



# STRATEGIC DISRUPTION: An Operational Framework for Irregular Warfare

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## INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of special operations forces (SOF) in irregular warfare is hindered by the lack of a clear and structured operational-level framework tailored to irregular warfare, akin to what large-scale combat operations (LSCO) offers in conventional warfare. Whereas LSCO provides a systematic framework for planning and preparing for conventional warfare, the concept of irregular warfare lacks any such framework – irregular warfare lacks its LSCO, so to speak. The absence of this nested, operational-level concept has introduced ambiguity for Army special operations forces (ARSOF). The broader joint force community has led to varied interpretations and approaches to irregular warfare. This ambiguity complicates the understanding of irregular warfare and challenges planners to align their efforts effectively.

In response, the RAND Corporation study—Strategic Disruption by Special Operations Forces: A Concept for Proactive Campaigning Short of Traditional War—emerges as a possible solution. This article argues that strategic disruption fills the SOF irregular warfare operational framework void. It seeks to bridge the irregular warfare planning gap for strategic competition, including both cooperative and competitive environments outside of conventional warfare. The primary objective of this article is to explain strategic disruption, highlighting two core pillars (support and understand), and their roles in strategic disruption. Further, it explores the application of the strategic disruption framework in developing an operational approach for competition below armed conflict.

This article explores how strategic disruption serves as a framework for how the military instrument of national power—more specifically SOF—can effectively engage in strategic competition below the level of armed conflict. It acknowledges that strategic competition is a comprehensive endeavor involving all instruments of national power, where the military’s role, specifically the role of SOF, might often be limited. However, illustrating these limitations are crucial as it realigns our expectations of the SOF role within the wider effort, and it serves to facilitate dialogue and coordination on how SOF can best contribute to overarching national objectives.

Furthermore, focusing on strategic disruption shifts the discourse from an academic debate on defining irregular warfare to actionable approaches that advance U.S. interests in environments of strategic uncertainty. By adopting strategic disruption as the primary mode for expressing the SOF value proposition, we will ensure SOF contributions are strategically aligned and operationally effective. I submit that the insights garnered from framing operations through the lens of strategic disruption will provide the additional benefit of contributing to a deeper, more intuitive understanding of irregular warfare itself. It will help clarify the how surrounding some of the ambiguous terminology currently in use.

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## WHAT IS STRATEGIC DISRUPTION

Strategic disruption operations are “individual tactical actions or a series of tactical actions” conducted “as part of



Utilizing the strategic disruption framework and the five pillars as the competition mechanisms provides a better method for developing an operational approach. This ensures that efforts align with broader national objectives and synchronize across the diplomacy, information, military, and economics spectrum, known as DIME. In other words, in irregular warfare, strategic disruption provides the overarching operational framework while the five pillars are the specific methods employed within the framework.

It's important to note that strategic disruption operations do "not need to produce strategic effects in and of themselves."<sup>05</sup> Rather, it is the gradual accumulation of effects by disruptive activities that eventually produce the desired outcome. This concept mirrors the principle of self-organized criticality found in physics, where continuous small changes can lead to a critical state, resulting in significant shifts or breakdowns. The analogy of the sandpile model, introduced by Per Bak, Chao Tang, and Kurt Wiesenfeld, illustrates how incremental stress can lead to a tipping point, fundamentally destabilizing a system.<sup>06</sup> In the same way, strategic disruption operates on the principle that tactical actions can exert cumulative stress on an adversary's preferred strategy, progressively altering the strategic landscape. This buildup can eventually reach a tipping point, where the adversary's strategies or capabilities may suffer a significant setback or collapse. Due to the cumulative nature, the RAND study points out that "success in strategic disruption should be measured by whether such campaigns are initially able to frustrate adversary-preferred strategies" rather than on the achievement of a strategic objective.<sup>07</sup>

an operational-level campaign" designed to delay, degrade, or deny "some aspect of an adversary's preferred strategy" for achieving their objectives.<sup>01</sup> The logic of this strategy is best explained by Joe Hyams in his 1982 book *Zen in Martial Arts*,<sup>02</sup> where his instructor presents him with two strategic options in competition: grow your own line or cut your opponent's line. This narrative underscores the essence of strategic disruption—cutting your opponent's line. In other words, strategic disruption involves tactically targeting the weaknesses in an adversary's approach. While this approach focuses on disrupting the adversary's strategy, it may incidentally, or as a secondary effect, include growing your own line in the process.

