

DoD Leaders, Strategists, and Operators in an Era of Persistent Unconventional Challenge

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- This study argues that the contemporary (and future) security environment will be dominated by defense-relevant, “unconventional” threats and challenges that lie substantially outside the boundaries of traditional warfighting. This is the new defense and national security status quo.
- Unconventional challenges will include irregular, catastrophic, and hybrid threats of “purpose” and “context.” Purposeful threats are those originating in the hostile designs of consequential state and nonstate opponents. Contextual threats are those rising unguided from the environment itself.
- The dominant demand on key defense actors in the new defense and national security status quo is the active management of persistent unconventional conflict. This requires development of a “new strategic competency” in defense leaders, strategists, and operators.
- The new “strategic competency” relies on deliberate cultivation of seven new or revised perspectives in key defense actors. The new or revised perspectives include:
 - The primacy of “social science” over “military science”
 - The limits and alternative uses of military power
 - The need to “mind gaps” in nonmilitary capacity
 - Risk and conflict management versus risk elimination and conflict resolution
 - The certainty of multiple, on-going conflicts and competitions
 - Thriving “in the mud”
 - Cultural and functional sensitivity

The “new strategic competency” also demands increased mastery of or familiarity with four foundational roles. These roles are:

- Policy student
- Strategic conceptualizer/synthesizer
- Operational artist and planner
- Tactical operator

The study makes three near-term policy recommendations:

- First, DoD should assess the design, governance, and conduct of defense-wide professional development in light of the rising prominence of unconventional challenges.
- Second, DoD should build a “center of excellence” for the detailed study of unconventional threats of “purpose” and “context.”
- Finally, DoD should create an interactive network of key defense actors for the free exchange of ideas on unconventional challenges.

1

INTRODUCTION: SHIFTING EMPHASIS TO THE NEW STATUS QUO

This study outlines a “new strategic competency” for defense leaders, strategists, and operators increasingly responsible for operating in unconventional environments and against unconventional challenges.

Commitment now to building key Department of Defense (DoD) actors for an era of persistent unconventional, defense-relevant challenges will progressively improve defense decisionmaking and operational execution. A previous generation of leaders, strategists, and operators ushered the United States out of the Cold War, guiding it through a delicate period of residual traditional challenge. A new generation will be responsible for managing the strategic impact of active, persistent, unconventional threats. This study focuses here. It outlines the strategic and operational demands on defense actors operating in a new, more unconventional status quo; the key perspectives essential for evaluating and confronting these demands effectively; and the various roles all defense practitioners will increasingly need to be familiar with, regardless of their principal domain of decision and action.

A new status quo dominates the defense decision and operating space from the strategic through tactical levels.

After seven years of persistent conflict, DoD leadership acknowledges a new unconventional status quo in the contemporary operating environment. A range of defense-relevant, unconventional “irregular,” “catastrophic,” and “hybrid” challenges present constant threats to U.S. security.¹ The term “unconventional” here is consistent with that of Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates below and implies “not bound by or conforming to [traditional defense] convention, rule, or precedent.”² Secretary Gates observes:

¹ The terms “irregular,” “catastrophic,” and “hybrid” have their policy origins in the 2005 National Defense Strategy (NDS). Among the three, “irregular” and “catastrophic” were explicit challenges, while “hybrid” challenges were implied. NDS 2005 lacks a great deal of specificity with respect to all three. For a more detailed description of the founding philosophy behind all of these terms, see Nathan Freier, *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century: Irregular, Catastrophic, Traditional and Hybrid Challenges in Context* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 2007), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB782.pdf>. Section 2 of the present report will discuss the three terms in greater detail.

² See “Unconventional,” Dictionary.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/unconventional>.

For the kinds of challenges America will face, the Armed Forces will need principled, creative, reform-minded leaders... An unconventional era of warfare requires unconventional thinkers... Conflict will be fundamentally political in nature and will require the integration of all elements of national power... [U]ltimate success or failure will increasingly depend more on shaping the behavior of others—friends and adversaries, and most importantly, the people in between... This new set of realities and requirements have meant a wrenching set of changes for our military establishment.³

In spite of this recognition by senior DoD leadership, defense leaders, strategists, and operators—working from the national strategic to the tactical levels of planning and execution—likely remain corporately underprepared for their new, more complex challenge set.⁴ These key defense actors must rapidly adjust to the reality of serial employment against unconventional threats and challenges. Indeed, despite growing experience operating in unconventional environments, these actors are still largely the product of institutions that have long-focused primarily on traditional warfighting.

Corporate adjustment by key defense actors to unconventional threats and challenges may be problematic. Prevailing defense culture, DoD structure and processes, and operational exhaustion may combine, pushing much of the previous decade’s substantial learning into the background. In much the same way that mainstream DoD rejected classic counterinsurgency (COIN) after Vietnam, a great deal about the contemporary environment, its challenges, and defense experience operating within and against it may prove too countercultural for meaningful institutionalization.

The new status quo demands a new kind of defense leader, strategist, and operator.

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) suggested that DoD needed to “shift emphasis” to confront a new national security status quo.⁵ This stems from recognition that DoD will be the nation’s most useful, adaptable, and broadly employable national security instrument for the foreseeable future. This shift requires arming defense leaders, strategists, and operators with a different intellectual tool kit than that appropriate to or valued and developed in the pre-9/11 era. They need to exhibit a new strategic competency marked by increased intellectual agility, optimization for unconventional threats of purpose and context, and an innate capacity to learn

³ Robert M. Gates, remarks to Air War College, Maxwell, Ala., April 21, 2008, <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1231>.

⁴ See *U.S. Code* 10 (2008), § 111, http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/10/usc_sec_10_00000111----000-.html. Reference to “DoD” or “defense” leaders, strategists, and operators in the present report refers to key actors operating in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the defense agencies, DoD field activities, the service departments, the unified and specified combatant commands, and operational and tactical headquarters.

⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: DoD, February 6, 2006), p. 19.

and innovate on the move. This new competency accounts for both the complexity of the contemporary environment, as well as the often blurred definitions of strategic, operational, and tactical decisionmaking and action.

No defense leader, strategist, or operator is likely to enjoy the benefit of a playbook or doctrine that adequately outlines both threat and response in sufficient detail in the new status quo. By definition then, effective action requires more sophisticated, integrative, and adaptive approaches to strategy development, strategic and operational planning, and tactical execution. It also requires leaders, strategists, and operators increasingly capable of assessing strategic and operational circumstances under a wide range of exigent circumstances; crafting coherent, risk-informed responses to those circumstances employing the universe of deployed instruments of power; and finally, adjusting strategy, plans, and tactical execution to rapidly changing conditions.

DoD must address four key areas related to the strategic competency of its leaders, strategists, and operators.

DoD looks to perpetually be in the business of global “three block war.”⁶ Success across a range of complex, unconventional endeavors is equally reliant on: (1) a detailed understanding of the art and science of strategy among senior leaders and strategists; (2) minimum essential strategic competency in key actors at all levels; and finally (3) innate sensitivity among leaders, strategists, and operators to the demands faced by one another. Thus, this study seeks to infer from a basic set of new or revised perspectives and roles that minimum level of strategic competency essential to each community. The study’s four key areas of emphasis are:

1. The demands of the environment on contemporary leaders, strategists, and operators;
2. The critical perspectives each community should employ when evaluating their unconventional challenges and responsibilities;
3. New or revised roles currently uncommon to their universal development but nonetheless essential for their success; and
4. Key near-term policy recommendations DoD might consider to better equip leaders, strategists, and operators for an unconventional future.

⁶ For a quick description of the concept of “three block war,” see Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine* (January 1999), http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corproal.htm. Krulak describes the three block war as “contingencies [where military forces] may be confronted by the entire spectrum of tactical challenges in the span of a few hours and within the space of three continuous city blocks.”

2

DOMINANT FEATURES OF THE NEW STATUS QUO

For today’s leaders, strategists, and operators, the most prominent “unconventional” challenges are “defense relevant” not “defense specific.”¹

Defense-relevant security challenges are typically “nonmilitary” in character and/or origin.² Nonetheless, the scope of their strategic impact and the nature of U.S. response to them dictate that they remain of substantial interest to all levels within DoD. These challenges lie substantially outside the conventions of traditional warfighting. Yet, success against them is impossible without important DoD contributions. U.S. government responses to unconventional, defense-relevant challenges include (but are not limited to) activities like COIN, counterterrorism (CT), stability operations (SSTRO), unconventional warfare (UW), counterproliferation, information operations (IO), and foreign internal defense (FID). All of these have recently been enshrined as new key competencies inside DoD.

Unconventional, defense-relevant challenges will include both “threats of purpose” and “threats of context.”³

Senior leaders, strategists, and operators must increasingly become adept at managing two forms of exigent, unconventional threat. Threats of purpose are more familiar. They originate in the aggressive designs of consequential opponents and manifest themselves in purposeful violent and nonviolent action. Threats of context are adverse conditions that evolve or suddenly emerge from the environment itself to challenge operational objectives or core interests in the absence of hostile design. Here the playing surface itself becomes the most dangerous opponent.

Prominent threats of purpose include terrorism, insurgency, “unrestricted warfare,” toxic populism or social agitation, and hybrid conflict and resistance. The more violent and/or dangerous of these fall into DoD’s new classification of irregular warfare (IW) and will be the focus of defense activities like COIN, CT, UW, counterproliferation, and IO. Whereas, important

¹ This and subsequent discussions of “unconventional, defense-relevant” threats and challenges are also included Nathan Freier, *Known Unknowns: Unconventional “Strategic Shocks” in Defense Strategy Development*, PKSOI Papers (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S Army War College, November 2008), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=890>.

² Nonmilitary threats connote security challenges, activities, capabilities, or circumstances whose origin and form have little in common with traditional armed forces or traditional armed conflict. Nonmilitary, in this context, does not necessarily mean nonviolent, nonstate, or disordered and unorganized.

³ See also Freier, *Known Unknowns*.

