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Social Terrain: The Strategic Substrate of Irregular Competition

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Strategic competitors increasingly seek to maneuver [societies](#) before they maneuver armies. Information operations, political warfare, economic coercion, cyber campaigns, and institutional influence are frequently treated as distinct forms of competition. Increasingly, however, they represent different methods for shaping the same strategic object. This evolution is reflected across a growing body of [literature](#). Concepts such as gray-zone competition, hybrid warfare, cognitive warfare, and unrestricted

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warfare describe different methods through which states seek advantage without escalating to open conflict. Although these approaches differ in emphasis, they share a common observation; contemporary competition targets the conditions that influence political decision-making, social cohesion, and collective behavior rather than relying on the destruction of military capability.

The prominence of these concepts reflects an important shift in strategic thought. Competition is no longer understood solely as a contest over territory, military forces, or even infrastructure. Increasingly, it is understood as a contest over the social and institutional environments within which political decisions are made and collective action [occurs](#). Adversaries seek to erode trust, reinforce existing divisions, cultivate sympathetic actors, influence institutional behavior, and shape public perceptions in ways that alter future political possibilities. The objective is often not immediate disruption. It is to reshape the environment from which future decisions and actions [emerge](#).

Despite broad agreement that these activities have become increasingly important, they are most often discussed according to their methods rather than their common objective. Information operations manipulate narratives. Economic coercion exploits interdependence while political warfare influences institutions. Each describes a different mechanism of competition. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to identifying what these mechanisms ultimately seek to change.

This article argues that they seek to reshape **social terrain**. Just as physical terrain constrains military maneuver, social terrain constrains [collective action](#). It is the social substrate from which political behavior emerges and upon which contemporary strategic competition increasingly acts. Viewing irregular competition through this lens does not replace existing concepts of cognitive warfare, gray-zone competition, or political warfare. Rather, it provides a common framework for understanding the object to which these diverse activities are directed.

Existing Perspectives Describe Methods More Than Their Common Objective

The literature on irregular competition has improved our understanding of how states compete below the threshold of armed conflict. Concepts such as [cognitive warfare](#), information warfare, political warfare, and hybrid warfare each illuminate important aspects of contemporary strategic competition. They explain how influence is exercised, how ambiguity is exploited, and how military and nonmilitary instruments can be integrated to achieve political objectives without provoking conventional war.

Cognitive warfare focuses on influencing perception, decision-making, and human cognition. Information warfare emphasizes the production, control, and manipulation of information. Political warfare examines the coordinated use of diplomatic, economic, informational, and covert instruments to influence political outcomes. Gray-zone competition describes persistent activities designed to secure strategic advantage while remaining below the threshold that would justify a conventional military response. Each perspective captures an important dimension of modern competition, and together they describe an increasingly sophisticated repertoire of strategic behavior. Yet these perspectives are organized primarily around methods. They classify the instruments competitors employ, the domains in which they operate, or the techniques through which influence is exerted. They devote less attention to identifying the common object that these methods seek to reshape.

This matters because competitors rarely employ these methods in [isolation](#). Information operations are coordinated with economic pressure. Legal and diplomatic initiatives complement narrative campaigns and institutional penetration amplifies disinformation. The strategic effect emerges not from any individual activity but from their cumulative interaction. Treating these activities as separate categories risks obscuring the broader logic that unites them.

That broader logic is visible in practice. Competitors are seldom attempting to persuade an audience, disrupt a network, or manipulate an institution. More often, they seek to reshape the conditions under which societies organize, cooperate, and make political decisions. They influence identities, alter perceptions of shared interests, strengthen or weaken collective resolve, expand or constrain opportunities for collective action, and exploit events capable of transforming latent tensions into observable political behavior. The individual mechanisms differ, but the strategic objective remains remarkably consistent.

Recognizing this strategic objective shifts the analytical question. Rather than asking whether an activity constitutes information warfare, cognitive warfare, political warfare, or gray-zone competition, analysts might instead ask a different question: What aspect of the social environment is this activity attempting to change?

Viewed from this perspective, existing concepts become complementary rather than competing explanations. They describe different mechanisms acting upon a common strategic object. Identifying that object provides a more coherent framework for understanding how contemporary competitors shape societies long before they seek to confront armies.

Social Terrain as Battlespace

Physical terrain has long occupied a central place in military thought because it shapes what military forces can and cannot do. Terrain does not determine outcomes, but it influences the opportunities available to both competitors. Commanders therefore devote considerable effort to understanding and shaping the physical environment before committing forces. Contemporary strategic competition increasingly operates according to the same logic, but the terrain being contested is often social rather than geographic.

Social terrain is not synonymous with public opinion, demographics, or culture. Nor is it simply the collection of individuals within a society. Rather, it is the social substrate from

which collective behavior emerges. It consists of the relationships, motivations, institutions, and conditions that enable groups of people to organize, cooperate, resist, or fragment. Just as physical terrain shapes military maneuver, social terrain shapes political maneuver by influencing what forms of collective action become possible.

