



Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare

A Framework for Analysis and Action

SECOND EDITION

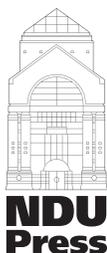
David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks



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Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
So What Is Irregular Warfare?	8
The U.S. Crisis of Irregular Warfare	15
The Estimate: An Analytical Framework to Diagnose Irregular Threats	19
The COA Framework: How to Respond to Irregular Challenges	44
Conclusion	64
Appendix A. Strategic Estimate of the Situation: A Study Guide	66
Appendix B. The Course of Action: A Study Guide	74
Notes	81
About the Authors	97

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Executive Summary

The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy made headlines by officially downgrading terrorism as a national security priority in favor of “inter-state strategic competition.” Many interpreted the statement as signifying a return to “conventional combat,” yet a closer reading suggests that even state-based competition is likely to be “irregular.” Much like insurgent adversaries, revisionist states blend separate lines of effort to offset military weakness, weaponize narratives to ease strategic progress, and exploit social and political contradictions to undermine and divide target societies. This approach is appealing because it allows for gains that, although incremental, are less likely to face backlash and are therefore more sustainable. Indeed, it was precisely when Russia abandoned this playbook, through its conventional invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, that it succeeded in mobilizing significant local and global resistance, greatly complicating its military and political effort. Thus, for several reasons, irregular warfare is likely to be the strategy of choice for states seeking to contest international order.

The United States, and the West, struggle to understand and respond to irregular warfare, whether by states or nonstate actors. Attempts to master the art have generated much new jargon, ranging from “hybrid war” to “the gray zone,” and most recently “integrated deterrence.” The terminology belies a struggle to overcome entrenched presumptions about war—a confusion that generates cognitive friction with implications for strategy. To inform a better approach, this monograph presents an analytical framework to assess and respond to irregular threats. The framework is based on the pedagogical approach of the College of International Security Affairs (CISA) within the National Defense University (NDU), the only U.S. irregular warfare college. It is designed to cut through the analytical ambiguities of irregular warfare and map such strategies to design an effective counter. Though an analytical framework is no panacea for the malaise facing Western strategy, it is an indispensable starting point for all that must follow.

Introduction

The United States is engaged in a struggle to retain its power and legitimacy. American leadership has waned since the end of the Cold War, and Russia and China, detecting a void, are asserting themselves—not only as regional powerhouses but also globally and with the intent to challenge, even surpass, the United States. Yet unlike the great wars of the 20th century, shifts in power are today more discreet, incremental, and multifaceted in both method and effect. As demonstrated amply by the stark Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the undisguised use of force is likely to generate a swift backlash and plays to America's strengths. In contrast, proper exploitation of influence, narratives, and ambiguity delays any reaction and makes violence, when used, strategically meaningful.

Irregular warfare has been Russia's playbook since 1917, and one to which it will likely return. China also has a long track record with irregular warfare, which it is now using to subvert the rules-based international order created by the United States in the aftermath of World War II.¹ On a smaller scale, Iran and North Korea have showcased their acumen with irregular warfare, which they use to empower viable state and nonstate proxies, build regional power, and amass influence.² On aggregate, then, the challenge of irregular warfare is existential to U.S. leadership—to *Pax Americana*—and to the values that have, at least ostensibly, underwritten this period of international affairs.

None of the above is news to the national security structures of the United States. In focusing attention on interstate competition, the National Defense Strategy also noted that the main rivals in this competition are blending traditional security policy with “efforts short of armed conflict . . . expanding coercion to new fronts, violating principles of sovereignty, exploiting ambiguity, and deliberately blurring the lines between civil and military goals.”³ Yet despite keen diagnosis, American policy and security institutions have, in this competition, been found wanting. Before 9/11, President George W. Bush confidently asserted that “the best way to keep the peace is to redefine war on our terms,”⁴ but in today's irregular campaigns the United States is finding that it is its adversaries who are setting the pace.

Seeking to remedy this problem, the National Defense Strategy devoted an annex to developing and institutionalizing capabilities for irregular warfare. Boldly, it stated, “We must not—and will not—repeat the ‘boom and bust’ cycle that has left the United States underprepared for irregular warfare.”⁵ A key message was that irregular warfare belongs not only to the special operations community that has traditionally been associated with these missions but also with the entire force, even the entire government, given the multifaceted nature of the attack. To help prepare for this challenge, in 2021 the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff made irregular warfare an “enduring special area of emphasis,” meaning that the Armed Forces must study, learn, and prepare for it—indefinitely. These initiatives are laudable and have prompted an effort at institutionalization. It bears noting, however, that previous efforts to learn irregular warfare have failed, the current attempt is under-resourced, and the bureaucratic and cultural obstacles in the way of change are formidable, both within the Pentagon and beyond.⁶

The common root to past failure and current malaise is the inability to grasp the challenge at hand. U.S. security institutions have clung to outdated expectations concerning interstate warfare and competition and assumed—fatefully—that their adversaries would do the same.⁷ Instead, America’s state adversaries have adapted and sought to offset conventional U.S. military strength, finding within irregular warfare new lines of attack for which the United States has no effective counter. The logic is the same as that used by America’s insurgent adversaries—in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—to paralyze the mightiest of military superpowers and, too often, prevail against seemingly impossible odds.

There is irony here, in that the very National Defense Strategy that warned of interstate competition also sought to dismiss insurgency and terrorism as subsidiary concerns.⁸ As deeper analysis reveals, the two sets of challenges share crucial traits. Both employ diverse lines of attack to undermine resolve and build leverage, often by exploiting vulnerabilities within target societies—political, social, or economic. Both weaponize narratives to confuse analysis, co-opt contested audiences, and lower the cost of action. Both also revolve around questions of legitimacy, or the right to lead, to shape new and long-lasting political realities. Violence,

when used, supports this broader strategy, which must therefore be understood and countered in its entirety, not only by striking targets.

The convergence between state- and nonstate-based strategy should not surprise, in that the approaches of Russia, China, and even Iran and North Korea are rooted within each country's foundation through successful insurgency.⁹ It is regrettable that the United States, formed through similar circumstances, has so resolutely decided to forget the lessons of its past. Instead, the United States is overly reliant on a militarized response to security threats and struggles to calibrate this line of effort within a broader strategy and overall convincing message.¹⁰

As the United States seeks to learn and react, the first—and, as Carl von Clausewitz notes, “most far-reaching act of judgment”—is to establish the kind of war it is embarking on, “neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”¹¹ When it comes to irregular warfare, this effort to understand has proved beyond the capacity and culture of the institution, confounding both analysis and response. Simply put, despite an emerging lexicon (some might say jargon), security professionals lack a framework that can untangle the character and logic of the threat, position it meaningfully within its context, and determine its overall strategy and operational art. Without such analysis, the prospects for crafting an effective response are low.

The College of International Security Affairs (CISA), a senior Service college within the National Defense University (NDU) in Washington, DC, has been concerned with irregular warfare since its foundation in 2002.¹² To fulfil our mandate of producing strategists capable of countering irregular challenges, we have devised, and based our curriculum on, an analytical framework of assessment and action. This framework has evolved over the years, via repeated testing and use in classroom settings and beyond, to evaluate irregular problems and arrive at a viable response. Throughout, the purpose has been to capture the bewildering aspects of irregular warfare, its ambiguity, unconventionality, and intangibility. Using the caseload of relevant precedents and a synthesis of helpful academic perspectives, the framework aims to identify the essential, to map the problem, and to build a suitable foundation for the crafting of strategy.

To aid educators, students, and practitioners of irregular warfare, this monograph sets out CISA's framework of analysis and action. It explains the approach to assessment and strategy-making, thereby providing an analytical tool for today's strategic challenges. Yet before proceeding, it is necessary to come to terms with exactly what we mean by irregular warfare.

So What Is Irregular Warfare?

The Department of Defense (DOD) defines *irregular warfare* as “a violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.”¹³ Irregular warfare was traditionally thought to be the preserve of nonstate armed groups, desperate to find a way forward against mighty states and the resources they can harness. Accordingly, in U.S. military doctrine, irregular warfare subsumes the missions of fostering and countering insurgencies, counterterrorism, and stability operations. In these operations, adversaries compete over the shape of society and of politics, centering on such issues as legitimacy, credibility, and effective mobilization. As history bears out, if a nonstate actor can succeed on these fronts, it may offset its comparative weakness in firepower.

As should be evident, state actors also face the dilemma of exerting themselves against conventionally superior foes. To one senior Indian general, the lessons of the overwhelming U.S. military victory in the 1991 Gulf War were clear: “Never fight the Americans without nuclear weapons.”¹⁴ As many others have found, there are more practical ways of going about it, within the irregular techniques practiced by insurgents and guerrillas. Irregular warfare “favors indirect warfare and asymmetric warfare approaches” to direct military confrontation and seeks “to erode the adversary’s power, influence, and will” until the military balance is favorable, and the use of force becomes both viable and strategically meaningful.¹⁵ For states, irregular warfare might entail sponsoring terrorism and insurgency abroad, engaging in subversion and nonmilitary coercion, infiltrating targeted societies and governments, and undermining the legitimacy of other states. This is now the playbook for most U.S. state adversaries and rivals.

Despite growing usage of the term to describe this trend, irregular warfare raises two sets of difficulties, one relating to “irregularity” and the other to “war-

fare.” These weaknesses are significant and betray the pathologies of the system charged with response. First, *irregular* warfare and its related terms are defined in contradistinction to their antonym—in this case, *regular* warfare (or *traditional* warfare as per U.S. military usage), which is upheld as more common. *Regular* warfare refers to militarily decisive contests, wherein victory belongs to the better armed and most operationally capable force. These confrontations are assumed to be direct and unambiguous, rapid and climactic, and, while lethal, also conclusive. It is likewise within the history of regular warfare that one finds the greatest U.S. victories. Thus, despite heavy casualties in these campaigns, *regular* warfare is also what the U.S. Government and military have focused on and come to expect, at least implicitly. In contrast, and perhaps because of this prioritization, U.S. adversaries have time and again forced it into *irregular* confrontations, wherein the emphasis is on *politics* and *legitimacy* and wars that are difficult to gauge and to end.

All while facing irregular challenges at far greater regularity than conventional combat operations, the U.S. military establishment persists with a vocabulary that privileges comfort zones over cold realities. As a result, despite several high-level directives to prioritize irregular warfare and its subsidiary missions, DOD tends to treat them, ultimately, as adjuncts to its “core mission”—to “fight and win the nation’s wars”—and these do not include what once were actually termed “military operations *other than war*.”¹⁶ Even as the National Defense Strategy spoke loudly of the need to institutionalize irregular warfare capabilities, this effort was included only as an annex to the main text, so that while its wording emphasized the importance of mastering this art, its placement suggested a rather different prioritization.¹⁷ The term *irregular warfare* was then largely absent from the follow-on 2022 National Defense Strategy, though the document’s overall characterization of warfare rightly acknowledged its complex and ambiguous nature. Still, the question is whether such wording will suffice, given the entrenched norms and budgets of the institution.

The second difficulty with irregular warfare as a term is that by invoking the word *warfare*, it presupposes a *military* confrontation. As seen, the definition specifies that—notwithstanding any ambiguity in the art—irregular warfare is inherently “a *violent struggle*.” This qualification justifies the allusion to warfare, but

it should be recalled that the violence in irregular warfare is often deliberately ambiguous or even implicit—until suddenly it is not. Russian Chief of General Staff General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov notes perceptively that in contemporary conflict, “The open use of forces—often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to *only at a certain stage*, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.”¹⁸ This philosophy is congruent with Sun Tzu’s aphorism that “supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting” or to attack only when one is in a superior position.¹⁹ Often, therefore, irregular warfare will not look like warfare at all.

This ambiguity makes it difficult to delineate where *strategic competition* ends and *irregular warfare* begins. It is perhaps also for this reason that the Pentagon, in the irregular warfare annex, elided the mention of violence as a definitional marker of irregular warfare, a subtle but meaningful shift that looks likely to shape future doctrine. Going further, it might be better to do away with the language of *warfare* altogether, to obviate the typical U.S. militarization of security challenges that are not primarily military in nature.²⁰ Certainly, such a move might enable the inclusion of civilian and international partners who see no role for themselves within any type of “warfare.” On the other hand, demilitarizing irregular warfare in this manner risks losing sight of its essential grounding in coercion, which can range from low-level violence or even threats thereof to outright conventional combat formations contributing to an irregular warfare strategy, as seen in Colombia’s fight against FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), during the Vietnam War, or—arguably—during the latest conventional phase of Russia’s war on Ukraine (given its continued struggle over the legitimacy of that nation-state, the blending, alongside conventional force, of many other, far more ambiguous and subversive lines of attack, and the strategic clash therein between contending narratives and of worldviews).²¹

Irregular warfare blends war and peace. It features an admixture of nonviolence and violence. The definitional criterion, therefore, is not whether violence is used at any given time or place, or even the type of violence, but the strategic intent: to erode or build legitimacy and influence via a combination of hidden and

visible methods, to include—at some point—the use or threat of coercion. The project must be seen at this strategic level, as it is this intent and focus that inform the purpose and logic of subsidiary actions taken, be they seemingly unwarlike or obviously belligerent. When an insurgent group is providing medical services, or distributing aid, it is for the same strategic reason as it engages in terrorism and violent attack—to build or erode legitimacy and forge a path to victory.²² When it quietly and nonviolently mobilizes societal support, it is to assist the eventual seizure of power. The broader project, and intent, is irregular warfare.

At an interstate level, China's strategy for world domination provides a crucial parallel. So far, its global quest for power has been mercifully bereft of outright violence, featuring instead growing economic ties, investment and loans, along with generous servings of subversion and information operations.²³ Still, this global effort can rightly be seen as a massive shaping operation for a future military confrontation with the United States (a showdown that might not even be necessary if U.S. resolve can be so eroded during peacetime that it opts not to fight even when core interests are threatened). Of course, China has no stark dichotomy between war and peace. In Beijing's approach, these two are not opposites, as commonly held in the West, but two facets of one struggle. It is just this embrace of war and peace as one that allows America's foes to focus on the business at hand while the United States remains enmeshed in debates on terminology. Still, this debate is more than semantic, as responding to a strategy that is deliberately deceptive and polymorphous will require keen analysis, flexible authorities, and broad capabilities to deter and respond appropriately across the spectrum of engagement.

Highly imperfect, irregular warfare seems here to stay, as both a term and a phenomenon. Rather than be paralyzed by semantic jousting, the wiser approach is to capture the essence of the challenge not through definitions but descriptions: to temper our concern with terminological precision in favor of a common understanding of key features. If these features describe how war is, we best get used to it, regardless of what we call it. On this basis, three main characteristics warrant our attention, as they explain the inherent ambiguity of the irregular approach and its appeal to a wide range of actors, both nonstate and state.

First, irregular warfare blends disparate lines of effort (LOE) to engage in the contest for legitimacy. It compensates for weakness in one area, typically raw military might, by bringing other efforts into play. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, insurgency has blended terrorism and other forms of violence with a range of nonmilitary efforts: governance, service delivery, mobilization, and legitimation. Among insurgents, the approach was perhaps best conceptualized, and also executed, by the Vietnamese and their “war of interlocking.”²⁴ What occurs in the realm of violence is critical, but it gains meaning through its symbiotic relation with other efforts: what the actor is doing politically, through alliances and non-violence (also known as political warfare), and by internationalizing the struggle.²⁵ These LOE must therefore be interrogated and countered as doggedly as the more high-profile use of violence.

The blended approach is also a distinguishing feature of state-based irregular strategy. The 2018 National Defense Strategy speaks of state powers “using corruption, predatory economic practices, propaganda, political subversion, proxies, and the threat or use of military force to change facts on the ground.”²⁶ When Russia was most effective in Ukraine—that is to say, prior to its February 2022 escalation—it combined its use of violence with political, economic, and informational efforts: disinformation, extortion, international “negotiations,” and governance in the occupied territories. Similarly, Iran’s sponsorship of militia across the Middle East involves not only the provision of weaponry but also political and social mentorship so as to create the popular base needed for longer term control.²⁷ Historically, North Korea has done the same.²⁸ China’s occupation of the South China Sea has been predominantly nonviolent, using instead civilian and economic efforts, although it is anchored in a shared awareness of underlying military realities.²⁹ While this nonviolent effort secures territory along with trade and communications routes, it is also setting the conditions for an eventual assault on Taiwan, either threatened or carried out when necessary.³⁰ In the Chinese theorization, victory stems from the blending of “all means, including armed force or non-armed force”; in the Russian vernacular, it stems from “the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures.”³¹

The second facet of irregular warfare is its exploitation of social and political contradictions to delegitimize the adversary and gain leverage. Targeting the pressure points of society can help sap morale, create rifts, and motivate violent political change. It is in this manner that terrorist groups become successful insurgents. Much as the so-called Islamic State exploited Sunni-Shia rivalries in Iraq to rally a popular base and pry society apart, so did Russia in Ukraine, using issues of identity, language, and religion. In Georgia and Moldova, Russia has exploited active legacies concerning minority rights to establish a firm foothold, which can then be used to generate power and influence. It should not be missed that the United States continues to be targeted in this manner, as it was also during the Cold War.³²

Similarly, China has proved adept at using the economic vulnerability of target societies to create a strategic foothold, much as it did in Sri Lanka and Cambodia, where it effectively has acquired maritime bases. Across the world, the dependence on Chinese economic support allows Chinese actors to set the terms of engagement, resulting in a lack of transparency in trade negotiations, unchecked Chinese involvement in illegal activities (ranging from illegal fishing to organized crime to leveraging corruption), and the careful management of what can be said and done in international fora.³³ Also in the United States, the Chinese Community Party is using the country's reliance on Chinese funds, markets, and investment to create pockets of support, or of acquiescence, that delay and stymie a united American societal response to growing Chinese political warfare on U.S. soil. This exploitation of vulnerabilities is what makes fostering societal resilience a key defense against irregular warfare.³⁴ Irregular warfare is armed politics—it is primarily about politics—and mobilization is key.

Third, because of its emphasis on mobilization, narratives are central to irregular warfare. They not only describe and explain reality but also achieve buy-in for political projects or shroud the nature of actions taken. Writing in 2006, Lawrence Freedman recognized the growing strategic salience of narratives, describing them as “designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events.”³⁵ Indeed, storylines can disguise unfavorable realities, align the political project with its supposed stakeholders, and close off legitimate entry points for intervention. In this light, scholars like Joseph Nye and John Arquilla

state starkly that, in contemporary conflict, “Victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins.”³⁶ Put differently, the point is to win the narrative before one wins the war. Framing the contest as other than it is serves as a central element of the approach.

Perhaps the prime nonstate example of this principle was the so-called Islamic State, which, by the time it launched its offensive in 2014, had already won a psychological battle through the mass production and precise targeting of social media messaging. Spewing out, at times, 40,000 tweets per day, the group created the virtual equivalent of a mass movement, hijacking the slogans of rival Sunni insurgent groups and intimidating ordinary Iraqis, including its military, into submission.³⁷ Through the dissemination of propaganda, memes, and guidance, it has managed to survive its loss of a physical counterstate and is focusing instead on creating a deterritorialized surrogate and a transnational movement that can sponsor and frame violent attack.³⁸

State actors, too, use strategic narratives as a force multiplier for armed action. Through framing, they create an alternative reality.³⁹ If actions taken can be presented as going “with the grain” of local want, any gains made become more sustainable and difficult to undo. Thus, Chinese policy is now driven by the so-called Tacitus trap, emphasizing the need for government to retain credibility with the citizenry: “Neither good nor bad policies would please the governed if the government is unwelcome.”⁴⁰ In 2003, China revised the “Political Work Guidelines of the People’s Liberation Army” and advanced the concepts of “public opinion warfare,” “psychological warfare,” and “legal warfare.”⁴¹ For similar reasons, in his commentary on the nature of contemporary conflict, General Gerasimov spoke of “the protest potential of the population” as a driving force in political campaigns—if “people power” can be harnessed, by hook or by crook, the strategy becomes more irresistible.⁴² To counter such action requires both credibility and resonance, but these are also the main targets of adversarial information campaigns and are difficult to regain once lost.

Legitimacy quickly emerges as a leitmotif in irregular warfare, but this is a central definitional point often lost in analysis. It must be emphasized that irregular warfare does not primarily denote an asymmetry in military approaches (con-

ventional versus guerrilla) or in legal status (state versus nonstate), but rather a struggle defined by its objective: “to undermine and erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will to exercise political authority over a civilian population.”⁴³ As implied, the minimum requirement is not to build but rather to erode legitimacy, a far easier task but one with potentially debilitating consequences. This reality drives home that legitimacy is not quantitative. As with all relationships in irregular warfare, it is the correlation of tangible and intangible forces which drives the outcome.

For all this, irregular warfare is not new. For most of our history, warfare has been irregular. War is a violent form of organized collective contestation. It is a bloody escalation of political and social strife, and its results, if they are to stick, must be consolidated through the continued application of politics. Certainly, the military intensity of warfare can increase or fall, but this concerns only the composition and capabilities of fielded forces; it does not displace the nature of warfare as an intensely political contest. As such, it is really the notion of conventional wars that is aberrational. At best, it is a flawed heuristic that ignores the purpose of war by artificially separating it from its sociopolitical antecedents and outcomes. At worst, it sets up expectations about the utility of force that seldom survive scrutiny, resulting in one strategic blunder after the other. These points are not new but bear repeating, in the hope of eroding a “conventional war mindset” deeply entrenched in Western strategic thinking but severely lacking in utility.

