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Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars

By Lieutenant General James N. Mattis, USMC, and Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hoffman, USMCR (Ret.)

Remember General Krulak's Three Block War? Are you ready for the Four Block War? You better be, says General James Mattis.

Thanks in large measure to the experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq, there is less talk in Washington these days about revolutions in military affairs (RMA) or defense transformations based solely on technology. Our fascination with RMAs and transformation has been altered once again by history's enduring lesson about the predominant role of the human dimension in warfare. Our infatuation with technology was a reflection of our own mirror imaging and an unrealistic desire to dictate the conduct of war on our own terms.

Recent conflicts highlight the need to always remember that the enemy is a human being with the capacity to reason creatively. In effect, he has a vote in the competitive process we know as war, and does not have to play by our rules. Certainly there are both revolutionary and evolutionary changes in the conduct of war. Social, political, and technological forces can impact the character of conflict. But they do not—they cannot—alter its fundamental nature.

This is an important distinction as the Pentagon completes the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). Relevance is more important than yesterday's dominance. The reasons that some claim dominance in their particular area of expertise or their domain of warfare is that no one is contesting us in that domain. If you want to start arguing about strategic priorities in the QDR, we argue that you look at where our enemies are gathering to fight us. That is relevance. If you want to determine where investments are needed to eliminate risk and have the greatest return in terms of defeating our enemies and saving the lives of Americans, look at combat in the "contested zones" of urban and other complex terrain. We need to create the same sort of dominance we currently hold in the Global Commons to our ground forces in these contested zones.

As you are probably aware, the new National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the Quadrennial Defense Review process are broadening our planning framework. This is a very important step forward. The NDS lays out four emerging challengers or threats: the traditional, the irregular, the catastrophic, and the disruptive.

Defense planning scenarios and force planning have focused on the traditional or conventional challenger in the past. While state-based conventional threats have not disappeared, it is clear that the United States will dominate conventional adversaries for the foreseeable future. Yet interstate war has not disappeared. It is possible that some state may miscalculate our resolve or commitment or some irresponsible state actor could take actions that might require a U.S. intervention of significant scale. Thus, we need to maintain our traditional combat capabilities for major war. This includes a forcible entry capability by an integrated combined arms team. These skills sets are still the foundation or baseline of our capability for other forms of war.

But our conventional superiority creates a compelling logic for states and non-state actors to move out of the traditional mode of war and seek some niche capability or some unexpected combination of technologies and tactics to gain an advantage. Thus, we need to explore the nature of alternative challenges and the corresponding investments we must make to better posture ourselves for a projected world of more unconventional adversaries.

Of course, the greatest probability is the rise of so called irregular challengers. Irregular methods—terrorism, insurgency, unrestricted warfare, guerrilla war, or coercion by narco-criminals—are increasing in both scale and sophistication and will challenge U.S. security interests globally. Such irregular challengers seek to exploit tactical advantages at a time and place of their own choosing, rather than playing by our rules. They seek to accumulate a series of small tactical effects, magnify them through the media and by information warfare, to weaken U.S. resolve. This is our most likely opponent in the future.

But as we look out at the future and formulate future priorities and recommendations about capability enhancements for the Marine Air-Ground Task Forces of the future, we become increasingly convinced that future conflicts will not present the sort of neat distinctions represented by the Office of the Secretary of Defense view of emerging challengers. We expect future enemies to look at the four approaches as a sort of menu and select a combination of techniques or tactics appealing to them. We do not face a range of four separate challengers as much as the combination of novel approaches—a merger of different modes and means of war. This unprecedented synthesis is what we call Hybrid Warfare.

In Hybrid Wars we can expect to simultaneously deal with the fall out of a failed state that owned but lost control of some biological agents or missiles, while combating an ethnically motivated paramilitary force, and a set of radical terrorists who have now been displaced. We may face remnants of the fielded army of a rogue state in future wars, and they may employ conventional weapons in very novel or nontraditional ways. We can also expect to face unorthodox attacks or random acts of violence by sympathetic groups of non-state actors against our critical infrastructure or our transportation networks. We may also see other forms of economic war or crippling forms of computer network attacks against military or financial targets.

The kinds of war we will face in the future cannot be won by focusing on technology; they will be won by preparing our people for what General Charles Krulak, the former Marine commandant, used to call the Three Block War. This is a pretty simple construct. You are fighting like the dickens on one block, you're handing our humanitarian supplies in the next block, and the next one over you're trying to keep warring factions apart. This environment should sound pretty familiar to anyone watching CNN these days. It is not an environment for specialists, who may find themselves in the middle of a firefight that they were not prepared for. This is the kind of complex environment that well-trained expeditionary forces must be prepared to deal with.

We are extending the concept a bit, and beginning to talk about adding a new dimension. We're adding a fourth block—which makes it the Four Block War. The additional block deals with the psychological or information operations aspects. This fourth block is the area where you may not be physically located but in which we are communicating or broadcasting our message.

The Four Block War adds a new but very relevant dimension to situations like the counterinsurgency in Iraq. Insurgencies are wars of ideas, and our ideas need to compete with those of the enemy. Our actions in the three other blocks are important to building up our credibility and establishing relationships with the population and their leadership. Thus, there is an information operations aspect within each block. In each of the traditional three blocks our Marines are both "sensors" that collect intelligence, as well as "transmitters." Everything they do or fail to do sends a message. They need to be trained for that, and informed by commander's intent.

The information ops component is how we extend our reach and how we can influence populations to reject the misshaped ideology and hatred they are offered by the insurgents. Successful information ops help the civilian population understand and accept the better future we seek to help build with them. Our Marine ground and air forces must have the tools and capabilities to get the message across in each block.

Combating our enemies in Hybrid Wars will demand Marines with equal amounts of tenacity, courage, and agility. They will have to be what they have always been, the world's finest expeditionary warriors. We also have to have Marines with the cultural awareness to excel in all four blocks. To this end we are investing significant attention to language and culture training. All career NCOs and officers will be assigned a region or area along the "arc of instability" one ethnic or geographic area. This will hopefully provide us the foundation for the increased intellectual firepower to deal with the interactions between our forces and civilian populations. Our goal is to make certain that they are as good at reading the cultural terrain of an area as they are at reading a traditional map of the physical terrain.

This leads to a point that needs to be underscored during this QDR. We should invest in new systems that better enable our Marines, but it is not our technology that shocks and awes our enemies. It is our capacity to produce highly motivated, innovative, and agile expeditionary warriors. All those who witnessed the Marine in Iraq understand the ultimate meaning of "no better friend, no worse enemy." This will be an even bigger challenge in tomorrow's Hybrid Wars, but no less relevant to victory.

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