

# Forging a Counterhybrid Unit

*by Karl Umbrasas*

The U.S. military is a highly-educated fighting force. Education in the ranks of the American military traverses both officer and enlisted communities. A college education is a baseline requirement for the commissioned officer corps but not for the enlisted community, which comprises the majority of servicemembers on active duty and the reserves. The enlisted community has demonstrated a steady increase in the level of higher education of its members since 2000. In 2000, only 3 percent of enlisted members had a bachelor's degree and less than 1 percent had an advanced degree.<sup>1</sup> By 2016, however, those numbers had more than doubled, as 6.9 percent of enlisted members held a bachelor's degree and 1.1 percent held an advanced degree.<sup>2</sup>

Servicemembers are non-traditional students because of their full-time employment. Much of their education is earned on their own time from online or local colleges and universities. Many of the colleges and universities attended by military students offer degree programs in the intelligence field. Two such universities, Henley-Putnam University and American Public University, have robust intelligence studies programs that span the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. Many students at these universities are in the military or are veterans.<sup>3</sup> The University of Texas, El Paso, offers programs in security and intelligence studies and is designated an Intelligence Community Center for Academic Excellence (IC CAE) by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The faculty in these programs have real-world experience in the military and the intelligence community (IC). The intent of these educational programs is to make graduates competitive for intelligence-related employment in the military, IC, and business. Evidence suggests that an education in intelligence does meet the needs of intelligence organizations and leads to employment in the intelligence sector.<sup>4</sup>

Education in intelligence offers advantages to troops navigating the twenty-first century battlespace. Intelligence-related degree programs tend to emphasize information processing

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abilities, among other areas.<sup>5</sup> These programs reinforce skills in the intelligence tradecraft, such as anticipation of threat and working within ambiguity.<sup>6</sup> Specific intelligence competency areas emphasized in these programs include intelligence operations (e.g., counterespionage and covert action), human intelligence (e.g., spying), and technical collection.<sup>7</sup> These degrees are different than other substantive disciplines because in addition to content, the students actively develop an identity as an intelligence professional. Though a person with a degree in history or political science may find work in the intelligence field, students who enter these disciplines are not necessarily developing a professional identity as an intelligence professional as they complete their studies. Most importantly, many of these programs are responsive to Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 610, “Competency Directories for the Intelligence Community Workforce,” which details the expertise needed to function appropriately in the IC.<sup>8</sup> Servicemembers who hold these degrees represent a unique asset to the services and one that is especially prepared for a twenty-first century mode of warfare—hybrid war.

Russia poses an ongoing threat of applying its hybrid warfare strategy in post-Soviet bloc and neighboring countries.<sup>9</sup> As a strategy, hybrid warfare is a deliberate mix of conventional deterrence and insurgent tactics.<sup>10</sup> The conventional aspect of the hybrid strategy includes fires and logistics, and perhaps most importantly, the threat of military escalation. The insurgent tactics in the hybrid strategy include activities such as propaganda and espionage, as well as fomenting agitation, criminal disorder, and fifth columns inside targeted countries. Insurgent tactics may furthermore entail the insertion of unmarked soldiers and the initiation of border skirmishes. The aggressor using this strategy enjoys plausible deniability, which prevents a wider conflict. The aim of the Russian

hybrid warfare strategy is to achieve political and territorial gains without triggering a conventional military retaliation. Ways to achieve these larger hybrid goals include dividing NATO, subverting pro-Western governments, creating pretexts for war, annexing territory, and controlling the European economy.<sup>11</sup>

