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14. ABSTRACT
U.S. strategy on Iran since the 1950s has fluctuated back and forth between hawkish and dovish tactics, however, none of these tactics have led to a successful campaign against Iran. With the new administration in place, there is an opportunity for U.S. strategists to use the U.S. Marine Corps' recently published framework on competition and the U.S. Marine Corps Planning Process as one method to determine the most viable and enduring strategy that would provide a realistic level of success.

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Shaping U.S. Policy Toward Iran Through a Competition Framework

Author: Nicole D. McClarren, U.S. Department of State

Thesis: Using the U.S. Marine Corps' approach to competition and planning process methodology would help U.S. strategists gain a sophisticated understanding of Iran in order to better develop realistic policies most likely to achieve vital U.S. interests.

Discussion: U.S. strategy on Iran since the 1950s has fluctuated back and forth between coercive and massive pressure to engagement and cooperation. None of these tactics has endured or resulted in a clear victory for the U.S. and the international community, and with the new administration in place, it is time for U.S. policymakers to rethink how they develop strategy. This paper argues that one useful method is looking to the U.S. Marine Corps' recently published framework on competition, which emphasizes that competition is the normal state of international relations. Given that competition is always occurring in a murky continuum between pure peace and total war, it is imperative to comprehensively understand the competitor and its orientation in order to gain an advantage.

Once a competitor is thoroughly analyzed and evaluated, this paper recommends that U.S. strategists incorporate the Marine Corps planning process to develop various courses of action (COAs) that could then be simulated to compare and determine the COA that will provide the most likely and realistic outcome. Given that Iran is an isolated autocratic regime with an avowed religious mandate, it is unlikely that the U.S. can coerce significant change in Iran's behavior, but this study identifies some limited ways of shaping Iran's perception of its own standing in the international competitive system.

Conclusion: The competition framework and the U.S. Marine Corps' planning process would enable the U.S. to obtain an attainable and most likely enduring level of success against Iran.

Preface

This paper recommends that the United States utilize the Marine Corps' recently published framework on approaching competition in order to develop a successful security strategy against Iran, to include decisions on whether the U.S. should continue its maximum pressure campaign and whether the U.S. should remain out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal. With the election of a new president, U.S. policy toward Iran is at an important inflection point, with the new administration having stated its desire to return to the JCPOA, a monumental deal led by its political party's predecessor President Barack Obama in 2015 to influence Iran from developing a nuclear capability. However, the U.S. continues to remain in a precarious position with Iran. U.S. strategies against Iran have been in a constant state of tug-of-war that goes back and forth from hawkish to dovish tactics, between coercion, epitomized by the previous Trump administration, and diplomatic engagement and compromise.

In the most general sense, creating and executing policies through a competition framework can help shift policymaking from an unattainable end state of a zero-sum victory or complete achievement of all U.S. policy goals to a more realistic approach that balances both sides' vital interests. This realistic approach will have varying degrees of success, as well as the expected ups and downs of tension and conflict. Some U.S. policymakers seem to forget that while we aim to protect our own interests, so do other nations - even rogue states - which can lead to a constant state of competition. The U.S.'s concept of maximum pressure is pitted against an adversary, Iran, with its own vital interests, including, at root, its own survival.

Marine Corps doctrine and approaches, even though designed to serve Service-specific ends, are crafted to nest within higher defense policy and national security strategies, and therefore lend themselves to addressing geopolitical problems that, on the face of it, far exceed

the Marines' service responsibilities. Specifically, in the Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-4, *Competing*, Marines are urged to approach competition similarly as they approach war by the maneuver warfare principles, which centers on the philosophy of orienting on the rival to shape the environment in order to create effective strategies. The Marines' competitive approach, moreover can be wedded with the Marine Corps planning process in comparing potential strategies to determine what will be the most viable and successful course of action (COA). The planning process may initially appear to be a rigid, process-oriented approach, but it actually carefully considers the unpredictability of the human element. To be clear, understanding the adversary's interests and worldview does not imply acquiescence to the adversary's interests or a "live and let live" outcome. Rather, a steely-eyed sense of U.S. policy objectives and vital interests is always at the forefront, while, in the competition framework, a sophisticated understanding of the adversary can better develop *realistic policies most likely to achieve vital U.S. interests*.

