

Spectrum of What?

Paul Scharre



A DECADE OF CONFLICT has refined and expanded our understanding of war. Our lexicon must change as well. Operations to stabilize under-governed regions and manage internal instability, once thought to be “operations other than war” or “low-intensity conflict,” are now understood as wars that may include intense combat. At the same time, sophisticated nation-state adversaries have expanded the spectrum of military operations by investing in advanced technologies designed to blunt U.S. power projection and thwart traditional U.S. advantages. Precision long-range ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, integrated air defense systems, anti-satellite weapons, and cyber weapons have the potential to complicate U.S. concepts of operation against adversaries who possess these technologies. Meanwhile, nonstate actors, not content with merely terrorism and insurgency as methods of warfare, seek more sophisticated weapons to enable them to impose new costs and risks on Western militaries and frustrate their attempts to seize terrain. These weapons, traditionally available only to state actors, include precision-guided anti-tank missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, sophisticated man-portable air defense systems, anti-ship cruise missiles, and precision-guided rockets, artillery, and mortars. U.S. defense planners refer to these new threats and U.S. concepts for countering them as counterinsurgency (COIN), anti-access/area denial (A2/AD), and “hybrid” warfare, respectively.¹

We must revise and expand the spectrum of operations or range of military operations to cover these new threats, with irregular operations like COIN, counterterrorism, and stability operations on the “low end” of this spectrum and counter-A2/AD concepts of operation on the “high end.” Conventional maneuver warfare, often labeled major combat operations, is now only a relatively small slice of the spectrum of operations. Conventional war is also not at the highest end of this spectrum of conflict, but rather in the middle. The high end features sophisticated A2/AD threats that require new U.S. capabilities and concepts of operation to counter. (One could plausibly extend this range even further to encompass nuclear exchange.) This new,

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PHOTO: U.S. Marine Corps Cpl Aaron Pickett fires a Javelin missile from the front of a Humvee during the Enhanced Mojave Viper training exercise at the Black Top Range Training Area, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, CA. 29 August 2011. (U.S. Marine Corps, Cpl Reece Lodder)

revised spectrum of operations varies not in level of effort or intensity of violence (COIN operations can exhaust immense resources and be extremely violent at times), but rather in scale and sophistication of adversary capabilities.

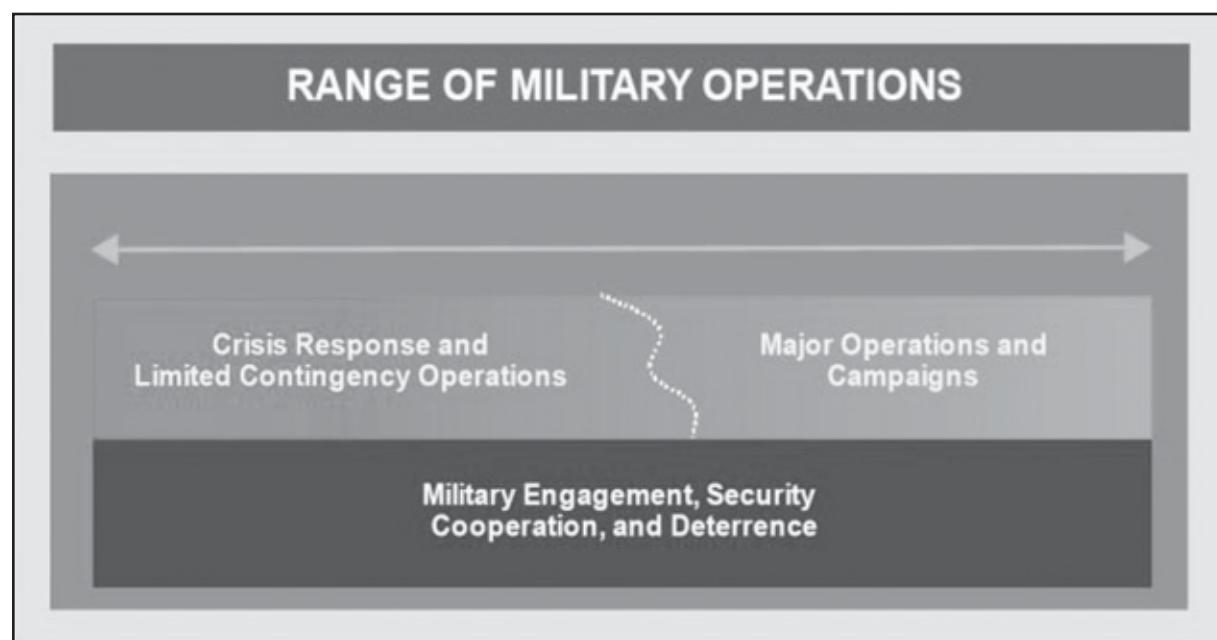
The Lexicon Today

Existing DOD joint lexicon fails to cover this new, expanded spectrum of operations in a meaningful and interesting way. Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, describes the range of military operations as varying from “crisis response and limited contingency operations” to “major operations and campaigns.”²

