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PERSPECTIVES



Complexity, Statecraft, and the Consortium for Irregular Warfare

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Politics and Complexity

War, whether conventional or irregular, is a finite activity – it begins and ends. Strategic competition is an infinite game of international politics – power manifesting in a variety of ways often more impactful on a daily basis than military force. The interagency is forever engaged in competing politically. In other words, it plays the infinite game every day. With the Department of Defense (DOD) accounting for over [45% of the discretionary federal budget](#) and over [31-45% of the federal government's employees](#) ([active duty plus civilians](#), respectively), the challenge for the DOD's newly established Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) is arguably to help the DOD learn how to play the infinite game rather than teaching the interagency to play the finite game. Where the IWC could have the most impact on national security is shifting the paradigm within DOD so that decision makers give at least equal weight to the infinite game of accruing [relative political power](#).¹ Doing so, however, will require the consortium approach alluded to in the recent opinion essay, "[Building Partnerships by Opening Up the Tent](#)."²

War is an episodic phenomenon that ultimately puts the balance of power to the test in order to achieve political aims. But doing so degrades national power and opens a nation to significant risk. Statecraft, on the other hand, is the [strategy of power](#) and should be oriented on the persistent means for achieving political goals without the necessity of war; the [Joint Doctrine Note 1-19: Competition Continuum](#) points the DOD in this direction. Here, the potential for IW knowledge and capability to achieve asymmetric results is tangible.

War is very difficult, violent, and uncertain, and it generally comes with perceptions about "winning" or "losing" – perceptions that change over time with new balances of material forces and political alignments. This description corresponds to Clausewitz's understanding of war as a [continuation of policy by other means](#) – a temporary period in the perpetual pursuit of power by nations and sub-national actors, the duration of which depends on calculations about the potential for future changes in the balance of power. Preparing for and winning war, whether conventional or irregular, is and must be the enduring domain of the DOD. Nevertheless, helping non-military partners, which include interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and civil society entities, to [expand the competitive space](#) in the pursuit of U.S. relative political power now is equally important given the DOD's vast resources and capabilities.³

In the modern era, the expanded competitive space is characterized by [complex systems dynamics](#) – the diverse, interconnected, and interdependent human ecosystems constantly colliding and resulting in significant impacts on the character, shape, and identities of states, nations, communities, and groups.⁴ These webs of [interdependence yield distinct power dimensions – sensitivity and vulnerability](#) – over which non-military partners are highly influential. Sensitivity is the "...degree of responsiveness within a policy framework – how quickly do changes in one country bring costly changes in another, and how great are the costly effects?" Vulnerability interdependence "...rests on the relative availability and costliness of the alternatives that various actors face." If the DOD expands its framing of power along these dimensions of the infinite game, many opportunities to support the wider non-DOD community of partners and contributors arise.





As currently conceptualized, however, adding DOD capabilities and manpower to non-military partner opportunities for accruing relative political power could easily fall outside conventional and irregular warfare concepts, or the opportunities might be too fleeting to respond to without regular, structured cooperative action. Whereas the infinite pursuit of relative power is neither constrained nor ruled by boundaries, the act of mapping, naming, and creating boundaries in the physical world imposes limits on the finite nature of conflict. As [James Carse](#) notes, “Finite players play within boundaries, infinite players play with boundaries.” In so doing, infinite players assert rule-making and rule-changing influence over the game in order to outmaneuver constraints and shape the state of play to their benefit.

Culturally, the US military is rooted in a finite mentality, constantly preparing for war so as to deter war with other states. But, as Carse notes, an infinite actor can erode the boundaries of states without direct confrontation using a range of network opportunities, thereby rendering the military inert even as relative political power erodes all around the nation. In contrast, the infinite game requires a complexity dynamics framing, which is reflected in the Joint Staff’s [Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning \(JCIC\)](#) issued in 2018. The basic elements of complexity dynamics include:

- 1) **Unknown and unknowable variables:** controlling the environment is impossible in the infinite game because certain variables cannot be quantified, measured, or predicted due to “emergence” (see bullet 5 below);
- 2) **Open systems versus closed systems:** despite attempts to control populations through force and surveillance, over time opportunities for change emerge due to unknown and unknowable variables impacting the system;
- 3) **Networks of interaction create systems:** open systems dynamics underpinning complexity rely on network interactions – the more relationships, the more potential for unknowable and unpredictable effects;
- 4) **Positive feedback loops create the appearance of social stability:** systems that generally benefit a population will rationally be replicated for a period of time until viable competitors become available;
- 5) **Colliding systems generate emergent, non-linear effects (the “edge of chaos”):** at the margins where the utility of dominant positive feedback loops break down, innovations generate viable competitors that can erode or even displace dominant social systems through unpredictable, immeasurable “emergent” innovation; and
- 6) **Local conditions and decentralization:** dynamics at the edge of chaos – where unique local conditions differ – generate opportunities for systems level change when they lead to positive feedback loops, but sensitivity to fleeting local opportunities requires a distributed, time-sensitive, and flexible structure to take advantage of them.⁵

The implication is that the DOD must become comfortable thinking and acting below the level of the state where complexity dynamics – and the opportunities for IW – are most acute. States are the aggregation of subnational elements, and this is where U.S. adversaries are going to have the most difficulty controlling dynamics. Sensing and responding to subnational and transnational network opportunities to accrue relative power lie beyond the capability of traditional, hierarchical systems, but the consortium approach inherent to the IWC’s “big tent” does align with complexity dynamics. The DOD must join its non-military partners in the infinite games that are already underway, every day across geography, space, and time. The IWC could perhaps become the mechanism (or catalyst) for changing DOD’s paradigm of power, thus enabling it to more appropriately and thus effectively contribute to the infinite game.

