



# Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare

A Framework for Analysis and Action

David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks



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# Contents

Acknowledgments .....	1
Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction .....	3
So What Is Irregular Warfare? .....	6
The U.S. Crisis of Irregular Warfare .....	11
The Estimate: An Analytical Framework to Diagnose Irregular Threats .....	14
The COA Framework: How to Respond to Irregular Challenges .....	34
Conclusion .....	49
Notes .....	52
About the Authors.....	63



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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, states blend separate instruments of power to offset military weakness, weaponize narratives to ease strategic progress, and exploit social and political contradictions to undermine and divide target societies. The effort to understand this approach has generated new jargon—“hybrid war,” “the gray zone”—yet the United States and the West in general struggle to overcome their entrenched presumptions about war. Such confusion constitutes an upstream source of analytical friction with implications for how strategy is conceived and implemented. Based on the pedagogical approach of the College of International Security Affairs within the National Defense University, this article presents an analytical framework to assess and respond to irregular threats. Though terminological precision and analytical frameworks are 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 climactic Great Power conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shifts in power are today more discreet, incremental, and multifaceted in both method and effect: military realities hover in the wings and occasionally make themselves known, but the struggle is predominantly one of influence, narratives, and ambiguity. In similar ways, Iran, North Korea, and other regimes—even traditional partners of the United States—are jostling for power at the expense of the rules-based international order created by the United States in the aftermath of World War II. On aggregate, the ongoing challenge is existential to U.S. hegemony—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. The 2018 National Defense Strategy identified the interstate competition in which the United States is now engaged; it further noted that, in this competition, rivals blend 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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,”<sup>2</sup> yet today—against a track record of defeat and disappointment in the intervening years—the United States is finding that it is its adversaries who are setting the pace. Meanwhile, American analysts wonder why the United States can no longer win its wars.<sup>3</sup>

The answers to this question are manifold, but a common root 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—fatally—that their adversaries would do the same.<sup>4</sup> Instead, America’s state adversaries have adopted *irregular approaches* to gain influence and power. They adapted to conventional U.S. military strength and found new lines of attack for which the United States had no effective counter. This approach is curiously similar to 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 an irony here, in that the very National Defense Strategy that warned of interstate competition also sought to dismiss insurgency and terrorism as subsidiary concerns.<sup>5</sup> 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—economic, social, and/or political. Both weaponize narratives to confuse analysis, co-opt contested audiences, and lower the cost of action. And both revolve around questions

of legitimacy, or the right to lead, so as to shape new and long-lasting political realities.

This convergence between nonstate and state-based strategy should not surprise, in that the approaches of Russia, China, and even Iran are rooted within each respective country's foundation through successful insurgency.<sup>6</sup> 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.

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.”<sup>7</sup> In this instance, the kind of war confronting the United States is often termed *irregular*. It is, for many reasons, an imperfect term, but its imperfections also reflect the deliberate ambiguity deployed as a central component of the approach, which confounds 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 in Washington, DC, has been concerned with irregular warfare since its foundation in 2002.<sup>8</sup> 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 paper 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.”<sup>9</sup> Irregular warfare was traditionally thought of as the preserve of nonstate armed groups, desperate to find a way forward against mighty states and the resources they can harness. Accordingly, in doctrine, irregular warfare subsumes the missions of fostering and countering insurgencies, counterterrorism, and stability operations. Still, 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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 more favorable and the use of force can be used to strategic effect. 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 immediate difficulties, one relating to “irregularity” and the other to “warfare.” 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*, which is implicitly upheld as more common or traditional. *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 also 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 prefer and, therefore, also what they have focused on. 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 also 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 tasks, 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*.”<sup>11</sup> Even in the latest National Defense Strategy, irregular warfare 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. It is also telling that CISA, the DOD flagship for irregular warfare education and partnership capacity-building, has faced untold challenges to its existence and is currently fighting to avoid outright elimination.

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 clarification is helpful in that misuse of the term *war* is already too common and can contribute to a militarization of response and the expectation of decisive “victories” against problems that never really go away.<sup>12</sup> Still, the issue is that the violence in these contests is often deliberately ambiguous or even implicit—until suddenly it is not. Former 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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 you are in a superior position.<sup>14</sup>

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 is now considering eliminating the mention of violence in the definition of irregular warfare. Going further, it might be better to eschew also the language of *warfare*, to obviate the typical U.S. militarization of security challenges that are not primarily military in nature. Yet on the other hand, it is important to anticipate the admixture of nonviolence and violence, that blending of war and peace so typical of these struggles. The matter is more than semantic, as responding to a strategy that is deliberately deceptive and likely to shift 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 debates, the wiser approach may be 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. On this basis, three main characteristics warrant our attention, as they explain the inherent ambiguity of the irregular approach and also its appeal to a wide range of actors, both nonstate and state.

First, irregular warfare blends disparate lines of effort; 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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 nonviolence (also known as political warfare), and by internationalizing the struggle.<sup>16</sup> These lines of effort 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 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.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in Ukraine, Russia’s use of violence relied on its admixture 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.<sup>18</sup> China’s occupation of the South China Sea has been predominantly non-violent, using instead civilian and economic efforts, although it remains buttressed by a shared awareness of underlying military realities.<sup>19</sup> 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.”<sup>20</sup>

The second facet of irregular warfare is its exploitation of social and political contradictions so as to weaken 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. Yet 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. 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, resulting in its effective acquisition of the Hambantota maritime base. This is why fostering societal resilience has emerged as a key defense against irregular warfare.<sup>21</sup> 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: to 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> Put differently, the point is to win the narrative before you win the war.

Perhaps the prime nonstate example of this principle was the 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.<sup>24</sup> Through the dissemination of propaganda, memes, and guidance, it has managed to survive its loss of a counterstate and is focusing instead on creating a deterritorialized and transnational movement that can sponsor and frame violent attack.<sup>25</sup>

State actors, too, use strategic narratives as a force multiplier for armed action. If actions taken can be presented as going “with the grain” of local want, any gains made become more sustainable and difficult to undo. 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.”<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, China in 2003 revised the “Political Work Guidelines of the People’s Liberation Army” and advanced the concepts of “public opinion warfare,” “psychological warfare,” and “legal warfare.”<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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. Let it therefore be emphasized that irregular warfare does not primarily denote an asymmetry in approaches (conventional vs. guerrilla) or actors (state vs. 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.”<sup>29</sup> As implied, the minimum requirement is not to build but rather to erode legitimacy, a far easier task but one with potentially irreversible consequences.

