

The Indirect Approach Lives!...in China and Russia:

Sub-threshold Maneuver and the Flanking of US National Security

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The aim of a nation in war is, therefore, to subdue the enemy's will to resist with the least possible human and economic loss to itself.¹

Basil Liddell-Hart, *The Memoirs of Captain Liddell Hart, Volume One*

One might justifiably ask whether the United States currently is akin to the post-World War II United Kingdom: exhausted by years of conflict and turning away from entanglements of previous decades. Unfortunately, our adversaries are—grain-by-grain—undermining the foundation of sand on which this return to political, social, and military comfort zones rests. They do so by avoiding US military dominance while pursuing objectives in other arenas to render that dominance all but irrelevant. We are arguably already at war from their perspective while our own perception is one of peace, albeit a somewhat uncomfortable one.² Theirs is an indirect approach, one that British interwar military theorist Basil Liddell Hart would have recognized as related to his concept by the same name. But while Liddell Hart conceived of this avoiding an enemy's strength in terms of terrain, our foes see it as incorporating maneuver in all relevant spheres: militarily when necessary, but primarily diplomatically, informationally, economically, socially, and otherwise as niches, opportunities, and vulnerabilities present themselves. This should not surprise. It is a fair argument that the Soviet Union was in part spent into oblivion, America's Strategic Defense Initiative or "Star Wars" being a factor. Russia learned. Its economy cannot afford an armed forces capable of directly contesting battlefields against the United States. Its leaders therefore choose to sidestep these strengths and compete in other fields cheaper to cultivate and maintain—cyber, information, and artificial intelligence among them. China similarly competes but does so less due to economic shortcomings.

Building a world-class military is not only expensive. It is a long-term undertaking involving confrontation not only in terms of technology, but also manpower quality, leader development, training, education, logistics, and other components that only collectively and symbiotically constitute a successful warfighting force. Developing these components individually requires years, in some cases decades. Molding them into an effective whole takes many additional years. For China, choosing to compete in arenas other than the physical battlefield may therefore be a matter of buying time in addition to taking advantage of whatever economies an indirect approach provides. Time might prove that progress in other-than-traditional military domains

¹ Basil Liddell-Hart, *The Memoirs of Captain Liddell Hart, Volume One*, London: Cassell, 1965, 138.

² Colleague Ian Sullivan notes that while we in the West tend to view war from an "on" or "off" perspective, a state of being at war or not being at war, our adversaries may not. It is thus arguably helpful to envision conflict generally and war specifically in terms of a continuum. A foe might view economics or the information realm as one of intense competition that achieves war status while keeping the dial turned to a lower point in terms of military confrontation. This depiction fits comfortably with the concepts of sub-threshold maneuver and indirect approach under consideration here.

renders battlefield superiority unnecessary. Achieving war aims without having to directly confront the United States in armed conflict would constitute the acme of success.

Whether in the interest of economy or time, it is crucial to avoid breaching thresholds that provoke an adversary's significant use of armed force. Sub-threshold maneuver aspires to do just that. "Maneuver" is not a term chosen lightly here. How the US and its partner nations' armed forces (and by extension their governments) understand the term goes far in explaining why we remain complacent regarding ongoing wars conducted by means other than combat. Maneuver as currently defined by the United States military is the "employment of forces in the operational area, through movement in combination with fires and information, to achieve a position of advantage in respect to the enemy."³ It is in this sense an inherently battlefield construct with little if any application to strategy. US armed forces are arguably the best in the business in when maneuver is so narrowly construed. Commendable, but how relevant is this superiority when the conflict space is other than a battleground? The problem is not one of playing baseball while our competitors play soccer. We as world champions have dutifully reported to the stadium while the other team burns the surrounding city. The above definition of maneuver is insufficient other than as applies to our chosen sport, one our competitors choose to play only to the extent it benefits them and then only at times and places of their choosing. Better to unbind maneuver to lend it value to broader and more elevated challenges. A far more relevant understanding conceives of maneuver as "the employment of relevant means to gain advantage with respect to select individuals or groups in the service of achieving desired ends."⁴ Thus unbound, maneuver sheds the shackles of applicability to armed force alone. (Given this revision of "maneuver," sub-threshold maneuver becomes "the employment of relevant resources to gain advantage with respect to select individuals or groups in the service of achieving specified objectives while not triggering an unacceptable response by one or more adversaries." Such maneuver can, but does not have to, include the use of military capabilities or combat.)