The U.S. Crisis of Irregular Warfare

Irregular warfare should not be mystifying. If war is “nothing but the continuation of policy with other means”—that foundational dictum of Clausewitz—it follows that the exchange of military hostilities must be understood within and reflect the political context of which it forms a part.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, despite extensive experience with irregular warfare, it has proved exceptionally challenging for the United States to internalize and prepare for warfare in its true political sense. Perhaps it is, as Christopher Coker suggests, that the United States, the world’s greatest military power, is Clausewitzian mainly “in its own imagination.”⁴⁵ Either

way, irregular warfare tests the standard U.S. military repertoire and highlights its failure to expend effort on a broader, more flexible, and more relevant response.

The frustration is in part a function of strategic culture, which in the case of the United States seems largely incompatible with the fundamental precepts of irregular warfare. The military effort is but one part of a much more complex political endeavor, the struggle is protracted, its gains ambiguous, and engagement requires patience, a deep understanding of society and the world, and the resilience to stomach setbacks and compromise.⁴⁶ Indeed, returning to the three facets of irregular warfare detailed above, it is as if this phenomenon was designed to bedevil American strategic culture.

As irregular adversaries seek out societal vulnerabilities to exploit, they find an increasingly divided America. The Russian hack of 2016 U.S. Presidential election was effective in manipulating America's many rifts, and others will have taken note.⁴⁷ Even in its response to a deadly pandemic, as with the COVID-19 crisis, U.S. society gave proof of exceptionally deep fractures and polarization, complicating a national, never mind societal, response and providing entry points for adversaries to use.⁴⁸ In case the domestic disunity be mistaken as an aberration spurred by today's unprecedented circumstances, analysts such as Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz noted, as early as 2007, the growth—since the 1970s—of growing polarization, both of U.S. politics and society, stemming from the “Red-Blue divide, the income inequalities driven by globalization, and the ideological homogenization of the parties”—all factors that they “expected to intensify” with time.⁴⁹

Compounding the issue of domestic fracture, the United States most commonly engages in irregular warfare abroad, and so the vulnerabilities being exploited are those not just of American society but also of partner governments. Not surprisingly, the United States struggles with the admittedly delicate task of prodding these governments toward necessary reforms it cannot itself execute. In Iraq and Afghanistan, great expenditure and sacrifice amounted, in central moments, to stunningly limited influence over key issues with conflict-generating potential: in Iraq, the treatment of the Sunni minority, and in Afghanistan, the political and economic malpractice of the regime.

Similarly, we see minimal sway over those nations targeted by state use of irregular warfare. Witness the Philippines' continued confusion as to how to approach China (leading to its vacillation on whether to maintain the Philippine-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement), or the great difficulty locally to discredit fully Russia's disinformation within Georgia, Bulgaria, and other states in the region. U.S. efforts, from 2014 to 2022, to help Ukraine counter corruption can be cited as a relative success story, intended to close off entry points for Russian subversion and propaganda. Even here, however, some assert insufficient progress was made.⁵⁰ Generally, the West's leverage relies on sticks that seem only to alienate and carrots that others provide more cheaply and with fewer conditions.

Furthermore, the focus on narratives within irregular warfare has befuddled the U.S. Government, almost by design, as it is legally and morally restricted from engaging in informational operations domestically or from controlling the media.⁵¹ Queasy about its role in the battle of ideas, the U.S. Government lacks the instruments to explain its actions, promote its values, or challenge disinformation. Frequent calls to resuscitate the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) make the point but also misremember the agency as more than what it was. As Matt Armstrong concludes, the "United States never properly armed itself, and especially not with USIA, for the cold reality of the political warfare it was embroiled in."⁵² It might also be argued that, in an era where information is instantly everywhere, it is insufficient to have just one organization devoted to strategic communications.

Today, that organization is the Global Engagement Center (GEC) within the Department of State. The center was created to combat disinformation and online radicalization, initially by the Islamic State, but is now focusing predominantly on state-based information campaigns. It has learned valuable lessons from America's initial forays into the information domain and plays a key role in overall U.S. Government efforts at communication. Regardless, as a sign of the State Department's overall limited capacity, this organization is underfunded and staffed mainly with contractors and detailees from DOD.⁵³ In 2021, the U.S. Congress agreed to authorize an additional \$150 million for the GEC, effectively doubling its funding, yet the U.S. investment in information still lags behind its major state rivals. Not only is the initiative insufficient in telling America's version of events; the U.S. Govern-

ment appears to lack a clear script or sense of narrative that could help it gain credibility and legitimacy outside of American borders and beyond its strongest allies.

Finally, whereas America's adversaries successfully blend military with non-military LOE, the U.S. response is driven by its lopsided budget, wherein DOD claims nearly half the country's discretionary spending.⁵⁴ This resource allocation reflects entrenched views on what constitutes strategic capability and predisposes the government toward a militarized foreign policy. When relevant institutions are starved of resources or not included in the crafting of a response, the United States struggles to achieve the blended statecraft required for irregular warfare.⁵⁵ It has many terms for the type of action needed—a *whole-of-government response*, a *comprehensive approach*, *smart power*, or *integrated deterrence*—but none of these monikers has affected budget realities or cultural proclivities.

Left standing is the military with its significant resources. But is it relevant? Though the U.S. military must retain its conventional deterrent, it finds itself stymied when confrontations deliberately eschew that level of intensity. In recognition of this trend, in May 2018, the Joint Chiefs of Staff released a report on the challenge of applying the “American military when adversarial behavior falls below the threshold that would trigger a direct response.”⁵⁶ Four years on, the work has had a clear impact on concepts and doctrine, which both focus increasingly on the so-called competition continuum, ranging from cooperation to competition and finally to armed conflict. Still, beyond some exciting anecdotal evidence, changes in organization, capability, or—as important—culture have been more difficult to discern. In contrast, China has historically included “political warfare” as a branch of its armed forces—an orientation that follows Mao Zedong’s exhortation that “the Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the *political* tasks of the revolution. . . . Without these objectives, fighting loses its meaning.”⁵⁷

A different approach to statecraft is needed, yet this calls for a new way of thinking about, analyzing, and responding to irregular warfare. This is the challenge that we seek to meet at CISA—not only or primarily for the United States but for all of partner nations targeted by subversion and attack. The analytical tools and frameworks that we provide in our curriculum are designed specifically to address the deliberate ambiguity of irregular warfare and to ensure we cap-

ture its essence and address its main components. Our analytical framework has two parts, one of analysis and one of response. Much like the Military Decision-Making Process, the analysis generates a *strategic estimate of the situation*, which is then used to formulate a *course of action* (COA) to guide response. The remainder of this monograph walks through these two parts of this framework and, thereby, provides a guide for students and practitioners engaged with the most pressing irregular challenges of the day.⁵⁸ An appendix provides a synopsis of both parts of the framework—the estimate and the course of action—and can be used as a study guide or *aide memoire* to facilitate application.

In presenting a guide in this manner, a clarification on usage. This framework has been designed as a series of prompts, or questions, presented in a sequence found to enable optimal analysis and response to irregular warfare challenges, but it is not a checklist. The framework enables *interrogation* of irregular warfare problem sets. It does not predetermine what content or arguments should be included within its elements or in the final analysis. It forces attention to the broader aspects of irregular warfare, but it is still the analyst who must weave together the relevant data, make the case, and draw appropriate conclusions. As Hew Strachan warns, “Strategy uses theoretical insights to question real events in a bid to shape them according to the needs of policy, but as soon as strategy allows the expectations of theory to lessen its grasp of what is really happening it has allowed theory to be its master rather than its tool.”⁵⁹ This is neither the function nor the intent of this framework.

The Estimate: An Analytical Framework to Diagnose Irregular Threats

As seen, Clausewitz considered it the “most far-reaching act of judgment” of the statesman and commander to identify the type of war being embarked on.⁶⁰ To French Marshal Ferdinand Foch, strategy was fundamentally about applying knowledge to real life; hence his key question, *de quoi s’agit-il?* (“What is it all about?”).⁶¹ In practice, however, the strategic process all too often begins with solutions, resulting in interventions that are “blind to context, and politics in particular” and that rely “on ‘best practice’ tactics” rather than a response tailored to

the situation at hand.⁶² This approach is both counterproductive and disturbingly common.⁶³

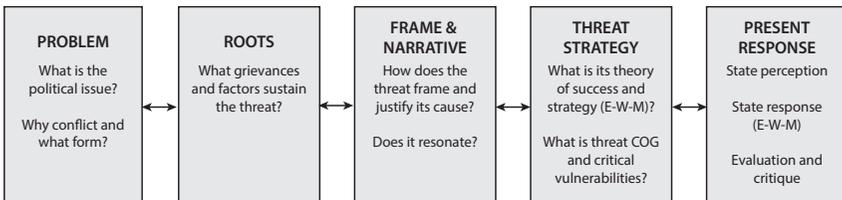
To encourage a better starting point for strategic planning, the CISA framework devotes almost half of its energies to developing a Strategic Estimate of the Situation. This estimate queries the nature of the problem to be addressed. It unpacks a complex situation, places it in political context, and maps the strategies and interests of its various players, thereby examining and critiquing our own approach. The point of this exercise is to identify relevant opportunities and obstacles to help design a better way forward—one closely informed by the nature of the problem to be addressed.

As illustrated in figure 1, the strategic estimate comprises five main components: the problem statement, the roots of the problem, the frame and narrative, the threat strategy, and the critique of the present government response. In combination, these analytical components cover the main facets of irregular warfare:

- ◆ the drivers of mobilization
- ◆ the adversary’s framing, or way of seeing the world
- ◆ the multifaceted approach applied by the challenger
- ◆ the strengths and weaknesses of the current government response.

All these components, fleshed out below, are distilled and integrated to fill the first “box,” namely the problem statement.

Figure 1. Graphical Representation of the Strategic Estimate Framework



Methodologically, the strategic estimate framework draws on a range of influences. To map the threat behavior and repertoire, it uses the military assessment of operational art, but this type of analysis has been elevated to the strategic level by incorporating intangible factors along with nonmilitary concerns. To explain the role of grievance mediation, mobilization, and strategic communications, it uses the insights of social movement theory and sociology in general. In blending these lenses and approaches, the Estimate can be used to assess contestation both within society and between state actors, or wherever the concern is a struggle over legitimacy marked by politics, narratives, and power. On this basis, the Estimate is applicable to a broad range of actors, to include armed groups and criminal syndicates, online movements and virtual networks, states and their proxies, or even nonviolent social movements, with each estimate used to generate unique analytical findings and recommendations for response. The point throughout is to grasp the *full breadth of the strategy* at play and to situate it within its crucial *political, social, and economic context*.

With that said, nothing in the framework is particularly controversial or even complicated. Its utility lies in its simplicity and structure. It unpacks and sequences analysis in a way that allows the systematic identification and study of what matters. The lack of such a structure has given rise to not only incomplete analysis but also unnecessary polemics as to which part of the problem to privilege: its causes or its symptoms, the adversary or our strategy, the ideology or its resonance. This framework considers all these questions in turn to allow for a comprehensive mapping of the problem, necessary for the crafting of a response. Indeed, the estimate is not intended as an endstate; it does not admire the problem but provides practitioners in charge of response with a foundation to plan from. With this telos in mind, the following section explains the five components of the strategic estimate framework.

The Problem Statement

Even though the problem statement is placed first in the order of things, as the synopsis of the entire estimate it cannot be completed until the other components have been fully interrogated. Its intent is to capture, concisely and precisely, the

essence and particular logic of the problem at hand: the political issue underlying the confrontation, the nature of the actor and strategy faced, and the main reasons why they have proved so difficult to address. Key is to identify the direction of the conflict based on current trends: who is benefiting, who is hurting, and why does it matter?

When engaging with these questions, the problem statement must be as profound as it is concise. In a rushed world of “bottom lines upfront” and “elevator pitches,” there is inherent merit to analytical brevity. Yet going further, this crystallization of analysis into a precise problem statement is also a *strategic* exercise in that it forces careful reflection on what is truly important. As such, it hones the mind to prioritize, to unlock the puzzle, and to justify convincingly the need for a new approach. Since such analytical clarity presupposes a rich foundation to draw from, the remainder of the strategic estimate must be executed and completed before attempting this final synthesis.

Roots of the Conflict

This takes us to roots. This analytical component identifies the political, social, and economic contradictions that the threat benefits from or exploits to erode or build legitimacy. Questions of identity, inequality, corruption, or state predation might be generating support for a challenger promising reform or might deprive the state of legitimacy, and any of these require some form of redress as part of a comprehensive response. To inform such action, the roots section asks the analyst to identify the drivers that fuel the threat and whose mitigation would help repair past harm and build resilience against future rupture.

How to identify drivers? In some cases, the process can seem deceptively simple. Any witness to the Philippines’ EDSA (People Power) Revolution of February 1986 would have had no difficulty in identifying what drove two million people to act: Ferdinand Marcos’s corrupt dictatorship and a yearning to restore democracy. Similarly, it was indubitably the politico-economic and ideological domination of the Soviet Union that, in 1989, compelled a similar number of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians to form an almost 700-kilometer-long human chain across these

three Baltic States. In these instances, cause and effect are closely tied, though questions still obtain about who participates, how, and who does not, and why.

In other instances, however, and particularly where violence is involved, grievances tend to present far more varied effects, forcing the analyst to query more specifically the relationship between context and conduct.⁶⁴ Not only is there, then, a need to interrogate which root causes truly matter, but also what their effect is, on whom, and why.

The line of thinking sets up a distinction between structure and agency that can engender interminable debate as to the causative factors behind alienation and violence. Consider Islamist radicalization among Muslims in the United Kingdom: is it the systemic problem of failed integration (a root cause) that fuels the problem, or is it the individual psychology among the exceedingly few Muslims who radicalize—a tiny proportion of the whole?⁶⁵ Are white nationalist groups in the United States a product of economic and social desperation, producing a susceptibility to extremist ideology, or are their members simply racist deplorables regardless of circumstance? The former explanation fails to account for the many “dogs that do not bark” (that is, those subjected to similar structural factors but who choose another path), whereas the latter raises the question of why, for some, this noxious ideology resonated in the first place.

The framework presented here eschews an either/or resolution to this question in favor of analytical integration. Such integration draws on the insights of social movement theory and its three lenses of analysis to assess collective contention: the macro level (the structure or context), the micro level (the agent or individual), and the meso level (the group or collective actor as an intermediary between the self and the system). Analysis must interrogate the ways in which context (macro) drives certain individuals (micro) to embrace or join movements (meso) as a mechanism for change. Where that movement is actively using violence to achieve its agenda, it must be asked why it has adopted this strategy and how this choice has affected its continued ability to speak for a base. Answers cannot be found through any one lens, but rather by identifying their unique interaction in each case. This is how drivers may be determined and, ultimately, addressed.

By means of illustration, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and its domestic racial tensions created significant macro-level grievances, resulting in the mobilization of large numbers of micro-level individuals. Yet importantly, not all individuals were driven to action. As sociologist Doug McAdam points out, one key intervening variable was simply the “biographic availability” of the individual, or his or her opportunity to engage in political activism at that point in life, given other commitments and obligations.⁶⁶ Other factors obtained, diversifying further the relationship between macro and micro: the grievances resonated with many, but not all, and only certain individuals among those affected were willing and able to act.

Among those galvanized, many meso options presented themselves: legal versus illegal, direct versus indirect, violent versus nonviolent. In this instance, most chose legal avenues of contestation—protest movements, demonstrations, and other forms of dissent—though a minority joined violent groups such as the Black Panthers and the Weather Underground. This pattern of participation needed to be understood to formulate a measured and appropriate response for each form of protest. In a worst-case scenario, a state will repress nonviolent members, perhaps because they are far easier to reach and thereby inadvertently boost the movement’s violent splinters.

If violence is the concern, analysts must query why it is being used. Two key variables obtain. First, sociology suggests a central variable relates to the perceived political opportunity structure. Where there exist no realistic opportunities for reform through peaceful engagement in politics, violent solutions will typically garner more support.⁶⁷ This is particularly the case when the system responds to demands for mediation with violence.

In the United States of the late 1960s, despite flaws in its democracy and an occasionally violent response to protest, most citizens who felt compelled to act had sufficient faith in the political opportunity structure to work through it rather than seek its overthrow. Because of this overarching faith in the system, violent groups such as the Weather Underground found it difficult to establish broad-based support and to survive in the open, forcing them to hide away from the very society they sought to change.⁶⁸ The grievances voiced by this group were

broad based, but the perceived opportunities for peaceful redress were such that the Weather Underground remained an unrepresentative violent fringe, acting on its own rather than as a vanguard of a broader movement. Conversely, given the racism of 1960s America, the Black Panthers enjoyed an entirely and far more successful relationship with its social base, which faced a different opportunity structure and therefore made different choices about how to protest. Such distinctions are key and should be a major consideration in deciding how to respond to different violent actors and the structural factors that drive their membership.⁶⁹

Ideology emerges as the second, yet related, variable in explaining an actor's resort to violence. Even an open democratic system will be insufficient to an entity driven by millenarian intent or revolutionary zeal. An actor such as Osama bin Laden would never be interested in democratic grievance mediation, and it is furthermore difficult to imagine what such a process would resemble. Where violently overthrowing the system is the aim, no blockage or broadening of the political opportunity structure will suffice and so the state must instead ensure that the threat's worldview does not come to resonate among would-be followers. Therein lies the continued need for some form of political mobilization to retain legitimacy for the state and ensure those who insist on violence remain ideologically isolated and politically alone.

These variables complicate the assessment of drivers. It is insufficient to consider the mere incidence of violence as proof of its representativeness, even where grievances are broad based. On the other hand, it is also hazardous to dismiss reflexively violent attacks or agendas as "violent extremism," for they may be powered by genuine societal and political cleavages that should in some way be acknowledged and addressed. In short, each scenario must be assessed on its own merits, considering its unique interaction between macro-level context, micro-level participation, and meso-level standing and behavior. In some instances, structural factors will produce a veritable conveyer belt of recruits; this is the "people power" that has changed the fate of empires and that underpins Mao's conception of People's War. In other contexts, participation is minimal, as with the Weather Underground. In yet other cases, participation is coerced and a matter of desperation, simply because the state is not providing options or protection.

FARC's ability to commandeer local populations within Colombia's hinterland is a case in point. The distinction is significant, as each situation requires a different understanding of the role of grievances in perpetuating violence and, therefore, a different type of response.

This same search for the causative drivers of conflict, blending structure with agency, is relevant also to state-based irregular warfare challenges. As much as insurgents exploit grievances among specific communities to win support and assert themselves, states weaponize these same types of issues to divide targeted societies and establish power. Russia is actively using ethnic tensions in Georgia, or minority rights in Moldova, as levers; Iran uses deep anti-Israeli and anti-Western sentiment to mobilize proxies and support; China capitalizes on financial weakness, corruption, and the double-dealing by elites in the societies it targets for its economic imperialism; and so on. Much as affected societies should defend against the exogenous threat, they must also consider the endogenous causes that the threat is exploiting. What macro-level grievances, if any, are driving micro-level citizens to succumb to the narrative or ploy pushed by outsiders? Are those who turn against the state a misinformed minority—Vladimir Lenin's "useful idiots"—or are they part of a more significant grouping that feels wronged by their own government? Why does the threat strategy work in some cases and in some places but not in others? And what can the state do, by way of addressing such vulnerability, to defend itself and build resilience?

There is a second purpose to analyzing the Roots for state-based irregular challenges. Given the strong presence of an external actor in fanning the flames of domestic strife, it is worth identifying the factors that drive not only its hostile intent but also its choice of strategy. Why is Russia undermining the sovereignty of its near-abroad via active measures and political warfare? Why is Iran infiltrating the governments of its neighbors and interfering in other countries much further afield? Why did elements of the Pakistani government sponsor the Taliban? What factors are driving these states to act? Could addressing these factors in some way change either their motivation or their approach? Identifying the motives and strategic choices made can help inform a constructive strategy, though deciding what to do with this information remains a difficult matter of policy and politics.

Frame and Narrative

In Jean Lartéguy's *Centurions*, Amar, a leader of Algeria's Front de Libération Nationale, illustrates the value of ideas in irregular warfare. Conversing with a French colonial officer, he explains:

*There's only one word for me: Istiqlal, independence. It's a deep, fine-sounding word and rings in the ears of the poor fellahin more loudly than poverty, social security or free medical assistance. We Algerians, steeped as we are in Islam, are in greater need of dreams and dignity than practical care. And you? What word have you got to offer? If it's better than mine, then you've won.*⁷⁰

The exchange demonstrates the decisive role of *meaning*, or the importance of framing struggles in a way that resonates with relevant populations. Indeed, framing and narratives are central to irregular warfare—contests, it should be recalled, in which perceptions of legitimacy aggregate into political power.

Two facets of the issue are at hand. First, the way those alienated from the existing order assess it and present their way forward must be discerned. The fatal flaw of “mirror imaging” is to see our assessment or thought as theirs. Second, as in all politics, the armed political challenge must present its understanding in such manner that it convinces and hence serves as the basis for mobilization.