The range of military operations in JP 3-0 delineates military operations along the dimension of level of effort, which is not very useful. Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan and the stabilization of Iraq are both “major operations.” These campaigns have swallowed the efforts of, at times, 100,000 troops or more in each nation, lasted for years of sustained conflict, cost hundreds of billions of dollars, and resulted in thousands of U.S. service-members killed and tens of thousands wounded. By any reasonable measure, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are major operations. In fact, the stabilization phases of the Iraq and Afghan wars turned out to require a significantly greater level of effort and

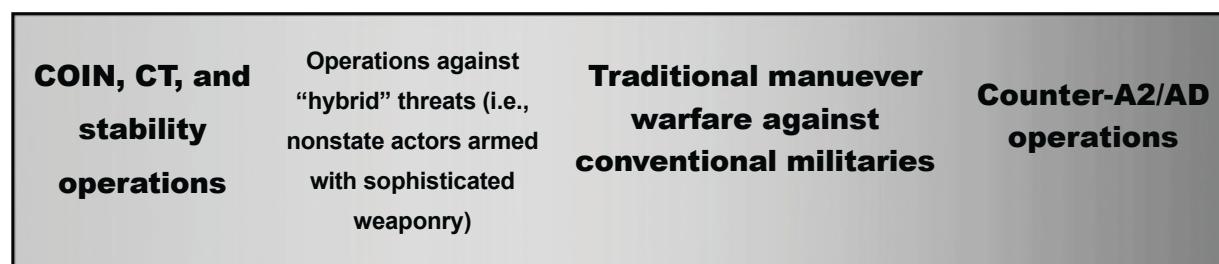
duration than the invasions to topple those nations, both of which lasted only weeks, not years.

Stability operations and conventional force-on-force conflict differ significantly in terms of forces required and training and equipment. For example, the force that invaded Iraq in 2003 was superbly trained and equipped to defeat Saddam’s army, but less prepared (initially) for the stabilization and counterinsurgency challenges that followed. The range of military operations presented in JP 3-0 does not draw this distinction. In JP 3-0, both the initial invasion of Iraq and the lengthier, bloodier, costlier stabilization campaign fall to the right edge of this spectrum. Assessed by level of effort, it is arguable whether the initial invasion of Afghanistan (accomplished by a limited number special operations forces and CIA ground personnel plus air power) rose to the level of a “major” operation in terms of level of effort. Because the range of military operations described in JP 3-0 focuses on level of effort, it fails to capture critical qualitative differences among COIN, “hybrid” conflicts, conventional military operations, and operations against A2/AD threats. All these operations require different capabilities, methods, and concepts of operations. A spectrum defined by level of effort alone fails to capture these crucial distinctions between operations and, as a result, is only marginally useful.



Range of Military Operations (ROMO), Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*

"Low-end" *Varies by scale and sophistication of adversary capabilities* "High-end"



Revised Spectrum of Operations

The High and Low End of What?

Military operations vary by level of effort, duration, type of conflict, type of adversary, or many other variables. Placing them along a one-dimensional spectrum is overly simplistic and problematic in many ways. Nevertheless, a “spectrum of operations” remains a useful heuristic or shorthand tool. Although the terms “high-intensity” and “low-intensity” no longer exist in formal DOD joint lexicon, many military servicemembers and civilian defense professionals continue to use the terms “high” and “low” to refer to edges of a notional military operations spectrum. At the “low end” of this spectrum are activities like COIN, counterterrorism operations, and stability operations. At the “high end” are operations to counter A2/AD threats, which are among the most sophisticated challenges U.S. forces may face.