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. As such, it is 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. These points are not new but bear repeating, in the hope of dismantling 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 executed and acted on within the political context of which they form a part.<sup>30</sup> And yet for the United States, internalizing this understanding of war has proved exceptionally challenging. Perhaps it is, as Christopher Coker suggests, that the United States, the world’s greatest military power, is Clausewitzian mainly “in its own imagination.”<sup>31</sup> 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, gains ambiguous, and engagement as a whole requires patience, a deep understanding of society and the world, and the resilience to stomach setbacks and compromise.<sup>32</sup> 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 election hack of 2016 was effective in exploiting its many rifts, and others will have taken note.<sup>33</sup> Even in its response to a deadly pandemic, as with the 2019–2020 novel coronavirus, U.S. society gave

proof of exceptionally deep fractures and polarization, greatly complicating a national, never mind societal response.<sup>34</sup> Lest the domestic disunity be mistaken as an aberration spurred by today's unprecedented circumstances, analysts such as Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz noted, already in 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.<sup>35</sup>

Compounding the issue of domestic fracture, the United States most commonly engages in irregular warfare abroad, and so the vulnerabilities are those not of U.S. society but of partner governments. And yet the United States struggles with the admittedly delicate task of prodding these governments toward the necessary reforms. In Iraq and Afghanistan, great expenditure and sacrifice amounted, in key moments, to stunningly limited influence over key reforms 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 only minimal sway over those nations targeted by state use of irregular warfare; witness the Philippines' continued kowtowing to China (leading to its near abrogation of the Philippine-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement in February 2020), or the failure to sway even the United Kingdom, never mind other countries, to resist China's 5G network, thought to be a front for its intelligence agencies. One notable success has been in helping Ukraine curb corruption, which was blunting its response to Russian aggression, but even here, it is debatable whether enough has been done.<sup>36</sup> More typically, the West's leverage relies on sticks that seem only to alienate and carrots that others provide more cheaply and with fewer conditions.

Second, 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 propaganda domestically or from controlling the media.<sup>37</sup> Queasy about its role in the battle of ideas, the U.S. Government lacks the instruments through which 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.”<sup>38</sup>

Today, information efforts focus on the Global Engagement Center within the State Department. The center was created to combat disinformation and online radicalization, initially by the Islamic State, but now it also focuses on state-based information campaigns. However, as a sign of the State Department’s overall limited capacity, this effort is underfunded and staffed mainly with contractors and detailees from DOD.<sup>39</sup> Not only is the initiative insufficient in telling America’s version of events, but the present U.S. administration is also not approaching foreign policy with shared storylines or narratives in mind, complicating the task of gaining credibility and legitimacy beyond America’s borders.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, whereas America’s adversaries successfully blend military with non-military lines of effort, the U.S. response is driven by its lopsided budget, wherein DOD claims nearly half the country’s discretionary spending.<sup>41</sup> This resource allocation reflects entrenched views on what constitutes strategic capability and predisposes the government toward a militarized foreign policy. As the 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.<sup>42</sup> The U.S. Government has many terms for the type of action needed—a *whole-of-government response*, a *comprehensive approach*, *smart power*, or *transformational diplomacy*—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.”<sup>43</sup> Three 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, 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 urging 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.”<sup>44</sup>

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. The analytical tools and frameworks that we provide in our tuition are designed specifically to address the deliberate ambiguity of irregular warfare and to ensure we capture its essence and address its main components. Our analytical framework has two parts, one of analysis and one of action; the analysis generates a *strategic estimate of the situation*, which is used to formulate a *course of action* (COA) to guide response. The remainder of this paper 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.<sup>45</sup>

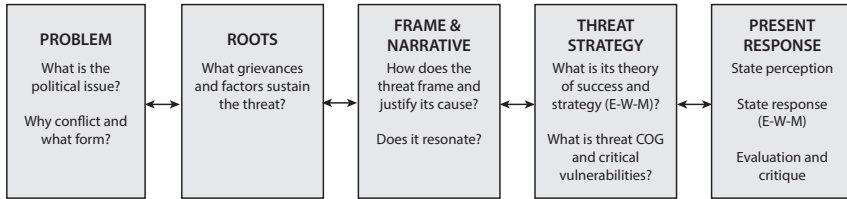
## The Estimate: An Analytical Framework to Diagnose Irregular Threats

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 several facets of irregular warfare:

- ◆ the drivers of mobilization
- ◆ the messaging used to mobilize support (and also support of violence)
- ◆ the multifaceted approach applied
- ◆ the strengths and weaknesses of the current government response.

All of these components, fleshed out below, are distilled and integrated to fill the first “box,” namely the problem statement. The following section explains these five components of the strategic estimate framework.

**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 draws on 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 draws on social movement theory and sociology in general. Though social movement theory concerns contestation *within* society, its insights can, with minimal alteration, apply also to contestation *between* state actors—and even to other types of actors engaged in conflicts over power, resources, and legitimacy. Accordingly, the framework can also assess purely nonviolent social movement organizations, which, in turn, should yield a different set of recommendations as concerns state response.

With all of 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 so as 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 from which to plan. This telos should be remembered throughout.

## 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 of the problem at hand: the political issue underlying the confrontation, the nature of the actor and strategy faced, and the main reasons why it has proved so difficult to counter. In a rushed world of “bottom lines up front” and “elevator pitches,” there is inherent merit to analytical brevity. Yet, going further, this crystallization of analysis into a problem statement is also a *strategic* exercise in that it forces careful reflection on what truly matters. As such, it hones the mind to prioritize and be precise—to unlock the puzzle and justify convincingly the need for a new approach. Such analytical clarity presupposes a rich foundation from which to draw—hence the need to execute and complete the remainder of the framework before attempting this final synthesis.

## Roots of the Conflict

This takes us to roots. This analytical component is concerned with the contextual factors that compel support for disruptive, even violent systemic change, and which therefore help sustain the irregular challenger. Put differently, the roots section identifies the social, economic, and political contradictions that the threat 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 legitimacy for the state, and either way require 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 resolution would help repair past harm and build resilience against future rupture.

This assessment raises a key issue concerning the role of grievances, or root causes. Not only is there a need to query which root causes truly matter, but also their effect is far from linear, forcing careful analysis.<sup>46</sup> If root causes are relevant, why do they compel some individuals but not others to shift their allegiance from the state?<sup>47</sup> The question 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?<sup>48</sup> Are white nationalist groupings 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” (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 and points instead to the need for 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 individuals (micro) to embrace or join movements (meso) as a mechanism for change, particularly when these espouse violence as part of the solution. Answers cannot be found through any one lens, but rather by identifying their unique interaction in each case.

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, a key intervening variable was the “biographic availability” of the individual, or his or her opportunity to engage in political activism.<sup>49</sup> This relationship between macro and micro already diversified the effects of context: the grievances resonated with many, but not all, and only certain individuals among those affected were willing and able to take action.



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 organization 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.<sup>50</sup> In the United States, despite the flaws in its democracy, most citizens who felt compelled to act had sufficient faith in the political opportunity structure to work through it rather than seek its overthrow.