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Introduction

Since gaining full sovereignty over its territory in 1947, Iran has been a prominent geopolitical force in the Middle East, and U.S. policy, in turn, has vacillated over the years. Initially, Washington was Iran's primary ally as the U.S. looked to counter the Soviet Union and maintain influence over Iran's strategic commodities in oil and gas. Under American security, Iran became a regional stronghold. However, the U.S. lost its close relationship with Iran during the Islamic revolution in 1979, which overthrew the U.S.-backed shah and brought the world's first Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Later that year, Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Iran and held more than 60 American citizens as hostages that lasted for more than 444 days as the U.S. reacted by imposing sanctions and an embargo on imports from Iran, and closing Iranian institutions in the U.S.¹ The crisis marked the end of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Tensions continued to rise as Iran sought to support terrorist and extremist groups who targeted U.S. citizens, and was designated by the U.S. as a "state sponsor of terrorism" with the 1983 U.S. Embassy bombing in Beirut, Lebanon that resulted in the death of 241 U.S. service members. The designation allowed the U.S. to impose further sanctions, halt loans and foreign aid, and restrict the sales of "dual-use items." Despite the designation, Iran continued to exacerbate tensions, resulting in the U.S.'s policy of containment throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Iran's perspective, meanwhile, was influenced by U.S. support to Iraq during the bloody Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, and following the September 11th attacks that resulted in Iran perceiving U.S. encirclement of Iran in the east, west, and north with the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2002 and Saddam Hussein in 2003, as well as the U.S.'s pursuit of energy and military agreements with Central Asian republics.²

In 2002, an Iranian exile opposition group known as the National Council of Resistance (Mujahedin-e Khalq or MEK) exposed Iran's hiding of a uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy-water plant at Arak, which was confirmed by satellite photographs. The exposure shook the international community as it demonstrated how advanced Iran's nuclear development had come in comparison to what was originally assessed of its status. Iran's pursuit of a nuclear capability goes as far back as the 1950s, and, ironically, the U.S. was the first country to help Iran gain nuclear technology when it supplied a five-megawatt research reactor to Iran.³ As the U.S. and the international community went back and forth with Iran on its nuclear efforts, on July 14, 2015, Iran, the European Union, and the P5+1 countries (U.S., China, France, Russia, UK, and Germany) signed a landmark nuclear agreement that officially went into effect in January 2016 known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The deal limited Iran's efforts to develop its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of some Security Council sanctions. Specifically, the deal ensured that the breakout time – the period between a hypothetical Iranian decision to build a nuclear bomb and its success in doing so – is lengthened to at least one year, giving enough time for the international community to react.⁴ The deal also limited Iran's ability to stock low-enriched uranium, capped the number of operating centrifuges, and required Iran to agree to inspections and rigid monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The JCPOA not only lifted some sanctions against Iran, but also helped reintegrate Iran back into the global community as some international members became assuaged with Iran's willingness to limit its nuclear efforts and thus pursued to reestablish diplomatic relations. However, in May 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the deal, citing that it “was a horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made.”⁵ The withdrawal

exemplified the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against Iran as the administration assessed that the deal was narrowly focused and completely disregarded Iran's continued sponsorship of terrorism and its rapidly developing ballistic missile program, giving Iran, as of March 2020, the largest missile arsenal in the Middle East, with approximately 2,500 to 3,000 missiles.⁶ Although the remaining P5+1 members attempted to salvage the deal after the U.S.'s withdrawal, Iran has resumed some of its nuclear activities to include exceeding agreed-upon limits to its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, developing new centrifuges, enriching uranium in higher concentrations, resuming heavy water production at the Arak facility, and in February 2021, Iran announced it will place new restrictions on the IAEA's ability to conduct inspections.⁷ Most recently, the Biden administration has announced its willingness to return to the deal should Iran come back into compliance, even as Israel is signaling it will not tolerate a return to a diplomatic track that it believes will leave Iran able to covertly pursue its nuclear aspirations.

Using a Competition Model to Break the Impasse on U.S. Policy Toward Iran

A key analytic assumption of this paper is that, whether the U.S. pursues coercive threats or diplomatic enticements, U.S. policy would be better served by having an enhanced sense of the adversary's interests and capabilities to pursue its own self-defined vital security interests. For too long, some Western strategists and policymakers have dismissed the glaring fact that while the U.S. strives to maintain a competitive edge, adversaries do the same. The tug and pull of international relations, the "other's" perception of its own national security interests, and the offsetting balance of capabilities, suggests policies aimed at zero-sum solutions, or outright

victory, are unrealistic. Instead, viewing the Iran problem through a lens of “competition” can better frame U.S. policies for the long term.