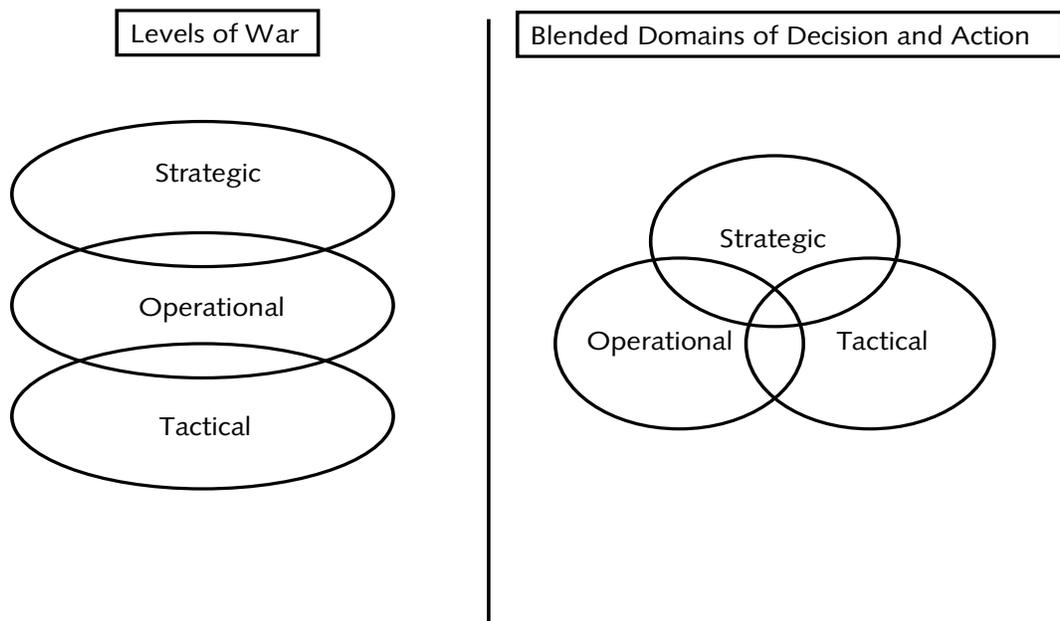
“contextual” threats might include, but are not limited to un- and under-governance, identity politics, civil violence, pandemic, environmental degradation, underdevelopment, human insecurity, natural or human disaster, state failure, and civil violence. These can involve the range of IW activities as well. Yet, they will likely be the target of SSTRO, FID, and humanitarian intervention.

Both threats of purpose and threats of context are increasingly prone to manifesting themselves at home and abroad. Both exist individually or in combination from the lowest tactical level to the highest grand strategic level. Furthermore, both are increasingly the business of DoD leaders, strategists, and operators.

The strategic, operational, and tactical levels of decision and action have merged.

For key defense actors, the once distinct levels of war (strategic, operational, and tactical) are now better seen as blended domains of decision and action (see figure 1). Each has a profound impact on the other. It is no longer easy to distinguish actions or decisions that are purely strategic or purely tactical. This is particularly true in unconventional environments. As a consequence, key defense actors at all levels must account for the demands on and choices of those operating in each domain—particularly, those exercising decisive impact on their individual areas of responsibility.

Figure 1. Levels of War as Blended Domains of Decision and Action



Building a new strategic competency implies continuing to move away from past defense convention.

The defense establishment is populated by talented and capable individuals. However, all are the products of their unique course of development and socialization. It takes time to identify and develop leaders, strategists, and operators for any environment. A near decade of experience operating within and against the new status quo by itself may not be enough to overturn 60-plus years of defense convention. Thus, corporate learning about and acknowledgment of the new status quo and its demands remain vulnerable within DoD institutions still largely predisposed toward an environment dominated by traditional military challenges.⁴

DoD leadership recognizes the imperative for significant institutional adjustment to new, more unconventional strategic circumstances. Yet, some resistance to this adjustment remains. This study acknowledges both points and argues that, while DoD has learned and adjusted to its contemporary environment in some measure, it has not adjusted nor learned enough. As a consequence, it remains vulnerable to corporate reversion to more comfortable norms of behavior. Any reversion like this would result in DoD confronting unconventional twenty-first-century challenges with leaders, strategists, operators, and defense conventions optimized for a substantially different environment than that likeliest to confront them.

⁴ The “defense institutions” of particular concern in this regard are OSD, Joint Staff, service departments, combatant commands, operational headquarters, and tactical units.

3

KEY DEMANDS ON DEFENSE LEADERS, STRATEGISTS, AND OPERATORS IN THE NEW STATUS QUO

[T]hose who form policy and make critical decisions on behalf of states and peoples must, ever increasingly, focus both on traditional “national security”...and on human security, in which “non-traditional” security issues predominate.¹

The dominant demand on contemporary defense leaders, strategists, and operators today is management of persistent unconventional conflict.

The United States has entered and will remain in an era of persistent, unconventional conflict for the foreseeable future.² Contemporary defense discussions artificially limit the idea of persistent conflict to the War on Terrorism (WoT). The reality is much more complicated for the defense establishment. In truth, the WoT is at the leading edge of an unconventional security future. Relentless resistance and friction against U.S. designs are the constant price of admission to singular great power. According to Clark Murdock and Samuel Brannen, “[W]ithout a doubt the United States is headed into a world in which its power will be increasingly contested by a range of actors and alternatives.”³ Harry R. Yarger, of the U.S. Army War College, characterizes the current era this way:

One way to conceptualize the threats confronting the U.S. is to see them as a global insurgency against the emerging 21st century world order for which the U.S. is the primary architect. The

¹ P.H. Liotta, “Through the Looking Glass: Creeping Vulnerabilities and the Reordering of Security,” *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 1 (March 2005): 50–51, <http://sdi.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/36/1/49>.

² See Nathan Freier, “Primacy Without a Plan,” *Parameters* (Autumn 2006): 11, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/06autumn/freier.pdf>; and Samuel J. Brannen, “Maintain Global and Regional Stability: Ensure Stability, Security, and Economic Prosperity in an Era of Globalization,” in *Facilitating a Dialogue among Senior-Level DoD Officials on National Security Priorities: A Methodological Note*, ed. Clark A. Murdock and Samuel J. Brannen (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, April 2008), p. 26. Brannen observes, “The United States will be increasingly challenged in its influence and how it can exercise its power. In the next decade and beyond, the United States will face an increasing number of competitors able to confront it in a range of domains, including the economic, cyber, and political spheres.”

³ Murdock and Brannen, *Facilitating a Dialogue among Senior-Level DoD Officials*, p. 22.

war on terrorism is but one manifestation of the emerging challenges. Others may react against this new world order also.⁴

Persistent unconventional conflict and resistance will be defined most by consequential struggles for human security and intense competition for local, regional, and trans-regional advantage across political, social, economic, and/or criminal domains. The impacts of all of these will freely transit the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of decision and action.

For DoD and its key actors, there is no strategic pause on the near- to mid-term strategic horizon. However, the likeliest forms of defense-relevant conflict and resistance will deviate substantially from those forms commonly accepted inside DoD as most dangerous prior to 9/11. This will force defense leaders, strategists, and operators to proceed according to very different rule sets.

As was suggested in section 2, above, much of the unconventional challenge set will be purposeful, manifesting itself as complex amalgams of armed, political, and/or social resistance. There will be a “kinetic,” but nonetheless discriminating, military component to any U.S. response to purposeful unconventional challenges. However, force as the primary instrument will be increasingly less useful.

Compelling security challenges will be purposeless or less purposeful as well. On balance, however, these will be no less dangerous. Witness recent recognition of the national security impacts of globalization, challenged governance, natural and human disaster, identity politics, crime, and climate change.⁵ Here force will be even less prominent in effective U.S. responses; nonetheless, DoD will still play a substantial role in leading the employment of broad U.S. instruments of power from strategic through tactical levels.

Finally, by accident or design, threats of purpose will free-ride on threats of context creating enormously complex contingencies for key defense actors. Terrorists leveraging un- or under-governed sanctuary is one manifestation of this. Others might include criminal exploitation of state weakness or state competitors achieving hostile designs by leveraging unstable local

⁴ Harry R. Yarger, *Educating for Strategic Thinking in the SOF Community: Considerations and a Proposal*, JSOU Report 07-2 (Hurlburt Field, Fla.: JSOU Press, 2007), p.3, http://jsoupublic.socom.mil/publications/jsou/JSOU07-2yargerEducatingforStrategicThinking_final.pdf.

⁵ See, for example, works like Richard L. Krugler and Ellen L. Frost (eds.), *The Global Century: Globalization and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2001), http://www.ndu.edu/inss/books/Books_2001/Global%20Century%20-%20June%202001/globcencont.html; National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future: Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, December 2004), http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020.html; and CNA Corporation, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change* (Alexandria, Va.: CNA Corporation, 2007), <http://securityandclimate.cna.org/report/National%20Security%20and%20the%20Threat%20of%20Climate%20Change.pdf>.

conditions. In all cases, one caution by Colin Gray is particularly noteworthy, “War should not be approached in ways that divorce it from its political, social, and cultural contexts.”⁶

All of these conditions will require delicate, nuanced blending of military and nonmilitary capabilities and methods in response. This trend argues strongly for the adoption of “indirect means” or approaches from the strategic to tactical levels.⁷ Yet, defense leaders, strategists, and operators will be unable to leverage indirect responses alone. And, thus, they will increasingly have to master both direct and indirect approaches employing a universe of deployed instruments of power.

The reality is that terrorists, extremists, violent rejectionists, and insurgents will threaten U.S. interests in perpetuity. Further still, other purposeful state and nonstate challengers will certainly discover or engineer new unconventional methods to check U.S. designs. Finally, adverse circumstances endemic to the environment will militate against U.S. success in the absence of purpose at every level of decision and action. All of these will manifest themselves in ways that defy traditional U.S. responses. None can be ignored. None are defense specific. Nevertheless, all require substantial involvement by DoD. On all of this, Secretary Gates recently observed:

[O]ver the next 20 years and more certain pressures—population, resource, energy, climate, economic, and environmental—could combine with rapid, cultural, social, and technological change to produce new sources of deprivation, rage, and instability. We face now, and will inevitably face in the future, rising powers discontented with the international status quo, possessing new wealth and ambition, and seeking new and more powerful weapons. But, overall, looking ahead, I believe the most persistent and potentially dangerous threats will come less from ambitious states, than failing ones that cannot meet the basic needs—much less the aspirations—of their people.⁸

Managing the demands of persistent conflict will involve serial exposure to irregular, catastrophic, and hybrid threats.