This insight is not lost on the world's leading practitioners of irregular warfare, past or present. In preparing for the 1917 revolution, Lenin saw “systematic, all-round propaganda and agitation” as “the chief and permanent task [and] the pressing task of the moment.”⁷¹ Looking back at the Vietminh revolutionary war, General Vo Nguyen Giap noted that “to make good preparations for armed insurrection, the most essential and important task was to make propaganda among the masses and organise them.”⁷² More recently, Osama bin Laden argued that the “media war” was “one of the strongest methods. . . . In fact, its ratio may reach 90 percent of the total preparation for the battles,” much as Ayman al-Zawahiri saw “more than half of this battle” as “taking place in the battlefield of the media.”⁷³

Storylines and narratives are equally important for nation-states. When Russia first launched its offensive in Ukraine, in 2014, military action was accompanied by the “most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare.”⁷⁴ Ukraine and others have since been bombarded by disinformation and propaganda: an online barrage of fake news and inflammatory content meant to undermine resolve, weaken partnerships, and facilitate the Russian project. China, in its efforts to establish regional, even global power also aggressively pursues an information strategy—one that differs in key respects from the Russian approach. China focuses on limiting information to its own population, of course, but also combines carrots and sticks to shape what is said internationally and, therefore, what is seen and believed.⁷⁵ One of the first Chinese efforts of this type, a “Voice of the Straits” radio station targeting Taiwan, was launched already in 1957, just years after Mao’s insurgent victory.⁷⁶

When Voice of the Straits began online broadcasting in April 2000, it rapidly furthered its reach. Indeed, while the war for hearts and minds is clearly not new, in a world where information in virtually any medium can be captured and broadcast instantaneously and globally, it assumes a more central role and even greater weight. In recent years, information technology has progressed massively, allowing for more evocative material to be shared faster, farther, and by more sources simultaneously than before.⁷⁷ As technology advances to include artificial intelligence–produced simulations, in both photo and video form, it will become easier to manufacture outrage, to mobilize popular movements, and to inject uncertainty as to what is really going on.

The importance of messaging is generally recognized; it can build and erode legitimacy, constrain government options, and change fundamentally the balance of strategic power. Still, few methodologies exist for the analysis of these activities, and this deficiency hinders the construction of a response. How exactly to respond is of course a question of strategy, requiring analysis of specifics, but an important starting point is having a method of assessment that can generate options. As messages stem from understandings, how does evaluation of Roots as engaged in by the challenger differ from the same analysis carried out by the analyst?

Social movement theory provides a helpful approach to this question via its work on *framing*, defined broadly as the process of attributing meaning to events.⁷⁸ The metaphor of a frame is apposite: like an artist with a painted picture, framing concentrates our minds on one aspect of reality, all while it excludes the rest, communicating thereby an impression that has been carefully curated to engender a particular effect.⁷⁹ Framing also focuses our attention on our different ways of viewing the world: it is not just a matter of smart messaging, but more meaningfully about *interpretation*, or our *Weltanschauung*. The importance of perspective, and of intersubjectivity, is what brings forth concepts such as “strategic empathy” and (channeling Sun Tzu) “knowing your enemy” (as well as yourself).⁸⁰ The frame of the opponent, in other words, will not be our own.

Social movement theory proposes three frames: the diagnostic, the prognostic, and the motivational. Each plays a key role in building a worldview and in changing perception and, ultimately, behavior. By analyzing adversarial narratives across these three frames, we can see the world from their viewpoints, how they link cause and effect, and how they justify the worst of transgressions. We can then assess which component, or components, appear to resonate most, or “sell,” among contested audiences.

Each frame requires elaboration. The diagnostic frame interprets the current situation. It explains, from the other’s perspective, what is wrong and (most critically) who is to blame. In the lingo of sales pitches and marketing, the diagnostic frame is the “hook,” providing an accessible and alluring explanation for it all. A typical function of the diagnostic frame in fueling conflict is to distinguish an in-group from an out-group, with the former being portrayed as persecuted due to the boundless cruelty of the latter.

The diagnostic frame has a second function: to prime the audience for the proposed solution. The prognostic frame holds the answer, the way out of the misery, through actions presented not merely as just and correct but as necessary and urgent right now. The trick lies in linking the litany of grievances of the diagnostic frame to the salvation promised in the prognostic one—to explain the dark past and present the project to glory as the one and only.

In the face of a collective struggle in which participation denotes risk, it is easy to give moral support, to nod in agreement, but to remain disengaged. As such “free riding” cripples movements, a narrative is necessary to justify personal sacrifice for the cause and despite the hazards involved. This is the purpose of the motivational frame. A common approach is to emphasize solidarity with something bigger than oneself. This framing can be achieved by subsuming the individual into the more meaningful *longue durée* of history, emphasizing the heroism of ancestors and the tyranny facing future generations lest action is taken now and without hesitation. Past injury, the hope of redemption, and treachery of passivity are all mobilized to emphasize collective imperatives rather than personal interest and thus to “offer no moral or political refuge” from active engagement.⁸¹ The key is to give the struggle depth, through myths and constructed legacies, and to make victory seem within reach, almost inevitable, but only so long as we all help.⁸²

An example from history can help reveal how these three frames combine. In the Marxist tradition, for example, the diagnostic frame presents the proletariat (the workers) as suffering under a ruthless dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Capitalism, it is argued, exploits the masses and feeds them religion to keep them compliant. The prognostic frame asserts that because there are no avenues for peaceful change, the only resort, one anyway predetermined by the great forces of history, is violent revolution so that the old society can give way to something new and humane. Violence is justified because the system was maintained through force, or the structures of oppression, and so revolution is if anything a defensive imperative. The motivational frame holds that the working classes must unite behind this project, that they have nothing to lose (besides their chains), and that those who fail to do so have been fooled and suffer from false consciousness.

The narrative had promise because it “posited a simple causal relationship between understanding, action, and outcome.”⁸³ “Converts” to communism (the religious allusion is not inappropriate) speak of being “shook . . . like a mental explosion.” Arthur Koestler provides a most eloquent rendering of the effect:

The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw

*puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past—a past already remote, when one had lived in dismal ignorance in the tasteless, colorless world of those who don't know.*⁸⁴

The epiphanic nature of the experience is hardly unique to Marxism. It speaks to the zeal of the convert and the power of ideologies in channeling comfort, anger, and purpose all at once.

Framing is a concern not only for bottom-up efforts at contestation but also for states seeking support for their geopolitical struggles. As Hermann Goering infamously noted, “Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece.”⁸⁵ In response, states have devised stratagems to push the population “over the top.” Some appeal to national values, identity, and ideology—though the more common and effective method is to “scare the hell out of the country.”⁸⁶ Goering explains: “It is always a simple matter to drag the people along. . . . All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger.”⁸⁷ The themes used are clearly evident in the Chinese Communist Party’s framing, which combines a narrative of victimization with one of pride: the country is both a target of foreign intrigue and a superpower, both at risk yet with endless potential, so long as it has the people’s unswerving support. This combination unites government and people against supposedly common foes, particularly where these are presented as stemming from abroad.⁸⁸

Just because framing and narratives are important, they are not automatically effective. Thus, having identified the other’s worldview and its logic, a final question within this component of the framework concerns its resonance. Is it successful in shaping perceptions—even behavior—and how can this be known or measured? Addressing these questions requires two steps.

First, given the dispersed nature of communication in today’s conflicts, it is necessary to identify the *relevant audiences*, that is, those being targeted. These may include domestic or foreign populations, as well as entities, agencies, governments, and opinion leaders (or “influencers” in today’s vernacular). It matters, for

example, whether the Islamic State is communicating to the Sunnis of Iraq or to a deterritorialized network of would-be followers spread around the world. Similarly, it matters whether China's information operations relate primarily to changing attitudes abroad or maintaining its perception of legitimacy at home. One front may be far more successful than the other, but whose perception is truly at stake?⁸⁹

Second, once the relevant audiences have been identified, what is the effect of framing on each? Gauging success on this front is difficult yet important, given the nature of irregular warfare as a competition over the perception of legitimacy. In a world where believing is seeing, it is crucial to know whether contested populations are receptive or resistant to the narratives being pushed. It is, for example, noteworthy that despite the "information warfare blitzkrieg" witnessed in Ukraine, sources suggest attitudes there, even within Russian-occupied areas, remained predominantly hostile to Russian actions.⁹⁰ It is likewise important to know that even during FARC's struggle, most Colombians supported the government. This is the type of data that can help inform strategic communications—even strategy writ large. It can be obtained via a variety of methods, from ethnographic research and polling to big-data analysis of social media habits and behavior. The key is to understand just how the world is perceived to know better what behavior to expect and how to respond.

Threat Strategy

Having elaborated the roots of the conflict and the narratives used to fuel support, it is time to consider what the threat does. More than a list of activities, what is sought is an understanding of the strategy at play: what it seeks to achieve and how it aims to get there. The traditional approach to understanding strategy within Western war colleges (there simply is no civilian equivalent) is that of ends, ways, and means, a formula most prominently articulated by Arthur Lykke. It posits that "strategy equals ends (objectives toward which one strives) plus ways (courses of action) plus means (instruments by which some end can be achieved)."⁹¹ It is a helpful model, yet for irregular warfare it must be adapted to accommodate the blending of violence with other, potentially more meaningful nonviolent efforts

and the unfolding of campaigns both tangibly and intangibly to affect matters of legitimacy.

The ends-ways-means formula, then, forces consideration of three fundamental questions: What is the threat seeking to achieve? How is it reaching that objective? What resources are used? The question of ends is deceptively difficult. Declarative slogans may not be the same as unspoken objectives. Short-term goals may relate indirectly, if at all, to longer term aspirations. The actor may be vague, or wholly idealistic, about what it seeks to achieve, making it unclear how its actions relate to an unattainable endstate and raising questions about its actual purpose. Thus, the question “What do they want?” is of cardinal importance, not least for the political implications that immediately surface. How do the stated objectives seek to address the political essence of the problem? How do they relate to what the actor can do and wants to achieve? As is the case throughout the framework, the first and easy answer is seldom the most analytically useful.

Careful consideration of ends allows progression to a discussion of ways. As a component of what Colin Gray termed the *strategy bridge*, this is perhaps the section that has received the least attention. As Jeffrey Meiser argued, “The ways part of the equation tends to be relegated to a supporting role as the undefined thing linking ends and means.”⁹² Indeed, in this triptych, it is precisely within the ways that the major changes and challenges are seen. It is here that irregular strategies surprise and achieve their full effect.⁹³

Ways are concerned first and foremost with the overall strategic approach. At the broadest level, what is the method employed to reach identified ends? Is it a full-blown insurgency, and if so, is it a People’s War that puts counterstate mobilization at its heart, or a focoist approach that leads with violence and makes political indoctrination a lesser concern?⁹⁴ Perhaps the strategic approach is one of nonviolence, or of political infiltration, or of criminal subversion. If facing a state actor, is the strategic approach one of political warfare (what George Kennan called “the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace”⁹⁵), of hybrid warfare (akin to Russia’s violent assault on eastern Ukraine from 2014 to 2022), or something in between?⁹⁶ The terms to describe strategic approach are numerous, varied, and contested. Most important is to communicate the nature

and logic of the strategy being used. Indeed, it is really the theory of success that matters: how is this strategy meant to bring about success or achieve the political outcomes that are being sought?⁹⁷

Once the strategic approach has been identified and explained, it is time to map the strategy to help design an appropriate response. The mapping of an intangible and complex strategy adds order to the chaos but requires an acumen for abstract thinking and a range of conceptual tools. Within Western military thinking, one such tool has been the *line of operation*, which defines the force in relation to the enemy.⁹⁸ Lines of operation represent the physical projection of force across geographical space and are typically visualized using military unit symbols moving via arrows on a map. This heuristic has proved helpful because it allows for the conceptual nesting of tactical and operational actions within their strategic context, thereby clarifying their larger purpose on the battlefield. Nesting, in turn, aids in the translation of strategic intent into tactical action and vice versa, ensuring a common understanding and coherence across all levels of activity.

Though lines of operation are fundamental analytical tools for the design of military campaigns, they fail to capture the intangible spaces traversed by irregular warfare. It was for this reason that the U.S. Army, in 2001, fielded the term *logical line of operation* and then, in 2011, *line of effort* to define expressions of power or influence where “positional references to an enemy or adversary have little relevance, such as in counterinsurgency or stability operations.”⁹⁹ In other words, whereas the military has traditionally traded mostly in its own currency—the use of force—doctrine now created space for “operations involving many nonmilitary factors” (political, psychological, informational, or economic) for which “lines of effort are often essential to helping commanders visualize how military capabilities can support the other instruments of national power.”¹⁰⁰

With this doctrinal development, the U.S. military entered a “back to the future” moment in which it unknowingly resurrected the insights of past practitioners of irregular conflict as diverse as the patriots in the Revolutionary War and the communist theorists of People’s War, such as Mao Zedong and the Vietnamese figures Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Truong Chinh. What unites these figures, and their respective approaches to violence, is the adaptation of traditional

military concepts and terminology to encompass political and psychological dimensions. Strategy, as theorized and practiced, was an integrated political effort of which the military is but one supporting aspect—or an enabler of political and psychological actions.

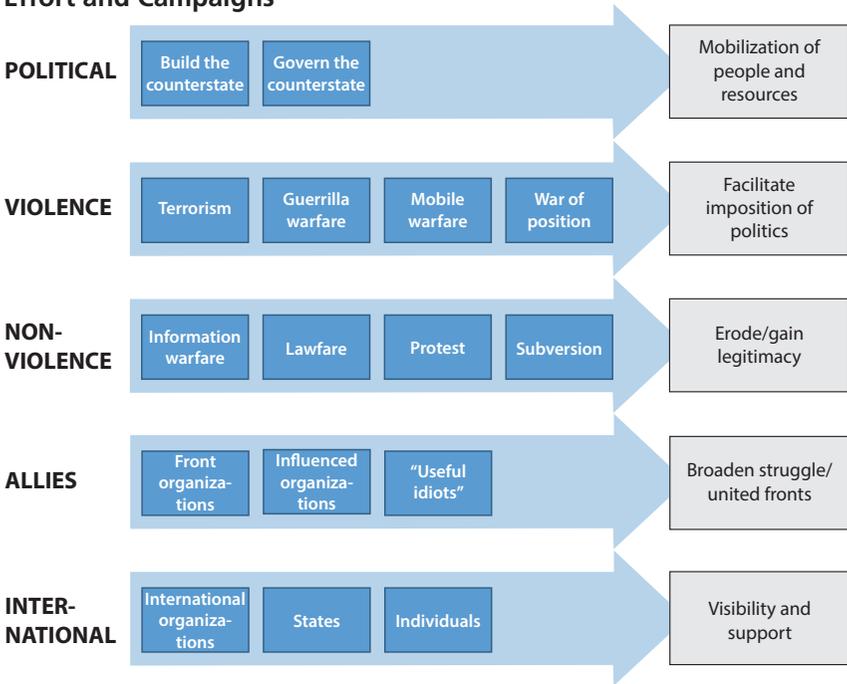
In recognition of this key feature of irregular warfare, our mapping of threat strategies borrows from traditional military operational art but elevates it to the strategic level to encompass the nonmilitary, and often more salient, aspects of the overall approach. A useful starting point in this mapping exercise is to capture the full breadth of the strategy. As detailed by Thomas A. Marks, interrogation of past irregular conflicts reveals five typical components that should be kept in mind: their political mobilization; use of domestic allies (through the united front mechanism); use of violence to enable politics; use of nonviolence (also known as political warfare); and internationalization of the struggle, making it difficult to contain or terminate within national borders. These five facets provide the inspiration for five questions that must be asked of any challenge of irregular warfare:

- ◆ How is the threat mobilizing *politically*?
- ◆ How is *violence* used to enable its political project?
- ◆ How is *nonviolence* used?
- ◆ How is it exploiting tactical *alliances* to better reach its objective?
- ◆ What is the role of *internationalization* in the strategy?¹⁰¹

When interrogated, these questions provide an accounting for the *how* of strategy, the totality and integration of *ways*, or the bridge between means and ends. As displayed in figure 2, answers to these questions can then be represented as LOEs, each with its own strategic interim objective that defines its purpose and direction. In this manner, one arrives at a blueprint of strategy.

For this blueprint to be useful, what fills each line of effort (the content generated by answering the five questions above) must somehow be ordered. A useful approach is to organize the tactical expressions of each LOE into conceptual *campaigns*, each a bundle of activity grouped together and labeled due to a common nature or purpose.¹⁰² This grouping exercise reveals each line's most

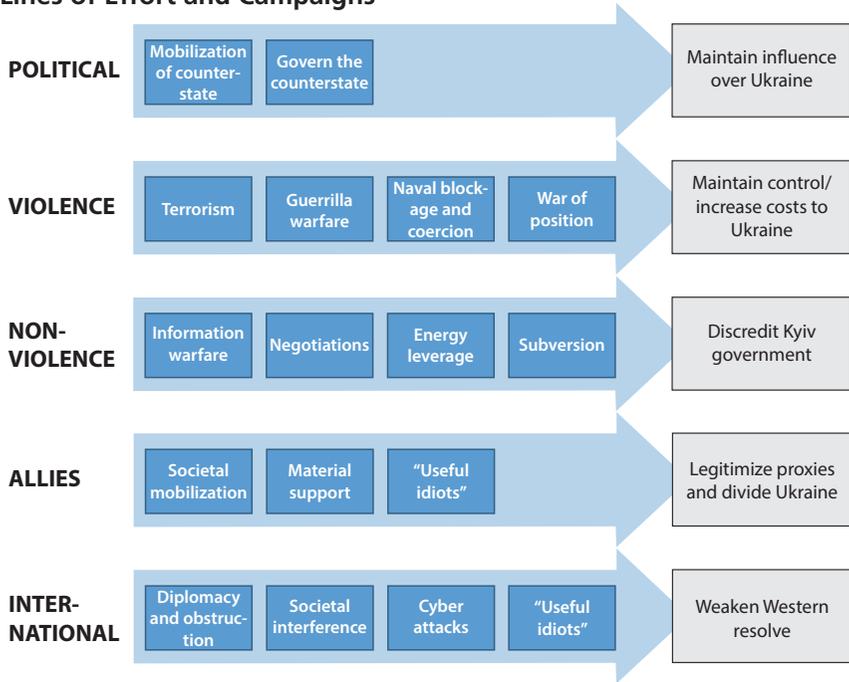
Figure 2. A Standard People’s War Insurgency, Mapped as Lines of Effort and Campaigns



prominent categories and, thus, also its priorities. For example, the nonviolent LOE may comprise campaigns of “information warfare” and “protests,” much as the violent LOE may include those of “terrorism” or “guerrilla warfare.” Identification of these campaigns, within their respective LOE, produces a bird’s eye view of operational art as it plays itself out in violent politics.

By means of illustration, figure 2 provides a relevant sample, derived from extensive and repeated application of the framework to real-world cases involving nonstate armed groups. Using instead the Russian intervention in Ukraine, ca. 2017, as an example, figure 3 illustrates that the same five questions can yield a mapping also of state-based irregular strategies. In both cases, the mapping has revealed dimensions of the overall strategy that are often missed by an overriding concern with the violent, or the “kinetic,” aspects of the problem. Similarly, mapping the strategy of a gang such as Comando Vermelho (figure 4), in Brazil,

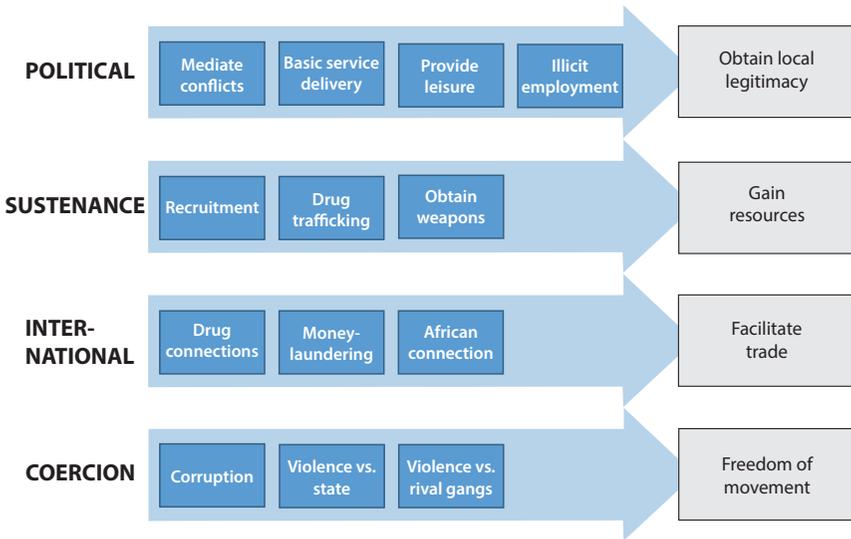
Figure 3. Russia’s Operational Art in Ukraine, ca. 2017, Mapped as Lines of Effort and Campaigns



reveals the range of its activities beyond mere drug-trafficking and the purpose of this broader strategy.¹⁰³

As part of the ordering exercise, this nesting of operational activity within its proper strategic category, it follows that each campaign will itself contain sub-campaigns, or opportunities to order further the expressions of the overall approach. For example, the campaign of terrorism, within the violent LOE, may be further subdivided, plausibly across the categories of targets struck—for instance, infrastructure, security forces, dignitaries, international actors, or simply groups of people. This coding allows for more informed analysis as to how the state should structure its own campaign of counterterrorism, perhaps within its security LOE. Similarly, a campaign of information warfare may feature subcampaigns of hashtag activism (for example, #КиевСбилБоинг, or #KyivShotDownBoeing), indoctrination, pamphleteering, or the distribution of “fake news” through licit networks.¹⁰⁴

Figure 4. Operational Art of the Rio-Based Criminal Gang Comando Vermelho, ca. 2017, Mapped as Lines of Effort and Campaigns



Governance, a campaign with the political LOE, could include subcampaigns of taxation, schooling, or the provision of basic services.