History and international relations theory suggest there will always be a state of competition within the international community, and thus it is imperative that the U.S. reevaluate its policies on Iran through a competition framework that pursues a more realistic approach. Part of a realistic approach is recognition that Iran is attempting to maintain a competitive position in the global order through its ballistic missiles program, its regional influence through proxy networks, and its efforts to build a nuclear capability. One way to develop an effective strategy to counter Iran as a competitor is to look to the Marine Corps’ approach to competition. In the Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-4 (MCDP 1-4), *Competing*, Marines are taught to approach competition similarly to how they approach war, in which orienting on the competitor (adversary) is necessary in order to develop models of the competitor’s system to identify viable ways to exploit an advantage over the competitor.⁸ U.S. strategists and policymakers should then utilize the Marine Corps planning process to analyze and compare different strategies to effectively determine the most *likely* and *realistic* course of action for the U.S. to pursue with Iran as we continue in the never-ending world of competition. The Marines’ service-level frameworks and processes translate well to the higher national-levels of policy analysis and processes.

Defining Competition

The term “competition” within the international community is used in varying ways and is often interchangeable with the terms conflict, contestation, rivalry, violence, and even war. One explanation is demonstrated by the vast amount of literature available that even differs on

the origin of competition where some scholars and psychologists argue that competition is innate and therefore, a natural state of being while others argue that competition is mostly manmade and societally induced. This difference alone can make a significant impact as it shapes how one will respond when confronted with competition – whether from pressure to be the best or as an instinctual response in order to survive. Literature has further branded competition into different concepts from economic competition to individual versus group competition to social comparison (known as social dilemma in the extreme). Competition has even been identified as an interlocking practice of cooperation, which to some would argue is the antithesis of competition when it is viewed as “zero-sum” rather than “positive-sum” outcomes.⁹

In the international relations context, competition appears to be normally understood as a state of antagonistic relations short of direct armed conflict between actors that reflects three basic distinguishing factors such as perceived contention, an effort to gain mutual advantage, and pursuit of some outcome or good that is not generally available.¹⁰ Of significance is that in this context, there is already put in place a dangerous undertone by describing competition as an antagonistic relationship. U.S. policy showcases that it predominantly embraces competition in this way – as a zero-sum rivalry, seen not only in the hawkish tactics used against Iran in U.S. policy, but also in the most recent U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) that focuses on “great power competition” with Russia and China, depicting the emerging threat as “increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order.”¹¹

U.S. policies that are grounded in the awareness that competition is a *normal* and *constant* state of relations in the international realm¹², are likely to be more effective than “all or nothing” strategies. This paper thus defines competition as “*a sustaining effort to advance’s*

one's interests by any means necessary to gain an advantage." This paper also refers to the opposing actor in the competition sphere as a *competitor* rather than a rival or adversary.

Using the Marine Corps' Framework on Approaching Competition

As competition is a standard norm of business among international players, whether it is perceived as an antagonistic rivalry or as a survival mechanism, history demonstrates that the level of competition ebbs and flows between nations because as one nation becomes stronger than the other, the other nation seeks to adapt and counter its competitor. The U.S.'s relations with Iran since the 1950s is just one example of this phenomenon as the two countries have been striving for the advantageous position over the other as seen by the tit-for-tat responses by both, which continues to this day. Notably, a glaring facet of the relationship is that neither nation has been at complete peace or total war with the other, but rather at some varying degree of competition. The U.S. Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy exemplifies this idea of competition and frames it as the following:

*Total war and perfect peace rarely exist in practice. Instead, they are extremes between which exist the relations among most political groups. This range includes routine economic competition, more or less permanent political or ideological tension, and occasional crises among groups.*¹³

MCDP 1-4 recommends that Marines rely on the concept of competition continuum derived from the Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 1-19, *Competition Continuum*, that further encapsulates this behavior as it describes that relations between nations should not be viewed as either pure peace or pure war, but that there is "an enduring competition conducted through a mixture of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict."¹⁴ Thus the interchangeable use of the terms, such as conflict, rivalry, and violence with competition explains the general understanding that the wide spectrum of actions between competitors are all

parts of the competitive world. JDN 1-19 identifies three main acts of competition – cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict, however, a more comprehensive look at the competition continuum identifies other competitive acts that are just as important and need to be factored in when examining the U.S.’s competitive relationship with Iran. One such model can be derived from MCDP 1-4:

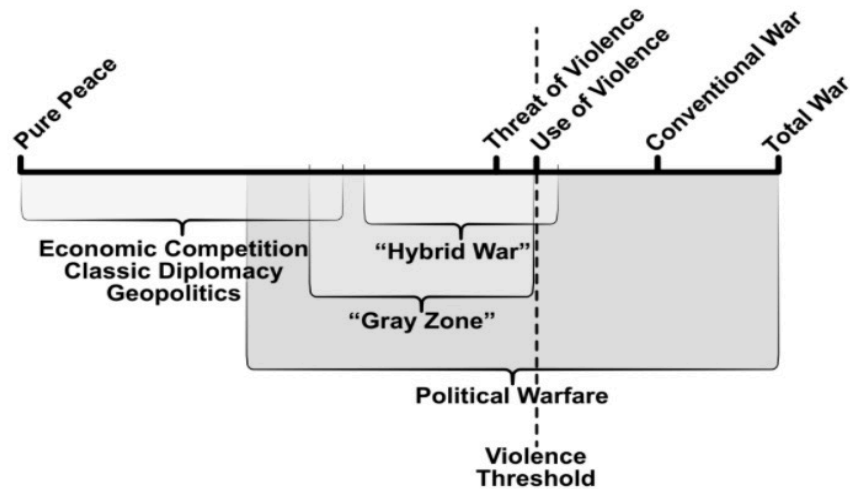


Figure 1. Linear Competition Continuum Model.