State response (or responsiveness) to bottom-up pressure for change emerges as a key intervening variable in informing the appeal for illicit efforts or violent solutions. A second related meso-level variable is the group's ideology, as it informs its repertoire and also its likelihood of finding a mass base. Despite championing broad-based grievances, a group such as the Weather Underground was undone by its hodgepodge Marxist-Leninist ideology, given its advocacy, within Cold War America, of communist and revolutionary violence. In contrast, leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., who promoted nonviolent strategies to deal with similar issues, found broad-based acceptance. Meso particulars such as these complicate the presupposed linear relationship among grievances, organization, and collective contention.

This triptych of macro-micro-meso is necessary in order to understand the drivers of mobilization into violence. It is insufficient to reverse engineer this question only on the basis of those taking the most drastic action. Answers will be found not only in structural realities, or in the individual's psychological foundation, but also within the relationship between both of these and the collective actor. This context is important; it matters greatly whether those pushed to the fringe are a self-contained squad (for example, a terrorist cell) or the vanguard of a movement fueled by a common cause (an insurgency group). Regardless of labels given and claims and counterclaims as to status, it is the representativeness of the actor—whether others cheer or condemn its actions—that matters for our response.

In some instances, structural factors will produce a veritable conveyor belt of recruits eager to play a part in the struggle; this is the “people power” that has brought down regimes and changed the fate of empires. In 1989, approximately 2 million people, spread across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, engaged in the peaceful almost 700-kilometer-long human chain, known as the Baltic Way, to protest Soviet domination and push for independence. Its message was loud and inescapable. In other instances, macro-level grievances fail to produce micro-level mobilization because of either meso incompetence (due to ideology or poor strategy) or because the system would not allow it (such as in Xinjiang today, or any other authoritarian police state).<sup>51</sup>

A final permutation should be considered: much as macro grievances can push micro individuals toward the meso, they can also provide the meso unfettered access to a base of micro individuals who have no option but to side with the “strongest tribe.” The failure of governance in Colombia’s hinterland in the 1990s, for example, provided the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) with a local labor force that had no choice but to live under its rule. Despite the coercive nature of this relationship, its enabling factors had to be understood to be addressed, thereby to weaken the group and strengthen society against similar threats.

This same search for the causative drivers of conflict, blending structure with agency, can be applied to state-based irregular threats. Here, too, we may begin our investigation by querying what perceived grievances cause states to engage in destabilizing strategies or outright coercion—or what macro-level issues are pushing the meso-level actor to act. Still, such an assessment is insufficient. It is also necessary to ask how macro-level factors compel the relevant micro-level individuals to support the meso’s behavior—in this case, that of a government rather than a movement or group. What factors, for example, led Vladimir Putin’s domestic approval rating to soar following the occupation of the Donbas and Crimea in 2014?<sup>52</sup> And what factors drive public acceptance of the Russian occupation in the Donbas, and why? What distinct factors may be contributing to a different perception of the same in Crimea? Such analyses matter immensely to the construction of a counterstrategy.

Also, much as insurgents exploit macro-level grievances among specific micro communities to win support and assert themselves, states also weaponize macro-level circumstances to prosecute their political projects: minority-rights issues as in Ukraine, ethnic frictions as in Georgia, grievances over Israel by Iran and Hizballah, debt and double-dealing in the societies targeted by China's economic imperialism, or internal strife, as exploited by Iran in Yemen or by Russia in its attempt to sponsor far-right movements in Austria, Italy, and other parts of Europe. Much as in counterinsurgency, these social, economic, and political vulnerabilities must be identified and addressed (even though they may not be immediately resolved) in order to counter the strategy at hand, build resilience, and prevail for a better tomorrow.

## 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 colonizing French 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.*<sup>53</sup>

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

This insight is not lost on the world's leading practitioners of irregular warfare, past or present. In preparing for the 1917 revolution, Vladimir Lenin saw "systematic, all-round propaganda and agitation" as "the chief and permanent task [and] the pressing task of the moment."<sup>54</sup> 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.”<sup>55</sup> 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.”<sup>56</sup>

Information and narratives are equally important for nation-states. When Russia launched its offensive in Ukraine, the military action was accompanied by the “most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare.”<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup>

Though the war for hearts and minds cannot be said to be new, in a world where information in virtually any medium can be captured and broadcast instantaneously and globally, its role looks certain to feature more centrally. Specifically, information technology now allows for more evocative material to be broadcast faster, farther, and by more sources simultaneously than before.<sup>60</sup> Unsurprisingly, Voice of the Straits greatly furthered its reach when it began online broadcasting in April 2000. 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, which 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.

Social movement theory provides such a method through its work on *framing*, defined by two leading scholars as the process of attributing meaning to events.<sup>61</sup> 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 excluding the rest, communicating an impression that has been carefully curated to engender a particular effect.<sup>62</sup> Social movement theory proposes three key frames: the diagnostic, the prognostic, and the motivational. Each plays a key role in building the message and in changing perception and, ultimately, behavior. By deconstructing adversarial narratives across these three frames, we can view the world from their standpoint, 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,” within contested audiences.

Each frame requires elaboration. The diagnostic frame interprets the current situation. It explains, from the threat actor’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. The diagnostic frame has a second function: to prime the audience for the proposed solution that is to follow. The prognostic frame holds the answer, the way out of the misery, though actions presented not merely as just and correct, but as necessary and urgent right now. The trick lies in laminating the litany of grievances of the diagnostic frame to the proposed solution of the prognostic one—to explain the dark present and present the path to salvation as the one and only.

In the face of a collective struggle, it is easy to lend moral support and nod in agreement but to remain disengaged. As such “free-riding” cripples movements, a narrative is necessary to justify personal sacrifice for the sake of the collective and in spite of the risk. This is the purpose of the motivational frame. A common approach is to emphasize solidarity with a constructed “in group,” creating a cause that is bigger than oneself. A related effort lies in tying the struggle to the past,

representing injury and sacrifice, and projecting it into the future, representing redemption and hope. In this manner, individual action is subsumed into the more meaningful *longue durée* of history. The key is to give the struggle depth, through myths and constructed legacies, and to make victory seem possible, almost inevitable, so long as we all help out.<sup>63</sup>

Framing is a concern not only for bottom-up efforts at contestation but also for states involved in international conflict. As Herman 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.” In response, states have devised stratagems to push the population “over the top.” As Goering continues, “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.”<sup>64</sup> Speaking at the Nuremberg trials, Goering may have been flippant, but he correctly observed a common framing technique that China, Russia, and other authoritarian states have used to great effect. Rather than win the hearts and minds of the insurgency-affected population, as per counterinsurgency theory, they sell the threat to the broader populace, surging support for both party and state, and whipping up a chauvinistic hatred for the other that justifies sacrifice and violence.<sup>65</sup>

Just because messaging and narratives are important, they are not automatically effective. Thus, having identified the framing and its logic, the final question of this component 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*—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. Whose perception is truly at stake?<sup>66</sup>

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. It is also valuable to know whether contested populations are at all resistant to information operations. It is, for example, noteworthy that, despite the “information warfare blitzkrieg” witnessed in Ukraine, sources suggest attitudes in Ukraine, even within Russian-occupied areas, remained predominantly hostile to Russian actions there.<sup>67</sup> It is similarly important to know that, even in the midst of FARC’s struggle, the vast majority of Colombians supported the government. This is the type of data that can help inform strategy. To obtain such insights, a variety of methods avail themselves, from ethnographic research and polling to big-data analysis of social media habits and behavior. In a world where believing is seeing, the key is to determine just how the world is perceived so as to know better what behavior to expect.