Unconventional, defense-relevant irregular, catastrophic, and hybrid threats rising with or without purpose define much of DoD’s unconventional operating space. The concepts of irregular, catastrophic, and hybrid challenge trace their policy origins to the 2005 National Defense Strategy (NDS 2005).⁹

⁶ Colin S. Gray, “How War Has Changed Since the End of the Cold War,” *Parameters* (Spring 2005), <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/parameters/05spring/gray.htm>.

⁷ See Department of Defense, DoDD 3000.07, December 1, 2008, p. 11, <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/300007p.pdf>. The most recent DoD Irregular Warfare directive describes “indirect means” as “[m]eeting security objectives by working with and through foreign partners.”

⁸ Robert M. Gates, speech, “U.S. Global Leadership Campaign,” Washington, D.C., July 15, 2008, <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1262>.

⁹ Freier, *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century*, pp. i–ix.

Purposeful irregular actors will leverage violence, politics, and social action in clever combinations to secure objectives and drive up U.S. costs.¹⁰ This unique blending of low politics and violence will stretch the contemporary defense actor's education, experience, and training base. The most capable irregular opponents demonstrate an ability to move at will between the inherently political and abhorrently violent with relative ease. The new Joint Operating Concept for irregular warfare is instructive but not complete on the subject of the irregular challenge when it observes, "[Irregular warfare] employ(s) subversion, coercion, attrition, and exhaustion to undermine and erode an adversary's power, influence, and will to exercise political authority over a relevant population."¹¹ Purposeful irregular challengers include nonstate groups such as al Qaeda, Jaysh al Mahdi, the Taliban, and Hezbollah. However, the adoption of irregular methods by competitor states grows increasingly likely by the day.

Irregular challenges also rise in the absence of hostile purpose. These irregular threats of context challenge operational objectives and core interests by triggering widespread human insecurity and instability, causing social dislocation. Thus, defense leaders, strategists, and operators will perpetually need to pay heed to dangerous, irregular conditions lying substantially outside the proximate control of both friend and foe.

Catastrophic challenges threaten sudden, severe, and paralyzing strategic costs.¹² Like irregular challenges, catastrophic challenges are likely also nonmilitary in origin, target, and design. However, their strategic effects or impacts rise more swiftly and exponentially. A prominent example of a catastrophic threat would be rogue or terrorist employment of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).¹³ Catastrophic threats of context will challenge operational objectives and core interests as well. For example, cataclysmic natural or human disaster might be as paralyzing and disruptive to an unsuspecting friendly government or population as WMD attack.¹⁴

Complex hybrid challenges are strategic conditions or circumstances where two or more of NDS 2005's "mature and emerging" challenges combine either by accident or design.¹⁵ Purposeful hybrid challenges might include terrorist campaigns punctuated by use or threatened use of WMDs or state competitors actively employing political violence and mobilized social action or agitation against U.S. interests while wielding traditional military capacity as a foil against U.S. retaliation.¹⁶ Frank Hoffman has been a thoughtful contributor on the subject of purposeful hybrid threats. He observes, "[F]uture scenarios will more likely present unique combinations and

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 33–46.

¹¹ DoD, *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)*, Version 1.0 (Washington, D.C.: DoD, September 11, 2007), p. 9, http://www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/concepts/iw_joc1_0.pdf.

¹² Freier, *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century*, pp. 27–33.

¹³ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 32–33.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 46–63.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 47–52.

deliberate synergies...designed to target Western societies in general and American vulnerabilities in particular.”¹⁷

Competitor states are increasingly veering in the direction of hybrid competition. They prosecute “war” against the United States in the absence of a clear *casus belli*. Traditional war with the United States is not an option for these actors. Their war occurs through alternative ways and means. Here Hoffman suggests, “Future adversaries will not offer up ‘tactics of the weak...’ They will exploit the tactics of the smart and agile.”¹⁸ With more at stake physically, these actors are naturally more risk informed. Thus, they manipulate the environment according to long-term design vice sudden, provocative action. Toward this end, they adopt a host of hybrid measures short of traditional warfare to wear away U.S. patience, political will, resources, and relationships. Defense leaders, strategists, and operators will be charged with recognizing this and acting appropriately in response. On this point, Colin Gray observes:

Because war is a duel, there are intelligent adversaries out there who will strive to deny [the United States] a mode of warfare that privileges the undoubted strengths of [its] transforming military power.¹⁹

Hybrid state and nonstate competitors demonstrate a propensity for leveraging surrogate violence, political and social agitation, and sophisticated economic and information warfare to nullify U.S. advantages. Quite often these actors possess or seek relatively sophisticated traditional or catastrophic capacity to compliment other decidedly irregular approaches.

Though typically less violent than traditional warfare, this hybrid form of competition is in the aggregate no less harmful to operational objectives and core interests. At the same time, it also runs counter to traditional U.S. fealty for decisive military action. Purposeful hybrid state competitors include Iran and North Korea. In the future, they might include a more bellicose China or Russia. As nonstate actors grow in their quasi-military capabilities and political clout, they too will increasingly leverage hybrid methods and capabilities to decisive effect.

Like irregular and catastrophic challenges, hybrid threats can arrive absent strategic purpose as well. One of the most complex and dangerous threats in this respect might be future dissolution of a strategic state possessing substantial nuclear and/or nonnuclear military capacity. Here, abject human insecurity, unguided irregular violence, and enormous traditional and/or catastrophic potential might combine, largely by happenstance.²⁰ Under conditions like these, some traditional conceptions of military action and force may remain appropriate. However, they will have to be

¹⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, Va.: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), p. 14, http://www.potomac institute.org/publications/Potomac_HybridWar_0108.pdf.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁹ Gray, “How War Has Changed Since the End of the Cold War,” p. 17.

²⁰ Freier, *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century*, pp. 58–60.

merged with more unconventional considerations as key defense actors move to gain control over the horizontal escalation of violence and instability.

The “indirect approach” is a two-way street.

Much has been made of the idea of increased employment by the defense establishment of indirect approaches against the challenges of the new status quo. However, both state and nonstate competitors see advantages in leveraging their own indirect approaches as well. In this regard, they target U.S. partners with many of the aforementioned irregular, catastrophic, and hybrid methods in order to raise the price of active alignment with the United States to uncomfortable levels.

Unconventional threats and challenges already represent the principal demands on defense leaders, strategists, and operators in the field.

All three challenge sets—purposeful or not—offer conceptual illustrations of the unconventional security demands facing contemporary leaders, strategists, and operators worldwide. All defy a great deal of prevailing convention. Thus, all also demand that key defense actors look at their environment and their response to it in fundamentally different ways.

Concept meets reality in operational theaters like U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). The unconventional security challenges in CENTCOM are legion. Here the United States is clearly not at peace. Nor, is it at war in the most traditional sense. Finally, most regional threats are defense relevant and not defense specific. All require sophisticated understanding and innovation at the different levels of action and decision.

In the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility (AoR), the United States and key partners face purposeful irregular and hybrid challenges from jihadists. Here purposeful radicals are fueled by endemic contextual threats like political disaffection, human insecurity, and challenged governance. Simultaneously, the United States is engaged in complex irregular conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both conflicts ebb and flow in intensity. And, like the jihadist threat, each conflict is perpetuated as much by purposeless human insecurity, as it is by violence and political action emanating from hostile design.

CENTCOM confronts a more outwardly traditional state actor in Iran. Nonetheless, competition with Iran is increasingly hybrid in character. As with most state challengers, Iran recognizes its inherent disadvantages vis-à-vis the United States. Yet, it also recognizes comparative advantages in alternative forms of competition. Iran leverages proxies against U.S. interests. It employs substantial local influence and religious sway to manipulate regional political outcomes. Throughout, it shields itself with just enough traditional military capability and the specter of a future nuclear deterrent to alter U.S. risk calculations. All of this occurs in the absence of the clear casus belli that might justify traditional military action.

Finally, large, consequential states like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan present CENTCOM leaders, strategists, and operators with unique contingency challenges. For example, collapse of internal

security in either could trigger widespread regional or global instability. Ultimately, both might be vulnerable to the type of hybrid dissolution described above.

The complexity CENTCOM's AoR is mirrored from the theater-strategic to the operational level. On any given day, CENTCOM leaders, strategists, and operators balance a number of competing unconventional demands:

- COIN, CT, SSTRO, FID, and IO in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- CT, FID, and IO in the Horn of Africa and South and Central Asia;
- Theater-wide CT, UW, and IO against a range of active jihadist groups;
- Counterproliferation and the prospect of hybrid war with Iran; and, finally,
- The specter of stabilizing a crippled strategic state.

From the operational to tactical levels, CENTCOM leaders, strategists, and operators are equally challenged. Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I) and Combined Joint Task Force–Afghanistan actively confront the hybrid confluence of threats of purpose and context in the conduct of ongoing COIN, CT, FID, UW, SSTRO, and IO. In Iraq, for example, MNF-I perpetually fights a subregional “three block war” against purposeful nonstate and state competitors who carefully leverage violence, politics, and economic incentive against U.S. objectives. These conditions occur at the intersection of and are perpetuated by contextual threats like failed governance and human insecurity.

In light of this wide spectrum of challenges in CENTCOM and, by implication, elsewhere around the world a caution from Clausewitz is appropriate:

The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.²¹

Implications of the new status quo's demands for key defense actors.

Defense leaders, strategists, and operators are the first line of defense against getting Clausewitz's aforementioned judgment wrong. Likewise, they should also be the first to recognize the interconnections and interdependence of the strategic through tactical domains of decision and action. A great deal of experiential learning has occurred in DoD over the past seven years. Witness the flurry of activity inside DoD associated with “irregular warfare.”²² The tour of the CENTCOM AoR was intended to highlight some of this. Similar surveys of other regional and

²¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 88.

²² This work recently culminated in the new IW Joint Operating Concept and the Draft Planner's Coordination DoD Directive on IW.

functional AoRs and an aggregate survey of national-level unconventional demands would yield like results.