When comparing the above model to JDN 1-19’s three main acts of competition, one can see that cooperation correlates with economic competition and classic diplomacy geopolitics in the above model; competition below armed conflict correlates with the gray zone, hybrid war, and political warfare before the threshold of violence, and armed conflict correlates with the use of violence and conventional war. In Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, *Warfighting*, war is described as a continuous adaptation between two opposing forces with a give and take or move and countermove dynamic.¹⁵ This also occurs in competition as one tries to best the other thus forcing the other to react and then respond. Of significance is that MCDP 1 emphasizes the criticality that an opponent is not an inanimate object to be acted upon but an

independent and animate force with its own objectives and plans; specifically keeping in mind of the human element at play.¹⁶

The human dimension is probably the most decisive factor when it comes to competition, yet it is also the most ambiguous factor. MCDP 1-4 attempts to account for the human factor by focusing on the competitor's *orientation*, specifically, by using the Observe, Orient, Decision, and Action (OODA) loop developed by Colonel John Boyd. Colonel Boyd described orientation as "it represents images, views, or impressions of the world shaped by genetic heritage, cultural tradition, previous experiences, and unfolding circumstances."¹⁷ Understanding the competitor's orientation illuminates *how the competitor will approach the competition*, which is key when determining what move should be made to gain an advantage over the competitor. That said, Boyd's idea of orientation is not as simple as it seems. Research has shown that groups have been found to behave systematically different than individuals because results have shown that in group settings, learning happens more quickly, decisions are more sophisticated and payoff-oriented, and there is less influence by cognitive limitations, behavioral biases, and social considerations.¹⁸ The fact that many of the U.S.'s competitors comprise a group of individuals rather than one individual makes it enormously complicated as each individual has their own orientation. Thus, in a competitive setting, it is imperative to consider the type of governments that the U.S. is competing against: to put it in terms of extreme opposites, is the competitor a totalitarian government where one individual makes all the decisions or is it a democratic government where a majority is needed to make decisions?

Iran Under Pressure as an Authoritarian Regime

Understanding the nature of Iran as a competitor is the critical first step toward crafting effective and competitive policies. Iran can best be described as a nation of glaring paradoxes;

on one hand, it is currently a regime ruled by the ideology of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the Islamic jurist) where clerical oversight is mandated on elected institutions. Yet, the Islamic revolution in 1979 was conceived by democratic forces in order to overthrow long-standing monarchy rule. One scholar describes Iran now as being “personified by the dour, aged faces of its autocratic rulers, where there are more public hangings per capita than anywhere else in the world...but has a young and globally connected citizenry.”¹⁹ While the revolution garnered support for a theocracy, Iran is best described as an authoritarian state with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei representing the divine mandate of God. Iran consists of a dual political system made up of a head of state (an appointed supreme leader) and a head of government (an elected political official with a four-year tenure), however, the head of state has quickly transformed into a position that ultimately makes all the decisions.

According to Iran’s constitution, a popularly elected body of theologians known as the Assembly of Experts is supposed to supervise the work of the supreme leader and elect a new one when he dies or is deemed to be derelict in his duties.²⁰ However, Khamenei has representatives in practically all of Iran’s institutions, to include Iran’s Armed Forces. Prior to Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Qods Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Qassem Soleimani’s death, Soleimani had direct access to Khamenei and often times, would outright dismiss or ignore President Hassan Rouhani. While it remains to be seen exactly what the dynamic is between Khamenei and the new IRGC-QF Commander Esmail Qaani, who was appointed by Khamenei, Khamenei undeniably has control over the IRGC, which he not only relies on for suppression at home, but also as his primary lethal weapon against dissidents and opponents overseas. Khamenei also appoints at least six of the members of the twelve-man Guardian Council, which now vets the candidates for every elected position in Iran.²¹ Furthermore,

Khamenei not only appoints the head of security and head of judiciary, but he also appoints the head of Iran's radio and television that has significantly allowed him to intimidate critics, and control and influence media rhetoric to his own liking.