## Threat Strategy

Having elaborated on the roots of the conflict and the narratives used to fuel support, it is time to consider what the threat actually does. More than a list of activities, what is sought is an understanding of the strategy at play. The traditional approach to understanding strategy within Western war colleges (there simply is no civilian equivalent) is that of ends-ways-means, a formula most prominently articulated by Arthur F. 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).”<sup>68</sup> 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, and means formula, then, forces consideration of three fundamental questions: What is the threat seeking to achieve, how is it reaching that objective, and 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. 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?

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.”<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup>

Western military thinking has historically conceived of ways as the totality of various *lines of operation*, each defining the force in relation to the enemy.<sup>71</sup> Lines of operation concern the physical projection of force across geographical space and are typically visualized using military unit symbols moving via arrows on a map. This method has proved helpful because it allows for the strategic nesting of tactical and operational actions, thereby clarifying their larger purpose on the battlefield. This system of nesting aids in the translation of strategic intent into tactical action and vice versa, ensuring a common understanding and coherence across all levels of activity.

Yet as the U.S. military has realized, though lines of operation are fundamental analytical tools for the design of military campaigns, they fail to capture the conceptual or intangible spaces traversed by irregular warfare. Hence, in 2001, the U.S. Army fielded the term *logical line of operation* and then, in 2011, *line of effort* (LOE) 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.”<sup>72</sup> 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.”<sup>73</sup>

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 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 analysis of threat strategies must also place military efforts within their proper supporting relation vis-à-vis the political, so as to explore its interaction with other, plausibly more meaningful components. As detailed by Thomas Marks, interrogation of past irregular conflicts reveals five typical components:

- ◆ political mobilization
- ◆ exploitation of tactical alliances with societal forces
- ◆ the use of violence to enable politics
- ◆ the use of nonviolence (such as subversion, propaganda, offers of negotiations, or inducements) to make violence more effective (this is also known as “political warfare”<sup>74</sup>)
- ◆ internationalization of the strategy to make it difficult to contain or terminate within national borders.<sup>75</sup>

What is at hand is the inspiration for five questions that must be asked of any challenge of irregular warfare:

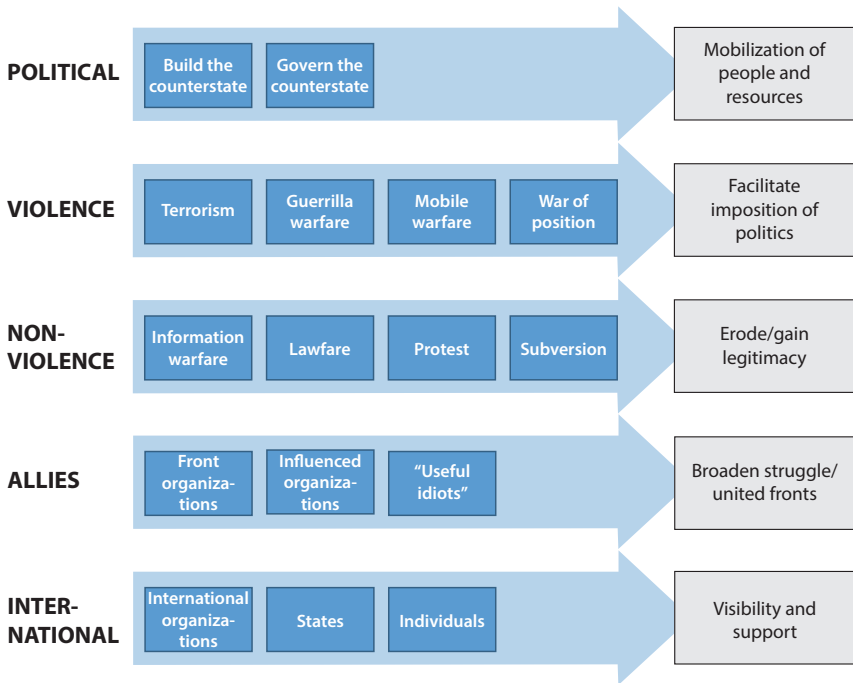
- ◆ What is the threat doing *politically*?
- ◆ How is it exploiting domestic *alliances* to better reach its objective?

- ◆ How is *violence* used in support of its political project?
- ◆ How is *nonviolence* used?
- ◆ What is the role of *internationalization* in the strategy?

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 be represented as five lines of effort, 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, the content of each line of effort, or the answers to the five questions, must be further organized and assessed for its strategic purpose. This requires the identification of the main *campaigns* in each LOE, or its constituent bundles of tactical activity.<sup>76</sup> For example, the nonviolent LOE may

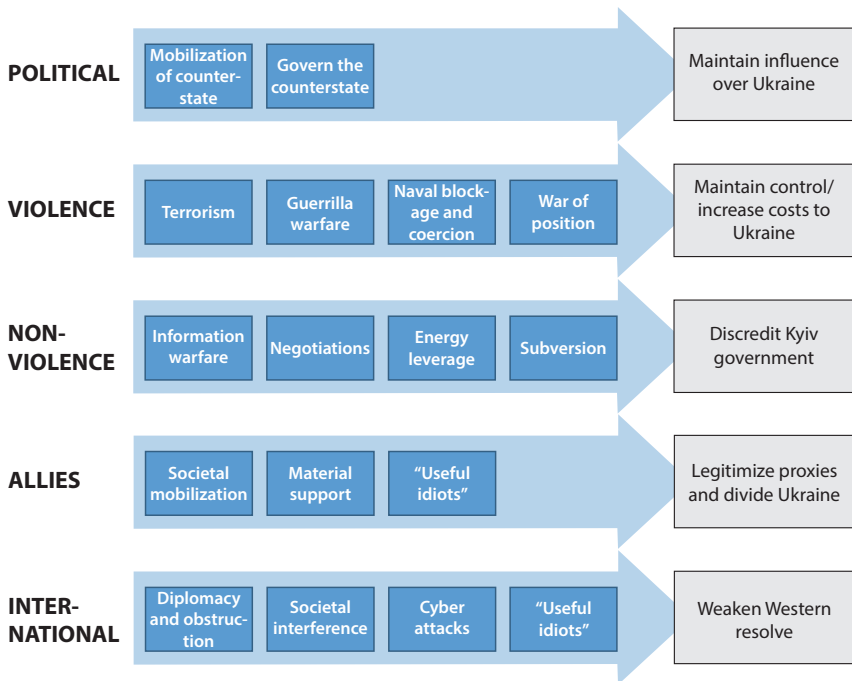
**Figure 2. A Standard People’s War Insurgency, Mapped as Lines of Effort and Campaigns**



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. Figure 2 provides relevant examples derived from extensive and repeated application of the framework to real-world cases involving nonstate armed groups. Using instead the Russian intervention in Ukraine as an example, figure 3 illustrates that the same five questions can also yield a mapping of irregular state-based strategies.