Strategic Competition Requires, but Moves Beyond, Existing Irregular Warfare Concepts

Below armed conflict, irregular warfare capabilities remain one of many vital tools in strategic competition, but IW and strategic competition are not synonymous. Strategic competition depends on each competitor’s potential to accrue power – its unique strengths; unique weakness; and its strategies given its constraints, resources, and range of global relationships. As such, it is not possible to apply a common doctrine to all competitors. As former U.S. diplomat [Charles W. Freeman, Jr.](#) notes, “Statecraft rests on accurate appraisal of the power of one’s own nation and its allies in relation to the power of rivals...In politics, however, perceptions are reality. In diplomacy, perceived power is real power. The *balance of perceived power* between states decides the outcome of struggles short of war.” Political scientist [Hans Morgenthau](#) captured the essence of political power, noting that it “is a psychological relationship between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised.”

Since each competitor’s networks of opportunity to accrue power are different, the requirement is for tailored strategies that amplify one’s own strengths, compensate for weaknesses, and exacerbate the challenges faced by each competitor. When possible,



competitors should be imagined as potential groupings so that “[wedge strategies](#)” – “us[ing] diplomacy and statecraft to move or keep a potential adversary out of an opposing alliance – can be applied through transregional and functional issue-linkage.”⁶

In contrast to strategic competition, [IW is currently defined](#) as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.” The [2020 Summary of the IW Annex to the National Defense Strategy](#) removed violence as an element of the definition, but it continues to focus on government-population relations and military capabilities and tactics, techniques, and procedures without thinking more broadly about how to apply all elements of national power toward strategic political effects; that is, to shape the networks of sensitivity and vulnerability power. These dimensions of relative power are rooted in the human domain and occur across a range of networks that often transcend state boundaries. Additionally, a key weakness of current IW thinking is that its subtext still retains a “counter” mentality, whereas effective political power is achieved by continuously pursuing new opportunities for accruing it, thereby adding to strategic options. Such a mindset is reflected in the JCIC which encourages the Joint Force to creatively find ways to enhance non-military activities in pursuit of achieving U.S. relative political power. Although, the IW Annex states that the Joint Force “will seize the initiative and execute *proactive, enduring* campaigns employing IW capabilities to expand the competitive space, shape the environment, and prepare for escalation to conflict, if required,” it does so solely within the context of avoiding hostile military action or coercion as opposed to seeking new pathways of relative power.

Certainly the DOD must retain extraordinary capabilities across the range of kinetic to non-kinetic military capabilities, but it is a mistake to equate its current framing of IW activities with the expanded potential for the DOD’s contribution to strategic competition. The DOD has much more to contribute to U.S. relative political power. As the JCIC notes, even the “...successful execution of ‘dominating activities’ does not automatically lead to the achievement of desired political objectives.” This is especially true, it states, in competition below armed conflict, which requires “...an *expanded view of the operating environment*...” and “...*align[ing] efforts with interorganizational non-military activities*...” in order secure the international political objectives of the U.S. Government.

*In short, the DOD should prepare for strategic competition recognizing that its contribution will be adding to aggregate U.S. political power, and then reimagine how IW might be adapted for each competitor in this pursuit.*⁷ In so doing the DOD might gain greater insight, perspective, and emphasis from a diverse consortium of IW partners and collaborators brought together and empowered by the IWC. In this way, the DOD would be in a better position to contribute to the relative power exerted by partner organizations every day, rather than simply identifying means by which partners can enhance DOD’s periodic IW initiatives.

A Consortium for Complexity

The common assumption among many in the DOD who work with the interagency is that there is simply a gap in process that precludes the necessary efficiency, clarity, and unity of command to achieve effects. As such the DOD’s tendency is to try to impose process controls across a non-linear system that by design cannot be effectively controlled in practice. This mental model ignores the complexity dynamics of statecraft and how relative political power is gained and sustained. Moreover, DOD’s finite game approach is incongruent with how the executive branch functions and how statecraft is conducted. Centralized command and control in the DOD’s paradigm is both impossible to achieve across non-military partners – each of which by definition voluntarily cooperates with one another – and runs counter to the requirement for decentralized initiative to take advantage of fleeting opportunities to gain relative political power.