Recently, the international community has seen an increase in challenge to Khamenei's rule by former clerical supporters, top Shia clerics, and even from former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani prior to his demise. Rafsanjani even proclaimed that, after Khamenei, a committee of clerics should assume the responsibilities held by the supreme leader.²² Recent events in Iran has exhibited tinges of anti-sentiment for authoritarian control, such as the surge of popular support for President Rouhani when he aligned himself with reformists in 2013, but also the internal protests such as the January 2018 anti-government protests. Of irony is that, in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini invigorated the population on the very ideal that every generation had the inherent right to demand its own mode of governance.²³ Now as Khamenei is advancing in age, there is an alarming realization amongst him and his staunch supporters of their increasing weaknesses on their grip on power as the Iranian populace is becoming more emboldened. Not only is the population becoming more educated and modernized, but the rapid availability of information through advanced technology and social media has also elevated this boldness despite the regime's significant efforts to clamp down on internet access in Iran that includes arrest.

Khamenei's efforts to enforce Draconian laws and harsh sentences as a means to control Iran in practically all aspects of life has led to an expansion of an underground society. A thriving, but covert means of living in music, theater, film, sexuality, art, and even gender roles can be found in Iran today. There is even a clandestine university in Iran, the Bahai Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) that was created after the 1979 revolution when the regime banned

Bahais from enrolling colleges, so members of that faith (a faith that believes that all religions are worthy) created this university, where the graduates have even been accepted to many prominent Western schools.²⁴ Today's Iranian public is braver than ever despite the regime's efforts to counter this bravery with brutal force, propaganda, and tighter control.

Iran as a Competitive Player

A regime's claim to legitimacy is vital in justifying its means of rule, and, in turn, its durability, and thus relying on repression alone is not enough to sustain authoritarian rule.²⁵ With an autocratic regime like Iran, regime survival is crucial and is absolutely its top priority especially now with the increasing uncertainty of the future of Iran's clerical regime as Khamenei advances in age coupled with the rise of internal dissent. When comparing Iran's position in the international order, many can agree that it is a position of vulnerability that is not only self-induced with its reputation as a rogue state, but it has been a nation that has been under foreign control for centuries until Reza Shah Pahlavi came into power in the 1920s to establish Iran as its own nation-state. An examination of Iran's competitive behavior for the past few years using the competition continuum suggests the following:

Cooperation, Economic Competition, Classic Diplomacy: Iran is the only Persian-majority state in a region of Arab-majority states to the west and south; Russian and Turkic-majority states to the northwest, north, and northeast; and Central and South Asian states to the east; and it is the only Shia-majority state in the world.²⁶ This geographical loneliness naturally leads Iran to mistrust its regional neighbors, compounded by having the third largest combined reserves of oil and natural gas, which has made others envious of its assets.

Iran's diplomatic efforts were demonstrated with its initial agreement to the 2015 nuclear deal, which also helped it to re-enter the global economy and re-establish diplomatic relations with some nations. With the U.S.'s withdrawal, however, Iran attempted to remain within the confines of the deal through the assurances of the other members. That said, Iran eventually assessed that without the U.S.'s endorsement of the deal's terms, it was not enough, and thus eventually exceeded the deal's agreed limits to enrich uranium and inevitably restricted the IAEA's inspections and monitoring of its facilities.

Competition below Armed Conflict, Threat of Violence, Gray Zone, Hybrid War: The U.S.'s strategy of containment is a constraint against Iran and most regional states endorse this strategy as an effort to counter or roll back Iran's influence through their procurement of weapons, the increase of security cooperation with the U.S., and the allowance of a large American military presence in their countries.²⁷ The long-standing containment of Iran along with the publicized deep distrust by Khamenei of the U.S., a distrust that stems from the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh that returned the shah to power against Iran's will, resonates a significant anti-American sentiment in Iran's military and political endeavors. Iran also has a very weak economic structure with its restrictive foreign investment laws, corruption, an inefficient tax system, a frail banking and financial sector, and the IRGC's significant control over a third of Iran's economy who was designated by the Trump administration as a foreign terrorist organization in 2019, which has really engulfed Iran's feeble economic system with harsh punishments by the international community. Iran's turn to illicit financial and procurement activities is in response to imposed sanctions and U.S. designations.

