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Competition Warfare: Strategic Terrain Is No Longer Geographic

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Militaries around the world have always mapped the world in terrain features, borders, and lines of advance. Yet in recent crises, the most consequential pressure has often been applied elsewhere - shipping slows without a port being seized; energy prices spike without a pipeline being destroyed; and supply chains fracture without a factory being struck.

This disconnect between traditional military analysis and the modern strategic landscape points to a deeper problem. [Strategic competition today](#) unfolds less through the seizure of geographic ground and more through the manipulation of systems that states rely on to function. Strategic terrain is no longer primarily geographic. It now resides in [infrastructure](#), in-

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stitutions, [markets](#), and information systems that shape a state's ability to govern, mobilize, and compete.

This is not a conversation about non-state actors, but rather a debate about the military's role in strategic competition. To fully compete in the spectrum below armed conflict, the military must set theaters of operation by leveraging whole-of-government effects to mitigate threats and adversary influence vectors. Elements of national power ultimately care about "[power in outcomes](#)." To achieve this, a mental shift is required in how defense departments view threat vectors and impose costs. Dr. Echevarria of the Army War College [frames it best](#): "Winning such a competition requires a mindset that thinks in terms of preclusion, that is, reducing or stealing away the options one's rivals have available, or could hope to acquire... strategic competition is about ensuring the game being played, whatever its intensity, is never a fair contest."

What Changed

The decline of geographic terrain as the primary locus of strategic competition is not the result of a single innovation or adversary tactic. It reflects a broader transformation in how states generate power and sustain themselves.

First, much of what enables national power is not owned or operated by the state. Critical infrastructure, such as ports, energy grids, telecommunications networks, transportation systems, data centers, and logistics platforms, is predominantly privately owned and globally interconnected. Try to unpack the [military-industrial complex](#) of any Western nation as further evidence of this claim. Governments depend on these systems, but they do not fully control them. This is further complicated with power projection into another nation's sovereign territory.

This arrangement is not neutral. Authoritarian systems often hold a comparative advantage in this environment. Direct or indirect state control of commercial industry enables faster decision-making, tighter information fusion, and more rapid responsiveness during

periods of competition. In China's case, [state-owned enterprises](#) are not merely economic actors, but integral components of national strategy. The [close integration](#) of government authority, commercial capacity, and military objectives allows influence to be applied across economic and infrastructural systems in ways that democratic states, constrained by law and market structure, often struggle to match. This integration underpins [Beijing's approach](#) to competition below armed conflict and helps explain why pressure applied through ostensibly civilian systems can have a strategic effect.

Second, [digitization has compressed distance and time](#). Logistics, finance, energy distribution, and information flows are increasingly mediated by software, platforms, and standards rather than physical proximity. [Disruption](#) can now propagate across borders without crossing them. Cyber-attacks are ubiquitous in this line of thought, but other areas, such as AI-generated deep fakes in the information space, are also to be considered.



Third, globalization has produced efficiency at the cost of resilience. Supply chains optimized for cost and speed are often brittle under stress. Dependencies that once appeared benign can be exploited during periods of tension, even in the absence of overt hostility. Pandemic-era supply chain shocks, [rare earth elements](#) and [soybeans](#) are recent examples.

Finally, legal and regulatory complexity has become a feature of strategic competition. Trade rules, sanctions regimes, environmental standards, labor regulations, and investment screening mechanisms shape what

states and firms can do and how quickly they can respond under pressure. The term “[lawfare](#)” describes this tactic as an offensive tool for states, but it is not all-inclusive of the options and techniques available. The challenge for modern militaries is not simply that this terrain has changed, but that much of it lies outside traditional authorities, planning frameworks, and analytic models.

Redefining Strategic Terrain

If strategic terrain is no longer primarily geographic, what is it? Strategic terrain today consists of the systems whose disruption, manipulation, or denial would meaningfully degrade a state’s ability to govern, mobilize, or compete. These systems are not always visible on a map, but they are decisive nonetheless.

They include energy generation and transmission, ports and shipping networks, logistics software, financial rails, industrial supply chains, telecommunications infrastructure, and the regulatory and legal frameworks that shape market access and behavior. In short, nearly any vector of influence a state can leverage to disrupt a competitor or set conditions for military operations should be considered. The range and scope of strategic competition is not limited to traditional non-state actors, business entities, or infrastructure. It also includes criminal, academic, and political networks.