Here, then, is the elegance of the IWC’s consortium approach for understanding and improving IW knowledge and practices. For the DOD to be useful in the complex environment of statecraft, it must move beyond its existing doctrines and paradigms of power. A structure designed specifically to infuse diverse perspectives and lenses of competitive opportunity into the DOD could promote creativity, innovation, and collective action in short order. A consortium by definition encourages developing networks of knowledge creation where expertise can then be swarmed to address diverse challenges. The IWC’s proposed consortium will better situate the DOD for responding flexibly to emergent opportunities and challenges in a complex world.

If these ideas have merit, then the IW communities of interest, practice, and research would benefit from accepting that complexity cannot be reduced to the [simple or complicated](#) processes associated with control-oriented, hierarchical organizational concepts. Rather, the communities’ efforts would be better spent on improving connectedness across the wide range of partners and contributors and amplifying relationships where competitive opportunities appear viable. Building relationships across this diverse landscape would be more valuable to national security than the IWC generating discreet and exclusive connections to individual organizations or institutions. It is the systemic interactions that can innovatively swarm together to take advantage of fleeting opportunities in the complex world of statecraft.

As a catalyst for innovation and a key hub for bringing together all interested contributors to the IW thought space, the IWC could incentivize network interactions through grant mechanisms. It could empower innovative thinking through distributed research collaborations, partnering with existing military and civilian universities, as well as federally funded research and development centers. As a central hub, the IWC is ideally suited for teaching the DOD how to contribute to relative political power, rather than



teaching the interagency or other partner militaries about IW doctrine. In a world where political power overwhelmingly manifests in non-traditional ways, a key orientation, as eminent political scientist [Robert Jervis](#) notes, is to remember “effective action is made possible by pursuit of multiple policies that constrain and navigate the system.” If the DOD were to address IW and strategic competition through a framework of complexity theory and statecraft it might appear at first impression messy, divergent, and dynamic, but its practices would then match how its non-military partners and collaborators currently engage the infinite game of relative power politics.

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Endnotes

- 1 Although space prevents a thorough exploration, relative political power is: (a) a function of a coherent national identity and will, (b) dynamic not static, (c) contextually dependent, (d) a perpetual process of aligning means with objectives, (e) reliant on influence and prestige *leveraged to form networks* that amplify innate national characteristics, (f) a function of dependencies states develop upon one another, and (g) concurrent with the capabilities of subnational actors acting congruent with general national aspirations. See James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey* (New York: Longman, 2001), 72-75; Freeman, *Arts of Power*, 15-21; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, Third Edition (New York: Longman, 2001).
- 2 For particularly impactful states, international power might reflect “hegemony,” defined as the ability to (a) establish a dominant set of rules for political and economic interaction, (b) manage the language and terms of debate, or even (c) establish the subconscious values and norms that constitute the international system. The manifestation of power in this regard reflects the “whole of nation” concept common in the DOD, but extends it beyond the government-centric framing and applies it to other actors whose existence and opportunities depend on maintaining the established hegemony. Since command and control across such a diverse group is impossible, the consortium approach offers a viable framing for sharing interests, fomenting cooperative behavior, and engaging in collective action. For example, see Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence*; Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Alex Williams, *Political Hegemony and Social Complexity: Mechanisms of Power After Gramsci* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), Chapter 6; Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Nicholas Onuf, “Constructivism: A User’s Manual,” in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, Vendulka Kubáľková, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert, eds. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 58-78.
- 3 Corporate should be considered an expansive space that includes non-traditional partners like academia, business, non-governmental organizations, global corporations, and regional organizations. On the importance of the DOD expanding the competition space and competing daily through support to the JIIM-C, see “Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC),” *Joint Chiefs of Staff* (March 2018). Accessed December 8, 2022. https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concept_integrated_campaign.pdf?ver=2018-03-28-102833-257
- 4 Webs of networks are now conceived of as sources of power in and of themselves, especially those operating below state levels, because they reflect and affect the “topology of power” through which influence and interests are exercised. For example, see John Allen, *Topologies of Power: beyond Territory and Networks* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1-15; Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 230-231; Hilton L. Root, *Network Origins of the Global Economy: East vs. West in a Complex Systems Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 5 For example, see John Urry, *Global Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); David Colander and Roland Kupers, *Complexity and the Art of Public Policy: Solving Society’s Problems from the Bottom Up* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Göktuğ Morçöl, *A Complexity Theory for Public Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Raoul Beunen, Kristof Van Assche, and Martijn Duineveld, eds., *Evolutionary Governance Theory: Theory and Applications* (Cham: Springer, 2015).
- 6 On the challenges facing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the strategic paradox of its rise, see Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2012). For geoeconomic challenges facing the PRC, see Dinny McMahon, *China’s Great Wall of Debt: Shadow Banks, Ghost Cities, Massive Loans, and the End of the Chinese Miracle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018); George Magnus, *Red Flags: Why Xi’s China Is In Jeopardy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Nicholas R. Lardy, *The State Strikes Back: The End of Economic Reform in China?* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2019); William J. Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).
- 7 However, for those seeking a recent critique and reframing of existing IW concepts, see David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, “Redefining Irregular Warfare: Legitimacy, Coercion, and Power,” *Modern War Institute* (October 18, 2022). Accessed December 13, 2022. <https://mwi.usma.edu/redefining-irregular-warfare-legitimacy-coercion-and-power/>.

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