Explicitly or implicitly, “intensity” is often the variable by which operations purportedly vary along the spectrum of conflict. Depending on who is speaking, “intensity” may mean level of effort, as outlined in JP 3-0, or level of violence. Either way, “intensity” is a misnomer. Irregular operations like COIN, counterterrorism, or stability operations can require significant levels of effort, in some cases markedly more so than conventional force-on-force operations against a state for the same territory. COIN, counterterrorism, and stability operations can be extremely violent. To the service member on the ground facing a complex ambush from machine-gun fire, IEDs or mines, and RPGs, it hardly matters whether the enemy is wearing a uniform or not. The actions one takes on the ground are the same. In Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. troops have been in bloody and

intense fighting at the squad, platoon, and company level. To characterize this fighting as “low intensity” defies logic.

Military operations do fall along a spectrum that varies by the scale and sophistication of one’s adversary. At the “low end” of this spectrum are COIN, counterterrorism, and stability operations. At the “high end” are counter-A2/AD operations. As one moves from the “low” toward the “high” end of the spectrum, the adversary’s capabilities increase in technological sophistication, training, and the ability to scale up operations into larger organized coherent fighting formations.

Interestingly, what was once the high-end of the spectrum is now the middle. Traditional maneuver warfare against conventional militaries is not the most sophisticated challenge U.S. forces may face. The most sophisticated challenges are threats from adversaries possessing advanced A2/AD capabilities.

This spectrum is meaningful and useful because different methods, capabilities, and concepts of operation are necessary to counter adversaries who fall at various points along the spectrum. The capabilities and approaches useful against conventional adversaries generally fall short in A2/AD environments, where new adversary approaches aim to frustrate traditional U.S. modes of power projection. While existing U.S. tanks, helicopters, fighting vehicles, fighters, bombers, ships, aircraft carriers, and satellites are generally qualitatively proficient for operations against conventional militaries, counter-A2/AD operations require new U.S. weapons, like long-range strike weapons, and new concepts of operations, like dispersed and hardened bases to increase resilience against missile attack.

While conventional enemy militaries can be considered “lesser includeds” of advanced nation-state militaries with A2/AD capabilities, this is not true of enemies engaging in irregular warfare. As we move to the lower end of the spectrum, where adversaries lack the technologically advanced weapons, training, drilling, and organization to stand toe-to-toe with conventional militaries, they respond by using the “weapons of the weak”—insurgency and terrorism. Instead of direct military confrontation, they rely on support from civilian populations and mask their movement within those populations. DOD characterizes this mode of conflict as irregular warfare, defined in DOD Directive 3000.07, Irregular Warfare, as—

A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capacities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.³

DOD Directive 3000.07 juxtaposes irregular warfare and “traditional warfare,” with traditional warfare defined as—

A form of warfare between the regulated militaries of states, or alliances of states, in which the objective is to defeat an adversary’s armed forces, destroy an adversary’s war-making capacity, or seize or retain territory in order to force a change in an adversary’s government or policies.⁴

Irregular warfare and traditional warfare are both modes of war. Traditional warfare directly opposes an adversary’s military forces through force-on-force conflict. Irregular warfare relies on influencing populations to achieve one’s political aims, including fostering insurgency, terrorizing key population groups, or sapping an enemy’s political will to fight.

Because the types of operations presented above vary in degree of scale and technological sophistication, operations to the middle and right of the spectrum generally meet the definition of traditional warfare, since they oppose adversaries who possess organized military forces. Operations on the left end of this spectrum are more irregular in nature, as adversaries turn to population-centric approaches to make up for their lack of

sophistication in traditional military means. In turn, population-centric approaches like COIN are necessary to defeat them.

Somewhere between insurgency and conventional warfare, “hybrid warfare” is a blend of irregular and traditional approaches to war. The term “hybrid warfare” has been debated in many forums.⁵ For the purposes of the revised spectrum presented above, “hybrid” warfare is operations conducted by state or nonstate actors that blend irregular and traditional approaches. One example is nonstate actors possessing sophisticated weaponry usually reserved for the militaries of nation-states. These technologies may include precision-guided anti-tank missiles, sophisticated man-portable air defense systems, unmanned aerial vehicles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and precision-guided rockets, artillery, and mortars. These capabilities may allow hybrid actors to resist organized military forces in force-on-force engagements. At the same time, strategic communications to influence relevant populations are key aspects of hybrid warfare. Defeating an enemy’s forces on the field of battle is not, alone, enough to secure victory.

Impact of the Revised Spectrum

Any given operation may move through multiple phases and through several or even all parts of the conflict spectrum. The Iraq war, for example, began as a traditional military campaign against organized nation-state forces, then evolved into counterinsurgency, then into a peace-enforcement operation aimed at tamping down a growing Sunni-Shi’ite civil war, and finally shifted to a security force assistance mission aimed at building the security capacity of Iraqi government forces. Some adversaries may even employ tactics and methods of warfare from multiple points along the spectrum simultaneously.