As part of this ordering exercise, this nesting of operational activity within its proper strategic category, it follows that each campaign will itself contain subcampaigns, or opportunities to order further the expressions of the strategy. For example, the campaign of terrorism, within the violent LOE, may be further

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



subdivided, plausibly across the categories of targets struck, be it 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.<sup>77</sup> 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 also drive what labels are given to the LOEs, and to their constituent campaigns. The point is not to force cases within templates but to capture and codify the full range of the strategy at hand 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 nonstate and state actors deliberately constrain stark exercises of military power in favor of still potent, yet more ambiguous and variegated types of coercion. 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 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, the identification of LOEs and campaigns should compel an interrogation of what means are deployed to undertake the identified activities. To what degree have our adversaries developed specialized capabilities to prosecute economic, social, and political campaigns? Beyond fighters, we should account for the insurgent’s structures of governance; beyond fighter jets, we should understand rival state’s means of subversion. These means, after all, behoove specialization on our end so as to 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.

On the basis of 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.”<sup>78</sup> 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)?<sup>79</sup>

One has to be careful in answering this question. For example, the common identification of the “population” as the center of gravity in counterinsurgency campaigns really only begs 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 determine 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.<sup>80</sup>

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.”<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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 are, whatever their flaws, preferred to the Islamists. In this context, it is worrisome that the Islamic State in the West African Province, in Nigeria, appears to be learning this lesson and now targets mostly security forces rather than the population, thereby generating worrying legitimacy vis-à-vis the state.<sup>83</sup>

In state use of irregular warfare, legitimacy operates also at the international level. Following the Kosovo intervention of 1999, Russia derived the troubling lesson that international law could be broken so long as actions taken were wrapped in a plausibly legitimizing narrative, in this case the “responsibility to protect.”<sup>84</sup> 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 at least a kernel of truth to the performance, where the argument is at least arguable—hence the exploitation of existing social schisms and political fault lines in targeted countries. Developing an arguable position in this manner helps split international society and can effectively create impunity for deeply dubious acts.

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 the FARC, which was 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 the FARC's narco-trafficking revenue that mattered, or its relative legitimacy with marginalized Colombians, producing a steady flow of recruits. 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.

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 the 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."<sup>85</sup> It was this correct assessment that guided all Colombian planning from 1998 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 identification of critical vulnerabilities can therefore be invaluable, pointing out 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."<sup>86</sup> Specifically, this definition reveals the two criteria at hand: the component's vulnerability, and its importance to the opponent. Many targets are important but not vulnerable, while some are vulnerable but not important. The task lies in finding the overlap so as 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 messaging),

and the threat strategy (its operationalization of ends, ways, and means), we can discern the weak points and poor connections in the threat actor's overall approach. These may be mismatches between frames and strategy (what is stated 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. China seeks regional, maybe global hegemony yet must contain its own domestic contradictions and overcome its own extreme sensitivity to social and political criticism. Through exploitation of critical vulnerabilities such as these, one can over time address issues relating to the center of gravity—often 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 this 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 understanding 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?<sup>87</sup> 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.



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 of the problem 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? Is it 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? Does it relate to perceptions of national interests, resource limitations, the wrong approach, or the right approach applied on too small a scale?

These questions must be engaged dispassionately and thoroughly because the critique of the present government response 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 5 minutes 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. Similar to the estimate framework, 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 around which to build content, 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.<sup>88</sup> The result is a comprehensive plan that encompasses several instruments of power and their interaction across time and space to meet policy objectives.

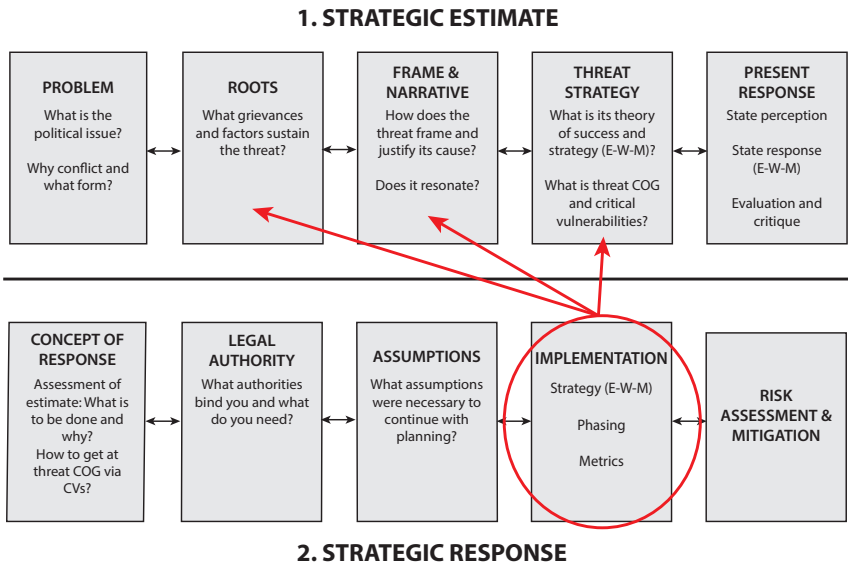
A point of order on the value of plans is immediately necessary. As Dwight Eisenhower famously noted, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything."<sup>89</sup> Another strategist commonly cited in this context is Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, chief of staff of the Prussian general staff, who 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."<sup>90</sup> 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."<sup>91</sup>

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 upon 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 famously 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.”<sup>92</sup> With this said, what are the main components necessary for comprehensive strategy-making?

Much like that for the estimate, the course of action framework comprises five boxes to help guide and sequence analysis (see figure 4). 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 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 will we know that we are succeeding?); and the fifth 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 4. 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 cannot be completed until the entire product has been finalized. Nonetheless, this box 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.<sup>93</sup> The estimate can help make this case, for example, by demonstrating why the 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 back 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.<sup>94</sup>

To stand any chance of implementation, the response should be guided by 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 might be, it has to be approached in relation to other competing national priorities. The ensuring constraints and tradeoffs are what make a recommended strategy at all strategic. As Eliot Cohen explains, "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)."<sup>95</sup>

For the same reason, 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, produce the desired end-state. 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 the pragmatic imperatives of the short term with longer term ideals and objectives.