The RAND study identifies five pillars through which strategic disruption is carried out: resist, support, influence, understand, and target. These pillars are force employment mechanisms in the same way defeat and stability mechanisms are for LSCO. The five pillars are the "mechanisms through which SOF-led strategic disruption has historically sought to deny adversary objectives in pursuit of friendly diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) aims."<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, JP 5-0, Joint Planning, mentions "competition mechanisms" for operations "below the threshold of armed conflict" to "establish favorable conditions," but it offers no guidance on what they are.<sup>03</sup> The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning, published in March 2018, proposes a number of potential competition mechanisms: strengthen, create, preserve, weaken, position, inform, and persuade.<sup>04</sup> I submit that the mechanisms proposed in the Rand study should instead form the strategic disruption pillars.

## THE FIVE PILLARS OF STRATEGIC DISRUPTION

The strategic disruption framework is underpinned by five pillars, each not only representing a specific force employment mechanism, but collectively embodying the capabilities of SOF in irregular warfare. These pillars are foundational to ARSOF's irregular approach, offering both direct, indirect, asymmetric, or unattributable strategies to support combatant commanders' campaign plans. They are delineated as follows:

**RESIST.** Efforts to enable a resistance or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power or deter an occupation.

**SUPPORT.** Efforts to build the capacity of foreign security forces and enable their own efforts to defend against internal or external threats to their security.

**INFLUENCE.** Efforts to inform and shape the attitudes, behavior, and decisions of foreign actors in support of U.S. interests.

**UNDERSTAND.** Efforts to extract strategically relevant information from politically sensitive, contested, or denied environments.

**TARGET.** Efforts to seize, destroy, disrupt, or secure key personnel, equipment, or infrastructure in politically sensitive, contested, or denied environments.<sup>08</sup>

Consequently, SOF's value proposition in strategic disruption is its unique ability to apply these pillars cohesively to frustrate adversary-preferred strategies, creating "time, space, and opportunities to achieve strategic objectives across major elements of national power."<sup>09</sup>

## THE FLEXIBILITY OF STRATEGIC DISRUPTION

There are two additional benefits to this framework. First, it is scalable and adaptive to authority, permission, and risk-tolerance constraints. In those places where policymakers or commanders want to be more provocative, they can look for targeting, resistance, or influence opportunities. Alternatively, in those places where direct intervention is less appealing, commanders can look for support, understand, and influence opportunities. This can help with expectation management for commanders and policymakers alike by better illuminating what actions can be tied to a specific competition mechanism (that is, one of the five pillars of strategic disruption). For example, in a case where a detachment is only authorized to conduct train, advise, and assist with a partner force, we should not expect contributions beyond the support pillar.

Second, the strategic disruption framework can be applied to counter varying strategies employed by the adversary across the DIME spectrum by assessing their overall objectives, core interests, and preferred course of action. As RAND points out, “SOF’s foundational priority in strategic disruption should be to build consistently deeper and deeper understanding of an adversary’s strategic design and preferred operational approaches.”<sup>10</sup> We explore how strategic disruption can be applied to various strategies that an adversary may employ later in this article, but suffice to say that a key tenet of strategic disruption is understanding an adversary’s likely objective and preferred course of action for achieving it.

In summary, the strategic disruption framework equips commanders with a structured approach to irregular warfare planning. By leveraging the five pillars, commanders can more methodically consider which mechanisms (or combination of mechanisms) to employ to frustrate an adversary.