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Societies that have ongoing and unresolved civil grievances may be particularly vulnerable to manipulation by the Russian hybrid strategy. This strategy can exploit preexisting fault-line conflicts, which are hotly contested between-group differences heavily grounded in group identity.<sup>12</sup> Fault-line conflicts are so particular to a tribe, ethnic group, or religion that they may not interest outside parties, which makes others less likely to become involved in the conflict.<sup>13</sup> The grey area associated with fault-line conflicts allow aggressors to exploit objectives without immediate concern of outside intervention. The manufactured internal instability in a hybrid attack merely looks like an increase in societal tensions, not an invasion by an outside military. The exacerbation of what appears to be an ongoing societal grievance enjoys plausible deniability, even though it is manufactured for military-political reasons. Russia, for example, used ethnic Russians in Crimea and Ukraine as pretext for its involvement in those countries. Several European countries have sizeable, ethnic-Russian, minority populations that can serve as an excuse for Russia to become involved in their affairs despite the clear violation of the host country’s sovereignty.

The response to a hybrid strategy poses a serious problem for strategists because the application of conventional forces in response

to a hybrid provocation makes a defender appear to be an unprovoked aggressor. Yet, a hybrid attack warrants a martial response because of the military-grade effects hybrid warfare levels on nations. Currently, however, no specialized approach exists to effectively deal with this threat. The scale of a hybrid campaign may be larger and its duration longer than what may be feasible for the special operations community to handle on its own. The special operations community has been stretched thin since September 11, 2001, which has caused concern about its ability to meet needs at various hotspots around the world,<sup>14</sup> which suggests that the U.S. must find a capability with the appropriate size and sustainability if it is going to be prepared for this threat. An effective, long-term mission such as this will also require direct participation and leadership by U.S. forces that goes beyond mere advising and presence.<sup>15</sup>

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Societies attacked by subversively-manipulated, civil disturbances struggle with certain functions necessary to maintain order.<sup>16</sup> Societal policing is often stressed by the disparate threats in this situation, and the intelligence functions are often overwhelmed. The increased need for intelligence leaves the state in want of collection, such as that achieved by surveillance and infiltration. Skilled manpower is needed for crowd control. Lines of communication with dissident leaders must remain open before, during, and after civil disturbances to prevent the appearance, intended by the subversives, that the government is dismissive of their needs. Strategic messaging is an ongoing element to countering hybrid operations, which includes defining a society and its core values and contrasting that

with Russian history of undermining legitimate societies.

A counterhybrid unit can assist with these functions, either as the principal actor or in support of secondary functions that allow host-nation actors to act as principals. It will likely entail a combination of both. Integrated intelligence operations across a spectrum of collection, analysis, and kinetic action can achieve difficult objectives, such as that found in the hybrid environment. The detection of Osama bin Laden is a good example of how the exploitation and processing of intelligence can lead to high-yield effects, even in non-permissive environments.<sup>17</sup> It is reasonable to presume that finding Russian trolls and little green men is easier than finding bin Laden.

The U.S. currently has more of an antihybrid posture, where conventional units are placed in or near at-risk countries as a deterrence to aggression. This posture is incomplete because its direct relevance is in opposing conventional forces. It may still be true that a hostile actor is less likely to unleash hard-power on a country filled with U.S. troops. However, hybrid warfare is not hard-power centric and emphasizes other modes of hostility. Conventional American forces stationed in a country's capital are less likely to deter the country's dissolution of civil order catalyzed by propaganda, subversion, and sabotage. A successful hybrid campaign that hijacks a society's organic, civil grievances could even use U.S. troops to make matters worse, such as by making one side appear that it is colluding with coercive outside forces. In addition to size and sustainability, however, a counterhybrid unit requires specialized knowledge and skills to counter a hybrid threat. This knowledge and skill entails recognizing and responding to subterfuge, propaganda, saboteurs, and agitators. It also entails coping with unmarked adversaries in addition to conventional threats.