Ever since the attacks of 9/11, defense leaders, strategists, and operators have executed a global “irregular warfare” campaign, loosely organized under the WoT. This campaign is underwritten by defense-specific capabilities but, ultimately, reliant on the careful employment of both military and nonmilitary resources and methods by defense actors from the strategic through tactical levels. This implies that the “hammer and nail” paradigm heretofore governing DoD’s mission and responsibilities requires continued retooling and adjustment.²³

The “hammer” has its limits. In addition, DoD’s material and human capacity and the difficulties attending orderly migration of key responsibilities from one U.S. government agency to another suggest that DoD will remain the instrument of choice against the myriad unconventional challenges for some time to come.²⁴ The more inherently violent and disordered the circumstances, the likelier this is to be so. Many aspects of COIN, CT, FID, and SSTRO fall substantially outside previous defense-wide convention. Yet, DoD will often continue to exercise strategic, operational, and tactical primacy over their execution. DoD will often own both the ground and the bulk of the resources employed. Thus, it will be persistently responsible for strategic, operational, and tactical outcomes.

Extending the hammer and nail analogy, defense leaders, strategists, and operators must increasingly become comfortable employing a variety of tools under circumstances where the hammer by itself is increasingly less useful. They will continue to have primary responsibility for designing, synchronizing, and executing linked strategic, operational, and tactical plans, employing a range of defense and nondefense instruments once distinct from but now intrinsic to the DoD repertoire.

This requires leaders, strategists, and operators who are quick studies and demonstrate extraordinary flexibility. They must display an innate sense for cost to benefit, sensitivity to the demands at different levels of planning and execution, a penchant for innovation and precision of

²³ “Former Joint Chiefs Chairman Speaks at Home Campus,” *Nota Bene* (Fall 2004) (Webster University Worldwide), <http://www.webster.edu/depts/business/notabene/04fall/shelton.html>. The former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is famously credited with observing, “America has a lot of tools in the kit bag—diplomatic, political, economic, informational and military.... The military’s the hammer, but not every problem is a nail. Sometimes you’ve got to use those other tools.”

²⁴ David J. Kilcullen, “New Paradigms for 21st Century Conflict: The Need for a Grand Strategy for Combating Terrorism,” *America.gov*, May 6, 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/peacesec-english/2008/May/20080522172835SrenoD0.8730585.html>. Kilcullen argues that current U.S. resource allocations for the WoT are substantially out of balance. He observes, “a [global COIN] approach [to the WoT] would suggest that about 80 percent of effort should go toward political, diplomatic, development, intelligence, and informational activity, and about 20 percent to military activity.” Later, he implies that in material size the American military is “210 times larger, than the other [U.S.] elements of national power.”

thought and action, enormous curiosity about their environment and appropriate responses to it, and finally, realistic and risk-informed vision that accounts for the capabilities and limitations of all relevant U.S. government agents.

Though somewhat alien to many of its core competencies, irregular, catastrophic, and hybrid challenges of purpose and context will—through persistence, complexity, and strategic impact—require the undivided attention of many key actors inside DoD. Combating these challenges effectively through the nuanced application of both military and nonmilitary resources will increasingly be the stock and trade of DoD from the policymaker to the “strategic corporal.”

4

SEVEN NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR KEY DEFENSE ACTORS OPERATING IN UNCONVENTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

As mentioned in the introduction, a new strategic competency for key defense actors rests on cultivation of a fresh or revised set of operating perspectives. The author offers the following perspectives as those that are essential to leaders, strategists, and operators working in and against the new status quo. In practice, these seven perspectives are filtered through an unconventional prism that allows key defense actors to appreciate their demands with greater sophistication and precision. Skillful use of them aids in the effective employment of defense capabilities and the wider U.S. government tool kit.

Many of the new or revised perspectives represent significant breaks from past practice.

Informal cultivation of these perspectives is already occurring in DoD. A number of them represent brand new defense conventions and norms (see figure 2). However, more deliberate development of these seven perspectives in key defense actors will require their formal integration into professional education and development.

Figure 2. A Pre- and Post-9/11 Comparison of the Key Perspectives for Defense Leaders, Strategists, and Operators

Pre-9/11	Post-9/11
"Military science"—traditional	"Social science"—unconventional
Overwhelming military force	Limits/alternative uses of military power
Exclusive employment of military forces	"Minding gaps" in nonmilitary capacity
Risk elimination and conflict resolution	Risk and conflict management
Linear, symmetrical, and binary challenges	Multiple, simultaneous conflicts and competitions—conflict "in the round"
Strategic, operational, tactical clarity	"Playing in the mud"
Cultural/functional expertise by exception	Cultural/functional sensitivity as a rule

▪ The First Perspective: “Social Science” versus “Military Science”

In the pre-9/11 environment, DoD undervalued “social science” in assessing its challenges. Previously, the security threats dominating DoD planning and decisionmaking were defense specific. They centered on real or speculative traditional military conflicts. They were acute problems of “military science”; they were not dominated by perpetual unconventional, “three block” war.¹ In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, defense leaders, strategists, and operators failed to appreciate the social science complexity of their unconventional challenge set.

Now, however, the most important, defense-relevant threats of purpose and context are typically complex social science problems.² They are marked by difficult political, human security, economic, social, and environmental components. Traditional military considerations and perspectives are less useful as a result. In this environment, a keen appreciation of military science is necessary but woefully insufficient for the task of designing and executing whole-of-government responses. Instead, defense leaders, strategists, and operators will increasingly be charged with the nimble employment of military and nonmilitary resources against decidedly human-based social science challenges in ways that seek “to maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative outcomes” against complex forces of endemic insecurity.³

Successive contingencies associated with the WoT have substantially reversed attitudes in this regard. Today, social science trumps military science under most unconventional, defense-relevant circumstances. Here the forces of active unconventional resistance interact freely with and are enabled by malignant environmental conditions. The defense establishment increasingly recognizes that a sophisticated understanding of the human and political terrain associated with unconventional threats allows leaders, strategists, and operators to act within versus adjacent to the environment’s complexity. Thus, mastery of the social science perspective is increasingly important. This requires some exposure to disciplines as varied as political science, economics, anthropology, sociology, geography, and development.

Today, vulnerable populations and adverse socioeconomic, political, and environmental circumstances are less conditions around which U.S. forces fight and are instead the objects or accelerants of consequential conflicts themselves.⁴ Note for example the new DoD definition of “irregular warfare” as “(a) violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and

¹ See “Military Science,” Dictionary.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/militaryscience>.

Dictionary.com calls military science “the study of the causative factors and tactical principles of warfare.”

² See “Social Science,” Dictionary.com, [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/social science](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/social%20science). Social science is defined as “any of various disciplines that study human society and social relationships, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, political science, and history.

³ Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy*, Letort Papers (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, February 2006), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubid=641>, p. 3.

⁴ DoD, *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)*, Version 1.0, September 11, 2007, pp. 8–11.

influence over the relevant populations.”⁵ On this point Frank Hoffman—invoking the words of Sir Rupert Smith—observes, “[T]he most frequent war is now ‘amongst the people,’ and we have been very slow in shaping our...tool set.”⁶

Contending effectively with these human- and environmental-based challenges has witnessed DoD supporting, protecting, and co-opting local populations under very complex conditions. Military forces have increasingly been in the business of meeting basic human needs with durable political, economic, and social intervention. Skilled employment of the social science perspective has proven critical to designing and executing campaigns and terminating intervention under favorable conditions. Toward this end, the new Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept observes:

[Irregular warfare] depends not just on our military prowess, but also our understanding of such social dynamics as tribal politics, social networks, religious influences, and cultural mores. People, not platforms and advanced technology, will be the key to IW success. The joint force will need patient, persistent, and culturally savvy people to build the local relationships and partnerships essential to executing IW.⁷

Cultivating the social science perspective in key defense actors is foremost a function of education and training. First, they should be trained to recognize and account for the most common social science considerations endemic to unconventional conflicts. Those most responsible for designing strategy and plans in unconventional environments should benefit from deeper understanding of the same subjects, acquired through more formal education. At a minimum, some exposure to social science allows key defense actors to integrate expert social science advice in their strategies, plans, and tactical actions.

▪ **The Second Perspective: Limits and Alternative Uses of Military Power**

The social science complexity of unconventional environments from the strategic through tactical levels implies that the utility of military force is either severely limited or narrowly appropriate. This is a direct challenge to past defense convention focused on overwhelming force. When the nation’s most robust and tangible foreign and security policy instrument is DoD, it is easy but also inappropriate to over-militarize specific challenges to make them conform to the traditional defense tool kit.⁸ There are few analogs between the previous era’s decisive wars of maneuver and the now more common challenge of fighting or competing among, over, and sometimes against

⁵ Ibid, p. 6.

⁶ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, p. 12.

⁷ DoD, *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)*, Version 1.0, September 11, 2007, p. 1.

⁸ Samuel J. Brannen, “Overview: Painting the National Security Landscape,” in *Facilitating a Dialogue among Senior-Level DoD Officials on National Security Priorities*, ed. Murdock and Brannen, p. 16.

vulnerable, disaffected, or poisoned populations.⁹ This requires discrimination in the use of violence and the alternative employment of military resources.

Traditional military force is not irrelevant to unconventional environments. However, it is less dominant. This does not imply a smaller or more limited role for DoD. Indeed, none of the most dangerous unconventional challenges can be addressed effectively without important defense contributions. This requires leaders, strategists, and operators that recognize the indispensable nature of the DoD, but see the inherent limitations of traditional military force as well. This allows them to see the many alternative uses for military forces and, at the same time, recognize the potential resident in complementary contributions by partner agencies and nations.

The problem for the contemporary leader, strategist, and operator is not getting the square (traditional) defense peg into a round (unconventional) hole. Nor, for that matter, is it about artificially making the traditional, square defense-specific hole itself round. Instead, the challenge is rounding the edges of the traditional defense peg sufficiently to allow it to confront unconventional challenges more effectively. As Colin Gray rightfully observes, in the contemporary environment, “[T]here is more to war than warfare.”¹⁰

Growing this perspective is mostly a function of training and experience. Key defense actors need to be exposed to the inherent limitations and alternative uses of traditional military power in unconventional environments from their entry into service. At the same time, skilled employment of this perspective relies on serial exposure to operational environments where DoD exercises substantial influence over outcomes but nonetheless is also limited in the extent to which it can employ military violence to achieve strategic and operational objectives.