## THE SUPPORT PILLAR

The support and understand pillars are pivotal because they represent the core of SOF steady state deployments: direct support and training to allies and partner nations and building awareness and understanding in territories inaccessible to other U.S. Government entities. Yet, despite being the most common form of SOF deployment, tactical SOF units are often challenged in understanding how their missions link to the broader strategic competition. The support pillar involves actions taken to build the capacity of foreign security forces to defend against internal and external threats and is crucial for enhancing stability and security of regions critical to U.S. interests. Operations, activities, and investments within the support pillar contribute to strategic disruption in two ways:

**FIRST**, this pillar serves a key role in establishing trust and reciprocity, essential for gaining important access and placement. This is crucial for enabling the successful execution of the resist, influence, understand, and target pillars. Special operations forces provide the partner nation with immediate value through military training and expertise. In fact, of the five pillars, only the support pillar focuses primarily on providing benefits to the ally and partner nations. Without providing this tangible benefit, SOF would

risk diminishing its strategic influence and would limit its ability to achieve U.S.-centric objectives. In this context, the United States should focus on further cementing its role as the premier security enabler through specialized, high-quality partnerships. In a Harvard Business Review article titled “Outsmarting Walmart,” companies that outpace Walmart “carefully segment their customers and then wow the ones that matter most...they cater to targeted segments... in ways that Walmart can’t.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, we must maintain a competitive advantage for what we offer within the security market. By leveraging our advanced space-based technologies, cyber, and special operations capabilities, we create a unique value proposition that competitors like China struggle to match. This focus also reinforces our existing alliances and positions the United States as the partner of choice for nations seeking to enhance their security apparatus.

**SECOND**, the support pillar is vital for its role in securing a foundation that enables all subsequent development and governance. Simply put, security is a prerequisite for economic growth and investment; without it, economic development is unlikely to occur. To recognize the criticality of this role, we need not look any further than our development as a nation. As Edward Bowie describes in *Development of the West and the U.S. Army*: “The presence of the...Army...profoundly influenced how and where the emerging economies of the Western Territories became established. Indeed, as the tangible manifestation of government, with all that implied, the Army was...the single most important and influential factor in Western American development,” highlighting the army’s indispensable role in shaping the economic prosperity of the West.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, through the support pillar, SOF is setting favorable conditions by creating pockets of stability and improved governance that facilitate other elements of national power to achieve broader strategic goals as well as maintaining the U.S. competitive advantage for security partnerships.<sup>13</sup>

## SYNCHRONIZED EFFORTS: THE SUPPORT PILLAR

However, one aspect of increased stability in strategic competition must be acknowledged from the outset: stability will benefit any nation seeking to invest. This duality can be exploited by our adversaries, who may leverage these stable environments for their own strategic gains, regardless of who initially fostered the stability. In fact, they would be foolish not to invest more in areas where the United States has created stability. This reality underscores the need for a more coordinated approach that involves not just military efforts to provide security and stability but also allows for active engagement from Civil Affairs, the private sector, the Department of State, and allies and partner nations. This is crucial to better capitalize on the stable environments we helped create, making them less susceptible to exploitation by competitors.

In essence, the success of the support pillar in strategic competition is not just measured by the stability it creates, but by how effectively this stability is utilized for long-term, sustainable development, countering the influence of competitors. This dynamic is crucial in shaping a holistic approach beyond military operations that encompass economic and diplomatic strategies.

## THE UNDERSTAND PILLAR

Building on the foundational aspects of the support pillar, the understand pillar serves as a critical yet underutilized component in the overarching strategy of strategic disruption. If the support pillar lays the groundwork for partnerships and capacity building, the understand pillar leverages these relationships to gain deeper insights into adversarial networks and intentions, making it an indispensable aspect of IW.