## Legal Authorities

Another key enabler that should inform the development of the course of action concerns the legal authority for the recommended strategy. Acting within the rule of law is important because of its legitimacy-bestowing qualities, in relation to 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 exercise *lawfare*, that is, “the use of law as a weapon of war.”<sup>96</sup> Establishing and communicating a clear legal case is often necessary to help show continued adherence to the rule of law, all while engaging against a threat that deliberately exploits 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, 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 and repeal 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.<sup>97</sup> 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 exactly the same set of laws during an insurgency which existed beforehand.”<sup>98</sup>

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.<sup>99</sup> 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 your own laws is like printing your 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 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.<sup>100</sup> However, the “arguability” did not protect the government responsible from the court of public opinion, undermining the 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.<sup>101</sup> To lawyers and those of a legalistic bent, the warning 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 it relates to the use of force. Faced with nonstate armed groups, states are unsure whether to treat their members as combatants or as criminals: the former status is deemed inappropriately ennobling and also 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 problem sets.

Colombia’s struggles against the FARC again provide a helpful precedent. As part of the Democratic Security Policy, Bogotá found a flexible 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 by distinguishing 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. During 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).<sup>102</sup>

Another interesting precedent is Ukraine, where 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.<sup>103</sup> 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 law, the state ensured it maintained the perception of being legal, a balancing act not atypical for those proposing fresh approaches to new challenges.

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. Depending on the relevant audience, different legal codes will matter more than others,

though in a compressed mediatized environment, the requirement is typically for some level of congruence across all levels. Decisions as to which level to prioritize, however, relate to where the most critical audiences reside and how they define legitimacy and legality.

## 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. And 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.<sup>104</sup>

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 can 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, and yet assumptions do have a necessary utility as part of the planning process.

Two 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 allow for such a development. The example is almost farcical, and yet, for most cases, determining the validity of planning assumption requires serious debate and analysis of context.

The second condition concerns necessity or importance. To avoid the problem of endless regression, only those assumptions that are strictly needed for planning should be made explicit. This criterion will limit the assumptions to those crucial uncertainties relating to the strategy, thereby delineating helpfully the limits of its applicability. 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.”<sup>105</sup> The process of determining importance is nonetheless more art than science.

Finally, in interrogating which assumptions were necessary for planning, a distinction must be made between explicit assumptions, used to allow planning to proceed, and implicit assumptions, those subconsciously integrated into planning without express intent or acknowledgment.<sup>106</sup> Donald Rumsfeld may have termed these “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns,” respectively.<sup>107</sup> The latter are typically more difficult to spot but can prove devastating when they suddenly fail to obtain. 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.

Given the abundant ambiguity and many pitfalls involved, the need for assumptions may be regrettable, but it is also unavoidable. To the degree possible, gaps in certainty should be narrowed or eliminated through a more rigorous estimate of the situation. Even then, however, the need for assumptions is inherent to the projection of human behaviors into an unknown future. Given such flux and the high likelihood of surprise, there is merit in demonstrating clearly the assumptions used, both explicit and implicit, 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 adopted, the operational art and campaign architecture employed, the means required, the main phases of the plan, and the metrics necessary to measure progress and appropriate transition points.

In terms of substance, the implementation box expands on the concept of response and addresses the conceptual targets raised by the estimate, whether these are to be found in the threat strategy, the roots of the conflict, the frames employed, or a combination of all of these. The difficulty within the course of action is designing, linking, and sequencing the correct actions that are likely to respond to these targets. This requirement calls for a keen grasp of context, of statecraft across the various instruments of power, and of relevant precedents—that is to say, the lessons and best practices that may, appropriately, inspire the approach. Enveloping these actions, their order, and their population by means is the theory of success, or why the approach taken is likely to produce the desired outcomes.

A key requirement in all this is clarity in demonstration. A strategy intended to deal with a complex threat or actor will itself be complex, with multiple actors

undertaking various efforts according to a particular sequence. The challenge lies in communicating said complexity in the linear format insisted on by sentences and words (visual representations notwithstanding). This search for clarity requires effective nesting, or grouping, of activities within their logical category, so as to arrange ideas in a clear structure that can be easily grasped at the macro level and also engaged further at the micro level to reveal the necessary detail. To this end, we return to the terminology of lines of effort, campaigns, and subcampaigns, the sum total of which constitutes the strategic approach.

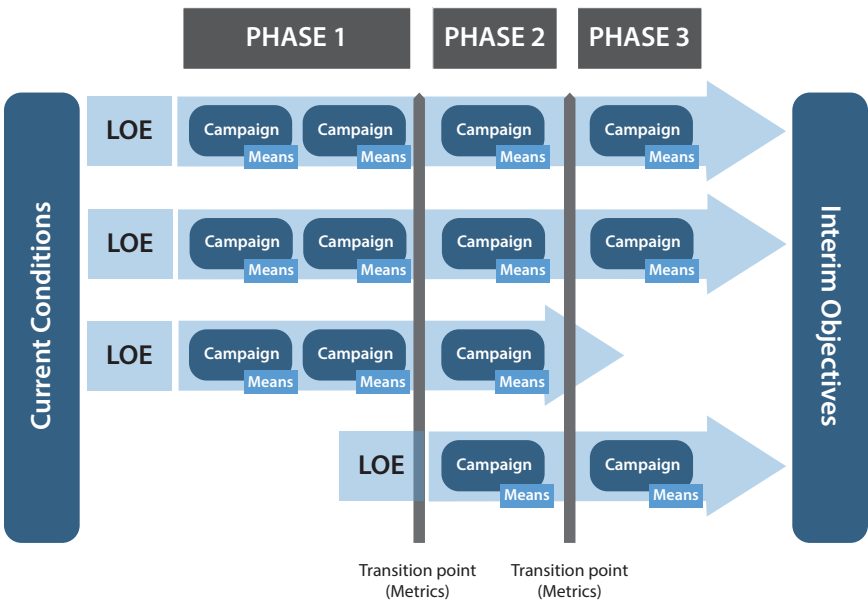
The *estimate of the situation* is the obvious starting point for determining the nature and content of the state's own strategic approach. By identifying the lines of effort and mapping out the campaigns, even subcampaigns, of a threat strategy, a set of "targets" is identified that must in some way be addressed in coordinated fashion by one's own 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 to design its own response, thereby negating the effect of the challenger's strategy. Yet more than simply mirror-image the threat actor's operational art, or letting its strategic decisions dictate the terms of engagement, the response must address the roots and the framing, as well as the state's sense of national interest, to impose its own vision of a better tomorrow.

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. Through mapping, design, and clear articulation of a theory of success, the frameworks encourage an approach for proper defense and also the opportunity to go on the offense.

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 of these concepts, be one unified product. Respective components must be informed by one another and the strategy’s overall logic. Figure 5 provides a graphical representation of how the different components fit together.

*Phasing* allows for a combination of short-term priorities with longer term visions. 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. Different phases will, for example, be more or less appropriate in addressing different elements of the estimate—roots, frame and narrative, and threat strategy. The sequence will relate to how the plan

**Figure 5. Sample Strategic Plan, Showing Integration of Operational Art, Campaigns, Phasing, Transition Points, and Measures of Effectiveness**



unfolds across time and space (and, needless to say, to the requirements of the case). The response may have phases that are sequential or concurrent or a combination of 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.