U.S. forces must be prepared for operations to shift, sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly, along the spectrum as adversaries seek the mode of conflict most advantageous to their aims. Actors, state and nonstate alike, seek to modernize their military equipment and tactics and move their capabilities further to the right of this spectrum. The U.S. military’s historical advantages in technological superiority mean that both state and nonstate adversaries will also seek to employ irregular, population-centric approaches to attempt to resolve conflicts on

their terms, turning populations against the United States and sapping the U.S. will to fight.

The United States has historically been strong in the middle part of the conflict spectrum, in conventional warfare. The high end of the spectrum, counter-A2/AD operations, is new and has developed as adversaries have modernized their militaries and designed clever approaches to counter U.S. forces. The low end of the spectrum has existed for millennia, but has recently become more relevant for U.S. forces as U.S. superiority in conventional war drives adversaries to employ irregular approaches like insurgency and terrorism. Most U.S. capabilities occupy the middle part of the spectrum, and because these middle-weight capabilities do not necessarily translate up or down the spectrum to A2/AD or COIN, the capacity and proficiency of U.S. forces at both the high and low ends are not satisfactory.

Recent U.S. military adaptations and investments, from riverine and civil affairs units to the new long-range bomber, have focused on the ends of this spectrum. When seeking savings, the DOD has recently looked to conventional capabilities in the middle part of the spectrum. For example, in the past several years the Army has reduced armor and artillery capacity to make space for COIN-centric capabilities like civil affairs or information support teams. Crucial gaps on both the high and low

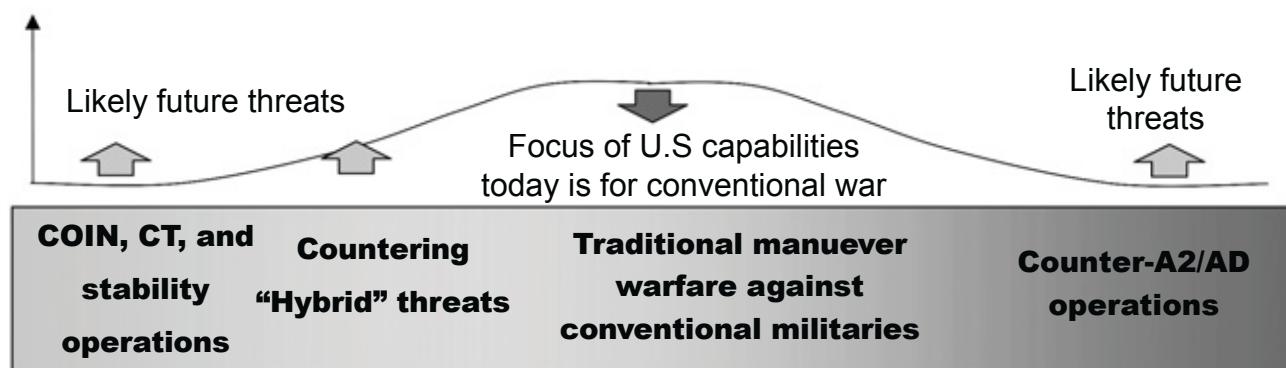
end remain, however. As budget pressures tighten, the process of rebalancing capabilities by pushing resources out to both the high and low ends of the spectrum will continue, not just in the Army but in the other services as well.

Not a Case of “Lesser Includeds”

Overcoming the challenges posed by adversaries fighting at different places along the spectrum requires different capabilities. The challenges posed by adversaries employing less sophisticated capabilities, and therefore irregular approaches, are not “lesser includeds” of the challenges posed by more sophisticated conventional or A2/AD adversaries. The mode of warfare qualitatively changes as one moves further to the “lower” end of the spectrum. U.S. armed forces must be able to cover the entire spectrum, but the spectrum affects the military services differently.

A2/AD approaches challenge traditional U.S. air and maritime power projection concepts, and thus, the Navy and Air Force must focus the bulk of their efforts on operations in A2/AD environments. Traditional warfare against less sophisticated conventional adversaries is largely a lesser included of counter-A2/AD operations. Fifth-generation fighters can perform the same missions as fourth-generation fighters, for example. Fifth-generation

Flattening the curve by rebalancing to meet future threats



fighters are significantly more expensive to operate, however, suggesting a high-low mix of aircraft, when possible. The same is true with ships. Employing a destroyer in a counterpiracy or maritime security mission where a cutter or frigate would be an acceptable solution is an overly costly approach. A high-low mix of capabilities would be a more effective way of providing the high-quality assets needed for the small number of the most challenging high-end missions and the quantity necessary for a wide range of possible contingencies.