Clearly, not all threat actors will use all five LOEs. Similarly, the specifics of the case will determine how to label each LOE and its constituent campaigns. The point is not to force cases within templates but to capture and codify the full range of the strategy along with its operational manifestations. The framework assists on this front by displacing violence from the central analytical place that it so often enjoys within strategic studies and creating space for other efforts, their interplay, and their essential relation to the overall objective. Careful mapping of this sort becomes particularly important as state and nonstate actors deliberately constrain stark exercises of military power in favor of still potent, yet more ambiguous and varied types of coercion.¹⁰⁵ The method presented here is designed for this brackish interplay of war and peace. By mapping the content of strategy, it reveals exactly what is being done, both militarily and otherwise, and to what strategic purpose. In turn, such an assessment will drive what the state must ensure is addressed, and therefore also be included in its own response.

The multifaceted nature of irregular strategies has strong implications for our discussion of means, the third component of Lykke's triptych. Rather than treat means as a separate inquiry from ways, the identification of LOEs and campaigns should compel an interrogation of what capacities and structures are deployed to undertake the identified activities. To what degree have our adversaries developed specialized tools to prosecute economic, social, and political campaigns? Beyond guerrillas and fighters, we should account for the insurgent's structures of governance; beyond fighter jets and tanks, we should understand the rival state's means of subversion and influence. These means, after all, behoove specialization on our end too so that we may counter the whole spectrum of irregular strategies thrown our way. In violent politics, victory belongs not to the strongest army or the best argument but to the best practitioner of the art, and this calls for the right tools.

Based on this interrogation of ends-ways-means, the final task within this "box" of the analytical framework is to identify the threat's *center of gravity* (COG) and *critical vulnerabilities*. The COG is an absurdly contentious term in strategic studies. As Clausewitz described it, the center of gravity is the "focal point of force and movement, upon which the larger whole depends."¹⁰⁶ Such a target may present itself in a conventional confrontation between two fielded sides, yet within the political and social realms of irregular warfare, hope for a decisive blow is often misguided. This limitation does not invalidate the concept entirely, but—where it applies—the COG will typically describe intangible forces: those that bind the threat and allow its strategy to work. Is there, in other words, a source of cohesion for the irregular actor, which, if removed, would result in its disappearance (or existential weakening)?¹⁰⁷

One must be careful in answering this question. For example, the common identification of the "population" as the center of gravity in counterinsurgency campaigns tends only to beg the question. Which population are we referring to, and precisely what is so important about it? Its perceptions (and if so, of what), its loyalty, or perhaps its very existence (which would motivate a highly illiberal, yet far from unprecedented, approach to operations)? Analytical granularity is needed, as determination of the center of gravity will fundamentally set the direction of our response. For this reason, it is also important to resist the temptation

to identify any number of COGs, as this outcome in most cases denotes a failure to prioritize. The test is not whether the target is important, but whether it is indispensable to the threat—whether it would collapse without it.¹⁰⁸

There is no preconceived answer as to what constitutes a COG in any given case, regular or otherwise, or whether the concept even applies. However, given the focus in irregular warfare on politics and the ability to control or co-opt contested populations, the center of gravity often relates to perceptions of legitimacy. Be it phrased in terms of *common interests*, *united fronts*, *ideological appeal*, *support*, or *credibility*, the term *legitimacy* applies, as it speaks to the “beliefs and attitudes of the affected actors regarding the normative status of a rule, government, political system or governance regime.”¹⁰⁹ With legitimacy, there is strong potential for mobilization—of people, allies, support, and momentum. Without legitimacy, the cost of doing business is dramatically increased, as are the efforts required to consolidate new political realities.

Legitimacy, in this context, is not a popularity contest. As Stathis Kalyvas explains in terms of “geographic loyalty,” military power can trump political and social preferences; those who control territory and populations—those who decide who lives or dies—can usually muster the cooperation they need.¹¹⁰ Yet because coerced forms of control are difficult to sustain over the longer term, our most potent adversaries strive to combine coercion with strategies of co-option. On this front, it has been a cardinal error of the Islamic State and its ilk to impose such a brutal rule on its newly gained subjects. This error has enabled its state adversaries to co-opt key populations, as these governments come to be seen, whatever their flaws, as preferable to the Islamists. In this context, it is worrisome that the Islamic State in the West Africa Province, in Nigeria, appears to be learning this lesson and now targets mostly security forces rather than the population, thereby generating new levels of legitimacy vis-à-vis the state.¹¹¹

The struggle for legitimacy operates also at the international level, or among states. Following the Kosovo intervention of 1999, Russia derived the troubling lesson that international law could be broken with impunity so long as the transgression is wrapped in a plausibly legitimizing narrative, in this case the “responsibility to protect.”¹¹² For this reason, in later engagements in Ukraine, Georgia,

and elsewhere, Russia pointed to supposedly threatened pockets of the population that purportedly relied on Russian intervention for protection. The ruse works best where there is a kernel of truth to the performance, where the argument is at least debatable—hence the exploitation of existing social schisms and political fault lines in targeted countries. Developing a plausible position in this manner helps split international society and shrouds deeply dubious acts in a legitimizing fog. Where there is no plausible position to exploit, as seen in Russia’s attempted subversion of Finland, or even Estonia, its efforts at disinformation and influence mostly fall flat—thus the attempts by many to replicate in any way possible the factors that make these countries so resistant.¹¹³

Regardless of how the COG is identified, its determination gives strategic direction to state response. As an example, when the newly elected Colombian government sought in 2002 to execute a new strategy to combat FARC, then controlling large swathes of the country’s territory and threatening attack on Bogotá, one key question concerned the COG of this formidable opponent. Though not couched in these terms, the discussion centered on whether it was FARC’s narco-trafficking revenue that mattered, or its legitimacy with marginalized Colombians relative to the state. The former hypothesis would motivate a counternarcotics response aimed at checking the group’s illicit stream of funds, whereas the latter would motivate a whole-of-government counterinsurgency effort designed to win back the population, mobilize society in support, and stem FARC’s steady flow of recruits.

In the end, the determination made was that whereas the drug money was fungible (using other means of revenue), the key to the puzzle was FARC’s ability to coerce a labor force, given the government’s mismanagement of the same population. As Carlos Ospina, then the head of the Colombian army, put it, the “center of gravity was the relationship between the state and its population, or legitimacy,” and the “new approach, labeled Democratic Security, was built upon the recovery of democracy for all Colombians by giving them security.”¹¹⁴ It was this correct assessment that guided all Colombian planning from 2002 to 2010.

Where a center of gravity can be deduced in this manner (and it does not apply to all conflicts), what remains is the vexing question of how it can be struck,

addressed, or otherwise affected. Much like the king on a chessboard, striking the COG requires patient maneuvering and repeated efforts. Inroads must be developed gradually to finally gain access. The location of critical vulnerabilities can therefore be invaluable, revealing chinks in the armor through which the beating heart of the problem can be reached, even struck. To extend the chess metaphor, the critical vulnerabilities of an opponent are exposed pieces that, when eliminated, improve our strategic position to come at the king.

As we seek critical vulnerabilities, what are we looking for? The doctrinal definition is surprisingly helpful. It defines *critical vulnerabilities* as components “deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack, creating a significant effect.”¹¹⁵ Specifically, this definition reveals the two criteria at hand: the component’s vulnerability and its strategic value. Many targets are important but not vulnerable, while some are vulnerable but not important. The task lies in finding the overlap to help guide our initial attack.

The strategic estimate can help in this effort. Looking at the roots of the problem (the drivers of mobilization), the frame and narrative (the threat’s worldview), and the threat strategy (its operationalization of ends, ways, and means), we can discern the weak points and poor connections in the overall approach. These may be mismatches between frames and strategy (what is believed versus what is done), between roots and strategy (what fuels legitimacy versus the threat’s mediation of grievances), or between components of the threat strategy itself (misalignments of objectives, approach, and resources). These, then, are the vulnerabilities that initial efforts can strike to build a better strategic position for follow-on action.

Some actual examples of critical vulnerabilities come to mind. The Islamic State claims to represent Islam but kills more Muslims than members of any other religions. As Russia extends its meddling, greater global awareness of its methods is adding a reputational cost to what is already a growing financial commitment. Its war of aggression in Ukraine provides an invaluable vulnerability that could be used to help change facts on the ground elsewhere—in Moldova, the Caucasus, and beyond. China seeks regional, maybe global hegemony yet must contain its own domestic contradictions and overcome its own hypersensitivity to social and political criticism. Growing recognition of China’s manner of operating in

the countries where it invests is also driving a backlash against its Belt and Road Initiative that could be used to win support and gain allies. Through exploitation of critical vulnerabilities such as these, one can over time address issues relating to the center of gravity—almost always a question of legitimacy.

Present Government Response

Having dissected the nature of the problem—its roots, frames, and strategy, along with the center of gravity and its critical vulnerabilities—we now turn our attention to the present response, or what is being done to address the challenge. This line of inquiry is an essential prerequisite for proposing policy recommendations and strategies and, therefore, the focus of the last analytical “box” of the estimate framework. What is the current strategy of response, what actions are currently under way, are they working, and why is change needed?

Systematic analysis of state response involves three steps. First, we must ascertain how the state views the problem and its own duty or purpose in responding to it. Second, given this perception of the threat, what is the present government strategy? A key concern here is identifying, even if it is unstated, the current “theory of success” or the hypothesis undergirding our efforts. How is success expected to be reached, and, going deeper, how has it been defined?¹¹⁶ This context helps us explain the strategy, not as a list of programs and efforts but as an approach and logic intended to respond to the threat, however perceived, and serve policy objectives, however defined.

The third and analytically most challenging step involves a critique of the present government response. The estimate is conducted because of a desire to improve the response, and so an important segue from analysis to prescription involves reviewing that which is currently being attempted. This assessment can begin with a basic issue of framing: Is the state perception correct? Is it cognizant of the problem? Is it underestimating (or overestimating) the strategic peril? Is it taking for granted its own legitimacy among contested populations or otherwise misdiagnosing the nature of the threat and strategy at hand?

An uncompromising assessment of state perception is typically a first step in interrogating the strategy itself. In this endeavor, we must ask whether the state is

making progress in countering the threat. Does it, through its response, address the symptoms of the problem or the problem itself (answering this question does presuppose an accurate and incisive problem statement)? Is the response affecting any center of gravity that has been identified, plausibly via deft exploitation of critical vulnerabilities? And if progress is not forthcoming, can we explain why? Is it the wrong approach or the right approach applied on too small a scale, or something else entirely?

A fundamental and necessary question in explaining a failing strategy is whether it stems from a dearth of capability or of will. Is it that the state lacks what it needs for a more enlightened response, or is it that it does not view such a response as politically necessary? Clearly, the two possibilities are far from mutually exclusive, but before proposing something entirely more ambitious, by way of response, the analyst must anticipate the prioritization and limitations at hand. Neither a lack of competence nor of interest is immutable but addressing shortfalls in either will likely require specific measures, so that proposed strategies do not fall on deaf ears. In other words, the strategy will have to address its own audience as well as the threat it seeks to address, hence the question: What are the political reasons why the state is pursuing a strategy that is not working and can these be altered?

The critique of the present government response must be engaged dispassionately and thoroughly because it acts as the pivot from the estimate part of the framework to the proposed course of action. The approach to analysis draws inspiration from the almost certainly apocryphal Albert Einstein quip that, faced with a problem to be solved in an hour, he would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and the remaining five solving it. In short, the estimate, and in particular the critique of the present response, both inspire and justify the solution that must now be proposed.

The COA Framework: How to Respond to Irregular Challenges

The course of action framework is designed to build on the estimate to construct a strategy that counters the threat and achieves set objectives. Like the estimate, its utility lies in asking the necessary questions and sequencing analysis. Any

expectation that it will itself generate the content is misguided and sure to produce failure. Still, even with this modest function, the framework provides guidance and a skeleton to build content around, ensuring that the key components of strategy-making are addressed and appropriately broached.

The COA framework builds on the U.S. military's relatively well-developed decisionmaking process, which, codified in doctrine, sets the Armed Forces apart from other institutions in terms of planning capacity. The framework presented here is adapted from this process in two ways. First, it elevates the focus from mostly operational and tactical matters to consider the strategic level, or where matters of national policy are set and then implemented through the state's main instruments of power. Second, it incorporates more than just military concerns, reflecting the contingent nature of violence within irregular contests.¹¹⁷ The result is a comprehensive plan that encompasses several instruments of power and their interaction across time and space to meet policy objectives.

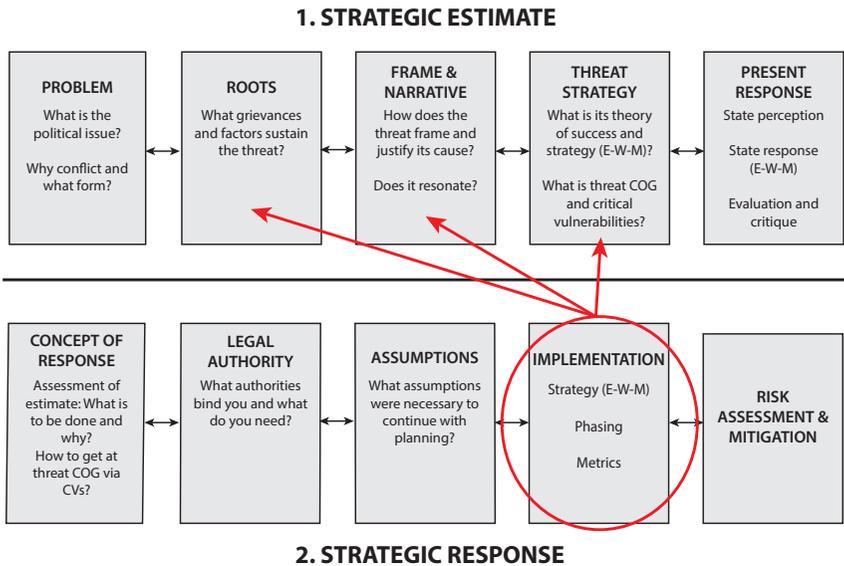
A point of order on the value of plans is immediately necessary. As Dwight Eisenhower famously noted, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything."¹¹⁸ Another strategist commonly cited in this context is Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, chief of staff of the Prussian general staff, who noted that "only a layman could suppose that the development of a campaign represents the strict application of a prior concept that has been worked out in every detail and followed through to the very end."¹¹⁹ The reason, he states, is that "no operation plan will ever extend with any sort of certainty behind the first encounter with the hostile main force."¹²⁰

The caution sounded by these "practitioners of practitioners" is important and should be retained. However, it does not condemn to futility planning constructs such as the one presented here. Planning is still *everything*, and planning cannot be conducted without some professional understanding of what this process entails. It is true that whatever plan is arrived at will most likely require modification at implementation to reflect shifting circumstances and the inevitable fog of war, yet this limitation only underlines the need for familiarity and expertise with a planning process that allows for quick adaptation and change. As the late Sir Michael Howard put it, "When *everybody* starts wrong, the advantage goes to the side which can most quickly adjust itself to the new and unfamiliar environment

and learn from our mistakes.”¹²¹ With this in mind, what are the main steps and the main components when crafting a strategy?

Much like that for the estimate, the course of action framework comprises five boxes to help guide and sequence analysis (see figure 5). The first box, concept of response, lays out the broad outlines of the proposed strategy, demonstrating the break with the present government response with which the estimate framework concluded. The second concerns the legal authority underpinning or required for the response. The third box clarifies any assumptions that were necessary to allow planning into an uncertain future. The fourth demonstrates the detailed implementation of the strategy within an ends-ways-means construct, also accounting for phasing and metrics (how do we know that we are succeeding). The fifth box considers the risks inherent to the strategy and their possible mitigation. The remainder of this section unpacks each box in turn, emphasizing the key requirements and considerations.

Figure 5. The Estimate and COA Frameworks and Their Relation



Concept of Response

Much like the problem statement of the estimate, the concept of response provides a brief synopsis, in this case of the overall recommended course of action. This distilling function means that, once again, the section is placed first and yet reflects the *entirety* of the product. The concept of response is where the big ideas are communicated: the nature of the recommended response to the problem analyzed in the estimate and, in broad terms, its implications for ends-ways-means and overall phasing.

An important component in communicating and justifying the new strategy is its *theory of success*, or why the recommended approach will generate a desired outcome.¹²² The estimate can help make this case, for example, by demonstrating why the proposed response addresses more effectively (than the present government response) the roots, the frames and narrative, and/or the threat strategy. Justification for this theory of success can also relate to any strategic center of gravity identified in the estimate or the critical vulnerabilities whose proper exploitation may yield promising returns. Even if a COG analysis is not deemed appropriate, what remains essential is to communicate how and why the proposed change to the present government response will alter the environment and attain the desired position.¹²³ Why is the proposed strategy not only better but also the best way forward given the context as is?

Importantly, in making this case, the strategy's quality should be assessed not on the loftiness of what it promises to achieve, but on its ability to attain set goals. Therein lies a delicate and deeply political balancing act between the best and the possible, between idealism and despondence. A guiding principle is to situate the response within the state's national interest as communicated in its official documents, as implicit in its policies or as determined (and argued) by the analyst. However vexing, the problem assessed in the estimate must be approached in relation to other competing national priorities. The ensuring constraints and tradeoffs are what make a recommended strategy at all strategic.

Second, questions of feasibility should be carefully considered. It is easy to come up with broad ideas that sound good, yet if they offer no roadmap of implementation or way of gradual realization, they are a list of aspirations rather than

a strategy. To be useful, a course of action should lay out an incremental set of achievable objectives that, over time and on aggregate, produces a viable *and* desired endstate. In this effort, phasing is a helpful ally, allowing for more modest, piecemeal, yet meaningful progress toward an objective that, in the short term, may seem farfetched. Of course, this journey is seldom linear, and it is up to the analyst to balance convincingly the pragmatic imperatives of the short term with longer term ideals. As Eliot Cohen notes, “Strategy . . . is the art of choice that binds means with objectives. It is the highest level of thinking about war, and it involves priorities (we will devote resources here, even if that means starving operations there), sequencing (we will do this first, then that), and a theory of victory (we will succeed for the following reasons).”¹²⁴

Legal Authority

Another key consideration in developing the course of action is the legal authority for the recommended strategy. Acting within the rule of law is critical because of the legitimacy it bestows for both international and domestic audiences. The need for legal clarity is all the more important given the tendency of irregular actors to blur legal lines, employ ambiguity as a weapon, and engage in *lawfare*, that is, “the use of law as a weapon of war.”¹²⁵ It may be tempting to mirror image such disrespect for the rule of law, but such actions will often come at the expense of legitimacy and deprive both actor and strategy of the moral high ground. Instead, establishing and communicating a clear legal case can be a force multiplier in the competition for legitimacy, even when (or especially when) engaging against a threat that deliberately rejects this same set of constraints.

The search for legal authority begins with an interrogation of any red flags raised by the proposed strategy or its subsidiary recommendations. These may relate to activity in the sovereign territory of another state, tensions between state and municipal authorities, treaty obligations, or concerns relating to civil liberties and human rights or to the collection of intelligence. By way of example, in the U.S. context, responses must contend with the civil liberties enshrined in the Constitution, the constraints of the Posse Comitatus Act, or with the Smith-Mundt

Act, which long prohibited the domestic airing of U.S. Government-funded and -generated broadcasting but was recently significantly watered down.

The case of Smith-Mundt raises a salient point: states are not simply subject to their own laws but can amend them, too. In this case, in 2013, Congress repealed the domestic-dissemination provision of the bill, given the pragmatic difficulty of isolating foreign from domestic audiences and the perceived strategic need to counter anti-American sentiments at home.¹²⁶ Frank Kitson, counterinsurgency practitioner and theorist, gets the point across: “Everything done by a government and its agents in combating insurgency must be legal. But this does not mean that the government must work within the same set of laws during an insurgency which existed beforehand.”¹²⁷

For the strategist, the implication is clear: where every attempt should be made to fit the recommended course of action within the legal authorities at hand, certain situations call for temporary, or even permanent, changes to legislation to better equip states to handle new challenges. The USA PATRIOT Act, passed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, is a good example, though debates continue as to the need for it both then and now.¹²⁸ The question, therefore, is not just whether the existing authorities are in place but also whether the state’s legislative body must enact specific laws for the optimal strategy to proceed.