Regardless of phasing construct, metrics are needed 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. As a Vietnamese colonel quipped to his U.S. counterpart when told, after the war, that the Americans never lost a firefight, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”<sup>108</sup> The conundrum then and now is that irregular warfare is concerned with intangible and immeasurable factors, which clashes with the objectivity and precision striven for in official accounts of effectiveness.<sup>109</sup> The challenge is compounded by what many practitioners feel is a fetishization of metrics, leading to the counting of whatever can be counted. During his time in southern Iraq in 2003–2004, Sir Hilary Synnott noted something of a “fixation” with such quantitative metrics as the number of schools built, roads paved, or pipelines fixed. “These were figures which our governments liked to publicise,” but as he adds, “they conveyed nothing of the reality.”<sup>110</sup>

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 the force is doing what was to be 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. The distinction appears simple, and yet it often proves too tempting to use these indicators—eminently measurable and thus within our grasp—to evaluate their effectiveness. The result is the so-called self-licking ice cream cone, to use another type of military jargon.<sup>111</sup>

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 road-building in Kunar, Afghanistan, he notes 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.”<sup>112</sup> Yet determining metrics for such processes is far from easy, even for Kilcullen.<sup>113</sup>

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, perceptions, 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.<sup>114</sup>

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 of its business management jargon and undisputed status as an important part of strategy-making, the question of metrics is, again, 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.*<sup>115</sup>

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

## Risk and Mitigation

Another tricky element in strategic planning is understanding the risks associated with the execution of the recommended strategy and devising appropriate measures to mitigate such hazards. 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.”<sup>116</sup> 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.<sup>117</sup>

As with metrics, it is precisely because the task is seen as important that the methods of analysis have become so convoluted. In the search to appease masters who will accept, at best, only the most minimal risk, planners get into the habit of dressing up courses of action to meet this expectation rather than engage 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 be helpfully 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 capability or capacity, or the absence of other requirements. The second concerns the risks that flow even 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 the planners identify as laden with risk. Indeed, in some cases, risk identification may force the analyst back to previous components to ensure that the product, as a whole, 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, every course of action implies some risk, and, at some undefinable point, it becomes necessary to communicate these as unavoidable for the sake of the greater good. Doctrine calls these *residual risks*—those that remain when the unnecessary or unacceptable risks have been eliminated.<sup>118</sup> 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.”<sup>119</sup>

When the residual risks have been identified, the next step is to devise possible steps that may nonetheless mitigate their potential 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. Measures recommended to mitigate residual risks would typically not be part of the strategy itself—indeed, they may not even be desired—but they should be identified as emergency actions should the plan fail or, even, succeed yet cause harm to 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 fairly 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 said to be “already obvious” and therefore not worth reprinting or exploring.

These criticisms all 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 said, the Framework for Analysis and Action is being shared because the faculty at CISA, 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. Indeed, a final purpose in sharing this approach is precisely to provoke a conver-

sation—to push for further refinements in our thinking and approaches to the strategic problems of today and tomorrow.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *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>>.

<sup>2</sup> George 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](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45992)>.

<sup>3</sup> Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (New York: William Morrow, 2019); Donald J. Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and U.S. Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Draws 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>>.

<sup>5</sup> The National Defense Strategy states 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.

<sup>6</sup> Overlooked 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).

<sup>7</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 75.

<sup>8</sup> These frameworks were originally created by Thomas A. Marks and draw on his life work and scholarship on an aggregation of the people's war approach, used by the American Patriots, the Asian theorists, notably Mao Zedong, and others.

<sup>9</sup> *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats*, Joint Operating Concept (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 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](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_iw_v2.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162021-510)>.

<sup>10</sup> As cited in Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Picador, 2001), 211.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> 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](http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf)>. Emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, 2006), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas A. Marks, *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007), 41–45.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas A. Marks, "Counterinsurgency in the Age of Globalism," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 27, no. 1 (2007), 24–25.

<sup>17</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> 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 has to 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](http://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/01/07/iran-soleimani-javad-zarif-donald-trump-pleitgen-intv-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn)>.

<sup>19</sup> 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 *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. Ducheine and Frans P.B. Osinga (Amsterdam: Asser Press and Springer, 2017), 280.

<sup>20</sup> 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).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Stephen J. Flanagan et al., *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*, Research Report (Santa Monica: 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.

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

<sup>23</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "The Information Revolution and Power," *Current History* 113, no. 759 (January 2014), 20. Citing John Arquilla.

<sup>24</sup> 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/](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/review-of-isis-the-state-of-terror/)>.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Greeley Misenheimer, *Thucydides’ Other “Traps”: The United States, China, and the Prospect of “Inevitable” War* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 53–54. I am indebted to Jesse Curtis for alerting me to this concept.

<sup>27</sup> 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*.

<sup>28</sup> Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Prediction.”

<sup>29</sup> *Irregular Warfare*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 69.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Coker, *Rebooting Clausewitz: “On War” in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 146.

<sup>32</sup> 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).

<sup>33</sup> 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, n.d.).

<sup>34</sup> 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/>>.

<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> 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](http://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](https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019_CPI_Report_EN.pdf)>.

<sup>37</sup> 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 all this time, the United States has allowed outlets owned by foreign governments to broadcast freely and without label.

<sup>38</sup> As Matthew Armstrong has noted, even at the high point of U.S. strategic communications, the organization faced a range of problems, ranging 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.

<sup>39</sup> 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/>>.

<sup>40</sup> Recent polling suggests that "America's global image plummeted following the election of President Donald Trump" and that "international publics express significant concerns about America's role in world affairs." See Richard Wike et al., "Trump Approval Worldwide Remains Low Especially Among Key Allies," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, October 1, 2018, available at <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/01/trumps-international-ratings-remain-low-especially-among-key-allies/>>.

<sup>41</sup> 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](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/defense-spending-is-americas-cancerous-bipartisan-consensus/2019/07/18/783a9e1a-a978-11e9-9214-246e594de5d5_story.html)>.

<sup>42</sup> Robert M. Gates, "The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, available at <[www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-06-02/robert-gates-overmilitarization-american-foreign-policy](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-06-02/robert-gates-overmilitarization-american-foreign-policy)>.

<sup>43</sup> 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](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257)>.

<sup>44</sup> 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.

<sup>45</sup> 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.”

<sup>46</sup> 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>>.

<sup>47</sup> This vexing question is the central issue in Christopher R. Browning’s groundbreaking study of individual participation 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).

<sup>48</sup> 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>>.

<sup>49</sup> Doug McAdam, “Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer,” *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986), 64–90.

<sup>50</sup> 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 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.