⁹ See, for example, the 2001 and 2006 QDR reports: DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: DoD, September 30, 2001, p. 13, <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/qdr2001.pdf>; and DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: DoD, February 6, 2006, pp. 35–39, <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>). Even descriptions of traditional military campaigns have changed to account for a new appreciation of the environment’s complexity. Note QDR 2001’s description of “major combat operations” and QDR 2006’s treatment of the same topic. In QDR 2001, “decisively defeating an enemy” entailed “the ability to occupy territory or set the conditions for a regime change if so directed.” In its discussion of “conventional campaigns,” QDR 2006 observes, “Be prepared to...remove a hostile regime, destroy its military capacity, and *set conditions for the transition to, or for restoration of, civil society*” [italics added]. This occurred in addition to DoD’s more striking recognition that it would be engaged in persistent “irregular operations” of varying size and intensity, as a matter of routine.

¹⁰ Gray, “How War Has Changed Since the End of the Cold War,” p. 18.

“Seeing Force from a Different Perspective”: A Post-9/11 Opportunity?

In the immediate post-9/11 period, the precise form of the U.S. response was uncertain. All options were on the table. A range of conceptual options was discussed. There was no question, however, that some military and nonmilitary force would be employed.

At the time, working-level U.S. Army strategists discussed creating interlocking counterterrorist (CT) networks designed to strike out at and neutralize terrorist infrastructure worldwide at multiple points of vulnerability. While this design was never anything but conceptual, it demonstrates the need to see military force and forces from a uniquely different perspective in the new status quo.

Mutually supporting CT networks would replicate requisite military and nonmilitary capabilities from Washington to the field. The concept hinged on responding to a networked terrorist challenge with our own countervailing national security network operating according to clear terms of reference and rules of engagement, allowing for maximum freedom of action in execution.

General purpose forces would provide lift, support, key enablers, force protection, conventional strike, and some C2. SOF and intelligence components would contribute to targeting, operational preparation of the battlefield, human and technical intelligence gathering and exploitation, and direct action. Federal law enforcement would provide the capability for competent extraterritorial legal and police activities. Diplomats and aid experts would coordinate with political authorities and concerned populations at the various levels of planning and execution. All would operate together as combined, distributed entities with heretofore unheard of levels of operational and tactical autonomy.

▪ **The Third Perspective: “Minding Gaps” in Nonmilitary Capacity**

In the past, military action was DoD’s sole responsibility. Conventional campaigns, for example, were predicated on the sequenced application of state power. The softer instruments were intended to first prevent conflict somewhat in isolation and then clean up after conflict when war became unavoidable. Military power operated by itself in between.

Today, the diminishing utility of traditional military force implies increased utility for softer or alternatively hard instruments of power. As the square defense peg gets rounder, it is complemented by the skilled employment of nonmilitary U.S. and partner resources. Harry Yarger argues, “Shared and often disparate interests will require the coordinated use of all socially determinant elements of U.S. power—economic, informational, diplomatic, and military.”¹¹

This is particularly true in complex unconventional environments. Since 9/11, this reality has increasingly led defense leaders, strategists, and operators to view their response to compelling challenges through the perspective of comprehensive whole-of-government capabilities and methods. Yet, a great deal still needs to be accomplished in order to posture key defense actors for increased success in employing these nonmilitary resources effectively.

¹¹ Yarger, *Educating for Strategic Thinking in the SOF Community*, p. 2.

For the foreseeable future, defense actors will be responsible for expert utilization of a range of interagency and intergovernmental capabilities—including military force. Leadership and action against persistent “three block war” will involve DoD in activities that range from kinetic and non-kinetic COIN, CT, UW, and SSTRO to human intelligence gathering, IO and PSYOPS, law enforcement, criminal investigation and detention, financial tracking, development assistance, and civilian capacity building. Each requires a keen appreciation of social science, temperance in the active employment of military force, and deep appreciation for capabilities resident in other government agencies, international institutions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

There is an obvious capabilities gap between what is expected from relevant nonmilitary actors and what is delivered. Thus, defense leaders, strategists, and operators must actively employ the whole-of-government perspective to integrate Yarger’s “socially determinant” instruments into a single unified approach, while simultaneously recognizing where precisely DoD institutions must themselves “mind gaps” in the absence of nonmilitary capability.

“Minding Gaps” in Practice: The Strategic Cities Initiative

The “strategic cities” initiated by MNF-I in the spring of 2005 exemplifies the role key defense actors play in “minding the gaps.” It attempted to identify critical urban centers or population concentrations where positive change in “social science” conditions might have a demonstrable impact on the conflict’s trajectory. It was a military-enabled effort spanning both Coalition and Iraqi instruments of power. It aimed at designing broad military and nonmilitary action from the theater-strategic through tactical levels nationwide. It provided initial strategic, operational, and tactical focus for Provincial Support Teams (the forerunners of PRTs).

Directed by strategists in MNF-I, the strategic cities effort brought together disparate players of the U.S. and Iraqi governments, as well as Coalition partners under a coordinated strategic concept. Strategic priorities for action were guided by theater imperatives. The form and character of the Coalition/Iraqi approach to any one strategic city emerged from the combined judgments of key stakeholders. The strategic cities project sought to provide the counterinsurgency campaign with greater precision, mostly in the application of finite, nonmilitary resources. It identified key population centers or concentrations; determined their needs in the political, economic, security, and social realms; and, finally, targeted resources and actions in very different combinations to address the unique demands of each city or population.

Increased skill in the precision application of the broad instruments of power among key defense actors meets near-term interagency and intergovernmental capabilities gaps. It is also a prudent hedge against failure by either to adequately account for the full demands of the new status quo in the future. Recent comments by Kathleen Hicks and Eric Ridge on stability operations are instructive in this regard. They observe:

Planners in [DoD] are thus faced with a seemingly impossible dilemma. Either they must [subordinate themselves and] remain squarely in the support lane, risking the inability to

succeed in complex stability operations if others cannot effectively lead on key tasks, or they must venture more broadly into the development, counterterrorism, and governance realms, risking significant military overreach in order to hedge against the potential lack of civilian capacity.¹²

Cultivating a new whole-of-government perspective for unconventional environments requires that DoD willfully expose key actors to the culture, capabilities, and inherent limitations of other government agencies, international institutions, and NGOs. These opportunities should not be the exception but rather the rule in routine professional development. Experience should be horizontal (i.e., across multiple U.S. government/international functions—diplomacy, intelligence, development, law enforcement, etc), as well as vertical (i.e., from the tactical to strategic levels).

▪ **The Fourth Perspective: Risk and Conflict Management**

Unconventional conflicts and contingencies are better seen as management challenges. Few of them are ripe for decisive resolution. Therefore, endeavors against them from the tactical to strategic levels will be marked by perpetual pursuit of outcomes that are “good enough” versus “ideal.” In most unconventional environments then, defense leaders, strategists, and operators will most often fulfill the role of conflict manager not conflict resolver. This runs counter to a culture of decisive military victory. Unconventional environments will rarely conform to the latter model.

Success will be less a function of winning and losing and more the product of careful selection of battles and the precise definition and pursuit of acceptable outcomes. It will be the persistent quest for the capacity to continue competing at very high levels of performance while constantly eroding or limiting the potential harm resident in an accumulating set of unconventional threats of purpose and context. Yarger argues, for example, that “[s]ometimes the environment is so complicated or entangled that...permanent solutions are improbable.”¹³

Decisive wins in this environment will be at a premium. Consequential unconventional conflicts will often never end; they will simply ebb in intensity and potential for harm. Some might burn out. Most will smolder. It is likely, for example, that the United States will never eradicate jihadist resistance completely or leave Iraq and Afghanistan with both entirely at peace. Key defense actors can, however, hope to ultimately cede most direct responsibilities to local authorities after making each of these more manageable.

Identifying and managing “good enough” demands that leaders, strategists, and operators view compelling unconventional challenges through the perspective of risk and conflict management,

¹² Kathleen Hicks and Eric Ridge, *Planning for Stability Operations: The Use of Capabilities-Based Approaches* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, December 2007), pp. 31–32.

¹³ Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century*, p. 18.

never through that of risk elimination, and rarely through that of conflict resolution. They should seek to perpetually secure and advance strategic, operational, and tactical objectives against consequential unconventional challenges at levels of effort, cost, and outcome that are acceptable but not necessarily always definitive or ideal.

Judgments on acceptable or tolerable outcomes define those minimum essential conditions (“good enough”) against which leaders, strategists, and operators design their courses of action. They also define the scope of the future “management challenge.” From the operational to strategic level, the strategist, for example, helps relevant senior leaders identify “good enough.” He/she then designs risk-informed “indirect” and “direct” approaches most appropriate to achieving and maintaining “good enough,” consistent with senior-level guidance over time.

In this regard, risk consciousness that avoids risk aversion is essential. Here leaders, strategists, and tactical operators remain cognizant of risk yet are not paralyzed into inaction or excessive caution by it. Risk is constant. It is the persistent presence of the likelihood of “failure or prohibitive cost” in pursuit of specific objectives.¹⁴ Risk is accounted for, mitigated, and often accepted (“good enough”). It is never eliminated (“ideal”). Contemporary leaders, strategists, and operators evaluate risk by assessing the balance and sufficiency of ends, ways, and means vis-à-vis the purposeful and contextual threats arrayed against them.

In any unconventional endeavor, there will be discrete successes, setbacks, and outright failures. Favorable aggregation of these (i.e., succeeding on balance) will become increasingly important.¹⁵ Shaping the contours of “good enough” and managing “good enough” over time are key responsibilities for those operating within and against the new status quo. This requires the competent employment of the conflict- and risk-management perspective.

Cultivation of this perspective in key defense actors is a cumulative endeavor. Specifically, it results from deliberate cultivation of the previous three perspectives, combined with serial experiences operating in complex, unconventional environments. In the end, it is often principally the product of trial and error where leaders, strategists, and/or operators have been forced by conditions to adjust their pursuit of ideal outcomes toward more modest objectives that on balance are “good enough.”

▪ **The Fifth Perspective: Multiple, Ongoing Conflicts and Competitions**

In unconventional environments, from the tactical to the strategic level, there are a number of consequential balls in play at once. Leaders, strategists, and operators are routinely playing multiple games—for example, great power competition, terrorism and counterterrorism,

¹⁴ DoD, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: DoD, March 2005), pp. 14–15, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2005/d20050318nds1.pdf>.

