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Reconceptualizing the 2006 QDR Threat Categories

by Dr. Robert J. Bunker

Projections of the future national-security environment are always laden with uncertainty and ambiguity. However, they help to serve an early-warning function concerning emergent threats and the national capabilities that will be required to respond to them. With this in mind, I would like to offer a reconceptualization of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, or QDR, threat categories by viewing these threat potentials through a modified perceptual lens.

The current QDR threat categories are based on a four-square box that has irregular challenges in the upper left-hand corner and, in a clockwise fashion, catastrophic challenges, disruptive challenges and traditional challenges listed in turn. The threats are shown migrating away from traditional challenges into the other three squares of the box. Specific areas of concern are the need to defeat terrorist networks, prevent acquisition or use of WMD, defend homeland in depth, and shape choices of countries at strategic crossroads. At the same time, the model recognizes that the United States must “sustain its capabilities to address traditional challenges.”

Earlier thinking by Frank Hoffman in *Armed Forces Journal International* also questions the 2006 QDR threat modeling:

Rather than the simplistic quad chart found in the new National Defense Strategy, future scenarios will more likely present unique combinational or hybrid threats specifically designed to target U.S. vulnerabilities. Conventional, irregular and catastrophic

terrorist challenges will not be distinct styles — they will all be present in some form. This could include states blending high-tech capabilities, such as anti-satellite weapons, with terrorism and cyber-warfare directed against financial targets. ... Opponents will be capable of what Marine Lt. Gen. James Mattis has called “hybrid wars.”¹

Articulating such “combinational or hybrid threats” is an important step forward in our understanding of QDR threat categories, yet further reconceptualization is still warranted. I would suggest that a better way of viewing these threat categories is through a modified diagram that factors in each category (irregular, catastrophic, disruptive and traditional challenges) from the perspective of threat level and time. Such additional modeling provides an iterated, rather than a static, perspective on national-security threats and allows us to gauge or measure their perceived level of severity. Such a visual reinterpretation would include hybrid threats as an additional component to the

original QDR threat categories.

Using this perceptual lens, we can think of warfare as transitioning from the modern to the post-modern era — just as the political and economic systems are doing. Examples include the rise of challengers to the nation-state form (e.g., al-Qaeda and drug cartels), endemic state failure, the European Union attempt at creating a post-Westphalian regional state, the rise of informational and bio-technical economies, mass migration to the Internet (cyberspace) and increasing globalization.

As an outcome of this epochal transition — a revolution in political and military affairs — the traditional challenges of the modern era are becoming less significant threats, even more so given the U.S. domination of conventional warfare. As we begin the transition into the post-modern era — as one human civilization comes to an end and another begins — irregular challenges become the greatest threat to U.S. national-security interests.

This transitional period is marked by de-institutionalization, privatization and outsourcing. Governmental institutions are no longer able to contend with changing times because of changes in all aspects of human civilization, including the technological, organizational and legal realms. These changes include the return to the battlefield, and probable ascendancy, of nonstate soldiers — terrorists, insurgents, guerrillas, mercenaries and private security contractors.

Eventually, as this historical process continues through the coming decades

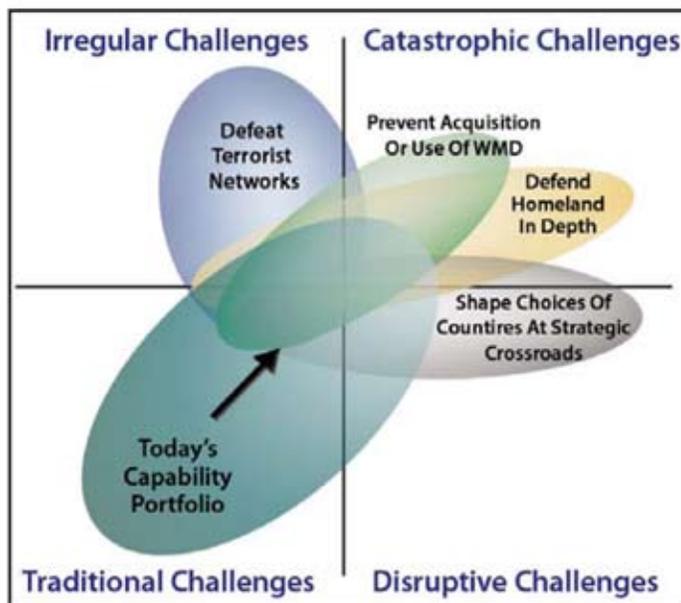
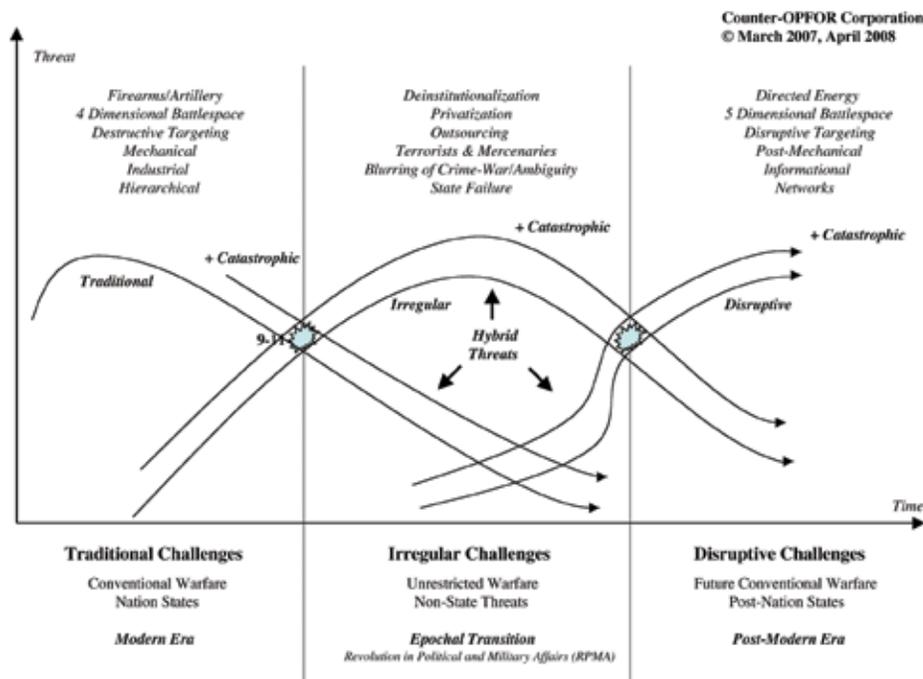