War without (much) combat: Practicing sub-threshold maneuver

[Submarine] commanders had been peacetime-trained to attack well-escorted enemy warships and avoid exposure, training that emphasized stealth and the use of sonar.... This training failed during the war when the Allied mission changed to attacking fast-moving convoys of Japanese merchant ships who had to be espied at periscope depth.... Yet most commanders hewed to their instinct to be invisible, missing target after target, a practice that changed only when

³ *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Washington, D.C.: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 2020, 135.

⁴ This definition is slightly modified from previous work by the author and colleague Ian Sullivan. See Russell W. Glenn, "Meeting Demand:: Making Maneuver Relevant to the 21st Century," *Small Wars Journal* (July 5, 2017), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/meeting-demand-making-maneuver-relevant-to-the-21st-century> (accessed December 9, 2020); and Russell W. Glenn and Ian M. Sullivan, "From Sacred Cow to Agent of Change: Reconceiving Maneuver in Light of Multi-Domain Battle and Mission Command," *Small Wars Journal* (September 9, 2017), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/from-sacred-cow-to-agent-of-change-reconceiving-maneuver-in-light-of-multi-domain-battle-an> (accessed November 12, 2020).

more aggressive younger skippers took over during the war. Thirty percent of US submarine commanders were relieved for cause in 1942.⁵

Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Technology and Strategic Surprise”

It is a tale familiar to most readers here. Following quickly on the heels of ousting Russia-friendly leader Victor Yanukovich, Russia first annexes Crimea on March 21, 2014 and later invades and occupies large portions of Luhansk and Donetsk Provinces in the eastern Ukraine. Popular referendums served as flimsy pretenses to legitimize the aggressions; that for the Crimea bore no way to vote for remaining a part of Ukraine.⁶ Moscow eventually cast aside early denials of Russian military involvement. Use of local surrogates and attempts to conceal Russian vehicles and uniforms had in any case failed to convince...but they sufficed long enough to ensure pressures for commitment of armed forces by NATO failed. Less publicized were the additional means used to remain below the threshold of provoking military action. These additional techniques had become a Russian art form by 2014. Operations in late 20th-century Chechnya and 2008 Georgia received widespread attention in the West. Others such as lending military assistance during the 1992 separation of the Transnistria region from Moldova saw less. Early examples of sub-threshold maneuver during these contingencies included sleight of hand designed to make any Western proposal for military force commitment a difficult sell. Russian false statements and claims of local citizens’ calls for Moscow’s assistance provided justification for inaction by Western political leaders less predisposed to support reciprocal military action. Russian leaders understood that few international aggressions are cost free; their ventures would spawn undesirable responses. The objective was to ensure none exceeded that threshold to become “unacceptable.” Economic restrictions, diplomatic slaps on the wrist, and other politically expedient sanctions were tolerable as long as they did not overly inconvenience. Justifying incursions under the cover of locals’ alleged solicitations for help, shrouding armed action via the use of resident para-military units and deniable participation by national assets, and only eventually admitting state participation meant leaders in the West found any fingers on the trigger twitching but lacking sufficient incentive to pull.

While Russia’s military incursions oozed along below NATO’s commitment threshold, other forms of attack likewise avoided unacceptable response by remaining within the West’s perception of the grey area between peace and war. Cyberattacks attributed to Russia interrupted power in various parts of Ukraine in 2015 and 2016; Ukraine’s commercial and government computers were the first to be crippled by an attack that later spread worldwide.⁷ Imposter Facebook accounts thought to be Russian portrayed themselves as Ukrainian, providing false

⁵ Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Technology and Strategic Surprise: Adapting to an Era of Open Innovation,” *Parameters* 75 (Autumn 2020): 75.

⁶ Steven Pifer, “Five year after Crimea’s illegal annexation, the issue is no closer to resolution,” Brookings (March 18, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/18/five-years-after-crimeas-illegal-annexation-the-issue-is-no-closer-to-resolution/> (accessed November 13, 2020). Pifer notes that the referendum “offered voters two choices: to join Russia, or to restore Crimea’s 1992 constitution, which would have entailed significantly greater autonomy from Kyiv. Those on the peninsula who favored Crimea remaining part of Ukraine under the current constitutional arrangements found no box to check.”