¹⁵ The author arrived at this conclusion after off-line discussions on China with Derek Mitchell, senior fellow in the International Security Program at CSIS.

insurgency and counterinsurgency, ethno-sectarian conflict and peacemaking, underdevelopment and development, toxic populism and capacity building. Each game occurs according to different rules, all mostly outside traditional defense conventions and norms. This requires that leaders, strategists, and operators employ a perspective that effectively disaggregates and reaggregates unconventional challenges in their most appropriate combinations.

Past defense convention focused on linear, symmetrical battlefields and binary challenge sets. Today's unconventional challenges occur "in the round." They are asymmetric and multiplayer in character. The challenge for key defense actors is akin to managing concurrent football games played according to 8-, 9-, and 11-man rules from the pee-wee through the professional levels. In some of these contests, the best possible outcome is perpetual possession of the ball with an insurmountable lead but no clock and no prospect of the opponent fully relenting. Remember, most contemporary, unconventional challenges will persist on some level indefinitely.

On yet other fields, opponents perpetually retain possession of the ball. After all, some will—through culture, politics, faith, and propinquity—maintain certain competitive advantages that are difficult, if not impossible, to reverse or fully overcome. Here leaders, strategists, and operators maintain the ability to change the dimensions of the playing surface, the methods of scoring, and the rules of the game, but never enjoy the full advantage of initiative.

In yet other cases, the U.S. team arrives on site only to discover that the game is not football at all. This forces leaders, strategists, and operators to abandon convention, reorganize for a new competition, and learn to play as the game proceeds. Here they must be able to adapt defense capabilities and approaches, as well as integrate the capabilities of other interagency "teams" and "players" into appropriate DoD-led action. Doing this effectively requires skilled employment of all of the aforementioned perspectives at once.

In every game, all participants and the playing surface itself are active contestants. Each has the capacity to both score points and take points away. Sometimes the game's many contestants choose sides, vying against one another in packs. At still other times, each individual contestant—regardless of team affiliation—plays as a free agent, competing both for and against multiple teams and/or players at once. Finally, some, most, or even all at times, play "modified Russian roulette," vying unintentionally against themselves and intentionally against all others at once.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, U.S. opponents militate against Coalition success as much through their competition against each other as they do through their direct resistance against the United States and its partners. All of this has an inherent rationality that defies traditional U.S. conceptions of military conflict. All of this also calls for a perspective that can distinguish between "black," "white," and "grey" actors and their distinct interests and objectives.

There is an analog to all of this in Iraq specifically. What began as an eminently conventional military operation rapidly devolved into a complex and indeterminate irregular conflict. Here participants routinely competed with and against one another according to a variety of rule sets or the absence of rules altogether. Success and failure often hinged on the capacity of key defense

actors to recognize the primacy of social science, the limits and alternative uses of military power, the utility of nonmilitary methods and resources, the importance of “good enough” vice “ideal,” and the certainty of multiple, ongoing competitions and conflicts. The ability to disaggregate and reaggregate challenges and challengers requires a perspective fine-tuned to the realities of simultaneous and confused lines of conflict and resistance.

Education and experience are the key determinants of the leader, strategist, or operator being able to employ this perspective effectively. Exposure to the complexity of unconventional contingencies in the classroom and serial exposure to that complexity on the ground builds increased capacity.

▪ **The Sixth Perspective: “Playing in the Mud”**

Ambiguity and relative indeterminacy will be much more common than past strategic, operational, and tactical clarity in the new, more unconventional status quo. Revisiting the football analogy, most current unconventional contests occur in the absence of both a consistent rule set and a clock. Further, both endogenous factors like sectarianism, tribalism, and criminality combine with exogenous factors like regional competition and local antipathies, domestic political limitations, and allied/partner indifference to increase the complexity of unconventional environments. By definition then, the unconventional operating environment will be “muddy.” This necessitates cultivation of leaders, strategists, and operators who are comfortable “playing in the mud.”¹⁶

Playing “in the mud” will be increasingly routine. Effective defense “mudders” thrive on the challenge of building “good enough” and managing risk in the confused worlds of low politics, human insecurity, and competing political interests. This requires an operating perspective that sees the art of the possible under inherently muddy conditions.

Those who already thrive in this environment recognize two truths. First, no “mudder” leaves the field without getting dirty. This requires routine interaction with “white,” “grey,” and “black” actors and persistent satisfaction with less than ideal but nonetheless manageable outcomes. Second, there is no permanence whatsoever to outcomes built in mud unless those responsible for them commit to the constant management of threats and opportunities. The diversity of actors and the likelihood that their interests will persistently compete or remain wholly irreconcilable implies that building a functioning order from mud is difficult and frustrating. It requires nimble adjustment to constantly shifting conditions.

On the first point, strategy development, planning, and operational to tactical execution in unconventional environments entails shaping the best possible outcomes from the worst possible conditions. As argued previously, it will be virtually impossible to realize ideal objectives. Realism

¹⁶ Reference to “playing in the mud,” as illustrative of the new national security norm, emerged in conversations with Frederick Barton, codirector of the Project on Post-Conflict Reconstruction at CSIS.

and pragmatism then become paramount qualities. On the second point, leaders, strategists, and operators faced with the persistent prospect of playing “in the unconventional mud” should recognize the inherent vulnerability of their preferred solutions. Building and maintaining stable and secure outcomes under these circumstances is an imperfect art that is fraught with inherent risk. It requires patience, determination, and constant attention to the management of adverse effects ranging from erosion to sudden torrent arriving via either threats of purpose or context.

There is no substitute for experience in this regard. In many respects, leaders, strategists, and operators will sink or swim, thrive or fail in muddy unconventional environments. Given the likelihood for persistent U.S. engagement in unconventional conflicts, those who fail to thrive are likely wrong for continued service overall.

▪ **The Seventh Perspective: Cultural and Functional Sensitivity**

In the past, cultural and functional expertise were niche specialties that were called off the bench by exception. Conventional wars were fought in spite of the concerns of local cultures and not necessarily within or because of them. Further still, one functional competency dominated—that of traditional warfighting—at the expense of all other relevant functional competencies (e.g., COIN, FID, SSTRO, etc). In this regard, the United States was perpetually committed to “fighting” according to its rules alone and only then under conditions it preferred.

Today conditions are much different. Cultural and functional competencies are persistent requirements. Yet, the bandwidth of understanding implied by the demands outlined above in sections 2 and 3 is so wide, diverse, cluttered, and complex it is difficult to imagine any formal development path of sufficient depth and efficiency to guarantee steady production of leaders, strategists, and operators who consistently demonstrate all of “the right stuff” from a cultural or functional perspective. At the same time, relying solely on “unconventional” specialists, focused exclusively on specific functional or regional challenges is equally perilous. Targeted cultural and functional expertise in every key defense actor is likely impossible. However, some advanced sensitivity to culture and function is essential to all.

Contributions by specialists with deep understanding of specific cultures and functions are necessary but not sufficient. These specialists may simply not have the requisite vertical and horizontal perspectives essential to operate successfully in and against the new status quo worldwide, as well as within all three domains of decision and action. Specific regional and functional expertise has its own conventions. As a consequence, they may or may not be wholly appropriate to the emergence of new unconventional challenges outside those that currently enjoy priority. Regional specialists, for example, are prone to clientalism, while command of a specific unconventional function might incline leaders, strategists, or operators to see each new challenge through the prism of their unique expertise.

In this regard, regionalists may mirror-image the problems of Iraq in their approach to Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, or the wider WoT whether that frame of reference is wholly appropriate or not. Functional experts in COIN, CT, or SSTRO, on the other hand, are prone to

see every unconventional challenge as insurgency, terrorism, or state failure depending on their unique functional perspective. Similarly, though our traditional military institutions have been forced by circumstances to adapt, the strategic and operational acumen for functioning effectively in unconventional environments will not be achieved through simple extrapolation of traditional military experience.

None of this is meant to suggest that these expert views are invalid. However, it is meant to suggest that the most appropriate functional and cultural perspective for leaders, strategists, and operators in the new status quo creates some new synergy between core military competencies (including those of special operating forces) and regional/functional expertise. This perspective is sensitive to culture and function and helps key actors infuse important aspects of cultural and functional expertise into plans and actions. It recognizes unique cultural components of a specific victim society or unconventional challenge and includes a working-level grasp of the most important functional components required in response. However, it is not captured solely by a particular cultural or functional perspective. Given inevitable shifts in strategic priorities, an alternative cultural/functional perspective for contemporary, defense leaders, strategists, and operators is one that has enough exposure to both functional and cultural demands to operate effectively against diverse unconventional threats worldwide.

By example, today there is a great deal of currency in getting the defense establishment more in tune with Arab Muslim culture. Likewise, current adjustments to the demands of COIN and CT, at times, verge on over-optimization. Both of these are in some measure critical to near-term success. However, given the likelihood that a range of unconventional threats of purpose and context (that include but are not limited to CT, COIN, or the Arab Middle East) will dominate the new status quo, DoD should avoid calibrating the cultural and functional perspectives of key actors with such precision that they exclude a host of other exigent conditions.

Education, training, and experience combine to cultivate this perspective in key defense actors. Education and training provide leaders, strategists, and operators with a basic cultural/functional tool kit. Experience demonstrates how the knowledge gained through formal preparation is adapted to specific strategic, operational, and tactical conditions.

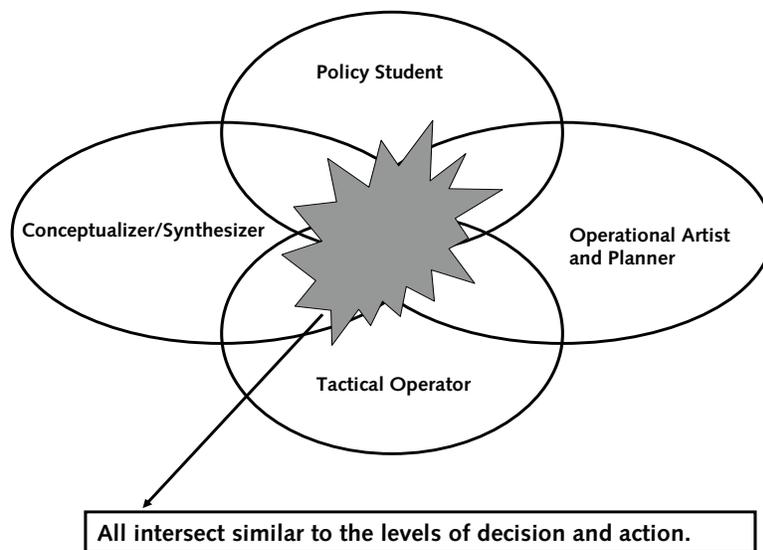
5

FOUR FOUNDATIONAL ROLES FOR KEY DEFENSE ACTORS

Key defense actors must see unconventional challenges through the seven key perspectives and exhibit the best qualities of four foundational roles.