Viewing society as terrain changes the analytical focus. Instead of asking whether an adversary has successfully spread a narrative or compromised an institution, the more important question becomes whether those activities have altered the conditions that enable [collective action](#). Individual operations matter because of their cumulative effect on the social environment, not because of their immediate tactical success. A narrative that attracts little public attention may nevertheless reinforce group identities. A minor legal action may gradually redefine institutional authority. Economic pressure may reshape incentives long before it changes behavior. These activities become strategically significant because they modify the environment within which future political decisions will be made.

For analytical purposes, social terrain can be understood as consisting of five interrelated conditions. The first is identity -- who understands themselves to belong to a common group capable of acting together? Identity defines the [boundaries of collective action](#). Competitors frequently seek to strengthen, fragment, or redefine these identities because changing who constitutes «us» inevitably changes political possibilities.

The second is goal compatibility -- the degree to which individuals or groups perceive their interests as aligned. Shared identities alone rarely produce coordinated action. Collective behavior depends upon sufficient agreement regarding desired outcomes. Strategic competitors therefore seek not only to build consensus among sympathetic groups but also to magnify perceived [incompatibilities](#) within opposing societies.

The third is collective will -- the motivation to translate shared interests into action. Even cohesive groups pursuing common objectives may remain politically inactive if they lack

confidence, urgency, or perceived efficacy. Much of contemporary competition seeks to [strengthen or weaken](#) this willingness to act rather than to change beliefs themselves.

The fourth condition is the means to act -- the organizational, institutional, informational, and material resources that make collective action feasible. Motivation alone produces little effect without mechanisms through which individuals can coordinate their behavior. Political parties, advocacy organizations, digital platforms, financial networks, and informal social structures all constitute elements of the means through which collective action becomes possible.

The fifth is a pivotal event -- those moments that transform latent social conditions into observable political behavior. Elections, economic crises, scandals, acts of violence, or symbolic incidents rarely create political movements by themselves. Rather, they activate conditions that already exist within the social terrain. The same event may therefore produce dramatically different outcomes across societies because it interacts with different underlying social substrates.

These conditions should not be understood as independent variables or a comprehensive model of social behavior. They represent a parsimonious framework for analyzing the components of the social environment upon which contemporary strategic competition acts. They are less a checklist than a way of understanding the substrate from which collective action emerges.

Seen in this way, social terrain occupies a role analogous to physical terrain in conventional warfare. Military forces maneuver geography because geography constrains physical action. Strategic competitors increasingly maneuver across social terrain because it constrains political action. The objective is often not immediate disruption or persuasion. It is to reshape the social environment from which future collective behavior will emerge.

Implications for Irregular Warfare

Viewing contemporary competition through the lens of social terrain has implications for both analysis and strategy. First, it shifts assessment away from activities and toward effects. Analysts frequently catalogue information operations, cyber incidents, economic coercion, or foreign influence campaigns as discrete events. While such activities remain important, their strategic significance lies less in their individual execution than in their [cumulative effect](#) on the social substrate. The relevant question is not simply whether an information operation succeeded or failed, but whether it altered identities, strengthened or weakened shared interests, changed collective will, expanded organizational capacity, or increased the likelihood that future events would produce coordinated political action.

Second, social terrain provides a common analytical framework for integrating activities that are often treated as separate forms of competition. Information warfare, political warfare, cyber operations, economic coercion, lawfare, and institutional influence become complementary mechanisms acting upon the same strategic environment. This perspective encourages planners to view irregular competition as a continuous effort to shape the conditions from which future behavior emerges rather than as a series of isolated campaigns or [domains](#).

This perspective also has important defensive implications. Democratic societies are constantly changing. Political coalitions evolve, institutions adapt, and public attitudes shift in response to ordinary political processes. Not every change represents foreign interference, nor should every social disagreement be interpreted as evidence of hostile influence. Doing so risks undermining the very political pluralism that competitors often seek to exploit.

The challenge, therefore, is not preserving society in a fixed state. It is understanding whether changes within the social terrain are primarily the product of endogenous political evolution, deliberate external manipulation, or the interaction between the two. Distinguishing

among these possibilities is unlikely to become easier. Competitors increasingly operate by amplifying existing tensions rather than creating entirely new ones, making attribution as much an analytical problem as a technical one. This suggests that resilience should be understood differently. Defensive efforts often concentrate on countering specific narratives, disrupting individual influence campaigns, or strengthening cybersecurity. These remain necessary, but they address particular mechanisms rather than the broader environment those mechanisms seek to shape. A resilient society is not one that never experiences disagreement or external influence. It is one whose underlying social terrain remains sufficiently cohesive, adaptive, and legitimate that attempts to manipulate it fail to produce durable strategic effects.

The character of strategic competition has changed because the strategic environment has changed. Military forces continue to maneuver

across physical terrain, but strategic competitors increasingly maneuver across the social terrain that shapes political possibility itself. Information operations, economic coercion, institutional influence, cyber activities, and political warfare are best understood not as distinct forms of competition, but as different methods of altering the social substrate from which collective action emerges.

Recognizing social terrain does not replace existing concepts of irregular warfare. It provides a common object around which they can be organized. If physical terrain has long been recognized as the environment within which military operations occur, then social terrain increasingly constitutes the environment within which irregular warfare is contested. Understanding how competitors shape that terrain may therefore become as important as understanding the methods they employ.