Control over this terrain does not require occupation. It [requires influence](#). In competition below armed conflict, influence is often a prerequisite for [access](#). Basing, overflight rights, port access, logistics support, and freedom of movement increasingly depend less on [formal agreements](#) secured during crises and more on [conditions shaped over time](#). These conditions are established through economic ties, regulatory alignment, infrastructure investment, political relationships, and commercial dependence. In this sense, [influence sets the theater](#) long before forces deploy.

States that understand strategic terrain in systemic terms focus less on seizing access during conflict and more on shaping the environment so that access

is available, denied, or conditional when it matters. Competition is therefore not a precursor to war alone, but an effort to determine whether military options are viable at all.

Why Militaries Struggle to See It

Despite extensive discussion of competition below armed conflict, many military institutions remain poorly positioned to assess strategic terrain as it now exists. One reason is organizational. Intelligence, economic policy, infrastructure regulation, and private-sector engagement typically reside in separate bureaucratic lanes. No single institution owns the [full picture](#), and coordination is often ad hoc or [crisis-driven](#).

Another reason is cultural. Military planning continues to privilege what can be observed, measured, and controlled. Systems that operate through markets, law, and civilian infrastructure are harder to integrate into traditional threat assessments. Their effects are diffuse, their timelines uncertain, and their failure modes nonlinear.

Authority also matters. Militaries may recognize vulnerabilities in ports, energy grids, or supply chains, but often lack the legal mandate to act on them. Responsibility is distributed across agencies, regulators, and private firms, each operating under different incentives and constraints.

The result is a persistent gap between what matters strategically and what institutions are structured to address.

Competition as a Practitioner Sees It

In practice, competition requires mapping terrain that does not look military at all. It involves identifying where adversaries exert malign influence across regions and sectors, then assessing how that influence intersects with critical systems the United States and its partners rely on for access, basing, and freedom of movement. Ports, airfields, logistics hubs, and

commercial infrastructure matter not only as wartime enablers but as competition terrain well before a crisis. What becomes apparent quickly is that resourcing alone does not solve the problem. The underlying deficiency is conceptual and institutional. Competition unfolds through authorities, effects, and actors that largely sit outside the military. The joint force relies heavily on interagency partners for many of the most relevant tools, which means it often moves at the pace of others and according to priorities it does not control.

The intelligence picture reflects this fragmentation. Information relevant to competition is scattered across military, law enforcement, regulatory, and commercial domains. These data sets are rarely integrated. Organizational boundaries, legal restrictions, and institutional habits prevent a coherent picture from emerging. Small but meaningful indicators are missed daily, not because they are invisible, but because no single entity is responsible for seeing the entire terrain. Meanwhile, [U.S. competitors](#) have spent decades shaping this same terrain. Through sustained investment, political engagement, and economic integration, they have accumulated influence and access across key regions. Their advantage is not speed alone, but time. Many have had a twenty-year head start in setting the conditions necessary for influence and control.

The result is a joint force that understands competition in theory but struggles to operationalize it in practice. Processes remain incomplete or fractured. Responsibilities are diffuse. The terrain that matters most is often shaped by others.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Recent events illustrate how strategic terrain is contested without overt attack. In Ukraine, the conflict has highlighted how [logistics systems](#), [energy infrastructure](#), and industrial capacity [shape endurance](#). Pressure on power grids, export routes, and production capacity has had strategic effects well beyond the front lines.

In the Red Sea, [disruptions to commercial shipping](#) have imposed costs not through territorial conquest, but by altering risk calculations across global trade networks. The effects are visible in insurance premiums, rerouted vessels, delayed deliveries, and strategic signaling rather than captured ground.

In the context of Taiwan, analysis often centers on invasion scenarios. Less attention is paid to how pressure applied through supply chains, financial exposure, information systems, and regulatory leverage could shape outcomes long before any kinetic threshold is crossed, or perhaps in ways that avoid it altogether.

In each case, the [decisive terrain is systemic](#). Influence is exerted through pressure points embedded in civilian and commercial infrastructure, often in ways that fall outside traditional warfighting paradigms.

Why This Matters

Understanding strategic terrain as systemic rather than geographic does not render traditional military power obsolete. Geography still matters. Forces still maneuver across geographical terrain. Territory is still fought over. But it does change where competition begins, how it unfolds, and which institutions are involved long before violence occurs.

If strategic terrain now includes systems largely outside military control, then competition below armed conflict cannot be understood or managed by militaries alone. It [requires sustained attention to civilian infrastructure](#), the incentives shaping private actors, and the institutional seams that adversaries increasingly exploit.

Before states can respond effectively to pressure below the threshold of armed conflict, they must first develop a clearer picture of the terrain on which that pressure is applied. Failing to do so risks strategic surprise, not because threats were unseen, but because the terrain itself was misunderstood.