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Hybrid warfare at sea off East Africa: Some perspectives

Background

Hybrid warfare connects regular forces typical of modern states to the actor landscape of powerful, dangerous and armed non-state and sub-state actors. This connection brings the familiarity of peer-on-peer armed conflict into the uncertainty of asymmetry vested in the irregular forces of the [21st century](#) and this actor mix is visible at sea as well. When blending regular and irregular actors in a campaign, governments face complexities that require of them to mobilise all their elements of power, and not only their military capabilities. Although a Western concern and noted in Russian actions in the Crimea, another latent location resides in the Gulf of Aden wedged in between Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

Discussion

Regular and irregular warfare form two overarching types; each entails a range of different categories that overlap to a larger or lesser extent and manifest independently or in conjunction (simultaneously or sequentially) with one or more of the other categories of warfare. It is this overlap or connection that fuels the hybrid warfare debate. Hoffmann¹ describes hybrid warfare as multiple convergences: physical and psychological, kinetic and non-kinetic, combatants and non-combatants. Overall, it is about acquiring multiple capabilities, but even more crucial is their merger (military and non-military) into a comprehensive approach in hybrid campaigns.

As the conduct of warfare blurs state-on-state combat, the conceptual challenge of actor escalation grows, as do capability adaptation and uncertainty by hybridisation of actors, ways and means. Hybridization is thus less about more forms of warfare, but rather about merging existing actors and their modes of operation to combine state and non-state actors with their respective skills to conduct a hybrid campaign. This extended actor mix is visible at sea as well. Liss, as well as Shemella frames the escalation of actors that heighten threats, as well as the responses required that include, but are no longer limited to navies and coast guards. Actor escalation at sea offers several avenues for setting

¹ Hoffman, F.G. 2015. The contemporary spectrum of conflict: Protracted, gray zone, ambiguous and hybrid modes of war, The Heritage Foundation. June. 32.

up non-state actors, or sub-state actors to bring hybrid warfare into step with the geographic environment as found around the Gulf of Aden.

Africa features regularly as to the escalation of threats and vulnerabilities off its shores. Around the Gulf of Aden an actor spectrum is emerging that reflects a mix of states, coalitions, foreign power escalation and multiple non-state actors with a focus on the surrounding oceans. Although Yemen mirrors a conflict rife with state, non-state and sub-state actors, a similar conflict landscape features in the Horn of Africa. In addition, three recent [SIPRI reports](#) elaborate on the growing foreign presence in the Horn region. While Yemen and Somalia portray landward conflicts that also foster direct and indirect threats and attacks into the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea in particular, the growing concentration around Djibouti represents a potential connection for hybrid warfare involving powerful international actors. From Yemen a [hybrid actor mix](#) is already attacking naval and commercial shipping along its coast. [Somalia](#) in turn, is known for its latent and real threats to security of shipping, as well as smuggling of goods, people and weapons between Yemen and Somalia.

Although the foreign bases around Djibouti² largely reflect elements of declared and operational cooperation against maritime threats around the Horn of Africa, these very countries also represent powerful states like the USA, China, Turkey, and Russia to combine with the rich actor landscape of irregulars in Yemen and Somalia that operate out to sea as well. In Yemen, the [Saudi-United Arab Emirates \(UAE\) and Iranian nexus](#) already plays out. Foreign presence in Somalia and its semi-autonomous regions in the north shows Turkish, UAE and Western footholds depicting aid transfers as well as military assistance. The confluence of international actors, local governments, and a myriad of sub-and non-state actors represent the blend that analysts identify for staging hybrid warfare. When connected with international maritime interests and geographic location, sea routes and energy flows, the threat of hybrid warfare at sea increases as both Yemen and Somalia demonstrates the reality of using the sea to conduct irregular and criminal threats to important maritime interests. Read together with the SIPRI reports that aver how common international interests of foreign powers to secure the shipping routes and support humanitarian endeavours are becoming more competitive, the amicable image of such an actor mix could well soon dissipate.

Summary

Events and actors in around the Gulf of Aden connect to hybrid warfare in several ways, although no clear hybrid warfare campaign is visible. The following aspects could however underpin future hybrid campaigns or threats in the region:

- Fully-fledged state actors with opposing political objectives that use military action or support it, like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, and Saudi coalition states.
- Contested and semi-autonomous regimes like the Houthi, Hadi and Somali government alongside semi-autonomous states in the north of Somalia.
- Affiliated armed groups and militias like Hezbollah, military factions from disintegrated former armed forces in Yemen and even mercenaries.
- Non-aligned transnational terrorist groups akin to al Shabaab, AQIAP and ISIL in Yemen and Somalia.
- Criminal groupings with maritime knowledge manifesting as piracy syndicates from Somalia and smuggling crime networks operating from Yemen into the Gulf of Aden.

² USA, China, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, Spain with Israel, UAE and Russia in Eritrea, and Turkey in Somalia and Sudan.

- Powerful foreign states based on African soil west of the Bab al Mandab whose relations could shift from cooperation to competitive patterns highlighting the utility of local actors as hybrid partners to threaten the Gulf of Aden.

Further Reading

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3. Melvin, N. 2019. The foreign military presence in the Horn of Africa. SIPRI Background Paper, April 2019. 26.
4. Shemella, P. (ed). 2016. **Global Responses to maritime violence: Cooperation and collective action.** Stanford University Press: Stanford.

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