This consideration requires care. Writing one’s own laws is like printing one’s own money—another government prerogative—in that both can rapidly backfire. Legal authority matters because it bestows legitimacy, yet legality and legitimacy do not always overlap. The worst excesses of the so-called war on terror—enhanced interrogation techniques, rendition, detention without trial, and extrajudicial killings—were all cleared by lawyers. Each was arguable in a court of law.¹²⁹ However, the arguability did not protect the government responsible from the court of public opinion, undermining the very legitimacy that was being sought. It may well be true, as Robert Barnidge suggests, that if the issue “can ‘fit’ and be ‘argued within’ the formal constraints of law, there will be no violation of law,” but if the aim is to garner legitimacy, a second, more demanding threshold must also be met.¹³⁰ To lawyers and those of a legalistic bent, the warning in *Hamlet* is apt:

“There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

A recurring legal dilemma in irregular warfare concerns the status of one’s adversaries, particularly as related to the use of force. Faced with nonstate armed groups or shadowy state proxies, governments often struggle to determine whether to treat their adversary as combatants or as criminals. The former status is deemed inappropriately ennobling and turns society into a war zone, with all that that entails, whereas the latter denies the state its mightiest weapons against an enemy that, if well-armed, may present an existential threat. Awkward compromises such as “unlawful combatants”—the legal construct of the George W. Bush administration—seldom fare well yet point to the need for flexible authorities against hybrid challenges.

Colombia’s struggles against the FARC again provide a helpful precedent. As part of the Democratic Security Policy, Bogotá found a nimble way of scaling its legal authorities up or down depending on the operation and its context. Constantin von der Groeben explains how the state was able to toggle between international humanitarian law (or the Law of Armed Conflict) and human rights law, and thereby combine the best of both worlds. Through judicial review of the threat, the state would distinguish between “operations during hostile scenarios” and “operations to maintain security.” During the latter, peacetime law enforcement would prevail, making the use of force a last resort. Throughout the former, the state could respond forcefully to a well-armed and dangerous adversary (yet even then, the rules of engagement would privilege demobilization and capture and be mindful of collateral damage).¹³¹

State-based irregular strategies present their own legal quandaries, particularly when they involve constituted armed forces deliberately flouting the rule of law. Several governments (Israel, but also Canada and the United States) have designated Iran’s Quds Force as a terrorist organization given its involvement in unconventional warfare (or sponsorship of terrorism). The designation not only brings in legal authorities but also raises analytical and practical difficulties given that terrorism is typically a nonstate endeavor and not a status bestowed upon government forces, however horrendous their conduct. For similar reasons, it is difficult

to see how the U.S. designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity will produce the legal and moral quarantine anticipated by such a determination (not to mention Lithuania's groundbreaking designation of Russia's war in Ukraine as terrorism).¹³²

Ukraine has itself faced legal difficulties in responding to Russian aggression since 2014. For many years, the legal authority for response was complicated by the undisclosed but universally known presence of Russian troops out of uniform, or the Little Green Men, among the separatists in Donbas. In this instance, the decision—legal as well as political—was whether to treat the Donbas as a counterterrorism operation, under the authority of the Security Service, or (as it eventually came to be) as operations against Russian aggression, with authority transferred to the joint operational headquarters of the armed forces under the strategic guidance of the general staff.¹³³ The eventual shift brought about greater immediacy in response, as well as flexibility, but required clear explication of the new powers and of the state's continued commitment to legal authority and accountability vis-à-vis its own citizens. In other words, although changing the rules, the state ensured that its usage of the law remained legitimate, a balancing act not atypical for those proposing fresh approaches to new challenges.

Even nonviolent state strategies can present legal complications for response. Chinese political warfare is designed to subvert and manipulate all while avoiding punitive reaction. In the face of Chinese disinformation, economic coercion, and other nonviolent yet harmful activities, both Australia and the United States have found themselves without legal recourse to respond appropriately, even within their own national borders. Seeking to do better, Australia passed a flurry of legislation. It is now compulsory for entities to register any political activities undertaken on behalf of a foreign principal. Covert and deceptive activities of foreign actors are now criminal if and when they intend to interfere with Australia's institutions of democracy.¹³⁴ For similar reasons, the U.S. Congress has passed, or is passing, legislation intended to defeat economic coercion, criminalize the activities of the Chinese United Front Work Department, and counter intellectual property violators.¹³⁵ These types of efforts echo the Foreign Agents Registration Act, passed in the 1930s and still in use (yet with little to no impact in online com-

munications). In seeking to equip the state to defend itself legally against unanticipated threats such as these, the key lies in not over-legislating and harming the very society that one seeks to protect.

In terms of balancing acts, the final requirement here is to acknowledge the overlapping coexistence of several legal regimes, not only at the international and national level but also relating to cultural, social, and religious factors. These different regimes do not always agree, forcing difficult questions of how to proceed. Much depends on the relevant audience, or whose perceptions of legitimacy are most crucially related to the solution. Still, in a globally compressed mediatized environment, there is often a need for some level of congruence across all levels, requiring tough decisions as to how to mesh disparate legal codes and how to speak to several publics all at once.

Assumptions

The crafting of strategy is inevitably an exercise in forecasting, as the analyst is asked to predict, with sufficient certainty, the effects of actions taken on current conditions. Because the future is unknown, because we cannot predict the type of environment in which recommended actions unfold, “planning” can sometimes feel like a fool’s errand. Yet it is necessary. Assumptions can be used to bridge the inevitable gaps in knowledge, allowing us to proceed with planning yet be cognizant and clear about the specific futures wherein our plans make sense. The process of identifying our assumptions, and communicating them to those who implement our plans, is therefore of utmost importance—but it is also an effort that is deceptively challenging.¹³⁶

There are two main challenges in making assumptions to help planning. First, assumptions provide the analyst with the dangerous power of deciding how the future will unfold, at least on paper. This liberty can be exploited, even unwittingly, to predict scenarios simply because they enable the proposed strategy. It is therefore critical that assumptions do not wish away inconvenient realities or guarantee the outcomes anticipated by the plan. It is still up to the plan to create the conditions necessary for success. Assumptions, in contrast, relate to uncertainties that are beyond the scope of the plan but that would have a bearing on its execution.

Even then, assumptions should not be used to predict desirable conditions that do not already obtain or to eliminate problematic circumstances unless evidence suggests they are likely to disappear.

The second danger lies in the sheer number of assumptions that go into planning. Assumptions are implicit in everything we do and plan to do, and any attempt to account for them all will quickly amass an unhelpful number of possibilities. Every act is based on presumed continuity or change within the environment, about likely responses to the act, its utility in meeting the desired outcome, the ability of the actor to complete the act, the perception of others witnessing it—and each of these is built on further assumptions *ad nauseam*. It is, to borrow a phrase, turtles all the way down. Any assumption is itself based on further assumptions, which in turn require additional assumptions. This endless regression is unhelpful to strategists, yet assumptions do have a necessary utility as part of the planning process.

Three conditions are helpful in defining a useful remit for assumptions in strategic planning. First, assumptions must be *valid*. In other words, an assumption, to be useful, must fix a variable in a way that fits with the available evidence. Even in the face of some fluctuation, it would be valid for a government to assume that oil prices will remain stable, thereby enabling the revenue necessary to finance the response. Although laden with some risk, this assumption is based on present trends. For a government to assume that oil prices will sharply increase, thereby allowing a vastly different type of response, is clearly more suspect, barring recognized factors that may reasonably produce such a development. The example is almost farcical, yet, for most cases, determining the validity of planning assumption requires serious debate and analysis of context.

The second condition concerns *importance*. A RAND study of assumptions-based planning provides a helpful definition: “An assumption is *important* if its negation would lead to significant changes in the current operations or plans of an organization.”¹³⁷ This criterion restricts assumptions to those crucial uncertainties relating to the strategy—those that delineate helpfully the limits of its applicability. Returning to the issue of oil, the valid assumption of stable prices only becomes

important if the strategy relies on this revenue; it is an eventuality that the strategy has no bearing over, but which would affect it should it fail to obtain.

The third criterion is *necessity*, which helps to avoid the problem of endless regression. In effect, assumptions should only be made if they are needed, if they paper over an acknowledged gap in knowledge. To extend the above example, if the *valid* assumption of relatively stable oil prices is *important* to the plan, it only becomes *necessary* if a fluctuation in the oil price is possible, perhaps as determined by past precedent. There would be no need to state assumptions, even those concerning important matters, if there is no real likelihood of them ever being proved wrong (assuming continued planetary gravitational pull is both valid and important, but hardly necessary). Necessity therefore exists in tension with validity, as an entirely valid assumption is not needed and all necessary assumption, however urgent, must nonetheless be grounded in sufficient evidence to allow for productive planning. The analyst finds the sweet spot between these two, neither wasting energies on truisms nor predicting a desired future that will never come to pass.

Finally, in interrogating which assumptions are built into the plan, a distinction must be made between explicit assumptions, those stated outright to allow planning to proceed, and implicit assumptions, those subconsciously integrated into planning without express intent or acknowledgment.¹³⁸ Donald Rumsfeld may have termed these “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns,” respectively.¹³⁹ The former are typically handed to or decided on by the planning team as a basis of continued analysis. The latter are those assumptions that sneak in without anyone necessarily noticing; they are typically more difficult to spot but can prove devastating when they are suddenly proved wrong. Interrogating the strategy, critiquing it, and challenging its conception of the future—what in the trade might be termed *red teaming*—is therefore an essential process.¹⁴⁰

Given the abundant ambiguity and many pitfalls involved, the need for assumptions may be regrettable, but as a step in the strategic process it is also unavoidable; it is inherent to the projection of human behaviors into an unknown future. Some gaps in certainty can and should be narrowed or eliminated through a more rigorous estimate of the situation. Beyond that point, the goal is gener-

ally to end up with as few assumptions as possible but as many as needed. Given the flux and the high likelihood of surprise, these assumptions—both explicit and implicit—must then be demonstrated clearly in such a way as to set out the strategy's conditions for implementation—or the parameters that, if breached, would require a revised course of action.

Implementation

If the concept of response is the summary of the strategy, and the legal authorities and assumptions explain the environment in which it unfolds, the implementation box provides the detailed breakdown of its components. These components include the objectives to be reached, the strategic approach to be used, the operational art and campaign architecture employed, the means required, the main phases of the plan, and the metrics necessary to determine progress and appropriate transition points. Enveloping and informing all these components is the theory of success, or the big idea as to why the proposed strategy will work.

Using the Estimate to Design the Response. The *estimate of the situation* is the obvious starting point for determining the nature and content of the state's response. A main purpose in mapping the threat strategy, for example, is to inform the priorities and content of the counterstrategy. If an adversary is engaging in a campaign of terrorism, a campaign of counterterrorism is required—this much is clear. Yet by identifying the specific subcampaigns of this conceptual campaign of terrorism, the state is provided with more precise priorities for its own counterterrorism effort, be it population security, protecting critical infrastructure, safeguarding dignitaries or cultural icons, and so on. By the same token, the response should use the other LOEs and campaigns of the threat strategy to design its own response, thereby negating the intended effects of these actions. If economic coercion and disinformation are being pushed as meaningful campaigns within a nonviolent line of effort, how may the state respond to these challenges via its own operational art and with its own means?

Put this way, it all seems painfully obvious, yet too often governments miss critical components of their adversary's strategy, typically because of a near-exclusive focus on its use of violence and the related insistence on using the military to

find a solution. In contrast, the holistic mapping of the threat strategy encourages a more multifaceted response and the concomitant identification of the means necessary for its execution. At the same time, it is insufficient merely to mirror image the opponent's approach, or to let its strategic decisions dictate the terms of engagement. Instead, the response must at some point impose its own logic and purpose to achieve the necessary change. This is the theory of success that should guide its unfolding.

An important aspect in this endeavor may lie in addressing the roots of the problem. This is arguably the most complex and politically sensitive component of the response, as the grievances causing mobilization to violence are typically deeply embedded within the structure of the state and society. Thus, alleviating these factors will at the very least require great time and effort and will likely also be destabilizing in that each reform generates new winners and losers. Moreover, there is the broader question as to whether achieving meaningful change is even possible or commensurate to the strategic advantage gained against a specific opponent.

As an example, transforming Afghanistan into a stable democracy, as intended with Operation *Enduring Freedom*, might very well have denied al Qaeda sanctuary there, but the ambition and demands of this undertaking seemed out of proportion to this gain, particularly when the network could quite viably find a new sanctuary in another failing state. Similarly, while there is every reason for a country such as Georgia to address the ethnic tensions that facilitate Russia's interference and annexation of its territory, it is less clear how this might be done, on what timeline, and with what impact on the threat facing the country. Even if the issue could be optimally addressed (no mean feat), would Russia's strategy then collapse, or would it find new lines of attack?

None of these difficulties should sideline the importance of countering roots as a strategic priority, when and where necessary, but they do force some humility and creativity in what is at all possible, and to what effect. One principle may be to focus less on resolving the social and political contradictions being exploited and to work instead toward greater resilience.¹⁴¹ Though serious grievances will likely remain, resilience implies an ability to address them via peaceful means,

through the political opportunity structure, and not to be seduced into subversion and violence. This may require, on the one hand, removing blockages within said political opportunity structure (opening the system to peaceful contestation) and, on the other, inoculating populations against those extremist ideologies that seek violent overthrow of the system regardless of its democratic merits (countering the frame and narrative among the most relevant audiences). Even with this lower bar of ambition, however, achieving progress on these fronts is likely to remain challenging yet also, in many cases, highly important.

In terms of the frames and narratives, it is remarkable just how desperately democracies struggle with the war of ideas, even when facing millenarian groups using terrorism and corrupt autocrats and other dictators. One might have thought the virtues and values of democracy, of human rights, and of civil liberties would in and of themselves be sufficient in dismantling rival ideologies and worldviews (and, indeed, this appears to have been the assumption underpinning the West's approach largely since its victory in the Cold War). As it turns out, competing for credibility is a challenge, not least because of the difficulty of convincing those already alienated. Psychological studies confirm that directly contesting people's "core worldviews" often evokes "a defensive emotional reaction" and can therefore "counterproductively lead people to fortify their belief systems." How can we reach those who explicitly reject the outside world?¹⁴²

The estimate's analysis of framing can provide some guidance. It may be, for example, that seams emerge between the three different frames—the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational—that can be exploited. Writing in the 1930s, French journalist Emmanuel Berl grasped a major limit in communism's prognostic and motivational frames at that time: "The intellectual," he wrote, "leans toward communism because he smells the scent of death hanging over the bourgeoisie and because capitalist tyranny exasperates him. . . . But Communism then requires of him that he subscribe to a program and methods that seem to him respectively stupid and ineffective."¹⁴³ Similar limitations can be seen today in Russia's lack of vision or of proposed solutions for all the problems for which it blames the West or in the repeated failures of violent radical Islamism to deliver something concrete once its denunciations and attacks are done.¹⁴⁴

The final component in the Estimate is the present government response, and it, too, provides an important target for our present government response to strike. A detailed and informed analysis of where the current strategy is working and where it is not will help tremendously in the design of a new, improved response. Beyond that which must be fixed or retained, a key concern will be the determination of political will, as it is typically the ball and chain of any discussion of strategy. How good are concepts, theory, and best practices if the government that is to act prefers to go in a different direction? The search for better practice and more enlightened approaches appears, then, simply to chase the shadow of a larger problem.

Political will eats strategy for breakfast. Still, allowing political will to paralyze discussion makes of it a self-fulfilling alibi for not trying. Instead, all while acknowledging political will, it would seem necessary to focus analysis on the admittedly daunting task of altering conception of interest, by fostering greater awareness of what inaction will yield and of what can be achieved through a more effective approach.¹⁴⁵ Therein lies the purpose of strategy.

Mapping and Presenting the Strategy. Along with elaborating the strategy's content, a key requirement is the ability to convey it clearly. A strategy intended to deal with a complex threat will itself be complex, with multiple actors undertaking various efforts according to a particular sequence. The difficulty lies in communicating said complexity in the linear format insisted on by prose (visual representations notwithstanding). This search for clarity requires structure to arrange ideas in a manner that can be easily grasped. To this end, we return to the terminology of operational art and design yet adapted for the strategic level.

The key pillars of the strategy are the ends, ways, and means—or the objectives sought, the approaches used, and the resources deployed. Once the ends and strategic approach have been explained, operational art provides a promising way of communicating the “how,” or the content of the strategy. Specifically, the nesting of tactical and operational actions within their strategic context, or of campaigns and subcampaigns within their conceptual lines of effort, produces a map of the strategy that can be grasped both at the macro level, to discern its logic in broad terms, and at the micro level, to reveal the necessary detail and relation to the

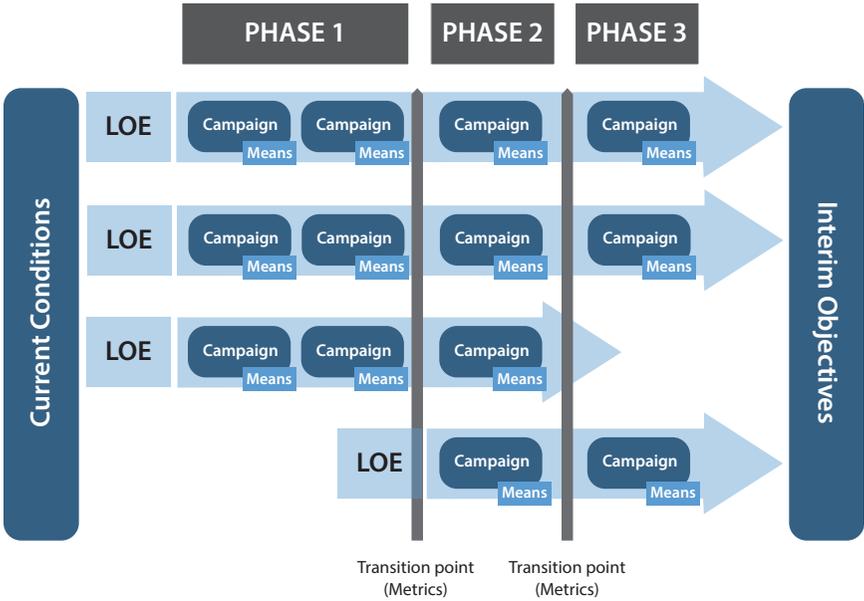
whole. The structure and hierarchy not only order operational matters within their proper category but also help, via LOEs, to communicate their common strategic direction and intent.

In assembling a strategy in this manner, an immediate requirement is proper integration of the proposed course of action, not just between ends, ways, and means (hence the image of a “strategy bridge”), or even in terms of nesting, as covered above, but also as concerns phasing and metrics. The strategy should, across all these concepts, be one unified product. Respective components must be informed by one another and the strategy’s overall logic. Figure 6 provides a graphical representation of how the different components fit together.

Phasing allows for a combination of short-term priorities with longer term visions and is key to the laying out of the strategy. By staggering the response across time, ambitious endstates can be approached incrementally, via preliminary phases that may, for pragmatic reasons, take on different priorities or approaches. Separate phases will, for example, be appropriate and capable in addressing different elements of the estimate: roots, frame and narrative, and threat strategy. The sequence will relate to how the plan unfolds across time and space (and to the requirements of the case). The response may have phases that are sequential or concurrent or a combination thereof. The phases may be defined by key activities, key conditions to be met, or key time periods or milestones. Answers to these questions are impossible to predict in general terms and relate instead to the requirements of the case. What is most important is that the phasing construct convincingly charts a viable path from present conditions to the desired endstate, acknowledging the likely effects of each step along the way and the reactions of other actors.

Phasing brings in the question of metrics, which are used to derive appropriate transition points between phases and criteria for overall success. The question of metrics is bedeviling, as evidenced by the infamously misleading “body count” measure used in Vietnam. When a U.S. colonel insisted, after the war, that his country had never lost a single battle, his Vietnamese counterpart quipped, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”¹⁴⁶ On the political plane, the Americans had lost—technology and firepower notwithstanding.

Figure 6. Sample Strategic Plan, Showing Integration of Operational Art, Campaigns, Phasing, Transition Points, and Measures of Effectiveness



The conundrum then and now is that irregular warfare is concerned with intangible and immeasurable factors, which clash with the objectivity and precision striven for in official accounts of effectiveness.¹⁴⁷ The challenge is compounded by what many practitioners believe is a fetishization of metrics, leading to the counting of whatever can be counted. During his time in southern Iraq from 2003 to 2004, Sir Hilary Synnott noted something of a “fixation” with such quantitative metrics as the number of schools built, roads paved, or pipelines fixed, writing, “These were figures which our governments liked to publicise,” but adding, “they conveyed nothing of the reality.”¹⁴⁸

A helpful starting point is agreement on terminology. The military tends to distinguish between *measures of performance* and *measures of effectiveness*, though the two can be put more simply as *inputs* and *outcomes*. Measures of performance are used to assess whether what was planned is being done: if more patrols are

intended to bring about security, measures of performance gauge whether the patrols were carried out in accordance with the strategy. No doubt an important part of institutional self-assessment, it often proves too tempting to use these types of indicators—relatively measurable and often within our grasp—to evaluate their effectiveness. The result is the so-called self-licking ice cream cone, to use another type of political jargon.¹⁴⁹

Measures of effectiveness concern the degree to which our input is generating its desired effect. Here, it is helpful to distinguish between output and outcome. To return to Sir Hilary's observation, the number of projects completed is an output that is intended to bring about an outcome, typically a political effect. David Kilcullen made this distinction in his work on counterinsurgency. Referring to roadbuilding in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, he noted that "what has made this program successful is not the road per se. . . . [It is that] people have used the *process of the road's construction*, especially the close engagement with district and tribal leaders this entails, as a framework around which to organize a full-spectrum strategy."¹⁵⁰ The greater the level of abstraction, however, the more difficult the task of desired effect.¹⁵¹

Indeed, while it is important to differentiate among inputs, outputs, and outcomes, it does not significantly simplify the task of choosing the right measures for a particular case. A major review of recent campaigns describes the task as "quite hard if not impossible," due to disagreement over what matters, what portends strategic progress, and the search for broadly applicable measures that can compare effectiveness across time and space. The most relevant metrics are typically those that measure intangible factors (legitimacy, resilience, trust, credibility, and attitudes), yet finding a somewhat objective way of measuring these can be difficult, not least in a climate leery of anecdotal data and always on the lookout for a "return on investment." Unsurprisingly, many resort to the "illusion of science": color-coded graphs, sometimes stoplights, arrows pointing up or down (or sideways), or numerical values ascribed without any published standards or explanation.¹⁵²

The litany of obstacles described here may frustrate those looking for clear answers, yet the search for generic solutions is likely to fail, as each case requires

its own assessment. In the end, for all its business management jargon and undisputed status as an important part of strategy-making, the question of metrics is more art than science. To cite sociologist Stanislaw Andreski:

*The ideal of objectivity is much more complex and elusive than the pedlars of methodological gimmicks would have us believe; and . . . it requires much more than an adherence to the technical rules of verification, or recourse to recondite unemotive terminology: namely, a moral commitment to justice—the will to be fair to people and institutions, to avoid the temptations of wishful and venomous thinking, and the courage to resist threats and enticements.*¹⁵³

Regrettably, these are not typically the ideals promoted by bureaucracies or those shaping progress reports to the powers that be.