Ways to meet the Russian hybrid challenge are multifaceted. Strong interagency cooperation

is suggested because hybrid warfare spans the military, political, diplomatic, and economic spheres of influence.<sup>18</sup> The European theatre, uncontested for a generation, now requires increased resource allocation to improve collection and analysis of intelligence.<sup>19</sup> Vulnerable European countries, such as those in the Baltics and Balkans, need assistance with internal security reform and defense building to help counter Russian covert operations in their territories.<sup>20</sup> Other suggestions to meet this challenge include increasing anticorruption efforts in certain European countries, improving push-back on Russian information operations, and increasing U.S. presence in Europe.<sup>21</sup> The human domain is essential to countering a hybrid strategy and requires an educated and trained force to address its unique elements.<sup>22</sup>

Harnessing the pre-existing knowledge base of troops educated in ICD610 content is a way to establish a counterhybrid unit. Servicemembers with this education have an advanced understanding of the information avenues weaponized by hybrid warfare. They understand the processes involved in the hybrid approach, such as denial and deception, recruitment, and subversion. Their education also makes them more receptive to countering the hybrid threat with methods other than hard power, such as those found in counterespionage. These troops, nevertheless, are uniquely able to address an adversary's escalation of force because they are trained in conventional warfare.

A battalion whose ranks are filled with ICD 610-trained troops provides a unique asset to commanders that would be hard to attain with military occupational specialty (MOS) training or other on-the-job preparation offered by the services, which would struggle to achieve the same depth and rigor as that offered by a college degree. An ICD 610-trained, counterhybrid unit would reflect interagency in that its presence is reflective of the Department of Defense, but its mindset is reflective of the IC. A military

unit such as this may also have an interservice character, as MOSs from across the branches of services can be pulled to fill unit roles if a single service did not have an individual appropriately degreed to fill a billet. A counterhybrid unit such as this would appropriately match the threat posed by a hybrid strategy.

### **Historical examples show the perils associated with lack of readiness to repel innovative military-political advances.**

#### **Perils of the In-Between State of Readiness**

Historical examples show the perils associated with lack of readiness to repel innovative military-political advances. The annexation of Austria by the Nazis in 1938 displayed a type of hybrid approach that resulted in Germany's acquisition of a whole nation-state. The Nazis were engaged in a mixture of subversion and power politics in Austria with the goal of uniting ethnic Germans.<sup>23</sup> Germany attacked Austrian society in several ways from the outside, including by applying sanctions and fomenting discord. The Austrian Nazi party complemented this and engaged in propaganda and terrorism inside of Austria, while an underground supportive of the Nazis agitated against the Austrian government.<sup>24</sup> These pressures resulted in Austria signing a friendship treaty that gave the Nazis legitimacy in the Austrian government. Austrian Nazis then began to raise Nazi flags over government buildings, feign maltreatment, and clamor for support from Germany as part of a plan to send Nazi troops to Austria to rescue their co-ethnics. Over 65,000 Nazis troops invaded Austria and encountered no resistance. Austria shortly voted to ratify its incorporation into Germany.

Other examples are illustrative of this phenomenon. From 1954 to 1965, the U.S. was

aware of the intentions of both North Vietnam and China to spread communism across Asia.<sup>25</sup> This ideological spread affected South Vietnamese peasants who were attracted to the charisma and perceived strength of the northern communists. The northern communists used subversive and insurgent tactics to decrease the South

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Vietnamese government's hold on power, and the South Vietnamese government concomitantly struggled with countermeasures to the North's approach. The communists sufficiently infiltrated the South, which gave them ongoing military and political advantages. The support provided by the U.S. proved inappropriately matched for the need at the time, which resulted in losses that were never recovered. Similarly, in 2003 the response to the realities on the ground in Iraq highlight the importance of readiness for an integrated approach to elements of an unconventional environment. There was a major misunderstanding of the Iraqi environment after the fall of its army, which rendered stability operations moot.<sup>26</sup> The conventional warfare paradigm clouded thinking, and coalition forces quickly lost the narrative. More recently, a susceptible sociopolitical environment in Ukraine lent itself to a robust hybrid campaign that left the Ukrainian government and the West scrambling for a correction.<sup>27</sup> Currently, the Baltic and Nordic States believe they are victims of Russian penetration testing in anticipation of its next major hybrid operation.<sup>28</sup>

**Practical Matters**

The commissioning of counterhybrid units is inherently practical. Currently, there is no matched approach to counter the hybrid threat.

