



Hybrid War Beyond Lebanon: Lessons From the South African Campaign 1976 to 1989

By USA, MAJ Sean J. McWilliams

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A debate is raging within the defense community about the pattern of future war and how best to prepare for it. One idea gaining acceptance is the concept of hybrid war. The term hybrid war as currently understood has multiple meanings and usages. The term is often confused with hybrid warfare leading to a fixation on the tactical implications of hybrid war when the true focus should be on the implications of a hybrid strategy. This paper reconciles the competing definitions for the concept of hybrid war in order to assess the long-term implications of hybrid war for strategic and operational planners. The concept of hybrid war is inherently an operational and strategic concept. To merely focus at the tactical level is to mischaracterize and misunderstand the very nature of hybrid war. Hybrid wars are innately strategic struggles for legitimacy and control influenced but not necessarily determined exclusively by battlefield actions. The historical experience of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) from 1978 to 1989 confirms the validity of this definition and provides additional insight to develop both the conceptual understanding of the concept of hybrid war and a plan to fight and win such conflicts. In the case of South Africa, despite winning the conventional and irregular military campaign against both domestic and external insurgencies, the RSA did not obtain its strategic goals. This failure seems to be in keeping with the definition of hybrid war instead of the predominate focus on hybrid warfare. The lessons from this experience indicate that in hybrid war, victory is only possible by achieving success simultaneously on the conventional, unconventional, irregular and domestic and international information battlefields. A series of recommendations based upon insights from the case study for how to plan, and fight a hybrid war conclude the discussion.

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