On this note, a concluding word on the implementation box is warranted. Despite the complexity of the strategy and the difficulty of communicating it accurately, the biggest and most important condition remains the profound idea of what will generate success. No amount of terminology or mechanical cramming will substitute for it. The need to retain a clear focus on what matters is precisely the reason for nesting, so that the details provided relate clearly to the bigger picture. Everything must flow from this central idea, lest style suffocate substance.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation

A change in strategy implies not only new opportunities but also new risks. These must be identified and communicated to those deciding on strategic matters to account for what to expect both positively and negatively from the proposed change in direction. Yet presenting the nature and gravity of risk is another complicated element within the planning process. By and large, despite great institutional attention to the task, risk assessments fail to predict the weak points of the strategy and (accordingly) to find suitable redress. One analyst studying the use of risk assessment in national security concludes that despite the growth of “risk

frameworks,” the process is too often “ill-defined and misleading.”¹⁵⁴ Even within the field of financial services, which arguably does more risk analysis than any other sector, the practice has been called into question given the failure to account for contingencies that caused massive loss or even the collapse of entire firms.¹⁵⁵

To some degree, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect human beings to predict the future, to expect the unexpected, and to rise above the cognitive vagaries that bound our collective reason. Hard work and focus certainly help, but as with metrics, precisely because the task is seen as so important the methods of analysis often become overly convoluted. In the search to appease masters who will accept, at best, only minimal risk, planners get into the habit of dressing up courses of action to meet this expectation rather than engaging in a sincere and untainted discussion of what may go awry. Underlying such political pressures, there is also disagreement on how best to understand risk, how to define it, and therefore also how the concept should be used.

At the possibility of oversimplification, risk can helpfully be understood as that which can go wrong due to the change in strategy. This field of risk can be further divided into two categories. The first group of risks concerns the plan’s likely points of failure, due to a lack of either capacity or capability, or the absence of other requirements. The second concerns the risks that flow specifically from the strategy’s successful execution. This type of risk speaks to the strategy’s implications for other national interests and the unintended consequences of getting it right.

If risks are identified, what are the consequences for strategy? Clearly, it would be foolhardy to propose a strategy that even planners identify as laden with risk. Indeed, in some cases, risk identification may force the analyst back to previous components in the framework to ensure that the product is revised and avoids the uncovered hazard. The process of crafting a course of action is never linear. Each component speaks to the others until the final product is one integrated whole.

No matter how much tinkering, however, every course of action will imply some risk, and, at some undefinable point, it becomes necessary to communicate these as part of the final product. Doctrine calls these *residual risks*—those that remain when the unnecessary or unacceptable risks have been eliminated.¹⁵⁶ Risk itself cannot be eliminated; even staying the course, or not acting at all, denotes

some risk. The test is therefore whether those of the proposed strategy are less significant, particularly in relation to the positional advantage being gained. As Michael Mazarr notes, “The goal would not be to prevent bad outcomes. Instead the purpose . . . would be to ensure that leaders make strategic judgments with eyes wide open to possible consequences.”¹⁵⁷

When the residual risks have been identified, the next logical step is to devise possible steps that may somehow mitigate their expected harm. Plans for mitigation could be full-fledged branch plans with their own logic, sequencing, and prioritization, or they could be far simpler, pointing to possible measures that might reduce the likelihood of risks materializing or of their consequences when they do. In this context, it is important to understand that if risks of failure do materialize, it means that a vulnerable part of the strategy has indeed broken, and so fresh thinking will be required to find new ways forward to absorb the damage being done. Given the need for new solutions, risk-mitigating measures would typically not be found in the strategy as is. Indeed, they may not even be desired. Instead, they often involve a “Plan B,” or an emergency measure that will only become necessary and be used should the original plan misfire or, even, succeed yet harm other interests.

Conclusion

It is never easy to propose a framework for analyzing and responding more effectively to today’s most vexing strategic problems. For starters, many observers insist that if the framework is not entirely original, it has nothing new to contribute. Second, and conversely, there is concept fatigue and the unwillingness to consider any new (*or old*) terminology as anything other than distracting jargon. Third, the use of frameworks is thought to encourage template thinking and to narrow the intellectual margins of the analyst. Fourth, it is suggested that policy errors committed by states are unrelated to the conceptual tools at their disposal, which are anyway advanced, and that further refinement on this front merely chases the shadow of bigger problems. Fifth (but far from finally), everything that is proposed is believed to be “already obvious” and therefore not worth reprinting or exploring.

These criticisms have some validity, and it is important to emphasize that what is suggested here is not seen as particularly contentious or as a panacea for strategic malaise. Nothing within the CISA Framework for Analysis and Action removes from the analyst the cardinal responsibility for strategic artistry, and little within it will compensate for deficiencies on this front. Indeed, it would be unwise to confuse an analytical tool with the very product it is intended to craft. Similarly, this framework is unlikely to “fix” the strategic pathologies that prevent a better response to irregular challenges. Nonetheless, it can—through proper investment in education—encourage greater awareness of the nature of contemporary conflict and the tradecraft involved in drawing up an appropriate response. Finally, this approach is but one possibility for how to engage. There are many diagnostic tools that can be used to confront ambiguous threats.

With that, the Framework for Analysis and Action is being shared because CISA faculty, their students, and their alumni—spread across the world—have found it particularly effective and relevant to irregular warfare and its associated challenges. Indeed, in our experience, both in the classroom and beyond, this approach has often provided comprehensive guidance and a structure for planning where none existed before. By fusing insights drawn from academic treatment of mobilization, legitimacy, and framing with the military methods of assessing strategy, it offers one way of capturing and rendering usable analysis relating to irregular threats. By going one step further, in providing a roadmap and methodology for how to design a response, it moves beyond simply admiring the problem and encourages the creation of strategy.

That is not to say that the framework is complete or cannot be improved. As the very fact of publishing a second edition of this monograph should demonstrate, the product is always evolving. Indeed, a final purpose in sharing this approach is precisely to provoke a conversation, to push for further refinements in our thinking and approaches to the strategic problems of today and tomorrow.

Appendix A. Strategic Estimate of the Situation: A Study Guide

This guide assists your production of a Strategic Estimate of the Situation. In your use of this guidance, please recall:

- ◆ This is not a checklist to be approached simply by responding in turn to each question. You, not the framework, are responsible for weaving together the relevant data, providing the analysis, and drawing appropriate conclusions.

- ◆ *Never include anything just because the guidance tells you to do so.* Use the Estimate framework and the associated terminology to interrogate your case; know (and demonstrate in your argumentation) why what you include is relevant and necessary to the point being made.

- ◆ The framework lexicon is used in conjunction with the terminology of operational design and art as derived from joint doctrine.

Problem

In two to three paragraphs, distill the nature of the problem, providing both a synthesis of the Estimate and an introduction. Reflect on the following questions, but save details for later:

- ◆ What is the political nature of the problem that the state is facing?
- ◆ What is the name and nature of the threat? Is it a terrorist group, insurgency, transnational criminal organization, militia, state government, or combination thereof?
 - ◆ Provide the information necessary (and only that information) to explain what the threat is doing now (and why).
 - ◆ Demonstrate the direction of the conflict based on current trends: who is benefiting, who is hurting, and why does it matter?
 - ◆ Why is this problem proving so difficult to counter? Why is a change in policy needed?
 - ◆ A map of areas discussed should be situated here.

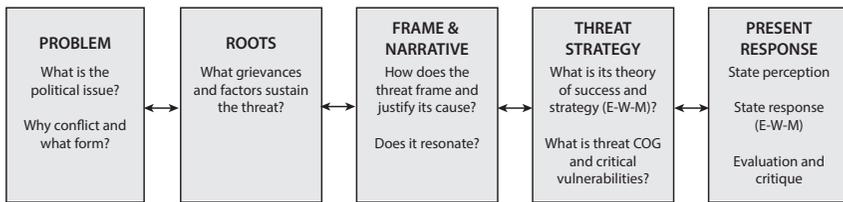
Note: The problem statement is the distillation of the analysis encompassed by the entire Estimate. As such, it cannot be finalized before the other boxes of the Estimate framework have been completed.

Roots

Roots is concerned with the factors that produce the threat—or how structural factors are undermining the state and allowing the threat to thrive. The grievances or “drivers” may be actual or perceived (that is, objective or subjective, tangible or intangible). The issue is their resonance in society and the legitimacy of those championing violent ways of achieving change.

The Roots section will differ according to the nature of the conflict:

Figure A1. Graphical Representation of the Strategic Estimate Framework



◆ In insurgency and other bottom-up efforts at change (including those sponsored by outside states), analysis should interrogate how *macro* factors (context, structure) lead certain individuals in society (*micro*) to embrace collective attempts at change via organizations (*meso*). Each facet must be interrogated, not linearly but in an integrated manner, as part of your overall analysis. Specifically:

□ Macro: What are the contextual factors that enable the threat, allowing it to amass support or strength? Typical examples of such drivers include entrenched inequity, poor governance, corruption, geographical isolation, lack of opportunity, abusive state behavior, or unresolved historical legacies, but the list is far from exhaustive.

□ Micro: assuming these drivers are relevant, why do they compel some but not others to support violent or subversive strategies of change? Can we determine

what groupings or individuals are more likely to be driven to extreme solutions? Why them? Why not others?

❑ Meso: why does the collective actor (be it a group or a government) favor violent, subversive, or destabilizing strategies? Why is such a strategy seen as necessary to resolve the political problem at hand? Was mediation of contextual issues through “normal politics” not possible (if so, who/what blocked it?) or not desired (if so, why)? Put differently, has violence emerged from a deficiency within the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) or due to a violent extremist ideology uninterested in peaceful change?

◆ In interstate conflicts, where one state is attacking another using irregular methods, Roots will consider:

❑ The vulnerabilities and contradictions that are enabling the attack and limiting the victim state’s resilience and resistance potential. This may refer to any number of weaknesses, dependencies, schisms, and other limitations. What pressure points are being exploited?

❑ The complexes and reasons for an outside state to launch such aggressive and subversive action. This may refer to its own insecurities, sense of impunity, or of desperation. What are the push factors for its behavior?

❑ Regardless of type of conflict, the hard-nosed purpose of the Roots analysis is to identify dispassionately what factors and flows are nourishing the threat, so that they may be addressed as part of a comprehensive response. As such, remember this intent and *do not get lost in the details*.

Frame and Narrative

Identify and analyze the threat’s:

- ◆ Diagnostic frame (framing of problem and apportioning of blame)
- ◆ Prognostic frame (framing of a necessary solution, and the justification for violence or extreme measures)
- ◆ Motivational frame (framing of why participation and support of others are necessary, despite risks).

- ◆ For each, explain the *narrative* used, be it to explain the world, advocate for a solution, or compel participation.

- ◆ To the degree warranted by the case, explain the threat's use of *frame alignment* (achieving resonance with broader frames and causes in society to gain legitimacy and allies).

- ◆ Evaluate the *resonance* of the framing structure among the *relevant or contested audiences*. Which are these? Use relevant data to support this evaluation.

Threat Strategy (Ends, Ways, Means)

Note: The nature of the threat you are addressing may be potential or fully evolved, an individual or a group, a nonstate entity or a state. Discussion below is relevant to all these categories. It is the analyst's responsibility to map the appropriate lines of effort (LOEs) and campaigns of the strategy at hand. The strategy is the totality of Ends, Ways, and Means, united via a theory of success that brings the desired change. Ways are a key component (the "strategic approach") but are not "the strategy." Furthermore, it is important to note that the ends-ways-means construct is best conceptualized in symbiotic fashion—*its components do not comprise a sequential list*.

- ◆ Ends: What are the goals of the threat and how do these relate to the conflict's political essence?

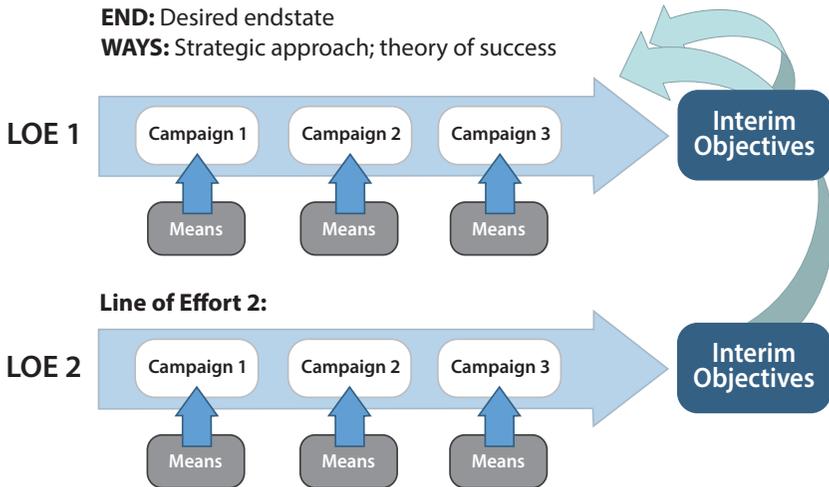
- Critical interrogation of stated objectives may be necessary, particularly when circumstances have made the realization of the declared endstate a distant prospect. What, in the interim, can be said to constitute the threat's objective?

- ◆ Ways

- What is the threat's strategic approach? What, in essence, is the approach to getting what it wants (for example, hybrid warfare, People's War, nonviolence, focismo, and so forth)?

- How does this approach bear the promise of resolving the threat actor's grievances? In other words, what is the *theory of success* underpinning the approach?

Figure A2. The Logical Relationship Among Ends, Ways, Campaigns, and Means



□ Now the strategy should be *mapped* to facilitate construction of an appropriate counter. We do this by identifying *lines of effort*, *campaigns* (bundles of activity), and—as appropriate—*subcampaigns*. In your analysis, always render explicit the relation of operational activity and strategic objectives (often via interim objectives).

□ To map the strategy, five leading questions should be fully interrogated:

◇ What, if anything, is the threat doing *politically* to bring about its desired objectives?

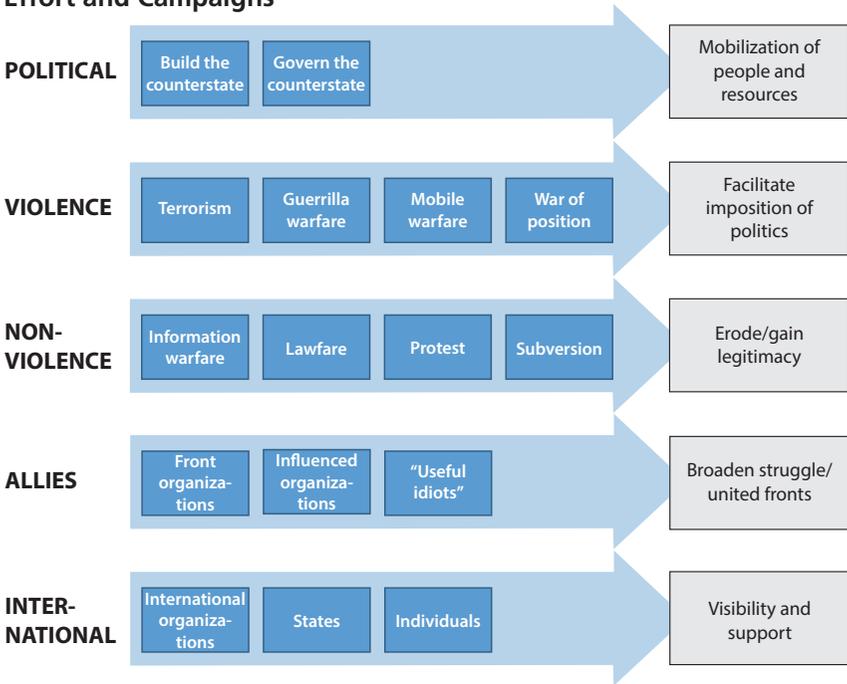
◇ How, if at all, is the threat using *violence* (that is, in what forms, by and against whom)?

◇ How, if at all, is the threat using *nonviolence*—also known as political warfare (that is, in what forms and by whom)?

◇ How, if at all, is the threat using external *allies* to reach its objectives (what role do they play)?

◇ How, if at all, is the threat *internationalizing* the conflict? To what effect?

Figure A3. A Standard People’s War Insurgency, Mapped as Lines of Effort and Campaigns



❑ Interrogation of these questions yields evidence of action, which can be grouped into campaigns. Two or more campaigns united in strategic direction and intent form a line of effort.

❑ Responding directly to the analytical prompts above, these LOEs could simply be labelled the political LOE, violent LOE, nonviolent LOE, ally LOE, and/or international LOE. They could also be labeled differently—whatever captures the strategy best. However labelled, each line of effort must have an *interim strategic objective*—a *purpose*—that contributes to the threat’s goal.

◆ Means: What are the threat’s resources, structures, and materiel?

❑ Means are not a separate concern from the “how” of strategy. As the strategy is mapped, include to the degree possible consideration of how the threat

is engaging in this strategy. What resources and specialized means are being deployed?

□ A separate discussion of means may also be appropriate to indicate holdings, structures, bases, ministries, command and control structures, and so forth. Diagrams and maps can be important here.

◆ Phasing: Is there a distinct “schedule” or sequence that the threat associates with its plan? How does the current phase of the conflict relate to its realization of political goals?

◆ Based on this mapping exercise, is it possible to determine the *center of gravity* (COG)? The COG is the focal point of power and coherence, without which the threat strategy could not function or be irrelevant. In irregular warfare, the COG often relates to perceptions of legitimacy of either the government or the threat, which in turn relates to the desire and interest of key actors in either supporting or opposing a political movement.

◆ To identify ways of addressing the COG, determine the threat’s *critical vulnerabilities* (CVs). A CV is a component of the threat strategy that is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack, creating a significant effect. It may relate to mismatches between Frames and Strategy (what is believed versus what is done), to gaps between Roots and Threat Strategy (what drives participation versus threat’s mediation of grievances), or to tensions within any component of the Estimate.

Present Response

Note: This is a discussion and critique of the *current* state response to the threat you are analyzing.

◆ State perception: How does the state frame the threat and/or the problem? How does it assess the threat COG? How does it view its own progress in addressing this threat? How does it describe its own reason for fighting the threat?

- ◆ State response: How is the state responding to the threat strategy? Is it correctly addressing legitimacy? What is the strategic approach and theory of success?
- ◆ Critique: Is the state's perception accurate—of its progress, the conflict, or the threat? Is the state making progress in defeating or countering the threat? Does the state's response address the symptoms of the problem or the problem itself (the underlying causes)? Is it appropriately addressing the Roots of the Conflict, the Frame and Narratives, and/or the Threat Strategy? As applicable, is the state affecting the COG via deft exploitation of the CVs?
- ◆ Offer a thorough critique of the state response that identifies and explains its strengths and weaknesses.

Note: The two most common errors in this section are:

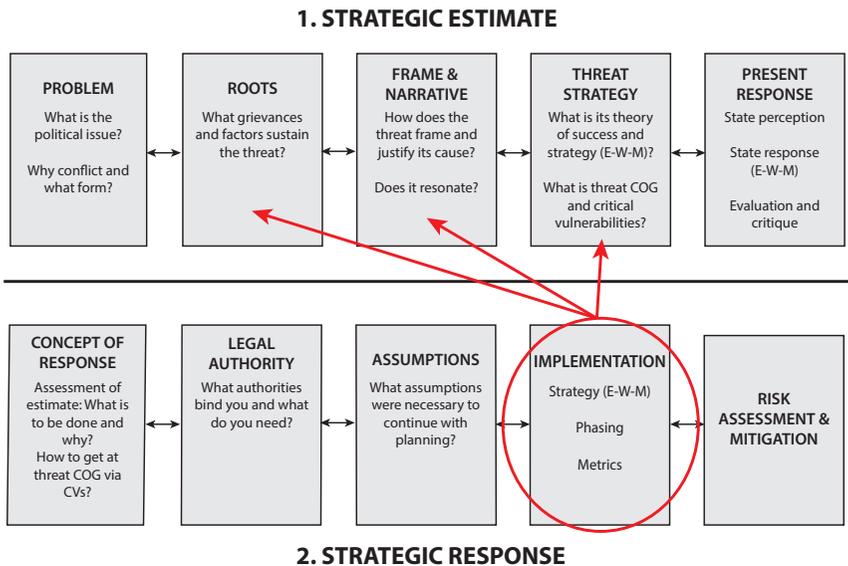
- ◆ Merely listing state programs. It is the interaction of the two contenders that is at issue. How is the struggle of capability and strategic approaches stacking up? Has a struggle for legitimacy resulted or has violence (in the form of raw power) changed the dynamic you are examining?
- ◆ Confusing the government response in past years for *the present phase* that currently matters. What the present phase is will depend on the specifics of the case but is always distinguished by meaningful continuity with the dynamics of the conflict as they express themselves today.

