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This is Not Your Father's Cold War - It's Irregular

By Paul Burton

As the U.S. national security establishment grapples with the change of the global environment from the post-Cold War U.S.-led unipolar world to a multipolar one, much of the investment of capital – fiscal and intellectual – has been on large scale combat operations between peer nations. Yet, if the past is prologue, much of the competition, and even conflict, between great powers will likely fall into the category of Irregular Warfare. How to approach the Irregular Warfare problem today presents significant challenges and great opportunities. In the DOD, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has much of the responsibility for the preparation of forces to conduct and execute Irregular Warfare (IW); its forces are purpose-built for this environment. The Special Operations Activities that presently fall under IW are: Counter Insurgency (COIN), Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Unconventional Warfare (UW), Counter Terrorism (CT), and Stability Operations. Arguably, during the execution of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and later Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) most of the Irregular Warfare “campaigns” were CT and COIN directed at Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs). As the national security establishment grapples with the use of irregular approaches to compete with its adversaries, the current definition of IW activities serves to limit strategic thinking; a broader approach to IW is necessary for the U.S. to accomplish its strategic objectives.

There are three main options and ways for SOF to approach the re-emerging challenge of competing with peer adversaries below the level of armed conflict. First, Special Operations Forces (SOF) can set the conditions to enable the General Purpose Force (GPF) to be successful in high intensity traditional war. This is largely accomplished through engagement with partner nations and supportive groups. Second, resist and disrupt peer competitors by conducting

activities that would be considered strategic and operational level disruption, including proxy wars. Finally, there is a combination of the approaches applying the degree of emphasis on UW or FID depending on the trans-regional or regional friction points that can be applied against a competitor; essentially, creating pockets of stability or instability.

One of the challenges of this shift to a peer competition, particularly below armed conflict, is that SOF have not been focused on this way of thinking since the fall of the Berlin wall over three decades ago. The West won chapter one in this struggle?, but only recently have acknowledged there is a second chapter called competition. This has created a void in both SOF and GPF thought process to provide indirect and irregular solutions for this second chapter. If SOF forces are struggling with the transition, especially in defining our role, the larger service components will have greater challenges, if only because of the scale of their formations. What are the service components responsibilities in this method of warfare; will they abdicate their role seeing SOCOM as the Title 10 USC executer of this warfare? Furthermore, the term Irregular Warfare seems to be a challenge for many of our inter-agency partners and partner nations Perhaps another term like “Irregular Activities” is more palatable at the policy level. while the DOD contribution remains warfare. Do we need to re-examine terms, through a historical lens, like Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) or Political Warfare? There must be an agreed upon definition because SOF’s operations need to be nested in titles, authorities, permissions, and precedence, the latter being what organization has traditionally conducted these activities. The definitional will likely be criticized as insufficient or incorrect, but we should not let that impede application against our competitors. Another challenge is that our competitors have a completely different threshold for the definition of warfare, with no regard for our lexicon. They have already stated that they are at war with the United States. This definitional disconnect

places the United States at an Inter-agency synchronization and execution disadvantage. If the very agencies that should be executing counter peer competitor actions don't acknowledge a problem, it is hard to convince them to actually counter it. There needs to a concerted attempt to educate many policy executers, across the whole of government and inform the US public that there is a threat. You can write all the policy you want, but if you don't do anything, that inaction becomes an action in itself.

The shift of the last several National Security Strategies to named peer competitors has accurately re-oriented the national security establishment? Or SOF focus on the IW effort and de-emphasized VEO operations. Documents such as the newly published JCS Joint Concept for Competing are a start, but there is more to be done.

The new environment is "not your father's Cold War", it is faster and more complex. At the national level not only has the strategic thought process atrophied, but we have also dismantled some the interagency capabilities we used to fight and conduct the conflict from 1946 to 1990. The binary global concept of the Cold War era does not sufficiently address the new problem set. Defining the DOD role in this present challenge and especially the SOF contribution at the campaign level must be addressed. A policy of containment is no longer an option and a new policy of flexible "constrainment" must be developed where pockets of disruption or instability and stability are created to impose costs for a broader long-term goal. Do our present strategies of short-term objectives facilitate the implementation of an effective counter strategy to slow or stifle competitor's regional and global objectives? The very structure of our political process and command cycle place us at disadvantage in comparison to implementation continuity when compared to our competitor.

Could the United States disengage on the ground and sea in certain areas to transfer the cost of stability to our competitor? I commonly refer to the United States Navy as the largest Police Force in the world, providing unprecedented maritime security since the end of WWII. Should we purposely create areas or pockets of disruption, instability, or conflict to deny access to key markets and materials thus slowing or denying expansion or “imposing costs” for a purpose.

The United States has the capacity and capability to effectively conduct irregular activities and irregular warfare. The current challenges our nation faces are: education of policy executers and the public, delineation of roles and responsibilities for both inter-agency and service components and managing success by not exceeding threshold in setting conditions, or intermediate objects in our long-term strategy in the Combatant Commands regions and globally. The need for a whole of government deterrence campaign outweighs the Inter-Agency reluctance to do IW. Finally, we must statutorily mandate action, the new IW center is a start, but just a start. We will have to think our way out of this challenge, not shoot our way forward to success, and how we define success in a long-term irregular strategy is the challenge at hand.

This the first in a series of articles on Irregular warfare.

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