⁷ “Alerts,” CFR Global Conflict Tracker, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine> (accessed November 13, 2020).

information and undermining the legitimacy of the targeted government.⁸ That Ukraine was simultaneously struggling with deeply-embedded corruption provided fertile soil for the disinformation and fuel to citizens' already-established distrust. Ukraine's earlier benefiting from bargain pricing on Russian gas and \$700M in debt cancellation had company in the larger neighbor's being permitted to lease a naval base at Sevastopol. Russia retained the base but further punished Ukraine by returning gas pricing to market levels, then cutting off gas supplies altogether. While Russia justifies these and other aggressions in terms of *Russkiy Mir* ("Russian community", a responsibility to defend those beyond its borders who are of Russian ethnicity),⁹ more prosaic considerations are at play. The struggling economy is one. Returning gas prices to market levels was a welcome boost for the country's increasingly depleted coffers. The seizure of Crimea had significant defensive economic implications for Russia in addition to those political and military. Ukrainian plans to develop the peninsula's gas reserves could have resulted in Russia losing one of its most valuable customers.¹⁰

Ukraine is not a member of NATO. Yet the United States and United Kingdom were among the parties that committed to Ukraine's defense with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. The agreement was sufficiently vague that Russia found the risk of attacking Crimea and the country's eastern reaches acceptable.¹¹ The lines are crisper for nations now part of NATO. Any Russian efforts to coerce had to be subtler and less attributable. Even the limited use of Russian military forces as in Crimea and eastern Ukraine would too greatly risk breaching the alliance's force commitment threshold. Manipulation of natural resources instead served as the blade inserted between the ribs of the NATO partnership. Russia offered Greece oil and natural gas agreements as a means of gaining influence. Further incentives twisted the blade to further separate alliance members. \$200M in rubles followed Putin's 2005 visit to Greece. The Russian leader designated the funds for Mt. Athos, an Eastern Orthodox monastic center, thereby opening another conduit to enhance Russia's influence, this through the channels of orthodox Christianity.¹² Two years hence, Estonia experienced a widespread and lengthy Russian cyberattack featuring bots and massive spam that crippled government, banking, media, and commercial services. Unquestionably an attack against a NATO member, once again the finger did no more than quiver on the trigger of forceful reaction. Though "the alliance's Article Five guarantees that NATO members defend each other even if that attack is in cyberspace," the

⁸ Dana Priest, James Jacoby, and Anya Bourg, "Russian disinformation on Facebook targeted Ukraine well before the 2016 U.S. election," *Washington Post* (October 28, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/russian-disinformation-on-facebook-targeted-ukraine-well-before-the-2016-us-election/2018/10/28/cc38079a-d8aa-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756_story.html (accessed November 17, 2020).

⁹ Andrey Grashkin, "Russian Neo-Imperialism in Ukraine and Greece," Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 21, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/russian-neo-imperialism-in-ukraine-and-greece/> (accessed November 13, 2020). "Mir" also translates as "world" or "peace."

¹⁰ Kimberly Amadeo, "Ukraine Crisis Summary and Explanation," *The Balance* (August 21, 2020), <https://www.thebalance.com/ukraine-crisis-summary-and-explanation-3970462> (accessed November 17, 2020).

¹¹ Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War Over Small Stakes*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2019, 4.

¹² Andrey Grashkin, "Russian Neo-Imperialism in Ukraine and Greece," Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 21, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/russian-neo-imperialism-in-ukraine-and-greece/> (accessed November 13, 2020).

British Broadcasting Corporation noted, “Article Five would only be triggered if a cyberattack results in major loss of life equivalent to traditional military action.”¹³

That very high threshold does more to protect attacker than victim. The 2017 WannaCry cyberattack, impacting the UK’s National Health System (NHS) among other suffers, demonstrates the difficulty of establishing causation and consequences. Even if the victimized country can unquestionably identify the perpetrator (not the case with the WannaCry attack, though analysts blame North Korea), directly linking an attack to casualties will prove problematic. The WannaCry disruption very likely resulted in deaths given NHS’s blocked access to vital information, delayed surgeries, and interruptions of other essential services. Yet establishing causal links between such cyberattacks and deaths proves difficult and time-consuming even in cases where attribution is feasible, the latter hindering any leader seeking to encourage a significant response given the dissipation of outrage over time.

