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# Shortening the “COMPETITION KILL CHAIN” Through Irregular Warfare Campaigning

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In the early 1980s, U.S. military doctrine had a paradigm shift from active defense to airland battle. Active defense was designed to preserve combat power, whereas airland battle provided enhanced maneuverability, increased tempo, and embraced offensive combined arms. This strategy signaled a shift from defensive to offensive realism.<sup>01</sup> The United States was no longer satisfied with imposing unreasonable costs on a potential Soviet occupation; it was instead prepared to dominate in battle. Airland battle worked so well during the Persian Gulf War that America's adversaries, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, realized there were no conventional solution to U.S. military capacity. The PRC and Russia, therefore, embraced irregular approaches, while the United States became engrossed in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).<sup>02</sup>

At the turn of the 21st century, the revolution in military affairs and wartime modernization saw the implementation of new technology and capabilities enabling the United States to gain complete air supremacy and uncontested use of global telecommunication networks. The Department of Defense was always the supported element within areas of conflict.<sup>03</sup> In this GWOT environment, U.S. military capabilities maintained conventional dominance in all domains against a series of insurgent enemies; the aggregate effect was an enemy that had no consistent or reliable ability to influence U.S. strategic decision making cycles.<sup>04</sup> Additionally, commanders maintained a relative advantage in collecting information, making decisions, and targeting for effect—a process that came to be known as the *kill chain*.

Today's environment is different. The U.S. military must get comfortable in the culturally ambiguous position of *supporting* other agencies and departments. U.S. adversaries can disrupt strategic decision making cycles and tempo; and nation state competitors have a credible vote in U.S. strategic calculus.<sup>05, 06</sup> The capability and willingness of U.S. adversaries require that senior defense officials reevaluate how the military gathers information, generates understanding, and makes decisions.

In late 2003, a Joint Special Operations Command assessment concluded that command and decision making mechanisms were being outpaced by the speed of the battlefield, reducing the effectiveness of units forward deployed or units engaged

in direct combat.<sup>07</sup> The problem at that time lay in the proper employment and importance of new technology, information, and weapon systems.<sup>08</sup> The kill chain was too time-consuming due to convoluted processes of command and control across government agencies and echelons of military control.<sup>09</sup> The technology at the fingertips of forward commanders surpassed the existing approval model for proper employment. One of the primary factors that shortened the kill chain was dominance over land, air, sea, and cyberspace. Simply put, *we had more time*.

Time is no longer a luxury, and neither is near-unilateral access to advanced technologies. Adversaries may lack U.S. sustainment or command and control capabilities, but they are quickly closing technological gaps.<sup>10</sup> Adversarial investment in key technology—such as anti-access and area denial, cyber, economic warfare, and funding for proxy campaigns—suggests adversarial policies seek to increase their security at lower cost, thereby increasing the cost for the United States and allies to compete.<sup>11</sup> Commands must move beyond the conversation that these obstacles or asymmetries must be reduced prior to the next conflict. This next conflict is here now, and fundamental concepts on how to achieve strategic objectives short of large-scale combat operations (LSCO) with maximum economy of force at the lowest cost must be addressed.

Within the Army, cultural biases exist that see competition as merely setting the environment for LSCO, deterring aggression, or supporting conventional war.<sup>12</sup> Further, the diplomatic community does not define the concept of warfare as solely tied to traditional armed conflict. Irregular warfare encompasses a wide range of activities—many of those peaceful—but for the State Department and many others, *warfare is warfare*. Consequently, military forces such as special operations forces (SOF) operating in competitive spaces may be constrained by siloed efforts in intelligence, development, and diplomacy circles, which ultimately hinders operations across the competition continuum.

The competition kill chain is unique in that the process does not simply place operations, activities, and effects solely onto a conventional battlespace. Competition requires an irregular approach to active campaigning—short of armed conflict and LSCO—to generate understanding of the operational environment and drive decisions that create relative advantages against adversaries. This is at the heart of irregular warfare: an economy of force asymmetric, non-attributable, or non-kinetic effort designed to erode political support and legitimacy for an adversary while supporting allies and partners.<sup>13</sup>

Shortening the competition kill chain requires redefining the cognitive model of competition at the strategic level. This provides a unique window of opportunity for the experts in irregular warfare—SOF—to introduce effects that are not fully appreciated in these conventional frameworks. The value proposition of SOF is the ability to leverage unique skills, access, and placement to actively support the execution of whole-of-government integrated campaigns during competition, below crisis and armed conflict. The core of these campaigns must be the layered application of effects on our adversaries, across multiple government agencies and combatant commands, to achieve relevant defeat mechanisms—isolate, disintegrate, dislocate, or destroy—and stability mechanisms—support, coerce, compel, influence, or control—to maintain competition

below the threshold of armed conflict.<sup>14</sup> By reframing competition as a threat-informed and irregular approach, SOF can be employed to effectively generate kill chain-like targeting that better enables decision making and more precise effects. Simply put, it embraces the Sun Tzu maxim to win without fighting.<sup>15</sup> And should deterrence fail, these actions provide friendly forces relative advantages over our enemies.

Articulating irregular warfare effects in support of theater campaigns is increasingly vital. Our peer and near-peer adversaries require a well-integrated kill chain, like targeted SOF investments in multiple theaters, to achieve transregional relative advantage. This demands SOF campaigners work alongside theater and interagency planners to clearly define how the combatant command campaign supports regional and U.S. country team operational and strategic goals. What the Department of Defense considers irregular warfare, for example, the National Security Council may see as a broader policy objective more comfortably referred to as integrated deterrence or strategic disruption.

The United States finds itself at a watershed moment. Our adversaries have set conditions where the opportunities to employ GWOT-era kill chain may be more untenable in an irregular warfare scenario than a future LSCO fight. The U.S. military, in concert with the interagency, must apply stability and defeat mechanisms now to set favorable conditions and influence adversaries and civilian populations. An irregular approach that considers the value of kill chain planning and operations to the left of armed conflict serves as the cognitive model to rethink the application of military and civilian skills to address regional security issues.

Shortening the competition kill chain requires combatant command and interagency integration based on SOF persistent presence, integrated deterrence, transregional campaigning, and threat focused targeting. It further requires orienting on an irregular operational framework to deliver threat-based defeat, competition, and stability mechanisms that ensure unity of effort across multiple domains and dimensions to enable relative advantage for the Army and joint force.

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