Fig 2. Modified 2006 QDR Challenges Model



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and we begin to enter the post-modern era, disruptive challenges will become the most significant threat to U.S. national-security interests. This will come about as post-nation states re-institutionalize nonstate soldiers and their network structures, advanced weaponry and concepts of operations into their forces.

Catastrophic challenges are an interesting case, in that they should not be considered so much a stand-alone challenge as an additive threat (or plus-up) to the traditional, irregular and disruptive challenges that exist. For instance, terrorists with tactical nuclear devices are a far greater threat to the U.S. than terrorists employing conventional explosive devices.

Additionally, when viewing potential foreign-state threats, such as those from Beijing, while it is understood that a sequence of challenges will dominate over time — first traditional (the past), second irregular (the present) and third disruptive (the future), each modified by catastrophic challenges (as an additive threat) — this would not limit Beijing or any other state from

using each challenge in a separate and discrete manner.

Rather, in the threat mixes advocated in the well-known mainland Chinese work *Unrestricted Warfare*, these challenges should be mixed and matched in such a way as to tailor them to specific situations. A prime example would be the layering of irregular and disruptive challenges, such as proxy terrorists' use of directed-energy weapons (the Chinese ZM-87 blinding laser comes to mind) against U.S. civil-aviation assets as an asymmetric response to the future fielding of U.S. man-portable air-defense-systems countermeasures.

Such "mixed-threat challenges" have been discussed recently in an article by retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel F.G. Hoffman, who says, "Our greatest challenge will not come from a state that selects one approach but from states or groups that select from the whole menu of tactics and technologies to meet their own strategic culture and geography."² None of this is all that new in the sense that combined-arms approaches (infantry,

artillery and cavalry) have a centuries-old history in the military arts. The only difference with these threat mixes is that they abstract things further by mixing and matching nonmilitary methods to military methods in "anything goes" combinations.

The utility of this reconceptualization of the 2006 QDR challenges model is that it better defines and articulates the national-security threats facing the U.S. It allows the time and intensity of threat concerns to be visually portrayed, views catastrophic threats as an additive (or plus-up) capacity to the other challenges, and takes into consideration the mixing and matching of hybrid threats.

Ultimately, what this model suggests is that, while the U.S. is well-positioned to fight the modern wars of the past against nation-states, it is now required to field an epochal transitional capability to fight the irregular wars of the present against nonstate threats, while further keeping one eye to the future, when it will be required to engage in the new "conventional" warfare against post nation-state forms.

All might agree that we live in very interesting times.

NOTES:

¹ Frank Hoffman, "How Marines are preparing for hybrid wars," *Armed Forces Journal International*, March 2006. Access at: <http://www.afji.com/2006/03/1813952>.

² Lieutenant Colonel F.G. Hoffman, USMCR (ret.), "Preparing for Hybrid Wars," *Marine Corps Gazette*, March 2007, 57-61.

Dr. Robert J. Bunker is CEO of the Counter-OPFOR Corporation and was the 2006-2007 futurist in residence at the FBI Academy, Quantico, Va. He has more than 150 publications in academic, military and law-enforcement venues, including the edited works Non-State Threats and Future Wars; Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency; and Criminal-States and Criminal-Soldiers. Earlier perceptions and notes concerning this reconceptualization were originally presented in congressional testimony to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.