In response to Iran's geographical and political isolation, coupled with the threat of conventional forces on its borders and a perception of the West's and Western allies' aggression,

Iran is inevitably forced to counter these perceived threats, and has built a sophisticated ballistic missiles program, which is considered a primary component of its strategic deterrent with its long-range strike capability of up to 2,000 km.²⁸ The international community has attempted to incapacitate Iran's foreign procurement efforts with sanctions, which then spurred Iran to develop its own domestic means to produce increasingly capable ballistic missiles. Iran is also pursuing to develop space launch vehicles with lift capabilities that could have similar ranges and uses comparable technologies to intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Iran has maintained its stance that not only is its missile force an essential part of its legitimate self-defense strategy, but also that its other capabilities to include its efforts to develop a nuclear program are all for the protection of Iranian sovereignty. These capabilities include cyberspace, chemical and biological warfare, space, and even intelligence that the international community has largely dismissed as mediocre or in the infancy stages until the last decade when Iran has astonishingly revealed just how advanced they have gotten. For example, Iran has previously used cyberspace predominately as a tool of statecraft and internal security, however, Iran has really showcased its cyber competencies through extensive denial-of-service attacks and damaging malware incidents against the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Another astounding revelation, especially for Western and Israeli intelligence services is the level of sophistication by the Iranian intelligence services in the spy world that has frankly left the U.S. and Israel in embarrassing and amateurish situations. For example, in 2019, Iran publicly announced its detainment of Iranian spies with video footage of suspected clandestine meetings and even business cards that belonged to the spies' alleged Western handlers. While there is no public evidence to these claims, the significance of this disinformation campaign not only belittled the elite spy organizations, but also bolstered Iran's standing in the competitive arena.

Armed Conflict, Use of Violence: Iran has also resorted to unconventional means of warfare in response to the overwhelming presence of conventional forces surrounding its borders. Iran's sponsorship and use of Iraqi militias, militant groups, and terrorist networks has really advanced Iran's ability to project its own power in the region. How Iran sponsors these groups varies, and includes support such as funding, training, provision of equipment, and even military support. The regime also uses these groups, specifically Hezbollah, who is its most important and long-standing nonstate partner to conduct terrorist and assassination operations on behalf of the regime. Iran's sponsorship of these entities has even evolved for it to benefit from the existing military and political fragilities in some of these nations where Iran has helped some of these entities gain political legitimacy through winning seats in national parliamentary elections and governmental cabinets, and has paved the way for Iran to influence the selection of national leaders.²⁹ However, Iran has also been forced to become increasingly involved in regional conflicts, specifically in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq in order to support key partners in these struggles.

The U.S. has a long history of interaction with Iran, and most notable throughout that interaction is the lack of a U.S. military response against Iran's numerous hostile acts – the Beirut bombings in 1983, the Khobar Towers bombings in Saudi Arabia in 1996, the support for insurgents attacking Americans in Iraq after 2003, in which Iran was assessed to rely on these proxy groups for plausible deniability. After a U.S. military drone strike killed Soleimani, Iran publicly retaliated just a short six days later against U.S. forces in Iraq, launching sixteen missiles at several installations.³⁰

Political Warfare occurs throughout the entire competition spectrum and can be seen through Iran's propaganda and disinformation campaigns, as well as through arrests and/or

punishments of dual Iranian-American citizens in Iran. *Pure Peace* and *Total War* has never really occurred between the U.S. and Iran because a closer look would demonstrate that even when the U.S. and Iran were allies during the 1950s and 1960s, there still existed an aura of economic competition and classic diplomacy between the two nations.

From 2016 to 2020, the Trump administration clearly categorized Iran as an antagonistic competitor where it was assessed more as a nation striving for regional dominance and/or assertion of Iranian influence rather than being assessed as a competitor attempting to secure regime survival. The administration shaped its strategy around the concept of maximum pressure, that not only led to the U.S.'s withdrawal from a monumental nuclear deal and the targeted strike against a government official, but also included for the first time ever for the U.S. to designate a part of another government as a foreign terrorist organization. Now with the new administration in place and President Biden's recent limited retaliatory response against Iranian-backed facilities in Syria after it was determined that an Iranian-backed militia conducted a February 2021 attack in Iraq that killed one U.S. contractor, it is still yet to be determined the direction that the U.S. will be going when it comes to Iran.

Using the Marine Corps' Planning Process to Compare Strategies to Determine the Best Course of Action

Using the competition framework helps to evaluate and determine the potential causes of Iranian behavior, the actors and incentives of Iranian decision makers, and identifies prospective points of leverage for U.S. policy to compete with Iran. Next, this analysis can be transformed into specific policies and actions. The Marine Corps planning process is well suited for translating the competition framework into policy proposals. MCDP 1-4 strongly advocates that

understanding a competitor's system is the key to success as it allows for thorough analysis on how the competitor's system fits together, where it is strong, and where it is vulnerable. This analysis is particularly well done in the Marine Corps Planning process, which is the Marine Corps primary planning tool used at all levels to plan operations and detailed in Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 5-10 (MCWP 5-10), *Marine Corps Planning Process*. The crucial element of this planning process is the **act of design**, which MCWP 5-10 explicitly identifies that the purpose of design is "to achieve a greater understanding of the environment and the nature of the problem in order to identify an appropriate conceptual solution" and that design is a **continuous** activity that constantly has to be **revisited** throughout the process.³¹ Specifically, design is orchestrated using a comprehensive series of various analytical procedures and tools, such as framing the problem, identifying and characterizing diverse tasks, developing assumptions and limitations, examining the competitor's centers of gravity, and ascertaining intelligence requirements and gaps. Design is continuously refined, but often overlooked once a solution is established.