Appendix B. The Course of Action: A Study Guide

Guidance

Your strategic response builds on your strategic estimate, producing an Irregular Warfare Plan. Both come together in one document, as it is impossible to do the Response without the Estimate.

Figure B1. The Estimate and COA Frameworks and Their Relation



Concept of Response

Summarize your recommended response to the problem analyzed in your Estimate. Illustrate *how* and *why* your plan differs from the present government response analyzed in the Estimate. The point is to be succinct. Capture your strategy in two to four paragraphs.

One way of crafting your response is by revisiting and seeking to address the strategic *center of gravity*, often via the threat's *critical vulnerabilities*. To the degree that the COG speaks to questions of legitimacy (often the case in irregular warfare), your response must be designed to address issues with the political opportunity

structure and/or the nonmediation of grievances, real or imagined, that sustain the threat. Your response should also be driven by a theory of success and/or the position that you want to attain and how. These theories must be grounded in *evidence* concerning the case, drawn from your Estimate.

In describing the *type of response* you are proposing, demonstrate:

- ◆ The strategic approach of your response (counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, counternarcotic, counter state, counter-some-other-threat, or some hybrid of these?). Do not feel confined by labels. Use your own words to express your intent—but be specific.

- ◆ In *broad terms*, the ends-ways-means construct of your response, its main phases, along with the theory of success, however worded—that is, how/why the response will succeed?

- ◆ The national interests that guide you:

- It should be clear which government the response is intended for

- On this basis, why your proposed response is superior to the government's present strategy, not only for addressing the threat but also *strategically*, in relation to the broader national interest.

Legal

While you may have the ways and means to accomplish a variety of responses, your plan must adhere to proper *legal authorities*. Ensuring that you have a legal basis requires interrogation of your planned action and consideration of legal ambiguities and challenges (these could arise from questions of sovereignty, use of force, constitutional constraints, or treaty law).

- ◆ As concerns the use of force, is your response based on *international humanitarian law* (the Law of Armed Conflict) or *the rule of law* (a law enforcement approach)? Or is it some hybrid of these?

- ◆ Are the necessary international and domestic legal authorities in place for those actions that require legal clarification? If legal authorities are vague or

lacking, can you implement temporary or new measures? You may find a need for your state's legislative body to enact specific laws to address the threat.

- ◆ Be aware that legal considerations can be formal—the rule of law—or informal, relating to cultural, social, and religious factors that will constrain your response.

Do not use this section to list all laws that relate to your conflict or case. Restrict the analysis to the specific red flags that might prompt legal review and need clarification as to the existing authorities. Where authorities and legal backing are lacking, elaborate on the necessary changes in legislation.

Assumptions

What assumptions did you *have to make* to allow for planning into the future? State and explain these assumptions.

Assumptions are used to make necessary predictions and to fill in gaps in required information or facts that are needed to continue planning. Your assumptions may relate to areas of continuity or change and delineate an environment in which your proposed course of action is relevant.

Bear in mind:

- ◆ Planning assumptions should be *valid* (supported by evidence), *important* (relevant to your plan), and *necessary* (address an area where uncertainty is crippling).

- ◆ As assumptions relate to key areas of *uncertainty*, aim to include as few assumptions as appropriate to enable planning. As far as possible, the Estimate should be used to provide the evidentiary basis for the strategy.

- ◆ Planning assumptions should relate to *uncertainties beyond the scope* of your own response. As such, planning assumptions are different from anticipated outcomes. Do not assume that desired conditions will apply if they do not already do so; do not assume problematic circumstances will change unless evidence suggests this is likely. Do not let the assumptions do the hard work for you.

What are the implications of your assumptions being proved wrong? Is there sufficient flexibility in your strategic response or must it be rewritten?

Implementation

This is the actual setting forth of the detailed elements of the plan to address the problem. *As appropriate to your case*, you must detail how your proposed response counters: the roots of the problem, the threat frame(s) and narrative(s), and the threat strategy.

Begin with a synopsis of how you *operationalize* the *Concept of Response* discussed earlier.

- ◆ Identify your strategic objectives (ends).
- ◆ Identify your strategic approach (a broad overview of overall *nature* of response, its key *phases* of implementation and/or *LOE*, along with main *means* involved)—that is, ways, operationalized by *means*.
- ◆ Explain within this section on the strategic approach how it responds to your theory of success.

This introduction to your strategy will allow you to get into further detail. In presenting the strategy, do not think of its constituent elements as separate but rather integrate them as part of one product, leading from the present to your desired objective and encompassing the necessary *LOEs*, metrics, phases, and means (see figure B2).

The *LOEs* will likely differ across the different phases of the plan so that each one builds on progress made until strategic and sustainable objectives can be reached. Different phases will be appropriate in addressing different elements of the Estimate—Roots, Frame and Narrative, and Threat Strategy. This will relate to how the plan unfolds across time and space (and to the requirements of your case). Your response may have phases that are sequential or concurrent or a combination of these. How will you decide to transition from one phase to the next? Are your phases based on time or are there specific conditions determined through metrics (see next section) that determine when to transition from one phase to the next?

means little if you do not specify just who and what is to execute a task and what that task will be.

In explaining your implementation, *provide visual aids* as necessary to illustrate how the response will unfold. These should include maps or charts denoting geographic and human terrain—population density, demographic data, religious affiliations, political alliances, natural resources, criminal activity, or whatever variable is most relevant to your case.

Ensure that your response, as presented, appears *feasible* (it is a response that the state could execute); *reasonable* (it is rational and logical); *acceptable* (within the bounds of relevant law and to the court of public opinion—both domestically and internationally); and *sustainable* (the results achieved will be consolidated rather than reversed). These conditions are not a list of conditions to be checked off one by one, but crucial considerations to guide you throughout your planning and design.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation

One of the most overlooked and difficult elements in strategic planning is understanding the risks associated with executing your strategic response and devising ways to mitigate such risk. Risk is the probability of failure in achieving an objective at an acceptable cost.

Some of the questions to consider include:

- ◆ Where are the greatest risks of failure?
 - Where do you see the greatest risk for a mismatch or disconnection between your ends, ways, and means?
 - Similarly, where do you see the greatest risk for an invalid assumption?

- ◆ What is the risk associated with your response, even if it succeeds?
 - What is the risk of executing the strategy to your other national interests?
 - What might be the unintended consequences of your plan, even if it succeeds?

For each risk identified, consider first whether changes to your response would resolve this vulnerability. Edit the response as necessary to arrive at unavoidable, acceptable *residual risks*. For these, develop plans for mitigation. If these risks are realized, what alternative measures could be taken to reduce the magnitude of the damage incurred? Can ends, ways, or means be rethought?

Notes

¹Thomas A. Marks and David H. Ucko, “Gray Zone in Red: China Revisits the Past,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (February 17, 2021), 181–204, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1870422>>.

²Ashley Lane, “Iran’s Islamist Proxies in the Middle East,” *The Islamists* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, December 17, 2020), available at <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>>; Michael Knights, “Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq,” *CTC Sentinel*, January 2020.

³*Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 2, available at <<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>>.

⁴George W. Bush, “Remarks to the Troops at Norfolk Naval Air Station in Norfolk, Virginia,” *The American Presidency Project*, February 13, 2001, available at <www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45992>.

⁵*Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), 1.

⁶Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance—1950 to Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977); Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

⁷Draws on David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, “Violence in Context: Mapping the Strategies and Operational Art of Irregular Warfare,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (April 2018), 206–233, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1432922>>.

⁸The 2018 National Defense Strategy stated categorically that “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern.” *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 1.

⁹Overlooked universally in Western discussion is the reality that key facets of the approach under discussion have been codified doctrine for roughly a century in both Russia (originally, the Soviet Union) and China, as well as the loser in the Chinese civil war, Taiwan. For discussion and assessment of the China and Taiwan cases, as influenced by the Soviet example and direct involvement, see Thomas A. Marks, *Counterrevolution in China: Wang Sheng and the Kuomintang* (London: Frank Cass, 1996). For North Korea, see Benjamin R. Young, *Guns, Guerillas [sic], and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World*, Cold War International History Project (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ For the useful backstory to this phenomenon, see Richard Middleton, *The War of American Independence, 1775–1783*, 1st ed. (New York: Pearson, 2012).

¹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 75.

¹² The framework was originally created by Thomas A. Marks and draws on his life work and scholarship on an aggregation of the People's War approach, used by the American Patriots and the Asian theorists, notably Mao Zedong, and others.

¹³ Joint Operating Concept, *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, May 17, 2010), 9, available at <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_iw_v2.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162021-510>.

¹⁴ As cited in Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Picador, 2001), 211.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Operations other than war* included “strikes, raids, peace enforcement, counterterrorism, enforcement of sanctions, support to insurgency and counterinsurgency, and evacuation of noncombatants.” See Joint Publication (JP) 3-07, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 1995), vii. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ David H. Ucko, “Nobody Puts IW in an Annex: It’s Time to Embrace Irregular Warfare as a Strategic Priority,” *Modern War Institute*, October 14, 2020, available at <<https://mwi.usma.edu/nobody-puts-iw-in-an-annex-its-time-to-embrace-irregular-warfare-as-a-strategic-priority/>>.

¹⁸ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Prediction,” *Military-Industrial Kurier*, no. 8 (476), March 27, 2013, available at <http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf>. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, 2006), 13.

²⁰ Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

²¹ See, for example, Kyrylo Sakhniuk, “Russian Information Warfare Against Ukraine,” *The Journal of Counterterrorism and Homeland Security International* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2022), 38–45. For discussion of Russian simultaneous focus on the nonviolent side of the equation, see Nikolay Y. Naydenov, “Russia’s Gray Zone Threat to Bulgaria,” *The Journal of Counterterrorism and Homeland Security International* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2022), 46–55.

²² Alexis G. Grynkewich, “Welfare as Warfare: How Violent Non-State Groups Use Social Services to Attack the State,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 4 (April 4, 2008), 350–370; Shawn Teresa Flanigan, “Charity as Resistance: Connections Between Charity, Contentious Politics, and Terror,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 7

(October 2006), 641–655. On the use of political fronts by insurgent groups, see David H Ucko, *The Insurgent's Dilemma: A Struggle to Prevail* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), chap. 4; Benedetta Berti, *Armed Political Organizations: From Conflict to Integration* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Arie Perlinger, *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*, 2nd ed., Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy, ed. Roger Eatwell (London: Routledge, 2009).

²³ Useful in this context are two articles, adapted from work conducted at the College of International Security Affairs, by two U.S. students, using the framework presented here. See Jesse S. Curtis, “Springing the ‘Tacitus Trap’: Countering Chinese State-Sponsored Disinformation,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (February 17, 2021), 229–265, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1870429>>; Cary Mittelmark, “Playing Chess with the Dragon: Chinese-U.S. Competition in the Era of Irregular Warfare,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (February 17, 2021), 205–228, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1870423>>.

²⁴ Thomas A. Marks, *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007), 41–45.

²⁵ Thomas A. Marks, “Counterinsurgency in the Age of Globalism,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 27, no. 1 (2007), 24–25.

²⁶ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 5.

²⁷ As Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, put it during an interview shortly after the killing of Qasem Soleimani, “Beautiful military equipment’ don’t [sic] rule the world. People rule the world. People. The United States must wake up to the reality that the people of this region are enraged, that the people of this region want the United States out, and the United States cannot stay in this region with the people of the region not wanting it anymore.” CNN, January 7, 2020, available at <www.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/01/07/iran-soleimani-javad-zarif-donald-trump-pleitgen-intv-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn>.

²⁸ See, for example, Young, *Guns, Guerillas [sic], and the Great Leader*.

²⁹ As Niels Woudstra explains, China has occupied vital islands in the South China Sea not by launching “large-scale offensives against its neighbours” but by “patiently broadening its influence in the area, often by using civilian or paramilitary means.” See Niels Woudstra, “Winning Without Killing in the South China Sea,” in *NL Arms Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2017: Winning Without Killing: The Strategic and Operational Utility of Non-Kinetic Capabilities in Crises*, ed. Paul A.L. Duchéine and Frans P.B. Osinga (Amsterdam: Asser Press/Springer, 2017), 280.

³⁰ See, for example, Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters* (New York: Abrams Books, 2020).

³¹ See, respectively, Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Prediction”; Liang Qiao, Al Santoli, and Xiangsui Wang, *Unrestricted Warfare: China’s Master Plan to Destroy America* (Panama City, Panama: Pan American Publishing, 2002).

³² Evidence that has emerged concerning Russian attempts to shape U.S. elections results has been overwhelming. See, for example, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For useful contextualization, see Robert S. Hinck, Skye C. Cooley, and Randolph Kluver, *Global Media and Strategic Narratives of Contested Democracy: Chinese, Russian, and Arabic Media Narratives of the U.S. Presidential Election* (London: Routledge, 2020).

³³ Alessandro Ford, “Chinese Fishing Fleet Leaves Ecuador, Chile, Peru Scrambling to Respond,” *InSight Crime*, November 5, 2020, available at <<https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/china-fishing-fleet-response/>>; “Gangsterism with Chinese Characteristics,” *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, February 4, 2022, available at <<https://ipdefenseforum.com/2022/02/gangsterism-with-chinese-characteristics/>>; Kathy Gilsinan, “China’s Bargain on Global Influence Is Paying Off,” *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2020, available at <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/china-global-influence-who-united-states/611227/>>.

³⁴ See, for example, Stephen J. Flanagan et al., *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*, Research Report (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), available at <<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1086498.pdf>>; Uwe Hartmann, “The Evolution of the Hybrid Threat, and Resilience as a Countermeasure,” NATO Research Paper No. 139 (September 2017), 1–8.

³⁵ Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2006), 22.

³⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Information Revolution and Power,” *Current History* 113, no. 759 (January 2014), 20. Citing John Arquilla.

³⁷ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamini, “Review of ‘ISIS: The State of Terror,’” *Syria Comment*, March 27, 2015, available at <www.joshualandis.com/blog/review-of-isis-the-state-of-terror/>.

³⁸ Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco Press/HarperCollins, 2016), 150. See also Laura Huey, “This Is Not Your Mother’s Terrorism: Social Media, Online Radicalization and the Practice of Political Jamming,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6, no. 2 (May 25, 2015), 2, available at <<https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1159>>; Jerome P. Bjelopera, *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat*, R41416 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 23, 2013), 20.

³⁹ It must be kept in mind that what is being posited is not merely an effort at deception but the advancing of correct interpretation of objective realities—as seen by the challenger—in a subjective manner that advances the cause. Vladimir Lenin, among many possibilities, made clear that strategic fidelity allowed any degree of tactical compromise.

Use of the latter did not mean belief in the former was duplicitous. Useful discussion in Sonia Ryang, *Language and Truth in North Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021).

⁴⁰ Alan Greeley Misenheimer, *Thucydides' Other "Traps": The United States, China, and the Prospect of "Inevitable" War* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 53–54. We are indebted to Jesse Curtis for alerting us to this concept.

⁴¹ Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>>; Marks, *Counterrevolution in China*.

⁴² Gerasimov, "The Value of Science in Prediction."

⁴³ *Irregular Warfare*, 9.

⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 69.

⁴⁵ Christopher Coker, *Rebooting Clausewitz: "On War" in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 146.

⁴⁶ F.G. Hoffman, *Decisive Force: The New American Way of War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

⁴⁷ Philip N. Howard, Bharath Ganesh, and Dimitra Liotsiou, *The IRA, Social Media, and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012–2018* (Oxford: Computational Propaganda Research Project, December 2018). See also Mie Kim Young, "Uncover: Strategies and Tactics of Russian Interference in U.S. Elections," Project DATA (Digital Ad Tracking & Analysis), University of Wisconsin, Madison, September 4, 2018, available at <https://journalism.wisc.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/41/files/2018/09/Uncover.Kim_v.5.0905181.pdf>.

⁴⁸ John Raidt, "Coronavirus Has Exposed the United States' Own Political Virus," *Atlantic Council*, April 29, 2020, available at <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/beyond-covid-19/coronavirus-has-exposed-the-united-states-own-political-virus/>>. For exploitation thereof, see Michael R. Gordon and Dustin Volz, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2021, available at <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-disinformation-campaign-aims-to-undermine-confidence-in-pfizer-other-covid-19-vaccines-u-s-officials-say-11615129200>>.

⁴⁹ Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," *International Security* 32, no. 2 (2007), 40.

⁵⁰ Adrian Karatnycky and Alexander J. Motyl, "Ukraine's Promising Path to Reform," *Foreign Affairs*, July 16, 2018, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2018-07-16/ukraines-promising-path-reform>; Isabel Weinger, "Die Ukraine—Transparent, aber Korrupt?" *Auslandsinformationen*, no. 4 (2019), 13. In Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index of 2019, Ukraine still ranks as the second-

most corrupt nation in Europe (after Russia). See *Corruption Perceptions Index 2019* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2020), available at <https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019_CPI_Report_EN.pdf>.

⁵¹ Until 2013, the media produced by the U.S. Government's Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, could not be disseminated domestically for fear of subjecting U.S. citizens to government propaganda. Though that has changed, and the BBG is now the U.S. Agency for Global Media, these outlets are clearly insufficient for strategic communications (even communications built on facts as opposed to spin). During this time, the United States has allowed outlets owned by foreign governments to broadcast freely and without label.

⁵² As Matthew Armstrong has noted, even at the high point of U.S. strategic communications, the organization faced a range of problems, from "a lack of training, to bureaucratic lethargy, to a failure to align and coordinate overt and covert activities." See Matthew Armstrong, "The Politics of Information Warfare in the United States," in *Hybrid Conflicts and Information Warfare: New Labels, Old Politics*, ed. Ofer Fridman, Vitaly Kabernik, and James C. Pearce (London: Lynne Rienner, 2019), 108.

⁵³ Observations based on interviews with members of the Global Engagement Center. See also Matthew Armstrong, "The Past, Present, and Future of the War for Public Opinion," *War on the Rocks*, January 19, 2017, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/the-past-present-and-future-of-the-war-for-public-opinion/>>.

⁵⁴ Fareed Zakaria, "Defense Spending Is America's Cancerous Bipartisan Consensus," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2019, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/defense-spending-is-americas-cancerous-bipartisan-consensus/2019/07/18/783a9e1a-a978-11e9-9214-246e594de5d5_story.html>.

⁵⁵ Robert M. Gates, "The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-02/robert-gates-overmilitarization-american-foreign-policy>.

⁵⁶ See Phillip Lohaus, "A New Blueprint for Competing Below the Threshold: The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning," *War on the Rocks*, May 23, 2018, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/a-new-blueprint-for-competing-below-the-threshold-the-joint-concept-for-integrated-campaigning/>>; *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 16, 2018), available at <http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257>.

⁵⁷ As cited in John Costello and Peter Mattis, "Electronic Warfare and the Renaissance of Chinese Informational Operations," in *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, ed. Joe McReynolds (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2017), 191.

⁵⁸ Detailed foundational treatments in Thomas A. Marks, “‘Counterterrorism’ 2018: Where We Stand Analytically,” *The Journal of Counterterrorism and Homeland Security International* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2018), 26–36; Thomas A. Marks, “Combating ‘Terrorism’: A Strategic Warfighting Perspective,” in *Essays in Honour of K.P.S. Gill*, ed. Ajai Sahni (New Delhi: Kautilya, 2019), 99–128. See also Ucko and Marks, “Violence in Context.”

⁵⁹ Hew Strachan, “Strategy and the Limitation of War,” *Survival* 50, no. 1 (March 2008), 51, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330801899470>>.

⁶⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

⁶¹ “Pour Foch, stratège par excellence, ‘la stratégie est un système d’expédients; le savoir transporté dans la vie réelle.’ Son premier pas appelle une réponse à la fameuse interrogation: ‘De quoi s’agit-il?’ [For Foch, the ultimate strategist, ‘strategy is a system of expedients; knowledge applied to real life.’ Its first step requires a response to the famous question: ‘what is it all about?’.] See Général de Lattre, “Foch,” *Revue Des Deux Mondes (1829–1971)*, no. 4 (1949), 588.

⁶² Heather Marquette and Caryn Peiffer, “Corruption and Transnational Organised Crime,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*, ed. Felia Allum and Stan Gilmour, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 473.

⁶³ See Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, “Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA),” CGD Working Paper (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2012), 237.

⁶⁴ Susan L. Woodward, “Do the Root Causes of Civil War Matter? On Using Knowledge to Improve Peacebuilding Interventions,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 2 (June 2007), 143–170, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970701302789>>. The vexing question of why some individuals participate and others do not is the central issue in Christopher R. Browning’s groundbreaking study of individual involvement in the mass killing of Jews. See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017).