The understand pillar entails all efforts to “extract strategically relevant information from sensitive, contested, or denied environments” where other collection sources are unavailable.<sup>14</sup> These efforts contribute to strategic disruption by revealing the intent behind adversary actions, thereby denying them “the ability to shape the environment through preferred strategies.”<sup>15</sup> Special operations forces provide “policymakers and diplomats information that enables them to expose malign behavior by an adversary and therefore increase the cost a competitor must pay.”<sup>16</sup> This capability is reflected in examples like the United States Military Liaison Missions during the Cold War, where intelligence gathering was crucial in understanding Soviet intentions, reducing the risk of conflict escalation, and exposing potential malign behavior.<sup>17</sup>

Another exemplary instance of our intelligence capabilities was seen in the fight led by Stanley McChrystal and Task Force 714 against Al Qaeda in Iraq. The mantra “it takes a network to defeat a network” perfectly encapsulated this network-based intelligence approach.<sup>18</sup> Recognizing the adaptive and decentralized nature of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Task Force 714’s rapid intelligence gathering, analyzing, and dissemination approach became the model then, and it remains profoundly relevant today.

Yet this example brings us to an inconvenient reality regarding our current utilization of intelligence capabilities in strategic competition. The extensive lessons learned and advanced skills in intelligence gathering and network illumination honed during the Global War on Terrorism, have yet to be fully applied to today’s strategic competition challenges. The Global War on Terrorism was a proving ground for intelligence collectors, Special Forces intelligence sergeants, and analysts. The skills refined over those two decades in illuminating and disrupting networks are now vital for the understand pillar of strategic disruption. However, today’s focus must shift to illuminating the networks that underpin our rivals’ economic and political strategies. The focus is a shift from focusing solely on physical threats to understanding the nuances of economic statecraft and the adversary’s strategy. The nodes and links within adversary supply chains—from vendors to server farms—are all potential opportunities for strategic disruption. Recognizing and deliberately gathering information about these nodes and links are crucial as they can later be exploited to frustrate and delay the adversary’s strategy. With advancements like digitization and optimized force designs, like operational support in the continental United States, we are better equipped than ever to map adversary networks in the ambiguous environments of strategic competition.

## SYNCHRONIZED EFFORTS: THE UNDERSTAND PILLAR

This brings us to a critical consideration of SOF’s role within the broader intelligence community. While SOF possesses unique capabilities in accessing denied areas and leveraging

human intelligence, other government agencies will often be in the lead for coordinating and synchronizing collection efforts, positioning SOF in a supportive role that complements broader intelligence missions. By working in close partnership with other government agencies and the intelligence community, SOF can contribute valuable ground-level insights and fulfill specific intelligence requirements.

As with the support pillar, a benefit of the understand pillar is its adaptability based on authorities, permissions, and risk tolerances. These actions need not be overly provocative and can vary from passive to active depending upon the current situation and country. This adaptability is critical to developing a clear and actionable picture of adversary activities within the framework of strategic disruption.

Furthermore, incorporating Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations into this pillar complements traditional reconnaissance efforts and adds additional understanding of local dynamics and the effectiveness of broader national efforts. Civil Affairs teams play a pivotal role in engaging with local communities and authorities, going places that Special Forces teams may not be permitted, and providing valuable insights into the sociopolitical landscape. Civil Affairs can also assess local sentiments and government structures, again looking for synchronized effects with any support pillar stability created. Similarly, Psychological Operations is instrumental in evaluating the effectiveness of information campaigns and understanding the perception management and information warfare strategies of our adversaries. This holistic approach, combining intelligence with an understanding of local sentiments and global narratives, is vital in designing strategies to effectively counter adversarial narratives and support our broader strategic objectives.

In summary, the understand pillar is not a stand-alone component, but an integral part of the strategic disruption framework. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to inform and shape our broader strategies in IW, ensuring that our actions are not only reactive, but strategically informed and proactive. Through this pillar, we gain the necessary insights to anticipate and counter our adversaries’ moves, thereby reinforcing the overall efficacy of our efforts in strategic competition.

## APPLICATION AND EXTENSION

As the strategic disruption framework outlines a comprehensive approach for SOF to navigate and influence irregular warfare landscapes, this section aims to illustrate how strategic disruption can guide the development of an operational approach tailored to counter adversaries’ strategies effectively. Through an oversimplified hypothetical scenario involving the economic influence of Great Power Country X in Country Y, we explore how strategic disruption’s principles can be operationalized to safeguard U.S. interests and foster a favorable strategic outcome.