Design is then visualized through COA development that encompasses the totality of the analytical efforts done on the competitor thus far that enables the creation of possible COAs that the U.S. can take. In mid-February 2021, the Biden administration had extended an offer to revisit talks with Iran on the JCPOA when Iran had set a deadline that if the U.S. did not lift sanctions, it would prevent any further IAEA inspections and would continue its endeavors to build up its nuclear program. Although the U.S. ultimately did not budge from lifting sanctions at Iran's demand, the U.S. is at a critical juncture as it is now in a tense stand-off especially after the U.S. strikes in Syria against Iranian-backed militia locations. Another significant factor that the U.S. needs to consider is that the next Iranian presidential election is scheduled for June 2021

that could tip the balance to an even more anti-American sentiment within the Iranian government.

When formulating possible COAs, MCWP 5-10 specifies that there are numerous techniques that could be utilized, either through the sequence of actions given goals and objectives, the consideration of key factors such as the Marines' mnemonic use of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time), or the determination of what the competitor's most likely and dangerous COAs will be.³² Whatever technique is used, the developed COAs are then simulated through a COA wargame that thoroughly examines each COA through an action-reaction-counteraction interaction that thus enables further refinement and adjustments as each move changes what the competitor's orientation, environment, and any influences or factors would be at that time. The results of the wargame would then help to illuminate the most *likely* and *realistic* course of action for the U.S. to pursue.

For example, U.S. strategists could use the planning process to determine if the U.S. should resume efforts to re-enter nuclear negotiations with Iran or to remain out of them, and one way to analyze whether to resume or refrain nuclear negotiations can be framed around the development of the most likely and dangerous COA, which is Iran continuing its efforts to enhance its nuclear capability, either covertly or overtly with limitations:

COA 1 Re-Negotiation: The JCPOA deal primarily leveraged sanctions to influence Iran to agree to limit its nuclear program, but one glaring factor that the U.S. and others did not address is Iran's perception that it is geographically isolated and relies on showcasing its nuclear endeavors as one of its deterrents against its regional rivals. When the nuclear deal pushed Iran to de-emphasize its nuclear undertakings, Tehran resorted to enhancing other capabilities to maintain deterrence, which, in turn, fed growing unease in the Middle East and in Washington.

Even with the diplomatic accomplishment of a nuclear deal, Iran's aggressive pursuit of enriching its ballistic missiles program as well as strengthening its unconventional means of warfare actually led to increased tension.

When defining the problem set and identifying the current state and the desired end state, the U.S. could look to design COA 1 to alleviate Iran's perception of an isolated nation. In effect although a new nuclear deal would still diminish Iran's ability to achieve deterrence through its nuclear programs, it would in theory have less need for deterrence if it is less threatened. For example, the U.S. could offer to ease the number of conventional forces encircling Iran as an assurance as Iran gives up its nuclear aspirations. The crux of the problem from the nuclear deal is the simple fact that Iran was giving up one of its main sources of deterrence and as a regime with a long history of foreign oppression and/or intervention, Iran's viselike grip on its other capabilities maintains a constant tug-of-war between the U.S. and Iran.

COA 2 Containment: Amongst U.S. policymakers, there are those who urge against the U.S. from re-entering nuclear negotiations. The Trump administration had repeatedly cited problems with the JCPOA deal, predominantly focusing on three issues: one that it was a "sunset" deal," which allowed Iran to resume its efforts after a certain amount of time, the second issue is that the deal never resolved past questions on Iran's nuclear weapons work, specifically that Iran had hid and lied about its previous work, and the third issue is that the equipment being used to develop these weapons had not been declared or monitored.³³ In evaluating the competitor, Iran places very little importance on international legitimacy and rather values self-sufficiency and autonomy, especially as it showcases itself as the only champion of the Islamic Republic's core principles. Our evaluation during the problem-framing step will demonstrate that it is most unlikely that the U.S. can change Iran's behavior

fundamentally. We have seen the regime push back at times when we pressure Iran, and thus coercion has not been effective as well. The design of COA 2 could focus on the U.S. refraining from resuming the deal at this time and rather look towards employing elements of containment. As George Kennan envisioned in his containment strategy towards the Soviet Union, rather than bringing the fight to the USSR itself, Kennan advocated using containment to promote long-term and non-violent regime change to moderate Soviet behavior.³⁴ One such course of action could be the U.S. conducting targeted information operations against the Iranian public that highlights the regime's continued efforts to build up its nuclear arsenal in order to heighten internal dissent while implementing additional sanctions specifically targeting Iran's access to materials, funds, and technology that further hinders Iran's economy. These information operations can illuminate the benefits from international cooperation once Iran is willing to negotiate.