The case of China

Political, economic, military, diplomatic, technical, and cultural channels can be used to demonstrate China’s comprehensive national strength. The combination of destruction and soft influence may be used together. Destruction involves attacks on centers of gravity and vital points of an enemy’s strength, while soft influence relies on collecting, processing and controlling capabilities to attack or disturb the attitudes and behavior of opponents.¹⁴

Timothy Thomas, “The Chinese Way of War”

Though China’s employment of sub-threshold maneuver is most prominent at the strategic level, there are exceptions. The reported use of a nonlethal microwave weapon to clear Indian soldiers from a portion of the disputed border between the two countries is an example of an effective tactical action designed to achieve strategic objectives while remaining below the threshold of significant response.¹⁵ China’s strategic use of sub-threshold maneuver involving overt demonstrations of military strength both reinforces the country’s newfound assertiveness in the international arena while serving as a distractor from initiatives in the economic, political, informational, cyber, and diplomatic realms. Recent bellicosity in the South China Sea and nearby waters avoids all but minor direct confrontations with US forces even as regional nations’ boats are accosted, rammed, or blocked from their legitimate fishing areas.¹⁶ It is these events that tend to grab media attention. One manifestation of this is Western security analysts’ fixation with Chinese People’s Liberation Army technological equivalency. China’s military has made dramatic technological advances in recent years such that it now has superiority in key areas while elsewhere China has yet to achieve par status with the US in other critical weapons

¹³ Damien McGuinness, “How a cyber attack transformed Estonia,” BBC News, April 27, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/39655415> (accessed November 13, 2020).

¹⁴ Timothy Thomas, “The Chinese Way of War: How Has It Changed?” MITRE paper, April 2020, 13.

¹⁵ Tim Stickings, “China ‘used secret microwave pulse weapon to cook Indian soldiers alive’ and force them to retreat in Himalayan border battle,” *Daily Mail*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8957019/China-used-secret-microwave-pulse-weapon-Indian-soldiers.html> (accessed November 18, 2020).

¹⁶ For example, see Shashank Bengali and Vo Kieu Bao Uyen, “Sunken boats, Stolen gear. Fishermen are prey as China conquers a strategic sea,” November 12, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-11-12/china-attacks-fishing-boats-in-conquest-of-south-china-sea> (accessed November 17, 2020).

systems. The country lags in its ability to orchestrate those capabilities super-regionally given logistics, training, manpower, and leadership capabilities...but recent advances have significantly closed previous gaps. China remains a near-peer regional competitor in terms of combat power generally but arguably a peer competitor in term of select capabilities. Accelerating closure of previous gaps means it may soon be a near-peer—if not a peer—competitor more broadly in a shorter period than most would have thought possible only two decades ago.

Initiatives elsewhere are particularly the stuff of progress in terms of sub-threshold maneuver and the indirect approach. With the rapidly modernizing People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as a backdrop, Beijing’s diplomatic, economic, and information efforts have proven very successful in making gains at Western expense. These include buying influence and sowing coercion via the Belt and Road initiative (Sri Lanka and Djibouti among others); cultivating indebtedness while purchasing land, mineral wealth, and elites’ support throughout the developing world (sub-Saharan Africa, for example); curtailing imports when political leaders rile Beijing (Europe, Australia); and flaunting international standards with *Russkiy Mir*-type claims that China is responsible for protecting the interests of anyone of Chinese ethnicity. There is often little subtle but much clever in these efforts. Cultivation of indebtedness is ingenious in terms of its long-term implications for the countries victimized.¹⁷ Though it might be a single leader that opens the door to Chinese bribes, questionable loans, major infrastructure projects, or other forms of commitment, the fetters that leader assumes remain long after the official’s replacement. The economic tactic can have additional, military implications as China patiently builds an infrastructure essential to super-regional military influence. Beijing does not hesitate to enter through a back door to secure these ends as the 99-year lease of Darwin’s port for Aus\$506 million demonstrates. Negotiating not through Canberra but rather directly with the government of Australia’s Northwest Territory, the Chinese company Landbridge gained control of what is a key embarkation point for Australian Army regional deployments and one through which United States Marine Corps units send equipment for annual training with that army. (Canberra had, in response, reportedly agreed to build a new port forty kilometers northeast of Darwin for use by America’s marines, a report quickly denied by Australia’s Department of Defence. The reaction would constitute another sub-threshold triumph for China were it to come about, waylaying likely hundreds of millions of national security dollars that could have otherwise been more effectively allocated, this for what would have been unnecessary infrastructure were it not for the Northwest Territory’s politicians.)¹⁸ Nor is outright bullying beneath Beijing, again with targets unlikely to inspire more than minor discomfort in most observers. The example of Daryl Morey’s “punishment” as general manager of the US Houston Rockets basketball team is but one. Morey’s tweet in support of Hong Kong protestors resulted in Chinese state-run television ceasing broadcast of Rockets games. Other steps were taken to further the pain. The National