**CURRENT STATE.** Country Y is experiencing growing influence from Great Power Country X, which seeks to reduce U.S. dominance through economic development aid and support. The U.S. presence, primarily through SOF engagements, aims at building partner capacity and strengthening internal security forces to combat a growing violent extremist organization threat.

**DESIRED END STATE.** Country Y maintains its sovereignty and continues to be a strategic partner of the United States with reduced influence from Country X. The economic aid provided by Country X does not undermine U.S. interests or relationships in the region.

**PROBLEM.** How can the United States counteract Country X's economic influence in Country Y without direct conflict, leveraging nonmilitary strategies to ensure U.S. interests and relationships are not diminished?

**OPERATIONAL APPROACH.** Utilize strategic disruption and the five pillars as force employment mechanisms. These include:

**SUPPORT MECHANISM.** Leverage Civil Affairs and Department of State initiatives to offer competitive economic development alternatives to Country Y, emphasizing U.S. commitment to genuine partnership and development.

**UNDERSTAND MECHANISM.** Conduct intelligence operations to illuminate Country X's strategic intentions and potential deviations from stated economic aid objectives. This involves close monitoring of projects like canal construction to ensure compliance with international agreements and prevent dual-use exploitation.

**INFLUENCE MECHANISM.** Conduct military information support operations to enhance U.S. credibility, promote emulation of democratic values, and highlight the malign intentions behind Country X's economic strategies. This includes exposing any deviation from agreed-upon economic projects that could serve dual purposes, undermining Country X's credibility.

By employing these lines of effort cohesively, the U.S. SOF and its partners can create conditions that favor the desired end state, ensuring stability, sovereignty, and continued partnership with Country Y. The operational approach emphasizes synchronized efforts across DIME spectrum, with a focus on strategic competition below the level of armed conflict.

The application of strategic disruption, illustrated through our hypothetical scenario, showcases a concrete methodology for commanders to conduct tactical actions to disrupt adversarial strategies in competition environments. By systematically leveraging the five pillars as force employment mechanisms, a commander can align and synchronize efforts across the DIME spectrum. This example not only highlights the flexibility and

depth of strategic disruption, but it also serves as a testament to its critical role in enabling SOF to proactively shape outcomes in the geopolitical arena. For a broader exploration of how each mechanism can produce outcomes across different fields of DIME, readers are encouraged to refer to the comprehensive examples provided in the RAND study.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to recognize this framework's significance in redefining the SOF's approach to irregular warfare. Strategic disruption represents a paradigm shift in irregular warfare, providing SOF with a proactive, structured approach to countering adversaries and aligning operations with broader U.S. strategic interests. Its adaptability across various operational contexts and alignment with the DIME spectrum demonstrate its practical applicability and relevance in today's complex global security environment. Although this article focused primarily on two of the five pillars of strategic disruption—support and understand—it is crucial to acknowledge that each pillar plays a key role in the comprehensive operational strategy of strategic disruption.

By exploring the support and understand pillars, we have seen strategic disruption's potential to enhance the effectiveness of irregular warfare operations and activities below the threshold of armed conflict. These pillars underscore the importance of building strong partnerships and gaining deep insight into adversary tactics, essential in strategic competition against an adversary employing many nonmilitary strategies. However, the other pillars—resist, influence, and target—also hold relative advantage and contribute equally to the framework's overall effectiveness. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the strategic disruption framework and to explore its other aspects not covered in this essay, readers are encouraged to refer to the detailed work by the RAND Corporation. The RAND study delves deeper into the five pillars, offering extensive historical examples of their application by SOF.

In summary, using strategic disruption as an operational framework provides SOF a path forward for planning, training, and executing irregular warfare operations and activities designed to delay, degrade, or deny an adversary's ability to achieve their objectives across the competition continuum that are scalable and adaptable to a variety of circumstances and risk levels.

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