Implications

A full analysis of COAS is beyond the scope of this paper's research design, which restricts itself to suggesting frameworks and processes for conducting actual COA analysis and policy implementation. However, if the paper's assessment of the nature of the Iranian regime can inform tentative, or going-in hypotheses that can be tested in a more fulsome research and assessment process, to include "wargaming" and other sophisticated COA analysis tools. With this caveat in mind, the above sketch of COAs 1 and 2 might suggest that the likely best COA may be a combination of the two. COA 1 reminds U.S. strategists that taking away a source of power from a competitor will only naturally force the competitor to identify and/or bolster other sources of power to avoid being in a weak position. COA 2 recognizes that the Iran regime's fundamental values and behavior cannot be changed, and stakes are at its highest when external

and internal forces threaten regime survival so it may be a wild card to tempt the Iranian public when the regime can then depict itself as a victim of U.S. imperialism.

The two COAs reveal the need for the U.S. to strive for more of a balanced strategy with Iran, such as a cooperate when we can, confront when we must approach. This happens to be a similar approach to U.S. competition with China – cooperate when possible, confront when needed – similarities that would lend themselves to a common “strategic coherence” in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy in an age of competition – whether with rogue states or great powers. A notional COA 3, where the U.S. can renegotiate with Iran on its nuclear aspirations, provide credible reassurance that lessen Iran’s perception of encirclement, while also rewarding Iran for conditions-based, measured progress in ceasing its sponsorship of terrorism and/or ballistic missiles program. Under a broad COA 3-like umbrella, the U.S. could explore numerous supporting or sub-COA possibilities or lines of effort, tying in sometimes disparate or unconnected U.S. actions such as military shows of force and deployments, perceived cooperation with Israeli “direct action” attacks, or, conversely, nurturing Israel’s outreach with Arab states in the region. A variety of policy options could be evaluated, and coordinated, under a broader COA umbrella that strives for a more balanced approach with Iran.

Conclusion

Iran has repeatedly demonstrated that it is a contender to take seriously in the competitive arena, and the U.S. is at a critical juncture with the new administration in place to reassess Iran through a competitive framework. Rather than striving for the conventional zero-sum victory when it comes to Iran, U.S. policymakers should endeavor towards a more realistic and balanced outcome in order to achieve some success against its Persian competitor. The Marine Corps

planning process is one possible method to devise a viable and enduring strategy as it embodies the criticality of knowing the competitor and that design has to be continuous and revisited in order to be successful.

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³ Nihat Ali Ozcan and Ozgur Ozdamar, 122.

⁴ Thomas Juneau, “The Enduring Constraints on Iran’s Power after the Nuclear Deal,” *Political Science Quarterly* 134 (2019), 41, <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=93218482-3ba2-4edb-aeb8-e5b4180205f4%40sdc-v-sessmgr01>.

⁵ Mark Landler, “Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned,” *New York Times.com*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

⁶ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power – Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2019), 30, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf.

⁷ Kali Robinson, “What is the Iran Nuclear Deal,” *Council of Foreign Relations*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

⁸ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Competing*, MCDP 1-4 (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Marine Corps, December 20, 2020), 5-2.

⁹ Timothy Taylor, *The Blurry Line between Competition and Cooperation*, The Library of Economics and Liberty (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, February 2015), <https://www.econlib.org/library/Columns/y2015/Taylorcompetition.html>.

¹⁰ Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, Michael Spirtas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2018), 3, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2726/RAND_RR2726.pdf.

¹¹ Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, Michael Spirtas, 1.

¹² Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Competing*, 1-20.

¹³ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, MCDP 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Marine Corps, June 30, 1991), 4.

¹⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Competition Continuum*, JDN 1-19 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 3, 2019), 2.

¹⁵ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, 3 and 4.

- ¹⁶ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, 4.
- ¹⁷ Colonel John R. Boyd, *Organic Design for Command and Control*, Powerpoint presentation (Defense and the National Interest, Washington, DC, February 2005), 13, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6ca9/63358751c859d7b68736aca1aa9d1a8d4e53.pdf>.
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- ²¹ Abbas Milani, 57.
- ²² Abbas Milani, 58.
- ²³ Abbas Milani, 58.
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- ²⁸ Defense Intelligence Agency, 31.
- ²⁹ Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Domestic Policies,” *Congressional Research Service*, 2021, 3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>.
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