Some truly “low end” air and maritime capabilities to conduct COIN, CT, and stability operations and support ground forces in these types of conflicts are still required, however, and are not necessarily “lesser includeds” of higher-end operations. Assets like riverine forces, maritime civil affairs, Predator and Reaper unmanned aircraft, and light attack aircraft are qualitatively different from destroyers, fifth generation fighters, and bombers. While the primary focus of the Air Force and Navy should be A2/AD threats, some resources must remain dedicated to irregular warfare missions.

The Army and Marine Corps face different challenges. Unlike air and maritime forces challenged by A2/AD concepts that aim to thwart traditional U.S. modes of power projection, U.S. ground forces retain significant advantages over any adversary land army. The main challenges they face come from lower-end irregular warfare operations, which are not a “lesser included” of traditional warfare, as we learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. A Marine Corps and Army geared primarily toward traditional warfare against nation-state militaries will not be sufficiently competent at COIN and stability operations to counter adversaries employing irregular tactics.

Both the Army and Marine Corps must possess the ability to conduct population-centric operations

to stabilize under-governed regions and build the security capacity of partner nations, while still remaining proficient at combined arms maneuver to destroy organized military forces in force-on-force conflict. That stability and counterinsurgency operations may last for years or decades further challenges ground forces by requiring a rotational base of forces. U.S. proficiency in conventional ground-seizing operations, on the other hand, allows the U.S. to complete conventional operations in months, if not weeks or days. Thus, if conventional operations and COIN/stability operations are to have equal weight (because conventional campaigns can rapidly transition to COIN), we must train, equip, and design most ground forces for COIN and stability operations.

We have yet to see whether we can achieve a dual proficiency in conventional war and COIN by aiming for the “sweet spot” between those two types of warfare or by orienting segments of the force toward each type of conflict. If there is a mid-point between conventional war and COIN, it is “hybrid” war against nonstate actors armed with sophisticated weaponry, operating among civilian populations, and simultaneously engaged in both irregular and traditional modes of warfare. Training and equipping for combat against conventional militaries alone is not sufficient, as stability operations and COIN are not “lesser includeds” of these operations. However, because hybrid threats employ both traditional and irregular means, countering these threats requires simultaneous population-centric approaches and direct force-on-force engagement. A hybrid-focused ground force that could both destroy enemy forces and influence populations might be able to fight both up and down on the spectrum of conflict by performing both conventional and COIN operations.

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Clarifying the Lexicon

For uniformed and civilian defense professionals to communicate meaningfully with each other, we must say what we mean and mean what we say. Terms like “high-intensity” are misleading and confusing, and we should abandon them. Calling the prolonged, bloody, and costly counterinsurgency phases of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars “low-intensity,” either in level of effort or degree of violence, is simply senseless.

A spectrum of military operations that varies only in level of effort is not useful, because it does not highlight key qualitative differences between COIN, hybrid war, conventional war, and counter-A2/AD operations.

A spectrum that varies in scale and sophistication of adversary capabilities is more reasonable and useful in describing how various kinds of conflict, from COIN to hybrid war to A2/AD environments, affect U.S. forces. These operations require different capabilities, methods, and concepts of operation. The U.S. military has historically been strong in conventional warfare in the middle of the spec-

trum, but these capabilities do not translate well up or down the spectrum, so the DOD is flattening the capabilities curve. The department has been increasing investments at the high (A2/AD) and low (COIN) ends of the spectrum, and to the extent that resource constraints require offsets, taking risks in the middle.

Mounting budget pressures are shrinking resources, all while potential adversaries continue to modernize their A2/AD capabilities and instability in under-governed regions continues to threaten U.S. interests. Faced with these conditions, rebalancing the force must continue. **MR**

NOTES

1. Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review (February 2010), 8-9, available at <http://www.defense.gov/qdr/images/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf>.
2. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-0, Joint Operations (22 March 2010), I-8, available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_0.pdf>.
3. Department of Defense (DOD), DOD Directive 3000.07, Irregular Warfare (IW) (1 December 2008), 11, available at <<http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/300007p.pdf>>.
4. Ibid., 11.
5. For a brief overview, see Frank Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly* 52 (January 2009): 36.


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