⁶⁵ See, for example, Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights Into the Motivations for *Hijrah* to Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (March 4, 2017), 191–210, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216>>.

⁶⁶ Doug McAdam, “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer,” *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986), 64–90.

⁶⁷ Benchmark work is Peter K. Eisinger, “The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities,” *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 1 (March 1973), 11–28. See also Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). The concept can become overspecified, and we do not delve here into the extensive

derivative work that followed the foundational treatment, which held in straightforward fashion that a structure of opportunity will politically either hinder or facilitate the realization of individual aspirations. For assessment of the growth and controversy involving this simple reality, see Karl-Dieter Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 2009), esp. chapter 6.

⁶⁸ Over time, this leads to what Della Porta refers to as a “state of clandestinity.” See Donatella Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). See also Wieviorka’s work on “inversion.” Michel Wieviorka, *The Making of Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 61–77.

⁶⁹ On Weather Underground, see Arthur M. Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising: How the Weather Underground Beat the FBI and Lost the Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). On Black Panthers, see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁷⁰ Jean Lartéguy, *The Centurions*, trans. Alexander Wallace Fielding (New York: Penguin, 2015), 474.

⁷¹ V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works [of] V.I. Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 40.

⁷² Nguyễn Giáp Võ, *People’s War, People’s Army: The Viet Công Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 78.

⁷³ See Akil N. Awan, “The Virtual Jihad: An Increasingly Legitimate Form of Warfare,” *The Virtual Jihad* 3, no. 5 (May 2010), 10–13.

⁷⁴ Peter Pomerantsev, “How Vladimir Putin Is Revolutionizing Information Warfare,” *The Atlantic*, September 9, 2014, available at <www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/>.

⁷⁵ Heidi Holz and Anthony Miller, *China’s Playbook for Shaping the Global Media Environment* (Arlington, VA: CNA, February 2020), available at <https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IRM-2020-U-024710-Final.pdf>.

⁷⁶ See J. Michael Cole, “Chinese Disinformation in Taiwan,” *Taiwan Sentinel*, December 30, 2019, available at <<https://sentinel.tw/chinese-disinformation-in-taiwan/>>.

⁷⁷ For a debate on the evolution of this phenomenon, see Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker, *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009).

⁷⁸ Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 74–88.

⁷⁹ For the seminal treatment on which nearly all subsequent work draws, wittingly or not, see Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁸⁰ Within a broad academic literature devoted to empathy, it can be helpfully defined as “imagining or simulating another’s experience and perspective, to better understand them. Empathy, in this sense, is rational and cognitive . . . a tool for understanding the way another person thinks, feels, or perceives. It enables us to comprehend another’s mindset, driving emotions or outlook, without requiring us to share the other’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, or, indeed, approve of them.” See Matt Waldman, *Strategic Empathy* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2012), 2.

⁸¹ Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 48.

⁸² For an analysis of how these methods cut across highly disparate cases, see Charles Lindholm and Jose Pedro Zúquete, *The Struggle for the World: Liberation Movements for the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁸³ Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 317.

⁸⁴ The quotation continues, “Nothing henceforth can disturb the convert’s inner peace and serenity—except the occasional fear of losing faith again, losing thereby what alone makes life worth living, and falling back into the outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.” Arthur Koestler, as cited in Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hine, *People, Power, Change Movements of Social Transformation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 141.

⁸⁵ As cited in G.M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1947), 278.

⁸⁶ This was the advice Senator Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI) offered for how President Harry S. Truman might gain domestic support for American assistance to Turkey and Greece. See E.J. Dionne, Jr., “Inevitably, the Politics of Terror,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 2003, available at <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/05/25/inevitably-the-politics-of-terror/c4fdf19a-8d88-4109-9c2f-06602221928f/>>.

⁸⁷ As cited in Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary*, 278.

⁸⁸ See David H. Ucko, “‘The People Are Revolting’: An Anatomy of Authoritarian Counterinsurgency,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2016), 40–41.

⁸⁹ Both Soviet (now Russian) and Chinese doctrine go to extensive lengths to delimit target sets within populations. For the former, a recent addition to the literature is Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (London: Routledge, 2019). For the latter, see Marks, *Counterrevolution in China*.

⁹⁰ Sergij Mikolajovič Plohič, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 351.

⁹¹ Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., “Defining Military Strategy,” *Military Review* 69, no. 5 (May 1989), 3.

⁹² Jeffrey W. Meiser, “Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy,” *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016), 83.

⁹³This section draws on Ucko and Marks, “Violence in Context.”

⁹⁴Paul B. Rich, “People’s War Antithesis: Che Guevara and the Mythology of *Focismo*,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 3 (May 4, 2017), 451–487, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1307616>>; Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical and Critical Study* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 330–331.

⁹⁵George F. Kennan, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare [Redacted Version],” April 30, 1948, 1, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, obtained and contributed by A. Ross Johnson. Cited in his book *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: [The CIA Years and Beyond]* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Stanford University Press, 2010), Ch1n4. NARA release courtesy of Douglas Selvage. Redacted final draft of a memorandum dated May 4, 1948, and published with additional redactions as document 269, “FRUS, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment,” available at <<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320>>.

⁹⁶A crucial distinction between these terms of provided in Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (2018), available at <<http://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/1680696/examining-complex-forms-of-conflict-gray-zone-and-hybrid-challenges/>>.

⁹⁷Frank G. Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy: A Theory of Success,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 97 (2nd Quarter 2020).

⁹⁸JP 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2017), IV-28, available at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp5_0_20171606.pdf>.

⁹⁹Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2001).

¹⁰⁰JP 5-0, IV-29.

¹⁰¹Ucko and Marks, “Violence in Context.” For the academic precedents of these five questions, see Marks, “Counterinsurgency in the Age of Globalism”; Marks, *Maoist People’s War in Post-Vietnam Asia*.

¹⁰²Frequently represented as decision points in conventional treatment, what are here conceptualized as campaigns are more accurately represented, using the vernacular of political economy, as struggles, the preeminent early theorist of which was Max Weber, father of sociology, but also in the economic world, Karl Marx, hence the influence on Soviet and Chinese communist (and later Vietnamese) theorists.

¹⁰³Claudio Ramos da Cruz and David H. Ucko, “Beyond the Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora : Countering Comando Vermelho’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 1 (January 2, 2018), 38–67; Enrique Desmond Arias and Corinne Davis Rodrigues, “The Myth of Personal Security: Criminal Gangs, Dispute Resolution, and Identity in Rio de Janeiro’s Favelas,” *Latin American Politics & Society* 48, no. 4 (2006), 53–81; James Freeman, “Raising the Flag over Rio de Janeiro’s Favelas: Citizenship and Social Control in the Olympic City,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 13, no. 1 (2014),

7–38; “Slum Lords—Comando Vermelho’s Hold on Brazil’s Favelas,” *IHS Jane’s*, August 31, 2011.

¹⁰⁴ For an assessment of Russian hashtag activism in Ukraine, see Oleksandr Nadelnyuk, “How Russian ‘Troll Factory’ Tried to Effect on Ukraine’s Agenda: Analysis of 755 000 Tweets,” *VoxUkraine*, n.d., available at <<https://voxukraine.org/longreads/twitter-database/index-en.html>>.

¹⁰⁵ For a fuller discussion of this trend, see Ucko, *The Insurgent’s Dilemma*.

¹⁰⁶ As cited in Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 182.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 182. Also, possibly the most detailed treatment of the concept as concerns irregular conflict, see Carlos Ospina, *La Estrategia En Colombia: Variaciones Del Centro de Gravedad* (Washington, DC: William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Studies, April 2014).

¹⁰⁸ This quest for analytical parsimony echoes Clausewitz’s own take on the center of gravity. He exhorts strategists to “trace the full weight of the enemy’s power to as few centers of gravity as possible and, when feasible, to one; and . . . to act with utmost concentration.” Of course, Clausewitz also speaks of striking the center of gravity as few times and as swiftly as possible, which does not necessarily apply to the protracted nature of irregular warfare. See Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 170–199.

¹⁰⁹ Cord Schmelzle, *Evaluating Governance: Effectiveness and Legitimacy in Areas of Limited Statehood* (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, January 16, 2012), 7, available at <<https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1986017>>.

¹¹⁰ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111–145.

¹¹¹ Idayat Hassan, “The Danger of a Better-Behaved Boko Haram,” *The New Humanitarian*, August 21, 2018, available at <<http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2018/08/21/opinion-nigeria-militancy-peace-boko-haram>>. See also Edward Stoddard, “Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency,” *African Security* 12, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2019), 300–329, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2019.1668632>>.

¹¹² Gareth Evans, “Russia and the ‘Responsibility to Protect,’” *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2008, available at <www.latimes.com/la-oe-evans31-2008aug31-story.html>.

¹¹³ Corneliu Bjola and Krysianna Papadakis, “Digital Propaganda, Counterpublics and the Disruption of the Public Sphere: The Finnish Approach to Building Digital Resilience,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 5 (September 2, 2020), 638–666, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1704221>>; “Study: Estonians Have Higher Trust in Government than Latvians, Lithuanians,” *ERR*, December 29, 2020, available at <<https://news.err.ee/1221847/study-estonians-have-higher-trust-in-government-than-latvians-lithuanians>>; Kaley Stoicescu, “The Evolution of Russian

Hybrid Warfare: Estonia,” *CEPA*, January 29, 2021, available at <<https://cepa.org/the-evolution-of-russian-hybrid-warfare-estonia/>>.

¹¹⁴ Carlos Ospina and Thomas A. Marks, “Colombia: Changing Strategy Amidst the Struggle,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 2 (March 4, 2014), 364. Funding and the “structures” (that is, organizations) of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia were identified as operational centers of gravity, or what in our terminology would best be described as *critical vulnerabilities* (see discussion below).

¹¹⁵ JP 5-0.

¹¹⁶ Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy.”

¹¹⁷ In that sense, the approach mirrors much of the analysis in Ben Connable, *Redesigning Strategy for Irregular War: Improving Strategic Design for Planners and Policymakers to Help Defeat Groups Like the Islamic State* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1172.html>.

¹¹⁸ As cited in William M. Blair, “President Draws Planning Moral,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1957, available at <www.nytimes.com/1957/11/15/archives/president-draws-planning-moral-recalls-army-days-to-show-value-of.html>.

¹¹⁹ As cited in Terence M. Holmes, “Planning versus Chaos in Clausewitz’s *On War*,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 1, 2007), 131, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390701210855>>.

¹²⁰ As cited in P.G. Tsouras, *The Greenhill Dictionary of Military Quotations* (London: Greenhill Books, 2000), 363.

¹²¹ Michael Howard, “Military Science in an Age of Peace,” *The RUSI Journal* 119, no. 1 (March 1, 1974), 6, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847409421160>>. Emphasis in original.

¹²² For a treatment of the topic, see Michael J. Mooney, “A Military Assessment of the Islamic State’s Evolving Theory of Victory,” *War on the Rocks*, June 26, 2017, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/a-military-assessment-of-the-islamic-states-evolving-theory-of-victory/>>; Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy.”

¹²³ The notion of positional advantage as a replacement for center of gravity is put forth in Lawrence Freedman, “Stop Looking for the Center of Gravity,” *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2014, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2014/06/stop-looking-for-the-center-of-gravity/>>.

¹²⁴ Eliot A. Cohen, “What’s Obama’s Counterinsurgency Strategy for Afghanistan?” *Washington Post*, December 6, 2009, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/04/AR2009120402602.html>.

¹²⁵ Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., *Law and Military Interventions: Preserving Humanitarian Values in 21st Century Conflicts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, 2001), 5.

¹²⁶ For discussion, see Weston R. Sager, “Apple Pie Propaganda: The Smith-Mundt Act Before and After the Repeal of the Domestic Dissemination Ban Notes and Comments,” *Northwestern University Law Review* 109, no. 2 (2014–2015), 511–546; Allen W. Palmer and Edward L. Carter, “The Smith-Mundt Act’s Ban on Domestic Propaganda: An Analysis of the Cold War Statute Limiting Access to Public Diplomacy,” *Communication Law and Policy* 11, no. 1 (January 2006), 1–34, available at <https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326926clp1101_1>.

¹²⁷ Frank Kitson, *Bunch of Five* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1977), 289.

¹²⁸ For one critical view, see Michael German, “Squaring the Error,” symposium address at Law vs. War: Competing Approaches to Fighting Terrorism, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2005.

¹²⁹ Not least because the 2001 U.S. Authorization for the Use of Military Force states that “the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations and persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism.” See U.S. Congress, “Authorization for the Use of Military Force,” S.J. Res. 23 § (2001).

¹³⁰ Robert P. Barnidge, Jr., “The Principle of Proportionality Under International Humanitarian Law and Operation Cast Lead,” in *New Battlefields, Old Laws: Critical Debates on Asymmetric Warfare*, ed. William C. Banks (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 181. It should be acknowledged that just as legality can be necessary but insufficient for legitimacy, legitimacy can also be achieved without clear legality. An example is the case of the 1999 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Kosovo, which proceeded without a United Nations Security Council resolution or other legal basis but was perceived by most, but not all, as justified and, overall, just. See Nicholas J. Wheeler, “Reflections on the Legality and Legitimacy of NATO’s Intervention in Kosovo,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 4, no. 3–4 (September 2000), 144–163, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13642980008406897>>.

¹³¹ C. von der Groeben, “The Conflict in Colombia and the Relationship Between Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law in Practice: Analysis of the New Operational Law of the Colombian Armed Forces,” *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 2011), 141–164, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krr004>>. As von der Groeben further explains, the status of an operation would be determined on a case-by-case basis by a Grupo Asesor and an Asesor Juridico Operacional, based on the military balance and the organizational capacity of the adversary (based on intelligence). The norms would be set up to inform several types of actions at once rather than one by one, and ex post investigations helped ensure dedication to the principle at hand.

¹³² Caroline Vakil, “Lithuanian Parliament Calls Russia ‘a State Supporting and Carrying out Terrorism,’” *The Hill*, May 10, 2022, available at <<https://thehill.com/policy/>

international/3483345-lithuanian-parliament-calls-russia-a-state-supporting-and-carrying-out-terrorism/>.

¹³³ See Vera Zimmerman, “What Does Ukraine’s New Military Approach Toward the Donbas Mean?” *Atlantic Council*, May 15, 2018, available at <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-does-ukraine-s-new-military-approach-toward-the-donbas-mean/>>; “Special Procedure for Announcing the Start of the Operation of the Joint Forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions,” Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, April 28, 2018, available at <<http://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2018/04/28/osoblivij-poryadok-shho-bude-diyati-z-ogoloshennyam-pochatku-provedennya-operaczii-obednanih-sil-na-teritorii-doneczkoi-ta-luganskoi-oblastej/>>.

¹³⁴ “FITS Resources,” Australian Government, Attorney-General’s Department, accessed June 14, 2022, available at <<https://www.ag.gov.au/integrity/foreign-influence-transparency-scheme/fits-resources>>; “National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018,” Pub. L. No. 67 (2018), available at <<https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018C00506>>.

¹³⁵ See the various legislative efforts related to the Strategic Competition Act, the Countering China Propaganda Act, and the Countering China Economic Coercion Act.

¹³⁶ The U.S. invasions and counterinsurgency operation in Iraq and Afghanistan were both based on fatally flawed assumptions. See T.X. Hammes, William S. McCallister, and John M. Collins, “Afghanistan: Connecting Assumptions and Strategy,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 135, no. 11 (November 2009), 16–20; John M. Collins, “You Can’t Assume Nothin’,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 2003, available at <<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2003/may/you-cant-assume-nothin>>.

¹³⁷ James A. Dewar et al., *Assumption-Based Planning: A Planning Tool for Very Uncertain Times* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993), 9, available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR114.html>. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁸ For this distinction, see Dewar et al., *Assumption-Based Planning*, 6–7.

¹³⁹ David A. Graham, “Rumsfeld’s Knowns and Unknowns: The Intellectual History of a Quip,” *The Atlantic*, March 27, 2014, available at <www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/rumsfelds-knowns-and-unknowns-the-intellectual-history-of-a-quip/359719/>.

¹⁴⁰ For a key resource for this step, see U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The Red Team Handbook: The Army’s Guide to Making Better Decisions*, Version 9.0 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, 2008).

¹⁴¹ The same can be stated about counterinsurgency and its focus on addressing root causes. As Marks and Bell argue, “Counterinsurgency, contrary to much misguided talk now, is not intended as the solution to the political breakdown which produced the challenge to the old-order by the insurgents’ intended new-order. Neither is it merely the restoration of the status quo. Rather, counterinsurgency is armed reform that meets

armed challenge to restore a political process that is given a second chance to reshape the political opportunity structure so that violence is neither necessary nor embraced by opposition to see grievances mediated. It restores the sickly body, in other words; it does not provide it with immunity.” Thomas A. Marks and Michael S. Bell, “The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 1 (Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War 2003–2006),” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30, no. 3 (April 16, 2019), 704, available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2019.1601873>>.

¹⁴²J. McDougall et al., *NESET II: Teaching Media Literacy in Europe; Evidence of Effective School Practices in Primary and Secondary Education* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018), 49, available at <<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/613204>>. The is an age-old dilemma: Hannah Arendt captured well the firm grip of totalitarian propaganda, describing it as “foolproof against arguments based on a reality which the movements promised to change, against a counterpropaganda disqualified by the mere fact that it belongs to or defends a world which the shiftless masses cannot and will not accept.” See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Publishers, 1973), 363.

¹⁴³As cited in Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 22.

¹⁴⁴In the case of the so-called Islamic State (IS), interviews with former members suggest major sources of disillusionment included mistreatment of civilians, women, and IS members, along with the lack of food. The violence was “often defined as hypocrisy on the part of ISIS leadership.” See Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, “ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time—Analysis of 220 In-Depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (April 2020), 109–110, available at <<https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.1.1791>>.

¹⁴⁵Iffat Idris, *Political Will and Combatting Serious Organised Crime*, Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) Evidence Review Paper 1 (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, May 2022); Carmen Malena, “Building Will for Participatory Governance: An Introduction,” in *From Political Won't to Political Will: Building Support for Participatory Governance*, ed. Carmen Malena (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2009), 3–30. See also Heather Marquette, *Moving “from Political Won't to Political Will” for More Feasible Interventions to Tackle Serious Organised Crime and Corruption*, SOC ACE Briefing Note 1 (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, May 2022).

¹⁴⁶Harry G. Summers, *American Strategy in Vietnam: A Critical Analysis* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012), 1, available at <<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1890088>>.

¹⁴⁷ For an excellent discussion of these difficulties, see Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), 79–92.

¹⁴⁸ Hilary Synnott, *Bad Days in Basra: My Turbulent Time as Britain's Man in Southern Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 211.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, the generally negative impact of benevolent aid projects in Afghanistan: Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship Between Aid and Security in Afghanistan* (Medford, MA: Feinstein International Center, January 2012), 41–53, available at <<http://fic.tufts.edu/assets/WinningHearts-Final.pdf>>.

¹⁵⁰ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵¹ See the critique of Kilcullen's metrics in Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War*, 81–89.

¹⁵² Lynette M.B. Arnhart and Marvin L. King, "Are We There Yet? Implementing Best Practices in Assessments," *Military Review*, June 2018, 20–29.

¹⁵³ Stanislaw Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973), 110.

¹⁵⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, "Rethinking Risk in Defense," *War on the Rocks*, April 13, 2015, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2015/04/rethinking-risk-in-defense/>>.

¹⁵⁵ Douglas W. Hubbard, *The Failure of Risk Management: Why It's Broken and How to Fix It* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009).

¹⁵⁶ Army Techniques Publication 5-19, *Risk Management* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, September 8, 2014), 1–10.

¹⁵⁷ Mazarr, "Rethinking Risk in Defense."

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Dr. Thomas A. Marks is Distinguished Professor and MG Edward G. Lansdale Chair of Irregular Warfighting Strategy in CISA. He assumed his present rank and position on July 1, 2016, after 12 years as the founding chair of the War and Conflict Studies Department and professor of terrorism at CISA. He was asked to occupy these positions following the attacks of September 11 because of his extensive academic and field experience concerning irregular warfare strategy and operations.

Dr. Marks previously served as the Oppenheimer Chair of Warfighting Strategy at the Marine Corps University and as a longtime adjunct professor at both the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS) and the Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis. In 2006, he was named USAFSOS Educator of the Year. In 2007, he received the Fellow Award from the Royal Military Institute of Manitoba. In 2014, he was awarded the Faith in the Cause medal by the Colombian army for contributions to the country's counterinsurgency effort. In 2016, he received a grant from the Minerva Research Initiative to pursue fieldwork on the topic of female combatant motivation in the Nepali Maoist insurgency. He was also the chief foreign correspondent for *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

A graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Dr. Marks completed his doctoral work in his home state of Hawaii, where for 14 years he was chair and professor of social science at Academy of the Pacific, a private high school, and, for more than two decades, a highly successful cross country and track coach.

Dr. Marks has authored hundreds of publications, both peer reviewed and journalistic. His latest edited books are *People's War: Variants and Responses*, co-edited with Paul Rich (Routledge, 2018), and *Perspectives on the American Way of War: The U.S. Experience in Irregular Combat*, co-edited with Kirklin J. Bateman (Routledge, 2019). Most recently, Dr. Marks penned "Violence in Context: Mapping the Strategies and Operational Art of Irregular Warfare," *Contemporary Security Policy* (February 2018), co-authored with Dr. David H. Ucko, which received the Bernard Brodie Prize 2019 for best 2018 article.