¹⁷17 Ingenious in terms of extended influence, perhaps, but the negative consequences of defaults on the Chinese economy have caused some internal reevaluation as to the cost of this leverage. I thank colleague Gary Phillips for this observation.

¹⁸18 James Broadbent, “Australian to build port expressly for US Marines,” *Asia Times* (June 24, 2019), <https://asiatimes.com/2019/06/australia-to-build-port-expressly-for-us-marines/> (accessed December 8, 2020); and Louis Dillon, “Defence denies planning of Darwin deep-water port,” *Defence Connect* (June 27, 2019), <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/4302-defence-denies-planning-of-darwin-deep-water-port> (accessed December 8, 2020).

Basketball Association received a demand for an apology. Some \$100 million in Chinese contracts were cancelled. Unfulfilled, Beijing's incursions on the American's freedom of expression had the effect of turning Morey into something of a pariah. High-profile players criticized Morey in the face of threatened further financial penalties, a particularly effective way of intimidating others given the influence such individuals have in American society.¹⁹ In short, Chinese strategy features virtuoso orchestration of state and commercial resourcefulness in the service of its national interests.

A sense of the sophistication and enveloping character of the Chinese approach to war is evident in looking at its "Three Warfares Doctrine" that has underlain information operations initiatives since approval by the country's Central Military Commission in 2003. The trio consists of (1) psychological operations, often targeting adversaries' leadership, (2) both overt and covert media manipulation, and (3) legal warfare designed to use enemies' adherence to legal systems—including international law—against them. Further understanding of this sophistication is apparent in China's division of strategic psychological warfare into five discrete but highly complementary parts:

- *Information deterrence* that accurately communicates examples of Chinese economic, political, and other forms of superiority. These superiorities can be quite limited, but the examples have some basis in fact. Chinese ability to control parts of the South China Sea can intimidate neighbors and more distant adversaries even though this control is contested and replicating the qualified geographic superiority elsewhere would be difficult if not impossible.
- *Information deception* is somewhat of a yang to information deterrence's yin, using false information to disrupt awareness and thereby promote confusion and hesitation in decision-making.
- *Information blockades* employ one or more forms of information superiority to deny foes access to information, effectively blinding him.
- *Information disruption* interrupts the circulation or exchange of information by jamming or otherwise disrupting those systems.
- *Use of computer viruses, logic bombs, and hacking* to undermine confidence and cause confusion via the disruption of financial, management, or other networks.²⁰

Each member of this quintet has the potential to enhance the effects of the others. Falsehoods cultivate credence in light of previous information based on accurate depictions of Chinese superiority. Employing multiple elements of the five in the service of a single objective complicates effective response. As a notional example, seeking to influence voting in a targeted country by disrupting voting machines would undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process in the eyes of voters while drawing attention away from parallel hacking assaults to alter tallies. In a military-specific example, the use of falsehoods combined with accurate reports of, say, Chinese long-range surface-to-surface missile capabilities could instill doubts in the minds of an enemy preparing to deploy forces. Elsewhere, state social media would target the adversary's military family members, seeking to undermine perceptions regarding the legitimacy of pending

¹⁹ H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, NY: HarperCollins, 2020, 119.