The new strategic competency relies finally on key defense actors that have the capacity to employ the seven perspectives outlined above, while operating to the appropriate level of competency in one or more of the following four roles. Increasingly, key defense actors should become part student of policy, part strategic conceptualizer and synthesizer, part operational artist and planner, and finally, part tactical operator regardless of their level of decision and action. They should progressively be capable of employing the seven key perspectives in the context of these four distinct roles.¹ All four roles routinely intersect at the confluence of the strategic, operational, and tactical domains (see figure 3).

Figure 3. The Four Roles.



¹ This structure emerged in conversations with Frederick Barton, codirector of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at CSIS. From his experience in the aid and development world, Barton outlined three communities that should inspire strategic thinkers within the development community: “Diplomatic” (analog to policy student and political actor); “Developers” (analog to the conceptualizer and synthesizer);

- **The First Role: Policy Student**

Contemporary DoD leaders, strategists, and operators must be active students of higher-level strategy and policymaking. This underwrites their capacity to understand their unique role in context. It is not enough to understand the mechanics of moving and employing military forces and resources in one direction or another. Instead, it is essential that key defense actors have a more sophisticated understanding of why and toward what end this movement occurs from a grander policy perspective.

This implies that they must possess a nuanced understanding of the political and policymaking context of their various activities, as well as the decision and risk space of higher-level leaders and strategists operating across functional and regional areas of responsibility inside the USG. This demands the ability to manipulate policy decisions with informed advice vertically and horizontally, as well as the capacity to translate higher-level political and policy guidance into actionable strategy and plans consistent with strategic intent and appropriate to specific conditions on the ground.

Contemporary leaders, strategists, and operators must be students of political decisionmaking and policy development regardless of their level of action. They need to appreciate the decision space and risk sensitivity of interagency senior leaders who have a material impact on their portfolio. This appreciation enables them to: (1) translate broad guidance into strategic, operational, and tactical action; (2) shape strategic decisionmaking in the event that either or both higher-level decision space or risk sensitivity are artificially broad or narrow; and finally, (3) ensure that supported strategic and operational leaders adequately appreciate the boundaries of their own operating space.

The higher one ascends toward the strategic level of decision and action, the more practiced one should be at this skill. Thus, this is the primary operating space for the senior leader and strategist. However, given the increasing complexity and interconnectivity of key features in the environment, tactical operators should demonstrate increased competency in this regard as well. While education and training are critical to this competency, higher-level decisionmaking is so personality dependent that there is no substitute for experience. Thus, finding innovative opportunities to expose leaders, strategist, and operators to higher-level strategy and policymaking is an essential component to their development.

- **The Second Role: Strategic Conceptualizer and Synthesizer**

In this capacity, leaders, strategists, and operators thrive on and master the complexity of contemporary unconventional security challenges. They do so foremost through a holistic process of cyclical net and risk assessment. Key defense actors as conceptualizers and synthesizers

and “Humanitarians” (analog to the tactical operator). A conversation with William T. Johnsen, dean of the U.S. Army War College, yielded the category of operational artist.

persistently evaluate the state of play through the most appropriate perspective or perspectives. They gain a detailed understanding of the environment's threats, challenges, and opportunities, as well as specific U.S. and partner interagency/intergovernmental advantages appropriate to contending with or seizing them. As a result, they construct and adjust risk-informed, whole-of-government strategic visions for specific conditions falling within their discrete responsibilities. Seeing challenges in all their complexity, recognizing key whole-of-government advantages that are appropriate in response, and visualizing strategic endeavors that artfully leverage those advantages from start to finish contribute decisively to their more effectively identifying strategic designs conducive to durable success.

Individuals with primary responsibility for operating in this space maintain a keen appreciation for the certainty and consequences of persistent unconventional conflict. They exercise discrimination in the identification and pursuit of strategic and operational objectives. They are coded to recognize and pursue strategic designs focused on the measurable "good enough" versus the less definable "ideal" in specific contingencies and campaigns. And, finally, they are risk conscious, while artfully avoiding risk aversion. In this respect, they recognize that some objectives, while ideal, are likely unachievable either absolutely or within the constraints of resources, time, and cost. Thus, they employ risk calculation as a tool to refine objectives back into the realm of the feasible and/or acceptable.

By implication, this is the primary domain of the strategist. However, senior defense leaders too play an important role in shaping concepts intended for detailed lower-level planning and tactical execution. Further still, given the increasing interdependence of the strategic through tactical domains, it is also operating space where tactical and operational actors should demonstrate increased competence as well.

Strategists, in particular, perform four essential functions from the theater to the national/strategic levels of decision and action in this regard. First, they identify key challenges and vulnerabilities that absent due attention will lead to irrevocable harm to operational objectives and/or core interests. Second, they identify emerging opportunities. These are positive developments that will—with investment of requisite action and resources—net favorable outcomes. Third, they identify limitations, constraints, and risks associated with both guarding against challenges and seizing opportunities. Finally, they affiliate key advantages, resources, and methods with a coherent, risk-informed strategic concept designed to address challenges and opportunities effectively.

It is impossible to gauge the validity of specific choices or evaluate individual choices against one another without a deep appreciation for the operating environment and its complexity. This appreciation comes through deliberate net and risk assessments, founded on expert employment

of the seven perspectives.² Contemporary leaders, strategists, and operators employ net and risk assessment to break through the opaque wall of persistent unconventional conflict to identify feasible, suitable, and acceptable courses of action. In the new unconventional status quo, holistic net and risk assessment identifies “strategic asymmetries” that exist between military and whole-of-government capabilities and the environment’s various sources of conflict, competition, and harm.³ It allows key defense actors to translate the environment’s complexity into a clear set of meaningful choices at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of decision and action.

In this respect, key defense actors need to be deeply curious about the foundational nature and source of specific conditions in the operating environment. They need to assess multiple—sometimes competing—inputs through the appropriate perspective or perspectives, as well as the range of options that best conform to their synthesized appreciation of the environment and its demands. At their various levels of responsibility and action, they become the principle engines for translating amorphous policy pursuits into more definable and achievable, whole-of-government strategic, operational, and tactical objectives. They then pursue those objectives through the identification and operationalization of strategies focused on getting to “good enough” within acceptable levels of general risk. The closer one gets to the strategic and high-operational level of strategy development, planning, and execution, the more likely it is that this particular perspective predominates.

Of all the roles, this is likely the one that is more the product of nature than of nurture. Experience, education, and training are important. Nonetheless, it is more likely than not that individuals are either predisposed or not to this type of thinking. Experience, education, and training serve to mature this quality over time.

² See DoD, “Directive 5111.11: Director of Net Assessment,” <http://www.defenselink.mil/odam/omp/pubs/Guidebook/DNA.htm>. By DoD definition, the director of net assessment is responsible for “develop[ing] and coordinat[ing] net assessments of the standing, trends, and future prospects of U.S. military capabilities and military potential in comparison with those of other countries or groups of countries so as to identify emerging or future threats or opportunities for the United States.” The author would suggest a new form of strategic net assessment that would be a perpetual process, at multiple levels, devoted to evaluating the “standing, trends, and future prospects” of wider U.S. national security capabilities, potential, and strategy in comparison to the broad potential for harm to core interests resident in purposeful and nonpurposeful threats and hazards—state, nonstate, environmental, etc.

³ Paul Bracken, “Net Assessment: A Practical Guide,” *Parameters* (Spring 2006), <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/06spring/bracken.htm>. Bracken describes “strategic asymmetries” as the ways in which “one competitor differs from another.” In the case of the new status quo, purposeful competitors, as well as less purposeful challenges born of the environment itself generate these asymmetries and must be the subject of comprehensive net assessment. On the subject of “strategic asymmetries,” Bracken concludes, “Identifying [strategic asymmetries] is an important step in understanding one’s opportunities and vulnerabilities, and those of one’s opponent.” On the latter point, in addition to “opponents,” the author would add opposing conditions and environmental forces as well.

▪ **The Third Role: Operational Artist and Planner⁴**

Leaders, strategists, and operators as operational artists and planners add discipline, order, and reality to higher-level strategic and operational concepts. Operational artists and planners give the strategist's conceptual vision increased rigor, translating it into a detailed and actionable articulation of operational-to-tactical ends, ways, means, and risk. They provide higher and adjacent leaders a fuller and more comprehensive appreciation of resources, time, opportunity cost, and trade space. They bound the actions of tactical operators within a risk-tested, whole-of-government operational design that focuses on achieving strategic ends through concrete operational and tactical actions and objectives. The operational artist and planner provide the connective tissue between those who issue policy guidance and make strategy and those who implement strategy at lower tactical levels.

Thus, the operational artist and planner lie at the intersection of strategy as art and plans as science. The operational artist and planner blends the strategist's conceptual design of what should be done (and to what extent) from a whole-of-government perspective with the physics, mathematics, chemistry, and biology of what can be done given the real strategic, operational, and tactical constraints of specific unconventional environments.

Toward this end, the operational artist and planner iterates with operators on the ground to gain their unique street-level perspective and communicate to them the details and discrete responsibilities embedded in specific operational designs. They also play a critical role in articulating risk parameters to operators. These are commonly "deal-breaker" actions undertaken by tactical operators that would have profound consequences on higher-level strategy, policy, and plans. Likewise, there are important strategic and operational opportunities, which manifest themselves at the tactical level, that operators may or may not recognize. One key role of the operational artist and planner is recognizing these and flagging them for operators. The closer one gets to operational or tactical levels of decision and action, the likelier this quality is predominant.

This attribute is best cultivated through training, matched over time with increasing experience at various levels of strategic and operational decision and action. The military already has a sophisticated approach for training operational artists and planners. The next challenge is making this more consumable across the defense enterprise and fusing this approach with a more sophisticated appreciation for the seven key perspectives.