The hybrid strategy has proved successful, which suggests it may be used again. As such, a countermeasure is needed. The hybrid threat is too large for the special operations community and too elusive for conventional forces. Commissioning of counterhybrid units prevents further stretching of the special operations forces, and it also relieves pressure on the need to recruit more special operations troops, which can lead to an inadvertent lowering of admission standards to that community. Though recommendations to increase the special operations involvement to meet the hybrid challenge have been made, it makes sense to reserve special operations for more congealed targets. The tendency to rely on special operations could also be manipulated by an adversary such as Russia, which may display hybrid feints across Europe to further stretch special operations forces and degrade its overall capability.

The counterhybrid unit requires a long-term commitment, so it needs an organic sustainability found in brigade-level operations. A combat brigade positioned regionally may have its counterhybrid deploy forward to the target site and receive support from the brigade throughout its mission, even while the brigade addresses conventional matters elsewhere. The long-term commitment ideally begins before sociopolitical turmoil reaches a critical mass. This allows the counterhybrid unit to conduct its operations and assist the host-nation in combatting the threat. Subversion is an insidious process that may appear surprising when it reaches a tipping point. As such, counterhybrid units can assist at-risk societies early to counter propaganda, engage agitators, and negotiate with dissidents.

Training personnel and units is expensive.<sup>29</sup> Servicemembers who have education relevant to the mission are an inherent asset to the services. The education they pursued on their own time will offset the expense of military-sponsored training and its associated costs. The personal education they received may also have more

depth and rigor than military occupational training, the training of which ensures the rudiments are grasped and then quickly moves the students out to the field. More than a rudimentary grasp of the situation is needed, however, in counterhybrid work because of the delicate balance often involved, particularly related to the narrative. Troops who do not understand the delicate balance can push it over the edge. The Abu Ghraib issue is an example of the perils associated with losing the battle of perception.

Practically speaking, organizational knowledge is akin to capital, and it offers a competitive advantage.<sup>30</sup> Harnessing the existing cadre of ICD 610-trained troops offers the services a low-cost, high-yield opportunity. These servicemembers represent a unique cost-savings opportunity in an era of budget crises. Even if all the troops in a counterhybrid unit do not have ICD 610 degrees, those degrees held by a substantial number of the unit, particularly those in first-line leadership roles, would pay dividends through institutional transfer of knowledge.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

Servicemembers who hold college degrees in the intelligence field can comprise a counterhybrid unit. The content of these degrees is often consistent with ICD 610, so their education is reflective of the competencies prescribed by the IC. A unit of these servicemembers will have a sophisticated understanding of the hybrid warfare environment, which capitalizes on deniability, recruitment, and subversion to create societal disorder for military-political objectives. A counterhybrid unit can perform important intelligence and security functions that the host nation cannot perform alone. A counterhybrid unit will also be able to engage an adversary conventionally because of its background in conventional warfare. A battalion of Soldiers with training consistent with ICD 610 is not without its limitations. Theory does not always translate into practice, and academic preparation often needs to be rounded out to make it ready for professional application. Despite these limitations, however, these servicemembers represent a unique asset that can be harnessed and shaped to engage a twenty-first century problem.

### ***Recommendations:***

1. Service-wide call for volunteers with ICD 610-consistent degree.
2. Branch managers review educational background for servicemembers with ICD 610 degree and make recommendations for joining a counterhybrid unit.
3. Incentivize the attainment of ICD 610 degrees.
4. Develop tactics, techniques, and procedures for counterhybrid operations.
5. Conduct unit-level training.
6. Embed the counterhybrid unit in a combat brigade.
7. Begin counterhybrid operations. **IAJ**



## NOTES

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