<sup>51</sup> David H. Ucko, “‘The People Are Revolting’: An Anatomy of Authoritarian Counterinsurgency,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2016), 29–61.

<sup>52</sup> Ellen Barry and Sophia Kishkovsky, “As Putin’s Popularity Soars, Voices of Opposition Are Being Drowned Out,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2014, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/world/europe/as-putins-popularity-soars-voices-of-opposition-are-being-drowned-out.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/world/europe/as-putins-popularity-soars-voices-of-opposition-are-being-drowned-out.html)>.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Lartéguy, *The Centurions*, trans. Alexander Wallace Fielding (New York: Penguin, 2015), 474.

<sup>54</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works* [of] V.I. Lenin (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 40, available at <[https://books.google.com/books?id=y\\_sNAQAAMAAJ](https://books.google.com/books?id=y_sNAQAAMAAJ)>.

<sup>55</sup> Nguyễn Giáp Võ, *People's War, People's Army: The Viet Công Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 78.

<sup>56</sup> See Akil N. Awan, "The Virtual Jihad: An Increasingly Legitimate Form of Warfare," *The Virtual Jihad* 3, no. 5 (May 2010), 10–13.

<sup>57</sup> 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/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/)>.

<sup>58</sup> 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](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IRM-2020-U-024710-Final.pdf)>.

<sup>59</sup> See J. Michael Cole, "Chinese Disinformation in Taiwan," *Taiwan Sentinel*, December 30, 2019, available at <<https://sentinel.tw/chinese-disinformation-in-taiwan/>>.

<sup>60</sup> 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 Security International, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 74–88.

<sup>62</sup> For seminal treatment, upon 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).

<sup>63</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> As cited in G.M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Co., 1947), 278.

<sup>65</sup> Ucko, "The People Are Revolting," 38–41.

<sup>66</sup> 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*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2019). For the latter, Marks, *Counterrevolution in China*.

<sup>67</sup> Sergij Mikolajovič Plohij, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 351.

<sup>68</sup> Arthur F. Lykke, "Defining Military Strategy," *Military Review* 69, no. 5 (May 1989), 3.

<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey W. Meiser, "Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy," *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016), 83.

<sup>70</sup> This section draws on Ucko and Marks, "Violence in Context."

<sup>71</sup> JP 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](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp5_0_20171606.pdf)>.



<sup>72</sup> Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> JP 5-0, IV-29.

<sup>74</sup> “George F. Kennan, ‘The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare’ [Redacted Version],” April 30, 1948, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Obtained and contributed by A. Ross Johnson. Cited in his book *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*, chapter 1n4. 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>>.

<sup>75</sup> Ucko 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*.

<sup>76</sup> Frequently 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.

<sup>77</sup> 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,” *Vox Ukraine*, n.d., available at <<https://voxukraine.org/longreads/twitter-database/index-en.html>>.

<sup>78</sup> As cited in Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 182.

<sup>79</sup> *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).

<sup>80</sup> 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.

<sup>81</sup> 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>>.

<sup>82</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111–145.

<sup>83</sup> 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>>.

<sup>84</sup> 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](http://www.latimes.com/la-oe-evans31-2008aug31-story.html)>.

<sup>85</sup> 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” of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or its organization, were identified as operational centers of gravity, or what in our terminology would best be described as *critical vulnerabilities* (see discussion below). It was this correct assessment that guided all Colombian planning from 1998 to 2010.

<sup>86</sup> JP 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2011), available at <[http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp5\\_0.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp5_0.pdf)>.

<sup>87</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy: A Theory of Success,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 97 (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter, April 2020). Strategists such as Eliot Cohen have long included a “theory of victory” as an inherent component of strategy. See Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 33. More commonly, however, a unifying theory of this type is omitted within the ends-ways-means construct, removing from the “strategy” the very reason why it is presumed to work. We therefore welcome Meiser’s emphasis on this concept and, given the characteristic ambiguity of “victory” in irregular warfare, his rephrasing of it as a “theory of success.” See Meiser, “Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy,” 86.

<sup>88</sup> 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](https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1172.html)>.

<sup>89</sup> 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](http://www.nytimes.com/1957/11/15/archives/president-draws-planning-moral-recalls-army-days-to-show-value-of.html)>.

<sup>90</sup> 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>>.

<sup>91</sup> As cited in P.G. Tsouras, *The Greenhill Dictionary of Military Quotations* (London: Greenhill Books, 2000), 363.

<sup>92</sup> 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.

<sup>93</sup> 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."

<sup>94</sup> 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/>>.

<sup>95</sup> 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](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/04/AR2009120402602.html)>.

<sup>96</sup> Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., *Law and Military Interventions: Preserving Humanitarian Values in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conflicts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, 2001), 5.

<sup>97</sup> 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](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326926clp1101_1)>.

<sup>98</sup> Frank Kitson, *Bunch of Five* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1977), 289.

<sup>99</sup> 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, 2005.

<sup>100</sup> 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).

<sup>101</sup> 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 NATO's 1999 Kosovo intervention, which proceeded without United Nations Security Council resolution or other legal basis but was perceived by most, but not all, as justified and, on the whole, 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>>.

<sup>102</sup>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, on the basis of the military balance and the organizational capacity of the adversary (based on intelligence). The norms would be set up so as 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.

<sup>103</sup>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/osobliviv-poryadok-shho-bude-diyati-z-ogoloshennyam-pochatku-provedennya-operaczii-obednanih-sil-na-teritorii-doneczkoi-ta-luganskoi-oblastej/>>.

<sup>104</sup>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>>.

<sup>105</sup>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/MR1114.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1114.html)>. Emphasis in original.

<sup>106</sup>For this distinction, see Dewar et al., *Assumption-Based Planning*, 6–7.

<sup>107</sup>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/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/rumsfelds-knowns-and-unknowns-the-intellectual-history-of-a-quip/359719/)>.

<sup>108</sup> Harry G. Summers, *American Strategy in Vietnam: A Critical Analysis* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012), 1, available at <<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfull-record.aspx?p=1890088>>.

<sup>109</sup> For a great discussion of these difficulties, see Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), 79–92.

<sup>110</sup> Hilary Synnott, *Bad Days in Basra: My Turbulent Time as Britain's Man in Southern Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 211.

<sup>111</sup> 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>>.

<sup>112</sup> 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.

<sup>113</sup> See the critique of Kilcullen's metrics in Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War*, 81–89.

<sup>114</sup> Lynette M.B. Arnhart and Marvin L. King, "Are We There Yet? Implementing Best Practices in Assessments," *Military Review*, June 2018, 20–29.

<sup>115</sup> Stanislav Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973), 110.

<sup>116</sup> 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/>>.

<sup>117</sup> Douglas W. Hubbard, *The Failure of Risk Management: Why It's Broken and How to Fix It* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> Army Techniques Publication 5-19, *Risk Management* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, September 8, 2014), 1–10.

<sup>119</sup> Mazarr, "Rethinking Risk in Defense."

## About the Authors

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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.