²⁰ Timothy Thomas, "The Chinese Way of War: How Has It Changed?" MITRE paper, April 2020, 13.

operations. Disinformation programs could simultaneously target broader community support while cyberattacks interfere with computer, traffic control, scheduling, and other systems essential to deploying forces. The outcomes of all are similar: accomplishment of Chinese ends without triggering unacceptable responses by the targeted party.

PLA Major General Hu Xiaofeng’s conceptualization of what he calls “war engineering” captures the nature of China’s comprehensive approach to war. War engineering requires an all-encompassing view of wartime space and time in addition to what politics, military affairs, economics, and diplomacy can provide in the service of aims.²¹

Limitations on an effective US response

Aircraft enable us to jump over the army which shields the enemy government, industry, and the people and so strike direct and immediately at the seat of the opposing will and policy. A nation’s nerve system, no longer covered by the flesh of its troops, is now laid bare to attack.²²

Basil Liddell Hart, *Paris, or the Future of War*

Replace “aircraft” in the above quotation with “disinformation and cyberattacks” and the situation is one we grapple with today. Objectives include undermining confidence in national financial systems, voting processes, and government legitimacy. The decentralized character of the US government and nature of its society make effective response to an antagonist difficult. An adversary’s sub-threshold employment of capabilities constitutes practice of the indirect approach on a grand scale, one that circumvents the strength of America’s military, thereby marginalizing the primary—arguably *the* primary—means of guaranteeing the country’s national security interests. Successful seizure of the Crimea at the cost of tolerable economic sanctions and a cancelled visit or two is a bargain by any measure. China’s regional economic, assertive diplomatic, psychologically undermining, and supportive military initiatives in the South China Sea address immediate strategic objectives while also setting the stage for further expansion of influence and, perhaps, a future limited but more substantial regional employment of armed force.

Despite the perceptions of many in the West, the use or threatened use of armed force is not essential to waging war.²³ It seems trite to quote one of Sun Tzu’s better-known offerings, but I am sure it has already come to mind in many of this article’s readers: “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”²⁴ Even if present, employment of armed force may assume no more than a subordinate role in relation to other applied means. As with our consideration of Liddell Hart’s

²¹ For more on war engineering, see Timothy Thomas, *The Dragon’s Quantum Leap: Transforming from a Mechanized to an Informatized Force*, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2009, 46-47.

²² As quoted in Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1977, 40.

²³ This also despite a fair number of “war” definitions that likewise cite the use of armed force.

²⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. and ed. By Samuel B. Griffith, NY: Oxford, 1982, 77.

indirect approach, we must look beyond battlefields if we are to appreciate Sun Tzu's wisdom in the context of the United States' current strategic challenges. Our competitors' success in applying the indirect approach via sub-threshold maneuver extends well beyond flying over, flanking, or enveloping forces on terrain. When the objectives include avoiding major armed conflict, the indirect approach requires the orchestration of multiple elements of national power, each of which is an instrument acting in combination with others the effects of which achieve sought-after goals without exceeding the threshold of an unacceptable response. This orchestration is dynamic and symbiotic. The wise competitor maneuvers economic influence, diplomatic initiative, the threat or limited use of armed force, psychological manipulation, cyberattacks, and other means to gain advantage while avoiding over-dependence on any one. Potential supporting activities range widely, from interfering with deployed soldiers' bank accounts to exacerbating divides between America's tech giants and government agencies.

Nor are the competitions inherent in war restrained to theaters of war (much less battlefields) unless one accepts that those theaters can extend worldwide and into space. The challenge for the United States is first to recognize this expanded conceptualization of war and, second, to address it despite the constraints of a national security structure too decentralized and otherwise flawed to bring the elements of national power to bear effectively. Constraints in the second case include bureaucratically rigid compartmentalization and absence of a management structure able to overcome that discretization. The political attractiveness of large, high-profile defense projects further complicates effective US development and employment of the means necessary to compete beyond the battlefield. Congressional legislation skews defense spending toward these expenditures and in so doing promotes funding for a new fighter jet or tank while relegating cyber, information, counterintelligence, diplomacy, and other initiatives to lesser status. America at present seems hesitant to recognize its ongoing involvement in wars of expanded character. It is also questionable that its current government structure is suitable for responding to the threat.

