and terrorists), which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose. Irregular forces need not be centrally directed, although in many cases they form part of a coherent strategy". This rather modern sounding definition would not be fully applicable in cases predating the Westphalian state system and begs the question if actors always truly need to have a common purpose or if they might not just join forces to pursue different goals, such as demonstrated in chapter two on Ireland. It also seems unduly restrictive as it does not provide for unconventional tactics like employing economic, technological or information warfare. It appears open to interpretation whether the use of unconventional military forces like Paramilitary police or the commissioning of PMC's would fall into any of the categories set out.

Chapter one deals with the Roman attempt to conquer Germania as the earliest example for the application of this type of war, in an arc that spans to the Vietnam War but unfortunately does not include any more recent case studies to fully connect the book to the present day, although several are referenced more briefly in the foreword.

The other chapters are analysing irregular warfare in Ireland during the reign of Elizabeth I. at a time when the Irish revolt was supported by the Spanish Empire, the American Revolution, the Spanish (also known as the Peninsula) War of 1807-14, the American Civil War (after the South was in effect beaten on the battlefield but smaller bands continued to roam and resist), the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the Japanese encounter in northern China and a rather lengthy chapter about the experiences of the British Empire from 1700-1970 which would almost warrant a volume by itself. While it may be read as a continuation of chapter two on the English in Ireland for an early experience with counter-insurgency it is slightly unusual due to the length of time it covers and the fact that it deals with several conflicts that occurred over this period instead of a particular one like the other chapters. In the final and most recent case study on Vietnam Karl Lowe offers several lessons still applicable to modern day military involvement abroad, some of which he clearly feels have been ignored in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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These are interesting examples relating to some of the more well known conflicts and are well written, at least for the reader with a penchant for the subject, but are very western centric, except for the discussion on the Japanese Army in China. It might have been illuminating if at least one more, preferably more recent, conflict would have been analysed where none of the parties was English-speaking or off the western hemisphere in general – the brutal and decades-long conflict over Kashmir between India and Pakistan comes to mind with the use of proxy insurgents by both sides to terrorize the population, or possibly another case longer ago in history from the non-English speaking world. Once one gets stuck into the subject there seems to be no shortage of examples for hybrid warfare through the centuries. How about the German auxiliary cruiser *Seeadler* in World War I or the use of buccaneers and pirates by the English crown in the Caribbean in the days of competition with the Spanish empire?

It is evident how the subject is, whatever the terminology, relevant to the post-Cold War world of today. The book was released before the self-styled Islamic State (IS) emerged as the dominant player in Syria and Iraq and before the events on the Maidan in Ukraine that set off a chain of events that culminated in Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing insurgency in eastern Ukraine. IS spread globally to threaten a nascent government in Libya as well as try and terrorize populations in Europe and as far as Australia to attack and destabilize the established order. Russian use of unidentified 'little green men', troops and equipment without insignia or official markings, in Crimea and the approach of constant denial of any involvement, coupled with sowing misinformation to shape public opinion, presented a tactic not used before but that may well be repeated again. The truth is that war is complex if it is not fought in a single dimension and modern technology is adding new possibilities into the mix all the time. The days when armies squared off against each other away from population centres and civilians were largely spared are gone, and they only lasted for the blink of an eye.

Terrorism can be defined as a "strategic choice of movements which face challenges in achieving their political goals", but these days terrorists raise armies, hold territory and proclaim states. Throughout time military strength has forced challengers to adopt asymmetrical and hybrid approaches to further their aims, either to neutralize conventional superiority or to achieve plausible deniability. In the modern age of information warfare another dimension is prominent: Fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD). Although psychological warfare is nothing new, always-on availability of modern media and near instantaneous communications have added a new quality and vastly extended reach. Russian campaigns of disinformation and cyber-attacks are ongoing and not just limited to events in the Ukraine. Disturbingly, they have now been linked to a strategy of 'active measures', the Gerasimov Doctrine, which suggests instrumentalising Russian-speaking minorities to achieve objectives like shaping the post-Soviet space and the Russian sphere of influence in the Baltic region as well as the Arctic. Perhaps one can take comfort from the fact that an old adage still holds true: All is fair in love and war. As any adversary of the future will most likely be media savvy and exploit the internet for propaganda through social media, web hosting etc. as well as for cyber attacks almost all future wars will be hybrid by nature and include several dimensions.

Mansoor is motivated by what he feels is the intellectual failure of the military establishment to learn from the past to prepare for the not so distant future. He pleads the necessity for military leaders to adjust doctrine according to the kind of war their forces are engaged in and learn the lessons from current conflicts if they are to persevere in the type of conflict that in his assessment will be the most likely in the 21st century, and he advocates for the United States to also "engage in hybrid warfare when conditions allow". In a similar vein Murray, who contributes the conclusion, warns of relying too much on expectations derived from technological superiority and of failing to learn from the historical record, which to him may well suggest that unconventional warfare has on the whole rather been the norm than an exception. However, a traditional focus on the battlefield makes me wonder whether the editors were thinking hybrid enough.

'Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present' is a book whose case studies help it achieve its stated purpose and which seems quite prescient given developments that followed not long after its release. It should be of interest to students and scholars of history, military and war studies, strategy, international security and related areas.

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About the author:

Bernhard Hoffmann graduated in social work and social education at ASFH Berlin 1996 and obtained an MA in International Security Studies from the University of Leicester in 2015. His interests are in military history, strategy, civil war and ethnic conflict, social and IR theory, in particular Constructivism. He is also a member of Chatham House.