▪ **The Fourth Role: Tactical Operator**

The most effective tactical operators sense partnership in the overall strategic and operational enterprise. They do so by understanding their unique role within larger strategic and operational designs. Tactical operators have a sophisticated appreciation for the unique challenges at the street

⁴ This quality was added as a result of a brief conversation with William T. Johnsen, dean of the U.S. Army War College.

level of execution. More importantly, they recognize the interconnectivity of their unique challenges with those encountered by leaders adjacent to and above them. In this respect, tactical operators recognize how their actions and experience impact the operating environment, plans, and actions of many others. This is often the product of a deep appreciation for the risk parameters and opportunities discussed above.

They remain focused on their discrete tactical missions. However, they do so with a clear appreciation for how those missions contribute to operational and strategic objectives. This appreciation is gained via net and risk assessment that accounts for challenges through the seven key perspectives. Firmly focused on mission, the tactical operator is open to exploring and even simultaneously proceeding along multiple avenues to achieve favorable outcomes. However, this is done with a keen sense for how alternative approaches positively or negatively impact on higher-level decisionmaking and action.

Tactical operators have a penchant for just “doing something” so long as that “something” is guided by the demands of the mission and an appreciation for what can be done and what must be done to achieve higher purposes. They are inclined toward action and predisposed against overcomplicating or overthinking issues, particularly those that are time or conditions sensitive. They opt instead to act decisively in ways appropriate to their areas of responsibility but always within the context of their overall support to broader theater-wide or national-strategic objectives. Here, there is a careful balance between understanding the complexity of the environment and acting accordingly versus becoming the indecisive prisoner of that same complexity.

Tactical operators intuitively recognize that demands accumulate and resources become increasingly stretched as one travels downward through the various levels of command and authority. Thus, a firm grasp of the art (and science) of the possible, as well as the opportunities, constraints, and limitations operative at the tip of the spear remain central to their decisionmaking and action. A sophisticated grasp of these factors underwrites their local success, while careful articulation of the tactical implications of these factors upward ensures that senior-level leaders and strategists account for them in future whole-of-government strategy development and planning. The closer one gets to tactical execution, the more this quality is likely to dominate decisionmaking and action.

Like the operational artist, this attribute is also the product of training and experience. Often, however, the value of experience outweighs that of formal training in that unconventional environments are persistently changing and, as a result, leaders, strategists, and operators are forced to constantly adapt and innovate as they proceed.

The sum of the new or revised perspectives and the best attributes of the four foundational roles will result in “gifted generalists.”

The gifted generalist is one inclined to acquire the requisite perspectives outlined above through experience, education, and training while at the same time demonstrating the capacity to acquire the best qualities of the four often distinct foundational roles via similar professional development

paths. Across all four roles, generalists should demonstrate the ability to rapidly infuse both the “lingua franca” and basic principles of a variety of professional disciplines impacting their particular areas of responsibility. The most important among these are captured in the detail of the seven perspectives. They then demonstrate the capacity to combine these interdisciplinary perspectives into appropriate and adaptable strategic-through-tactical approaches at various levels of responsibility.

At the different levels of strategy development, planning, and execution, one or more of the aforementioned roles will be predominant. And, they should be. Further, it is unlikely that leaders, strategists, and operators will enter their distinct fields already possessing requisite exposure to all of these. The inherent tensions of operating in the real world indicate that these various roles can be at odds. As a result, they will often compete for primacy. Nonetheless, DoD should endeavor to cultivate the best attributes of all four roles in its leaders, strategists, and operators to varying degrees of sophistication, depending on projected responsibilities.

“Gifted Generalists” are more than mimics.

The scope of generalists’ apertures indicates they are vulnerable to becoming mimics. However, they do vastly more harm than good if they evolve into mimics. Instead, key defense actors predisposed for success in unconventional environments need to possess innate curiosity about why circumstances evolve as they do and, from a broad interdisciplinary perspective, identify the best options falling inside the “art of the possible” in response. This requires some core understanding of the principles of operation, philosophical orientation, and capabilities and limitations of the various functions contributing to effective, holistic responses to unconventional challenges. In this regard, gifted generalists close gaps between the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of decision and action, as well as those between different interagency and international actors, by seeing challenges through the appropriate perspective and employing aspects of one or all of the four roles in their distinct areas of responsibility.

6

CULTIVATING A NEW UNCONVENTIONAL STRATEGIC COMPETENCY IN KEY DEFENSE ACTORS

The requisite strategic competency for the new status quo blends the seven perspectives and the four foundational roles into adaptive twenty-first-century leaders, strategists, and operators.

Familiarity with both the key perspectives and foundational roles results in a new defense intuition that enables key defense actors to more competently determine when, how, to what extent, for what purpose, and toward what end they will employ finite human, fiscal, material, and political resources to secure core interests and operational objectives from the street level to the arena of high international politics. Key defense actors likely to face persistent unconventional challenges need fine-tuned strategic through tactical insight on the precision blending and application of military and nonmilitary capabilities and methods against the myriad threats of purpose and context. This insight is the quality that allows them to instinctively separate the important from the merely interesting, evocative, or immediate and, subsequently, apply action and resources appropriately in response.

Much more thought should be devoted to developing this new insight in key defense actors. To the extent it exists today in any of them, it is largely the product of self-motivation and long, hard experience. A more universal and formal process targeted at making key defense actors increasingly more comfortable and skilled at the competent employment of defense-specific instruments—in combination with nonmilitary instruments—should be a key target for future civilian and military professional development within DoD.

This report offers three near-term policy recommendations.

Given an increasingly unconventional challenge set and its attendant demands on key defense actors, it is fair to ask whether DoD prepares its leaders, strategists, and operators corporately for high performance in the contemporary environment. Recent experience indicates that the answer to that question is likely “no.” In light of this conclusion, the following are three near-term policy recommendations DoD should consider as it shifts its emphasis toward unconventional challenges and builds a bench of leaders, strategists, and operators optimized to contend with them.

- **Recommendation 1: DoD should comprehensively assess the design, governance, and conduct of professional education and development given the demands of a new, more unconventional defense status quo.**

Success in contemporary unconventional environments hinges on key defense actors at the different levels of decision and action that routinely employ the aforementioned key perspectives in various roles. This requires smart, savvy leaders, strategists, and operators predisposed to looking at their challenges from a unique interdisciplinary perspective.

Senior uniformed leaders are likely to have some exposure to the demands of the four roles but are not likely adequately trained or educated for a keen appreciation of the aforementioned perspectives. Senior civilians and their supporting staffs similarly may be practiced in the first two roles but nonetheless are less familiar with the last two. Further still, their familiarity with the key perspectives is wholly dependent on the experience, education, and training that they bring to their positions off the street. Strategists—in and out of uniform—likewise have no common foundation in either the key perspectives or the foundational roles. Thus, the appropriateness of their prior preparation for unconventional challenges is largely a function of chance. Finally, operators may have deep tactical and operational experience in unconventional environments. However, their formal exposure to either the key perspectives or the first two foundational roles (policy student and strategic conceptualizer/synthesizer) is likely limited by experience, education, and training.

Thus, a more deliberate professional development path is critical to growing leaders, strategists, and operators with a unique acumen for operating vertically within DoD and horizontally across government agencies with relative ease. DoD should strive to build an effective professional development program that blends formal schooling (advanced civilian education, certificate programs, intensive professional military education, etc.), rigorous and realistic defense-specific and whole-of-government training, and broad experiential learning. By necessity, this starts with a comprehensive appreciation of the adequacy of current programs. The alternative is leaving the effective preparation of key defense actors to chance.

- **Recommendation 2: DoD should build a center of excellence focused on whole-of-government strategy development, operational planning, and tactical execution for defense-relevant unconventional environments.**

To support personnel and institutional preparation for persistent employment against unconventional challenges and environments, an intellectual clearinghouse for the strategic through tactical study of threats of purpose and context is essential. Drawing on appropriate lessons from military and social science and from the best practices of diverse communities like other government agencies, academia, and industry, and leveraging the real strategic through tactical experience of the post-9/11 period, DoD needs a center of excellence focused on defense-relevant responses to crosscutting irregular, catastrophic, and hybrid threats.

As argued earlier, DoD will be responsible for positive outcomes under many of the most dangerous and important unconventional circumstances. It will have to blend traditional applications of force with interdisciplinary efforts like CT, COIN, SSTRO, FID, development assistance, institution building, etc. Creating new defense-led, whole-of-government synergies from the strategic to tactical level will only be possible by dedicating resources and effort to

detailed study of the environment's unconventional demands and the role of key defense actors and institutions in securing interests and objectives in light of those demands. A center of excellence focused on detailed examination of the new status quo is a good place to start in this regard.

- **Recommendation 3: DoD should create an all-channel, interactive network of leaders, strategists, and operators for the free exchange of ideas on unconventional challenges.**

A near-term initiative to network the community of practitioners currently focused against unconventional challenges from the strategic through tactical levels of decision and action worldwide would enable near real-time, department-wide learning about the environment, its complexity, and its demands. It would fast-track broad appreciation for the seven perspectives and their applicability to those operating against unconventional threats from Washington to the field. This interactive community of practice would be less a mechanism for formal policy, strategy, and plans coordination and more a platform for the active exchange of ideas on key defense-relevant unconventional threats. It would also enable leaders, strategists, and operators currently working against unconventional challenges—at very different levels and in decidedly different functional or geographic areas of concern—to routinely account for the experience of those operating above, below, and adjacent to them.

7

CONCLUSION: LEADING U.S. GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION BY EXAMPLE

In the near to mid-term, there will be no substitute for the capacity and potential resident in DoD. By necessity then, defense leaders, strategists, and operators should lead the government by example toward becoming much more capable in confronting complex unconventional threats and challenges. All of this begins with DoD developing a new strategic competency in key defense actors. This would enable DoD's leaders, strategists, and operators to leverage enormous government potential to decisive effect around the world.

Cultivating a new strategic competency in key defense actors depends on three steps. First, DoD should fully invest intellectually in the demands of its unconventional challenge set. Second, key defense actors should view their unconventional demands through seven new or revised perspectives that account for the environment's increased complexity. And, third, all leaders, strategists, and operators should blend the best qualities of four foundational roles that allow them to appreciate the environment's key demands and their responsibilities in the proper context.



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