Toward a coherent approach

Washington has become overly dependent on military tools and has seriously neglected its nonmilitary instruments of power.²⁵

Robert M. Gates,

“The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy”

Former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates' observation is correct, but the problem is a deeper one. Our chief competitors' employment of sub-threshold maneuver means reliance on armed forces' dominance for winning wars undermines not only foreign policy effectiveness but US national security in general. We certainly cannot relegate armed force to history's dustbins. We also cannot continue to believe that success on battlefields guarantees national survival. Existential conflict might include major clashes between armed forces or an exchange involving weapons of mass destruction. It need not do so. Spheres of competition have expanded and evolved from ones primarily military to others in which societal, economic, and informational

²⁵ Robert M. Gates, “The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 99 (July/August 2020): 122.

components assume primacy. Wars now include those in which armed force is relegated to the corps de ballet if on the stage at all.

Leaving adversaries' sub-threshold maneuver substantially unaddressed fundamentally threatens US national security. The federal government structurally defaults to the Department of Defense as primary guardian of national security. Decentralization of the executive branch below the National Security Council leaves no organization or individual responsible for holistic consideration of the country's well-being, making systematic orchestration of the instruments of national power all but unachievable. The independence of our commercial sector further diffuses security coherency.

A comparison between the post-WWII United Kingdom and United States today is largely superficial. Far more substantive is the comparison between the US approach to national security in those years and that currently. The nature of interstate competition is no longer that of the mid-20th century, yet the federal government remains designed for war in which armed force use is preeminent. America's federal government requires restructuring. Reallocating existing responsibilities and accompanying that reallocation with the necessary resources might offer an acceptable, less dramatic alternative. Regardless of the approach, the end result must provide an organization empowered to manage the elements of national power coherently in an environment in which multifaceted sub-threshold maneuver is the norm. Restructuring (or reallocation) will require dramatic change, e.g., possible consolidation of select congressional committees and replacement of the National Defense Authorization Act and separate Department of State (and other) authorizations with an overarching national security budget. Control over purse strings will be fundamental to the success. Without it, departments and agencies will ignore the dictates of the new oversight organization. The body's responsibilities would include government-private sector liaison and negotiation of agreements, e.g., with leaders of the major commercial organizations constituting 85% of US cyber capability.

A reconsideration of deterrence should also be inherent in US adaptation to the existential threats posed by sub-threshold maneuver. The challenge is more complex than that of nuclear deterrence; the heterogeneous character of such maneuver requires ubiquitous surveillance married to a comprehensive orchestration of multi-departmental proaction and response. Sub-threshold maneuver well executed is multifaceted and symbiotic. When a competitor impedes one or more ways of gaining advantage, other means are brought to the fore in the equivalent of what would be a flanking movement, envelopment, or some form of subterfuge on a physical battlefield. Deterrence therefore requires the same multi-disciplinary, government-private sector, and god's-eye perspective as do strategies, policies, and national security activities inherent in foiling or executing sub-threshold maneuver. Unlike the case of nuclear deterrence, deterrence as addressed here is made further difficult in that complete denial of use is unrealistic. Information, cyber, and additional capabilities cannot be completely denied other than in rare circumstances. We should therefore view deterrence in terms of its own thresholds: dissuading threat use by establishing and (when appropriate) making known tolerance red lines.

Successfully guaranteeing national security in light of sub-threshold maneuver will be the realm of innovation demanding collective genius. Threats—state or non-state; government, commercial, or some Frankenstein combination of these—will mold existing capabilities and create others new in the service of their objectives. China’s palette of Belt and Road agreements; South China Sea assertiveness; and policies that include bullying vital US partners and America’s own citizens for offenses as varied as speaking out against human rights violations in Hong Kong and barring Huawei telecoms demonstrate the amorphous nature of the means inherent in sub-threshold maneuver. They also make clear China’s often indirect approach in the sense of seeking to undermine foundation stones underlying US security by attempting to erode relations with those key allies. Meeting these challenges would have stretched the intellectual capacity of even our Founding Fathers. The first step is acknowledging the existence of the already-present threat. While the United States adapts its approach to warfare, our primary threats are adapting their approach to war.

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